



Valuing the 'neighbourhood': Responding to Racialised Post-War Development in Slave Island, Colombo

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Accepted: 9 September 2024
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Abstract

This article explores how Slave Island, a neighbourhood in Colombo, Sri Lanka, responds to upheaval in a context of post-war urban transformation that masks undertones of racialisation. Through life histories of Slave Island's multigenerational residents, we offer fresh insights into how communities navigate the uncertainty and disruption of evictions, where besides material and economic infrastructure, communities repurpose differences and commonalities built on lineage and place-memory, to (re)negotiate their 'borders' as they interact with 'outsiders'. By adapting the internal and external boundaries of their community and its members, they find creative methods of positioning themselves to access development dividends in how they understand and utilise notions of 'value'—instrumental, commercial and intrinsic. In this way, we show that raced interventions are not simply experienced as subordination but are repurposed transactionally by affected communities for negotiating their agentic power over distribution of development dividends.

Keywords Urban regeneration · Post-war development · Racialisation · Labour migration · Sri Lanka · Ethno-politics · Oral history

Resumen

Este artículo explora cómo Slave Island, un vecindario en Colombo, Sri Lanka, responde al trastorno en un contexto de transformación urbana posguerra que enmascara matices de racialización. A través de las historias de vida de los residentes multigeneracionales de Slave Island, ofrecemos nuevas perspectivas sobre cómo las comunidades navegan la incertidumbre y la interrupción de los desalojos, donde además de la infraestructura material y económica, las comunidades reutilizan las

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diferencias y similitudes construidas sobre el linaje y la memoria del lugar, para (re) negociar sus “fronteras” mientras interactúan con ‘forasteros’. Al adaptar los límites internos y externos de su comunidad y sus miembros, encuentran métodos creativos para posicionarse para acceder a los dividendos del desarrollo en cómo entienden y utilizan nociones de ‘valor’ – instrumental, comercial e intrínseco. De esta manera, mostramos que las intervenciones racializadas no se experimentan simplemente como subordinación sino que son reutilizadas transaccionalmente por las comunidades afectadas para negociar su poder agente sobre la distribución de los dividendos del desarrollo.

Résumé

Cet article explore comment Slave Island, un quartier de Colombo, Sri Lanka, répond à l’agitation dans un contexte de transformation urbaine post-guerre qui masque des sous-entendus de racialisation. À travers les histoires de vie des résidents multigénérationnels de Slave Island, nous offrons de nouvelles perspectives sur la façon dont les communautés naviguent dans l’incertitude et la perturbation des expulsions, où, en plus de l’infrastructure matérielle et économique, les communautés réutilisent les différences et les points communs basés sur la lignée et la mémoire des lieux, pour (re) négocier leurs “frontières” lorsqu’ils interagissent avec les “étrangers”. En adaptant les limites internes et externes de leur communauté et de ses membres, ils trouvent des méthodes créatives pour se positionner afin d’accéder aux dividendes du développement dans la façon dont ils comprennent et utilisent les notions de “valeur” - instrumentale, commerciale et intrinsèque. De cette façon, nous montrons que les interventions racialisées ne sont pas simplement vécues comme une subordination, mais sont réutilisées de manière transactionnelle par les communautés affectées pour négocier leur pouvoir d’agent sur la distribution des dividendes du développement.

Introduction

Post-war development can be used as an instrument for nation-building, and this is true of Sri Lanka. During the civil war (1983–2009) and in its aftermath, reconstruction and development were repurposed, somewhat perversely, as dividends of victory possibly to further the dominance of majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist ideologies and post-war triumphalism (Venugopal 2018). This article focuses on the impact on people due to such public-private urban development projects in Slave Island or Kompanna Veediya, which is a neighbourhood in Colombo (the de facto capital of Sri Lanka while Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte is the administrative capital). Slave Island, covers nearly 160 acres situated south of the sixteenth century Portuguese fort, Colombo’s central business district, and in close proximity to Colombo’s harbour and the new Port City Development (Karunaratne et al. 2023).

‘Slave Island’, was only recently (on Sri Lanka’s Independence Day in 2023) officially removed from the common lexicon in favour of retaining the name ‘Kompanna Veediya’. Besides its name, there are aspects of the neighbourhood which could be characterised as a fundamentally racialised relationship between space





Image 1 A dormitory rented out to Chinese labour migrants working on one of Slave Island's new developments, built on the second floor of a resident's house. *Source* Photo taken by Sanjani Liyanage, 2021, for British Academy My City (in) visible project

and society (Pulido 2002). Formed out of historic migration connected to the urban transformation of Colombo as a colonial port and later as the national capital (Perera 2002), the neighbourhood is made up of ethnically and religiously diverse multigenerational families who have contributed to the city's cultural and economic fabric in different ways. In this article, we present the oral histories of some of these multigenerational families to foreground their "affective knowledge" (De Mel 2007, p. 252) of living through upheaval, change and uncertainty in times of crises, such as during the war and its aftermath. Over 10 years, after parts of their neighbourhood were cleared for urban 'beautification', historic buildings demolished for private developments, and inward migrations of cyclic labourers brought from outside Sri Lanka to work on the new constructions sites¹ (Image 1), their stories highlight what Jha and Pathak (2022) have described as "affective urbanity" (p.4)—the experiential dimension that links the social and the spatial in contexts of urban transformation created out of wider structural changes (migration, political violence and economic rationalisation). While Slave Islanders might identify themselves (in an ascriptive sense) with markers of ethnicity and religion rather than race, the fact that differences are organised hierarchically and that certain bodies get marked for surveillance and eviction, lends more analytical value to race and racialisation as something that is experienced in these encounters of border-making between the neighbourhood and what sets it apart from outsiders.

¹ While there is a paucity of disaggregated data regarding foreign short-term labour migrants brought to work on construction sites by registered foreign construction companies (see list here) or where/which projects such workers are placed in specifically, there have been newspaper articles and anecdotal evidence from oral histories about foreign labourers of Chinese, Burmese, Indian, Pakistani and Nepalese nationality who work in Slave Island, (See also, Weeraratne 2018 and Time Online 2024).



Much of urban sociological interest in race and space has zoomed in on ghettos, refugee camps and enclaves. Slave Island is none of those. It has raced characteristics owing to its long history linked to colonial trade routes. It has been traditionally home to low-income, mostly precariat labour-dependent families. Over time, and intergenerationally, they have formed a distinctive community for themselves within Colombo where contrary to the national demographic ratios of majority Sinhala to other ethnic and religious minorities, Slave Island has historically had a majority population of ethno-religious minorities. Particularly, Sri Lankan Moors and Malays, who practise Islam and as such are colloquially and collectively referred to as ‘Muslims’².

The race lens can be applied here in two ways. A more traditional approach would consider racialised spaces and identities as categories of ‘territorial belonging’, where various raced groups interact with each other through these predefined markers of difference. Such a view, for example, has been reflected in work on spatial segregation as a form of social control in ghettos (Keith 2005), and enclaves and treatment of deprived neighbourhoods (Ranganathan and Bonds 2022). A more embedded approach, however, considers racialisation as a “contingent construction” (Redclift 2017) as residents of ‘segregated’ or ‘disidentified’ neighbourhoods, who may reconfigure racialisation in different ways for different ends. For example, Abdoumalig Simone (2004) has shown that in the highly fractured social space of Johannesburg, interdependencies emerge between urban residents from ethnic groups otherwise at odds with each other, for innovative economic transactions in the city. His conceptualisation of “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2004, p. 407) was built on the notion that if we simply looked at particularisms of identity and location, we would not see these ‘invisible’ infrastructures that happen due to the economic collaboration between residents marginalised by urban life.

This article’s discussion builds on the latter ‘embedded’ view of race and space. While Simone, does not explicitly mention raced dynamics in the crafting of infrastructure by marginalised communities, we foreground it here. Thus, adding to Simone’s “people as infrastructure”, we argue that community groups create ‘borders as infrastructure’ where socio-cultural, ethno-political and economic relationships—in what can be thought of as concentric circles starting from the family, to the neighbourhood community, to the city and to the nation,— are negotiated through continuous acts of blending and highlighting. We propose therefore that besides material and economic infrastructure, communities or groups repurpose differences and commonalities built on lineage and place-memory to (re)negotiate the ‘borders’ of the community as they interact with outsiders, in the face of change and uncertainty. They do this in order to access development dividends by protecting the idea of ‘community’, if and when their rootedness in the neighbourhood is made permanently precarious because of the combined effects of labour migration urban

² The ethnic diversity in Slave Island stands at Sri Lankan Moor (52.2%), Sri Lankan Tamil (17.6%), Sinhalese (15.8%), Malay (12.8%), Indian Tamil (1.3%) and others (0.4%). The religious diversity is Islam (69.7%) (practised by Moors and Malays who are colloquially referred to as Muslims), Buddhist (14.4%), Hindu (10.5%), Roman Catholic (4.5%) and others (0.9%) (Census of Population and Housing, 2012).



evictions, resettlement and ethno-politics masquerading as development. How a community impacted by racialised tropes of urban development post-war negotiates with shifting borders (of social relations, spatial change and control) formed out of violent heritage and urban transformation combined, is the crux of the article.

We present here that articulations of racialised encounters (with state and market, urban society and nation) do not take the form of overt protest or challenge but rather as carefully mediated negotiation through blending and highlighting of difference and commonality contingently³. In response to the 'highlighting that is experienced' in times of uncertainty and change (such as suspicion; marginalisation and precarity), they blend differences from within to form a cohesive 'we'. These acts of blending may blur internal class, religious and ethnic differences temporarily and could become a constitutive part of their collective agency. For example, the narratives of what makes Slave Island a community could be repurposed politically as arguments for staying or being compensated in ways that recognise their loss and claim development dividends offered to elite structures of power and capital.

As their local social contexts change rapidly with the entry of new short-term labour migrants, and pre-existing social class differentiations shift in response to new developments, they redraw boundaries, through ideas and acts of othering, while keeping instrumental connections with their neighbours. In this way borders between insiders and outsiders (government, private sector developers, new cyclic labour migrants) are performed through everyday encounters to strengthen the 'wensness' of who belongs to Slave Island and in order to legitimise the neighbourhood community as part of regimes of nation and citizenship. By doing so, racialised tropes that are used to justify urban development as ethno-political domination over communities such as Slave Island's residents, who instead of being treated as collateral damage of 'urbanisation and development', are able to clarify their own boundaries and bolster claims-making. We propose that residents reclaim agency and power in how they understand and utilise notions of value—intrinsic, instrumental and commercial—as powerful tools for bargaining and negotiating their due of the development dividends from which they were hitherto excluded.

Methodology and Positionality

We, as researchers, come from two disciplines and perspectives to this exploration of Slave Island. One of us is a political sociologist⁴, interested in how markers of difference—such as race, ethnicity, religion, class and gender—underpin ideas and practices of urban planning and infrastructure development. One of

³ While we acknowledge the intersectionality of racialised development, particularly in relation to gender, securitisation and politics, we could not address it within the scope of this paper. However, our forthcoming paper tentatively titled 'Shifting Layers of Citizenship: Indigeneity, place-memory and performance in the context of minoritisation and securitisation in Sri Lanka will delve in deeper.

⁴ More personally, one of us is Sinhala-Christian from Colombo, living adjacent to Slave island and therefore may be perceived as a member of the ethnic majority although not belonging to the Sinhala-Buddhist identity, and the other is British of Indian origin and would be perceived as an outsider.



us is a public history practitioner, interested in how people narrativize their personal experiences as they respond to and contest dominant narratives of capital, social construction and history.

Bringing these perspectives together, we contribute to urban sociology and neighbourhood studies, which puts identity, difference and political contestation at the centre of analysis of the impact of developmental structures. We foreground an affective view of urban development as narratives of communities—whose perceptions and aspirations are usually neglected or rendered invisible by generic top down approaches to planning ‘good’, ‘liveable’ cities. We began by acknowledging that if we only imported theorisation from ‘the outside’, instead of highlighting local realities, they may suppress and disenfranchise local experiences and local understanding of the power relations and historical social construction of space in Slave Island (Perera, 2016:12). Therefore, the research was made possible because of ‘insiders’ who collaborated as participant-researchers/auto-ethnographers from Slave Island. The decision to engage grassroots ‘people’ in the process of collective meaning-making, understanding and co-creating their own histories, was to facilitate the “vantage point of inquiry” and “intellectual presence of the ordinary people” (Perera, 2016, 14). The life history approach also mitigates the abstraction of mapping out the spatial and temporal evolution of Slave Island without the meaning-making and emotional investment that story-telling layers over such (sometimes violent) transformations. The stories therefore, are subjective truths and memories long-held, reiterated over time. They may be contentious as historical sources of knowledge but hold true in producing affective states of meaning and a sense of community that it creates (De Mel, 2007, p.250–252), in a way that frees their voices from the constraints of historicising (De Silva 2006, pp. 62).

Our collaboration started with the My City (In) visible project through a participatory photo survey conducted by the residents of Slave Island. It revealed the ‘invisible’ characteristics that have made their community successful in living through continuous cycles of uncertainty in the city (Basu and Liyanage 2023). We built on these initial revelations to capture ten oral history narratives in life-history format of long-term and multi-generational resident families of Slave Island. We attempted to document a variety of identities: Sinhala-Buddhists, Sinhala-Christians, Tamil-Christians, Tamil-Hindus, Sri Lankan Moors and Malays practising Islam, and those of mixed ethnic and religious heritage. They were male, female and those identifying as transgender, who collaboratively documented their histories, in family groups of parents-children-grandchildren between the ages of twenty five-eighty two years old. This helped us situate our query within the understanding that Slave Island is ‘layer upon layer of histories’, a kind of memory etched into the historical landscape without being wholly erased. Histories may be repurposed or reimagined, but we consider memory as intrinsically valuable to our understanding of “precariat” labour, mobility, the social function of property, and the (now financialised) social contract between the residents, the state, the labour market and the land (Bhan 2023).



Situating Slave Island as a Neighbourhood of Colombo

The Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, conceived of Colombo as a fortified trading settlement in the sixteenth century. The British chose to expand the port of Colombo and change its spatial and social geography rapidly, after the whole of Sri Lanka became a colony in 1815 (Parasram 2023). Continuing from this legacy, the city is cosmopolitan and has the highest concentration of ethnic and religious minorities within its wards⁵. While this has made the city a symbolic representation of privilege and elite-capture throughout Sri Lanka's many conflicts (of ethno-political exclusion and socio-economic marginalisation), Colombo has always remained a city where its ethno-religious minorities have had more power to negotiate their relationship to politics and governance as a registered voter base (Perera and Spencer, 2023, pp. 209–210). The electoral fortunes of dominant political parties have therefore historically depended on how convincingly they have wooed its minorities, which in the city of Colombo, is reflected in the fact that members from minority communities have had greater opportunity to hold the post of Mayor of Colombo (nearly 50% according to the Colombo Municipal Council website).

Within this set up, among the neighbourhoods which have been 'safe spaces' for minorities over several decades, Slave Island holds a distinct and curious foundation myth (Image 2). The more popular account by R.L. Brohier (1984) suggests that Slave Island was so-named because it was used to enclose Black African slaves in transit, after a group of them murdered a Dutch fiscal officer in 1723. Historian Nira Wickramasinghe (2020, p. 28), however, disputes this account as eighteenth century Dutch census administrators initially only categorised and counted the Christians as "free" and slaves as "slave" populations. The Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims were considered heathen and left out of census calculation, although it is highly likely that the slaves who made up 50% of Colombo's population at the time and played a crucial economic function, were in fact, people of different ethnic origins, not only Black African slaves (Wickramasinghe 2020, p. 30). The fact that the so-called 'slaves' of Slave Island are considered as people of African origin only, could be due to the ethnicised nature of national historiography, as the memory and label of the 'slave', Nira Wickramasinghe explains, sits uncomfortably with the Sinhala and Tamil claims to indigeneity.

Meanwhile, amongst the Moors and Malays of Slave Island (who are the Islam-practising majority in the neighbourhood, followed by the Tamils and Sinhalese), the preferred origin narrative begins with the Dutch East India company and the subsequent expansion of the Colombo port by the British. The Sri Lanka Malay Association recounts tales of large contingents of Malay regiments brought over by the Dutch in the sixteenth century, descendants of whom were then colloquially identified as 'Malays' by the British in the eighteenth century. By enlisting

⁵ According to the 2012 census, while the Colombo district is 77% Sinhala in line with the national level ethnic demography, Colombo municipality is only 25% Sinhala with a greater number of Muslims (40%) and Sri Lankan Tamils (31%). The suburbs of Colombo, like Maharagama, Homagama and Kesbawa are 96%, 98% and 97% Sinhala.



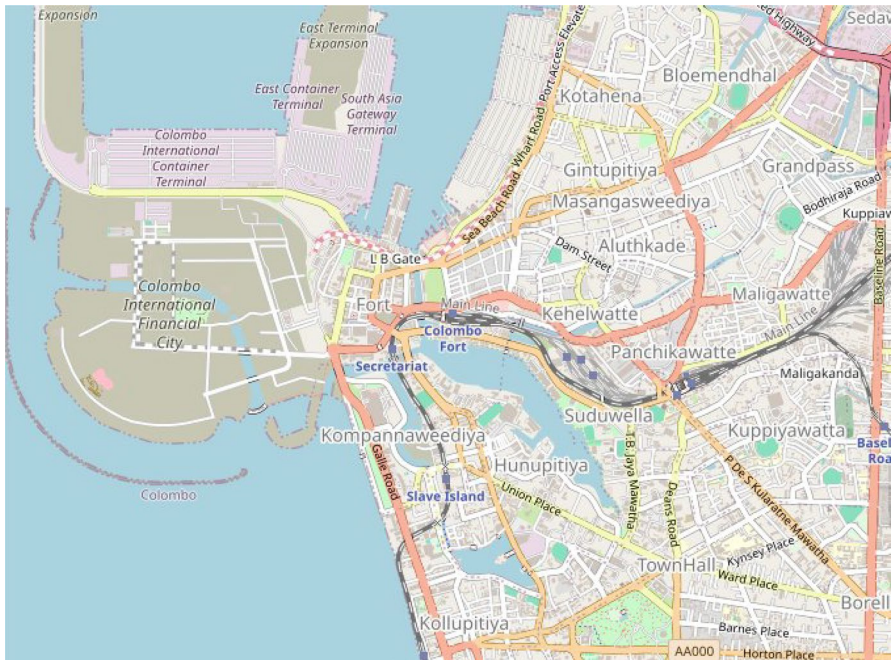


Image 2 Map showing Slave Island's location within Colombo 2 *Source* Openstreet Map, WikiCommons 2024

them as part of British troops, they received the status of a 'privileged minority'. The legacy of place-names such as *Kampong Kertel* or *Kompannga Veediya* meaning 'company street' in Malay, is deemed to originate from the histories of Slave Island's Malay community. Perhaps, this narrative offers them a legitimacy as paid workers and soldiers of the Empire(s), that they can repurpose to justify their present role and significance to the city. In alternative narrativisations, *Kompannga Veediya* may also refer to companies such as the Ceylon Ice Company that were set up with the commercial expansion of the area in the late 1860s (Perera 2002).

For residents of Slave Island, the rapid changes to their neighbourhood have meant that they have not had the requisite time to adjust, fully negotiate or manage the risks of displacement (of their bodies, their identities and their sense of belonging) when stripped of their historic relationship with 'place'. Some have found ways to counter this lack of meaningful participation in such 'development processes' with initiatives such as *We Are From Here* launched in 2018 by Slave Island artist Firi Rahman and the murals and graffiti of the Fearless Collective with Slave Island artist Vicky Shahjahan, that celebrate some of Slave Island's people (Image 3). Artists' depictions thus serve as an alternative to the suspicion and animosity with which the Slave Island community was being treated during the proposed land evictions and bringing to light the multigenerational histories of identity indelibly linked to 'place'.





Image 3 A mural depicting three women from the community highlighting their multigenerational 'connection' to Slave Island with the words "We belong to this land", drawn by the women of the community including Vicky Shahjahan. *Source* Photography by Vicky Shahjahan

Racialised Undertones of Post-War Development

Shortly after the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009⁶ Mahinda Rajapaksa's government launched a plan to 'beautify' Colombo which included a bold claim to make the capital "slum-free" (Perera, Uyangoda, Tegal, 2017, p.2). Plans to evict residents of low-income neighbourhoods, including parts of Slave Island, were emboldened by the leadership of his brother Gotabaya Rajapaksa who brought the Urban Development Authority under the mandate of the Ministry of Defence (Wickramasinghe, 2010). Demographically, Colombo city is different to the rest of Sri Lanka: more

⁶ After 26 years, the civil war ended brutally on May 18, 2009 after four attempts at a negotiated peace process. The end of the war through military means, with both sides accused of human rights violations, was followed by a nationalistic and triumphalist state narrativization in the aftermath of the civil war, heavily weighted towards the foregrounding of Sinhala-Buddhist ideology which has impacted how post-war development and the political economy of the country has evolved (See Seoighe 2017).



numerical minorities, such as Tamils and Muslims combined, outnumber the (otherwise majority) Sinhalese. Thus, Colombo city is historically more inclined to vote for the United National Party (considered neo-liberal in its policies and more ethno-religiously inclusive) than Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka People's Front (whose voter-base is unabashedly a more Sinhala-Buddhist constituency)⁷. The beautification, planned evictions, and increased military involvement in development, was therefore read by some scholars as an extension of Sri Lanka's post war developmental ethos intended to showcase the nation's economic potential to global investors while appeasing the existential anxieties and territorial insecurities of the Sinhala Buddhist majority (Perera and Spencer, 2023, Venugopal 2018). A decade later, the same audience, however, would rise against the Rajapaksa government during the Aragalaya protests⁸ with Colombo as the heart of the protest movement, due to the failure of over four decades of neo-liberal economic policies (Shanmugathas, 2020) and the populist development initiatives post-war, that had stifled the nation's cash reserves to the point that the average person could not afford basic necessities like fuel and food (Hemachandra and Hettiarachchi, 2023).

In 2010, residents of Slave Island's Mews Street and Java Lane were among the first to be impacted by the violent transformation. The blocks bordering Malay Street and Glennie Street were evicted, compensated for by apartments or money, and their land repurposed for private development. Playing to Sinhala Buddhist majoritarian sentiments, political leaders described this neighbourhood as a 'slum' and 'under-served' settlement (Karunaratne et al. 2023), and the people living there as 'encroachers' and 'criminals' who should be disciplined by the development vision of a world-class city (Perera and Spencer 2023, p. 224). Such rhetoric ignored their long history within the city and their own agency in political bargaining for services and the rights to property they had claimed over the years (Perera and Spencer, 2023). Eviction and resettlement, not only manifested as urban segregation of the 'poor' but also cut ties to place and community from where they derived their sense of social status, belonging and safety.

Over the course of the proposed evictions, 'race' did not serve an ascriptive purpose, as neither the eviction plans nor the impact of evictions were specifically ethnically targeted. Instead, 'race' is something that is experienced through 'social and spatial encounters' (Zewolde, et al. 2020), as is apparent by the narratives of the long-term residents, in those significant moments of change and conflict when bodies and physical spaces of ethnic minorities are marked for eviction. However, racialisation is two sided, as we present in the sections below. It operates on one level as raced valuation and intervention of the state (and market) towards the

⁷ Gotabhaya Rajapaksa when elected President of Sri Lanka made a speech to the Parliament that "It is no secret that the majority, who voted for me then, were Sinhalese. They rallied because they had legitimate fears that the Sinhala race, our religion, national resources and the heritage would be threatened with destruction in the face of various local and foreign forces and ideologies that support separatism, extremism and terrorism'" (See Suryanarayan, 2020; and Ananthavinayan, 2020).

⁸ The 'Aragalaya' was a series of protests building up to a 124-day occupation of Galle Face Grounds, in close proximity to Slave Island, demanding system change, regime change and accountability for economic crimes.



neighbourhood and at another level these same logics are internalised by the community in their response to waves of outsiders/interests.

Redrawing Borders Between Residents and 'Outsiders'

Slave Island has always been characterised by waves of migration. From the colonial era as its foundation myths indicate, during the twentieth century with the movement of families to and from Slave Island, the temporary migrations of boarders who moved in to work in factories or hospitals, and in recent years of post-war development of Slave Island, to the cyclic migration of labour from overseas, who are brought in to work on construction sites. These 'new migrant labourers' from India, Pakistan, China, Nepal and Myanmar are usually brought in by labour contractors and are repatriated by the company when their contracts are completed. Some are housed outside the city and bussed in for work. Their life in this neighbourhood retains the broad characteristics of a 'work camp' (Prins and Dasgupta 2023), yet in this case are encamped in dispersed houses spread throughout the community, where a 'handler' rents out houses in Slave Island for 6–10 workers, checks on their health and supports them throughout their stay. Most of these new cyclic labour migrants do not come with their families, and typically live together with other workers from the same country and rarely mix with the local communities. The oral histories highlight how multigenerational residents (who are Slave Island's historical precariat labour force) negotiate and manage their relationship to this new type of labour migration into Slave Island, which effectively displaces them as the primary labour force in the area. Many residents indicate that they do not want to work on the construction sites with its long hours and routine but prefer the informal sector that affords them a subsistence wage and flexibility. It is also possible that they are no longer considered a viable labour option because contractors prefer a globalised labour precariat that can be moved around with minimal negotiating power whereas local residents may have more agency, experience and history of 'place' in negotiating their labour, politics and access to welfare (Deshingkar 2018).

Kumari aunty⁹ is an unmarried woman in her early seventies who lives in her family home at the bottom of Church street. It is a large 4-bedroom house on a 14-perch plot (a perch is 5 m × 5 m) with a courtyard garden in the front and back. She is from an old, well-educated Sinhala family, that worked at mid-management level at a printing company in the adjoining business district. While Kumari aunty's maternal grandmother's family was from Mews street in Slave Island and her maternal grandfather worked for the Slave Island police, it was her father who bought the house she lives in nearly eighty years ago when he got married to her mother. As Kumari aunty says, the new labour migrants "...mind their own business and go to work. They come back at lunchtime around twelve, eat and go back. They come back again at eight in the night. They cook and eat their food, and keep to themselves" (Kumari Aunty, 13 August 2023, Colombo).

⁹ Names of all oral history narrators have been changed to preserve their anonymity.



The forces of global capitalism serviced by transnational labour movements (reminiscent of the colonial era) (Tilley and Shilliam 2017) means that yet again, Slave Island ‘hosts’ these commodified bodies of capital in and amongst the multi-generational residents who over time have established historical ties to their land. In its wake, the neighbourhood becomes a new site of contestation, where spatially negotiated boundaries between old insiders and new outsiders are carved out to demarcate ‘insider–outsider’/ ‘us versus them’ dynamics. The oral histories make this apparent in two ways: Firstly, multigenerational residents project their ‘Slave Islanderness’ by blending their own internal differences into a ‘we-ness’, to highlight their historical attachment to place, collective memories and common values. Secondly, by marking themselves different from outsiders and the ‘outsiderness’ of the new cyclic migrants (who to them, are proxies for the forces of global capital), they highlight the uniqueness of their neighbourhood and the reasons for affording them a privileged position to negotiate their specific needs as a community.

Expanding upon the first point, we are curious about what moral codes determine these concentric circles of ‘in and out’ dynamics. What rituals reinforce such norms? What rumours or histories and memories govern them? The relationship between place and lineage is indelibly linked to being an insider, which removes barriers to entry, to memory, sharing, accessing welfare and remaining protected by community during unsettling and insecure times due to outside pressure (such as the conflict, rapid development or the influx of new migrants). This is apparent in the case of Sandy—a transwoman of mixed heritage who returned to Slave Island with her mother. She was born to a Muslim man and a Tamil woman while the family worked overseas. As a return-migrant her case is unique and is very different from the ‘new’ labour migrants who are also not born in Sri Lanka. Sandy recounts,

When I first arrived from India, my first experience [on] the first day... I still can't forget it. Somebody made a derogatory comment by calling me gay or something because of my behaviour. Then my grandmother stood up for me.... She started protecting me (Sandy, 23 August 2023, Colombo).

Sandy's story shows that even the strict moral codes of heteronormativity, gender and sexuality as they relate to the ethno-religious groups of Sri Lanka that would normally be fraught with challenges, seem to be secondary when it comes to protecting insiders—a case of knowing ancestors and being able to establish genealogy and place. Similarly, the concentric circles of ritual, cultural practices and respect for the cultural autonomy of others—being a community of Buddhist temples, mosques, churches and kovils all existing in close proximity—has normalised codes and practices of living in harmony with other religions (Piyarathna and Coorey 2023). Ritualistic religious rites practised over centuries have become commonplace and part of Slave Island's uniqueness as they are jointly practised. Neighbours send each other traditional food (for Sinhala and Tamil New Year or Eid) celebrating festivals as a community, including ‘street-party’-esque events (pandols for the Buddhist holiday Vesak, decorating the streets with tender coconut leaf for the Hindu festival of vale, putting up Christmas lights).

Mangala Aunty is a Tamil woman in her sixties. Her father's family had lived on the same street for four generations although her mother is from ‘outside’. She



lives in the 'Church Lane *watte*'. Her house comprises two 10ft x 10ft rooms with an internal bathroom and upper floor. She has always enjoyed her life in Slave Island's *wattes* stating that, "we laugh and we fight and we live". Mangala aunty, like many other narrators of their histories in the article, echoes this confluence of cultures and unity, as a unique characteristic of Slave Island:

The Vale cart (the cart they kept the god's statues on), when it comes, people are very happy and they go and eat and drink and stay...and watch it... Everybody celebrates. At that time there was no separation because of differences (Mangala Aunty, 5 August 2023, Colombo).

Similarly, place-memories also bind families as insiders. Shakthi aunty is eighty-two years old and grew up and lived most of her life in the Java Lane area. Her mother's family has been from Slave Island for generations, with her own memory stretching back to their grandparents' house at the edge of Java Lane and Malay street. Once she married, Shakthi Aunty rented the front room and veranda of a small house (the extent of which was one perch) on Java Lane, and took on the rent when the old woman died. In the 1990s they received freehold deeds to the house. Over the years, the family pooled money to build four more storeys above it (all illegal construction). She remembers going to see 'Kallathoni' prisoners "kept in open cages by the police barracks" [literally meaning boat-people, these were stowaways discovered on ships or escapees from the tea-estates trying to find their way out of indentured labour]. Other older residents also remember going to see them as children: connecting them across space and time. In this way, formative memories collaborate and conspire to reify these place memories and "memory returns" (Muzaini 2015). In these ways, multigenerational residents redraw their social and cultural boundaries as they highlight their connectedness to each other as a collective community in order to distance themselves from the new migrants (Image 4).

Expanding on the second point, the 'othering' of the new migrants who live geographically within, yet entirely isolated from the community, (as they do not engage in any of the rituals or performances of the socio-cultural identity of the Slave Island), could be because they are seen as a visible articulation of the changes and policies that threaten their existence as a community (Shankley. 2023). Their difference is highlighted through rumours and fantastic tales of their 'otherness'. Raheema, a woman in her forties who identifies as Muslim, is a widow of a Tamil man. Her father was Muslim and her mother is Sinhalese. Her father's family has lived in the same house on Dispensary Lane *watte* for five generations. She lives with her family in three 8ft x 8ft rooms (one accessible from outside and rented out to three boarders) with a shared bathroom inside. The family of four live, work and sleep in the front room. citing a cultural incongruity Raheema states,

In these *wattu* of ours ...here there used to be a Chinese boarding [house] those days and towards evening they would sit down.... in a stretch from here to there and eat. (Raheema, 4 August 2023, Colombo)

She echoes others in Slave Island who believe that the Chinese migrants bring diseases, and eat cockroaches, dogs and mice – rumours that create an image of



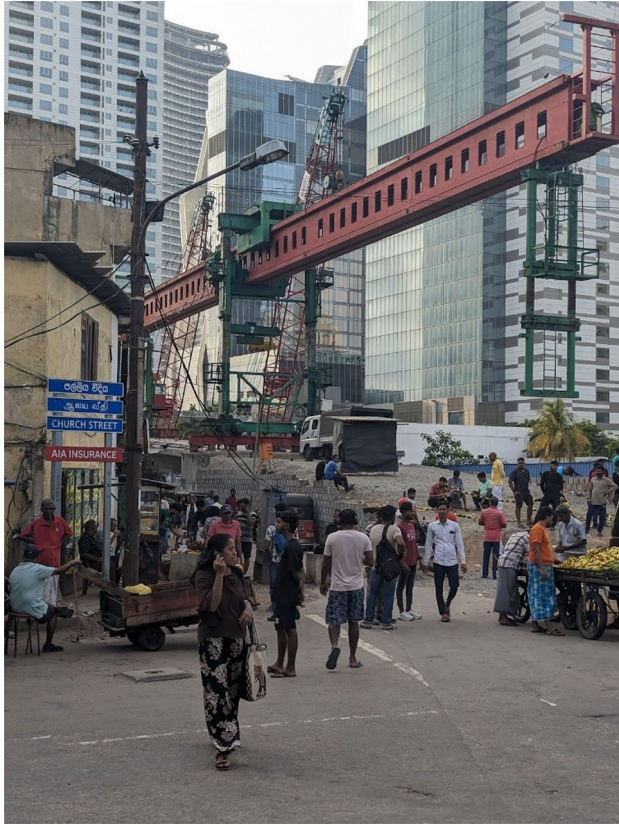


Image 4 Foreign workers, working on the Urban Development Authority's new highway bisecting Slave Island, relax on the half constructed highway on a Saturday. *Source* Photograph by Vicky Shajahan

the other that is simultaneously terrifying and ridiculous. Kumari Aunty believes that while the Indians boarded next door keep to themselves and are not a disturbance, their presence has created an opportunity for local thieves (who do not steal from the old families). Raheema agrees that phones, clothes, slippers etc., that are left out now, unlike a decade ago, can go missing as a more dangerous impact of the 'presence' of new migrants that attract thieves and drug addicts to the area.

It is interesting, however, that while the multigenerational residents view these new foreign migrants as isolated and 'outside' the community, they have managed to adapt and orient their small businesses to accommodate change without having to fully accept them; an articulation of how they instrumentalise insider–outsider relationships within the neighbourhood:

Our people make it and sell it. Cabbage and other vegetables are combined into a soup of sorts....They sell stuff for them specifically....Now they [locals] know how to make different types of food. ...There are a lot of them [locals]



who can speak Chinese as well. They learn it....Just like how Tamil people can speak Sinhala well, they too learn to speak their language. (Mangala Aunty, 5 August 2023, Colombo)

Protecting Boundaries; Maintaining Safety

Even with Slave Island's history of migration, it is highly unlikely that this new wave of international labour migrants will be assimilated. The oral histories highlight several reasons for this. Firstly and most importantly, historical migration carried possibilities of inter-marriage and becoming assimilated, while the separateness imposed upon the new labour migrants does not. Many of the oral histories indicate that marriage and inter-marriage within and between ethno-religious groups was not a barrier to someone becoming an 'insider' once they married someone from Slave Island and 'moved in'. Here, although not empirically verified, inter-marriage between ethnic and religious groups seems to be more prevalent in the *wattes*. Caste, class and marrying within one's ethno-religious group seem to matter more to those who consider themselves of higher status (defined by ownership of larger, ancestral plots of land along the main roads).

Meena is a woman in her seventies, living on Malay Street in a three-storey apartment block where her extended family live in close proximity to their businesses. She traces her lineage of place and family to her great-grandmother. She proudly shares the story of the history of Malays in Slave island, their culture, food and customs that are similar yet distinct from the Sri Lankan moors even if they both practise Islam. Meena aunty highlights 'marrying into Slave Island' thus;

Around the 18th century, they arrived here by ship. Everyone aboard the ship were Malaysian soldiers and lots of the young local girls ended up marrying them. While some soldiers went back with their new wives, many stayed back on account of marrying locals.... (Meena Aunty, 21 August 2023, Colombo)

During the 1970s the oral histories indicate that both Sinhala and Tamil residents started buying houses in the area, which increased during the civil war in the 1980s, when significant numbers of Tamils from the north also moved in, albeit temporarily as many have since joined their families abroad. We explore this intersecting dynamics of racialisation and securitisation in detail in a forthcoming publication. Mangala Aunty speaks to the changing demographics of Slave Island when she explains that,

There are people who come to Colombo for work. So, they come with their families and stay on rent in houses, and like that, a lot of people came....From Kandy, Gampola [predominantly Sinhala areas in the south] and areas like that. Now after staying here for so long they have become old people (Mangala Aunty, 5 August, 2023, Colombo)

Safety becomes a primary concern in protecting the cohesiveness and uniqueness of the community, including by not assimilating new migrants, as evident in Rajkumar uncle's histories. He is a ninety year old, who identifies as a Sri Lankan Tamil. Upon after marriage, he moved to Slave Island seventy-five years ago and into the



same house on Stuart Street that his wife's family had been renting since she was five years old. He and his father both worked in the ports, very close to Slave Island. He, like other Tamils in the area, was at work in the local harbour during the anti-Tamil pogrom and it was his fellow workers who told him to, ¹⁰

go home, there is a mob coming to beat you. Then about twenty to twenty-five family members hid in this home and we had to feed them all...now all those people have left and gone abroad" (Rajkumar uncle, 16 August 2023, Colombo).

He was 'saved' from the violent mob because of the proximity of home to his workplace, which enabled him and others like him to reach home to safety through back alleys and known neighbours' backyards. Safety in a time of crisis happened because he had the protection of being 'from the neighbourhood' and the 'safety in numbers of the a privilege, fiercely guarded by insiders neighbourhood'.

Negotiating intrinsic and speculative value of place and property

It is no surprise then that, in the wake of large-scale development and upheaval of their way of life, many of the residents preferred to stay in Slave Island because of livelihood, lineage and the safety that social capital lends their families. For Karunasiri uncle, a Sinhala man in his sixties, remaining in his *watte* (a previously privately owned plot of land unlike the other *wattes*, now subdivided with about 20 houses each with freehold titles and common Colombo Municipal Council-managed public toilets), is important not only because of his family history on the site, but the continuing proximity to informal sector income as a fruit-seller and a day-labourer. He lives in the same house where his polyandrous mother Malayaga Tamil (also known as Indian, hill-country or Estate Tamils)¹¹ mother, Sinhala father and his mother's first Malayaga husband lived together and raised their family of four children. The house, with two rooms of 8ft x 8ft with an illegally constructed upstairs room and internal bathroom, belonged to his stepfather who was a second generation Slave Islander. He says,

It's heart-breaking if I am asked to leave here. No other place will offer me comfort or convenience. If they build up this area and then let me stay in the same place, I don't mind [development]. I'm born here, I am from here, how can I go somewhere else? How can I go to, say, Peliyagoda? I won't know the place, I won't know anyone, I can't do anything. Slave Island is my vil-

¹⁰ The 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, known as Black July, saw Sinhalese mobs, many claim to be sanctioned by the Government, attack, displace and kill hundreds of Tamils and loot and destroy Tamil-owned businesses across Sri Lanka (AlJazeera, 2023).

¹¹ Indian Tamils, Plantation Tamils or Malayaga Tamils were brought to Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century by the British to work in the tea plantations as indentured labour, who were thought to be 'owned from cradle to grave' by the companies for which they worked. Their road to citizenship has been fraught with hardship and denial (Ahmed 2014).



lage. I can go anywhere for work in Colombo and come back here even at night, to my own house. (Karunasiri uncle, 5 August 2023, Colombo)

However, amongst the narrators, there was an emerging instrumentalised logic that in the face of inevitable transformation, having a stake in the real estate dividends that could come from the regeneration of Slave Island, was desirable. Even if this means eviction, the agency they derive from being from the neighbourhood, enables them to pursue anticipated development dividends for themselves and their future generations. Furthermore, part of negotiating their rights as compensation in this way, shows that those who are relatively more insecure in Slave Island (due to their dependence on precariat labour and property) internalise the erasing of their histories.

Rizwiya lives on Henry De Mel road with her four children, husband and eighty-two year old father. What they claim was their large family house, which stood over 100 years, is now only a 'portion' (divided over the years between her father's family of thirty-five children) reached by a 2ft wide alleyway between shops. It is a 10ft x 10ft room with an illegal and dangerously decayed wooden upstairs. The toilets and the access alleyway are shared. Yet, they retain some of the 'qualities' expected of an 'old', 'decent' family – educated, mid-level corporate employment and with no intermarriage outside of their ethno-religious community. Rizwiya, spoke about the proximity to services, livelihoods and schools as one of her main reasons that encourage her to stay in the neighbourhood;

... Life is hard and we have no space, but the kids' schooling is close. ... Now the value we placed on being an 'old' family is gone. There is only the commercial value here. The man coming from outside doesn't know who we are ... I want to get the deed to my name because in future this [land] can be of benefit to my children." (Rizwiya, 8 August 2023, Colombo)

What is clear is that Rizwiya, Kumari aunty, Karunasiri uncle and many of the other narrators live with the possibility of being displaced (or having already been moved to the Metropolitan flats after the demolition and eviction from Java lane). Although the current development plans (commercial or the Road Development Authority (RDA) do not seem to include the homes of some of the oral history narrators in this article, the commercialisation of property that has taken root in other parts of Slave Island has complicated the 'intrinsic value' that they place on connectedness and community, and the safety and security of 'home'. While loath to leave what they know and love, there is an emerging articulation of 'value' as an 'exchange value'. Here, the competing regimes of value that are placed on Slave Island – from real estate speculation and urban gentrification – influence the way the residents think of their neighbourhood's value to them. While comparing and contrasting commercial value of land with intrinsic value, Rizwiya sums up this hedging of 'future value' best when she states:

... The Tata company bought their land [as a collective contract] first and built the Metropolitan flats. Before that, the land [individual plots] wasn't worth much... They paid above the [official] valuation because people



refused to sell. In the *wattes* the houses are small temporary structures, so when the hotels started coming in and the value started going up, people started fixing their houses up and building upwards to two to three stories. If the houses are better, then they get compensated more (Rizwiya, 8 August 2023, Colombo)

This is reminiscent of Shakthi aunty's 'enhanced' house with its additional square footage which enabled her to negotiate a better compensation. She and her family now own three flats at the Metropolitan flats built for the evicted Java Lane residents, less than 200 m from where she originally lived.

However, beneath the pragmatic and self-preservative responses to the changes that come with rapid development—including the instrumentalisation of 'value' when threatened with evictions and displacement—the fractures and differences 'within' the community become highlighted. One of the clearest examples of the manifestation of difference in the wake or in response to development, particularly in accessing its dividends, is to maintain and highlight one's own status within the community. These are identity-based claims linked to place—the type of house one owns or the street one lives on. For example, among the residents of Slave Island, those who are economically better-off live on the main road, in larger houses, situated on 6 to 15 perches. Whereas those who are relatively less well off, live on small alleyways in tracts of shared land called *wattes*, where about 20–25 houses are often on just one perch of land each. *Wattes* are what some people would associate as 'slum' areas behind the bigger stand-alone houses alongside the main roads. Most *wattes* would have electoral registration, assessment numbers and utility bills (with some having freehold deeds) but almost all have significant illegal construction (bathrooms and upper floors). Thus, the residents live in a tenuous and tense relationship with the law, as many of the rights they are afforded are negotiated within this grey area of "sanctioned illegality" (Gururani 2013:105).

In reifying their identities, the socio-material articulation of their location (physical, historical, racial, class-based) within Slave Island's larger fabric becomes a touchstone—simultaneously inclusive of and against which these identities exist. Value, in this context, is intrinsic. It is not necessarily the 'financialised' value of property or place, but is tied to the social function of place—where they live and how they live. For example, the reference to status and class in relation to others and the nuances of what they expected as compensation—not always a like-for-like monetary value—for the property they could potentially lose, becomes important. For them, keeping these differences of status and ranking is possibly part of the system of protections that they have established for themselves as members of ethnic minorities or labour precariat.

Nazeema aunty is a Muslim woman in her sixties. Her mother came from 'outside' and her father was from Slave Island for three generations. There has never been ethno-religious intermarriage in her family, and she married a man from another urban centre and brought him to live with her in a large three-storey house on nine perches of land on Church Street. Similar to Kumari Aunty, she also politely acknowledges the residents of the *watte* but never associates with them as her social status is higher. The class consciousness as a marker of difference, means her



socio-cultural identity is not simply as a Muslim woman from Slave Island, but also as a woman from a 'decent' family *within* the unspoken and entrenched community hierarchies. As with Kumari aunty, and others from Slave Island, decentness references higher education and a or government job as qualifiers of their social class, which separates them from their more boisterous and uneducated neighbours from the *wattes*. If she has to be moved by the possible acquisition of her land by the RDA, she hopes that she and her family members will be able to negotiate separation from the residents of the *wattes* to maintain distinction;

It's like this, we are 'decent' because we live on the main street. Those people live in the '*watte*'. We are educated, we live inside our houses, big houses, we are quiet and decent. ...If we are put on the same floor we have to walk past their houses to go to ours or they can walk past ours and see inside, we can't live like that. (Nazeema aunty, 10 August 2023, Colombo)

Conclusion

When established norms of 'where one is from' and 'who one is because of where one is from' are threatened with the violent transformation of 'development', how do communities counter the violent displacement of their bodies and identities attached to place? Do communities clarify the abstractness of belonging and 'reclaim' their losses and marginalised identities? The simple answer is 'yes', because the oral histories articulate that communities are agentive, and not simply commodified bodies displaced by development. They understand and utilise notions of value—intrinsic, instrumental and commercial—as powerful tools for navigating the dividends of development for as a neighbourhood themselves, albeit not always successfully.

How do communities such as Slave Islanders respond to the precarity of violent urban transformation, particularly in a post-war developmental context? We find that they fold back into themselves as a community, strengthening notions of mutual belonging through lineage and connectedness to place. Blending internal differences towards a cohesive collective identity based on reciprocal recognition and vouching for each other as 'insiders', is part of marking themselves 'different' and unique. This is a form of protection from the loss of their space and way of life by external interests—including the state, private sector developers and the cyclic labour migrants who come in its wake. This also means that against the influx of new cyclic labour migrants (who to local residents, visibly embody the development policies over which they have no control), 'insider narratives' are reinforced by 'othering' them as 'foreign', 'temporary' and having no 'spatial ties' to Slave Island.

The articulation of the intrinsic value of Slave Island as a community is built, firstly on memory and meaning-making as they clarify the nuances of how a multi-ethnic community lives (mostly) peacefully, even in the context of the violent heritage of development. Secondly, it is built on proximity to economic opportunity as 'dependent livelihood security' and safety in the recognisable ancestries, connectedness and networks rooted in community. Finally, it is built on an aspirational 'real' commercial value that may be exchanged or passed on to future generations. Such



narrativization also then helps to promote the notion that Slave Island's multigenerational community and their historic relationship to 'place' needs to be preserved for its uniqueness.

In this way, Slave Island's multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-generational communities marked for the violent transformation of development, actively respond using the 'tools' at their disposal. By proposing 'intrinsic value' in narrativising the loss of histories, memories and uniqueness of their community as insiders rooted in place, they speculate a compensatory valuation above the commercial value of their properties. Thus, they understand and utilise notions of value for bargaining, in non-traditional ways to insert themselves into dividend-claims of the development happening around them. Thus, processes of race and racialisation, appear in the making of 'us' and 'them' narratives to shore up current and future claims to Slave Island.

Current approaches on racialised practices of urban development, on one hand sees race and territory as bounded entities to explain structures of inequality and graded subordination, and on the other hand, as a relationality that is used more contingently, transactionally and in ever-evolving ways to secure specific interests. Our article contributes to the latter view. The narrativisation of Slave Island's residents' experiences (of living through development and change) reveal that they are not simply bodies marked by difference, before rather they are agentive actors who embed alternative values into the economic rationalisation of the top-down developmental script. 'Racialised' practices therefore take on a new meaning in their affective experience of responding to change and are reevaluated in for bargaining developmental dividends in nuanced ways.

Acknowledgements We thank the editors for the invitation to be part of this special issue, the reviewers for their comments, our research collaborators from Slave Island and Nirmani Liyanage to whom this article is dedicated. The initial research for this article benefitted from a British Academy Sandpit Grant (2021–2022) and University of Westminster's impact funding (2023).

Declarations

Conflict of interest We declare that there are no conflict of interests in this article.

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