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Rest House. Top Station.

'Rest House. Top Station.' Photograph in an album by G.W. Cole, early twentieth century.
Image source: James Finlay & Co. Archive, The Scottish Business Archive, Glasgow University Archives
and Special Collections UGD 091/1/12/4/5/1.

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The Elephant in the Room: Sourcing the Planter's Chair

INTRODUCTION

In 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' Ursula le Guin makes a case for replacing the extraordinary with the ordinary: heroes are replaced by everyday people, conflicts by conversations and spears by bags.¹ Bags, she argues, alongside other objects designed to hold stuff, including nets, pots and baskets, are likely the earliest cultural devices. As such, they are worthy of our attention and scrutiny. In this paper we turn to the so-called 'planter's chair' as a mundane cultural object with an unusual capacity for holding stuff: over the past two centuries of its existence, it has been a container for diverse bodies, objects, stories, actions, imaginaries and meanings.

Of uncertain origins, and possibly developed in nineteenth-century India within the context of British East India Company rule, the planter's chair became synonymous with colonial modernity, lifestyles and attitudes – a seat that supported leisure and repose, while simultaneously enabling power and surveillance. It undergirded the (often male-gendered) excesses of colonial life and assisted expressions of discrimination, othering and violence. From British-occupied India, it spread widely through other colonial contexts – Dutch, Portuguese, French and beyond.

Our research has investigated the form, materiality, facture and use of the planter's chair in different locations. We widen our gaze to investigate the settings in which it has operated: bedrooms, verandahs, foyers, libraries and clubs. Scaling up, we interrogate how it intersected with larger colonial landscapes such as tea plantations and cantonments.

Here we unfold a selection of the (hi)stories that the planter's chair holds, thereby foregrounding our methods and sources. How do you unravel the history of a chair? For something so ubiquitous, its traces are faded and scattered. As an object it often eludes the logics of archival catalogues and is rarely included in meta-data entries. Yet it can be found in the margins of a wide range of archives and has been documented in a rich variety of sources. Learning from the CCA's 'Fugitive Archives', we present stories through five sources: photo album, poem, museum, movie and oral history.² These vignettes serve to disentangle strands of meaning that the chair holds, colonial and otherwise, and illustrate how the chair becomes a vessel for new notions of modernity.

- 1 Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.' In *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (Grove Press, 1989).
- 2 Claire Lubell and Rafico Ruiz, *Fugitive Archives: A Sourcebook for Centring Africa in Histories of Architecture* (Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2023).

PHOTO ALBUM: JAMES FINLAY & CO ARCHIVE

We have found planter's chairs in several repositories of historical material.³ The search can be time-consuming and has involved studying visual material such as old photographs with magnifying glasses. This was certainly the case with the James Finlay & Co Archive.⁴

Founded as textile merchants in Scotland in 1750, James Finlay & Co shifted to cotton manufacturing in the early nineteenth century and opened a branch in Bombay. By the early twentieth century, they had diversified into tea production, becoming the UK's leading tea supplier with estates in India and Ceylon.⁵

The archive includes a photo album belonging to G.W. Cole, who was 'Chief Engineer High Range' and active in the service of tea production in South India from c. 1900–1931. Cole oversaw infrastructure projects enabling the efficient transport of tea from high-altitude estates to the valleys below, including the construction of a narrow-gauge light railway and a ropeway system.⁶

His album, dating from around 1910, presents thirty-five pages of black and white photographs, presumably taken by Cole himself, of infrastructure projects, landscapes, factories, and other buildings, including social clubs for the white population. The album evidences the destructive imposition of a utilitarian, agro-industrial Western modernity on the rural landscape, documenting how it impacted places and people. Cole's photos illustrate an isolated manager's bungalow, deforested mountainsides, and workers plucking, sorting, rolling, firing, sifting, and packing tea. The barefoot local labourers are in stark contrast with a helmeted, booted, and suited plantation manager, whose angular body language and cane violently reinforce his authority.

Within this unsettling colonial album, a pair of planter's chairs can be seen on the shaded verandah of the 'Rest House' at the top of the ropeway, offering respite to figures like the plantation manager or Cole himself during their regional travels. Also capturing the staff who would attend to the Rest House's guests, Cole's camera is implicit in enforcing colonial hierarchies of those who attend and those who are attended to.

POEM: MOONSHINE

The humorous poem 'Moonshine,' written around 1871 by Major Walter Yeldham (1837–1916) under the pen name Aliph Cheem, captures a serene yet discontented scene of colonial life. On a moonlit verandah, a man lounges in a planter's chair – referred to as a 'long-arm chair' in the

³ These include the KITVL and Wereldmuseum in the Netherlands, The India Office Records, National Archives and Scottish Business Archive in the UK, and the Sarmaya Museum in India.

⁴ Housed in the Scottish Business Archive at the University of Glasgow's Archives and Special Collections.

⁵ Tata Tea purchased many of Finlay & Co's Indian tea estates in 1982.

⁶ The Kundale Valley Light Railway was damaged in floods in 1924 and never rebuilt.

poem – savouring a cigar and a drink, lost in thought as he embraces the stillness of the night. Yet beneath his reverie, the poem hints at his distaste for his surroundings. In the nocturnal silence, he unfondly recalls the rhythmic beat of the tom-tom drum as 'horrid' and the hum from the bazaar as 'irritating.' His insecurities also emerge as he anxiously hopes that the ice in his drink won't make him ill. In a context where he feels disquieted and uncomfortable, the verandah, planter's chair, cigar, and drink convene to provide a state of relative relaxation.

The 1901 edition of the poem features an illustration that further shapes the scene. A man, dressed in a suit and slippers, reclines in a planter's chair, a cigar in one hand and one leg propped on the chair's footrest. He gazes upward, watching the smoke from his cigar slowly dissipate into the night air while a servant pours a beverage – likely moonshine – into a glass on a nearby teapoy, or side table. The man's dismissive use of 'chokra,' a Hindi word meaning boy or young man, highlights his sense of authority. These power dynamics are reinforced by the planter's chair, which exudes dominance even though, or perhaps precisely because, it holds the sitter in a reclined position.

'Moonshine' appears in 'Lays of Ind', a collection of Yeldham's poems. The book, which offers a view of 'English life in India' from civil and military stations, was aimed at 'Anglo-Indian folk who enjoy a bit of humour.' Published by Thacker, Spink and Co. in 1871, 'Lays of Ind' was a hit, going through thirteen editions over fifty years. Founded in Calcutta in 1819, Thacker, Spink and Co. were prominent figures in the Indo-British publishing market, known for their Directories and for publishing Rudyard Kipling's early works.⁷ Their imposing building in Calcutta, a landmark in the colonial city, reflects their role in shaping and reinforcing British perspectives on colonial life. In this context, 'Moonshine' is more than a lighthearted portrayal; its satire offers a weak colonial critique, with the planter's chair – emblematic of authority and privilege – highlighting the uneasy coexistence of colonial leisure and underlying discontent in late nineteenth-century India.

MUSEUM: ARNHEM NETHERLANDS OPEN AIR MUSEUM

Specialising in recreating 'vanishing scenes of human life,' open-air museums are closely linked to ethnographic studies of indigenous cultures, and work to preserve cultural heritage, often in alignment with national or regional agendas.⁸ They allow visitors to experience recreated houses and interiors, learn about local cultures and crafts, and sometimes interact with 'inhabitants' portrayed by actors. As places that seek to authentically evoke living history, exhibited objects could be perceived as being in their natural, authentic setting.

⁷ Victoria Condie, "Thacker, Spink and Company: Bookselling and Publishing in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," in *Books without Borders*, Volume 2, ed. R. Fraser and Mary Hammond (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁸ Edward A. Chappell, "Open-Air Museums: Architectural History for the Masses," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999): 334–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/991526>.

In India, the planter's chair features in at least two open-air museums, the Dakshinachitra Heritage Museum in Tamil Nadu and the Hasta Shilpa Heritage Village Museum in Karnataka, which showcase traditional homes of South India.

Perhaps more unexpectedly, a planter's chair is also displayed in the Dutch Open Air Museum in Arnhem an early and highly popular open-air museum dating from 1918.⁹ The chair is located in a converted farmhouse from Hoogmade, built circa 1600. The building and its contents were acquired by the museum in 2002, following the threat of demolition due to the construction of a high-speed railway line.

Occupying a corner of the entrance hall alongside an oven, a love seat, and two rustic wooden chairs, the planter's chair is positioned by the window, overlooking the path through the garden to the front door. Its placement echoes that of many planter's chairs in warmer climates. Positioned outward on verandahs, these chairs allowed the sitter to monitor the house's entrance and survey the surroundings, exerting control over the environment.

What is the provenance of this planter's chair? Was it an heirloom? Does it have links to Dutch colonialism? Unfortunately, these questions remain unanswered in the museum. However, its presence as part of a curated set of objects suggests that the former owner of the farmhouse had 'domesticated' it to create 'an early modern material world that is global as well as domestic, exotic and yet, ultimately, Dutch.'¹⁰ Made from foreign materials and crafted in previously occupied territories, perhaps the chair was viewed as a desirable object, proudly displayed in a traditional Dutch home.

MOVIE: ELIPPATHAYAM

In real life, the agency of the objects that surround us may not always be apparent, but in films and novels, they often evidence deeper intentionality and meaning. Deliberately placed within a carefully constructed space, these objects shape the setting and narrative, directing actions and movements.

The planter's chair has appeared in various films, for example orchestrating action in the Dutch plantation-centred film 'Rubber!' (1936), employed as a weapon in the Tamil movie 'Indian' (1996) or holding a silent watch in the Bollywood classic 'Sholay' (1975). These films document its transition from a colonial object to one used by affluent landowners and officials who aspired to the British lifestyle.

⁹ Thank you to Marie-Thérèse van Thoor for informing us about this chair.

¹⁰ Anne Gerritsen, "Domesticating Goods from Overseas: Global Material Culture in the Early Modern Netherlands," *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (September 2016): 228–44, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epw021>.

In the 1982 award-winning movie 'Elippathayam' [Rat Trap], director Adoor Gopalakrishnan uses many metaphors to depict the trapped lives of his characters. Much of the film is shot on the pillared verandah of a dilapidated ancestral house in Kerala, a threshold where the tensions between the outer modern world and the inner traditional one are most evident, and where public and private life merge.

The film is minimal—in dialogue, characters, settings, and props. There is little furniture on the verandah or in the house, with raised platforms serving as seats. Unni, the dysfunctional protagonist and head of a once-affluent family, is seen on the only chair, a planter's chair on the verandah. The chair clearly belongs to him, as the man of the house. He spends most of the day in it, barking orders, reading the newspaper, or staring into oblivion. He doesn't rise to greet or offer a seat to a visitor, who is instead given a small mat, nor does he get up to shoo away a cow feeding on a banana tree in the yard. These scenes highlight the divide between those who may sit and those who may not, while commenting on shifting power dynamics in a crumbling household. Feudal life in Kerala is fading, and the chair is Unni's refuge from the modern world, allowing him to retreat into his narcissistic, patriarchal persona.

ORAL HISTORY: NAOMI HOSSAIN

While the oral histories we have collected have revealed the role the chair played in colonial history, it was rare for someone to vociferously express the kind of ambivalent discomfort that Naomi did in her interview.

Naomi, an academic who grew up in a multi-racial family in the United Kingdom, spoke fondly of winter holidays spent at tea garden bungalows with her extended family in Sylhet, Bangladesh. She remembered coming across the planter's chair there, 'We thought they were great. The kids would climb all over them. And we were like, look, this [armrest] comes out... Yeah, we thought it was fabulous. What the hell is this weird thing with the bits out, what is it for?'

She recalls being told that it was for colonial officials: 'They would put their dirty boots up and their helpers would pull them off for them. That's what it was for...' While aware of the history of exploitation in colonial tea plantations and the association of the chair with plantations, she wonders: 'Why would you call it that?... People don't know what happened on plantations?' Yet, when she came across the chair in a shop in Brighton, she couldn't resist buying one. 'I was like, oh, we used to have these when I was a kid! So I had to have it.' She finds herself conflicted, struggling to part with it because, 'It's been around the world a bit with us.'

As well as the troubling historical associations, Naomi found the chair uneasy in other ways: 'To be honest, they're really uncomfortable to sit in. Like nobody ever sits in that chair. Nobody. The dog doesn't even sit in the chair.'

CONCLUSION

This exploration of the planter's chair reveals its ongoing entanglement with colonial modernity, as well as its continued significance today. From colonial-era photo albums to museums, literature, and cinema, the chair has consistently symbolised privilege, power, and control. In many contemporary examples – from the verandahs of 'Elippathayam' to Naomi's recollections of the chair – the planter's chair continues to evoke its colonial past, reinforcing its associations with authority and exclusion.

Rather than subverting its historical meanings, these examples demonstrate how the planter's chair still serves as a marker of status and control, even in different contexts. Yet, through this continued presence, the chair also invites reflection on how colonial legacies persist and how they might be reinterpreted in modern settings.

The planter's chair thus acts as a vessel for stories and memories that continue to shape our understanding of power and privilege. Its role in both historical and contemporary narratives reminds us of the importance of questioning how coloniality persists in the present – and how we might confront and transform these legacies moving forward.