

# TEA & SOLIDARITY

TAMIL WOMEN & WORK IN POSTWAR SRI LANKA



MYTHRI JEGATHESAN

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Mythri Jegathesan

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
*Seattle*

## CHAPTER 1

### Productive Alternatives

I SAT IN A CONFERENCE ROOM WITH A GROUP OF SRI LANKAN researchers in Colombo. It was July 2017, nearly nine years after I had begun conducting research on the plantation sector, and the researchers I sat with had several years of research experience studying the estates. We were discussing the most productive ways to approach the plantation as a site of inquiry, and the conversation turned to our methodologies: what had worked, what had presented challenges, and how best to collect data to effect the most social change in the community. Among development researchers the standard approach to studying the plantation sector primarily involved the use of mixed methods including focus groups, household surveys, management-based document collection on wages and household sizes, and interviews. But each method we discussed presented unique challenges. Hill Country Tamil participants in the focus groups were unwilling to speak in front of one another due to caste, gender, and labor differences and relations, and the likelihood of bias and controlled speech was high. Household surveys and individual interviews were difficult to schedule around laborers' long and unpredictable working hours. Most challenging was obtaining access to the estates themselves: managers had to approve questionnaires before being administered, and constant shifts in the estate management and labor force made it difficult to maintain a steady sample over continuous funding and research periods.

One senior researcher, speaking for the group, claimed it seemed as though, despite the large quantity of data coming out of the estate sector over the years, researchers were struggling to learn something *new* about the lives and experiences of Hill Country Tamils on the

plantations. Her comment brought me back to a line in a research study on the estate sector conducted by the Centre for Poverty Analysis, a research organization based in Colombo. The study had been published in 2008, the year I began conducting fieldwork on the tea plantations. I had read it closely beforehand as I was preparing my own questions and methodological approaches; in 2017 I returned to the text as I reflected on my own methods and our discussion. In the study's limitations section, the researchers reflected on Hill Country Tamil participants' reactions to their study: "Respondent fatigue was clearly evident. Estates are a highly researched sector, and the respondents were not particularly interested in participating in the study. Frequently, they did so only out of habit of agreeing to requests by the management."<sup>1</sup> The perceived lack of learning something new about Sri Lanka's tea plantations directly relates to how Hill Country Tamils themselves perceive scholarly and development research, as well as their sense of faith and investment in outside productions of knowledge about their lives. If research was fatiguing Hill Country Tamils, what engagements might be more commensurate with what they want for themselves and their longer-term aspirations? Furthermore, if we were to look at the types of knowledge that might seem relatively marginal, untapped, and beyond the normative categories that enclose and define Hill Country Tamils and plantation life, could we locate alternative and more productive forms of knowledge?

This chapter argues that feminist methodologies and a decolonizing approach to researching Sri Lanka's tea plantations can engender new, more commensurate forms of knowledge about Hill Country Tamils' life and work experiences. The purpose of this book is not to reiterate the historical and empirical narratives that scholars have already made known; rather, I seek to locate geopolitical sources that have not been previously explored and to put these forms of knowledge into conversation with previous ways of knowing. Analyzing these forms of knowledge from a humanistic perspective supports an ethics of challenging and disrupting former structures of oppression and marginality. First, I outline what previous scholars have defined as the structuring features of marginality as well as of life and labor practices on Sri Lanka's tea plantations. Second, I explore what conditions allow the tea plantations to remain sites of authority and inequality and the need for decolonial approaches to study these sites of residence and industry from an anthropological

perspective. Third, I outline my methodological approaches to studying Hill Country Tamil workers' experiences in life and labor and the choices I made to examine features of plantation life that matter and meet the needs of the Hill Country Tamils with whom I worked. These methodologies or approaches are neither perfect nor standard; nor are they the only ways to study plantation life and the labor experiences of plantation workers and residents; rather, they are methodologies contingent on the consent and collaboration of Hill Country Tamils themselves. I advocate that if researchers continually attend to community interests and investments, these approaches can be potentially expansive opportunities to acknowledge sites and sources of knowledge that may not have been previously or regularly engaged in academic research.

Hill Country Tamils on the tea plantations remain one of the most studied communities in Sri Lanka among scholars and practitioners in international development, public health, social sciences, and Sri Lankan history. Anthropologists, such as Valentine Daniel, Daniel Bass, and Sasikumar Balasundaram, use ethnographic research and analysis to demonstrate how Hill Country Tamils' heritage of dispossession affects contemporary labor and life relations, while historians Patrick Peebles, Kumari Jayawardena, Valli Kanapathipillai, and Angela Little employ archival analysis to reveal how power operates within the colonial record.<sup>2</sup> Feminist scholars such as Rachel Kurian, Amali Phillips, and Vidyamali Samarasinghe have marked the tea plantations as sites of gendered labor and patriarchal subordination using social science research methodologies such as household surveys, participant observation, and structured and semi-structured interviews.<sup>3</sup>

The push for a decolonial perspective on labor and life on Sri Lanka's tea plantations has yet to be seriously undertaken as a methodological approach, and we need to seriously consider why more scholars have not embraced "acknowledging the source and geo-political locations of knowledge that have been denied by the dominance of particular forms."<sup>4</sup> The history and place of tea production and consumption in and beyond Sri Lanka make it difficult for those who drink Ceylon tea to embrace calls for decolonization. Sri Lanka's tea plantations are beloved places and national treasures, sites of prestige, nostalgia, and success. Likewise, the commensality and rituals of preparing and drinking tea in homes, workplaces, and at social events define Sri Lankans' daily habits and

social relations, and larger narratives about the country's transition from British colony to postcolonial nation. From being the first drink prepared and consumed in the morning to being the first offering to a visitor, tea connects individuals and allows work to continue. Tea is memorialized, commoditized, and circulated and as a consequence generates value as an object of financial, scientific, and spatial investments across corporate, ethnic, and national communities—not only in the Hill Country and across Sri Lanka but also in auction houses, cafes, export economies, and countries around the world.

What features of our lives and worlds facilitate the nostalgia of tea? What allows it to circulate and generate value within and across our bodies and places of inhabitation, and in our desires for its taste, place, and value? How might an ethical recognition of Hill Country Tamils' history and labor destabilize the plantation as a site of that nostalgia and reorient our desires for tea and its consumptive value? This book argues that structural inequalities based on caste, ethnicity, and gender make this nostalgia and desire for tea possible. These inequalities may be able to be swallowed easily, stripped away from, and distorted in the consumption experience, but foregrounding them leads to a more ethical place for the workers who experience injustice and whose labor is central to the story of Ceylon tea.

### **Caste, Class, and Ethnicity on the Tea Plantations**

A core of this ethical foundation is acknowledging the sustained caste, ethnic, and class discrimination that Hill Country Tamils have faced in Sri Lanka since the arrival of their ancestors. This book is committed to recording and representing the expressions and language Hill Country Tamils use and understanding this community's struggles for dignity and rights as primary consequences of their caste, class, and ethnic discrimination. Caste differentiation and identification infuse Hill Country Tamils' life and labor interactions with their employers, members of their plantation resident communities, and outsiders. It was the basis of labor recruitment under British rule and also featured unevenly during repatriation of Hill Country Tamils to India when more "upper-caste" Hill Country Tamils were able to return while mostly "lower-caste" communities remained on the island.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, foregrounding caste and

ethnic difference is critical to understanding Hill Country Tamils' ongoing experiences of marginality across their labor and social relations in Sri Lanka.

In the course of my research, Hill Country Tamils regularly mentioned ethnic and religious differences in our conversations. The Hill Country is richly diverse with respect to religious, ethnic, and linguistic variety, and the tea plantations themselves are sites of encountering difference through work and industrial relations. From incoming Sinhala or Jaffna or Colombo Tamil superintendents; longtime Muslim and Sinhala neighbors, shop owners, or estate staff; white, Euro-American backpackers; wealthy tourist visitors from Europe, India, the Middle East, and East Asia, to local Sinhala, Jaffna Tamil, Colombo Tamil, and Burgher tourists from other regions in Sri Lanka, Hill Country Tamils are familiar with encountering ethnic difference and also with being culturally evaluated by visitors and outsiders based on their distinctive identification. Anthropologists Oddvar Hollup, Sasikumar Balasundaram, and Daniel Bass note that broader practices of caste differentiation in Sri Lanka inform the markers of Hill Country Tamil ethnicity and ethnic identification. Balasundaram specifically argues that caste discrimination predominantly affects the "PPC castes" (Paraiyar, Pallar, and Chakkiliyar), or the group terms that are known in India as "Dalits," though it is important to acknowledge that the latter term is not presently used to address PPC caste communities in Sri Lanka.<sup>6</sup>

While I heard about ethnic difference often and overtly in my research, my discussions about caste differences were more implied and many times silently understood. But when explicit, the utterances were poignant signifiers of the underlying effects of caste discrimination that Hill Country Tamils on the plantations experienced. My own positionality as a Sri Lankan Tamil American woman initially compelled me to not ask explicit questions about caste unless the individuals with whom I was speaking initiated it. It felt methodologically unethical to use leading questions and probes to insert the question of caste into conversations during which the issue did not arise organically; but if the issue did come up, I would inquire further into the dynamic of caste differentiation if my interlocutors were open to it. Part of my unwillingness lay in the fact that the Sri Lankan Tamil communities to which I am linked by blood and heritage were and remain directly implicated in



ongoing forms of caste discrimination against Hill Country Tamils communities today.

On Kirkwall, where I conducted long-term research, the majority of Tamil-speaking residents with whom I spoke self-identified as being members of Paraiyar and Pallar castes at one time or another in our conversations. Utterances of caste names would almost always come up in discussions of marriage and in the search for suitable marriage partners. Only twice in the first year of research did caste come up in distinctly discriminating senses. The first instance involved rules of caste in commensality: I observed a woman worker who identified as Paraiyar refusing to drink tea in the house of an individual whom she later identified as Pallar. In the second instance, a woman who had earlier self-identified as Paraiyar was telling me about the rumored extramarital relations of a woman neighbor and commented on her Kudiyanavar *jāthi* (caste) as a reason for her behavior. In my fieldwork experience, four households in Kirkwall division were identified to me as having household members who were of the Kudiyanavar caste, which is considered an upper caste among Hill Country Tamils. Members of Kirkwall also mentioned to me that another estate division of the same RPC in which Kirkwall was situated had more upper-caste households in the line rooms. These members told me that due to the caste's upward social and economic mobility, this particular division enjoyed more wealth, resources for education, and infrastructural support across generations. On my visits to this division, I saw the evidence of this support myself. It was visible in the landscape, schools, employment positions of younger generations, and improved line rooms.

Beyond conversation, I regularly observed institutionalized forms of caste discrimination in hierarchical relationships and social practices. These ranged from observing rules of commensality to where Hill Country Tamils would stand and position themselves in Hindu festivals and rituals on the estates, to how they interacted and held themselves in public spaces such as on the bus, at political and union meetings, in NGO offices, hospitals, stores, and schools. The Tamil caste names Paraiyar, Pallan, Chakkiliar, Kallar, Kudiyanavar, and Muthuraj are based in an oppressive social and historical hierarchy of social relations. They are also terms that Hill Country Tamils used in instances of self-identification during my research, so I maintain their usages here as observed and



recorded. In many contexts in and beyond Sri Lanka, these caste terms are not mere labels but tokens of sustained forms of violence, oppression, and domination that are cruel and derogatory. Furthermore, anthropology is also complicit in the production of functionalist ethnographic accounts that present these terms and their caste identifications stripped of their varied and often contradictory embodiments, investments, and motivations. Acknowledging the absence of an active anti-caste movement among Sri Lanka's Hill Country Tamils forces us to consider how and why contemporary anti-caste movements, such as those in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, have not taken root in Sri Lanka.<sup>7</sup> With this lacuna in mind, my primary interest in this book is to explore the consequences of this prolonged discrimination in shaping the everyday lives of Hill Country Tamils and to draw the connection between desires to detach from previous forms of oppression and the actions of solidarity for social transformation observable in the plantation residents' lives.

### **Plantation Women and "Killer Stories"**

The tea industry's nexus of caste, class, and ethnic discrimination is inextricably linked to the feminization and gendered division of labor among Hill Country Tamils on the plantations. Scholars have referred to women from this community in the following terms: "puppets on a string,"<sup>8</sup> products of reinforced social and labor inequalities,<sup>9</sup> agents constrained by structures of violence,<sup>10</sup> "bearers of cultural compliance,"<sup>11</sup> and individuals who shoulder "double" and "triple" burdens on their tea estates, in their communities, and in their homes.<sup>12</sup> Each of these descriptions represent Hill Country Tamil women on the tea plantations as carrying a weight—the weight of being strung up by patriarchal relations, the pressure of structural violence on their bodies, the burden of complying with the demands of their "culture," and the toll of maintaining commitments to their kith and kin. Human rights and media accounts about Hill Country Tamil women's experiences on the tea plantations follow similar representational modes. Statistics on maternal and infant mortality draw from quantitative research-based surveys, and individual stories are extracted as case studies from focus groups. Stories about Tamil women's being carried in the dozens by tea trucks to abandoned

buildings to get sterilized against their will circulate and shock audiences with their exposures of abuse, rights violations, and stripped human agency. Public health officials report that female and male sterilizations—in the form of tubal ligations and vasectomies—are provided with monetary incentives of Rs. 500. Human rights activists and NGO workers then report that women and men favor this method of contraception, and that the economic transaction blurs the lines that distinguish force, informed consent, and choice.

These well-intended stories, too, have clear and objective ends to make a difference in Tamil women's lives and futures on the plantations: by asserting that women's rights have been violated and their reproductive futures cut short, the exposures of such grim realities aim to prevent them from happening again. The stories, however, do not explicitly discuss or present the experiences of those women who, postpartum, live with their incision wounds and blocked fallopian tubes; nor do they follow those women who continue to mother, pluck tea, and sustain their kin through their reproductive histories. Women's *desires*—the motivation or drive that opens, moves, and operates within women's bodies—seem to be more or less in the background of scholarly, rights-based, and feminist concerns, if not completely unacknowledged.<sup>13</sup>

In her essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," Ursula Le Guin writes about the iterative process of human desire and its consequences as follows:

If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because its useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solidier container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then the next day you probably do much the same again—if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.<sup>14</sup>

For Le Guin, a storyteller and novelist until her death, the carrier bag or sack was the best type of enclosure for stories that did not involve

“heroes” or “killer stories” of violence, trauma, and violation that relied on some one person to save the day. Of the “killer story,” she writes, “It is the story that makes the difference. It is the story that hid my humanity from me”; in contrast, she advocates for the “words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.”<sup>15</sup> Even though Le Guin uses the carrier bag as a metaphor for the process of writing novels, there exist strong parallels between the traditional steps that a researcher takes when conducting research in cultural anthropology and Le Guin’s theory of producing fiction. Field researchers are instructed to go to their respective fields, collect data, return home with their findings, and disseminate them for wider circulation and knowledge production. Cultural anthropology was built on a predominantly white, cisgender, male-dominated canon, and it is not a coincidence that “killer stories” dominated the ethnographic genre. These stories depicted the anthropologist as hero, the Native as Other, the powerless as voiceless. The traditional ethnographic form did not think about the extractive features of research, and only in the late 1990s did serious questions around the ethics and praxis of collaboration emerge. This history urges us to consider the following questions: If anthropologist-ethnographers are charged with telling stories, what kind of stories should they be telling and for whom? Is there another story beyond the killer story? Is there an alternative story that intervenes and moves but at the same time protects and restores humanity, rather than hiding it from the individuals whose stories are being told?

Cultural anthropologists in the decolonial turn know now that the production of scholarship within the anthropological canon has actively silenced and continues to silence teacher-scholars of color and intersectional perspectives that push for life stories beyond the heroics of representation and ethnographic production.<sup>16</sup> We also know that despite these structural inequalities and biases in citation practices, those scholars committed to an antiracist and decolonial praxis have brought forth and supported life stories and the use of methodologies that positively affect the ethnographic genre to which our profession adheres. These ethnographies conclude with potentials of transformation, places in transition, and futures unknown. They tell stories of imagined cities and aspirational moving bodies.<sup>17</sup> They present evidence of resilience and expansion amid loss and constriction.<sup>18</sup> They track the emergence of decentering publics around questions of visibility, creativity, and justice,<sup>19</sup>

and they trace the movement of optimism, happiness, and possibility against backdrops of structural violence, racism, and patriarchy.<sup>20</sup> These stories have no single heroes. They describe innovation, which is a deceiving word these days, because in a sense it presumes a singular end, product, or achievement in a capitalist-technological sense. But in actuality, innovation requires multiple players, diverse reach, collaboration, connection, and human labor. These stories reach out not to move away from humanity. They embrace the unevenness of humanity, foreground collaboration, and write with an ethics of continuation rather than closure.

Sri Lanka's tea plantations and Hill Country Tamil women workers have yet to have their life stories told in such a way in cultural anthropology. Reviewing the "carrier bags" of knowledge produced about Hill Country Tamil women thus far, I found myself, like Le Guin, troubled by the absence of "life stories," with the exception Arasu's *Karuppi* and Sivamohan's *Ingiruthu*. "Killer stories" overwhelm the knowledge produced about Hill Country Tamil women's lives and long feature as the evidence of scientific and historical inquiry, development, and human rights discourse. Knowing the endings of these stories and qualitative and historical descriptions of Hill Country Tamil women fixed my a priori understandings of gender and labor practices on the plantations. But learning through ethnographic fieldwork with women on the plantations unfixed that knowledge. The stories they told me did not follow the instrumentalist narrative arcs of human rights and NGOs, where the end of the story (knowing or confirming the violation) justified the means (exposing and even shaming those violated in their defenses). Instead, women stood alongside, rationalized, and even spoke about their reproductive and life choices in sentimental terms. Troubled by these incommensurabilities, I struggled to share my fieldnotes about formerly only violating but now equally generative practices. I hesitated to characterize women's labor, their decisions, their desires—which they had valued and which had sustained their kin and bodies—as simple human rights violations, devoid of life and their bodily investments.

On the other hand, I would be lying if I said that I did not feel Siva's patriarchal stance as I approached him on the hill that day and that I did not hear the heaviness of grief and anxiety in Kāmāci's cries over Sadha's departure. But as a feminist anthropologist, I struggled to reproduce

these experiences as only weight or burden through the ethnographic genre. The representation of weight alone would not do justice to, on one hand, the evident desire for movement that Hill Country Tamil women and their kin embody and inherit from their labor pasts and, on the other hand, their investments in futures in and beyond Sri Lanka. The absence of desire in former accounts of women workers left me wondering what methodologies could locate them and why they were missing from these records. I wondered how those stories would have been fuller and less flattened if women's desires had been the central focus of the story rather than their burdens. Would the shift from recording women's weight to recording women's desires make a difference in the lives of those whose stories were being retold, represented, and circulated?

This ethnography is committed to describing and recording such desires and, in doing so, explores specifically how privilege and positionality operate in the construction of former histories and accounts of Hill Country Tamils and Sri Lanka's tea plantations. Each chapter reminds readers that the struggle for dignity and equity on Sri Lanka's tea plantations and among Hill Country Tamils is ongoing and changing every day. The records and descriptions included in this monograph do not claim to be the only story of this community that has a long history of being misrepresented and stigmatized through negative stereotypes and subsequently marginalized through those narratives. In doing so, I remain committed to presenting what Hill Country Tamil women and men want to share about their lives, where they see themselves in Sri Lanka, and how they map their desires onto imperial, industrial, and national terrains of life and work.

### **The *Poiēsis* of Desire**

On an individual level, humans map their desires to control their social relations, experiences, and futures. Desire guides human conduct and in turn urges the production of what Edward Fischer calls the "shared moral values [that] undergird economic systems."<sup>21</sup> Building on Max Scheler's concept of "becoming," I understand a human being to be a combination of "life-urge" and "spirit": the combining of these two forces is the manifestation of the movement from one place of being to becoming another, and the process never completes itself, but rather continues and

keeps a human being human.<sup>22</sup> The mapping of such desires—with its unpredictabilities and diverse investments—is world making and has deep effects on the future of the Sri Lankan nation and economy in the postwar context. No longer wanting to be seen as “coolies,” Hill Country Tamils are refusing to partake in agro-industrial relations and practices that signify their enclosure, and any analysis of the tea industry’s contemporary economic crisis must take into account their motivations to move and be seen beyond this oppressive category.

This book argues that a process of unbecoming among Hill Country Tamils has been unfolding in Sri Lanka since the “coolie” began circulating as a viable category of labor and personhood. Personal and kin-based investments to not be seen as coolie challenge the coherence of the tea plantation as a socio-ecological form through what I call a *poiēsis* of desire. In “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger describes *poiēsis* as the “bringing forth,” “presencing,” and “revealing” of something as it emerges from an enclosure.<sup>23</sup> To say that it is movement alone is not entirely accurate because the presence of the desire itself shifts how people think, the structures that enclose those desires in the first place, and the surrounding fields they enter. *Poiēsis* is sensed, observed, and above all resistant to reification. Embodying and enacting *poiēsis* takes skill (*technē*), or as Heidegger would write later, “*Technē* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiēsis*; it is something poetic.”<sup>24</sup> Skill and poetry constantly surfaced as themes in my research interactions with Hill Country Tamils and on the plantations. Children and students often wrote poetry or drew art in my fieldnote books, and I often heard men and women sing, whether during wage protests, cultural performances, religious festivals, home rituals, or to children before sleep. Each of these moments of poetry rested on the skills Hill Country Tamils had cultivated over time and had passed down through generations. Likewise, the rhetoric of the industry itself is poetic and passed down. It is strategically designed to maximize profit, and it features incremental adjustments made to sustain the tea plantation’s alluring aesthetic of grandeur and success.

This ethnography is interested in how desire infuses the spatio-temporal dynamics of industry, residence, and work and how it moves in relation to its intended ends—that is, what people actually want and what it takes for them to fulfill their desires. On desire, Lauren Berlant

writes, “[It is] less a drive that is organized by objects and more a drive that moves beyond its objects, always operating with them and in excess to them, with aims to both preserve and destroy them.”<sup>25</sup> Desire, therefore, requires movement toward excess: we move past what we want and in relation to what we have. It is neither linear nor logical. Rather, it enmeshes its own subjects in contradictions, reversals, and, continually collaborative and contemplative moments.

Through *poiēsis* of desire, unbecoming coolie for Hill Country Tamils in Sri Lanka is a process of becoming a collective something not yet known. Unbecoming is polyvalent, in motion, and not yet complete. By operating in the worlding of plantation life and gendered labor relations in Sri Lanka, these desires are disrupting the story of Ceylon tea and are moving toward alternative futures of national and transnational solidarities. On the one hand, Tamil plantation residents and workers make public their refusal to give up their desires for mobility, place, and dignity and defy stereotypical narratives of their subordinated positions in Sri Lanka. On the other hand, this deconstructive work and their desires to detach from former and current narratives of patriarchy and labor present themselves as unbecoming and even unacceptable to Sri Lanka’s tea plantation industry, which remains unprepared to meet their expectations at the expense of sustainability and profit accumulation. Unacceptability, refusal, and incommensurability are core features of Hill Country Tamils’ attempts to secure their dignity.

This book also refuses to accept the neat, linear story of tea production in Sri Lanka. It uses *poiēsis* of desire to demonstrate how Hill Country Tamils value their work and how the struggles they engage in disrupt formerly accepted narratives of tea’s success. Desires do not have clean or clear paths. They are messy, entangled in investments and inheritance, and difficult to track in relation to the objects of their pursuits. Likewise, writing ethnography is equally entangled, collaborative, and unclean. Most troubling about writing an ethnographic monograph is that it must end even though the stories and lives recorded are ongoing. The structure of what the anthropological canon puts forth as the standard and privileged ethnographic monograph demands that the author translate fieldwork experiences to text, take that which was experienced as moments of chaos, contradiction, and deficiency, and convert them into a single present continuum that is structured, rational, and



sufficient. In doing so, ethnographers engage in the inevitable and required process of redaction and reduction; we manipulate time, taking someone's life and representing it in words, enclosing breaths in quotation marks, slicing experiences into vignettes, and splicing bodily experiences with the experiences of others' bodies across pages.

Responding to these demands, anthropologist Dick Powis reminds us that ethnographic research itself is "iterative" and not linear; it is not only "about writing but [also about] description, representation and record."<sup>26</sup> I use this perspective to frame my understanding of writing ethnography as a process that involves listening to individuals and getting their stories "right," but also taking heed that the "right" story may not fully or ever, for that matter, encompass that experience and often, may even be contradicted after an earlier confirmation.<sup>27</sup> This ethnography is interested in how scholars-of-color feminists, anthropologists, and activists can tell stories of work that interrogate and push the disciplinary commands of ethnography in the process. Such an ethnography—one that privileges, as Piya Chatterjee wrote in *A Time for Tea* in 2001, a "language of interruptions"—should no longer be considered experimental. It should be an ethical necessity and productive alternative when working with communities where extraction in work, life, and research is the established norm.

If the term *coolie* was and continues to be a colonial judgment, present form of oppression, and political assertion, an exploration of Hill Country Tamils' desires to move away from its frames may give us a more commensurable version of the story that Hill Country Tamils' themselves wish to tell and hear. Disrupting former narratives and representations of Hill Country Tamils and their labor reorients those willing to listen to narratives about gender and work on the plantations that move beyond binaries of structure, agency, compliance, and consent. My hope is that ethnography, in its urgent aspirations to disclose the contradictions of humanity, acknowledges the imperfections and implications of telling such a story of women's work—a story that is more than consumable, a story that refuses to end.

By reorienting the story of Hill Country Tamil women to foreground how their desires map onto the gender, reproductive, and labor relations of the tea plantations, I seek to make room for alternative forms of knowledge that interrogate how Sri Lanka's tea plantations have been

researched and thought about. Responding to Kamala Visweswaran's call to recognize what kinds of knowledge get left out or do not make it into the anthropological canon in the first place, I follow South Asian feminist departures from the more traditional forms of ethnographic representation by examining the intimacies of intersectional violence and gendered forms of labor investment and inheritance.<sup>28</sup> I foreground the voicing of women's narratives about their desires as embedded in their kinship relations; the openness and visibility of their wounds; the unintentional exposures that accompany rights-based, political, and legal discourse and praxis; and women's refusals to settle the past injustices of their labor heritage.

### **Research Trajectories**

From 2008 to 2009 I carried out twelve months of ethnographic research in Sri Lanka that coincided with the final months and immediate aftermath of Sri Lanka's twenty-six-year-long civil war. Between 2010 and 2012 I maintained contact with those who spoke with me during my initial field research period on the telephone and through social media and email when available, and then conducted six and a half months of research between 2013 and 2018 in the United States and in Sri Lanka on Kirkwall, in Colombo, and on tea plantations outside of Kandy and Hattton town.

In 2008 I spent one month in Colombo, where I collected development and historical documents and spoke to politicians, activists, government ministry officials, and NGO workers who were active in the plantation sector. While there, I was told that I would need to enter the tea estates with an NGO worker, which would be the best way to conduct long-term research. In this first month, I began to observe how NGOs were characterizing Hill Country Tamils and plantation life in both conversation and document-based records. I observed implicit caste- and class-based assumptions and judgments about Hill Country Tamils residing on the plantations; for those reasons, and given my own positionality as a Sri Lankan Tamil American woman whose own heritage and ancestors are implicated in the discrimination of Hill Country Tamils, I decided that I did not want to enter the estates with NGO workers, so I found a way to conduct research without an outsider or community leader escorting me.

I spent my second month of research in 2008 in Kandy, the second-largest city in Sri Lanka, located in Central Province. There I stayed in the quarters of a local plantation NGO that was one of the first of its kind in the estate sector. I participated and observed development and vocational trainings designed for a multi-ethnic rural and plantation Sinhala and Tamil youth and adults, and I met with other Kandy-based NGOs and unions that were working closely with other development actors in Sri Lanka on Hill Country Tamil plantation issues.

Following my stay in Kandy, I spent the next ten months (January–October 2009) conducting ethnographic field research in and around Hatton, a hill station town in Sri Lanka's Central Province and Nuwara Eliya district. Hatton sits at an elevation of 1,271 meters above sea level and is surrounded by tea plantations and various tourist spots. It joins with the smaller town of Dickoya under the Hatton-Dickoya Urban Council and is surrounded by RPC-owned tea plantations and a sizable number of privately owned smallholder plots, small hotels, banquet halls, and tea-drinking centers. In Hatton town I worked with local NGOs and community leaders, observing their development initiatives and participating in and observing workshops, seminars, and trainings for Hill Country Tamil plantation residents. I spent the rest of my time conducting ethnographic research among Hill Country Tamil plantation residents living on Kirkwall, one of four divisions of an estate on an RPC-owned tea plantation. In January 2009 I obtained permission from the then superintendent managing Kirkwall to conduct research on the RPC. Halfway through my initial research period he left his position, so I had to obtain a new letter from the incoming superintendent. Kirkwall estate division is approximately fifteen kilometers outside Hatton and about two hundred yards from where I stayed throughout the duration of my fieldwork. I made the conscious decision to live outside Hatton town so that I could be closer to the estates and maximize the amount of time I could spend there. The private and public buses, while regular every half hour during daytime hours, were not frequent at night, and I would often sleep in the homes of my interlocutors on neighboring plantations in Maskeliya, Norwood, Talawakelle, Kandy, and Hatton town or only come home either shortly before or well after dinner and sundown.

At the time of my initial research, Kirkwall was primarily composed of Hill Country Tamils, with the exception of a few Sinhala family

Table 1.1. Available statistical data for Kirkwall division, 2008–2009

Number of persons, sexes, and households			
Male	231		
Female	249		
Total persons	480		
Total families	82		
Total line rooms	107		
Workforce (registered and casual)			
GENDER	RESIDENT	NONRESIDENT	TOTAL
Male	36	36	72
Female	88	53	141
Total	124	89	213

Source: Data were tabulated and given to author by Kirkwall staff at the end of January 2009.

members who were visiting the residences of their relations from time to time. When I began my fieldwork, the RPC management staff provided me the details from their records about the resident community (table 1.1).

Through community members and NGO workers, I also interacted with plantation residents and Hill Country Tamils in hill station towns and areas outside Hatton. Having witnessed the social and interactional shifts that took place among Hill Country Tamil tea plantation residents in the presence of NGO workers, I chose not to work with any escorting research assistants on Kirkwall.

### Recording Life on a Tea Plantation

Emergency rule in the final months of war presented challenges for conducting field research among Tamil-speaking minorities with little to no legal assurances. The community has a long history of being suspected and questioned by security forces who doubted their loyalty to the

Sri Lankan majoritarian state and feared their support and sympathy for the LTTE. Between October 2008 and June 2009, checkpoints and cordon and searches were frequent, and during and after the war various security forces questioned me regularly as an outsider of Tamil descent. Additionally, while the state did not enforce any curfews in the Hill Country, I was advised not to travel alone after dark given the security situation and my own status as a foreign researcher and unmarried woman, and irrespective of the state of emergency, Hill Country Tamil girls and women do not usually travel alone on the road at night. Therefore, throughout my research in the Hill Country, interlocutors or known people always escorted me if traveling after dark.

Due to the heightened surveillance and state of emergency, I adjusted my research methodologies to further ensure the safety of my interlocutors. I did not conduct household surveys or collect statistical data regarding topics such as caste, marriage patterns, age breakdown, and health factors per household on Kirkwall as initially planned. After my first line of questioning by security forces, friends on Kirkwall and NGO workers in Hatton town told me that I should avoid any formal methodologies of obtaining data that could further compromise the security and safety of my worker and resident friends, and I agreed. Furthermore, the estate management asked me to not interfere with any industrial activities, which meant that I was prohibited from observing or participating in any work-related activities on site such as plucking, factory work, weeding, or accounting. Another limitation was that I also did not physically visit rubber and tea plantations in Sri Lanka's Mid and Low Country areas outside my research sites in Kandy, Gampola, Badulla, and Nuwara Eliya.

Doing this type of anthropological fieldwork under surveillance drew me toward more humanistic, decolonial, and feminist methodologies. I abandoned what I had learned earlier of the plantations and began asking the women, men, and families on Kirkwall what they wanted me to record and study. I asked them what they thought was important for me to know, and if they deemed a feature of their lives unimportant, they told me so. This was how I came to ask follow-up questions not on caste and household data, but about housing conditions, wages and debt, reproductive desires, individual labor histories, and livelihood choices. As a Tamil-speaking, non-male, cisgender woman of Sri Lankan descent, I

engaged in gendered spaces and had conversations that were not ordinarily accessible to white-passing and foreign researchers and NGO workers. Much of my time was spent with workers and their families after hours and in their line room homes, kitchens, washing areas, verandas, and on worker footpaths. I conducted informal and unstructured interviews and almost always spoke with individuals while they were carrying out life activities such as breastfeeding, cooking, and cleaning. To honor the time the women and men spent with me as a researcher and what I recorded in their homes, I decided to focus on the residential and life spaces on the plantations and the features of plantation life that are often overlooked on industrial and quantitative levels. Between 2014 and 2018, I returned to Sri Lanka to conduct follow-up research on Kirkwall and with two of the NGOs I had connected with in my initial research period. These visits were quite different with respect to surveillance and security issues, as the Sri Lankan state eased certain restrictions of the wartime state of emergency regulations. In the Hill Country, the roadside checkpoints were lifted and I experienced no formal types of questioning from security forces. Nevertheless, to remain committed to the relationships and rapport that I had cultivated on Kirkwall and with community members, I continued to avoid the more traditional, survey-based forms of data collection and opted for less conventional methodologies that I will detail below. More important, between 2014 and 2017, I was able to see individuals, relationships, houses, and spaces change over time. My decision to focus on oral and life histories rather than the more quantitative or traditional case studies is a conscious choice to resist reproducing or reinforcing the imperial and industrial calculus of the industry—where wages, check rolls, and surveillance dominate everyday life and labor practices. In doing so, I am interested in foregrounding a practice of what Kim TallBear calls “inquir[ing] in concert with,” so as to disclose what might be learned through relationships with individuals in engaged research over time.<sup>29</sup>

### **Research Methodologies and Data Analysis**

Throughout my research, I primarily used the following methodologies: (1) interviewing; (2) participant observation; (3) body mapping and sketching; (4) photography; (5) one collaborative survey with NGO youth

participants; and (6) archival document collection and analysis.<sup>30</sup> I conducted the majority of the research for this book in Tamil, a language I grew up hearing and speaking but in a different dialect from the dialect spoken by Hill Country Tamils. I had formally studied written and spoken Tamil in educational institutions in the United States and South India prior to 2008, so with the dialect spoken among Hill Country Tamils different from the one I had learned, I used the adjustments I had to make to build deeper connections with my interlocutors. During my research, I sparingly used a digital handheld audio recording device unless I felt comfortable enough to do so and or I was speaking with public figures such as politicians and union leaders. If I did use a recording device, I asked for verbal consent and kept the unit visible at all times. For the transcription of audio recordings into Tamil script, I hired two research assistants, both Hill Country Tamil women from the plantations; however, both women did not escort me to the plantations or in my field research activities for the reasons noted above.

For participant observation and all other methods apart from my time in the archives, I took “jottings” in a small notebook: it was a less-invasive recording technique, not as distracting, and a notebook and pen were easy to carry around, especially during walks and public events and in families’ homes and more intimate spaces.<sup>31</sup> The technique also allowed me to be more fully immersed in my surroundings and conversations. In my jottings, I noted sensory details, emotional expressions, and language, including direct dialogue, reported speech, colloquialisms, phrases, and words that were repeated and the timing of those repetitions. I noted what emotions those words would accompany, bodily gestures and interactions between individuals, and group dynamics. I also jotted general impressions of my surroundings, how I was feeling, and when I was sensitive to new or repetitive power dynamics and gestures. Lastly, I often reflected on the fact that I was a visitor during a period of heavy surveillance in Sri Lanka as well as on the casual and everyday optics and nature of surveillance, what those dynamics brought out in the interactions of the people around me, and how they influenced my own methodological choices and limitations.

From those jottings, I generated typed and handwritten full fieldnotes and re-created dialogue through direct and indirect quotations, reported speech, and paraphrasing. Because I often stayed with people in their



homes, using my laptop was not always possible, so I relied mostly on handwritten notes that I then typed and annotated with integrative and expanded memos. Throughout the recording process and to enhance my own understandings of what I was documenting, I would regularly and often ask my interlocutors for clarification. My analysis process was fairly traditional; I used open and focused coding to identify emergent themes. In 2014 I was able to bring those identified themes back to the people I had engaged during my initial research, and each chapter title and focus came from those collaborative conversations and the interplay of shared open and focused codes and theme selections.

Like jottings, photography was an integral part of my research experience and methodological approach to this study. My use of photography was not expert in any way, but it roughly followed the outlines of cultural anthropologist Ryan Anderson's methodological uses of the camera in fieldwork.<sup>32</sup> I used photographs to trigger my memory and fill in gaps in my jottings and fieldnotes, especially during high-activity moments such as participation in rituals, festivals, walk-alongs with community members on the plantations, and public events, and to also collect larger amounts of data from documents such as land deeds, flyers, handouts, and wage slips in shorter amounts of time. I often took solicited photographs and gave them to families as gifts for the time they took to speak with me, and I photographed residential spaces such as line room houses over time in order to track changes in the architecture and areas surrounding living dwellings. Lastly, I used photographs as a form of elicitation in my conversations and interviews, most specifically in oral histories and group interviews with families or community members. My employment of photographs prompted me to think more closely about the connections between the desired aesthetics of the plantation landscape and the ways Hill Country Tamils themselves wanted to be seen by those around them in Sri Lanka and in their communities. I paid attention to how photographs came to stand in for aspirational ideals of presenting oneself, as in my taking of portraits and bridal photographs, and how the aesthetic orderings of the tea plantations were depicted visually in the archives and marketing of Ceylon tea to visitors and local Sri Lankans alike.

Visual ways of knowing also extend to more embodied and sensory ways of knowing. During fieldwork, I used body mapping, drawing, and

the analysis of art to capture the experiences and aspirations in ways beyond what the spoken word affords. Informed by an attention to what the somatic senses reveal, in what Laura Ellingson calls “embodied knowing,” I also used my own body to understand the sensorium of plantation life—changes in my muscles from prolonged periods of cold and dampness, sinus infections from the changes in the climate and air pressure, the impact of stress from being questioned and monitored by security forces at the end of the war, my balance and proprioception while standing on crowded buses, the feeling of walking barefoot in the mud or on slippery or sharp stone paths, and the experience of infections and swellings in my skin from leech bites.<sup>33</sup> Because illness and health concerns were common themes that surfaced in the lives of many Hill Country Tamils I worked with, attention to embodiment was integral to my understanding of how laboring and caring bodies become carriers and signifiers of workers’ desires and aspirations for physical and emotional security.

As described above, I initially used methodologies that resisted quantitative measurements, but when I returned to Sri Lanka in 2014 I began to think about what I could understand by putting different types of measurements—quantitative, humanistic, archival, embodied, expressive—into conversation with one another, and to consider what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls the “five conditions . . . that help map the conceptual terrain of struggle”: (1) an attention that social change must take place; (2) a “reimagining” of the world based on the deployment of different and not always tapped forms of knowledge; (3) attention to the “intersecting” conditions that allow social change to thrive and take hold; (4) the tracking of the “unstable movements that occur when the status quo is disturbed”; and (5) an understanding of the conditions of power that validate and perpetuate marginality.<sup>34</sup> I became interested in placing forms of knowledge that I took from archival and document-based research and more official records of plantation life and work alongside and against imagined, humanistic, and embodied expressions of struggle and aspiration. I did this intentionally to see how such unexpected intersections could produce new ways of disturbing the continuum of power that perpetuates social inequalities for Hill Country Tamils on the plantations.

The chapters that follow tend to these five conditions, knowing that when taken together, they are not the only narrative of Sri Lanka's tea plantations or Hill Country Tamils. The individuals with whom I spoke had no reason to talk to me and should have been fatigued and uninterested by my persistent presence and questions; but to my surprise they were not. As researchers rightly stated in 2008, Sri Lanka's tea plantations are overstudied places. But somewhere amid the nostalgia for tea and empire—Hill Country Tamils, and women workers specifically, had desires they wanted to share. These desires did not have clean endings—they were often messy, contradictory, and entangled in structures and histories of oppression—but they were productive alternatives that I chose to follow in concert with and alongside their storytellers. When acknowledged for what they are, and where they can potentially and creatively lead an industry, nation, and research experience, these desires have the potential to disrupt and discomfort those who are not ready to hear them play out; but they also attend to those disruptions with alternatives more commensurable with what Hill Country Tamils in Sri Lanka want for their futures in the long run.