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Plantationo(s)cenes: Creative Activism and Sri Lankan Plantation Workers

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Abstract: This paper describes the methods of creative activism used by a women-led plantation trade union in Sri Lanka to improve workers' living and working conditions. We discuss how the feminist idea of "relational humility" is a vital component of how creative activism with plantation workers can work against extractive forms of research and knowledge-making. The paper unfolds in three parts. After setting out our orienting ideas and describing the colonial history of Sri Lankan plantations, we present two examples of unexpected relational humility, first in a workshop and then in a plantation Sunday School. Finally, we suggest the particular value of trade union research in taking up and locating research findings within workers' self-organised struggles for sustainable living and working conditions.

Keywords: creative activism; colonialism; feminism; methods; plantations; trade unions

1. Introduction

On the 8th of June 2024 at Jasmine Hall in Colombo, an international tribunal delivered its findings on working conditions in Sri Lankan tea and rubber plantations (see [Srinivasan 2024](#)).¹ The testimonies of eleven tea and rubber plantation workers and three trade union representatives informed the verdict of the Tribunal's three former judges. "This Tribunal is horrified by the stark realities of the lives of tea and rubber plantation workers. It has shocked the conscience of the Tribunal that such practices could continue unabated in the modern civilized world", the statement began ([Workers Tribunal 2024](#)). It went on to add, "The Tribunal is moved by the heart-rending testimonies of the workers, especially the women workers". If implemented, the Tribunal's recommendations—covering wages, housing, collective agreements, living and working conditions, social security, health and safety—would be transformative. Underneath the formal verdict, there is a quieter revolution in the statement's attention to the accounts of women plantation workers ([Workers Tribunal 2024](#)), who in Sri Lankan society rarely appear in dominant cultural spaces. [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak \(1988\)](#) describes this kind of social and political exclusion as the position of the "subaltern". Caught up in the meeting points of patriarchy, class and colonialism, subalterneity refers to those who are denied access to recognition and voice.

To understand why women plantation workers, speaking in public to a panel of judges, should be remarkable, we need to rewind a little and take you back to the creative activism behind the staging of this historic moment by plantation unions. Our focus is on showing the value and the challenges of methods of creative activism informed by relational humility within the specific colonial history and extractive conditions of Sri Lankan plantations.



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2. Creative Activism and Relational Humility

Turner and Clisby (2020) describe creative activism as combining, “social action with creativity and arts to challenge inequalities, promote positive futures, and enable socio-cultural wellbeing in innovative ways that can be simultaneously engaging and participatory, and decolonising and democratising” (p. 1). In our research, creative methods such as storytelling, performance, crafting and visual elicitation offered participants ways to express themselves that are not wholly reliant on language or individual confidence. Because these methods are receptive to what falls outside of words, such as gesture, atmospheres, rhythm and emotion, they can also elicit knowledge more obliquely—through free association and non-conscious habits for instance. For us, the creativity within the term creative activism comes from more than using different methodological tools, such as drawing instead of writing or role play rather than interviews. We have come to understand creativity as being produced in the lively flows between methods, the material world and the specific sensory ecologies of participants’ everyday lives. In other words, creativity is a relationship. It might come from the material qualities of an object held or made, in the improvisations of a game, or in the collective momentum of a story being spontaneously pieced together and acted out. When situated storytelling breaks up linear time, when dramatic performance exaggerates or unsettles taken-for-granted assumptions, or when visual methods complicate or refuse mimetic interpretation, creativity is generative, surprising. It can show novel ways of seeing, sensing and being in the world that might otherwise remain unspoken or be unacknowledged.

Despite these qualities, creative methods by themselves do not produce creative activism in the terms Turner and Clisby (2020) have described. Why? Because these methods do not necessarily rearrange or contest asymmetries in power, knowledge and expertise. For this more radical potential, we have learnt from feminist discussions of “relational humility” (Dalmiya 2016), which emphasise the importance of shifting epistemic authority away from the researcher and locating knowledge within the histories and circumstances of research with dispossessed communities. As Dalmiya (2016) puts it, “we foreground the epistemic authority of others while and in the act of acknowledging our own epistemic lacks” (p. 119). In practice, we have found relational humility to be unruly, sometimes fractious; unsettling research plans and what researchers think we know. When creative activism and relational humility are also a part of trade union action research, this shift in authority can have bigger implications because research findings have the potential to be more than one-off empirical events and can go on to inform labour campaigns and negotiations, such as collective bargaining.

This approach of using creative activism informed by relational humility has been a part of the methods used for many years by the Ceylon Workers Red Flag trade union—known colloquially as “Red Flag” (RFU). Menaha Kandasamy was the first woman to serve as the President and General Secretary of the Ceylon Plantation Workers’ Union and was a Founding Member of the Red Flag Women’s Movement, where she has long contributed to developing women’s leadership skills through structured mentoring systems, including designing and facilitating programmes based on creative activism approaches. Menaha is currently an advisor to the RFU and with other RFU representatives co-developed and facilitated the workshops we discuss here, which were largely in Tamil. Yasmin Gunaratnam, a Sri Lankan born, British sociologist, contributed to the design of the workshops and the analysis of findings and did not participate in the workshops. Our various collaborations have taken shape over a decade and through a fluid mix of face-to-face and online meetings, telephone calls, voice notes and text exchanges, at times involving other RFU representatives and independent project evaluators.

Taking into account critiques of how positionality is often practiced in research, as little more than a listing of identity/biographical details (Gani and Khan 2024), we have been especially interested in how the physical conditions of plantation work have changed how we understand positionality and relational humility in research. Working amongst vegetation, soil, insects and animals and exposed to extreme weather conditions, plantation workers live in/at the edges of ecological breakdown. As we will go on to show, this intimacy with climate change produces sensual knowledge and a diversity of human-animal-nature relationships that resist more usual conventions of positioning individuals and communities mainly in relation to demographic categories. Experiences of living up close to climate thresholds can cultivate forms of perception and bodily relationships that escape identity categories while unsettling assumptions of agency as primarily a human quality.

Here, we discuss examples of our most recent collaborative work, a one-day workshop and five one-day plantation “Sunday Schools”, highlighting the methods of image elicitation and performance. We have learnt how even while we might work towards being more receptive to marginalised and unrecognised knowledge, how such realities emerge cannot be predicted or staged in advance. And so, we invite you into the unexpected events in our research which offer insights into the “unbecoming”, to use anthropologist Jegathesan’s (2019) term, of Sri Lankan plantation hierarchies as they have taken shape through the structuring relation and figure of the “coolie”. The term coolie in this context does not refer to a person or fixed identity, but to a position of subalternity, created through the plantation’s demand for servile, easily exploitable labour and its simultaneous withholding of recognition of the human needs of workers. It is a relation of economic extraction and epistemic sidelining that renders certain lives functional to capitalism while they remain persistently in the shadows.

On another technical note, when we use the term extractivism, we are placing ourselves within longer lines of anticolonial and anti-capitalist feminist work. We follow Linda Alcoff (2022) in taking extractivism to mean, “common practices of extracting monetized value that are linked to colonial histories and that are embedded still today in vastly unequal global economic and political power” (p. 4). Breaking the flows between exploitative economies and knowledge hierarchies is one vibrant strand in this body of thinking and activism. The methods we discuss are important in this regard because they carry the potential to revalue what has been debased. As Alcoff explains:

The sphere of value is circumscribed to only that which can be monetized and exchanged for profit. Profit is defined by what the extractor gains, without factoring in what others have lost. When profit is assumed to exhaust the sphere of value, prior ideas about value that a community may have are left unattended. (Linda Alcoff 2022, p. 3)

That profitmaking can overshadow everyday losses is perhaps an obvious point when made in the abstract. A striking reality of losses in Sri Lankan plantations is how quickly they can circle and close in on workers, while remaining barely legible as a loss at all. Through Tamil street drama—an approach loosely informed by Sri Lankan street theatre, *terukkutu* in Tamil, *veedi naatya* in Sinhala²—the nature of these losses, so often incremental, can surface (Figure 1). One example is a dramatic response to a prompt asking workshop participants about the problems of the casualisation/informalisation of plantation work, known as the *thunda kane* system, increasingly used on Sri Lanka’s tea plantations, since the sector’s privatisation in the 1990s. Under this system, individuals are hired on a casual, daily basis rather than as permanent employees, with no guarantee of regular work or access to employment benefits such as paid leave, pensions, or healthcare. Workers are

often recruited by a *kangani* (a labour supervisor) or local brokers, who mediate between management and labourers. These intermediaries have considerable discretion over who gets called in for work and how much they are paid, reinforcing patronage relationships.



Figure 1. A street theatre performance in our workshop. Photograph by Ceylon Plantation Workers' Union.

In one of our Sunday School activities, a group of four women acted out a scene of the losses inflicted by the *thunda kane* system. In the performance one woman had been stung by a wasp (*karunge kulavi* in Tamil), leaving her unable to walk. Bites from *Hymenoptera*—bees, wasps and ants—can be hugely debilitating and even fatal, leading to thousands of hospitalisations each year in Sri Lanka (Witharana et al. 2015). The scene was full of drama, peeling away from what we might usually think of as a role play. Menaha felt her heart racing. The faces of other workers winced in pain, some gasped and moved as if in pain themselves. There was a sensual entrainment, but also what felt like a bodily recognition or memory. The performance brought to life the spiralling of a chain of hidden consequences for all of the women, who in the scene had run to the *kangani* to ask for transport to take their friend to the hospital. In the performance, the women's *kangani* told them that because they were working under the *thundu kane* system, the company would not provide a vehicle or pay for transport. The women were left scurrying to find an auto rickshaw driver to make the hospital trip. Someone they would have to pay back in the future. Because in *thunda kane* wages depend on the kilos of tea picked, regardless of injuries at work, there were also financial losses; a single wasp bite surfacing the fragile interdependencies and distributed precarity of plantation lives. In Povinelli's (2011) terms, we can think of the wasp bite as a "quasi-event"—something that seems minor or even ordinary, yet sets off a cascade of deprivations that barely register in dominant economic logics as they structure the mundane financial and bodily vulnerability of plantation workers' lives.

To better understand how such cascades of harm have and continue to be made possible—and can also become normalised and even habitual—we turn to the colonial histories and the economic and social architectures of Sri Lanka's plantation system, with a particular focus on tea.

3. Tea Times

Where sandalwood, cinnamon and breadfruit had once
flourished in equipoise of give and take with teak
rosewood and ebony. . . (Daniel 2008, p. 257)

Etched into Sri Lanka's lush Central Highlands is an enduring legacy of British colonialism: the plantation. Large-scale plantation mono-crop agriculture was a foundation of British colonialism, building on the earlier exploitation of cinnamon by the Portuguese and Dutch and later expanding to include coffee in the 1820s, followed by tea, rubber, and coconut.³ Flourishing rainforest was replaced by enclosed monocultures, destroying local biodiversity and bringing an ecological commons into privatised capitalist markets. ". . .Victoria/dispensed with justice, felling trees without number,/to redeem unassisted nature. Gloria!/", writes the Sri Lankan anthropologist Daniel (2008, p. 257), who grew up on a tea plantation. Valentine's epic poem, "The Coolie" is an "ethnohistory" (Daniel 2008, p. 255) of the impoverished South Indian communities who were uprooted and taken to Sri Lanka to serve a growing demand in the Northern hemisphere for coffee and then tea.

In a collection of Sri Lankan newspaper articles by members of the Scottish Ferguson family, published in 1885 (Ferguson 1885, p. ix), Tamil "free labour" was extolled as the "greatest advantage" for prospective colonial planters. "Close to our shores are the twelve million coolies of Southern India, whose average earnings are between £3 and £4 a year each", John Ferguson would boast in an interview. The category of the coolie, Mythri Jegathesan (2019) reminds us, is welded into colonial labour exploitation, at the interfaces between race, class, gender and movement. What the inclusion of the term "movement" does in Jegathesan's analysis is to hold together the constitutive and fluid power of several forces:

. . .the physical move from homeland to industrial landscape, the capitalist
move from person to payment, the calculated move from labour to commodity,
and the oppressive move from human to subhuman. (Jegathesan 2019, p. 12)

A consequence of the colonial geographies created by plantation economies across the globe, and through their distinct histories, is how their violence has made possible the naturalisation and legalisation of servitude—the lives lost, debilitated, scattered and diminished. The effects of this totalising violence are difficult to map and account for, because these lives have been seen as disposable and lacking in selfhood.

While our focus is on Sri Lanka, contextualising plantation regimes within broader Black feminist research on transatlantic plantation economies, is a practice of epistemic solidarity, Jegathesan (2021, p. 86) has argued, because it refuses "to silo, siphon, and alienate" transglobal struggles for restorative justice. Such comparative framings are important in understanding historical patterns of colonialism over the past 500 years, learning from each other's unrecognised histories, while making sense of how plantation regimes continue to spread. McKittrick (2011, p. 948), for example, has written about how plantation systems were a crucial mechanism of slavery, "free labour under bondage. . .marked black working bodies as those 'with-out'—without legible-Eurocentric history narratives, without land or home, without ownership of self—as this system forcibly secured black peoples to the geographic mechanics of the plantation economy".

Using archival research, social scientist Rachel Kurian (2003) has drawn attention to the coincidence between British colonial rule in Sri Lanka—known then as Ceylon—and the rise of industrial capitalism in Western Europe. As scholars such as Walter Rodney (1972) and Cedric Robinson (1983) have made clear, the growth of Western capitalism was made possible by the wealth generated through the transatlantic slave trade. In Sri

Lankan plantations, Kurian (2003) describes how the British introduced a “West Indian system of production” (Kurian 2003, p. 174). Although plantation labour was not akin to transatlantic slavery⁴, Kurian finds disturbing resonances: the perilous conditions of sea crossings between India and Sri Lanka, the sexual vulnerability of women and the control of workers by a superintendent, “the white manager, who governed the estate like a slave plantation in the Caribbean.” (Kurian 2003, p. 182). A 1984 special issue of the journal *Race and Class* on Sri Lanka, identifies plantations as violently hierarchical, extractive and totalising. Under British governance, Kurian et al. (1984) assert, “Every aspect of the working and domestic life of the plantation worker was subsumed to the need for profit.” (p. 83).

The intimacy between colonialism and capitalism has prompted some scholars to theorise plantations in South Asia as an overlooked axis of “racial capitalism”, underpinned by white supremacy (see also Jegathesan 2021; on citation politics and plantations). Writing of the history of Indonesian plantations and their reliance on huge reserves of “variously enslaved, bonded, or cheap labour”, Lisa Tilley (2020, p. 69), finds “a racially stratified order, with granular evidence on the “planting” of whiteness in the top layer of the labor regime.” (p. 68). As wider research (Stoler 2008) suggests, plantations have allowed for, or have forced workers into self-subsistence, resulting in hybrid ways of living, including various forms of resistance, from marronage and secret farming and gardening, to theft (Tilley 2020).

Today, plantation work remains inescapably physical and poorly paid.⁵ In Sri Lanka, the work is most often performed by impoverished women from the “Malaiyaha” (Hill Country) or “plantation” Tamil communities. Still regarded as outsiders, Hill Country Tamil communities are seen as socially distinct from “indigenous” Tamils who live in the north and east of the island. Most plantation workers do not own the land and houses their families have lived in for generations. Poverty and debt bondage weigh heavily (Jegathesan 2019). Women in the tea plantations earn less than men, often performing the more physically demanding work of tea plucking (Fonseka 2018). However, tea plucking is also now more often carried out by men, with gender differences gathering around its intensity, with women working longer shifts. Women have primary responsibility for housework and childcare.

4. Plantationocenes

If plantation lives are seared through with colonial history, critical thinkers have seen other scales of damage at play. Feminist philosopher Donna Haraway (2015) uses the term plantationocene to name the ongoingness of plantation regimes as enclosures of “multispecies forced labor” in (Mitman 2019). Every life form is put to work. In plantations, relationships to place and across generations are so transformed, Haraway believes, “the capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation” (Haraway 2015).

For Maan Barua (2023), plantations deplete life through a slow, diffuse violence, working through the immobilisation and control of botanic and human lives. “Both plant and worker are disciplined with the aim of generating surplus value.”, Barua explains. “The tea bush is regularly pruned so that it mirrors the worker’s body and so that it maximizes yield.” (Barua 2023, p. 25). A plantation then is more than a distant and remote place, more than an early laboratory for colonial plundering. Plantations are a repeating structure, recurring or mirrored in other types of enclosure, such as camps and prisons (McKittrick 2011), as well as signifying a much contested epochal shift akin to, or for some thinkers, preceding the Anthropocene—an era when human impact on the planet is thought to have brought about a new geological age.

With the contributions of plantationocene thinkers in mind, we want to piece together and offer other “plantationoscenes”. “A scene is a framing device” (Gunaratnam et al. 2024, p. 266), researchers have written, “a dramaturgical apparatus and a ‘problem space’ (Lury 2021), in which conundrums unfold and stories are told and re/enacted”. A scene is valuable methodologically because it gives some form to the relationships between experience, objects, space and time in participants’ lives, whether these are real or imagined. If you are open to a more psychoanalytic framing of this last point, a scene can also be thought of as a space of play, within which external realities can be brought into inner worlds of make-believe to be experimented with and perhaps seen anew.

The scenes we go on to share come from collectively dramatised tales—intimate recalling, performance, rumour, storytelling and demand making—themselves the outcome of how plantation bodies come to be entwined in different kinds of environmental and sensual intimacies. When so much of plantation life—where and what you can eat and drink, how much you might be able to work or rest, whether you are bitten by dogs or wasps, whether the lunch you tied to a tree branch or left underneath a tree trunk for safe-keeping gets soaked in the rain—is not in your control and is determined by the drive for profit, sensory knowledge can become more vital, more attuned. Collective care can be a small but nevertheless beautiful response to neglect. “When a dog or crow eats our food” one workshop participant told us, “other workers share their food with us”. As our participants played games, acted out scenes from their daily lives and recreated through drawing and with clay their experiences of harsh weather conditions and the lurking threat of snake bites (Figure 2), we were shown the filigreed details of how bodies can attune to their environments. How workers learn by the pace and weight of a beating heart and straining legs, the gradient of different hills and how this can affect the time it can take to run back to your home, feed your baby and return to your shift. We gained insights into the medicinal plants (as well as soap, tobacco, Dettol and oil) used to try to repel leeches or to palliate other types of injury and illness; how mathematical knowledge is imbibed in calculating the time and financial costs at stake in daily working lives: should you stop working to remove a leech from your foot during a shift, or carry on? This sort of sensuous knowhow and agility is what sociologists Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 20) thought of as “ontological complicity”. It is how bodies learn (tacitly) to habituate to the weight and demands of their environments.

Habituation can sound relatively benign, perhaps even consensual. But ontological complicity is an idea with many layers. Habituation can give you your bearings; help you to survive. As an adaptation to the extractivism of tea plantation working, it is a sensibility and capacity driven deep into the body, minute by minute, day after day. It is a knowledge and wherewithal that is simultaneously culturally devalued and mined for economic exploitation. As much taken for granted, as it is expected and leveraged for profit.

Keeping all of this in mind, we turn to the beginnings of our participatory research and to events that took us by surprise. Our aim is to show something of how relational humility can be produced in creative activism and how it can undo conventional understandings of research in which findings are resolved and translated into unambiguous “results”.



Figure 2. Clay representation of plantation working. Photograph by Ceylon Plantation Workers' Union.

5. Mustering as Method

The first stages of our research began in the summer of 2023, with 20 women workers from four different tea estates in the Hill Country of South Central Sri Lanka. We recruited women to a one-day workshop through a public announcement at a muster shed in one of the estates. The sheds are usually used for collecting and weighing tea leaves after plucking. In English, the word muster has military roots. It means the act of assembling for a drill or inspection. It can also signify the gathering of emotions and energy, in order to do something. In many ways, the muster shed gathering was where the dialogic qualities of research first came into appearance.

When the RFU field organiser called a meeting of interested women in one of the estates, one week after our initial public announcement about the research, 25 workers showed up. The RFU researcher had to explain that the workshop was limited to twenty. The women discussed amongst themselves who should attend, based on criteria we had previously identified in conversations with the RFU researchers: women should come from a spread of age groups, they should be able to travel to the workshop (in auto rickshaws we would rent) and be able to stay the whole day. In the muster shed, the women added their own criteria: any women who went to the workshop must be willing to share what they had learned with others. The years of plantation working varied among the finally agreed group of participants, ranging from four women who had less than 10 years of experience, to two participants who had over 30 years of experience. The largest group consisted of 8 women who reported between 21 and 30 years of experience.

A mustering point in the workshop was a picture book, “Denial of Rights”, designed and written by Menaha. Each page of the booklet depicted a different plantation scene for women tea pickers, some with speech bubbles in Tamil. The scenarios would conventionally fall within the remit of “Health and Safety”, but when reanimated as points of discussion, the meanings of health and safety expanded. The booklet scenes included talking animals, tree bushes, kettles and trees, as well as exchanges between tea pickers and other plantation workers (a doctor and supervisor). All the scenes were based on accounts and cases previously reported to the RFU. At the workshop, each scene was dramatised in role-plays by the facilitators, with facilitators wearing enlarged images from the booklet on boards around their necks, bringing them to life (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Workshop facilitators wearing images from the booklet. Photograph by Ceylon Plantation Workers' Union.

A dialogue between a rabbit and a tea bush was the opening scene of the booklet. The rabbit tells the bush it will not come close because the bush smells bad. The bush replies that it is smelly because the sisters and mothers of the estate are urinating under it. There are no toilets for the women to use, the bush explains. The use of multispecies characters and dialogue in this way had two purposes. We were able to recognise and animate some of the interdependencies of everyday plantation life, while orienting to what methodologists call “sensitive topics”. That is, topics holding a level of threat for either the participant and/or the researcher. Research that is intrusive, or involves information which might be stigmatising or incriminating, or is related to matters of vested interests, coercion or domination are three main ways in which research can be “sensitive” (Lee 1993). Although it is impossible to know how a topic is, or can become, “sensitive”. Arts-based and performance methods, we have found, can hold a greater capacity to play with and vary psycho-social distance and closeness to topic threat, by enabling participants to talk about, act out or to ventriloquise experiences projected onto imaginary scenes and/or protagonists.

After the different booklet scenes had been performed, women were allocated into four smaller groups to discuss what the performances had sparked for them. Three groups shared the problems they had identified through a role play and the fourth group created a song to share their discussion. Six main themes emerged covering the lack of, or the minimising of, spaces of dignity and privacy in the women’s working lives. The topics included the insecurity of personal belongings and food (sometimes animals would take items); the lack of toilets; having no rest places, or spaces to talk or to sit and eat food.⁶ The remaining theme was about women not having medical leave or health insurance. The tone and tense of group responses to the scenes varied, with some women raising questions, as if seeing their working lives freshly, or from a distance. “How can the management allow us to use the same place as toilet, eating place and also where we stand and pluck tea?” one woman asked. The indignity of plantation work also surfaced indirectly.

An unexpected finding for us was how women’s accounts were interwoven with environmental knowledge. Participants made connections between the clearance of land and how animals were being pushed further into plantation zones. “Usually, the rain

arrives only during the rainy season”; now they observed how heavy and sustained rainfall was more unpredictable, sometimes leading to an increase in insect bites, as well as making it more difficult to find places to eat or store food. We were also told about and shown the huge effort of negotiating the many ways in which plantations betray bodily safety and integrity. Some women drank less water, or would not urinate at all during their shifts, because of the lack of toilets. They described how they sometimes searched for drains or hidden areas to relieve themselves, although these secluded nooks could further expose them to leeches, snakes and wasps. Together with the hazards of working outside, trying to avoid indignities constantly risk a body’s integrity, threatening to open up or invade the boundaries of the skin and potentially transgressing cultural borders and prescriptions between the sacred and profane. Bodily matter and fluids, for instance, can leak into materials and spaces not meant for such overspilling, carrying the risk of shame or unwanted intimacies; working on in soiled clothes, or perhaps tearing some material from your clothes to give to another woman for sanitary protection. “If the *kangani* (supervisor) does not permit us to go home for a change, we rip our saree and offer it to young people to change the pad”. Women told us they often wear two saree underskirts to work, “So, we’ll take one skirt off and give it to someone who needs it. They use that skirt as padding”.

As the anthropologist [Mary Douglas \(1966\)](#) suggested long ago, when matter is out of place we are in the realm of dirt. At the same time, we noticed how spaces that might usually be thought of as dirty can bring workers closer to changes in the natural world. By noticing differences in rainfall, soil or the changing behaviour of animals, plantation workers become both more knowledgeable of, and more affected and concerned by, climate changes and their impact. We came to understand dignity as being lived as a distributed rather than an individualised experience or event. The slow, incremental undoing of dignity, its descent into the ordinary, to paraphrase [Veena Das \(2007\)](#), is challenging to articulate and to research because it can become naturalised or habituated to over time. Collaborative methods of creative activism can catch something of these aspects of everyday living and make them noticeable, creating a dissonance or a breaking with inherited framings. We need to be careful with our claims here though. We are not suggesting the booklet images and storytelling in themselves brought out these capacities of climate literacy or sensitivity and in ways that might be replicable. Rather, we understand the specific and unstable circuits between the images and words in the booklet and their relational and methodological circumstances as an unpredictable, “temporary outcome of a process” ([Motamedi Fraser 2015](#), p. xvi).

We can perhaps best show this singularity and contingency in a story, or more precisely a rumour, told between several women in the workshop. In the account, a young woman tea picker’s womb had become invaded by leeches, because of the common practice of workers having to urinate in outdoor spaces. The young woman’s womb had swelled, so that she looked pregnant. This had led to speculation about her sexual morality, driving her to leave the plantation to become a domestic worker in the Middle East. The workshop facilitators were surprised by the story and were not able to find out more about the woman.

For us, the collectivised narrative gave us a sense of how fears associated with the particular gendered and sexualised vulnerabilities of the working body (although all bodies have openings and leak) can gather and spread, as a generalised, gendered anxiety. Shared stories, for [Veena Das \(2007\)](#), carry an infectious force, regardless of whether they represent an event that has happened. What is methodologically and ethically significant here is the bodily, emotional, material and creative conditions in which stories are told; a process that cannot be pre-determined or contrived.

6. Unschooling

What if school, as we used it on a daily basis, signaled not the name of a process or institution through which we could be indoctrinated, not a structure through which social capital was grasped and policed, but something more organic, like a scale of care. What if school was the scale at which we could care for each other and move together.

(Gumbs 2020, p. 55–56)

Following the provocation of Gumbs (2020), to reimagine school as a scale of care, our Sunday Schools—Sunday is the only day most workers have off—were imagined as secular spaces in which participants could explore, share and revalue their own knowledge. We hoped we could provide a space for them to connect this knowing to bigger social patterns, using social science methods to produce new opportunities for them to work together towards change. We also wanted the Schools to be places of care, taking into account the demands and effects of plantation conditions. For plantation workers, the capacities required for conventional learning—being still, listening and taking in and making sense of information, articulating an opinion—cannot be assumed. Tiredness, boredom, fluctuations of attention, all also related to health, informed how the Schools were planned and paced to be interactive, with lots of opportunities for moving around and participating in a variety of ways. We developed the module from methods used in the one-day workshop, using the same method to recruit participants. The overall organising themes of the five Schools were sequentially:

1. Identifying problems;
2. Analysing the problems collectively in greater depth—Why is this happening? Who is responsible?;
3. How can we resolve these problems?;
4. Other places/institutions we need to learn about; where we have to go to solve problems (we focused on the Labour Department and media);
5. How to plan future strategies to resolve problems.

The five Sunday Schools, with 28 plantation workers were designed as a module, taught between March to July 2024. A total of 28 tea and rubber plantation workers participated: 19 women and 9 men. The age distribution was as follows: 7 individuals were aged 20–30, 7 aged 31–40, 7 aged 41–50, and 7 aged 51–55. The workers' years of experience in plantations ranged between 5 to 42 years. The average length of service was 15 years. Participants were drawn from various geographical areas, including Hatton Maskeliya, the Kandy District in Nuwara Eliya and Awissawella in Colombo District. Additionally, 6 people (2 men and 4 women) joined the Schools from other unions. Eight worker leaders of the Ceylon Workers Red Flag Union also participated.

Rather than discuss the curriculum and activities within the different Schools, our example is a spontaneous “aside” in School 4, showing the trails of another facet of relational humility which interrupted the planned curriculum. These types of unexpected “extracurricular” events have started to crystallise for us the undecided potential and what can be at stake in the relational humility of creative activism methodologies, beyond formal outcomes. This potential includes how creative methods can be receptive to emotions and affect, as conscious and non-conscious feelings, connecting individual bodies and larger histories and environments (see Ahmed 2014).

Our example is a discussion between workers and a representative from the Department of Labour. The participants had been asking the representative direct questions about what could be done about the lack of toilets and clean spaces to rest and eat. The

representative initially responded in a jovial way, asking why these questions were being raised now, when such conditions were far from new. Other workers who were rubber tappers spoke about the long distances they have to walk between trees and how this impacted their productivity and therefore their wages. They asked for their daily targets to be reduced. The representative told these workers to present more evidence of the problem, so the Labour Department could make an informed decision. Some participants grew angry with the dismissive trivialisation of their demands.

They discussed all of this among themselves in Tamil, a language the representative did not speak. They were reluctant to voice their anger more directly. At this point Menaha, breaking away from the schedule, spent time listening and speaking with these workers, encouraging them to tell the representative what they were feeling. With another RFU facilitator acting as translator, the workers eventually put their concerns and feelings to the representative. However, this is not a story with a satisfying endpoint or result. For us, the interaction marked a moment of the “unbecoming” (Jegathesan 2019) of expected deferential relationships between plantation workers and those in authority. It was also a moment full of anxiety, hesitation and the palpable difficulty and obstacles of challenging those with more power and authority.

As part of a more diffuse outcome of a creative activism methodology, the impromptu address by a group of workers to a government official suggests how subaltern knowledge claims can always be suppressed and/or put into question. Although these contestations are often localised within local plantation communities, regions and countries, they are implicated and shaped by global histories and economies, showing how epistemic values circulate. “By viewing the implicit epistemic norms operating in real-world struggles,” Linda Alcoff (2022, p. 8) has written, “we can begin to formulate corrective epistemic norms to address the operations of coloniality still at play”. It is this latter point of Alcoff’s on formulating “corrective epistemic norms” that we have been dwelling on. For us, relational humility requires more than a willingness to learn from participants and democratise research relationships. It also demands attention to the silences and constraints that structure how, and to whom, subaltern knowledge can appear and be taken seriously. Crucially, because our research was embedded in trade union activism, participants’ demands did not remain symbolic or contained as empirical “data”; they could be taken up and amplified within broader campaigns for labour rights and workplace dignity. Absent from these activist infrastructures, the transformative potential of relational humility risks becoming rhetorical with little traction within the structural conditions it seeks to unsettle.

7. Drawing Together, Endings and Beginnings

Methods of creative activism are often presented as alternatives to extractive research. In collaborations with globally and socially marginalised groups, they can promise routes towards democratising research, empowering participants and bringing researchers closer to participants’ realities. Yet these promises, we have suggested, must be approached with criticality and care. How forms of domination come to inhabit and settle into what lies between the recognised outcomes of research and relational humility is a concern that continues to trouble us.

Within the rolling hills and troughs of plantation extractivism, and how plantation lives habituate to all sorts of degradation, we have made a preliminary case for the value of creative activism combined with a place-based relational humility in research. When used within a trade union activist framework, this approach has the capacity to make legible, if only temporarily, subaltern knowledge, while also drawing out play, performance, desire and day-to-day relationships with more-than-human life.

We are aware that accounts of plantation economies and the lives sustained within them can make for heavy reading. We know that plantation lives are routinely diminished and overlooked. And yet, we have come to recognise fuller, more intricate life-worlds—relationships to land, labour, kin and more-than-human lives—that resist the plantation’s extractive logic even as they are shaped by it. In this, we find reason to question Haraway’s (2015) assertion that “the capacity to love and care for place is radically incompatible with the plantation”. What we have witnessed instead is how even within the brutalising conditions of plantation economies, care and creativity persist—not in spite of these systems, but often as modes of endurance and resistance within them.

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Notes

- ¹ The tribunal and the work to support it was funded by Solifonds. The tribunal is itself an example of the staging of a conception of justice that makes space for those traditionally excluded from the formal realm of justice. In this sense, the insistence of including the testimonies of plantation workers rehearses a bigger global difference in Global North and Southern approaches to justice that are perhaps most apparent in climate change politics. As environmental economist Ikeme (2003) has observed in relation to environmental justice, Southern conceptions emphasise participatory equity, based on the rationale that “Those who are affected by decisions should have some say in the making of those decisions.” (Ikeme 2003, p. 202).
- ² Sri Lankan street theatre, particularly as developed by leftist collectives in the 1970s, emerged as a politically charged form of popular education and resistance, shaped by postcolonial state violence, caste-class hierarchies and labour struggles. While often compared to Augusto Boal’s (1985) Theatre of the Oppressed, its methods are less formalised and more deeply embedded in local cultural idioms, drawing on satire, parody, and folk performance traditions. Performances are minimalist and mobile, often staged in public spaces—from village streets to factory gates—where audiences are not turned into actors, as in Boal’s spect-actor model, but positioned as political witnesses through shared references and complicity. In Tamil contexts, although less extensively documented, street theatre has been used to engage histories of war, militarisation and economic dispossession, often employing fragmentary, subversive forms that speak to lived experiences of surveillance and exclusion. Creativity here is not so much a workshop technique but a practice of survival, critique and collective sense-making under conditions of structural constraint.
- ³ The plantation sector in Sri Lanka remains economically important for the country. Coconut, rubber and tea are leading exports. In 2022, tea exports generated over 1.1 billion USD (International Labour Organization 2024).

- ⁴ The economic insecurity and changing relationships of debt bonds of former enslaved peoples in Malabar, Kerala see (Ravindran 2016) and Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu see (Gough 1981) rendered these communities a more available pool of plantation workers.
- ⁵ In Sri Lanka, from 10 September 2024, the average daily wage for plantation workers is 1350 Sri Lankan rupees (approximately USD), a rate established by the government's wages board (ETP 2024).
- ⁶ These working conditions and experiences have also been described in a Guardian investigation (Ravindran 2023).

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