

Indentureship's Ghostworld: Re-imagining the Coolie Archive

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Abstract

How do we creatively re-imagine the productive presence of ghosts in the coolie archive? This photo essay revisits the early experimental period of Indian indentureship (1845- 1848) in Trinidad through artistic installations—based on the transcripts of an inquiry into coolie misery and death. The author conducts a creative 'archival ethnography' to think about questions around coolie transience and the in/visibility of absented presences in the official record. In doing so, the essay attempts to stage an affective-political circuit of intelligibility to contemplate the ghostworld of indentureship. It is this ghostworld (as another worldliness) that is crucial for understanding the coolie archive as living, contiguous, and counter to official knowledge production.

Keywords

coolie, indentureship, Trinidad, ghostworld, archival ethnography, Kunduppa, transience.

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Introduction

As an Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian scholar who has worked on the East Indian indentureship in the 19th-century Anglophone Caribbean for the past two decades, I am interested in how East Indian labourers, marked as docile, transient labouring subjects or 'coolies,' have been made to appear and disappear through the official and popular colonial archive. In other words, how has 'the colonial archive' –as a state apparatus of discipline and governmentality-made us both legible and invisible to ourselves in the prism of the present? In my doctoral research (Wahab 2010), I focused on colonial Trinidad and the visual representations of coolies during a period (mid-to-late 19th Century) in which the British indentureship system was already established and systematized. However, there has been very limited historical excavation and re-imaginings of the moment of transition between slavery and indentureship, especially during the early experimental period of East Indian indentureship in Trinidad (1845-1848)—a period distinctly marked by the visual absence of coolies in the colonial archive. This essay attempts to reimagine this absence/absenting by looking for and communing with the ghostly presences of indentureship, to expand on the question of what constitutes 'the coolie archive.' In doing so, it attends to broader methodological questions about counter-knowledge production: How might we conduct or stage an ethnography of the

indentured past, especially when the field is the colonial archive? By extension, what sorts of practices of visibilization allow for a meaningful interlocution with ghostly presences in the field? In other words, might we think of archival ethnography, within and beyond the frame of a mixed methods approach, as a distinct form of creative knowledge production that blurs the boundaries between presence and absence?

This essay was inspired by Roshini Kempadoo's "fictional re-imagining" of what she refers to as the "contiguous Trinidad archive"—a methodology for critically responding to the absences and situated presences and visibilities of the official colonial archive. Through her multimedia artwork (*Amendments*), Kempadoo layers contemporary images onto official colonial archival images to expand and productively distort our officialised (and thus limiting) understanding of the Trinidad archive "as a site and space concerned with the contemporary and continuous re-interpretation and analysis" (2008: 87). Jordache Ellapen (2018) offers a similar approach to queering the archive by opening up lines of relationality between queer bodies of colour in South Africa, through a turn to aesthetics and eroticism. Ellapen layers, blends and juxtaposes family portrait photos with official archival material (e.g. the Indian pass document) to create what he calls "visual assemblages," which allow for an exploration of "the pleasures of transgressive erotics." He claims that: "By assemblages, I refer to my artistic practice of creating something different by fitting together objects (in this case, photography and documents) that individually can appear unrelated" (2018: 11). This way of inter-mediating past and present helps us to rethink the meaning and potential of what some have termed 'the living archive,' though my hope in this essay is to suggest that such a conception blurs, rather than reify the categorical divide between 'living' and 'dead.' In line with Kempadoo's and Ellapen's strategies of creative relationing, I employ the layering of images of 'the past' and 'the present' onto each other—as a creative critical ethnography—to disturb the temporal fixities and affective registers we normatively assign to these images. I see layering/blending as creating "contact, proximity, adjoining and touching" (Kempadoo 2008: 88), especially focused on mediating lines of connection and relationality (across multiple "archival formations" [Kempadoo, 2008: 88]) that get cut off by a more teleological mode of engagement and knowing. This way of rethinking the archive is a form of re-mediation that is not only about correcting or improving through 'making present'¹, but a way of queering the 'archive' by provoking an other-worldliness about the circuit of past-present that conditions our horizons of intelligibility.

The Record of Indentureship

Early post-emancipation (1834-1838) Trinidad was riddled by problems of controlling labour, as the colonial plantation society shifted from slave-based labour to one that was supposedly based on free labour. British planters deployed a range of disciplinary coercive techniques to regain the level of control they had over black and creole bodies during slavery, with very limited success. The British colonial administration (under heavy influence from the plantocracy) subsequently responded through various contract labour immigration schemes, which failed for a number of reasons. The orientalist turn to coolie contract labour from India, however, provided a more promising option, since East Indian subjects were constructed as docile and easily disciplined, and as such the best suited subjects for experiments with contract labour systems in the new era of freedom. The Indian indentureship scheme in Trinidad began in 1845 and ended in 1917, during

¹ Anjali Arondekar addresses this problematic of discovering 'the other' in the colonial archive.

which time, over 143,000 contracted coolie labourers were brought to service and stabilize the sugar and cocoa plantation economies.

While the indentureship system was revised in this early transition to a free society, the indentureship contract served to secure a bound labouring subject or as Look Lai (1993: 52) has suggested, a figure that was “half free, half tied.” As such, the conditions of the contract, set within this ambiguous context of transition, served to produce the coolie as an oriental, non-settler and transient subject in the Western-Atlantic world (in contradistinction to orientalist discourses about East Indians as outside ‘the West’). This transience or not-quite-humanness of the coolie was already shaped under British colonialism in India, but it was further compounded by various disciplinary formations of the indentureship process which solidified the transient, ghostly figurations of the coolie. From the recruitment process, to the conditions at the emigration depots in Calcutta, to the 3-month ship journey across Indian and Atlantic oceans, to the landing and processing on Nelson island (just off Trinidad), to the everyday plantation life of contracted subjects, uncertainty and transience were naturalized as innate to the early indentureship experience and instrumentalized in the governing of coolie labour. This multiplied potential of ‘vulnerability within transience’ served to construct coolie subjects as always already violable and disposable, even though indentureship was projected as a benevolent and humane reconstruction of colonial labour relations (i.e. not slavery!). It is within this context that I situate the case, which is the focus of this essay.

Seeing Ghosts in the Record

While conducting research at The National Archives in London in 2006, I came across the case transcripts (record#: C0295/153) of a state inquiry into the ill-treatment of coolie labourers, and the death of one labourer, Kunduppa, on the Clydesdale Cottage Estate in South Naparima, Trinidad in 1846. The planter, Edward Walkinshaw, was held responsible-though not punished-for the psychic, corporeal and physical abuse of many of his coolie labourers as well as the death of Kunduppa. Walkinshaw used techniques such as double tasking, starvation, medical neglect, physical violence and even death to discipline and punish the coolie labourers on the Clydesdale Cottage Estate. In a letter to the Colonial Secretary he claimed that “my life and property I consider both at stake. Mr. Lacroix of Fullarton estate was pelted with stones and mud lately by his gang, and I much fear unless a very severe example is made and that immediately that you will ere long hear of murder being committed by them” (Walkinshaw, 12th August 1846, C0295/153). Walkinshaw’s testimonies reveal a planter rationale about the deployment of disciplinary violence against transient coolie labourers as necessary for plantation order. While the colonial state attempted to demonstrate that Walkinshaw’s ill-treatment was an example of despotic planter rule in breach of the indentureship contract, the testimonies suggest a more complex scenario whereby the planter’s violence was very much conditioned within the contract (precisely because the rules and regulations were not explicitly defined during this early experimental period).

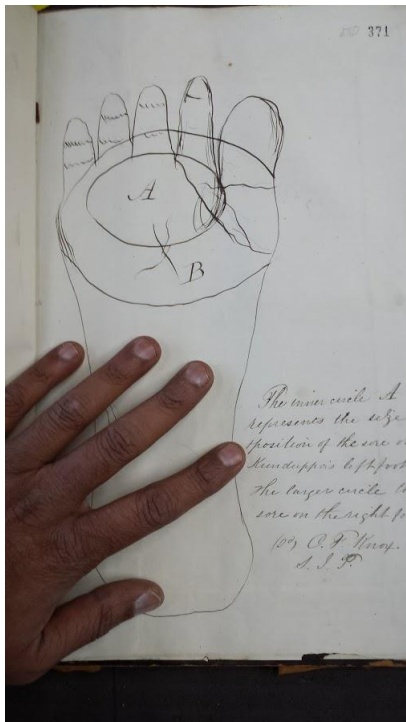
In the case of Kunduppa’s death, the inquiry revealed that the elderly labourer became ill and physically debilitated from chigoe infestations on his feet. The estate overseer testified: “his toes were half eaten away by worms and there was a great stench from them. I found many worms on the soles of his feet. There was one foot worse than the other. One of the feet had the whole of the ball eaten by worms as well as part of the toes; the ball of the other foot was also partly eaten away” (Smith, 4th November 1846,

CO295/153). Kunduppa was taken to the coolie hospital on the estate for treatment. However, because of the depraved conditions at the hospital and the lack of medical attendance (by the doctor attached to the Estate), Kunduppa left the hospital, crawling on his knees. Walkinshaw subsequently refused to supply Kunduppa with the food rations stipulated within the indentureship contract, which led to starvation and further emaciation. Testimonies from fellow labourers reveal that Walkinshaw was seen kicking Kunduppa in the mud to force him to return to the hospital. Kunduppa crept to the estate mill where he lay on the ground, starved, ailing and exposed to the rain for 10 days before he died. The Coolie Stipendiary Magistrate (or the Protector of Coolies), Major James Fagan, who visited Kunduppa in his last days recounted: “[I saw] an old man in the last state of exhaustion and nothing but skin and bones ... He had a blanket over him which was all he had to cover his nakedness except a piece of cloth round his loins which barely answered the purpose of decency ... [he told me] the ‘Sahib’ had turned him out of the hospital.... I have no resting place anywhere, I am dying from hunger, and the doctor never comes to see me, and at the same time he pointed to his feet, mouth and body...Kunduppa repeatedly told me, on that day, that he was uncared for and forsaken, and that he was dying and wished to die” (Major Fagan, 27th October 1846, CO295/153). While the inquiry found Walkinshaw and the estate medic, Dr. Meikleham, responsible for Kunduppa’s death, both men remained unpunished. This case is not unique since the early experimental period of indentureship (1845-1848) was characterized by numerous reports of coolie abuse and death, which led to a temporary suspension of the scheme in 1848. However, it represents one of the few detailed inquiries into coolie abuse and is the only case I have come across which produces visual evidence—sketches of Kunduppa’s sore-afflicted feet—of the horror of this period.

In reading this case about the calculated “slow death” (Berlant 2007) of Kunduppa (and his fellow labourers), coupled with the sheer horror of the image of his feet at the end of the transcripts, I experienced feelings of shock, trauma, grief, and anger. Through these affective registrations, I was inspired to explore questions around the coolie as a subaltern subject, whose constructed transience or not-quite-humanness became the basis for rationalizing disciplinary violence, ironically at the very moment in which British colonial rule had reinvented itself as humanitarian. Furthermore, I wondered how to communicate with and on behalf of Kunduppa’s ghostly presence in the archive and what sorts of hauntings (Gordon 1997) might this case productively provoke in the public domain? To address this latter question, I staged two impromptu public installations—using the archival material—in Trinidad and London. The installation *Coolie Sarcophagus* was done in Trinidad (Dec. 2017), where I reconstructed a body using select pages of the transcripts and floated it on the ocean. The second installation, *DisAffections*, carried out at The National Archives and the Houses of Parliament in London (Feb. 2018), involved the public staging of a canvas containing the image of Kunduppa’s feet superimposed onto the “Rules and Regulations” of indentureship. Both installations were designed to think creatively about the disruptive power of ghostly presences in producing a counterarchive of indentureship (which I regard as an extension of Kempadoo’s “contiguous Trinidad archive”). My goal is not merely to make visible that which has been buried, but to open up a space for contemplating the genealogies of those marked as transient and their generative value to the violent story of Western modernity.

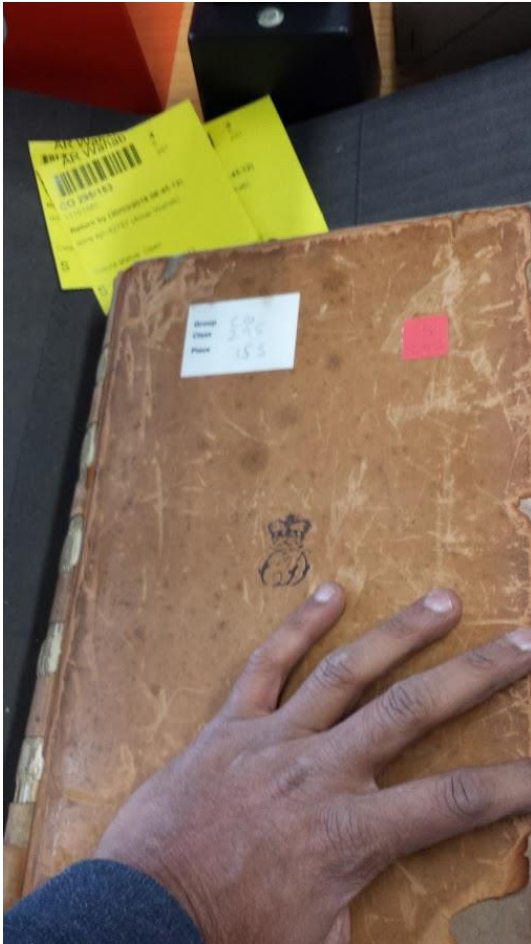
The Coolie Archive: Three Acts

Act I: Ghosting



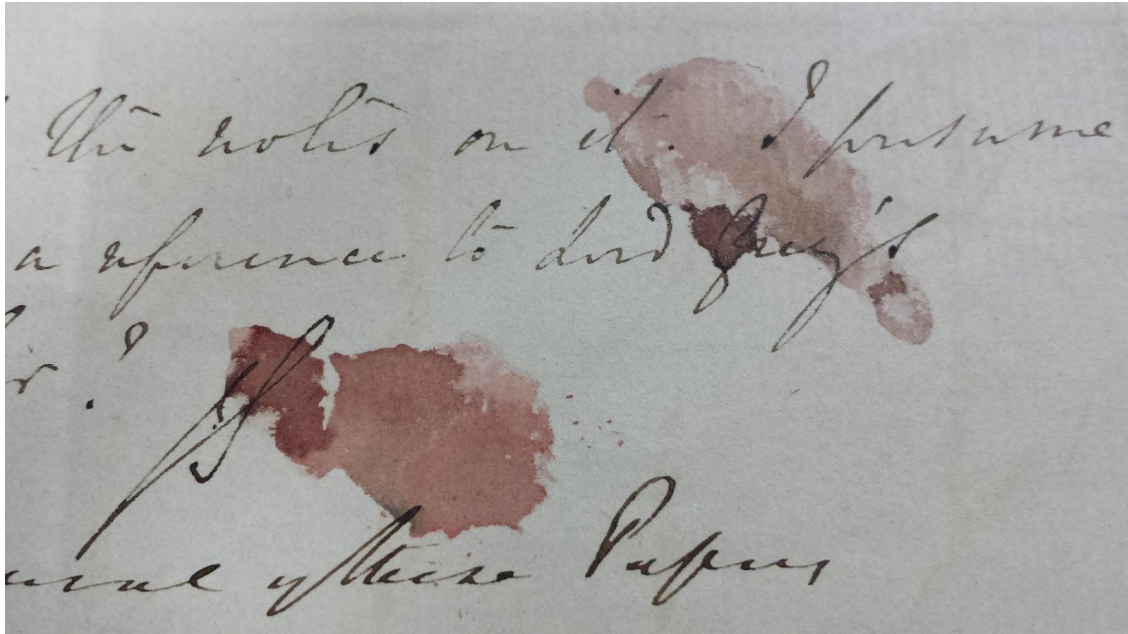
1

This ‘medicalized’ drawing of Kunduppa’s feet, showing the “inner circles” (“A” and “B”), which were afflicted by sores as a result of chigoe infestation, is the very last page of the colonial document. There is no explanation about how it was meaningfully used in the case, nor is it clear whether it is a sketch or an outline of his actual feet. Nevertheless, the feet represents one of the most visceral and haunting traces of his debilitated body, and performs a sort of returned speech/screech. My own hand (instrumental to my own speech) touching this image is an attempt to forge a political-affective connection—a conversation—through the touching of bodies as an incitement to counterknowledge, rooted in a desire to open up public psychic space for thinking about the deathly effects of transience.



2

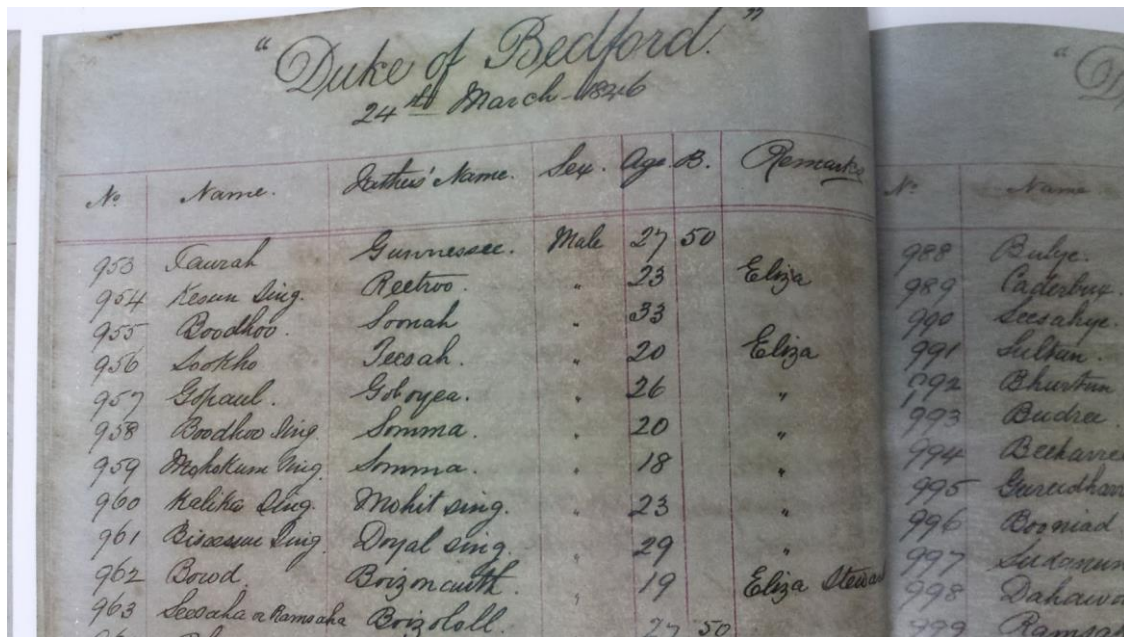
Touching the hard-bound record 'CO295/153: Despatches from Governor Lord Harris [George Francis Robert Harris] concerning Edward Walkinshaw's ill-treatment of Indian immigrants' (no mention of any of the immigrants' names in the title). The embossed signature of the Crown, the catalogue stamp and the barcode all serve to classify thick matter into archival property. The document was dusty and musty to the touch and smell, almost like a coolie sarcophagus, bound and buried—out of sight!



3

C0295/153 is a record of the atrocities suffered by the coolies in the early experimental period of East Indian indentureship in Trinidad. The detailed accounts of psychic and physical abuse of labourers and the death of Kunduppa represent a form of 'blood-shedding'—not only through the breaking of the body through wounding and disease, but through the debilitation of the body's capacity for labour (for example, through overwork and starvation). On one page of the record is a triptych-like pool of blood-stains. Whose blood is this? How do we process these embodied marks of blood and hand-written ink juxtaposed onto each other? What is the slippage between the official story and the bodily-ink (the blood) that marks the disappearance of another presence?

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4

The record, C0295/153, sits buried in the vault of the The National Archives, UK—the center of empire’s official memory machine. No duplicate record of C0295/153 exists at the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, yet, Kunduppa’s actual body is somewhere buried in the Naparima region on the island—the actual site unknown. These are two different grave sites. How do we reconcile this dissonance between the imperial record as the official grave and the space of vanishing of Kunduppa’s body in Trinidad? How might we forge lines of relationality across this dissonance to make appear what should not exist? I combed through the “General Register of Immigrants” and the “Estate Register” to find out more about Kunduppa. There is no trace of his name (or even the plantation, the Clydesdale Cottage Estate, on which he laboured and died). If “Kunduppa” was his moniker, the case transcripts did not care to include his official name (or at least the one recorded in the “General Register”), perhaps because the investigation was labeled an “inquiry” and not a criminal court case (since the planter, Walkinshaw, was never punished for Kunduppa’s death). While I could not find Kunduppa’s name in the “General Register” what stood out were the ways in which indentured labourers were categorized based on registration number, name, father’s name, sex, age and remarks. The latter category (remarks) remained vacant for most labourers, save for cases where the indentured immigrant returned to India or had died. The “Register” is a form of colonial record keeping (and colonial biodata), akin to animal husbandry records, that constructs the coolie as not-quite-human. This photo essay is an attempt to critically intervene in this colonial knowledge formation, through the photograph as a form of re-marking on the violence of indentureship. In so doing, I also mark the very same violence that conditions the possibility of the ‘human.’

Act II: Coolie Sarcophagus

5

After photographing the entire record in London, I travelled to Trinidad with a printed copy of 'the record' (the simulacrum of the official – itself a simulacrum) to build a body upon which I would scaffold the case. On the floor of my mother's (a descendent of indenture) garage, I ripped the printed transcripts into pieces and reassembled them onto a plastic skeleton using rice starch (the transcripts document how the labourers, including Kunduppa, were punished through starvation – especially through the denial of rice). The feet of the skeleton were wrapped in a transcript segment on which was written "bound coolie." Other transcript segments used to assemble the body included: "Rules and Regulations to be observed in regard to the distribution and location of coolie laborers" (outlining the conditions for care of labourers), the signature of the planter (Walkinshaw) who was held responsible for ill-treatment, the testimonial marks of coolie labourers used for the body's mouth, the sketch/outline of Kunduppa's feet on the chest of the body. A mixture of rice and dhal was bonded using starch and placed at the feet of the body, which was mounted on a styrofoam platform covered in transcript pages. The installation was left to dry in the baking sun. Weeks after taking this image, I realized that I had assembled the body on the very spot on which my father (a descendent of indenture) had died in the very year when I 'dis-covered' this case in London.



6

My mother and I travelled with the body to the Temple in the Sea in Waterloo/Carapichaima, located on the coast of the Gulf of Paria (west Trinidad) – a calm body of water that separates Trinidad from the South American continent (the Orinoco delta), where Columbus lost his anchor, and through which indentured immigrants would have approached the Trinidad mainland after a 3-month ship journey, after being processed on the nearby Nelson island. The site has become a tourist attraction, but it holds ethno-religious significance for Hindu worshipers, who perform various ceremonies and rituals which involve offering flowers and fruits and staking *Jhandis* (coloured prayer flags on bamboo poles for different deities) in the water. The temple was built in 1947 (the same year British India was partitioned) by Siewdass Sadhu – an indentured labourer – who having been denied land by British authorities to build a place of worship, created an artificial island and dirt temple in the sea using buckets of mud (Destination Trinidad and Tobago Ltd., 2017). Despite earlier demolition by the colonial government, the Trinidad tourism website claims that “The Temple was the 25-year attempt of Siewdass Sadhu to construct a worship centre at no-man’s land – the sea” (ibid.). It is exactly this understanding of the sea as “no-man’s land” that I found intriguing as a space for contemplating coolie transience. My aim was to float the body at this site at sunset, juxtaposed with Sadhu’s resistive inhabiting of “no-man’s land”/transience. What *appeared* in this photo of the sun setting at the Temple in the Sea, was a mirage on the ocean’s horizon, a figuration of a ghostly mountainous presence connecting sea and sky. In floating the body on the Gulf waters, I did not necessarily aim for a sense of ‘return’ (to India); although it is difficult to think beyond the metaphor of ‘the door’ which divides ‘arrival’ and ‘return’². The ghostly presence is not just *on* the horizon, but it distorts and transfigures into *another* horizon of intelligibility – almost as if the dazzling sun on the Gulf projected its shadow of possibility upwards into the air. An ethnographic poesis of disinterment.

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² See Gosine for a critical discussion of the metaphor of ‘arrival’ in Indo-Caribbean studies.



7

Floating the body at Temple in the Sea after many attempts. It was almost as if the body resisted surfacing. The case transcripts do not confirm whether Kunduppa was Hindu, but I was asked why did I not re-stage the body in fire (instead of water) as cremation is usually the form of burial for Hindu bodies. I chose water because I wanted a medium that would signify floating as a signifier of transience. Furthermore, floating is also a methodology of producing counterknowledge, as the body resists burial and in doing so, it re-surfaces as a refusal to be silenced (as it is in the colonial archives). The installation, *Coolie Sarcophagus*, (not an object, but an act of making a space happen) therefore opens up another archival space in which to ponder how we listen to and *see* those ghostly presences that are made to disappear after empire (i.e. the demand for amnesia), even through postcolonial nationalist projects (which celebrate Indian arrival as cultural retention but look away from the psychic subjections of not-quite-arriving). The body floats together with old bamboo poles (used for *jhandis*) in proximity to washed out prayer flags stranded on old branches; they represent debris – worn and fragmented—that when stitched together, might offer another insight into the complex and entangled potentialities (imprisoning and resistive embrace) of the coolie’s transience.



8

Gulf waters wash/bathe the shores at Temple in the Sea with the debris of prayer offerings. Flower petals (Hibiscus, Ixora, Allamanda), mango leaves, and a clay *lota* (water vessel) are beached on the artificial boundary (made of deposited rocks and a concrete-molded brick) between “no man’s land” and the (post)colony. These offerings help to hold the body’s re-emergence/re-surfacing as a metaphorical garden for ghosting. This staging stands in contradistinction from the archive where CO295/153 can only be exhumed from the vault with felt gloves, metal chains, catalogues, security cameras, body scanners and white eyes (exacting the punishing price of wanting to know).

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9

The body at the water's edge sitting on the entrance into the water, flanked with flowers and banana offerings, with *jhandis* and fishing boats in the background. In addition to their religious significance, the slanted *jhandis* also symbolize the precarious staking of claims in "no-man's land" i.e. a possibility of politics in a space of transience (water, as opposed to land) that is usually regarded as politically impossible. The *jhandi* gateway is not so much an entrance, but it forms a certain kinship or assemblage with the body as that which is undeserving of political ground in post-empire and nationalized fictions of "the human." In fact, this image forces us to rethink the situated violent genealogy of this concept. I regarded this installation as an impromptu public staging in that it was also an attempt to open up an affective space for public engagement, without warning. Visitors to the site showed signs of deep horror as they saw me throw a body into the sea, especially at a very sacred site. People lingered at a distance, peeping out from behind shrubs, one person almost falling into the water! It is precisely this intimacy between the obscene and the sacred that I wanted to stage (similar to the muddy Gulf waters) as a way of making space to think about the transience and disposability of the coolie body.

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10 (a)

Jhandis at sunset, Temple in the Sea: on haunting



10 (b)

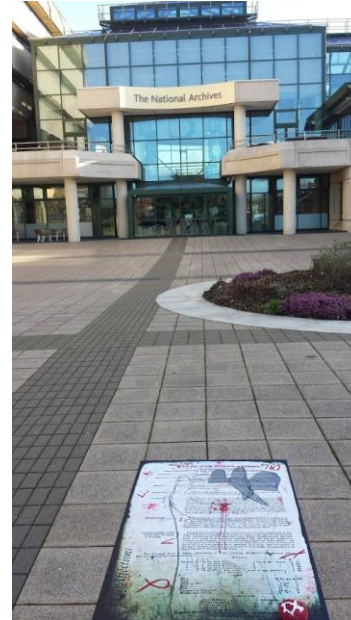
Jhandis, Temple in the Sea: on kinship



10 (c)

Lone *Jhandi*: on refusing

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Act III: DisAffections

11 (a), 11 (b)

Two months after staging *Coolie Sarcophagus* I returned to London (via Toronto) to stage the second installment, *DisAffections*, in front of The National Archives (where the original case transcripts are 'buried') and in front of the Houses of Parliament (the site of imperial legal-administrative governance). The installment was prompted by the question "Can the coolie speak back?"—my own iteration of Gayatri Spivak's question about the terms and conditions of subaltern knowledge production. In Toronto (Fig. 11 a), I worked with layering multiple images onto each other, starting with my interpretation of the sketch/outline of Kunduppa's feet as a visual representation of subaltern speech. Onto this horrifying image that signaled the atrocities of indentureship, I layered a transparency of the "Rules and Regulations to be observed in regard to the distribution and location of coolie laborers." This juxtaposition was aimed at pointing to the irony of ill-treatment and death under a contract labour system (indentureship) that was supposedly more humane and benevolent than slavery (which was legally ended just eight years before the case). At this same time I wanted to make the point that this was not ironic; for it is precisely this "improved" system of governing labour through the contract ("Rules and Regulations") which produced conditions of precarity that made the coolie labourer disposable, and in Kunduppa's case, killable. On a 6 ft. x 3.5 ft. canvas I employed a printing firm to superimpose both images onto each other. My partner (Anglo-Indian descendent) helped me die the canvas in tea (another icon of the British-Indian Empire) upon which I used red paint (to symbolize blood) to reproduce the marks (in lieu of their signatures) of all the coolie labourers who provided testimony against the planter in the investigation of Kunduppa's death. These represent voices speaking back against the violence of empire. The canvas was laid on the ground, in front of The National Archives, with a crown of 'blood rice' at the base (Fig. 11 b). Security personnel interrupted the public staging with curiously repetitive stutterings of "we don't think you're doing anything terrorist, but you're not allowed to take images on/of our premises without permission." Bitter irony.



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The crown of 'blood rice' was made to provoke questions about the hidden and buried violence that made possible the fiction of colonial benevolence. Rice was dyed red and molded (with glue) into the shape of a crown, with the coolie's, Oojear's, mark on top (his testimony was the most damning against the planter). 'Blood rice' signified both the life-giving properties of rice (as acknowledged in the contract) to fuel the machination of coolie labour as well as the generative power of its denial—through starvation—of punishing and "letting die" those coolies, like Kunduppa, who were constructed as indocile and unworthy of care.



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Staging of *DisAffections* on Westminster Bridge (the site of a terrorist attack in 2017) with the Houses of Parliament in the background. Passersby looked on in confusion, horror, and discomfort (i.e. disaffection) as the canvas was unfolded and held up. What did it mean to open this wound in such a sacred space? How did it attempt to re-open the public as a site of contested politics? How might we connect the representation of Empire's death world (on the canvas) to its life-world, its engine of constituting 'the human' (the Houses of Parliament) as "a parliament of things" in "broad daylight" (Latour, 1993).

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