

# Preface: A Scarcely Spoken Past

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Together with a friend, my mother's father left Sri Lanka (then, British Ceylon) in the second decade of the twentieth century and, having stopped off, so it is said in the Canary Islands and perhaps elsewhere as well, eventually found himself in Jamaica (then too, of course, a British colony). Who knows what motivation prompted this journey halfway across the imperial world. Who knows what imagined horizon he traveled toward. His name was T. H. Samil (the initials standing for Tana Hewage—his *ge*, or family name). In Jamaica, he became T. H. Samiel. He was Sinhalese, from a small town called Angulugaha in the south of the country, not far from the port city of Galle. I never met him. He died in 1956. I have little idea of who he was. His family in Sri Lanka, it appears, was in the jewelry business, and in Jamaica, Samiel established himself in the trade, opening a store in downtown Kingston, on Harbour Street, near the fabled Myrtle Bank Hotel. This was the great hotel of its age in Jamaica. It had been converted by the colonial government from an entertainment and social center of sorts into a grand hotel in preparation for the Great Exhibition of 1891. Like much else in Kingston, Myrtle Bank was destroyed in the 1907 earthquake, but by the time my grandfather arrived in Jamaica it had been rebuilt and sold to the United Fruit Company.

For a while Samiel seemed to prosper in his business—enough, anyway, to support some members of the growing population of Indians in Jamaica and to send money back to Angulugaha, to build the house to which he must have dreamed of returning. But, alas, this was not to happen. He formed a union with a woman of Indian descent from Black River, St. Elizabeth, named Iris Black, with whom he had three children. My mother, Myrrol, was their firstborn. I never knew Iris either; she died in 1945. Samiel didn't marry her until after their second child, Arthur, was born. Only Lilavati was born in wedlock. What was he waiting for? Did he wonder what it would mean

to marry an Indo-Jamaican, what it would mean to take her back to Sri Lanka to his family? In any event, Samiel never returned home. Was the late marriage itself a sign of defeat, disappointment, the end and not the beginning of the promise of the journey? Going back to Sri Lanka seemed no longer an option.<sup>1</sup> Certainly it appears that Iris and Samiel were not very happy together. Indeed, she eventually left him, taking my mother with her—to what appears to have been a hard, joyless, precarious life. My mother scarcely spoke about Iris or about her own childhood and adolescence; she shared few anecdotes that might have offered my siblings and me a window onto her past. And when she did speak of the past, it was invariably with a great deal of anger and bitterness. There was too much unpleasantness. This contrasted sharply with my father, John, who spoke a lot about his childhood, all the towns he'd lived in, and whose mother, Bridget, at least I knew.

The hegemony of the Afro-creole in the Jamaican national story meant that being a “half-coolie,” as I was often designated (at school, on the football field, in teenage social circles), was at best an ambiguous status. Even in being a young Rastafarian—a “coolie dread”—there was clearly something *unearned* in the identity, and not only because I was obviously middle class. The founding narrative of slavery gave “blackness” a potential positive value not only in the scale of *authenticity* but in terms of a sense of *entitlement* on the basis of that original wrong. Unlike in Guyana and Trinidad, perhaps, the Indian in Jamaica had a social presence of sorts but no *cultural-political* claim. Nothing in the way of *recognition* was owed for the fact of indenture: it shaped, in other words, no national wound; it had incurred no moral debt in the anticolonial imaginary. And thus the national discourse had prepared no language of justifiable resentment, no cultural idiom for the expression of personal bitterness. Not surprisingly, therefore, even in my mother's angers there was only a disturbing muteness, a frustrating silence—but nothing that could disclose to me as a child the story of who she was. I came to be haunted by my mother's obscure past, her reticence about it.

I don't know exactly how it happened, but at a certain point in graduate school in the 1980s (at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research), I turned sharply away from the idea I had of doing my PhD on Jamaica and decided instead to conduct research in Sri Lanka, on a group of healing rituals called *yaktovil*. It certainly wasn't a clearly thought-out decision. After all, I knew next to nothing about Sri Lanka, even less about these arcane practices. I had, by a series of detours, arrived in the anthropology department, not knowing exactly what the discipline was all about. I'd in fact gone to New York to study psychology, having received a BSc in government from the University of the West Indies (Mona). It's a long story, but obviously I wasn't quite sure what I was doing. I was following my nose, putting one foot in front of the other, finding my way by finding my way. At the New School, I met Joel Kovel, a brilliant psychoanalyst and Marxist, who was teaching in both the psychology and anthropology departments. Two of his books in particular, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* and especially *The Age of Desire: Reflections of a Radical Psychoanalyst*,

1 Many years later I read Yasmine Gooneratne's *Relative Merits: A Personal Memoir of the Bandaranaike Family of Sri Lanka* (London: Palgrave, 1986). In it she recounts the fascinating story of her father studying in Trinidad, and there meeting and falling in love with a woman of “Indian” descent. The family in Sri Lanka, not knowing what an Indian in Trinidad was, consulted the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which offered that an Indian in Trinidad was an Arawak Indian. Taken aback they forbid him to bring the young woman home. Of course, he did. It is not clear that my grandfather lived in Jamaica as “Ceylonese.” I assume he was assimilated into the Indo-Jamaican population.

influenced me enormously.<sup>2</sup> They opened a world to me. They gave me a new language. In addition to this, and urged in fact by Joel, with whom I had endless conversations, I started to undergo psychoanalysis, spending years on the couch, fully intending to someday practice myself. Inchoately, something was beginning to take shape in my mind about the role of *displacement*, about the *detour* of the hermeneutic circle, in the conduct of inquiry. If I was experimenting with this mediation in my psychological life, why not experiment with it in my intellectual life? Thus the idea began to emerge of a route through a cultural-historical *elsewhere* that would eventually take me back to Jamaica.

In any case, once I decided to turn my attention to Sri Lanka, and had done a basic amount of reading, I contacted Gananath Obeyesekere at Princeton University. Gananath is the great savant of the anthropology of Sri Lanka, a man of immense stature and (as I was soon to discover) generosity. When I met him, around 1985, he had only recently published his masterpiece, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini*.<sup>3</sup> To my astonishment Gananath invited me to come have lunch with him in Princeton and to talk about the work I had in mind doing in Sri Lanka. He too was influenced by psychoanalysis, in particular by Paul Ricoeur's magisterial *Freud and Philosophy*, and so, timid though I was, we had much to talk about.<sup>4</sup> Gananath helped me get to Sri Lanka in late 1986, and indeed he had made an arrangement to have me met when I arrived at Katunayake International Airport and had even found me accommodations in Colombo not far from his home in Bambalapitya. Gananath is an inveterate ethnographer, and I traveled around the country with him, trying to determine where I was going to settle myself in order to conduct my research. I finally decided on the southern town of Devinuwara. My first book, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (a revision of my PhD thesis), grew out of this journey.<sup>5</sup>

My mother died in July 1986, just months before I was to leave for Sri Lanka. It was a very painful experience. It seemed to me unnatural, an injustice. She knew that I was going to Sri Lanka, and as she lay dying she said she was sorry she would never be able to visit me there. But in truth she was always with me in Sri Lanka; I dreamed of her almost continuously for many months. I saw her face everywhere around me. I visited Angulugaha, and my grandfather's relations, and saw the house he had sent money to build. I announced myself as his grandson. I am not sure the family was very pleased to see me. I never went back.

In 1993, I returned to Sri Lanka to spend a year as a fellow at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo, then under the leadership of its unforgettable founder, Neelan Tiruchelvam. My friends Malathi de Alwis and Pradeep Jeganathan were also fellows there at the time. Neelan, who would be assassinated in July 1999, apparently by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam, was a visionary without equal. Thoughtful, unassuming, always juggling a thousand things, he maintained a devotion to the rationalities of constitutional law that never blinded him to the demands of reasons of state. My hope was to write a book on the making of the modern colonial state in Ceylon. But in

2 See Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), and *The Age of Desire: Reflections of a Radical Psychoanalyst* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

3 Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970).

5 David Scott, *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

the end, I just couldn't. I began to feel a strange, melancholy unease. I found myself dreaming of Jamaica, of being on familiar roads and in familiar neighborhoods in Kingston that nevertheless I couldn't accurately identify. A curious kind of forgetting seemed to be overtaking me. Perhaps the detour was coming to an end. Perhaps at last my mother was releasing me from the duty to her memory. The hybrid book *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* emerged from this *return* in the hermeneutic circle.<sup>6</sup>

I met Andil Gosine in 2015 at "Caribbean Queer Visualities," a *Small Axe* conference convened at Yale University. It was fortuitous. He and I immediately connected, and we began to talk about doing something on the question of the Indo-Caribbean. He offered me the barely speakable word *Coolitude*—on the analogy of Negritude—a way of trying to capture the phenomenological experience of "Indianness," especially in those subaltern Indian diasporas of the Caribbean, South Africa, and Mauritius. Besides being a fine scholar and an artist of delicate sensibilities, Andil helpfully knows how to raise funds. Within a year, he had organized the very stimulating symposium "Art after Indenture" at York University, Toronto, in March 2016, work from which is featured in this issue of *Small Axe*. Needless to say, I have been embarrassed by the fact that in all these years *Small Axe* has not ventured seriously into the arena of the Indo-Caribbean. Why is that? We have often been taken (especially in the US context) to be a journal of the African diaspora, and we are of course. But it is always necessary to remind people—and indeed, more important to remind *ourselves*—that the Caribbean is constituted by *several* diasporas, not least the one drawn from South Asia.

In some measure, perhaps, the *Small Axe* Project is forever catching up. I acknowledge that it will never be identical to the demands of the field of Caribbean studies with which we are concerned. Certainly, we seem chronically unable to get *ahead* of ourselves. But quite apart from our real, inexcusable shortcomings, this may simply be the way of journal work—never on time, always a little belated, seeking from the rear to define and redefine the intellectual and artistic arenas that claim our attention. My hope, though, is that the special section "Art after Indenture" in this issue of *Small Axe* is but the first foray in a direction that will come to occupy a larger share in our concerns. I am very grateful to Andil for his patience, his guidance, and his support.

—Glasgow, Berlin, Kingston, New York  
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6 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).