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TRICKSTER AT PLAY :
AN INQUIRY INTO TRANSGRESSION
IN A COLONISED WORLD

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# The Trickster at Play

# An inquiry into transgression in a colonised world

# Contents

## Acknowledgements

To Dian, you are present in this work in many guises, and I owe a lot to you.

To Alexandra Elbakyan, who enriched this work in countless ways, and helped break a colonial construct.

And to all that were part of this inquiry, in many practice and spirit, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

## Abstract

This is an inquiry about transgression of colonial discourse.

My intimate encounter with the ongoing ecological destruction of the world fills me with grief and shapes my perspective. This grief is made invisible in our lives and business through hegemonic discourses that marginalises ecological integrity and sustainability. As a sustainability practitioner of an apparel manufacturing company, I occupy a discursively constructed margin.

How do I bring about meaningful change that preserves the key life sustaining processes that honour earth as a living system within such a context? I claim resistance and transgression, play critical and strategic roles in the praxis of those who occupy such colonised spaces and attempting to transform the same.

I explore transgression as a mode of practice that opens windows of opportunity to broaden the discursive boundaries to enable new modes of action and relationships. I explore how transgression becomes performative; and in my praxis exists in a wider spectrum of activities including collaboration, coalition building, advocacy and expertise, that gives it a unique sense of power and agency. I explore trickster as an embodied and performative form of transgression, and locate it within the larger body of practices and explore her influence in shifting discourse.

I describe a complex practice that employs these methods and others to challenge the normalizing effects of power and attempt to build a more sustainable world through action and shifting of discourse. It is also a risky and unsafe territory where self-care has little meaning. I look beyond traditional and sanitised accounts of change, to narrate a deeply conflicted, contradictory, political and complex account of a change agent, as an offer for resonance.

I explore historical, cultural and colonial constructs that sit at the foundation of the research process, specifically action research. Moving beyond deconstruction of method, I offer a different way to approach method in action research, that would support radical activism based out of a performative mode. I also explore what it is to be writing from outside to an academy with its Eurocentric structures.

Writers imagine that they cull stories from the world. I'm beginning to believe that vanity makes them think so. That it's actually the other way around. Stories cull writers from the world. Stories reveal themselves to us. The public narrative, the private narrative - they colonize us. They commission us. They insist on being told. Fiction and nonfiction are only different techniques of story telling. For reasons that I don't fully understand, fiction dances out of me, and nonfiction is wrenched out by the aching, broken world I wake up to every morning.

— Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things

We are always doing something

Why are we always doing something?

Ha ha ha

Hee hee hee

- Kavini Ralapanawe (unpublished)

## 1. Beginnings

### Introducing the Journey

This thesis reflects a five-year action research inquiry into 'how I turn up in the world.' It integrates a multitude of roles played and identities inhabited during that time; a corporate sustainability practitioner, an environmental activist, an action researcher, a husband and a father, among others. Multiple arcs woven together and made visible, while many more remain hidden.

In this work, I attempt to shine a light on transgression and the emergence of the trickster within staged and everyday contexts. The trickster is not only present in the narratives, but also in the margins, in the shadow and occasionally gloriously in the centre. I write about oppression and marginalisation created by hegemonic discourses, with trickster and transgression emerging as its modes of resistance.

This has not been an easy work to write, and I am aware that it may not be an easy text to enter into, read and inhabit[1]. As I aged with this work, I struggled with linear narratives, as interruptions and reframings seeped in; an interrogative narrative whose value I realised only later on. The text also reflected the complexity of my life, with its frequent interruptions, discontinuities, diversions and ironies.

I entered the Ashridge Doctorate of Organisational Change (ADOC) programme during a stagnant phase of my corporate career, deeply mired in organisational politics. At ADOC, I wanted to understand change; its emergence and the role of the change agent, so that I can *be a better leader* to *drive sustainability* within the company. I had attributed the company's reluctance to emerge as a *radical* sustainability leader at least in part, on my own inability to create sufficient change; not *leaderly enough* to *drive sustainability*. I picked action research hoping that it would improve my personal practice.

Leadership, change and agency; three interconnected ideas that fold into each other. And underneath it was a restlessness that was difficult to pinpoint at that time.

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[1] Here I salute to Derrida on what does it mean to read a text – to enter into its world, to inhabit

My appropriation of the company's reluctance to truly embrace sustainability may appear as hubris, but this problem formulation is not unusual within the contemporary leadership discourse, heavily influenced by the grand narrative of heroic leadership. It was not coincidental that in 2013/14, my friend and colleague Shevanthi and I were writing *the cornerman* (Ralapanawe & Fernando, 2014)*,* the biography of the company's then CEO, Dian Gomes. Dian was a mentor and a role model, and was known as a 'transformational leader' within the organisation and outside. Though I had been somewhat troubled by toxic elements of charismatic and *heroic* leadership, having seen it up close, I was also seduced by it. It was part of my world at that time.

As I began exploring theory and paying closer scrutiny to my own practice, my views of leadership began shifting. I began interrogating the dominant discourse that defined business leadership, with its links to narcissism and toxic masculinity. I began noticing cultural, gender, racial, colonial and class underpinnings of the discourse. I pondered on voice, marginality and gender, and how they related to leadership. Writing the book was a pincer movement arising out of a double vision. A glorious celebration of leadership while stripping it of its illusions of grandeur; the work of a trickster deep inside.

My primary area of practice was environmental sustainability. The intensification of the destruction of natural systems and climate change continued to hold a mirror of urgency to my work. I was also engaging on issues of social sustainability and human resources, blurring boundaries of disciplines. My field of engagement was resisting categorisation.

At MAS Intimates, as a sustainability practitioner, I was always able to create spaces to influence, progressively getting better at it, while feeling marginalised within the larger MAS group level initiatives. My *reputation* as a radical thinker and actor with an ambivalence to authority, which worked well with Dian, was frowned upon at group level. I found myself being passed-over for leadership opportunities within the organisation, and being mired in conflict with the group sustainability leadership.

During this time, I began working with the Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC), a global apparel industry organisation with a commitment towards sustainability. I found myself committing significant time and emotional energy working with them, contributing to multiple projects – from strategy to tool building. SAC's approach to the industry sustainability problem intrigued

me, as for the first time, manufacturers had some say in how solutions were structured. I saw a potential window to shift the discursive structure that I felt was holding back progress. Almost in parallel, I found myself in the limelight, as an environmental activist attempting to stop the state utility from building multiple coal power plants.

At the nudging of Dr Gill Coleman from the ADOC faculty, I began exploring postcolonial theory. I was captivated by the work of Gayatri Chakravorthy Spivak. After spending years immersed in Western scholarship with some discomfort, I had found a voice that resonated with my own experience[2]. It wasn't merely that she was speaking to the postcolonial condition; I was finding her style and method of critical interrogation of hegemonic and colonial discourses applicable to the apparel industry, sustainability and business.

I began discovering patterns within my practice; contesting oppression, collaboration, disruption, pedagogy and transgression. As the gaze turned inwards I was beginning to see how the interplay between these patterns worked, a complex personal practice that had many guises. Enabling and collaborative at times, agential at others, dissonant and transgressive at times and oppositional at others.

Though the framing changed with time, my inquiry continued to be anchored in self-discovery and emancipation. Discovering *I*, as both an active and passive subject, a subject-in-relation, understanding the discourse of this subject formation, and my attempts to break free from limiting frames, have always been present in my work.

This brought forward an exploration of 'I'; who and what is this 'self' that is trying to inquire into a practice. I began encountering the instability of 'I', and the instability of 'practice', struggling to pin them down as if they have any form of solidity, continuity or fixity. It surfaced the dominance of how much the "Western" ideas of selfhood had displaced my roots in Buddhist ontology and epistemology.

ADOC was always an inquiry of *how I turn up in the world*, and many locations that I turned up tended to be marked by oppression and marginalisation. I found I was constantly inhabiting a discourse colonised in many fronts. I was striving to break free from colonial frames that imprisoned us as individuals and as communities, within organisations, society, industry,

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[2] Spivak is also part of the Western scholarship.

civilisation and ecology. This began taking centre stage of my inquiry, especially as I began reflecting on methods of intervention at such locations.

ADOC was giving wings to the radicalism that lay dormant within me, and as I strove against frameworks of domination and discipline, even turning my gaze at action research. I was transgressive, but my practice was broader than transgressive acts. I explored how transgression becomes performative; and exist in a wider spectrum of praxis, that gives it its sense of power and agency.

My ADOC journey ran parallel to many other strands in my life. I was at times a bystander as my two daughters grew up, a grieving witness to the dramatic changes of the landscape and ecology around us, and an observer when my wife Magda began falling ill. These events and many others shaped me, reshaping my perspectives and praxis. Not as much as shifting from one phase to another, but polymorph, to occupy multiple positions, roles and identities. The trickster, the teacher, organiser and the provocateur, influencing 'sustainability', holding attention on ecology and emancipation… To hold these positions somewhat lightly, with reflexivity and irony.

And sometimes with utter sadness and despair.

My introspection puts me into a space that Roy (2010) describes beautifully.

> This book, like my teaching, is written in the impossible space between the hubris of benevolence and the paralysis of cynicism. It is a space marked by doubleness: by both complicities and subversions, by the familiar and the strange. I write it in the figure that most often strikes a chord with my millennial students, as a double agent, shaped by centralities and multiplicities (p. 40).

This is the space of the trickster.

## Interruption

A day off after a month of hectic work schedules, and I am hoping to get the second draft of my thesis done. A colleague taking some time off and some visitors from abroad had added to my workload. The thesis is half-done, it has been on a slow simmer, and I haven't closed it in any meaningful form. And today was supposed to be the beginning of focused writing; but it is not to be.

A phone call breaks my concentration. A cabinet paper has been presented seeking approval for two more coal power plants for Sri Lanka, and a group of us have been mobilising and lobbying against the same with ministers. This paper is presented in some secrecy, without the regular review process, and we are scrambling to respond quickly.

We have a few contacts, and we need to act fast; a string of calls to the key group members, and we are strategizing. How and when to bring the media in? How to inform and mobilise the local resistance? This is the initial activism, our focus is on the immediate steps, tactical; not a mobilisation for a long war.

As the techie of the group, I am suddenly tasked to prepare two documents, a detailed comments document to be circulated to a key Minister and another explainer on the non-viability of the coal industry euphemism of 'clean coal' to a very senior politician.

First, a furious round of research; on technology, trends, costs and success rates. The documents require thought on positioning, how to highlight the sensitivity of the ecosystems, and the broader impact of the decision.

The document is finally out of the way, and I am exhausted. The calls don't stop – more mobilisation is needed across groups. I want it to stop, I hate the stress this places on me. The thesis is open on my computer, and I wonder when I will be able to focus on it again.

I begin with an interruption. Can I interrupt what has really not begun?

This thesis was not written with soothing music in the background, in an organised room with a writing table, books full of post-it notes and flipchart paper with the key strands and

narrative arcs. This is written in the middle of the hustle of daily work, the messiness of having to balance a corporate career, environmental activism, a family, and life in general. The placement of these items in this sequence is not accidental.

This work is discontinuous, stories told in starts and spurts, built literally with delays, tears and procrastinations. It is written with different intensities and energies at different times, a rhythm with ebbs and flows. Moments of high excitement that give way to days of stupor, depression and anxiety. There is no beginning, there is no end. There is no arrow of progress to mark, it is a work of moving back and forth, with no fixity but fluidity. A reflection of my life and practice in full colour.

It is a collection of stories and reflections, stitched together with another narrative layer that opens and explores sensemaking and theorising, a metanarrative of sorts. This is not a problem if we accept that discontinuity is more 'real' than continuity.

## The Reluctant Trickster

Tricksters are holders of double-edged swords. While they may encourage levity, we should also take them seriously as both a cultural form and as a mode of description powerful enough to constitute social relations and identities (Geismar 2015, p. 379).

As my thesis emerged out of the ruins of my progression paper, I hesitated to foreground the trickster, though it kept propping up in multiple locations. The hesitancy arose out of multiple concerns. The impression of the trickster within a business context was negatively skewed through the association of 'confidence tricksters' and charlatans. Trickster was viewed as a person with a hidden agenda or motives. Some tricksters carry strong negative cultural connotations that are difficult to shed.

"What is your doctorate about," I visualise a colleague asking me. "It's an inquiry into my role as a trickster in corporate life," I imagine myself replying with quite the trepidation.

Another concern was my own questioning; how much and how often does the trickster *show-up* in my practice. Was I attempting to bring a peripheral practice to the centre?

During a supervisory call, Steve's nudging to "more carefully theorise your practice as *trickster*," forced me to ask – who exactly is a trickster?

Trickster shows up often in academic literature, rooted in (uprooted from) tales from indigenous cultures. Salinas (2013) suggests that the trickster archetype is an academic amalgamation of multiple figures and performance practices. Each trickster emerges from (and transgresses) its own culture, place and epistemology. These tales cannot fully cross the epistemological boundaries; we can only partially glean the significance of the trickster within her own context.

I will introduce the trickster in a later chapter, and point her emergence in patterns of behaviour within the thesis. Here, I want to claim a more central idea of trickster by introducing this work as one necessarily imbued with a trickster quality, arising out of irreconcilable tensions and splitting.

Visweswaran (1984) points out,

> The notion of feminist trickster hinges on the supposition that we can "give voice" and the knowledge that we can never fully. Here I argue for a suspension of feminist faith that we can ever wholly understand and identify with other women (displacing again

the colonial model of "speaking for" and the dialogical hope of "speaking with"). This requires a trickster figure who "trips" on but is not tripped up by the seduction of a feminism that promises what it may never deliver: full representation on one hand, and full comprehension on the other. In this scenario the feminist as trickster mediates between cognitive failures and its success; it is trickster agency that makes the distinction between success and failure indeterminate, alerting us to the "possibilities of failure". I believe that holding these two terms in tension – the desire to know and the desire to represent – gives us the means as Spivak suggests, to "question the authority of the investigating subject without paralyzing her persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility" (p. 100).

Similar multiple impossibilities mark this thesis with its diverse set of expectations, its attempts to cross cultural boundaries, the problem of researching as a 'native scholar' (Russel y Rodriguez, 1998), its attempt to critique colonial knowledge construction within its own constructs, while asking if action research itself, makes a claim of impossibility; willing the emergence of trickster across multiple locations in this text.

The tension between desire to know and desire to represent is also at the core of the action research process. I am attempting to understand 'self and my practice' (full comprehension) and to describe such understanding (full representation) in this thesis. I am aware that the 'real' practice is not really understandable, lies beyond what can be really investigated, relies on an extended epistemology that is beyond propositional knowledge and this cannot be conveyed accurately nor comprehensively. Can reflexivity and deep interrogation of my own writing help me escape framing the researcher *as the one who knows*? Can I really escape being *tripped up* on these as I attempt to write an action research thesis?

Bhabha (1985) depicts the colonial gaze as an unreconcilable pull from two distinct spaces, "it is in-between the edict of Englishness and the assault of the dark unruly spaces of the earth, through an act of repetition, that the colonial text emerges uncertainly" (p. 149). This is the story that emerges as I explore colonialism in the apparel industry sustainability discourse in this thesis.

He points out the ambivalence as an inevitable result, "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (p. 150), leading to inevitable construction of split subjects.

> Its discriminatory effects are visible in those split subjects of the racist stereotype - the simian Negro, the effeminate Asiatic male - which ambivalently fix identity as the fantasy of difference. To recognize the differance of the colonial presence is to realize that the colonial text occupies that space of double inscription, hallowed - no, hollowed - by Jacques Derrida (p. 150).

Bhabha goes on to posit that ambivalence and hybridity as generative concepts that arises out of the colonial gaze and power. Two concepts that are central to the trickster and recur within my praxis.

This type of splitting of subjecthood and 'purpose' is recurrent in this thesis. There is the tension of being an activist, a corporate executive and an action researcher at the same time. Tension between insider/outsider frames also are pronounced. My writing also imbues trickster qualities, with commentary, irony and sarcasm, invoking an authorial trickster.

I believe as action researchers, we must draw forth our trickster selves, in ways perhaps not cognitively definite, but intuitively right, to hint at what we may know through text. To glean what we can of our own praxis, knowing upfront the impossibility and partiality of the task. I attempt to write not in ignorance, but with full awareness, tripping on joyfully.

## Notes to Reading (and Writing) this Text

"You live on the surface," Lia told me years later. "You sometimes seem profound, but it's only because you piece a lot of surfaces together to create the impression of depth, solidity. That solidity would collapse if you try to stand it up."

- Umberto Eco, Foucault's Pendulum

"My text is unruly, fractured, a mosaic of sorts (Williams 2008), a layered text, a montage, part theory, part performance, multiple voices, a performance with speaking parts…. Performance to be a way of knowing, a way of creating and fostering understanding" (Denzin 2009, p. 255).

This thesis has been years in the making.

As I worked with various pre-written segments of text, bringing them into a coherent form became a pastiche, with permeable membranes that loosely held things together. Writing, though at conclusion appears in linear form, is never a linear process for me. It is always a back and forth movement – a continuous framing and re-framing, intertextual, pointing to the fluidity of meaning that can never be truly fixed. The end reframes the beginning, a conscious or sub-conscious movement that asks continuous questions of meaning. All texts do this, yet some more than others.

This text has been written, re-written, re-read and written again. It is not fixed in time, on a self; a fluid text which cannot claim a beginning or an end, unstable, as with all the stories told within it. Inserting text written years before at times feel like cheating; they mean different things to me now, because I have changed. If text is bound with time, then how does one make sense of a stitched-up thesis?

This text is built on two interwoven trajectories, one centred on themes and the other built on narratives. After struggling with form, I opted to privilege the narrative arc, building the work on a storytelling tradition, which closely matched my reflective writing. This felt more in line with my own epistemological framing.

The different narrative threads in the thesis ran parallel trajectories in time, hence they too resist the linear flow of the text even within each narrative. The interrelatedness of the individual strands, with events and implications in one area feeding into others is critical to sensemaking. It reiterates the fluidity of identity and self across trajectories.

I use terms such as 'brand', 'manufacturer', 'first world', 'global south', 'West' etc. in the spirit of "strategic essentialism" introduced by Gayatri Spivak (Banerjee 2003, p. 144). They discursively form binary relationships such as 'brand-manufacturer' and these frames must be used with caution. Whilst the examples speak of specific behaviour, brands and manufacturers work within a behavioural spectrum that cannot be wholly essentialised. The differentiation of brands and manufacturers are problematic as many manufacturers are brands by their own right. Yet such framings are important to understand what Banerjee (2003) calls "particular set of discursive power relationships" (p. 144) that these entities are inscribed with.

The literature I engaged with tossed up challenges. French theorists, like Foucault and Derrida, and post-colonial theorists like Spivak and Bhabha, use language that is not easily accessible. I spent hours parsing through their meanings. Their theoretical nous and language use was seductive due to their complex encoding. I found myself mimicking this voice in my writings, which was challenged by my ADOC supervision group on accessibility. This comment by Craig was prescient.

> "You are choosing to use the words of the academic elite, (another form of power and colonisation). I notice this in contrast to the claims that you are making about being oppositional to colonialism and power. So my question is this – are you being deliberate (using their words against them, or is this you hiding behind language that is not accessible to those who are not fluent in this form of jargon."

Claiming the language of the coloniser is a treasured anti-colonial strategy, an act of claiming agency. But Craig's second point on purpose made me reflect deeply. Accessibility to text demands a different way of handling language. I reverted to a more broadly accessible text, that matched my narrative tilt.

A story and/or a narrative can be *scholarly*. Visweswaran (1994) speaks of the blurring boundaries of the novel, autobiography and ethnography. Action research is also my story. Stories privilege flow, and I always felt good narratives are aided by a certain degree of revelation as form; the *a-ha* moment. It is the play of the trickster, where the revelation demands a re-interpretation and re-contextualisation of what went on before. I feel this as more consistent with my lived experience. The day does not begin with an abstract; each moment is a wondrous revelation. This stands in contrast to the style of academic writing, where framing upfront is privileged. I try to balance these two demands in my writing, and invite you the reader, to allow such a play in the thesis.

Stories embrace intertextuality, without pretences of fixity of meaning. This may complicate the reading of a scholar, diverging in style and intent from the traditional academic text. I find it more natural and attempt to walk a fine line on the margin; to meet the academic demands whilst being true to a more embodied sense of form.

The writing is also juxtaposed with quotes, that add, contradict, complement or displace the text. Many a time a quote points a finger at the text in jest. A transgression that interrupts and interrogates the flow with irony, a common feature in my writing. It serves as a reminder of the danger of being caught up with our own constructions. The comedian John Cleese wants us to honour humour, noting that humour is not the opposite of seriousness[3]. Irony forces us to laugh, reframe and rethink and hold on to concepts lightly. There is no stable centre for the narrative to hold, as we have built our world on uncertain ground. There is no correct reading of this text, but opportunities for 'pleasurable misreadings.'

As I reflect on my writing, I notice that I have become more ambiguous and tentative in my conclusions, qualifying my statements more and more, as I attempt to develop a theory of action. On the one hand my delving into deconstructionist work has resulted in a mistrust in text and authority of the written source. On the other hand, past few years have acutely shown me how my subjectivity is formed, battered down through multiple bruising encounters, at times barely able to stand. The wins were shown to be fleeting, as the dominant discourse reasserted itself. I was made aware of my subject position, dictated from without as the *other*. The more I resisted such framing, more I realised that certainty and stability are luxuries when fighting from marginal positions.

The world I paint with this work is also exotic; writing in part to academia in Europe from Sri Lanka, where work culture, nature and the pulse of life may appear quite dramatic and different. Writing to this audience makes me pause, am I "*selling the exotic* as a postcolonial" (Ng, 2011, p. 119)? I attempt to set as much context as I can, knowing the impossibility of doing so.

This thesis reflects my ambivalent identity, a near permanent occupation of liminality. How do I negotiate the insider-outsider of my subject position, as I write this thesis? Paralysis of not knowing how to write, sitting next to 'extreme self-consciousness' with the danger of writing full

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb5oIIPO62g

of irony, elitism and solipsism (Ng, 2011, p. 115). I point to the sometimes-debilitating dilemmas that needed negotiation as I write, to contextualise and bring relevance.

"There are two kinds of writing; the one you write and the one that write you. The one that writes you is dangerous. You go where you don't want to go. You look where you don't want to look," Sparks (2013, p. 210) quotes Winterson (2012). This writing is dangerous, and with it I have travelled, at times with significant cost to me and my family.

## The Politics of the Thesis

"Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (Smith, 1999 p. 5).

My ADOC journey made me question the construction of knowledge and its colonial inscription. My inquiry attempts to "critique, interrupt, and reinscribe normative, hegemonic, and exclusionary ideologies and practices" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000 p. 3), and that cannot exclude the academy. My gaze turned inwards to critically look at the modes and methods of research that construct *knowledge*, the edifice that supported the *academy*. I delve into this at depth in chapters three and six.

A thesis is deeply embedded in the 'academy'; I write to the academy, and reference from it. Yet what is this academy that I write to, but one that is constructed by the empire, from the treasures of the colonies, where indigenous knowledge is marginalised, misinterpreted and appropriated as Smith (1999) highlights? It is a *Western academy*, with a historic orientation along the axis of power that privileged neoliberal, male, heterosexual, Judeo-Christian thinking. Thus inevitably, fragments of colonial authority is marked along this text.

My critique of the Western academy comes from a contested location. I am embedded in it and a product of it. An insider-outsider position; an opening for a trickster. Though I quote from radical, feminist, ecological, postcolonial and queer theorists, (theorists of the margin), this only speak to part of my lived experience. The other part arises from a traditional Sinhalese cultural legacy and thought, imbued with Buddhist epistemology, that my Western academic trappings has subdued. I struggle to voice this within an academic context and am discomforted by it.

Mohanty (1984) asks us to visualise "scholarship as a directly political and discursive practice in that it is purposeful and ideological", treating it as a "political praxis which counters and resists the totalizing imperative of age-old 'legitimate' and 'scientific' bodies of knowledge" (p. 334). Thus, the *location* from which I signify becomes critically important. In this work, I critique it from a double vision, as a *halfie*, embedded within with discomfort; like a trickster.

What is a doctoral thesis? It is not a 'reporting' of fieldwork with theorising and interpretations. It is also part of the inquiry, and thus cannot shed its political connotations. A doctoral *submission* is perhaps a deliberate pun, a submission to enter into a hallowed hall. My work is pedagogically confrontational. I must hold my trickster spirit in abeyance, which wants to trip up

the academy, and possibly trip myself along it. Thus the tension; embracing a confrontational pedagogy evoking the trickster, yet holding back the same in writing the thesis.

This is an unabashedly political text, foregrounding opposition to colonial constructs using a myriad of approaches. This raises a critical question on accessibility. Action research's ask for a larger contribution to the practitioner fraternity suggests that I place them at the centre; and in this includes others who challenge colonialism in its multiple incarnations. This work is also for the academy, and I struggle at this dance of impossibility of situating a text to these somewhat disparate constituencies.

At times this thesis takes a strong anti-colonial position as a necessity and this may prove challenging to some readers from the first world. I recognise this inaccessibility. While I empathise with the same, I also believe that there is no text that is universally accessible. As a post-colonial researcher, I have struggled with literature that objectified me, my history and my ways of knowing, constructing me as a category through discursive formations. My exclusion within literature is real and ever present.

I note that the demand for universal acceptability is also a privilege of a power structure, a point highlighted by Ta-Nehesi Coates, in his viral answer to a student regarding *words that do not belong to everyone*.

> When you're white in this country, you're taught that everything belongs to you, you can do whatever you want, you can go wherever you want. You're conditioned this way. It's not because your hair is a texture or your skin is light. It's the fact that the laws and the culture tell you this.

> For white people, I think the experience of being a hip-hop fan and not being able to use the word "nigger" is actually very, very insightful. It will give you just a little peek into the world of what it means to be black. Because to be black is to walk through the world, and watch people doing things that you cannot do, that you can't join in and do. So, I think there's actually a lot to be learned from refraining[4].

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[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YysrO5aDc64

I wonder what is the political nature of this text, as imagined by the relationship between the author and the reader. Who reads this text, what is my relationship to her, what is the nature of this intervention, if we ask critical questions about nature of research/ethnography/narrative within the performance turn (Denzin & Lincoln 2018). Visweswaran (1994) asks us to disrupt the identity of the reader with a unified subject of enunciation by discouraging identification. Ray (2009) reminds us of Spivak's belief of the "crucial need to constantly problematize one's authority as an investigating subject" (p.12). I am mindful of both these asks.

With all this caveats and signposting, I invite you into the world of this text.

## Reading this Thesis

In chapter two, I explore the main theoretical concepts that are central to this work. I dive into definitions of resistance, transgression, tempered radicalism and trickster, analysing differences and overlaps in these concepts.

Chapter three is a critical look at methods in action research, and my struggle with the same. I reflect and touch on knowledge construction and power inherent in method, and discuss quality & validity. Then I propose a new approach to methods in action research with focus on action, research and writing, that opens up space for radical action and transgression in a performative era.

Chapter four introduces environmental grief, how I visualise and embody it. I discuss the colonial and neoliberal inscriptions within the climate change and environmental discourses. I discuss how I hold and work with grief, and map out my own path for action, and its own contradictions.

Chapter five explores how I work with grief in pedagogical settings, and my search and explorations of how to become a better communicator. I speak about how I attempt to create ecological activists like me, and the outcomes and challenges of such work.

Chapter six explores occupying marginal spaces, and the role of the body in this work. I then critically look at reflection as a method in action research and question its historical origins and its potential role in sustaining specific power relations.

Chapter seven explores my role as an activist, discusses the oppositional and community building aspects of my practice. It touches on identity as a partial multiplicity and the challenges of working from marginal positions. It discusses how knowledge inscribed via colonial structures create specific challenges for the global south. The chapter closes with reflections and questions about change and agency.

Chapter eight and nine narrate my engagement as an apparel industry sustainability practitioner, working with a global industry organisation, Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC). They explore how colonial structures and neoliberal economic models flavour the industry and its sustainability discourse. Chapter eight depicts a collaborative effort and performance to shift such discourse to be more sustainable while building global tools and *improvement regimes*.

Chapter nine speaks of my engagement in social compliance space with SAC, discursive colonisation and how it framed the conversations and ideas of equal partnership. Within this chapter I discuss failure of my project and the price of failure. I problematise agency and attempt to make sense of a long journey after trauma.

Chapter 10 reflects of the multiple trajectories and speak to a theory of practice in working from marginalised spaces, and how different modes of resistance, transgression play out. I reflect in the role of trickster within such contexts, offering insights to other practitioners.

* * *

I use coloured text to mean different things within this thesis.

Text coloured in **dark red** are quotes that set and/or displace context intended to frame the following content or question its own underpinnings.

Text coloured in **purple** are my own reflections culled from either papers submitted to my supervisory group or my own reflective writings 'as a reflective diary'.

Text coloured in **orange** are reflections by others through various forms of co-inquiry.

* * *

Within this work, I have used the following names with their own concurrence. Steve, Craig, Paul, Annemiek, Kathy, Joseph, Sybille, Katherine, Shevanthi, Dinal, Hiru, Akvan, Christelle, Abhishek and Cameron. All other names are anonymised. I have made a choice to name SAC and MAS within this work, as anonymising them makes no real difference in the digital age – a visit to my linkedin page would suffice. I name them also as a process of agency, as a right to claim my own history and body of work.

## Pondering the Autobiographical Beginning

Identity is this multiple layer whose process never leads to the True Self, or to Woman, but only to other layers, other selves, other women (Minh-ha, 1999 p.51).

Stories generally begin with 'once upon a time, in a particular country[5]. But this is too arbitrary, for no lived story has a specific beginning nor an end. A story is a temporal stitching of events with whimsical starts and ends. In a complex world, a narrative is constructed by choices governed by mood, perception, discursive field, economy and aesthetics. As I write this, I am conscious that the stories I include in this thesis and their framing are choices that I make.

Again, as I begin, I pause.

I wanted to write a short piece of autobiography, a contextual retelling (and reimagining) of the past to situate self and inquiry. The story I wrote persisted across multiple drafts, yet always shifting, twisting this way and that way, as I framed and reframed it. Every rewrite of the thesis forced a retelling of the autobiographical beginning. Its fluidity was troubling.

> "How should I introduce you, Vidhura," asks Charitha, as we discuss my TV appearance. I am hesitant; what does this initial framing do? I have many faces as I venture into the limelight, seamlessly moving between labels; a climate 'commentator', a renewable energy advocate, a corporate sustainability practitioner, an environmental 'activist', and perhaps more general, *an environmentalist*, which we settle for. Faraz adds an adjective to call me 'the *young* environmentalist'. This adds much hilarity back at home.

What does this initial framing do? It is always arbitrary and limiting, irrespective of reflexivity I hold in the retelling. How do I label and frame myself, and not have it as an albatross hanging around my neck? What does the framing do when I continue to occupy the margin, the frame?

> I am meeting the new country head of the World Bank, at a meeting prompted by my run in with their consultant a month back. I was told by the Bank officials that she comes from an environmental background, hence a potential kindred spirit. I am excited about this meeting.

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[5] This spatial and temporal framing was always present in the tales I grew up with in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist Jathaka stories extended this by one more step by introducing the 'ruler' of the country.

> I introduce myself as a corporate sustainability practitioner and an environmental activist, and discuss how we are trying to build a clean energy future for Sri Lanka, and how I am part of a group that is resisting the government attempts to build more coal power plants.
>
> As the meeting heats up over our disagreements, I wonder if the way we framed ourselves triggered particular modes of behaviour in both of us. There is a separate 'category' of environmentalists called *World Bank environmentalists*, I think, that looks at the environment largely from a GDP point of view. I have encountered them before. And perhaps my 'activist' framing puts her in the defensive.
>
> This is not the constructive conversation that we both claimed we wanted to have in the beginning.

I have pondered how the initial framing could have contributed to the troubled outcome. I took her environmental background as a promise of solidarity - universalising, expecting her to show a strong eco-centric approach, without recognising how a strong institutional discourse would create a particular subjectivity, especially with her senior leadership role. Is it a naïve expectation, that her environmental background would create a tempered radical? Did the World Bank announcement of a new policy with a strong climate change mitigation focus make me think that she would take a different approach towards coal power? It is simplistic to believe that the organisational inertia and structures that arise out of the discourse will be that easily shifted.

Did my framing as an environmental *activist* trigger a particular response from her? How did my (dualist) corporate identity shift this impression? I do not have luxury to explore our assumptions on identity construction, in a short time bound meeting that is politically and relationally charged.

Framing forms a subjectivity that has historical, discursive and cultural roots, that attempts to narrow the field of action. It has impacts on self and others.

I worry how this initial framing will shape the story, how it may privilege a particular narrative, and how it may narrow the field of interpretation of the reader. I am conscious of how it also affects me as an author, and my inner resistance or enticement to tell a 'particular story'. This

inquiry is not about one category of practice, but of a multitude. I hesitate to pin it down in one way, much to the chagrin of my supervision group. Yes, it has dominant themes, but transgressing dominant narratives is what I try to do across a wide spectrum of practice. Why give in now?

"Autobiography itself operates as a colonial discourse, shunting selfs into Western notions of unique and autonomous subject, noting the same time the shift of the subject from an individual to a collective one." (Visweswaran, 1994 p.7).

Even as I hesitate, I recognise the need for some history to locate this body of work. My historical and cultural roots are different from many readers of this thesis, modulated by language and my own style of writing. I reflect on the contingent nature of words, compounded by the need to translate across cultures and epistemologies, accenting the indeterminacy of meaning; a situation made more complex as I straddle margins in my way of being.

Thus I pause, and bring autobiography slowly, mindful how it frames and reframes meaning along this text.

## A Story of Margins

I choose to begin with *Thurulie*, for it was a springboard for my career at MAS.

In 2007 I was given the opportunity to lead the design team of Thurulie, a 'green factory' for apparel, first of its kind. Thurulie was a fleeting window of serendipity that allowed some of us to dream of turning the tide, where ecology would move from the margin to claim *a more central* location in the corporate discourse. Thurulie proudly claimed many aspects that are considered important in the corporate sustainability shift; low-carbon/low-impact building, and collaboration across the supply chain for a shared purpose. (Reason, Coleman, Bond, Gearty & Ballard, 2009).

I also worked on its green building certification to achieve the highest rating of the US Green Building Council (LEED Platinum), and ended up as its principal spokesperson earning me the moniker *the green man* inside the organisation. Thurulie was a marker for an emerging environmental focus in the apparel industry, still known for its significant environmental impact, and regarded as an 'exploiter of the poor of the third world'.

We were the supporters (and for a while, Thurulie the main exhibit) of UK retailer M&S's *Plan A,* an ambitious corporate sustainability plan. Thurulie was considered a global best practice (Holcim Foundation for Sustainable Construction, 2009), and kick-started a 'green factory' movement in the apparel industry. I felt the momentum also within the organisation.

The recession of 2008/09 put a damper to the greening movement, reemphasising that capital had a priori claim. For a while, MAS hunkered down, privileging financial 'survival'. The loss of momentum worried me, but it also brought an opportunity to think long term.

With my engineering background, I began building a community of inquiry and practice among the engineering teams of MAS factories, MAS Energy Forum – in the belief that they can play a key role in retooling factories for low-carbon manufacturing. We came together initially for skilling, quickly realised that many were disempowered in an organisation where the environmental issues were not a priority. The team gelled and slowly matured – and we were able to slowly shift organisational decision-making processes, empowering them by shifting power dynamics. This team later became a key driver of our work in environmental

sustainability. We operated without a clear organisational mandate as a sanctioned transgression.

In 2010, environmental sustainability emerged as a key strategic pillar of the organisation, and a structure to support the execution emerged, funds were becoming available, complete with a board director; who promptly selected a person from his own division with no environmental background to lead. I found myself locked inside a paradox; considered to be the expert, *the green man who walks the talk*, yet not good enough to lead.

I found my practice had two different flavours. With my colleagues and junior teams, my work was collaborative and pedagogical, building communities of practice. With the senior sustainability teams, the collaborative and pedagogical processes were often overshadowed by conflict. I was rebelling against a leadership, who I felt to be lacking in intent, competency, knowledge and capacity to advance the agenda.

There were changes to the leadership, yet still lacking skill or context. I was angry for being overlooked for the second time, though possessed the credentials for the job, from subject knowledge, achievements, organisational credibility. I was feeling let down by my own CEO, Dian, for not pushing my case. It was not a good place to be.

My public persona at MAS was complex. Known for smarts, and an ambivalent approach to authority. I was being labelled as a person difficult to work with, which erased my previous pedagogical and collaborative work and achievement. I was guilty of letting standard narratives establish and define me, which are difficult to change. I hear Russel Brand's voice in my ears…

> Lose the ability to define your own narrative, now I have become an extracted icon of me, used to splash across newspapers and used to say what is convenient against these narrative ideas.

> There is a clear danger that you start to believe the public's idea of you. (Media1512, 2010).

Within the organisation, the combination of my passion and my expertise, in an area where few shared them, worked against me. At instances where technical aspects were debated, my push to get them right created an image of a non-compromising personality. Working with a leadership which lacked skill or urgency was never a mitigating circumstance for judgement.

I was trapped in a discursive bind; my natural affinity for transgression continuously challenging the norming process of *leadership*. Sustainability is clearly at odds with the hegemonic economic discourse[6]. Either it is embraced and assimilated to the dominant discourse, or transgressed. The leadership practice and modes of behaviour are dependent on the positionality within the discourse.

Though a strategic pillar of the company, sustainability was a muted discourse; a status I refused to accept, a transgression and a dilemma. The organisational framework for sustainability was underwhelming compared to the other pillars. Eight years after elevating it as a strategic pillar, it was unceremoniously removed, and is still pursued without the *real* urgency in the company to get this right.

Initiatives that were identified were getting stuck at execution; delays, conflict and frequent changes of goal posts were common. The recurrent conflicts were creating a particular performative reality, trapping me within it. My organisational identity and the environmental agenda seemed to be stuck within these conflicts. Though I lacked 'formal' power to move forward at a group level, I held domain expertise and could effect change through resistance and counter narratives. My role as the environmental sustainability lead at MAS Intimates, the largest division of MAS, gave me certain degree of independence.

Throughout this time, I was engaged in roles outside the organisation as well. Via Co-Energi, the green building consultancy firm founded by Magda, my wife, helped me sharpen my technical skills, and opened up opportunities to engage with other organisations on strategy and solutions. Co-Energi was also attempting industry transformation working with state sector, including the authoring of the Sri Lanka Energy Efficient Building Code. These engagements saw me soon cast as an industry 'expert'.

Yet the marginalisation within the MAS was stifling my practice as well as my career. The toxicity was impacting me personally, and further radicalising me organisationally.

Heightened awareness of the planetary environmental crisis, and humanity's collective inability to make a significant shift towards reversing the same is a significant concern for me. Inability of the organisation to shift practice to be in line with the stated strategic position of the company

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[6] Explored later

made me question what is possible within a fiercely profit driven organisational context where environmental sustainability is also subjugated to fairly rigid financial constraints. Through Co-Energi, I was seeing the same trend across multiple industries and geographies. It was business as usual, masked as a green-shift. My own inquiry practice was filling me with grief and pausing me to question my own complicity.

I pause at this point, not to pre-empt the practice narratives that follow.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

This brief narrative is written attempting to contextualise and frame the work that follows. As an insider action researcher (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005) I am invited to use reflexivity and write of how I negotiate the insider-outsiderness of my subject position. This narrative highlights the marginality of my position, outsiderness and contradictions. It is a partial account that glosses over the complex political, cultural, behavioural and organisational dynamics that were at play. This is a staging, that reminds me of the opening sentence used by Hyde (1998), "the first story I have to tell is not exactly true, but it isn't exactly false, either" (p. 3).

I notice that the labels such as insider, outsider arise out of totalising discourses, and even as I attempt to write a staged narrative, it is not possible to avoid slippage. Even as I speak of marginality, I speak of collaboratively leading. I resist; yet this resistance is also part of the discourse quite often when deployed within a field of power; though my agency may determine the contours. I have risen within the organisation. This marginality is not straightforward, yet it still persists, heralding to Minh-ha (1986), "the Other of the West, the Other of man: one is never installed within marginality, one never dwells outside" (p. 3).

## 2.  Theorising Practice

Resistance, transgression and trickster – these three ideas are central to my practice as I navigate my world and attempt to shift conversations. I explore these concepts as a staging for the rest of the work. They form a core part of my praxis, therefore becoming part of my research methodology.

## Of Resistance and Transgression

I refer to resistance, transgression and trickster as three overlapping approaches I use to confront power and marginalisation.

Resistance to power and marginalisation has been always present in my life, perhaps being the youngest among four siblings being the origin. I remember being punished in school for challenging abuses of power by those with authority. At university, I was part of a group that rebelled against the student union leadership who attempted to impose their political agenda onto the student body. I had an ambivalent attitude towards rules, especially those that appeared to be imposed simply for privileging power and discipline. I was rebelling against rules that placed me in object positions. As hooks (1994) notes, "we cannot enter the struggle as objects later to become subjects" (p. 46).

Foucault introduces three concepts of power – juridical power is the power over death, that is meted out by the juridical process. Disciplinary and biopolitical power are classified as power over life, with disciplinary power designed to create docile bodies, using surveillance to internalise the gaze. Biopolitics is designed to construct a docile social body, using statistical management techniques and classifications. The docile bodies are constructed and maintained (via repetition) discourse. For juridical power, resistance can be straightforward, but it is not so clear in disciplinary and bio-politics. Foucault theorises that resistance and counter discourse for these forms of power are internalised, and thus integral aspects of power itself (Harcourt 2015).

Courpasson & Vallas (2016) emphasise that domination presupposes some agency in submission, and go onto note that "domination is almost always a fractured phenomenon, riddled with complex and intersecting forms" (p. 7) and suggest individuals continually constitute and reconstitute themselves as subjects, often as a result of their resistance. They resist a distinction between resistance and transgression.

Foust (2010) differentiates hegemonic resistance as a form of resistance that intends to replace the existing power structures with an alternative power structure, invested in the new status quo. Transgression on the other hand, cross boundaries and violate limits while shining a light on the boundaries of what is allowed in discourse.

Transgressive is reflexive, questioning both its own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness. It is not simply a reversal, a mechanical inversion of an existing order it opposes. Transgression, unlike opposition or reversal, involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories. It is not, in itself, subversion; it is not an overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo. What it does do, though, is implicitly interrogate the law, pointing not just to the specific, and frequently arbitrary, mechanisms of power on which it rests – despite its universalizing pretensions – but also to its complicity, its involvement in what it prohibits (p 9).

hooks (1994) notes, "resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional and cultural spaces" (p. 22). If I use Foust's differentiation, hooks really speaks of transgression, positioning it as a necessary gesture towards emancipation.

Jenks (2003) writes of transgression,

To transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention. Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation (p. 2).

Thus the boundary becomes a site of contestation and action. Transgression points to the fragility of the boundary (the realm of the trickster), a wilful re-cognition. Foucault (1977) notes the illuminative effect of the boundaries through the transgressive act, "its role is to measure the excessive distance that it opens at the heart of the limit and to trace the flashing line that causes the limit to arise (p. 35)."

"But isn't breaking conventions and laws bad? Doesn't it hurt people like in a murder?" asks my daughter, Anoush, as I try to explain her what transgression is. She was piqued, as she saw a snippet of Cole Porter's 'anything goes' in the opening page of Chris Jenks book *Transgression*, a song she once performed at a concert. I pause; how do I select the boundaries to transgress? How do I make sense of what is good or bad, I wonder, if our value systems are also discursively produced. What then is the role of

transgression? Which transgressive acts are 'good' and what are 'bad', and how do we know them?

I share my own ambiguity on transgression with her, and say that the action is dependent on the context and from whose point of view that we look at. I remind her of her bi-racial history, noting that my marriage to Magda was a transgression of particular 'cultural norms.' And then an epiphany; as we discuss how rules and norms are created, I realise we are really talking of power, and how normative power is formed within a discourse. I am also conscious that transgression can also be a privileged act, as the penalty for transgression is unequally distributed through the axes of power.

The marriage analogy is apt. Transgression is often framed around sexuality, and often temporal; "within colonial discourse the fear of racial contamination and miscegenation was at the heart of the concept of transgression between the colonizer and the colonized" (Ng, 2011, p.104). hooks (1992) speaks of how in the era of open racism, looking at a white person by a black person was a transgressive act, which was also means of claiming agency, "even in the worse circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (p. 116). There is also a spatial dimension to transgression, highlighted by Cresswell (1996), who reminds us that the interpretation of an act as transgression is also location specific, because *place* is a key criterion in normativity. What is considered 'normal' in the margins and enclaves becomes transgressive in the centre, both literally and metaphorically.

Michel Foucault, in his 'preface to transgression', breaks the negative framing of transgressive acts,

it must be detached from its questionable association to ethics if we want to understand it and begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes; it must be liberated from the scandalous or the subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations (Foucault, 1977 p. 35).

Transgression is generally frowned upon in business, except in certain approved domains such as 'disruptive innovation', a discursively constructed space geared to increase profits.

Transgression is an important space for the oppressed and the marginalised. Ng (2011) writes,

ideological and positional transgressive writing has been invaluable to disciplines that study women's history, sexual identities, racial identities, and history of colonialism. This liberating reinscription of transgression is embraced by feminist discourse and postcolonial discourse as an agency of empowerment. (p. 105).

The ability to "interrogate, destabilize, and disorganize dominant strategies of power" (Leonard & McLaren, 1993, p 49) becomes important as transgression is deployed to contest marginality, othering and colonialism. Transgression offers opportunity to re-inscribe relations from a different point of view, while critiquing the dominant discourses of deep ethnocentrism, phallocentrism, eurocentrism and neoliberal economics that has colonised our thinking.

Both Butler (1990) and Bhabha (1994) show that performative nature of discursive power and how it is sustained through repetition, opening the possibility of breaking the cycle through acts of micro subversion, breaking the repetition. Hybridity destabilises the normative capacity of repetition, and as Bhabha argues is implicit in any form of domination relationship.

## Trickster to the Fore

Tricksters have always existed in the world, mythology and literature. Trickster myth and archetype entered into mainstream Western academia through the work of Radin (1956) on the Winnebago trickster Wakdjunkaga. Karl Kerenyi notes that the trickster is the "spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries" (Radin 1956 p. 185).

The history of the world is replete with trickster imagery; Andare, the archetypal fool in Sri Lankan mythology, Krishna and Shiva, the divine tricksters from Hinduism, Odysseus, my personal hero from Greek mythology being some of them.

Of all archetypes, trickster has been notoriously difficult to pin, with a range of interpretations from the shadow to the clown. Jung (1972) notes,

> phantom of the trickster haunts the mythology of all ages, sometimes in quite unmistakable form, sometimes in strangely modulated guise. In his clearest manifestations he is a faithful reflection of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has hardly left the animal level (p. 165).

Jung does not differentiate between the different incarnations of the trickster, which is attempted by Lock (2002), "the trickster, however, is not playing. He is not confined to his own sphere of activity, playing the fool, he is a trickster in the world at large." She goes on to define "his interest in entering the societal game is not to provide the safety-valve that makes it tolerable, but to question, manipulate, and disrupt its rules."

Doueihi notes "the trickster story opens us to the way our minds function to construct an apparently solid but ultimately illusory reality out of what is on another level a play of signs… The playfulness of language in the trickster tales reveals a different order of reality" (Hynes & Doty, 1997 p. 198).

Working to interrupt hegemonic discourses require the use of language in a way that challenges frames of reference. The trickster has the capability to bring in elaborate language play that can be formally clothed in the business narrative and context, yet deeply subversive and radical.

Doueihi further states,

by playing in the space between discourse and story, trickster stories point to the way ordinary conventional reality is an illusory construction produced out of a particular univocal interpretation of phenomena appearing as signs. This deeper wisdom about the linguisticality of our constructed world and illusoriness of that construction is where trickster stories open onto the sacred (p. 198).

Inciarte notes in her assessment of Sinbad as trickster,

Tricksters have, above all, great rhetorical skill, and the retelling of their experience is often tailored to suit the audience and the need… His retelling is a response to the landsman's perception of a wheel of fortune guided by predestination; through his storytelling, the Seaman argues for a form of free will, the only possible de facto philosophical position for a trickster, a man who lives by his wits" (Bloom 2010 p. 210).

Narrative is a recurring element in trickster stories, and is something I too play with, whether through video, imagery or story. I find myself playing with the ambiguity of language to encode meanings, as a method of reinscription. Some of my work, as narrator of *the cornerman* (Ralapanawe & Fernando, 2014) and as the Corporate Communications head at MAS Intimates, was to change the visible narrative and artefacts of the corporate story, bring a strong human flavour to the nature of the organisation. The cornerman is a counter narrative of the organisational evolution that is layered and polyvocal; a story with multiple leaders, that stands in stark contrast to the official histories developed by the organisation. At another register, it also gives rise to subjugated voices, that a deconstructionist reading surfaces; a true realm of a trickster.

This method is elaborated by Doueihi (1984), "the text opens into plurality of meanings, none of which is exclusively correct because as the narrative develops in the trickster stories, the conventional level of meanings ceases to be appropriate," (p. 299). The chapter of the book that I am proud the most is 'the scriveners narrative', which is my own reflections of Dian. It can be also read as the hermeneutics chapter, that questions the master narrative.

There is a history here; Dian wanted the book to be only about his engagement in sports, and I convinced him that the organisational history should be written as well. His history at MAS was also of a trickster, who focused on the wellbeing of the people, and created an enabling environment for radicals to thrive.

"There's a very special property in the trickster: he always breaks in, just as the unconscious does, to trip up the rational situation. He's both a fool and someone who's beyond the system. And the trickster represents all those possibilities of life that your mind hasn't decided it wants to deal with. The mind structures a lifestyle, and the fool or trickster represents another whole range of possibilities. He doesn't respect the values that you've set up for yourself, and smashes them... The fool is the breakthrough of the absolute into the field of controlled social orders."

– Joseph Campbell

Tricksters live in the edge of systems, in the boundaries, in the liminal spaces – either physical or discursive. Boundaries fascinate me; the jagged edges and inbetween spaces, and its inherent instability. When the gaze is turned to the partition, its porous nature and the permeability of the categories is evident. Hyde (1998) adds, "trickster is a boundary crosser, often a traveler, breaking social rules. Tricksters cross lines, breaking or blurring connections and distinctions between 'right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead" (p. 7).

In an ecological system, it is the boundary that has the higher diversity. It is the space for the liminal beings; the home of the shaman, with the ability to

> readily slip out of the perceptual boundaries that demarcate his or her particular culture- boundaries reinforced by social customs, taboo, and most importantly, the common speech or language in order to make contact with, and learn from, the other powers in the land (Abram, 1996 p. 9).

Tricksters do not see boundaries the same way as others, opening up modes of transgression; be it physical, identity, gender and discourse. "Trickster creates a boundary, or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight," (Hyde, 2010 p. 7).

This play with discourse allows the trickster to show the structure of power. If power and resistance are mutually constitutive, reconstituting a different power relationship is 'reifying normativity'. Trickster continues to expose in a manner that interrupts the normativity of power to establish itself. The trickster is a social subversive, using humour and irony as strategic subversive and transformative devices.

I encounter glimpses of trickster in many change practitioners to show characteristics of the trickster; some with more resonance than others. I can see the same in many who work against hegemonic systems, attempting to break through.

Trickster performs acts of transgression. I can simply place trickster as an embodied and performative form of transgression. But this seems to belittle the role of the trickster, who in most cases defies such simplistic (or any framing). One way I approach trickster is to note its playfulness as a necessary function of its existence.

I resist the notion of enacting trickster, a phrase used by Frentz (2010) to depict when he purposefully adopts a trickster stance. I too at times do this, as shown in the section below. But there is another form of trickster, that is more intuitive, that emerges spontaneously, and is thus performative rather than a performance.

It is this trickster that is difficult to catch and pin, because this emergence is not rational nor thought through, and cannot be captured through reflection. We can place trickster as a reflexive practitioner, but it is not the measured, almost calculated reflexivity of action research. And that is simply because trickster does not learn from her mistakes the same way others do. Trickster needs to make her mistakes again and again, to continue to subvert the discourse. Learning and reflexivity of the trickster will be her own death.

## Alternative history of MAS Intimates

These narratives are of trickster *interventions*. These show staging, which is one form of practice. The other is the spontaneous emergence of the trickster spirit, which peeks through the work. These two narratives are extracts from my progression paper.

> All organisations have a dominant narrative of origins, growth and success, codified by multiple mechanisms of reinforcement –from organisational metrics, formal histories, publications and PR collateral. I too wore the PR head hat during part of my career and generated such material. I wondered, what voices are marginalised in the formalised narratives, and what would be their story? Not surprisingly, the voice that was not heard much, was that of the blue-collar worker, *the team member[7]*, predominantly female. If they were to narrate the growth of the company, what would they say?
>
> I had an assignment on my hands, to create a video on behalf of my division, MAS Intimates, to be shown at an annual senior management retreat that brings together 150 top leaders of MAS Holdings. The annual event is to talk about the past year's successes. Conversations with participants revealed that the absence of the voice of the apparel worker is stark, yet goes unnoticed. Can we bring that voice to this forum and make it heard? Would it make a difference?
>
> My colleague Shevanthi, who heads communications, is always a good ally and together we pitched the idea to Dian, our CEO, who is also the key voice of the masses at the MAS Board[8]. Having buy-in for the idea from him, working with a group of colleagues, we developed a script, visualised the same and created a video[9], *An Alternative History of MAS Intimates*.
>
> Doniger (2009) states, "Part of my agenda in writing an alternative history is to show how much the groups that conventional wisdom says were oppressed and silenced and

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[7] The orgaisation coined this non-name (member of what team?) to avoid the phrase 'machine operator' which had lost social acceptance. Though contested, it was difficult to offer a more empowering title.
[8] Shevanthi, is my co-author of Cornerman, Dian's biography. Many turning points of MAS is chronicled in Cornerman with references to the actual incidents and origins, though somewhat sanitized, represents a more accurate description of history, which attempts to recount the contexts of innovations.
[9] See appendix for the script

played no part in the development of the tradition—women, Pariahs (oppressed castes, sometimes called Untouchables)—did actually contribute to Hinduism" (p. 1).

Our attempt also contextualised some of the key milestones and inflection points of the company, bringing out the role of the apparel worker in them. It portrayed the company's treatment towards workers, community and some key initiatives as progressive responses to worker demands, rather than pure foresight of senior executives. It was also a presentation that looked at the organisation from a different lens, bringing focus to organisational culture, and metaphors. We also dared to break the taboo of similar fora by raising questions on wages and the dearth of career progression for the apparel workers.

The video was well received. While not all had grasped the nuances and the perspective, many called in to compliment the freshness of the approach, and the shifting of focus to the worker rather than staying on the product and financials, a template followed by all other divisions. Our presentation was gendered very differently from the others – where the masculinised financials and victories are flaunted alongside images of models in lingerie deigned to feed the masculine psyche.

"They are the core part of our business," said one Director of MAS Intimates after the event, referring to the workers. "And it is good that we remind ourselves that without them, there is no business."

This is a question worthy of inquiry. MAS is known as one of the more ethical apparel manufacturers globally, yet some of the core aspects of business is taken for granted, even at formal settings. Is there a systemic suppression of voice at an organisational level, sanctioned through management complicity. We do not inquire.

As businesses, we are expected to focus on what is material and important, and in many a times, environment, workers and the communities do not figure very high in the agenda. Corporate complicity for the current social and environmental challenges can be laid at least partly here.

This narrative is a trickster staging of an attempt to shift discourse through transgression, by giving voice to the silenced. It was radical for speaking a muted discourse, breaking the tradition

of attributing key organisational change at the hands of the leadership and locating agency on the workers. I feel good about this intervention, for giving voice.

When we needed to improve on this for a second presentation, we sought input from factory HR Managers.

> We revisit the former script and tweak it again, and I feel we have made something good. This is a more collaborative process, as the script is shared with others for comments. When I receive feedback, I sense the difference in objectives/framing built into the comments. I wonder; I have choices here what to integrate, but if I stay true to the sentiments received, I do end up diluting the core message and theme.
>
> And then I get a call from AW, an HR manager of a factory.
>
> "If this is to be the voice of a worker, why don't we ask them what they really feel?"
>
> I feel ashamed. In my mind, I go through a part of the script which reads as "sometimes I feel that the company does not understand us." I was guilty of the same problem I saw the 'organisation' was doing; not giving the apparel worker her voice, but appropriating it.
>
> I welcome AW for her suggestion and she agrees to do a focus group and get feedback. A rapidly arranged focus group, set in the existing organizational power structures may not be the 'representative voice'[10]. Timing did not allow anything more for us. I amend the script using the feedback; some things change but the overall narrative track remains the same.
>
> My reflection on the process takes me to the ethics of re-presentation, and how organisations appropriate the voice of the employees. I have a history on this with the company. From the early years in my communications career, I used the voice of the employee as the critical aspect of the communications work I was doing, bringing the faces and their voices to the fore. In reflection, I note that what normally gets out in communications is not necessarily the voice of the employee, but at best, the voice of the employee modulated by the 'appropriate' corporate discourse. I know the freedom I

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[10] I am searching for a category here, with all its epistemological implications. Is this a better representation?

had to articulate this, which stemmed from me seeing eye-to-eye with Dian, the CEO who had a specific interest in this area. *It was fascinating that the Intimates 'voice' as articulated by us stood in quite a contrast to rest of the divisions of MAS, but set the tone and context.*

So where does the ethics come into play when the voice is re-re-presented by the organization? I know I was complicit in this creation – or rather re-articulation of the organization through media. But does this type of re-articulation have any impact in the organization? I would like to think so, if the articulation matches at least with some consistency with the lived experience. I see my own hesitancy as I write these words. Can we generalize the lived experience of a company as large as ours? Is this the same for me in senior management, who has a charmed existence, as the blue collar apparel worker from the village?

In her influential work, *can the subaltern speak*, Gayatri Spivak (1988) notes the inability for subaltern to speak within the hegemonic discourse, partly because their voice is ignored nor recognized. Edward Said (1979) also notes how the oriental must be represented by those who 'control' the discourse, because of the constructed notion that they cannot represent themselves. Of course the apparel worker is not a subaltern, because she does have a voice within the organizational processes. Yet the fact that she is represented by others, thus denying her of her own voice is pointing to something important, that even within organisations like ours, even with us, who claim to 'represent' her, we deny her voice.

Even as I represent, I cannot help but deny her voice. I am trapped into representing a category, representing a political position as opposed to representing a person. I am more focused on a message and form to give her own voice an outing. Though I believe that this 'performance' will add value, attempt to shift discursive boundaries, and stage destabilisation at the beginning of an event, it comes in the form of a betrayal. It is the benevolent responsibility that silences the subaltern.

Moving further, I wonder how I can theorise this practice. As a trickster, I transgress the discourse. It is intended to interrupt locations where marginalisation of 80% of the employees is built into the structure of the event, through an ironic process of erasure. The intervention is an

invitation to re-centre the worker in the organisational narrative, even if it is only among a reflexive few. If hegemony is maintained through repetition, each interruption of the repetition is an act of transgressive resistance; especially when done from stage.

## Situating Practice

"We are the Borg. Your biological and technological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Resistance is futile."

- Star Trek : The Next Generation

Meyerson & Scully (1995) coined the phrase *tempered radical* to describe those who "are committed to their organisations, and are also committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization" (p. 586). Radical because they challenge the status quo through action and being who they are (imperfect fit); and tempered because they are moderate, strong, angry at the incongruences of value systems and composed.

I struggled with the field of action proposed by Meyerson (2001); 'disruptive self-expression,' 'verbal jujitsu', 'variable term opportunism' and 'strategic alliance building'. These seemed to be based on the visibility (and risk) of the change agent in her attempts to shift organisational behaviour. I felt these were inadequate for shifting a dominant discourse.

Tempered radicalism appeared to be too accommodating to the prevailing system. I suspected that this was due to the level of accordance of the practitioner to the dominant discourse; the practitioners level of marginality. This was echoed by the authors themselves in a later paper, when the differences of experience of black and white women tempered radicals were put under the gaze,

> Hurtado argues that White women are seduced by the power system of organizations and get the message that if they are compliant, they will be treated well and invited into the opportunity structure. In contrast, Black women encounter rejection and have no delusions about their hard work and good behavior easily yielding advancement into the power system (Bell, Meyerson, Nkomo & Scully, 2003 p. 397).

Organisational culture fit (or the level of subjection to organisational normative structure) opens up different trajectories for action for practitioners. The degree of discomfort to the 'oppressive' framings gives rise to different forms of resistance. The seduction of power is perhaps the most normative influences in the corporate discourse.

Black women appealed to their pain in doing this work and to the deep roots of the problem of oppression in society. In contrast, Jean defined her vision as "higher," soaring above the painful landscape of racism, sexism, and oppression. She focused on diversity in cognitive and work styles. While interesting, it neutralizes the deeper culturally and historically laden dimensions of diversity such as race and gender (Bell et al, 2003 p 392).

Thus marginality (either based on positionality or radicalism) demands a practice different to tempered radicalism; it depends on *how much skin one has in the game*. For me, the environmental issues are ontological and epistemological problems that goes to the root of *being*. I see the organisational narrative of environmental sustainability as a gesture of inadequate generosity, leading to actions that fail to sufficiently change the discourse. As Freire notes,

> True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands - whether of individuals or entire peoples--need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world (Freire 2005, P 45).

This deeper understanding of the nature of oppression such that the privileged also put *skin in the game,* not out of generosity but as a fundamental means to their own emancipation, has also been highlighted by others such as Nandy (1983) and Hall (1992). Thus, the field of action for those who are oppressed and those who fall into the class of the privileged would be different and would also differ based on their own conscientisation. This is one instance where the practitioner runs the risk of being accused of having the cause 'sold down the river', a phrase that comes out of slavery as the authors reminds us (Bell et al, 2003).

I locate my practice beyond tempered radicalism; resistance, transgression and trickster are modes of action that appear in my practice. While the concepts transgression and resistance were explored earlier, I want to explore trickster and transgression.

Trickster has always avoided framing and precise definitions, not surprising for a boundary crosser. The modern conception of trickster is an amalgam of multiple traditions, an unstable

category, and eludes definitions. We can try to pin down trickster, but she escapes, or dies in captivity. But what is the relationship between transgression, trickster and change agency?

While not all transgressive acts invoke the trickster, most trickster acts invoke transgression as they cross or blur boundaries. Trickster is not a change agent in the conventional sense, since most mythical tricksters, from whom we derive the archetype and tradition, are not driven from same notions of causality or change. She may not intend for a particular change to happen, but her actions would trigger a change.

Change agency has a broad scope including actions towards *directing* instrumental change, as well as larger shifts of discourse. Not all change agents are tricksters, but many do exhibit trickster characteristics and behaviours. I see the three ideas of change agency, trickster and transgression as circles with overlapping parts.

To simplify, trickster transgresses, but not all transgressions are trickster enactments. Trickster is a particular change agent, but not all change agents are tricksters. We may see some actions which can be called trickster and some which are not, but those acts at the boundaries will always elude definitions.

This work is also of me as a shapeshifter, that moves seamlessly across multiple domains and multiple expert frames; climate change, ecology, energy policy, coal combustion pollution, political activism, social/labour compliance and environmental sustainability. This shapeshifting is also a characteristic of the trickster.

# 3.  Stumbling into Method

"The test of the machine is the satisfaction it gives you. There isn't any other test. If the machine produces tranquillity, it's right. If it disturbs you it's wrong until either the machine or your mind is changed. The test of the machine's always your own mind. There isn't any other test."

DeWeese asks, "What if the machine is wrong and I feel peaceful about it?"

Laughter.

I reply, "That's self-contradictory. If you really don't care you aren't going to know it's wrong. The thought'll never occur to you. The act of pronouncing it wrong's a form of caring."

– Robert M Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

## Introduction

My introduction to action research was during my MSc in Responsibility and Business Practice at the University of Bath in 1998. Yet at ADOC, I struggled to articulate method(s).

It wasn't for a lack of trying. There were others who appeared to be fellow travellers in the wilderness. I slowly began making headway by applying a critical lens to it. I was also aided by work on *method* collectively by my supervisory group in late 2016.

My concerns about method arose out of its positivist heritage, where the research question and method were *expected to be* set at the inception and were presumed to remain static. Greenwood & Levin (2006) show the messiness of the research process even in the positivist tradition. In an action research setting, where emergence is an integral part of research, method also emerges, following the trajectory of the inquiry. Throughout my inquiry[11] the research question shifted, twisting and turning in orientation, along with my practice and sensemaking. Fixing the method upfront would have created significant challenges to me within this milieu.

I procrastinated on writing about method out of unease. Then I began to deconstruct and reimagine method, quickly turning it into a joyful and fascinating exercise. I spent significant amount of time on it, toying and playing with it, feeling liberated.

This obsessive focus on a problem, looking at it from multiple lenses, attempting to get to the roots of its construction – these are methods that pop up throughout my work; a critical inquiry into form and the underlying structures of knowledge and power relations hidden within it, and reimagining them as acts of transgression.

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[11] I am mindful that the shifting was not only within the ADOC process. I have been researching this topic most of my life. The ground was continuously shifting, but I only began to sense the movement properly during ADOC.

## Action Research and Philosophical Underpinnings

Reason & Bradbury (2013) introduce action research as "a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing" (p. 1). They go on to say that, "it is not so much a methodology as an orientation to inquiry, that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues."

The commitment of action research to "change with others" places it within a participatory worldview. It recognizes emergent forms of inquiry, and shifts with emerging consciousness of the researcher. Reason & Bradbury suggest participatory action research (PAR) should encompass radical democracy and inclusion, to broaden the aims of the process of inquiry to benefit many.

Greenwood & Levin (2006) highlight three elements that must be present in action research - action, research and particpation. They explictly argue against the claims of 'disembodied' and 'value-free' knowledge creation, and the pseudo-split between knowledge and action:

> It creates a useless dance between disengaged theorists and engaged actors, a dance that liberates both sides from the need to generate valid understandings of the social world and its change processes and to hold themselves accountable to both meaningful social consequences and solid methodological and theoretical groundings (p. 6).

Action research asks practitioners to view their practice as a praxis, a theoretically informed, transformative action, that improves understanding for the collective (Kemmis, 2011), which resonates with me. Carr (2006) positions it as a revival of the *Greek tradition of praxis*, which I struggle with, as I find the binary separation of praxis/poesis problematic. I see poesis, the act of creation, also central to action research and my practice.

I come from a messy philosophical background. I have studied under the Western intellectual tradition, but my philosophical roots are enmeshed in the Buddhist tradition, *Buddha Darsana*, through immersion from childhood.

Indian schools of philosophical thought are referred to as Darsana,

ways of viewing the world that must include a pathway to liberation or release. In Indian
thought, philosophy cannot be regarded as merely theoretical knowledge. If that
knowledge does not also somehow transform one's everyday life in such a way that
liberation is realized, then it is invalidated as a philosophy (Coward, 1990, p. 23)[12].

While not claiming this as a universality of the myriad philosophical approaches in the Indian
tradition, I feel this aligns with my understanding of Buddhist thought. The above description
can easily stand in as a definition of action research. In the Buddhist tradition of an
emancipatory praxis, action and reflexivity are co-developed (Rahula, 1974), with liberation
from suffering implicit in the process. Its emancipatory praxis is drawn from the *noble eightfold
path*; right seeing, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right
mindfulness and right concentration; principles that are co-constructed, and function together.

I wish I had studied the Buddhist philosophy more; with its constructionist, participatory,
dialectical and embodied framings (and how they sit next to each other in different schools of
thought), and its practice of mindfulness, all of which would have allowed me to explore an
action research setting through a non-Western frame. These two do not quite sit together, and I
struggle with compartmentalisation and hybridisation, as I delve deeper.

Most Indian philosophical schools (including Buddhism) are built on a strong liberatory
foundation (soteriology), fed by a spiritual tradition of emancipatory agency. I struggle to even
write this; the word soteriology has roots in salvation (via a saviour), in contrast to the self-
emancipatory orientation of the Indian traditions. I am continuously made aware of the
contingency of language, as I describe concepts that arise out of a particular philosophical
tradition using the language of another; and am reminded of Derrida's claim that all translations
are mistranslations.

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What must be translated of that which is translatable can only be the untranslatable.

- Jacques Derrida

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[12] I note my own paucity and irony of quoting a Western author here. This continues to mortify me as I
write.

This slipperiness of language in description is not isolated to philosophical constructs, but also built into the day to day use of words and meanings. This is a point to note when reading this thesis.

I am also drawn to a Freirian praxis, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 2005, p. 51). Freire appropriates transformational agency as an explicit acknowledgement that our action either reproduces power, or shifts it, framing working towards emancipation of the oppressed as an ethical imperative.

Freire's work is built on critical thinking,

> which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved (Freire 2005, p. 92).

The importance of critical thinking in action research is also highlighted by Kemmis (2011), and it is important for the work I do on oppressive and colonial structures.

Reason & Bradbury (2013) refer to an 'organising framework' for action research, with first, second and third person inquiry as components.

## First Person Research

First-person research is

> "skills and methods which address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act… with awareness and to assess effects in the outside world while acting… [it] brings inquiry into more and more of our moments of action – not as outside researchers but in the whole range of everyday activities." (Reason & Bradbury, 2013, p. 6)

The importance of first person research in change efforts has been recognised by Argyris in 'action science', Torbert in 'action inquiry' and Quinn in 'advanced change theory' (Taylor, 2004).

My work places me in politically charged contexts that have strong power differences,  where  I have to work 'against the grain' of the dominant discourse. Here, my first person-practice focus is the development of critical self-reflexivity; 'in the moment' awareness that holds multiple mirrors to the self, which helps bring up context and polyvocality of viewpoints. The *Critical* aspect highlights the contingent nature of such a position, and how it is constructed out of larger social-historical-epistemological framings and power relations embedded in the discourse.

## Second Person Research

Second person research is "our ability to inquire face-to-face with others on issues of mutual concern", which "starts with interpersonal dialogue and includes the development of communities of inquiry" (Reason & Bradbury, 2013, p. 6). The domain of influence and learning is a collective 'us' in this sphere. Methods such as collaborative inquiry are structured second person research interventions, with initiation and closure.

Second person inquiry is an important part of my work, especially in group encounters, and at times somewhat controversial. In my practice, I explore how to broaden the discursive boundaries in groups to find better solutions to problems, especially where marginality and oppression may be present.

## Third Person Research

Third person research looks at wider impact across organisations and groups. This area is not well explored in literature apart from large group interventions. Torbert & Taylor (2013) define it as adding to "third person body of consensual knowledge"[13] (p. 240) through publications and growing *the body of practitioners* that shifts the system. However, the phrase 'inquiry practice' seems somewhat dissonant with this interpretation. Coghlan and Shani (2013, p. 644) breaks down first and second person work into couplets of voice and practice, but place third person purely as voice. This seems sensible; one may make material available for a larger group, and

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[13] The notion of consensual knowledge is deeply problematic, especially from the view of the oppressed and the colonized. The history of knowledge creation and its consensus is deeply problematized by many including the post-colonial theorists that I draw on. This consensus seems to be pretty much a positivist Western neoliberal frame, and this issue pops up throughout this work. The fact that Torbert and Taylor (2013) argue for objective knowledge seems curious. Looking at the cultural construction of the academy, one ask *whose consensus are we speaking of*.

dialogue that originates with specific people from that intervention then becomes a second person inquiry.

If the change aspired relates to a larger system, a third person inquiry seems necessary. I strive to create an enhanced dialogic space that helps shift context and boundaries – using speech, writing and social media, which falls into third person practice. These attempts to shift discourse feeds back into first and second person practice, as will be described in later chapters. Still, this falls short of genuine third person 'inquiry' as I feel it lacks genuine *participation*.

My attempts to shift discourse are acts of power. While I may write, or talk from a marginalised position, I am aware that its articulation elevates it from other marginalised discourses, which will continue to remain hidden. This doesn't lead to a meaningful way to inquire collectively. It is not clear if third person *inquiry* is possible outside structured large group interventions.

The inter-relatedness of the three approaches to action research is touched on by Taylor (2004), who points out that "1) the need for first person research in order to act as a third person change agent; 2) the need for second person research in order to do first person research" (p. 83). Second person research thus becomes an important element of quality and validity of a first person inquiry. Taylor blurs the neat lines that separate the different 'classes of inquiry' by focusing on their inter-dependency.

I see the interweaving of different strands within my practice, where I try to hold an inquiring space in many contexts by bringing a critical presence and tension to 'open it [the practice] up' to explore the larger discursive framing. Here the boundaries of first and second person research crumble, even in a post-event reflection phase. In a relational domain, the separation of first person practice from second person practice raises a question of epistemology; for example, whether a self, as an entity, could engage in pure, first person inquiry.

Taylor (2004) goes on to say, "without first person research into this issue I would continue to act from the deeply held and unconscious frames that prevented me from speaking to power and thus limiting my effectiveness as a change agent" (p. 84). I hesitate here. Speaking truth to

power begs the questions, *whose truth?* And to *what power*? Both questions require a deep and

committed engagement with them through critical thinking[14].

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[14] The privileging of first person inquiry raises myriad of other questions that originates from the conception of self.

## The Search for (Methodology and Method)

> Thus, the ethnographic promise of a holistic account is betrayed by the slippage born from the partiality of language of what cannot be said precisely because of what is said, and of the impossible difference within what is said, what is intended, what is signified, what is repressed, what is taken, and what remains. From the unruly perspectives of poststructuralism, ethnography can only summon, in James Clifford's (1986) terms, "partial truths" and "fictions" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000 p.28).

The first participant-led workshop at ADOC focused on methodology, where we explored multiple qualitative research methods such as auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry. These methods privileged the 'research' component of action research.

My formal training as an engineer and my immersion in quantitative research within the positivist paradigm imprisoned me on methodology. My inquiry practice refused to fit into a neat method container. I struggled to articulate my approach, as I feared that *it probably did not meet the necessary rigour*, thinking from a qualitative research methods framing.

In my progression paper in December 2015, I highlighted my concerns at that time and my yearning for *freedom from shackles*.

> I spent a lot of time struggling to write the methodology chapter. I read many books/articles on methodology, action research, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, critical thinking…
>
> I was never able to find fluidity in my writing. It felt laboured, technical and dry. It was never coming to a point of closure, although hours have gone into the production of it. Why was it happening? It was sounding more and more like the methodology part of technical papers I used to write at engineering school – and still do, for publications at work. I noticed how this was operating in the back of my mind; as a metaphor. But is this what is needed as methodology in action research? Where is the missing piece on enjoyment that I find doing this work?
>
> Barbara Czarniawska's Narrative Approaches to Organisational Studies (1998), closes with a quote by Roland Barthes:

> Some speak greedily and urgently about method; method is all they wish to see
> in their work. It never seem rigorous or formal enough for them. Method
> becomes Law, but this Law is deprived of any effect that would be different of
> the Law itself (nobody can claim to know what, in 'human sciences' is a 'result').
> Method invariably disappoints; posing as a pure metalanguage. It partakes the
> vanity of all metalanguages. Thus a work that unceasingly declares its will-to-
> methodology always become sterile in the end. Everything takes place inside
> the method, nothing is left to the writing. The researcher repeats that his text
> will be methodological, but this text never arrives. There is nothing more sure to
> kill research and sweep it off into the leftover of abandoned works, nothing
> more sure, than method (p. 76).

A critique of method in a methodology chapter, born out of frustration, a rebelling that still did not clearly articulate the problem. I was struggling but did not know why. Later I added more to the chapter; of transgressive practice, critical theory and narrative inquiry as strands, but still lacking closure.

In the spring of 2016, I presented a paper at the Ashridge International Research Conference (AIRC5), writing the following as the method of my *first person inquiry*:

> As a method, I make use of reflective personal narratives that are written as a process of
> journaling. The narratives become raw data for analysis and are later revisited as a
> process of deep questioning, sense making and learning. This learning then becomes
> ground for different ways of action, and thus setting forth a spiralling mode of action
> and reflection. I show some of the process of narrative and sense making cycles in this
> paper.

Reflective narrative writing was a partial (reductive) description; just one method I was using in my inquiry. This description only covered first person practice, while the paper itself stepped into second and third person practice. More importantly, this description of method only touched the *reflective and sense making phase* of the action-reflection cycle, with only a partial gesture towards the *action phase*. This phrasing itself appeared as *a symbolic erasure of action*, that hinted at an uneasy détente with the positivist tradition. I did not know how to present a complex practice that failed even more to fit in a box.

I was rebelling against two aspects. One was the process of reflection, which I viewed it as an iron cage. This created a significant unease due to its centrality in action research. The other was the difficulty in categorising and articulating a framework of action, that can successfully embrace the complexity of my praxis. I was resisting abstract descriptions and neither fitted into neat frames.

Did I err by looking for method cues from qualitative research? Did that marginalises action? Action research is oriented towards the transformation of the researcher and the community, whilst qualitative research traditionally eschewed action.

Yet these boundaries are also shifting, when faced with the realisation that research process itself changes the context, subjects and the observer. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) notes the 9th moment of Qualitative Research must connect social science to social purpose, while many ethnographic narratives explicitly speak of inner and outer change (see Chaudhry, 2000).

I needed clarity to move forward. I wrote on quality and validity as a tangential path into method. I wrote on my second person practice exploring both action and reflection. My ADOC supervision group explored method during a lengthy supervision call.

As I began assembling my thesis, I felt that I must begin by writing the method/methodology chapter, applying a critical lens on method. Is defining method(s) in the beginning a salute to my positivist upbringing? If I wrote on method(s) at the end, does it have the same meaning as writing it at the beginning? Is methodology a stable centre, a yearning for fixity in a research landscape that is fractured and on unstable ground (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)? I am still steeped in the positivist tradition, though I try to distance it.

## Is Action Research Without Methodology?

Trickster's multiplicity is reflected in a ''methodological syncretism'' that deprivileges singular approaches and attempts to use any and all available means to produce the best possible research (Salinas, 2013 p. 149).

"How the very notion of a 'methodological debate' is itself rooted in action research's acceptance of certain historically rooted prejudices concerning the nature of practice and how practical knowledge can be developed" suggests Carr (2006, p. 432). Mapping the roots of action research to Aristotelian tradition of praxis governed by phronesis, Carr, drawing on Godamer, argues for the development of "a non-methodical, dialogical model for social sciences" (p. 431).

This also reflects on Reason & Bradbury's (2013) claim, – "it is not so much a methodology as an orientation to inquiry" (p. 1).

Methodology is the theoretical framework that justifies both the research methods and knowledge generated from it within an epistemological context. This seems like a holdover from the positivist paradigm, where data collection is a means of testing quality and validity of the research (to ensure replicability) and is privileged over text - interpretation/representation - which appears to sit outside methodology. Denzin & Lincoln (2005) question this privileging of data gathering; "fieldwork and writing blur into one another. There is, in the final analysis, no difference between writing and fieldwork" (p. 19). Methodology must speak to a space beyond the realm of data gathering. In action research, in addition to the data gathering and text, there is also action that must fit into the methodological frame.

Looking closer, the boundaries of data gathering, interpretation/representation and action begin to slip both epistemologically, discursively and practically. Epistemologically, the separation of knowledge and action (metaphorically the separation of reflection and action) becomes problematic, while discursively, interpretation/representation are a form of action. Following Shaw (2002), shifting conversations – text - become a core method for change. If we use the earlier definitions, third person *practice* is wholly textual. More we interrogate this framework, action, data and text end up folding into one another.

Law (2014) reminds us that "method in any case, is also found outside such settings. So method is always much more than its formal accounts suggest" (p. 144). Carr (2006) points out, "praxis cannot be developed or improved by a mode of inquiry that is based on methodological principles or rules" (p. 433).

There is also the question of how one can write methodology. Could I not write methodology to include data gathering, interpretation/representation and action? This would simply be a reductionist exercise where writing methodology becomes no different to writing an abstract or a preface.

"The preface is a necessary gesture of homage and parricide, for the book (the father) makes a claim of authority or origin which is both true and false", remarks Gayatri Spivak (Derrida, 1997 p. xi), in her ground-breaking introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. "The preface, by daring to repeat the book and reconstitute it in another register, merely enacts what is already the case: the book's repetitions are always other than the book."

This difficulty around writing on methodology and methods in an inclusive manner should not leave a potential researcher in a vacuum. What it does, I believe, is leave one with a particular freedom to play with method(s). At its root, method is a way to bring phenomena into awareness and act in different forms. Thus, it must emerge with the researcher's own shifting of awareness and modes of action.

Law (2014) opens up method to further scrutiny,

> Method is not, I have argued, a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality. Rather it is performative. It helps to produce realities. It does not do so freely and at whim. There is a hinterland of realities, of manifest absences and Othernesses, resonances and patterns of one kind or another, already being enacted, and it cannot ignore these. At the same time, however, it is also creative. It re-works and re-bundles these and as it does so re-crafts realities and creates new versions of the world. It makes new signals and new resonances, new manifestations and new concealments, and it does so continuously. Enactments and the realities that they produce do not automatically stay in place. Instead they are made, and remade. This means that they can, at least in principle, be remade in other ways. (p. 143).

A performative method then brings the purpose of the research process and the values that it is built on, into sharper focus. That focus is reflected and refracted through the research process. This brings us back to the question, *what is action research for*, and searches for answers in the domain of values and paradigm on which action research is built. I would propose that these are also necessary conditions of quality and validity.

## Quality and Validity – Choices and Implications

*The real cycle you're working on is a cycle called yourself. The machine that appears to be "out there" and the person that appears to be "in here" are not two separate things. They grow toward Quality or fall away from Quality together.*

*– Robert M Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

Quality and validity concerns become more visible in qualitative and action research, because they lack the fig leaves of concrete methodologies and objective data. One must continuously confront and question the aims of research, its normative agenda, how it generates *knowledge* and how it benefits different constituencies on one hand, and its claims of validity on the other. As my praxis is built around critical emancipatory roots, I ask if the research discloses, interrupts or sustains oppression.

Greenwood & Levin (2006), anchors questions of quality and validity on practical use of action, measured on workability and on how the participants' situation (or awareness of the same) has improved. Reason (2006) extends this idea and points out that in a participatory paradigm,

> validity considerations that include the practical, the political, and the moral; and away from validity as policing and legitimation toward a concern for validity as asking questions, stimulating dialogue, making us think about just what our research practices are grounded in, and thus what are the significant claims concerning quality we wish to make. (p. 191)

Noting that action research is about choices, he claims "that quality in inquiry comes from awareness of and transparency about the choices available at each stage of the inquiry" (Reason, 2006, p.198). He frames quality around the four characteristics of action research, 'worthwhile purposes', 'democracy and participation', 'many ways of knowing' and 'emergent development form'. I note that the first two phrases are steeped in contested meanings and are directly implicated in how power is deployed.

As reflexive practitioners, we are expected to demonstrate an awareness of our own subjectivity/situatedness and wider context of action. Macbeth defines reflexivity as a "deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself", (2001, p.35).

Having recognised all of the above, I want to say, "yes, and…"

I hold aloft three questions in this text that are related to quality.

Pillow (2003) cautions that "using reflexivity to write toward the familiar works against the critical impetus of reflexivity and thus masks continued reliance upon traditional notions of validity, truth, and essence in qualitative research" (p. 180). Noting that reflexivity of self/other forms a field of familiar, she invites authors to break traditional boundaries by interrupting the comfortable by adopting a *reflexivity of discomfort*. She explores

> how reflexivity can act not as a tool of methodological power but a methodological tool interruptive of practices of gathering data as "truths" into existing "folds of the known" to practices which "interrogate the truthfulness of the tale and provide multiple answers" (Trinh, 1991, p. 12), and to what I suggest are unfamiliar – and likely uncomfortable – tellings (p. 192).

She notes that it is important to interrogate "reflexivity's complicit relationship with ethnocentric power and knowledge in qualitative research" (p. 192). This brings back the focus on the purpose of research and its deep complicity with power and dominant discourses. I want to explore how reflexivity may need to be reframed if the purpose of this text is also about signifying from the margin. Chapter six explores these further.

The second question is can the quality and validity criteria be fixed across multiple narratives as if they form one unified category. Looking at the diversity of encounters that sit within this text and their different power and subject positions, I ask if the criteria of  validity and quality should be different in each telling. Quality and validity are also constructions of the specific paradigm – how do we define one when they shift and one speaks to the inbetween spaces?

The third question is the quality of writing and the ability to resonate with the audiences, and its capability to help them inquire into their own positions and actions, a sign towards the third person inquiry process. Here, the quality of writing becomes important, in its capacity to hold people engaged. Visweswaran (1994) explores the ever-shrinking difference and overlapping of literature, field notes and anthropological text, quoting Marcel Mauss, "the anthropologist has to be also a novelist able to evoke the whole society" (p. 16). This forefronts 'writing to resonate' as a critical requirement of quality. I hesitate here; and wonder if this criterion of quality privileges a particular writing skill, over and above other skills of an action researcher,

and wonder if this too constructs a particular marginality as an additional hurdle for previously marginalised groups.

## Reflections on Method and the Madness

We are all interpretive bricoleurs stuck in the present, working against the past, as we move into a politically charged and challenging future. – Norman Denzin

So I take a chisel and a hammer and begin to pry away at the method, the foundation of research process and find it wanting. While I critique, and have glimpses on how to work while taking in the challenges, I do not have an alternative to present. I still work within this paradigm, trying to hold on to its flaws and critiques. I can only point out that this critique takes a non-hegemonic approach, without intending to replace the existing order with a new one.

This chapter also speaks to another aspect of my practice, the interweaving of an expert role with that of the trickster. As the practice narratives unearth, the approach to dig deeper and deeper into propositional knowledge, even within new and diverse subject areas, is a skill that I have developed, which I couple with close reading and critical analysis.

It is a skill developed from school age, wanting to not be bested within encounters. I am keenly aware of its shadow when used in social interactions. I become a formidable antagonist in some frames, and at times stifling dialogue when knowledge is used as brute force in a confrontational mode. I am still learning how to use expertise in more collaborative ways, and that will remain a constant focus of my practice.

> "When you ask us a question, we are always nervous and unsure on how to respond," G laughs as she says this. D, sitting next to her, nods in agreement. I am surprised at this comment; I have seen G, who was unsure of her role in the company and her future, blossom into a confident professional leader within her department, venturing into new territories with enthusiasm and confidence.
>
> We have been meeting frequently, trying to work out a future plan for a department in the company, which has been quite stagnant of late due to relational and strategy issues. I have been working with G for much longer, where I crafted some interventions for her team, and we had regular chats with each other, with her adopting me as a mentor.

Yet her statement takes me by surprise. I thought, and felt, we were having frank conversations, and did not notice such self-doubt from either. I probe, searching for clarity.

"The truth is when you ask a question, there are layers of meanings that is implied, that makes us unsure. Right now, you asked us what is the purpose of a strategy session. When you ask this question, I know that it is not the obvious answer you are looking for. So we are not sure how to respond."

I wonder how this works when a power differential is not present, how do I come across. Arrogant and dismissive?

## Revisiting Methodology

This sub-chapter is written at the end of writing this thesis. Here, I attempt to look beyond the preceding critique of action research (and also that of chapter 6 decentring reflection) and explore my own methodological approach of this work. This can be further developed to extend the methodological and theoretical framework of action research in future.

Trickster methodology by its nature must elude definitions. Trickster has inexhaustible toolbox of methods, and none knows them all, including her. They emerge in context and intuitiveness. It is possible to analyse post-fact, but it cannot be converted to a bounded methodology. I can only gesture at its contours.

As I reflect on my critique of methodology, I realise that my discomfort arose more from thinking about the role of the *researcher* in an action research paradigm, noting that this question arises from privileging research over action. After all, a doctorate is a research degree, even in the action research paradigm, with vestiges of the positivist tradition. I see this as a constrain that arises out of an orthodoxy, and a misplacement of action research especially its radical and experimental arm.

What form and gaze can deprivilege research, in a way that the radical promise of action research can be upheld? Denzin & Lincoln gives us a peak, as part of their project to reimagine qualitative inquiry.

> We could go one step further and make the performance turn, the humanbeing-as performer, not as researcher or inquirer. A performative project, informed by research and inquiry, involves acting in the world so as to make it visible for social transformations. This is a postqualitative, postresearchinquiry-world. It is a world defined by risk taking by textual experimentation, by ontologies of transformation, a world defined by acts of love, struggles, and resistance, a world shaped by dramatic radical acts of activism (2018 p. 44).

Purpose of our work must be rethought beyond the realms of research and inquiry, beyond knowledge into active transformation. I read this invitation and wonder if I could have better summarised my intent than this. Though their frame of reference is qualitative inquiry, this

invitation sits quite comfortably within the action research paradigm where social change is implicit.

Naming the work as a performance constitutes a radical reframing that sheds a different light. For one, performance is trickster territory, and I find resonance in this. I see performance running as a thread across my work, from my deconstruction of method to presentations and presence. It also brings a sharp focus to the writing of the thesis, and foregrounds the choices I make on style and form as much as substance.

They also speak of resistance and dramatic radical actions of activism. This work goes beyond micro-activism and microgestures that mark many methodology chapters and accounts of action research interventions. I speak of a different space of action that is defined by taking up high risk positions for a larger decolonisation purpose. It is action research for activists. To tackle hegemonic discourses, one must continue to hold an oppositional consciousness (Sandoval, 2000) as a conscious act of being, a permanent signification of activism.

I also free myself from a methodological straightjacket that troubled me. Action towards radical social and ecological justice as an everyday endeavour requires a high degree of flexibility in modes of thinking, acting and writing. As I reflect on my work, I notice that I use a large toolkit within my work; pedagogy, collaborative/relational practices, deconstruction & critical analysis, decolonisation of the discourse, performance pedagogy, pedagogy of discomfort, technical mastery, transgression/trickster, first person reflection, narrative analysis, critical thinking & deconstruction, post-colonial studies, interviews and feedback, writing and storytelling, presentation…

As Denzin & Lincoln (2018 p. 45) notes, the researcher may be seen as a bricoleur, and her work as a bricolage, that uses a multiplicity of methods, critical and interpretive styles in her performance project. The methodological bricoleur selects different methods in a way that suits the project in hand.

What is visible is also how these are used. I use a critical and deconstructive framing as a foundation for action, critically interrogating the discursive framing and attempting to destabilise it through transgression and trickster interventions. This also spins into how this thesis is written and assembled.

Such an approach requires a flexibility in modes of operation, skill and methods. The necessity of such flexibility, especially in the face of hegemonic discourses and marginality is understood. In her anthology *methodology of the oppressed*, Chela Sandoval (2000) introduced differential consciousness as a methodology of flexibility especially under multiple oppressions.

> The cruising mobilities required in this effort demand of the differential practitioner commitment to the process of metamorphosis itself: this is the activity of the trickster who practices subjectivity as masquerade, the oppositional agent who accesses differing identity, ideological, aesthetic, and political positions (p. 61).

As Sandoval notes, shifting discourse demand different approaches to power and modes of action as well as shifting subjectivities. I notice that I take this as a given in my practice not always put under microscope. She states,

> Differential consciousness requires grace, flexibility, and strength: enough strength to confidently commit to a well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requisites of another oppositional ideological tactic if readings of power's formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committed to egalitarian social relations and race, gender, sex, class, and social justice, when these other readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands (p. 60).

While I cannot say that I have sufficient discipline and grace proposed, I see this as a critical element of an emergent methodology of action.

Am I opening a space up where anything and everything becomes methodology? What are the boundaries of an open, performative bricolage? What are the parameters of validity and quality that must strengthen such practice, and how does it hold the performative researcher accountable?

I propose two key questions to hold as a practitioner to hold on to a promise of ethics in this type of work.

The first is the reflexivity of discomfort, building on deconstruction and critical theory, proposed earlier as a quality criteria that should span across the work. The reflexivity of discomfort must disrupt both the narrative and the identity of the reader, challenging and questioning the easy

regression to a promise of a shared discourse. This premise of the humanist project with its claims of identity and representation is challenged through a deconstructive move emphasising "how we think we know is neither transparent nor innocent" (Visweswaran 1984, p. 78). Visweswaran goes on to say, "self-reflexive anthropology questions its own authority; deconstructive anthropology attempts to abandon or forfeit its own authority, knowing that it is impossible to do so. It is this level of impossibility that deconstructive ethnography adopts as method" (p.79).

The second is the commitment to positive social change and enactment of the same as evidenced by both the text and action. This, I propose, should be held, both as intent and outcome, held with an understanding of complexity that looks beyond the binaries of intent/outcome. The commitment to a performative method colours this process and foregrounds how we branch off from the traditional to surface and honour different epistemological positions.

I resist in grounding this methodology on a non-Western way of thinking, although my history and context influences it, I am a product of a western knowledge system. And I ask a question, am I a category that is not West?

Reflections on how methodology is played out in the practice narrative chapters that follow are accompanied in the introductions to the chapters. I want to comment now on the performative form of the thesis.

This work is written leaning heavily towards a storytelling tradition, something that I was conflicted on during the time of writing. I see storying as a rejection of the positivist tradition, that reaches to traditional ways of knowing, as quoted by Thomas (2014) in Kovach (2018), "I believe this point is critical to storytelling—it is rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and we must be patient and sit with the words" (p. 401).

To judge the thesis as a piece of performance, I must also interrogate its purpose, as it struggles to tell a story around decolonisation and sustainability as a practitioner's narrative and theoretical frameworks around it. It also attempts to transgress the intellectual tradition by interrogating colonial constructs and knowledge formation, with a promise of a critical text to advance the academy perhaps minutely through a decolonising project. An attempt to create an

> "interrogative" text that reflects back at its readers the problems of inquiry at the same
> time an inquiry is conducted. Such a text strikes the epistemological paradox of knowing
> through not knowing, knowing both too little and too much, addressing the question,
> "How does one act knowing what one does?"(Lather 2002 p. 285).

Interrogative texts are messy; the writing style thus foregrounds interruptions and disjunctions through comments and quotes to keep categories and identification unstable; to trouble the referential function of discourse. It uses a writing style based on stories for fieldwork much like experimental ethnography, honouring the logic of storytelling tradition. The almost autobiographical writing, is perhaps too self-centred – but does not try to mask my own subjectivities by writing in third person, using a depersonalized voice or introduce polyvocality for its sake. There is an implicit acknowledgement of representation that questions not only how knowledge is made, but by whom, and the power relations and histories that colour such process.

Thus this thesis (text) demonstrate a critical part of the performance project, that at its core share the same intentions, methodology and play of the trickster. I point this out as a core part of the methodology – that a trickster cannot write a straightforward thesis, try as she might. That the performance project methodology encompass not only action and knowledge construction, but how that knowledge is also enacted and storied to be told.

I also point out that the deconstruction of methodology has also fundamentally shaped my praxis and the stories that are told in this thesis. I remember speaking to my supervisory group about my activism on coal, and mentioning that 'this is not really action research, and it will not be in my thesis', and Steve's gentle rebuke. As my critique on method widened, so did my practice, and I was able to find ways to broaden my understanding of the action research paradigm to integrate my activism beyond tempered radicalism, and in turn, use the methodological awareness of trickster and performance to shape my activism.

I see that I am merely upholding the promise of radical transformational promise of action research, as a method of the margin.

## 4. Of Environmental Grief

### Introduction

I wanted to surface the implications of our cleaving from 'nature' and our inability to see and feel as part of a larger whole; which epistemological errors, coupled with advanced technology would give us the likelihood of survival of a *snowball in hell* (Bateson 1972). Chapters four and five narrate how I began deepening my environmental consciousness and began to accept the grief from a closer understanding of the ever increasing ecological destruction and our own complicity.

In these narratives, I speak of my distance to nature and how my *scientific knowledge*, while bringing necessary and critical insights, also emphasised a particularly objectified view of it. My work sees me intervene in multiple ways to shift specific actions, and in other times, the discourse. I use critical analysis to deepen my understanding on how scientific knowledge, as used within a business context, stand in contrast to more holistic and systemic indigenous knowledge among local practitioners.

The narratives here also refer to a performative project and pedagogy. I use a multiplicity of approaches to shift action and discourse, that range from bringing images (and facts) outside the field of view into visibility, coalition building and presentations/performances that are intended to provide critical and radical points of view. Chapter 5 illustrates how a presentation on a green factory morphed to a presentation on ecological grief, through cycles of action and inquiry while also questioning its ability to shift a larger discourse meaningfully.

This work is built around grief, as my understanding of climate crisis and ecological destruction points to mass extinctions and loss of life in our more than human world. I believe acknowledging this grief as a critical element in our transformation, and our way of (perhaps intentional) talking of these issues that deny grief as a reason for our slowness of action. Surfacing grief, in locations where it is normatively eschewed, is a trickster manoeuvre.

It is also deeply personal, as I try to make sense of the grief with my family, and the complexity of our lives that denies collective grief.

This writing does not portray the full range of work I do, including supporting large scale biodiversity restoration with MAS, to localised pollinator habitat creation. Choice of what is

presented is governed by the need to contain the breadth of this work to explore particular

modes of interventions.

## A Wetland Story and a Question on Sensemaking

Denial (De Nile) is a river in Egypt. – Marie-Helene Kutak

A holding action at incredible expense and self-congratulation and after a while the dream itself enchants one so that it is just reproducing the system. – Gayatri Spivak

My daily commute is eight-kilometres across an urban area built on the Bellanwila-Attidiya wetland, currently undergoing rapid 'development'. Colombo was once a large wetland, with only fragments remaining. I watched the decline of the wetland during the last twelve years, a slow death by a thousand cuts, grieving in silence. Steep concrete channels replaced the natural canals, severing the relationship between water and earth, curtailing the capacity to modulate with water levels, impacting groundwater and cutting off access to animals and reptiles. This would dry out parts of the wetland and change the ecology and species diversity significantly. Parts were dredged into lakes; other parts filled up for human habitation. Acts that lead to the death of many plants, amphibians, reptiles such as monitor lizards, small mammals such as civet cats and fishing cats; some of them already endangered, many will disappear in the near future.

Wetlands are complex ecosystems that undulate with the terrain and time, dancing with the rhythm of the ebbs and flows of water. They are liminal spaces that shapeshift yet holding integrity through dry spells and floods. It is a rich ecology teeming with life and creativity, a sponge for water and carbon, functioning as the 'kidneys' of the land, purifying water. They are sensitive eco-systems radically (and perhaps catastrophically) changing when the flow of water and nutrients are altered.

They are more than what we know of them, beyond our ability to conceptualise and textualize.

When is a wetland not a wetland? Is it still one when its relation to water, to land, and to the species that inhabit it is changed? What happens to it when its character and contours are defined and changed by its *colonizer* from his limited gaze?

The intrinsic and ecological value of wetlands are negated within our discourse. The Sri Lankan government uses the term 'low-lying lands', defining it in a binary relationship to the privileged 'firmer, higher ground'. They are 'non-productive' land in the development discourse, that need to be made 'productive'. A canvas to be painted over, a 'colonised other' to be 'civilised'. This framing has permeated into the vernacular. The local terms that recognised the variety of

wetland spaces such as *owita*, *deniya*, *wela* have fallen into disuse, leaving just one master category, erasing the ecological and human value of each niche. How can wetlands be protected when they are marginalised in a discourse anchored in anthropocentrism and 'development'?

Small fragments of wetlands are 'preserved' as nature parks while others slowly make way for 'development'. Fragments struggle to hold their integrity from multiple stresses; a loss of resilience and wholeness.

It is but a sad parody of the majestic whole, I contemplate, as I walk with my family through the Wetland Nature Park in our neighbourhood. We marvel the diversity of plants and animals that are part of it. Dragonflies and damselflies catch my attention. Magda is fascinated by the shifts of colours and contours, the flow of water and stillness. Anoush and Kavini are enamoured by the vistas and how the colours of the sky complement the colours on the ground at sunset. The calls of birds and insects are set against the deep stillness of the mangroves, a silence that I have to train myself to hear. The dull throb of vehicles is ever present, reminding us that this is a fleeting refuge of beauty, too close to human habitation, and simply too small. A miniature that can only sigh and remember her own greatness of yesteryear, surrounded and caged by humans, made into a spectacle for human enjoyment; a zoo.

Ecological destruction of both large and small scale is ubiquitous. From the burning of Indonesian rainforests that give way to oil-palm plantations, to the destruction of pristine Boreal forests of Canada to extract oil from tar sands. Closer to home, the destruction of the natural spaces through *development*, encroachment or destructive practices is too widespread to mention. This slow poisoning of the planet is enabled by a discursive regime that has transformed the wilds/nature into an 'environment' which is valued merely through instrumentation and spectacularisation.

"The transformation of nature (depicted in European traditions as a 'wild, untamed', often hostile force) into environment (more 'manageable' and goal directed) is one of the hallmarks of modernity, in which domination of nature becomes a key indicator of human progress rather than a transformation of the relationship between humans and nature," notes Banerjee (2003, p.152).

I notice my own complicity in this discourse, as a participant, a co-constructor and as a consumer. A cursed subject of a colonising discourse; a discourse that invites transgression. Yet I do not fully know how.

Numerous social, economic and ecological indicators show a rapid acceleration of multiple stresses on ecology during the last 30 years, termed as the 'great acceleration' (Steffen, Broadgate, Deutsch, Gaffney, & Ludwig, 2015). The disruption that humans are wreaking on the planetary ecology has resulted in the current geological epoch being called the 'Anthropocene', signifying that we are the primary cause of the alteration of the systems, and also that we care the least for anything other than exploitation of the planet for our own supposed wellbeing.

* * *

As I read through my own narrative, I notice that I write of nature as something that is external. This is an issue beyond language; the distance to nature is both an ontological and epistemological issue. My description of the wetland recalls a space that I drive through in a vehicle, and visit occasionally to see its *splendour*, to breathe its myriad fragrances amidst faint whiffs of diesel fumes. It does not recall a space I intimately inhabit. I am a voyeur, with all its implied fetishism.

I wonder what I represent when I speak of nature, and what I silence. I notice that nature is silenced by my noisy chatter and my partial, reductive descriptions born out of a questionable epistemology. Though I critique the voice, I do not have the means to sufficiently transcend it. I lack the vocabulary and the syntax to write or speak differently.

This language is born out of my worldview arising from a positivist education system, which also inhabits the discourse of science and business. Science itself is a particular form of intimacy, perhaps not that of a lover (Macy, 1991) but of an intimate 'other' for some – but for others an object to be exploited. It gives rise to a syntax of facts and descriptions. It uses objectification as a method of distancing, of othering, resulting in a partial erasure of the violence and grief imparted to the larger system. Though I have methodology related concerns, I am enmeshed within a scientific paradigm, and I value the insights and knowledge it brings. This framing is embedded within the discourses of economics/business, science and development. Though I am a subject formed within this discourse, I attempt to critique, interrupt and destabilise it.

Intermittently, I write with a close intimacy to nature, in a voice that is poetic, emotional and experiential, evoking beauty and grief – and one able to embrace a larger whole. Though not as eloquent as Abram (1996), Leopold (1949) or Macy (1991), these writings attempts to decentre self in the narrative. These two worlds of writing co-exist, continuously overlapping and displacing each other.

"Science notices, distances, separates and objectifies. As humans, we apprehend; our capacity to see radically beyond the boundaries of science into the same scientific *facts* from a holistic frame, is a form of apprehension," my ADOC colleague Kathy writes beautifully. It is apprehension that I seek to embed and cultivate, as a way of expanding margins for action.

I am interrogated by Kathy and Craig, on my language of separation in my depiction of nature. Craig comments on how nature is cast as a victim in my writing, without agency, and the accuracy and the epistemology of such depiction. I wonder how I should respond to this in the Anthropocene. I feel that the answer to this claim must come from a different epistemology. I am equally uneasy from my scientific self, as I am from a deeper ecological self.

Kathy is eloquent;

> what does it require for us to act as Earthkind before any other identity… how would we speak about this (climate change at the meta level, wetlands loss at the local, etc.) if we could/would act AS the whole (of Earthkind, water, etc.) rather than merely ON BEHALF OF (the latter of which is a construct that keeps the elemental world 'other' and therefore abstracted and at-a-distance…

I know what I am struggling with is a similar seduction of impossibility that Visweswaran (1984) placed on the feminist trickster. I want to *fully understand* and be able to *fully represent* nature. These needs, presaged by the impossible adjective 'fully', is a mission doomed to fail, and only points to a split epistemology.

I notice that Kathy moves beyond the attempts to *fully understand* and to *fully represent*. What Kathy asks for is to *fully be*.

A shift from a scientific gaze towards a holistic, more complex way of knowing, attempting to decentre the 'human' gaze. It requires unlearning decades of education, in an attempt to

displace the ontology of separation. I do not know how, and remain conflicted, looking at the world, seeing images split through a fractured lens.

Out of the partial gaze and the impossibility of knowing better, I can only become a dancing trickster.

## Climate Change - A Colonial Encounter

I first heard of climate change in the '90s, and soon realised the gravity of it. It figured in my move out of a career in the IT industry to work on sustainability, a nascent field in 1999. After my Masters in 2000, I joined a renewable energy firm. From 2002-2006 I worked as a climate researcher, focusing on the climate of Sri Lanka. I began reading academic literature on climate change, and my concern was rising. I left academic research to work in the corporate sector, believing that corporate sustainability efforts would create the impetus to solve such issues like climate change.

Hansen et al (2015) note that we have crossed the *safe* thresholds, demanding dramatic reversal of the current emissions trends. Such pathways seem beyond our grasp or horizon, with the collective target of COP21 currently out of reach. The shift in the tone of climate scientists from concern to alarm is evident, even in scientific journals. I am haunted by a bleak outlook of the future for all species and the planetary ecosystem.

The impact of climate change that is observable is frightening, yet I get numbed with each disaster. 2016 was the warmest year on record with maximum temperatures in February breaking records in multiple countries and localities. 2016/17 heat wave resulted in massive coral die-out across the globe, including Bar Reef in Sri Lanka and perhaps marking a point-of-no-return for the Great Barrier Reef. Drought, floods and wildfires created significant destruction across multiple regions. The Arctic and the Antarctic experienced a dramatic loss of sea ice and glacier melts.

In Sri Lanka, the heat wave in February and March of 2016 with a severe drought, brought death and misery to animals and people. In May 2016, a storm led to destructive floods and landslides, which recurred in May 2017 while part of the country was struggling with a multi-year drought. These extremes and slow shifts appear mere harbingers of what is to come.  As I write, hurricane Florence and Typhoon Mangkhut are still taking lives.

Hansen (2010) articulates the three injustices of climate change, which I rephrase below:

a)      Today's adults to young people (intergenerational): The current heating in the pipeline, coupled with amplifying feedbacks, produce a climate system out of control for the next generations to deal with.

b)    North to South (colonial/developmental): The Global North burned most of the global carbon budget, while large scale impacts are mainly borne by countries of the Global South with less resilience to deal with the impact.

c)    Humans to other species (Interspecies): Climate change and other stresses pose a potential risk of 25-50% extinction of species.

All three injustices are normalised and inscribed within the global climate change discourse, including the UN process designed to address climate change. The global targets and strategies do very little to redress them.

At a climate summit for Sri Lankan university students, at my co-presenter's urging, I touch on the fault lines of the climate agreements. I ask how the 2°C target was set at the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit. The small island nations were urging for a more ambitious 1.5°C target. The 'developed world' refused this tougher target, claiming potential harm to their economic growth. Clearly, the survival of the people in small island nations were not as important as the economic growth of the 'developed' nations. Sadly, this is not the only location for colonial/imperialist thinking, it is also fundamentally written into the justice & equity processes within.

I speak of the multiple flood events we have been facing and ask her what type of resource mobilisation and capacity is needed to avoid the present scale of floods, let alone future ones triggered by more warming. Focus on adaptation is another trap, I state, noting that climate induced disasters would keep poor countries in a poverty trap, leaving 'development' out of their reach.

"Vidhura, you are really making me worried," she responds, and I feel further depressed. She is a climate summit veteran, part of the official Sri Lankan delegation for multiple years. I wonder how she copes with disappointment in those, but I have no sympathy for her.

The Paris agreement 'recognised' the historical responsibility of developed nations with a commitment to create a fund with a floor of USD 100 Billion per year, which is severely underfunded, making both mitigation and adaptation unaffordable for many countries. I ask her about equity when the agreed amounts are not being committed. She has no answer to offer.

I was harsh on her, because I felt she approached climate change in a matter-of-fact manner, fuelled by an ignorance of the scale of the problem at an event set up to educate students. I felt her experience at the summits should have given her better context.

Having closely worked with the Sri Lankan Climate Change Secretariat[15], I know they lack the knowledge and capacity to really grasp and direct action/responses. Years of colonial and development legacy has created a dependence of foreign consultants that has left the sector capacity and capability poor. The local Meteorological Department, Disaster Management Centre, research and predictive institutions are struggling to understand and give a coherent picture of impacts and adaptation options. This is possibly the reality of most countries in the Global South.

We struggle to map the impacts, develop coherent adaptation plans and resources to execute. This reality appears to be absent in the global discourse of climate change. The countries who least contributed to the problem, while being most vulnerable to it, are left virtually to fend for themselves through power structures.

I feel trapped; a climate activist on stage, attempting to speak of a climate system moving away from stability. What discursive frame can we construct to address this in a meaningful way?

I do not want to leave people with false impressions, that we are on track for the Paris target or that the Paris target is meaningful or adaptation is feasible. I want to expose the colonial imprint in the climate change conversation, and how it is a disservice to us. I feel as young climate activists they need to know the political context.

I also want to speak of Kathy's identity of acting as the Earth, but the words that come out is about acting on behalf of earth. I simply do not know how to speak otherwise.

This is also why it is difficult to speak of the third injustice that Hansen mentions, from humans to a more-than-human world.

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[15] I am a reviewer of the Third National Communication on Climate Change that Sri Lankan Government submitted to the UNFCCC in 2018, and had the opportunity to work with the Climate Change Secretariat, local experts, meteorological department and also review response actions and adaptation. I have worked in the sector for a while in multiple capacities.

> I had been working with Dharshana on mangrove conservation for over a year and charmed by his love for the work he does, and the energy he puts to educate local students on the value of mangrove protection. A giant of a man, with a booming voice, yet gentle and jovial, with a vast knowledge on local plants. He is attempting to regrow coral reefs that died out during the first global coral die-out event in 1997. I am dismissive, noting that South-Western Sri Lankan coral reefs cannot be made anew, due to sea temperature trends. I see the sense of resignation in his face.
>
> The brutality of what I said, and my dismissal of his efforts crippled me afterwards. How can I make such decisions as if these beings have become disposable?

At UNDP GEF-SGP[16], we peruse over 50 funding proposals annually, all of them for urgent needs asking for pittance in the larger scheme of things. Only a few receive the funds. Each decision is directly tied to life and death of hundreds of species. I come home from these sessions completely burnt out. I feel like a heartless god, making choices of life and death through a stroke of a pen. With limited funds to go around, we *decide* what will be saved, and what will not, dancing around rationality, measurability and criteria.

For the many who do the actual conservation work against odds, born out of love and care, these are mere words. I cannot judge; I too work against such odds.

Though these may appear different, each choice we make as consumers or industrialists have similar consequence though hidden from our view due to the structure of our systems.

Hansen (2010) believes the current emission trajectory is likely to cause 25-50% extinction of all species, and this is echoed by other scientists (see Warren, Price, VanDerWal, Cornelius & Sohl 2018). The coral die out of the Great Barrier Reef is forgotten a year after its emergence, the third global event since 1997. How do we verbalise this tragedy and injustice? *Are we still human after the coral reefs die out*, I keep coming back to this question again and again. Do I really grieve?

In April 2018, our family is at Kalpitiya, and we decide to go and see the Bar Reef, famed for its beautiful corals.

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[16] UNDP Global Environmental Facility – Small Grants Programme

Magda wants to stay in the boat, Anoush and Kavini are with me and we are snorkelling. I look down, only to find a coral graveyard, bleached, dead, white and grey is all that we see. A few colourful fish still capture my attention, streaks of beautiful colour in the midst of nothingness. A sinking feeling is all I have, and I cannot look anymore. I try a few more times at different locations and go back to the boat. The joy of seeing the dolphins and whales earlier in the day has melted, with a sense of foreboding and grief.

"There is nothing to see, it's all gone," Magda says, and I nod. I knew the reef was bleaching in 2016/17 heatwave but didn't realise it is gone. Our colleagues who used to come here often are also shocked and speechless. It is gone, and it is also erased from our collective memory.

I do not know how to grieve this loss while staring at a coral graveyard.



Magda Aghababyan added a new photo.
April 14, 2018

A coral graveyard
where Dory is not,
as Dory cannot
be without
a live coral reef.
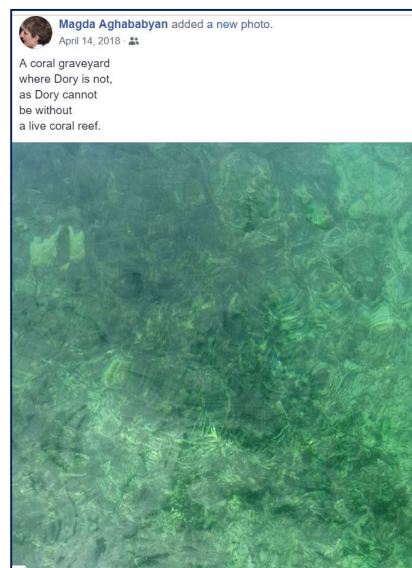
During a lecture by a former Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), I question the anthropocentrism at the heart of our construction of climate change, and how it shapes our responses to it. I ask who speaks for the more-than-human world and how it curtails our field of action with disastrous consequences. I get a rousing applause from the audience, much to my surprise. The speaker has no real answer.

The issue sits outside the discourse, raised mainly by indigenous groups within the UN system, because their epistemology acknowledges it. We who live within a colonised knowledge system, struggle to fathom it. I note that it is only humans who can even contemplate a question on

whether we should look at climate change should be adapted or mitigated. Those who ask for adaptation appear to be more focused on humans, who perhaps have a higher adaptation capacity. My despair sets in.

The climate change discourse does not meaningfully address the three injustices because it doesn't acknowledge the scale of the problem, because economists and others do not want it so. It is derived out of the sustainable development discourse which is by itself colonially constructed and subjugated to the neoliberal economic system (Banerjee, 2003). An epistemology of separation cannot really solve it for all beings.
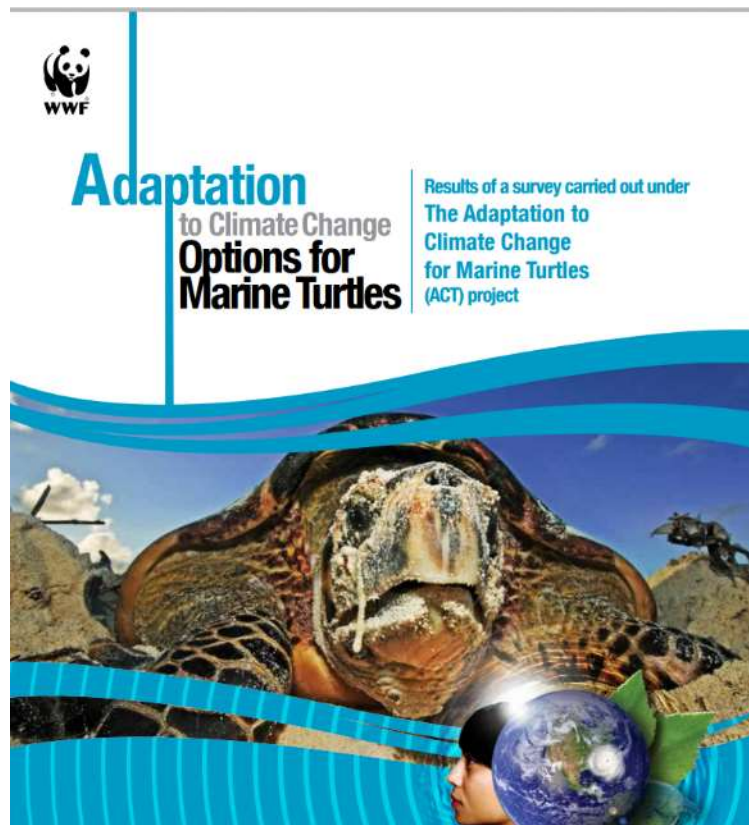


*Figure 1: A UN Report on Adaptaion for Climate Change*

Could we not teach turtles how to read English, so that they learn how to adapt? The turtles may not know what is going to come and may not have the capacity to adapt fast enough - the idea of adaptation comes from an epistemology that separates them from us and focuses on narrow human utility. It comes from an epistemology that selects winners and losers, those who can adapt, and those who cannot, even within humans.

* * *

"I love you," says Magda. And I automatically ask, "why?"

It is a game we play, an ongoing inquiry of sorts that holds us together, not only on the larger issues, but also the small miraculous moments.

"Because in a room full of people, you ask him the only question that everyone claps to."

The audience is mostly environmentalists and naturalists, I think. It is easy for this audience to find resonance in what I say as I bring to the surface a truth that is intuitively known by them, though marginalised within the discourse. I raise it up as an act of transgression to show the boundaries of how we talk about climate change comes out of a cleaved epistemology and hence unable to heal.

This narrative also speaks of the loneliness of transgressive work. I rely on fleeting moments of affirmation to give meaning and validity, and I treasure that from my intimate other. They validate my agency in a lonely place.

Does it really bring about meaningful change, or is it just theatrics that boil down to nothing in the end? How can I know, when we are trying to change not merely a system but the discourse itself?

## Holding Grief

> In all strict logic, the loss of a species of bird on some small remote island matters little to the future of the world. Even the irreversible loss of soil and vegetation from some eroded African hillside is a small thing. Yet people grieve…. These feelings cannot be embodied in the hard and brittle logic of science, but they may have truth of another kind, for all that (Windle 1992 p. 364).

The first Buddhist meditation I learnt as a child was of imparting loving kindness to all beings. It is a meditation central to the Buddhist value system that I grew up with. The violence our civilisation inflicts on the complex life-sustaining systems of nature, is bringing death and misery to millions of species. We face the sixth great extinction in the planetary history, and unlike the five before, it is created by a species within.

I feel my complicity in the violence; "the death of your mother is different than the loss of biodiversity. Unless you killed your mother, you are not complicit in her death" (Eaton 2012 p 13).

The grief is channelled through cognitive, emotional and bodily pathways. It is the gut-wrenching sensation, the tightening of the facial muscles, the cracking of the voice and a deep sense of despair and emptiness. It is the dull throb that is felt deep in the bones, when a loved-one is in distress. It shows through fatigue that slows my will to fight, and the overwhelming sense of dread, that comes from a realisation that all my actions are still inadequate. It shows through a sudden petrification that stifles action. It is everywhere I look, yet nowhere; hidden in plain sight, as I go about my daily routines. With each successive encounter a gradual numbing spreads, normalising the grief that never disappears.

Kevorkian (2006) uses the phrase *environmental grief* as "the grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems caused by natural or man-made events" (p. 2). Macy (1995) combines fear, anger, sorrow into a collective despair, "the apprehensions of collective suffering – of what happens to others, to human life and fellow species, to the heritage we share, to the unborn generations to come, and to our blue green planet itself, wheeling in space" (p. 1).

Windle writes how she needed to be guarded in displaying her attachment to the species she studies yet had to speak positively on attachment to it as a *necessary precondition* to science.

This attachment, and the emotions that it engenders are routinely excluded within the scientific discourse. The façade of emotional impenetrability among scientists sometimes crack, due to the sheer scale of the impact of climate change and other ecological stresses[17].

Similar normative processes police corporate settings normalising a non-acknowledgement of grief. I have been requested numerous times to not be emotional during meetings, especially on ecological issues. It is a systemic erasure of emotions and the body that generates them. *Professionalism* is wielded as a disciplinary mechanism where 'objectivity and rationally' are used as a ruse to mask emotions, to deny an embodied presence at work; the construction of a docile body. This sits alongside a corporate discourse of empowerment. I can only partially rebel.

I was initially hesitant to work with this grief, too scared to open it up. There is no support systems to manage what comes out of such a process. This is a burden that I, and many of my colleagues, bear in private. Even within my team, we hide our grief with a silent acknowledgement, and an occasional 'outing' by one, even though we collectively hold a safe space. We are a community in silence.

But it opens up in all types of places.

> I am at a meeting with a local environmentalist who is fighting a lone battle to prevent elephant calves from being kidnapped from the wild by criminals, to be sold.
>
> I feel an intense sense of loss. I am transfixed, not knowing how to react. As he speaks, his grief is out there in the open for all of us to see. He speaks for those who cannot speak[18]; his voice is a re-presentation.
>
> He reminds us that elephants are social animals, and of the violence that rips the calf from the herd, of his efforts to track down kidnapped elephants and perpetrators, and his slow and loving work of preparing the elephants to be released back to the wild. He speaks of how each step of the way he must fight moneyed and criminal interests, of legal, regulatory and political hurdles. His is a story that is partly a thriller and a

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[17] Dr James Hansen of NASA became an activist protesting at coal mines. Many scientists in the environmental field in Sri Lanka wear activist hats.
[18] In the Sri Lankan courts of law, his organisation was allowed to speak on behalf of the elephants, on the doctrine that they represent those who cannot represent themselves.

romance. It is also a story of intense loss, a voice weighed down with grief, flanked by his wife and daughter. I listen to him, emotions welling in me, my face tightening.

At the meeting, he is asked to tone down his passion, lest he creates more enemies than he already has. I am surprised by the comment, which comes from other environmentalists, but realise that he is working in a space that is not safe, fighting against well organised groups with both financial and political muscle. But it is his passion that moves us and calls us to action!

Is it his and his family's burden to carry, with us merely offering muted or fleeting empathy?

Even within my family, it is not easy to find the space to let my grief to surface. With two teenage daughters, I am riven between showing the destruction we cause on one hand, while still trying to keep them hopeful of a bright future; the middle-class dream that increasingly seems implausible. Can I simply say that there doesn't seem to be a bright future for them, with the destabilisation of the climate system?

Some days we sit and talk about it, but these conversations are also framed around facts. I am a coward, for I do not know how to deal with the emotional energy of this conversation, if we speak of it differently.

I ask my daughters how they feel when I share these stories with them. "Sad, angry," the two emotions I anticipated. But then Anoush goes on, "I feel very guilty, that somehow I am also responsible for all these bad things that happen." As I struggle to deal with my emotions, I wonder how I can support her. I honestly have no clue.

I feel alone. Magda's susceptibility to depression makes me fearful to surface grief, worried what it would do to her. She too feels alone and is struggling with her own grief.

Her questioning forces me to confront and reflect on my body of work and its utility:

"Why do you not see the futility of what you are attempting to do? After 10 years, how can you still talk of a change that is on the way? What have you really changed? We can bang our head as hard as we wish, but the truth is that we already crossed 350 (ppm), and then we crossed 400 (ppm). Are you acting because you are really impacting the

events and changing the course, or it feels good to do something and it pleases your ego?  At which point we should stop changing which is not ready to change, and look for some other path? Action for the sake of action is not worth of effort, action with a targeted aim to find a weak link in the chain that is worth of sacrifice."

It is a stinging rebuke of my somewhat optimistic disposition and a fair assessment of ten years of work at MAS within the context of the larger global problem. Yes, there has been changes to the good in the organisation, to which I contributed, and at times, took the lead. Yet what is enough, and what is success? The mirror held in my face cuts through the ego, the corporate trappings and *minor* accomplishments. It raises questions about what I have really done to change the larger organisational context which marginalises the environmental discourse. My claim of how we are building momentum, that things are changing (though not fast enough and change enough), sounds hollow.

Magda's comment is influenced by her seven-year effort to build an engineering consulting business focused on green buildings and energy efficiency. She faced hypocrisy and greenwashing, where claims and labels of sustainability were more important than actual impact. She struggled to build a strong environmental ethic in an industry and even within her own team. Seven years that clearly surfaced the inability and/or disinterest of organisations to address the environmental concerns without financial incentives or regulatory demands. At the end of the day, greed was more powerful than the change espoused.

Yet I do not agree with her on giving up, even though the required change is not happening. It is simplistic to say that she is pessimistic, and I am optimistic. I too share the pessimism of change that does not come fast enough. But to me, what I do is deeply connected to 'participation' as a way of life.

"You are correct that the change is not enough," I respond. "But this is a question about who we are in this world. If we are part of a larger whole, then doing what we can to reverse the destruction that is going on becomes a necessary intervention as part of who we are."

I wonder if I really believe this, or if this is a convenient rationale.

> Finding a path through despondency and hope is difficult one for me. I flip between the two often, holding both together and neither, and keep moving forward.

Reflecting on this conversation, I wonder what keeps me going, given the odds stacked against what I do. Is it because I enjoy the power of the marginal position and taking on the world feeds my ego? I think the answer is packed in a question Kathy asks me, "what makes you an activist rather than merely a provocateur?"

I am activist because of my deep sense of care for my work, and my emotional commitment to it. I have a decade long practice as a key sustainability practitioner, a teacher and an activist; this and my organisational profile gives me a stage to be provocative. My provocation is a moment of transgression, and I see it as a necessary part of shifting discourse.

None of this makes the grief easy to bear.

> I was moderating a lecture and a Q&A session of the former Chair of the IPCC, with over 400 people in attendance. Though he is the ultimate insider, he raises his concern on the COP 21 agreement.

> "The Paris Accord tries to limit warming between 1.5 - 2 degrees Celsius. Even if all the countries implement their commitments to the full, and it is not a given that this will be the case as some of the reductions proposed are conditional, we are likely to see 3 - 4 degrees Celsius warming."

> It is ironic, as a few weeks before, we were speaking of the political nature of 2 degrees goal, and that leading scientists do not believe this to be an appropriate target (Hansen et al, 2016). Yet 2 degrees is better than no target.

> When we came back home, Magda's spirits are down, and I don't have answers to her questions of how and why the change I seem to believe in is not happening. I know she keeps me grounded, lest I become enamoured by my own work.

> Tonight, I am frustrated at her line of questioning, and pause and ask her what is really bothering her. Her reply is stark; "I don't want to live in a warmer world." I don't have an answer to give her, because deep inside, I know that the targets are not within our reach. It is not so easy to rewire the global economy, industry, behaviours and more

> importantly, discourse, with the corporate/political/economic interests that are far too invested in retaining the power structures of the present.
>
> I am silent, at a loss of words to say anything meaningful. We are both looking at the same abyss.
>
> Next morning, Magda is commenting on my optimism, how against all of this backdrop I can find capacity to get up to work, day after day. I keep thinking it is not optimism that drive my passion, it is despair, desperation and the absolute refusal to give up. She finds it paralysing and I seem to draw more energy out of it.

Yet on that day, I found myself moping, filled with grief. After four days of conversations on climate change, realising how distant of a concept this is to most people, of insufficient action, and the injustices... This had taken a heavy toll on me. I found myself tearing up, unable to summon the courage and anger that I normally channel my grief into. It was a day to crawl under a rock and die.

## Shifting the Gaze, Generating Change

The full ecological impact of our lifestyles is shrouded in cloaks of invisibility. At MAS, very few see the manufacturing waste generated and what happens to it, where the fuel and material come from or the quality of discharged water and its potential impact. This is also true of our personal impact on the planet. Organisations function with a bias towards good news with the shadow of operations hidden from both internal and external gaze. Even in sustainability reports, the impact is sanitised.

At the apparel industry-led sustainability summits, a real sense of urgency to address ecological impact is absent, overtaken by an urge to create standards and tools for measurement. There is no shared grief that should permeate with the understanding of the overall impact. We continue to work in generalised abstractions while charting our organisational sustainability *journeys* sans urgency. "At least we are getting somewhere and getting somewhere is better than standing still" states Milne, Kearins, & Walton (2006, p. 13). As they point out, journey at times become a dialectical manoeuvre used to justify not moving fast enough.

My company generates approximately 180 tons of fabric and offcut waste per month from operations, hidden from the corporate gaze; waste management areas are in the back of the facility where leaders rarely visit. The landfills are external to the gaze (and the discourse), as acts of omission and commission.[19]

My team wanted to explore how making the invisible visible could shift organisational discourse to bring about change. We began showing environmental impacts in our internal presentations, an early subversive act to challenge and change the flow of information. One photograph showed a "waste mountain," a landfill site in Colombo, surrounded by low-income housing. Another showed the landfill in the largest Export Processing Zone of Sri Lanka, a sea of pink and blue, our fingerprint clearly visible.

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[19] The largest EPZ in Sri Lanka has its landfill in a corner. Interestingly, this is visible from helicopters in their landing approach, hence within the gaze of senior executives of the company and the VVIPs (senior executives of the brands). This raises the question of what is truly invisible, and what is made invisible through normalisation.

*Figure 2: Above- Meetotamulla Municipal Landfill. Below - Biyagama EPZ Landfill*

This triggered conversations that catalysed to changing the organizational practice of landfilling. The idea of imminent regulation added to the pressure.

The visual juxtaposition helped illustrate the issue in a way dispassionate numbers could not. It also placed what has been excluded in the discourse in a different register. It is an interruption that destabilises the silence and opens up space for different conversations to happen. The breach of invisibility is a transgression that opens doors – perhaps for fleeting moments of time.

The momentum is difficult to sustain, especially when solutions are not available or come with added financial cost. Businesses routinely externalise environmental costs. It took us almost five years from sensitisation to find solutions, partly due to the lack of national infrastructure to manage certain waste categories. Yet the company has solved bigger problems in other spheres faster. It was a stark reminder that the environment was positioned as a marginal discourse.

I am with a cross-functional team to discuss the options on waste disposal. Some of our waste disposal methods are environmentally damaging and finding better solutions has been difficult. We have worked on some solutions, which requires changes to the way we currently manage operations and additional funds and were running into resistance. My team had struggled to get this meeting together, and our previous overtures for this solution had not been accepted.

"We cannot allow the current practices to continue," I argue.

"Are we breaking the law?" This question by R, a senior finance executive, makes me pause. I feel hewed-in by this question, a far too narrow discursive space for us to act. Prior to this meeting, I had discussed the issues with others separately, so I know I have buy-in from them. But I feel alone. As the primary proponent of the scheme, I need to make the case for the intervention, and without R's assent, we will be stuck in the status-quo. And he is no raving environmentalist!

"We can look at this at three levels," I begin. "The first is, are we doing something illegal? The second is, are we violating organisational policy, and the third is, as humans, is this an acceptable practice?"

I wonder at the third framing, noticing the complexity of assumptions that are built into it, based on individual history and worldviews. This is a loaded statement, but I refuse to stay strictly within a legal/policy framing; I need a broader discursive space. I am attempting to link this to identity and relationship to nature; back towards an ontological question.

R's response does not surprise me. "I am interested in the first. We can ignore the policy if we don't like it," he goes on. I realise that I have created a discursive trap for myself.

> Why have I privileged the legal and policy items over the argument of *being*? Is that not the primary? I take the gamble,
>
> "Let me restate this, we should look at 'what we should do as humans', as the first matter for consideration." R is not buying into the argument, but I go on. "Before you become a Director, you are a human, you were born human." There is a comment on subject formation here.
>
> Is this merely hopeless banter at this point? I am probing; trying to feel the boundaries of the conversation. R and I are looking at the problem differently, and I am attempting to redraw the conversation space; perhaps not for this project but setting the stage for the long run. The legal and policy domains are lagging indicators of the discourse and will not make sufficient difference if the context/discourse is not shifting.
>
> Support comes from A, who suggests to R that we should look at the recycling option. "Since factory C has agreed to do the pilot, let's try it out," A adds. I am grateful for the intervention, coming from R's own team, shifting the dynamics. I explain to R how the planned system can work, and how it will not add any additional burden to the process or efficiency.
>
> R is interested, and a solution emerges. Soon we agree on how to set up the new scheme.

I sense a silencing of others after the opening moves, and I wonder why this is solely my burden to bear. My team is silent; they have worked on this for a while, and worried of a bad outcome. R's own team is also silent, perhaps afraid to transgress a discourse where profits and efficiency are privileged over ecology, though I have their prior concurrence. I notice that the late support from A was critical within this encounter. I had been working with A for about two years by then; a slow engagement during which phase I felt I had influenced his perspective.

There is also a relational element here – my relationship with R, relationship between R and his team (including A), the relationship between R and my team, and my relationship with A & others. We cannot read the silences purely on issues – outside the context of the relational. My relationship with R and A goes back to multiple years, and I can voice issues in a way that perhaps others cannot in this context.

The organisation's pride in 'going beyond the legal' is what I want to tap into, but avoiding R's disdain for corporate rules/policy became an open trap. The collapse of the Meetotamulla landfill had shifted attitudes. I see myself probing, sensing and reframing the conversation to find a way to construct a discursive frame that positioned a favourable outcome.

I am curious about how discourse frames the outer bounds of the organisation, a semi-permeable membrane, which appears to limit it to what is legally permissible yet is open for renegotiation. What is discursively formed can also be remade through exploring its limits and method of constitution. This is my project, plasticizing the boundaries, exposing its permeable nature through being and acting to bring a larger context into the business discourse. This, I feel, opens up an enhanced space for action for sustainability, although in micro steps. This is one method within my inquiry.

In specific instances, trickster interventions help change the emotional charge and context of a conversation, so that we can move beyond facts. The surfacing of grief shifts the dialogic space.

> How do we eliminate the plastic bottles that we use in our offices? My colleagues Hiru and Akvan were searching for solutions, finally working out a way to replace them with a refillable glass bottle, and a viable business model which is 'cost neutral' *for the business*. I notice the irony here.

> For months, we struggled to gain traction with the cafeteria operator, who profits more from the plastic bottles, while collecting and managing empty glass bottles becomes an additional burden.

> With our conversations at a deadlock, I ask them to watch a short 4-minute video with us. It documented the tragedy of the albatross on Midway Island due to the plastic debris of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, beautifully photographed and narrated by Chris Jordan[20]. The visuals of dead birds with plastic in their stomachs, and those that are in the throes of death are moving. Though I have used this short clip multiple times, I still tear up with a lump in my throat every time I watch it.

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[20] http://www.midwayfilm.com/

It is a visibly moved group that returns to the conversation. For a moment, we have faced grief together, acknowledged it in our presence. There is no space to hide. Hiru talks of how this is also happening in Sri Lankan beaches, affecting turtles, birds and whales. We don't directly speak of the grief, but it is present, real, and with us in the boardroom. The quality of the conversation has shifted, less conflictual, softer. We are all moved, and it is tangible. Our goals are no longer at odds with each other.

The owner of the catering company wants to work with us to make these changes happen. He requests from us to come and talk to all of his managers across multiple sites, to help the company work differently, and better.

We are pleased at the outcome. Hiru and I wonder if we can push them on palm oil also.

The shift in perspectives triggered that day was visible among this group, three years after the initial encounter. Though progress is slow, I notice that we enter a different conversation space, with a deeper appreciation of what we are aiming for. At intent level, there is alignment, but issues around implementation continue to stymie us.

As the convener of the meeting, I had the luxury of creating space for an intervention to allow emotional energy to permeate the conversation. I cannot always command the time and space for such encounters, suffocated in our rush to conclude meetings quickly and move on to the next task. It is not easy to continuously create such spaces, to play with structure, form and quality of the conversations. The attempt to find spaces for such interventions, to reorient conversations within a larger-than-business context, are my key challenges. I am trying to surface a subjugated discourse that lies outside business conversations, and trickster-type interventions are sometimes necessary to break through the blinders.

Though businesses are beginning to internalise some environmental costs, the discourse limits the gaze. A reductive scientific frame becomes the first filter – is this damage and impact *proven* by science? Business logic becomes the second filter through questioning what and how much to internalise. For example, microfiber pollution of the ocean from clothing is a serious issue, but rarely touched by sustainability frameworks in the apparel industry.

Mainstream scientific discourse is narrowly framed and conservative in its truth claims. The reductive, compartmentalised approach of science also continues to err on the side of ecology.

When this science is mapped into business discourse the urgency of action has been diminished. Ecological risk, business risk and scientific risk are very different claims.

A group of employees of a factory once boycotted the inauguration ceremony of a new biomass boiler, the switch away from fossil fuel considered as a sustainability achievement. The employees were protesting the middlemen who come to their villages to cut off the trees to feed the boilers by paying small sums to the villagers, resulting in the village losing its green cover and biodiversity. The truth of the villagers was different from business logic.

This was a transgressive act that shocked the organisation, who believed in the sustainability narrative of the shift from fossil fuels. The sustainability teams leveraged this news to create space to work on sustainable biomass supply chain. Active resistance by employees as in this case is rare; a breach that showed the community impact of the operations, invisible to the corporate gaze. It allowed us to move a marginal discourse to the mainstream.

> I am with my daughters and two of their friends, coming back from a half-day nature programme for children. We are talking about what they learnt, and our focus shifts to waste. On a whim, I detour and drive to Karadiyana landfill site, so that they see what happens to the 'waste' that is conveniently taken away from their gaze. The landfill mountain, where plastics are quite prominent sits on the opposite side of the road from the Weras river, a tributary of the Bolgoda lake. We laugh seeing the small strip of land designed as a park, complete with park benches on the riverbank opposite the landfill with an overbearing stench of rotting biomass. To see birds continuously feeding on the waste was not so thrilling. We discuss the fate of our 'waste' as it is taken out of our houses, noticing that we do not know its resting place.

These occasions, engineered or spontaneous, rupture the cloaks of invisibility. A momentary shift of the gaze, opening a space for different conversations. The dominant discourse is interrupted and displaced momentarily, allowing a marginal discourse to surface. This displacement offers a window of opportunity for change; at times to drive through a pre-set solution, and at others, to integrate the marginality. Yet discourse is kept in place through power and structures, thus it never shifts fully. For more sustained change, these fleeting windows are insufficient. The problems need to be continuously brought to the surface for sustainable change.

## 5.  Dialogues on Environmental Grief

 It made me think about the relationship between performance and catharsis; it commented on the gap between the public and private sphere when it came to mourning his death… it's time to decolonize Environmentalism, democratize the conversation and create a more nuanced approach to environmental challenges. - Zina Saro-Wiwa[21]

This chapter is the evolution of my presentational pedagogy on climate change and environmental sustainability. Initially redirecting a facility presentation to a larger discursive project, and then weaving in ethical and philosophical dilemmas as my inquiry deepened. This trajectory ran parallel to the other sections in this work and is referential, fed by my work with various grassroots organisations and other corporates.

> One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen. An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise. (Leopold, 1972 p. 165).

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[21] https://frieze.com/article/its-time-decolonize-environmentalism-interview-zina-saro-wiwa

## The First Wave

In 2008, I was the 'tour guide' for the many visitors to the Thurulie Factory. With my interest in addressing climate change, I was attempting to bring notice to it – a step beyond a factory feature presentation. I began with an introduction to climate change, then presenting Thurulie as a 'model' response. My knowledge of climate change was propositional, through statistics and trends. framing climate change as a technical/design problem, that can be solved through technical solutions. If the 'scientific facts' of climate change and technical solutions were shown, wouldn't action surely follow? I understood the urgency that was driving me. I expected others to follow the same trajectory, through discovering facts.

For most of my audience, mainly apparel sector executives and academia, climate change appeared to be an abstract long-term problem. The temperature rise and droughts were merely inconveniences for many with air-conditioned offices and cars. My passion resonated but not the urgency; not compelling enough for serious action, nor change in discourse, even within my own organisation. I was feeling disappointed and began questioning the effectiveness of the presentation.

I was tired of people asking me to keep fighting and not to lose the passion at the end of the tour. Why was it purely my fight? The lack of urgency I saw troubled me.

I saw real urgency in rural farming communities, who were already feeling the impact of climate change at the UNDP GEF-SGP. Their needs were immediate, and I saw how multiple stresses intersect – climate, chemical intensive farming models, soil degradation and 'development' - to erode local resilience. They were the real people of the soil, tuned to the rhythms of nature, who actually felt the change.

I could only *see* their lived experience, shunting between air-conditioned spaces. Most of my audiences were denied of this access to communities; where a heat wave is a nuisance and an icebreaker at social gatherings.

*Above writing appears to rise from despondency, and I notice that I engage in a process of othering my audience. They are silent, put into a category, a foil to my engaged activism. I cannot gauge in any meaningful sense what change my engagement engendered in them. I only have my limited interaction with them to go by. What I was presenting was quite new to most*

*people I presented to, and the idea of corporations taking strong climate action was not a norm in 2008/09. I was an outsider even then.*

As my speaking opportunities increased and moved beyond the factory, my message evolved to speak of multiple environmental challenges of our time. As I began reflecting on my own motivations for the work I do, and the grief I was holding, my framing became the focus. How should I frame my presentation to really touch people with this message, beyond cognition, in a way that reached the gut? Can I attempt to bury seeds of activism in my audience?

I wanted more climate activists because of the urgency of the climate crisis. I wanted to inject climate change as an issue into the way we talk about factories and the industry, to elevate a marginal discourse. My voice came from a margin, easy to listen to, and easy to ignore. How does those in the margin change the discourse? If not those at the margin, then who?

My approach to change was shifting. Earlier, I was trying to convince people to act on a specific issue, in a prescriptive mode. Now a broader contextualisation of modern civilisation being at odds with the ecology – a deeply personal critique. Still scientific, more emotional, story driven. Rosteck & Frentz (2009) question science as a persuasive discourse, pointing to its reliance on non-scientific narratives for legitimization, "narrative humanises the science, science legitimises the narrative" (p. 11).

I was shifting my approach to pedagogy, away from a banking model to a problem-posing model (Freire, 2005) with its implied activism as an outcome. More engaging and questioning, without easy answers.

Was I missing the plot again? Can such a transition be done via one-off presentation? What is the change achievable through one presentation? What type of a presentation would aide such change?

As my understanding of nature began to shift from reductive scientific to holistic and systemic, I began noticing the limitations of science to talk about nature and ecology, which became an ontological issue. Can I really talk about nature whilst subscribing to a dualist epistemology? Can I rewire myself away from it, and how long will it take?

## The Second Wave

In 2013, I was tasked with presenting Sustainability to two groups – MBA students of a local University, and a group of summer interns.

How can one hold a space for inquiry on a subject as vast as sustainability with a group of young people within 90 minutes? How do I arrest my natural inclination to bombard them with facts? How do I do it if the awareness level of the participants is quite low?

I spent two days working on my presentation, moving from a purely science-based positivist framing to mix in light explorations of structural, social, and value system considerations that drive the current 'working model' and its inevitable social and ecological crises. It was an intense presentation with emotion-provoking videos and narratives woven together with facts and imagery.

I am a showman, and during presentations, I play.

Before the presentation one participant asks me if the video I used for sound check was a horror movie trailer. I say, it is not. Then I think, hang on[22]…

Although the intention was to have a process of inquiry, I was somewhat taken aback by the lack of awareness of the earth's ecological challenges among the participants. How is one to critique the triple bottom line approach when most have not heard of it and only three had seen a half-decent sustainability report of an organization? And this, among the MBA's! The interns seemed a bit more clued-in.

We explore complexity of natural systems and of the double binds of modern life – the existential crisis of modern-day *bread-and-butterflies* (ExxonMobil); the challenges of replacing the tractor with the buffalo; of ignorance and apathy amidst the very real appreciation for life. I am using a presentation, and small group exercises to work on issues.

The shift away from prescriptive models is disconcerting for many. I am asked – "so what is it that we should do?" And I tell them – "I can't give you solutions. You need to inquire into impacts and actions that cause the same. You need to come up with your

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[22] The video was from Chasing Ice by James Balog

own solutions –and action. Learn about nature, ground it in ecological principles. Think about systems and interdependencies. Remember, as in analogue forestry, respect the mature eco-system."

I see disappointment in some eyes, no quick fixes that helps one become 'guilt free.' How does one describe success in this context?

With the interns, there is more emotional space for us to work with because the timelines and expectations are more fluid, opening up a higher level of intimacy. There is a different quality in the relationship. They are offered space to process their emotions in small groups, to talk and write, and as expected the work has created a huge emotional upwelling. They are overwhelmed, with strong sentiments of sorrow, empathy, guilt, regret, and anger. I get sheets of thoughts, their worries, and statements of courage. Most indicate a strong interest towards future personal and collective action, and discovery. I wonder if the change is sustainable beyond this fleeting moment in time.

One criticism stands out – though prescriptive solutions may not be the answer, I should have communicated more on direction and intent on sustainable lifestyles. Without that, the presentation framing becomes negative.

We arrange a visit to Thuruwadula, the analog forest we are working on, and the Thurulie factory; two attempts by MAS to address ecological challenges associated with the company's business practices. My next interaction with the teams in two weeks hence will indicate if a lasting intervention was made in the inquiry format. Following the visits, there is an opportunity for them to work with my team on a project to design a methodology to solve a complex problem around waste/material recovery.

I am curious – would any join despite the scares and the horror movie trailer that is actually real?

The second interaction does not happen, nor the proposed project. The corporate HR team informs me that scheduling an additional session late in the programme became difficult with MAS being one of four companies in charge of the agenda. Within its structure, networking with business leaders is privileged; my session is an outlier. Sustainability as a marginalised discourse.

I am unhappy – cancellation of the second session upends my second person inquiry process too.

Was the first session too intense to handle? It was dark, painful and emotionally draining; a difficult journey for the uninitiated. I inquire with my own team what they thought, and Akvan responds, "it's good for them to face reality." I notice the impish glint in his eye, but others also agree. We are fellow travellers who share a gaze, with the work we do together, our own ongoing inquiry. We are trapped within our regime of truth, they in theirs, as we try to breach the boundaries. And outside, the ecology is dying.

I want to theorise this as a piece of *pedagogy of discomfort*, stuck in a constrained, time limited engagement. Zembylas (2015) suggests that "discomforting feelings are important in challenging dominant beliefs, social habits and normative practices that sustain social inequities and they create openings for individual and social transformation" (p. 163). This is predicated; as we are attempting to shift a subject formation of a discourse that instrumentalises the ecology.

The other question is the scale of the discomfort, which is something I ponder. My claim is that this is relative to the scale of violence that we impart on nature, seen from my point of view. "Come look what I see," as an invitation. As Magda recently said to me, "I do not want to see your facebook posts, it is too depressing." Whether it leads to fatalism or a call for radical action, in the end, is an issue of epistemology.

Zembylas (2015) quotes Butler (2005),

> we can be responsible only for that which we have done, that which can be traced to our intentions, our deeds [ . . . ] but [we are responsible] by virtue of the relation to the Other that is established at the level of my primary and irreversible susceptibility (p. 170).

We are collectively and irreversibly implicated in the ecological crisis.

What are the conditions that may engender a more lasting change? I wonder if the audience was invited to a space that is safe enough to engage with, if they had a level of intimacy to collectively explore grief. Kathy asks me if I should think of constructing this space *outside the formal system to be effective?* I see the logic of sitting outside of the traditional context to contemplate another paradigm. Yet I am ambivalent, out of practicality, and a desire to see how

we can reflect and act from where we are. I do not want to mimic the weekend trip to the wild, another form of separation and spectacularisation. For what is this safety, but a luxury for a group, shielded from the ecological catastrophe that is unfolding around us? I think of the rural farmers who are suffering, or the species in the forest that is being destroyed and wonder what safe spaces actually mean.

Kathy also asks me why I do not acknowledge my own grief in the presentation,

> your work seems to be to create the conditions that allow the emergence of what is already known and awaiting naming. You provide them frameworks and permissions to name the already-known and as you said earlier so well, to make visible the invisible. This make me think about how invisibility – social, ecological, organizational – is systemically held in place by not naming. I find it interesting that you never mention to them the matter of grief and yet it comes up – so again" (personal communication).

The grief is present – the presentation is a lamentation, yet it is depersonalised, some tell me. I don't have an answer why – is grief too personal to expose, or I simply lack the method to do it? I struggle not because it is othered in a way that is missing, but perhaps through a lack of vocabulary. It has histories arising from childhood trauma; my hardening of shell after repeatedly being told, boys don't cry. It has histories that are embodied and normalised; the hard shell needed for a slight, fragile, male body.

I notice that my expectations from the presentation have also shifted from the prescriptive iron cage. This is now play, that transgresses emotional boundaries within the presentation, to surface grief breaking a corporate norming process. The realm of the trickster, who is beginning to point to the discursive boundaries that trap us with an ecological crisis. A different practice and a theory of change is emerging.

* * *

During the presentation, I feel intensely alive, living 'in-the-moment'. I find it difficult to inquire into this mode of action, since post-event reflection is a poor substitute. The presentation is as equally emotionally charged and draining on me, as much as it is for the participants. And I am unable to reach further in to understand what happens within.

It is a dance of intimacy, I feel as if I am strongly connected to the audience, moving with them, as if their emotions are opened up and plasticised as I speak. My movements, pauses, tone and voice, what and how it is expressed modulates from a tacit sense of intimacy between myself and the audience. It is a uniquely embodied experience; I do not 'feel' the presence of my body that well in most other moments.

I know the material intimately, allowing me to observe the audience as they react to the material, and what I say and how I say it in the moment shifts within me sub-consciously. A presentation is a staging; a performance, and however much I vary the individual event, it takes a predictable path, in part, it is governed by material. It is always a performative space. How does one approach authenticity in a performative space? But then I wonder, what is not performative, and can authenticity withstand a post-structural critique?

"Identities are multiple, contradictory, partial and strategic. The underlying assumption is of course that the subject herself represents a constellation of conflicting social, linguistic and political forces," notes Visweswaran (1994, p. 50) posing the question what then stands as authenticity? We must argue against attempts to fix of authenticity and define it within a relational and discursive field of the moment. Authenticity in this instance defined by my relationship to nature and the audience, within the permeable discursive boundary that I play in. I am on an ongoing conversation with my material and my audience, that defines the framework for authenticity. It is not one thing fixed.

## The Third Wave

I wanted to inquire into our relationship with ecology at a participant organised workshop of ADOC, miffed at the absence of it in the programme. Though grounded in a participatory worldview, ADOC is focused on human-relational, erasing the human-ecological.

How can we address the problem of ecological illiteracy? How do I begin to remedy the impact of bad educational practices and epistemology so that our relationship with the nature shifts, enabling better practices and space for action?

In the workshop organising team, Kathy was also working on ecological issues, writing poignantly on environmental grief. She was engaged in a water-walk, a deeply spiritual, embodied and immersive learning of Indigenous practices of water in the North American Great Lakes system. Our work was complementary.

I expected my session would bring out strong emotions and I wanted colleagues to stay with the grief rather than looking to immediately neuter, sanitise or 'find quick fixes' for it. Kathy and I wanted participants to reflect and ponder and chose to close the evening with a ritual that honoured the Earth.

> I sense an eagerness in the room as I begin, the room is dark with only the projector screen visible. The material is not new, but my pitch is different, perhaps a more starkly framed around our complicity with the systemic dysfunctions that sustain and magnify the planetary ecological crisis. I feel absorbed in the content; my voice is not really my own. It comes from places both near and far away. It is a performance, that comes with deep sincerity. I have put a lot of myself in here, exposing to others the world of grief that I inhabit. My voice breaks many times, hoarse at others. My body speaks of the grief even as the 'rational mind' attempts to suppress it.

> We had shared a lot in the three preceding years, laughing together, grieving together and playing together. I find myself at home, with permission to be more open, shedding some of the cultural norming that my subjectivities pose. I am a 'radical environmentalist' today, no corporate persona. I speak in a voice that rarely comes to the surface.

> After more than two hours, the session is over and I feel my body come out of a trance, utterly drained. No Q&A' follow. I sense that as a group we are subdued. We are all holding some form of grief and some are perhaps still too stunned to know what they feel.
>
> Kathy and I have opted for ritual as a non-rational way of processing the grief. Drawing on embodied action (walking) and poetic voice (calling forth the world's waters into our circle under the trees as a way of naming an element so maligned by our actions), we guide the group through a sensorial encounter with the non-human world and how we move in it. We walk to different locations of the Ashridge grounds, each marked by a feature – a labyrinth, an ancient tree, a tree ring - letting ourselves be reminded of our connection to the more-than-human world. We are pilgrims and perhaps refugees, of our own encounter.
>
> There is no party that night, a break from tradition; there is not much joviality to go around.

I was holding up the ecological issues for people to see up close, in a way that made denial and distancing difficult for them. The process was stripping defences, sometimes in an 'emotionally brutal' way, laying bare the darker secrets of our own complicity. This would be a bruising encounter, especially for those who had not been aware/or in denial, of their own complicity. I simply hoped Kathy's ritual would help people to cope with the upwelling of emotional energy.

We do not inquire nor stay with the topic next day, and I feel this was a mistake, a chance to explore how it was received and help colleagues process gone begging. My inquiry with colleagues moves to electronic form, which has a different flavour than in-person conversations and delayed.

Sybille wrote,

> Because you had taken yourself so far out and made yourself 'invisible', the subject-matter was almost harder to see. I thought it was curious how you edited yourself out while making a point that everyone should edit themselves into this tragic story. I was listening out for your own actions, paradoxes, struggles with this topic. By sharing your own reflections, I would have felt encouraged to enter mine at a deeper level and share

those with you, too. In an extreme moment, I almost fear you standing with your finger pointing, declaring: what is doctoral quality here, you are all rubbish!

So, I was left wondering whether the intention of the presentation was to genuinely co-inquire? And if you do, what other forms could serve that?

Kathy points out that my initial framing of the session could have been better; a point raised by others. I prefer to allow the material to emerge and speak to what it will and see this as an epistemological problem. The framing implies a narrower 'purpose', while I aim for emergence.

I ask questions that challenge our framings in some form and find it ironic having to frame it upfront. Is this a bias from the positivist paradigm, that spills over to locations that may refuse explicit framing and may allow *(un)pleasurable misreadings*? Did my bias towards a revelatory form in presenting obscure and constrain how others experienced the session? Or a deliberate shielding of transgressive content? Can a trickster signpost?

I link this back to the performance turn of the academy, of which I am only now coming to grips with. This is a performative project, using confrontational pedagogy, and while I acknowledge the discomfort and confounding of others, I do not see a reason to frame beyond what it is.

I still struggled with the comments on *erasure-of-self.* Steve offered,

my sense was not that you had absented yourself. Rather that you were inviting us to step into the space. The images were shocking, violent and oppressive - they confronted us in our passivity. My response was to the aesthetic rather than the scientific. NO scientific 'justification' would ever enable me to 'see' those images as a way forward for humanity… I feel nauseous at the memory of them.

Kathy echoed my own sentiments

It's a *yes AND…* situation, Vidhura. The structure did, indeed, serve a purpose AND the relational space either extended an invitation or not, made it safe or not. The issue of balancing confrontation with emotional vulnerability is, perhaps, one of the greatest challenges and potentially greatest breakthrough practices of your work. How to balance terror with love, horror with beauty…

Kathy is beautifully eloquent and illuminates my practice better than me. I know I struggle with this balance, trying to walk on the edge; but the edge is relationally defined. I cannot stand on the edge with all of my audience, and for some, I transgress and trespass too much. This is a dangerous space for relationships. I understand the shadow of my presentation; the almost judgemental vision that terrifies people. But I do not speak to other the audience; this is our collective guilt.

What I have been grappling with is not only a change in behaviour, but an epistemological shift. What type of intervention can shift consciousness in a world where our subject constitution constructs an apathy towards ecology?

Rosteck & Frentz (2009) places similar discourses within a spectrum, from an *epistemological rhapsody* to a *political jeremiad*. Analysing Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, they note how the complex interweaving of the mythic, the personal, the political and the scientific opens up a larger discursive space for sensemaking and action. They note the monomyth at the heart of the film, and how it builds on the tension between the catastrophe and redemption. This Christian iconography is not my story, and I have no easy fix schemes like Gore.

Mine is a story of non-redemption, where the tension is expecting a redemptive pathway, and finding that none is offered.

My focus was less on personal dilemmas, and more on collective dilemmas of our civilisation. Does my audience yearn for a redemptive arc, for me, them and the collective? But that comes from a gaze that is not mine. Am I merely asking people to hold the grief for a fleeting moment and inquire into our own complicity? I resist easy, *feel good actions* that we can take refuge in. Not that there is no need; nor can I stop it. For my lived world is also an inadequate response to the scale of the problem, and besides, our subjectivities implicate us in the ills no matter what we do.

> I had just completed my presentation on environmental grief to a business team, led by a cheerful and highly energetic colleague. Her response at the close shocked me, "our team will begin our environmental work by recycling all the wastepaper we generate."

I remained silent, concealing the anger and grief that this episode generated in me. Sibylle's comment on being judgemental echoes in me, though in my mind I was not othering point

fingers at 'you', but at 'us'. The guilt is ours. I cannot judge the responses of others when mine is also inadequate. Yet I resent responses that attempt to trivialise the problem, which I felt was a partial rejection of my proposition. It was a refusal of re-cognition of nature, coupled with the expediency of our subjectivity.

Sybille's question still hangs in the air, her asking me why I think this type of exposure to violent imagery would make people change, and what type of epistemology creates such change.

I am aware of the trauma that the presentation unearths.  It is something I live with constantly, and something that touches me at the core every time I present. It interrupts and destabilises the status quo of the audience, their sleep of ignorance and comfort. It transgresses an implied premise of ADOC and generally in action research communities, that avoids explicit conflict and violence out of sensitivity to each other's emotions. I transgress comfort zones without asking of the needs of the group and their emotional resilience to weather the encounter. "Transgression's violations of propriety incite responses from those vested in, subject to, or in conformity with the status quo," (Foust 2010, p.5).

The ability to recognise violence inherent in the discourse, made invisible through normativity, is a privilege of marginality. I did not feel violence dominated my presentation without sufficient empathy and communion, but I can recognise how some may view it as such. I saw it as a presentation of intense sadness.

Rick Roderick speaks of the critic's paradox,

> the more powerfully the critic paints the ills of the society and the fragility of the self and the struggle it undergoes to be a human; the more powerful our account is, the more hopeless the people feel who could do anything about it. On the other hand, if we don't paint the account in such a powerful way then people tend to underestimate what they are up against, so you have got a critic's dilemma. Foucault clearly has picked the path where he doesn't care if you feel powerless or not; that's your problem, you have got to do something about it, so he draws out all the mechanisms of control to the maximum so that you understand them. where one has to expose sufficient content for people to see the urgency of the change needed and how this then runs the risk of turning people off (The Partially Examined Life, 2012).

Rosteck & Frentz (2009) talks of how apocalyptic language pushes those like me to the margin.

> [T]o employ apocalyptic rhetoric is to imply the need for radical change, to mark oneself as an outsider in a progressive culture, to risk alienation, and to urge others out into the open air of political rebellion. The apocalyptic narrative is an expansive and offensive rhetorical strategy (p. 13).

Marginality becomes a pre-condition to speaking this truth, which is invisible, sanitised and normalised within the dominant discourse. Mine is a dissident truth, and voicing it creates a form of radical marginality, which is performative, constructed not only by identity, but is also continuously formed and re-formed by the truth that one decides to speak. Or from a different epistemology, by the path one decides to travel on.

With all the grief that is packed inside me, it is a labour of love, as I attempt to *balance terror with love, horror with beauty,* a poetic description of pedagogy of confrontation.

> I am at a Youth Climate Summit, where the opening presentations were by three American university students, speaking of climate science, impacts and action. I was fascinated by the third presenter, who began by saying that as an American, she needs an optimist disposition to move forward. Yet the action, revolving around installing solar panels and working with local authorities on adaptation, feels glaringly inadequate. Necessary, but insufficient; where is the action to shift policy and activities targeting changing large systems? Or shifting of utilities, industry and government? What is the discourse that prevents these issues from becoming equally important for action?
>
> During my session, I began pointing out that an optimist disposition should not act as a veil to hide the scale of the problem and inadequacy of proposed solutions. I speak about having to work with grief and pause; we are working with students whose introduction to climate change has been basic. Are we even speaking the same language?

The optimist disposition is an orientation to action stemming from a specific worldview. Yet it moves to hide an essential truth, that the range of actions offered are woefully inadequate to fix the issue. It appears more as a feel-good move.

My own gaze has cultural and historic roots. Its shadow can cripple the urge to act, not knowing the path, stifled by grief and the enormity of the challenge. How do we train our minds to work with grief, hold on to doubt, and keep asking if what we do is enough, rather than rush towards the quickest fix we can find in the name of expediency?

Kathleen speaks to this awareness,

> I was incredibly moved by your presentation and I have felt disturbed and sometimes distressed since. It has been years now that I feel desperately miserable at the situation we have created and continue to do so on a daily basis. Any change of habits (I'm on a mission against plastic at the moment) feels so utterly futile and ill-judged. But I have found no way to live in the society I am part of, without contributing on a daily basis to the ills of our world. Using technology is just one more way…
>
> So yes, you had and still have my attention, and I feel hopelessly inadequate and at a loss as to what to do, except for living as mindfully as I can…

This has a lot of resonance to me. My grief is that of Kathleen, the absolute inadequacy of my own actions as much as I try to create an impact.  I try harder to do more; and I wonder if that too is an epistemological error.

<center>* * *</center>

Bateson (1972) refers to the 'thunderous' lecture given by God to Job in the Bible for not knowing natural history, "Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth? Or canst thou when the hinds do calve? Canst thou number the months that they fulfill? Or knowest thou the time when they bring forth?" (p.442). Why was it important for Job to know? Were his ills related to him not knowing?

Senanayake (2010) quotes from Jung, "people who know nothing about nature are of course neurotic, for they are not adopted to reality" and goes on to say,

> at this stage the emergence of a reality other than nature must be perceived, for otherwise the neurosis of the modern planners will be exposed. The reality they describe can be best seen as a machine reality, where society requires an incredible

input of energy and resources for its maintenance. But the question to ask is: at what cost? (p. 44).

Bateson asks a pertinent question, "is sanity possible in a culture based on false premises? Is epistemological conflict a species of double bind?" (1976, p. 56).

We do have an epistemological challenge. We are building our world, our industrial systems, and social systems, on the wrong premises.

> I had joked, though not in my memorandum, about the idea that Original Sin was the discovery of planned purpose; and that, following this discovery, Adam and Eve expelled God from the Garden. This led to the loss of topsoil, etc. the general notion was that God symbolized the systemic and cybernetic nature of the environment which inevitably took vengeance on man's short-sightedness (Bateson, 1982 p. 66).

How important is it to attempt to fix the epistemological errors that we live with? Can this be done? This is the larger thread of my work, and not to merely come up with solutions for the issues that we face. It is this that I try to engender through interventions attempting to destabilise discursive formations. I play in this space while holding onto ambiguities and asking if this is really possible.

Denzin (2009) notes critical performance studies,

> travels from theories of critical pedagogy to views of performance as intervention, interruption and resistance. It understands performance as a form of inquiry; it views performance as a form of activism, as critique and as critical citizenship. It seeks a form of performative praxis that inspires and empowers persons to act on their utopian impulses (p. 257).

What is this presentation but a form of performance inquiry, that invites a radical praxis, that interrupts and destabilises? Its invitation was for a deeper communion with nature, an inquiry into our complicity at an epistemic level. Through performance, I was expanding the discursive space in the way that incremental change is problematized. My sense that this crisis requires us to revisit how we are implicated in the problem and how we must rethink our 'purposes' begin to pervade my work like a thread finely woven into a fabric.

## The Fourth Wave

This one is short, for an audience of Sri Lankan environmentalists and businesspeople. I opt for a sharp critique of *sustainability* within the corporate discourse and its roots in an anthropocentric frame. My despondency shows, as I open up about how the language we use to speak of climate change; mitigation, adaptation and ROIs are born of a discourse that others the ecology. My grief is visible, there is no joy.

There are many more presentations, and the Q&A that follows is sombre; I have spoiled the mood. I get shaken by the last question, from an older gentleman, who challenges the doom & gloom messaging. I do not have anger, because I too am implicated, but note that optimism is not the only location for strong climate and ecological action.

I use the video[23] of my presentation to inquire with Christelle and Abhishek, apparel industry sustainability practitioners/friends. We have been inquiring into our practices for more than a year.

My question is about displacing and distancing grief, to which Christelle replies,

> Your way of presenting is very balanced: you are grave, I personally feel your pain, I even identify with it but yet, there is some humility about it since you include yourself in the problem and do not position yourself on the edge.

I am humbled by her next comment, which also makes me wonder.

> I cannot help but wondering about what the audience may or may not understand. There is a clear ecological illiteracy that the 3 of us have to constantly face. I am blessed by having visited some of these thoughts because you are part of my life (another blessing). You have made me wonder about this earlier: through our conversations, by reading your presentation materials, by reading your thesis, by my own research etc.

I am back to pondering ecological literacy also as an ecological problem. It reminds me that education requires learning to learn in specific ways, the preparation of minds for particular types of knowing. This is a shifting of epistemology. And I note that I too have been preparing

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[23] https://youtu.be/lBeG-pw-Qfw

my mind also to learn differently, and from this learning, to speak differently. To speak with

grief that I hold inside.

# 6. Margin and the occupation – stories from the colonized present

## Introduction

*It is in hybridity, being halfie, seeking both margin and center, and being virtual that I have a voice. – Monica Russel y Rodriguez*

This chapter began as an exploration of the challenge faced by those in the margin attempting to shift a dominant discourse. It is the need to occupy both the margin and centre to raise (and to have a voice). Those in the margin who find themselves suddenly thrust to the centre are expected to represent a class irrespective of individual subjectivities, only to be thrust into the margin by the process. As Russel y Rodriguez states, "I saw my space on the margins place me at the center and move me back out again," (1998, p. 23).

But this story gets interrupted, and is later retold in chapter 9.

As I start thinking about marginality I recognise the body also plays a part in shaping both marginality and my response to it. I find myself critiquing colonial models of exoticism and the tropes of the naked native. This evolves into an inquiry to the subjugation of indigenous ways of knowing and the complicity of the research process in it.

This chapter is an example of the irruptive act of storytelling, a story that emerges that must be told, though this interrupts what was initially planned.

## Centre and the Margin – Showing up in Osaka

"Who are you?"

"I am no-one."

- Hope Awakens, Star Wars Episode VII

On day one at Osaka, I was no one, a few known faces and smiles, a 'South Asian', perhaps dressed a bit dandy, not a suit nor a chequered shirt, *visible*. I walk into the cocktails, a bit apprehensive, looking for a known face. I wonder around, a wine glass in hand, vulnerable, a bit hesitant. Why is this? Where is my supremely confident alter-ego? Where has she deserted me? Stick to a corner in the room, there is safety.

I look at a room that is full of people, and there aren't many from my part of the world. We are here to talk of sustainable apparel, but I notice that the apparel making world, primarily the global South, is conspicuously absent. It is about those that are absent that we will be talking about, within the current discourse. This is my identity, and I wonder what this absence means, and how many others would notice. It is a contradiction of sorts. A lack of representation of the manufacturing world on one hand; an invisibility of the class (apparel manufacturers). A heightened visibility for a select few (like me) who are present to re-present the class.

I am acutely aware of the inability for MAS or me, to accurately represent the diversity of the class. Those at the margins cannot represent the whole. And then I wonder, can the whole be represented anyway without some form of essentialism?

The asymmetry is a common, recurrent pattern, and I notice it, now that I have started picking on it.

I mingle slowly; I meet a few individuals I have worked with via webinars. I feel the anxiety ebbing away, aided by the company and the wine. I slowly move out of obscurity. As the crowd thins, I am still there, with the hard core party people, the chemistry different…

… final day in Osaka, and my presentation is in the penultimate session. At the conclusion, I get a standing ovation. During dinner that night, many come to congratulate me, saying that

> I delivered the best presentation of the workshop. One person comes and tells me, "your speech was so moving that I stopped taking notes and just listened."

> We have a great dinner and Karaoke party afterwards. Now I am centerstage, I like Karaoke after a few glasses of wine. I may hold positions that are in the margin, but my presence is hardly so anymore.

I notice the contradiction; I am in love with the margin and the centre – *perhaps not the centre, but a little left of the centre* - and want to occupy both spaces at the same time. To be seen and unseen. Can I do both? Perhaps not in the classical physics perspective. Like a quantum state of a particle which is *everywhere* at the same time but locks down to a particular location at the time of calling, the time of measurement. Or the *Eastern* framing, the martial arts master, who is a 'no-one' at the very state of being, invisible but in plain sight hid; until the calling comes.

As a practical matter, I know that I have to occupy the centre, at least to get the marginalised narrative heard, to make it visible, to transgress.

## The Socially Constructed Body – A Confessional

*My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin —*

*They will say: "But how his arms and legs are thin!"*

*- The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock, T S Eliot*

Now what of the body? This work is not merely of the mind, a cleavage I struggle to rid of. My grief is related to my body, as it is felt through the physical. Grieving is an embodied response. My slight frame and youthful looks structure some relationships, and how I think, act and even my methods are shaped by my history which has a strong linkage to the body. Irrespective to the role of the body to cognition, we are shaped with and through our bodies. How do I speak to this, especially the vulnerabilities that are socially imposed through a structure of 'perfect bodies'?

I have carried a sense of shame of my body for the most part of my life. I was always thin, and used to be among the three smallest boys in the class in a school for boys. I performed well academically, scoring high in tests, loved by teachers. I also found that a boy-school is not the most forgiving for the perceived weak, especially in body shape.

The construction of shame on the body was always present within the system. School assembly was held in the grounds under searing heat, humidity and dust, and we formed lines based on height, with the shortest in front. Schools also had special dietary programmes for children who were considered either malnourished or at risk, a measure that was based on deviation from BMI, irrespective of energy levels, genetics or metabolism. Quite likely, the BMI values used were from UK. I remember going to a special clinic ever so often, where after examination, we were issued enriched flour at subsidized rates to be added to food. I hated the taste.

Bullying by peers was something that I could not avoid, during breaks or after school. I remember for some of them (few of whom are now friends), it was akin to a sport. Unless I stayed in the class during the break, which I was not inclined to do, I would be found out in the playground. Avoiding the bullies were as much a part of the game in hindsight; although it never felt like a game at school.

Placing self in a survival mode creates a choice; fight or flight. Some colleagues resorted to the latter, but my spirit never let me take that option. As the youngest of a family of four including two older brothers, I was sufficiently schooled of a fighting spirit at home. (Perhaps that is part of being a large and competitive family). I never shied away from the physical games, (many quite painful at the receiving end), but this was merely to be in play, not to shine. I never wanted to settle for the lesser, or more docile games.

I was tired of being bullied both physically and verbally. I knew I could not win in physical aggression. I began fighting back around the age of 13, realizing that my wit can outsmart those around me. I was slowly building a steely exterior, numbing my own self and emotions, and sharpening my verbal skills; initially as self-defence, and then as offense. I too was becoming a bully, hiding my shame behind a steel armour that is almost impenetrable – or so it may seem.

I know that this came with a price, losing some of my empathy and numbing down of emotions. Quite emotional as a child, I was slowly being schooled out of it, both in the family and at school. Boys don't cry.

What happened in my formative years carried with me, both as scars and as armour. I see these elements and patterns, even now, 30+ years later.

Shame, works closely with its close cousin, guilt. June Tangney distinguishes the two by noting guilt is feeling bad of a behaviour (how could I have done *that*?) while shame is feeling bad of self (how could *I* have done that?) (Tangney, 2008). Shame deals with our construction of self and identity, evaluating it against what we internally hold as ideal. She notes two elements that are foundational – our ability to separate self from others and evaluate itself, also pointing out that it calls for a unique ability to play a dual role of both evaluator and evaluatee at the same time. (Tangney 2008).

Body image issues took a long while to overcome. My first instinct was to hide it, ignore it. Yet being invisible was never my intent, too spirited to be outside the limelight. I remember cryptically replying to Steve about 'being seen' that my desire is to be seen and unseen. I craved to be seen, in ways that I can script encounters, where there was no shame, but acceptance.

> My reply may have appeared facetious, but it does harken liminality, ambivalence and inbetweenness. Being pulled from both the centre and the margin. I notice how tentative I am in new surroundings, unsure of moorings. I am aware how in more amenable contexts, I become jovial. When cornered, armed with all my skill in rhetoric, I become dangerous. At that moment, I am transformed; blood pumping in my veins, my senses sharpened, with a razor like focus… a particular type of a high, that reaches into histories of wrongs, and saying, not anymore, not now.

A little autobiographical vignette, reflecting and making a claim on shaping of self through history. Is this reflexivity in writing or reflection as an act of stripping? I am deeply troubled.

> The dream recurs; only the location is different each time it occurs. I am at a public event, and as I mingle with others I realise I am naked. To my surprise, no one notices, yet the deep stress does not disappear. I am trapped in two minds. Do I run, or do I pretend that nothing is wrong? Choices…

As I stare back at the gaze that questions, suspects and exoticise the native; the gaze that attempts to pin me, against which I constantly rebel.

> And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
>
> The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
>
> And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
>
> When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
>
> Then how should I begin

As I reflect on the above narratives, I see a metaphorical stripping via reflexivity, and wonder who I am stripping for. A Western white academy, that brings memories of the naked or semi-naked native? It is not the impeccably dressed Nehru, but scantily dressed Gandhi that drives the imagination. I have had enough of the colonial gaze, and now I am back again, the dancing monkey in front of the tourists, that gaze at this exoticised body, back in the circus.

I am reminded of the image of 'ourselves undressed' used to construct the civilised Western man, set against the naked native. These are not innocent juxtapositions.

No research is innocent, and the academy I write to is also a construction of power relations, that draws on a history of white men researching on the native (Smith 1999). The doctoral process is built on an edifice of the Western intellectual tradition, methods and knowledge with a systematic erasure of that is not Western. Methods and knowledge that are situated within a field of power, of the West interrogating to produce a particular knowledge about the East Visweswaran (1994), Said (1979), Hall (1992). How do I avoid perpetuating the same? Of course, what is considered Western here is also not uniquely Western, for what is West, but a mere construction of discourse?

Yet the non-Western knowledge is appropriated and deployed in a particular power orientation as the Western body of knowledge. There is a manifest absence of the other of the West within the academy that this discourse is built on. To do a doctorate within it, as much transgressive as I may be, is to submit to that tradition.

Pillow (2003) warns about how reflexivity can be a tool for reconstituting the traditional power roles and norms. Others such as Law (2014) speaks of absence, especially the absence of the other. As a postcolonial, whatever that I write, the coloniser is never absent. It is their language, constructs and grammar that this thesis is built on. Every instance I write of ontology and epistemology and not darshan, I wonder who is it that is being othered in this writing.

I wonder how reflexivity should be retooled to handle systemic power imbalances. What is the reflexivity of the postcolonial, and how would it differ from that of the colonial other?

## Decentring Reflection

Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? - Nancy Hartsock

Action research invites practitioners to focus on post-event reflection using methods such as journaling. This is considered as a primary skill to gather data for research. The intent of reflection is to develop a reflexive practice. Coghlan & Brannick (2005) notes, "how post-mortems can move from being a review of the past to a living practice that anticipates issues and generates emergent learning in action" (p.36).

They go on to highlight the importance of journaling,

> it enables you to integrate information and experiences which, when understood, help you understand your reasoning processes and consequent behaviour and so anticipate experiences before embarking on them. Keeping a journal regularly imposes a discipline and captures your experience of key events close to when they happen and before the passage of time changes your perception of them (p. 37).

David Coghlan was insistent of reflection as a daily ritual when I met him in person. *Ritualising* reflection does not fit into my practice neatly. I am spontaneous, unstructured and drawn to interruptive processes. My personal experience in journaling made me think deeply about validity.

As I journal about an incident, the text that emerges is part reflection and part projection. I can only capture a partial and reductive version of it from my consciousness, and what I write is a further reductive version of that experience, modulated by language, style, economy and discourse. I rely on *unreliable memory* as I recall incidents. I am aware my gaze is limited. Practice can increase the depth/breadth by a fraction, not more. My journaling often ends up placing strands of reflections into a chronological narrative, linking them up with sense making, almost storylike. What I write, and the way I write, shifts, based on the mood and sensory influences *at the time of writing*. I may write of a joyous experience – but the narrative, details and language are emergent, influenced by my mood *when* I write it. Each retelling is different, each rewrite or edit, a modulation.

This partially untethers the binds between the journal entry and the original event. What I call an event is also arbitrarily bookended. These ideas contest the claim writing closer to the event gives 'better data' for the inquiry, noting its tenuous and contingent hold. Temporal proximity may focus on a particular narrative, and later writings reorient this focus. None can claim privilege; they are simply different stories.

Journaling as a means to understand the reasoning process is proposed by many in the action research domain. I find that only a part of the decision-making process is explainable; decisions are made within contexts and influenced by complex histories and emotions. Journaling to 'help you understand your reasoning processes' can easily slip into a post event rationalisation than an illumination of 'reason'. The reflective practice creates its own reality – and cements it in the consciousness. It privileges one narrative out of a possible multitude, one chain of events in a large event universe.

Reflective journaling when focused on reason, assumes a knowable cause/effect relationship. It denies the complexity of social interactions, limits of cognition, language; journaling space and time constrains demand a particular economy. Does 'knowing' in this context recreate relationships performatively?

> "In spite of all evidence that life is discontinuous, a valley of rifts, and that random chance plays a great part in our fates, we go on believing in the continuity of things, in causation and meaning. But we live on a broken mirror, and fresh cracks appear in its surface every day.
>
> – Salman Rushdie

As I dig deeper, I become aware of the epistemological roots of this edifice. The idea that causal relationships in social interactions can be determined is a remnant of the positivism and relates to the focus on truth in the Western intellectual tradition. The Buddhist philosophical approach to causality, *paticca samuppada*, (dependent co-arising), states that any 'effect' can only be partially attributable to knowable roots. It suggests a world of complex relations and plural causality, that questions both the knowability and the purpose of such knowing. It is less focused on truth-seeking than emancipation out of all constructions.

I am trapped between the Western tradition, in which I am entrenched, and the Buddhist epistemology that offer glimpses through the veil. I do not think or write within a Buddhist

epistemology. I recognise that I am intellectually colonised, subject of a discourse that is historically not my own, a tourist in my own culture. This yearning is not purely a case of relativism; I sense that the Buddhist tradition, and its focus on non-self, offers a counterpoint to the 'stable coherent self' of the Western tradition. The stability of self itself is under intense scrutiny with its roots in "the Cartesian belief in a unified, essential self that is capable of being reflected on and is knowable," (Pillow, 2003, p. 181).

Reflection within the Western tradition is deeply bound to its context of seeking truth, as a *techne* for interrogating self to find the truth about ourselves. As Lorenzini (2016) notes,

> according to Foucault, the emergence of the idea of a truth we have to discover about (and in) ourselves, as well as the idea of a discourse through which we are asked to articulate it, are nothing but the effects of a series of techniques of power and of the self, of a certain regime of truth that urges us to "discover" the hidden truth in ourselves, but that in fact digs in ourselves the very space in which it produces the truth we are asked to disclose and manifest.

Thus, reflection becomes a technique of subjection to a particular discourse than one for comprehension and illumination. It is a method bound in power, which has significant implications. Foucault (1999) refers to, "parrhesiastic game — where the problem is to confront the truth about yourself," as being part of the techniques of self, that binds us to a particular discourse.

Coghlan & Brannick referred to a post-mortem. It brings to my mind both confessional and avowal. Foucault defines avowal at the outset as "a verbal act through which the subject affirms who he is, binds himself to this truth, places himself in a relationship of dependence with regard to another, and modifies at the same time his relationship to himself" (Foucualt 2014 p. 17)

Does the first person action research, through the process of reflective practice – a process of avowal, create a particular type of subjectivity, with specific boundaries around truth and action? Does this recreate and cement existing power relationships through the process of subject formation with avowal? Do we bind ourselves to a particular discourse through this process – and how can one be free of it?

Below the surface is the assumption of a 'knowable self,' that is to be discovered through reflective practice. The 'I' who is thinking and writing (as opposed to, say, a self that is co-constructed through the act of reflective writing). If one takes the position that there is no self or *anatta*, again the rationale for reflective practice breaks down. In Buddhist praxis, where mindfulness (different from reflexivity) is a specific goal, the focus on the past through methods such as reflective practice or confessional is absent; its methods are aimed at *being in the moment*, as an embodied, transient non-self.

I place reflective practice and its data, *sous rature*, under erasure, following Heidigger and Derrida (St Pierre 2013). This is an invitation to decentre data arising out of the reflective practice, noting its contingent nature, its relation to power and discourse, and pure irruption at a moment that is simply, arbitrary.

## 7.  Voice and Activism – The Fight Against Coal

### Introduction

I now think of ethnography as regulating fiction, as a particular narrative practice that produces textual identities and regimes of truth. Such an approach admits a significant problem ignored by traditional ethnographic narratives, namely the inevitable tensions of knowledge as partial, as interested, and as performative of relations of power. This returns us to the clashing investments in how stories are told and of the impossibility of telling everything. There is that excess, that difference within the story, informing how the story is told, the imperatives produced within its tellings, and the subject positions made possible and impossible there (Britzman 2012 p. 253).

Sometimes there's a man – I won't say a hee-ro, 'cause what's a hee-ro? - but sometimes there's a man.

– The Big Lebowski

The *fight against coal* began almost by accident and pulled me into a whirlwind of activity that created an outspoken activist out of me in the public sphere. This story has many guises and frames of action. At one level, the work was oppositional and adversarial, at another, it was collaborative with a significant amount of community building – the communities and relationships that still come together for a larger cause. Dissident, transgressive and collaborative; with fluidity in identity, a bricoleur in practice. How do I negotiate this space with its complex politics of representation in an ethical manner?

Sandoval (2000) speaks of the oppositional as a necessary framing to tackle ideological subjection, states that the

citizen subject can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is, marshal the knowledge necessary to "break with ideology" while at the same time also speaking in, and from within, ideology, is an idea that lays the philosophical foundations enabling us to make the vital connections between the seemingly disparate social and political aims that drive, yet ultimately divide, social movements from within (p. 43).

Though this can be read as a tale of heroic agency (notwithstanding the moments of cowardice), I question attribution of causality in a story with a complex unfolding. I also question the causal and temporal narratives when partial visibility to the events is all that there is, to go on. Without clear lines of causality, *what is a hee-ro*? Is the Dude from the Big Lebowski a *hee-ro*? This raises critical questions of how we visualise change and agency and our epistemological frames.

One can read this chapter as a privileging of the masculine even though this is a complex intervention that cannot be easily gendered. I speak of how specific roles within this work became my responsibility, especially those that demanded expertise. The male voice also gets privileged in confrontational spaces, which are performative within technocratic audiences, which in this story are many. It may colour this narrative but should not take away from the relational work of building coalitions and sustaining networks across multiple groups.

In this story, the privileging the performative is important, as I recognise the role it had in the process and outcome. Perhaps this story could have held my quality criterion of reflexivity of discomfort, bit stronger. But I note that as much as we treasure coalition builders, we also need those activists who put their bodies and reputations in the line of fire now more than ever.

This chapter brings forth the trickster in multiple fronts; as a shapeshifter who occupies multiple expert positions, and with radical interventions that disrupts the dominant discourse and foregrounds its limitations. This is also a location where discourse shifted; coal will always be spoken of in Sri Lanka along with its human and ecological toll after this work.

I can only write a partial account of my interactions with few of the many networks and activities that I was engaged in. There were many others who played important roles, who are invisible in this narrative, and to me. Storying is an act of arbitrary beginnings, plotlines and endings. Through narrative we privilege some voices while marginalising others and make heroes and villains through discursive frames of violence.

I attempt to be reflexive as much as possible, while honouring the story and the subjectivities of those involved… while recognising the fact that this is a story of signification from the periphery, that does require a claiming of agency.

## How to Become an Activist



*Figure 3: Coal through Kavini's eyes… image used in my LinkedIn article.*

It began with a serendipitous meeting; I found myself at a gathering to discuss how to oppose the 500MW Trincomalee Coal Power Plant (TCPP) to be built in Sampur, Trincomalee, in the Eastern Coast of Sri Lanka. TCPP was a joint venture between the CEB, the Sri Lankan state owned utility, and NTPC, an Indian state owned utility, with a large coal power generation portfolio. After much delay, the Government of Sri Lanka had given the environmental clearance for the project to go ahead, ignoring the concerns raised by environmentalists and the community.

Trincomalee is a geopolitical hotspot. India wanted a strong presence close to the Trincomalee harbour due to its *strategic importance*, and to pre-empt China, who had significant involvement in the other two Sri Lankan ports[24]. The present government was supported by India (their predecessors were closely aligned with China) and there was significant diplomatic pressure for the project to move forward quickly. In the aftermath of the war in Sri Lanka, there were also Sinhalese people who opposed the project due to the Indian involvement.

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[24] These eventually became parts of the Belt and the Road Initiative

Trincomalee bay, formed by the outfall of Mahaweli river, boasts of the second largest natural harbour in the world. A deep ocean cavern that formed due to the flow of water across millennia, it is home to a unique blend of marine life; hosting both deep and shallow ocean species, from corals and giant clams to one of the largest blue whale colonies who visit the bay.

Sampur was home to traditional fishing and farming communities, predominantly Tamil. Most were displaced during the war and had just resettled. "Sampur means plentiful," a community member told me in a voice filled with pride tinged with sadness. "Give us our land, and we can feed a lot of people in the country." We were in the midst of a conflict between the 'larger national developmental need' and local community needs, with intersecting racial and geopolitical fault lines.

I found myself among a small group of concerned environmentalists and businesspeople. We shared notes – I shared insights into CEB's planning approach and thinking. A marine biologist spoke of the uniqueness the area and the impact on marine life; he had been battling to stop coal in Trincomalee for over 25 years. An ecologist spoke of the risk of acidification of rainwater and its potential impact on the cultural and natural heritage of Sri Lanka. Concern was raised about the people whose lands were dispossessed during the war and will be dispossessed again. There was a palpable sense of desperation, anger and grief around the room. The stakes could not be higher; after this project, CEB was to begin 1200MW of coal power plants with Japan in the same location. We were trying to dismantle the coal agenda of the CEB. This was the birth of the 'Coalition Against Coal.'

We agreed to engage in three directions; raise public awareness using media with an intent of mass mobilisation in the future, lobby critical stakeholders including government Ministers with alternative options, and explore legal action to block the project. Social media as a platform opened access to masses, but I was sceptical of its ability to create sustained pressure. We needed print and TV.

A week after the meeting, I was sitting in the office of a friend who headed a media network, when things began to move.

> The meeting with Damien was long overdue. We bumped into each other at our office cafeteria a few months back and agreed to meet and discuss how to work together to

> raise public consciousness on environmental issues. The meeting never happened – but this is as good an opportunity to begin.
>
> I am flanked by two journalists, one with a deep scepticism of my anti-coal position. He was ready to grant that coal may be polluting yet was pressing me hard on alternatives and the cost to the end-consumer. The impact on the local communities and climate did not seem to negate his idea that 'need for cheap electricity for the *common man* and for development.'
>
> I am angry, but I do not see how I can counter this effectively within the development discourse. When pressed by me on how we can ignore the plight of the local population, the journalist pushes back, stating, "at the end of the day, the average person who watches the programme is interested in knowing what is going to happen to their electricity bill." I recognise this argument; it has been echoed by CEB many times before.

I am contesting a developmental discourse that allows the subjugation of the local population, their quality of life/livelihoods and the environment for cheap electricity, considered necessary for 'development'. Cheap electricity to make exports to the 'West' cheaper than the neighbours, our collective race to the bottom. A value system based on externalising costs and impacts. An epistemology that systematically devalues ecology (and *unchosen* communities) beyond direct human utility. Nature sits outside this particular frame.

This framing troubles me, but I cannot build a counter discourse with a few appearances on TV. We are, after all, inscribed by the neoliberal economic system, and the colonially determined development model. The discourse is held together with structures and processes that cannot be easily dismantled. I earn my salary from an industry that explicitly relies on this. My position of privilege will make my critique of the development model on TV sound hollow or disingenuous. Conversations on epistemology and ecology runs the risk of appearing as an indulgence of the privileged. I can only point to the epistemological problem with brief acts of subversion.

I must engage at three levels simultaneously; speak from the economic/technology frame and show coal is not the best option, expand the discursive boundaries by drawing attention to social, community and ecological impact, and attempt to speak to the epistemological errors

within the current discourse. My challenge is to hold these three in sufficient tension, as I speak on the issue.

Gross (2016), based on Foucault, constructs two regimes of truth – obedient truths and disobedient truths. In the economic/technology frame, the contestation is within the *expert truth* regime, an obedient truth. I use *ethical truth,* a disobedient truth, deployed to broaden the discourse. The epistemological frame shifting is a deployment of dissident truth. I can only do that in flashes.

*I keep thinking to myself, but I just finished my progression paper, I just want to finish my thesis and be done with…*

> In the midst of our conversation, Neela calls me, full of excitement. A local environmental group from Sampur, had begun a protest in front of the land blocked out for the power plant. Damien immediately mobilises a news-crew, and asks me to contextualise the issue on TV. I am hesitant; I am invited to become an activist in the public arena, yet I am painfully aware of my corporate role, within which I need to work with the CEB, knowing that they will frame me as an antagonist. Damien commits media time; but insist that I front the campaign, due to my knowledge and capacity to articulate. "Machan[25], this will not work without you at the front," he insists. Deep inside, I know he is correct and that I can add value in a unique way.

Where are the boundaries of my corporate identity, and how does it co-exist with the activist? Can I splice, fracture my identity and play two personas *on different stages*? Can I appear in media as a private citizen? In a small networked community, as in Sri Lanka, there is no anonymity. I cannot shed my corporate visage at will; it is part of my public persona. Corporate identities are normative, deployed as a form of disciplinary control, inscribing control on the body. It subjects the body to the neoliberal capitalist regime, contesting and marginalising the citizen identity (Gross 2016). Organisational restrictions on media appearances are one mode of such control.

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[25] Colloquial phrase meaning buddy.

I do not know what the limits of control are. What are my rights as a citizen, and how much do they get circumscribed as I rise within the organisation? How are the unwritten rules of public presence deployed differently within the organisation (my ex-CEO Dian had a free hand)?

The opportunity to try and halt the planned trajectory towards coal power is too hard to resist. It seemed that all my preparation - my studies on climate change, analysis of generation plans of the CEB, and my exploration of change, positions me to potentially make an impact. My marginalisation within corporate politics constraining me from making a wider impact, is another reason to take this on.

The intersection between work and a larger purpose has become the space that organisations are trying to occupy as a method to motivate employees. MAS, influenced by apparel brands such as lululemon and Patagonia, has also begun toying with the concept of supporting life goals of employees, a form of mimicry, "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, 1994 p. 122). We co-construct these disciplinary regimes via a tacit acceptance of the cleaving between work and purpose, and the possibility that for most employees, work does not have fulfilment and meaning. Spivak (2012) speaks of this breach between the 'salaried work' and 'engaged work', warning that this split results in the instrumentation of the former, while raising the contradictions of the same (Wright, Nyberg & Grant, 2012). This concept is unequally applied privileging a select few, and I am ready to leverage this.

I ask the Group HR Director for permission to appear for the campaign, but a reply does not arrive, leaving me frustrated. I sit down and reflect, asking why this is important to me.

> Magda was sick and unable to drive, so Anoush and Kavini are with me at the coalition meeting. As our conversations evolve, I am aware that they are both listening with intense focus. As we drive home, I ask them about how they feel. I see the sadness and anger in their eyes, and they cannot fathom why we (the grownups) are allowing a project with such potential for damage to go forward. The horror in their faces at the meeting is etched deeply in my mind. I ask myself, what is my responsibility for my children, and what does this project mean in this context?

I grieve thrice, as part of the ecology, as a human and as a father. It is an added burden as someone who understands what the impact of climate change will be for the future of my children. Hansen (2010) spoke of shifting his stance from scientist to activist as he thinks about

his grandchildren. There is a cultural contextualisation; in Sri Lanka, our lives are tied to planning a better future for our children, a particular form of subjectivity. This too can be strategically deployed. I pen an emotional note making my own case for action and send it to the Group HR Director. I wrote,

> On a personal note, as a father of two young children, my conscience is not allowing me to be silent in this regard. This is simply because I cannot ever claim that I did not know the dangers this is going to create, and I did my best to prevent it from occurring. In sustainability space, we are most burdened by knowledge. This is much better articulated by Dr James Hansen (NASA/Columbia University) who first came into prominence by testifying in Congress on climate change in 1970, who was arrested in 2014 for protesting against coal[26].

> He talks of his grandson, "he thinks he can protect his 2 and a half day old little sister. It would be immoral to leave these people with a climate system spiralling out of control." And he speaks of his conscience, how he will have to go to the grave, with a sense that he knew, and yet did not do enough to stop.

> Perhaps I am not as eloquent, but I fight the same demons.

The Group HR Director is also a father of similar aged children, and I am purposefully speaking to his identity as a father. I am attempting to breach the narrow identity of the corporate executive, to become *a human* again, and inviting him also to step into this space.

I get a swift approval. Reading through the mail, my boss Dinal sends me a note of support, "Just read over a drink, might have to have a few more now, good stuff, you are cut out to do this kind of stuff." I sense the power in this piece of writing and decide to publish it[27] as a call of arms for the cause. My activist life has begun.

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[26] http://blog.ted.com/why-i-must-speak-out-on-climate-change-james-hansen-at-ted2012/

[27] https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-i-must-speak-against-coal-call-action-vidhura-ralapanawe

## The Movement Begins

I was not the only activist in the making, Neela and others were also adding activism to their corporate roles and identities. Our initial meeting has enabled and motivated others to join.

I was on national TV, a newspaper interview followed, and more TV appearances. While the interview format helped get a clear and coherent point across, soon I am on TV debates; a format that is structured for adversarial positioning. This space is significantly politicised, and highly charged. Though I enjoyed the jousting, this format is designed to heighten conflict; not resolve or develop solutions.

I fitted far too easily into the adversarial context than I liked. The debates enhanced the antagonistic modes of being, over the affiliative. The moderators work to bring out the adversity; conflict enhance ratings. At one outing, a 'moderator' (the term instigator was more apt), was concerned that there wasn't enough energy in the studio (read: not enough fighting), requesting us to up the 'energy levels' after the break. When I raised this issue with a media executive, I was politely advised that in a ratings driven industry, this was inevitable.

The media narrative fixed me as one of the two staunchest opponents of the TCPP; the other being a senior government bureaucrat, who, like me, was playing an *informal* role to oppose the project. Media presences are performances. I was a different persona on camera, as were the others. The contrast between the cordiality that debate participants extend to each other – both pre-event and post-event - compared with the on-air antagonism seemed almost surreal. It seemed that our roles and differences sharpened on stage – we assumed our identities out of our subjectivities, shedding doubts.

## Identity in Opposition

> Butler (1992) explains that the agency of this subject lies precisely in its ongoing constitution—the "subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process" (p. 13). Indeed, poststructural feminists are troubled by the very category "woman" and work to keep that category unstable and undefined, open to the reconfiguration Butler describes. They agree with Derrida (1995), who says that this loosening of the category does not imply the "liquidation of the subject" but rather a "subject [that] can be reinterpreted, re-stored, reinscribed" (St. Pierre & Pillow, 2002 p. 256).

The people I faced off were senior professionals including the Chairman of the CEB, and lecturers from my former university, some of whom I had worked with before in various capacities. Cast against them in a charged oppositional context, I struggled between urges to show deference and attack. Can I call them out as liars when they lie? I was hesitant when I could have been brutal, held back by my own construction of 'respect' with strong colonial and cultural history. I found myself unsure and tentative.

I was suffering a crisis of identity with open fault lines. I was not comfortable with the identities of an environmentalist, or an energy sector specialist at that time. These are identities that are coalitional (Visweswaran 1994), identities of inclusive solidarity. Those skills I developed later. I was an outsider, whose primary skills are the ability to soak up information as a sponge, good rhetorical skill with an ability to critique.

Who was I at that point, but a trickster? Though I claimed an activist identity, the shadow of my corporate and private lives loomed large in the background. I could not shed these. I was also representing the Coalition Against Coal and carried the weight of their expectations. I was also carrying a voice for the subjugated; speaking (and grieving) for the ecology, and the local population, who were excluded from the discourse. Along with the same were the grandiose dreams of vanquishing giants and dragons, and at least a fleeting sense of ambivalence on being cast as Atlas... I construct a hybrid identity on stage, with multiple subjectivities intersecting. And these never fully die after the media event is over. What then is my identity, what is self?

<p style="text-align:center; color:red;">To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet - T.S. Eliot</p>

Did I privilege the corporate role and 'respect' over those that comes from re-presenting the voiceless (another erasure)? Can I shed years of conditioning called 'respect' to forcefully call out lies of CEB Chairman straddled with the Angulimala[28] complex? Visweswaran (1994) suggests "Identities, no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power always historically determined" (p. 8).

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[28] Angulimala is a Buddhist parable of a student who is instructed by his teacher to kill 1000 people as an act of repayment for teaching. Later he gives up violence and becomes a monk after meeting the Buddha. This story signifies the danger of blind obedience to teachers, where respect for teachers is culturally elevated. I was a 'good student' at school and university.

Hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) is shuffling of form at each micro engagement, a subconscious picking and mixing of form among many choices. This is how I read hybridity, not as a conscious choice, which then becomes a staging. Hybridity is performative, both internally and externally determined, not an 'act'. Each micro-encounter in an ambiguous space demands that I remake myself. What then is this self that is continuously remaking? That we ask this question is a privileging of a particular epistemology. A stable coherent self is a product of western intellectual thought and is contested by post-structuralists and post-modernists among others. On top of this destabilised self, we build identities based on normative discourses. Hybridity is not a new feature, but an essential outcome of this structure of the discourse.

A looming power crisis was about to grip the country (arising out of drought heightened by climate change), and in the midst of it, we are attempting to block a planned and delayed power plant. Not only did we have to raise environmental issues, we also had to propose viable alternatives. The dominant discourse is constructed through erasure of social and environmental impact; cost becomes the privileged site of the battle.

I was attempting to build a counter narrative, with occasional destabilisation of the discourse. If I did not know enough about power generation, the prime location of conflict *within* the discourse, I may not have been that successful in bringing focus onto environmental issues. *A mere environmentalist would not do.* I was attempting to be within the established discourse and offer a counter narrative. The insider-outsider, holding on to an unstable identity, a play. *The young environmentalist, who is also a power sector specialist*.

I was entering a territory fraught with danger, as I attempted to take on technocrats on their own turf, as an expert. A slip-up on a technical aspect in big stage would compromise credibility. I needed to master generation technologies, costs, pollution, abatement and trends very fast. I ended up spending hours immersing myself in technical documents, reports and news articles, coached by others. My engineering background, and previous engagement in the power sector helped.

My identity as an energy sector expert was ferociously challenged by the CEB, who refused to cede authority, claiming that true expertise is measured through *experience in power plant construction*. This was a carefully constructed strawman, as the discussions were primarily around costs, environmental impacts and power plant choices. This was an attempt to

appropriate the discourse on electricity generation to a particular technocracy, the experts of the CEB.

My approach to fight this was to also claim expertise through my own debate performance. I was able to hold my own in power generation topics, and also able to articulate from a wide range of sources on costs, pollution, community and environmental issues, climate change, and even the inner workings of the existing coal power plant through internal sources.

> I am giddy with excitement. A person working at the coal power plant, who I reached through a network, just tipped me that a key pollution prevention mechanism is not working on the day of the debate. This would make the plant operation illegal, and a media exposure would be explosive. The moment CEB Chairman speaks about their care towards the environment, I directly challenge him, giving specific details of the failure. The moderators smell blood, I too can sense it across the hall. They ask me to repeat the allegation. I do, with glee.
>
> The CEB Chairman is furiously typing on his phone, double checking. I am awaiting a challenge that does not come. I sense a chunk of the armour is broken.

This is theatre, and makes great entertainment, and a lot of buzz the next day. Through a trickster move, I have legitimised my claim to be part of the conversation.

Tactical victories create their own complexities. Am I locked into an identity of 'the enemy of the CEB'? I wonder if this narrows my space to work with the CEB on future solutions – cancelling the coal power plant is step one, but the real target is building a different energy grid, dominated by renewables. Without the CEB, this task is all but impossible.

I realise that this keeps me away from becoming too antagonistic, moderating and re-calibrating positions. Can I really be the critic and the friend, both at the same time? Is this an unrealistic hope, when cancellation requires strong oppositional positioning, when the CEB treats cancellation of the project is a direct challenge to their legitimacy?

## Voice, Re-presentation and Participation

I was trying to bring out the voice of the marginalised in the conversation; for the communities and the more-than-human world.

None of the debates hosted a participant from Norachcholai nor Sampur. The conversations lacked polyvocality, where other ways of knowing could have surfaced, and voices of the communities heard. While we firmly placed environmental and community interests within the discursive field of the conversation, we had also reinforced that the energy planning to be exclusive provenance of the experts; we just added a different class, environmental *experts*, into the frame. We have othered the population.

This again reinforced the marginalisation of the local communities. I could have brought in people like Gophan, who headed the Green Trincomalee movement, to the media spotlight. Sarath, Alexander or Peter to give a resident's point of view. This would have ensured their presence, rather than being *re-presented* by me. I had appropriated their voice, and by doing so, specifically devoiced them and cemented their subaltern status. Another *Colombo expert* claiming to represent a community that he cannot relate to.

There was also a racial dimension rarely acknowledged and lay just below the surface. A coal plant was originally planned for Hambantota, in the South-East corner of the country, with a planned mega-city next to the port. Hambantota was also the seat of power of the former President, who refused the authorisation, moving it from a predominantly Sinhalese community to a Tamil community in Trincomalee.

*Though I knew this history, I never raised the racial angle in my media appearances. I was hesitant to raise it for the fear of rekindling racial tensions, after a fraught war. This is a position of privilege for me, a majority Sinhalese. Class was present, but race was erased in the conversation, although race was inscribed in the whole project from the beginning. As a colleague once said, people in the South will always block coal plants, and they will build them in places where there are poor, uneducated minorities, who cannot mobilise, or understand the scale of the damage.*

I notice that I have doubly denied voice to Gophan.

Spivak (1988) notes the ethical conundrum of western educated intellectuals speaking for the subaltern. Though I 'represent them' I cannot speak for them, as I do not share their social, cultural, economic, historical, experiential or epistemological knowing. I can only appropriate a position of in-betweenness; between them, and the 'establishment'.

The communities were absent in the conversation before me, though I added 'their voice' I am unsure if this was meaningful. My representation of the community (and nature) was subject to the domination of the expert voice, that scientifically categorised impacts and placed the community and the more-than-human world in relation to that. It is a mark of privilege. I was speaking *for* them, not *with* them. Spivak (1988) comment rings in my ears, "the postcolonial intellectuals learn that their privilege is their loss. In this they are a paradigm of the intellectuals" (p. 82).

> I finally meet Gophan, the local environmental activist who led the protest in Sampur at the end of our campaign. We are happy to meet each other, two people fighting the same battle in two different ends.  His comments lifted me, "we saw you on TV, and we knew that we were not alone on this fight, that people in Colombo are also talking about this, fighting for us."
>
> A comment that crossed geography, class and ethnic boundaries.
>
> I was more impressed with his grassroot campaign, that gave us legitimacy beyond a frame of *Colombo elites*. I respond, "because of you, it stopped being an issue of Colombo elite fighting for a cause. We too could not have done it without you."

We were mutually constituting our roles, the centre and the margin, the metropole and the periphery. I am aware that my voice is stronger on TV because of his absence, allowing me to appropriate. Seeing his eloquence at the press conference, I see he could have added so much value to this campaign. And I had devoiced them and made this still a conversation of the metropole.

Here I face the complex world of voice and representation. I am invited to the conversation, because I can play the role of the expert on generation choices, with the ability to talk about the ecological impact. I remain in the conversation because I speak this expert truth, and by doing so, I fail to shift the contours of the conversation away from the narrow scientific technocratic frame.

The technocracy still holds power because the discourse privilege the experts. My intervention also reconstructs and validates the expert's right to this work, be it with the inclusion of the *environmentally aware power sector technocrat*. I recognise my role in strengthening this

narrative, complicit in Gophan's exclusion. Would he not be marginalised? Yet his presence would shift the contours of the conversation and would have been the real trickster act that I could have made.

We were trying to shift an established base of power in a short period of time, and the reaction wasn't surprising. That the narrative shifted somewhat was significant, recalling Visveswaran (1994), "ideological discourses can be interrupted, if only briefly, by individual agency" (p.57).

## Subversion: Elevating the Marginal Narrative

The odds were stacked against us. CEB favoured coal, and the leading 'energy experts' in Sri Lanka were all ex-CEB officials and proponents of coal based generation. CEB had a strong trade union of electrical engineers, who could even get the Ministers changed. Strong financial and institutional interests propped up the status quo.[29] Power sector planning was legally in the hands of the CEB, with the regulator's role diminished. Renewable energy was marginalised. Climate change was *othered*, subjected to *development needs (costs).*

The negative impact of the existing coal power plant was rendered invisible and externalised to the community. As a resident living next to the coal power plant told me, "the newspapers come and listen to our stories and go back, but nothing gets reported." Our search for media reports of pollution during the five years the plant was in operation yielded only three articles. A systematic erasure of voice of the community.

A quick field visit shocked us. Open mounds of coal and fly ash, located between the ocean and the village, created a massive air quality problem, especially during the monsoon winds. Clouds of ash and coal dust were being blown into the village, polluting the ground water, destroying crops and impacting the health of the people. The villagers complained of respiratory and skin ailments, especially among the children. Fishermen alleged significant reduction of their catch. Vegetation and living spaces were covered with layers of fine dust, which we knew to be toxic.

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[29] One Energy Minister, who was an electrical engineer, was removed from his portfolio for being critical of CEB's practices, and the union began agitating against him. There are multiple news reports of senior government ministers criticizing coal and diesel interests of the CEB. Some of the largest corruption cases in Sri Lanka relate to financial irregularities of coal tenders and diesel power plant contracts.

Figure 4: the impact of fly ash and coal dust on vegetation and agriculture



Figure 5: Coal yard and  ash dump site from the village.

My first visit to the village was with an environmental organisation, EFL.

> The house was located downwind from the fly ash dump, stacked probably 6m high. I can see bulk of the crop being wilted away except in a small patch, noticing that some vines spread on the fence has acted as a simple barrier. The woman invites us in, and I see the walls and roof discoloured. I touch the surfaces and see a thin layer of dust, uncommon in any other part of the country on the weekend after the traditional New Year.  She is angry and resigned to her fate, both at the same time. I look at her children, and I feel a huge hole inside me. This is fly ash that they are daily exposed to, and it is hazardous. Her husband shows the scabs in his legs, caused by sweat and ash while working in the field. This is nothing short of a tragedy.

> Their health permanently compromised, and there is nothing that I can do.

> I recall the small boy I met earlier, not much older than Anoush. His wistful remark that during the monsoon, how it is impossible to wash his white school shirt and hang it out to dry, because of the coal dust... This is the price they pay so that we can enjoy *cheap* electricity.

> This doesn't have to be this way, I keep thinking. There are better ways to manage this. This is criminal negligence, allowed by the local environmental authority, and the ignored by the *system*. They are victims at multiple levels, without voice, without health, looking at the abyss.

> I too see only the abyss.

We managed to get one TV channel to report on the pollution and challenges faced by the local community. The ensuing pressure forced a minister to defend the power plant, stating that he would show the citizens of Sampur that there is nothing to be worried about.

My trickster spirit came into play. I wanted us to do what the Minister proposed, before him. Working with Gophan, we organised a group of villagers from Sampur to travel to Norachcholai, to talk to the villagers about the impact of the coal power plant in their proximity, in the full glare of news media. The coverage shocked many who saw the visuals in print and on TV. The counter narrative of the pollution impact of coal, and CEB's mismanagement of the existing coal power plant could no longer be denied. The mood was shifting.

The focused media attention shifted CEB's own stance towards the community. They began addressing some of the environmental damage. There was a sensitization towards the community and an attempt to build relations. CEB invited a community leader to meet the management, and some change emerged.

## Building Communities of resistance

The activism in the media, the foil for the CEB, was one side to my role. Behind the scenes there were networks of resistance, which required facilitation and engagement. It was a distributed resistance, with multiple interventions by dispersed group of actors loosely co-ordinated. A different kind of a change experience for me, with emergent leadership and multiple agendas. I found myself working across multiple networks, supporting diverse groups, and at times working as the link between many. I found myself shifting gears, ceding and assuming authority, linking people, playing multiple roles.

My activities included

a) Lobbying government ministers and officials on costs, challenges and alternatives with Neela and Anil

b) Working with media to create visibility of environmental issues of coal and impact of the current coal power plant

c) Working with an independent group of energy experts on future strategies for the country

d) Working with Environmental Foundation Limited (EFL) on litigation strategy for Norachcholai and Sampur

e) Working with a group of scientists and technical specialists to critique the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the coal power plant (Technical Report supporting litigation)

f) Working with the energy sector regulator, headed by a close friend on policy and regulatory issues

g) Providing input as a technical expert to multiple committees

h) Social media activism, and information exchange/clearing house

Neela, the CEO of a large communications firm in the midst of a merger, transformed into a dedicated activist. Even with stretched schedules, we both found time to engage officials and government ministers, finding friends and foes. We were a great team together; she with the network and connections got us the meetings, and would open with an emotional pitch, followed by me with the specific critiques and alternatives as a technocrat. It was a rapid learning experience for her too, taking on the role of a citizen activist, and I saw her passion

when she spoke out in public fora, a welcome voice. Consequently, this locked me to an expert role which I relished.

Many others were working on this, environmental organisations, media organisations, scientists, citizens and officials, known and unknown to us. The resistance was dispersed; I was perhaps one locus (out of many) in an interconnected network. What was needed was links and nudges. This was a campaign that was without a centralised leadership but coalescing as clusters on ideas and skill.

Foust (2010) quotes Richard Day (2004), "[I]f anarchist-influenced groups look disorganized, this is perhaps because the ways in which they are organized cannot be understood from within the common sense maintained by the hegemony of hegemony. Perhaps a new, uncommon sense is needed," (p.1).

There was a proliferation of resistance actors with diverse approaches. While not centrally linked or co-ordinated, loose networks created an emergent field of activism, linked only to a common cause. We never aspired a centralised organisation. Different groups had different demands; some who argued for coal to be replaced by natural gas, while others lobbied for large scale adoption of renewables.

There were also a lot of moneyed interests at play, from energy companies with a stake on the outcomes from both sides. Coal is a very lucrative commission bearing industry, and if we switch it to Natural Gas or Renewables, different actors' benefit.

EFL filed two Fundamental Rights petitions to the Supreme Court. First was challenging the approval of TCPP, and the second was regarding the environmental pollution of the existing coal power plant.

The TCPP case challenged the approval Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the project. EFL requested me to put together the technical critique, noting that I had the most all-round knowledge on the subject. Working together with a senior academic, we assembled a global team of Sri Lankan scientists; specialists in climate and weather, modelling and simulations of pollutant and temperature dispersion, marine biology, oceanography and engineering. I worked with each person to identify the flaws in their area of expertise to build a technical critique of the EIA. Most of the scientists wanted to stay anonymous; some due to the sensitive roles they

played, and others for fear of reprisals. My role as the synthesiser of the final report forced me to rapidly learn and understand each discipline at high level through email, phone and skype conversations. I compiled an 82-page technical report which was filed as part of the case.

In parallel, I was also in the centre of working with multiple clean energy specialists, trying to work out viable alternatives, and to think of a renewable energy grid. These interactions were on social media, as we began to understand and build the case for clean energy. I was also working with a number of governmental officials on energy and environment, looking at policy options.

I was seamlessly moving in and out of multiple engagements, and networks, cross pollinating each with information gathered from the others. I found myself shifting orientation when working with each network; a shape shifter, a trickster. We were helping each other inquire and build knowledge on climate change, clean energy, coal and environmental impacts.

## Care and Safety

When I began my activist life, I was asked was if I was not afraid for myself or for my family. Sri Lanka had just come out of a regime where opponents of some projects were intimidated. Though with the new regime this disappeared, the fear that held people captive was still present.

There were many times I too was overcome with fear. I had conversations with Magda, Anoush and Kavini about potential risks. I deleted all personal information and family pictures from social media accounts. There were others in the network who were worried.

> Another long phone conversation with Srimathi, and I see her torn between wanting to support our work, and concerns about the safety of her family. Her worry is perceptible over the telephone. She fears silencing via violence.
>
> "Vidhura, I will support you with everyway I can," she says, "but I cannot do this publicly. I am worried about my family."
>
> It jolts me into thinking about the same issue as well. I too had thought about it; I know her fear all too well. I have held it during the bloody insurrection in 1989/90 when I was

> a student. It is latent, with the kind of histories of violence. The amount of money locked into coal was staggering.
>
> Srimathi refused to send anything via email, and all her comments are over the phone. I sense her grief, she wants to do more, but is afraid. But I also notice that her courage is picking up as we continue to work, as it transforms her.

Srimathi was helping me to critique the EIA at that time. Later on, when the President met a group of scientists to discuss climate change, she picked up the courage to openly request the stoppage of the coal power plant. When I spoke to her afterwards, she was full of energy and enthusiasm about her courage.

Our communities of resistance were also communities of inquiry, where we collectively explored and learnt from each other – not only the technical aspects, but also our modes and methods of resistance. I was continuously working with seven different people, and many others on shorter timeframes. We tested our theories on each other, gave feedback on technical and presentation aspects, held on as a community in despair and joy.

The work that was going on at multiple levels was creating its own inertia. The conversations that was going on was locking us into new forms of resistance and strengthening our hands and resolve. Knowing that they are not alone in opposition is a permission to resist.

This work was extremely taxing on my time. During this time, I was almost an absent father and husband. I had let go of my ADOC work and was struggling with my office work. I had engaged in some projects with SAC[30], which was eating into my time. Yet there was only a short window open for us to stop the project, and the potential guilt of not doing enough hung heavily on my shoulders.

My conversations with Magda on committing family time on the coal project was strained. She did understand the importance of what I was trying to do, but sceptical of my claims that life will revert to normalcy after the issue is put to rest. "You will always have something else to do," was her parting comment. And I know it is true, as I look back at the last 10 years. I am a serial offender, and I was not with her when she needed me, fighting her own demons.

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[30] See chapters 8 & 9

But she was supportive as well as Anoush and Kavini, who were excited with what I was trying to do. They understood climate change and pollution from coal, which they saw first-hand.

I was also reminded of the power of networking and relationships, that comes from being in a small country where the business, civil society and government are all fairly tightly networked, representing shared histories of schools, universities. For example, myself, the energy regulator and the planning chief engineer came from the same engineering batch from the University, making a senior CEB official quip, "maybe we should put the three of you into a room, and ask you to sort out this issue." These networks made connections possible, and access available to media, government, diplomats etc.

The pushback also came; from 'energy experts' who were predicting massive financial impact and blackouts if the project is cancelled. The CEB Engineers Union also pushed back claiming coal is not damaging contrary to evidence on the public record. The World Bank spoke on behalf of coal. Pushback also came from Indian and Japanese embassies who are lobbying the government hard. This was a long hard battle, with no easy ways out.

> "This meeting did not happen," begins the Indian Ambassador, as he sets the stage for our conversation. We are here to explain our position on the coal power plant, and to assuage him that we are not *anti-Indian*.
>
> Neela begins with introductions, and frames the issue, asking him to convert the coal power plant into a solar farm. She is respectful and passionate and positions our concerns as ecological rather than geopolitical.
>
> We take turns and do our pitches. The Ambassador has sympathy to the environmental concerns we were raising. "Although I am not a Buddhist, I always try to go and visit the Bo tree[31] in Anuradhapura. I am very worried to hear that it may be impacted." The first officer comes hard at us, asking where we were when the first Chinese coal power plant was built.
>
> "Why is that all projects we want to do to support Sri Lanka are blocked, whilst Chinese projects go forward?"

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[31] One of the most sacred sites for Buddhists all over the world

He lists many such instances, which makes me pause. I too wonder, where was my opposition in the first time around? I know I too did not believe there were alternatives and did not do anything to protest.

The Ambassador focuses on China and geopolitics. "You have to remember that we are a stakeholder on what happens in the Trincomalee harbour."

Hiran, who is sitting next to me is bristling with anger, and I see his hands shaking. "Mr. Ambassador, I do not know how you became a stakeholder to Trincomalee. We are a sovereign country, and what we have the right to decide what we do here."

I am trying to calm the tension. Luckily it doesn't spill out of control. Later on, I wonder why did I try to control? Why not sit in that discomfort? Why did I rush to construct cordiality?

We are all smiles when we leave, though we know clearly the geopolitical interest that underlie the project. And there are layers and layers of meanings and interests on each claim we make.

As I reflect on the communities that came together, I recognise that I shifted roles at each setting, at times taking the lead, at others, purely supportive. Respectful and focused on learning when working with scientists and experts, confident and assertive in public fora and lobbying, confrontational and detailed in media appearances, collaborative in building frameworks in technical areas. It is a dance of many guises, that brings forth the multiplicity of approaches that are inherent in my practice.

I am also aware that my capacity to work across all these engagements was a result of mastering propositional and presentational knowledge though it is not possible to deny the experiential and the practical. "In my theoretically oriented praxis, I always deploy expert knowledge to resist," notes Harcourt (2016), and I too see this in the centre of my praxis, though not theoretically oriented. I also think my capacity of speaking on multiple voices – the energy expert, the ecologist, the citizen activist; it is an unfolding of a complex self that enabled me to help catalyse these communities of resistance.

## Colonial Structures and Colonised Minds – Taking on the World Bank

Some days he walked along the banks of the river that smelled of shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans.

— Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things

Third World reality is inscribed with precision and persistence by the discourses and practices of economists, planners, nutritionists, demographers and the like, making it difficult for people to define their own interests in their own terms — in many cases actually disabling them to do so.

- Arturo Escobar

The cabinet requested the World Bank (WB) to review and report on CEB's generation planning methodology. WB appointed a consultant, Dr Peter Meier, who had previously worked with the CEB. We knew of his bias towards coal with his involvement in a previous study (World Bank, 2010) which gave the CEB licence to effectively ignore the environmental impact of coal.

His draft report was leaked to us. Myself, Dr. Janaka, a retired senior state employee, and Anil, a retired World Bank renewable energy specialist, read through and critiqued the document, comparing notes. The consultant had critiqued some elements of the plan, but given a broad endorsement of it, comparing it as 'better than what is done in the region,' creating a sentiment that being slightly better than neighbours as a sufficient test of quality. All comparisons were with South Asian countries, as if we are unitary entities. I began sensing traces of orientalism (Said, 1979) and colonialism structured into thinking and language. The report went on to make a specific recommendation to 'build the proposed coal power plant in Sampur as soon as possible,' a clear excess of the mandate, which was only to review the planning process with no recommendations on power plants[32].

While digging into the report, what struck us most is how the social and environmental impact was converted to costs in the planning process. The methodology appeared to be an institutionally rationalised colonialism, that subjects 'developing countries' (the only countries that use world bank for this type of work), into a pollution and carbon intensive fossil fuel trap.

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[32] WB country head conceded that this was stepping outside the mandate at a later meeting.

The marginalisation was done in two ways.

a)     Limiting the types of impacts in the methodology. For coal, only SOx, NOx and PM are considered, ignoring Mercury, heavy metals, coal combustion residue disposal, water withdrawal, thermal pollution from cooling water discharge, eco system destruction and impact on other industries. These impacts are typically used in evaluation in most 'developed countries' – see Alberici et al (2014). Ignoring impact categories used in developed nations, the WB appears to contribute to an intentional devaluation of people and ecosystems in developing countries.

b)     Quantified damages are scaled down using the GDP ratio. Pollution leads to mortality and morbidity for a percentage of people exposed. Mortality is converted to a monetary figure using 'value of a Statistical Life' (VSL), stated as the marginal willingness to pay for avoiding a death. The scaling based on GDP in effect makes the value of a life of a person in Sri Lanka at a 1/20th of a person in the USA. The report claimed to be using the World Bank published methodology, and when I dug up the methodology document, it appeared to be authored by the same consultant.

As I read through the background work, I was appalled at what I was seeing. Here was an institutionalising of the famous memo of former President and Chief Economist of the World Bank, Lawrence Summers,

> 'Dirty' Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn't the World Bank be encouraging MORE migration of the dirty industries to the LDCs [Least Developed Countries]? I can think of three reasons:
>
> 1) The measurements of the costs of health impairing pollution depends on the foregone earnings from increased morbidity and mortality. From this point of view a given amount of health impairing pollution should be done in the country with the lowest cost, which will be the country with the lowest wages. I think the economic logic

behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable and we should face up to that.[33]

With the proposed method, the country's care for the people/ecology and environmental safeguards are treated as a function of their GDP, hence this process would ensure that poor countries will use polluting technology, and will only make choices of better environmental protection with the growth of the GDP. By privileging a unitary economic value (GDP) the method resurrects the fault lines and injustices of colonialism, imparting it into the world through uncritical and unforgiving eyes.

Smith (1999) notes "research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions"(p. 5). Here it is easy to critically interrogate the methodology to see how they construct the world, who is marginalised and made into subalterns. VSL is a reductionist abstraction at many levels, and using such methods are active choices. Ecofys for example, rejected VSL when evaluating impacts in EU, stating "for human health damages it is further the case that we prefer to treat each human life in the EU, or globally, in the same way and at the same value" (Alberici et al, 2014 p.95). The cynic in me does not believe that this is an enlightened position as claimed; the authors probably could not justify a claim that placed the VSL of Luxembourg at 8 times higher than that of Hungary.

I wanted to challenge the WB report, and also step beyond to ask questions on WB methodologies which can have such impacts across the developing world. The report was to be presented to the Prime Minister and the cabinet, and risked compromising some of the important work we had been doing to shift the planning methodology. This was a case for resistance; how do we delegitimise this report so that it does not become established?

WB had organized a meeting to present the findings primarily to government officials including the Deputy Minister. WB needs stakeholder engagement in such projects, and I wonder if this is one on the sly, without distributing the report in advance. We decided to challenge the report, though I was not an invitee, Anil, who was abroad, forwarded me his invite.

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[33] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summers_memo
Mr Summers has claimed that he sent this memo to stimulate discussion in irony. However the content of the memo is institutionalised through processes and methodology as shown.

I am tentative, feeling like the uninvited guest who will soon insult the hosts. The session on environmental impact valuation is the third session the Consultant is presenting, followed by lunch. The Q&A sessions after each presentation is brief, and I wonder how I should approach this? I probe with innocuous questions in the first few sessions, to gauge the temperature, understand how he would respond to questions. I see a deep sense of anger within me, looking at how people are hanging onto the consultant's words, without using their own critical faculties. Who said colonialism is over?

Only Dr Janaka is asking any probing questions, possibly the only other person who has critically read the report. After the Consultant's presentation, Dr Janaka opens with the first salvo. He is sharp in his critique, his anger contrasting his avuncular disposition. I let my anger rise and simmer and open up about institutionalized colonialism on the methodology. The consultant responds by saying that he has merely employed the World Bank methodology. This is juvenile, I am better prepared than that. I quote the name of the methodology document and note that he is its principal author. I ask the people seated, whether they think that their lives are worth only 1/20$^{th}$ of that of an American.

The Consultant does not come back to respond. I see that the WB team is shaken, I believe partly due to the use of the word colonial, which is apt in this context. Another WB official tries to calm things down rather than respond to the critique.

As we break for lunch, a colleague from CEB makes a comment about the altercation. My rebuke to him was sharp. "I can understand WB and the Consultant having a colonial attitude towards Sri Lanka," I begin. "What I do not understand is why is it that you devalue the lives of people of our own country?"

The damage control gets to full swing. I see my critique has hit a mark, acknowledged by the Ministry secretary in his closing remarks. WB wants to meet me, when the new country head is appointed, who is supposedly an environmentalist. I consent.

## In defence of conflict

<div style="text-align:center; color:red;">Where there is power there is resistance. - Michel Foucault</div>

"Whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is always a violent event," (Fanon 2004, p.1). Though I encountered Fanon's writings late, the spirit of Fanon has lived in me far longer.

Fanon is both anti-colonial and post-colonial, because his project was not merely the replacement of the coloniser with the colonised, for which he argued, but on a new relationship of *men*[34], a rejection of multiple dualities, arguing against "a world divided in two… inhabited by different species" (p. 5).

As I reflect on the antagonistic nature of some of the interventions, I wonder how this work sits within the participatory action research paradigm, with its high ideals of collaboration, democracy and participation. I shuffle through modes of behaviour; oppositional, collaborative, facilitative and open conflict. There are questions of ethics, method and purpose. Can overtly conflictual interventions fit into the action research paradigm?

Jordan (2003) reminds us that PAR has traditionally been a methodology of the margin, strongly influenced by emancipatory pedagogy, although running the risk of losing that edge and being co-opted. He reminds us that PAR is explicitly political, and that its core "practices have emerged from a critique of western social science methodologies as cultural imperialism" (p.189). PAR's agenda of social justice requires the marginalised to be able to meet those with power as equals. This by itself is sufficiently challenging, even when the action researcher is able to structure the encounter.

Greenwood & Levin (2006) present an approach to deal with AR with such strong power differentials, noting importance

> to affirm solidarity with the oppressed and to declare an adversarial role toward the powers that be. As a result, in this kind of AR, the holders of power themselves are rarely included. Much of the activity-be it education, organizing, mobilizing-involves building structures and confidence among the poor to enable them to confront the

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[34] Why men and not women?

powerful in sufficient numbers and with clear enough plans so that they have some

likelihood of success (p. 30).

More often, the researcher is a participant in the margin, when the terms of engagement of the encounter is set by others in a manner that is not conducive to exploration. This is the reality of many action researchers, who research on their own encounters within this world – within work or other forms of engagement. Following Marshall (2016), for those who open their own lives and encounters as the research subject, the practice must also explicitly speak of those encounters that are marked by violence and conflict.

They too are participatory, because opposition, conflict and resistance are essential properties of power. Democracy demands dissent, including disruptive forms.

Foucault spoke of two forms of truth, obedient truth and disobedient truth, and as Harcourt (2016b) notes, they are more truth claims that are deployed for different ends, *staged performances of figures of truth*. Foucault looks deeper into the Greek concept of Parrhesia, as an ethical act of disobedient truth telling that demands courage. Harcourt (2016a) quotes Foucault on the need for courage; "parrhesiast taking the risk of breaking and ending the relationship to the other person which was precisely that made his discourse possible." For Foucault parrhesia "is the courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears."

The Western philosophical tradition's focus on truth is evident, yet the previous encounters are based on a tradition of emancipation, in this instance, fed by a need of decolonisation. What is being critiqued in these encounters is the neo-colonial discourse, and its construction of knowledge that splits the world in two, and how knowledge is structured and maintained through institutions to apply differentially to different people in the divide.

<span style="color:red">To dislocate the colonial world .... To destroy the colonist's sector… - Frantz Fanon</span>

Interventions such as this are intended to shed a light on, dislocate and reorient knowledge that is constructed within a colonial discourse. "Challenging the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of viewpoints. It is not a discourse on the universal, but the impassioned claim by the colonized that their world is fundamentally different" (Fanon, 2004, p.6). The fundamental

violence of the colonial discourse that others and diminishes the colonised (and in this case, also nature), cannot be contested through rational conversation, but by a stark expose, that points a direct finger to the structure of violence of the discourse.

My intervention was an act of *violent* resistance that is a direct challenge to the author of an oppressive methodology, and to the World Bank, that institutionalised the same. The encounter is an intentional stand-off, a face-off to delegitimise a method imbued with colonial logic; structured in such a way since the window of the encounter is brief. It is also a plea for solidarity in resistance to the audience, who are Sri Lankan.

Sandoval (2000) notes the analytical landscape in theory in the last few decades bloomed with

> new terms such as *hybridity, nomad thought, marginalization, la conciencia de la mestiza, trickster consciousness, masquerade, eccentric subjectivity, situated knowledges, schizophrenia, la facultad, signifin', the outsider/within, strategic essentialism, différance, rasquache, performativity, coatlicue*, and *the third meaning* entered into intellectual currency as terminological inventions meant to specify and reinforce particular forms of resistance to dominant social hierarchy (p 68).

This speaks to the theorising space (if one makes distinction between action and research components – bearing in mind that this is a false dichotomy). Yet theoretical explorations of overt resistance and conflict as part of action within PAR is more difficult to find.

A lot of action research literature seems to have a specific bias towards the micro encounters in its action domain, and has a proclivity towards mediating them to be dialogic and collaborative, at times at the expense of the wider political and/or social justice agenda. Cooke (2003) notes as he traces the history of early PAR with Kurt Lewin,

> the evidence, supplied by Lippitt (1949: 193), demonstrates that the emphasis on personal feelings and group dynamics at New Britain actually shifted participants' desires for action to this micro level, and away from the broader agenda of antiracist social change. What was invented there, then, was a method that had precisely the effect that Wynn identified, namely of focusing on "goodwill" (1976: 108) to the exclusion of issues such as employment, housing, poverty, and opposing racism per se" (p.84).

Within my praxis, I tend to focus on the larger social justice agenda, sometimes at the expense of creating dialogic spaces, and focus on the relational within each encounter. This is in part because I hold a more complex view of collaboration, where open confrontation (truth-to-power) and subversion in the service of exposing and exploring the larger context and discourse is important. It is an explicit resistance to working within the existing discourse.

## Reflections on Change Agency

The President of Sri Lanka makes a sudden trip to meet the Prime Minister of India to request him to convert TCPP to a natural gas power plant, claiming that Sri Lanka will not build any more coal plants. He delivers a similar message to the Prime Minister of Japan. Few weeks later, the Supreme Court is informed that TCPP will not go ahead. A sudden end to what we believed would be a long drawn out (and perhaps unwinnable) battle.

Months later, I ask Magda why she thinks that the coal power project was cancelled. She simply says, "because Ranil wanted to," reminding me of a story that was circulating as we began our work, that the Prime Minister was looking for a grassroots mobilisation as a rationale to stop the project. I am bemused, not the least for having to reinterpret what I thought I knew. Were we merely acting out a pre-written script, invisible to the gaze?
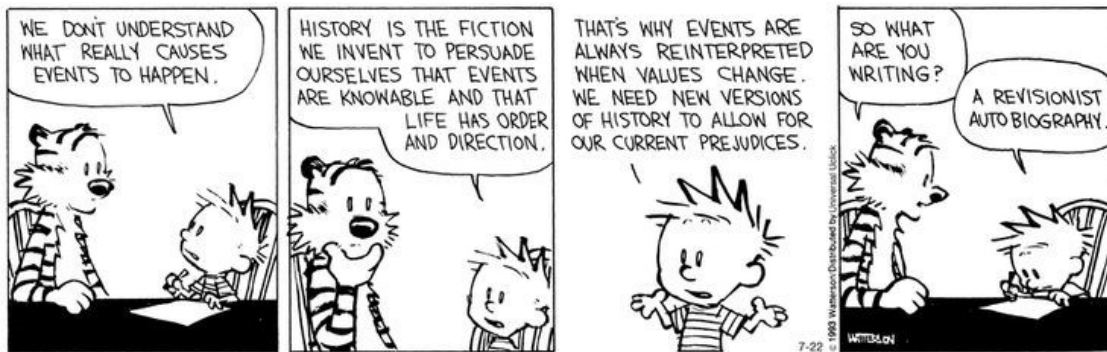


What then can I say of agency? As I acknowledge the work done by many, any attribution to instrumental agency seems beside the point. Shifting the discourse was important, where we had some success and a long journey ahead. Agency is still important, as it operates at micro encounters, and none of us are fully subjectivised within the discourse; there is always space for transgression. Each of us had our moments of agency, which we embraced as we could.

When thinking of the larger movement, it is not sufficient to stop a coal power plant, we need an electricity grid based on renewables. As I write this, coal plants came back into the horizon through various guises in multiple cycles, forcing us to be in constant vigilance, battling it out. The networks have shifted, so have the locations of the conflict. We work with different intensities. Bookending episodes are simply arbitrary.

The counter discourse that we presented has taken some hold, with the imaginary triggered by images of solar farms, and the idea they are likely to be cheaper and abundant. So has the idea

that coal pollutes. But the dominant discourse that privilege the fossil fuel industry is held in place through institutionalised processes, systems and procedures that repeatedly enact this reality. I see new engineering graduates still talking about coal based generation. CEB planning processes are still locked into large scale centralised power. I see commentators still dismiss emissions mitigation and ecological impact.

Rules and norms of knowledge and power are made and kept through repetition (Bhabha, 1994). Our work, as I reflect, is in part open resistance (opposing the coal power plant directly), in part remixing (working with the regulator to bring in stricter environmental criteria within the planning process) and creating new forms (creating public fora for new energy systems, making public consultations count during the regulatory process). Opposition always demands active agency, requiring the construction and sustenance of healthy communities of resistance. Those we built are still somewhat active and may still awaken when the next call comes.

## An Epilogue

The matter does not end. As in a bad zombie movie, coal comes up again in the guise of clean coal. An oxymoron, but it shows that the narrative on pollution has taken hold. This is low-level trench warfare; a few of us working in close collaboration behind the scenes are fighting to keep it at bay. The surge in the coal price in the market is aiding our effort.

We were also making headway in tackling pollution in Norachcholai through a court mandated intervention.

> The four of us representing EFL are the last to walk in to the boardroom. I look at the irony of trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, a senseless act; once the conversation starts, I will be in the thick of things. Past betrayals[35] have had a toll in me, and I am hesitant, hoping they will not link me back to MAS. In short, I am afraid.
>
> Damitha, Director General of the PUCSL begins; "we are here to come to a settlement to resolve the pending court case that EFL has filed against the Norachcholai power plant." The General Manager, CEB is in the audience; the last time we met, I was representing MAS, along with the group COO, facilitating a conversation to build 35MW of solar power on top of factory rooftops. Today, I am the lead technical expert for an environmental litigant, who will negotiate with the CEB team on the way we will work together to minimise the pollution of the power plant, and build a monitoring regime.
>
> A room full of tension, we are antagonists and comrades with crisscrossing allegiances and relationships. Damitha and Gamini, my university colleagues and friends represent PUCSL, the facilitators of the process. I notice familiar faces of CEB, people who have seen me openly resist the coal power plants in public, in the role of an antagonist. They are probably cautious of a process that will provide us with incriminating evidence. CEB and PUCSL are also locked in a policy and legal battle over future generation choices. There is tension between different CEB teams. The Provincial Environmental Authority is probably jittery that their lack of oversight is being exposed.
>
> We have a long list of items, and we dive in. The first points are feelers, we are talking a lot, positioning, bargaining - testing water. I am almost over-conciliatory – I  wonder if this is the

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[35] See the chapter Revolution that wouldnt

right thing to do. We do hold enough cards in our hands to make serious damage in court or in public eye. But we have resolved to play the long game, work with the power plant, and build solutions to mitigate pollution.

We all know that the day the CEB thinks of another coal power plant, we will be in opposing sides[36].

Soon, we are into the technical content, and I am directly negotiating the deal with the CEB technical team. With time, the relationship evolves, and we are exchanging information more freely. The tension is broken, and our conversation is more open, and we find agreement faster.

Can I really pull it off, can I be the enemy and the friend, at the same time?

We meet a second day and finalise the agreement. Two weeks later it is signed. I do not go to the signing ceremony; my work will be in the implementation and monitoring phase. We appear to have achieved something significant together.

The agreement seems to have pleased everyone, which makes me nervous. CEB GM was highly pleased, I get to know, considering it to be a significant step. Village representatives, who are at the signing ceremony, are also pleased to see concrete movement and commitment. PUCSL and the environmental authority have been strengthened technically, aiding their oversight roles. The CEB whistle-blowers dig into the agreement in detail and are surprised and pleased.

We are in the cusp of something here, I feel, nervously holding on to hope.

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[36] This is prescient – written in early 2018. By June we are in open conflict

# 8. Disruption and Radical Collaboration

## Introduction

This section speaks of a sustained engagement with a global industry association in an attempt to shift the contours and context of environmental sustainability discourse in the apparel industry. This work is grounded in a wider decolonisation project (that extends to the next chapter). It begins at a technocratic domain, with a group coming together for a narrow task, slowly blooming into an impromptu community of inquiry, held together by an exceptional facilitator. The work then bloomed into a broader project of conscientisation of systemic issues in the industry and an attempt to shift the discourse.

This engagement illustrates researcher as a bricoleur, with a multiplicity of methods and tools at play. It speaks of the complex set of behaviours, collaboration, transgression and solutioning at a practical level, coupled with a process of deep questioning and critique that worked well towards changing the collective understanding along with triggering of curiosities.

This work is also an inquiry into how discourse is constructed and maintained, and in return construct knowledge (measurement system, how it is viewed, what is data). It also is a study in understanding and stretching the dialogic boundary. The engagement is about interruptions by acts of performative disobedience/trickster, and in selecting the tool making process as a point of departure to try and reinscribe a different discourse/set of power relations.

It is also a reminder how the discourse is not easily shifted and how the system reasserts. The discourse is sustained through repetition and is difficult to interrupt (interruption must also be repetitive).

This chapter stands in contrast to the previous chapter, as this foregrounds the relational and the collaborative. It is also told in a polyvocal setting. Though the work is collaborative, it was difficult to convert this into a formal co-inquiry framework, forcing me to rely on post-process conversations to build a more inclusive narrative. The fact that this inquiry process became quite successful is almost a fluke, as many other similar projects I was involved with (including those within the company) never reached this stage due to either bad facilitation (or more likely) the lack of time or commitment to look beyond the narrow framing of projects. Our own constructs on efficiency are the hurdles in front of us.

## Engaging the SAC

Sustainable Apparel Coalition (SAC) is an apparel and footwear industry organisation with a goal to improve 'sustainability performance' in the industry. SAC represents a dominant business model – global brands that primarily sell in the West, and source from developing countries. The edges of this category are fraying, as the brands expand to Asia, while the traditional business models are disrupted through digital/niche players.

The SAC agenda was brand driven, even with manufacturer representation. As the image below[37] indicates, the original intent of SAC was to build a universal performance measurement system for the industry. The binary pass/fail reference in the image is not accidental.
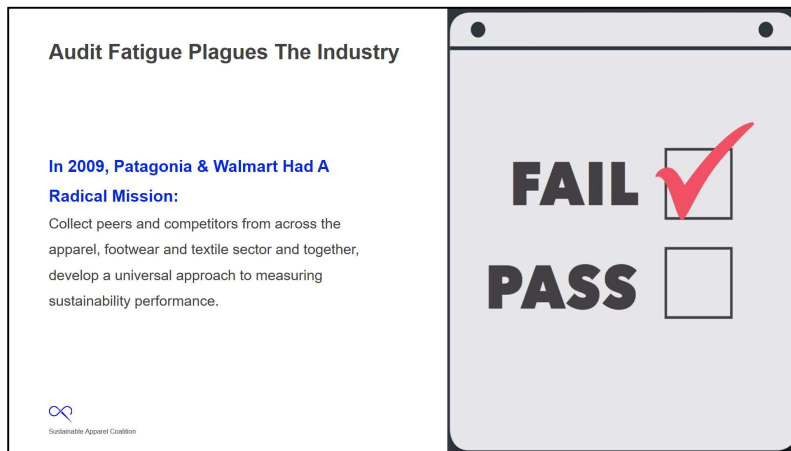


*Figure 6: An image capture of a SAC presentation*

This focus on measurement is a response from the brands to the pressure from trade unions and NGOs from the 'West', representing a colonial discourse that locates sustainability challenges at the manufacturer. Though SAC's measurement regime extended to product and brand assessments, they are treated differently in terms of timelines and rigour.

The proliferation of tools and standards purported to measure sustainability impacts created audit fatigue for manufacturers. For brands, audits were an unnecessary cost burden, that also did not insulate them from complicity to violations of labour rights and workplace conditions in the supply chain.

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[37] From the SAC introductory slides

The desire to pre-empt regulatory intervention has always been at the forefront in the corporate sustainability agenda (Banerjee 2003, p.161). SAC explicitly noted the same in the original letter of invitation for organisations to join, "as an industry, we will benefit from the unique opportunity to shape policy and create standards for measuring sustainability before government inevitably imposes one," (Gunther 2012).

SAC had a multi-stakeholder membership that included NGOs and academia, and a commitment to *equal partnership* across the value chain. Interpreted within the existing discourse with its colonial underpinnings, this still placed manufacturers in a marginal position. SAC's offices in San Francisco and Amsterdam (closer to the brands), mostly staffed through former employees from brands, created barriers to shed the brand-oriented perspective.

I was ambivalent about standards and ratings, noting the importance of the sustainability discourse for action. Without this, the tools would become a burden rather than an improvement mechanism.

My work with the SAC began in early 2015, with a conference call with Cameron, the Project Manager at SAC working on the Facility Environmental Module (FEM) of the Higg Index[38]. I had led the development of a tool to help MAS improve environmental performance and MAS was keen to donate the same for the wider benefit of the industry. My 'reputation' had preceded me as Cameron told me later, my MAS colleagues had forewarned her by saying "he takes pretty extreme stands, be prepared for that."

After the initial conversation, I was invited to join the tool making teams. I was bringing valuable technical skills to the table. I was sceptical of the existing compliance regime in the industry, noting its oppressive nature. I was probing not only the content of the tool, but also underlying assumptions, the larger economic context and discursive framing. I wanted manufacturers to own their improvement programmes and imposed from outside.

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[38] A portfolio of tools that measure various aspects of sustainability performance in apparel and footwear.

## 'Global Apparel Industry' as a Modern Colonial Encounter

No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self. – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

I am at a meeting, hosted by a leading global brand , and a representative from the brand is presenting their new sustainable sourcing framework to the compliance/sustainability teams of their Sri Lankan suppliers. The manufacturer representatives are unhappy.

The framework consisted of a measurement tool and a data regime, which create challenges to manufacturers. It significantly increased data points, requiring significant investments for new systems, and also demanded certain costs to be reported on a monthly basis, which was unprecedented. This would enable the brand to reconstruct the cost structure of each manufacturer.

There were benefits – the new method would result in fewer audits, but it still appeared to be a Faustian bargain. Trading off a few audits for an intrusive remote survillance programme, dressed up in the language of empowering manufacturers, didn't appear to be helping a journey towards sustainability.

The meeting begins, and I sense my deep frustration. The representative from the brand goes through the slides and I am amused when a slide mentions of partnership between the brand and the manufacturers. I ask a question. "If this is a partnership, how is it that our views were not asked when these tools were being made?"

The reply comes, "we have consulted some manufacturer representatives."

Next is a slide which show the areas of interest of stakeholders. I look at their main parameters (water, energy, waste, fair wages and industrial relations) and ask if they considers manufacturers also as stakeholders. The answer is an enthusiastic yes! I then ask how is it that the most important area for manufacturers, fair price, is unacknowledged, and only fair wage is included.

> The meeting is rapidly spinning out of control. I see most manufacturers acknowledging the comments I am making. It feels almost like a rebellion.
>
> The context is important; I represent a large organisation, who is a leading sustainabiltiy practitioner. We have more negotiating room with the brand to mount a challenge. We also have the capacity to work with the brand more proactively.
>
> At the end of the meeting, manufacturer representatives agree to support the brand "in principle". The new data regime is heavily contested, the differences to be resolved later.
>
> Later that year, the brand drops the tool from being applied in Sri Lanka.

I reflect on this encounter, a combination of resistance, transgression and trickster. I want to explore this episode beyond the chest thumping to see undelying themes and frames.

This was a small rebellion. The slides were leaked to us by another manufacturer. Most manufacturers met before the meeting to strategise, and I had negotiated space with my senior management to push back hard.

Tripping them on the question of fair price was the realm of the trickster, highlighting the point of failure of the discourse. A sustainability conversation outside the context of commercial reality and the business model has the effect of passing the full responsibility and costs of improvement to the manufacturer, while the brand can continue demanding discounts (each season with this particular brand).

Yet this type of direct challenge is rare for a manufacturer. I did not come from a traditional social compliance/audit background, hence I had not normalised the power relationship that is common among my colleagues. Was this foolish wisdom?

The key transgression was the direct challenge to the brand sustainability assessment model, as I critically and methodologically teared it apart at the meeting (and via a follow-up detailed email). Scott (1990) notes the stakes, "the open refusal to comply with a hegemonic performance is, then, a particularly dangerous form of insubordination" (p. 205). The public declaration of refusal by MAS allowed others who are present to embolden their opposition.

This episode doesn't end there. The matter gets escalated to the business leads, and the regional head comes to meet us. It was later revealed that the brand officials dreaded having to present this material to MAS, and expected opposition.

I also note the way power (and opposition to it) are played out are not homogenous across geographies, with some countries more subservient than others.


* * *


The 'East-West' apparel industry has strong colonial roots. It began with trading cotton from Egypt and India, wool from Kashmir and silk from China via the silk route. European colonisation shifted the trade in favour of the European powers and the industrialisation of Britain created the first wave of cheap textiles that lead to the decline of the Indian textile industry (Roy 2002, p. 112). Gandhi's began his politics via a campaign to revive the Indian textile industry as an act of anti-colonial resistance.

Prasad (2003) highlights the use of economic power in a "complex structure of unequal exchange and industrialisation that made colonies economically dependent" (p.5) as a defining feature of modern colonialism.

Nandy reminds us that "colonialism minus a civilizational mission is no colonialism at all. It handicaps the colonizer much more than it handicaps the colonized," (1983, p.11). The civilizational mission is perhaps the most singularly visible phenomena in the apparel industry, deployed through its approach to sustainability in the supply chain. Gayatri Spivak's 'missionary impulse', and 'alibi for intervention' (UCBerkeleyEvents, 2010) quite visible in the industry.

The civilising mission is built into the discourse and buttressed by the academy; "those in position of power have the deontological duty to use power responsibly and the obligation to positively influence the weaker parties possibly by setting standards, serving as role models, anti-pressure group campaigns and through personnel training and value orientation," (Amaeshi, Osuji & Nnodim 2008, p. 231). The assumption that the powerful are worthy role models is built on a claim the weaker party (supply chain) is morally inferior to make a case for a 'Western' value orientation imposed through power; all standard trophes of colonialism.

The industry uses assessment tools as methods of discipline and survillance, normalised in the discourse as built on 'universal value systems' often uncritically assuming that standard setting as non-political (De Neve 2009, p.63). Yet these value systems, and the metrics deployed to assess the same, sits in a model that defines the colonised subject through the lens of the West, denying them agency. They are not designed to improve, but monitor and report, a disciplinary move.

This civilising mission is enabled by the production of the *manufacturer* through a process of othering, via a binary relationship with the *brand*. The manufacturer is defined as the location sustainability is made problematic – both on social and environmental spheres. This allows the brand to occupy the moral high ground in a dialectic move (we are good, but have to work with cheating third world manufacturers).

It is the construction of the oriental as deceitful (Said, 1979). The institutionalised racism around which the industry is structured is often ignored. Fanon (2004) notes that colonialism is built on a foundation of racism.

It is the construction of the oriental as deceitful (Said, 1979). The institutionalised racism around which the industry is structured is often ignored. Fanon (2004) notes that colonialism is built on a foundation of racism.

This is plainly visible; casting the manufacturers as a unitary category suffering from moral deficiency that must be continuously policed, and corrected (and increasingly, put under a survilliance regime); a structure that pits brands against the manufacturers rather than sharing sustainability goals. Such shared goals and collaboration is common in the industry elsewhere - product design, innovation and speed.

As a Sri Lankan, encountering racism within the industry is common. They vary from microaggressions to overt or systematic. It is when a global brand sends a European white male, who has no experience or context of India, to propose how to calculate the living wage for Indian factory workers, while their own distribution center employees in Europe do not receive a living wage; it is when a European consultant claims that *Asian* companies do not understand how to use a particular tool; it is when a Director in my own company claims that a brand will not accept our 'green factory design' if no white man is heading the design team; It is when a

supply chain sustainability head of a UK brand casually says, "all my manufacturers cheat" referring to his Asian supply chain at a conference, and the audience does not even notice.

I am at the closing session of the Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals (ZDHC) meeting in Shanghai. ZDHC is an apparel industry consortium setup due to pressure brought on by Greenpeace, to address the chemical pollution in the industry.

A few apparel manufacturers are in the ranks for the first time, though we have been clamouring for entry for awhile. The rules used to monitor and measure apparel manufacturers were finalised just before we were allowed to join. Two days of frustration, as our concerns on impracticality are listened to, and politely ignored – because *the rules have been already finalised*.

At the close, I pose a suggestion to the member brands. I note that many ZDHC violations occur because the particular product or finish cannot be made without using banned chemicals. I ask the brands to ensure that the product can be made cleanly, before asking manufacturers to make it.

I am shocked by the ferocity of the push back by *Donovan*, representing a cheap, mass market British apparel retailer.

"We can have this conversation when you are ready to have a grown up conversation. If a manufacturer cannot make it, they should come and tell us."

I am wondering if this white man just called me, 'boy'?

I wonder why my request for him to ensure products can be made cleanly – his responsibility – is not a grown up conversation for him. I note the irony of having a brand known for some of the cheapest clothes produced and bad sustainability credentials, lecture to MAS and me on sustainability.

How should I respond? Should I call out the implied racism? Attempt to delegitimise me and my company through his own framing/construction of discourse? Or should I speak to the 'facts' only, but ignore that *the facts* are 'established' within a particular power relationship? Is his insinuations really independent from the tools that he builds?

> I play it safe in the end, noting that many manufacturers will not give up an order. My desire to 'not make a scene' defining the conversation at the end. It feels hollow and a disappointing end.

A different response than the first narrative. I did not have the energy for a push back, tired after two days of being battered, the day after Donald Trump got elected as the President of the USA.

The movie 'Get Out' by Jordan Peele introduces *the sunken place,* where agency to fight repression is taken away from the protagonist, and he is forced to internalise the same. It is a place of desperation that reminds a person of all of the other times it has happened, as flashback TV. I feel I am in the sunken place.



> **Jordan Peele** ✔
> @JordanPeele
>
> The Sunken Place means we're marginalized. No matter how hard we scream, the system silences us.
> 9:42 AM - Mar 17, 2017
>
> 💬 652    🔁 71,960    ♡ 117,789

The discourse sees the brand appropriation of the innovations and good practices of the manufacturer whilst distancing itself if a problematic practice comes into media attention by insisting on their rigorous 'assessment' of factory standards. As in the colonial encounter, this appropriation of discourse is largely accepted and is reflected every time a 'scandal' breaks through to the public gaze, with the media closely following this script. *An ethical brand not doing enough to police their group of cheating manufacturers.*

This discourse allows the brand to develop codes of conduct and apply the same as a disciplinary mechanism. Yet they are never uniformly applied across geographies. They are hardly applied to the brand's own retail or distribution operations, but kept exclusively for the manufacturers in the global South.

This is not merely a brand's own creation; this discourse is sustained by the NGOs, labour activists in the First World, academics, and now being adopted by institutional lenders. What is missing are the useful programmes and shifts in the commercial frameworks to unlock concrete action.

## Corporate Construction of Sustainability

> We are meeting a Bangladeshi apparel maker interested in green buildings. I am feeling guilty as we speak; Thurulie was the first LEED certified facility, and suddenly, LEED certified factories have mushroomed in Bangladesh, irrespective of its limited utility as a standard for factories[39]. The intent and execution untethered and deployed through norming process across the industry.
>
> I gently suggest that they should also focus on process water, operational efficiencies and chemicals – all spaces outside the LEED certification, but more critical for Higg Index and ZDHC. He is exasperate, wondering who will pay more to meet these requirements. He wants to know about Accord and Alliance, the two safety related standards. It is clear that there is too much confusion about what sustainability is, and we have lost capacity to think outside a certification.

Sustainability is discursively produced in conversations, and for manufacturers, it is the ambiguous conversations presented by brand *merchandisers* that produce structure and meaning. In the typical business context, this conversation happens between the marketing & supply chain teams, who for the most part, are semi-literate on sustainability. The outcomes of these can be quite unrelated to what is useful.

Brundtland commission is credited for the definition of sustainable development  as "a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, direction of investments, orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs" (Banerjee 2003, p. 152). This definition exists within the development and neoliberal economic discourse, both with strong colonial roots (Banerjee, 2003; Mir, & Mir, 2009; Escobar, 1995).

The definition of *sustainable development* and its derivative *sustainability* are critiqued on its orientation to maintaining a particular economic order at the expense of the environment while the intended core stakeholders - the future generation is left voiceless (Banerjee,  2003).

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[39] LEED was developed for commercial buildings.

Though it remains popular as a moniker for social and environmental progression within ecological limits, many have pointed out the unwillingness of the sustainability discourse to tackle issues of exploitative practices with respect to ecology, people and society, the capitalist model of the market, and its sustenance of the exploitation of the global South through hegemonic interpretations (Kallio, 2007; Klein, 2015; Bannerjee, 2003). For example, few in the apparel industry would talk about the rate of consumption of apparel, its continuous growth model and if these can be sustained within the current ecological limits.

Corporate appropriation of *sustainability* has been rapid in the past decade. This is mostly an appropriation of already suspect sustainability discourse and definitions into the existing capitalist regime, as opposed to fundamental assessment of the premises of the business and industry and its overlapping on physical, biological and ecological demands. (Klein, 2015; Wright et al., 2012, 2014; Kallio, 2007; Bannerjee, 2008).

Aided by the corporate appropriation, sustainability has now become an empty signifier; reflecting the concept's slippery nature and meaning everything and nothing—comfort terms— all things to all people (Davidson, 2004, p. 392). Brown (2016, p. 115) notes that an empty signifier gestures towards the failure(s) of signification itself. Noting that current forms of sustainability do not address or represent scale of the ecological challenges, he accuses the dominant forms of sustainability being at best 'reformist' or at worst 'inherently reactionary'.

But the empty signification is also an offer of potential, as he goes on to argue "that in functioning as an empty signifier, sustainability holds potential as a tool for radical politics, expressing the need for fundamental reconfigurations," (Brown, 2016, p. 115). To me, this holds the promise of potential locus of agency.

The outsourced manufacturing model in the apparel industry came with instances of abuse of labour laws and work practices. In the 1990s, European and American labour activists forced the brands to begin building accountability of social performance in the supply chain, focusing primarily on child and forced labour and working conditions. A similar focus on environmental performance only emerged post 2012.

The response to the crisis of social/labour issues was to create a compliance model with standards, policed by brand, internal and third party auditors. This has resulted in leading

manufacturers internalising the standards, and the bottom end playing cat and mouse with them. This is evidenced by the regular detection of violations to large scale disasters such as Tazreen and Rana Plaza debacles in Bangladesh, and numerous incidents in other countries including India, Pakistan and China. (Rahman, 2014; Khan, 2015).

The failure of the compliance regime as a vehicle for sustained change was evident as response to such disasters show. Three years onwards from the signing of the ACCORD/Alliance standards as a response to Rana Plaza, addressing the basic fire and structural safety upgrades agreed still remained a problem (Butler, 2016).

The compliance regimes are now being renamed sustainability regimes, enhanced to address more elements including environmental performance and metrics. Yet the compliance model was never designed to work towards continuous improvement of sustainability performance. It was designed to prevent the worst excesses, as a hurdle standard, for which there seems to be success, as noted by Mahmud & Kabeer (2003). They note that manufacturers view the compliance regime as a "public relations exercise on the part of international brand name companies, concerned about their public image, to maintain a facade of social responsibility with their consumers while covertly passing the cost of compliance to their producers" (p. 32). Similar sentiments are seen elsewhere (De Neve, 2009).

Sustainability initiatives have the potential to become emancipatory tools that support genuine social development and ecological health, or tools of oppression. In my view, it has largely taken the latter path, assuming a colonial character which creates multiple fractures and interruptions of the intent.

## Dreaming of a Post-Compliance World

<p style="color:red; text-align:center">My strategy was to re-inscribe sustainability from our own location.</p>

Higg Index Facility Environment Module (FEM) is the manufacturing facility environmental 'performance improvement' tool of SAC. I present my engagement to develop this as a partially polyvocal narrative, with the voices of Cameron, Christelle and Abhishek. The story is constructed using first person reflections, post process interviews and an unstructured second person inquiry group that emerged with Christelle and Abhishek. Other voices from the team also chime in.



*Figure 7: SAC Higg FEM Kickoff meeting in Hong Kong*

The FEM 3.0 kick-off meeting was in Hong Kong in June 2015. We were to revise the existing tool and write the first prototype within two days by resolving inconsistencies and updating the chemicals section.

I wanted to build a tool that was geared to improve the environmental performance, which found support among other manufacturers, especially Abhishek and Christelle. This was a radical idea for some with only a handful of manufacturers and more brand representation.

The disruption was innocuous at the beginning. Abhishek and I push an idea that the tool should evaluate organisations differently based on their specific impacts. At Cameron's request, we step out and develop the basic permutations for water and wastewater sections and present a new model; an 'a-ha' moment for everyone.

We push for facilities that are not in compliance with local environmental permits to be disallowed from using the tool and are taken back when two brand representatives resist this idea, with one insisting, "even if they don't have licences they should be allowed to work!"

It is at these encounters that constructions of the dominant discourse become unstable. Manufacturers asking for tougher sustainability standards being opposed by brands is so off-script. We were encountering the commercial reality of the brand supply chain relationship where costs are privileged irrespective of sustainability claims. A wilful blind eye allowing serious environmental infractions.

As we move back and forth on what questions are useful in the tool, I bring forth my frustrations of intrusive surveillance and MAS' own tool making exercise on performance improvement to the table. I want to reframe the conversation to focus why we are here – *to improve sustainability performance*. I propose a test for each question in the tool; does this lead to/provide information to support performance improvement? If the answer is no, we should remove this question from the tool.

Christelle insists the facility sustainability agenda being owned by the manufacturer, and not imposed by brands. "We don't want some brand, who does not have any idea what is important to us or our communities dictating their CEOs whims on us."

We were slowly displacing the brand from the centre of the facility sustainability improvement domain, reworlding it ourselves, contesting the brand centric sustainability discourse. We were claiming the agency for performance improvement and demanding that the tools are structured to support this process.

Beneath this shift, we are attempting to recast the corporate subjectivity to empower the activists within us. We privilege our identities as environmentalists over corporate executives. Christelle and Abhishek are vocal with me, and this switching of identities appear to affect others too, because conversations begin to shift. We were building a counter hegemonic movement – one that is enabled by the expansion of the discursive space through transgression.

Christelle reminisces,

> "it was very interesting how Cameron reacted. When she realized the intent, when she thought, oh, so these people are sustainability practitioners; they defend sustainability.

> They don't defend their game like the brands. At the beginning she assimilated us just like the brands. They just come with their hat of the brand, I mean they come into a room and this is convenient for them, have this, this and that in the agenda and they are going to get it in a bullying way. But she realized that we were actually *sustainability practitioners* and we were passionate about the environment in general. And whether we work for TAL, Arvind or MAS, we will never drop it. And she realized that the intent we had was the only real one in the room. And I guess this is when she switched, and said hang on, these people are really aiming at performance. And therefore maybe I should embrace and listen, even if I have an agenda."

Abhishek concurs,

> "most of the time the question that many stakeholders wonder is how does this tool affect my facilities. I never look at it, I always say I want to make things better, I said it on stage, even if it makes things bad for our company, so that we will improve. Cos that's the only way it will change."

But my agenda is bigger; I want to destabilise the idea that a surveillance tool set within a disciplinary regime will move the industry towards sustainability[40]. I am pushing for us to reflect and ask what makes a trajectory of sustainability possible? How do we look at this as a larger systemic problem, rather than a simple issue of agency? How do we own up to the structural and relational problems, and start addressing the same?

This is a push that takes us beyond the scope of the project, broadening of boundaries, but I fear we will not achieve sustainability targets unless the discourse shifts. Now that we have established the purpose of the tool as performance improvement, I am asking questions of what else is needed beyond a tool to make performance improvement work.

Can the periphery really shift the centre with this type of trickster work?

We are way off the agenda and Cameron has given up on any substantive writing of content. She is comfortable of the shifts in direction, but perhaps this is a bridge too far. Cameron asks

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[40] I wrote this a while back – the tool is not really a surveillance tool – but having seen the implementation, I see it still used in disciplinary trappings. Thus I want to keep the original writing as is.

me and Abhishek to step out of the room, think about what is it that we wanted, and present back.

"She kicked us out of the room," laughs Abhishek. "We were way too disruptive."

The two of us develop a rudimentary *performance improvement framework* and present to the group, which excites Cameron. This is a staging, a performance, foundation setting for bigger things to come. We have marked our field of play.



*Figure 8: Performance improvement framework presented in Hong Kong*

We were attempting to slowly reframe the agenda of the SAC. Cameron comments,

"you couldn't change everything over, but the two of you went away and came back and shared it and that was a pivotal moment. It doesn't have to be massive things but choosing how to say things can start to shift things over time."

Freire's (2005) conscientisation proposes a dialogic process that is designed to reveal oppression. As described by Greenwood & Levin (2006),

The stakeholders are moved from passive to active voice, from a sense of powerlessness and worthlessness to an understanding that is designed to lead to confronting power through redescribing society as it is experienced by the downtrodden rather than as it is said to be by the beneficiaries of their suffering (p. 30).

The redescription of the manufacturer reality into the conversation through our own voice is the critical breakthrough of the meeting. Throughout my engagement period, I was transgressing

the conversation boundary, attempting to broaden the same and continuously asking what makes change possible. Though we were describing sustainability, the inscription of economics and business models were easy to see. Our journey would fail unless this too becomes part of the conversation.

Freire (2005) states the oppressed must lead the revolution for social justice because they have intimate knowledge of oppression and are more likely to develop the impetus to changing unjust social conditions, while the oppressor is blind to the structure from which they benefit. We were tackling the structure of the brand-manufacturer relationship and how it discursively passed the burden of sustainability to the manufacturer, while the commercial relationships remain untouched. We were all moved by environmental grief and were fighting for something beyond decolonisation – we also wanted a radical improvement of sustainability performance, and in our reading, this required at least some degree of decolonisation, shifting of agency *and* discourse.

Our work process was aided by Cameron's exceptional facilitation skills. She was able to hold space for difficult and uncomfortable conversations. It wasn't easy at the beginning.

> "At IDC calls you did something I never experienced before as a facilitator, you kept going into what I thought at the time was really off topic, asking tough questions that did not have solutions. It took me time to finally figure out that you were not trying to derail things, but actually making a point that we can't really talk about the questions within a compliance framework. A question might be useful, but interpreted in a compliance framework, they would be assigned corrective action and this is different from partnering for improvement. This context was the problem.

> I remember this period of several months we had really long calls and it's not that I was frustrated but I didn't know how to fix it, because as a facilitator, when someone's upset usually you can find a way to solve it pretty quickly. But the way you were raving from the first time, problems that were coming up were those that can't be solved quickly, because it is not about the content or the training manual or partnership programme, but the fact that we are operating in a system that is broken."

Good facilitation was necessary. We were in a location loaded with power dynamics – I did not think many brand sustainability practitioners were ready to hear the perspective we shared, if not for Cameron creating space for expression.

It was also critical for the process that a few of us were quite vocal. Cameron highlights me,

> "you say things that other manufacturers won't say, because there are customers in the room. Someone has to say that stuff right…"

Why wouldn't other manufacturers say this, I wonder. Am I rushing where angels fear to tread? What is the difference between courage of the truth and foolishness? How large or narrow is the boundary? What is the danger in continuously walking along this path? If discourse is held through structures and interests, it cannot be as fragile that a few of us can dismantle it easily.

Cameron was leading a session on equal partnership at the SAC winter retreat. We speak about the need for SAC staff to understand what this means, as a process of decolonisation. She approaches me and Christelle and use us as sounding boards. She plans to use 'colonial stories' from us for material to broaden the conversation space.

By this time, Christelle, Abhishek and me are almost on warpath with M on SLCP (see next chapter), so we see this as critical to our decolonising project.

## Holding on to the disruptive – the relational and the method

"Must we behave like some damn godforsaken tribe that's just been discovered?"

— Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things

A six-member steering team came together, facilitated by Cameron for post Hong Kong work. This was the long middle of painstakingly building the content to prototype one. Numerous virtual meetings followed where we discussed framing, content and outcomes. We presented together in Osaka, showed the changes and asked the members to commit to a pilot testing of the new tool.

We still struggled to get a clean break from the earlier tool and mindset. Christelle and I were representing manufacturers, and we were frustrated, because the tool intent and our way forward was not clear. We didn't make Cameron's life easy and forced her to adapt and innovate.

> "I dreaded their emails. I dreaded their hand raises with provocative questions about the broader system that I couldn't possibly answer – and they'd ask in front of everyone! And take up all the time! I thought I needed to find a way to appease them so they would stop disrupting calls and meetings and let us get on with our deliverables. I felt insecure and unsure in how to handle it and worried that our deliverables would be late because I wasn't keeping my task team under control. Wasn't sure how to deal with it so I do what I always do with tricky members – have 1:1 conversations.
>
> So I started to listen. I stopped trying to answer their questions and started to ask my own. I tried repeating back what I was hearing until I was able to distil what was really being said. What I learned is that… these individuals are actually the ones that have the most precise clear vision of what we're trying to do here. To be honest, I didn't really internalize our vision and strategy until I started listening to these two. They believe in the SAC as the most powerful lever for change that this industry has ever seen. They aren't disruptive because they don't get it or are trying to get out of work… they are disruptive because they believe wholeheartedly that SAC is here to DISRUPT THE SYSTEM. That's the whole point. These are people that believe wholeheartedly in

sustainability, have dedicated their careers to environmental work, have decades of experience on the factory floor, and want this collaborative experiment to succeed."

The capacity of Cameron to hold the space, and listen deeply, work with us to neutralise tension and unearth the marginalised narratives made a huge difference. As Christelle remarks,

"Cameron took the feedback seriously, writing one-to-one emails, a lot of conversations, where she wanted to understand more, she was taking us seriously and she wanted to innovate; real dealbreaker for me was when she went for maternity. That was when I got disassociated…"

How do I speak of my method here? As I read Cameron's reflections, I can see how easily this project could have disintegrated and relationships destroyed. I see how critical the role she played. I want to say that I know how to dance on the knife's edge, but this is not true. Six people from multiple nationalities on time stressed conference calls is a difficult space for a trickster to gauge the boundaries.

Through my work at MAS and at Co-Energi, I had a good expert knowledge on impacts and solutions, and I also brought specific experiences of change within organisations, the relational and the contextual. My engagement was layered; at one point, I would go down to a minute technical detail, and at another, just step back and critique the system. Or simply point out to how the apparel industry really works, outside abstractions.

We are talking about chemical compliance, and the current approach that says all purchases of chemicals must be accompanied by a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) from the manufacturer. The chemicals are defined to include detergents. I am listening, reflective. I know the plan is impractical unless the industry changes significantly.

But these are the rules imposed by ZDHC; the rules written by a few chemists representing brands and large chemical companies, while excluding anyone who had actual manufacturing experience. It is written in a way that structurally disadvantaged anyone except large chemical manufacturers.

I had heard about the street market for apparel industry chemicals in Bangladesh. My team was in Dhaka at that time, and I ask them to go there and send me some pictures.

At the next FEM call, I share the pictures and ask them if their process can really work here.

A jarring dose of reality.



*Figure 9: Chemical shops in Dhaka for Apparel Manufacturers*

Cameron shares her insight to my method,

> "It would be very easy for you to be just rebellious and disagree and be angry and push and push but you don't do that. Sometimes you hit it hard like in task team meetings, but then I think in one-on-one conversations, and at meetings and email, you make light of something serious that allows people to consider something without feeling like being attacked... It is like you have mastered the topic so that you can play around it a little bit. And tell stories and make jokes, *even if they are not that funny*, its relatable. You make it a topic that we can approach and maybe deal with as opposed to it being something we can't talk about."

There is method at play here – how I bring in concerns exogenous to the discourse and make it part and parcel of it – and then by this virtue, attempt to shift it. A subtle mix of provocation, humour, storytelling on a strong relational context that keeps the communicative space open. Though I play with a spectrum of elements in my interventions, the particular choice of how I

intervene and in what form, is not driven from a rational, calculated space of consciousness. It is almost sub-conscious, and intuitive.

I search my other colleagues' views about how this plays out within the process for them. CW and AT, who represent brands, found my manufacturer voice important, and weren't fazed at the way it was offered. They are both conscious of the shifts it was having in the group setting. AT, who joined the team late, relates how his experience in working with manufacturers was complementing what he was learning at the calls and what I was saying. At a recent call, AT interrupted the conversation and said, "I want to say something. I work closely with manufacturers, so I understand what you are saying. My company may not be doing it yet, but I get it." An indication that at micro-levels, the shift in discourse is very real.

AT, as well as AD are more reflective than the rest of us in the team, and in my reflective conversations with them, I ask a question that always worry me in hindsight. I note of my tendency to speak a lot and ask them if they felt that I was either intentionally or unintentionally silencing them. AD notes, "well you don't talk all the time, and in some other calls I am part of, there are people that speak and dominate all the time... You bring out the manufacturer point of view quite strongly, and I believe that it is needed to be voiced out."

KK, who represents an environmental NGO, but worked for a brand earlier, appreciates my role in highlighting the manufacturer point of view, which was missing even for him, although he runs a performance improvement programme for manufacturers. He notes, "what you are good at is always coming back to the question of why. It makes us think and puts things in perspective." CW thinks that the interventions are useful, because I balance out manufacturers point of view with good technical feedback and is keen to see this happen across the industry.

The secret glue that helps magic happens is the unique facilitation skills of Cameron. In a personal reflection I wrote, "Cameron is the super facilitator – way she holds the space allows me to play a multitude of roles including radical experimentation. I can be provocative with good intention, and she gives me space to be so, because I think, deep inside she feels that this is important."

AD also concurs the role played by Cameron, "she is superb. She will allow the conversation to really broaden up, and then she knows when to bring us back into alignment and focus." This allowance for digression (and specifically for rants and example stories from me) is also

welcomed by KK. "If you notice, I too have a tendency to go off in a tangent, so what you are doing is absolutely fine."

When I reflect on these interventions, I notice a particular practice, aimed at shifting context and discourse. It is in many times an intervention to step back and relook at the wider context on which the conversations exist and ask where this is going and what is it that we are trying to do here. From this standpoint, the initial work that we did in Hong Kong to commit to a purpose of enabling performance improvement was critical as a marker.

I am curious on how Cameron reacts to these types of interventions. She is contemplative. "I need to find the balance between respecting a really important question but also allowing the group to lose momentum."

> The most important point is for people to know they are making progress, and to understand why. I think you are good at posing the why question, and as long as we can start to answer the why, it just gives people enough, so we are making progress here, that they won't outright reject the question. And they actually say this is a manageable question… and know that we don't have a perfect answer. We need the performance improvement framework or something like that, and I am aware how frustrating it is for you and for others like manufacturers, to say yeah, you keep pointing to the performance improvement framework, *but it doesn't exist yet* and that is the stupidest thing in the world, because you are making stuff up! So I know it is frustrating, but there is this balance of being able to ask tough questions.

A strong relational element sustains us as a group and allows us a safe and contained space to stretch discourse. We have become good friends, spending time together at in-person meetings, sensitive to each other's needs exacting due to multiple time zones. Perhaps one measure of the relational element is the eagerness by the whole team was to spend time with me on conference calls to explore our experiences as interviewees for my doctoral inquiry.

What started as interviews with Abhishek and Christelle, later turn out to be a longer second person inquiry process, where we reflect and strategize our work with SAC and beyond.

I also wanted to understand how Cameron saw the mix of my behaviour including my strong oppositional voice, and the collaborative voice that also goes along with it. As I reflected on this,

it occurs to me that we tend to focus on the more controversial, sensational aspects rather than the 'softer' elements that engender collaboration. Cameron was reflective when we explored this, together.

> "I experience the oppositional more as a facilitator. In the beginning it was more oppositional but in the last 8 months, you are sending methodology documents, you are having your whole team go through leading practices and highlight stuff, you are rallying manufacturers to complete surveys, you are on calls to defend ideas… that's where the magic starts to happen. When you can balance the oppositional with those progress pieces, I think that's where you get people to support you on more provocative things. Definitely now that you ask, I see you play on both sides, and I think that helps people from shutting down and walking away, to well ok, I challenged you before but now here is a solution, I agree with you and I will work with you rolling up my sleeves. And in recent months what has been hugely important was this whole leading practices thing, which was your idea, and for a second I thought you were going to go back on it – the work your team did is the base for the case study/best practice for the impact task team. It legitimizes you on the tough stuff because they know you are a team player."

AD comments on our group process. "So the reason everything was working well was because of transparency and the way we were talking to each other – we were very upfront – why? Why not? And everyone was really listening to the real rationale."

This process is put in context by AD, who works in multiple groups, who makes the comparison, "so even in other groups, they basically don't listen to what the manufacturer has to say. Which is sometimes interesting, because they only look at the angles of the brands, but we are paying the same amount of money but they don't ask us what we need."

* * *

As we started inverting power, we began to ask the question of how we transform the audit/verification process central to the tool. Can we break the model and convert it to improvement support? I broach this at the next meeting in Hong Kong and face fierce resistance from some brands in the room. The insistence of an audit as the *only* scope bothered me, as there was a lack of sufficient sustainability professionals to support both audit and performance improvement.

The session was facilitated by another SAC staff member, who struggled to step out of her own auditor background, eager to *get the meeting done*. This was stifling the conversations and frustrating the few manufacturers present. The tensions were rising; and I am reacting badly. Cameron, who is sitting in the back is worried and sends me a message to pull back.

I retract to my shell. I had forgotten that this is a different type of facilitation, with different rules. There is no power neutralisation here. There is no focus to unearth views, no questioning of an end goal. We will recreate the monstrosity that we currently have in social/labour space in the environmental space again. I am detached; I feel there is nothing I can add. Afterwards, I am walking upstairs, where Cameron has got together some of the steering team to work on the content.

I am frustrated, and I begin speaking to KK, asking how we can bring the focus back to the impact reduction, and to support manufacturers to improve. Our ideas spark, and then CW joins in, and then all of a sudden we are all engaged, and we spark-off the rudimentary design of the 'ecosystem for change'. This is the portfolio of interventions beyond measurement, which includes a facility improvement wiki, databases of tools and templates, performance improvement programmes for the industry – we are all excited.

Cameron was as elated as we were,

> "I remember walking out of that conversation just like completely floored and I remember walking home with Betsy and Diana talking their heads off and I remember saying how important this is, and the mindset shift that is needed and how we have to make the performance improvement part of the verification and brands should link verification with performance improvement…"

## *Why Are We Here* at Copenhagen

It's a glorious day in Copenhagen, unusually warm weather for Denmark in early May. Kurt, Cameron and I are sitting together at a downtown sushi bar, thinking about our presentation at the SAC's full member meeting next day, and are wondering how to position this. The basic content is sorted, but we feel it still lacks the power to make an emotional impact.

I am still angry at the final outcome of the Hong Kong meeting previous month, but elated by the conversations we had in closing. Performance improvement should be at the heart of all that we do, but we lost a key battle at the verification task team. I want us to make a stand on where we are and speak about the broader context.

I wanted a good context setting at the beginning of the conference, but this is not in the agenda, and we have a speech by H&M[41]. The irony is not lost on me. I had seen the draft presentation slides Cameron circulated, but feels that it lacks a call to arms; too functional. I tell her, we must begin with talking about why we are here.

She writes the title of the slide 'This is why we are here' and something clicks in me. I remind her of the slides I showed her on environmental grief, back in Hong Kong, and say that we have to create a mood of urgency. Cameron is searching for images and comes up with one of a woman collecting a sample of water from a river turned red. Kurt's eyes lit up, and he tells us that she is collecting water from a polluted river downstream from the apparel district for testing, on behalf of NRDC. And then we pick another image of a race in Beijing with people wearing face masks against pollution. I propose that we run a parallel narrative which is visual, of the environmental issues that we are trying to tackle, the real reason why we are here. We pick an image of a waste landfill, and the global temperature chart showing the February 2016 peak.

We are full of energy, each of us sensing how we can play with this shift. We are in a creative space and we are leveraging on each other. Cameron comes out with a phrase

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[41] Two days after the SAC meeting, the same site hosts the Copenhagen Fashion Week, with most participants present. Livia Firth publicly roasts H&M for their attitude towards sustainability and for promises not being kept. H&M was a sponsor of the Copenhagen Fashion Week.

*measurement with intention*. And then she fishes out the image to go with it. We are

elated, and now we are off for dry Danish vegan sandwiches and wine.



*Figure 10: Closing slide of FEM Presentation*

As I reflect on this episode, I notice that I was focused on two specific areas. The first was to

anchor our work in the wider sustainability context; something that was missing at SAC that I

have noticed. Without the environmental crisis entering the dialogic space, we forget that many

at the meeting have selected this line of work because we care, and we all share some level of

environmental grief. I felt that acknowledging the same has the power to open a window

beyond the narrow organisational goals and commercial relationships, to visualise that we are

all here, and this is our making. Second, the presentation was speaking purely to the cognitive

mind, and I want it to also speak to an aesthetic sensibility.

Next day at the meeting, I notice that each table has only one or two manufacturer

represetatives, indicating the lack of balanced representation. At the strategy update, I am

incensed to see a slide by the consultants stating, "equal partnership has been operationalised

as a core function of the SAC." I probe at the Q&A session what this means, and hear that since

all task teams now have equal representation of manufacturers and brands, things are ok. I look

aroud, surrounded by white men and women, from brands, NGOs & academics from the West,

and can only smirk. We have a long way to go. The word colonialism springs up from Jason, CEO of SAC, and my ears perk-up. My mind is on overdrive, I am elated, charged. I feel my spirits rise, the body responding to the excitement. My trickster spirit kicks in, and we are going to transgress, and subvert this discourse. We are going to have fun.

I am calm as we go on stage for our session, and I have the opening visual to speak to. I begin by asking if we have really got to a stage of achieving equal partnership, wondering if colonial structures can be dismantled this quickly. I make my point and pivot to the task in hand.

I ask the audience to reflect on why we are gathered, speak of the ecological crisis, an invitation to step into the larger purpose and context in to our work. My role is to present a case for why, grounding it strongly in the ecological crisis, followed by Kurt, speaking on how, and then Cameron on timelines and roadmap.

We seem to have struck a chord; I can see the audience listening intently. We are making a case to center the work of FEM on performance improvement, a departure from the focus on measurement. We speak of how that changes the portfolio of work of SAC from building measurement tool towards building an 'ecosystem for change'.

*Figure 11: Presenting at Copenhagen - myself, Kurt & Cameron*

## The Aftermath

Cameron is thrilled as she speaks of the aftermath of the presentation, her energy and excitement contagious,

> "Jason grabbed my hand and held it the longest time and said that it was the best we had literally done the whole time. It was so cool – there was no questioning or what have you done or it went against everything… it was all celebrations. After he said good job to me, it was never again about the presentation, but I kept hearing the key words from our presentation being used to describe the whole meeting. So we started to really shift and focus on impact and *measurement with intention*, and it's all about *performance improvement* now. It's like the whole team owned that feeling of success and it was all positive. It was all positive vibes, Scott said it was his favourite presentation of all time. And it set the tone…"

I smile as I notice that she too transgressed, and we were asking that the organisation reorient its trajectory, a riskier proposition to her than to me. I am also elated, and comment on how the task team seems to have *radicalised* all of us, especially Cameron.

I probe Cameron as to what she sees as the outcome of the work that we were doing, and she is full of excitement.

> I feel like I've chipped away at them over time. BB and DT… after a while BB started to respond to my passion about it, like ok, Cameron is going to be our new troublemaker… What started from there is a desire to bring the team into it, because often we tend to keep these conversations in the product team, but these had to go to AN and others, and then eating level conversations about it. And the other big thing that helped was after Copenhagen, feedback and response to transparency piece – I anonymised it, but I took paragraphs of the piece you sent me, being frustrated that we were so brand driven, and I spoke to Jason and it clicked, and these little pieces of, hey, wait a minute, that's the wrong mind set started to get people together. But I don't think we got into that far to everything is shifting just yet…

Copenhagen meeting seems to have shifted the ground, something I did not see in Osaka. It would be simplistic to attribute the change to one group of people and a presentation, but ripples of this intervention were spreading.

Francine wants to chat over lunch the next day. She works for a brand that MAS manufactures for, but not from my division. She is an experienced sustainability practitioner, though new to her current role. She is piqued of my comments on colonialism and equal partnership and is curious to see how it could be operationalised. I probe her on what she is doing currently, and she speaks of redrafting the vendor code of conduct. I have seen these before. I point out to her that they are one sided documents, and suggest she make a vendor partnership agreement, being explicit of what both parties are committing to, and a willingness to look into the nature of the relationship to move forward. She is pensive and determined; and coming from a boutique apparel brand, has more flexibility to play with formations. We have a great conversation, and commit to work together, though this would raise political issues for me within MAS.

Copenhagen meeting leads to more conversations on equal partnership, and I feel hopeful.

## Reflections

Is this project doomed for failure? Is my assumption of the sustainability practitioner as a subject constituted through a privileged commitment to the ecology doomed to fail as it ignores that the subjects are constituted through multiple overlapping historical and relational interests and with a specific distance from the dominant discourse, where sustainability is marginalised? The neoliberal order that foregrounds the primacy of the profit cannot be shed by a marginalised community, whose undoing perhaps is its own axis of power.

My reflections begin in the gloom, that comes out of intertexuality, and the inability to fix meaning in time and modulated by other events (chapter below).

This is a space that I invested a lot of time and energy, because I felt that this is a site of resistance to the dominant discourse in apparel sustainability. I claimed that the compliance approach as a significant problem in the apparel industry that sits on top of the colonial construction of the industry organisation. This of course sits in the context of the larger political economy, that is marked by exploitation, and maximisation of profit. Sustainability is a marginalised discourse within this context with conflicting definitions, and this problem forms and informs all actions taken within.

This is a story about discourse, facilitation, transgression and collaboration.

At the beginning of the project, the degrees of freedom that manufacturers had were quite limited. The scope of the project was quite narrow; we were operating on a dialogic space that marginalised the manufacturer, and focused on a disciplinary role of power, to measure and punish. This compliance frame was a threshold standard. We wanted to change this and reorient the brand-manufacturer relationship for improvement.

I look at FEM work first as a process of unlearning – as a process of decolonising the sustainability discourse within the apparel industry triggered by a group of practitioners, coming together and collectively forming a deep understanding of issues that were technical, discursive and relational.

As outcomes, a tool that privileges performance improvement orientation over measurement, compliance and audit arose. However, the tool can only rearrange intent, and absent shifts in

the relational space and discourse, will be of limited utility. The irony of it is not lost among us either. As Cameron noted in a recent email,

> "**The problem:** 'Performance improvement plan' fatigue could very quickly become the next audit fatigue once FEM 3.0 is released. We're already seeing it, and performance improvement plans (PIPs) are just another checklist developed by brands."

This is not to say that revolution is not possible or desirable, but that, often, one regime of truth simply replaces another. This is the hegemonic resistance Foust (2001) contrasted against transgression. But in this tool, I see more opportunity to break the traditional mould and for new relational forms to appear. It has potential.

The larger discursive shift was not within our reach for many reasons, not least of which is my exit from the work as outlined in the chapter below.

## Change from the Margin

Is it possible to make the change from the margins of power to a larger system? This remains the fundamental question that this project poses across multiple levels. It seems that from a marginal position, and with a committed group we shifted the trajectory of the tool, and also potentially the trajectory of SAC.

a) We were tapping into counter discourses that were present within the dominant discourse (and at times, present via an absence). In that sense, my work was not really to present a new view, but unearthing a subjugated view, and holding on to it to build it into the dominant frame. This of course requires agency.

b) The team was made up with a group of unique individuals, who were open to renegotiate terms, inquire into assumptions, and free enough to be bold, supported by an excellent facilitator. This allowed us space to create something different.

c) Shifting the relationship between the brand and the manufacturer is necessary but is a more difficult project altogether. This requires a long-term commitment to a project of decolonisation, and remains hanging.

We are already seeing fissures of the discourse, whether related to our work or not, with a raft of joint work between brands and manufacturers. In this sense, I am hopeful, though sceptical if we would react fast enough to halt or reverse ecological crisis.

My claim is that real change originates from the margin, and is also contingent to a number of influences at micro-practice, relational and discursive levels. In this project, the confluence made a significant difference.

I believe that those at the margin must be better at relationships, skill and knowledge. This is also because we were aiming at a 'better' hegemonic system, rather than a mere transgression. In this instance, my credibility came first from my technical expertise, and second from the organisation.

I also feel that transgression and trickster roles are critical for the transformation. As Cameron noted, "You say things that other manufacturers won't say because there are customers in the room. Someone has to say that stuff right…" Change is not always gradual or incremental, it comes in fits and spurts, and trickster type interventions such as in Copenhagen has a marked impact in destabilising the discourse.

This project was built on commitment to collaborate with great facilitation. We committed to spend time as needed to understand issues and work out solutions. A luxury not always available.

# 9.  The Revolution That Wouldn't

Decolonization is the encounter between two congenitally antagonistic forces that in fact owe their singularity to the kind of reification secreted and nurtured by the colonial situation. Their first confrontation was colored by violence and their cohabitation -or rather the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer- continued at the point of the bayonet and under cannon fire. The colonist and the colonized are old acquaintances. And consequently, the colonist is right when he says he ''knows'' them. It is the colonist who fabricated and continues to fabricate the colonized subject. The colonist derives his validity, i.e., his wealth, from the colonial system. (Fanon, 2004, p.2).

## The Sucker-punch

I am at the final session at Bangalore SAC meeting. We have presented the final version of the Higg FEM, and spoken about equal partnership. It is the end of a busy week.

When the email from my boss, Dinal, arrived, I was at the task team session for the brand module, and sitting at the same table as Kyra.

> What ever u have presented has caused major issues at the apparel board
>
> Mahesh had got calls from Nike
>
> Sarinda pissed
>
> Suren is fuming
>
> Dinal

I have a sinking feeling in my stomach, a sense of dread and a lightness as if I am floating. I try to push the email to the back of my mind and focus on the sessions without success. The brand module is a core focus for our work on equal partnership, and this meeting is important, as we want to integrate the business model to be a part of the sustainability domain evaluation.

My concentration comes in fits and spurts. In between, I am attempting to think through what is going on and implications. I am lost… I show the message to Cameron, who is the facilitator, and I see the shock in her face.

I ask Kyra for a quick chat outside the session, and she begrudgingly accepts. I show her the message and ask her if she knows anything about it. She replies she spoke with Mahesh, Chairman of MAS. I ask her what her main concern was, and her reply is that I do not show sufficient respect to the brand partners in the room.

I ask her if she understands the implications of her actions. She replies I must realise that my actions have consequences.

I pause, and let the message sink in. I ask her, what she expects of me. She suggests that I should get some communications coaching. *We want you to continue the work*, she adds as we head back to the room.

I am angry and disappointed. I recall my meeting with two of her colleagues, just the previous week over a beer in Colombo, and our conversation on equal partnership. The chat I had with Kyle, just the previous day before he left, where he thanked me for my input which he said helped him navigate the board meetings. I recalled my work with Dana and Kim on FEM, and I wonder how all of a sudden I have become the *undesirable number one* at the hands of this brand.

I remember the words of Kyra, "not showing sufficient respect to brand partners in the room," and recall my colleague Faye from MAS, using the exact same words few weeks before at a conversation on the Social Labour Convergence Project (SLCP) meeting in Vietnam. There seemed to be more to this than what appears to the eye. I feel this is an entrapment with a whiff of complicity of Faye. It is this betrayal that floors me.

I am faced with Bhabha's (1994) prescience,

> how do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable (p. 2)?

The worldviews of Faye and me are worlds apart, where she accepts the brand oriented sustainability hegemony on the belief that it is *a force for the good*. I can also guess at multiple other possibilities including an urge to curtail my rising influence within the SAC.

I have a chat with Jason, and notice that the support I am getting is lukewarm. When it is most needed, I see betrayal all around me, from those whom I trusted. I have held on to a delusion of a fraternity of sustainability practitioners. These betrayals are a loss of innocence. I should have known better.

After the sessions, myself, Christelle and Abhishek sit for a drink before my flight. I am finding friends in the midst of a tragedy, number of others come and show support. I am happy that I am joined on the flight by two brand colleagues, and that I am not flying alone. We are flying back to Sri Lanka through a storm, while drinking champagne… I can only marvel at the metaphor.

Back at home, I am lost.

> I wander around, aimless, still in shock. Overwhelmed. Angry. Sad. A multitude of emotions. Numb. The body refusing to yield to the mind, a unity of sorts in its depressed stage. The colonialism of this industry inscribed in my own body. I am marked.

> I feel empty. There is nothing in my head, nothing to say, aimless thoughts, no capacity to feel pain or anger. I am a zombie, an empty shell.

The enormity of the situation is not lost in me. I wonder what my future in MAS is, fearing that the company will not stand up to a customer on my behalf. Should I fight back, or should I acquiesce. I do not know. Uncertainty of the situation is the biggest worry I have.

I am trying to trace the roots and feel that this is a pushback on the equal partnership panel, and my naming of the colonial/racist structure of the apparel industry, signified by its deployment of sustainability as a civilising mission.

## Introduction

This is the closing chapter for more than one reason. It speaks of an engagement that occurred in a more politically charged, colonially coloured environment than the previous chapter, although it held the promise of overcoming it. It lacked what made a difference in the previous example, great facilitation, team membership. It was bogged down by a stronger and vested discourse. As I had noted at the inception, it was designed to sit within a narrow boundary, and fail as a larger transformation project.

My interventions were much more oppositional here (along with Abhishek and Christelle), as this was a location more ideologically colonised than the previous chapter, though collaborative strands were also evident. My use of critical theory and attempting to shift conversations through published material (3rd person voice) was prominent in this engagement.

This narrative describes a complex set of interventions, but with a strong agential and performative flavour. This mode is required due to the nature of ideological regime that we were trying to dismantle, Christelle points out in the next chapter. This story is also written in a different tenor to that of some of the other sections, because this is the way this story presents itself to me. The grief and shock of the incident has left a profound mark – writing this was an act of discomfort, and even now, re-reading it for editorial purposes is traumatic.

I think with categories when building tools (brands/manufacturers) though bearing in mind that these are not unitary forms, my understanding of them does not exist outside my history and experiences, always coloured/shaped by them. I try to bring this up explicitly, naming the experience as opposed to the abstract within the processes. What is also evident in this work is the complex negotiation of positionality that is also temporal and transient – our positions are constructed within a continuous negotiation.

What people can say and cannot say are also at least in part constructed out of their own subjectivity; what people can and will say about an issue cannot be taken as direct evidence of what they know or do not know. What strictures are placed on speech and what degrees of freedom are complex problems. Christelle and Abhishek have explicit authority to make their claims. I appropriate my space as a rebel and a trickster, because I play in a grey area not explicitly framed through an organisational avowal.

Whilst such flexibility may create the illusion of freedom, it also comes with an equally high degree of risk, as there is no organisational cover if and when things go wrong. Living in liminal spaces and marginality is not all glory, it is a highly vulnerable position without safety.

It is an ironic way to close this thesis, a position of despair. This writing is marked with a sense of grief, that is a necessary outcome of the embodied writing style that I use.

I want to suggest that while I am conscious of the dangers posed, that trickster is not a character that is tempered, and in mythology, does not 'learn' and would continue to push for an idea with extreme persistence. While my understanding has developed from this episode, I am still the trickster that continues to push to stretch the boundary.

## The Production of the Colonial Subject

 "What is it about cultural Others that make it so easy to analytically formulate them into homogeneous groupings with little regard for historical specificities?" (Mohanty 1984, p. 340).

> I am at a SAC conference to craft a new industry standard for social/labour compliance for apparel manufacturing. This is the first such instance that I am aware, where a number of manufacturers are also present. The manufacturers come from established, large organisations, who are leading practitioners; not a representative subset. Traditionally, standards were made by either NGOs or brands in the 'first world' and imposed on manufacturers, so this was novel.

> On the first day itself, a change of agenda is announced.

> "In the afternoon, we have two breakout sessions, the first is only for the manufacturers, and the second is for others," begins M when introducing the agenda. I am intrigued by this shift, and later ask M about the reason for the change.

> "A lot of manufacturers were uncomfortable in talking about the issues with the brands they manufacture for present in the same room. They wanted a separate session to discuss the problems that they face and propose a way forward."

> I am mildly amused –even the sustainability practitioners are not immune to the power dynamics at play.

> The manufacturer session was somewhat fiesty, yet consigned to the 'reality of brand imposed standards'. The manufacturer representatives wanted a simple standard/implementation with one audit – and also limits on intrusive questions. There was worry that we are moving into a phase of massive survilliance. As I reflected on this session, I noted a collective sense of frustration and resignation among many. One participant commented, "I have been in many such meetings before. I do not think the outcome this time would be any different."

That a separate session for manufacturers is needed to discuss how to collaborate with brands, when most brand sustainability strategies speak about equal or fair partnership, is telling. This is the fear of retribution that points to the power of the colonial encounter. De Neve (2009) notes,

"rather than an image of equal partnership, it is a picture of inequality that emerges, in which fear-mongering and intimidation are central to the way that compliance is enforced by buyers" (p. 68).

A minority of us hold a contrary position on power. We demand a better say in how tools are created and what detail should go in there. Social/labour standards are framed around brand reputational risk. This made a lot of unique manufacturer practices based on local community needs, invisible to the brand gaze.

How do we really own our own agenda, our own pathway outside the dictates of the brands? Outside the imperialist civilising mission?

This has real world implications. As one business director of MAS told me about a comment from a leading brand, "we agree MAS has great programmes, and because of it, they are quite arragont. You should be conducting our programmes too, like other manufacturers." We are expected to sign up for brand driven programmes uncritically, irrespective of its value to the organisation or employees.

The apparel industry sustainability discourse is appropriated by brands and Western NGOs, who determine what is constructed as sustainability outcomes or measures. This problematices the implementation by the manufacturers, as well as removing the local contexts for action that cannot be generalised into hegemonic frameworks.

"In many ways, contemporary disciplining projects by western companies can be considered a neocolonial practice, mirroring earlier colonial interventions that similarly sought to regulate, educate and classify," suggests De Neve (2009), going on to say that, "discourses and policies of CSR have become a central tool through which post-colonial power inequalities are being maintained and reshaped, and often even intensified by dominant players in the global market" (p. 64).

The price paid to a manufacturer is never discussed within a sustainability context even at the sustainability practitioner gatherings. Beyond cost, there are brand business models that impact sustainabilitgy at manufacturer level; especially related to wages and overtime.

These absences deny them as factors that relate to sustainability performance of manufacturers. The brand's capacity to take this subject off the sustainability conversation is an

indication of their ability to shape the discourse. Nor is it discussed that a well run facility with good sustainability performance may have a negative price advantage in the industry.

As a practitioner once said to me, "the problem is as soon as we upgrade our plant to all the customer requirements, they come and say, now you are too expensive and we cannot give you orders anymore." This is echoed by others Quadir (2014). De Neve (2009) quotes a manufacturer in Thiruppur in India,

> "at the end of the day, if we fulfil all codes and standards and then we ask 5% more, the company will simply go elsewhere. The cheapest deal is what they are ultimately after. Western buyers are not interested in Indian workers, and we should not expect them to look after our workers either… they are only concerned about their own reputation among consumers" (p. 67).

Miller & Williams (2009) contend that increasing wages for apparel workers can be achived through a modest shift in prices paid to manufacturers, coupled by productivity enhancements. They comment on the difficulty of the same,

> funding any increase must, however, be based on a supplier's *enhanced ability to pay*. Here we come up against the harsh reality of commercial relationships and patterns of ownership within the apparel supply chain. Retailers are accustomed to winning year-on-year reductions in prices paid to suppliers, and are resistant to any suggestion of paying more to ensure a living wage is paid (p. 114).

A senior sustainability practitioner from a leading UK clothing retailer once told me that shifting their strategy of long term partnership with suppliers to open tendering based on costs was necessary because, "our manufacturers are making too much profits!" Aside from the attitude that the brand can determine the profitability of the manufacturer in a capitalist system, conversations with other senior executives pointed at multiple other issues that eroded company profitability including ill-deseigned retail space, failed experiment on e-commerce and market confusion which were unaddressed.

In my experience, a good sustainability performance in a facility is directly related to good infrastructure, people, systems and processes; these do not always mean low-cost facilities but may add other benefits such as speed, innovation and quality.

The exclusion of the commercial context in the sustainability conversations has stymied the advance of the sustainability agenda, and has resulted in avoidance of viewing sustainability as a systemic issue.

The ambivalence of the Brand representatives is visible at the level I engage in and arises from the multiplicity of positions that colonial presence thrust on them. At close encounters, the value imposition does not sit cleanly with many brand auditors that we meet. "The buyers take on the role of teacher, the supplier is depicted as the apprentice, who has to be taught, disciplined and tested" (p.68), notes De Neve, who quotes Rebecca, a brand auditor in Thiruppur, who approaches the audit as a strict disciplinary process. In contrast, I remember talking to a regional sustainability head of a brand, who also came from a manufacturing background, holdings a different view of manufacturer agency, "I cannot say what is the appropriate sustainability standard for the plant. I can only ask for the minimum performance and allow the business to determine what is appropriate beyond that within their own context."

There is agreement among most manufacturers that minimum standards and an audit process is necessary. This is contrasted with acceptance of authority but on the manufacturer's own terms. Bhabha (1985) names the hovering of the colonised between these two points as hybridity,

> If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. It reveals the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority and enables a form of subversion, founded on that uncertainty, that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention, (p. 112).

In this reading, the subtle subversion of the requirements and conditions by rejecting the *unitary enunciation*, and reading the standards in a modified form, that is common in the industry is not only an act of rebellion but also an act of agency for the manufacturer.

The fraying of the colonial authority also provides locations for resistance; something I engage in my practice in various forms; from overt to implied, and solitary to collective The articulation of the space of resistance is important; as hooks (1994) cites Mohanty (1989), "resistance lies in self-conscious engagement with dominant, normative discourses and representations and in the active creation of oppositional and cultural spaces" (p. 22).

There is a sense of play that subtly undermine the colonial power by naming what must not be named. The exercise of power and acceptance of its authority must be invisible (Lukes 2004); these interventions destabilise such authority, akin to pulling back the curtain to reveal the true form of the Wizard of Oz.

The marginalised space for manufacturers also allows a reverse discourse to happen. Many manufacturers are now pursuing their own sustainability pathways that are loosely coupled with that of the brands, based on their own localised priorities. There is ample innovation within such approaches.

Many areas in the industry that used to be brand-centric, such as product design & development, innovation and speed-to-market are now driven by supply chain partner initiatives, displacing the brand from the centre. Yet these are still on the margin; while the brands too have understood the power of latent potential in the supply chain, the current structures and systems are unable to fully leverage on the same. Sustainability is one space where such decentring can lead to innovation and better performance.

As a sustainability practitioner, this is the territory that I occupy, a location that is marginalised by corporate discourse (Wright 2012), colonised by the capitalist discourse and sits within the wider apparel sustainability narrative. For my practice, I find it important to interrogate the existing structures of positionality.

Sustainability not only demands such resistance, but also explore locations for collaboration. This too is my field of action, though not articulated in this paper.

> Dinner after a meeting with a standard setting organization after a meeting in Colombo. My wife is abroad, so I am accompanied by my two young daughters. After the pleasantries I pose a question; noting that compliance regimes now have been in existence for more than two decades, I wonder what a 'post-compliance' apparel world will look like.
>
> It is one of my daughters who breaks the silence, asking what we mean by compliance. I say it is similar to me trying to impose rules on her behaviour. Her response is quick. "Oh, that doesn't work!" I can only grin in response.

M, who is an industry veteran from the organization adds to the conversation. "We have been using a carrot and stick approach to compliance all this time. And it doesn't work."

I reflect on this; where carrots and sticks are the game, emergence of cat and mouse is inevitable. But this is a different worldview from participation and collaboration. How do we move from the former to the latter?

How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? (Bhabha 1995, p. 2)

This meeting was not a great intervention on my side. I think both Faye and I were on the defensive; she begins the meeting by casually saying that she didn't expect me to be present, which I take as a polite rebuff. I poke my hand where I am not invited. Her agenda is different from mine, and wants to avoid the meeting dragged into a territory she is not interested in. I find no traction with Faye to the argument on legitimacy for the brands to impose burgeoning standards, pass down the costs, ask for improvements and at the same time ask for price reductions. We all agree that the standards are not uniformly implemented, and there are differences in application across countries and even within a country across different factories. I note that then this becomes more oppressive for those who strictly follow rules.

We agree for a further meeting after Amsterdam, which doesn't happen either. Going home, I talk to IP, who was also at the meeting representing a different division. I introduce the context and our stance, and although she was ambivalent at the meeting, she agrees with me, and suggests she would back our position at the next session.

The Intimates team is backing me, because I represent their lived experience which some divisions do not fully experience, although IP did indicate numerous examples in my conversation. This experience is more common in the industry, and where the real problem is, this must be represented for legitimacy.

My claim is that we cannot move to more sustaining industrial practices by holding on to a colonial model of implementation. We cannot compliance our way to sustainability. I

> am trying to challenge the system that gives the illusion of improving things, but in
> reality, is an oppressive colonial bureaucracy. My belief is we need to expose the flaws
> of the system to start thinking of what must come after. We need to show the
> limitations and oppression to build something which is more lasting and equitable.

I am placing this to indicate the complexity of the decolonisation process that I am attempting. The power of the colonisation is to make the colonised believe of the superiority of the coloniser, and within this I see how it is played out at brands, organisations such as SAC and MAS. Fanon (2004) speaks of the difficulty of decolonisation,

> it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a
> gentleman's agreement. Decolonization, we know, is an historical process: In other
> words, it can only be understood, it can only find its significance and become self-
> coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form
> and substance (Fanon, 2004, p.2).

I knew this was never easy and the gravity of the shift I am attempting – however, attempting what may be conceived as impossible as within the realm of possibility, is part of my method towards change. Earl (2013) echoes this sentiment,

> the world and its social systems should be approached as *created* and *transformable*
> realities which are constantly in the process of being shaped and made along with
> the individuals embedded in them, by human interaction and acts that are guided by
> ideological representations of reality (p. 22).

The capacity to push boundaries come with a sense of ambivalence towards them, to authority and to norming processes. Within organisational politics, it could be quite dangerous to subvert the norms.

I wonder if this means the outcome was inevitable.

## The Missing People

I have written about sustainability in the apparel industry, hardly mentioning the people who produce apparel. Although my practice predominantly focuses on environmental issues, it has a reach to the social aspects as well. Have I too played into the brand narrative, that constructs the sustainability/compliance regimes as a conflict between the brand and the manufacturer? A construction that erases the employee in the sustainability conversation. Or am I speaking from my own location, wearing the hat of a manufacturer representative, representing capital and my own privileged position as a senior leader, with its own trappings? I cannot deny any of these claims.

What I can say is that during the social/labour project I was involved in, I could not find many who genuinely wanted to improve pay and overtime challenges beyond gestures. Nor was it part of the discourse. A good compliance regime, applied uniformly, can have positive impact on health and safety elements, and reducing issues such as child labour and forced labour – though these are also ethical issues that resist universalising (but applied through a universal gaze). There are margins where these too break down.[42]

Yet the wages and overtime issues are tightly coupled with business models and processes. My work was to show these interlinks and decouple the narrative that manufacturers (as a category) avoid paying employees decent wages. The attempts of Christelle, Abhishek and myself to set the social tools in a performance improvement setting was blocked.

I have no real hope that pay and work hours will improve a lot, looking at the disruption of the business models going on. They are harbingers of further poverty and income inequality. Here too, we fight without hope, similar to the environmental space.

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[42] In countries where people do not possess birth certificates, there is no 'correct method' to avoid child labour. Nor do they end up in school if they are not working, nor are their parents paid more…

## Equal Partnership –Marking the Discourse

"By studying the margins of what is allowed we come to understand more about the center – the core – of what is considered right and proper" (Cresswell, 1996 p. 21).

SAC *pillar* of equal partnership opened up a range of possibilities; it created space to resist the hegemonic discourse, for voice and conversation, to de-centre the brand as the location that determines agenda. But discourse is kept in its place through institutional structures of repetition, and actors invested in the same. Opportunity by itself meant nothing.

The discourse of sustainability was built on a Western colonial gaze that essentialised the third world manufacturer and the apparel worker. Shifting the trajectory became difficult because the pervasiveness of the discourse; not only was it an industry specific, but it also tied down to other such constructions including the othering of the third world, racism and developmentalism. It appeared that many NGOs endorsed the approach that brands preferred to take; make rules on how the labour and environmental conditions should be managed by manufacturers and build a surveillance system to check if it is being complied with. The compliance conditions are changed unilaterally without manufacturer engagement. The surveillance systems are justified using 'transparency' which is considered as an important component of sustainability.

The manufacturers operational details become part of transparency, whilst the brand sourcing practices remain opaque. Manufacturers environmental pollution and impact demands closer scrutiny, whilst brands contribution to conspicuous consumption by manufacturing desire, designing for rapid obsolescence and issues such as microfibre pollution generally do not even figure in the discourse. This has resulted in fast fashion brands dominating sustainable apparel brand rankings.

"Transparency is a phrase leaden with power," I say to Tania, when I discuss this issue. She is perplexed that as a sustainability practitioner, I have not subscribed to the mantra that defined transparency as something always desirable.

"Who defines what needs to be transparent?" I am patient, as patient as I can be while exasperated. "Why is the wage that is paid to employees need to be transparent, while the price

paid by the brand is not? Why is it that it is always the manufacturer who has to declare everything for the sake of transparency, while brands merely have to show the supply chain?"

This is not a lone battle; at a meeting in Colombo, a brand representative informed us that they are also under pressure to provide this information to activist shareholders and NGOs. Abhishek is incredulous; "just because they cannot take the pressure from an NGO and tell them this information is not useful and is a burden, we cannot be expected to give it to them.[43]"

In addition to the tools that rate manufacturers, SAC was also building a tool to measure brand sustainability performance.

> We are in Colombo, at a SLCP meeting, and in the middle of it, I hear that SAC does not have money for the brand module, thus plans to push it back by a year. The manufacturer representatives talk about this and we are extremely unhappy. The way the meeting is progressing is not improving our mood either.
>
> I come up with a plan to send a message to the SAC board, cajoling others including a SAC board member to come on board.
>
> Before a break, I go to the front of the room, and explain SAC's inability to fund the brand module, noting that there always seem to be funds to build tools to measure manufacturers but not enough to measure brands. I then introduce a till and say that we are going to start collecting money from the manufacturers using our own begging bowl, amidst laughter and a few grim faces.

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[43] The complexity of data disclosure where pay is structured into multiple layers of incentives. Salary slips are tradeable commodities here, whereas in the West sharing salary details with others is looked down on.

*Figure 12: Trickster at Play - the collection box in Colombo*

The picture goes viral with SAC staff and created much hilarity. Nikhil offers to carry the till to the next SAC board meeting. Afterwards SAC issues a statement that the brand module work will begin immediately as a rapid project, with Cameron at the helm.

Christelle and I are invited to the brand module steering team, and Cameron sets the stage for us, giving us an extended opportunity to talk about how the brand-manufacturer relationship is important to make real and lasting improvements, requesting this be integrated in the tool.

In the environmental space, we were making progress, albeit slowly. Post-Copenhagen, I was keen on building the *performance improvement wiki,* an open source guide to facility improvement while Kurt from NRDC was focusing on deploying Clean by Design, a performance improving programme for manufacturers. These two elements are in our 'ecosystem for change', but we are resource starved.

Kurt and I are in a task force to get these projects above ground, and for nine months, nothing much happens but an occasional meeting. We are both frustrated, but finally things start to move, with the two of us committing time (in my case, time that I do not have). At the same time, FEM is in the final stages, as well as the Brand module. I was at this stage spending time almost every day on conference calls, generally beginning at 4.30 am. It was a tough period, but

I felt that we were making real progress that can help move the industry sustainability journey. This more than offset the grief in SLCP.

*   *   *

On the last day at the Copenhagen summit, I am having breakfast with two senior leaders of SAC, Rick and Jason, and we open up the equal partnership space for critique. My critique is somewhat unrestrained, and I challenge the SAC's meeting locations (USA, Spain, Japan, Denmark), office locations (San Francisco and Amsterdam), fee structure, staff background and work orientation, to show that it is far too wedded into the brand narrative and gaze to talk about equal partnership.

Later in the year, Jason and I are sitting at a Starbucks in Shanghai. Donald Trump has just been declared the President elect of the USA, and we are both emotionally drained, having followed the roller-coaster election results announcements while sitting at the ZDHC sessions. We are talking of equal partnership again, but this time the context is different, with Jason, who is not defensive but open. I have shared my paper presented at AIRC5 conference, so that he understands the context I come from. I speak of my different experiences working in the industry and in multiple project teams at SAC, and how equal partnership is played very differently at each setting. He asks what my proposed solutions are. I note that SAC team would need good facilitation skills and capacity to critically interrogate power. He proposes an assessment of how equal partnership has played out, and a report to the Board. We are both feeling good about our trajectory, despite the gloom of the election. The culmination of this work is to be a panel discussion at the meeting in Bangalore.

I am at a high in Bangalore, as I am allocated three sessions which is unusual. I am billed to speak at the equal partnership panel on day one, and at the FEM launch on day two. Day three is manufacturer forum, where I am the keynote speaker. I have key roles in workgroups too – FEM, Brand Module, Product Footprint. I occupy a high-profile space, earned through technical proficiency, hard work, collaboration and outspokenness. I have risen too high, and alongside it some hubris and a fall is inevitable.

At equal partnership panel discussion, I speak about the same issues; I am not able to gauge how it is received. I point to the structured racism of the industry, using the phrase that garnered Gayatri Spivak some notoriety, "white man, saving the brown woman, from the brown

man." An apt description of the industry sustainability practices, which at the same time pointed to the foundations of colonialism that is reflected in the business models, sustainability discourse, and the casting of the 'brown man', the manufacturer, as the villain in the drama. I get positive feedback from most manufacturers present; Punit Lalbhai, CEO of Arvind Ltd, comes and congratulate me personally.

"As pedagogical practices, performances make sites of oppression visible. In the process, they affirm an oppositional politics that re-asserts the value of self-determination and mutual solidarity" (Denzin 2009 p.262).

On the first evening, SAC staff has a special ceremony, where they acknowledge the contributions of a group of people who had contributed a lot to their ongoing work. We are given custom honorary staff ID cards, and I am humbled when I read mine.



*Figure 13: Honorary Staff badge from SAC*

That night, Kyra speaks to Mahesh, the chairman of MAS to complain …

## The Unravelling

> An overwhelming numbness that has enveloped me. I do the chores at home, more an automaton than a person. Why am I not glad to be back home, amongst a loving family? Is SAC a bigger truth to me than home?
>
> I know this numbness is out of fear than anything else. I wonder if I will be asked to leave, and even if I stay, how this will impact my future in the company. It cannot but diminish my progression in its current setting. My colleague Zahara's words haunt me; "you are as good as your last mistake." When it comes to the final call, I wonder who will stand up for me. After a long while, I am seriously thinking of life after MAS. That I had also been betrayed by a colleague doesn't help.
>
> I am sad that the equal partnership project, the tools, the wiki – all that I spent three years working for is suddenly gone. Some of the initiatives were heavily dependent on me, to both hold the vision and to mobilise effort and resources to take to completion. I feel SAC will take their eye off these, as well as the manufacturer agenda. Not a lot of fun…

Colleagues from brands and manufacturers offer support, writing to Dinal and Suren (my CEO), emphasising the role I played and what I have contributed at SAC. Suren asks me, "what did you say?" I repeat the Spivak quote, and they both begin laughing. "Machan, it is true, but why the hell did you say that from the stage?"

Dinal is firm in my defence, Suren attempts to move on, but the decision is made by Sarinda, who had already decided to take me out of all active engagement from SAC. I am not awarded a chance to even defend myself. I write to all the teams I worked with at SAC and resign from all engagements. The silence from the SAC was deafening.

SAC disbands the equal partnership panel, much to the chagrin of other manufacturers who were part of it. The wiki project is hobbled, and the transparency work now has no strong manufacturer voice. Abhishek grudgingly steps into my shoes at the brand steering committee. There were only few of us from manufacturing background putting hours at SAC, and my departure stretches him and Christelle even more.

My relationship with Christelle and Abhshek move to a higher gear, and I feel deeply cared for. We collectively reflect our journeys together, inquiring into our behaviour, change and sustainability. We reach out to each other often, visiting at times, collectively strategizing, sharing notes and best practices. A collaborative inquiry group has sprung up unplanned. At SAC, my friendship with Cameron also continues.

Punit and Delman, CEOs of Arvind and TAL, take up the fight on behalf of me, as do a few more manufacturers. I am touched by their interventions. The action meted out to me by Kyra, and SAC's inaction against her is viewed as a threat to all manufacturer representatives. SAC makes policy changes, but we know this means little. An introspection never comes.

I had accused the industry of being systematically racist and colonial. The response by Kyra, her company, SAC and MAS simply affirmed the colonial claim. I see myself as a fighter, not a martyr; hence the disappointment. The aftermath also showed the power of the discourse; as SAC decided no restitution is needed. While others fight for me, due to MAS' own reluctance to stand up to the bullying, no other action follows.

I am broken for a long time. It takes a lot of effort to raise myself back from the depths, supported by Magda, Christelle, Abhishek, and my office colleagues. I look at the SAC honorary staff ID I was gifted and see how SAC itself is fractured.

The fightback led by Dalman and Punit, the CEOs of TAL and Arvind, who saw the problem beyond the individual Vidhura, hoping to re-establish safety for their employees and space for good conversations at SAC. Dalman's persistence saw him escalate the problem to the Chair of the Board and to the CEO, not settling till changes in internal process is mandated. We do not have much hope, and when the new policies are presented, we are nonplussed. No penalty, no restitution is on offer. The brand that Kyra works for is too powerful even at SAC, with a board seat, and they prevailed.

We feel that given the circumstances; SAC did not rise to the occasion even with a tokenism.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

At one point I ask Christelle if my skin colour had anything to do with this. She is silent, thinking. I rephrase my question. "Do you think the same thing would have happened to you if you raised

this point?" After some thought, she suggests that quite likely it would have been different if it was her.

"It is different when a white person says it," she comments.

I want to place this dialogue as an open-ended piece without sensemaking. It is important part of the work, but I have literally run out of things to say on this and not because I have exhausted them.

It is time to move on to other things…

## Choices and Reflections

By denying rebels the status in public discourse they seek, the authorities choose to assimilate their acts to a category that minimizes its political challenge to the state (Scott, 1990, p. 206).

This is an end.

One year later, I make a journey back to SAC. The organisation does not feel the same, for me and for some others. What has happened cannot be undone. Among many manufacturer colleagues I speak to, there is a sense of despondency. We had a weak hand to begin with, which has become weaker both as a narrative and drowned in the dominant discourse. There is a latent sense of worry among others of bullying. Our proactive engagement has suddenly become defensive. SAC makes stronger statements on equal partnership; yet the trust is no longer present, and without introspection, I wonder if trust can be rebuilt.

Within SAC, officially, I have ceased to exist, erased as a victim, erased as a presence. A transgression too far perhaps.

I look at the new ground rules set up by SAC to prevent recurrence – and it sounds hollow. I share the image with Magda, and she replies, 'damaged career for a bullet point ☹'.
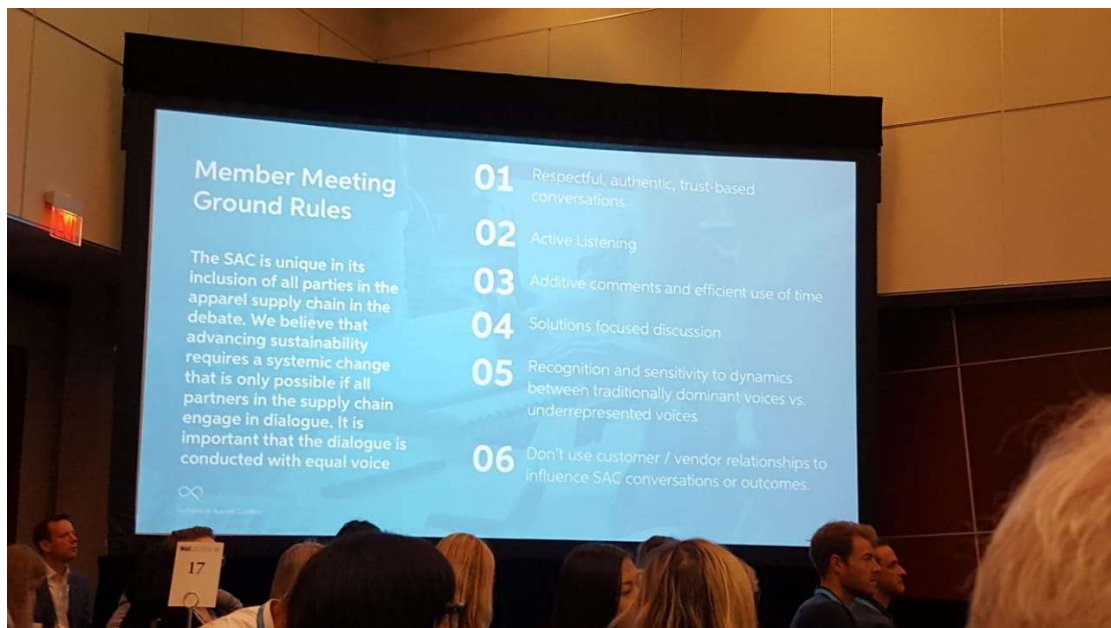


My hand is weak within my company because I refuse to be fully subjected to the corporate discourse. I am a radical that continues to step outside the frame, an activist, that lives in liminal

space. It enables me to push boundaries in many levels but comes with a very heavy risk; once stepped out of line, you are on you own, on thin ice. As things sour, even my history and work portfolio ceases to be matter, irrespective of how good it is. I am mortally wounded.

Subjectivity is formed by binding a 'self' to the truth of the discourse; a total submission would create a measured, loyal, rational, fetishist phantasm, that is devoid of what is original of the person. But no discourse is total and a subject can merely mimic this depersonalised ideal, as it is flesh and blood people who have relational selves who come to work.

There are also a set of intersecting discourses, and in my instance, sustainability is significant. With my focus on decolonisation, I am an imperfect fit to the role, sitting in liminal spaces. In many instances, such as Thurulie, this has been generative to the organisation. The misfits bring their own shadows.

"You are representing the company when you are on stage," Suren tells me. I don't contest this, but this does not make any sense to me. The company does not have a position on colonialism in relationships or have a capacity to do a critical reading. Any person who represents any organisation is split between corporate and individual identities. As a person living in the margin of the corporate discourse, I take a much more radical position with its attendant risks.

<p style="color:red; text-align:center"><strong>Post-colonial counter discourse is a form of counter othering of Europe - Spivak</strong></p>

Scott (1990) introduced the hidden transcript as the private dialogue of the subordinates of the critique of power that dominates them. The trickster sense of irreverence to the norms and perhaps even ignorance of them, allows freeplay – and capability to voice the hidden transcript. Voicing the hidden transcript must be public. Scott also notes the importance of 'charisma' and eloquence of speech at voicing. The public voicing of the hidden transcript is an act of transgression with serious implications.

I wonder if it is ego that made me do it? This is a difficult question. I know I was being provocative, and it was a trickster intervention, but I also felt that we could not get into addressing equal partnership without surfacing the underlying systemic problems. It is illustrative that a lot of people I spoke to afterwards did not see anything amiss.

Yet this is my reality – knowing very well that I would say the same thing again given the circumstances, I am now wrecked with doubt, like many victims are, doubting myself, motives in a non-stop series of 'what-ifs'.

Part of being in a trickster frame is living in this almost permanent state of ambivalence. Bhabha (1994) presents ambivalence as a necessary status of colonial encounter. Ambivalence is also the result of the fractured message that comes out of the SAC agenda and how it fractures our selves. The narratives of equal partnership, sustainability as a collaborative process was conspicuous, but was inconsistent with the lived experience.

It is this liminal space that I used as the locus of my action, using wit, irony, humour and sometimes hostility to point to the fractures, discontinuities and irreducible stupidities. And I know I am not the only one, and this is not an isolated incident. I use sly civility (Bhabha 1994) as a tool of the colonised, the deliberate and intentional mocking that points an accusatory finger to the fractured discourse, held together by repetition of the claim of equal partnership so that one tries to believe in it.

I want to avoid romanticising ambivalence, because the stress it places on the self is significant. Christelle notes of her experiences, and how she struggles to hold herself together,

> "Sometimes I think I did not have intellectual honesty – if I think back what was I thinking; if I put my TAL hat for the moment, do you really think that its ok for us to not be in the room? But I wanted to ignore it, it was so convenient, you know… to ignore that there is a whole Social/Labour thing going on and to say whatever that they come up with, I'll just do it. As long as I have to do it only once a year, I will do it. In my mind, I was always thinking they will use an existing tool. Improvement in my company is not related to a tool. Its linked to a decision of my company to do the right thing. I am not bothered by a score. I am happy to explain why my score is like that.
>
> And then I went to that room and K was speaking about the toilet size. And I wanted to shoot myself. And I was thinking – here we go, the absence of intelligence to the utmost, the epitome the embodiment of ignorance; this is it, we have it in the room. And I was like oh my god, what did I put myself in. I was silent the whole time, and when I wanted to speak, B shut me down, and I turned around and killed him, and I said to him, if I wanted to say one thing, you cannot possibly shut me down. Because K had

> talked about toilets for half an hour and I was going to say something at a different level than the toilet size. They were being Faye, they were being <brand A>. Total control – it has to go to massive detail, it has to be a massive tool it has to gather everything out there so that the bad supplier will get caught. So I said that the most intelligent way of working with my current clients that they actually let me own my social/environmental sustainability. I said that was the very best way I found to work with total ownership. And I said the most sophisticated people are allowing me to do that."

I feel it on my skin, as I listen to her, her anger balled up into an irascible firebomb. And I wonder where the space for self care for the likes of us is, who care too much for what we want to do, but stuck within colonial discourses that marginalises us at every turn. Is our agenda incommensurable with the larger socio-political discourse, within the neoliberal economic model?

We see each other as comrades in arms, who, not only provide therapeutic release, but psychological support. I know that without Abhishek and Christelle, I would not have survived this phase effectively. Not everyone is as lucky.

So what of the fractured identity, of being this and that, living in a permanent site of liminality? Butler (1999) argues that the identity is constituted through repetition, and is not determined but comes to form through repetition, thus making it performative, rejecting linearity in formation. She argues that agency "then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" and "it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (p. 185).

And within my praxis, I focus in construction of an 'identity in resistance.' As McLaren (1992) concurs,

> Friere firmly believes that individuals can form a praxis of liberation. In this context, self-identity is always a situated practice rather than an inviolable self-contained and unified state in the sense that there exists some metaphysical edition of ourselves that can be won- as marketplace logic tells us (p. 11).

I keep wondering if I pushed too much too fast in the equal partnership work, or should I have moderated what I said, make it more sanitised, palatable. Speaking against the discourse of

course comes with its own dangers. It is silly to hold on to utopian ideals of equality, fair play and honour. Yet something in me refuses to back down, to expose the forked tongue.

> An emancipatory commitment to community action which performs social change, even it change is only an idea, whose time has yet to come… In these performances of resistance the personal is always political. This happens precisely at that moment when the personal intersects with the historical. Here is where identity construction is made problematic, (Denzin 2009, p.265)

Denzin goes on to recognise the pedagogical nature of such interventions, performances make sites of oppression visible. In the process, they affirm an oppositional politics that re-asserts the value of self-determination and mutual solidarity. (262)

In the final stages of his career, Foucault spoke of parrhesia as the "courage of truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears" (Harcourt 2016c). He goes on to classify parrhesia as an act of self-care, as being true to self.

While I find my speech as an act of truth-telling, a parrhesiatic act of courage, I feel it is more. I am trying to expose an issue of power, structurally colonial and racist construction that keeps us trapped in an antagonistic frame instead of linking and partnering towards good sustainability outcomes. I saw such exposure a necessary comment to that would help us in our long path of decolonisation. It is a moment of trickster energy, a metaphor that wounds, and exposes a dark gash borne by manufacturers. Having listened to and fought crap for months at various forums, it is a truth that cannot be denied. Yet it exists in a reality that sees such exposure as toxic and dangerous. And it is a viewing of a particular truth, that paves a way for emancipation.

## Post-Traumatic Writing

It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought. To ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it, as Velutha did, is much the harder thing to do.

-    Arundhati Roy, the god of small things

This episode was disruptive, destructive and formative. It exposed me to the fragility of the space that I inhabit, a small boat exposed to the vagaries of the ocean, supercharged by warming oceans. I have no life jacket, nor buoys, when it matters.

As I assemble this thesis, recontextualising field notes, I cannot break free from this shadow that looms over me in my writing. It is inscribed in my outlook and my positioning, at times consciously and at others subconsciously. As such, this work is muddied with crisscrossing timelines. The fieldwork notes and the final writing are from different worlds, written by different selves.

Neither is 'true'; both are partial fictions.

With this in mind, I want to resist that this thesis is fixed even in the present – as I write, I cannot stop my thoughts from being both in the past and in the future. The words are framed in the past, looking at the future – with an inability to stay fixed; reflecting the shifting notions of subjectivity.

And what it does to the words is mirrored in actions. The hesitancy that held me back in Vancouver, as I navigated the politics of my re-entry to SAC work – a level of not merely double, but triple consciousness felt strange and sad.

## 10. Concluding Thoughts

*A holding action at incredible expense and self congratulation and after a while the dream itself enchants one so that it is just reproducing the system – Gayatri Spivak*

In this thesis, I have inquired into transgression and the emergence of trickster in my practice, a practice that is centred around decolonisation and sustainability. I wanted to show the contradictions, messiness, glimpses of joy, and the underlying grief, along with its theoretical and performance underpinnings. It is not a thesis that will end up in HBR, for it refuses condensing and sanitisation. It opens up a world colonised by hegemonic discourses, multiple sites of marginalisation and oppression. It shows choices; to act, transgress, dance, grieve, collaborate and play - to attempt to shift fields of action even though the odds are stacked against. It also opens up text as a site of decolonisation, political and contested. All spaces of complex negotiation, and for trickster to emerge.

The play of the trickster is inherently unstable and dangerous. The trickster does not always 'win' and whether she looks at win/lose in the same way we do (within a particular discursive frame) is also questionable. But I am not a fully-fledged trickster, it is a partial identity of mine, and a mode of action. For me, this danger is very real with consequences. Fighting against hegemonic structures is a flight without a safety net, imbued with danger. As financial needs of raising a family comes to the forefront, I keep wondering how long I can fight, and how radical can I be. Radicalism doesn't pay as much, and it is a lonely place to be. It leaves scars on self, and family.

I do not have the luxury of Russel Brand, "the need to find out what will happen if I don't relent or moderate my actions has been a constant source of difficulty and discomfort in my life" (Media1512, 2010).

This thesis is also about identities, their complex negotiation and the transient nature. Identities that are strategically deployed or assigned externally and performed; all constructs. Just because they are performed (or performative) doesn't mean they are not *real*. I have explored how they enable and constrain action and the dialogic spaces. They are partial, contradictory and unstable, without a coherent centre to hold together.

St. Pierre (1997) beautifully ties the unstable identity to both ethics and action, that I feel is a summary description of how I visualise my practice,

> ethics explodes anew in every circumstance, demands a specific reinscription, and hounds praxis unmercifully. In a postmodern world, the individual's responsibility is much different than in the world of liberal humanism. If the self is not given, if there is no core, essential self that remains the same throughout time, if subjectivity is constructed within relations that are situated within local discourse and cultural practice - both of which can be resisted to some extent, then "we have no excuse not to act" (Caputo, 1993, p. 4). We can no longer justify positions that are hurtful because "that's just the way it is (I am)" (p. 176).

This work is also a collection of narratives, pointing also to

> the inevitable tensions of knowledge as partial, as interested, and as performative of relations of power. This returns us to the clashing investments in how stories are told and of the impossibility of telling everything. There is that excess, that difference within the story, informing how the story is told, the imperatives produced within its tellings, and the subject positions made possible and impossible there (St. Pierre & Pillow 2000 p. 38).

This sentence points to a suspect epistemological position about knowledge construction. I place this as this thesis is also a process of knowledge creation. It is written from shifting positions of power and discourse, with varying political intentions, only some of which are known to me and explicated in this work. As much as I use an interrogative frame to write, the reading of this work must also be a process of interrogation. I hope it is also a place for play.

I also highlight the important role of critical theory and interrogatory readings and writing within this work, as a vital component of decolonialisation. Critical theory places a critical gaze on research, methods, action and representation (both in action and writing) and our own privilege.

As much as I try to eschew linear models of cause and effect, positivist constructs of change agency and systems, I am far too wedded to the same via language, histories, hegemonic educational systems and artefacts. Decolonising the mind is not an easy exercise but a lifelong project.

The Buddhist imaginary suggests that the only certainty in the world is *change*. We often write about (and think about) change in the opposite, as if things are stable and constant, hence change must be brought in from outside. We hold visions wedded into a linear cause and effect with agency – thus we talk of driving change, managing change rather than perhaps more appropriate terms such as moving with change. There is space for agency, but held with humility that one does not know what the outcome will be.

This view of *Patticca Sammuppada* – dependent co-arising, the Buddhist theory of change, that each outcome is a result of agency and the larger systemic context. If my change endeavours say anything, it is merely this.

While a decentring of the heroic agency is needed from a systems point of view, it does not deny the role of the change agent. Choices matter and has implications, some systemic and wide reaching, and we act without knowing, holding on to intent, holding on to the reflexive, interrogative expectations. I recognise that the language we use does not help, our syntax and grammar points to constructions that permeate illusory solidity (maya).

I make the following contributions to the academy.

1. A critical interrogation of method that explore historical (positivist), cultural and colonial constructs that sit at the foundation of the research process, including action research. I raise the issue that many research methodologies are built on the foundations of a specific Western knowledge system, and thus excludes the indigenous ways of knowing and are also responsible for maintaining an oppressive system of knowledge. I claim that specific practices in action research such as reflection and reflexivity run the risk of sustaining these hegemonic constructs, and invite further inquiry towards building a research process that opens up for multiple epistemologies. I propose contours of one such system from that I employed in this work, to be developed further.

2. I claim that we are living within hegemonic knowledge systems that has contributed to significant ecological damage that appears to be irreversible. For humanity to overcome a systemic collapse, urgent action is needed, yet this requires creating new ways of viewing the world and acting within it. Within this work, I point to how such methods

could be developed, placing a performative radical agency at the centre, guarded with reflexivity of discomfort that interrogates the value system underlying action.

3. Shifting our way of viewing the world require those that sit in the periphery to deconstruct, destabilise and create opportunities to reinscribe the discourse in a way that is more systemic and holistic. It requires bringing forth marginalised discourses that privilege ecological ways of thinking. This process of transgression, of showing the limits and impacts require acts of radical agency. This is a location that tricksters thrive.

   For activists, I propose that transgressive acts and trickster interventions are necessary for bringing forth large systems change. Within this work I explore how I have used such methods for change, with varying degrees of success. I highlight its locations of success, and its inherent dangers and shadow. Within my practice I show a complex unfolding of transgression and trickster, which is also coupled with collaborative and pedagogical actions. Within my experience, these multiple modes of action strengthen each other's effectiveness than on their own.

What can I offer activists? Stories of courage, danger and persistence against the odds, to say that you are not alone.

Though this work can be read as one that is covered in grief, it is also a work that demonstrates a resilience that defies odds. It is a celebration of transgression and opposition with a commitment and engagement to building solutions. It highlights the value of communities that collaborate for solutions, and approaches that may be used to critically interrogate power and knowledge in the hope for building a more equitable solution.

This is a thesis about activism, but my activism is an activism of privilege. The work in this thesis represents me as a senior corporate executive, with its trappings, privileges and safety nets, that many activists lack. I also engage in a specific type of activism, a trickster who dances on a foundation of science and knowledge, again a luxury for many I meet in the world. I want to first refrain from commenting on activists as a category.

But this story is bleak even for me, which also is the reality of many whom I meet working in decolonisation and sustainability.

"Vidhura, I am leaving my organization, and planning to migrate to Australia", says D, catching me by surprise. I have seen her work in the environmental arena for decades, having worked closely with her on multiple projects. Her activism is built on her commitment to environmental science and care for community wellbeing. I couldn't imagine someone so rooted to local ecological preservation to be anywhere but here. "Why are you leaving," I ask.

"I am tired and depressed of what is happening here," she responds, grief evident in her voice. "We strive so hard and are delayed and stymied by courts on one hand and bureaucracy on the other. I simply cannot take any more."

Her words resonate with me, it is a feeling a lot of activists in Sri Lanka share. Perhaps globally too. "But Australia is not different," I hear myself saying, wondering if I can change her chosen path. "You will be even more frustrated there than here."

"No, I will not," is her reply. "It will never be my country. Over there, it will be a job. I will have less emotional attachment to that place."

I wish her luck. I know exactly what she is speaking of. It is a space that I too intimately inhabit.

I see her grief, and I also wonder, if I too should leave, and what would that departure make of me. Would I still be an activist, and if so, what type? I offer empathy with my grief, desperation and angst all balled up. For me, the action this work represents are necessary things that must be done. This work selects us as much as we select them. It is far too tied to identity.

"For those who value stability, who fear transience, uncertainty, change, have erected a powerful system of stigmas and taboos against rootlessness, that disruptive, anti-social force, so that we mostly conform, we pretend to be motivated by loyalties and solidarities we do not really feel, we hide our secret identities beneath the false skins of those identities which bear the belongers' seal of approval. But the truth leaks out in our dreams; alone in our beds (because we are all alone at night, even if we do not sleep by ourselves), we soar, we fly, we flee. And in the waking dreams our societies permit, in our myths, our arts, our songs, we celebrate the non-belongers, the different ones, the outlaws, the freaks. What we forbid ourselves we pay good money to watch, in a playhouse or movie theatre, or to read about between the secret covers of a book. Our libraries, our palaces of entertainment tell the truth.

The tramp, the assassin, the rebel, the thief, the mutant, the outcast, the delinquent, the devil, the sinner, the traveller, the gangster, the runner, the mask: if we did not recognize in them our least-fulfilled needs, we would not invent them over and over again, in every place, in every language, in every time."

- Salman Rushdie, The Ground Beneath Her Feet.

I want to close by saying that living in a liminal place, formed by specific subjectivities and knowledge, we must still strive to give wings to our dreams, irrespective of their inherent danger and grief. It is about discovering who we really are.

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## 12.    Appendix – Script for the Alternative History of MAS Intimates

| Narrative | Imagery |
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| When Slimline opened its doors, it was a new thing to Pannala. We walked in as seamstresses full of anxiety. Garment industry didn't always have a stellar record. | 1994. Slimline as a gated facility with Sri Lankan National Flag, Union Jack & Stars & Stripes.<br><br>Images of Katunayake FTZ in mind. Sewing inside Slimline. (women in simple dresses coming in, working in uniform) |
| For all its air-conditioned buildings and lush landscape, we were still second class citizens, facing constant wrath of superiors. But we, the women of Pannala, were becoming organised, the management noticed with concern. | Supervisor and Exec scolding TM. TMs getting together with placards. |
| Then things changed, fast. The walls that separated us were broken, and our voice was getting heard through the new JCC, through our elected sisters. | breaking the cafeteria wall separating the executive canteen. JCC elections and JCC meeting. |
| Soon, we saw ourselves as part of Slimline, more than just hired help. Our voices saw company change. We could go to the CEO for any grievance anytime we wanted. And we did. | Slimline library, transport for workers, improving food and conditions. Walking to CEO office. |
| But Slimline was still fighting Pannala, until the realisation that we were really fighting ourselves.  Slowly we began developing | Beating up van occupants in the side of the road. Pannal auditorium, science lab, Kuliyapitiya hospital. |

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| Pannala. We felt good, we were investing on the future of our families! | |
| When the company ran into trouble, we carried it on our shoulders with love. | Quota crisis, lifting a factory and placing it in an island (Gan) |
| We were becoming famous for how we valued each other. And as the company grew so did our way of being. | Winning 5S, CSR and H&S awards<br><br>Casualline, Slimtex, LC, Unichela joining hands |
| We valued the different ways to grow. | Craft classes |
| And sports opened doors to write our names in gold all over the world. Our sisters were becoming world renowned champions | Womens cricket, rugby, boxing (Olympics) and fencing |
| Through the JCC, we were developing ourselves, with better training, facilities and chances to grow. | OBT training, reproductive health training, computer and IT. Promotions. |
| Through what we built, women go beyond was born, that helped MAS win plaudits across the world. | WGB awards, magazines with recognition |
| We had a lot more of what we liked. But not enough of what we needed, like more opportunities to grow and better pay for ourselves. Thousands of sisters were still leaving our fold as they did throughout our history. | Craft programmes<br><br>Pyramid getting flat (with the base expanding) and concern over pay. |
| Lean brought us back to the fore, and we loved the new responsibilities and working without others peeking over our shoulders. | MOS launch. Teams meeting together and making decisions (in a huddle). MAS sign glowing. |

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| Our strengths made the company stronger and greater, able to withstand any challenge. | |
| But our work got tougher, the targets more demanding. The company looks more flatter than what it used to be. | Efficiency, target boards. Pyramid becoming flatter |
| The way we work has changed. We now have higher technical skills, better interpersonal skills and able to handle speed and style changes at ease. We too have governed how MAS has grown, giving the company the core strength to go places. | Speed and teamwork. Show a line with different products |
| At each inflection point in history, each challenge was a transformative moment. At MAS Intimates, we have the courage to change, to make MAS anew! | Challenge => Transorformative Moment<br><br>Change is Courage.<br><br><br>MAS Intimates |