

Bargaining in a Labor Regime:
Plantation Life and the Politics of Development in Sri Lanka

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2013

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is an ethnographic study of migrant labor, development, and gender among Malaiyaha (“Hill Country”) Tamil tea plantation residents in contemporary Sri Lanka. It draws on one year of field research (2008-2009) conducted during state emergency rule in Sri Lanka amongst Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents, migrant laborers, and community members responding to histories of dislocation and ethnic marginalization. Based on ethnographic observations, detailed life histories, and collaborative dialogue, it explores how Malaiyaha Tamils reconstitute what it means to be a political minority in an insecure Sri Lankan economy and state by 1) employing dignity-enabling strategies of survival through ritual practices and storytelling; 2) abandoning income-generating options on the plantations to ensure financial security; and 3) seeking radical alternatives to traditional development through employment of rights-based ideologies and networks of solidarity in and beyond Sri Lanka. Attending to these three spheres of collective practice—plantation life, migrant labor experience, and human development—this dissertation examines how Malaiyaha Tamils actively challenge historical representations of bonded labor and political voicelessness in order to rewrite their representative canon in Sri Lanka.

At the center of each pragmatic site is the Malaiyaha Tamil woman. Focusing particularly on the female worker, I present emerging gender relations and experiences in group life, transnational labor mobilization, and development work that pose radical and deliberate alternatives to economic marginalization and capitalist plantation production in Sri Lanka. Negotiating their place within patriarchal structures on the plantation and in civil society, Malaiyaha Tamil women present themselves in ways that sharply contrast the expert narratives of their experiences, which are composed for public recognition and consumption. Interceding this transmission of knowledge, their stories actively transform plantation development discourses in Sri Lanka and resituate their practices within the more enabling frame of transnational feminism and solidarity. Addressing lacunas in South Asian, social science, and humanities literature on Malaiyaha Tamil women, this dissertation contributes lived content on previously unrecorded women's experiences and complicates former accounts of the woman worker in Sri Lanka.

Informing this project is the relationship among community, vulnerability, and reproduction. How are forms of Malaiyaha Tamil development and membership, when increasingly opened up to the realm of the political, made at once vulnerable and generative in their attempts to gain a sense of security and belonging in Sri Lanka? What do practices of cultural reconfiguration and solidarity-building reveal about the persistence of community as an affective term and the woman worker's position in global movements of transnational feminism and migrant labor? Each chapter focuses on this relationship in the context of the final months and aftermath of civil war in Sri Lanka, and I engage the work of political theorists, Sri Lankan historians, and development

scholars to argue for a more productive way of thinking about communities in crisis. I argue that community is the continual mental exercise of self-refinement and a mode in which Malaiyaha Tamils address insecurities of a closed past with intentional practices of fixing belief in an open present. This enabling perspective allows us to account for the realities of social investment, movement, and network-building that Malaiyaha Tamils experience in Sri Lanka.

By analyzing the contradictions and legacy of seizing Malaiyaha Tamil plantation experience in Sri Lankan history and scholarship, this dissertation seeks to envision the Sri Lankan woman worker as a global subject with transformative possibilities for her community and nation and contribute to the anthropologies of development, labor, and gender in South Asia.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research and the writing of the dissertation would not have been possible without the support of several individuals, organizations, and communities in Sri Lanka, the Netherlands, and United States. I first want to acknowledge my committee members in the Department of Anthropology for their continued mentorship and support. It is very difficult to describe the indebtedness that I have to my advisor, Valentine Daniel. I came to this Department in 2003 as a Classicist, who was trained to deconstruct Greek and Latin sentence structures for the purpose of translation and analysis. When I began working with him on my Masters thesis on trauma and memory among children in Sri Lanka in 2004, he asked me to abandon my methodological approaches to language. He urged me to remember that *words matter* and—to use Heidegger’s expression—write in order to make a “clearing” for my readers where I could connect them to the experiences that I wished to describe. I am beyond grateful for his close readings and re-readings of every paper, grant proposal, examination essay, and email that I have produced and shared with him over the last nine years. His scrutiny and generous care have undoubtedly made me more critical scholar of anthropological theory, South Asia, and Sri Lanka. A special thank you to his wife Pegi and their family for the meals and tea that I have enjoyed in their home during my time at Columbia. My first course in anthropology at Columbia was David Scott’s core course, *Culture, Politics, and Ethics*, in 2003. The dialogues that he encouraged in this course laid down the foundations for my approach to theory and politics and instilled in me the desire to question the structuring of the discipline. Under his mentorship as a teaching fellow and research assistant, I learned

to read sympathetically but critically and to value the politics of anthropological interventions with attention to postcoloniality and social movements. Michael Taussig has encouraged a type of creativity in my writing that has allowed me to push the bounds of ethnographic genres. By taking his course, *Art of Fieldwork*, in 2006, I learned to abandon the seemingly inhumane habits of ethnographic writing and to value the rewriting of and revisiting my fieldnotes. I am particularly grateful to him for encouraging me to sketch and have people sketch in my notes while in the field and to incorporate the recordings of art, song, and ritual into my thesis and future work on plantation life.

I want to acknowledge my outside readers, Kavita Sivaramakrishnan and Denise Brennan, for their close reading and comments on this text in its earlier drafts. Kavita has been a wonderful friend to me and an inspiration to young South Asian women scholars. She always encourages me to think beyond my discipline and to collaborate with scholars in historical, public health, and Asian studies. I want to acknowledge Denise Brennan, who introduced me to anthropology at Georgetown in 2001 and whose passion for teaching and mentoring young women encouraged me to become an anthropologist and educator after leaving Georgetown. Words do not do justice to the value and respect that I have for her dedication to an engaged anthropology and her thoroughness in mentoring young students. I am especially grateful for her personal and professional encouragement to apply to the American Association of University Women (AAUW) American fellowship, for her line-by-line comments on every single word of this dissertation, and

for allowing me to build my teaching experiences in Georgetown's Department of Anthropology during my final year of writing.

There are several people at Columbia University and in New York whom I need to acknowledge for their teaching, mentoring and friendship in and outside the classroom. I want to thank my teachers who have impacted my writing and approach to research in valuable ways: Lesley Sharp, Karen Seeley, Neni Panourgia, Carole Vance, Katherine Franke, and Paul Kockelman. I especially want to thank Elizabeth Povinelli and Pegi Vail for their teaching mentorship and for encouraging me to be a dynamic lecturer by getting students to live and breathe anthropology once they leave the classroom. I want to thank Paige West who encouraged me to apply for the National Science Foundation grant and provided me invaluable feedback on my proposals and careers in teaching anthropology at the undergraduate level. Lastly, I want to acknowledge the care and administrative support of Joyce Monges, Marilyn Astwood, Michael Chin, Juana Cabrera, and Patrick McMorro for attending to each and every question, receipt, and registration unit of mine during the last nine years.

I want to acknowledge Gajendran Ayyathurai, Rajan Krishnan, and Sam Sudhanandha for their dedication to teaching me Tamil at Columbia in preparation for my research in Sri Lanka. This dissertation could not have been completed without the support of my peers in and around New York and who have gone elsewhere since we studied together beginning in 2003: Adriana Garriga-Lopez, Nima Paidipaty, Siva Arumugam, Ravi Sriramachandran, Thushara Hewage, Antina von Schnitzler, Nimanthi Rajasingham, Neena Mahadev, Hester Betlem, Anderson Blanton, Amanda Gilliam,

Kaori Hatsumi, Sayo Ferro, and Marie Varghese. I especially want to thank Kitana Ananda, whose friendship, emotional support, and collaboration have been invaluable to my growth as a colleague and scholar, especially in the final years of writing.

There are so many individuals working on South Asia and Sri Lanka in and outside anthropology that I need to acknowledge. I want to acknowledge Delon Madavan, Gaëlle Dequirrez, Éric Meyer, Jonathan Spencer, Nirmala Rajasingam, and Shoba Sakthi for the comments that they provided me about my work during the 2010 conference on Tamils in Sri Lanka at the Sorbonne and Vyjayanthi Rao, Mark Whitaker, Francis Cody, Barney Bates, and Amali Phillips for providing me valuable feedback on my initial presentations on this research following fieldwork and during the Madison South Asia and Tamil Studies conferences between 2007 and 2011. I want to thank Thomas Blom Hansen for supporting me as a Visiting Research Scholar at the University of Amsterdam from 2009 to 2010, and to also express gratitude to Sharika Thiranagama for her collaboration, friendship and encouragement since we met in 2006. Lastly, I want to thank Daniel Bass and Sasikumar Balasundaram for our shared experiences and investments in Sri Lanka's Hill Country. Their work in Sri Lanka has deeply informed this dissertation and its growth from research question to text.

The research for and writing of this dissertation was completed with financial and administrative support from the following institutions and programs: Columbia University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS), Columbia University's Department of Anthropology, the U.S. Department of Education Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship program (FLAS), American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS),

American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS), the National Science Foundation (NSF) SBE Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant, Green Harbor Financial, and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) American Fellowship. I also want to thank the Office of Residential Life and Housing for compensating my graduate housing for five of the nine years at Columbia University.

Next, I would like to acknowledge the organizations and research centers that I engaged during and after fieldwork in Sri Lanka. I want to acknowledge the support of the University of Peradeniya, Social Scientists' Association (SSA), International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), Marga Institute, Law and Society Trust (LST), Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), and the Women's Education and Research Centre (WERC). Particularly, I want to thank Kumari Jayawardena, Mr. Thambirajah, B. Skanthakumar, S. Sumathy, Sanjana Hattutowa, and Selvi Tirunchandran for their support of my research on the plantations and our conversations. In Kandy, I am deeply indebted to the staff of the Institute of Social Development (ISD) and to those at Satyodaya and PREDO for allowing me to stay with them for one month, observe programs, and use their libraries. I am especially indebted to Father Paul Capsersz for our long conversations about the plantations and activism. I always looked forward to our daily meals together during the time I spent at Satyodaya and to hearing about his reflections on the past and future of the plantations. I want to acknowledge Periyasamy Muthulingam, whose solidarity and support have grown since I left Sri Lanka and deeply informs my thinking about the plantations. I also want to thank Noeline Akka and Amarapathy Devi, whose friendships inform the care with which I wrote this text. In Hatton, I am grateful to the affiliation,

collaboration, and support provided to me by the Centre for Social Concern (CSC) and Plantation Social Sector Forum (PSSF) during my research period. Particularly, I want to thank Father Beni, A.C.R. John, Mr. Nagalingam, Rani, Priya Akka, Yogitha Akka, and Ribina Akka for taking me into their community, drinking tea with me, and sharing their work and reflections for the purpose of this research. I see this dissertation as the product and beginning of a long friendship and collaboration in years to come.

It is hard to find words to acknowledge the women, men, and children who took me into their homes and shared their lives with me during my research on the plantations. I am unable to recognize them by name here, but they know who they are. Their humanity and care has transformed the way in which I think about Sri Lanka, Malaiyaha Tamils, and workers experiences. The women, men, and children on Kirkwall and other plantations on which I carried out research treated me like their daughter and sister, and they had no reason to given the conditions of emergency rule and marginalization that they were experiencing in the final months and aftermath of civil war. Words are better left unwritten for the gratitude and place that they have in my heart. I particularly want to acknowledge the care and friendship of Andrew, Rita, Shayamalie, Kanna and all whom I stayed with and who made sure I was safe while I was in Hatton. The chapter on widows and marriage is dedicated to the late Rita—who slept in the room next to me for ten months during fieldwork and whose sudden passing after I left Sri Lanka in 2010 has left a void for all of whom she touched throughout her life.

In the Netherlands, I want to thank our friends—Polle, Marthe, and Bo—for their emotional support and numerous dinners while I was writing and working through notes

and data during the first year after finishing field research. I am deeply grateful for the twenty-year friendship of Heather McKellar and Marcella Szablewicz, who both listened to me endlessly talk about the woes of graduate school and writing and whose own research and work continue to inspire me. In New York, I am grateful for the friendship and support of Bonny Hart and Paul Share who let me stay with them during my teaching fellowship years and also to Jane Bender for our friendship. Our dog walks in Riverside Park kept me balanced during a year of weekly commutes between Boston and New York in 2011 and 2012, and I cannot thank the three of them enough for their support over the last six years. I also want to thank the Ores family for their support and friendship and for inspiring me to remain engaged with communities around me. In Washington, I want to thank my colleagues in the Department of Anthropology at Georgetown for their feedback and comments during my final year of writing, and also to my dear friends, Andrew Masloski, Gautam Raghavan, Indhika Jayaratnam, and Sashi Selvendran, who supported me in our decision to move to Washington in 2012 and made it a hospitable place for me in the final stages of writing and defending. I also want to thank my friends and colleagues at Lanka Solidarity and especially my oldest friend, Sugi Ganeshanathan, whose dedication to Sri Lanka and continual feedback on my writing has made me a more critical scholar. We have never lived in the same place except when we were at Columbia together from 2006 to 2008, but I always feel at home when I speak to her and am extremely grateful for our friendship.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of my family in Sri Lanka, the Netherlands, and United States. I am deeply indebted to my family in

Jaffna and Colombo for taking care of me during multiple research trips between 2005 and 2009 to Sri Lanka. To my family in the Netherlands—Karina, Floris, Sebas, and Jesse—I am grateful for your warmth and for treating me like a daughter and sister you never had over these last seven years. Our relationships have taught me that love is not defined by blood or where we come from, but by the connections we make and choose to make with one another. I especially want to thank dear Karina, who called me every Sunday during the final stages of writing to check in on me. In the United States, my sisters and brother-in-law—Meera, Mithila, and Jeff—have shown me unconditional love and support that is hard to write about. Our relationships have grown so much in the last decade, and their words of encouragement and challenge me to be a better person. I am especially grateful for my precious niece, Lena, for making me a “Chitty” and making me smile through even the most difficult periods of research and writing. The last sentence in this dissertation is for her.

This dissertation would not have turned out the way in which it did if not for my loving partner, Kay. We met in 2006 as I prepared grant proposals to complete my research in Sri Lanka. He came to see me when I was there in 2008 and 2009, worried about me when we were separated during research, comforted me when I left the field, created a home with me in Boston, and made me quiches and lasagnas that nourished me during the final stages of writing. None of his actions or any part of our history have gone unnoticed. Being in law school and graduate school as partners is not an easy task, but we have been so blessed to have one another’s support. The best is yet to come. To our darling, Vondel, thank you for generating love and warmth in our lives.

I do not know how to write about the gratitude that I have for my parents, Kanagaratnam and Kanthimathi Jegathesan. Because of their constant push for me to be more secure in an insecure world, I have become stronger. They taught me how to work hard and feel and express love without hearing or saying, “I love you.” Their support has not always been what I have wanted to hear, and often, they have been concerned about my future. But their worries for me have never stopped them from acknowledging my happiness and passion to learn and teach. Thank you for telling me never to forget Sri Lanka before I could even remember it.

To my family



Figure 1. Map of Sri Lanka (Courtesy of Brigid, www.deepsouth.lk, October 29, 2009)

INTRODUCTION

womb

noun

a : a cavity or space that resembles a womb in containing and enveloping

b : a place where something is generated

THE END OF WAR

May 19, 2009. I am visiting my mother's uncle who had suffered a stroke and is receiving medical care at Delmon's Hospital in Wellawatte, Colombo. As I wait in the lobby for the nurse to finish feeding him, the Sinhala teledrama on the Government-run television channel, *Swarnavahini*, cuts abruptly to a special news segment. Doctors, nurses, patients, and visitors momentarily forget their social hierarchies and crowd together below the mounted television—their eyes fixing on the moving image. The initial recording, released by Sri Lankan security forces, lasts approximately fifteen seconds but has been looped to give an appearance of continual footage.

The screen fills with the image of a corpse. Its eyes wide open—it is bloated, stiff, and stained with blood and looks as surprised as all of us. A blue handkerchief covers what appears to be a severe trauma to the frontal area of its head and separates the brown-skinned body from the color swatch of green lagoon-like grass, which is later confirmed as the grass of Nanthikadal Lagoon in Sri Lanka's northeast Mullaitivu district. In the island's North and East, the Sri Lankan Army and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had been fighting intensely since the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between both parties broke down in December 2005 and before the CFA, since 1983. Soldiers around

the body were smiling and yelling, and the younger ones were taking out their cellular phones to capture magnified images of the corpse's pruned flesh and bloodstained fatigues. In the commotion, one soldier checks for a pulse by grabbing the right inner wrist of the lifeless body, which has already been laid down on its back with its hands touching one another on a white sheeted carrier for the dead. Another soldier, in a gesture of seeming care, brushes a fly that has landed on the corpse's chin.

Hours later, Sri Lanka's President, Mahinda Rajapaksa, gives a victory speech to members of Parliament, declaring the end of an era—the end of civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil militant group, the LTTE. In his speech, the President declares that there would no longer be minorities in Sri Lanka, but only two types of persons:

We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary. No longer are the Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any others minorities. There are only two people in this country. One is the people that love this country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group.

Since independence, the country has never seen so many flags raised as on this day, when the government declared the death of LTTE leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran and the President declared the removal of the word minorities from Sri Lanka's vocabulary. *Who was this man? What did he represent for Tamil-speaking minorities living within and beyond Sri Lanka's borders?* Sri Lanka's civil war initially emerged as a war about Tamil-speaking minorities living within a Sinhala majoritarian state and their demands for recognition and political representation. But over the course of the war, both Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms and militant movements excluded and destroyed communities

across the island and what emerged in 2009 was an increasingly authoritarian political regime and the persistence of a silenced civil society. In life, Prabhakaran, as the *self-proclaimed* leader of Sri Lankan Tamils in and beyond Sri Lanka and recognized leader of the EU and United States-labeled terrorist organization, the LTTE, had come to symbolize not only the separatist demands of Tamil nationalists but also the continuation of suffering for all communities living in Sri Lanka and anticipating the worst of a nearly three decade-long war.

With his death, signs of celebration filled Colombo. Crowds of masked men and children sang and danced on Galle Road. Three days later, organized military parades filled Galle Face Green, a place for the public, which up until then, had been off limits to them for security purposes. Sri Lankan national flags of all sizes waved in the ocean breeze on Colombo's Marine Drive and filled street shop bins in Bambalapitiya suburb. Trucks and three-wheelers whizzed by with loudly singing youth hoisting placards with the smiling faces of President Rajapaksa and his brother, Basil Rajapaksa, the Defense Secretary. National media lauded both brothers for their abilities to end a nearly three decade long civil war, along with the executing help of former commanding General of the Sri Lankan Army, Sarath Fonseka. Some elderly Sinhala women dished out *kiribath*¹ from large pots on the side of the road. Outside the market in Wellawatte, a Colombo suburb where a disproportionate amount of Tamils live and the same suburb that was doused in petrol and burnt to the ground during the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots, firecrackers hissed and exploded on the pavement causing my cousins and me to jump.

¹ A coconut milk rice dish served on auspicious occasions and for breakfast on the first day of the month and on special days like Sinhala New Year.

These celebrations fueled Sinhala nationalist euphoria of military victory, but in the months to follow when I carried out field research in 2009, Sri Lanka's minority citizens still speculated and remained anxious about the future of *their* country. When would the state of emergency and increased militarization of society cease? Does patriotism for one's country deny the right to express cultural difference and political dissent? Is the love of one's country or the art of politics, for that matter, so simple? What is the fate of those whose obligations and loves are complicated by trauma and fear?

My love of and obligations to Sri Lanka have always been complicated. During fieldwork, this obligation, as it did in many other Sri Lankans living in and outside the country from 2008 to 2009, manifest as anticipatory anxiety and blunt horror. In the five months leading up to the war's end, those living outside the immediate war zones in the North and East areas, which are no less than 350 kilometers away from the capital,² knew that atrocities were being committed by both Sri Lankan security forces and Tamil militants and not necessarily with just witness. At the end of April 2009, the United Nations estimated that between January 2009 and mid-April 2009, nearly 6,500 civilians had been killed and 14,000 civilians injured in the war zones where Sri Lankan security forces and the LTTE were fighting and continuing to fight with intensification.³ Outside the war zones in Sri Lanka, the certainty of distant but continuous violence against innocent civilians had created everyday embodiments of emergency that had confounding sense of now. What kind of present produces a reality in which displaced Tamil civilians

² Roughly the distance between Boston and New York.

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/apr/24/srilanka>

are shot in the back by the LTTE, who was claiming to represent them, and simultaneously shelled by the Government, who was claiming to give them refuge in No Fire Zones? Could Prabhakaran's corpse alone resolve this wretched certainty and insidious paralysis? When the war ended, Sri Lankans living inside the country at that time remained enmeshed in anticipation of something beyond the worst, which they had sadly come to know. *What now?*

Two weeks later, I returned to Colombo for a meeting among intellectuals and concerned citizens who met to discuss the postwar state of affairs on the island. Over the course of our evening discussion, the sun had gone down and it had become dark outside. Outside the undisclosed space in which we were talking, a flash of yellow light moved across our sights. The lights were coming from a white van, which had become a familiar indicator of disappearances and abductions in Sri Lanka over the last thirty years. It pulled up directly in front of the window and come to a stop. Our conversation stopped abruptly and dwindled to complete silence for all but two seconds. When the van began to reverse and drive away, we burst into laughter, purging ourselves of the seizing of anxiety that had grabbed us in the moment. The conversation about postwar conditions recommenced. The anxiety had passed; but like doubt, irritating our confirmations, we knew it would return. Although the death of a terrorist and the end of a civil war had been declared, critics and minorities in and of Sri Lanka remain at risk.

THOSE IN OUR CARE

On May 17, 1998, Jaffna Mayor Sarojini Yogeswaran, the widow of the assassinated Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) parliamentarian, V. Yogeswaran, was shot and killed in her home in Jaffna, after only four months of holding office.⁴ The first female to be elected as mayor of Jaffna, Mrs. Yogeswaran, had often insisted on being a leader among her people and had demanded minimal security despite the fact that the LTTE had assassinated her husband and fellow TULF MP Appapillai Amirthalingam in July 1989 during a TULF-LTTE meeting with her watching.

On that morning, Mrs. Yogeswaran took a meeting with a TULF municipal councilor identified by the media as Paramasivam in her family home in Nallur, Jaffna. As they spoke about the day's agenda in the front meeting room, two plain-clothed young men came into the main room where they were and fired more than twenty-five shots at her in the room. Councillor Paramasivam survived with bullet wounds to his leg. In June 1998, he and other TULF municipal councilors resigned from their posts due to threats on their lives from the LTTE. In September 1998, the LTTE would capture the key town of Kilinochchi, later to become the *de facto* capital of the group until it was recaptured in January 2009. In September 1999, the LTTE would attempt to assassinate former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, and in July 2001, the group would take responsibility for an unprecedented attack on air force planes stationed at Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike International Airport. From suicide air attacks to the conscription of child combatants, the

⁴ Website: <http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1998/Gunmen-Kill-Sri-Lanka-Mayor/id-b11be51234979e439a1ca045c e718f90>

LTTE and fascist violence that ensued during Sri Lanka's civil war had undoubtedly impacted scores of individuals and shaken their sense of security.

I was born to and raised by Sri Lankan immigrants outside Sri Lanka's borders. My father was in the first batch of students to graduate from University of Peradeniya's Faculty of Medicine, but due to the *de jure* and *de facto* force of the Official Language Act No. 33 of 1956, he could not secure a permanent job with a decent salary for four years after completing his degree. Sensing the onset of educational discrimination that would later actualize in the 1972 university quotas for Tamils seeking employment in Sri Lanka's government and public sectors, he took a chance to leave Sri Lanka for the United States in 1971 to apply for and redo a medical residency program and practice medicine, with the intention of returning to Sri Lanka once he had finished and once the tension had subsided. When that time came, Tamil militant groups were on the rise and state-sponsored anti-Tamil riots in 1977, 1979, and most emphatically in Black July 1983 convinced him that he could no longer return to his place of birth. In the spring of 2006, days before I was to return to Sri Lanka for a second summer research trip, we sat down over a cup of tea and realized that he had in fact lived in the United States longer than he had lived in Sri Lanka. All he could do was shake his head and look away.

I could never think of Sri Lanka as a news item that I could read and at once claim to know. I learned about my own heritage through fragmented moments of reflecting upon the unknown. My knowledge was and continues to be destabilized by redefinitions, questions and recantations. These often left me in a perpetual state of not knowing what to believe. Alongside many others of my generation, I did not know a Sri Lanka without

violence and injustice. I only knew a Sri Lankan experience where children had been forced to fire guns and schools had become camps for the internally displaced. My knowledge may have been filled with more distortions than truths, but this knowledge was all that I had.

Given the conditions, I gravitated towards a particular type of knowledge about Sri Lanka, that which could be found in the stories that Sri Lankans told me. One of those Sri Lankans was Paramasivam, my great uncle and the same man who had been shot with his colleague on May 17, 1998. In June 2006, I went to Sri Lanka to carry out preliminary fieldwork, and he told me about the incident in his Colombo flat, where I was also staying. He told me that he had gotten shot in the calf but had not processed the feeling of the bullet entering his body due to shock. In this state, he ran outside to his bicycle to get help. When a shocked bystander told him that he had been shot, he looked down at his leg, saw the blood pouring from his wound, and fell unconscious on the road. In the weeks following the shooting, he lay in bed in Jaffna recuperating and received multiple death threats from the LTTE front group, the Sangkilian Forces, to resign from his Municipal Council post immediately or meet the same fate as Mrs. Yogeswaran. With a smile, he told me the following, as we sat in his flat eight years later:

They threatened me to resign so I did. I did not want to, you know. But as I lay in bed, she [*pointing to his wife, my grandmother's younger sister, who is smiling and listening*] and this one [*their only daughter who is cooking nearby*] were going mad. So now I am happily translating immigration papers in a shop here [*in Colombo*]. I have to listen to them. I am responsible *to them*, right? I tell you, I am not afraid of the person who might kidnap or detain you when you go out to these libraries every day when you stay with us here. I am afraid of what *your Amma* will do to me if you are hurt while in my care.

I believe him. I came to realize that emergency rule in Sri Lanka had produced bonds among individuals and groups to and for whom one is responsible. These connections are some of the strongest determinants of human action in moments of insecurity and disruption. Our records and recollections of trauma and insecurity create new forms of knowing the world and our place in it. Under such conditions of vulnerability, we can say that what we strive to know best—what is most intimate *to us*—is that which is in our care.

UNPREDICTABLE SELECTIONS

In December 2007, an anthropologist working in and on Sri Lanka gave a talk about the state of Sri Lankan anthropology at the American Anthropological Association General Meeting in Washington, DC. The anthropologist claimed that the anthropology of Sri Lanka had “gone adrift.” Unlike the other anthropologies of postcolonial South Asian states, Sri Lankan anthropology had called out a peculiar tension in the relationship between theory and area. The discipline’s preoccupation with keeping war and violence in the forefront, he said, had convinced the anthropologist, to make the local a fixed singularity through which general theories could merely pass. War and violence, he lamented, Sri Lankan anthropologists had “not handled well.”

Anthropologists working on and within Sri Lanka have spent much of their lifetimes trying to detect, comprehend, and produce meaning from the experiences and stories they hear in the field. The moments that often preoccupy the imaginations of Sri Lankan anthropologists tend to be the moments of crisis and conflict—two inbred terms

that have dominated the last thirty years of scholarship on and within the country. What this body of literature has shown is that the task of writing about colonial forms of rule in Ceylon was perhaps an easier and less problematic than the tasks of making claims alongside and about postcolonial forms of power as manifest in state governmentality, nationalist ideologies, and the apparatus of development.

Decades of violence and discrimination preceded the official years of Sri Lanka's civil war, which academics and media outlets have customarily agreed upon to be from 1983 to 2009. The end of that period presented a time of reckoning for Sri Lanka and its scholars to rethink Sri Lankan scholarship and treat differently the canon of violence and conflict that they knew best.

In 2005, I conducted preliminary dissertation fieldwork in Eastern Sri Lanka. With the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE in place, civilian travel to the North and East was permitted and possible. Having completed a graduate thesis on the recollections of violence and militancy among children within the LTTE during the 1980s and 1990s in Sri Lanka's Northern Province, I spoke with former female youth who had been LTTE combatants prior to the ceasefire in a town outside Batticaloa on the Eastern coast. While I traveled and spoke freely with Tamil youth during this time, the escalation of disappearances and abductions committed by the LTTE breakaway paramilitary faction, the *Tamizh Makkal Vitutalai Pulikal* (TMVP), and August 2005 assassination of former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lakshman Kadirgamar, forced me to reconsider the security and logistics feasibility of completing such a study as a Sri Lankan Tamil woman. Returning to Sri Lanka in 2006

and again in 2007, it was clear that all political parties were no longer honoring the CFA, and that violence was paramount. During these first years of the final stages of war, I faced the hard reality of shifting my research focus elsewhere within Sri Lanka's borders.

I had become familiar with the history and experiences of Malaiyaha or Hill Country Tamils in Sri Lanka by reading the poetry of Malaiyaha Tamil unionist, C.V. Velupillai, and the anthropological writings of Valentine Daniel. I knew that shifting my dissertation project would not be an easy task, and in those first months, I consistently found the following history of a "migrant" Tamil-speaking community working in British colonial Ceylon as documented in the official and written record.

AN "OFFICIAL" HISTORY⁵

As one of the largest global exporters of tea, Sri Lanka takes great pride in its industry, whose origins date back to the mid-1800s. Under British Rule, colonial Ceylon⁶ underwent a massive and extended process of industrialization. This far-reaching scheme resulted in the creation of internal transportation systems and a number of export economies for colonial profit. To fulfill the tasks of building roads and railroads and toiling on coffee plantations, British planters, with the help of hired overseers, brought low-caste, primarily Tamil-speaking laborers from South Indian villages to support their efforts. In a colonial narrative akin to historical accounts of migrant workers across the

⁵ This is the history that I compiled for a number of "official" histories, documents, and scholarship on Tamils living on the plantations. It does not represent oral narratives, anthropological scholarship, or other more penetrative forms of research on this community and thus reflective of the initial preparatory stages of my research.

⁶ I will refer to Sri Lanka as Ceylon when discussing historical events that take place before the change of the country's name in 1972 to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka ("Sri Lanka").

British Empire, these laborers endured many hardships during and after their arrival including deplorable working and living conditions and intractable forms of representation within the Ceylon polity.

Tamils of Indian Origin laborers worked on the coffee plantations until a coffee leaf virus wiped out the majority of plantations and destroyed Ceylon's coffee economy in 1869 (Moldrich 1989: 5). Tea first became successful as a crop in the 1880s and planters were able to use the labor force that had emerged in an already resident community of Indian Origin Tamil laborers. Though termed "free labor," the Tamils working on the tea plantations were anything but free; as historian Patrick Peebles contends, the system of labor not only created a residential worker community but also maintained its permanence in Ceylon:

The planters exploited the ambiguity in the terminology: the labor force was 'free'—that is, not indentured—and therefore they were a 'free' labor force. In reality, they attempted to bind workers to the plantation by every legal and extralegal means possible. The laborers were tied to the plantations by labor laws that became increasingly stringent until the First World War. The planters enlisted the aid of *kanganies* [Tamil for "overseers"], to whom the workers were tied by indebtedness and loyalty. The planters decided in the 1840s that the best way to control their labor force was to create a permanently resident population of workers, and a community of settled Plantation Tamils emerged in the 1850s (2001: 53-4).

Despite their permanent residence and long-standing contribution to Ceylon's colonial success, the Tamils working on the tea plantations were still regarded as unbelonging to the Ceylon polity. Despite the rise of trade unions in the 1920s and 1930s and the representation of Indian Origin persons in Ceylon before independence, the Tamils working on plantations had little social mobility and political power. In addition, with multiple groups of Ceylon "nationals" vying for political power in the years before

independence, other ethnic groups expressed resentment toward the potential voting power of this once migrant, now resident community of laborers.

In 1948, Ceylon gained independence from Great Britain and the first Parliamentary Acts disenfranchised Indian Origin Tamils, rendering them stateless.⁷ In 1964, Ceylon and India signed the Srimavo-Shastri Pact, which agreed to arbitrarily divide the stateless Indian Origin population in Ceylon and initiated a process of repatriation of stateless Indians in Sri Lanka back to India. In 1982, however, repatriation efforts ceased with the onset of civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Tamil militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).⁸ As the civil war continued through the 1980s and 1990s, Malaiyaha Tamils largely remained stateless. In 2003, the Government of Sri Lanka, in an effort to dispel Malaiyaha Tamils from joining the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups, granted all stateless persons citizenship.

The period of prolonged statelessness had long-term effects on the way in which Malaiyaha Tamils advocated for their rights in Sri Lanka during the first half a century after independence. During this period, Tamils on the plantations had political representation, but their political and union leaders often served as patrons to the majority political parties rather than as advocates for their rights. In 1975, the plantations were nationalized under the Land Reform Acts and already suffering health, education, and

⁷ Ceylon Citizenship Act No. 18 of 1948

⁸ It is important to note that there are different Tamil-speaking communities in Sri Lanka that have distinct histories and heritages. The Sri Lankan Tamils originally come from the Northern and Eastern areas of Sri Lanka. The Muslim communities speak Tamil but also Sinhala and have different religious and cultural practices. Malaiyaha Tamils, though they speak Tamil, have culturally distinct practices and histories in Sri Lanka than that of Sri Lankan Tamils in Colombo, and the North and East.

living facility conditions continued to worsen with the shift in management.⁹ In 1992, the plantations were privatized leading to yet another series of debilitating conditions for plantations residents.

Furthermore, Hill Country Tamils working on the tea plantations did not escape the civil violence that escalated from the 1950s through the end of the civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and LTTE. Although the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups claimed to be fighting for all Tamil-speaking persons in Sri Lanka, these groups, in reality, only made claims for certain castes of non-dissenting Sri Lankan Tamils living in the Northern and Eastern provinces. Malaiyaha Tamils, who were living primarily in the Central Province but also in Colombo and other areas of the country were excluded from their vision for an all-Tamil “homeland” (“Eelam” in Tamil), but still bore the brunt of the civil violence. To weaken rising Tamil insurgency movements, the Sri Lankan Government enacted the Prevention of Terrorism Act No 48 of 1979.¹⁰ This temporary and then later permanent law gave state security forces the right to search, seize, and arrest any individual in Sri Lanka if a potential suspicion of unlawful activity was present.

The prolonged state of emergency¹¹ required that everyone in Sri Lanka carry appropriate forms of identification for routine checkpoints on the road and unexpected cordon and search operations of homes and entire areas. For the stateless Tamils living on

⁹ Land Reform (Amendment) Law No. 1 of 1972

¹⁰ Prevention of Terrorism Act No. 48 of 1979

¹¹ In May 2011, two years after the war’s end, the Government of Sri Lanka lifted some of the provisions of the PTA, but not all of them.

the plantations, emergency rule not only restricted their physical mobility but also sustained a perpetual fear of being detained without reason (i.e., for simply being Tamil and without identification during a civil war). Furthermore, the anti-Tamil riots in 1977, 1981 and the most violent of all, July 1983, resulted in the deaths and harm of several hundred Hill Country Tamils who were internally displaced from their plantation homes. On top of being stateless, Hill Country Tamils faced a literal uprooting from their residences and their sense of belonging in Sri Lanka was irreparably shattered.

Nearly three years after the war has ended and despite re-instated citizenship rights, improved labor conditions, and higher degrees of political representation, the plantation sector is still one of the most deficient in healthcare, literacy, and higher education. These social indicators of deficiency are most prominent among Hill Country Tamil women, who comprise more than half of the plantation work force, but suffer the greatest marginalization due to patriarchal forms of domination, unequal labor practices, and, in some cases, violence and abuse. But with the civil war in full force until May 2009, the concerns of this minority community have more or less been sideswiped by the exclusionary Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms and as a result have faded into the backdrop of Sri Lanka's political landscape.

As the first grant-appropriate, compiled version of Hill Country Tamil history that I had encountered through readings of various historical and official texts on the plantations, this history made sense on paper. Furthermore, its purchase made it compelling enough to retell, and I spent the next year and a half retelling it in preparation for field research. Looking back at this fledgling period, I now see how my desire to fight

that looming instability of knowledge that all Sri Lankans living outside Sri Lanka possess, in fact, led me down a path of stringent categorization. I had never spoken to a Malaiyaha Tamil currently living on Sri Lanka's tea plantations; I had never walked onto a tea plantation, and I had never stepped inside a line room. The history that I had learned had been stripped of any emotional connection, collaborative process, and meaningful contemplation. More importantly, significant parts of this history had most certainly not been conjured by any member of the Malaiyaha Tamil community living on Sri Lanka's tea plantations.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

This dissertation seeks to destabilize this history in hopes of better understanding the contemporary subjectivities of Malaiyaha Tamil gender, community, and development on Sri Lanka's tea plantations. Attending to these three spheres of collective practice—plantation life, migrant labor experience, and human development—I argue that Malaiyaha Tamils actively challenge historical representations of bonded labor and political voicelessness in order to rewrite their representative canon in Sri Lanka.

Chapter One takes key colonial and postcolonial moments in Malaiyaha Tamil history and political and economic points in which the question of their minority status was put on trial. By examining the process of minoritization, I use this history to contextualize the current issues of political alienation and economic struggle that workers and their representatives face today. I conclude by providing a working concept of

community that seeks to unhinge Malaiyaha Tamil belonging from more rigid understandings of their placement in Sri Lanka and place them within more pragmatic and future-oriented modes of belonging.

Chapter Two explores the core of this pragmatic community and explores gender subjectivities that emerge on the plantations among retired, married, and sterilized women. These narratives contribute to what Valentine Daniel calls a Malaiyaha Tamil “bardic heritage” (1996: 30-1), and I argue that this heritage is what makes Malaiyaha Tamil women significant producers of knowledge within their communities. Chapter Three continues exploring plantation subjectivity and focuses on the themes of movement and migrant labor and their effects on plantation group life dynamics and aspirations. With younger generations, wives, and husbands moving off of the plantation for work in Colombo or abroad, movement becomes a strategy for seeking social mobility, financial security, and community recognition. That being said, reflections on the insecurities and risks associated with migrant labor such as that of domestic work and undocumented urban work present contradictions and split subjectivities of pride and fear among community members, politicians, and development actors.

Chapter Four expands upon this question of assigning risk and focuses on the work of plantation NGOs and development workers who seek to improve the Malaiyaha Tamil community by improving living conditions and raising awareness around human rights. After providing a brief history of plantation development, I explore rights-based strategies and forms of global and transnational solidarity building that seek to release the working, Malaiyaha Tamil woman from paternalistic forms of development and labor. I

conclude by exploring what such development work entails—namely, the production of categories of risk. I contend that such categories of risk can produce cultural stigmas about plantation life and, in doing so, further complicate the goals and methodologies of development practice on the ground.

Chapter Five concludes the dissertation by rethinking what knowledge is being produced and circulated among and for Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations. Working through their own expertise and knowing of their place in Sri Lanka, this minority community also engages techno-political forms of authority and knowledge that attempt to place and regard them on different terms. Using patient narratives and an exploration of a healing ritual in response to illness, I contend that Malaiyaha Tamils cultivate their own forms of expertise to tame uncertainty for the most possibility-enabling future.

METHODOLOGY

From October 2008 to October 2009 I carried out ethnographic research in Sri Lanka and with funding support from the National Science Foundation and Green Harbor Foundation. I spent the first month in Colombo, where I collected development and historical documents and spoke to politicians, activists, government ministry officials, and NGO personnel working in the plantation sector. In Colombo, I had the good fortune of meeting a local artist who gave me the contact information of a former plantation manager, Dillon, who had worked in the Hatton area. I contacted Dillon, and he told me that he knew of a family that I could stay with outside Hatton during my research period.

Grateful for this contact, I proceeded to Kandy, the second largest city in Sri Lanka located in Central Province. Here, I stayed at the quarters of a local plantation NGO that was one of the first of its kind in the plantation sector for one month. I used the NGO's extensive library on plantation, labor, and religious literature, and I participated and observed development and vocational trainings designed for a multi-ethnic rural and plantation youth and adults. I also met with other Kandy-based NGOs and union offices that were working closely with other development actors in Sri Lanka on Malaiyaha Tamil plantation issues. It was in Kandy that I met Kannaki, a plantation NGO field site coordinator for plantations outside Kandy town. I shared with her my plans to go to Hatton, and she introduced me to her elder brother and his family who were living and working on a plantation outside Hatton town and coincidentally close by to the place of residence that Dillon had mentioned.

In January 2008, I traveled to Hatton, a hill station town in Central Province's Nuwara Eliya district sitting an elevation of 1271 meters above sea level. Under the Hatton-Dickoya Urban Council, Hatton joins with its smaller suburb-like town, Dickoya, and is surrounded by tea plantations. I spent the next ten months conducting ethnographic field research in two distinct spaces. In Hatton town, I worked with local NGOs and community leaders, observing their development initiatives and participating and observing workshops, seminars, and trainings for Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents living in and around the Hatton area. I spent the rest of my time conducting ethnographic research among Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents living within one of four divisions

of an estate called Kirkwall,¹² which was situated within a larger tea plantation approximately twelve kilometers outside Hatton and about only one hundred and fifty to two hundred yards from where I stayed.¹³ The division where I studied was primarily composed of Malaiyaha Tamils with the exception of a few Sinhala family members who were visiting the residences of their relations now and then. The sex, work force, and union data for Kirkwall Division, which was given to me by the plantation management staff, was as follows in the year of 2008-2009:

Figure 2.
Available Statistical Data for Kirkwall Division
(Data tabulated by Kirkwall staff at the end of January 2009)

Number of Persons, Sexes, and Households

Male	231
Female	249
Total # of Person	480
Total # of Families	82
Total # Line Rooms	107

Work Force (Registered & Casual)

	Resident	Non-Resident	Total
Male	36	36	72
Female	88	53	141
Total	124	89	213

Worker-Union Affiliations
(Data tabulated by Kirkwall staff at the end of March 2009)

¹² Pseudonym

¹³ I made the conscious decision to stay outside Hatton town so that I could be closer to the estates and maximize the amount of time in the days that I could spend there. Bus, while regular, were not frequent at night, and I would often spend nights in the homes of my interlocutors on various estates (Maskeliya, Norwood, Talawakelle, Kandy, Hatton) and/or only come home for or after dinner/sundown.

Union Name	# of Workers
Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC)	47
Democratic Workers' Congress (DWC)	18
Up-Country People's Front (UPF)	37
Non-Members	17

Through these community members and other contacts, I also interacted with plantation residents and Malaiyaha Tamils in hill station towns and areas outside Hatton. Having witnessed the social and interactional shifts that take place in the presence of NGO workers among plantation residents, I chose not to work with any escorting research assistants while on Kirkwall. But I did, however, work with a woman research assistant, who helped me prepare off-site transcriptions of my interviews and other audio recordings.

CAVEATS IN EMERGENCY

Emergency rule due to the intensity of fighting in the final months of war proved to be challenging for conducting field research among this minority, Tamil-speaking, worker community. In Colombo, Kandy, and Hatton I was required to register with the local police and provide a letter of support from my place of residence and organizational affiliation in person at the station before commencing any research. Just three days into my stay in Colombo, the street in which I stayed in Bambalapitiya was blocked off for a random search and cordon at seven in the morning, and at least twice a week I was randomly checked at bus, junction, and pedestrian security checkpoints.

While Kandy proved to be a more relaxed site in terms of security checks, I encountered difficulties in the area that I stayed in outside Hatton town because it was located on the edge of a High Security Zone.¹⁴ In preparation for research, I immediately registered with the Hatton police and secured a formal letter of affiliation from the Hatton NGO that I was working with, and it was written in Sinhala and English. The area was also unique because a Government-installed Sinhala village bordered the plantation off of the main road and near the dam. As time progressed and I made stronger connections with Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents on Kirkwall, rumors apparently began spreading in the nearby non-estate areas about my status as a “Jaffna Tamil” (i.e., not Malaiyaha Tamil but Sri Lankan Tamil from the North or East)¹⁵ girl who did not speak Sinhala or Tamil and was living on the estate. Five months into research, unidentified persons had seen me walking on the road with some of my interlocutors to the nearby *kadai* (street shop) one afternoon, and the next day, I was paid a visit by the nearby Navy guards who questioned me; they later told me that I was a “Jaffna Tamil” girl and that they had received a call about my presence in the area. A few months later, when I visited an interlocutor’s child with a family at the nearby hospital, an unidentified person told the estate doctor that I was “taking children to hospitals” and I was questioned by him, and he turned out to be, in fact, very cordial and welcoming of my presence on Kirkwall. In

¹⁴ The HSZ was in place because the water supply of a nearby dam, Castlereagh Reservoir, controls all of the power supplies for Nuwara Eliya district. To get to a particular estate that I visited often, I had to travel by bus and get off and on for a person-person checkpoint at the navy barracks. According to my interlocutors, the area was under strict surveillance because it was perceived to be an ideal target for a possible LTTE or terrorist attack.

¹⁵ In my conversations with Malaiyaha Tamils in research, I would share my familial origins with them—namely that my father was from the Northern Sri Lanka and my mother from Eastern Sri Lanka, and that I was, in fact, Sri Lankan Tamil but held American citizenship.

the final months of research, rumors were still persisting about my identity, despite the end of war. Due to an anonymous call in these months, I was taken in for questioning by the Hatton police for unspecified reasons. At this point, the plantation manager who had given me permission to conduct research on Kirkwall had left for another post, and the woman who I stayed with suggested that I pay the new *dorai* a visit to gain more security in the area. I explained myself to him, shared with him my research goals, and did not have further issues in the last month of research.

During each of these interrogation occasions, it became clear to the security forces that I, in fact, spoke Tamil (give my ability to speak in Tamil with Tamil-speaking police officers in Hatton) and that I was from the United States (given my passport and visa), and that I had registered with and obtained permissions from all required parties to conduct my research (with the police, NGO, and plantation management). Among trusted circles of friends on Kirkwall, we began joking that the only group left to question me was the Army since the Navy and Police had already had the occasion. Nervous jokes aside but necessary, the overwhelming sense of being watched by those unidentified was concerning and gave me insight into the type of emergency circumstances that Tamil-speaking civilians face in the Hill Country on a daily basis.

For these reasons, I did not obtain more statistical data regarding sensitive topics such as caste, marriage patterns, age breakdown, and health factors per household on Kirkwall as initially intended. After initial attempts to collect this data through the use of written or verbal questionnaires or surveys, I was told that I should avoid any formal methodologies of obtaining data for the purposes of preserving the security and safety of

my worker and resident friends. This advice cautioned me to avoid the risks that someone would interpret my questions as ill intended as a researcher and further compromise an already tense and surveillanced project. In lieu of substantial quantitative data, however, I found that the security situation ended up being a surprising methodological boon; it gave me unmediated and more open access to the women with whom I worked and who took it upon themselves to be my helpers in, what turned out to be, a joint project of sorts. The empowerment of my interlocutors as experts of *their* residence (to which I was a visitor) and their knowledge of my Tamil origins somewhat softened our perceived differences in status and privilege. Furthermore, these women were keenly aware that communities outside the plantation and nation-state would be interested in their life histories as part of a wider struggle of gender, class, and ethnicity. This awareness was a distinctive discovery in my study. The more outspoken women and with whom I had stronger connections would, at one time or another in intense conversation, even charge me with the responsibility and duty of disseminating their experiences to this wider world. It was a role that I had not expected, and one which went beyond the limits of my own goals: namely, to accept me as a researcher who came to their community to ask questions for the purpose of learning from and about them and to share, with their consent, what I learned with a wider world through anthropological study.

For these reasons, I engaged in gendered spaces and conversations that were not ordinarily accessible to male or non-Sri Lankan, non-Tamil-speaking researchers. I recorded oral histories, stories and casual conversations about forced sterilization, reproductive choice, domestic violence, labor practices, being an ethnic minority in a

majoritarian state, and decisions that women and men were making to leave the plantations and work as domestic and semi-skilled workers¹⁶ in Colombo and the Middle East. As a result, I became privy to information and sentiments that had not been documented in the social sciences, in general, and in anthropology, in particular.

If this study moves toward any goal, it seeks to return the dignity and care to those women and men on Kirkwall and other plantations who welcomed, fed, and took me into their homes, kitchens, and minds in order to share their aspirations and experiences. This study seeks to acknowledge the persistence of Hill Country community members and activists with whom I spoke and who shared with me the reasons that they take on the tasks of building solidarities in hopes of a better future. In doing so, I want to bring attention to the stumbles, successes, and contradictions that they faced along the way as minorities and workers engaged in transnational and global forms of cultural and economic exchange and production. In times of war, insecurity, and not knowing what was to come in the future, I can say, with some confidence, that each person that I spoke to in Sri Lanka took a chance to speak with me when they did. It is with this chance that I attempt to write about their words and deeds in my care.

¹⁶ In this study, I use the term “domestic worker” instead of maid or housemaid/help to express solidarity and align with the language of the Domestic Workers’ Union (DWU), Women’s Working Front (WWF), and International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention on Domestic Workers Rights.

CHAPTER ONE PUSHING THE BOUNDS OF MALAIYAHA TAMIL COMMUNITY

The planters decided in the 1840s that the best way the control their labor force was to create a permanently resident population of workers, and a community of settled Plantation Tamils emerged in the 1850s.

-Patrick Peebles, *The Plantation Tamils of Ceylon* (2001)



Figure 3. Sri Lanka's current 100-rupee note and a photograph of a contemporary Malaiyaha Tamil tea plucker on an estate outside Kandy taken in late 2008 during field research. Photographs were taken by author.

PART ONE: THE CURRENCY OF A NATION

On the back of Sri Lanka's one hundred-rupee note, two women are plucking tealeaves on a hilled slope. Their heads are covered to protect them from cooler and harsher elements of the Hill Country, and they smile with subdue as they carry out their work. Sri Lanka's Malaiyaha Tamil women were not accidentally selected as indices of the national

economy's success; the image of the idyllic agricultural laborer signifies the calculated construction of colonial capitalist production and Sri Lanka's interest in promoting an image of a symbiotic relationship between the worker and the nation. As Peebles cogently argues above, the Plantation Tamil community was the product of a colonial desire to control its laboring members for the purpose ensuring maximum economic return. Facilitating the conditions of permanent residence for Tamil plantation laborers—once a strategy of colonial capitalist enterprise—would eventually become the defining aspect of Malaiyaha Tamil political community-formation in postcolonial Ceylon and Sri Lanka.

In the first half of this introductory chapter, I discuss the political and labor-oriented events that have come to define Malaiyaha Tamil history in colonial and postcolonial Ceylon and Sri Lanka. Understanding of this history is critical to grounding the current perspectives that Malaiyaha Tamil politicians, union representatives, and community activists hold about the present and future of their minority community in Sri Lanka. Engaging Jean-Luc Nancy's claim that community is in the realm of the political (1991: xxxvii), I contend that colonial intentions of capitalist labor control and early postcolonial forms of political exclusion uniquely shaped the contemporary understandings of community that circulate among and regarding the place of the minority and laborer within broader discourses of labor production, state-building, and political recognition.

In the second half of this chapter, I use this history and key theoretical works to present my own working concept of Tamil community on the plantations and the current

conditions by which we can begin to think about community-formation among this minority, laborer resident population. I engage the perspectives of Malaiyaha Tamils, Sri Lankan anthropologists, human rights activists, and political theorists who have duly noted the life stakes and desires that motivate one to find solidarity with and claim membership among other individuals and groups in Sri Lanka. I also use moments and narratives from field research that might help us understand the unique dynamic of community that Malaiyaha Tamils experience on the plantation and beyond. Working through these field-oriented and theoretical engagements, I seek to present a definition and application of the term “community” as understood in the Sri Lankan Malaiyaha Tamil context.

BREAKING THE BONDS OF COLONIAL COMMUNITY

In 1967, D.M. Forrest wrote *A Hundred Years of Ceylon Tea*, a commemorative volume dedicated to the first one hundred years of tea production in British colonial Ceylon. Of the Malaiyaha Tamil tea plantation workers, whose labor had sustained the successes of the industry, Forrest seldom wrote. But one of his passages addresses them as follows:

The Tamil who made the long journey from his South Indian home found an environment suited to him and a standard of living which, simple as it was, surpassed in most respects what he could have hoped for in his native village. He and his wife and children enjoyed the field-work and stuck to it well, . . . looking, as an early observer noted, ‘like a flock of dark sheep grazing’ . . . What we have seen . . . is the emergence, after all the storms and setbacks, of the typical Ceylon tea estate as a go-ahead, prosperous, and (in Victorian terms) well-balanced community (Forrest 1967:113-4).

With colonial conceptions of community rooted in territoriality and place, the planters and administrators had employed disciplinary tactics that would make laborers at once mobile and immobile according to the shifting possibilities afforded by the plantation economy. Entrenched in systems of capital, the labor regime's hegemonic control over bodily movement produces actualized consequences for the ways in which Malaiyaha Tamils perceive their worth and sense of belonging in Sri Lanka today.

Visitors, Sri Lankan and non-Sri Lankan alike, often consider the Hill Country landscape a representational schema of colonial pleasure and indulgence. The scale of the rolling, green hills and contours of perfectly manicured tea bushes provide them with an appetite for enjoying the colonial aesthetics of control. Former superintendent bungalows have been turned into luxury boutique hotels complete with a replica Malaiyaha Tamil wait staff that would have served the white *dorais* ("masters") and their guests from Colombo or abroad. Visitors can even trek within the plantations and watch Tamil women pluck tealeaves, all the while never interacting with them or asking them about their lives and families. These idealized constructions aim to keep the Malaiyaha Tamil silent and, in D.M. Forrest's sense, a voiceless, toiling animal—a mere fixture on the plantation landscape. Just as the tourist's framing of a photo focuses on or excludes the Native, the overwhelming presence of imperial nostalgia presents an open palette for selectively consuming images and experiences that seldom speak out and apart from the colonial ideal.

From the colonial and managerial perspective, community can be defined as the company's ability to provide security by exerting sustained power over its resident

members. The tea plantation had and still has the potential structure and necessary provisions to fully satisfy the life needs of Tamil estate workers and their families. Such conceptualizations affirm previously held claims in plantation scholarship that the plantation is an “enclave,” (Bandarage 1983, Moore 1985, Biyanwila 2011) and all-encompassing “total institution” ([Goffman 1961] Loganathan 1990, Hollup 1994) isolated geographically and culturally from broader forms of civic life and society. The planters and colonial administrators who had pushed for this construct of *community* had long considered the capital-producing benefits of such a conception. But these restrictive conditions of membership did not fulfill what the Malaiyaha Tamil tea plantation worker could have hoped for in the long run.

Today, Malaiyaha Tamils find their community interests within forms of membership and security that provide previously unattained forms of potential and dignity in Sri Lanka and beyond. How did the colonial means to preserving a Malaiyaha Tamil “community”—i.e. through labor control—in fact produce this excess of desire for community-formation on the plantation and beyond? This questions encourages us to destabilize the colonial ideals for Plantation Tamil community and pursue more nuanced ways of thinking about how contemporary Malaiyaha Tamils negotiate their attachments to the plantation and self-cultivated aspirations that go beyond its geographic boundaries. These desires are also directly linked to key social and political moments in Sri Lanka’s history that cultivated within Malaiyaha Tamils an existential sense of insecurity and exclusion. In British Ceylon, the Plantation Tamil community was considered alien and not worthy of residency; in postcolonial Sri Lanka, continual states of emergency,

internal displacement, and waves of exclusionary Sinhala and Tamil nationalist movements created a unique environment in which the precarious relationship among vulnerability, self, and community became even more heightened for minorities. Despite the end of the civil war in May 2009, Malaiyaha Tamils still work within frames of political marginalization and ethnic and class-based discrimination that have developed over time and provide fertile ground for the formation of their distinct needs and interests.

THE MINORITY QUESTION BEFORE INDEPENDENCE

The contemporary relationship between insecurity and development in Malaiyaha Tamil politics and community building in Sri Lanka finds its underpinnings in the question of the minority representation in colonial Ceylon and postcolonial Sri Lanka. Marked events of minoritization dating from the early 1900s to early 2000s significantly shape the articulated interests and demands of today's Malaiyaha Tamil political and community leaders. The following section details key political moments that gesture to the question of minority representation and work through its definitions and place in Sri Lanka.

When independence became an actualized possibility in the early 1920s, Ceylon nationals began contemplating the role that minorities would play in a newly representative Ceylonese state. In 1919, the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) took shape as a political association of elite Ceylonese individuals from various backgrounds to advocate for their political stakes in the British colony. Though initially multiethnic by composition, CNC had, by 1922, become increasingly dominated by Sinhala majoritarian

interests. Ceylon Tamil Congress member, Ponnambalam Arunachalam, the CNC's inaugural President and staunch supporter of a multiethnic, cooperative Ceylon polity, had withdrawn from leadership, and the unofficial minority interests of the Legislative Council¹⁷ had begun to manifest in weak political alliances that were subjected to the manipulations of British colonial administrators holding official members. In August 1922, the CNC sent a telling Memorial to the Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies, Winston Churchill, in which they expressed their collective concern over the question of minority representation in Ceylon:

In regard to the minorities, the Congress has repeatedly put the question as to what their separate interests are as distinct from the interests of the country generally. This question still remains unanswered and will never be answered for the obvious reason that they [the minorities] have no separate interests . . . having secured all they wanted and even more, the minorities are now asked to sit in judgment on the form and strength of the representation to be given to the country generally of which they are comparatively a negligible factor (Bandaranaike 1928:421).

The statement, made twenty-six years before Ceylon's independence, eerily finds mutual language with the following excerpt from the speech that President Mahinda Rajapakse gave in Parliament immediately following the killing of LTTE leader Prabhakaran and the end of the thirty-year civil war in May 2009, which I first discussed in the Introduction and repeat here for emphasis:

We have removed the word minorities from our vocabulary three years ago. No longer are the Tamils, Muslims, Burghers, Malays and any others minorities. There are only two peoples in this country. One is the people that love this

¹⁷ The Legislative Council was established in 1833 by recommendation of the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission and is considered the first legal form of representative government in Ceylon, but whose official members were only British (unofficial members included some Ceylonese elites)

country. The other comprises the small groups that have no love for the land of their birth. Those who do not love the country are now a lesser group.¹⁸

What had happened to minority interests in colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka between 1922 and 2009 such that the language of exclusion could persist and function in the name of national interests? What conditions allowed Ceylonese colonial subjects, looking up to the horizon of sovereignty, to pivot their desires for the nation on the denial of distinctive minority interests? Why was and, in many ways, is the minority considered a threat to the nation's survival and strength?

Between 1912 and 1949, minorities in Ceylon provided multiple and often dissenting evidence to the assertions of the CNC and proved that they, as “negligible” groups, in fact, had interests that were distinct from the general interests of the future Ceylon nation. As independent Ceylon became an emerging possibility, the pressures imposed on Ceylon nationals to conform ideas of “representation” with the logic of *representativeness* or a “politics of statistics” (Appadurai 1993:332, Chatterjee 1993:203, Krishna 1999:51) became increasingly clear. The CNC's claim of the minority “negligibility” in relation to the greater nation's interests suggested that enumerations of community would triumph over communal interests. This precondition of “representativeness” in colonial Ceylon would later provide a fertile yet disciplined economy of words and deeds in which majority and minority groups were compelled to vie for their social standing and recognition in the political sphere.

¹⁸ English translation of speech provided by the following website:
http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/shrilanka/document/papers/president_speech_parliament_defeatofLTTE.htm

With Ceylon politicians and colonial administrators abandoning the ideal sense of “representation,” minorities readily engaged in the politics of *representativeness*, a way of communicating that provided a terminology of representation that could be of use and circulate in the political climate of nation-building. In the next section of this chapter, I will explore the social history of the concept, “minority representation,” in the political economy of Ceylon between 1912 and 1949. In doing so, I will use key moments in which the concept manifest in the debates and discussions on state-building that serve as a foundation for the eventual marginalization and disenfranchisement of Malaiyaha Tamils on the eve of independence. What were the circumstances in which the concept of minority representation became available for circulation? What political and economic forces enabled this concept to gain currency in the years leading up to Ceylon’s independence? While this colonial period may seem distant to the state of minority politics in Sri Lanka during the immediate aftermath of civil war in mid-2009, it shares an shared existential sense of uncertainty as to possibilities and impossibilities of building and rebuilding the state. This shared ground, I believe, directly impacted the formation of minority politics for Malaiyaha Tamils and the social possibilities that they were afforded under such terms of representation.

THE EXCLUSIONARY FORCE OF STATE BUILDING

Extending from the Enlightenment Project, reforms pushed by both colonial administrators and politicians dominated the political debates on the island between 1912 and 1919 and provided social and economic incentives through which viable forms of

“representation” took hold. As mentioned earlier, the Legislative Council provided the means by which British colonial administrators were able to maintain centralized control over the economic development of a territorially unified colony. Its creator—the Colebrooke-Cameron Reforms of 1833—also included repeated reconfigurations of provincial boundaries, improved modes of communication within the island’s territory, and economic expansion vis à vis the growth of the plantation industries, imperial trade, and commercial activity. The structure of the Council, however, left the desire for an elective principle of representation for Ceylonese nationals unfulfilled. Within this body, regulated gubernatorial nomination, practices of political patronage, and communal forms of recognition had restricted the forms of representation among the Council’s Unofficial Members. This tactic of colonial governmentality was, as K.M. de Silva contends, a “representative legislature in embryo,” (1981: 262); but this was only to the extent that its imperialist nature nurtured the agitation for further constitutional reform and a self-representative government on behalf of Ceylon’s colonized subjects. As David Scott claims, the Council also introduced Ceylon nationals to a “new game of politics,” through which they could be recognized and considered as “political” subjects” (Scott 1999:45). Compelling are the ways in which Ceylonese colonial subjects engaged in self-making practices and the consequences they presented for the debates on representation, self-government, and the exclusion of minorities.

To British colonial administrators, only those colonized subjects who actively welcomed and engaged the conceived benefits of the Enlightenment project—reason, education, and progress—could be capable of being represented; furthermore, they had to

simultaneously support and maintain the founding principles of the imperialist scheme. This colonial strategy particularly informed the emerging concept of minority representation in Ceylon and later minority politics to ensue following independence. First, colonial administrators all too quickly assumed that the conceptual transition from communal to territorial representation, as reinforced by the linearity of the Enlightenment project, would hold in the minds of Ceylon's colonized residents. Second, territorial representation had been located within the interests of an emerging elite class that had land and wealth-acquiring interests and access to education. The concept of territory dominated debates on representation and was slowly becoming the desired end for Ceylonese nationals as colonial administrators had hoped. In this sense, desires for representations were as Partha Chatterjee contended: "community would be banished from the kingdom of capital" (1993: 236), and territorial delineation would be emplaced firmly into the minds of the colonized by normative forms of colonial regimentation. But where the strategy faltered was in its inability to predict the continual and ever-growing strength of communal allegiances between and among distinct corporate entities *alongside* claims for territorial representation. This backfire of imperialist logic provided a moment in which minorities in Ceylon could potentially recognize that the constructions established to maintain the colony's political economy could provide "subterranean, potentially subversive" (Chatterjee 1993:236) forms of representation. This tactic would make its way into the normative modes of political discourse in the 1920s and through the 1940s as Ceylonese politicians anticipated the formation of an independent state.

As hinted at by the Churchill memo, the question of minority representation became even more prominent in the debates of the CNC during the 1920s. Professing ideals of national unity and ethnic harmony in the name of economic and social reform, the CNC's main goal was to agitate for constitutional change in opposition to Governor Manning's push for communal electorates that would potentially support the safeguarding of minorities' interests. Though representatives from minority groups of Ceylon were present at the CNC's founding in 1919, they found that its elitist composition and opposition to protecting their rights provided little flexibility for the recognition of group interests, and they soon defected.¹⁹

In 1920, however, Legislative Council member and Ceylon Tamil, P. Ramanathan, sent Governor Manning a secret "Minority Memorial," which would prove interesting for minority debates in the years to follow. In the Memorial, Ramanathan claimed that minority groups across Ceylon had joined in solidarity in order to discount the CNC as a true representational body. Furthermore, the Memorial stated that the "Sinhalese Members of the Council . . . have no claim to speak for anybody but themselves" and that "communities differing from each other in race, religion, and social structure cannot justly be 'shoved' into a general electorate" (Bandaranaike 1928: 430, 437). Following the Memorial's publication in the *Ceylon Daily News*, the CNC vilified

¹⁹ The exception was Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam, Ceylonese Tamil elite and CNC founder. However, he too left the CNC in 1921.

Ramanathan for daring to speak on behalf of *all* minorities, and most of the leaders²⁰ that were implicated as signatories to the Memorial later refuted their alleged affiliations.

Regardless of their refutations, Ramanathan's Memorial directly addressed the growing fear among Tamils and other minorities that a Sinhala majority could and would determine a minority's respective representation and ultimately consider the group's contributions negligible and ancillary to the social and economic concerns of a Sinhala-dominated polity. At the same time, his claim to represent the opinions of all minorities and the return to communal representation were viewed as setbacks to the political and economic progress of the unified Ceylon territory. Even Vaithialingam Duraiswamy, a Jaffna Tamil and founder of the Hindu Board for Education who would later support the Jaffna Youth League's boycott of the 1931 minority-inimical Donoughmore-reformed elections, made the following statement as first Speaker of the Council: "If we have to hand the guidance of our political matters to the Minorities what is our political worth? . . . I will never support any scheme of that kind that commits the Tamils to the back-waters of political uselessness" (Bandaranaike 1928:445). What social and economic factors had convinced Duraiswamy and other politicians that the minorities of Ceylon²¹ did not—or rather, should not have any "separate interests" from the interests of the general country? For Ceylon nationalists, the colonial regime had already established such norms of

²⁰ Although the CNC Handbook notes that the Minority Memorial was a joint memorandum of "European, Burgher (Mr. Arthur Alvis), Tamil (P. Ramanathan), Mohammedan (Mr. Kamer Cassim), and Indian Members of the [Legislative Council]" the Tamil representative from the Eastern Council (Mr. E.R. Tambimuttu), all minorities excepting Ramanathan and Alvis denied their affiliation with the document in a drawn-out print media debate (Bandaranaike 1928:443-57).

²¹ It is important to note that Duraiswamy would not allow himself to consider the Minorities to be inclusive of his fellow Ceylon Tamils.

representation. These norms were conveyed through state reforms and were based on liberal ideals of progress and elitist privileges such as patronage, education, and profession. *Communal* representation, giving preference to the corporate entity rather than the individual, would not support the political economy and progress of the polity; thus, minorities, in having potentially communal and distinct interests, were interpreted as being relegated to the “back-waters of political uselessness.” The ideology of *representativeness*—as enacted in the colonial enumeration and reconfiguration of historical communities had deemed territorial representation most suitable to maintaining an efficient level of economic control and colonial prosperity. Thus, to concede to the minorities along lines of communal representation would mean abandoning territorial representation as the economic and political end of the soon-to-be self-governing Ceylon polity.

The push by minorities for communal representation did not lose its enchantment; rather it lost the ability to sustain itself within political debates in Ceylon during the 1930s and 1940s. This was particularly evident in the aftermath of the 1931 Donoughmore Constitution and its introduction of concepts of territoriality such as “universal franchise,” “domicile,” and “abiding interest” (Peebles 2001:152). These statistical concepts, when enacted and put into motion, produced a series of commitments and entitlements that enabled forms of social stratification along lines of caste, class, gender, and residence. In the case of communities of lesser numbers who were vying for representation, these terms became the grounds upon which a politics of minoritization developed more emphatically and meaningfully in Ceylon.

Immediately following the Donoughmore Constitution's establishment of the Sinhala elite-dominated State Council in 1931, restrictive measures were placed upon Plantation Tamil franchise, and minorities had come to realize that representation was not only a marker of status and roles but also of difference and inequality. The concept of minority representation in Ceylon was in desperate need of reform, and G.G. Ponnambalam, a Ceylon Tamil politician and founder of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (ACTC), made a unique and far-reaching demand for Fifty-Fifty majority-minority representation, which provided the first revolutionary yet engaging attempt to rupture the normative distinction of the majority and minority binary. To replace the binary, he favored the notion of equal communities and balanced representation between majority and minority groups of a unified polity; this single unit, furthermore, was at once aware of their privileges, separate interests, and differences, but willing to break away from the rationalization of *representativeness* that had dominated the last twenty years of Ceylon politics. The campaign, despite its initial momentum and support from politicians in the Tamil-dominated Northern and Eastern Provinces, did not take with the larger Ceylon polity and was rejected by Governor Caldecott in 1937. Its failure confirmed the difficulty to create sustainable forms of solidarity among minorities and would later surface in the postcolonial politics of Sri Lanka with regards to Malaiyaha Tamil political development amidst the emergence of Tamil nationalism and desires for a separatist state. Even after presenting Fifty-Fifty within the representation scheme of the ACTC, Ponnambalam was forced into compromise, and the concept of minority representation again became bound to the disciplined rationality of numbers.

The failures to break away from the majority-minority distinction and sustain solidarity among the minorities were further exacerbated by the Soulbury Commission's arrival to the island in 1944. During this commission, the debate over Plantation Tamil franchise turned decidedly communalistic. Although the Head of the Board of Ministers, D.S. Senanayake, claimed to be above the so-called divisive throes of communalism, he found himself entrenched in the nationalistic practices of political exclusion. In a 1940 address to the Jaffna Youth Congress he said, "I am totally unconcerned as to which community an elected representative may belong so long as he is a member of the indigenous population. The Indian Tamils are not members of the indigenous population." (Russell 1982:248). Some scholars, such as Kodikara, attribute the push for disenfranchisement to the fact that Plantation Tamils, as defined by the terminology of "abiding interests," "domicile," and "permanent settlement," were, in fact, "an unassimilated minority" with strong communal allegiances and affiliations with India (1971:213). Other scholars, such as Nawaz Dawood, claim that Plantation Tamils had a "temporary interest in the land [that] was much less" (Dawood 1980: 59-60). But as, Patrick Peebles (2001) contends, these claims of transience and disinterest fail to represent the realities and dispositions of Plantation Tamils who were actively seeking citizenship and felt strongly about their residence and belonging in Ceylon. Furthermore, alienating forms of representations such as these ("unassimilated" and "non-Ceylonese") contributed to the further exclusion of minorities²² and resulted in the loss of citizenship

²² See Uyangoda's discussion in *Question of Minority Rights* regarding the Tamil minority problem as problem of assimilation (2001:95).

and disenfranchisement of Plantation Tamils by the Ceylon Citizenship Act and Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) Amendment Act in 1948 and 1949 respectively.

During this pre-independence period, the social history of “minority representation” in Ceylon’s political economy revealed the ways in which Ceylon’s politicians engaged in a “politics of statistics” that was never fully in their reach or control due to the economic and political circumstances upholding the colonial administration. The code of *representativeness* and the promise of progress, as reinforced by an imagined framework of dichotomies in Ceylon, forced politicians to categorize, negotiate, and judge corporate entities and their representations as either fit and unfit for the general wellbeing and prosperity of the future Ceylon state. Integral to the development of Sri Lanka’s postcolonial minority politics are the moments that sought to rupture these very binaries and break away from the normalized processes of minoritization within colonial Ceylon political discourse. In the next section, I will discuss the key historical debates in which politicians and leaders re-enunciated the terms of minoritization after independence and focus specifically on the placement of Malaiyaha Tamils and their vying for status and citizenship rights as a minority community amidst the escalation of postcolonial ethnic conflict.

FEDERALIST FAILURES AND THE POLITICS OF PATRONGAGE

The disenfranchisement of Plantation Tamils in 1948 confirmed that the separate interests of minorities could be neither constitutionally safeguarded nor entrusted to the Sinhala majority until a consensus on just representation and distribution of lesser-numbered

groups within newly-formed state institutions could be reached. G.G. Ponnambalam's politics, despite his arduous campaign for minority rights during the Donoughmore Commission, had failed to represent Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations in D.S. Senanayake's 1948 government. Under the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, a person could claim citizenship in Ceylon by either descent or registration; descent could be pursued if a person's paternal father or grandfather had been born in Ceylon; if descent could not be proved, the applicant in question would have to prove their birth by registration of pertinent documents to make their case. Valli Kanapathipillai cogently points out that both routes were largely untenable for Tamils of Indian Origin due to the fact that birth registrations began taking place between 1895 and 1897, and not completely through the country until the 1920s (2009:42). She also makes a valid point about the gendered discrimination of its follow up act, the Indian and Pakistani Residents (Citizenship) Act of 1949. This legislation allowed non-citizens under the first act to apply for citizenship based on evidence of domicile status in Sri Lanka, and Kanapathipillai contends that this applications process limited the flow of citizenship to the paternal line even into the twenty-first century:

The great majority of Tamil women, as reproducers of an ethnic group, were therefore denied citizenship. An anomaly in the law was that until 2003^{4,23}, the children of male citizens married to foreign-born spouses could acquire Sri Lankan citizenship, while children of female citizens married to foreign spouses could not; the children of such marriage could not acquire citizenship through their mothers even if she was separated or divorced and resident in Sri Lanka . . . [this] placed the responsibility of applying for citizenship squarely on the shoulders of the male heads of households. Although women in the estates were

²³ Kanapathipillai notes as follows: "Following petitions, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2003 was passed, which entitles women married to foreign-born spouses to pass their citizenship to their children" (2009: 204).

workers, earning and contributing to their household, it was the men who were given the right to apply. There was no provision for women to apply on behalf of men. They were given the right to apply independently only on the condition that they were widows or of unmarried status and above the age of 21 (2009: 44-5).

Kanapathipillai's point is crucial for future reworkings of community among Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents. This paternalistic notion of citizenship and entitlement also produces alternative gender subjectivities around economic contribution and social possibility on today's tea plantations—a point that I will address directly in Chapters Two and Three on women and migration respectively.

With their citizenship and franchise rights taken away,²⁴ Tamils on the plantations needed a political framework and space in which their status and rights could be reclaimed and reconceptualized as both non-threatening to the Sinhala majority and enabling of a democratic, pluralist Ceylon polity. Bittersweet redress for Plantation Tamils was found in the *Ilankai Tamizh Aracu Katchi* (ITAK) or Federal Party (FP), which S.J.V. Chelvanayagam founded in 1949, after rejecting the seemingly abandoning politics of G.G. Ponnambalam (Wilson 1994:8). On one hand, the federalist platform denounced the Citizenship Acts, pointing out that Tamil minorities had been legally discriminated against under the unitary state system. On the other hand, it claimed that Tamils in Ceylon had an 'unchallengeable title to nationhood'" within "an autonomous linguistic state" (Wilson 1994:74-75). But even this declaration failed to account for the political and economic commitments that Plantation Tamils had to the Hill Country region and their livelihoods in the Central plantations areas. Though attempting to rupture

²⁴ The third and final act was the Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) Amendment Act No. 48 of 1949 that deprived non-citizens, who had previously been able to under British rule, of their right to vote (Peebles 2001: 225).

the normalized political discourses of a Sinhala-dominated state, the FP could not move far enough away from the exclusionary principles that structured the process of minoritization for Tamils. Furthermore, while the notion of a Tamil-speaking fraternity or alliance seemed tempting in lieu of the discriminatory tactics of Sinhala majoritarianism, Chelvanayagam's "classic thesis that language and territory were one" (Wilson 1994: 75) was neither feasible nor favorable because the plantations and the Plantation Tamil residing on them were geographically excluded from this linguistic state.

An exclusion of this kind was again seen with the political disengagement of the Plantation Tamil citizenship question in the signing of the 1957 Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam Pact. Chelvanayagam's inability²⁵ to secure citizenship and franchise for the Plantation Tamil community again left them without leadership and outside Ceylon Tamil discourses of minority rights. Their representation and the political solidarity between the Ceylon Tamils and Plantation Tamils were, as Valentine Daniel claims, "sacrificed to politics, the art of the possible" in that Ceylon Tamils saw the very possibility of their minority rights being afforded for the sake of abandoning the rights of Tamil-speaking minorities in the plantation areas (Daniel 1996:115). The missed opportunity to create intra-Tamil solidarity based on minority interests would again

²⁵ This is a contentious point, as Wilson claims that Chelvanayagam did not address the Plantation Tamil franchise question because CWC President, S. Thondaman, had "requested Chevanayagam to let the Prime Minister negotiate with him—so that his standing with his people would remain undisturbed" (1994:86). But Thondaman makes no reference of this intention in his autobiography, *Tea and Politics: My Life and Times*, only saying that he was "happy that [Chelvanayagam] had persuaded Bandaranaike to include a clause to review the Citizenship Act" (1994:160). From his recollections in his autobiography, it is clear that Thondaman and Banadaranaike's relationship during this period was one of political camaraderie, with both politicians aware of the "pragmatics" of politics (Daniel 1996:114). Thondaman sympathetically describes Banadaranaike as ridden with anxiety, "helpless," caught between giving Tamil-speaking peoples equal status, and "keeping his Sinhala Only constituents happy (1994:155).

surface in 1975, when the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) declared a separatist Tamil Eelam, or Tamil homeland. This decisive move in Tamil nationalism forced Plantation Tamil politician and Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) union leader, S. Thondaman, to withdraw from the association on the grounds of excluding his Malaiyaha Tamil plantation constituents.

Excluded from Tamil nationalism, Malaiyaha Tamils did find an accessible but flawed form of political representation in the trade unions. On the basic level, the unions informed Tamils working on the plantations of their rights and mobilized around wage and various labor grievances. But on the higher level of assuring fundamental human rights on a daily basis, the structure and tactics of the unions always left them underrepresented with regards to their prolonged status of statelessness and lack of franchise. Furthermore, larger and more powerful unions, such as the CWC, were becoming highly fragmented on organizational levels: caste discrimination prevented lower-caste workers from attaining upper-level positions, and female laborers felt alienated from patriarchal constructions of power (Bass 2012:113-4). These factors contributed to their inability to effectively represent this diversifying minority community and created internal rifts and lack of trust among constituents in their unionist-cum-politician leaders. In April 2012, I spoke to Meenachi, a veteran trade unionist who had, in 1941, campaigned to establish a separate trade union for women, within the Ceylon Indian Labour Congress (CILC). In our conversation, she immediately voiced her strong opinions about the CWC's leadership, particularly that of S.

Thondaman.²⁶ Though revered on the record as one of the most well known Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka (Bass 2012:107), Thondaman, she confirmed for me, was infamous not only for shifting his political allegiances but also for being seduced by the power of politics and accumulation of capital:

His life as a representative of the people was one hundred percent a lie! It was all about money for him. He took all of the money of the people and for crores and crores of money bought buildings and businesses in India to enjoy for himself. In our women's committee, we worked on the ground with the depressed and suffering people. Thondaman's history we shouldn't remember.

Her call for scholars and activists alike to re-imagine the history of leadership of Malaiyaha Tamil community is significant. As contended by scholars such as Daniel Bass (2012) and Janaka Biyanwila (2011), plantation union leaders such as Thondaman, served as hegemonic filters that came to define much of Malaiyaha Tamil possibility through their visibility, politics of patronage, and bargaining power as politicians. In these formative years during statelessness and the escalation of civil conflict, such dynamics ended up creating more distrust and distance between key union representatives and their alienated constituents.

The weakening of bargaining power was most evident in the political paralysis of Malaiyaha Tamil plantation worker representatives S. Thondaman (CWC) and Abdul Aziz of the Democratic Workers' Congress (DWC) during the negotiation of the Srimavo-Shastri Pact in 1964. Without consulting either Thondaman, who was a Minister of Parliament (MP) at the time, or other plantation trade unions, Sri Lanka Freedom Party

²⁶ The CILC did not last and Thondaman, an emerging figure in the CILC, renamed the Congress the Ceylon Workers' Congress in 1945. Soon, after, Meenaci, left the group to work in public service in the government sector, but stayed in touch with plantation unions and development groups to coordinate labor-related movements and activities.

(SLFP) party member and Ceylon's President Srimavo Bandaranaike and Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri completed the arbitrary, yet statistical exercise of dividing 975,000 stateless Plantation Tamil community into three arbitrary categories of citizen-subjects: 525,000 Indian resident repatriates (over fifteen years), 300,000 entitled to Ceylonese citizenship, and a stateless 150,000 remainder, whose status would be determined at a later date (Sahadevan 1995:195). No Plantation Tamil representative²⁷ would have agreed to leave 150,000 Plantation Tamil constituents stateless. But this was a form of calculation that could only take place between two relatively new nation-states that were concerned with their respective burdens of caring for citizenship-entitled bodies and populations. It was an exercise of governmentality or, as Partha Chatterjee says, reading through Foucault, an exercise of "costs and benefits" (Chatterjee 2004:34). Furthermore, the agreement demonstrated both states' refusals to engage the terms of minority representation in Ceylon as demanded by Malaiyaha Tamil communities and their political representatives. That Tamils on the plantations had a representative in the Cabinet at the time was not of concern; minority representation was still seen as beyond the margins of the state (Das & Poole 2004) and as foreign and undeserving of consensus by a Sinhala majoritarian nation-state. In this way, the paralysis of union representation was a by-product of the state's refusal to negotiate just terms for minority representation.

This predicament would resurface later when they would not be able to secure adequate redress for grievances experienced in the 1972 Land Reforms and 1975

²⁷ The deal furthered the rift between Thondaman and Mrs. Banadaranaike. Thondaman recalls his political contributions to the SLFP-majority Government of the early 1960s, "not even a proverbial 'voice in the wilderness,'" and called the Srimavo-Shastri Pact a "horse deal" for not even consulting the Plantation Tamil representatives before partitioning the community for repatriation (1994: 185-190).

nationalization of the plantation sector and then again with the 1992 privatization schemes that threw the plantations and the resident works forces back into the hands of private companies. Both periods of transition were detrimental for obviously administrative reasons of shifting management from the state to private sector; but even more so, the transitions blurred the lines of state and management responsibility for the workers' welfare on levels of health, education, sanitation, and housing (Caspersz et al 1995, Manikam 1995, Shanmugaratnam 1997). With the welfare of Malaiyaha Tamils living on the plantations in the hands of the private plantation company, workers and their families needed to readjust their expectations of the state and strategize how best to utilize union representations for the one issue that would determine their place in Sri Lanka: the daily estate wage.

BARGAINING IN A LABOUR REGIME

“They used to milk the cows by hand. Now they use machines, which extract both the milk and blood from the cow. This was how the past Collective Wage Agreement was done.”

-Reflections of Malaiyaha Tamil activist on September 2009's Collective Agreement

Plantation Workers' Wage Collective Agreement 2007 allotted plantation workers a Rs. 200 daily wage,²⁸ a Rs. 20 daily price share supplement, and Rs 70 daily attendance incentive.²⁹ During research, union representatives were demanding that the daily wage

²⁸ Upon this basic wage EPF and ETF benefits shall be paid.

²⁹ This supplement is only for workers whose attendance is 75% and over the number of days per month for which work is offered by the management. It is to be noted that leaving work early, taking a half-day, or coming late does not count towards this incentive.

be increased to accommodate the rise in cost of living standards. Collective bargaining practices have a long history in Sri Lanka dating back to the Trade Unions Ordinance 14 of 1935 ([Jayawardena 1972] Gunawardena and Biyanwila 2008). The first Collective Agreement (CA) in the plantation sector was signed in 1940 between the Planter representatives (Employers Planters' Association of Ceylon, Ceylon Estate Proprietary Association, Ceylon Association in London) and estate trade union representatives (Ceylon Indian Congress Labour Union, The Ceylon Indian Workers' Federation, and the All Ceylon Estate Workers' Union) (Maliyagoda 2000: 9-10). Between 1940 and 1998, various unions collectively bargained with plantation employer representatives through colonial rule and into nationalization in the 1970s. Privatization of the plantations in 1991 brought the current signatories (Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) and three trade unions—Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC), Lanka Jathika Estate Workers' Union (LJEWU), and the Joint Plantation Trade Union Centre (JPTUC)) into negotiations for the first collective agreement signed between them in 1995. The three union signatories were designated as representatives of the entire plantation labor force because their collective memberships comprised the majority (70-75%) of tea and rubber plantation workers in Sri Lanka at the time. The CA document not only covers the plantation worker's wage, but also outlines plantation employment regulations, employee benefits, estate facilities, and union and worker grievance procedures. Furthermore, the entirety of the CA document is up for re-negotiations every year and must be re-evaluated and re-signed every three years.

The remuneration package of the 2007 Wage Collective Agreement expired on March 31, 2009 without any decision regarding the re-negotiation of the contract's content and most importantly, the wage raise. According to union and media reports, the regional plantation companies (RPCs), represented by the EFC, had repeatedly refused to offer a wage raise citing the looming global economic crisis and consequent financial loss.

Talks between the RPCs and trade union representatives were held during the five and a half months in 2009, but to no desired outcome for both parties. During this time, estate laborers worked on the plantations without a contract. Acknowledging that workers needed some sort of wage raise, the RPCs offered a 12.5% increase on the current total wage (Rs 326). The unions rejected their offer and called for a basic³⁰ wage raise that would parallel the 55% cost of living increase that had taken place over the previous two years (2007-2009). When the RPCs refused their demands, the unions called for no less than Rs 500 for the basic wage on the basis of humanitarian grounds and cited the 2007 World Bank Poverty Assessment Report in their support. The RPCs then offered Rs 330 and again up to Rs 360, but the unions would not accept these raises either. It was at this point of negotiation that the unions decided to take collective action. All unions initiated a “work-to-rule” or “go-slow” campaign³¹ on September 7th, and it lasted until September 16th. According to a statement by Ministry of Plantation Industries, D.M. Jayaratne, the

³⁰ The basic daily wage (*adipadai sampalam*) does not include the daily attendance incentive and price wage supplement (inclusion of the latter is referred to as the total daily wage (*motta sampalam*)).

³¹ During such campaigns, workers perform just as they are required but no more. The primary purpose is to economically hurt company profits.

campaign cost the RPCs, over 800 million rupees in losses (Interview with Daily News, September 14, 2009). Negotiations came to a head and in the end, the Collective Agreement No. 14 of 2009 was signed on September 16th between the EFC and three union signatories. The signed and agreed upon total daily wage for plantation workers was set at a cumulative 405 rupees.



*Figure 4. Photograph taken in September 2009 of Up-country People's Front posters protesting the 2009 Collective Wage Agreement negotiations outside Kotagala town—
Top Poster: "President, intervene for estate workers' wage raise"
Bottom Poster: "Collective Agreement? Or folk-dance agreement?"
Photograph was taken by author.*

Non-signatory unions such as National Union of Workers (NUW), Up-Country Workers Front (UWF), Democratic Workers' Congress (DWC), and Ceylon Workers' Alliance (CWA), however, rejected the 2009 Collective Agreement; they claimed that the CA document was illegitimate because it had failed to include the full representation of estate workers during negotiation talks. These unions also felt that the government should

have intervened on the grounds that the 2009 CA violated International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 98,³² which Sri Lanka had ratified on December 13, 1972.³³ Furthermore, they stated that the three CA union signatories had comprised no more than 55-60%³⁴ of the plantation work force at the time of signing and were therefore unfit to make decisions for the entire plantation worker community. Lastly, the unions stated that the Rs. 405 (28.4 % increase on the total daily wage) would not be enough to meet cost of living demands not only because it did not match the percentage of inflation but also because the price wage supplement and daily attendance incentives were not be guaranteed sources of income. Plans to re-initiate the go-slow campaign following the conclusion of mid-October 2009 Tīpāvaḷi festivities were in place, but never mobilized. Thus, workers remained under this binding agreement until May 31, 2011 and began receiving their new wage on September 16, 2009.

Given the events leading up to and during the signing of the 2009 Collective Agreement, the lingering sense of betrayal and resignation among plantation workers regarding the inability of union leaders to represent their economic rights called out a general pessimism about the ability of unions to represent the people more broadly. In mid-June 2009, I met with a group of unionists and community leaders that held a meeting to discuss the Collective Agreement negotiations, and their frustrations focused

³² Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949

³³ ILO Ratification Index for Sri Lanka:
http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:11200:0::NO:11200:P11200_COUNTRY_ID:103172

³⁴ This statistic has been disputed by non-signatory unions, who say that the numbers for the three signatory unions are even lower than stated. At local protests and union discussion, leaders have cited the refusal and inability of CWC, LJEWU, and JPTUC to provide managements and other unions with up-to-date subscription records for membership verification.

on the fact that the negotiations were behind closed doors and had not incorporated the views of local *talaivars* (estate-level union leaders) and other members within their organizations. One veteran unionist raised valid questions about the transparency and dynamics of participation more generally:

What about the *kīzh makkaḷ* (“lower class or bottom people”) and those in civil society? Were they satisfied? Was there an open invitation (*azhaippu veḷippātu*) to them? In my experience, they will ask for 450 rupees and when they get 350, they will say it is enough (*pōtum*) without thinking. This wage struggle is like a disease for the plantation workers (“*Oru noy mātiri*”).

Other unionists and activists felt that the 2009 Collective Agreement was a prototypical display of the politics of opportunism and a stepping-stone for unionists-cum-politicians to secure votes for the next election and an agreement between Colombo’s *mutalāḷis*, or money-making businessmen. The frustrations also extended to the signatories after the signing. In September 2009, a CWC representative even admitted that the signatories felt “cheated” by the way in which the RPCs handled the Collective Agreement negotiations and felt as if they were forced to make a decision based on false disclosures of company profits and investments. Given that the CA would not expire until March 31, 2011, *Malaiyaha* Tamil estate workers and their representatives were forced to reflect on these missed opportunities and formulate new strategies in order to secure their social and economic rights.

Unfortunately, the next Collective Agreement, signed two years after I left Sri Lanka, did not present improvements to the negotiation process and wage raise struggle. Signed on June 16, 2011, the Collective Agreement No. 22 of 2011 raised the plantation

daily wage from the 2009 CA from 405 to 515 rupees.³⁵ Although reflecting a twenty-seven percent increase, the news did not match media reports coming out in January 2011 citing that Sri Lanka's cost of living had risen nearly two hundred percent since April 2010.³⁶ Politicians like the Democratic People's Front leader, Mano Ganesan, though not an official signatory, protested the RPCs sub-standard offers and made an interesting point about the collective bargaining process within the plantation labor regime: "We need at least 1,000 rupees per day for a decent life . . . if we demand more, the tea industry will collapse" (Wijesiriwardena 2011). His remark brings together to the conundrum faced by unions working for and representing plantation workers in a state of economic crisis and national, postwar economic reconstruction. It also calls attention to the classical Marxist point that the plantation system desires to keep wages as low as possible in order to retain maximum levels of production and profit. This dynamic, however, simply does not satisfy the workers' needs and in Mano Ganesan's words, one's hopes for a "decent life." Anxiety over the wage (*sampalam*) and, more importantly, lack thereof (*sampalam pattātu*) is crucial for our rethinking of Malaiyaha Tamil perspectives on community and how community hinges on this existential sense of insecurity and the desire for a dignified life. In the following section, I will briefly present a theoretical framing of Malaiyaha community among plantation residents; in doing so, I seek to lay down the foundations for us to understand the contemporary practices and dynamics of life, gender, and practice.

³⁵ Note that this is not the daily wage rate but cumulative wage, where Rs. 135 is not guaranteed pay. The daily wage increased from 290 to 380 rupees in this last agreement.

³⁶ Website: <http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2011/1/64161.html>

PART TWO: COMMUNITY, REVISITED

By working through the political events and dynamics of minority representation observed during research, I want to first interrogate former historical and anthropological conceptions of Malaiyaha Tamil community and suggest more attuned ways of viewing this minority worker group within their actualized realities of membership and mobility. I will then present a working understanding of community, which foregrounds the uncertainty of Sri Lankan minority politics and life as observed in the aftermath of war in 2009 among Malaiyaha Tamils in the plantation areas. This understanding not only lays down a foundation for the ethnographic narratives in the chapters to follow but also contributes to our understanding of Sri Lanka's civil war and its effect on the subjectivities of minority groups.

As evident in Patrick Peebles' account of Plantation Tamil history (2001), Malaiyaha Tamils residing on the plantations never fully accepted the purchase of labor security afforded by the managements. Nevertheless, given their histories as sites of colonial and postcolonial capitalist production, the plantations have been likened by scholars to Erving Goffman's "total institution;" and it was in these contained spaces of contiguous labor and residence, they contended, that Malaiyaha Tamils made life choices in Sri Lanka (1961). For instance, Oddvar Hollup even went so far as to claim that Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantation lived in isolation from other ethnic groups and were geographically bounded by the fields on which they toiled:

The Tamil plantation workers have largely been confined—first economically and subsequently emotionally—to the estates. Plantation Tamils, of whom most are low-status plantation workers, to some extent have been geographically and

socially isolated compared to Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamils. Plantation Tamils have lacked integration into the wider society and have remained within the territorial boundaries of the plantations, constituting a relatively “captive” and immobile labor force (1998:78)

Hollup and other scholars such as George Gnanamuttu (1979), Angela Little (1999), and Valli Kanapathipillai (2008) contend that even the more intimate spaces of family life are, to some extent, institutionalized. Tamil workers live where they labor, and amidst the land they toil to produce profits, which their own community does not primarily receive. Furthermore, the plantation is a space that is continuously reinforced by daily cultural habits and standardized labor practices. Workers live in “line rooms” which they do not own but rather inhabit only if a family member is working regularly on the plantation (Little 1999: 50-1). Lastly, in this traditionalist portrait, the estates provide their own schools (from crèche facilities to grade school level) within the plantation compound such that a worker’s child is accustomed to go to school in proximity of his mother plucking tealeaves and working in the fields (Little 1999:49). This blending of work and leisure within an institutionalized space nicely fits the category of what Goffman terms, the “encompassing tendency,” which defines the “total institution” as such (1961: 4).

But as confirmed by more recent Malaiyaha Tamil scholars (Balasundaram 2009, Bass 2012), activists and community members, it is neither practical nor realistic to fully extend Goffman’s concept to Sri Lanka’s tea plantations given the forms of migration, global communication, and media that Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents engage on a daily basis. While it is worth exploring the idea of how living in a space with no barriers and sustained institutional rule might influence the choices and movements of all who

live on the plantations, I want to urge us to go beyond Goffman's structuralist enclave and explore how more politically engaging concepts of community could be more fruitful to our endeavors.

Given the high productivity and success of the tea industry, Ceylonese (and later Sri Lankan) nationals made concerted efforts to sustain the plantation as a capitalist and institutionalized space after independence. These efforts included nationalizing the plantations through land reform in 1972 and 1975 and later privatizing these same spaces in 1992. Some activists and development workers argue that nationalization was the moment that determined the inapplicability of Goffman's term to the plantation system. For instance, Muthulingam, a seasoned Malayalam Tamil activist and director of the Institute for Social Development (ISD) in Kandy wrote to me in an email in May 2012 on the issue of the plantation as "total institution":

In 1972-75 . . . a number of plantations were distributed among to the villagers and . . . the state owned plantation companies allowed the workers to go out in search of employments. The children were given opportunity continue beyond primary education. This diversion led to another a leaf forward in 1980s. The educated youngsters of the plantations moved out in search of employment in the cities due to non-availability of employment in the plantation. The migrant labour towards increased in the later part of 1990s. The migration accelerated following the de-nationalisation of state owned plantations in 1992. The private companies promoted premature retirement soon after the take over and stop recruitment of permanent labour. At the same time, youngsters look at employments outside of plantation due social stigma or dignity and low wage. Currently 75% of youths work outside of plantation sector. Therefore the total institution is no longer valid in relation to Sri Lankan plantation labour. Above all, currently the state is responsible to look after the social welfare of the community. Except primary health care, all other needs are to be provided by the government (*Email Correspondence, May 7, 2012*)

Muthulingam's comments are striking on three levels. First, while dispelling the plantation as total institution myth with historical and political evidence, he reminds us

that economic and political shifts in capitalist production and the nation matter to Malaiyaha Tamils and minorities in Sri Lanka more broadly when constructing an idea of community. This was the case for Muslims being evicted from and losing land and their homes in Jaffna in 1990 and for Sri Lankan Tamils who were displaced during the anti-Tamil riots in 1983. For Malaiyaha Tamils, shifts from nationalization to privatization had direct impacts on their social practices, livelihoods, and economic choices.

Second, his comment about state responsibility calls out the fact Malaiyaha Tamils are now and have been citizens of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, and therefore, are entitled to be taken care of by the welfare state and receive benefits relating to language rights, free education, and government-run health services. To ignore this fact and even place it in the background of an understanding of Malaiyaha Tamil community—as the total institution conceptualization tends to do—would detract from the possibilities that their community have reached out to and strategized about for their future in Sri Lanka.

Third, he reminds us to look at the broader historical and social insecurities that the plantations, Malaiyaha Tamils, and broader nation of Sri Lanka were facing during this particular time period—namely the escalation of civil war and the ensuing violence of ethnic conflict from 1983 until 2009. The combination of these terms allows us to explore a far-reaching idea of community that hinges upon these insecurities and risks to minorities against the backdrop of the plantation labor regime and its excesses.

POLITICAL ORPHANS IN A NATION WITH NO MINORITIES

On June 6, 2009, just two and half weeks after Prabhakaran’s death, I attended a regular dialogue meeting among Malaiyaha Tamil activists, unionists, and community leaders in Hatton town. The topic was the “war situation” (*yutta nilai*) and focused on how Malaiyaha Tamils could fit within the dilemma of finding a political solution for the minority question in postwar Sri Lanka.

The dialogue began with a somber review of the known atrocities that had taken place during the final weeks of war and its devastating aftermath: over 300,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Menik Farm camp³⁷ and other IDP camps in the North’s Vavuniya district, numerous accounts of rape, photographs of dismembered children, and disappearances among separated kin. This review led to a more pointed discussion of the political role that Malaiyaha Tamils could play at this critical juncture.

The first speaker, Jeyaraman, claimed that plantation workers were always “behind” the political scene. The position of Malaiyaha Tamils in the background of Sri Lankan national politics, he said, needed to change. He then proceeded to list ten political events that had impacted Malaiyaha Tamil political participation in Sri Lanka.³⁸ Hearing the public listing of historical exclusion riled the participants, one of whom, chimed in:

Prabhakaran created fear in our hearts, regardless of being Tamil or not. In what kind of country are people placed in brackets within the law? Are we citizens or

³⁷ To get a sense of how the larger civil war impacted on this Tamil-speaking community, many of the individuals remaining in the postwar internal displacement camps in Vavuniya as of February 2010, were in fact Hill Country Tamils who — displaced twice and thrice over the past decades — had no “home” to return to.

³⁸ The 1948 Citizenship Act, 1964 Srimavo Shastri Pact, 1976 Vadukottai Resolution, 1983 July riots, 1985 Thimpu Declaration, the military intervention of Indian Peace-Keeping Forces in 1987, the 2000 Draft Constitution, 2002 CFA (for lack of power sharing at centre), and 2005 victory of the now ruling party—United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) (for political patronage and party shifting).

tenants? Our history is being forgotten. No birth certificates, forced repatriation. How do we keep a place in Sri Lankan politics when there is no national dignity or honor? We are *kuṭiyāḷ* [“tenants”]. There is no such thing as an Indian Origin Tamil anymore. Maybe in that time, it was okay to use that name, but not now. As soon as one comes to a land, you can keep that name. Now, it is not appropriate. This name must be abolished. It is a societal symptom and part of a plan to keep our exclusion in the foreground.

Nearly two hundred years since the arrival of their ancestors, Malaiyaha Tamil development and community leaders in the plantation sector were and are still fighting for the validation of their name and place in Sri Lankan society. Consistently defined in relation to the majority and in relation to their discriminating counterparts that comprise “Sri Lankan Tamils,” Malaiyaha Tamils with whom I spoke to during research in 2008 and 2009 had felt as if the polarized conflict had detracted attention from their protracted forms of political and economic marginalization on a national level. In the bloody months leading up to the end of war in May 2009, Tamil-speaking minorities in Sri Lanka were still considered a threat to national security, and this dynamic of emergency significantly impacted life on the plantations. During the first months of research and until the war’s end, there were regular police checks in the plantation lines rooms for suspicious persons and activity and to verify the reported residential registrations of all persons in each household at any given point in time. In Kirkwall division, security checks were always a concern for Malaiyaha Tamil residents, especially for those without National Identity Cards. Letchumany, a seventy-two year old retired plucker on Kirkwall told me about the intrusiveness of police checks in the lines and how it had made her constantly anxious: “To live here, you must know Sinhala. It is a must. Without it, you are in trouble. When the army comes, they are just boys, but they are frightening. They have guns and come

into house asking us who we are and why we live in our house. It is frightening.” Letchumany’s anxiety is not uncommon among Malaiyaha Tamils living on the plantations and moving about Sri Lanka in ways that would customarily be afforded to full citizens of a country. In April 2009, when Sri Lankan Security Forces and the LTTE were firing at civilians in No Fire Zones and more than 300,000 innocent civilians were trapped amidst government shelling and LTTE fire, the Government of Sri Lanka heavily censored any reporting on the war. Foreign media outlets, however, including Al-Jazeera, BBC, and networks in Tamil Nadu were providing more coverage of the atrocities. It was during this time that it was reported by human rights activists and community leaders in the plantations areas that police forces had gone through the lines and removed any television satellites that were receiving signals for Indian-based channels. Such effects of emergency and former instances of detainment and disappearance among Malaiyaha Tamils since the signing of the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act had not only relegated the Tamil language as a language of choice but also created instances where Malaiyaha Tamils were being asked, yet again, why they belonged and how they were to live their lives as a minority community. As Rajendran, a local union leader, said angrily in a postwar meeting in Hatton town, “We are political orphans (*araciyal anātaikal*), and we must be prepared to change this. A political being should be inside you and inside each family.” If this was the case, how then are we to understand the connection between political abandonment and the perspectives of estate residents such as Letchumany, whose familial space is being entered and questioned for its very belonging and

membership within the larger state? How might a working definition of community hinge on this existential sense of vulnerability among the self, community, and nation?

A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO COMMUNITY

Though the colonial conception of community desired to create a resident group of laborers that would be at once bound to the plantation labor regime and affectively attached to its so-called affordances, it did not take into account the reality that its membership had always resented the hierarchical structure through which their concept of community had been imagined. Nor did it account for the social and political effects of postcolonial ethnic strife and economic liberalization that would further destabilize the plantation enclave concept. Working with these contradictions of fixedness and instability, social relations based on individual and corporate commitments and entitlements nevertheless took shape on the plantation, and they manifest in cultural practices and habits today: individuals assumed their roles and responsibilities as marked by gender, caste, and status. Through this shared history of practice and experience as a Tamil-speaking ethnic minority in Sri Lanka, a Malaiyaha Tamil community—in the formal understanding of the term—came to be. Previous anthropological studies of Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka present their accounts by supplementing the former, more fixed understanding of community with supporting ethnographic detail and narrative. From structuralist studies of caste (Jayaraman 1975) and kinship on the estates (Hollup 1994) to the broader cultural accounts of religion and politics (Bass 2012),

anthropologists have long and largely located Malaiyaha Tamils in one place—on the plantations.³⁹

I seek to destabilize and challenge this aspect of fixedness in community for Malaiyaha Tamils. Considering significant deployments of the term community in anthropological scholarship (Mintz 1974; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Gray 2002), I contend that community for Malaiyaha Tamils is dynamic, unfixable, and off its disciplinary hinges, so to speak. Given the entrenchment of plantation institutions in colonial structures of power and domination, it is impossible to disregard the foundational “modes of response” (Mintz 1974: 132) that characterize life on Sri Lanka’s tea plantations. In fact, the above conversational signs of the political orphaning of Malaiyaha Tamils and reclaiming of names and identities speak to the very undergirding of Malaiyaha Tamil resistance that Mintz had noted over thirty years ago among former plantation labor peasantries in the Caribbean.

This mode of response, however, reveals a more complex representation in the common interests and shared experiences that bind Malaiyaha Tamils of Sri Lanka to one another in corporate membership. Here, John Gray’s understanding of community and interest in the process of “place making” find compatibility with the evidence of mutual needs that I gathered during field research (2002: 39-40). For Malaiyaha Tamils, whose history in Sri Lanka has been marred by multiple layers of state and social discrimination,

³⁹ A notable exception has been the work of anthropologist Sasikumar Balasundaram. His article, “Caste Discrimination among Indian Tamil Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka” (2009a) calls attention to how the coming and going of young boys who work off the plantation change caste relations on the estate. His focus on dynamic relations on the estate has significance for a deeper study of the place-making practices and social relations of migrant workers, especially women.

the shared interests are quite simple on a basic level: survival and security. Without viable land and housing rights, little to no means of upward socioeconomic mobility, and restricted access to higher levels of education and healthcare, Malaiyaha Tamils share this interest based on what Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson call, “a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness” (1997: 13). Thus, if community is based on a shared interest in securing a better future within frames of exclusion, how exactly do its members enact and maintain it from such marginal positions?

I contend that *movement* is one means to attending to this common interest and maintains a uniquely emerging sense of community for contemporary Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka. In this way, Malaiyaha Tamil community is very much “on the move,” as its members are unhinged from the colonial nostalgia and institutionalization of the labor regime and in search of alternative places that secure a better future. Therefore, I would like to suggest that Malaiyaha Tamils practice “place-making” in multiple places, both physical and imagined and in Sri Lanka and beyond.

To make sense of what the process of place-making might entail, I follow philosopher Charles Peirce’s pragmatic maxim, which states that the “meaning or significance of any conception lies in its conceivably practical bearings” ([1903] 1998: 145). For Peirce, *pragmatism* was not merely determining how we think about the future; it was how we, “in conceivable circumstances[,] would go to determine how we should deliberately act and how we should act in a practical way” ([1903] 1998: 145). Considering these conditions of thought, *community* can come to mean the manifestation

of the continual mental exercise of refining self-knowledge and a sense of belonging through shared understandings of conceivable social relations, history, and experience.

Furthermore, these social relations and experiences are differentiated according to the degree to which possibilities are afforded in the past, present, and future. The individual's orientation to time within their community, therefore, determines the ways in which he or she would act in any conceivable circumstance. The process of striving to a highest good in the present and in relation to a fixed past and possibility-filled future is where this conception finds compatibility with the lived understandings of community for Malaiyaha Tamils. For this minority population, discriminatory limits and a history of suffering have sealed their past as former disenfranchised and stateless labor group; official records of their history are seemingly impenetrable and the polarization of the ethnic conflict not only caused prolonged discrimination and violence but also excluded them from larger political engagements for more than thirty years. Their present, however, is dynamically open given the effects of neoliberal economic reforms and the decline of youth workers on the plantations and out migration to urban areas and abroad for employment. As a community, their actions and beliefs are very much rooted in their openness to move through places in order to secure the best and most secure life possible. In this way, the plantation, nation, and state have become landscapes upon which the Malaiyaha Tamil individuals can continually map the practical bearings of their emplacement in the present and aspirations for a better future.

Directly related to the historical suffering faced by Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka, the present realities of poverty and marginality in a neoliberal economy and post-

war majoritarian nation-state largely inform understandings of what this community is today. Quite contrary to what D.M. Forrest wrote in 1967, contemporary tea estate workers are not “sticking to the field-work well.” Unsatisfied with and unable to survive on estate salaries, younger generations of Malaiyaha Tamils seek to pursue alternative job opportunities off the estate that are financially more lucrative, but often have less physical and emotional security.

Given this orientation, community for Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka is very much rooted in place and a sense of being-in-the-world. It is a continual mental exercise that its members engage in so that they can sustain a sense of belonging and improvement in their lives. The effects of such a conception forces Malaiyaha Tamils to struggle and make reasonable the external realities of their situation so that they can deliberately respond to a possibility-filled future and the greatest good. Thus, a desire to attain self-control over one’s social relations and status guides human conduct and urges a shared understanding of and moral commitment to this enabling exercise. The following chapters on gender and group life experiences, migration, and development speak within and to this very process. In doing so, I hope that the meaningful narratives of the people with whom I spoke—in their fragments—reveal the stakes that they hold for those in their care and their encountering of moral and social spaces of uncertainty in Sri Lanka.

CHAPTER TWO
REGENERATION ON SRI LANKA'S TEA PLANTATIONS

A HERITAGE OF ACCOUNTS

If it hadn't been for 300 chappättis a day, the kicks in the belly from 14 children . . . if your mind hadn't been filled with the need to change the wick of the stove once every four days; the need to buy kerosene when it was available; the troubles of the rainy season, bugs in the rice and lentils; pickles in the mango season, pāpadam in the hot season; the juices, the jams and sherbet in the seasons of each fruit; the old clothes exchanged for pots and pans; lime for the kitchen drainage once every two weeks; the worry of a late period; the worry if it's not late . . . if you hadn't stuffed the drawers of your mind with all this . . . You might have sat on Mount Kailasa and written epics. You might have painted masterpieces on the walls of caves . . . You might have created a world without war, armies, gallows, or chemical weapons.

How did you ever come to think that strength lay in setting out just the right amount of food, in jewels on ears, throat or forehead?

Go deeper, still deeper.

When you reach the bottom you will touch the water that measures the world. You will connect with the world all around you. Your vagina, breasts, womb will fall away. The smell of cooking will disappear. The shimmer of jewels will fade. You will be genderless. You will be the you who is not stuck in that, not entangled in it. You will be the you who is released from that.

-Conclusion to the Tamil short story, *Vīṭṭin Mūlaiyil oru Camayalarai* (“The Kitchen in the Corner of the House”) by feminist poet and activist, Ambai⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Translation from Tamil by Ambai, Bate & Ramanujan (1992: 39-40).



Figure 5. Ramaiyi, a Malayaha Tamil widow on Kirkwall, makes rice outside her line room for the funeral of a relation. Photograph was taken by author.

In 1988, Gayatri Spivak published her seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” in Grossberg and Nelson’s *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988). Founded in 1982, the Subaltern Studies Collective had been dominating the conceptual landscapes of South Asian scholars. The Collective’s aims were to present representations of postcolonial social movements that had come to be sustained by those who had not written their own histories. Spivak’s critique took issue with the Collective’s very attempt at postcolonial reasoning by suggesting that such representations, by “speaking for the subaltern,” in fact take away the possibility of subalterns speaking for themselves. In 2000, Spivak gave the last word on the Collective’s work in their final volume in the essay, “An Afterword: on the New Subaltern.” In this essay, she expanded upon her twelve-year old critique by redefining the new subaltern subject as follows: “the somewhat monolithic woman-as-victim who is the constituted subject of justice under

(the now-restricted) international capitalism” (2000: 305). In the same year, Spivak reminded scholars that the Collective’s work “though not inimical to a feminist politics, is not immediately useful for it” (2000a: 325). Coming eighteen years after the birth of the Collective, Spivak’s critique was urgently overdue. As Partha Chatterjee later commented, gradual and significant social, economic, and international shifts throughout the 1980s and 1990s had demanded new conceptualizations of the “subaltern” subject:

“When economic liberalisation came in the early 1990s, it did not have to be imposed by authoritarian means . . . Greater and greater sections of the people were developing a stake in the governmental regime and becoming aware of the instruments of electoral democracy as a means to influence that regime. The arms of administration were reaching deeper and wider into domains of everyday life hitherto untouched by government. At the same time, corporate capital was gaining a position of unprecedented legitimacy within urban civil society, displacing the status once enjoyed by the postcolonial developmental state. The image of the subaltern rebel so meticulously portrayed by us now seemed like a throwback to the days of the British Raj – a construct that historians of colonial India might find useful but one that would be of little help in understanding the contemporary Indian peasant. We now saw that the latter would have to be understood within a new framework of democratic citizenship—complex, differentiated, perhaps fundamentally altered from the normative ideas of citizenship in western liberal democracies, but nonetheless citizenship, not subjecthood. Subalternity would have to be redefined” (2012: 45-6).

Attentive to economic liberalization and stake-building among democratically enabled citizens in South Asian postcolonial states, Spivak’s redefined subaltern subject—the “monolithic woman-as-victim” raised significant critique of the Collective’s scholarly trajectories. The collective had not been able to sufficiently discuss the heterogeneity of women’s experiences within a global world, which was generating social capital through promoting justice and then essentializing the gendered objects of that very justice’s transgressions. The subaltern woman was a structural genre that could

repeatedly emptied and filled with narratives of injustice, inequality, and voicelessness, and more alarmingly, according to the whims of the scholar's needs and the time and place of the intervention. Something had to change within the Collective in order to address such structural flaws and their inability to represent women who take part in diverse forms of group life.

Alongside the Collective's shortcomings, anthropological studies about women in Sri Lanka were attempting to meet Spivak's task by addressing feminist politics and the diversity of gender subjectivities in the war torn and multicultural nation. Following the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots and escalation of civil war, Sri Lankan anthropology's preoccupation with violence brought women again to the forefront of discussion in unique ways. For feminist theorists such as Radhika Coomarasamy and Nimanthi Rajasingham (2008), Sri Lankan feminism entailed an identification and testing of the exclusionary forces of Tamil nationalism—namely in the brand of the LTTE claiming to liberate women by having them become front line militant combatants. Feminist scholars such as Malathi de Alwis (2000 & 2003) explored subjectivities of motherhood and peace activism in order to destabilize essentialist framings of motherhood and re-imagine the political concepts of womanhood in relation to the nation. For anthropologists studying working women (Gamburd 2000, Lynch 2007, Hewamanne 2008), feminism required a critical examination of who and what got to judge rural Sinhala working women in Sri Lanka and how their tailored and shared forms of resistance and unmaking sought to interrogate such dominant perspectives.

Apart from Sasikumar Balaundaram's Masters thesis (2009), no anthropological work on Sri Lankan women to date has focused on the diversity of experiences that has been communicated by Malaiyaha Tamil women in Sri Lanka. Ethnographic studies on Malaiyaha Tamils, primarily informed and written in the male voice, have more or less placed the Malaiyaha Tamil woman within Spivak's monolithic frame and as a complement to ritual (Hollup 1994), caste (Jayaraman 1975) and identity-formation politics and practice (Bass 2008, 2012). Many reasons for such elisions exist. First, women were simply not on the horizon of anthropological writings on Sri Lanka's plantations beginning from the 1970s and into the 1990s.⁴¹ Structural-functionalist approaches to the plantation could be partly at fault given their focus on the larger plantation system that was held together by the plantation worker and his family. The woman was simply part of this organically bonded system of labor—carrying out commitments and entitlements without input and tending to the kernel of kinship that allowed such a system to persist and sustain itself. In this way, Jayaraman (1975) and Hollup (1994) focused on how Durkheimian social facts such as caste and religious practice had compelled Malaiyaha Tamils to think and act in a certain way that one might call Malaiyaha Tamil plantation "society." Other anthropologists such as Daniel Bass have focused on "Up-Country" identity-formation politics (Bass 2012). But, the concept of an "Up-Country" Tamil identity has been largely paternalistic in its execution within the Sri Lankan political sphere, and this is due to the overall male-dominance of Sri

⁴¹ Malaiyaha Tamils were often, however, the subject of sociological and policy-driven studies; to wit: Rachael Kurian (1982), Angela Little (1999), Gunatilleke et. al (2008), and Abeykoon (2010).

Lankan minority discourses, trade union political representation, and the larger polarization of the ethnic conflict.

Women were also avoided as an object of anthropological inquiry for methodological reasons. Males not from Sri Lanka who were carrying out ethnographic fieldwork would not forwardly have the occasion to speak with Malaiyaha Tamil women living on the plantations unaccompanied and in uncomplicated trust due to customarily distant relations between foreign males and Tamil women⁴². Consequently, most research data about women would be obtained from men who would often speak about women for a particular agenda or political purpose (Bass 2008). Such research conditions would be more useful for externally conceived (extra-community) human development projects on the plantations, an issue I will address further in Chapter Four on development in the estate sector. The one exception to this trend is the work of anthropologist Sasikumar Balasundaram (2009), who, as a Malaiyaha Tamil male born on the plantations, was able to study women's reproductive experiences in the summer of 2007 due to his in-community status. Such research, I believe, would not be able to be carried out independently by an anthropologist of non-Malaiyaha Tamil descent, and even he writes very clearly about the obstacles that his three Tamil research assistants faced in carrying out three months worth of interviews with the twenty-seven married women on one plantation during civil war and under the gaze of the estate management and security forces (2009: 7). His thesis, which I will address more closely later in this chapter,

⁴² Interestingly, Oddvar Hollup (1994) was able to spend a part of his ethnographic field period living in estate quarters with an upper-caste, Mudalaiyar family, but given his status as a white male and avoidance of women as a subject of inquiry in his finished work, he may not have had full access and trust within gendered spaces that women inhabit on the plantations and in the lines.

directly addresses Spivak's claim and suggests that she takes issue not only with the work produced by the Collective but the methodologies and theoretical frameworks that shape the actual conducting of research and writing on women and their experiences.⁴³

Excepting the unique conditions of Balasundaram's research, such methodological and politically strained conditions have uniquely impacted feminist thought in plantation literature and created representations of the Malaiyaha Tamil woman as largely dominated, voiceless, and uninformed agricultural laborer. Valentine Daniel's work on coolie formation and the difference between heritage and history (1996), while not primarily focusing on Malaiyaha Tamil women, provides an opening for further discussion of the Malaiyaha Tamil woman outside this essentialist frame. The opening was possible through the concept of *bardic heritage*—a term that I would like to seriously consider as an enabling entry point for the possibility of a Global Southern feminist contextualization of Malaiyaha Tamil experience in contemporary Sri Lanka. Such an understanding not only addresses the far-reaching realities that Malaiyaha Tamil women experience but also grounds their collective presence in Sri Lanka within broader debates on international feminist thought among Sri Lankan ethnographies about women.

Daniel's concept of *bardic heritage* draws on the reality that Malaiyaha Tamils, as discussed in Chapter One, have been marginalized and represented by communities in Sri Lanka for political, economic, and nationalist agendas over time and space. Most

⁴³ This link became most apparent to me upon reading a statement made by Balasundaram in his Introduction: "I try to explain a big problem by using the voices of individuals in the community. Instead of looking at the vulnerable population merely as victims, however, I examine how women choose sterilization as a coping strategy to deal with many forms of social vulnerability" (Balasundaram 2009: 3). Using purely inductive reasoning, Balasundaram seeks to destabilize the woman-as-victim subject and allow the voice to do the anthropological work, so to speak.

pointedly, Malaiyaha Tamil experience—their disenfranchisement and statelessness—were manipulated for Sri Lankan (primarily Jaffna) Tamil, nationalist agendas that would later fuel the fight for a separatist Tamil state that refused to include them. Such hypocrisies of a revolution-turned-fascist movement carried out through Sri Lankan Tamil militancy and the LTTE’s crushing of dissent allowed for further forms of exclusion and discrimination to take place along lines of caste, class, and status. Despite such a co-opting of cultural and political representation on such a large scale, Daniel claims that Malaiyaha Tamils’ *bardic heritage* remained in tact and in the hands of its enactors:

“There is one aspect of the Estate Tamils’ heritage that has not been alienated from them, an aspect that they feel has not been colonized by the Jaffna Tamil. This consists of poetry, song, drumming, and the art of storytelling. I shall call this the bardic heritage. This bardic heritage has two extensions: one in time, and the other in space . . . in this inward extension, heritage intersects with history, to be nourished by a common experience. This history is not a history of ‘long ago’; it is a history of ‘just yesterday.’ It is not a finished chapter that may be reopened at will, looked at, reexperienced if so wished, and reclosed. It is still being ‘written.’ It is not an abstract history or a history of abstractions; it is anchored in experience, the experience of suffering” (1996: 30-1).

Though writing of this heritage twelve years before I conducted field research, Daniel makes a strong claim about how exclusion creates the distinction between heritage and history—the latter more concretized and institutionally affirmed, and the former more vague and richly expressive (1996:27). Heritage, in this way, is something that is lived and enacted through memory and oral work and less so through records and written words. This distinction became most apparent to me when trying to document the Kāman Kūttu folk drama performed by and recalled through the memory work of particular Paraiyan men in song, dance, and drumming. When my Malaiyaha Tamil friend was able

to videotape the performance and I was able to take an audio recording of the songs and drumming, our documentations were of great interest to Malaiyaha Tamil community leaders outside the plantation who wanted to hear and have it for posterity. This phenomenon aligns closely with but is less alarming than Daniel Bass' description of Malaiyaha Tamil upper class and caste cultural workers "salvaging" Malaiyaha Tamil Parayan "culture" by performing high-end, stage versions of the Kaman Kuthu folk drama for an educational and national audience in an urban space (Bass 2012: 158-163). In this way, Daniel's earlier claim of heritage's "rich potentiality" (1996:27) was a premonition that the concept of a Malaiyaha Tamil heritage would become more and more the object of historical desire (i.e., that to be salvaged) of those elites seeking to seize and commoditize its practices for larger political purposes.

Apart from poetry, song, and drumming, the art of storytelling is the aspect of *bardic heritage* that lends itself most usefully for exploring alternative readings of gender subjectivities among Malaiyaha Tamil women within a Global Southern feminist framework. As discussed in the Introduction, my methodological bearings as a woman of Sri Lankan and Tamil-speaking backgrounds attributed to the access and trust that I gained from the women with whom I spoke and who shared their stories. The knowledge that I came across came not in the form of statistics or policy-driven narratives, but in the form of storytelling in gendered spaces that had mostly been off limits to wider anthropological studies conducted by non-Sri Lankan and non-Tamil speaking men: kitchens, inner changing rooms, bathing areas, gardens, and verandahs. In the words of the Tamil poet, Ambai, my field site ended up being, by methodological conditioning,

“not just a place. It was a concept, [and] a principle”⁴⁴ that went in and out of such gendered spaces where Malaiyaha Tamil women carry out their everyday practices and experience their lives, in the most mundane sense of the phrase. But the knowledge gained was not simply taken from individual stories; rather, it was, in Judith Butler’s sense, representative of multiple “accounts of oneself” (2005) that Malaiyaha Tamil women were narrating to me. For Butler, who is reading through the work of Italian feminist philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, giving an account of oneself entails a personal investment in persuading another person of one’s moral and agentic place in the world and not just in telling a story for oneself:

“We are beings who are, of necessity, exposed to one another in our vulnerability and singularity, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle—and to honor—this constant necessary exposure . . . I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed upon myself . . . posing questions of myself alone. I exist in an important sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no “you” to address, then I have lost ‘myself’ . . . one can tell an autobiography only to an other, and one can reference an ‘I’ only in relation to a ‘you’: without the ‘you’ my own story becomes impossible ” (2005:31-2).

The combination of necessity, exposure, and vulnerability of the self bring Daniel’s *bardic heritage* and Butler’s *account* into concert for the purpose of exploring gender subjectivities among Malaiyaha Tamil women that place their experiences alongside other women’s experiences in the Global South and across borders of nations, ethnicity, and occupation. For minority communities in perpetual states of vulnerability under emergency rule and civil conflict in Sri Lanka, the reality of exposure cannot be ignored, and we see direct responses to such exposures in the rise of political resistance

⁴⁴ In Tamil, *camayalarai oru iṭam illai. Oru kōṭpāṭu maṭṭumē*. The emphasis is on *kōṭpāṭu* (“theory”) (Ambai 1988:31).

(such as the JVP student uprising) the rise of Tamil nationalism and separatism, and India's involvement in resolving Sri Lanka's citizenship and ethnic conflict question.

But the women with whom I spoke on the plantations and whose ethnographic accounts are shared here were not necessarily active participants in such social movements.⁴⁵ Rather, the women, whose stories I present in this chapter, were committed to persuading a wider world about their future aspirations and reflections upon the past as minority women and as widows, caregivers, workers, and wives; their individual claims attach to multiple times, places, and roles within a self-articulated and collective heritage of women's accounts in and beyond Sri Lanka. By presenting such accounts, I contend that Malaiyaha Tamil women can and do generate counter hegemonic knowledge about themselves within the formation of their community and in the articulations of their beliefs and aspirations for collective futures. These stories are also about the woman's place in the world and how such places are exposed and made vulnerable present rich arsenals of knowledge, through which scholars can learn about the desires and aspirations of this minority laborer community.

Listening to Malaiyaha Tamil women speak about their pasts, beliefs, and aspirations, I suggest that storytelling is very much alive in their lyrical persistence to protect the fullness and dignity of their experiences. The information transmitted in these stories sharply contrasts the detached descriptions of Malaiyaha Tamil life and worth that political and elitist narrators compose and control for public recognition and consumption. Challenging such externally produced forms of knowledge, I contend that

⁴⁵ I will discuss accounts of such Malaiyaha Tamil women and their participation in labor and social movements in Chapter Five on the politics of development in the plantation sector.

Malaiyaha Tamil women still have a powerful hold over their storytelling and that their accounts directly engage the histories and representations that were seized and reconfigured for exclusionary purposes. Lastly, I believe that these accounts attest to the dynamic continuation of Malaiyaha Tamil *bardic heritage* in meaningful ways and ensure place for Malaiyaha Tamil women as community actors and citizens within broader discourses of feminism in the Global South.

The remaining discussion in this chapter is organized into two sections. The first section provides ethnographic accounts that were recorded over the months that I conducted fieldwork on tea estates in Nuwara Eliya district in Central Province. As mentioned in the Introduction, I heard and recorded these stories without the presence of outside research assistants and development workers through oral history, casual conversation, interviews, and during everyday activities like domestic work, travel, and ritual practices. Taken from various points in women's lives, I hope to these accounts demonstrate the diversity of gender subjectivities among Malaiyaha Tamil plantation women. This section also serves as a foregrounding to Chapter Three on migrant labor and movement among Malaiyaha Tamils more broadly. The second section of this chapter comes back to the site of the Malaiyaha Tamil woman's body. Inspired by Ambai's test for women to find ways of measuring a woman's worth beyond what a woman's body knows how to do, I provide accounts related by women about their bodies, wombs, and fertility that demonstrate types of knowledge that cannot be measured through traditionally marked and gendered divisions of labor among kith and kin on the plantations.

PART ONE: REFLECTIONS FROM RETIRED PLUCKERS



Figure 6. Sitting with Ramaiyi and Sakuntala on the verandah of their line that overlooks the main road on Kirkwall Estate. Photograph taken by author.

Ramaiyi and Sakuntala were the first women that I met on Kirkwall estate. Ramaiyi's younger brother was one of three *kankānis* in the division and had been introduced to me through a former plantation manager who gave me access to conduct research on Kirkwall. Both women had worked in the same “gang” of female pluckers for over thirty years. Now retired from estate work, they live on the estates and fulfill roles in their families as caretakers for their children and grandchildren. Through these two women, I met the rest of the women that I spoke to over the course of research on Kirkwall—grandmothers, widows, mothers, wives, unmarried young girls, and small children. As retired workers and figures uniquely respected within their community, Ramaiyi and Sakuntala took their roles as caregivers seriously and their dedication, I

believe, facilitated my research among women on the plantations and entry into gendered spaces of storytelling, ritual, and work.

While I am not able to include the accounts of all of the women with whom I spoke in detail, I believe that the accounts of Ramaiyi, Sakuntala, and others presented here serve as insightful entry points into rethinking how elderly Tamil women make a place for themselves on the plantations. The following section presents their life stories and how they speak of their pasts as mothers, wives, and young girls over time. Their experiences as elderly retired pluckers signal that a Global Southern feminist perspective needs to be inclusive of gender subjectivities around ageing and differences among elderly women along lines of belief, caste, class, and family ties. In many ways, these accounts continue a response to Sarah Lamb's question as provoked by her work with ageing women in a West Bengal village and the prevalence of feminist ethnographies on younger, reproductively viable women in South Asia: "What would older women's (or men's) songs and stories look like if they were the central characters and tellers of the tales?" (2000:8). The Tamil women with whom I spoke and the ways in which they perceived their bodies and worth on the tea estates attend to this question. Even though they are no longer working as pluckers on the plantations and technically not institutionally entitled to the residences and land in which they live, elderly Malaiyaha Tamil women continue to make a place for themselves on the plantations by performing valued roles of caretaking, income generation, and knowledge production within their households and community.

BUILDING BONDS: RAMAIYI'S LIFE BEFORE WIDOWHOOD

Ramaiyi was born in 1957 and is a retired plucker on Kirkwall Estate. She is the eldest of eleven children, eight girls and three boys. Her father's *sonta ūr* is Vandavasi, a town in Tiruvanamalai district near the northwest coast of Tamil Nadu in India. He came to Ceylon when he was just four or five and at fourteen began working on Galloway estate, which is about eight kilometers from Kirkwall. He worked on the plantation as a mason and married her mother, who was a plucker from Lochanora estate⁴⁶ and had come to Ceylon from Vēlur, a small town in Namakkal district in north-central Tamil Nadu, with her mother and father when she was two months old. She died from old age on Kirkwall estate in 1997.

Both of Ramaiyi's parents did not have citizenship under the Citizenship Act of 1948 given their fathers' birthplaces, and neither her siblings nor she obtained citizenship in the form of National Identity Cards until they got married. When I first asked Ramaiyi how old she was and she told me that she did not know and that I would have to ask Sakuntala because she only got her National Identity Card and citizenship once she got married for the second time in the mid-1980s. Neither of her parents had held citizenship, and her father, who is living with her younger brother on Kirkwall, still does not hold a National Identity Card, but a paper registration card from the local Grāma Sēvaka confirming his registration of residence on Kirkwall.

As the eldest child, Ramaiyi did not go to school past Grade Five, which was the highest level of education offered on the estates at that time. When she was eleven began

⁴⁶ About 12 kilometers from Kirkwall

staying at home to help her mother take care of the other children, and at fifteen she began plucking in the fields for *kai kācu* (“hand money,” thus, off the books) to help her family. When she was twenty years old, she got married to a twenty-three year old man from Duncan Estate (approximately eight kilometers away from Kirkwall by road) and had two children, Seelan and Sadha. In 1983, her husband traveled to Colombo and got caught in the July anti-Tamil riots, disappeared, and was presumed dead. With Sadha only two years old when he disappeared, she remarried her mother’s brother’s *makan* (maternal uncle’s son) from Kirkwall a few years later. He was already legally married and had a wife in Samimalai (about two kilometers away by road), but her relationship with his first wife was cordial, and she had regularly met his children who were living there regularly.

In 1998, Ramaiyi was severely injured while plucking when she fell from a considerable height in the fields with the weight of a fifteen-kilogram basket full of tealeaves on her head. The *kūḍai* (“basket”) band from her basket knocked out many of her front teeth. The dental wounds got severely infected and she was admitted to the nearby hospital for one month and had twenty-eight stitches in her mouth. Only forty-one years old at the time, she did not want to return to *koṟuṇtu vēlai* (“plucking work”), but decided instead to become a domestic worker in Colombo. This period was also seven years after most government-owned estates were privatized, resulting in a number of gradual but negative changes in working and life conditions on the plantations (Manikam 1995, Shanmugaratnam 1997), and the plantation in which Kirkwall is located suffered a labor shortage and laborers could not find estate work. Working in the home of a Sinhala

exporter of fruits and vegetables, she worked as a domestic for three years, earning enough money for Seelan's wedding in 2001. When his wife became pregnant with her first daughter, Ramaiyi returned to Kirkwall to care for the family's first grandchild. With two more granddaughters born between 2003 and 2007, she remained on the estate and took up her full-time responsibility as caretaker for her grandchildren and house while her daughter-in-law and son worked full-time on the estate. In 2007, she received her retirement funds from her Employees' Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees' Trust Fund (ETF) and used them to build an extra back room to their line house (show image) and support their seven-member household. The funds presented a surge of income for their family but were quickly extinguished given the reality of the estate daily wage and costs of living that had elevated considerably in the international economic crisis and Sri Lanka's return to civil war.

Ramaiyi claims that she has suffered troubles throughout her life and that her losses of the past have determined her beliefs and practices in the present. As one of my closest friends and often motherly-like protector of me during my times spent on Kirkwall, she would often tell me how much she looked forward to our conversations about the past, and her genuine enjoyment of giving accounts of herself and sharing her thoughts about the community in which she lived would come out in the more animated ways in which she would speak to me about these accounts. In Daniel's sense of *bardic heritage*, she was also incorporating storytelling as a form of communicating the suffering that she had experienced in her life as a widow. Her perceptions and those of other widows on Kirkwall complicate former anthropological conceptions of marriage

and widowhood among this community and demonstrate how explications of suffering and grief can have cathartic effects on those who describe such emotional processes of transition.

WIDOWHOOD AND MOURNING

The most recent event of suffering in Ramaiyi's life was the sudden death of her second husband in May 2006. She remembered him fondly and not vaguely; at least once a week during the time that I carried out fieldwork, she would tell me how good a person her husband was to people on the estate, her family, and children. On the third anniversary of his death in May 2009, she was particularly upset and told me in great detail about the night that he had suffered his fatal heart attack on Kirkwall:

“That day, I had cut the chicken, gave him and everyone rice, chicken curry, and some vegetable curry. I put it in the center of our house, which is where we usually eat. I cleaned the house, took a head bath, and went to bed around nine thirty in the evening. A short while after lying down to sleep, he began making a noise in his sleep like a cough [*she makes a cackling noise*]. When I came by his side, he was in a pool of sweat. I did not know what to do so I carried him on my back to the front door and some others helped carry him to the steps to the main road, but he had already died.

Enna cēyratu? (“Now what will we do?”) [*She begins to cry*] He was a good man. He never hit, never yelled, or treated anyone badly. He never called children or anyone by their name. He always said, “*Vāratā? Pōratā?*”⁴⁷ (“Are you coming? Are you going? He had affection for everyone (*ellārukkum pācum*). Usually a second husband would treat the children of your first husband badly. But he was not like that. He treated my children like they were his own, and because of that, I will never forget him.”

⁴⁷ The *-ā* suffix attached to the end of a question denotes a speaker's affection for their addressee in Tamil.

The description of her second husband is a central piece of Ramaiyi's account given that she was his second wife and that he is not her children's biological father, signaling that bonds of kinship extend beyond blood and that there are informal bonds of love and obligation between Malaiyaha Tamil men and women that go beyond previous anthropological conceptions of marriage and widowhood on the plantations. Anthropologist Oddvar Hollup specifically mentions the higher frequencies of levirate and sororate marriages after widowhood among *Paraiyar* caste Malaiyaha Tamil estate widows of younger ages (1994: 265-6). But such instances would most likely result in children produced from the second marriage. In Ramaiyi's case, she did not have children with her second husband given his marital status and children from his first wife. Such shifting dynamics in widowhood should be noted in transforming preconceptions of caste-based and kinship-driven marital behaviors and how they correlate to a widow's sense of allegiance to her deceased husband.

Interestingly, Ramaiyi did not speak often or passionately about her first husband, who disappeared in the 1983 Colombo anti-Tamil riots and who was presumed dead. Another elderly retired woman and wife of Ramaiyi's second husband's brother said that he actually did not die but ran away with another woman in Colombo, which was why she never received information about his corpse or an official notice of his death. Furthermore, it was a rumor that I only heard from her, and I was never able to confirm its veracity during my research period. Regardless, Ramaiyi's outspokenness about her second husband and the gestures of allegiance that she put forth during our conversations indicate that gendered conceptions of widowhood on the plantations can be reformulated

in direct response to the way in which a widowed woman loses her spouse and partner. The presumed death (and more so, absence) of her first husband was undocumented, unseen, and most importantly, unconfirmed. His body literally did not show itself, and unstable social and economic circumstances forced Ramaiyi to move on in the best interests of her children. It was also noticeable that he was the only “deceased” ancestor that did not have a photograph framed and hanging in the main room of Ramaiyi’s house. His photograph was kept in a box in the cupboard, and Ramaiyi only showed it to me in passing as she searched for another document.

Her second husband, on the other hand, was very present in our conversations. He had died her arms, and she had very vivid recollections of his last breaths, his perspiration, which foods he consumed before his death, and how heavy he was to lift in his lifeless state. Her memories and grief reflect that she, as a wife, had witnessed firsthand and confirmed the loss of his life in their home. Unlike her first husband, he had left in conditions of shock that were mutually shared. Although her second husband, like her first, was not here to tell his story—a fact that she reminded me of at least once a week—she would constantly reference how he *would have* spoken with me: “He would have been able to tell you the history of this estate nicely, when it was built, who built the temple, who were the *kaṇakkuppiḷlais* back then. I do not know that information. He knew it well.” Her desire to defend his knowledge—his *arivu* or skill for knowing—in death reveals the love and respect that she continues to have for him. Her acknowledgement of his permanent physical absence and mention of his dignified role as

husband, father and former *kankāni* also validates her own status as a retired widow on the estate today.

Ramaiyi's transition into widowhood also brought on behavioral changes that are specifically connected to her working through the grief and loss. Since his death, she has struggled to fall asleep at night on the floor in the front room of her line house, where she now sleeps with her daughter and two granddaughters. She told me that to distract herself from not being able to fall asleep, she had to watch television before falling asleep, a habit that I witnessed during the several nights that I stayed in her house sleeping in the twelve by seven foot front room with her, Sadha, and her two older grandchildren. Every night that I spent there I would drift in and out of sleep as she watched television on silent for nearly two hours before turning it off and immediately falling into a deep sleep. When I asked her about this habit, she said that she had picked it up when she was a domestic in Colombo; her *dorai* and *nōnā*⁴⁸ had put a television in the back room that she had slept in while there. She stopped watching when she came home but picked up the habit again once her husband died because she moved from sleeping beside her husband in the back room and to the front room with her daughter and the two girls. The television, she told me, served as a distraction because she did not like sitting still and needed to see the moving images in order to calm her mind for sleep.

For Ramaiyi, grief and the process of mourning introduced new habits into her everyday life and perspectives about what new roles she could inhabit as a retired plucker turned widow. For instance, when he was alive, her husband played an integral role in the

⁴⁸ Sinhala term of respect for a lady

upbringing of Seelan's first two daughters. He would walk them to school, discipline them to study after school and obey their mother's instructions. He did this, she told me, because he was well educated and had been a *kankāni* so had held a certain degree of authority over residents in the lines. Furthermore, the goodness of her husband had brought out a moral certitude in her about her beliefs about the goodness of the estate and its residents. When he died, she feels that such assurances about goodness have weakened; her family has experienced social and economic uncertainty in the recent years following his death,⁴⁹ while she has seen other families around her prosper.

CĀMI VARUTAL: SECURING A PLACE IN COMMUNITY

In response to her persistent feelings of economic and personal insecurity, Ramaiyi continually thinks about the ways in which her family can actively plan for a better future. One way that she makes a place for herself with her resident community on Kirkwall is through communicating her faith and conversing with the divine. This capability is known colloquially among Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations as *cāmi varum*, or the state of being possessed or divine frenzy. South Asian scholars studying Hindu Tamil communities have long studied possession and trance in the context of ritual, religious, and socio-structural practices. Scholars Michael Moffat (1979), Louis Dumont (1986), and Isabelle Nabokov [now, Clark-Decès] (2000) use the Tamil word

⁴⁹ This plummeting in economic security following his death resulted from the fact that her husband, even though retired, would carry out casual day labor employment off the estate in private gardens, hotels, and nearby shops to get *kai kācu*, or hand money, to support his family. Even though the family received his remaining retirement benefits following his death, the amount was minimal given the larger size of their growing, inter-generational family.

āvēcam to describe the state of possession, but in research, I only encountered the term *cāmi varatu* among a variety of upper and lower caste Malaiyaha Tamils on the estates.⁵⁰

Throughout field research, I occasionally witnessed Malaiyaha Tamil women in trance or in a state of divine frenzy on the plantations. Most occasions took place during estate festivals, or *tiru vizhā*, and in connection to the other Hindu religious festival practices of penitence and devotion such as *āvaṭi* (arches decorated and boosted upon one’s shoulders), *parava kāvaṭi* or *tūkkam* (where a man is hung from hooks in the skin of his back from beams and taken through the festival procession in a bird-like position), *thēkuti* (“walking on burning coals”) and *cāmiyāṭikaḷ* (those who begin dancing in a trance-like state upon “receiving the god”). In this chapter, I will not discuss the larger ritual practices carried out in estate festivals; such ritual practices have been examined in South Asian anthropological studies on Malaiyaha Tamils but mostly from a male perspective, as noted earlier (Jayaraman 1975, Hollup 1994, Bass 2012). In Chapter Five, I examine a particular healing ritual involving possession (*cāmi pākkiratu*, or “consulting god”) with relation to bodily illness and fixing belief. In this chapter, I am interested in how Tamil women on the estates and their connections to the divine, as manifest in Ramaiyi’s connection with *cāmi*, further complicate our understanding of women’s experiences on the estates and their ability to enact change and assert their knowledge and capacities within the community.

⁵⁰ Daniel Bass, in his ethnography among Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka, confirms the colloquial use of this phrase (2012: 131) in the context of observing a particular Māriamman estate festival in the Hatton area. Mary Hancock in her ethnography on ritual practices among Tamil women in Chennai uses *amman vantatu*, meaning, “the deity, amman, has come” (1999:144).

I first witnessed the *cāmi* come to Ramaiyi in her home on the evening of *Civarāttiri*⁵¹ on February 26, 2009. She and her family had invited me to spend the evening with them and go to the estate temple *pūcai* (“temple puja ritual”) late in the evening. Before going to the temple, Ramaiyi and her family had a small *pūcai* in their home. She started by taking the lit lamp (*viḷakku*) to worship the family altar⁵² (*cāmikaḷ*) in the small altar in the corner of the main room. She then blessed the framed photographs of her deceased ancestors. She took *vipūti* (“holy ash”) in her right hand and sprinkled it to the left, right, and center of the framed deity images and then everyone in the room lined up to receive *vipūti* and blessings from her. At the time, her daughter-in-law, daughter, the children, her younger sister’s son who was visiting from a nearby estate and I were in the room.

When Ramaiyi placed *vipūti* on my forehead, I noticed that her thumb lingered there a bit longer than it had on others’ foreheads before me and had started to tremble a little. She retreated her finger, and I knelt down to touch and pray at her feet and retreated myself so that her nephew could receive her blessing. He stepped forward and as she placed *vipūti* on his forehead the trembling intensified. She then began writhing as though she had a pain in her stomach. Her breathing deepened and grew faster, developing into a rhythmic stacatto-like, “su . . .su . . .su,” repetition of sound. The entire time, she kept her thumb transfixed upon the young boy’s forehead. The boy did not flinch and kept his stance: his feet a little wider than shoulder width, locked knees, hands at his sides, and

⁵¹ Hindu festival held every year in reverence of Lord Shiva.

⁵² In her family’s altar, there were framed photographs of various Hindu gods including Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha, and Murugan.

eyes lowered to avoid eye contact with her. Ramaiyi's daughter-in-law, daughter, and children retreated into the corner of the room looking intrigued and frightened and not taking their eyes off of her. They motioned that I join them, which I did. She continued breathing heavily and kept her thumb forcible pressed into the boy's forehead such that his body was now moving along with her side-to-side writhing motion. After a minute, she lowered her hand to his neck with a similar motion, and her right leg began violently shaking. She released her thumb and finally lowered to the ground and bent on her knee, clutching her stomach. She placed the lit lamp on the ground and with *vipūti* in her hand, shifted her weight from leg to leg and tossed the *vipūti* to the left, right, and center of the boy's neck. It became increasingly violent and at one point, her daughter-in-law softly asked, "*Enna, Ammā?*" ("What is it, mother?"). After another minute, she lowered to the ground and her shaking slowed to a halt. She bent her head and upper half over her thighs and knees, remaining in this position for about ten seconds. When she raised herself up to stand, she had slowed her breathing, and her eyes remained lowered. She then smoothed her hands on her sari at thighs' length and looked up. Her daughter-in-law told us to come into the front room, and Ramaiyi joined us five minutes later, squatting on the floor opposite the television. Her smallest grandchild, Sobika, only one and three months old, immediately went to join her, smiling and shifting her weight from one leg to the other making the "su" sound and smiling. Everyone, including Ramaiyi, laughed. "*Pārunkaḷē*" ("Look at her"), she told me. "She is the center of this house," and she settled Sobika onto her lap. We continued watching television as if nothing had happened.

The incident came up in conversation a week later when I was talking to Ramaiyi about the estate's Māriamman festival and her faith. She told me that she was told that the *cāmi* first came to her when she was fourteen years old. She had practiced *kūttu*, a ritual where one pierces through both cheeks in divine penitence at a *tiru vizhā* for the goddess, Kāliamman, consort of Shiva and goddess of empowerment. At that time, the *cāmi* began coming and would come often after. She told me that she has no memory of it after it happens, but that she knows it comes from her faith:

“*Cāmi* does not come to everyone. It came for my mother, but not my daughter and not my daughter-in-law. *Pōkātu* (“It does not go to them”). I do not remember it when it comes, but it can happen anywhere. It is a good thing. It is *deivam* (god). When you are with god, you will not even feel fire beneath your feet. *Onnum varātu* (“Nothing will come to you”). It comes when it needs to. That day—that boy was not well. He had a fever, a heat in him. The *cāmi* came to me to get rid of it and in the morning, he was better. If anything it is bad, it will come. When you walk alone back from here in the dark, I think—*cāmi*, how will she go? Watch this *Komari piḷḷai*⁵³ so that no boy approaches her. That is my faith (*nampikkai*)—for my family, for everyone here.”

Ramaiyi's communication with god raises significant points about the centrality of Malaiyaha Tamil women's faith to addressing uncertainties that arise in everyday life on the plantation. Because elderly women do not contribute financial income to their households, they strongly emphasize their imparting of knowledge that can actively contribute to generating more secure forms of living and recognition for their kith and kin. What remains shared in such diversity of practice is the presence of uncertainty—or, in Ramaiyi's terms, “the need” to address infelicitous conditions. Belief-based practices such as *cāmi varatu* serve as a means to purge such negative energies, but its exclusivity and divine selection of individuals on the plantation signals to differently inhabited and

⁵³ *Komari piḷḷai* is a Tamil colloquial term of an unmarried girl.

singular gender experiences that elderly and retired women, like Ramaiyi, embody for active purposes.

REWORKING CONTRIBUTIONS: LIFE AFTER KOLUNTU VELAI

Anxieties among the retired Malaiyaha Tamil women that I spoke to primarily revolved around the social and economic changes that have shifted living dynamics on the plantations their bodily health, and how both sites of concern relate to one another over time (ISD 2004). In storytelling among Malaiyaha Tamils, such changes are indexed by Tamil deictics such as *anta* (“that”) and *inta* (“this”) with reference to time (*kālam*). *Anta kālam* was a time of easier living—where families could have ten or eleven children without financial struggle and adequate resources to sustain a full life such as food, clothing, and education were readily available. *Inta kālam*—the here and now—is uncertain and in many ways, looking to a horizon of unknown conditions. The contrast also comes out in the way that elderly women see their bodies change with age. Ramaiyi and other retired pluckers would often tell me that they used to be big, healthy girls (*tadicca ponnu*) who had eaten well in their youths and into young motherhood. Now, with thinner frames and the wear and tear of heavy household work, childcare, *vettrilai* chewing, and old age their respiratory and immune functions have been lowered and they firmly believe that such bodily changes reflect the increasingly harder times faced by families living on the plantations today. Plantation NGOs have documented health concerns among elderly Malaiyaha Tamil women (ISD 2004: 9, CEPA 2008: 33-4) and how such anxieties correlate to the degrees to which they can contribute to their

children's households beyond non-paid work such as childcare and household duties. In fact, many of the conversations that I had with elderly women about health would almost always turn in story to better times and how their mothers and fathers did not suffer like this and how this *kālam*, this estate, and the people are now not good.

Such conditions of uncertainty and dissatisfaction would also lead to the acquiring of other choices after losing a partner. Often, capable elderly widowed women with no grandchildren to look after would be brokered to work as domestic workers in Colombo for temporary time periods to ease the burden of her child's family and boost their overall familial income. Such was the case of Bukiammā, a seventy-two year old Malaiyaha Tamil woman who suddenly lost her husband in March 2009. We first met when Sakuntala took me to her house (*cettavītu* or "house of the deceased one") three days after the funeral burial of her husband who had been a domestic worker in Colombo even into his old age. A convert from Hinduism to the Christian Assembly of God (A.O.G.) Church, Buki had the support of the local pastor and church members on Kirkwall, where there were at least four homes of kin that attended services in a nearby church. Nevertheless, she was inconsolable with grief over the loss of her husband:

He was a good man. When I put the sand on his [coffin] box, I saw his photo and he looked as though he was smiling. Therefore, I should not be crying. He had honor. Other men here are not so good, but he was a good man on this estate. He worked doing housework for a *periya dorai*⁵⁴ in Colombo, had a good salary, took care of us, and now what? *Enna cēyratu?*

Buki's mourning demonstrates how, like Ramaiyi, the loss of her husband and his absence in the present conjures up judgments of those who live around her. Those "not so

⁵⁴ *Periya* ("Big") *dorai* is a Tamil plantation labor term for the big or head manager of the plantation.

good” men make her husband stand out in death as that one man who held the dignity and goodness of the community. For Buki, such goodness was in his ability to care for her family and support them financially even into retirement from estate work. She would soon take these sentiments with her in her own transition from wife to widow in the months to come.

After five months of grieving, Buki began intensely fighting with her son, with whose family she lived. Angry that the family was struggling economically since his father’s death, her son demanded that she find work as a domestic in Colombo. On one particular evening, he had too much to drink and became violent, hitting his wife and mother and causing a commotion in the lines. She was forced to move into her daughter’s house in a nearby line, and soon began contemplating taking up a job as a domestic worker in Colombo in order to bring in more money for her family. Such instances of elderly widows working in Colombo as domestics pose considerable risks to a widow’s mental and physical health. Given that their bodies are generally weaker than those of younger Malaiyaha Tamil women, new working and living conditions can further deteriorate already fragile bodily systems; furthermore, undocumented domestic work offers little to no assurances for emergency and preventative healthcare. Encountering these evident risks, widows like Buki nevertheless view domestic work as one viable strategy to make their lives within their families more secure, and their participation in the domestic labor economy signals how elderly women negotiate their perceived worth within familial circles by engaging global markets of labor and production.

ATTUNED TO THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE: SAKUNTALA

Exemplary of the Malaiyaha Tamil woman in constant motion was Ramaiyi's retired friend and neighbor, Sakuntala. My first attempts at taking Sakuntala's oral history took place over two hours of cooking and household duties in January 2009. I soon learned that my search for the ideal interview location or oral history setting was out of reach when working with women on the plantations. The diversity of work required of them—tending to rice boiling in a pot over a fire put, handing a *maṇvetṭi*⁵⁵ to a two-year old girl to give to her father outside, cleaning a grandchild's backside in the tap outside the kitchen—reminded me that these were the intimate moments and familial obligations that build families and accounts of families. Thus, any perceived imperfection in piecing together the history of a woman's family is not imperfection but an embracing of the conditions of care in community.

Apart from the first time I met Sakuntala in the presence of the *kankāni* and *kaṇakkuppillai*, our conversations always took place in the midst of cooking, childcare, cleaning, washing, and other household duties. On occasional evenings she would come into to Ramaiyi's front room and watch television (which almost always precluded the possibility of more focused interviews or conversation), but would run back to her house in between commercials to oversee cooking or her grandchildren. In this way, she was always moving and carrying out her role as retired caretaker of her home.

⁵⁵ This is a large knife for the cutting of soil and even thick plants. It is used for plantation work such as weeding, unearthing rocks, and soil upkeep. It is often kept among workers for household tasks.

For Malaiyaha Tamil women who are not widows but retired from estate work, life on the plantation revolves around the care of the *oikos* (household). Retired women who are still married customarily live with their children in the lines, creating a multi-generational support system created to bring in the maximum family income. In Sakuntala's home, for instance, both her son and daughter-in-law work full-time; her son is an electrician in Hatton town, and her daughter works as a plucker in the fields.

When we met Sakuntala was sixty-seven years old. She was born in the same house she lived in. Her family home was a standard line room at the end of a line overlooking the main road; in 1998, the family next door moved out of their house, and she and her husband adjoined the two houses creating a larger space for her multi-generational family. Growing up on Kirkwall, Sakuntala is one of four children, and her siblings all live with a day's trip from Kirkwall with families of their own. Her mother plucked in the fields and her father and brother did field work on the estates until it became difficult to find work during the labor shortage. At that point, father and son turned to tailoring and bought two Singer sewing machines and ran an informal tailoring business out of their home.

Like Ramaiyi, Sakuntala stopped studying early in life after the 6th Grade to begin plucking in the fields of Kirkwall. When she was seventeen, she said that the *dorai* at that time was causing trouble (*kuzhappam*) and that she was told that there was no work so she stopped working and stayed at home for nearly five years. When she was twenty-three, she married Ponniah, who was five years her senior and working in various field jobs on the estate such as administering pesticides and masonry work. He was promoted

to *kankāni vēlai* and later became a security guard (*kāval*) for the estate store and factory until his retirement in 1993 when he was fifty-six years old. Apart from a slight chest problem and acid when he eats spicy (*kāram*) food, he is able and still carries out manageable household tasks such as shopping in town and managing their accounts at the bank in Hatton.

Sakuntala's knowledge of Kirkwall came through most vividly in her recollections of her experiences as a mother. A mother of six children, all of whom are still alive, we would regularly discuss childbearing and what changes had taken place on the estates since she had been a young mother. For instance, all of her children, except her fourth child, were delivered in the house she was born in. The only reason she gave birth to her fourth child in the hospital was because she had had unexpected pains and thought it would be best to deliver there. She mentioned that now, there was a law now prohibiting the deliveries of children at home, but I was not able to find the law to which she was referring and suspect that prohibition of home deliveries had been and was continuing to be communicated to Malaiyaha Tamil women by Government-service Public Health Midwives (PHM) and Estate Medical Officers (EMOs) that monitor expectant mothers during their antenatal periods.⁵⁶

Such changes in antenatal counseling and birthing methods on the estates concerned Sakuntala. She had not had any issues with her home deliveries and had appreciated the security of her surroundings and kin and presence and knowledge of the

⁵⁶ Statistics indicating decreases in home births have been lauded by the WHO, UNICEF, and Government of Sri Lanka for attributing to lower infant and maternal mortality rates and lower instances of birth defects. In 1970, nine percent of all births in Sri Lanka took place in the home, and that percentage declined to two percent in 1995 and then to 1% in 2006 (http://www.unicef.org/devpro/46000_48498.html, <http://www.rcog.org.uk/news/rcog-release-promoting-safer-childbirth-sri-lankan-success-story>)

midwives who were known to by recommendation and by way of prenatal and postnatal home visits:

Even though our estate clinic is good, in the hospital, you do not know who is there and who can take care of you well. Nowadays, I hear from new mothers here that the doctors are not good and not giving medicine for their pains as they should be doing. If pains come and a woman must give birth—today, she must go by ambulance or lorry. You do not have to give money for either but it takes twenty minutes to go to the hospital from here and there is only one ambulance for the four nearby estates. At home, these issues are not there.

Sakuntala's concerns reflect the judgments that elderly Tamil women have about the changes in surveillance and monitoring of life on the plantations over time. She and other women on Kirkwall have cultivated the knowledge needed to build healthy families, and their children and grandchildren serve as testaments to the utility of their wisdom. But, over time, their knowledge is being challenged by more technocratic ways of knowing about the mother's body and childcare.⁵⁷ For Sakuntala, the intimacy of the process is missing, and she is keenly aware of this trend of alienation and its impact on shifting group life dynamics on the estates.

Sentiments of alienation among retired Malaiyaha Tamil women extend beyond childrearing and into concerns about how best to build stable home lives and self-sufficient families in the wake of uncertainty. Sakuntala takes pride in the way that she raised her children and the decisions that she made with regards to their marriages and employment choices; all six of her children are married and working, and only one, her

⁵⁷ Such bureaucratic shifts also signal to larger trends in South Asia regarding the institutionalization of the woman's reproductive body in the context of family planning and childbirth during the 1970s and 1980s (Bass 2008, van Hollen 2003: 141-65).

second to last daughter, does not have children of her own. Sakuntala claims that they are only able to do so through career-driven social networks on their estates:

On certain estates, there are lawyers, police officers, post office workers, and many youth who have studied in university. If one person gets a job, that one can help others succeed and try for a chance. Here on this estate, there is no one like that. Now, more and more people are traveling abroad and away from here to find work. Here, the salary is less, so going abroad is good.

Under such limiting socioeconomic conditions, Sakuntala feels that her children have done well in creating secure livelihoods for themselves: two of her daughters worked as domestics in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and one was able to bring her family abroad with her and is now raising her children there. Her other two daughters have worked in garment factories over plucking and her two sons chose not to do estate work, instead opting for work in urban areas as electricians and contracted construction workers. Furthermore, all of her children all take great pride in educating their children—a childrearing standard that she herself was not told to adhere to, but now, according to her, is a must for surviving in Sri Lanka.⁵⁸ Sakuntala is aware of such shifts and discussed their direct correlations to the changing values placed on estate work between the time of her plucking days and today:

When I began working at thirteen years of age, the wage was two rupees a day. We had double-layer *irattai kambalis* (a lambswool blanket shaped into a knee-length hooded cloak) to wear for warmth and protection for the rain. Now, the management gives plastic jackets that are no good. Even the conditions of the estate crèches have gone bad (*uṭaṅcu pōccu*). I will not send my grandchildren there now. It is dirty (*aciṅkam*), and I worry about the children who stay there. It is better to keep them in the house.

⁵⁸ Sakuntala's grandchildren are particularly noteworthy for their educational merits. Her grandchildren in Saudi Arabia speak fluently in Arabic (which she cannot understand) and two of her female grandchildren completed their A/L examinations and are studying at University of Peradeniya.

Sakuntala's opinions about the uncertain and substandard state of affairs on today's tea plantations reflect how retired and elderly women estate workers actively participate in the transformation of social habits and practices for younger generations among their kin and kith networks. Many of their contributions, as noted above, are neither monetary nor officially acknowledged by public institutions of surveillance; instead, their contributions delicately straddle "knowing well" the existential sense of insecurity felt by and within their community in the present and staying attuned to the significance of the wisdom gained through their experiences in the past.

Given the vulnerability of community on the plantations, such circulating forms of knowledge and gender subjectivities across differences in age, marital status, belief, and status impact how the larger Malaiyaha Tamil community will regard and carry out their lives in the present. Their impact is most significant in their humbled realization that the labor and work that they once carried out and the conditions of womanhood in which they lived no longer carry the same dignity or value for their offspring and future generations, and on the most extreme level, simply are not feasible for the survival of their kin. By acknowledging these changes over time and through accounts of themselves, these women impart a diversity of wisdom and experience that informs the choices made in their community today, and in doing so, create and restore a space of dignity for themselves on the plantations.

PART TWO: BEARING DEBT IN THE WOMB

As elderly and retired Tamil women rework their pasts into pragmatic methodologies for the future of their families, they realize that the present insecurities faced by the Malayaha Tamil community writ large are felt most acutely and intrusively by young women approaching and in marriage and motherhood on the plantations. On a very basic level, older generations of Malayaha Tamil women had received different messages about their reproductive ancestors. Families with eleven children, such as the one into which Ramaiyi was born, or even Sakuntala's brood of six, were no longer possible; marriages, albeit arranged, were more and more ending in separation and divorce. Most painfully, such narrowing and foreboding relational and reproductive trends hinged on how couples and their families handled the perpetual problem of financial insecurity and poverty. In conversations with expectant mothers of one child, having two children was enough and desired. For a mother of three unexpectedly having a fourth, that extra child—though wanted and loved in the future—presented too much of a financial burden if viable outside the womb. Who is permitted to draw the line that says two children are enough for Malayaha Tamil women on the plantations? What does it mean for these women to be told that their wombs should no longer be generative of future life?

This chapter concludes with attempting to answer these questions. But an understanding of the end of womb production—female sterilization—entails an understanding of the womb's possibility as manifest in the centrality of fertility and its representations among Malayaha Tamil families on the estates. As Margaret Trawick so

simply begins her chapter on children in Notes on Love in a Tamil Family, “Childhood is made much of in Tamil Nadu” (1990: 215). Her observation was mirrored in numerous observations of affection for and signs of love expressed to children among Tamil families living on the plantations. Children, especially younger ones, were, in Ramaiyi’s words, “the center of the house.” With such emotional investment in the production of life, its continuation through the fertile wombs of offspring is an obviously natural desired outcome within cycles of families.

One of the most outward demonstrations of such investments among Tamils in Sri Lanka’s Hill Country is the recognition of fertility through the celebration of a young girl’s coming of age or first menstruation. A ritual also known colloquially among my interlocutors as the *vayacu āccutunka* (“age [attainment] ritual”), this ceremony and celebration comprise the first major introduction of a Tamil girl-turned-woman to the larger community and signifies her potentiality as reproductively able woman that is eligible for marriage in the near future. In September 2009, I was able to witness and document the *cutunka* of one of my interlocutor’s brother’s daughters on an estate in Talawakelle, which is about twenty minutes by train from Hatton town. The ceremony and celebration spanned over two days and, as confirmed by my interlocutor who took place in the ritual as the young girl’s maternal uncle, cost nearly 50,000 SLR for her family including the rental of the hall for the celebration, material goods for the ritual, catering of food for both days, photography and video (including professional album making) and of course, three different saris and sets of jewelry for the young woman.



Figure 7. Sivadharshini, photographed on the day of her vayacu āccutunka and professionally videotaped during the reception on the day after in Hatton area. Both photographs take by author.

During the reception, I sat with my one of younger interlocutors, Rajesh, a young boy working in a Colombo shop from Kirkwall estate. He had taken leave from work and come back for the *āccutunka* because his father was the young girl's maternal uncle. I asked him what the standard money-gift or *moi* would be for relatives and estate community members attending the event to give to the young girl. He told me that nowadays, one could not give less than 500 SLR but that one family could give whatever they please like as long as the *moi* was placed in a sealed envelope with your name, name of your estate, and address on it for reciprocity purposes. His family, because they were closer in relation, had given the girl a gold ring, which he had purchased in Colombo and brought back with him to the celebration. I shared with him the obvious fact that 500

SLR was a lot of money (more than one day's salary for estate work) for one family to give, and he told me that it had to be that way because the *cadangu*'s cost would put a significant dent in the family's savings. The *moi*, he said, would help the family recover.

It was then that he said the most telling thing:

You know why they do a big *cutunka*, Akka? It is because, now, most young girls do not get married like before with their parents finding a boy for them, watching for caste, and what not. Now, it is either a love marriage or mostly elopements so the family figures that this will be their only chance to show and celebrate their daughter's virtuousness so publically. The *cutunka* has become more important than the marriage."

If such is the reality for young Malaiyaha Tamil girls looking up to the horizon of marriage and motherhood, what do such expectations of disappointment hold for marriage once they are wives and expectant mothers?

FALLING SHORT OF THE IDEAL

On one hand, fertility and the roles of wife and mother can be said to be life goals that Malaiyaha Tamils desire for their daughters; but how exactly do they perceive the range of emotions and pressures that come along with such split expectations and subjectivities of womanhood as communicated within the larger plantation community? Such questions came to mind when I met Amudha. Twenty-seven year old when we met, she is the last of three children to a *kanakkuppiḷḷai* and crèche mother on Dearborn Estate. Her parents are upper-caste (*Muthuraj*) Malaiyaha Tamils who have worked on the estates for over thirty years. A bright student, Amudha completed her G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) in 1998 and Advanced Level (A/L) examinations in 2003. At the suggestion of her aunt,

Kannaki, an NGO worker in Nawalapitiya, Amudha sat for both sets of examinations in Sinhala medium and not in Tamil, which is her mother tongue. Choosing Sinhala, Geography, and Buddhist Civilization for her A/L subject examinations, she passed all three with satisfactory marks. Her educational record and knowledge of Sinhala and Tamil seemingly made her a viable candidate for a number of jobs in Sri Lanka at that time.

Planning pragmatically for a young girl's professional future is key feature of upper-caste Malaiyaha Tamil family life and necessity for Amudha's mother and father. Their first daughter, Kokila, did the same and was now holding a permanent job in the Dearbon Estate financial office. Their only son, Partheepan, had also studied well but given the lack of jobs and upward mobility on the estates, had secured a job in Riyadh working for a large hotel. With the money he earned, he was able to support his wife, Yogitha, and their two children, who all lived with parents in the *kaṇakkuppiḷlai* quarters on Dearborn. The only major family stress had occurred when Kokila fell in love with a Sinhala man from town and they got married despite their parents' objections. After the couple had a baby, Kokila's parents accepted her and her husband, but he soon left her and the boy for another woman and left the Hatton area, and she never heard from him again. When I met the family, Kokila and her three-year old son were living with her parents as well in the same house on Dearborn. The incident had made it even clearer for her parents that their youngest child, Amudha, had to get married to a man within their caste, according to horoscope and with careful scrutiny of the boy's family. It also

justified that education was an imperative and a choice that had saved Kokila from total loss since she had a good and steady job with financial security.

Following the completion of her A/L examinations, Amudha completed a diploma in computer studies in Kandy, where she specialized in computer programming and design. After earning her certificate of completion, she worked at a plantation NGO as a computer operator for three years and also served as a computer literacy instructor and lecturer at two different research and vocational centers. In January 2007, she left Kandy and her job to get an arranged marriage to a man named Kannan within her family's *Muthuraj* caste. Kannan's mother and father, who are originally from Trichy in Tamil Nadu, were shop owners in Wellawatte before their store was burned in the 1983 riots. Their family house was also burned in Matale while Kannan's mother was pregnant with her daughter. At this point, because they held Indian citizenship, they were able to go to Trichy, but soon returned to Sri Lanka. They settled in Maskeliya, where Kannan and his sister went to school and lived during their childhood. It was to this house that Amudha moved and after marrying Kannan, she stayed at home without a job. In March 2007, she became pregnant with her first son and gave birth to him in December of that year.

We first met in January 2008 when her aunt, Kannaki, who had become a close friend of mine, invited me to her family's house on Dearborn Estate for Thai Poñkal. During our first meeting, Amudha was surprisingly candid with me, but I attribute this initial level of comfort to her affection and trust in her aunt, who had been instrumental in advising her about studying in Sinhala medium and whose connections in plantation NGO circles had secured Amudha's first job after finishing her studies.

Amudha immediately expressed an interest in my research and told me about her background as a computer operator. She asked if I needed help with my research, and because I preferred not to use a research assistant to escort me while doing fieldwork on the plantations, I asked her if she could help me transcribe some of my audio recordings of interviews and development trainings. She agreed and was delighted at the prospect of being employed again. In this process, we developed a close friendship given our closeness in age and mutual interests.

From the first day we met and throughout my research period, Amudha would tell me about her “new” married family. Having lived with them for nearly two years, she still considered Kannan’s family “new” because she did not trust them and felt as if bad luck had fallen upon her after marriage. Furthermore, in the past two months, she had become increasingly worried about her home life. With her husband jobless for the past two months, Amudha had become pregnant with her second child in January 2009, and she was worried about how they would afford to care for their growing family. Kannan, desperate to find a job and feeling pressure from his mother and father, went to Trichy in March to work in a shop owned by his maternal aunt’s husband. In this job, he 2,000 Indian rupee (roughly 4,785 Sri Lankan Rupees) monthly salary, part of which he had to give to his aunt for allowing him to stay in her home. The other part he had to use for his own living expenses. Alone and pregnant, Amudha continued to live with her in-laws, and the instability of her family’s future and regret over not actualizing her former career ambitions remained constant fixtures in her mind. It was during this time that her husband was away and that she had a stable salary as my research assistant that she began

to confide in me more candidly the expectations and obligations that she faced as a wife and mother.

Amudha is resentful of Kannan's family and their unwillingness to support them during this difficult time. Before going abroad to Trichy, Kannan went to Colombo for a month to try to find a job but was unsuccessful even though his younger brother lives in Colombo with his family and has a successful real estate business. Furthermore, he has a sister who lives with her husband in Dubai and successful relations in the United Kingdom and Canada who also refuse to help them in their time of need. She attributes his family's arrogance despite their son's losses with the fact that they are from Trichy. His father, who owns two shops in Maskeliya town, had Kannan run one of the shops before he and Amudha married. It was upon these premises, she told me, that her parents had decided that he and his family would be a secure match for their last daughter.

However, soon after Amudha gave birth to their first son, the shop went under. At the time of its fall, it had an estimated value of Rs. 700,000 or seven *lakhs* (roughly \$6,422 USD at that time). To cover their loss in debt payments, income, and assets, Kannan took out a loan of twenty *lakhs* (roughly \$18,350 USD). To partially repay the interest and cover daily household needs, Kannan's parents demanded that Amudha pawn twenty pounds of her gold jewelry, including seven rings, one bangle, one chain, and a pair of gold earrings. For each pound of gold she received Rs. 35,000 (roughly \$321 USD at the time). During one of our meetings, she showed me one of her pawn slips for the bangle, earrings, and chain where the market value was set at Rs. 89,000 and net value at 55,000 rupees. She and her husband took an advance of Rs. 50,000 from that transaction

with a twenty percent annual interest rate, leaving them with a debt of Rs. 12,000 to pay. Amudha told me that if they did not pay the total of Rs. 62,000 off within the year, all of the gold would be lost. In addition to this, they have another loan of two *lakhs* (roughly \$1835 USD) from an informal moneylender, for which they pay a monthly interest of Rs. 5,000.

Without the expected markers of security and familial status, Amudha's reality of married life was not measuring up to her ideals, as conceived of within the prior, more felicitous, and stabilizing frames of caste, wealth, and educational success. Worsening her home situation was the arrival and long-term stay of Kannan's younger sister, Vijayarani, who had recently married a man from Haputale, another hill station town about one hundred kilometers east of the Maskeliya area. Now living in Abu Dhabi, Vijayarani became pregnant with her first child, but wanted to have the child in Sri Lanka so she came back to live with her mother. Because she looked down on the hospitals in Maskeliya, she had planned for a delivery in a private Colombo hospital and gave birth to a baby girl in late 2008, almost a year after Amudha's first child was born. Immediately following the birth, she came to visit her mother and father in Maskeliya for six months so that her mother could help her care for the baby before their return to Abu Dhabi in July 2009.

Vijayarani arrived in Maskeliya just in time for the January Thai Poñkal⁵⁹ festivities in 2009. As if directly addressing Amudha's losses and circumstances, she wore an exorbitant amount—relative to what those around her wore—of gold in the form

⁵⁹ Thai Poñkal is an annual harvesting festival that takes place in the Thai month (January).

of earrings, rings, necklaces, and even a small gold necklace and belly chain for her baby girl. Especially proud, she made regular comments about how she did not like living in Maskeliya and that she preferred life in Abu Dhabi where there more resources and life “looked richer.” Her comments upset Amudha, who was embarrassed to only wear her wedding *tāli* (*mangalasutra* or symbol of marriage unions in South Asia martial practices) and the last pair of gold earrings that she had along with costume jewelry bangles. When Amudha told Kannaki and me about Vijayarani’s comments and attitude in March, Kannaki attributed Vijayarani’s arrogance to her lack of education and worldly perspective: “Look at how she talks. Look at me. I have traveled abroad—India, Japan, Bangkok. I do not come back proud, do I? I do not say that this place is worse off. This is my home. I am not proud. She is not educated. She is that type of person.” Kannaki, while speaking in Tamil, said the word “proud” clearly and emphatically in English, and it is an English term that marked a number of conversations that I had with women about the feelings of slight that they would feel upon being judged by other women coming and going from the estates. If a woman was “proud,” she was so because she not only flaunted what other women did not or could not have but also did not respect and thus disrupted the place that she came from, her *ūr*. In Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way, Valentine Daniel describes this sense of disruption within the lived relationship between *ūr* and person but in relation to shifts in substance: “The villager’s concern is not only with what substances enter the *ūr* and affect its inhabitants but with the effect of these alien substances on the substance of the *ūr* itself” (1984: 79). The materiality and gestures that represent being “proud” among young wives and mothers present a dynamic

that Malaiyaha Tamil women acutely sense and take issue with. The gold calls out, most ostentatiously, the fact that its wearer disapproves and looks down up the place that she is in and from. Such slights are even more felt among women when negotiating the expectations put upon them as new mothers and wives.

Furthermore, being “proud” is a demonstration of emotion that minority Malaiyaha Tamils know well in political and public spheres. With INGOs, NGOs, politicians, and elite classes telling the community that their members can do better and must change their ways, being proud—and, more importantly, showing pride to other members of your community—can dangerously disrupt or shift the bonds that have purportedly defined community in the past. Kannaki’s comment also raises a crucial point about the sense of security and obligation that comes with feeling as if you belong in a home, community, or nation. For Kannaki, her family *is* her home. It extends beyond her blood kin and to her NGO family that allows her to emotionally support her kin, especially those in insecure circumstances such as Amudha. She is also keenly aware of the significance of return of Malaiyaha Tamils back to the Hill Country from places of work or stay abroad or in Colombo. As Balasundaram, Chandrabose, and Sivapragasam (2008) claim, the attribution of value on foreign remittances is shifting allegiances and value attributions based on caste hierarchies. Status markers such as education and caste, as affirmed by Kannaki’s comment, may not necessarily provide the financial security or feelings of accomplishment as they once did. Today, new opportunities such as the sudden cash increase from and living experiences abroad create new relationships of

pride and resentment among women in their roles as wives, mothers, and daughter-in-laws.

For Amudha, the realities experienced in marriage do not commensurate with the expectations and pride that she took in her education and cultivating of aesthetics as woman in this place in her life. An attractive woman and in line with trending concerns over beauty and appearance among young Malaiyaha Tamil women, Amudha always wore makeup, dressed well, and had an impeccable appearance. Growing up on the plantations and as the daughter of a *kaṇakkuppiḷḷai*, she looked and fit the role of the ambitious and successful daughter well and often drew upon standards of beauty that had been nurtured within plantation colonial mentalities. The financial calamities suffered by her husband and her had managed to detract from these aesthetic comforts and expectations as well:

“Before, Kannan was like a manager—fat, broad, wearing a tie with a full shirt. He dressed well, with gold chains and our registration was done richly. Now, his face is dull. Mine too. You should have seen me before marriage in Kandy. You didn’t know me then, but I looked better. Now, I’m dull [“*dull*” in *English*].”

Amudha’s nostalgia for life before marriage is not uncommon among educated Malaiyaha Tamil women who make compromises to their career ambitions and personal security when entering marriage and motherhood. Her comment also calls out an important linking of expectations put upon unmarried women and new wives in the Hill Country in the face of economic uncertainty and upper-caste pressures to being upwardly mobile and secure. Drawing upon the sentiments of Rajesh’s comment at the *cutunku*, Amudha believes that her *komari piḷḷai* (unmarried) future was brighter and that the financial stresses ruined the image what she thought marriage would be like. Such

changes in appearance also accompanied behavioral changes in their relationship. After Kannan lost his job, he began drinking occasionally; one time in late 2008, he got angry with Amudha for talking back and hit her in the face. She told me that he later apologized, but she has not forgotten it and never imagined that her husband would strike her. Financial instability and its dulling, sometimes violent, products are new to Amudha; her father and mother had been continually employed as a *kaṇakkuppiḷḷai* and crèche attendant respectively for over two decades, and such opportunities were afforded to them not only because of their higher caste status but also due to the social and economic decisions that they made to create the best future for their family.

Even so, such futures did not hold together for parents, and in my conversations with Amudha's family, they expressed their constant worry over her wellbeing and choices made after marriage. Their main anxiety was about the fact that she had become pregnant again when her first son was only eighteen months old, and her husband and she were without jobs. In our conversations at their house on Dearborn, they, sometimes in the presence of Amudha and sometimes not, would tell me about her Rs. 25,000 monthly salary from before and how at least when she turns fifty, that she has some retirement benefits saved. Amudha knew her parents were concerned, but did not feel comfortable to ask them for immediate financial help, and her mother was adamant that Kannan's family should be caring for her. At one point during her pregnancy, she contemplated moving back into her mother and father's house, but her parents advised her against it, assuring her that her parents in law were obligated to care for her in the absence of her husband.

In August 2009, Kannan had not yet returned and as Amudha had spent seven out of nine months of pregnancy without her husband, she was increasingly dejected and worried about their future. Two days before her due date, she asked if we could meet at her home in Maskeliya. When I arrived her house, she was meeting with her midwife and looked uncomfortable and tired. Her blood pressure, which the midwife had just measured, was high, and her eyes looked swollen and, as she said to me, felt tight in their eye sockets, a condition which made her look even more, in her words, “dull.” She had also, in the last month, been diagnosed with gestational diabetes and with her high sugar, had to avoid eating sweets and refined carbohydrates. On top of her elevated sugar, she had also been experiencing pain in her lower abdomen and groin, to which the midwife attributed the baby’s head turning to the right. With her due date approaching, she could feel the baby “coming down,” and we talked about giving birth. From her first birth, she knew the pain would be bad, but also how she was happy to finally see the baby’s face and how it would be. Thinking of her own education and love of learning, she told me how she had enjoyed transcribing my interviews and felt that it was good for her baby’s brain to keep active in her own brain and to think about the stories from the women on the estate that she had been hearing.

As soon as the midwife leaves, Amudha immediately stopped talking about her baby and began telling me about the latest developments in her marriage and relationship with her in-laws in Kannan’s absence. Kannan’s mother had begun taking her research assistant salary and was asking for cash. Furthermore, Kannan’s brother’s from Colombo had come and promised her he would give her Rs. 11,000 to pay off Kannan’s pawned

jewelry interest, but as the date approached, he, instead, bought a used car for twelve *lakhs* (approximately \$11,000 USD) and said to her, “*Celevu kuraivu*” (“Cash is low”). The pawn broker had called demanding that Amudha pay the money, and Amudha was forced to ask Kannan’s father, who gave it to her before leaving for India to settle some family land issues. But as soon as he gave her the money, his wife, Kannan’s mother, reminded Amudha that she had taken it and asked it back from her salary. With such financial dealings and manipulation, the causes of her high pressure were clear:

“What is sad is that this financial problem is not mine, but her son’s. We need to pay for our family. I already gave a lot to my husband in January and February for his India trip in March. I gave Māmi [Kannan’s mother] 5,000 rupees to pay the phone bill as a favor back in June, and she never returned it.”

Amudha’s anger was understandable and calls attention to the expectations placed on expectant mothers and wives in domestic circumstances that are fraught with financial insecurity. Anticipating the same behavior this month, Amudha hid half of the monthly salary that I gave her for her transcription work. She told me that she did not like to, but would lie and say she only got this amount so that she can save money for her new baby. She said that she hoped tensions between her mother-in-law and her would ease with the arrival of the baby. Two days later, Amudha gave birth to a baby boy in the hospital. I phoned Kannaki and the first thing she said is that everyone was sad that Kannan and Kannan’s father had missed the birth since they were still in India. Knowing well that the delivery was this date, they should have returned.

When I arrived at the hospital after the birth, I found Amudha in the post-natal recovery room nursing her newborn son. She was alone, still in pain from the delivery, and unable to turn on her side because of the vaginal stitches. She told me that she had

felt pain at four in the morning and had delivered in the hospital at eight thirty, only four and half hours later. She is slightly crying and has a cramp in her leg because she had contracted it so hard during the delivery. Her hair is uncombed, and her milk low so she is having trouble breastfeeding so frequently. She had worn two fake gold bangles to the delivery room and because her body had become so swollen, the nurses had angrily cut them off with a wrench before she gave birth. Even in labor, Amudha felt that she needed to look fashionable, speaking to the way that she holds herself and thinks of her unmarried past as a bright and independent, working woman. After just five minutes, the rest of her family arrived—her mother in-law, Kannan’s brother from Colombo, Amudha’s mother, Kokila, Yogitha, and their three children. Amudha’s first son does not recognize his mother at first and somewhat scared, he stayed hiding behind Kokila’s leg.

In the commotion, Amudha became dizzy and went with her sister to change her sanitary napkin for her residual bleeding. When she returned, Kannan’s brother asked her for Amudha’s papers to register the birth since Kannan was out of the country. Her mother in law quickly mentions that the infant has no name yet and that she must call her Chitti in Trichy to select a good name—a comment that gets a side look of frustration from Amudha’s mother, who is swaddling the baby. Until a name was selected, he was affectionately called *pāpā*, *dorai*, and *cāmi*. Everyone comments on the baby’s fairness in an effort to distract Amudha from the noticeable absence of her husband and father-in-law. Kokila and Yogitha reminisce about their own births, and Amudha’s mother does what she knows best as a crèche attendant and runs off a list of maternal duties before leaving: take care of the baby, take care of herself, watch that the baby does not fall off

the bed, and give him milk often. As we leave, Amudha tells me that she is sad that Kannan missed these important months and this momentous occasion, and she would not forget it, but for now, would put her mind's focus on her new son.



Figure 8. Amudha at her second child's thirty-day cutunku in September 2009 (Her twenty-one month old son is kneeling in the background.). Photograph taken by author.

In October, nearly two months after the birth, Amudha's husband had yet to return from India, and the infant began suffering from chronic congestion, finding it hard to breathe. Amudha took him to the doctor in Nawalapitiya who told her that he had a hole in his heart. The news shattered her and though treatable, she had not been able to sleep for days and could not stop crying with worry about his health. She was trying to ask Kanna's brother could get him treatment in Colombo, but given the past

disappointments and unmet expectations of her husband's family, she was not optimistic. Crying, she told me, "I can never forgive him for this."

Former anthropological studies of Malaiyaha family structures have represented expectant mothers as a monophonic bearers of gendered traditions and "cultural" compliance; these are woman who bear children, participate in thirty-day *cutunkus* for their babies' fortunes, and outwardly obey their husbands' parents (Kurian 1982, Hollup 1994). In many ways, Amudha performed all of these commitments and duties; she followed the wishes of her family, married the man, who on paper and in appearance, would secure her and her future children's futures, and stayed with her husband's parents, even in his absence. But her account and articulations of unmet expectations destabilize the coherence with which such gendered traditions of marriage and motherhood are transmitted and to be understood.

After I left Sri Lanka, the problems in Amudha's family continued unresolved. Amudha's husband returned from India in late 2009 and was still in debt. Jobless in the Hill Country and with no prospects in India through his kin connections, he left his family in Maskeliya for Colombo to take a job in a hotel, but this job did not last for more than two months due to lack of need and poor salary. Amudha had managed to get a part-time position as a computer operator for a nearby NGO, but when she became pregnant again in May 2011, she realized that she could no longer try to find work and would have to remain at home to care for her children. Finally, with the help of Amudha's brother in August 2012, he got a job as a bank security officer in Doha for a monthly salary of 30,000 SLR. Her sister-in-law, Vijayarani, had two more children and in an unexpected

turn of events, was left by her husband on her most recent trip to Maskeliya, when he told her not to return to Abu Dhabi with their three children. Now, Amudha says, she is no longer proud, and working in her mother's shop, is re-learning life and new habits as an estranged wife and single mother of three in the Hill Country.

Both of Amudha's parents retired and left Dearborn, buying and moving into a house in Hatton town. Kokila, to the dismay of her entire family, fell in love with a younger Tamil boy and is living with him. With her parents and brother enraged, she no longer goes to their house and even Kannaki cannot convince her to stay with her family and not live unmarried with a boy seven years junior to her. She told Kannaki, "I will not get out. I will be this way."

The combination of Kokila's resistance and resignation brings us back to Rajesh's comment about a young girl's entry into womanhood and how public recognitions of a woman's reproductive viability are intricately linked to the evaluations made upon women entering and encountering experiences of marriage and motherhood. As indicated by the women handling such obligations and separations in Amudha's life, the conditions of marriage and motherhood force women to consider the following options: one must defy the ideals of an already unstable social practice amidst financial and national insecurity, endure such insecurities at the expense of having their bodily decisions measured and evaluated, or resign themselves to the possibility that the community has pre-determined their ability to meet such unattainable ideals of perfection. Such a conundrum forces fertile women not only to act intentionally but also to continually make sense of the world into which they were born and socialized. Accounts of such dilemmas

reveals that Malaiyaha Tamil women, charged with such evaluations of their bodies and wombs, seek modes of self-dignity and honor to replace the physical and emotional debts incurred over time and space.

COMMUNICATING NECESSITY

As soon as she learned that she had become pregnant for the second time, Amudha began speaking about getting “the operation” with her family. Her mother and sister-in-law, Yogitha, were worried. I sat with them in the kitchen one afternoon while waiting for Amudha to arrive for a visit while she was pregnant. Her mother pulled away her sari and pulled down the fold to reveal a faded, but present cross-like scar. She then took two splinters of wood that had fell from the sides of the fire pit and held them in a cross-like formation to show me.

Amudha’s mother had had “the operation” in 1981—more formally known as female sterilization, which is carried out through the surgical procedure known as tubal ligation or the cutting, sealing, or “tying” of a woman’s fallopian tubes to prevent eggs from entering the uterus for fertilization. She claimed to me that she had elected to have it after giving birth to Amudha at the suggestion of her Sinhala midwife who had said that a family with three children was more than enough to handle. At the time, twenty-seven years before, she was not given other methods of contraception to choose from or nor did she know any better to ask. But today, as a seasoned and trained Tamil crèche attendant working with young mothers on the estates, she knows better and that there are other forms of contraception beyond tubal ligation.

When Amudha arrived, her mother began telling her about the other forms of contraception that she should try over tubal ligation. Yogitha chimed in—the Depo Provera injection (“The Shot”), the Birth Control Pill (“The Pill”), intrauterine devices (IUD), or the “loop”—the list went on. Yogitha had previously used the Depo shot, but it did not work well with her body. She had stomach pains and did not like the idea of her periods not coming. She then tried The Pill, which she has stuck with, but she has to get it through a private doctor and pay more money for it. In the Government Hospitals, the shot is free. Today, Amudha’s mother tells me, women do not need to get sterilized.

Her claim was striking because she used the word “need” (*tēvai*) to describe the conditions in which Malaiyaha Tamil women on the plantations make decisions about their wombs and reproductive capacity. To finish her thought, women do not need to get sterilized because there are other options of family planning in the wider world. But why then had almost every fertile, married woman with two or more children that I encountered in research on the plantation undergone the sterilization procedure? What had made these women think that they needed “the operation”? Who had identified female sterilization as a necessity for Malaiyaha Tamil women, and how did they validate and champion such “needs” as the right “choice” for women and their families?

These questions directly relate to the communicative relationship among human need, technologies of knowledge production, and agentive capacity. These three sites of attention and their workings with one another present the issue of female sterilization as a rights-based issue that uniquely affects Malaiyaha Tamil women and their reproductive experiences. As evident in previous policy and anthropological scholarship on female

sterilization among Malaiyaha Tamils (Bass 2008, Balasundaram 2009), the procedures that serve as a means to the end are never discussed in isolation, because it is a medical transaction whose terms are communicated and understood within the context of the woman's social circumstances. Anthropologist and member of the Malaiyaha Tamil community, Sasikumar Balaundaram, states that "women bear the total responsibility of controlling reproductive capacity" on Sri Lanka's tea plantations in that the whole conception of family planning—the controlling of one's family size—is only communicated to women, thus feminizing the concept and social practice itself (2009: 49). Under such conditions, how do Malaiyaha Tamil women on the plantations that are contemplating the generative capacity of their wombs think through such feminized social practices? For women who have undergone female sterilization, how do they come to understand the process that they underwent within the context of their wider lives beyond reproductive futures?

The last section of this chapter seeks to explore such questions and builds upon the inclusion of such narratives of reproduction within the *bardic heritage* (Daniel 1996) of Malaiyaha Tamil women across generations. Though I would have liked to have continued in the scholarly footsteps of Balasundaram and his research assistants⁶⁰, I was under methodological constraints of insecurity, emergency, and war given my outsider status to the Malaiyaha Tamil community and did not want to attract negative attention to my presence on the plantations for fear of being denied entry into the estates or worse, detainment. But, as I quickly learned, the topic of sterilization would weave itself into

⁶⁰ Balasundaram and his research assistants, one of whom was female, were able to carry out focus groups and interviews unnoticed by the plantation managements.

everyday conversations that I had with elderly women, second and third-time mothers, human rights activists, and community members.

I will first provide a brief history of family planning and population control in order to contextualize the reasons that female sterilization—forced, with informed consent, and desired—is perceived as both a necessity and violation of human rights on the plantation. I will then conclude by sharing a series of ethnographic narratives that I recorded in research about tubal ligation procedures performed on middle aged and elderly women. Their perspectives demonstrate that the procedure and transaction exceed the expectations of “family planning” and uniquely transform gender subjectivities among generations of women about their bodies and reproductive capacities. In keeping with the theme of storytelling and accounting for oneself, I hope that these narratives contribute to a polyvocal, feminist presence in the Global South about women’s bodies and make a place for Malaiyaha Tamil women on the plantations within a wider world of world of working women and their generative futures.

FROM HEALTHY COLONY TO CALCULATED NATION

Sri Lanka has long been considered one of the most successful countries in terms of population control. The current, centralized government family planning initiative’s objective is to influence reproduction rates in the context of population control on a general level applicable to all socio-economic and religio-social populations.⁶¹

⁶¹ *Family Health Bureau*, The Ministry of Health (July 28, 2011, 6:30 PM), <http://www.familyhealth.gov.lk>.

Nevertheless, for the national population at large, the program produces different experiences and narratives of choice, consent, and rights, and this is particularly the case for Malaiyaha Tamil women seeking contraceptive methods on the plantations. In a 2006 Demographic and Health Survey, 41.1% of Malaiyaha Tamil women using modern methods of contraception “chose” sterilization as their form of contraception.⁶² In order to contextualize the conditions under which Malaiyaha Tamil women make choices about reproductive health, it is first necessary to understand the history of health policy and family planning in colonial Ceylon and postcolonial Sri Lanka. The development of a national health policy and introduction of family planning and reproductive health concepts have direct connections to the long-standing practice of monitoring of maternal health and family planning in the tea plantation sector.

Although independence in 1948 provided fertile ground for laying the framework for a centralized government structure, the foundation for health law and policy and in particular, maternal health law and policy for plantation workers, had earlier roots. The first hospitals for civilians were used as early as the 1850s,⁶³ and in 1926, the first official health unit was established in Ceylon (Abeykoon 2010:1). This system led to the creation of Sri Lanka’s current universal healthcare system, which falls under the administration of the central Government of Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Health. This ministry provides both medical services and public health services, all of which are carried out on the provincial, district, and divisional secretariat levels accordingly.

⁶² Demographic and Health Survey, Ministry of Health 2006/07, Annual Health Statistics-2006: Appendix Annual Health Survey 2006.

⁶³ Excepting medical facilities used for the containment of diseases such as leprosy, smallpox, and malaria, which were erected in the 16th century during Dutch occupation.

With regards to maternal health, the Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPASL) was created in 1953. As an NGO, this organization initially sought to address issues of maternal health, malnutrition, and quality of life for mothers and children (Abeykoon 2010:1). Sensing the need to address population control, the Ministry of Health created the Family Health Bureau (FHB) within the Maternal Child Health Bureau (MCH) to address the healthcare needs of mothers and children and to meet the concerns of a growing postcolonial population in Ceylon in 1968.⁶⁴ During this time, family planning became incorporated into national policy, and the Government of Sri Lanka worked to further implement family planning policies through a series of programs at the field level (Abeykoon 2010: 6). During this time, family planning also became an issue of population control in the name of nation building—namely, that the nation’s future success would be directly dependent on its ability to control its population size. In 1977, the Government of Sri Lanka’s national policy recognized female sterilization as a modern method of contraception and as a successful form of population control (Abeykoon 2010:2). In 1980, under the Commitment to Health Charter, the government provided financial incentives not only to medical personnel who carried out sterilizations, but also to the recipients of the procedure itself (Abeykoon 201-6-7).

Since its acceptance as a form of population control and permanent modern method contraception in Sri Lanka, the Government of Sri Lanka has widely promoted female sterilization to Sri Lankan married women. In fact, in 1991, right before the 1994 Cairo paradigm and the International Conference on Population and Development

⁶⁴ *Family Health Bureau*, The Ministry of Health (July 28, 2011, 6:30 PM), <http://www.familyhealth.gov.lk>.

(ICPD), the Government of Sri Lanka changed its population policy with the aim to achieve replacement level fertility by the year 2000 (Craig 1994: 20-2). Despite marked shifts and positive changes in Sri Lanka's family planning rhetoric after ICPD in 1994,⁶⁵ family planning practices remained relatively unchanged. For example, the Family Health Bureau website still states that they need to achieve a higher use of contraception among married couples before the year 2015 in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs).⁶⁶ The lack of radical change reflects what Sonia Correa calls a "compromise" and "semantic re-interpretations or refinements of conventional maternal and child health or family planning programs" (1997: 110). The notion of "compromise" will become significant when considering the development of family planning and alongside the transitions of healthcare in the plantation sector itself.

PLANNING A PRODUCTIVE WORK FORCE

The national promotion of female sterilization in Sri Lanka in addition to the history of marginalization in the plantation sector, which I discussed in both the Introduction and Chapter One, have great significance for the use of contraception among Malaiyaha Tamil women in Sri Lanka. Healthcare monitoring has long history in the plantation sector dating back to British colonial rule. Because Malaiyaha Tamils working on the tea plantations were subject to harsher elements during their sojourn from India to Ceylon

⁶⁵*Services: Introduction*, Health Family Bureau (Jul. 26, 2011, 2:00 PM), (<http://www.familyhealth.gov.lk/services.php>).

⁶⁶*Achievements*, Health Family Bureau (Jul. 26, 2011, 2:00 PM), (<http://www.familyhealth.gov.lk/achievements.php>).

and in their agricultural work and poor housing and sanitation facilities, they suffered from a number of preventative diseases and ailments. Acting upon the concerned demand of Indian colonial agents, the colonial Government of Ceylon enacted the Medical Aid Ordinance No 14 of 1872, which required planters to provide their workers with medical aid; however, planters largely did not implement this ordinance, and in 1880, Ordinance No 17 provided plantation workers medical care by the Government of Ceylon (Peebles 2001: 142). Though plantation workers could now legally seek Government services off the plantation, such services were not easily accessible or possible given their long work hours and lack of transportation to Government-based hospitals from remote tea estates. These habits became the foundations upon which Malaiyaha Tamil healthcare would evolve over time, and the healthcare needs of Tamil plantation workers were largely unmet and continued to be so into the next century.

Three major economic phases in Sri Lanka's plantation history shaped the development of healthcare administration and practice for the Malaiyaha Tamil estate workers. As discussed above, from 1880 to 1972, the healthcare of the plantation workers, though officially under the care of the Government of Ceylon, fell under the responsibility of the plantation companies. However, Sri Lanka underwent a broad socialist scheme, in which the country's tea and rubber plantations were nationalized under the Land Reform Law No 1 of 1972 and Land Reform (Amendment) Law No 39 of 1975. The shift to nationalization meant that all plantation healthcare, housing, and educational facilities and services would now fall solely under the Government. Under nationalization, some positive changes occurred within the estate sector, including the

building of more government hospitals; but problems such as language barriers, lack of identification, and escalating civil violence persisted and hindered Malayaha Tamils living on the plantations from fully accessing their health rights.

Privatization in 1992 again placed the wellbeing of plantation workers under the care of the plantation companies. Recognizing the transitions estate workers had made during nationalization, the regional plantation companies (RPCs), in conjunction with the Government of Sri Lanka and select plantation trade unions, created the Plantation Housing and Social Welfare Trust in 1992.⁶⁷ Later renamed the Plantation Human Development Trust (PHDT), PHDT currently serves as the mediating organization that manages services for plantation workers, including housing, educational training, social welfare, and health programs.⁶⁸ The transition to a privatized estate sector was not without problems. According to a 1995 report by a plantation NGO, even basic needs such as access to water, housing, and toilet facilities were not updated and hospitals and estate dispensaries were not given the same supplies and services afforded to the rest of the country's population (Caspersz 1995: 20). In 1997, the Government acknowledged these disparities, creating the Ministry of Estate Infrastructure and Development to allocate funds for the development of the estate sector.⁶⁹ However, a recent report written by the former secretary of the Estate Infrastructure Ministry stated that the Ministry had been renamed after Sri Lanka's 2010 General Elections and that development of the estates

⁶⁷ *Welcome*, Plantation Human Development Trust (August 12, 2011, 9:30AM), <http://www.phdt.org/phdt/>.

⁶⁸ *Welcome*, Plantation Human Development Trust (August 12, 2011, 9:30AM), <http://www.phdt.org/phdt/>

⁶⁹ M. Vamadevan, *Sri Lankan Estate Sector Deprived of full budgetary allocations*, The Sunday Times (October 29, 2011, 1:35PM), <http://sundaytimes.lk/110220/BusinessTimes/bt20.html>.

was no longer specifically mentioned in the Ministry's mandates.⁷⁰ These three phases of health management demonstrate that shifts in management had very direct and negative consequences for the ways in which Malaiyaha Tamil women could enjoy their reproductive rights in the context of family planning and sexual health. It also lays the foundation for understanding how the government, plantation managements and other institutional seats of surveillance were able to cultivate the delicate relationship among human need, technologies of knowledge production, and agentive capacity for Malaiyaha Tamil women making "choices" about their reproductive futures.

A Government of Sri Lanka survey in 2006 estimates that of the 64.2 percent of married women in the estate sector that use contraception, 61 percent of these women use modern⁷¹ methods of contraception. Of that secondary 61 percent, 41.1 percent use female sterilization as a modern (and permanent) form of contraception.⁷² This demographic is approximately three times larger than its counterparts in the rural and urban sectors surveyed at the same time. Why is the number so disproportionately high in comparison to other sectors in Sri Lanka? What legal and socioeconomic factors contribute to the higher prevalence of female sterilization among Malaiyaha Tamil women living on the plantations?

⁷⁰ M. Vamadevan, *Sri Lankan Estate Sector Deprived of full budgetary allocations*, The Sunday Times (October 29, 2011, 1:35PM), <http://sundaytimes.lk/110220/BusinessTimes/bt20.html>.

⁷¹ The 2006 Demographic and Healthy Survey defines the following contraception methods as *modern*: male and female sterilization, pill, IUDs, injectables, Norplant, LAM (lactational amenorrhea method).

⁷² Demographic and Health Survey, Ministry of Health, 2006/07: 74, Annual Health Statistics-2006: Appendix Annual Health Survey 2006.

In a legal sense, Malaiyaha Tamil women do not readily have access to education about their sexual and reproductive rights as defined by international law. The mobilization around the 1994 ICPD, while encouraging for a widening of dialogue around reproductive rights beyond population policy, has yet to effectively reach Malaiyaha Tamil women on the ground. For example, estate midwives and EMAs, as employers of the regional plantation companies (RPCs), are often the front line educators for female estate residents. While legally, Malaiyaha Tamil women on the estates could go to government hospitals or private clinics for their reproductive health needs, they often do not have the time, money, or resources to do so.

On an administrative level, re-privatization and lack of defined infrastructure on the plantations have obscured where exactly legal responsibility lies in the case of the Malaiyaha Tamil residents' healthcare and wellbeing. While the RPCs employ the EMAs and midwives, these health professionals also carry out the programs that fall under the PHDT—which is managed by the Government, RPCs, and trade unions. This confusion often leads to key players in health management having conflicting interests. Most prominently, the estate midwife, who has between 2,000 and 5,000 women under her care,⁷³ is not only given annual sterilization quotas by both the plantation management and PHDT but also rewarded with additional financial incentives for every woman who receives a sterilization under her care, a fact that estate medical personnel and crèche attendants confirmed for me during research. Such quotas and incentives could, for obvious reasons, cause the midwife to encourage Malaiyaha Tamils under her care to get

⁷³ *Family Health Bureau*, The Ministry of Health (July 28, 2011, 6:30 PM), <http://www.familyhealth.gov.lk>.

sterilized. Furthermore, these incentives pose a potential risk that midwives will perform their professional duties in a partial manner that leans towards advocating for sterilization over other more temporary forms of contraception, a point that Amudha's mother, as a crèche attendant, made very clearly. This combination of societal insecurity, lack of education, and administrative quotas and incentives put forth by the RPCs and PHDT validate and inform the communication to married and reproductively capable Malaiyaha Tamil women that female sterilization is a "necessity."

Having established the need, institutions deploy hardened technologies of production and practices of surveillance to effect larger percentages of female sterilizations that take place among Malaiyaha Tamil women and their families in the estate sector. The site of such technological transactions of knowledge is the midwife's visit to the woman before, during, and after pregnancy. Contrasting the privacy of the medical clinic, midwives make home visits to women on the plantations in the late afternoon or early evening when everyone returns from work and school. Transmitting medical advice and authoritative forms of knowledge in such places that are not only not private but bordering, if not adjacent to, the woman's place of work, may very well enable such conversations to end with the "decision" to get sterilized over other forms of temporary contraception.

While the blending of work and residence paints an Erving Goffman-like picture of the "total institution," I argue that such technologies are not so bluntly authoritative and isolating in that the midwife also uses this time in the household to transmit knowledge not only to educate the woman about her body but also to educate her

surrounding kith and kin about the future utility of her body for the betterment of the family and community at large. In an article on fertility in Sri Lanka, Indra Gajanayake and John Caldwell point to the possible factors that contribute to higher levels of sterilization procedures among female tea plantation workers:

A few respondents explained these high levels by saying that the wife's income as a tea plucker—half the family income and often the sole grounds on which the family's housing was retained—would be endangered if she were to be physically weakened by too many pregnancies (1990:97).

Such was the household environment that I encountered on Kirkwall when visiting Selvarasi and her twenty-four year old daughter-in-law, Subamini, who had just given birth to her third child and was working as a plucker on the estate. Having just returned from Galloway Hospital seven days earlier, Subamini was meeting with her Sinhala midwife who was conducting a postnatal follow up visit to her home. It was around four thirty in the afternoon, and everyone was already home or returning home from work. Selvarasi plucks on Kirkwall and often works as an off-estate agricultural laborer weeding and plucking for small growers and private residences in the area. Her husband, Veeriah, is retired but does casual labor and gardening for a small hotel in the area and runs an illicit arrack bar within their house for men on the estate (footnote story). Subamini's husband used to work on the estates, but was planning on searching for a job in Colombo once she had given birth to get a better income. Their line room, though expanded in the back area to incorporate a private kitchen space, was the standard twelve by seven foot room, and thus, their family of six was finding it hard to adjust to the extra child and addition to their family.

I stopped by their house as the midwife was leaving, and Selvarasi and I sat with Subamini as she breastfed her newborn child in the front room. Veeriah and his son were in the back kitchen area doing business with some men, but took a few minutes to sit with us to invite me to the upcoming thirty-day *cutunku* for the infant, which would be held in the estate temple. Selvarasi mentioned that the midwife had been talking about Subamini needing the operation and had chastised her for given birth to three children in a little over four years given their family's financial situation. Only twenty-four, Subamini was worried because she knew that a woman had to be twenty-five to qualify for the operation. Given the restrictions, she now needed to find an alternate form of contraception and was considering using an IUD or "the loop." Interjecting, Veeriah said that she should use the "loop" but as soon as she turned twenty-five should get "the operation" just to be safe. He turned to me said, "I am getting old, and soon my wife and I will have to retire and will not be able to support my son and his family. We do not need any more children in this house."

His comments and the effect of the midwife's judgment of Subamini demonstrated not only how such home visits impact a young mother's desire to get sterilized but also how surrounding family, neighbors, and work authority figures, all with particular investments in her decision-making process and household contributions, compromise her decision-making ability or "agency" in the situation. Under such conditions, it became clear to me that the hypothetically "free choice" about one's reproductive capacity could never be made, and yet she would have to bear that total responsibility.

The question of choice and agency raises valid questions about the marked gap between the way in which reproductive rights are talked about in international rights discourse and the way that choices are made on the ground. In September 2009, I spoke about this difference and the complications that it presents for human rights activists working on female sterilization and advocating for women's reproductive rights. Having worked in the field of human rights for over ten years, she said that some progress had been made since 2000 regarding female sterilizations among plantation women in the Hill Country but that the issue still came down to the hypocrisy of the word "choice" within such transactions:

People think of forced sterilization and the word "forced" makes us think of images of women being carried by tea lorries into empty buildings and getting sterilized by the dozen against their "free will." This used to happen but now the meaning of "forced" has changed. "Forced" is not necessarily without consent. What does consent look like? If a mother is given eighty-four days for her first and second maternity leaves and then forty-two days for her third, does this difference not mean anything? How is consent being taken? That is where reproductive rights need further examination.

Her comment raises significant questions about the ways in which scholars in the Global South need to reconfigure the relationship between agentic capacity and the enjoyment of reproductive rights among women in marginalized and worker communities. While institutions and health personnel tout the necessity of "informed consent" in the name of ensuring a women's right to "choose" female sterilization, informed consent is not a vessel empty of information; rather, this term teems with technologies of power that are able to convince larger political and economically productive worlds of the transaction's integrity. For example, midwives and other plantation officials may convince the woman that she had no other choice but to get sterilized given her social situation of poverty and

immobility, thus absolving them of any legal accountability. This state of being makes it difficult for Malaiyaha Tamil women to locate the freedom in their “choice,” thus making the concept of “informed consent” not viable outside the community in which it must be situated in order to thrive. From Marxist perspective, informed consent is further invalidated by the diminished exchange value placed upon a third pregnancy; the exchange rate of forty-two days leave as oppose to eighty-four days informs a woman’s decision and desire to undergo a tubal ligation and perhaps justifies her feelings of content with her “choice.” Additionally, an incentive of Rs. 500 (approximately a little under 5.00 USD) in exchange for completing the sterilization procedure further buries the notion of “informed consent” because the “informing” is conditioned by state and institutional desires for ensuring the maximum output of economic production.

With the exchange value on having children and stripping wombs of their reproductive capacities set, Malaiyaha Tamil women and men think of their generative possibilities in the transactional language in which such procedures are communicated to them. It should be noted that men too are offered sterilization in such midwife home visits, but in the form of vasectomies for financial incentives. While scholars like Balasundaram notes that this procedure is often not elected because it tends to undermine men’s feelings of masculinity, I encountered men in research who had done it alongside their wives getting tubal ligations after second and third pregnancies (2009: 49). For instance, Ramasamy, a thirty-one year old father of three and full-time estate worker, got a vasectomy soon after learning that his working wife became pregnant for the third time within seven years after marriage. I asked him why he had done it since I had known that

she had told me that she had had “the operation” after delivering her third child, and he said that he did it so that they could eliminate any worry about having any more children and for the financial incentive because it would help pay for the other children’s school expenses. His decision confirms that family planning goes beyond the womb and reaches into the social relations and financial decisions that determine a family’s social standing and security within their community. Such dynamics of constraint and desire also command us to look into the archaeologies of such transactions on the body and how Malaiyaha Tamils reflect upon the process of sterilization and life such decisions and procedures.

“LIKE A CROSS”

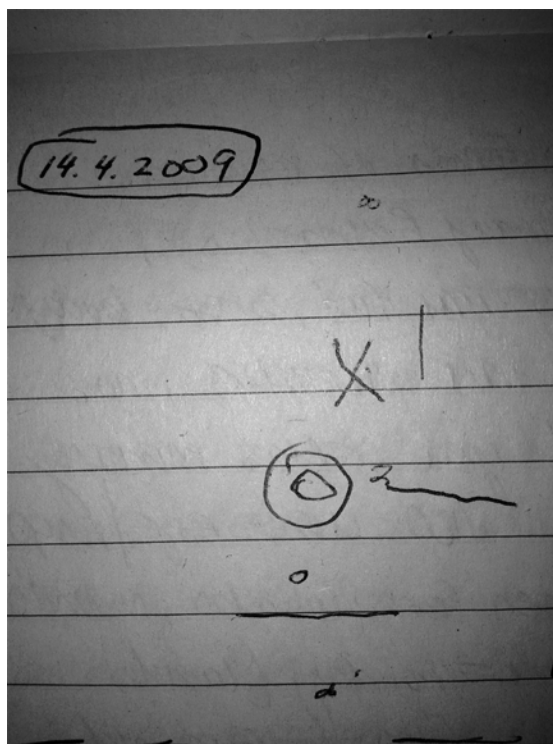


Figure 9. A sketch made by Gunamalar showing the placement and shape of her tubal ligation surgery scar, also known as, “the operation.” Photograph taken by author.

While much can be learned from women's narratives of encountering reproductive decisions in the here and now, narratives of those who had been sterilized and how they went about communicating such stories of the body are equally revealing and informing of the accounts of Malaiyaha Tamil women on the plantations. This section evokes the saying and image that I came across repeatedly among middle-aged and elderly Tamil women on the plantation, which is that of the "cross-like" scar left on women's skins after undergoing tubal ligation or, as retold in our conversations, "the operation."

These retrospective accounts do not speak within the registers of reproductive rights and agency. Rather, they individually detail each woman's embodied experience of being sterilized and what the procedure means to women across generations in their families and communities who hear them. With only scars and their words to serve as evidence of these procedures, the women who relate these accounts can uniquely inform a contextual understanding of family planning narratives on the plantations and the far-reaching consequences of female sterilization transactions for future Malaiyaha Tamil women and their families.

Banu Mary, 63 years old

I had my first child in 1961 and had eight more children after until my last, my daughter, who was born in 1982. Two of the children have died, and seven years ago my husband either drank some bad *kasippu* (home-brewed moonshine) or committed suicide on Deepavali, it was never clear. After giving birth to my daughter in 1982, I had the operation. The doctor at Galloway told me to get it. At first, when he told me, I was scared (*payam*) at having such a big (*periya*) operation [*pulls back her sari and pulls down her bottom half to show me the cross-like scar on her bottom abdomen*]. I was made to wear a gown and lay

down on a table. They gave me an injection to take away my consciousness but it did not work so they had to give me another one. Afterwards, I ate carefully—no tomatoes, but foods like *māṭṭu iraicci* (beef) and *keerai* (greens) to give my blood strength. I was in the hospital for five days.

Now my daughter is three months pregnant with her second child. She became pregnant with her first baby before marriage and had a registration only with the father. They separated after the baby was born but now they are okay again. He will go to Colombo and work now that they will have two children. After this child, she will have the operation.

Gunamalar, 42 years old

I have three boys—14 years, 15 years, and 18 years. I had the operation fourteen days after giving birth to my last son who is fourteen years old now. It took place in an estate clinic, not a Government hospital. They opened here [*lifting her sari to show a cross-like scar and then draws it in my fieldnote book*]. Afterwards, my body felt like it was on fire. I had to pee in a bag and walk slowly. I did not like other forms of contraception like the Pill because they cost too much and ones like the injection make you fat (*thadippen*). With this procedure, there are no problems, and you receive money. For us, it is good. We have no money. It is difficult. If another child does not come, it is easier. No house problems then.

Bamani, 52 years old

I was twenty-five when I had the operation. Myself and another girl from this estate did it in Galloway Hospital together. The doctor made a bad mistake and I went to Nawalapitiya and then Kandy because of infections. Before, we had no problem. But afterwards, I was hunched over [*demonstrates by folding over in half and walking*]. I could not wear a sari and had to take medication for regular stomach pains. My kidney became swollen and the doctor said there was a *kaṭṭi* (“tumor”) and had to operate again. Now, I cannot eat as much as I used to without having pains. The scar before was very big, but now it is a small [*lifts her sari to reveal me a small and faded cross right above her pubic line*].

Udayarani, 48 years old

I was twenty-three years old when I had the operation after my third child in 1983. When I got the operation, I was with twenty other women or so in a hostel—one room. Back then it left a bad scar (*draws an “x” mark in my fieldnote book*). Following the operation, the stitches separated (*pirinji*) and the wound (*puṇ*) got infected. I was in the hospital for one month after. Since then, my body has been weak. I get stomach pains often and my back has become hunched, and I feel unfit, even after all this time. My daughter-in-law will go in for the operation

at Galloway in one week. Now she is using the *ūci* (“injection” or Depo Shot) every three months, but it is giving her problems—her body is cold, she cannot work, and she feels achy all the time. She wants to have it. She cannot afford to have more children. *Camāḷikkavillai* (“She cannot cope with it”). Then it was different. My mother had eleven children. Now, two or three is more than enough.

Connecting these narratives is the visual performativity of suffering these women communicate through their bodies and initiative to discuss their reproductive pasts. Throughout research, I spoke to countless married women who had also been sterilized, but these four women and Amudha’s mother felt comfortable enough to enact their suffering, pick up my pen, lift away their saris, and reveal the traces of the moment that their reproductive capacities were sealed.

Listening to their accounts through what their bodies were able to perform and recollect in the storytelling moment, I heard of what Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat call the quieter, “more secretive and menacing” side of managing reproductive bodies on the plantations (2006:3). If, in the words of Udayarani, “two or three is more than enough,” then the scars and accounts of bodily pain shared above reveal that Malaiyaha Tamil women, entangled within the complicit linkages of economic strain and political marginalization, were afforded, at the very least, less than they desired for their bodies and families’ futures.

CONCLUSION: THE EXCESSES OF NATION

Family planning methods have a complex history of institutionalized practice in Sri Lanka that is deeply rooted in colonial and postcolonial forms of hegemony and nation

building. As a postcolonial state struggling with ethnic conflict and civil war, Sri Lanka has, like many other postcolonial states, come to acknowledge the success of family planning policy and practice as indicators of the nation's "health" and prosperity.

Self-told accounts of reproductive capacity and family planning among Malaiyaha Tamil women reveal that this success indicator often produces complicated roles for women on the plantations to embody. The word, "choice," needs to be questioned for its applicability in that the entitlements that it affords do not entirely match the realities that Malaiyaha Tamil women face in their everyday lives. In Sri Lanka's postwar context, my conversations with politicians, human rights activists, and the women making these decisions on the ground, in their home, and at the advice of midwives, I demonstrate that scholars must revisit the practicality of ICPD and other national health policies that claim to protect the reproductive rights of sovereign citizens.

Sonia Correa, in expressing her hesitation over ICPD's functionality, rightfully terms the 1994 paradigm as a "compromise" (1997: 110). What my conversations with Malaiyaha Tamil women about female sterilization or "the operation" have shown is that women are often the terms of this compromise when planning the success of the nation. Partha Chatterjee cogently argues that national success, in the postcolonial context, makes its demands with women as its currency, and in doing so, distances itself as a means to power from the larger citizen-subject community:

In setting up its new patriarchy as a hegemonic construct, nationalist discourse not only demarcated its cultural essence as distinct from that of the West, but also from the mass of the people. It has generalized itself among the new middle class, admittedly a widening class and large enough in absolute numbers to be self-producing, but is irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate classes (1989:632).

Malaiyaha Tamil women on the plantation and their relationship with sterilization practices in Sri Lanka are at the center of this compromise. Excluded from enjoying the powers that stem from the nationalist forms of rule and patriarchal structures that dominate the plantation landscape, they find themselves making reproductive health “decisions” that complement the economic production of a nation that intrinsically excludes them from the benefits of such productivity. “Two or three is more than enough” not only for the Malaiyaha Tamil plantation worker but also for the nation wishing to curtail the presence of a minority that has consistently yet discreetly pushed the colonial and postcolonial bonds of their exclusion.

In thinking of the stories from elderly and married women in Part One and the accounts and history of family planning in Part Two of this chapter, we should also interpret Chatterjee’s critique of the nation as asking scholars in South Asia to consider how emerging gender experiences are destabilizing previous conceptions of what it means to be a woman; these accounts are not clear opposition to the nation, *per se*, but are emerging and being articulated in ways that the nation has not yet encountered. Sri Lanka, a nation-state recovering from thirty years of ethnic conflict, has yet to collectively acknowledge the diversity of desire and interests within political minorities, women worker communities, and marginalized groups across age, races, ethnicity, and class. These areas of agentive capacity, if and when left unacknowledged, have and will seek solidarities outside the nation that directly respond to the disciplines of their pasts and uncertainties of their presents. The accounts of oneself shared by and among Malaiyaha Tamil women move the plantation community in such a direction. In time,

these women's desires as heard in their accounts will release them from past forms of exclusion and inform the actualization of the realities that they wish for themselves and their communities.

CHAPTER THREE
A PLANTATION COMMUNITY “ON THE MOVE”—
NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION, CARE, AND BELONGING⁷⁴

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE—KNOWING A PLACE

The theme of movement dominates community-based and external perceptions of Malaiyaha (“Hill Country”) Tamil tea plantation workers and their families in contemporary Sri Lanka. Previously labeled by scholars as an “unassimilated minority” (Kodikara 1971), Malaiyaha Tamils in fact perceive and imagine themselves as belonging to a place, if not multiple places, within Sri Lanka and abroad. In this chapter, I present ethnographic case studies of domestic and migrant workers that I spoke to during fieldwork in Sri Lanka from 2008 to 2009. In presenting ethnographic accounts of Malaiyaha Tamil women as primary breadwinners of their families and their perceptions of movement and its consequences, I take a gender-based approach within current Malaiyaha Tamil scholarship by challenging previous representations that collectively cast Malaiyaha Tamils as a patriarchal, culturally isolated, and voiceless minority. I call for scholars in South Asian and Sri Lankan studies and gender studies to think of movement as a theme that goes beyond the terms of globalization and deconstruction of the local and consider the ways in which stories of movement among women can

⁷⁴ Sections of this chapter were first presented as papers in two conferences held in February and April of 2010. The papers were entitled “A community ‘on the move’: perceptions of belonging and possibility among Hill Country Tamil tea estate residents in Sri Lanka” and “Negotiating History and Attending to the Future: Formations of Solidarity and Community among *Malaiyaha* Tamils in Sri Lanka.” The latter conference paper was published in a longer format in *Géographie et Cultures Tamil Communities and the Sri Lankan Conflict*, edited by Delon Madavan, Gaëlle Dequirez, and Éric Meyer. I am grateful to the comments of Valentine Daniel, Éric Meyer, Jonathan Spencer, Vyjayanthi Rao, Denise Brennan, Delon Madavan, and Kitana Ananda for their review and comments of earlier drafts of this chapter.

destabilize and re-animate understandings of voice, power, and place in their communities and beyond.

This chapter builds upon the working definition of community in Chapter One and presents movement as a theme that animates the subjectivities of internal and foreign migrant Malaiyaha Tamil tea plantation residents and the dynamics of community life that take form in group life on the estates in response to migrant labor. Progressing through fieldwork among plantation residents in the Hatton-Dickoya area, I found that movement was a staple concept in conversations with Malaiyaha Tamils about their past, present, and future in Sri Lanka. In oral histories, I listened to elderly men talk of their fathers' arduous immigrant journeys from South Indian villages like Vandavasi and Thindivanam through Talaimannar in the early 1920s before they were even born and looked at the Indian passports that they had kept even after receiving Sri Lankan citizenship in the 1980s. Unmarried women shared contemplating their decisions to apply for contracted work as housemaids in the Middle East because plucking work was not paying well, and they feared that agricultural labor would make their bodies ineligible for marriage.⁷⁵ Teenage youth spoke eagerly about their aspirations to finish their schooling until their Advanced Levels so that they could move off of the plantation to work in

⁷⁵ The connection between being marriageable and types of labor for women was brought to my attention at a number of conversations around life rituals such as age attainment and looking for a suitable husband through caste-specific kin networks on the estates. Fear over the casting of ineligibility due to darker skin color and looking "dull" and "tired" after working in the fields was mentioned particularly among unmarried women between the ages of 20-27 years and recently married women working in non-estate employment fields (mostly garment or office) about their wise employment choices. Jobs such as housemaid, shop, office, or garment factory work were considered more desirable not only for their monetary rewards but also their relatively less noticeable toll of young women's bodies and appearance. Such correlations can also be attributed to Sinhala and Tamil film and television such as serials and popular movies that put forth representations of beauty, appearance, and marriage eligibility.

finance, tourism, and other employment sectors in Hatton town, Kandy, Colombo or abroad. Such references of past movement and the desire to move in the present and future coexisted alongside one another and allowed me to contemplate the contradictions and affordances that each perception posed in a fluid and continual but unstable concert of what Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson call “place making” (1997:17). Gupta argues, “processes of place making are always contested and unstable but also that relations between places are continuously shifting as a result of the political and economic reorganization of space in the world system” (1997: 17). In invoking this relationship, I do not suggest that the rooted intimacies of plantation life contrast the political insecurities of community as raised in the preceding chapter. Rather, I argue for particular fashioning of plantation group life that incorporates such political vulnerabilities into dynamic and daily experiences and exchanges among plantation community members. As evident in Malaiyaha Tamil history in Sri Lanka, movement has multivalent indications for the binding, displacement, and separation of communities and their members. Turning on desires to survive and make the best life for their families, Malaiyaha Tamils recognize the value of movement and its possibilities. Because of this existential awareness of self, movement is an integral determinant that speaks out to the shifting of group life dynamics on the plantation residence.

I write “speak out” because of a particular moment from the beginning of fieldwork that alerted me to the difference between visiting and residing in the Sri Lanka’s Hill Country as a new resident and outsider. On the days that I had to travel into Hatton town from my residence, which was about ten kilometers away, I would wait for

the local bus on the roadside opposite the house where I stayed. On one particular day in early January 2009, I had to wait for more than twenty minutes. I stood reading some Provincial Council Election campaign posters and candidate numbers that had been pasted and chalked into the rocks that lined the edges of the plantation field slopes. During the twenty minutes that I stood there, I did not see one person walking by on the road or any three-wheeler or car pass by. Furthermore, since I had been waiting below the edge of a slope's cliff, I could not see anyone working in the fields above from my angle. The bus eventually came, and I climbed onto it and carried on with my day with interviews at a local NGO office in Hatton town.

Later that afternoon, I went to a division of Kirkwall Estate, which was located near the house that I stayed in and the center of my plantation-based field research. I went to see Sellamma, a retired plucker to whom I had been introduced on the plantation. After asking me what I ate for breakfast and lunch, she asked me what I had done in Hatton town that morning. I told her that I had met with a few NGO staff members in order to ask them about their work, and I asked her how she had known where I had gone and where I had been. She told me that she had seen me waiting for the bus while taking a break from her housework and chatting on the stoop of her friend's line room verandah, which was adjacent to her own home. The lines of that particular division of Kirkwall Estate are at an elevation of approximately 3700 feet, and the road on which I was waiting was about fifty feet below and a little over half a kilometer to the east of them. I had not seen anyone within my sight, but someone had seen me. For Sellamma, my presence on the road as a visitor—manifest in my posture, skin color, clothing, and

mannerisms—was recognizable to her even from a distance. Living in Kirkwall division for more than fifty years, she, as a participant in plantation group life, knows the rhythms and textures of the place to which my presence was a new addition. Self-conscious of my outsider presence on that January afternoon, I would sit with Sellamma outside her line room often in the months to follow, watching that same road and its unsuspecting travelers from above.

The view from the lines makes Malaiyaha Tamils who inhabit these residences privy to their place in their communities and in Sri Lanka. This intimate knowledge reveals itself in dynamics of group life that Malaiyaha Tamil residents cultivate, resist, and partake in on the tea plantations. The incident was minor in its attentiveness to movement in the moment, but it presented a significant entry point into the need for scholars to challenge the previously held assumption that Malaiyaha Tamils living on Sri Lanka's tea plantations were and are transients with no real sense of belonging to places or territories within Sri Lanka. Whereas most histories and early social science studies of Plantation Tamils mark them as migrants (Kodikara 1965, de Silva 1981, Sahadevan 1995) or newly becoming Sri Lankan diasporic subjects of India (Bass 2012), this study seeks to emphasize the evident process of acquiring intimate knowledge of a place *in situ* and over time; furthermore, I contend that the process of making a place intimately known requires a sense of time *over time* and an established commitment to interact with the earth such that emotional attachments take form. These affective obligations, by their very nature, often elude the institutional realms of recording and documenting individuals like Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents in their spaces of dwelling. The attachments

became evident in my discussions with elderly retired pluckers, who, having spent work and home time outside in the unseen fields and non-roads within the manicured plantation, could tell me what time it was by the sun's reflection on the tea bushes. No one other than a Malaiyaha Tamil plantation resident will experience the intimacy and "talk" of plantation life nor hold the same gaze from the verandahs of a line room or from within one for that matter. Malaiyaha Tamils, as a minority population, have cultivated these experiences of residence since settling and emerging as a community of laborers in the 1850s.

If adhering to imperial and capitalist-driven forces behind colonial constructions of plantation life, the fact that Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents often moved within British Ceylon and engaged in non-plantation forms of employment and livelihood would soon dispel beliefs in its ability to contain and isolate the bonded laborer. Evidence of such employment trends among Malaiyaha Tamils in plantation areas dates back to as early as the coffee plantation era, as Patrick Peebles presents in his discussion of early conceptions of Plantation Tamil identity from 1840 to 1940; he himself, however, warns, "such mobility is a constant feature of British colonial history . . . [,] fits neither the needs of the colonial economy nor the various constructions of Plantation Tamil identity and has left little trace in the official records" (2001:15). Peebles also call our attention to the commonly missing element and conundrum in historical and social science Plantation Tamil studies: "Scholars in their attempts to resolve questions that have arisen from the colonial discourse have decontextualized the sources. Colonial records were produced in response to particular enquiries at particular times" (2001:19). Keeping this critique in

the foreground of this chapter's contributions, the imperial inefficiency of documenting Malaiyaha Tamil movement, and the paucity of such findings in the colonial record, I suggest that internal migration in pursuit of informal modes of employment was not of interest to British colonial agents and therefore, integral to Malaiyaha Tamils' means for keeping a "place" in Sri Lanka.

The value that is placed on movement, however, does not discount the risks associated with its undertaking. With their pre-independence history marked by linguistic, caste, and class discrimination, their ability to move was compromised by their historical disenfranchisement and statelessness from 1948 until 2003. Furthermore, nearly thirty years of emergency rule in Sri Lanka made the ability to move freely and without fear a luxury for Tamil-speaking minorities. The effects of civic and political exclusion on Malaiyaha Tamils have been documented, most tellingly in the weeks before the February 14, 2009 Provincial Council Elections, when the Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE) estimated that nearly 71,520 residents in the predominantly Malaiyaha Tamil Nuwara Eliya district did not possess National Identity Cards (NIC) and were thus, ineligible to vote.⁷⁶ Furthermore, under the 1979 Prevention of Terrorism Act and emergency rules, those residents without an NIC were without an identity in the state's eyes, so to speak, and risked immediate and unquestioned detainment. Such a fate could be had at the any number of military checkpoints along roads to and from major cities and towns and bordering and within High Security Zones (HSZ) and urban centers. For Malaiyaha Tamils living on the tea plantations, exercising one's right to move, in its

⁷⁶ CaFFE Website: http://www.caffesrilanka.org/No_NICs__Nuwara_Eliya_district_voters_lament-5-248.html

gradations, was a risky decision that had come to be weighed with the potential life benefits. Often represented in the margins of the Sri Lankan state, Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents quite contrarily have made a place for themselves on the plantations and know how to move to, from, and within urban localities and spaces of global capital and possibility.

“FROM THE WOMB TO THE TOMB”: UN-BECOMING THE WAGE

On June 28, 2009, I attended a meeting in Hatton town that had been convened by the Christian Workers’ Fellowship (CWF), an Anglican, socialist trade union that formed in November 1958 and continues to represent workers in the plantation sector. There were twenty-three people in attendance: sixteen men and seven women. On the meeting’s agenda was a debate about the 2009 Collective Wage Agreement between the Regional Plantation Companies and representing unions, which I discussed earlier in Chapter 1. Incited by failed negotiations, unions such as the Christian Workers’ Fellowship had begun to organize meetings open to the public and members to discuss the process and their potential interventions.

Rani—a former tea plucker-turned-activist—listened and waited patiently in the back of the meeting room that day. Male trade unionists were dominating the open forum, yelling back and forth about the need for uniforms, corrupt field officers, and doctored check rolls. In the first moment of silence, she raised her hand and spoke:

In five to ten years from now, it is my opinion that there will be no more laborers working on the plantations. All of the youth will be in Colombo, in schools, or abroad. There is no honor in estate work. Children living on the estates do not want to live like their parents live. They want respect. They want dignity.

That day, Rani articulated what most trade unionists and politicians continually fail to acknowledge. Malaiyaha Tamils are not able to live on the plantation wage; but more importantly, they *do not want* to live by it, and their desire is critical in refiguring employment options that were available across generations for Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents in Sri Lanka's postwar economy and emergency state.

When I first began conducting research on the plantations, a former manager took me aside to show me a plantation from afar, which was directly across the primary estate on which I worked, called Kirkwall. Pointing to specific landmarks in the plantation's landscape, he told me the following:

From the womb to the tomb, the tea state worker is taken care of. When a female worker gives birth, she is given maternity leave and a midwife. When she goes back to work, she can leave her infant in the crèche childcare facility right there. And when the child is ready to go to school, he or she can get a free education up until the 5th standard. Their homes are within short walking distance from work, and finally, when she dies, the management will even pay for her tomb and funeral expenses.

My research findings mostly contradicted his characterization of plantation life and fleshing out of the word "care," and these contradictions can be examined through a closer look at the actual breakdown of a plantation worker's wage. In August 2009, I sat down with Selvarasi, a plantation worker and union leader in Kirkwall division who had just received her pay slip. As she breastfed her one-year old daughter, she told me that she was upset that her monthly salary was so low and showed me the slip, which I have recreated as follows:

Earnings

Total Daily Wage: Rs 4,200⁷⁷
 Daily Attendance Incentive: Rs 1,470⁷⁸
 Cash Plucking: Rs 2,400⁸⁰
 Daily Price Wage Supplement: Rs 420⁸¹
Total Earnings: Rs 8,490

Deductions

EPF & ETF: Rs 420
 Advance for Deepavali: Rs 450⁷⁹
 Monthly Advance: Rs 1,500
 Trade Union Subscription: Rs 65
 Rice and Flour⁸²: Rs 2,880
 Community Welfare⁸³: Rs 300
 Other (Funeral Expenses, etc): Rs 50

Total Net Earnings: Rs 2,825

Total Deductions: Rs 5,665

In 2012, the monthly poverty index Nuwara Eliya District was Rs. 2,187 per person, which was approximately \$17 US dollars at the time; the cost of living allowance in Sri Lanka was estimated to be approximately Rs. 3,000 per person, far surpassing the typical monthly wage received by a plantation worker who is supporting a family of more than two in most cases.

As indicated in the chart above, four major issues are apparent in the current plantation worker wage. First, the number of working days are not guaranteed and can range anywhere between 20 and 28 days depending on inclement weather, crop output,

⁷⁷ Rs. 200 x 21 days (number of days offered by management not including Sundays and Poya Days for pay period month in 2009)

⁷⁸ Rs. 70/days whose attendance is 75% and over of the number of days work offered per month

⁷⁹ Last year's Deepavali advance on Kirkwall estate was Rs. 4,500 to be deducted over the course of following ten months.

⁸⁰ These earnings are offered outside of work hours for extra bonus at a rate of Rs 50 per kilo plucked; known as "hand cash" in Tamil, it is not a predictable source of monthly income due to changes in climate and productivity.

⁸¹ Rs 20 per day paid to the worker who achieves the norms and tasks of the day (Rs 20 x 21 days)

⁸² Workers must inform the management on the 1st of every month regarding how many kilos of rice and flour they would like to receive on the following 25th. A worker can elect to receive any amount of rice and flour and the expense will be deducted according to the estate's rice and flour rates per kilo.

⁸³ Temple and Religious Infrastructure Maintenance

and climate conditions, thus making a plantation worker's monthly income unpredictable and unreliable. Second, while Selvarasi earned the supplements highlighted above, many workers do not—simply because it is difficult to pluck more than 18 kilograms of tea leaves in the seven hours of afforded work each day. Third, the deduction column serves as evidence to the pressing concern over plantation workers' cash advance and debt cycle with their employers, an employment characteristics that has persisted since colonial rule and has carried over to the plantation companies in the postcolonial setting. Lastly, serving as disproof of the former manager's earlier comment about expenses being covered by the management, plantation workers and their families pay “community” fees for religious festivals and funerals of their community members as life determines. Therefore, this numerical breakdown and Selvarasi's justified frustrations reveal that central to workers' strategies are fundamental disagreements between worker and management understandings of care and dignified labor.

Such sentiments carry over into older generations who have transitioned from colonial to postcolonial plantation labor settings. Michael, a seventy-six year old Malaiyaha Tamil of the older generation who had worked under British planters before Ceylon's independence, recalled for me the social and economic transformations that have taken place over the last half a century in the plantation area:

The time of the white man was better.⁸⁴ The white man was more disciplined, watched the work closely, let us off of work on time, and took care of us well. Not

⁸⁴ Interestingly, I came across similar sentiments in an excerpt of an oral history of an elderly worker in Satyodaya's *Voice of the Voiceless* Bulletin. In this interview, Veeran says, “British times were better. Now, there is a lot of dishonesty and thieving on the estates. It was not so when we had the white men” Volume 18, Issue 1 (1984: 8)

like the *dorais*⁸⁵ now. I started plucking when I was 8 yrs old under the white *dorai*. Because I could not reach, I had to stand on top of a rock and pluck. He watched us closely, a good man. Then, my daily salary was 1 rupee. It was difficult, but at least our family of seven could eat. Today, my son's salary of 300 rupees⁸⁶ is not enough to feed his two children. I am retired, but I must continue to work to support my family.

Now an off-estate, casual day gardener for a nearby hotel, Michael has been working for sixty-eight years and has a wife, five children, and several grandchildren to whom he contributes his day-to-day wage. Cost of living inflations, he claimed, had compelled him to continue working into his old age. Having exhausted his retirement EPF and ETF benefits⁸⁷ on the estate where he was last employed, life after estate work has come to be employment as a casual laborer without benefits.

Michael's articulated need to work off-estate is not uncommon among older Malaiyaha Tamil plantation community members that I spoke to during field research. Such trends of labor migration in the plantation areas during British colonial rule and as late as the early 1980s have been highlighted in earlier social science studies (Kurian 1982, Peebles 2001); but what has not yet been discussed more thoroughly are the generational differences in desires that determine a plantation resident's choice to seek either casual, off-estate agricultural or work in Colombo or the Middle East. As Guy de

⁸⁵ *Dorai* is a Tamil term of respect for one's employer or ruler ("master"); originally a term used by plantation workers for their white, colonial British planter employers, the term is commonly used many employer-employee relationships throughout the Malaiyaha (urban male household head-domestic worker, plantation manager-plantation worker, etc.).

⁸⁶ 300 Sri Lankan rupees is the equivalent of roughly a little under three U.S. dollars.

⁸⁷ The EPF (Employees' Provident Fund) and ETF (Employees' Trust Fund) were established under No. 15 Act in 1958 and No. 46 Act in 1980 respectively. The EPF is a social security plan that provides employees financial security and funds after they retire via monthly deductions from one's salary; the ETF is a fund to which employers contribute 3% of the employees' gross income, and one from which employees are eligible to withdraw upon retirement.

Fontgalland claims about the desires of female plantation youth, “Working outside the estates should not be treated as a panacea for economic ills faced . . . but they complain that the type of work they want is not available for them in the present scheme of things—white collar jobs, as crèche attendants, medical assistants, office helpers, or even as welfare supervisors” (2004:27). Such was the sentiment shared among male and female school-going youth and middle aged residents in Kirkwall division, a number of full time laborers were not only employed by the estate but also off of the estate; these residents would take up odd-jobs and ongoing, non-contractual, unskilled to semi-skilled manual labor (plucking, weeding, cooking, cleaning, shop work) with nearby small growers, smaller hotels, and private restaurants for under-the-table or day-to-day wages that are instantly exchanged and free of EPF, ETF, and estate community deductions. Such employment choices, as indicated by Michael’s and others’ needs for immediate cash income, also reflect the frustrations of youth and middle-aged residents who do not see upward mobility within the plantation management as a viable option and thus, seek this alternative.

But specific to post-education younger generations are their motivations to seek forms of employment off the plantation that will match their higher levels of education and aspirations. In a focus group run by the Centre for Poverty Analysis on an RPC-run tea plantation in Nuwara Eliya district, a Tamil youth from the plantations claimed the following about key differences between parents and younger generations: “We want to have a good education no matter what happens; 15 years ago education was not a priority, as soon as they had financial problems they stopped education and started working”

(2008:91). Although education is a priority for Tamil youth, the desire to be educated is often met with logistical challenges. Obstacles such as the lack of good schooling on the plantations, poor transportation infrastructure between remote estates and main roads, and the lack of spaces to study in the line rooms are just a few of the reasons that education and literacy levels in the estate sector are among the lowest in the country (Gnanamuttu 1979, Little 1999, CEPA 2008).⁸⁸ Determined not follow in the footsteps of their parents and grandparents and transform conditions and perceptions of poverty attached to life sustained by only estate work, younger Malaiyaha Tamils, are eager to unhinge themselves from the plantation landscape and believe that estate work is a vocation that has lost its call. Furthermore, their sentiment is shared among the older generations of Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents who recognize the untapped financial and long-term incentives to be gained for their collective and kin-based prosperity by their sons and daughters working in Colombo or abroad.

SRI LANKA'S INFORMAL AND FORMAL LABOR ECONOMIES

For younger Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents, movement is critical strategy to be employed in order to fulfill their aspirations and their decisive shift presents significant implications for a more diversified range of employment opportunities among their generation. Today, it is uncommon to find a Tamil family on the tea plantations without any nuclear kin who work or have worked in Colombo or abroad. Depending on one's

⁸⁸ This statistic is relative to education levels beyond the 5th standard which is the last grade provided by the plantation managements.

education and gender, alternative occupations range from domestic work for low-level educated children and women, garment and office work for female O/L and A/L level graduates, shop work for low-level educated boys and male youth, and manual unskilled and semi-skilled labor for young to middle-aged men. The range of possible employment opportunities, when discussed among Malaiyaha Tamil youth, is not only appealing for its diversified portfolios but also ensured to provide higher levels of income than those jobs afforded by plantation managements and off-estate casual agricultural labor in the plantation areas.

This financial appeal, however, is not without caste and class-based discrimination and internal hierarchies of risks and assurances. As discussed above, the type of work afforded not only depends on specific levels of education but also divisions of labor across gender, caste, and the family's economic status and ability to financial invest into employment searches within formal and informal economies of labor. For instance, domestic work has been a seasoned yet informal mode of employment for lower-caste, Malaiyaha Tamil women since British rule and ideologically stems from colonizer-colonized traditions of subservience, indentured labor, and hierarchical structures of power. The white *dorai*, of whom Michael spoke, may very well have departed from postcolonial Sri Lanka's landscape; but the shell of power that he represents has been filled by upper and middle-class urban household heads in Sri Lanka and in countries abroad, primarily in the Middle East. These new *dorais* employ Tamil domestic workers from plantations in the Hill Country for domestic work. Because of long-term institutional and informal discrimination against lower castes within the

Malaiyaha Tamil community and Tamil-speakers in Sri Lanka more broadly on levels of literacy, education, and health, I did not hear of or speak to middle to upper level caste domestic workers during field research in Nuwara Eliya district, and most middle to upper caste women living on the plantations would, because of their higher levels of education and relatively higher levels of familial wealth in the form of land, material goods, and social networks, seek office or retail employment in the commutable and nearby hill station towns Hatton, Dickoya, Bogowantalawa, and Maskeliya. In contrast, domestic and foreign domestic work among lower-caste Malaiyaha Tamil women with whom I spoke to on Kirkwall division was very common, and at one time or another, at least fifty percent of women I spoke to had worked as a domestic in either Colombo or the Middle East.

Likewise, upper to middle caste young to middle-aged Malaiyaha Tamil men that I spoke to either worked under formal contracts with small to large Tamil and Sinhala businesses in Colombo, and, more respectably, in semi-skilled to skilled labor in India and countries in the Middle East such as Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia through the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). In contrast, lower-caste men, among the same age range would, if able to migrate for work, take non-contractual jobs in Colombo such as hotel cleaning, shop work, and private agricultural or manufacturing businesses through informal employment brokers or recruiter networks on the plantations. In conversations with men from this lower-caste group, I often heard that both men and women would like to work in the Middle East but did not have either the desired education levels, specific skills, and the money to finance the application

processes and acquiring of necessary documents such as passports, marriage licenses, and birth certificates. What these caste and class-based differentials suggest is that while movement is a mutually agreed upon method for Malaiyaha Tamils seeking to work off the plantations, it is, as most venues for advancement and opportunity, rife with historical and institutional forms of caste and class-based discrimination and limited access.

Statistical information on Malaiyaha Tamil internal migrant workers is difficult to find. Comprised of mainly women and children, this work force is informally brokered for employment via estate brokers, sub-agents, kinship networks, and word of mouth. Documentation of employer-employee relationships and experiences, unless otherwise solicited from the employer or employee, are often undocumented, off the record, and thus, more likely to produce more risk to the physical and emotional security of the employee. Likewise, domestic and shop work in Colombo, Kandy, and other urban locales are often negotiated without contracts or documents, such as prior salary confirmations, assurances of safe accommodation, and clearly delineated job responsibilities. Consequently, work hazards such as sexual harassment and assault, payment withholdings, poor accommodations, and physical and emotional abuse readily occur without documentation or redress, and workers have little, if any, formal assurances for their personal safety and job security despite earning incomes higher than what is offered for plantation work.⁸⁹ Most concerning are the conditions of risk for

⁸⁹ I make this claim in keeping with the recent and recurring instances of sexual abuse, legal intimidation, and physical and emotional coercion that have involved Sri Lankan domestic workers in countries of the Middle East and do not, despite formal channels of foreign employment regulations, have adequate means of redress in the event of an act of injustice. The a recent case that has gained the attention of international and Sri Lankan human rights groups alike has been that of Sri Lankan Muslim national Rizana Nafeek; seventeen years old at the time of her illegal employment as a domestic for a family in Saudi Arabia,

women and children in Sri Lanka,⁹⁰ who, working within culturally-specific gender and age dynamics are, if dominated in abusive labor situations, less likely to seek the formal modes of assistance (police forces, human rights and legal advocates, women's shelters, etc.) that would be available to greater civil society and within international norms. While Sri Lanka ratified the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention on Domestic Workers No. 189 in June of 2011, the implementation of such laws would be difficult given the informal and undocumented nature of domestic work in Sri Lanka. Taking into account the current conditions of these formal and informal labor situations, Malaiyaha Tamil women, on one hand, work in service-based economies that have little to no means of redress and face more physical and emotional risks. On the other hand, they know the potential financial and status-based rewards that can be reaped from these economies and must make decisions that are weighed against these risks.

In stark contrast, the increasing levels of migrant workers abroad has regimented and institutionalized domestic labor employment among all Sri Lankans (Gamburd 2000, Kelegama 2011). In 1985, Sri Lanka established the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLFBE) to address the needs of foreign employees, implement foreign employment policies with partner nation-states, and promote foreign employment within

Rizana was charged with the murder of an infant who suffocated while under her care. In police custody, she was physically abused, denied legal representation, and forced to give a false confession. She remained imprisoned for over three years. In 2011, the protests and pleas made by Muslim human rights groups, Rizana's family, the Sri Lanka's Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, Saudi Arabia's Sri Lankan Embassy, and the Asian Human Rights Commission resulted in her granting of clemency. On January 9, 2013, Nafeek was executed in Saudi Arabia and her death was followed by international and national protests and calls for the Government of Sri Lanka to impose bans and restrictions on migrant labor agreements with Saudi Arabia.

⁹⁰ In November 2000, Sri Lanka ratified the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and Work specifying the minimum age for work as 14 years.

Sri Lanka. According to their *2009 Annual Statistic Report on Foreign Employment*, male Sri Lankan foreign migrant workers comprised 48.27% of the total foreign employment migrant work force (2009: 3); furthermore, eighty-nine percent of all women who left Sri Lanka for work in 2009 traveled abroad for housemaid labor, and roughly forty-four percent (109, 628 women) of the total 247,119 migrant workers in 2009 traveled to work as housemaids in Middle Eastern states (2009: 11-12). In the Central Province,⁹¹ fifty-two percent (16,600 women) of all foreign migrant workers were housemaids abroad, and in Nuwara Eliya District, whose majority population is Malaiyaha Tamil, sixty-nine percent of the district's foreign migrant workers traveled abroad for housemaid work (2009: 38). Lastly, in the two divisional secretariats of Nuwara Eliya District where I carried out sustained fieldwork among Malaiyaha Tamil tea plantation residents from 2008 to 2009, seventy percent (2,824 women) of migrant workers from these areas went abroad for domestic work in 2009 (2009: 46). On a national level, the SLBFE stated that female domestic workers comprised forty-three percent (43%) of all Sri Lankans migrating for work abroad in 2008 (2008: 9). Such trends suggest that the desire to seek foreign employment, particularly to Southeast Asia and the Middle East is not only mutually shared within the plantation sector but across urban and rural sectors in Sri Lanka facing comparable conditions of economic insecurity and social immobility.

I share the above statistics not for the sole purpose of providing quantifiable evidence of Malaiyaha Tamil female domestic workers abroad. Rather, the fact that I can even present this data here serves as a testament to the way in which the Sri Lankan state

⁹¹ Districts of Kandy, Matale, and Nuwara Eliya

and their partner employing states have monitored and regulated foreign employment for the purposes of sustaining their respective national economies. Furthermore, bureaucratic regulations of foreign employment—as manifest in the monitoring of foreign remittances, airport arrivals, and mandatory job trainings—exist alongside the more informal economies of domestic labor within Sri Lanka. This spectrum of surveillance has a direct effect on how Malaiyaha Tamils navigate spheres of possible employment and how they secure income in order to support their families.

Such circulating perceptions of movements among the plantations and sites of migrant work have significantly changed the social relations and shared values among estate residents. When women and men leave and come back to their estate homes from Colombo or abroad, their absence and presence shift the social values placed on territoriality and kinship within the prior conceptions of community that the planters and colonial administrators had imagined. These shifting social relations on the tea estates caused by the coming and going of kith and kin have been duly noted (Balasundaram, et al. 2009: 93), but only in relation to changes in “caste consciousness” among young boys working in Colombo and their emerging roles in social practices such as estate-organized Hindu festivals and the selection of marriage partners according to participation in migrant labor workforces. What is missing from this discussion is the importance of women’s perspectives on work in Colombo and abroad and the changes that take place within the plantation landscape and group life dynamics that go beyond challenges to caste and tradition-based social practices and into the more intimate and affective realms of group life on the plantations. Given that Malaiyaha Tamil women are often their

community's breadwinners, such shifts in landscape, interaction and judgment not only signify the acquiring of alternative habits and values but also reveal the degree to which Malaiyaha Tamil families place stakes in such strategies of securing dignity and survival.

Turning upon these shifts in gender and community subjectivities, I present the following ethnographic accounts of Malaiyaha Tamil migrant workers from Kirkwall division in order to demonstrate how such emerging labor imaginations effectively transform community dynamics on the plantation and in group life among Malaiyaha Tamils in the Hill Country. As constructions of their lives have been based largely on external perceptions and colonial records, I share these abbreviated but rich stories in order to foreground the theme of movement within Malaiyaha Tamil and plantation scholarship and to place their stories within other migrant narratives in and beyond Sri Lanka and South Asia.

SASIKALA

Sasikala is thirty-two years old. She was born in Kirkwall division and her parents are both estate workers—her mother plucking in the fields and her father working in the bungalow garden of the plantation manager. The eldest of four children, she was proposed to a man on a nearby estate when she was twenty-two years old. Her parents had already bought the wedding rings and saris when the man suddenly decided not to marry her. Humiliated and the subject of estate gossip, Sasikala decided to move to Colombo and work as a domestic servant in a pastor's home. After two years, she returned to Kirkwall and worked in a nearby garment factory for under a year until it was

shut down. Sensing the insecurity of this employment, she decided to apply for domestic work in Lebanon without the knowledge of her parents or three younger siblings. She even went to great lengths to lie on her application to say that she was married and had already had one child so that she would be a more favorable applicant. She was accepted and underwent a fifteen day, 135-hour training in Colombo that covered how to be a good housemaid, show respect to employers, and tolerate and follow the customs and culture of the Middle East for a fee of 2,505 rupees, which is a little under twenty five US dollars.⁹² From 2005 to 2008, Sasikala worked for a Lebanese family of five as a domestic, learned Arabic, cooked, and cared for three children. When her visa expired, she had to return to Sri Lanka in October 2008. Without a job until September 2009, she found work in a garment factory in Colombo and had been living in employee boarding and working six days a week when I left Sri Lanka in late 2009.

When I asked Sasikala about her future plans before September 2009, she told me that she did not want to stay in the house and wanted to go to Colombo or the Middle East for work. When I asked her why, she said that she felt ashamed of her failed engagement and that she, as an unmarried thirty-two year old woman, was the focus of gossip among estate residents. She has no desire to get married and instead focuses her life on supporting her family. She told me, “All of [the] money problems have fallen onto my head,” noting that her mother and father were approaching retirement and her obligations to contribute to her family’s needs. She knows that without her financial support, her younger siblings would have never been able to finish their education and

⁹² Website: <http://www.slbfelk/article.php?article=38>

get decent jobs off the estate. Because of her contributions, one brother now holds a permanent job as a bank teller, the other brother is sitting for his Advanced Level examinations with the help of a privately hired tutor, and her sister was able to complete a training to work in a flour factory outside Hatton town. Her parents are undoubtedly happy with the increase in their family's income, but still looked away in shame when she spoke to me about the failed engagement in their presence.

Nevertheless, Sasikala felt lucky to have left the estate and provided for her family, and she would often perk up when asked about her experiences and what she earned in Colombo and abroad. After seven months of domestic work in Lebanon, she was able to send one *lakh*⁹³ (at the time, roughly 875 USD) in foreign remittances to her father's bank account. With that money, her parents renovated and expanded their line room, adding tiled flooring to their front sitting room, glass windows in replacement of the older, cracked panels, and a carved wooden frame to replace their original front threshold. Within Kirkwall, estate residents speak with admiration and envy of her parents, as they have now become informal moneylenders for the more impoverished families within their caste (*Parayar*) who need to take out loans to survive. Among neighbors and kin, I often heard passing comments of jealousy (*porāmai*) with regards to the various fruits of her income, including a new TV, VCD player, and her brothers' video-enabled mobile phones.

⁹³ One *lakh* is the Tamil term for the equivalent of 100,000 Sri Lankan rupees.



Figure 10. The effects of migrant labor remittances show in the remodeling of line rooms, even within the same line. Both line rooms are within the same line on a government plantation during an NGO field visit in Kandy in December 2009. Photograph was taken by author.

Sasikala's story reflects the way in which estate conditions drove her to acquire new gendered practices that would orient and open her future to more possibilities. In our conversations, she was proud of herself for independently deciding to work in Lebanon and considers her employment and earnings more valuable than the possibilities afforded by marriage and estate life. Furthermore, the surrounding community, while eager to judge her failed engagement, affirms her recent decisions and familial contributions. For Sasikala, the engagement and subsequent shame could not ensure her dignified modes of belonging on the estate. For her, movement to Colombo and life and work in the Middle East served as means to re-establishing and securing her self and community worth.

VASANTHI

Vasanthi too was born on Kirkwall, where both of her parents worked and lived until their deaths. I first met her in passing during a trip to the local hospital to visit a sick

friend. I later learned from her that she was there with her daughter, who was receiving treatment for rheumatic chorea. Her daughter, now ten, had contracted rheumatic fever four months before and had to be admitted to Kandy Children’s Hospital for two and a half months. When we met, Vasanthi was forty-one years old and had been married for just under fifteen years to Ligneswaran, a thirty-year old estate worker and the youngest brother of one of the division’s *kankānis*. With him, she had three other children—two sons (ages fourteen and seven) and her daughter, who was ill. Because her husband works full-time on the estate, she had to stay in Kandy hospital with her daughter until she was released and sent home. In her absence, family members on the estate had to help her husband take care of her other children while he worked.

Before her daughter became sick, Vasanthi worked in a number of jobs as a domestic worker since she was ten years old and has never worked on the estate. For five years, she was a domestic for a Muslim family in Cinnamon Gardens⁹⁴ and then for another seven years for a Colombo Tamil family in Wellawatte. Her last job was for six months in late 2008, in which she worked as a domestic for a Catholic religious leader and his family in Kotahena, another suburb of Colombo. She took this job because her mother had died two months earlier after being diagnosed with stomach cancer the year before, and her family had to pay back her medical bills in Kandy, which amounted to approximately Rs. 10,000 (a little under 100 USD). Working for this family, Vasanthi earned the largest salary she had ever earned as a housemaid, nearly Rs. 8,000 a month. For this salary, she was proud that she was able to save a sizable portion of that income

⁹⁴ Cinnamon Gardens is a suburb in Colombo (also known as “Colombo 7”), which is known for its expensive real estate, wealthy legacies, and cinnamon plantations during British colonial rule.

monthly and send money to her husband every three months. When her daughter became sick, however, she was forced to leave this job, return home to Kirkwall, and physically care for her daughter.

When I asked Vasanthi about her work experiences, she spoke only fondly of her last employer, his family, and life as a Colombo domestic. There, she said, everyone was equal to one another. There was no distinction when they ate meals, and she ate with them at the table. Her story is quite exceptional given the numerous reports of sexual abuse, discrimination, harassment and even death among Malaiyaha Tamil domestics in Colombo. Furthermore, she told me that she did not like life on the estate and her husband's behavior. She disliked his daily drinking and lack of respect for her. Most of the money that she had earned as a housemaid during those years, he had spent on alcohol, and her daughter's recent illness had also diminished their savings. To worsen her regard for him, twelve years ago, he had had a very open affair with a woman who was living in the lines above theirs, and she had lost trust in him since. She said to me:

I do not like life on this estate. People are always talking about one another and gossiping for no reason. But it is never to your face. It is always to your relation or to your husband. They say I was acting like an unmarried girl, or *komari pillai*, going to Colombo and Kandy alone. But what was I supposed to do? My husband will not even give me money to take our daughter for her appointment at the hospital tomorrow. I had to ask my sister for the money. After estate work, he earns 300 rupees as a casual laborer off the estate, but every day goes straight to the bar and spends it on drinks. He doesn't come home until late and if I get angry, he yells and hits me, so I keep quiet. Now, I don't even talk to him, only when necessary. With those 300 rupees, do you know how much we could have done? *Aniyāyam* ("What a waste!")!

As a child, I did not have these problems. I was happy in my mother's house. My father and mother took care of us together. A husband—a man—should take care of his family and children. A wife has her responsibilities and can work too. But a

wife and husband need to care for their family together. Not this way. *In̄ta tōṭṭam tōṭṭamoru keṭṭa jati tōṭṭam* (“This estate is a mean-spirited place!”)!

Although Vasanthi spoke to me in Tamil, she said the word, “man” very clearly in English, and her emphasis reflects the way in which her migrant labor experiences have shaped her handling and judgment of her husband’s behavior. Her frustration is not uncommon among Malaiyaha Tamil married women who work as domestics outside the estate and reveals how Colombo work or work abroad transforms social relations within and among estate families. Vasanthi is often the object of gossip and judgment, particularly among her female relations who disapprove of her non-conforming habits and thoughts as a woman and wife. To her kith and distant relatives, her actions are that of a *Komari pillai*, or “unmarried girl,” who lives without regard for the commitments to and entitlements of family. They question her need to work in Colombo and stay alone in Kandy alongside her child in the hospital. To Vasanthi, her actions signify her conviction as a mother. She challenges the current demands of community and strives continually for new ways of being that can ensure potentially more dignified modes of membership. It is also interesting to note that Vasanthi employs the derogatory caste term, *keṭṭa jāti*,⁹⁵ in angrily describing her residence. For her, the actions of her husband and its ramifications metonymically stand in and represent the status (and, in her mind, downfall) of the estate’s greater good.

⁹⁵*Jāti* or *cāti* are terms that are used to denote the pan-Indian *jati*, (commonly translated into English as “caste”) may also be used to designate a kind or type of person, thing, place or animal. For Malaiyaha Tamils, whose ancestors descend from primarily lower castes within South Indian Tamil-speaking social structures, the term, when used with the modifying “keṭṭa” (“bad”) and used within the Malaiyaha Tamil community, is particularly demeaning and powerful.

Such familial and martial tensions have been noted by anthropologists working with women domestic workers (Constable 1997[2007], Chang 2000, Parreñas 2008) and also by those working with Sri Lankan women migrant laborers outside the plantations, namely in Sri Lanka's rural South (Gamburd 2000). In her study of transnational migration and worker docility and resistance among Fillipina migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong, Nicole Constable argues that such tensions reveal the ways in which women use "self-discipline" and resistance as coping mechanisms in response to persistent insecurity (1997: 181). Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, also working with Fillipina domestic workers, concludes that the "force of domesticity" pervades the social relations of transnational migrant families and how "acts of transnational communication in the migrant family retain gender norms around women's maternalism and natural propensity to do care work" (Parreñas 2008:63). Chang, writing earlier on the institutional and home-based modalities that maintain migrant women as imported labor in the United States, concludes that women perform roles "as care workers in institutional and private household settings and as providers of unpaid reproductive labor in their own families" (Chang 2000:12). Michele Gamburd, in her ethnographic work among rural Sinhala villagers in South-West Sri Lanka, concludes that the introduction of wages outside the village "drive wedges between husbands and wives, parents and children, nuclear families, and more distant relatives" (2000:239), suggesting that migrant work disturbs formerly established kin relations upheld by rural and village-based structures of labor and life. In my own work with the women in this chapter, I find shared ground with Constable and Parreñas' attention to "care" and its linkages to the plantation

management's failure to "care" for its workers by providing a livable daily wage. I conclude that Tamil women migrant domestic workers are perceived as challenges to gendered notions of care but remain tenuously invested in them for the sake of their families' wellbeing. But they engage in such forms of tension in direct relation to their emerging roles as primary economic breadwinners of formerly patriarchal families. With this role, migrant domestic workers assume the need to make decisions for their families as mothers *and* remittance providers in an unstable plantation daily wage economy.

The need to challenge became even more public to the Kirkwall community during Vasanthi's last trip home from Colombo on August 1, 2009. That day, I was on Kirkwall talking to a part-time plantation woman worker who had recently learned that she was pregnant in the line perpendicular to the line where Gunasekaran, Ligneswaran's older brother and the *kankāni* of the division, lived. When we finished our conversation around a quarter past six in the evening, it had begun to grow dark and I decided to head to his home to speak to his daughter who was preparing for her O/L examinations. When I approached the line, the first exceptional thing that I noticed was that all of the doors to each line room were not just closed, but locked—a sight I had never seen before since commencing research in the division. I wandered around the back of Gunasekaran's house to find his daughter at the edge of their small garden. She was carrying her two-year old cousin and peering down to the dam, located alongside the main road and within a High Security Zone. I asked her where everyone had gone and what she was looking at. She told me that something had happened by the dam and that everyone had gone running but knew nothing more. We walked through the garden and down into the brush

to see if we could get a closer look and saw a crowd of people from Kirkwall, including Ligneswaran's relatives from the locked line, running towards the edge of the dam. In less than a minute, we lost sight of them, and all we could hear was some faint shouting. We traded carrying her cousin who was getting fidgety and crying and in a few minutes, we saw Gunasekaran's wife and other women coming out of the brush from below and their feet were covered in mud and skirt hems soaked in water. Devi, Ligneswaran's sister in law and mother of the two year old we had been holding, took her, and washed her feet with some water in a pale outside her threshold. She then unlocked the door to her house, where we sat down next to her as she breastfed her child. Ligneswaran's relatives started to come into the room one by one and shared the story of what had happened.

Taking a five-day leave, Vasanthi had returned to Kirkwall with her salary and goods that she had bought from Colombo for her home and children on July 27th. Frustrated with Ligneswaran's drinking habits and predicting that he would use her savings on alcohol and not on basic familial needs, she said told him on her last day home that she was going to go to the bank alone and refused to let him come with her to withdraw the money that she had earned. They had a heated argument, and in anger, she went to the bank in Hatton alone and then immediately onwards to Colombo by bus. Ligneswaran, emasculated by her actions, drank nearly three bottles of arrack liquor after work and around six o'clock that evening, threw himself in the nearby dam and attempted suicide. Found by some local fishermen, he was pulled out while unconscious but still breathing and was taken to the nearest hospital by a passing biscuit truck with another

Tamil *kankāni*, Gunasekaran, and another one of his older brothers. He survived, and his relations immediately called Vasanthi on her mobile phone to tell her the news as she reached Colombo. She returned to the estate the next day to care for her children while he recuperated in the hospital.

After he was transported to the hospital, I sat around the fire in the kitchen of his sister's house while everyone's dried their clothes and so that any leeches that had been brought back from the dam marsh and water could be ripped from our skin and burned. As relations filtered in and out of the back kitchen area, we began to speculate about why this could have happened and the potential consequences. Gunasekaran's sister mentioned that the police may fine him for "causing trouble" I asked her why, and she said, "Because, he was displaying the characteristics of *irāñki*," (which, in Tamil, means arrogance or cheekiness); furthermore, the incident had taken place in a High Security Zone. Her relations attributed the possibility of a monetary fine to Vasanthi's un-uxorial behavior in not allowing him to come to the bank with her. Ligneswaran survived the incident, and returned from the hospital four days later. But when his family tried to ask him about why he had done it, and he would remain silent.

Shunned by her relations for "causing" her husband's actions, Vasanthi stayed in the house, avoided her husband, and only went out to buy food items or take her daughter to the hospital in the months following the incident. During each encounter we had after his suicide attempt, she confidently mentioned to me that she would return to Kotahena for work and that she had regular contact with her employers and had told them that her daughter had fallen ill again. She also told me that she had to wait because she did not

have her original NIC and that she needed to go to the Grāma Sēvaka to begin the process of getting a new one. The process, she told me, was not difficult because there was a whole network of domestics on Kirkwall and that a sub-agent or broker would come and write a letter confirming her registration on the estate and informal agreement for work. Given the networks in place, she did not seem worried about the prospect of not working and told me that she knew that even though Ligneswaran had acted foolishly that day, he would continue to drink and would soon forget their fight because, in reality, he too depended on the income that she could generate as a domestic. Although Vasanthi never went back to Colombo during the remainder of my research period, she had rightly predicted Ligneswaran's behavior in the months to follow. Apart from the one day in September when he asked Gunasekaran for money, I never saw him not inebriated and up until I left, Vasanthi was able to cohabit with him and care for her family as expected of her without further incident.

Vasanthi's desire to change her circumstances raises valid questions about how Malaiyaha Tamils imagine movement as a mode of gaining or losing control over their social relations and status in their community. For this wife and mother, the ability to travel to Colombo alone and earn nearly four times more than the standard estate salary makes her the primary wage earner in her family and allows her to provide for her three children. But with this acquired status comes articulations of resentment and hostility from her husband and his family that fluctuate according to their perceptions of her character as a wife and mother. In Vasanthi's case, the desire to work off of the estate and return to Colombo and such unwanted treatment at home destabilize her unique process

of place-making and suggests that such movements can create dystopic spaces for Malaiyaha Tamil migrant women upon and in the aftermath of their return.

SADHA

Sadha was born in 1984 and lives on Kirkwall Estate. When we met, she was twenty-five and had been working as a plucker in the fields off and on since she was fourteen years old. Not yet married, she is the youngest child of Ramaiyi and lives with her mother, her brother, Seelan, his wife, and three children. Seelan has been injured and out of work for four months, and their family of seven was finding it difficult to survive on one less wage given that Seelan was unable to perform his usual manual labor in the plantation fields.⁹⁶

Throughout the first half of June 2009, Sadha told me that she would be going to Colombo for three months, but like Vasanthi, she was waiting for a broker to finalize the details and her papers for the job, including a letter from the Grāma Sēvaka⁹⁷ to confirm that she was registered on the estate and in Hatton-Dickoya area. She is nervous because a girl called and said to come but she said no because she did not provide enough details and had no trust in it. The domestic job would be three months maximum—just short enough where she could take temporary leave from her estate job without losing it and just long enough to make up for Seelan’s unpaid leave and boost their collective income. As she waited in anticipation, she talked of the need to get a new suitcase and clothes and

⁹⁶ Plantation work for men is often physically challenging and consists of moving large rocks, administering pesticide, clearing fields and lifting large items for shipment.

⁹⁷ A local administrative office and set of staff that are appointed by the central government to carry out government duties and transactions on a local level within capacity.

how she was nervous to see if the family would be good. She likened her anxiety to the worry that she has about present and future *dorais* of Kirkwall estate: “You know, one is not able to say if a *dorai* is good or not when the man is a still their *dorai*. Only after he, or you, leaves can one say if they are good or not.” Her comment is logically pragmatic and draws significant parallels between the ways in which Malaiyaha Tamils employ effective approaches to evaluating and forming value judgments about potential work options by adopting habits from work relationships inhabited on the plantations. Her comment also foregrounds the stakes that Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations put in their work both financially and emotionally. No longer just a wage or coolie—they are deeply motivated to form judgments about their employers and calculate to strive for the best possible transactional situations to meet the stakes that they invest in often risky and unpredictable employment ventures.

On the morning of June 15, 2009, I met Sadha on the road as I was walking towards Kirkwall. She was in a three-wheeler approaching from the opposite direction. The call had come from an informal broker the day before, and she was travelling to Colombo by public bus that morning from Hatton town. She tells me that she will be working for a small Sinhala family—a husband, wife, and small boy—living in Maradana, a suburb of Colombo city. She would be cleaning, cooking, and taking care of the boy after he got home from school. Her eyes were brimming with tears as she told me that she would be okay. She gave me the mobile number of her *dorai* but told me not to call until she called from Colombo that evening, for she did not know if it would be okay for her to receive call on the line. I wished her well and told her to be safe. She squeezed

my hand and smiled briefly, and the three-wheeler continued down the road to Hatton town.

On Kirkwall, the Mariyamman temple bell was ringing, and Gunasekaran and Kanagaraj, another *kankāni*, were waiting at the top of the hill expectantly. “A local minister is coming today,” Kanagaraj told me. “We will do a small ceremony at the temple, and he will promise us roofing sheets to repair the hold in the ceiling and speak to us.” I asked him to let me know when he came and offered to take photographs if they wanted. I walked past the temple and up the smaller makeshift stone path leading to the line of Sadha’s home. At the top, Ramaiyi was sitting down on the ground, sobbing loudly and hunched over with her head in her hands. Vijayaletchumi, a retired plucker from the adjacent line who worked in the fields with Ramaiyi, impatiently told her to stop crying, but she was almost crying herself. I told Ramaiyi that Sadha and I had met on the road, for which she looked temporarily relieved. There was nothing more I could have said to make the absence of her daughter less near than it was at that moment. Some time passed as we sat on the steps watching below.

Ramaiyi was worried about her daughter’s safety. She told me that Sadha was too young to return to Colombo, even though she had sent her to Colombo as a mere twelve-year old child. Back then, it was different, she told me. We knew the family that she had gone to when she was young and others’ relations were close by in Colombo and could check on her. Now, it is dangerous, and besides her cousin Kunalan, she does not know anyone. A *Komari pillai* (“unmarried girl”) like her should stay here, work, and get married. She told that she would have preferred to go in her place, but had she gone, there

would be no one to take care of Seelan's children, the last of whom had just turned one. The only positive thing was that she would be earning SLR 8,000 monthly and that income could slowly lift her family out of debt.

While Sadha was in Colombo, I would call the number she gave me weekly to speak with her. The number belonged to the wife of her Sinhala employer who would speak perfect English and was working full-time in a financial office. When I called I had to ask for her formal name—Sadhanathi—a name that I had not known of and that her family never used at home. When we spoke on July 7th, just over three weeks since she left, she told me that she was returning to Kirkwall with her cousin on the following Sunday. She claimed that the child—only nine years old but big for his age and naughty—had started to hit and disrespect to her when she tried to take care for him and that was lonely and missed her family. She would take the one-month salary plus round trip transportation to and from Colombo that she earned and that would be enough to help their family some.

When she returned on the 13th, she showered her extended family with gifts—candy, toys, and pens for the children and clothing for her mother, uncle, brother, sister-in-laws, and aunts. She showed me a scar on her lower forearm where the boy had scratched her. She explained that while the *nōnā*⁹⁸ and *mahāttaya*⁹⁹ she could not bear to stay because it was lonely. Though happy to be home, she told me about how life is different when she is alone in Colombo. There, after all the domestic work is done, she

⁹⁸ *Nōnā* is the Sinhalese term of respect for a woman, such as “madam.”

⁹⁹ *Mahāttaya* is the Sinhalese term of respect for a man and is very similar to *dorai* (“master” or “sir”).

can sit, watch TV, rest, and would be given her own bed to sleep on. Here on Kirkwall, she sleeps with her two nieces and mother in a row on the floor in their twelve by seven foot front sitting room. While we spoke, one of Seelan's daughters spilled tea and biscuits on the floor. Sadha immediately got irritated and jokingly told them that she was better off in Colombo without all of them and that she would go back if they continued misbehaving. Here, as in Vasanthi's experience, domestic work in Colombo has both incentives and risks. Sadha is well aware of both. The eight thousand rupees earned lifted her family out of dire conditions to some extent. With that money, the children got new clothes, her brother was able to buy medicine for his ailment, and the family was able to expand their kitchen and create a private bathing area in the back of their line room. But her homesickness and maltreatment not only pose risks but also present limitations that come with Malaiyaha Tamil women's participation in informal economies of domestic work in Colombo. Nevertheless, she used this predicament and her experiences in Colombo to make a place for herself on the plantation after her return.



Figure 11. Sadha's mother showing me the construction expanding the back of their line and the after photograph of the larger kitchen space and doorway to a private bathing area. Photographs were taken by author.

TERRAFORMING ŪR: TAKING THE CHANCE FOR NEW FORMS OF RECOGNITION

Given these conditions of movement and to return to this question of place making and belonging, what is this home that Malaiyaha Tamils desire and in fact have? How does migration and migrant labor influence the deconstruction of the plantation residence force ideal as envisioned by the plantation managements and their colonial predecessors? Based on my findings, I contend that former South Asian and anthropological concepts of postcolonial territory and investment do not accommodate the homes and practices that were presented to me on the tea plantations.

Following the semiotic works of Valentine Daniel, Diane Mines, and other anthropologists working in South India and Sri Lanka, Malaiyaha Tamils do not have a Tamil natal home, or *ūr*. According to Valentine Daniel, *ūr* is a “spatio-territorial concept” used in speech as a “territory that is (1) inhabited by human beings who are believed to share in the substance of the soil . . . and (2) to which a Tamil can cognitively orient himself at any given time” (Daniel 1984: 63). This is an important feature that I found was missing from Malaiyaha Tamil resident life. For instance, Sadha’s mother, Ramaiyi, was not born in the line or line room that she currently lives in, but on an estate where her mother and father worked before moving during a period of labor shortages. During the repatriation years, one of her sisters went to India, and they have not spoken since. Furthermore, her father, who is still living, was born in Vandavasi, a small village in South India’s Tamil Nadu, and he came to Sri Lanka when he was four years old. He has never held citizenship and stays two doors down with her younger brother with only a

faded paper slip from the plantation management verifying his residency on Kirkwall. So, when I would ask him, Ramaiyi, and others on the plantation that seminal question—what is your *ūr*—which is always asked by and of anthropologists working with Tamil-speaking communities—I never got a firm orientation, and would often hear more fluid stories of dispersed kin, internal migration, and uncertainty.

More prominently absent in this landscape is the feature of village or *ūr* as a territory that consists of self-constructed foundations in accordance with criteria of auspiciousness. Malaiyaha Tamils have not laid the original foundations of the line rooms that they inhabit; rather, they made their ways to them through kin-based networks that have been built on wage labor. In this way, in the plantation's original state, the soil or earth was never shared by a consistent group of human beings and rather exists primarily for the purpose of capitalist production. This became most evident to me during a funeral I attended, when the body of the deceased resident was not buried on the actual grounds of the plantation but alongside the main road in an available place. And while it is common that Malaiyaha Tamils bury their deceased as oppose to cremating them within caste practices and habit, the management has not provided them with a designated burial site or lands, which interestingly the Government of India is being forced to provide for Dalit and low-caste groups in rural areas since I concluded field research in Sri Lanka.

Lastly, Malaiyaha Tamils do not legally own their line rooms and residence is contingent upon one person per household maintaining full-time employee status on the plantation. So if a family decides to not work on the plantation and pursue other opportunities full-time, they will be technically homeless. Their line rooms do not fall

within Tamil categories of territory and space. They are not attached to or included within a particular village or, in Tamil, a *kirāmam* (or in Sinhala—*grāma*); the government determines such village boundaries, and their homes are, in fact, legally inscribed outside state jurisdictions of care. In 1987, local government councils, called *Praedeshiya Sabhas*, were formed to address the development needs of Sri Lankan residents. But, Section 33 of the Act specifically prohibits elected officials to implement any development activity in the plantation sector, without plantation management approval. Interestingly, this legal barrier exists alongside President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s 2005 and 2010 election manifestos, which proposed to make the plantation community a “house owning society” and that “instead of present line rooms, every plantation worker family will be proud owners of new homes with basic amenities by the year 2015” (*Mahinda Chintana* 2010) In 2013, the President has yet to respond with meaningful action, suggesting that Malaiyaha Tamils and local NGOs have justifiable reason to doubt the care of the State and plantation managements.

Addressing this second question of landscape and life transformations, what we see in the earlier comparative images of Ramaiyi’s home are products of such agentive strategies, and they indicate that plantation residents are not waiting for the government or even development to enact change. Instead, they actively seek out and secure more dignified lives, and migrant labor is deconstructing the ideals of a standardized plantation work force and landscape. For Malaiyaha Tamils, migrant labor initiates what I argue is a process of *terraforming*. A scientific term used to describe the deliberate modification of a space’s atmosphere and topography in order to make it inhabitable by humans, this can

also be seen as a pragmatic task taken on by plantation residents who recognize that the allotted line room spaces are not inhabitable. This distinction was most evident when I went to visit a development worker the day after sleeping along with Ramaiyi and her family in their line room home. I explained where I had been and he said the following to me with frustration:

The line room is like a prison. Only when you leave do you see the disadvantages of living there. You cannot grow—socially, mentally, physically—it is a debilitating system. You can give someone a house, but will it be a space where he or she can grow or will it just be a facility?

On this point, plantation residents and development workers would agree. Both groups realize that their desires for dignity will not be met by managerial and state notions of human care, and in this process of *terraforming*, they strategize, find alternatives, and manipulate the allotted spaces in order to reconstruct places that are more commensurate with their aspirations. What is left is this new artifact of *home*—a practiced space that is neither *ūr* nor owned—but more inhabitable and more compatible with the resident’s needs and desires.

But *terraforming* also enhances communal stratifications. In the lines, I found that migrant labor was creating social ruptures and reconfiguring former hierarchies among plantation residents. Leaving the estate not only ensures the return of monetary remittances and capital to the household, but also introduces the possibility that this “chance” (*vāyppu*) might improve the living conditions and standard of life for one’s family in the long run. The opportunity to work in Colombo for Malaiyaha Tamils has status-based benefits as well. From observing and interacting with Tamil estate residents during my fieldwork, I noticed that mentioning the acquiring of work in Colombo

(*Kozhumbu vēlai*) or work abroad (*veḷiyūr vēlai*) often did not require further qualification from the speaker. Both Tamil phrases, once uttered, did not produce the opportunity to ask more questions such as, “What type of work,” “Where in Colombo,” or “Is she happy with her work?” The phrases themselves had sufficed in orienting the addressee’s attribution of value and secured the addressee’s approval regardless of their knowing the actual type of work or services performed.

Scholars have well-documented migrants’ attraction to Colombo as a global city (Arachchige-Don 1995, Perera 1998 & 2002, Bremner 2004), and most recently by anthropologist, Sharika Thiranagama (2011), who contends that the city affords a certain mutability and imagining for Sri Lanka’s ethnic minorities in particular. This attraction, furthermore, is directly tied to a minority’s claim to political rights and claims of belonging more broadly:

This is why any long-term solution to minority issues in Sri Lanka must come up with solutions that acknowledge that minorities are also highly mobile . . . Colombo has for generations provided a site for minority and majority futures, even when these futures were centered on Sri Lanka as a dystopia (2011: 255-6)

Confirming the centrality of movement to Malaiyaha Tamils, Thiranagama’s claim about Colombo as a site of moral and dignity-enabling imaginations explains why Malaiyaha Tamils can find entry into Colombo and its possibilities during this particular period of social and economic insecurity. Thus, movement to Colombo, in presenting possibilities not necessarily afforded on the estate, significantly transforms dynamics of community membership and relations for Malaiyaha Tamils living on the estate. As Balasundaram, Chandrabose, and Sivapragasam claim, the presence of those working in Colombo shifted

the responsibilities taken up during such life and community ritual events, including those duties that were formerly designated along caste-lines:

The new notion of “Colombo boys” (estate boys who work in Colombo) changed the caste-based occupations to some extent. Many estate boys who work in Colombo are becoming a very important group in estate communities. They too have a good place in the community. They visit the estates during festivals and when there is a funeral. They actively take part in these functions. When Colombo boys do such activities they disregard caste altogether. For example, burial digging was traditionally performed by *Parayar* caste but now Colombo boys who belong to almost all caste groups do it as a contribution to the community. This is indicative of a weakening of caste-consciousness and even a deliberate disregards for caste in younger generations exposed to the outside world (2009: 93).

Extending this argument beyond the effects of migrant labor on the weakening of caste consciousness on the estates, I contend that this “Colombo effect” and coming and going of kith and kin during these times present a whole host of behavioral shifts on the estate relating to gender relations, status vying, and exchange. As evident in Sasikala’s monetary contributions that produced material changes to her family’s home, relations, and opportunities, migrant labor and foreign and domestic wage remittances transferred from the employed family member to kin reinforces the employed individual’s place so that it is “good” regardless of previously practiced gender subjectivities associated with patriarchal structures of domesticity and submissiveness of the woman worker. The exchange of wages is also effective on a pragmatic level. On one hand, the outcome is felicitous for those reaping the benefits of additional cash flow outside the channels of social capital afforded through plantation work; on the other hand, the outcome can produce feelings of resentment and jealousy for those plantation kith and kin not directly receiving benefits.

The transformative effect of movement is also apparent during nationally recognized and estate-specific holidays when men, women, and youth working in Colombo and abroad take leave from work and return to the estates to see their families. This tension became evident during Sinhala and Tamil New Year or *puttāṇḍu* on Kirkwall Estate in April 2009. Celebrated by both Sinhala and Tamil-speaking communities across Sri Lanka, the New Year is particularly celebrated on the plantations given the time given off from work for celebrations. Kumar, a married man in his early thirties with three young boys, works in Pannipitiya, a suburb of Colombo city, for a smaller, Sinhala-owned packing business. He came for the New Year festivities on April 14th and brought along seven male Colombo Tamil and Sinhala friends with whom he worked to visit his home and have a holiday in the Hill Country. Staying in a nearby hotel, his friends from Colombo came to his home on the first day of celebrations. When unknown people enter the residential line rooms on the estate, their presence does not go unnoticed—an awareness among Malaiyaha Tamil estate residents that is directly linked to the state of emergency and insecurity produced by a history of displacement, violence, and discrimination targeting Tamils in the plantation areas. I was sitting in the home adjacent to Kumar's home visiting his relation through marriage, Pachchayamma. Soon after the men arrived, we heard Tamil music coming from their home on other side of the shared wall. One of Pachchayamma's granddaughters went next door and came back reporting that they were watching an old Rajni Kanth VCD on their player and dancing. After some time, Pachchayamma's daughter, Ramya, got up and started to sweep, moving in and out of the room from the kitchen area in the back. "I do not like if these

Colombo Tamils see our house and kitchen like this,” she tells me. Later, she told me that last year, Kumar brought nearly twenty people for New Years and that it was a *karaiccal* (“nuisance”) because they were loud and drinking. Ramya then decided to change her clothes. Debating over wearing a dress or skirt, she settles on denim jeans and a graphic print T-shirt, and her mother chastises her for caring so much about the visitors.

Intrigued by the arrival of newcomers as much as other estate residents, I stepped halfway onto the front threshold of Pachchayamma’s home to get a better look, and Rati’s father walked in concurrently. The younger brother of Pachchayamma’s first husband, he is approaching seventy and walked slowly into her house, telling me that it was too noisy for him and that he was irritated with the way his daughter and son-in-law were acting. He was also carrying my slippers inside, pointing to the six pairs of slippers outside Kumar’s door on the verandah. You should keep them inside here for now so that they do not get stolen, he told me with a knowing smile.¹⁰⁰ With such commotion and the precedence of bad behavior from last New Years, the surrounding kin of Kumar and Rati had learned their lessons and were adjusting their habits accordingly.

Soon after we moved into the kitchen to start preparing the New Year meal, Kumar’s wife, having changed from her work clothes she had been wearing earlier that morning, came in wearing a fancy skirt and new blouse, Talking quickly and with slight impatience, she asked Pachchayamma for a carrot and potato. Pachchayamma started to voice her irritation, but gave them to her begrudgingly. She took the vegetables and ran back to her home, presumably to resume cooking for her guests. Twenty minutes later,

¹⁰⁰He smiled because on the night of *Civarāttiri*, my Bata flip-flops were taken by an unknown person outside the temple when I went inside with his family for the nighttime puja and never found.

Kumar walked into the house with a burnt light bulb, demanding that they give him a replacement. Pachchayamma's son gave him one that he found tucked away in a box of wires and batteries from their main cupboard. Within minutes he came back, claiming it was not working. When he was told that he did not have another, he stormed out, saying, "Nothing works! You don't have anything!" and returned to his guests. After he left for the second time, Pachchayamma voiced her frustrations to me:

Before they used to help so much. Now they will not help. Once I gave them Rs 3000 (approximately 30 USD) when they needed it. They are like that. If you just sit, think, and wait, there will be a *saṇḍai* ("fight") with them. He even took our glass plates before and did not even ask. He just came in talking with *rāṅki*. *Manacukkuḷḷa vētanai* ("My mind has been soured"). We should not give them anything from now on.

A number of details are significant to note from this particular series of incidents during Kirkwall on during the 2009 New Year holiday. The presence of Colombo through returning migrant laborers and Colombo visitors triggers a series of effects among residents on the estate. The reputedly arrogant behavior of Kumar and his wife is out of line with customary behaviors that were previously unquestioned by his kin. Furthermore, these changes cause feelings of slight and resentment among Pachchayamma, her family, and Rati's father and reflect the ways in which formerly governed social relations such as respect for elderly and gift-giving among kin shift and make way for reevaluations of migrant laborers and their obligations to the community.

Significant also is Pachchayamma's recounting of previous transactions between Rati's and her family. Her family was over SLR 25,000 in debt to various moneylenders, including to Sasikala's parents, and they had pawned most of their valuables to make ends meet. Kumar and Rati's disruptive behavior only reminds her of the money that her

family needs and of the assistance that her relations will not give. Because they flaunted their Colombo visitors and treated their relations badly, Pachchayamma's vow not to honor the obligation of giving kin money in the future can be understood as her way of attempting to control her own economic situation and social standing on the estate. Her value judgment also suggests that Malaiyaha Tamil migrant workers' public handling of their newfound wealth on the plantation directly affect social relations on the plantation and transform the value systems that govern group life and economic decision-making among Malaiyaha Tamil residents.

DOMESTIC SUBJECTIVITIES

The accounts of Sasikala, Vasanthi, and Sadha's experiences also reflect a number of complex predicaments that domestic work in Colombo or abroad present for Malaiyaha Tamil political representatives and movements more broadly. Despite the reality that domestic work had been a staple method of earning income in Ramaiyi's family and in other families and throughout Kirkwall, the experiences of not knowing the outcomes of such risky ventures are always troubling, especially given the rumors and realities that circulate about abused Malaiyaha Tamil domestics in Colombo and the Middle East. But the dystopia created by hierarchical and intractable forms of employment mobility on the plantations creates an overwhelming lack of faith among Malaiyaha Tamils who firmly believe that it is impossible to maintain financial security on estate wages alone. This distrust and frustration justify not only the risks taken and but also the sacrifices made by Malaiyaha Tamil migrant workers and their families during such employment periods.

Michele Gamburd (2000) notes the force of economic factors that contribute to Sinhala rural women's decisions to migrate to the Middle East; but for Malaiyaha Tamils, the lack of proper identity documents and prolonged forms of discrimination based on their minority status make domestic work in Colombo more feasible and less risky. Furthermore, Sasikala and Vasanthi's desires to leave Kirkwall for domestic work directly correlate to their desires to evade familial and community shame and judgment for their perceived failures as women and seek dignity and worth outside the plantation. As confirmed by their families' shift in perspective upon their returns, their contributions and financial support are duly noted and serve to compensate for their perceived and former failures. The same terms of compensation manifest in remittances and gifts, which, have significant sway on the transactional value of the worker's absence at home. Alongside such desires and affirmations, however, is the fact that Malaiyaha Tamil leaders worry about this continuing trend of housemaid work within the plantation community. In the conversations that I had with trade unionists, politicians, NGO personnel, and activists about migrant labor to Colombo, housemaid or shop work is monophonically labeled as a risk that threatens the rights and security of Malaiyaha Tamil workers. Furthermore, news of an abused child laborer or unmarried female domestic suggests that the move to Colombo is at the least dangerous and a symptom of chronic poverty and communal ills. And yet, informal gossip and conversation about youths and their movements off the plantation and into other employment sectors directs respect to these migrant practices and solidify migration as a communal objective of many plantation residents. Such polarizing representations split Malaiyaha Tamil

minority and gender subjectivities further. How are such risks and labels to be reconciled with Malaiyaha Tamils' desires to take that chance for a better life?

This split subjectivity is further complicated by hierarchical preconceptions among Sri Lanka's non-Malaiyaha Tamil, urban and upper class communities, who generally perceive this worker minority as nothing more than exportable and cheap labor. Such tendencies and representations irritate most Malaiyaha Tamil politicians and community leaders in NGOs and unions who worry about the social and political future of their community and struggle to defy the constant depreciation of their group's status. As one Malaiyaha Tamil politician asked me, "Do you think we, the Malaiyaha Tamils, want to be seen as the womb of Colombo's domestics?" Another activist, in a meeting for the Collective Wage negotiations in August 2009, used the issue of child labor to mobilize around the economic problem: "This *vīṭṭu vēlai* ("house-work") trend is horrible. It is becoming a Colombo *tōṭṭam* ("estate"). We must take this struggle seriously and cannot further deny that the people are desperate." As scholars we need to recognize the publicized efforts of these local leaders, but also be cognizant of the contexts of caste, class, and patriarchal hierarchies in which such utterances are made. How should we make sense of the disjuncture of pride and remorse that exist among different female Malaiyaha Tamil subjects? What do their feelings have to say about the state of solidarity and community between and among Malaiyaha Tamils and their larger representatives? The coexistence of such risky necessities and life desires complicate representations of the Malaiyaha Tamil female subject herself. On one hand, Malaiyaha Tamil community representations of women strive for a dignified story of labor that has the least amount of

associated risks and harm to the self. On the other hand, the desire to break from the visceral strains of poverty, socioeconomic upward immobility, and lower tiers of education and health demand that Malaiyaha Tamil women and men perform types of labor that do not provide the highest levels of dignity and safety. As the mother of one man who had recently applied for his identification card, told me, “This ID is like giving life to our family. Now he can go to work in Colombo. Then the children can go to school, and we will have no money problems. Now, even to go to Hatton, he is afraid. Now he can do anything.” Such splits within the self and collective representations suggest that the sense of belonging experienced by Malaiyaha Tamil women within the Sri Lankan polity is not only in flux but dependent on their abilities to make claims to forms of dignity previously not experienced by their parents and ancestors.

CONCLUSION

The forms of movement observed and recorded in research raise valid questions for developing more nuanced forms of scholarship on the Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents and, in particular Malaiyaha Tamil women. In the trade union meeting that I described earlier, Rani later commented that there was no present weight or reason in Sri Lanka to say, “*nānum tōṭṭattoḷilāḷi.*” *I too am an estate worker.* For Malaiyaha Tamil estate workers, she contended, there was no desire to be identified or referenced, as such. Instead, workers and their families express shame and fear of association. For Rani and other community leaders and unionists that more radically challenge the plantation labor regime and structure of capitalist control over production and labor, the need is not for

the restoration of some past dignity, but for an intervention that reinstates a Malaiyaha Tamil woman worker subject that challenges former and current perceptions of marginality, abandonment, and powerlessness. Deconstructing the concept of care, Hill Country Tamils perhaps never believed the “womb to the tomb” ideal and agentive strategies such as migrant labor, *terraforming* and movement are risky but prove their successes in transforming Malaiyaha Tamil lives and homes in the long run. Over forty five years later, the plantation’s discipline and balance *have been and are being* destabilized, as its members seek alternative income-generating options outside the labor regime that was designed to limit their potential. As they do so, their pursuit of movement as a mode of affordance and risk-taking constitutes and continually transforms their sense of membership and community in Sri Lanka today.

CHAPTER FOUR

CATEGORIES OF RISK: DEVELOPMENT, SOLIDARITY, AND STIGMA IN THE PLANTATION SECTOR

At the centre of development, therefore, as its subject and its object, or as the one directing it and the one for whom it is intended, there is and there has to be, irreplaceably, the human person in community. This is the first and most important difference between the concepts of development and ‘development.’ The former is true of development; the latter is false development or anti-development. The latter is a robber parading self in stolen clothes, a driver driving somebody else’s car.

-Father Paul Caspersz, Founder of Satyodaya (2005:237)



Figure 12. A discussion on leadership capacity from a co-educational training for Tamil youth organized by a local plantation NGO in early 2009. Photograph was taken by author.

In late June 2009, I attended leadership training for youth women outside Hatton, a hill station town in Sri Lanka’s Central Province. The two-day training was held at a small hotel and organized by a local plantation sector NGO that I worked closely from 2008 to 2009. Using a rights-based approach to human development, the training was specifically designed to give school-going women youth living on the tea plantations

leadership skills. On the second day, the program began with a morning session on the “untold” history of the Malaiyaha Tamils, which Tamil youth would not have been taught in government-run schools and which was attentive to the particular forms of labor and subordination that had taken place on the tea plantations since British colonial rule. The presenter also spoke of labor and life during the coffee era of the early nineteenth century, when there were no crèches for infants, and women workers had to carry their babies in cloth slings on the hills where they toiled the land. He told the story of the folk name for Hatton estate— *Toppi Tōṭṭam* (literally, “Hat-on Estate”)—which we could all look at outside the hotel windows as he spoke. The story, which is also retold by anthropologist Daniel Bass in his ethnography of Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka (2012:88-9), claims that the plantation *dorai* (“master”) would make a self-image of a scarecrow with his hat (*toppi*) on top of it so that when the scarecrow was seen in the fields, the hat would index and strike fear and discipline in the workers as they worked. The presenter ended with a history of the plantation union struggles (*pōrāṭṭam*) and an explanation about why knowing the unique histories of Malaiyaha Tamil politics and life would be important for their leadership potentials and post-educational futures.

After lunch, a short break took place, during which the women youth could take rest in their rooms. Soundramalar, a fourteen-year old girl participant from a nearby estate, had already spent the morning resting because she had woken up with a fever and stomach pains. Toward the end of the break, Delphina, one of the female NGO workers, asked me to go to each room and call the girls for the next session so that the session would start on time. I began knocking on hotel room doors and when I got to

Soundramalar's room, there was no answer. I tried to open the door, but it would not open fully and was blocked by something on the floor. The room was dark with the curtains drawn, but upon closer inspection, I saw Soundramalar's body on the floor near the door and immediately pushed through to get to her side. Her eyes were closed, and she appeared unconscious. Her body and clothes were damp with cold sweat, and her feet were ice cold. I felt for her pulse, which was present and saw that she was breathing so immediately called Delphina and others for help while trying to get her conscious. An expected commotion ensued, and Delphina, two other NGO women workers, and I carried Soundramalar to the hotel bed and asked the other young girls to leave so that we could give her room to breathe.

When Soundramalar came to and was able to sit up in bed, Delphina suggested that she go home to the plantation and stop participating in the program. Soundramalar immediately began crying loudly, telling us that she could not go home and wanted to finish the training as planned. One of the NGO workers took me outside the hotel room and explained that Soundramalar had a "domestic problem" (*vīṭṭil piraccinai*). Her father had been physically and emotionally abusive, and she had tried to commit suicide four times already. According to her, the young girl was either lying about her illness or had literally made herself sick so that she would not have to go home. Either plan, regardless of its veracity, had worked. "How can we send her home when he will most certainly beat her there?" she asked me. We rejoined Delphina and Soundramalar in the hotel room. To calm her down, Delphina assured Soundramalar that she could stay and participate in the training. To soothe her, she said gently while holding her, "Soundramalar is my child

(*pillai*). Is she your *pillai*, Mythri?" I said yes and smiled while giving Soundramalar some of my water to drink. Shivering, the young girl smiled lightly and took more rest during the next session, but eventually rejoined in the evening. Two weeks later, the same NGO held an exhibition in Hatton town, at which Soundramalar and her peers sold the arts and crafts that they had made over six months in their womens youth group in order to raise funds for their scholarship program. I asked her how she was doing, and she smiled and said that she was fine and happy about the program's success.

Development, in the technical sense, does not often want to remember the alarming and dystopic experience at the hotel that I have described above. The event would not be something that a local organization could write about or chronicle in a quarterly newsletter or in the outcome section of an annual report to international funding agencies. Nor was it the type of experience that fit neatly into the categories of programmatic success or failure. Rather, the event brought together the challenges, realities, and transformative possibilities of rights-based engagement on a local level in Sri Lanka's plantation sector and the significance of such development work on the plantations as they respond to the acute effects of a sustained labor regime. It was, as Father Paul Caspersz wrote—a moment of *humanity in community*—where the development worker, Delphina, was not simply an authoritative, detached figure who was existing within an apparatus and producing categories of risk toward an unattainable ideal of progress. Rather, she was encountering risk and vulnerability in ways that reaffirmed the necessity of a rights-based approach to development in the plantation sector under conditions of uncertainty that young women, like Soundramalar, face on a daily basis.

The relationship between precarity and development shapes this chapter's approach to studying NGO development practices among vulnerable subjects in Sri Lanka's Malaiyaha. Throughout research, I was, as discussed in the Introduction, affiliated with two local NGOs that addressed issues of the tea plantation sector in Kandy and Hatton. My relationships allowed me to participate and observe in a variety of NGO development programs that catered to women, youth, teachers, and families who were living and working on the plantations. Because I had allocated a longer time to carry out independent research in Hatton on Kirkwall Estate simultaneously, I was able to collaborate with the Hatton NGO more deeply over time. Reviewing and working through grant and annual reports and participating in workshops and planning sessions of NGOs and transnational and national networks of plantation groups, I often found myself in a process that Colombian anthropologist, Joanne Rappaport, calls, "co-theorizing" or "the merging of differently situated theories . . . [that] involves the forging of connections between indigenous-created concepts and the theories and methodologies that politically-committed academics draw on from their own traditions (2007:27). The role of the political is crucial for me, because this project initially began as a preemptive critique of development within the anthropology of development. The December 2004 tsunami had allowed for a new host of international development and aid to flow into Sri Lanka (Bastian 2007), and subsequent stories of aid corruption, neocolonial "voluntourism," and donor recipient dissatisfaction had convinced me that I would be able to find a breadth of similar evidence in the plantation sector and that I should continue in this train of

scholarly thought.¹⁰¹ But after spending time with plantation NGO workers in their fields of practice, I realized that, as David Gow (2008) contends, an anthropology of development was often pessimistic, if not fatalistic, in its approach. The “gaps between promise and practice” (Crewe & Harrison 1998: 187) were not as pressing as objects of anthropological thought and I became more interested in the spaces of transformation and creativity that were emerging and shifting my theoretical foci accordingly. What kinds of transformative knowledge were development workers creating in their fields? How were their programs and objectives creating new modes of belonging and entitlement for marginalized Malaiyaha Tamils in the plantation sector during and in the aftermath of prolonged ethnic civil war?

This chapter returns to the larger question of the sociopolitical marginality of Malaiyaha Tamil minorities in Sri Lanka and the role of plantation sector development in attending to their community concerns. I discuss the presence of solidarity and stigma by rethinking the fixedness of development knowledge as local plantation NGO workers encounter the concept of undesirability in their “fields” of practice. After providing a brief history of development within Sri Lanka’s plantation sector, I explore ongoing strategies that development workers partake in for the purpose of addressing the interests of Malaiyaha Tamils within a rights-based frame of development and progress. I present narratives of plantation development that explore the successes, challenges, and moments

¹⁰¹ After the December 2004, tsunami a number of incidents took place that marred the reputation of NGOs in Sri Lanka including the freezing of the US-based NGO Tamil Rehabilitation Organization’s (TRO) tsunami funds for connections to the separatist militants (LTTE), child trafficking of orphaned children, feelings of Western entitlement, the rise of volun-tourism among foreign NGO workers, and dissatisfaction with programs taking place on the ground such as the Hungama housing project in Southern Sri Lanka (<http://www.irinnews.org/printreport.aspx?reportid=75979>).

of rupture and solidarity that tell us more about the changing approaches to Malaiyaha Tamil development and its historical contextualization within broader discourses of minority politics and labor in a postcolonial South Asian nation-state.

I conclude this chapter by exploring how development workers treat the conundrum of undesirability within development discourse and face the possibility of “discrediting” (Goffman 1963: 4) cultural and social life forms among their development subjects. I discuss this dilemma with transparency to the people with whom I worked and continue to collaborate in our mutual understanding that plantation sector development in Sri Lanka predicated on crisis and hinges on vulnerabilities of the self and larger uncertainties for the community. How can we understand stigma and undesirability in development discourse? How do categories of risk and intersections with subjectivities of gender, class, and status circulate and get interpolated among Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations? How do alternative methodological approaches such as solidarity building within and beyond Sri Lanka’s borders allow anthropologists and development workers to rethink the fixedness of progress, morality, and the attainment of “the good life”? In engaging these questions, this chapter examines how such commitments to development in Sri Lanka’s Hill Country complicate understandings of desire and risk and what this hybridity of experience suggests for future solidarity initiatives among Malaiyaha Tamils and anthropological studies on development in the Global South.

A CULTURE OF POVERTY CREATES A POVERTY OF PHILOSOPHY

Scholars have studied closely the rise and development of NGOs in Sri Lanka (Fernando and Heston 1997, Caspersz 2005). For a fuller and more detailed historical account of select NGOs and labor-based organizations in the plantation sector, development scholar Udan Fernando (2007) has written a detailed biography of plantation NGOs from the perspective of international funding engagement and mobilization among Dutch Christian Funding Agencies (CFAs). In this chapter, I focus on NGOs that are local to the plantation areas and not those NGOs that have their main offices in Colombo or abroad.¹⁰² The purpose of this section is not to provide a comprehensive history of NGOs in the plantation sector but rather to contextualize the work that I observed among NGO workers during research and how this work reflects necessary and historically contextual shifts in economy, labor, and national perspectives on plantation sector community development and its place in Sri Lanka.

In the 1960s and 1970s, conditions of social unrest, statelessness, and the escalation of communal tension had created a prevailing sense of insecurity in the plantation sector. Groups such as SETIK (the Development and Social Justice agency of the Catholic Diocese of Kandy in Sri Lanka) and Satyodaya, two Kandy-based NGOs, which began in 1964 and 1972 respectively, commenced their activities with such

¹⁰² By way of this framing, I do not focus on the work of the Plantation Human Development Trust (PHDT), which, though registered as an NGO in 1992, was established by the Government and is a tripartite organization—led by Government Ministries, the owning Regional Plantation Companies (RPCs), and two dominant trade unions (Ceylon Workers Congress-CWC and Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union-LJEWU). Interestingly, the two trade unions are also signatories to the collective wage agreements, and this seemingly contradictory relationship could further explain the friction among non-signatory unions and these two groups given their rumored collusions and shared financial stakes with the Government and RPCs.

sociopolitical conditions in mind. Within the Jesuit tradition, Satyodaya particularly aimed to sustain Marxist-Christian and inter-ethnic and religious dialogues around issues of social justice and socialism. But the group soon shifted to responding to the sustained violence and discrimination experienced by plantations workers during communal violence and ethnic anti-Tamil riots in the 1970s and most pointedly in July of 1983, also known as Black July (Fernando 2007:140). Satyodaya became one of major hubs of plantation development and dialogue from its inception until the mid-1990s, when its founder, Father Paul Caspersz stepped down from direct leadership. Other NGOs such as PREDO (Plantation Rural Education & Development Organization) emerged in alliance with Satyodaya in 1987 and focused on children's education and the establishment of sustained Montessori facilities and programs for preschool-aged children on Sri Lanka's tea plantations.

In 1974, Satyodaya also founded the Coordinating Secretariat for the Plantation Areas (CSPA) amidst Sri Lankan land reforms, statelessness, and continued violence against Tamil-speaking minorities and dissenting voices more broadly. This alliance was one of the first attempts at building networks of solidarity among the plantation NGOs and trade unions in protest of injustice, inequality, and human rights violations committed against Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations. Given their collective voice, this network was also able to mobilize on larger Malaiyaha Tamil issues such as repatriation of Malaiyaha Tamils to India, the effects of statelessness, wage strikes, and the targeting of

Tamil-speaking minorities in Sri Lankan communal violence and emergency rule as dictated by the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979.¹⁰³

As violence against Tamil-speaking minorities escalated in Sri Lanka through the 1970s and into the 1990s, the plantation sector grappled with the opening of the national economy and sustained ethnic conflict (Gunasinghe 2004). The liberalization of Sri Lanka's markets was most evident in the shift from nationalized plantations in the 1970s to the privatization of the plantation sector in 1991. During this period of change, the plantations NGOs also suffered major funding crises in direct response to the larger global economic crisis and escalation of civil war and ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. During this period, the CPSA also began to dismantle, and several NGOs, including Satyodaya, reduced their activities and number of workers due to the lack of funding from international donors.

In my conversations with NGO workers and community leaders in the plantation areas, they shared that more tangible forms of development had begun seeping into forms of charity that were closely associated with liberation theology and social justice missions within the Jesuit tradition. Such movements, while validated on the ground by international donors and Sri Lankan recipients alike, were, sustaining an ideology that Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations were living in Oscar Lewis' "culture of poverty" (1965); the understanding was that if this community were to be presented with tangible materials that were wanting in their lives, they would change their ways and the cycles of poverty, which had sustained them in forms of bonded labor, would slowly diminish.

¹⁰³ Much of CPSA's work has been documented meticulously in their quarterly journal, *The Voice of the Voiceless*, which began in 1972 and continues today under the supervision of Satyodaya.

Interestingly, the “culture of poverty” found itself in scholarly representations of Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations as well, most notably in Nawaz Dawood’s *Tea and Poverty* (1980) and Donovan Moldrich’s *Bitter Berry Bondage* (1989). These characterizations, while useful in garnering policy-based attention to the socioeconomic conditions of Tamil plantation workers (CEPA 2008, Devaraj 2005), were not, according to many local development workers, useful for substantive progress in the long run. As one veteran plantation activist and NGO worker told me, the course of development in the plantations had to change:

Development cannot just be about leadership in one person or one founder. This is why many of these older NGOs lost their momentum—because they put all of their efforts into one founder and one person to guide their work. In this way, too, pure development collapsed as you see in the Coordinating Secretariat [for the Plantation Areas]. Any networks or associations based solely on development have collapsed now. Just tangible development will make no progress. The networks that express solidarity across lines of difference—industry, interest, institutional, roles (NGO, union, etc.) will fare better and those focused on advocacy will as well.

For this activist, conceptualizing the plantation culture as a culture of poverty had led plantation NGOs and networks of development into, as he calls it, a “poverty of philosophy,” where tangibility could stand in for more substantial and sustainable programming. Furthermore, organizations considered to fall outside the Tamil plantation community such as PHDT and other Colombo-based NGOs and INGOs were offering and continue to offer tangible forms of development in the form of water tanks, roofing sheets, line room renovations, and other material goods. For some NGO workers, the association between tangible gifts and extrinsic forms of development directly contradicted the struggle of the worker, which was deeply rooted in Marxist and socialist

forms of resistance. Kanagarajah, a young plantation NGO worker, told me about his concerns over individuals and groups that were claiming to be Marxist in principle and for the working people but only offering them goods and wages to survive to no significantly affective and transformative end:

If a worker's struggle and social change are their goals, then when they realize that the plantation system and labor regime will not change, why do they still program within the structure? A real Marxist would want to radically push for social change and break from the structure that dominates the worker.

Kanagarajah's point raises valid questions about how the belief that Malaiyaha Tamil plantation communities practice a culture of poverty could lead to a perceived poverty of philosophy. This lack of philosophy would then urge the productions of development programs that would push for significant and radical forms of social transformation. Recognizing this philosophical lack, NGOs such as the Institute for Social Development (ISD), Society for Welfare Educational and Awareness Training (SWEAT), Hatton Social Action Centre (later to become the Centre for Social Concern-CSC), UNIWELO (United Welfare Organization) and other community-based organizations began foregrounding rights-based initiatives that aimed to transform Tamil plantation workers and their families mentalities and potential. The rights-based approach involves educational and skills-based programs such as plantation resident and worker's education, skills-based and vocational trainings, and targeted workshops designed to transform the person from within by discussing the question of human and worker rights. This approach also engages the socioeconomic and political forces that create crisis and insecurity among Malaiyaha Tamil workers and their resident families. Because of their positioning in Sri Lankan civil society and in contradiction capitalist production within

the plantation system, these NGOs continuously find themselves challenged in their work because their goals, in Kanagarajah's words, question the very structures and institutions of labor that strive to keep the plantation worker idle.



Figure 13. An act from an NGO-sponsored International Children's Day program held on October 10, 2009 featuring children demanding (as indicated in central poster): "There needs to be education for all" while singing "Vellai Pookal," an A.R. Rahman song from the Tamil film, Kannatil Mutamittāl ("A Peck on the Cheek"), a film about an orphaned Tamil child in Sri Lanka's civil war. Photograph by author.

The difficulty faced by NGO workers that practice the rights-based approach hinges on the conundrum of visibility in civil society and on the plantations. On one hand, such development work demands the attention of the public to validate its representative voice of authority within the Malaiyaha Tamil community; on the other hand, such programs are simultaneously most effective when less visible to their institutional counterparts, such as the plantation managements and political and union

leaders that desire to keep the plantation system financially productive. Mary, an NGO field worker in Kandy, spoke to me about the strategies that she uses to carry out her rights-programs on the tea estates within her field site:

In most cases, it is not necessary to speak to the management. I go along with the people on the bottom (*kizh makkaḷōḍu*) because rights-work will not be granted by the management. Furthermore, rights are rights, and you should not need permission to do that type of work. Implementing water schemes and schools are one thing but rights can be discussed among the people without notice, and it only creates more problems (*piraccinai*) to go through the management.

Mary's strategies and sentiments regarding the rights that every person on the plantations is entitled to not only points to the difficulty of carrying out rights-based work within institutional spaces of work and residence but also calls attention to the intrinsic reasons why such focused development work can be discreetly effective in accomplishing its goals of human transformation. In the end, the rights-based approach only works because it is public and not clandestine in its implementation. The best examples of these performative displays of international solidarity can be seen in events such as International Women's Day or International Children's Day, where local NGOs organize and implement public events and invite local political and institutional leaders such as police officers, school officials, and Urban Council representatives to officially recognize their work on stage, so to speak. Recognizing both the constraints and possibilities of the rights-based approach, I will now present moments of rupture and solidarity through which we can understand the challenges and strategies implemented by development workers in the plantation sector today.

PLANTATION SECTOR SOCIAL FORUM: GIVING SPACE IN SOLIDARITY

Following the collapse of the CSPA network in the early 1990s, another NGO-exclusive solidarity network formed in 1994, which was called the NGO Forum for Plantation Organisations. This network, however, was short-lived for bureaucratic and funding reasons and because, according to one of its members, it too, was purely based on tangible development. Given this setback, Malaiyaha Tamil activists and development workers were turning to the possibility of collaborating among diverse interest parties within the plantation sector. Such a potential collaboration would not only bolster a collective voice in the plantations but foreground multilateral perspectives on plantation issues that could be further mobilized on national and global levels.

Following the collapse of the NGO Forum for Plantation Organisations, members of Sri Lanka's plantation NGOs participated in the 2003 Asian Social Forum held in Hyderabad, India. From their participatory dialogues emerged the Plantation Sector Social Forum (PSSF)—a network of solidarity that was unprecedented for its composition of trade unions, NGOs, and CBOs (community-based organizations) all of whom were working with and for plantation workers' rights in Sri Lanka. According to Guy Fontgalland, who produced one of the first documents out of the PSSF following its creation, the Forum sent members to the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai, India where they urged plantation work issues to be taken up separately under the theme of labor (2004: 33). Fontgalland describes how the PSSF's participation in the WSF 2004 impacted the formation of the network's goals across development areas of workers' advocacy and minority and human rights:

Following this a number of meetings were held at the district level in order to inform the plantation workers about the WSF and the objective of 'Another World is Possible.' In this period PSSF organized a number of picketings and demonstrations on the negative impact of globalization at the national level as well as in the plantation sector.

PSSF was declared to voice the concern and challenges faced by the plantation people at regional, national, and international levels. It is a challenge to oppose the slogan that there is No Alternative 'Except the Market Economy' as being prophesied by the WB [World Bank], IMF [International Monetary Fund], and WTO [World Trade Organization].

PSSF will take this challenge in the coming years with the support of the national and international groups to search for alternative models of development for a better plantation system where people in this sector can live with equality and justice.

We appreciate the efforts [,] which are going on across the globe to mobilize the people in all the continents . . . especially the people who are affected by the plantation system that is prevailing in different continents.

The concept of 'Another World is Possible' "Another Sri Lanka is Possible", "Another Plantation Sector is Possible" have raised the hope of the oppressed, depressed, and exploited communities. The emergence of the WSF and the concept will help in coming together of all the exploited who account for 90% of the entire population of the world to find the alternatives of their choice. It is an important process and we welcome wholeheartedly this historical event in Mumbai (Fontgalland 2004: 33-4).

As Janaka Biyanwila contends, the creation of PSSF under the blessings of the World Social Forum reflected the Sri Lankan plantation development sector's decisive shift to explore "labour internationalism or global labour solidarity" in order to achieve rights-based goals; more importantly, such transnational networks also introduced the need for plantation NGOs to position themselves less inimically to plantation managements (as evident in Kanagarajah's earlier comment) and to introduce the concept of "stakeholding" through worker advocacy (2011: 134). One of the most significant

PSSF-sponsored programs today is the establishment of International Tea Day (ITD), a day of worker recognition held annually on the 15th of December. On this day, plantation NGOs, managements, unions, and workers across tea-producing countries¹⁰⁴ come together to discuss their stakes in improving working and living conditions for tea plantation workers and to make plantation work more dignified. During Sri Lanka's December 2009 ITD conference, for example, a collective demand of the Sri Lankan government to implement all programs outlined in the Ten Year National Action Plan for the Social Development of the Plantation Community between 2006-2015 under the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Millennium Development Goals (MDG)¹⁰⁵ was put forth. Since its creation, PSSF has continued to program with the help of international funding from Cordaid (Christian funding agency (CFA) in the Netherlands) and has pushed the bounds of advocacy and development among local NGOs working with Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations.

How does the PSSF's unique push for transnational solidarity serve as a radical alternative to the traditional forms of development that were formerly sought and implemented in the plantation sector? First, its desire for global solidarity further reinforces the implementation of a rights-based program over tangible development. With internationally shared principles of human rights and worker justice tailored to the plantation sector, NGOs in the plantations can carry out their work with more confidence

¹⁰⁴ Some tea-growing countries that participate in ITD are as follows: Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Uganda, India, and Tanzania.

¹⁰⁵ This project was the subject of conversation among many plantation NGOs during my field research period. However, funding was closed in March 2010 with only partial completion of the stated goals. See UNDP website for further information: <http://www.undp.lk/SubProjects/Pages/detail.aspx?itemid=2>

and recognition from plantation managements by emphasizing the concept of stakeholding and overall improvement of the tea industry on the grounds of productivity and sustainability. Second, the international line of funding and diverse composition of the network distinctly sets PSSF apart from previous attempts at solidarity networking within Sri Lanka's plantation sector. In a planning meeting among PSSF members in June 2009, one of the members presented to the group about why PSSF holds more possibility for remaining in tact over time when compared to its network predecessors:

The CSPA internally had problems among its members and suffered from a "Founders Syndrome" and has been taken over by the majority. The Plantation NGO Forum was working but the problem was with bureaucratic management because it was fund-based only and driven by money. Then, there was the Civil Forum, which was only comprised of trade unions. All three networks have failed or shut down. PSSF is distinct because it comes from organizations that are all funded by Cordaid (*via* UPACT-Upcountry Social Action Centre).

The role of cash flow is crucial to PSSF because the network must acknowledge the reasons for past programmatic failures among local plantation NGOs amidst financial crisis. The fighting over funds had been the demise of the Plantation NGO Forum and was symptomatic of larger issues regarding jealousy among plantation NGOs over cash flows and grant getting from international donors. As a veteran NGO activist and leader told me when I first began my research, "There has been a lot of jealousy over money among the estate NGOs. For that reason, they do not like working together." PSSF's acknowledgement of past blunders is crucial here and speaks to the challenges faced by local plantation NGOs to work within market-driven economies of capital flow between international funding agencies and local, Southern NGOs. In a PSSF planning meeting that I participated in and observed in June 2009, NGO and union members alike agreed

that PSSF should never include INGOs because of the possibility of financial and political sway or worse, corruption. They further emphasized that the network should be ideologically continuous in its capacity-building, similarly structured like the Dalit Movement, which began in India, and global women's movements. Therefore, even if international funding would cease, such an approach would avoid previous pitfalls into a "poverty of philosophy" that assumed a "backwards approach" to addressing the claims of the tea plantation worker and resident constituents.

The network also strives to place weight on localized terms of transparency (*velippaḍaiyāna*) and force (*thākkum*) on local, national, and international levels and individual autonomy within collectivity. Such Tamil terms have currency not only in Sri Lankan development discourse but also in minority and political discourse with regards to the civil war and constitutional reform to ensure the rights of minorities in a majoritarian Sri Lankan state. In 2009, Muthulingam, director of the Institute for Social Development (ISD) and a PSSF member, gave a presentation to PSSF members on the significance of networks to the larger group and paraphrased Robert Putnam's famous definition of *social capital*—"the norms and networks which facilitate cooperation and collective action."¹⁰⁶ For him, such a concept would urge PSSF members to rethink the type of solidarity in which they partaking. This capital, he contended, could not be sacrificed and would be integral to the uniqueness of having a plantation-based labor and solidarity network. Furthermore, each member group had to carry out work that was individually autonomous so that when joined in collective force, each representative, by

¹⁰⁶ The original definition can be found in Robert Putnam's article, "Bowling Alone" in *The Journal of Democracy* 6:1, Jan 1995, 65-78.

contributing their individual skills and expertise, could develop their “global competencies” within the network membership. The push for competency within a solidarity network is reminiscent of James Tully’s suggestion that “mutual recognition of the cultures of citizens engenders allegiances and unity” (1995:197). Though Tully is considering the case of multiculturalism and representation within constitutional frameworks, PSSF is working as a solidarity network within similarly binding frames of institutionalism and public recognition within a postwar but not post-conflict Sri Lankan state. The key for individual competency, therefore, lies in the collective’s force and ability to garner the attention of the public and hold a stake in the rights and advocacy of plantation worker constituents.

The question of force also impacted PSSF’s decision to not collaborate with other solidarity networks within Sri Lanka. Originally, their donor, Cordaid, had asked PSSF why the group could not join other networks in Sri Lanka as such Lanka Social Forum. In a June 2009 planning meeting, PSSF members stressed that the network had tried their “level best” to work with such networks, but, in the end, chose not to because their interests would have been assimilated and eventually marginalized from broader political and social movements yet again. Their fears are not illegitimate and call to mind the danger of embarking on networking or political engagement across cultural and industrial difference, which, in of themselves, ask for potentially alienating forms of assimilation and compromise. At this point in advocacy and development and after three failed attempts at forming bonds of solidarity, plantation organizations and unions were finally and decisively showing their unwillingness to compromise. This contention to stand

together in the name of the plantation workers was important not only for safeguarding the singularities of their constituents' identities and positions, but also for demonstrating that the unwillingness to settle for anything under "level best" was necessary for plantation development. The transparency lay in the point of not only acknowledging this shared unwillingness for compromise but also holding one another accountable for each individual member's choice and commitment to enter the network deliberately and on the individual member's volition. Such conditions, the group agreed, would unavoidably present internal conflicts, but such intra-member conflicts had to be accepted openly and with transparency.

As predicted, PSSF's push for solidarity was not without conflict, and the narrative of events to follow demonstrates the ruptures and challenges that such plantation development solidarity networks face and the ways in which workings of solidarity in development inevitably hinge on the admission of wrongs and conflict. In 2008 and 2009, I participated in and observed a number of PSSF-sponsored workshops and planning meetings where the network collectively identified their goals, reviewed each issue or focus area, and administratively organized their collective resources and skills. In July 2009, the PSSF Executive General Council held a two-day planning meeting where thirteen representative members (eleven men, two women) discussed and presented on their various topics of expertise: Housing and Land, Minority and Citizenship, Child Rights, Labor and Wage, and Women and Gender. Priya, a representative of a women's organization in Nuwara Eliya district, was presenting on women and gender and is one of two leaders of PSSF Women's Wing and Gender Unit.

Each participant was given twenty minutes to speak, and Priya wasted no time putting women's issues on the table and in front of the eleven-man majority group. Her speaking presence revealed that development itself is, in both planning and implementation, performative and perhaps, even more so, for network members seeking to secure their "global competencies" and place at the table. Priya used this performative space to her advantage beginning with an open critique of women's treatment in plantation sector development to date:

Women workers have problems but they are never able to tell the perpetrators of those problems directly. There needs to be a continuing dialogue around this question of a woman's rights and her participation because it is lacking. And for which reason (*enta kāraṇam*)? We all know the reason (*ellārukun teriyum*) [*She paused for about five seconds for emphasis and stared at the men in the room*]. We all know the difficulties that this [women's] committee faces. There has been no example or model to set the way. This needs to be developed.

The admission of wrongdoing—namely the paternalistic exclusion of women in plantation development leadership and mobilization—was both necessary and forewarning. Speaking very quickly and only stopping to take a sharp breath in when her breath ran out, Priya spent the first ten minutes of her presentation covering a wide range of topics and knowing that her twenty minutes would not nearly be long enough to discuss the depths and intricacies of each and every issue that Malaiyaha Tamil women faced and that she, as an NGO worker like Delphina, encountered on a daily basis: raising awareness about the UN's Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the expendability and maltreatment of widows, lack of

female *kankānis*,¹⁰⁷ domestic violence, respiratory disease, women committing suicide by setting themselves on fire, increasing percentages of young divorces and tension in families over transnational migrant labor. In those ten minutes, Priya had curated a category of risk into which plantation women could be placed. Such a process entailed that she publically identify the social practices and habits that these women had experienced and acquired through significant and persistent forms of subordination and marginalization and link those inequalities to the need for more labor-oriented and culturally appropriate forms of women's empowerment and mobility. She then meticulously brought this category of risk back to the specific working goals of the PSSF Gender Unit. She discussed the need for NGO women workers and unionists to create safe spaces for women to share their true experiences, without lying and mitigation out of fear for social retribution. She then discussed how PSSF could form relationships with other women's groups in Sri Lanka to further mobilize around global women's issues such as domestic violence, the enforcement of CEDAW, and labor representation across industrial sectors.

It was at this point in her speech that one of the older male participants callously interrupted her to ask the session organizer, Patrick, if the group could stop her presentation and move on to more "pressing issues" such as the Collective Wage and Ten Year National Action Plan. To his suggestion, there was a slight, if not two second, hesitation from Patrick and the other participants to follow his plan. But then, Patrick

¹⁰⁷ Tamil term for overseers of groups of women laborers plucking tea leaves in the plantation fields ("One who sees").

startlingly slammed the table with his fist and yelled in Tamil and then emphatically in English to shut down the proposal:

Inta uṟavu vēṇḍum [“We need this relationship!”] [*He continued in English, emphasizing as noted.*] *We need this! We, as men must admit this—they have no space! We must give the space! Now, at this moment, the women have no chance [vāyppu]! It is all hypocrisy! We can talk on air, but on the ground, we must admit we have not given them the space!*

His comments silenced and shamed the entire room. The man who had interrupted could only look down without words, and Priya, too, stood motionless in surprising acknowledgment of Patrick’s admission. What Patrick said and what was felt by PSSF participants in the room as witnesses to his outrage was the emotion of potential defeat and future remorse—that if this solidarity network of men and women could not even give member women the space to discuss constituent issues, then the group, as a collective force, would not be able to forgive themselves and would have failed. If the network missed this opportunity, cut off Priya’s presentation, and postpone women’s issues yet again—that action would be a defeat. The admission of guilt and wrongdoing was a lucid and rupturing moment that had been brought on and made public by the very conditions of solidarity and cohesion that the PSSF network had fostered. Patrick had disturbed the collective conscience of the group and had irritated the doubts of the participants in the room: *would they be able to move beyond the “hypocrisy” of gender discrimination and paternalism that had plagued development of women living on Sri Lanka’s tea plantations?* It was a stern reminder that the creation of PSSF and public recognition of solidarity in plantation development would not presume an end to development work through itself. Patrick had placed the refusal to settle for anything

short of compromise on the table, and in doing so, the network had been reminded that development, like the humans that carry out its “work,” are flawed and entail, in their own collaborative processes, work on the vulnerabilities of the self as well.

Outside the room, what had Patrick’s act done for the question of solidarity among plantation development actors? How did it go beyond the “orthodoxy of buzz words” and “development praxis” (Stirrat & Henkel 1997) that detract from the sincerity of development work on the ground and, in doing so, force us to look beyond the simplicity of just saying “empowerment” or urging “participation”? His claim was effective beyond its work on PSSF for a number of reasons. It admonished paternalistic mentalities of Malaiyaha Tamil politics and invoked the history of such intrinsic flaws of development in the plantation sector over time. *We have not given them the space.* The utterance brought the past into the present for the sake of rupturing a pattern in development that had long plagued the plantation sector. His admission, albeit momentarily, broke this pattern, and it is fruitful for us, as scholars, to think of what such ruptures, coming from those who have dominated women in plantation development circles, *can do*. What records of knowledge do they produce, and how might such admissions of wrongdoing impact future decisions and routes of development for women in the plantations to take? His silencing, in this way, was an attempt to develop some human capability that had not been given due attention within the plantation development framework to date. It was also an attempt to reorganize the obligations of plantation development actors and shift articulations of need to those sites and persons that had long been ignored and excluded from central social and political debates—women. Whether or

not Priya felt empowered in the situation was not important. Patrick's calling out of error and moral crisis served as a form of solidarity work that could potentially produce enabling possibilities for social change in the future of Malaiyaha Tamil plantation women's development, the re-visions of the interrupting man, and contemplations of all actors who would be willing to be silenced in order to have women take the floor.

At the end of the Executive Council meeting, I, as an external consultant to PSSF, was asked to say a few words of reflection on the two-day program. I spoke of what I knew best and shared the story of young woman with whom I had spoken with on Kirkwall Estate and her decision to work in Colombo to financially support her ailing brother. I spoke about one of my closest interlocutors on the estates, a widow named Ramaiyi, and about her experiences as a caretaker and producer of community knowledge in the lines rooms and her home.¹⁰⁸ I then told the members that I felt that the space that PSSF was creating was a space that I had not yet seen in plantation development work and would have significant impact on the public recognition of plantation issues on local, national, and international levels. The network had created a space that was not perfect but that was thriving on categories of risk and imperfection as sources of motivation, accountability, and collective action. Under such conditions of desiring progress, emotions of doubt, fear, shame, and hope could circulate in their flaws for a better future and in acknowledgement that the present was always in need of revision. That circulation had also urged me, as a scholar, to stray from the binaries of top-bottom, donor-recipient, and North and South—dichotomies to which the

¹⁰⁸ I discuss the life histories of Sadha and Ramaiyi in more detail in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation.

anthropology of development had desperately clung and that were now uncovering their limits of potentiality. By moving away from such disciplinary bindings, I was able to reflect upon the inner workings of a solidarity network that, in response to a history of errors and exclusions, was reaching into the plantation and beyond the Sri Lankan nation in order to explore more far-reaching and transnational possibilities of exchange and collaboration.

GLOBAL FEMINIST AND LABOR MOVEMENTS



Malaiyaha Tamil women from tea plantations surrounding Hatton stage a rally for women's rights on International Women's Day, held on March 8, 2009. Translations of the two foregrounded Tamil signs from left to right are as follows: "Do not validate and maintain the slave-like conditions for women" and "Do not sexually assault and rape women." The original slogans were written and produced by women working on the plantation and partaking in a local rights-based NGO and PSSF member organization. Photograph was taken by the author.

Over the next months and in the years following my research period in Sri Lanka, I worked and communicated with PSSF as an independent observer of their individual

member and collective work. Through this relationship I began to see how development in the plantations was going beyond previous demarcations of tangibility and progress and into more uncharted relationships of transnational women's solidarity and human rights advocacy.

On February 25, 2012, the Institute for Social Development (ISD) inaugurated and registered the Working Women's Front (WWF), the first independent women's trade union in Sri Lanka to serve the interests of women workers exclusively. Funded partially by a German Protestant NGO called Bread for the World, the WWF is unique to Sri Lanka's labor union history because the union serves women who work across multiple labor sectors such as the plantations, garment industry, domestic work (abroad and domestic), clerical, and shop work. Given the accounts of movement and women's experiences of risk and harm associated with the last two categories of employment, a union of this kind is unprecedented in institutionalizing expansive and gendered services to and within previously undocumented and informal sites of labor and economic production. At present, the WWF has over two hundred members across Sri Lanka, and its collective force, according to Ms. K. Yogeshwary, WWF Secretary General, will strengthen Sri Lanka's place within international and transnational feminist and women's working movements.

In July 2012, the ISD's Plantation Workers' Museum, member of PSSF and organizer of WWF, received an invitation from the US-based International Coalition for Sites of Conscience (New York) to take part in a three-way cultural exchange among women in the United States, Chile, and Sri Lanka to dialogue on issues of women's rights

and social change. Entitled “Girl Ambassadors for Human Rights,” this one-year, \$100,000 project is being funded by the U.S. Department of State’s Cultural Programs Office and the Museums Connect grants program in the American Alliance of Museums, which is a cause-based organization in Washington, DC. In the program, local, women-focused NGOs, including ISD, will hold local and international dialogues among young women (between 17 and 18 years of age) and then organize transnational visits among the three groups of young women during which the participants would present their sites of conscience to one another in the form of cultural exchange. During the international dialogues, carried out online via video conference call, one of the fifteen girls from each site is to give a brief presentation to the larger group about their home site’s collective history, culture, and particular issues faced by women in their community. Then the participants will hold, what the organizers call, a critical dialogue in which they will talk about the significance of the Girl Ambassador for Human Rights program and how such intercultural forms of exchange can enhance young women’s knowledge about systems and institutions of education, rights-enabling venues for women within their own countries, and gender stereotypes that detract from women fully enjoying their rights in a local context. Following the international dialogues, four girls from each site will travel to their partner sites in an intercultural exchange during Spring 2013.

In talking to ISD’s Muthulingam, who came to Washington, DC in September 2012 for the first organizational planning meeting among the site directors, this type of work is unprecedented in the plantations and presents a unique opportunity of learning and change for the Malaiyaha Tamil young women from the plantations who are

participating actively in the program. The emphasis is also on women's leadership is also meant to go beyond the development venue or moment as captured in the year-long grant. In my discussions with Muthulingam and other site organizers from Chile and the United States, they told me that they, as organizers, hope that this transnational collaboration will create a group of women in each site that can serve as a basis of community leaders, where the philosophy of human rights includes a critical understanding of history and the need to draw parallels across cultures and women's experiences more broadly. Furthermore, Muthulingam and the other organizers stressed that this community should make a commitment that does not depend on the organizations running the program but on the energy of the participants themselves. In doing so, the program strives to create an identity and fellowship that will critically transform the participants as they transition from young women to adults.

Coming full circle from a culture of poverty to transnational feminist movements of solidarity, development in the plantations has learned to assemble categories of risk but at the same time find spaces of possibility and creativity within that necessary and formative process of admission. Both ISD's Women's Working Front and Girl Ambassadors of Human Rights programs hinge on the realities that Priya outlined in the PSSF meeting, and in doing so, encourage a flourishing of the human capability (Gow 2008) that brings the concept of partnership into modes of attributing values within and for a community. By sharing oral histories, gendered experiences, and histories of

subordination and action,¹⁰⁹ women in solidarity networks can engage in collaborative relationships that are generative of knowledge beyond pure participation and the self. Furthermore, for Malaiyaha Tamil women on the plantations, their development has always been about their place in one place—working on the plantation. Thus, transnational forms of solidarity building can destabilize the idea that progress can, on the micro-level of community interaction, change social relations and community attitudes on the plantation and in accordance with the modes of movement that women engage and employ in their lives. With political patronage, distrust in nationalist politics, and discrimination on the fronts of labor, residence, and nation, such networks and intercultural exchanges may also serve as a release for women to explore more maximally open possibilities in their future.

THE STIGMA AND VULNERABLE PLANTATION SUBJECTS

Our main activity centres round “CONSCIENTIZATION.” Conscientization is a process whereby oppressed and exploited people become aware or are made aware through reflection, of the oppressive and exploitative conditions they are in, and then make a decision to change that condition.

- Statement of NGO Activity in *Voice of the Voiceless*, Bulletin of the Coordinating Secretariat of the Plantation Areas (CSPA), Issue No. 1, August 1980

Although networks of solidarity produce far-reaching outcomes for plantation development, the centrality of the vulnerable subject and categories of risk still present

¹⁰⁹ In late April 2013, I will be traveling to Syracuse, New York and New York City to continue research with the young women and Muthulingam on their visit with New York, the Coalition, and other Girl Ambassador for Human Rights local community organization. In an afterward to this chapter, Muthulingam has expressed interest in having me translate and publish the testimonies of the women that were given when participants from New York visited Sri Lanka in early December 2012, and we have been in correspondence about publishing a separate volume of testimonies based only on this program.

complications for Malaiyaha Tamil plantation development work on a more grounded level. Throughout research, I found that plantation NGO development workers needed to not only identify categories of risk among their plantation subjects but also validate their claims by employing universal principles of dignity, progress, and the desire to be lifted out of oppression and toward the “good life.” As a result of such categorization work, certain aspects of current plantation work and life were designated as potentially undignified and undesirable according to the history of plantation labor and present conditions of the larger plantation community, and this designation would often cause friction between youth aspiring to leave the plantation and elderly plantation residents who had long endured and lived through such life forms.¹¹⁰ I am interested in the unfixing of these borders in assigning stigma to certain aspects of plantation life for the purposes of executing development ideologies and practice. How do such borders of desirability and undesirability exist and take form? What happens when a transgression of that border takes place, further dictating but complicating what a vulnerable and at-risk subject should feel about their life’s course? What implications are presented to the vulnerable Malaiyaha Tamil plantation subject when such transgressions are called out to a larger political public?

¹¹⁰ In my community-based study of plantation life outside NGO work, the comments about development work that I would hear among elderly plantation residents often reflected ambivalence about the impact of contemporary forms of rights-based NGO development work. On one hand, they would acknowledge that NGOs were helping youth in their families by giving them more avenues for education and mobilization to pursue alternative and more promising forms of income-generation. On the other hand, the elderly and even middle-aged plantations workers without or not accessing NGO programs would acutely realize that such forms of assistance and community-based development were not present or employed during their youth, thus securing them in less desirable forms of labor and life.

Such oversteps came up frequently in my conversations Malaiyaha Tamil and non Malaiyaha Tamil Colombo-based development workers and community leaders, who were mostly middle to upper class and upper caste, not living on the plantations, and carrying out policy-based and development “work” with Tamil plantation communities. When they learned that I was carrying out a separate study on a plantation estate and had been sleeping overnight in the line rooms and having meals prepared by my interlocutors in their homes, they quietly cautioned me not to sleep there and often incredulously asked me, “You eat there?” sometimes with a laugh at my research methodologies or just simply shocked at my personal hygiene and social practices.

Dating back to British colonial rule, the plantation line room, comprising single and sometimes double barrack style housing of six to nine adjacent twelve by seven foot rooms, remains home for all Malaiyaha Tamil tea plantation workers and their families today. Plantation workers and residents do not have ownership or land rights to their homes and in the words of a Malaiyaha Tamil activist and teacher in the plantation sector, as quoted in Chapter One, the workers are “tenants” (*kuṭiyāl*) whose residence is termed by the work that they can perform.¹¹¹ These economic and living conditions incite rage among development workers and activists who contend that the line room inhibits growth and human development. As Edward, a community leader told me in February 2009 before the Provincial Council Elections, the lack of land rights and inhumanity of the line rooms are determining factors to the diminishing projection of plantation community in the years to come:

¹¹¹ In order for a plantation resident to maintain living in their line room, the family must have at least family member registered for full time estate work at any given point in time.

What is a plantation community? In a few years, there will be a skeleton of workers. They cannot rely on tea. The line room is a like a prison. Only when you leave do you see the disadvantages of living there. You cannot grow—socially, mentally, physically. It is a debilitating system. But will the unions accept the rights-based approach? This is where they get their money. You can give a house, but will be a space where one can grow or just a facility?

His comments draw out the fundamental tension that development workers must face on a daily basis in their fields of practice. How had such stigmas and risks had come to be associated with Malaiyaha Tamil plantation life and what impacts do such questions such as, “You eat there?” or the term, “tenants” have on the rights-based work that plantation NGOs were implementing? Tamil plantation workers often encounter publicly circulated and stigmatized community representations of themselves, many of which can directly contradict or devalue the realities and desires that they experience in group-oriented and familial dynamics. What had the concept of progress done for categories of risk and undesirability?

In order to identify “the good life,” plantation NGO workers and community leaders must identify its negative counterpart; in order to tell a Malaiyaha Tamil that they deserve dignity, the NGO workers must also acknowledge that someone out there—not necessarily the Malaiyaha Tamil subject—thinks of the plantation worker or resident’s life as undignified or on terms of undesirability. In order to liberate, uplift, and empower depressed or subjugated development subjects, those subjects must first be literally put in their place within embodied hierarchies of pleasure, desire, and worth. Such was the work of indexing underdevelopment and the assigning of stigma—the literal sealing of potential with respect to progress.

Thinking about this dilemma, I began reflecting on my own methodological transgressions that had led me to utterance of the elite's comment. In the plantation lines, I had been privy to experiences among Malaiyaha Tamil plantation communities that had directly contradicted the representations of undesirability put forth in development and political circles. Culture—as I had come to know it—in the form of ritual, belief, group dynamics, and life cycles—was coming under fire for the sake of progress. I more than once heard NGO workers say that Malaiyaha Tamils were in need of development and therefore lacking or inhabiting places that were designated as stigmatized or unworthy of possibility. These hypothetical characterizations were most assuredly validated with cultural evidence presented in binary relationships with ideals of progress, morality, and dignity. For instance, Tamil plantation workers and residents who were superstitious would be termed as backwards; those who consumed alcohol were in need of moral counseling; those who were obsessed with watching television or chose to work as domestics in lieu of further schooling were forsaking their potential worth for more undignified forms of life. Furthermore, these perceptions did not just exist in development contexts but found slippage within and in elitist civilian circles that often caricature and define estate life only by its seeming imperfections and inequalities. For instance, Sri Lanka's economically middle-class and elite often describe Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents as impoverished in mind and with substandard hygiene practices but would be perfectly fine in believing that these humans would be good for only two things—cleaning and taking care of their homes or working among the tea bushes in the fields away from more promising and dignified forms of global capital and

security. Such static representations of Malaiyaha Tamil life served their purpose for the elites who created and sustained them, and development workers were acutely sensitive to the sustained public shaming of this minority community's life and future.

And nevertheless, the slippage of elitist caricatures and development knowledge had made questions such as, "You eat there?" a possibility. But if the line room and the very life that it had afforded to individuals and families over time and space was not livable, how then had I come to know Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents who had made it their home and had found and experienced pleasure and life emotions in it? How is anyone to make sense of such an incommensurability of judgment and value in a wider world of development and desire?

While not necessarily always the intention of development workers, the assigning of undesirability upon and for vulnerable development subjects can, in Erving Goffman's terms, "discredit" (1963) current forms of experience and life. Goffman claims that there are two types of stigma: the *discredited* and the *discreditable*. The discredited is maximally public, morally affronting, and unambiguous in its assignment of inferiority; examples of this type would be indices such as the line room or a man exhibiting signs of intoxication in public. But other social practices such as the superstitious belief in a healing ritual or desire to work as a domestic in Colombo are *discreditable* in that the assignment of inferior rank is less obvious to the person being potentially stigmatized (1963: 4). The potentiality of stigma is therefore in the hands of those who can assign it, and, the stigma, once assigned, can create split subjectivities among the stigmatized individual:

This uncertainty arises not merely from the stigmatized individual's not knowing which of several categories he will be placed in, but also, where the placement is favorable, from his knowing that in their hearts the others may be defining him in terms of his stigma (1963:14)

Contemporary scholars studying critiques of the poor find resonance with the work of categorizing for the purposes of validating modes of economic development and policy-making on national and international levels. As Katherine Newman, who studies communities below and hovering around the poverty line in the United States, claims, the process of categorization is inextricably linked to policy-oriented discourse on maximizing national capital and monitoring its flow through the federal welfare system. Such a dynamic, however, makes poverty and the embodied lives of its practitioners both “visible” and “invisible” (Newman 1999) in the eyes of the state. Similarly, Michael Katz, channeling the work of legal scholar Martha Minow, suggests that the practice of categorization is deeply embedded in the way in which scholars and policymakers alike treat poverty within an essentialist framework—released from temporality, reflexivity, and socially constructed changes in perception and action:

Some of the ways of classifying people, such as undeserving—or even poor, are so old we use them unreflexively; others, such as homeless or underclass, though much more recent, quickly become unexamined parts of discourse. The problem with this language of difference is both philosophic and practical. We assume that verbal distinctions reflect natural or inherent qualities of people. By mirroring natural divisions, we think the language of difference represents objective distinctions. In fact, it does not. For reasons of convenience, power, or moral judgment, we select from among a myriad of traits and then sort people, objects, and situations into categories which we then treat as real (1990: 5-6).

Likewise, Malaiyaha Tamils, particularly from lower-castes, encounter the uncertainty of being defined and represented not only on the level of local development but also on political and institutional levels. This was most clear when I saw a crèche attendant yell

and openly chastise a new mother for morally apprehensible parenting skills because she forgot to bring her baby's growth chart to an on-site check and or in the utter lack of faith that Colombo-based NGO workers would have in the plantation worker's inability to stop drinking alcohol. Such exercises in categorizing—you are a good or bad mother or you are either a drunk or sober—can create split sense of self within Malaiyaha Tamil subjects themselves who do not necessarily think of their abilities as a parent or community reputation as wholly determined or damaged by a piece of paper or a bottle of beer.

Such publically available assignments of stigma have direct and far-reaching consequences for the political aspirations of Malaiyaha Tamils as a larger community. NGO workers often assign stigma and risk to forms of plantation life because their very stability and legitimacy pivots on the public recognition of elite classes, local and national media, and institutional officials. An example of this dynamic revealed itself in preparations for the International Women's Day program in early March 2009 at a local NGO in Hatton town. Upon observing young Tamil women from the plantations rehearsing their dance routine on stage, Nadesan, a male Malaiyaha Tamil NGO worker, became very upset with the ways in which the women were dancing. He said that their movements were too "cinema-like" because they were, with their backs facing the audience, moving their hips from side to side with their hands placed on the sides of their heads. Their female coordinator immediately turned off the music and chastised them, instructing that they switch to a Tamil folk-dance type step frequently seen in forms of dance on the plantation traditionally reserved for religious or plantation-specific cultural

rituals—a clap while stepping one leg forward, then lifting the back leg and clapping upon the lift. Nadesan watched the revised move and deemed it acceptable for the program. Such was the task of curating an image of plantation culture for a development public, and the future of the organization’s status in a larger institutional setting was at stake.



Figure 14. A child’s drawing for a local NGO arts fair in Hatton town depicting “typical life and labor on the tea plantations. Simultaneously denigrated by NGOs as forms of backwardness or indignity, signs of labor such as wearing the traditional basket on one’s back for placing tea leaves, carrying jugs of water to their homes because there is no water line, and carrying wood for toxin-producing wood fires in confined line rooms are marked as undesirable and yet reflect the way in which plantation workers and their families live on a daily basis.

Photograph was taken by author.

CONCLUSION

For development workers, what contains the potential of development in the plantations is the necessary but uncertainty-producing assigning of stigma and risk. In thinking back to Soundramalar, the fourteen-year old girl who fell unconscious at the youth training, the stigmas of plantation life had produced, more than once, unique conditions of vulnerability and risk where she no longer felt worthy of life, and yet that life had long been deemed unworthy for her. As development workers like Delphina know first hand, the moral crises and effects that such contradictions of existence present, if left unacknowledged, can further alienate development subjects from knowing themselves. Finding solidarity in risk can, thus, present new ways to manage the inevitable process of marking undesirability in development practice. And while such a balancing act may create experiences among Malaiyaha Tamils that do not get recorded in the official accounts of development work, such modes of transparency and moral accountability can help build the capacity of humans to strive for ways of making their own lives more dignified in the long run.

CHAPTER FIVE
CUNNING AS EXPERTISE—
CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

ENNA CĒYRATU? STRATEGIZING UNCERTAINTY

I am sitting with Selvarasi in her kitchen on Kirkwall Estate. She is making us tea and has been coughing up yellowish-green phlegm consistently through the day. She tells me to tend to the fire because she has to get something from the front room. She comes back with three, palm-sized, Tamil newspaper squares, a brown apothecary glass bottle, and a shot glass. She asks me to open each brown paper square. In each square was a different pill distinguishable by color and shape—pink capsules, white discs, and red tear-drops. She then asks me to take one of each and place them on the kitchen table near the shot glass. I do as I am told, and she pours some lukewarm water from the warming kettle into the shot glass, drinks a full sip, and takes all three pills in one go. For the cough syrup, she goes outside to the back covered area of their home, spits out her *vettrilai*¹¹² into the brush and then takes a swig of syrup from the glass bottle and then finishes it off, shuddering at its taste. She comes back to the fire pit and tells me that she does not like it at all because it gives her a headache. What were the names of the pills and what are they for, I ask. She says that she does not know, but she is coughing with stomach pain, and the doctor gave her all three to take. She does not know if they are helping, and if they are not, she may go to Nawalapitiya hospital for further examinations. *Enna cēyratu?* What to do?

¹¹² A combination of betel leaf, areca nut, sun-dried tobacco leaves, and slaked lime paste.

Enna cēyratu? This is a Tamil phrase that I heard uttered at least once a day by Malaiyaha Tamil women and members of their families on the plantations. *What to do?* I remember the phrase not only because it was repeated daily in my conversations with Malaiyaha Tamils during research, but also because it never seemed to be answered clearly or directly when asked. The question is a powerful rhetorical tool, drawing the listener's mind into the crisis of social action at hand and compelling all who heard it to critically ponder the possibilities and impossibilities of the speaker's situation. Both timely and timeless, the phrase also calls out to such insecure worldviews that must be recorded, and it has the encompassing ability to capture the sense of insecurity—the blurred sense of now—that predicates and informs plantation group life, development discourse, and to a larger extent, the state of silenced morals and civic paralysis that most Sri Lankans felt during the war euphoria of 2009.

In reference to the future, *enna cēyratu?* can reflect uncertainty and doubt about what is to be encountered. *What should we do? What can we do?* In reference to the past, it can convey defensive remorse about what has transpired or what opportunity was lost. *What could we have done? What other options did we have?* In the moment, it reveals the speaker's frustration and investment in existing circumstances. *What to do here and now?*

It is perhaps best to understand this question with another question. When something unfortunate happens to us, why do we look for a reason behind its doing? Why do we, by extension, look for that which is unattainable—the truth? We seek reasons and the truth when we doubt that reality which presents itself to us in the given here and now. We seek it more earnestly when we feel that evidence is simply not there; if there is

evidence, we look for a reason because we doubt the veracity of it. The process of fixing belief is a shared method—like, community—a continual mental exercise of making life certain after considering all of the bearings that the available consequences afford.¹¹³ From this mental exercise come those pieces of information that somehow coalesce into what we can call knowledge—literally pieced together from doubt, the process of intercourse between available evidence and belief, and the formation of value judgments.

Selvarasi's question, *enna cēyratu*, is a speech event that calls for a process of collaboration within such mental exercises. In doing so, it asks us to make sense of the political vulnerability and uncertainty that Malaiayha Tamils and other minority communities in Sri Lanka face on a daily basis. Subtly emerging in even the most mundane of conversations, it reminds us that the production of knowledge is critical for minorities that often have knowledge about them created externally and for purposes that are not productive for the community. The claim or task of making life certain, therefore, brings the question of representation for Malaiyaha Tamils back into focus of the community and its members.

FROM ESSENTIALIZED SUBALTERN TO ENABLED SUBJECT

Among Malaiyaha Tamil development workers, such a question could be perceived as a symptom of hopelessness and index of undesirability such as the suffocating line room or superstitious belief. But as I contended earlier, such markings of essentialism and stigma

¹¹³ I flesh out this concept of community in the last section of Chapter One. For further discussion of fixing belief and the maxim of pragmatism, see Peirce ([1877]1992: 113) and ([1903]1998:135) respectively.

that inform the production of transformative knowledge, in fact, limit the reach of development “work” and its ability to critically engage Malaiyaha Tamils over time. I would like to approach Selvarasi’s question differently. Rather than take it at face value, I want to use it as an entry point into the process of gaining and exacting expertise among Malaiyaha Tamils who desire to transform their experiences on the plantations and in Sri Lanka. Such a reclaiming and re-presentation of the self ultimately reorient the future of this minority community in the long run.

I draw inspiration from Dominic Boyer’s definition of the expert—“an actor who has developed skills in, semiotic-epistemic competence for, and attentional concern with, some sphere of practical activity” (2008: 39). Boyer generously phrases his definition in order to account for the degrees of recognition and social validation that experts, who are positioned within various social spheres, attract and maintain. Furthermore, such a broad definition, he claims, “highlights the tension between the experiential-performative and social-institutional poles of skilled knowing and doing” (2008: 39). I suggest, however, that it is more useful to see such spheres of activity as imbricated or overlapping rather than polarized in their engagement of one another. Such a perspective is particularly helpful in understanding the experience of minorities in Sri Lanka. Engaging historical grounds of exclusion, minorities must know not only how to perform but also how to navigate within the very social realms of labor, institution, and state, which enforce their exclusion. In fact, the expert’s ability to take on such agentive obstacles effectively mobilizes a host of beliefs and actions that produce effective outcomes directed towards both the individual and the institutions encountered.

In this way, the Malaiyaha Tamil expert constructs and employs knowledge for pragmatic purposes. Such individuals can be considered within Gramsci's category of "organic intellectuals . . . distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong" (Gramsci 1985[1971]: 3). Stemming from my previous discussion of community, movement, and development, evidence suggests that to dismiss the hegemonic structures of governance that produce competing symbols of capital and value within the plantation sector would be to discount the exceptional force that gave rise to Sri Lankan majoritarian politics and subsequent strategies of building solidarity and dignity among minorities such as the Malaiyaha Tamils. Aware of such hegemonic structures that organize experience in civic and political society, the expert carries out actions that consciously permit both histories of domination and the exclusionary parameters that such histories afford to shape a particular "path of internal transformation" for a greater communal good (Chatterjee 2004: 51). Where the actions become pragmatic are in their continual attending to the former experiences of subjugation and domination.

This permission further complicates and challenges James Scott's characterization of subaltern resistance (1985), which, as contended by scholars such as Donald S. Moore, "neglects the processes through which social spaces are formed, reproduced, and reworked through situated cultural practices" (1998: 351). For Moore, such spatial binaries essentialize subaltern action by suggesting that resistance can only take place in "*sites* where power does not saturate or colonize the consciousness of slaves, peasants,

and other subalterns” (Moore 1998: 351). Fortunately, recent scholars of Malaiyaha Tamils (Bass 2012, Balasundaram 2009) have not taken up the “fetishization of resistance” (Kellner 1995: 39); this scholarly trajectory, I believe, can be attributed to both a critical turn in the discipline on the “thinness” (Ortner 2006) and spatial simplicities of agency and resistance theory and the blunt pervasiveness of power that permeate sites of experience in postcolonial Sri Lanka. As evident in the multiple and competing factions within Sinhala and Tamil nationalist movements and the crushing of dissent within ethnic groups, political action or response could not be termed simply as “resistance” writ large. Furthermore, emergency rule in Sri Lanka offered no space exempt from the technologies of governmentality that state-building and competing Sinhala and Tamil nationalist movements require for their maintenance.

The most intimate subaltern spaces for Malaiyaha Tamils are, in fact, lived artifacts of colonial and postcolonial enterprise and informed by and included within complicit attentive systems of power and structural inequality. The plantation line room, for instance, attracts and bears such mutual attention, as I briefly touched upon in the previous chapter. This colonial artifice is a place of belonging and life that Malaiyaha Tamils claim as a residence and only exists as such because it is the place where kinship networks and group life have taken shape. But critical to this flourishing was the fact that the plantation managements over time and space have not allowed Tamil plantation workers to own these homes or the land on which they are constructed. Despite such legal and civic denials of capital acquisition, the line room is still considered a space worth investing in, and such a condition—investing without purchase or ownership—reflect

that Malaiyaha Tamils constructively think and do for the sake of state-constructed relations and forms of being.

Such a residential site would also mislead one to think of the intimate or private space as off limits to the hegemonic practices of the state. But, on the contrary, the intimate is even more animated by such technologies of surveillance and consumption; it is in such places that subaltern subjects think about and spend creative energies on fashioning themselves to work best within a dominant state and exclusive nation. I am reminded of Gayatri Spivak's critique of Qadri Ismail's claim of the nation as an "inoperative, oppressive, disabling community" (2000: 222). Spivak claims, "the problem is, precisely, that it is only too operative, too enabling, leading to liberation claims that seem the opposite of oppression" (2000:308). The excess of power and exclusion created for the sake of the postcolonial nation-state (Babha 1994) fuels minorities such as the Malaiyaha Tamils to pursue the continual mental exercise of constructing knowledge that will, in a pragmatic sense, make a difference in their lives and conditions.

This chapter is interested in the intersections of marginality, power, and knowledge that enable the production of such unlikely expertise among Malaiyaha Tamils. In interrogating the past, present, and future, Malaiyaha Tamils use such embodied spaces of exclusion and marginality to strategize and, in Boyer's words, "develop competence for," determining possibilities in interstitial spaces of symbolic capital and civic becoming. I would like to think of such expertise as unlikely only because there are those institutions and actors—elite, managerial, and exclusionary—that would not like Malaiyaha Tamils to hold such effective knowledge and often believe that this once

coolie-now global worker community had never possessed and could never possess such creative forms of knowledge that would be able to transform their community from within. Building competency cannot be understood as simply resistance or agency. Rather, it is best framed as the acquiring of knowledge that will be most efficient for the production of possibility in the face of uncertainty at best.

To explore this process of acquisition further, I suggest that this unique form of expert knowledge construction relies on knowing well the intricacies of marginality. For Malaiyaha Tamils, exclusion is not spread evenly but felt in direct relation to moments when insecurity afflicts most invasively and where the life stakes are high—often in moments that involve the body. The body is a site of production that has been not only seized, as in the case of sterilization of women and men, but also publically available to those holding more valued or technocratic posts of expertise (Boyer 2008: 39), as in the case of illness and health. Throughout research, I spoke with and observed Malaiyaha Tamils that were engaging in meaningful and effective projects of knowledge production to make their lives more certain in the face of such bodily insecurities. I would like to address three particular moments of addressing insecurity that I encountered over time during field research and how these moments resulted in the construction of effective knowledge among the involved Malaiyaha Tamil participants.

FROM DOMICILE TO DOCILE BODY: PERFORMING TAMILNESS

Foucault's concept of discipline and its ability to produce techniques of encounter and becoming among excluded beings is a helpful starting point in understanding such forms

of expertise and how they take shape. The concept seeks to identify the overlappings of anatomical-metaphysical and technico-politico registers that engage the body,¹¹⁴ and these imbrications are what precisely urge the construction of “expert” knowledge for individuals in duress (1977:136). Such entities of labor are what the plantation system thrived upon since their construction; by employing such techniques through checkrolls, pay slips, line rooms, and food rations, they managed to create and maintain a domicile labor force on top of denying them rights to land and citizenship. Thus, the practice of discipline was and still is far-reaching in its methodological aspiration to efficiently and fully coerce, control, and regulate the largest number and concentration of bodies.

This disciplining force is also deeply penetrative in that it codifies and maintains the modalities of its subjects and their social relations—their permissions, obligations, commitments, entitlements, rights, and responsibilities. When a family member working on the plantation falls ill, the first loss or failure of commitment, so to speak, is financial—the unearned daily wage. This unmet commitment then triggers a host of unmet responsibilities to support one’s social relations. Throughout research, I would often speak to estate workers who had to take the day off due to sickness. The first thing that they would say would be that they were afraid that they would not meet the required number of working days for the month to get their desired and contracted monthly pay rates. Getting better would eliminate this uncertainty and the sick individual and his or her social relations would use their creative energies to better the situation and attain such

¹¹⁴ For Foucault, discursive practices of discipline, when imposed upon their subjects, create anatomical entities that are “cellular,” “organic,” genetic,” and “combinatory” and employ the following four “techniques”: the constructing of tables, prescription of movement, imposition of exercises, and the arrangement of tactics” (1977:167).

security. In this way, Foucault's disciplinary practice creates a docile body that can be "subjected, used, transformed, and improved." (1977:136). No longer amorphous, the anatomical, "politically invested" body now has aim and direction, having participated in the techniques noted above. What emerges is a docile body that embodies the workings of the "micro-physics of power" (1977:139). Without such technologies of power, Malaiyaha Tamils would not be so actively invested in their future and intent upon constructing knowledge that could successfully address their concerns in the face of insecurity.

In the case of disciplinary practices around language and ethnicity in Sri Lanka, the main imposition lies in the state's ability to engage the "combinatory forces" of those postcolonial subjects who fall outside its "principles of partitioning" and inclusion. The 1956 Sinhala Only Act shifted the ways in which Tamil bodies moved and interacted within the Sri Lankan state. On a practical and administrative level, the ways in which individuals entered and engaged in modes of public discourse transformed such that a Tamil-speaking individual was made conscious of their linguistic lineage and what rights it could afford or curtail given the state's fancy.

The legal removal of Tamil as an official language also forced Sri Lankan postcolonial subjects to rethink the ways in which they would speak to one another. As Edmund Leach puts it, "For a man to speak one language rather than another is a ritual act, it is a statement about one's personal status" (1954:59). Regardless of the language legislation following 1956, it was clear that the state was keen on both monitoring language use within its territory and making the performance of the Sinhala language an

emblematic role, which postcolonial subjects would regard in relation to their own status markers.

The combinatory force of governmentality and security increases the magnitudes of discursive practices of discipline. Thus far, I have limited my discussions to state forms of disciplinary control, but it is important to note that practices of governmentality and security take place outside state-activated networks, and in relation to the “conducting of politics *between* states” (Foucault 1977:168). In Sri Lanka, the polarization of the conflict between the Government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) left a narrowing space for dissent that is intricately connected to conceptualizations of state governmentality and national security.

Here, it is helpful to think of Nira Wikramasinghe’s three interrelated concepts of security (2001:19-37). *National security* is rooted in territoriality, political order, and the reducing the possibility of external threats. It concerns the protecting of borders that enclose a body of people for the purposes of economic wellbeing. In Aristotelian terms, national security remains in tact for the sake of the “good life” (*eudaimonia*) through and for the necessities of bare life (*zoe*). Given these orientations, the livelihoods, skills, exchanges, and social relations of postcolonial subjects fall into disciplinary control of the state in order to maintain a certain level of economic production. Whatever of these lived realities that are deemed illegitimate or deleterious to the preservation of the state must be transformed in order to promote its wellbeing.

Internal security is rooted in reducing the possibility of internal threats to the maintenance of political order and unity. Still concerned with protecting territory, internal

security seeks to identify and manage the authoritative voices that might disrupt the sovereignty of the state *within* its borders. Thus, any form of dissent, secession, or disassociation from the state is subject to techniques of silencing, policing, and militarization in everyday life.

Lastly, human security is rooted in the individual body and its fundamental rights, such as the freedom to live without harm or threat. It too is concerned with territory but with the “idiocentric or person-centered” (Daniel 1984:65) enclosures—the smallest unit of community and the bare life of the state being that of the household (*oikos*). Thus, in order to preserve the political economy and order of the state, the intactness of the home and its individual bodies fall under the vigilance of state forces.

Given these three concepts of security and the Sri Lankan state’s disciplinary control over class-based and linguistic performativities, one can envision the possibilities that emerge from the precarious and calculated moments in which these combinatory forces are at work. In Sri Lanka, the possibility of violence triggers a series of disciplinary techniques by which postcolonial subjects order their bodily gestures and reactions. Furthermore, in an effort to maintain the polarization of conflict and suppress any forms of dissent, groups in power employ these concepts of security within their tactics in order to efficiently manage the distribution of bodies in their control. One sees these techniques at work in Pradeep Jeganathan’s discussion of the “tactics of anticipation,” (1998:98) which are deployed by Tamils who encounter perceived threats on *all* three levels of security—national, internal, and human—in postcolonial Sri Lanka. These tactics are oriented towards a past arsenal of knowledge, in which the individual

might have encountered or been privy to the possibility or actuality of violence. These tactics also take form in the performance of one's ability to mask or transform difference—one's "Tamilness as Sinhalesness" (1998:99)—through changed gestures, external appearance markers, and utterances. It is the dialectic between *technē* ("technique") and *mētis* ("cunning") that must be deconstructed in order to see the ways in which the discursive practices of discipline automate and animate the postcolonial subject's ability to perform and tame difference.

Mētis ("cunning, trickery"), first used by Homer to characterize the maneuverings of Odysseus, has been discussed in various texts, most notably in Detienne and Verlant's Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society. In Seeing Like the State (1998), James Scott, employing theories of practical knowledge put forth by Bourdieu (1977) and de Certeau (1984), uses *mētis* as "a means of comparing the forms of knowledge embedded in local experience with the more general, abstract knowledge deployed by the state and its technical agencies" (311). However, James Scott, in a move reminiscent of Geertz's "dialectical tacking" (1983), fails to deconstruct the proposed binary, as put forth in a critique by Michael Herzfeld (2005: 374-5). *Mētis* does not involve a comparison of knowledge; rather, it requires what I would like to think of it as inhabiting a genre of *expertise*—an ability to know and do for the best possible outcome under conditions of insecurity.¹¹⁵ It is also an indication of the acquired technique to master the enactment of "emblematic roles"—"a role which is minimally ambiguous and maximally

¹¹⁵ Here, Foucault's use of the term "cunning" to mean "of the attentive malevolence that turns everything into account" could also be helpful. But to this point I will return later in my discussion of deception and the fear of misperception. But this observation could change due to translation of the original French (1977:139).

public” (Kockelman 2005:274-284). Such an undertaking would ensure, to the best of one’s knowledge, the least potential for further accrual of insecurity upon reviewing one’s status. I am compelled to include an account of a failed tactic of a Malaiyaha Tamil caught in the ultimate test of knowledge, as related by B.A. Ajantha in Sri Lanka: July 1983 Violence Against “Indian Tamils (1984). A man named Ravindran was outside after curfew hours in the Hill Country during the July 1983 violence, when a policeman caught sight of him. He “stuck a rifle on his chest and demanded, ‘What’s your name?’ Trembling, he replied: ‘I am Ravi.’ ‘What Ravi?’ demanded the policeman further (Ravi is a name common to Sinhalese communities as well). When the reply came ‘Ravindran,’ a shot felled him.” (1984:19). When thinking of what enabled the failure of this tactic, one could think of Charles S. Peirce’s *Secondness*; the rupturing of habit, the “bump on the head from behind,” and the announcing of possibilities before *Thirdness* instantaneously settles in.¹¹⁶ For Ravindran, the rifle had interfered with his ability to hide his emblems of Tamilness and maneuver out of the situation. His name, once uttered, was marked by linguistic difference and thus for death. Here, his *Tamilness* was at once front and center and under fire, and, it can be argued, that the unwelcomed perception of violence denied him the possibility to tame his difference—his *Tamilness*—for the sake of life over death.

¹¹⁶ In his lecture, *What is a Sign?*, Charles S. Peirce breaks down the triadic sign, where Secondness, or indices, point to how we should interpret or take in a symbol, or Thirdness. Because they point or direct our attention, they break our habits and push their way into our experiences to enable us to get to more meaningful ways of perceiving those things around us. For Ravi, the Thirdness ends tragically and the meaning of his Tamil name, and consequences of its interpretation/perception become known once he is shot (Peirce [1894] 1998: 5-6).

During field research, the constant state of instability that inflicted all three levels of security in Sri Lanka produced a host of “emblematic roles”¹¹⁷ and maskings taken on by Tamil-speaking plantation residents in daily life. The stakes that I observed were never as high as they were in the case of Ravindran in the July 1983 anti-Tamil riots, but sustained emergency rule and ethnic discrimination against Tamil-speaking minorities had created the very real possibility that the stakes could be raised to such a level without warning or welcome. The most determinative roles that I observed among Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations were performed during rituals of *mētis* and expertise that involved exchanges of knowledge about the body and its future. As the core of household production and sustenance, the body is the site through which the three modes of security filter and take residence. When the body is not running at full capacity, the ability to engage in pragmatic strategies of *mētis* and expertise can be compromised, which can lead to potentially infelicitous outcomes. After observing a number of instances where Malaiyaha Tamils took on such performances for the sake of acquiring more secure conditions, I began to consider the broadness of ritual as a category of meaningful behaviors directed towards the health of the household.

FAMILIARIZING ONESELF WITH AN INVENTORY OF ILLNESS

Throughout field research, I encountered illness, ailment, and disease, at least once a day. On a statistical level, the frequency made sense given my knowledge of health literacy levels, lack of proper sanitation, and health deficiency statistics. I quickly began to take

¹¹⁷ Regarding emblematic roles see the [Sage Handbook for Sociolinguistics](#) or Kockelman 2007: 172-3.

inventory of the Tamil words and gestures that would index the mental energies spent on one's health and communicating bodily conditions at any given point in time:

irumal (cough)
caḷi (phlegm)
taṭumal (a cold)
talai vali (headache)
talaiuttu (dizziness)
mayakkam (fainting spell)
kāiccal (fever)
vīkkam (a swelling)
puṇ (a sore)
kāyam (a wound)
kaṭṭi (hard boil)
cuhamillai (unwell/unfit)
caktiyillai (weak)

Anxiety about health is ubiquitous on the plantations, and I became acutely aware of its penetrative force when I noticed that my own reactions to and questions about illness were transforming as well in conversations that I had with friends and interlocutors. For instance, if a woman would tell me that she was not feeling well, I would first ask her what was wrong. After she would finish describing her symptoms, I would find myself asking, “*Maruntu eṭuttīṅkaḷā?*” (“Are you taking medicine?”). I would skip the more open-ended questions such as, “What are you doing to feel better?” or “How did you get sick?” and my omission was unconscious but driven by the prevalence of medication on the plantations as a quick remedy for higher volumes and frequencies of preventative ailments.

These anonymous substances and the forces of expert knowledge behind them seemed to produce and sustain habits of anxiety about the body's health and social future.

The instinctive question that I had grown accustomed to ask was one of these habits. My question indexed the answer, “*Yes, I am taking this medicine.*” If the answer happened to be “no,” which was rare, I would immediately wonder why someone was not being medicated. Adults on the plantations who fell sick seemed to be placated by medication but only to a certain extent, and this is partly due to the uneven, class-laden transactions of knowledge that takes place between doctors and patients. Doctors would often dole out medicine without substantial explanation. As witnessed in my account of Selvarasi’s cough treatment, medicine was often nameless and came in various shapes, colors, and substances: creams, liquids, and pills—all in scrap paper, handmade newspaper envelopes, and empty apothecary bottles that had been used and reused for different formulas and chemical compounds. Most prescriptions that I saw were written in English but barely legible, making the proper dosages and prescriptions difficult to read. What exactly are we ingesting and how do these transactions relate to the acquiring of knowledge about one’s body in a state of uncertainty?

In direct contrast to these uncertain messages, “minimally ambiguous” information about an ailment can enable knowledge constructions that adhere to the technical registers in which the expert message-bearers operate. Such was the case for Raju, a three-year old boy and son of two estate workers on Kirkwall Estate. I visited his family at their home at least once a week during field research and during this time, he was healthy and lively toddler—always interested in my notebook and even doodling in it from time to time alongside the notes that I took. Six months before we met, Raju began showing signs of sluggishness, which were all the more evident to his family given his

active personality. Whenever he ate, his eyes would become yellow and his face would swell. He was admitted to the nearest hospital on Galloway Estate and then transferred to Nawalapitya Hospital and finally admitted to Kandy Children's Hospital for longer observation. The doctors in Kandy diagnosed Raju with uncomplicated viral Hepatitis A and nephritis. Had he remained untreated, he would have gone into renal failure.

Raju's medical history is, as is the case for many individuals on the plantations, recorded and kept in a children's school stationery pad in his parent's possession. For every doctor's appointment, they must show this pad to the doctor who then reviews prior entries made by previous doctors that he has been seen by across hospitals and even districts. His parents were eager to tell me about his condition, mostly characterized by his "inflamed body." The diagnosing doctor had written in English, and because they could not read English, they asked me to pronounce his ailment and translate the written English into spoken Tamil. Throughout our conversation, Raju did not sit quietly; rather, he excitedly and fluently told me about his prescriptions for not getting sick again, which includes eating only vegetarian meals consisting of red rice and no white flour, meat, fish, or other grains. Jumping up and down, he told me that he cannot play sports or run too fast, and the juxtaposition of restriction and reality got a stern scolding from his mother. Three years old, Raju knew his prescription well, and though he did not know the words nephritis or hepatitis or use them in daily life, he knew what it felt like to have "an inflamed body." Such conditions had motivated him to construct his own knowledge about his body and what he needed to do to stay healthy.

Raju's case is unique in that both his parents and he were made well aware of methodologies to confront and avoid further symptoms of his condition. Though they were not literate in English, they still knew that his kidneys would fail if they did not monitor Raju's food and his bodily habits. In this way, we can see how such transactions of expert knowledge concerning the body are, when minimally ambiguous in their content and directives, most effective in creating shared knowledge about the afflicted individual and their future. However, such conditions of exchange are not always so felicitous for the patient. Hill Country doctors—often of middle to upper class Sinhalese or Muslim backgrounds, can communicate unclearly across cultural differences, and Malaiyaha Tamil patients—especially those from lower socioeconomic levels living on the plantations—do not feel that it is appropriate or timely to ask for clarifications or directions beyond what is offered up in the initial transaction. To explore such conditions, I will now present three ethnographic narratives that are closely linked in their inclusion of multiple forms of expert knowledge and how such knowledge was confirmed, transacted, and employed for the addressing of uncertainty in the lives of the participants involved.

ABIRAMI: METHODOLOGIES FOR PRECARIOUS FUTURES

This is an entry point into the first narrative of Abirami, the last of three daughters born to Vijayaletchumi and Kanageswaran, both of whom are estate workers. Born in December 2007, she is the center of her family's affection and knows it. When her teenage uncle takes leave from his shop work in Colombo and returns home, he

especially showers Abirami with small gifts—including a toy mobile phone that rings, ornate skirts, and hair clips. Making her even more distinct is the extra finger on the inside of her left hand—a supernumerary part that her grandmother, Kamaci, tells me gives her power and makes her special. Her two older sisters were not raised like Abirami because Kamaci’s husband, their grandfather, had disciplined and helped raise them in their early years, but he then died in 2005. Abirami, on the other hand, is different—especially precocious and yet often eluding irritation or scorn from her elders and sisters, even when misbehaving. She is at once *cellam* (“dear”) and *cutti* (“mischievous”) and, like many one to two year olds on the estate, is the life of her family. During fieldwork, Abirami was frequently by my side, grabbing my skirt or salwar pants and motioning for me to sit down in a chair or on the floor next to Kamaci or Vijayaletchumi. She would ask for *vettrilai* (just the leaf) to chew when Kamaci was preparing her own. When I interviewed Vijayaletchumi, Abirami would be listening and staring at me while being breastfed and fondling her own ear in instinctive reflection and maternal attachment.

I first met Abirami’s family in January 2009 shortly before Thai Poñkal festivities, which took place on the fourteenth. The week before, Kamaci told me that Abirami had had a “fit” or convulsion while being breastfed during Vijayaletchumi’s noon work break in the house. In this fit, her body went limp initially and her eyes rolled up into her head. She began to froth at the mouth and shake uncontrollably. During this time, she appeared to have stopped breathing, but came to in about five minutes. Because there was no ambulance available at the time, she was taken by a three-wheeler on the road to Galloway Government Hospital, which is about ten kilometers from their estate.

There, she was kept overnight for observation and then sent home with the diagnosis of a febrile seizure. A month later, on the morning of February 13th, Abirami again had a fit while being breastfed. Rushed to the same hospital, she was kept overnight with intravenous fluids for vitamins and nutrition since she would not take Vijayaletchumi's breast for milk.

I accompanied Kamaci and Kanageswaran to the hospital on the evening of February thirteenth during visiting hours. Abirami was in the third bed in the pediatric unit. There were flies on the bed frame and urine on the floor beside the bed because Abirami had peed in her mother's lap, and no one had come to clean it. Her mother used the nightgown that Kamaci had brought to clean the urine from the floor. Kanageswaran had bought some shop *vadai*, knowing that Abirami likes spicy (*kāram*) food. Her mother takes some in her mouth, chews it and gives it to Abirami who eats it and asks for more. She tells me that the doctor had not come to see Abirami yet and would not see them until the next morning so they had to stay over for a second night. This time, Vijayaletchumi tells me, Abirami had been unconscious for about fifteen minutes. Because there was no ambulance, she had been brought to the hospital by a tealeaf lorry.

During our visit, it was clear that Abirami was uncomfortable and disheveled. The IV fluids had finished entering her body for nearly an hour, and the entry point appeared painful for her because she was constantly fidgeting to remove it and crying. As a result, blood had begun entering the clear tube. Alarmed, Kanageswaran asked one of the nurses if they could remove the IV but the nurse said in Sinhala, without putting down the magazine that she was reading, that she would remove it later. Kamaci, unable to bear her

granddaughter's pain and the sight of the blood in the tube, went to the nurse again after a couple minutes and said, "*irattam*" ("blood") in Tamil, and the nurse sighed, stood up and removed it, snapping in Sinhala, "Maybe you should leave since you are making her fidget," and sits back down to resume reading her magazine. Abirami looked instantly relieved, stopped crying, and resumed eating her *vadai*. Kanageswaran looked at us and told us that we should leave. We did, despite hearing Abirami cry "Ammammō!" after Kamaci left the room.

Kamaci and Kanageswaran were visibly distraught over leaving Vijayaletchumi and Abirami in the hospital unaccompanied for a second night. It is unusual for a married Malaiyaha Tamil woman to spend a night away from home and separated from her husband and children in a public, non-employment, non-kin based space. The behavior of the Sinhala hospital staff person, with whom Kamaci and Kanageswaran had interacted, had also been unsettling. In Nuwara Eliya district, 60.2 percent of residents are Tamil-speaking,¹¹⁸ and yet the language barrier between Tamil-speaking, plantation residents is felt acutely in institutionalized spaces of authority and regulation. Authoritative, Sinhala responses to Tamil inquiries in medical settings demonstrate the unevenness of communication that takes place between medical practitioner and patient: the nurse appears to be an expert on account of a very emblematic role that is "maximally public and minimally ambiguous" (Kockelman 2007: 172-3). She is wearing a uniform of authority and speaks the majority language. Her authority is further communicated by the

¹¹⁸ Department of Census and Statistics for 2012, Figure A2: Population by Ethnic Groups According to Districts. Website: <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/index.php?fileName=pop42&gp=Activities&tpl=3>

fact that she refuses to help Kanageswaran and does not bother to put down the magazine when addressing him.

What disrupts the flow of authority is Kamaci's attempt to restore justice in the situation. I noticed that even though Kamaci knew Sinhala from working as a domestic worker for a Sinhala family earlier in her life, she decided to speak in Tamil when addressing the nurse. In doing so, she was maneuvering out of the authoritative structure as an elder to the nurse and at once calling out the previous transgression of duty to serve the patient that had taken place minutes earlier with her son. At least twenty years senior to the nurse, she embodies her own authority in equally public roles as grandmother, mother, and patient. The Tamil word for blood, *irattam*, is urgent and said urgently. And for only a moment, its utterance reorders the hierarchies of action and power that widen the gap between medical practitioner and patient. While waiting for the bus back to the estate, Kamaci tells me, "Abirami, that child, is my life. Without her, I would rather be dead. She is all that I have. She is my only happiness." Seeing Kamaci interact with her extended family throughout field research, I knew that her statement was emblematic of her role as a caretaker in her household. It also reminded me of the reasons that individuals engage in pragmatic strategies. The methodology is developed for the sake of those in one's care and directly relates to the commitments and responsibilities that one has to another within their network of social relations.

Upon Abirami's February hospital discharge, the doctors told Vijayaletchumi that she had to take her child for neurological testing and a one-night observation at Kandy Children's Hospital within the month. On the evening of March eighteenth, both mother

and father took unpaid leave from the estate and with Abirami, made the journey to Kandy by public bus, stopping outside Nawalapitiya for the night so that they could see Vijayaletchumi's relations on a nearby estate. Kamaci was worried about the journey. Her son did not have an NIC, and it would be an expensive trip. The war was not yet over and because the Sri Dalada Maligawa tooth relics, sacred to Sri Lanka's majority Buddhist population, were being exhibited in Kandy earlier that week in the presence of President Rajapaksa, the security checkpoints would be more frequent and scrutinizing. Because they had little money and no mobile phone in hand, she was worried that something would happen, and that they would not be able to call the estate or get home. Vijayaletchumi and Kanageswaran were expected back home on the nineteenth, and when they did not come home during the day, their family became extremely worried. Around 9pm that night, their relations outside Nawalapitiya phoned the line room next door. Vijayaletchumi, Kanageswaran, and Abirami were in Gampola, about thirty-one kilometers away from Hatton. Their bus' tire had burst, and they had to take a different bus and were running out of money. They managed to phone their relations and were trying to get a bus to their house overnight. On the 20th afternoon, they had not yet returned, and Kamaci was anxiously waiting for their arrival given that it was lightning and raining heavily, and they were supposed to have returned home.

At six thirty that evening, the three of them rushed into the house soaked in rain followed by seven of their relations who had seen them walking up to the lines from the main road and had wanted to hear the story. Kamaci took Abirami to change her dress, which she had been wearing since the day they had left. Once she was changed,

Vijayaletchumi breastfed Abirami and told us that she had been seen by a “specialist.” Kanageswaran handed me Abirami’s record, a damp exercise book, and asked me to read it since it was written in English, and they could not read or understand it. The following notes were written immediately under the Galloway doctor’s handwritten notes:

Baby A being investigated for afebrile seizures and possible epilepsy. A had fits of unconsciousness, approximately one month apart (January, February), both occurring while she was being breastfed. Her eyes rolled up into her head, she began to froth at mouth and was shaking. During fits, no incontinence and no fever.

Below this was an English image inventory of her symptoms. Next to the symptoms that she had had, there was a cross; next to symptoms that she did not have, a circle—a code I was able to decipher because I knew English and had heard accounts of her previous fits. It was then written, “Doctor has advised mother on treatment,” but the specific treatment was not made explicit. Kanageswaran later filled in the details, telling us that Abirami had to be fed good foods—greens, rice, and protein, and reduced breast milk. Upon leaving the specialist, they had to enter a secure area for her electroencephalography (EEG) scan. The guard monitoring the area took Abirami’s records, asked no questions, and demanded they give her Rs. 100 before allowing them to enter. They gave it without asking, knowing that they were being bribed, but not taking the chance given Kanageswaran’s ID situation.

The EEG procedure deeply upset Vijayaletchumi. She hated to see her one year old helplessly strapped down to a board at the wrists and ankles and wearing a headband with flashing red and green bulbs. When shuttled into the enclosed chamber, Abirami sobbed loudly and continued until she was back in her mother’s arms. They were given

the scanned image and were told to bring it to Nawalapitiya Hospital on the 23rd of March, three days from then. The doctor in Nawalapitiya, they were told, would be able to produce a diagnosis at that time.

Upon hearing about the harrowing trip, kith and kin in the room were happy to see that Vijayaletchumi, Kanageswaran, and Abirami were safe at home but incited with anger by the guard's bribe—an act that had confirmed Kamaci's earlier fears about going to an unknown place. The woman living in the next house began a rant, to which everyone listened earnestly:

My son was in Kandy Hospital before and someone tricked him offering help but took Rs 700 from him. It is always like this with these types of people—taking bribes, acting badly. I believe there is a god. I will go to temple and pray. I have no interest in going to them so that they can just take my money. You see? And this was a government hospital? *Enna cēyratu?*

Here, the woman's question, more than ever, urged everyone in the room to listen and take notice of the conditions of uncertainty in place for *their* community. First, the juxtaposition of belief and doubt calls upon the community to seek future, alternatives of fixing belief beyond those forms offered up in technocratic institutions of expertise. Such alternatives could, if tried, offer some strategy to avoid the financial losses and public blows to status as experienced by Kanageswaran and Vijayaletchumi in their encounter with the bribing guard. Second, the question brings awareness to the room about the hypocrisy of corrupt government services in a war-torn, emergency rule Sri Lankan state. If government-run hospitals are sites of bribery and turpitude, the questions asks the community to strongly consider shifting the trust and credit from such places of authority and welfare to alternative places of justice and mutuality.

Her rant subsided, and everyone soon filtered out of the front room. As I was leaving, it was dark and still raining, so Kamaci insisted that she walk me to the bottom of the hill so that she could see that I got home safely on the main road. She told me to put a quick call to the landline in the line room next to hers so that she would know I got home safely. She told me, “I need to worry about you. I know these places. You do not. You do not know how these people can act, what they can do.” The events of the day in Kandy had clearly made Kamaci more inclined to suspect unknown places and persons, those around her, and the places that she knew well. This ongoing life crisis was keeping her expertly sharp, and she was not letting her guard down in the face of insecurity. Responding to the injustice that her son experienced yet again, she was determined to assert her knowledge into the present to successfully care for someone within her reach. The incident had damaged everyone’s trust in those institutional entities where bodies are entrusted to those who claim to know more or best. But with this loss of trust, alternative forms of knowledge and strategies to avoid future transgressions of duties are gained—through first-hand experience, past stories, and the intimacy of wronged kin.

On the 22nd night, I spent the night at Kamaci’s house so that Vijayaletchumi, Kanageswaran, and I could go to Abirami’s Nawalapitiya appointment early the next morning. We took the bus from Kirkwall into Hatton and then transferred to a public bus to Nawalapitiya town. The hospital was crowded, consisting of four floors and an adjoining outside wing with specialized quarters for patients. Following Kanageswaran’s cue, we walked to the Children’s Ward. At the door, a Sinhala female guard said something prohibitory in Sinhala very quickly and pointed to Vijayaletchumi,

Kanageswaran, and Abirami, only allowing them in. Because we were anxious from the trip and finding the place and because our knowledge of Sinhala was basic, we did not want to argue.

I waited outside while they went in, but they emerged just five minutes later saying we had to go to the Pediatric Clinic, which was on a different floor. At the clinic, we found a long line of people waiting to see two doctors. A Tamil lady from an estate near to Kirkwall said that she had heard a rumor that the doctor had already left, and Kanageswaran, worried, went to ask the nurse managing the cue for verification. The nurse in front of the line told him that we had missed the doctor and were supposed to arrive at eight in the morning for the appointment. Dejected, we went back downstairs, and I suggested that since we had come all this way, we should ask the Information Desk once more to be certain before leaving the premises. Kanageswaran asked the Sinhala desk staff member again and showed them the EEG scan. She directed him to the Children's Ward—the first place we had gone to. This time, before the guard could even speak, Kanageswaran told the guard that I was Abirami's aunt and that she had misunderstood the last time. She let me in without question.

Inside the ward, Kanageswaran gave Abirami's name to the front nurse, and she was soon called for review. The doctor, a young Sinhalese man, was congenial and spoke Tamil the entire time, which surprised all of us after the episodes at Galloway and Kandy. He reviewed the book and began asking Vijayaletchumi questions about the first two episodes. How did they happen? How was she doing now? He also asked questions about their family's history and looked closely at the EEG scan, which he remarked, looked

different from what a child's scan should look like. I asked him what that meant and he said that she most likely had epilepsy (*valippu nōy*). He then left the table to show the supervising doctor the scan for approval.

While he was gone, I noticed that both Vijayaletchumi and Kanageswaran looked somewhat relieved. They were finally being seen; something was being done, and most importantly, their family was being treated with dignity and care. The doctor returned and told them that the condition was indeed epilepsy and that she had to be treated with the medicine, Valproate. It was not available in the hospital, and they would need to buy it in an outside pharmacy for Rs. 600-700 each month. Abirami would need to have one monthly check at Nawalapitiya Hospital to check her liver responses to the medication and administered dosage. The doctor then tested Vijayaletchumi on what to do if Abirami were to have another episode, and she immediately held Abirami's legs in one hand and held her upside down. He smiled a little and said, "No, Akka. Is that what you did last time?" She looked nervous but defended herself and said no, but that was what they had told her to do at Galloway Hospital, to which he shook his head in frustration. He told her to keep Abirami's head in a left lateral position and to hold her firmly in that same position until the fit stopped. He also told her to remain calm. As we were leaving, he interestingly mentioned that while the price of the medication was high, Abirami would continue to have fits if left untreated, and she could suffer permanent brain damage. Vijayaletchumi and Kanageswaran listened and nodded. We thanked him for his help and left the hospital.

This first trip to Nawalapitiya hospital presented both questions and resolutions to Abirami's situation and her family's sense of security as experienced through her future wellbeing. The experience in Kandy had prepared Kanageswaran and Vijayaletchumi for this trip, and their maneuvering through Nawalapitiya Hospital demonstrated their ability to use knowledge gained in such institutional spaces to their advantage. This was most striking in Kanageswaran's lie in basic Sinhala to the guard about my non-kin status so that I could enter the Children's Ward. In our first interaction with her, we were not clear about the actual reason for my having to stay outside, but assumed it had to be because I was not related. Using this assumption, Kanageswaran knew we had to adopt a new approach to get me inside the second time around. Having studied, worked, and lived on the plantation his entire life, Kanageswaran knows about as much Sinhala as I do—enough to get by in public, “Sri Lankan” spaces like buses, stores, and at checkpoints. But he managed to recall and utter the Sinhala word for “aunt” (*nāntā*) and put it next to the Tamil and Sinhala word for baby (*papā*)—not even in a full sentence—so that the guard could process our feigned consanguinity and so that I could be allowed into the ward. His tactic worked.

A pleasant surprise in the trip was also the doctor's demeanor when examining Abirami and interacting with her parents about her condition. It was a unique instance where the communication between doctor and patient revealed what Malaiyaha Tamils lack and deserve in institutional, power-laden spaces of expertise and surveillance usually: intention and dignity. Most doctors that see Malaiyaha Tamil plantation residents resign themselves to carrying out care without hope for a better future. This means that a

doctor may know that chewing tobacco may increase the likelihoods of oral cancer, but he or she is somehow convinced by stereotypes and stigmas associated with Malaiyaha Tamil plantation life that the expert entry into the patient's life at that moment will not matter or affect future life choices. The doctor we spoke with at Nawalapitiya was different. He knew the financial sacrifices that Abirami's family had made for her to be seen and diagnosed that day: two persons' worth daily salary (Rs. 290 x 2 = Rs 580), round trip bus fare for two from the estate to Nawalapitiya (Rs. 132), and miscellaneous incidentals like snacks and drinking water (roughly Rs. 100-150). In the moment, telling a family who had spent over Rs. 700 to care for their daughter in a single day that they would have to spend Rs. 600-700 monthly to maintain her health monthly was something that he could not relate without recognizing the moral crisis at hand. By telling both Vijayaletchumi and Kanageswaran that the health of their daughter was under their care in their mother tongue, he acknowledged their sacrifice by meeting it with a dignified and pragmatic call for action that they were able to understand and use for future good. During the rest of field research, Abirami did not experience another epileptic episode¹¹⁹ and their family, with difficulty, found money¹²⁰ for the monthly visits and medication expenses to cover her treatment and care.

¹¹⁹ Though she did not have another episode, Abirami had two significant side effects to the medication. Her gait became unsteady and she developed a yeast infection and sore in her vaginal area. Both experiences were increasingly alarming to her family.

¹²⁰ On top of this, they did not have enough money to make the hospital trip, and Kamaci's son asked her for her *mūkkutti* (nose ring) to pawn in town before getting on the bus. On the morning we left for the bus, he put it in a self-made paper envelope and began looking through another tin of goods in the armoire and in the suitcase for other things to pawn.

LYING IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH

Abirami's medical condition was not the only reason for this family to go to Nawalapitiya Hospital during the time that I conducted research. In April 2009, Kanageswaran began experiencing stomach pains after eating and the pain soon became continuous. A usually physically able and strong twenty-nine year old man, he could not perform the tasks assigned to him in his estate job, which included administering pesticide, moving large rocks, and clearing large fields for fertilization and planting. Not going to work meant that Kanageswaran did not receive his daily salary of 290 rupees, which at the time, was approximately a little below three US dollars. In addition, he was not eligible to receive an advance on his salary because he had not worked the majority of available days offered by the estate management under the collective wage agreement. With only the wages of his wife and younger sister as means of income, his family of seven was finding it hard to survive.

Kanageswaran had not gone to work for nearly three weeks in the month of July and took temporary and unpaid medical leave. On the night of August 3rd, I spent the night at his family's home to celebrate *Ādi Pūcai*, a ceremony commemorating the end of the fourth month, *Ādi*, in the Tamil calendar year. During the night, he was up heaving and vomiting blood and though the pain subsided for a day, it returned suddenly on August 5th, and he was transported to Galloway Hospital. Even after taking anti-nausea medication, he did not stop vomiting and was then transported to Nawalapitiya Hospital. I had been in the outskirts of Kandy visiting an NGO to monitor a water project immediately after *Ādi Pūcai* and learned of his admission upon my arrival in Hatton a

few days later. Kamaci was inconsolable with anxiety. Vijayaletchumi had taken too many days off from estate work and his sister, also working on the estate, could not afford to take off work to visit him. The children missed their father but were in school, and Abirami was agitated and had stopped eating. As an elderly woman, she did not want to travel to Nawalapitiya alone and asked if I would join her for the trip on the 7th.

We left the estate at ten in the morning and arrived at Nawalapitiya at a quarter past twelve shortly after visiting hours were open to the public for admitted patients. We found Kanageswaran eating his midday meal with other male patients in the dining hall adjacent to the Men's Ward. Upon seeing her son, Kamaci began crying again, while giving him the *idiyappam*, *muttai* (egg) and white potato curry she had made for him that morning. Kamaci's younger brother had also come but on an earlier bus and was there as well. We went back to the Men's Ward, where about thirty patient beds filled a large room. Crowded because of visiting hours, the room was stuffy and it was hard to hear conversations over the din. Kamaci unpacked what she has brought for her son—a tiffin, bed sheet, blanket, and clean shirt. We went to see the doctor who did not speak Tamil, but only Sinhala and English. Sensing that Kanageswaran was not able to ask questions given his weak state, Kamaci suggested that I speak English with the doctor to ask him what was wrong with her son. I, too, know that my basic Sinhala would not get us anywhere, followed her lead. As I began to speak, Kanageswaran quickly pulled me aside and warned me not to tell the doctor about the blood in his vomit. Later, when I asked Kamaci why he had interjected with this warning, she told me that he could not tell the doctor about that because he would assume that Kanageswaran had been drinking

illegally manufactured moonshine (*kasippu*) on the estates, and therefore, would call the Police who would then fine him. With no salary, and whatever saved money and daily wages of his wife and sister that had to be spent on bus trips and medicine, a hefty police fine was the last thing his family needed to make ends meet. I told the doctor that I was studying in English and that we did not understand Sinhala. I asked if we could speak in English and if I could translate for Kanageswaran and Kamaci. The doctor agreed and then said English that there was fluid near Kanageswaran's pelvis, which was why he experiencing pain after eating. Everything else appeared normal but he told me that he must see the consultant who would come only tomorrow.

After the appointment, visiting hours ended and a foreboding security guard ushered us outside yelling loudly in Sinhala. Kanageswaran walked out with us and began to cry as we parted ways. Kamaci wiped his tears and told him not to cry. She reached into her sari blouse and pulled out packets of *vipūti* and *kun̄kumam* (“holy ash” and “saffron powder”). Placing both on his forehead, she recited a prayer as he held his right hand above his mouth and nose. As we walked out, Kanageswaran watched us walk away. “Go, *cāmi*,” Kamaci told him, and we left the hospital.

The trip was a critical turning point in what would be a longer inquiry into Kanageswaran's condition and the causes of his affliction. That day, Kanageswaran and Kamaci were not given an experiential, morally driven reason for his ailment; rather, they were given anatomical evidence—pelvic fluid—that could not commensurate the immensity of the financial and emotional anxieties that this ailment was causing their family. He was never told what he had and why he had gotten sick. The doctor gave him

a barely legible prescription for pills, which he then had to buy out of pocket at the pharmacy for Rs. 90 upon his discharge. His warning also demonstrated that he was aware of the stereotypes that existed in medical fields of authority about Malaiyaha Tamil plantation workers, like him. In this way, his warning was emblematic of representations of deception and self-protection that I came across during field research and the accompanying stereotypes to which they were responding.

During research, upper caste and class Sri Lankans often asked about what I was “doing” when I went to the plantations. I would be as open with them as possible within my means and for the security of my interlocutors, and when I shared that I would sleep in family’s homes overnight, I was chastised for and warned about spending too much time “in the lines” and getting too close to those living on the plantations. The comments were more than disappointing to hear, and when I told them that the conditions were just fine, they insisted that I was wrong and told me, like Kamaci said earlier, that I did not know the people and the place, and that there was always trouble there and that it was not good for my body to stay there. To an extent, their degrading comments had the expertly driven statistics and moral backings of Malaiyaha Tamil upper class communities as support. It was as if the estate lines were regarded as places exempt from Sri Lankan, modernized moralities and exclusive of those customary practices that were meant to keep life certain and safe. Such warnings would come up especially during moments of crisis and release such as workers’ strikes, local elections, estate festivals, New Years, and Tīpāvali. For instance, during September 2009 work-to-rule campaign, an acquaintance of a former plantation manager who I was visiting felt the need to tell me

about his experience as someone who regularly hires Tamil domestic workers from the plantations for work in his home. He told me as follows:

During strikes, you do not know, Mythri. We do. They act like animals, cutting each other up. 360 rupees daily wage is enough. They should just accept it. They lie through their teeth and exaggerate. They do not think hard, not beyond their noses. How many lies they tell. This has been *our* experience.

This man said the last part knowing that what he was saying could not speak for my experience as a researcher or for any experience of a Malaiaya Tamil living in the lines. But his claims sadly voice the sentiments that most Sri Lankans share about this minority community. I began to wonder what was missing from the “our experience” to which he was referring: the understanding and precondition that humans make genuine decisions for their lives and for the lives of those who are in their care. Those decisions are not necessarily lies that are homogenously articulated. Rather, they are performances of expertise that are varied in their approaches and intentions. Susan D. Blum discusses the ability to trick as a tool that one can employ for pragmatic purposes:

In cases of trickery, if people are harmed, it is lamented, and yet in other cases, there is a certain admiration for cleverness, patience, perseverance . . . [in trickery] language is a tool like many others. And those who are clever in their manipulation of language are likely to be successful. Anticipation of others’ reactions can be a skill used for virtue or vice, but it is understood to be a primary responsibility in all human interactions (2005: 298).

Here, we can then see how the “lies” told by Malaiyaha Tamils to those who either do not respect them or are likely to not believe them can be seen as parts of a pragmatic course of action and emblematic of Malaiyaha Tamils’ desires to advocate for themselves and those in their care in the face of uncertainty. With such a foundation, we can begin to think of the lie not as a one-dimensional utterance of deception and detached

from larger structures of power and violence but as the manifestation of doubt that the addressee has already formed an opinion about the speaker and that the addressee will not believe the speaker's claims regardless of the truths to be perceived. Given such realities, it can also be seen as the manifestation of knowledge that the reaction of the person being lied to may negatively impact the liar's ability to secure a better future within morally implicated fields of experience.

Using this logic, Kanageswaran's lies to the guard about my status and his warning to me about hiding the blood in his vomit from the doctor illustrate that those who evade "telling the truth" are just not willing to take the chance to bare it given a past of disbelief that has been verified by community experiences of sustained inequality and injustice. Observing Kanageswaran on the estate, speaking to his family, and observing patterns and participants in alcohol-related activities on the estate, I knew that Kanageswaran was not drinking regularly to the point of being considered an alcoholic. And yet, such a risk—taking the chance that the doctor would or would not believe him—was simply not worth the potential damage. Lying, in this instance, was more successful than baring the truth and its vulnerability in this authority-laden relationship.

In the face of uncertainty, to tell the truth makes the potential outcome even more unknown, and evading the truth suggests that Malaiyaha Tamils who do lie in these situations do so because they are employing their own mastery of stories of subordination and discredit in order to transform their presents and futures. On the contrary to what the former manager's friend told me, Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations see quite far past their noses in order to make a place in their worlds with the least amount of

unpleasantness and indignity possible in the long run. From community experience, lying was the best tactic for the time and place, and Kanageswaran sought to redirect the signification of his symptoms to prevent the bearing of further misfortunes for his family.

EXPOSING KNOWLEDGE AND FIXING BELIEF

Kangeswaran was discharged the day after we visited Nawalapitiya Hospital and remained out of work for another two weeks. Upon his return to the estate, I asked him what the doctor had diagnosed him with and he that the doctor would not say because it was a *pollāta nōy* (“bad or vicious illness”), and the doctor did not want to frighten him. He seemed dissatisfied with the response, as was I. *Pollāta nōy* lacked a full disclosure of the conditions of his suffering: why did this happen to him and his family? How could his family achieve balance after such injustices and misfortunes? The doctor’s stating of the facts—that he had an ailment—was simply not enough to assure him of a specific strategy to rectify the present for a better future.

Four days after his return, Kamaci addressed this dissatisfaction and called a *Paraiyar*, local level priest, or *pūcari*, to perform a healing ritual for her son and their family in their home. In colloquial terms, the ritual is called, *cāmi pākkiratu*, which means “consulting god,” and it has been briefly discussed by Oddvar Hollup as a ritual commonly used by Malaiyaha Tamils within Paraiyar castes to elicit the reason why a family member suffers any personal misfortune such as an illness, monetary loss, or an ongoing calamity (1994: 294-5). I hope to show that the process of attending to doubt in this intimate event directly reveals the varied tactics that Malaiyaha Tamils use to fix

their beliefs in response to more unsatisfactory or less assuring forms of knowledge that circulate about their place in an uncertain, postwar Sri Lanka. Contrary to other “expertise” outside the Malaiyaha Tamil plantation community, unofficial forms of knowledge—found in oral tradition and rituals of fixing belief that are cultivated over time and space—have transformative capacities to move Malaiyaha Tamils to pragmatic forms of discourse and action. Given the conditions of discontent and insecurity, Malaiyaha Tamil ritual participants create a space and dialogue for understanding human action, belief, and the inner workings of a community that is highly engaged in global networks of labor, economic production, and movement. The relationships cultivated in the ritual were particular to this time, place, and the participants who had committed to securing a more dignified future.

The ritual took place in the back room of Kamaci’s home at about half past four in the afternoon. Kamaci’s entire family, including her two younger brothers and their families (roughly fifteen people in total) and I sat with our backs to the wall facing the *pūcari*, who had a number of items assembled before him. At the center of the room in which the ritual took place was a *kumpam*, a foil-covered copper pot wrapped in a yellow and black cloth with a husked coconut in its mouth, which was affixed with thread (*nūl*) and adorned with *sanguppu* (*hibiscus* flowers from the bushes outside the home threshold). To the left of the *kumpam* were a broken tender coconut, a bottle of oil, a plate of holy ash (*vipūti*) and an assemblage of various material offerings placed on a banana leaf covered plate: ten limes, two packets of rice, two eggs, a packet of sugar, assorted toffee candies, packets of savory mixture, *vadai*, and a bowl of turmeric water. To its

right were a bunch of bananas, one heap of white rice, a banana leaf smeared with turmeric paste (*manjal*), and two eggs smeared with saffron paste (*kuñkumam*). The *pūcari* kept with him a whip (*sāṭṭai*), small drum (*uṭukku*), shells (*muttukkaḷḷu*), knife (*katti*), and an unlit cigar. He asked Kanageswaran to sit to his left and Kamaci's younger brother, Chandran, to assist him on his right.

Kamaci lit the oil lamp with camphor and walked around the entire house to bless the space and when she returned, the *pūcari* used the flame to light camphor on the *kumpam* and flicked young coconut water on it to begin the first prayer. He then cut a lime in half, dipped the halves in saffron paste, and placed them on either side of the *kumbum*. We were asked to pray, and the *pūcari* sprinkled coconut water on us and then asked Kanageswaran to drink some of it in his hands. He then pressed the dipped lime halves to create a red lime and saffron paste, smeared the mixture on the bottom of the home's threshold, and closed the door slightly. From the copper foil and thread, he made a necklace for Kanageswaran to wear, and singing into the thread, he recited an invocation for the Hindu deity, *Māriamman*. He then dipped the necklace into limejuice and holy ash and placed it on the tray. He then incensed the tip of the cigar, puffed on it until it was fully lit, and then placed the burning tip into his mouth and puffed out the remaining smoke that had entered his mouth and throat. With the knife he then cut two limes in half and had Kanageswaran stand with his toes on the two open halves while he smeared the other two open halves on Kanageswaran's head, then back, hands, and forearms. He then had him squat and burst the lime halves with his feet, and with the whip, he smeared the juice onto Kanageswaran's hair, asking him to repeat some oaths

and aphorisms to the gods (*piramāṇaṅkaḷ*). The priest sang verses to the goddesses, Kaliammaṅ, and other deities coupled by same-count, measured beats on a drum. In the invocation, he asked for the protection of *Mariamman*'s children and praised her healing power and ability to protect her children who walk with her.

JUSTICE REVEALED

The *pūcari* then presented the general conditions that beset Kanageswaran and his family—that five months had gone by without any justice or goodness (*nītiyillai, nalamillai*), and that there was a lawfulness to would justify this misfortune. After nearly nine minutes of verses and drum interludes, the priest's breathing became heavier, and his tone more erratic. After another three minutes, his body began convulsing, and he threw himself against the wall behind him. In between gasps for air, he repeated, *cāmi vārum ammāaa*, the “come goddess.” At this point, Kanageswaran's maternal uncle, Chandran, began conversing with him to draw the story of his nephew's injustice out. The priest then entered a trance state and related, in call and response with Chandran, the story of why Kanageswaran had become ill in dialogic song.

Eighteen days before he started having his piercing stomach pain, Kanageswaran was walking home four steps from the estate factory after cutting wood at work. At exactly twelve o'clock in the afternoon when he was walking at that place, Rodaiah (or Rōtai muny)¹²¹ came in the form of a woman from the lower lines¹²² waiting in the

¹²¹ Estate god for machines and factories (Hollup 1994: 280-2). Plantation residents on Kirkwall also called Rōtiamuny by the name of Miniyaana Cāmi.

bushes as he walked by. The priest called this woman an *eccināy* (“drooling dog”), an idiom that Kamaci later explained, meant a whore or sexually and morally loose woman. Kanageswaran, the priest said, was tempted by the *eccināy* and the lustful feelings spread through his whole body. Even though he did not act upon it, a spirit (*pēy*) in this woman surrounded and got a hold of him, bit him, and struck him in the side of his stomach. In the days and nights between that first encounter and his pain, he would walk past this place and like a mongoose waits for a snake, the tempting spirit waited for his body each day and bit him repeatedly. In the middle of the nights he could not sleep but did not know why and since this time, he has been experiencing this piercing pain in his pelvic region. This is how justice works, he said, while in trance, and hearing it would help restore balance to Kanageswaran’s life and the wellbeing of his family.

Still entranced, the priest then turned to Chandran and began talking about his son, who was working in a shop in Colombo. He warned that for the upcoming Tīpāvali festival that he would return home and be tempted to drink and play the fool with badly behaving gangs of boys in the lines and to avoid them or he too would be bitten by a *pēy*. Chandran agreed to watch over his son and warn him of such calamities. The *pūcari* then had Kanageswaran hold one of the eggs in his hands. He twirled the thread necklace that he had made and kissed it twice before tying it around Kanageswaran’s neck. Later, he would tell me that he had to wear it for seven days to protect him from the spirit that had afflicted him.

¹²²The woman interestingly belongs to a higher caste, *Kudiyānādu* or *Kurinādi* jāti.

The priest then took the knife, dipped it in oil, and then smeared the oil on Kanageswaran's bare back along with sandalwood paste. He then had him put a mixture of tea and oil on his palms and asked him to change his clothes. Kanageswaran was then asked to bless the house with the lit oil lamp and take the tray and egg that he held outside, to where Kamaci had built a makeshift Mariamman altar opposite their threshold. The egg would have to be kept carefully on the altar for three days. He then asked all of us who were watching to be blessed and put holy ash and oil on our foreheads while praying. He gave the mound of sandalwood covered flowers to Kamaci to put on whoever was ill, and she blessed Abirami and her elderly father. To conclude the ritual, the priest sang a blessing for Mariamman, beat his drum, kissed it two times, and told any unmarried persons to stand and turn towards the opposite wall, while he cracked the second egg and mixed it with the oil. He then asked that we be vigilant (*kanbalai*) so as to protect us from all of the malignant influences and spirits (*sarva toṣankaḷum pēyum*). Following the ritual, all but Kanageswaran snacked on the *vadai*, toffee, and mixture, while Kamaci and Vijayaletchumi cleaned the ritual area.

“NORMAL KNOWLEDGE”

Communicated by the priest throughout the *cāmi pakkiratu* was the concept of *nīti*, or justice. Once absent from Kanageswaran's life, justice was and would be restored through the ritual communication with god by fixing the belief of all of the participants in the reason why he fell ill. Contrasting the explanations that the doctor had given Kanageswaran about his ailment, the priest's story of affliction was grounded in material

and meticulous detail. Later, I asked Kamaci for clarification about the *eccinaay*, to which he had referred numerous times throughout the ritual. She brought me to the edge of her line and showed me a home in the line below near the estate temple. Its windows were boarded up and it had an unkempt appearance. In all my time in research, I had never seen anyone coming in and out of the dwelling and had assumed it was abandoned or vacant. She told me that there, lived a woman with a husband who worked in Colombo and three small children. Even though she is of the *Kudiyyanadu* caste, a *periya jāti* (higher caste) than that of Kamaci's family (*Paraiyar*), her mind is not well. Because her husband is gone most of the time, she is not moral and has slept with many men on the estate. This was one of the few instances where one of my interlocutors on Kirkwall had explicitly mentioned a particular caste without my urging, and it shed light on how caste can serve as a way of understanding one's place in a morally situated field of behavior and practice. According to Kamaci, there are more bad people on this estate than good people, and what the priest told her confirmed her belief that she and her family must remain vigilant at all times regardless of where they are—the plantation and beyond.

The ritual was also a process of continual verification and contrasted the technocratic interactions that Kanageswaran had previously engaged in the hospital with his doctors. Though Kanageswaran was one of the most silent participants in the ritual, he was privy to the dialogue between the priest and Chandran that engaged all participants in its call and answer pattern. Throughout the entranced storytelling, the priest repeatedly asked Chandran, *viḷankutā?* Do you understand? And Chandran, responded with either, “Yes, *cāmi*” or “Yes, continue speaking.” The dialogue confirmed for all who were

watching that justice, once lost, was being divinely communicated and received for the purpose of healing and understanding. Though the dialogic story lasted only three minutes, it had provided Kamaci and her family with enough information to understand the imbalance of justice that had afflicted her family over the last five months.

Regarding this ritual and the explanatory power that played out in the context of this family's relationship with affliction, I thought back to Levi-Strauss' idea that rituals of healing present complementary relationships between normal and pathological thinking. For Levi-Strauss, the *normal* attempts to find meaning in and of things that do not readily "reveal themselves," whereas the pathological is outpouring with emotion and literally cannot be contained; therefore, it makes up for an otherwise, in Straussian terms, "deficient reality" (1963:181). It is important to deconstruct such binaries of thought and examine them as presented in daily life. In relation to the ethnographic detail presented earlier, two questions come to mind—when Malaiyaha Tamils on the estates use ritual to attend to doubt in their lives, what exactly comprises these perceived deficiencies of reality? What might these methods of fixing belief tell us about the specific ways in which Malaiyaha Tamils see themselves in relation to their perceived class, social status, and worth in Sri Lanka?

Putting this healing ritual into the larger chronology of Kanageswaran's illness, I found that *cāmi pākkiratu*—this method of attending to doubt and justice—took place alongside and in direct response to institutionalized forms of fixing belief such as the interaction between Kanageswaran and his doctors at Galloway and Nawalapitiya Hospital. Malaiyaha Tamil rituals have been examined on significant grounds of caste,

religion, and cultural work (Jayaraman 1975, Hollup 1994, Bass 2012), but they have yet to be closely followed for their attendance to the vulnerabilities of self created by social and economic insecurity in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, these studies have not fully explored the pragmatic force of ritual, and how, as contended by David Scott, ritual can be seen as a “strategy” that both avoids representative dichotomies of agency and structure and foregrounds the utility and “rationalities” of the moral and political fields in which its participants are situated (1994: 209). How do Malaiyaha Tamils employ rituals that address the emplacement of their bodies in an uncertain world? How do such rituals explicitly engage moral questions about the placing of their community as raised in technological spaces of surveillance and expertise?

TAMING UNCERTAINTY

Situated in prolonged crises and historical forms of subordination, ritual participants employ knowledge within sociopolitical registers of becoming that specifically attend to vulnerabilities of the self. The uneven and disjunctured exchanges of knowledge about Kanageswaran’s illness not only revealed the effects of prolonged marginality on Malaiyaha Tamil aspirations in civil society but also explained why his family needed the *cāmi pākkiratu* ritual to address injustices incurred in the past. Can such exchanged explanations and substances—pelvic fluid, neurological scans, and differently shaped pills—possibly “fathom the problem of illness,” for Malaiyaha Tamils amidst such insecurities (Levi Strauss 1968:181)? How might expert forms of knowledge, bred and nurtured through a shared sense of vulnerability, draw upon both the normal and

pathological in mutually constitutive ways and succeed in better representing their conditions and predicaments? The ritual, while being an overflow of emotional investment, did not complement its “normal thinking” binary as Levi Strauss intended. Rather, the ritual incorporated it in order to challenge the proposed stratifying ideologies and ingrained practices of class and status that seek to preserve the perceived deficiencies of experience for Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations.

In Sri Lanka, the authoritative knowledge transmitted from doctor to patient is often regarded with unequivocal awe and without further inquiry from the recipient. In the case of Malaiyaha Tamils living on the plantations, circulating languages of human development often reduce the possible categories of what they are or can be. During fieldwork, I repeatedly heard NGO experts, elite classes, community leaders, doctors, and political figures caricature the Hill Country Tamil as impoverished, lying, superstitious, alcoholic, and uneducated. But in engaging in intimate conversation with Tamils on the estates about their life choices and observing how this community cultivates expert strategies of decision-making for a better future, I found such outside perceptions to be far removed and deranged from the grounded realities of fixing belief and struggles with conditions of uncertainty that Malaiyaha Tamils face on a daily basis. The individual stories and the process of storytelling had in fact exposed the deficiencies and complicated the redacted categories in which Malaiyaha Tamils were simultaneously being emplaced.

The processes of signifying doubt and belief revealed in these three ethnographic vignettes show that Malaiyaha Tamils, in their attempt to tame uncertainty, transform

themselves with the acquiring of alternative forms of knowledge that make *uncertain* the dominant and subordinating perceptions of their worth and place in Sri Lanka. In doing so, they testify to such emblematic transformations and provide insight into the capacity that such practices hold as pragmatic gestures to comprehend realities of marginalization and insecurity.

CONCLUSION THE EPIC SIDE OF TRUTH

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it . . . The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks

-Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller—Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*

In this dissertation, I have argued that Malaiyaha Tamils address social and political uncertainty in an attempt to retell their representative canon in Sri Lanka. I began by rethinking key colonial and postcolonial moments of political alienation that brought on the marginalization of minorities and most particularly, sentiments of political orphanage for Malaiyaha Tamils. I then moved beyond the more “enumerative” conceptions of community to present a working understanding of the pragmatic exercises and bonds of care and risk that constitute Malaiyaha Tamil community on the plantation. The chapters on women and migrant labor seek to revise the representation of Malaiyaha Tamil subjectivities of gender and belonging and in doing so, strive to release anthropological scholarship from less radical and less paternalistic conceptions of plantation group life and womanhood. Keeping the understanding of community and vulnerability in the foreground, the chapter on plantation development traces various stages of development curatorship of action, human rights, and solidarity and in doing so explores the undertakings of development workers who create pragmatically-driven and

transformative categories of risk for their development subjects to inhabit. The dissertation's concluding chapter suggests that the assignment of cultural stigma produces practices in ritual and belief that go beyond its destructive intentions. Rather, it presents spaces and modes of creativity that serve as transformative points in identifying the dignity-enabling directions in which Malaiyaha Tamils want to take their lives.

Revisions to Malaiyaha Tamil representation became all the more urgent on August 15, 2009, when nationwide news reports came out that the bodies of two Malaiyaha Tamil young women, Maduraveeran Jeevarani and Lethchuman Sumathi, were found dead face down in a canal on Bauddaloka Mawatha Road in Colombo. Next to the bank of the shallow canal were two sets of rubber thongs facing the water's edge. Both girls had been employed as domestics in two adjacent Muslim households located near the junction since April 23, 2009. Though their deaths were first ruled as a double suicide, investigations into their deaths were reopened for examination at the request of the girls' parents when they suspected foul play.

The story would have been less noteworthy except for the fact that their bodies were found within a High Security Zone in Cinnamon Gardens or Colombo 7, an affluent and elite neighborhood suburb of Colombo's city center. Once known for its sprawling cinnamon plantations during British colonial rule, the suburb is now home to prime real estate, fancy clubs, and maximum-security government offices. How did the bodies of these two girls end up in a canal in a High Security Zone? Why had they purportedly taken their lives? More importantly, how could they have drowned in less than three feet of sewage and trashed filled water alongside a prominent and traffic-heavy road?

News of the deaths quickly traveled through the Malaiyaha Tamil community by word of mouth, newspapers, and the television evening news. Rumors were flying about what had happened, and newspaper reports of the story were biased and at the very least, inaccurate. The first media reports stated that the girls were eighteen and seventeen and that they had definitely committed suicide; one website, *War Without Witness in Sri Lanka*, showed images of the backsides of both girls' bodies floating in the sewage and trash-filled canal water where they were found. News reports in the days to follow reported their ages were in fact sixteen and fifteen. Eventually, their bereaved parents, who were living on the same estate in Maskeliya¹²³ were able to produce their certificates of birth to confirm that their daughters were in fact, younger. Sumathi was thirteen years old, and Jeevarani was fourteen. Their statement confirmed what Malaiyaha Tamil politicians, development workers, and community leaders had feared most—they were children, and they had been illegally employed as domestics to financially support their families back on the plantation.

On August 28, 2009, one of the largest English print newspapers in Sri Lanka, *The Daily Mirror*, published a two-page spread on the story in which the details of the case were further expanded upon. In the news item, the Cinnamon Gardens Officer in Charge (OIC), Kapila Premadasa, confirmed that there was no evidence supporting the possibility of foul play. The OIC justified his statement with the further evidence

¹²³ Maskeliya is located about seven kilometers from Hatton town and is the next biggest hill station town and sits upon three adjacent tea estates. It is more infamously known as the site of Sri Lanka's worst airplane crash in history—that of the 1974 Martinair Flight 138 from Surabaya, Indonesia to Colombo, Sri Lanka. The crash killed all 182 civilians who were Indonesian hajj pilgrims making their way to Mecca via Colombo.

suggesting that Sumathi and Jeevarani had in fact committed suicide and was quoted on the record in the following statement: “. . . There is evidence that points to suicide. There was a letter[,] which had indicated homosexual behaviour. The victims slept on the same mat[,] and there was evidence of sexual activity between the two.”¹²⁴

According to Colombo-based human rights group working closely on the case, the doctor summoned first to conduct the autopsy had concluded that both girls had died from drowning, calling their deaths a double suicide. However, during the embalming process, it was found that certain organs including the liver, heart, and parts of the GI tract had been removed, and that the bodies had been stuffed with newspaper. Furthermore, there had been signs of external trauma, which their girls’ parents observed upon viewing their daughters’ bodies in Maradana following the autopsies. Furthermore, their parents confirmed speaking to their daughters on the phone only days before and they gave no indication of trouble and told them that they were planning on coming home for the upcoming Deepavali celebrations in October.

Details then emerged that Sumathi’s elder sister had gone to one of houses in question as a domestic worker earlier that year and had been sexually abused. Due to the abuse, she had returned to Maskeliya but had not told anyone about it and still refused to press charges against her employers out of fear. The Colombo-based investigators for the case were placed on probation, and it was determined that the broker, a Tamil man from the same estate of her parents, had also known of the alleged abuse but still sought to send domestics there as a sub-agent for Rana Employment Agency in Masekliya town. It

¹²⁴ Daily Mirror article, August 28, 2009

was through him that Sumathi and Jeevarani's birthdates were doctored and through him, that they found employment as child laborers in the adjoining houses.

News reports of the case and its followings after the re-opening of the investigation were few and far between. On August 30, 2009 the bodies of Sumathi and Jeevarani were exhumed from the burial locations in Maskeliya at the request of their parents, and on September 3rd Hatton police arrested the sub-agent broker, Veeriah Manivannan, who had brought them to their places of employment. The last English news report to be found was released in the week of September 18th, reporting that the mother of Sumathi was to testify about her older daughter's abuse in a trial set to begin on October 29th.¹²⁵

Apart from Tamil rights activists and politicians in the Hill Country, no one in Sri Lanka held the newspaper or statement-giving officer accountable for making public and "on the record" statements about the supposed sexual activity and preferences of two minors. As a Tamil human rights activist in the Hill Country told me, "The media forgets that they are telling stories about children, false, uncorroborated ones, no less." The media's grotesque handling of the story was appalling not because it provided too much information, but because its assumptions were too easily received for their representative claims about Malaiyaha Tamils on the plantations. As Walter Benjamin lamented, this "information" is the *alternative*, because the "epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out":

[It is] the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing . . . The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in

¹²⁵ I have been in touch with the Head Counsel representing the parents of Sumathi and Jeevarani, and have asked him for updates about the case. But as should be, the details of the case have been closed to the media given the issues of both minor involvement and sexual violence.

itself.' If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs (1968: 87, 89).

For Malaiyaha Tamils, the present state of affairs at that time was clear. Tamil politicians and union leaders, in the throes of debating the pending Wage Agreement negotiations, were on the brink of collective action, and news of Sumathi and Jeevarani's deaths only bolstered their passion and efforts. Protests were staged at Maskeliya Junction with union leaders urging to keep the story of their deaths in the newspaper pages; in the Hatton International Children's Day October 2010 program, children staged a drama about evil brokers coming into the lines and luring children away to work in Colombo. In the final act, the children wore black bands on their wrists to protest the unlawful hiring and tragic deaths of their peers. As one Hatton-based activist said in a meeting that I attended in early September 2009, "Our children are like a reserve stock (*iruppu*) because of this economic problem. More honorable wages and work are needed." The stakes were high, and the public deaths of these two children were conjuring political moments where Malaiyaha Tamil politicians and leaders were again forced to reckon with the daunting task of reconfiguring the possibilities of an entire cultural community.



Figure 15. The final act of an NGO-sponsored International Children's Day program held on October 10, 2009 featured children protesting the deaths of Sumathi and Jeevarani. Photograph taken by author.

Where I found wisdom was in the cracks of doubt that such an enormous task had presented for the community and how this uncertainty revealed itself in the reflections of Malaiyaha Tamil leaders who struggled to comprehend how a senseless strategy had in fact come to make sense in the uncertain realities of Malaiyaha Tamils. In late September 2009, I met with former Member of Parliament and current President of the Democratic People's Front (DPF) political party and Democratic Workers' Congress (DWC) trade union, Mano Ganesan, in his Colombo home. A firm supporter of human rights in Sri Lanka and a strong voice of support for the plantation workers, he was also the first runner up to be awarded the 2007 United States Freedom Defenders Award by former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice for his human rights vigilance on abductions, disappearances, and extrajudicial killings in Sri Lanka. We spoke about the current economic and social status of Tamil plantation workers, and our conversation about the

wage inevitably turned to Sumathi and Jeevarani and the issue of child labor from the plantations:

Those who talk about the child soldiers do not worry about the child workers . . . I met the parents of the girls there [*in Maskeliya*], and emotionally, I scolded the mother and father of those children. I said, ‘Why on earth are you sending those children—those young girls [and] boys—to get killed?’ And they just came out and said, ‘What are the alternatives here?’ And I had no answer. As a Sri Lankan Parliamentarian, as a trade union leader, as a politician in this country, I got ashamed . . . I do not know how many other Parliamentarians or trade unionists would have felt ashamed, or felt uncomfortable, but personally, I hung my head because I had no answer. I had no direct responsibility. I am not a person who in any way is directly responsible for their poverty and living conditions, but as a politician and a Parliamentarian, I felt ashamed.

Set in the final months and immediate aftermath of three decades of state and nationalist violence in Sri Lanka, this dissertation began with an exploration into the very source of shame that Mano Ganesan had admitted to and the shame of exclusion that Malaiyaha Tamils have had to encounter since before Sri Lanka became a nation that could even declare an end to minorities as it has over and over again. While it is true that he, as an individual person, did not have direct responsibility for the socioeconomic conditions of poverty and constraint felt by Sumathi and Jeevarani’s parents, he, as a political and representative voice of the Malaiyaha Tamil people, felt ashamed for not having an answer to the question that I continually heard asked throughout my research: *Enna cēyratu? What was I to do?* If there is no concrete answer or methodology to answering this provoking question of Malaiyaha Tamil community and uncertainty, and if they are shamed into leading the lives that they lead on the plantations—where and to whom does responsibility lie for questioning the conditions of life that they experience?

How might a radical understanding of difference and community in Sri Lanka upstage the more conventional forms of nationalism and exclusion that we have become so accustomed to? Let us imagine that the prediction of Tamil trade unionist Rani would become a reality: in fifteen to twenty years, there will be no Malaiyaha Tamil tea pluckers in Sri Lanka. *What then?*

An activist and teacher in Sri Lanka told me in January 2009, “History is neither the rule nor the law but a series of struggles. And it is up to us to be on the right side of the struggle.” If the right side of the struggle is feeling shame in moments of lawlessness and uncertainty, then this seems to be a small step in the right direction. Because, by the very entry of doubt, feeling shame for not knowing acknowledges one needs to know the very life conditions and daily strategies that Malaiyaha Tamils take on to feel secure and make a place for themselves and those under their care in Sri Lanka. For a country whose history and present have been marred by illegitimacy and fear, the role of uncertainty cannot be ignored and is central to understanding the perspectives and experiences of Malaiyaha Tamils in Sri Lanka. For this minority laborer community, the more critical step lies in building generative conditions of solidarity that can unfix previous boundaries of self, gender, community, and nation in order to widen and reach beyond the horizon of collective possibility.

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