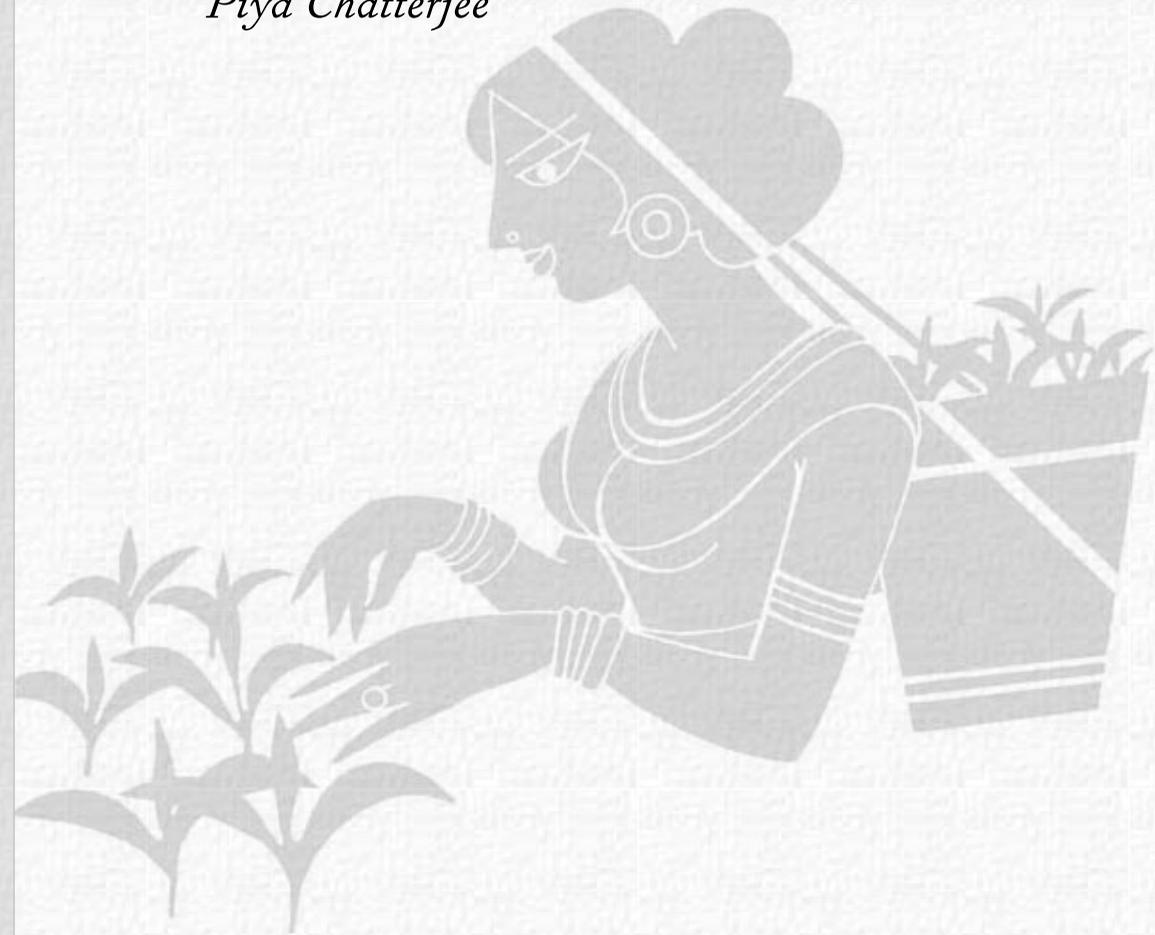


# A Time for Tea

WOMEN, LABOR, AND POST/COLONIAL

POLITICS ON AN INDIAN PLANTATION

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## chapter 1 Alap<sup>1</sup>



### A Time for Tea: The Play

*Dramatis personae: She/Narrator; Alice, of Wonderland fame, and companions; British burra sahib;<sup>2</sup> British memsahib; Indian sahib; Indian memsahib; four women pluckers as a chorus; “Son of the Forest”; goddess; dancers; and other incidental characters.*

#### ACT I, SCENE I

*The stage is horseshoe-shaped. It curves, a crescent embrace, around you. On the far stage right, suspended from the ceiling, an empty picture frame. On the stage, at an angle behind the picture frame, an ornate wooden table and chair. On the table, an oil lantern. To one side, a large oval-shaped mirror in a highly baroque bronze gilt frame. Next to the chair, a stool. Next to the stool, a pirhi (small wooden seat). The backdrop is a cream gauze cloth, stretched loosely across the back of center stage. The stage is dark. There are hints of shadows.*

*Slow drumming begins: dham dham dham. Then a sound of keening, “continuous like the lonely wailing of an old witch . . . an unsettling, unsettling” sound.<sup>3</sup> This wailing rises to a crescendo, reaches an unbearable pitch, and then stops suddenly. Absolute silence.*

*A woman (Narrator) steps out stage right, which curves out like a strange pier, into you (the audience). She wears a long, dark red cloak of some lustrous material. The robe has a cowl; it falls low on her forehead, shadowing her eyes. She wears gloves the same color as her cloak. Her mouth is outlined in red and black. She stands by the desk, in front of the chair. With exaggerated motions, she removes some objects from a deep pocket in the cloak, moving as if she were a magician: slowly, with flair and precision. A quill pen, a bottle of india ink, a silver sickle, a bottle of nail polish, a clutter of false fingernails, a porcelain teapot with a long pouring spout, a porcelain cup, and some tea bags. She turns*

and my suddenly explicitly racialized and gendered position. Patriarchal comments such as these laced most aspects of my research, sometimes with a splintering power, because my transgression—as a Bengali woman from a “good family”—was that of an “insider.” My ontology was now inscribed as dishonor. I was betraying the “family.”

The contradictions of the insider/outsider<sup>20</sup> as a gendered, classed, and racialized subject fissured every encounter over tea in North Bengal. Patronage and power was simultaneously the methodology of field research and the substance of the text. Translation of method into text and ethnography has to take into account these inevitable contradictions, in no simple way.

The politics of the ethnographic translation of women’s lives is situated in a series of conversations about the relationship between feminism(s) and anthropology, and more recently, the theoretical practices of feminist ethnography.<sup>21</sup> The substance and style of this ethnography is indebted to these important debates about feminism(s) that continue to raise important questions about the relationship of textual production to anthropological practice. It engages the perils and possibilities of feminist ethnographic production through a writing voice that is postcolonial and “Third World” in vexed and contradictory ways.

In the past decade, the interrogation of the Third World as a primary site of investigation has been partly compelled by the changing face of disciplinary practitioners, many of whom come from “there” and who themselves embody the absent but still powerfully resonant space of nativism. For many women anthropologists trained in the U.S. academy who are from the “there” of the dominant episteme, ethnographic production and writing are fraught with colonizing dissonance.

How can the “native” woman write within and against the here/there without reifying the exoticism that she may embody for the paradigmatic gaze? How can she write herself, beyond the re-visions of such a dichotomy, into the space of an integral, though not transparent, praxis? How can she be accountable to her privilege and the paradoxes of her own de/colonization?<sup>22</sup>

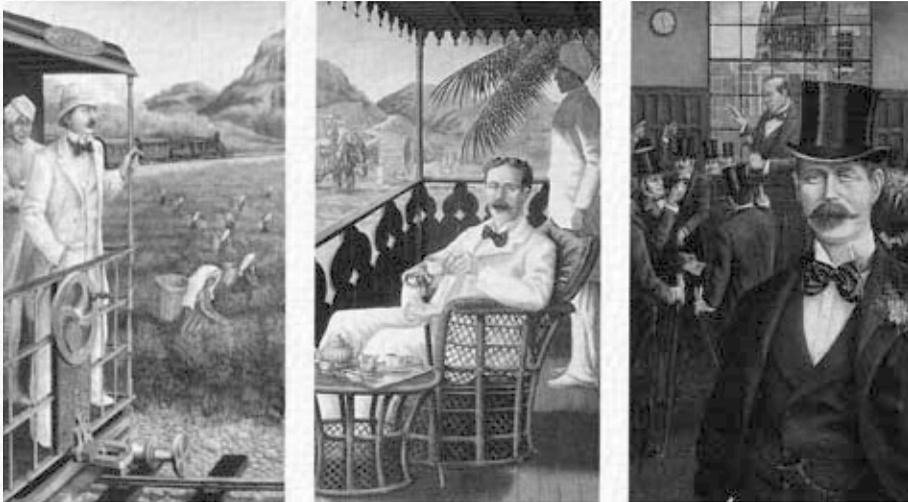
Coming to the writing voice, within and against the binary, is a process shot through with variegated threads. The text it produces traverses the *here-there-here-there*. Its dance is an exquisite ad infinitum. Yet, its voices may be dis/abled by the very oscillations that make these hybridities. These are not only calligraphic gestures to movements across maps. They speak through the body, in flight, traversing borders defined by global, national, and regional state-power. Transnational anthropology is a given for those of us

who came here to be trained, but our entry into the here (of a U.S. “center”) from the there (of the periphery) is itself compelled by specific postcolonial and imperial histories.<sup>23</sup>

Yet such transnational moves are mediated by “actual” power plays: the contradictions of class location, state, and juridical power, the politics of nationhood and citizenship.<sup>24</sup> To then claim where we come “from” as an ethnographic site, to engage the *home-as-field*, gestures to a counter-paradigmatic dance. Yet its practice is implicated within the actualities of late-twentieth-century globalization and its imperial orders. It is simultaneously, and perhaps contradictorily, inflected by the bourgeois, feudal, and regional particularities embedded within the larger matrix.

Through these moments of encounter and contest, I reflect on the shared codification of my specific authorial positioning as a *postcolonial, Third World, feminist anthropologist*. Through this ethnography, I push into the membranes of these categories because of my desire to destabilize them. My desire is fueled by the need to understand the relationship between reflection and practice, the ontologies of worlds in the word, of writing as an act of despair, celebration, enablement, and im/possibility. I do so, however, in an open-ended way, employing rhetorical strategies to speak up, against, and about the silences that many of us inhabit because our dizzying oscillations do not allow the safety of fixed categorical boundaries. De/colonization is the sharp-edged frame within which the act of writing and the politics of the plantation experience is narrated.

I am, however, most interested in viewing these destabilizing meditations as a corridor through which we can reflect on ethnographic writing as an *act* always embedded in the mother lode of its actualities. I offer them walking on paths paved by contrary philosophers of field and text to whom they owe many debts. They are poets, singers, raconteurs, scholars, theorists, and activists. They are crafters of the spoken and written word, narrators of the possible. They sit on my shoulders with folded wings and urge me to think beyond the confinements of borders. They push me to imagine, and theorize, the work of writing-action-power as an integral matrix. They ask me to explore the dialectics between language games and the worlds to which they gesture. They suggest that perhaps writing, and ethnographic writing in particular, is a re-presentation of human experience that is not only about violence/betrayal/appropriation. Yes, these are important characters in my theater of silences and silencing. Writing, like the body, can sway in the paradoxes of its own making. Perhaps, with folded wings, it can honor.



11a. Portrait of Sir Thomas Lipton visiting his Ceylon gardens, on his verandah, and at a London auction. Triptych. (below) 11b. Garden scene. From an advertisement for Lipton's tea. Both reproduced in Anthony Burgess et al., *The Book of Tea* (Flammarion: Paris, 2000).



11c. Sacks of tea on a Ceylon plantation. Photograph, late nineteenth century. From Anthony Burgess et al., *The Book of Tea* (Flammarion: Paris, 2000).

defined by essentialized characteristics of laziness and instability whenever they encountered the coercive edge of colonial administration.<sup>67</sup>

The dyadic contrast between “primitive” and “settled” work was situated, simultaneously, on what may be called an evolutionary “laboring chain of being.” An implicit register of essentialized characteristics, measured by the kinds of work done by each community, plotted a telos of work. As such, “traditional” labor came to define a culturally bound essence, and plotting, within a chain of progress. Thus, “nomadic tillage,” the first stage of evolution, presented qualities of indolence and instability that were considered unsuitable for regular wage employment. For example, colonial administrators consistently depicted the Bodo-Kacharis of Assam, employed to clear the jungle because local peasants weren’t willing to work, as “unruly” and erratic, lacking settled disciplines.

For colonial administrators, customs of “primitive” and “unsettled” labor were characterized as nonwork. Because nomadic tillage could not be mapped into the settled imperatives of agrarian revenue collection, it came to inhabit a place of invisibility and lack. This colonial epistemology of labor thus charted the human emptiness that defined the essence of a savage and unknown land. Unworthy to be called “real” work, customary cultivation located its actors into a “human” absence.

others were heaping into the grates beneath the cooking pan logs of wood to feed the flames, which caused the leaves to hiss and crackle, *the chopsticks in the nimble hands of the Chinaman* rattled their accompaniment on the sides.”<sup>22</sup> Such a peculiarly detailed description of the Chinese tea maker (the focus on nails, the nimble hands) creates an aura of connection between the fetishisms of women’s plucking and this premachinery work of manufacture.

One postcolonial manager defines plucking as an inherited craft. He remarks, “Women pluckers are like those weavers who make *dhakai* [Dacca muslin]. It is the same fine quality that is our objective. This is why weaving, like plucking, is hereditary — women can pass their skills to their daughters.” Tea plucking, in this analogy, is elevated to a craft whose skill is inherited and takes on feminized suggestions, even though weaving is a transgendered craft. The inheritance of plucking jobs is a complex business, and a lineage of women is difficult to trace. Indeed, many young brides — married in from other plantations and villages — “inherit” jobs from their husbands.

However, the idealized analogy is striking, in that weaving is inflected by an aesthetic of seduction and allure. Dhakai saris are high-end luxury items, so fine and transparent, the saying goes, the face of a bride veiled in such muslin can still be seen. As analogy and referent, the conflation of two fetishisms — and their significations of the feminine in both work and product — are telling. The value of tea, as with muslin, is intrinsic. Its worth is enhanced by feminized tradition. The labor that creates such products of value is to be protected *and* disciplined. Surveillance, then, is the cost of romance and its seemingly transparent seductions.

#### ACT 6, SCENE 3

*The stage is dark. A backlight is turned on slowly, enough to show the silhouettes sitting at the Mad Tea Party table, stage right: the Sahibs and Memsahibs sitting center stage; and the figure of the Narrator, who rests on her mora just left of center stage. She leans over and turns on the black oil lantern at her feet. There is movement, extreme stage left. A woman Dancer comes out from behind the gauze backdrop. She carries a mora and sits next to the Narrator.*

WOMAN: You summoned, memsahib. What for?

SHE: I have been reading in the dark, some poems from other places, other languages. I wanted to share one with you. That’s all. Only a part of it, I promise. It is not long.

WOMAN: Go on, memsahib. I can rest my feet. Go on. Is it a song, this poem?

*As she talks, she reaches into a fold of her sari and pulls out some leaf and tobacco. She begins to roll it as the Narrator responds.*

SHE: Yes, like a song. A man writing for his lover, an ode to her hands. It is called “Girl Gardening,” “Oda a La Jardinera.” “Yes: I knew that your hands were / a blossoming clove and the silvery lily: / your notable way / with a furrow / and the flowering marl.”

(Pause) Odd, to not know the language of his words, translating this for you in an alien tongue.

WOMAN: Go on, memsahib, I am listening.

SHE: “The whole / of you prospered, / piercing down / into earth, / greening the light like a thunderclap / in a massing of leafage and power. / You confided / your seedlings, / my darling, / little red husbandman; / your hand / fondled / the earth / and straight away / the growing was luminous.”<sup>23</sup>

WOMAN: (After a long pause and inhaling her bidi) In a massing of leafage and power. In a massing of leafage and power. (She repeats the phrases slowly.)

*The Narrator turns the lantern down completely. The stage lights fade into total darkness. The only light is the glow from the bidi glowing, an ember in the blackness. The sounds are of rustling crickets, the unquiet dark. There is a stirring. Quietly, the Dancer gets up and leaves, stage left.*

#### *Ethnographic Leisures*

June is bursting with leaf, and the pressure of work is constant. Some days, I walk into the field with Anjali and we visit Bhagirathi’s dol. Even though they are welcoming, their exhaustion limits our conversation, and we sit quietly in the shade. Many afternoons, I remain in the leisured isolation of my bungalow venturing out in the late evening when I assume that the women who have befriended me will have completed their necessary chores. Yet again the awareness of the sharp divide between my leisured privilege and their constant labor is acute.

To mull over that divide, in a feudal system within which structural inequity is a given, appears facile and indulgent. Yet, because of the basic tenets of ethnographic field research, I must carefully consider the historically specific terms within which my own experience and understanding of women’s laboring takes place. To do so is not to absolve myself of the inescapable conclusion that I reach about my fieldwork experience: that it is

## chapter 9 A Last Act



### ACT 9

*The spotlight turns on the Narrator who is standing extreme stage left. She holds in her hand, the black oil lantern. It glows brightly. She turns it down. She walks around the crescent of the stage and arrives back at her table, stage right. As she does so, all the characters of the play appear quietly and take their customary places. Alice, the Mad Hatter, March Hare, and the Doormouse sit at their tea party. The Sahibs and Memsahibs sit on rattan chairs, center stage. The son of the forest, the four Women, the Goddess holding a sickle, come out from behind the gauze backdrop, stage left and squat on the ground. She looks around at them. Her fingers move across the artifacts of the story on the table: a clutter of false nails, the quill, the porcelain tea cup, the teapot. She holds up her fingers; the long nails flicker in the light.*

*SHE: (turning in her seat to look at Alice) So here we all are, Alice, spiraling back to the beginning. To our fingers, our nails, their thin cuticles. Nothing begins or ends, perhaps, but this flexing of flesh. The fingers curling around stones. Then throwing, throwing, throwing.*

*There is a long pause. Five slow, steady but loud beats from a drum.*

Who can say anything about the endurance of women? Perhaps the plantation is like Singbhum, “a white-haired old woman collecting firewood in the jungles, who never answers a stranger, never looks at anyone. Keeping the intruders into her grief, at a distance, beyond the barrier of her silence, she continues collecting firewood.”<sup>1</sup>

*A second long pause. Five slow, steady but loud beats from a drum.*

Keeping the intruders into her grief at a distance . . . .  
Keeping the intruders into her grief at a distance . . . .

*The lights are turned off suddenly. The silence must be absolute.*



TABLE A3. Scales of Pay and Allowances for Daily Rated Garden Workers

Time Period	Adult	Child
<b>A. Wages: Garden Workers</b>		
1/4/97 to 31/3/98	Rs. 29.30	Rs. 14.77
1/4/98 to 31/3/99	Rs. 32.20	Rs. 16.27
1/4/99 to 31/3/2000	Rs. 34.80	Rs. 17.52
<b>B. Wages: Factory Workers</b>		
1/4/97 to 31/3/98	Rs. 31.10/31.55	Rs. 16.57/17.02
1/4/98 to 31/3/99	Rs. 34.30/34.80	Rs. 18.27/18.77
1/4/99 to 31/3/2000	Rs. 36.80/37.30	Rs. 19.52/20.02

*Notes:* 1. Paniwalas (watercarriers) [other than bungalow and hospital], malies (gardeners), sweepers, lorry and tractor mates, helper to mechanic, carpenters and masons, cowherders (where employed) will receive Rs. 2.00 and tea makers and helpers to fitters will receive Rs. 2.50 as "Additional Compensation" as shown under Factory Workers; 2. Extra leaf pice 50 paise per kg. W.e.f 1/5/98.

#### *B. Authorised Amenities*

1. Free Quarters: For each employee and his/her family as defined in the Plantations Labour Act.
2. Firewood: 2½ peels annually per household as per agreement dated 1/2/97. Management shall supply coal briquettes in lieu of firewood. One standard Dooars peel of firewood will be equivalent to 286 kilos of coal briquettes. A household of a daily rated workman in receipt of . . . will received coal briquettes amounting to 715 kgs in Dooars area. A "chulah" is to be supplied free of cost at time of introduction.
3. Rations: At the scale and concessional rate as may be prescribed from time to time for himself, his wife—if incapable of working or have been refused employment—and children up to the age of 18 years, living on the garden, fully dependent on parents, and not employed.
4. Maternity Leave: As per Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (1 week = 7 days)
5. Dry Tea: 400 grammes per worker per month.

*Source:* Dooars Branch Indian Tea Association, *Pay, Allowances and Other Conditions of Service* (Circular no. 28, September 1998), 9–11.

TABLE A4. Gendered Muster and Field Labor Tasks, Peak Season 1992

Field Task	Permanent				Casual (Bigha)		
	Men	Women	Adolescent Children	Children	Women	Men	Children
<b>APRIL</b>							
<i>Weeding</i>	38	8	28*	26*	—	—	—
<i>Plucking</i>	104	344	—	—	157	—	45
<i>Manuring</i>	—	—	—	—	40	—	—
<i>*Only one day worked in the fourteen-day sample.</i>							
<b>MAY</b>							
<i>Weeding</i>	43	7	31	—	139	—	43
<i>Plucking</i>	105	342	37*	—	—	—	—
<i>*Only three days worked.</i>							
<b>JUNE</b>							
<i>Weeding</i>	39	7	34	—	138*	—	73
<i>Plucking</i>	84	326	42**	—	—	—	—
<i>*Only eleven days worked; ** Only three days worked.</i>							
<b>JULY</b>							
<i>Weeding</i>	40	7	—	14	129*	—	—
<i>Plucking</i>	110	337	—	15	—	—	—
<i>*Only eight days worked.</i>							
<b>AUGUST</b>							
<i>Weeding</i>	46	7	35*	13	156	—	50
<i>Plucking</i>	104	315	29**	—	—	—	—
<i>*Only ten days worked; ** Only five days worked.</i>							

*Note:* All compilations collected from *Daily Kamjari (Work/Attendance) Book at Sarah's Hope Tea Estate in 1992*. Monthly averages were calculated from fourteen days of statistics.

*the Year 1953: Annual General Meeting Held on 10th April, 1954* (Jalpaiguri: ITPA, 1954).

- 93 For a definitive examination of the role of tea plantations in defending the northeastern borders of India from the Japanese incursions during World War II, see Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, 685–690.
- 94 Debates about the implementation of FERA on foreign-stock holding companies continued through the 1970s. See ITA, *Report for 1976*, 148–151, for a discussion of income tax and profit-sharing allowances within the law.
- 95 These are images that still echo the planter dictum of advertising: “The basic idea was to bring home the fundamental appeal of Indian tea as a beverage to the educated and semi-educated Indians, both male and female, who exercise control the home and community life of the nation.” DPA, *Report for 1935*, xxii.

#### chapter 5 Estates of a New Raj

- 1 *Zenana* is an Urdu word describing the household “inner” space of Muslim women. Its demarcation of necessary feminized interiority is patriarchally and religiously coded. However, it also inflects the aristocratic and bourgeois “private” places of non-Muslim women. I understand it within such a hybrid and historical matrix.
- 2 A. R. Ramsden, *Assam Planter: Tea Planting and Hunting in the Assam Jungle* (London: John Gifford, 1945), 50.
- 3 Maurice Hanley, *Tales and Songs from an Assam Tea Garden* (Calcutta; Thacker, Spink, 1928), 87.
- 4 Alexander MacGowan, *Tea Planting in the Outer Himalayah* (London, 1861), 26.
- 5 Samuel Baidon, *Tea Industry in India: A Contemporary Review of Finance and Labour and Providing a Guide for Capitalists and Assistants Engaged in the Industry* (London, 1882), 36 (on the agreeability of the planter’s occupation); MacGowan, *Tea Planting in the Outer Himalayah*, 23 (on the planter as an outdoors man).
- 6 It would be interesting to compare the emergence of this hybrid post/colonial domesticity and its Victorian threads with the construction of Victorian domesticities in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States. See Kathleen McHugh, *American Domesticity: From How-to Manual to Hollywood Melodrama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The manner in which this hybrid, feudal and postcolonial ambit of plantation domesticity is linked to its colonial, urban past needs further scrutiny. For example, traces of the inside worlds of nineteenth-century Calcutta *bhadramahilas* (gentlewomen) can be glimpsed in these fortified and interiorized worlds of postcolonial *memsahibs*. For the most detailed discussion of the former, see Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in 19th-Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989).

What this also suggests about nationhood and its modernities deferred is particularly interesting in the context of postcolonial connections of gender, status and hierarchy. I extrapolate such possible connections from Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Difference-Deferral of (a) Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal,” *History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians* 36 (autumn 1993): 1–34.

- 7 Lewis Carroll, “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” in *The Complete Stories of Lewis Carroll* (London: Magpie Books, 1993), 68.
- 8 It is no accident that in late-nineteenth-century England, the Victorian middle class began to organize and lobby for prohibition in the name of industrial discipline, efficiency, and productivity. Ironically, tempering the intemperate English working class with work breaks on the assembly line involved serving them tea.
- 9 George M. Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam* (Calcutta, 1884), 174. The use of alcohol as a means of extraction of labor power is an old one within colonial labor history. Supplying country liquor became one strategy of bondage, which underwrote indentureship in the plantation of liquor and discipline, as K. Ravi Raman noted with some clarity: “It is a subject of grim jest that it strengthens their hold on a number of coolies, who without this state incentive to drunkenness might save money and at the end of their term leave the garden to become independent ryots.” K. Ravi Raman, “Global Capital and Peripheral Labour: Tea in South India, c. 1860–1957,” *Proceedings of the Conference on Plantation Labour in Colonial Asia* (Amsterdam: Center for Asian Studies, 1990), 195; Despite the transparent encouragement of the liquor trade by the colonial elite and the careful marking through revenue legislation of what was to be demarcated as “licit” and “illicit” liquor, planters would still comment that increased liquor sales would detrimentally affect “the health, prosperity and working habits of labourers.” See also Dooars Planters Association (DPA), *Detailed Report of the General Committee of the Dooars Planters Association for the Year 1917*, 73.
- 10 I have transposed this imagery directly from a dance sequence in a film about Caribbean slave plantation women and history called *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* (prod. Ingrid Lewis, dir. Frances-Ann Solomon, 1990).
- 11 Government of India, Royal Commission on Labour in India, *Written Evidence: Assam and the Dooars*, parts 1 and 2, 6. It is important to consider, again, the colonial and historical economy through which such a negative rendering of the “detestable” Bengali *babu* emerges. See Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
- 12 Barker, *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam*, 32.
- 13 See Rudyard Kipling, “The Head of the District,” *Selected Prose and Poetry of Rudyard Kipling* (New York: Garden City Publishing 1937), 604–619.
- 14 I will continue to use the term *babu* interchangeably with “staff” because