Refugee Legacies, Media Objects, and Collective Memory: Evolutions of Diasporic Consciousness among Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Summer 2023

Abstract

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Since the 1980s, Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has caused the mass migration of over a million ethnic Tamils from their homeland, creating a transnationally interconnected Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora deeply engaged in homeland politics. This study focuses on the Tamil-Canadian diaspora, the largest Sri Lankan Tamil community outside of Sri Lanka. It seeks to explore the way particular histories of war, refugee migration, and a sustained relationship with media technologies and objects have shaped the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's collective memory and diasporic consciousness. Through paying particular attention to second-generation Tamil-Canadians, this study investigates how this generation interacts with, are influenced by, and ultimately tries to contribute to this community's evolving diasporic consciousness.

Building an interdisciplinary methodology, this study blends together digital ethnography, participant observation, media and visual culture analysis, as well as in-depth interviews to consider various interrelated questions about the forces that shape the identity, collective memory, and political subjectivities of this diasporic community. This study argues that it is useful to approach this community and others like it through the framework of what it means to study a *refugee diaspora*. The *refugee diaspora* framework asks us to consider how diasporic communities that migrate to escape war are wholly shaped by the particular conditions of their violent dispersal and the continuities that stem from it. These continuities extend far beyond the legal term, 'refugee' and have lasting effects on the diasporic imaginings of future generations. This study also argues that the collective memory of this transnational diaspora is one that is maintained by both politicized narratives forwarded by community organizations and more amorphous and embodied memories and traumas carried by individuals and families. This collective memory is then continually mediated through what this study calls a *visual landscape of identity*, which is made up of the media technologies, media objects, local realities, imagined homelands, and inherited traumas that the Tamil-Canadian diaspora engages with. Finally, this

study argues that in their place-making projects, the second-generation of this diaspora is learning how to contribute to an evolving sense of diasporic consciousness through integrating their unique experiences, perspectives, and political subjectivities into the tapestry of Tamil identity woven by the generations before them.

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Prologue: A Memory (Un)made

In the summer of 2016, I traveled with my parents to Sri Lanka for the first time. My mother and father immigrated from Sri Lanka to Canada in 1987 and 1986 respectively. They met in Toronto through family connections and were married in a small temporary structure on land that was being used to build one of the first Tamil Hindu temples about a hundred kilometers north of Toronto. Growing up, I learned that a trip back to Sri Lanka was something I should not ask for. "It's too dangerous *Kanmani*," my Appa would say, looking past me, to where I'm not sure. Slow pauses filled with the weight of contradictory feelings interrupted his sentences. "Maybe one day there will be peace…but not now….we ran here for a reason…there's no point going back." As I got older, I saw opportunities to go, there was a ceasefire for several years in the early 2000s, but my parents shook their heads in distrust. When the 2004 tsunami devastated the country, killing more than 30,000 and displacing countless others, I wanted to go to volunteer, but their faces paled in fear. Finally, seven years after the official end of the war in 2009, in the middle of my Ph.D program, I sat them down and told them I was going to Sri Lanka for two months. I wanted to explore whether it would be possible or fruitful to incorporate Sri Lanka as a site of investigation in my dissertation. After trying to convince me out of it, they caved and decided that if I was going, they needed to come with me. Their reasoning was framed around their worry, but I could feel the other reasons pulling at them. I could feel their yearning to see their home again, almost thirty years after leaving. If they needed a better reason, I was happy to provide it for them. As soon as other relatives caught word that we were going, four different families, one from Toronto, one from New Jersey, and two from Australia, decided to plan their own trips to overlap with us. Sri Lanka would serve as a homecoming for us all, a family reunion in a place that was at once home and a new space, one that did not yet hold shared memories for us all.

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After our arrival, on a Sunday in the middle of our trip, my parents and I woke at dawn to make the trek to my father's childhood home. Unlike my mother's home, his was in a part of Jaffna that had been carpet bombed and evacuated in the late eighties and had only been cleared of landmines and made open to the public six months before our trip in 2016. The entire village had not been inhabited for decades. Overgrowth and disrepair left few roads accessible. My father was in contact with a childhood friend from his village that still lived in Sri Lanka. This former neighbor had already tried to make his way back to see how his family home had fared and offered to take us to try to find a way to my father's home. My father, my mother, my uncle, my cousin and this neighbor set out that Sunday. The six of us were travelling the bumpy narrow paths in a van that at one point could no longer fit between the overgrowth on the sides of the road. We got down and as we walked, my father's friend suddenly seemed to be able to tell this part of the overgrowth from the rest and started to push through the weeds and bushes.

As we followed, a sense of excitement brimmed. We were so close! My father started ecstatically pointing out plants we were pushing to the side, exclaiming over these familiar

smells and sights, recounting the many health uses for one plant and the cultural significance of another. I took out my camera to record this moment, struggling to hold it upright as I pushed back branches and stumbled along while trying to take in the information my father was throwing at me. My mother trailed behind, passive aggressively wondering aloud about what we would do if we were bitten by snakes before making it there.

And then, all of a sudden, we were there. A clearing. A house. Our house? The large wrap around veranda (entryway porch) that my father and his family had always described was gone, the wood decomposed and seamlessly blended into the foliage, but the concrete framing of the home still stood. I turned back to the recording, making sure the structure was in frame as my father ran around with a rush of youthful energy I had not seen in decades. He started pointing out rooms and recounting all the stories he had told me growing up now that he had the physical setting to ground them. We went round and round the house until the stories trailed off and we sat there in silence where the porch would have been, until finally accepting that it was time to get back.

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Weeks after being back in Toronto, the video I had taken that day had already made international rounds on WhatsApp being passed around to all our family members and even others from my father's hometown I had never met. Sitting there on the beige embroidered couch in my parent's living room, I pulled up the video myself, ready to relive that cherished memory again. As I watched, I felt my shoulders tense, warmth spreading across my chest and face. My cheeks tingled. I felt like I had been slapped. I had an emotional reaction opposite to the one that I had had while recording the video. Watching our excited faces as we rushed around this broken structure seemed so *inappropriate*. I felt ashamed. For what, I still had not processed. I let the video keep playing. In the midst of recounting a childhood memory, my father paused to point out bullet holes in the walls mentioning that there was heavy shelling in this area and that the house was probably occupied by the army for a few years in the early nineties. Without skipping a beat, he quickly flipped back to the story about misadventure and childhood antics he had originally been telling.

We were so grateful for what we had found that we did not see the sadness of this broken home that had been ravaged by the war and deserted for decades. The last memories there were mostly good ones, the ones that made my father not want to leave in the first place. His parents and siblings had already left for Canada a full year before he finally decided that he needed to join them. In that video, my father was reliving those cherished memories and trying his best to relive them with me, an only child who had grown up hearing so much about this place I had never been. He tried desperately to use this moment to fill in all the holes of those stories left by everything I was unable to see, hear, touch or smell until that moment. It hurt to watch our happiness. It hurt to watch his desperation to fill those unfillable holes. It hurt to hear my own voice but not see myself recorded in that place. It felt shameful to be overjoyed in a place that looked so very sad.

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Months after we returned from Sri Lanka, I was skyping with my father from my apartment in Berkeley, California. He sat on the beige embroidered couch we've had all my life, the middle sagging a little under his weight. He leaned in, his face taking up a little too much screen space. He wanted to tell me about a dream that he had the night before that he couldn't shake. For decades he would have a reoccurring dream once every few years. He would be in his childhood house, in his childhood room, waking up to a door that kept shuttering in the wind because it was not latched properly. He would rise from his slumber and walk around the house, checking each door and window to find the one that needed to be closed. He would wake up from this dream without ever finding it. This time, he had the same dream, yet the house was different. His new memory of his home in its 2016 condition mapped itself over the childhood memory of his home. In this version of the dream, he had awakened in that concrete structure and was walking by walls ridden with bullet holes under a crumbling roof. There were no longer doors to any rooms, yet he still heard something rattling in the wind. He walked through each room and around each corner, still not finding the mystery door. Then he suddenly heard his father's voice and spun around to see his father standing in the front doorway. "*Rasa*, what are you doing here?" my grandfather had asked. With a look of sympathy, he softly followed, "You shouldn't be here anymore". And with those final words from his late father, who had died in Toronto, Canada fifteen years prior, my father jerked awake.

A lump reached my throat as my dad paused his recounting of his dream there, unsure of what else to say. After a moment, he started again, "he was right…that place isn't my home anymore…it hasn't been in a long time." Just like they felt when I was a child, the pauses between his sentences felt heavy against my chest again. After he got out the words, I felt like I could see this new sense of loss hit him thousands of miles away through the screen. The lump in my throat widened, painful and heavy, filling my chest as I felt the ache of the loss my father was re-experiencing at that moment. This loss was layered. It was the loss of his father, the loss of his childhood house, the loss of his homeland, the loss of his belonging in Sri Lanka, even the loss of his memories that had stayed frozen in time for decades before being upended by our trip back home. His pain rippled outward through Skype towards me. I could not reach out to touch him. As he thought of the home he could no longer inhabit, I felt the urge to be in my home, in Canada, the home we shared and where he sat now.

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My father would never watch that video again. But I would. Repeatedly. I would re-watch it every time I was thinking about my dissertation, every time I would think about Sri Lanka. Sometimes just flipping through my phone, I would go to the folder it was in without much forethought, just to see a few seconds of it again. While it was a symbol of loss for my father (the loss of both a home and the memory of that home), for me, it was still a memory gained, a home that had only existed in my imagination for decades. Even decimated and broken and full of ghosts, it was a real place, a material place. The ghosts that inhabited it were my family and the multiple generations that had come before me and now I had my own memory of them and this place and this video was my lifeline to it. My father's memories of home had been unmade and complicated in that visit and through the re-watching of that video.

But my memories of a home that had been in my head all my life had been made real in that moment. And now all I had was a video, my own memory recorded, one that will probably be shared with the generation after me. What will their relationship be to it, I wonder?

Introduction

Since the 1980s, Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict has caused the mass migration of over a million ethnic Tamils from their homeland, creating a transnationally interconnected Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora deeply engaged in homeland politics. Toronto, Canada, is the site of the largest Sri Lankan Tamil community outside of Sri Lanka and the diaspora that my family and I are a part of. What I witnessed growing up in this community and the many questions it sparked led me on my academic journey to this dissertation. This dissertation explores the way particular histories of violence, war, politics, and migration have shaped the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's collective memory and diasporic consciousness while paying particular attention to the way the Canadian-born second-generation of this diaspora interacts with, is influenced by, and ultimately tries to contribute to this community's understanding of itself.[1] The collective memory of this transnational diaspora is one that is maintained by a combination of forces, including: (1) politicized narratives and organizations, (2) embodied memory, and (3) a visual landscape of identity created through media technologies and media objects. I argue that as part of this refugee diaspora, the second-generation is heavily shaped by their interactions with this collective memory and has started to contribute to and sometimes even challenge the narratives within it in order to slowly broaden the boundaries of Tamil-ness through their own experiences, perspectives, and memory-work. In this dissertation, I advance four intersecting arguments in order to illuminate how this new generation of the Sri Lankan Tamil Canadian diaspora comes to understand its past, present, and future.

First, I seek to frame the Tamil-Canadian diaspora as a *refugee diaspora* in this dissertation. By this, I mean to argue that this community is wholly shaped by the particular conditions of its violent dispersal and the continuities that stem from it. The history of war and the rights-claiming process, both in seeking asylum and in making human rights claims against Sri Lanka, shape the narratives this community tells itself about itself. In this dissertation, I focus on the Canadian-born second-generation and how the legacies and continuities of the history and trauma their parents carry with them are passed down through to this generation, even through silences and unregulated memories. Through this focus, I aim to underscore the fact that even though the legal term "refugee" expires at the end of the rights-claiming process of seeking asylum, "refugee-ness" and its attendants continue to affect community identity through multiple generations.

Second, I argue that as a *refugee diaspora*, this community's diasporic consciousness is deeply tied to its attempts to articulate its political subjectivity. In Sri Lanka, Tamils first began to articulate a Tamil identity-based political articulation of their rights in the face of majority oppression. They then soon started fighting for self-determination and the sovereignty of an independent Tamil homeland. Simultaneously, large swaths of the population were emigrating and involved in the political process of making rights claims to gain refugee status. In this growing diaspora, the community's relationships to the homeland and its host nations were

[1] I define the first and second generations according to how members of Tamil diaspora most commonly refers to each generation. Second-generation refers to the generation born/raised in the diaspora, while first-generation refers to the first generation that emigrated from Sri Lanka.

tempered through its continual efforts to make rights claims both for those left in Sri Lanka and in the new nations that they called home. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's narratives about itself are deeply impacted by its need to articulate identity through rights-based frameworks to justify its deservingness and to claim political power over its own future.

Third, I argue that the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is engaged in several different types of placemaking projects that are often entangled with its efforts to articulate political subjectivity. While "placemaking" is usually explored as a localized project of finding belonging, a sense of home, and a community in one particular place, I explore the various and layered spaces through which the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is trying to claim space, maintain community, and ultimately find safety and belonging. This includes spaces like the streets of Toronto but also the imagined homeland of Tamil Eelam, media spaces, and virtual spaces engaged in memory work. Second-generation members of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora, in particular, are not just navigating post-war Sri Lanka, Canadian multiculturalism, and being part of a transnational diaspora, but are also battling for space amid the placemaking projects of the earlier generation. In navigating these elements, they are also coming to terms with the way they see Tamil identity differently from previous generations. While these differences lead them to sometimes seek new spaces where they feel free to engage in placemaking projects that reflect their lived realities, they still build these placemaking projects in ways that allow them to still feel connected to the larger diasporic consciousness.

Finally, I argue that the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora interacts with its collective memory through political narratives and embodied memory but also, crucially, a visual landscape of identity created through media technologies, media objects, imaginings of a homeland, and their current localities. The proliferation of media technologies and the increased way media objects become a living part of our everyday landscapes are only amplified for refugee diaspora communities that are transnationally dispersed and violently uprooted from a homeland. The second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora did not grow up traveling back to Sri Lanka, like many other modern diasporas, since safe travel only became an option in the years of ceasefire or after the conflict ended. Even then, vast areas of their parents' ancestral land have been either restricted or entirely changed by war.[2] The images from political organizing and commemoration-work by the diaspora dominate their visual engagement with memory and community from the homeland as well their connection to the rest of the transnational diaspora. Taking a critical visual culture approach, my research reveals that 'to see' and 'be seen' are political acts that are fundamentally connected to this community's placemaking projects, their quest for belonging, and their articulations of political subjectivity. Therefore, I use the term *visual landscape* to capture the new form of landscape that the diaspora is interacting with and contributing to in its maintenance of collective identity. As a framework, *visual landscape* centers ideas of space and place while interrogating the way this community interacts simultaneously with their current localities, media objects, and the immaterial imaginings of collective memory.

Below, I will begin with a brief sketch of the existing literature about the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and how I am seeking to contribute to the field. I will then expand on the

[2] Vast areas of north and east Sri Lanka have been restricted at different times due to the presence of landmines, road closures, military occupation and other reasons tied to the war.

scholarship and theoretical framing I am drawing from to make the four main arguments I listed above. Then, I will round out this introduction by presenting my methodology, a note on defining my subject, and discussing my own positionality as part of the community I am studying.

Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora studies

Scholarship on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is useful in contributing to our understanding of refugee communities, diasporic communities, and immigrant communities. This community can help bridge the gaps between South Asian studies, Asian American studies, and Critical Refugee studies. As a globally dispersed diaspora, this community reveals much about how diasporic consciousness is maintained across spaces and generations and complicates understandings of diaspora through the contours of its experiences of refugee-ness. Focusing on diasporic Tamils in Canada leads this dissertation to also contribute to Canadian studies. It is similarly deeply in conversation with Asian American studies, a field that has informed Asian Canadian studies as it continues to grow as an adjacent field.

The last few decades have produced some compelling scholarship on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, but only a few full-length manuscripts have focused on this population, with only one of those looking as the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada specifically. My work is indebted to what has come before me in this field studying this unique population. Valentine Daniel and Sharika Thiranagama have both written about the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, however, the primary scope of both these scholars has been on ethnographic projects in Sri Lanka, and this work has proved very useful to me in the richness they offer for understanding the roots of this diaspora.[3] Øivind Fuglerud, based in Norway, has been writing about the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora since the 1990s, exploring its long-distance nationalism, its transnational networks, and even the aesthetics of martyrdom within the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).[4] His scholarship explores this diaspora's experience through Sri Lankan politics and the LTTE's ideological and material influences, diving into the nature of "nationalism-in-

[3] Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).; E. Valentine Daniel, *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (Princeton University Press, 1996); E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (University of California Press, 1984).

[4] Øivind Fuglerud, *Life on the Outside: The Tamil Diaspora and Long-Distance Nationalism* (Pluto Press, 1999).; Oivind Fuglerud and Ada Engebrigtsen, "Culture, Networks and Social Capital: Tamil and Somali Immigrants in Norway," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 6 (November 1, 2006): 1118–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870600960388.; Øivind Fuglerud, "Fractured Sovereignty: The LTTE's State-Building in an Interconnected World," in *Spatialising Politics: Culture and Geography in Postcolonial Sri Lanka*, ed. Catherine Brun and Tariq Jazeel (SAGE Publications India, 2009).; Oivind Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom: The Celebration of Violent Death among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," in *Violence Expressed* (Routledge, 2011).

exile."[5] The complicated nature of how diasporic identity, Tamil nationalism and the LTTE are connected is further explored by Cheran Rudramoorthy, who frames the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora as a rational political actor in the face of scholarship that overemphasized the LTTE as the sole producer of Tamil nationalism and the diaspora's transnational politics.[6] In fact, most journal articles that explore this diaspora do so through a focus on the LTTE, trying to understand its networks, the flow of remittances, its propaganda, etc.[7] Although understanding how the LTTE fits into this community is important and unavoidable, there is much less scholarship that seeks to understand this diaspora in its own right.

While earlier studies on this diaspora focused on its transnationalism in light of the growth of the fields of globalization and transnational studies in the 1990s, a few studies have started to look at the particularities of the diaspora as rooted in a specific host-nation. Many of the ones that look at the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada focus on the context of Canadian multiculturalism, but do not have the scope to speak to its transnational experience along with its Canadian experience.[8] Amarnath Amarasingham's book, *Pain, Pride and Politics,* however,

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[5] Fuglerud, *Life on the Outside*.

[6] Cheran Rudhramoorthy and Vimalarajah, Luxshi, "Empowering Diasporas : The Dynamics of Post-War Transnational Tamil Politics," *Berghof Occasional Paper* 31 (January 1, 2010); Cheran Rudhramoorthy, "Diaspora Circulation and Transnationalism as Agents for Change in the Post Conflict Zones of Sri Lanka," *Berghof Foundation for Conflict Management*, January 1, 2004.

[7] Sarah Wayland, "Ethnonationalist Networks and Transnational Opportunities: The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (July 2004): 405–26, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210504006138.; Kalyani Thurairajah, "The Shadow of Terrorism: Competing Identities and Loyalties among Tamil Canadians," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011): 129–52, https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2011.0010.; Amba Pande, "Role of Diasporas in Homeland Conflicts, Conflict Resolution, and Post-War Reconstruction: The Case of Tamil Diaspora and Sri Lanka," *South Asian Diaspora* 9, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 51–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2016.1236458.; Shyam Tekwani, "The Tamil Diaspora, Tamil Militancy, and the Internet," in *Asia.Com* (Routledge, 2003).; Matthew Godwin, "Winning, Westminster-Style: Tamil Diaspora Interest Group Mobilisation in Canada and the UK," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 8 (June 11, 2018): 1325–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1354160.

[8] Glynis George, "The Canadian Tamil Diaspora and the Politics of Multiculturalism," *Identities* 18, no. 5 (September 1, 2011): 459–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2011.670610.; Amarnath Amarasingam, Gayathri Naganathan, and Jennifer Hyndman, "Canadian Multiculturalism as Banal Nationalism: Understanding Everyday Meanings Among Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 48, no. 2 (2016): 119–41, https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.2016.0016.; Kalyani Thurairajah, "The Jagged Edges of Multiculturalism in Canada and the Suspect Canadian," *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* 12, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 134–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2017.1319377.

does some of this by tracing the political organizing within the Tamil Canadian diaspora.[9] Taking a sociological approach, he provides a detailed account of the conditions of dispersal, the way this diaspora grew in Canada, and explores the 2009 protests and the political cleavages in the community that were produced in the post-war era.[10] In this dissertation, I would like to build upon this collection of work on the Tamil diaspora in Canada and explore many of the same themes but through a critical visual studies approach, and a focus on memory-work and the way the second generation interacts with the larger diasporic consciousness. I believe these focuses and approaches help reveal new dimensions of the experience of a second-generation refugee diaspora.

Maya Ranganathan wrote *Eelam Online* about the power of the internet in constructing, conveying, and nurturing the imagined homeland of Eelam and shaping the way the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Australia navigates the Sri Lankan conflict.[11] In a similar vein, other scholars have also explored this diaspora's engagement with new media technologies, while others have separately looked at media representations of this diaspora.[12] This dissertation seeks to bridge the gap between these ways of looking at the diaspora's relationship with media technologies and objects and use a critical visual studies approach to interrogate these media technologies and objects as active objects that act upon the diaspora instead of accepting them as passive tools of diasporic communication and imagination.

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[9] Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Maya Ranganathan, *Eelam Online: The Tamil Diaspora and War in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011).

[12] Priya Kumar, "Transnational Tamil Networks: Mapping Engagement Opportunities on the Web," *Social Science Information* 51, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 578–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018412456770.; Shyam Tekwani, "The Tamil Diaspora, Tamil Militancy, and the Internet," in *Asia.Com* (Routledge, 2003).; Chitra Sankaran and Shanthini Pillai, "Transnational Tamil Television and Diasporic Imaginings," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (May 1, 2011): 277–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877910391867.; Ashley Bradimore and Harald Bauder, "Mystery Ships and Risky Boat People: Tamil Refugee Migration in the Newsprint Media," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 4 (January 26, 2012): 637–61, https://doi.org/10.22230/cjc.2011v36n4a2466.; Sailaja Krishnamurti, "Queue-Jumpers, Terrorists, Breeders: Representations of Tamil Migrants in Canadian Popular Media," *South Asian Diaspora* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 139–57, https://doi.org/10.1080/19438192.2013.722386.; Daphne Jeyapal, "'Since When Did We Have 100,000 Tamils?' Media Representations of Race Thinking, Spatiality, and the 2009 Tamil Diaspora Protests," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 38, no. 4 (2013): 557–78.

Therefore, what this dissertation offers that has not been explored by the scholarship so far is (1) its focus on the Canadian-born second-generation, (2) its exploration of this diaspora as a *refugee diaspora*, and (3) its critical visual studies approach to this diaspora's use of media technologies as part of its collective memory.

Centering a Refugee Diaspora

To understand the experience of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's Canadian-born generation, the context of this diaspora as a *refugee diaspora* must be considered. The context of its dispersal from Sri Lanka and its arrival in Canada sets up how this second-generation sees itself, and therefore this dissertation explores the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora as a *refugee diaspora* – that is, a diaspora that has been shaped by its experiences of refugee-ness. Even though the concept of diaspora can be traced back centuries, if not a millennia, many scholars, such as Khachig Toloyan, mark the consolidation of the field of diaspora studies with the 1991 publication of the journal, *Diaspora: a journal of transnational studies*.[13] It is during this period that the term was more consistently theorized and used to refer more broadly to the phenomenon of populations living outside of their homeland. As diaspora studies developed, it allowed for a new approach to the study of migrant populations, which centered their experience and their collective sense of identity.

This field and the interconnected field of transnationalism studies introduced concepts that helped understand transnational and displaced populations in a world where migration and movement were increasingly changing national and community dynamics. Concepts that came out of these fields, such as 'long-distance nationalism,' which explores how an imaginary homeland can hold power over a diasporic consciousness and how diasporas can influence homeland politics, are highly relevant in the context of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.[14] However, early diaspora scholars focused solely on the relationship between a diaspora and its imagined homeland, this relationship being the most central to what defines them as a diaspora.[15] This approach can narrow understandings of diaspora, rendering diasporic

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[13] Khachig Tölölyan, "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (December 4, 2007): 647–55.

[14] See: Benedict Anderson, "Long-Distance Nationalism," *Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the Wolrd* 58 (1998); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, 2006); Nina Glick Schiller, "Long-Distance Nationalism," *Diaspora* 1, no. 1 (2005): 570–79.

[15] Both Safran and Toloyan explore the relationship between diasporas and their integration into their host countries, but only in terms of how that affects their diasporic consciousness, which is defined by the diaspora's collective consciousness that is connected to the real or imagined homeland. See: William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 1991): 83–99, https://doi.org/10.3138/diaspora.1.1.83.; and Khachig Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s):

relationships with their new countries of residence and other systems of power as secondary instead of considering how they are actively shaping these populations in ways that are interconnected and simultaneous to their relationship with the 'homeland.'[16] Other work in diaspora studies, like that of Stuart Hall, Benedict Anderson and Paul Gilroy, underscore the colonial and imperial conditions that begin dispersal and shape the diasporic consciousness.[17] This dissertation is particularly shaped by the way diaspora studies can continue to thread these histories to the ongoing nature of these power relations, which manifest in new ways in our modern neoliberal age.

The definition of diaspora I find the most useful for this project is provided by Parrenas and Siu, who define diaspora as:

> …an ongoing and contested space of subject formation embedded in a set of cultural and social relations that are sustained simultaneously with the 'homeland' (real or imagined), place of residence, and compatriots or co-ethnics dispersed elsewhere.[18]

Working through the unique vantage point of Asian American studies, they go on to outline some of the key features they see in the diasporic experience:

> (1) displacement from the homeland under a nexus of an unequal global political and economic system; (2) the simultaneous experience of alienation and the maintenance of affiliation to both country of residence and the homeland; and finally (3) the sense of collective consciousness and connectivity with other people displaced from the homeland across the diasporic terrain.[19]

This definition first makes clear the way diasporas are subject to "unequal" global systems of power and are in a space of ongoing "subject-formation," which inculcates not just the conditions of dispersal from the home state but the relationship with the new state of residence and the other global forces that shape their movement and experience. It also veers away from early articulations of diaspora that proposed a two-way relationship between a diaspora and the 'homeland, instead highlighting that multiple diasporas can form and be in a multilayered

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Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5, no. 1 (March 1996): 3–36, https://doi.org/10.3138/diaspora.5.1.3

[16] Brubaker actively argued for keeping the definition of diaspora narrow to retain the unique elements 'diaspora' had come to connote. See: Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000289997. Toloyan also said something similar, see: Tölölyan, "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies."

[17] See: Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory* (Routledge, 1994); Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; and Paul Gilroy, "Diaspora," *Paragraph* 17, no. 3 (November 1, 1994): 207–12, https://doi.org/10.3366/para.1994.17.3.207.

[18] Rhacel Parrenas and Lok Siu, eds., *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions* (Stanford University Press, 2007). 1.

[19] Ibid., 1-2.

network of relationships with each other and the homeland. This is particularly useful in studying the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, since the homeland it interacts with is both the state of Sri Lanka and the imagined homeland of Tamil Eelam. Moreover, it is but one of many pockets of Tamil diaspora dispersed across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia, all of which develop concurrently, sometimes differing, yet always existing as intersecting formations of collective consciousness formed in relation to each other and the homeland.

In thinking about what defines a '*refugee diaspora'* then, the elements to consider are further narrowed. Refugee Studies has often found itself tied to the refugee regime in ways that limit and constrain it. By refugee regime, I am referring to the combination of international/national laws and policies, international/national/nongovernmental institutions and governing bodies that interact with and shape refugee policy, protections and processes.[20] The geopolitical and socio-economic interests that create the volatility of the refugee regime, manifest its discursive and legal justification for changes in refugee policy and procedure upon the terrain of how a 'refugee' is defined. Accordingly, in Refugee Studies, there is a lot of debate over the definitions of the refugee; whether broadening them to include people who are environmental refugees, internally displaced, products of other types of exile is productive, or ultimately erode refugee protections by dismantling the refugee.[21] These debates also speak to the limits that scholars of Refugee Studies keep confronting, what Malkki refers to as the *functionalism* within refugee studies, which encourages the creation of labels, categories, patterns, and stages to essentialize both refugees and refugee experiences.[22] While desired by policymakers, these simplifications lead not only to what Richard Black called the "intellectual cul-de-sac" in refugee studies but also deeply dehumanize, depoliticize, and de-historicize the lived realities and complex personhood owed to refugees.[23]

Growing out of a critical multidisciplinary approach, the field of Critical Refugee Studies helps to work beyond these limitations by emphasizing the need to center refugee-based perspectives and critically contextualizing refugee experiences in the historical and ongoing contexts of the larger political, social, and cultural forces that shape how we view and ultimately

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[20] For more, see: Scalettaris Giulia, "Refugee Studies and the International Refugee Regime: A Reflection on a Desirable Separation," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2007): 36–50.

[21] James C. Hathaway, "Forced Migration Studies: Could We Agree Just to 'Date'?," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 349–69, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem019.

[22] Liisa Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From "Refugee Studies" to the National Order of Things," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (1995) 495–523.

[23] Richard Black, "Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy," *International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 57–78; Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things."

treat refugees.[24] For example, the term *refugitude* from Khatharya Um's work highlights the complexity involved in the consciousness and struggle of refugee communities even after the legal identity of "refugee" is shed.[25] *Refugitude* re-centers refugee consciousness and subjectivity, escaping the way the term refugee has instead been understood pejoratively through the language of needs and the legal statuses that refugees themselves have no control or say over. This type of work moves the idea of refugee-ness from an individual within the state's purview to looking at how this subjectivity can affect entire communities over generations in line with how diasporic identity is studied.

Taking a Critical Refugee Studies approach to theorizing a refugee diaspora, therefore, asks us to look more closely at certain elements that differentiate a refugee diaspora's experience. In this dissertation, I am exploring the following elements (this is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but one that reflects the experiences I found among the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee diaspora of Canada): (1) the ***violence of its dispersal*** as a social condition that is being lived with; (2) the ***distinctive relationship with the homeland*** this results in; (3) the ***experience of the refugee process and statelessness***; (4) the ***uniquely developed relationship with the host nation***; and (5) a ***collective memory shaped by specific traumas and ruptures***. Below, I explore each of these strands a bit further.

(1) Violent Dispersal[26] - In her ethnographic work on Sri Lanka, Sharika Thiranagama describes war, "not as along a continuum with other forms of social life, but as a powerful and distinct force, period, and subjectivity, a making on a site of unmaking."[27] Lubkemann too, argues that "war conditions can create a social life rather than suspend it," focusing on the "makings" possible during war instead of just the "unmakings" that are emphasized in the

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[24] Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu, *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2021).

[25] Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (NYU Press, 2015).

[26] I am narrowing down the term refugee to speak directly to populations like Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who have fled war specifically. Forced migration studies, on the other hand has expanded its contours to make space for other types of mass displacement: environmental refugees, IDPs, economic refugees, exiles, etc. The term refugee itself can also be used in other scenarios other than just war, classically defined. I believe it is useful to broaden definitions of the refugee as a means of solidarity building, but I also think it can be productive to dive into specificity, which I do in this dissertation. See: Josh DeWind, "Response to Hathaway," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 381–85, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fem022; Stephen Castles, "Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation," *Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2003): 13–34.

[27] Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

scholarship.[28] It is useful to think about war and violence in this way; as a social condition that does not just impact the lives of *refugee diaspora*, but violently re-orders it and actively creates their new realities. However, I believe that it is also useful to see the social condition of war as one that is not temporally contained. As Um makes clear, "history is neither just a prelude to nor just a cause of migration, but threads through and informs post-migration experiences in the diaspora."[29] Hence, war is not a temporary part of the lives of a refugee diaspora, but one that reaches back to various histories that created the conditions of war, and reaches forward on a continuum that impacts future trajectories, even for multiple generations.

Some diaspora scholars, such as Tölölyan, do try to narrow the conditions of dispersal for diasporas. This is because he argues that "a diaspora that is born of catastrophe inflicted on the collective suffers trauma and usually becomes a community to which the work of memory, commemoration, and mourning is central, shaping much of its cultural production and political commitment."[30] While he acknowledges that other forms of dispersal can create a diaspora that engages in collective memory in similar ways, he emphasizes these elements of commemoration and collective mourning. Migration and other types of transnational movement only continue to increase in our modern age with the forms that they take and the experiences and networks they produce only becoming more heterogeneous and multilayered. Therefore, I believe it is useful to broaden our understanding of diaspora to reflect these different types of movement and the various experiences they create, while using *'refugee diaspora'* to help retain a focus on the elements of diasporic dispersal by 'catastrophe' that Tölölyan and others explore.

Other scholars complicate our understanding of war by attending to the continuities of violent histories in a way that reshapes how we think about war and its violences. Maldonado-Torres, for example reveals modernity's 'naturalization of the death ethic of war through colonialism, race and particular modalities of gender differentiation" which together link to what Sylvia Wynter called "the denial of co-humanness."[31] This conceptualizes war as not just a military struggle but points towards the fact that the conditions which create war, like colonialism, create a never-ending state of war, full of the every-day violences that Veena Das turns her attention to in her exploration of how violence structures subjectivity.[32] For second-

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[28] Stephen C Lubkemann, "More than Violence: An Anthropological Approach to Wartime Behavior," *AnthroNotes : Museum of Natural History Publication for Educators* 28, no. 2 (September 12, 2014): 12, https://doi.org/10.5479/10088/22429.

[29] Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (NYU Press, 2015).

[30] Khachig Tölölyan, "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 647–55.

[31] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2008).

[32] Veena Das, *Violence and Subjectivity* (University of California Press, 2000).

generation Tamil Canadians, the violence of the war in the collective memory is combined with the continued denial of co-humanness they live through, from the apathy they encounter in the face of their human rights activism to the Canadian news stories that stereotype and criminalize their community.

(2) Distinctive relationship with the homeland **–**While diasporic scholars often speak of "return" as a key feature of a diaspora, the concept of "return" for a refugee diaspora is more complicated. Often return is not possible in the interim, and even if an eventual return to the 'imagined homeland' is longed for, that is also an impossible form of return, as war will have changed the country in irrevocable ways. Both Safran and Tölölyan recognize that the concept of "return" for diasporas is not always a literal one. Tölölyan spoke about how instead of a physical return, there might be a re-turn, "a repeated turning to the concept and/or reality of the homeland and other diaspora kin through memory, written and visual texts, travel, gifts and assistance, et cetera."[33] On the other hand, Safran called the idea of return a "largely eschatological concept…used to make life more tolerable by holding out a utopia that stands in contrast to the perceived dystopia in which real life is actually lived." [34] But for refugee diasporas, the homeland is also dystopic, where so much of their nostalgia was scarred by the violence of war. Um, talking of the Cambodian struggle to "free themselves from a tormenting past" identifies that it is actually "the *denied* possibility of return that makes for the poignancy of longing."[35]

Refugee diasporas experience the condition of exile more strongly than their other diasporic counterparts. Their restriction of movement makes real the psychic condition of exile. As Liisa Malkki argues, "exile," as Edward Said explored the term, "connotes a readily aesthecizable realm," a metaphor for the disaffection and alienation experienced. Whereas the label 'refugee' "connotes a bureaucratic and international humanitarian realm."[36] The aesthetic quality of the exilic artist, for instance, is fundamentally changed when thinking about the psychic condition of exile for the refugee.[37]

The impossibility of return also limits the diaspora's transfers and exchanges with the homeland; without the same mobility and movement back and forth, a refugee diaspora again experiences a level of disjuncture and estrangement that affects how its sense of collective identity evolves. Diaspora scholars generally talk about the way the imagined homeland is ruptured from space and time, but considering how war changes the social and physical landscape of a country, this rupture is felt all the more by a refugee diaspora. As Um argues, what most refugee diasporas "desire is not simply return but a reinsertion into a specific

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[33] Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s)."

[34] Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies."

[35] Um, *From the Land of Shadows*.

[36] Malkki, "Refugees and Exile: From 'Refugee Studies' to the National Order of Things," 513.

[37] Ibid.

temporal frame, affixed in the exilic memory at the moment of rupture."[38] She also explains that for second-generation and other younger-generations, "return " is "not just going back to the past but addressing the past in order to go beyond it."[39] This idea of return links to the impulse this dissertation reveals among the second-generation of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. This generation does not yearn for 'return' to the time before 'exile' or even the physical space of the homeland the way earlier generations do; instead, it sees return as a tool through which to paint future trajectories of their diasporic identity. How will the trajectories of this generation's identity change and evolve as the multiple facets of their intersectional identities interact and encounter new challenges, oppressions, and opportunities for community?

The nation-state of origin, then, is not synonymous with the homeland for a refugee diaspora, even though this might also be true for other types of diaspora. For a refugee diaspora, however, the nation-state of origin is ruptured from their conception of the 'homeland' through politics, violence, and the geopolitics of war. For populations from countries like Cambodia and Vietnam, the homeland is forever changed by war, not just metaphysically, but through the influences of other foreign powers, political shifts, and new regimes of power. Similar in theme but different in manifestation, Sri Lankan Tamils, like Palestinians, experience a ripping apart of the homeland from the internationally-recognized nation-state system that is functioning in the space of their imagined homeland. This produces a dyssynchronous reality of two 'nations' occupying the same land (the legally recognized nation and the imagined nation of a refugee diaspora), and the diaspora maintains markedly different relationships with each. Through its exploration of the history of political organization in both Sri Lanka and Canada, Chapter 1 demonstrates the way Sri Lankan Tamils see Sri Lanka (their state oppressor) and Eelam (the imagined homeland) separately. This becomes even clearer in the nationalistic rituals explored in Chapter 4 and the way the "international community" and not the Sri Lankan state was the audience to their 2009 protests covered in Chapter 3.

(3) Statelessness and the refugee regime – A refugee diaspora does not only experience the violence of war in their home countries but also the violence of seeking asylum and being subject to transnational and national systems of the refugee regime. The refugee regime refers to the network of national/international/nongovernmental institutions, laws, and policies that interact with and shape refugee policy, protections and processes. Marie Lacroix's study on the social construction of refugee claimant subjectivity, in which she critiques the effects of the refugee status determination process, speaks to some of the direct results of not critically challenging a legal-oriented definition of the refugee subject.[40] Asylum seekers are put in a position where they are not even recognized as refugees until the state grants them this status, putting them through a process where the state is the arbiter of legitimizing their experiences

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[38] Um, *From the Land of Shadows*.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Marie Lacroix, "Canadian Refugee Policy and the Social Construction of the Refugee Claimant Subjectivity: Understanding Refugeeness," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 147–66, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/17.2.147.

and claims and exposing the massive institutional power exerted over the status of legal 'refugee' identity. The states' own responsibilities, as dictated by international law, national laws, and political interests, impact this process of legitimization that allows the refugee to be able to *come into existence*. It is a category that affirms the process of biopower – allowing the state to determine or deny the very existence of a refugee through a bureaucratic processing that is managed by the state's geopolitical and socio-economic aims and directives. This has profound implications for the political subjectivity of refugee diasporas.

George and Jettner's study on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India and Canada reveals that their refugee migration journey is marked "by exposure to multiple pre- and post-migration traumatic events.[41] Pre-migration, they were scarred by the experience of the war, but even once they left Sri Lanka, many were faced with the trauma of life in refugee camps and in their new host countries. The study focuses on the feeling of "limbo" they reported feeling while they were uncertain of what their futures held and felt lost in the cracks of government purview without support.[42] Claiming refugee status is therefore experienced as a precarious state of in-between-ness, where asylum seekers are untethered from the forms of citizenship and rights that most of us take for granted. This dissertation does not have the scope to explore all the dimensions of the impact of the refugee process on this diaspora. Nevertheless, Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 reveal hints of how the second-generation is starting to grapple more directly with the community's experiences of refugee migration, even if their parents are not.

Moreover, diaspora studies has sometimes tended to frame diasporas as both a symptom and a cause of the dissolution of the centrality of the nation-state in our global understanding and lived reality of the world.[43] However, for a refugee diaspora, the power of the nation-state system is still powerfully felt. They are not liberated from the nation-state system with the mobility promised by the celebratory narrative of transnationality and globalization, but instead suffer the realities of statelessness. As Mimi Nguyen states, "as a political noncitizen, the refugee is outside the law, devoid of rights, the effect of a terrible exception through which his or her life is forsaken. The refugee, at the same time, is an object of imperative concern for the arbiters of law and sovereignty."[44] This juxtaposition makes clear how the refugee is rendered both outside of legal protections while still targeted for bureaucratic oversight.

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[41] Miriam George and Jennifer Jettner, "Migration Stressors, Psychological Distress, and Family—a Sri Lankan Tamil Refugee Analysis," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 17, no. 2 (May 1, 2016): 341–53, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-014-0404-y.

[42] Ibid.

[43] See: Tölölyan, "Rethinking Diaspora(s)."; Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the Nation-State: From Victims to Challengers," *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (July 1, 1996): 507–20, https://doi.org/10.2307/2625554.

[44] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012). 58.

Along the lines of complicating the simplified dichotomy between citizenship and statelessness, Aihwa Ong argues that in the modern era, "elements of citizenship (rights, entitlements, etc.) are becoming disarticulated from each other, and becoming re-articulated with universalizing criteria of neoliberalism and human rights."[45] Her concept of "flexible citizenship" has sometimes been taken up by celebratory narratives of transnationalism because it depicts an example of a population that leverages its privileges and networks between different nation-states to create economic, cultural, and social flows that serve it, untethered by national belonging. This, at first, seems different from the experience of refugee diasporas that still seek citizenship for the rights and protections it provides, instead of primarily for the economic opportunities it represents. However, at the heart of Ong's argument, she is focused on the ways that populations navigate the biopolitics of the state. While the Chinese population she looks at in her work on flexible citizenship leverages the systems and opportunities presented by citizenship to optimize flexible capital accumulation, refugee diasporas are also actively trying to navigate and leverage the systems and opportunities of citizenship just for different priorities. [46] The flows of capital and technology are not separate from the flows of other forms of power and control exerted by and over nation-states. Stateless subjects start from a vulnerable position of less mobility and options; however, it is still important to see refugee diasporas as populations with agency that are also refusing to be limited by the nation-state system. As this dissertation seeks to illustrate, refugee diasporas are actively navigating transnational terrains to claim rights and space for their placemaking projects.

(4) Uniquely developed relationship with the host nation - Even after the difficult journey of claiming refugee status and finding a pathway to citizenship in a new host nation, gaining citizenship and other rights and statuses does not erase the foundational relationship between this population and its host country. First, the process of claiming asylum and trying to gain refugee status is a highly taxing process that can lead to high levels of psychological distress. As one study on the problematic aspects of Canada's refugee claim decision-making process concludes, there is a "culture of disbelief" within the structure of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB).[47] They point out that there is a double bind between the message "we are here to protect you" that is projected by the board and their simultaneous "construing of the refugee as a liar, if not a criminal." They also attribute this double bind to ideas of the "pure victim" and pressure "to align Canada's rates of acceptance with those of most other Western countries."[48] This structured system that makes refugees 'prove' their

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[45] Aihwa Ong, "Mutations in Citizenship," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 2–3 (May 1, 2006): 499–505, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406064831.

[46] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Duke University Press, 1999).

[47] Cécile Rousseau et al., "The Complexity of Determining Refugeehood: A Multidisciplinary Analysis of the Decision-making Process of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 43–70, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/15.1.43.

[48] Ibid.

trauma and "deserving-ness" creates the foundation of their relationship with becoming Canadian.

This is tied to what Mimi Nguyen called "the gift of freedom."[49] Through her work, she highlights how the refugee is made part of a contractual debt that is owed to the nation-state that has accepted them; a debt that is never-ending and tied to the nation-state's interest in continuing structures of power that benefit it. Like Maldonado-Torres, Nguyen explores the ways that colonialism and its violences continue through liberalism, creating an enduring state of war, which she connects back to the refugee body.[50] It is through the "refugee patriot' that military actions and intervention in other parts of the world are justified.[51] Nguyen also talks about how this 'gift' is, "among other things a gift of time: time for the subject of freedom to resemble or "catch up to" the modern observer."[52] This speaks to the ways that refugee diasporas, while first propped up as symbols of a nation's savior narrative, are quickly expected to blend into the model minority stereotype and uphold the narrative of 'successful' integration, their difference now conveniently erased.

To earn belonging in a new nation of residence, refugee populations are thus expected to perform their deserving-ness and play their part in maintaining the national narratives the nation-state is invested in telling. In the case of Canada, immigrant groups and refugees in particular, are expected to contribute to the narrative of Canadian exceptionalism based on its progressive narratives about benevolence, inclusion, and being a multicultural mosaic. The contours of this will be further explored in Chapter 2.

(3) Collective memory affected by trauma and rupture – The concept of collective memory, originally coined by Maurice Halbwachs, has been woven into our understanding of diaspora.[53] It is a collective sense of memory that enables a diasporic consciousness, and it is the unique elements of how social memory is created, maintained, and transmitted that shape the way diasporic identity evolves. Diasporas, in general, experience a temporal and physical rupture from their homeland which affects memory. Sara Ahmed, for instance, argues that "migration involves not only a spatial dislocation, but also a temporal dislocation: 'the past' becomes associated with a home that is impossible to inhabit, and be inhabited by, in the present."[54] Ruptured memory, then, comes to take up residence in what Homi Bhabha referred

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[49] Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom*.

[50] Ibid., 170

[51] Ibid

[52] Ibid., 17

[53] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).

[54] Sara Ahmed, "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (December 1, 1999): 329–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/136787799900200303. 343.

to as 'in-between spaces.'[55] For Bhabha, it is not just diasporas but the post-colonial experience as a whole that creates a disruption of time, a break in "the continuum of past and present" that calls for borderline work in 'in-between' spaces that can become the "terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation."[56]

But for refugee diasporas, this experience of the in-between place is much more pronounced as their collective memory is ruptured from not only time and place but through the traumas of war, the migration process, survivor's guilt, and strained relationships with those left behind or those that escaped elsewhere. The uneven terrain created in the shadow of war and statelessness affects refugee diasporas in poignant ways. Um speaks about this rupture in refugee diaspora memory through the idea of fragmentation and uses the metaphor of a "broken-chain" to "depict the sense of discontinuity, anomie, and rupture that survivors feel in their lives"[57] However, she also highlights how memory can be a source of strength and resilience for refugee communities, "anchor[ing] them in genealogy against a future fraught with uncertainty and ambivalence."[58] This points to why the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora might cling so firmly to its memory-work, creating a diasporic consciousness that is so full of memory that is repeatedly politicized through the community's work to advocate for itself and those 'back home.' Memory very clearly becomes this community's anchor to both a ruptured 'home' and a future painted by uncertainty.

Much of the work in Critical Refugee Studies brings to light that for refugee diasporas, memory exists in the silences held within and among families. To study memory within refugee diaspora communities, then, it is useful to follow in the footsteps of Avery Gordon's work on hauntings and look for 'seething presences' in order to locate the ghosts of the past that that have been hidden by history.[59] What is remembered for refugee diasporas often lives as ghosts inhabiting spaces of in-between or living embodied in refugee bodies. Paul Connerton and Diana Taylor both explore ideas of embodied memory, with Taylor exploring how trauma specifically can be transmitted through forms of embodied memory.[60] This ties well with Marianne Hirsh's concept of *postmemory*, which captures the way that memory can be passed

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[55] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2012).

[56] Ibid.

[57] Um, *From the Land of Shadows*.184.

[58] Khatharya Um, "Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora," *Positions: Asia Critique* 20, no. 3 (2012): 831–50.

[59] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[60] Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).; Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003).

down through generations with such vividness that for younger generations who are far removed from the traumatic experiences that preceded their births, these memories still feel like their own.[61] Transmission of *postmemory,* for Hirsh, happens in the "familial structure of mediation and representation [that] facilitate the affiliative acts of the *postgeneration*."[62] She also looks specifically at the power of photographs in this transmission process.

However, for the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, *postmemory* is not only transmitted through silence and the family. The nature of the ethnic conflict produced a strong Tamil nationalism which was consciously developed and leaned upon to imbue the community with strong narratives about the war. Yen le Espiritu and Viet Nguyen, both looking at Vietnamese-Americans, show that refugee memory is also manipulated by national narratives of history that write over the lived experiences of refugees.[63] For Sri Lankan Tamils, the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE were both actively trying to write the narrative about the war. Still, this diaspora was actively engaging with LTTE narratives, developing them, contributing to them, and forcefully trying to deter the fragmentation of memory that war produces to maintain a collective memory about the war that was continually used to advocate for rights, refugee status, and intervention for Sri Lanka's humanitarian crisis.

This dissertation looks at how the second-generation navigates both the community-regulated narratives about Tamil collective memory and the ephemeral seething presences at its edges. It will explore how embodied memory is performed and communicated through refugee bodies as well as how media objects are used as active objects in transferring collective memory to the second-generation, with Chapters 3, 4, and 5 diving into the ways that second-generation Tamil-Canadians are being shaped by and contributing to the diaspora's collective memory.

Claiming rights and articulating political subjectivities

This dissertation is deeply interested in the political subjectivity of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and the structures of powers that influence the way they negotiate this subjectivity, articulate it, and reflexively understand it. While Foucault presents "subjectification" as the process of being made by structures of power that produce "consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control, and administration," Aihwa Ong uses the term "cultural citizenship" to refer to the "dual process of self-making and being made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society."[64] Lok Siu then further expands our understanding

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[61] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 103–28, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019.

[62] Ibid.

[63] See Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Univ of California Press, 2014); Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Refugee Memories and Asian American Critique," *Positions: Asia Critique* 20, no. 3 (August 1, 2012): 911–42, https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-1593582.

of cultural citizenship by exploring the concept of diasporic citizenship to capture the "social process that encompasses both the legal-juridical aspects and the cultural-affective dimensions of belonging" that a diaspora navigates.[65] As a refugee diaspora, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has a complicated relationship with the legal category of "citizenship" and its human rights activism is also directed beyond the nation-state system affecting the way it politically positions itself as a "citizens" sometimes, and as "the subjects of human rights" in other contexts. For this reason, I choose to use the term political subjectivities to describe the multilayered ways the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora comes to understand and articulate themselves in a variety of political and cultural contexts. I also find Judith Butler's work on political subjectivity useful since she highlights the performative nature of political agency in exploring the way social norms, discourses, and regulatory practices shape subjectivity.[66]

The Tamil diaspora's multiple experiences with state and non-state structures shape the way they form political subjectivity. Some of these experiences include: (1) their experience as an oppressed minority population in Sri Lanka, (2) their experiences with appealing to the human rights system in their activism, (3) their experiences with navigating the refugee process, and (4) their experience trying to negotiate their place and worth within Canadian multiculturalism. The power dynamics of these structures mean that their subjectivity is always and already political. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is not just a pawn of these dynamics, however, and is active in this process of creating its own political subjectivity. It is a community that has always been conscious of their rights: which they have, which they do not, and which they continue to vie for through their different expressions of political agency.

The community's articulation of political subjectivity in the hopes of becoming legible to the forces of power that offer the community safety, rights, and belonging are entangled with the community's embodied practices of memorialization and its efforts to create and maintain diasporic consciousness. Along the lines of Butler's emphasis on performativity, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora can be seen as constantly performing its political subjectivity whether it is being asked to by refugee boards, or Canadian multiculturalism, or when it is trying to forcefully engage the "international community" and "human rights system" to fight for human rights in Sri Lanka. These performances then become part of the living memory that is both embodied and made part of the diasporic consciousness. As Brian Massumi explores in the *Politics of Affect,* affect, emotion, and bodily experiences have an important role in shaping political subjectivity, and the acts of political organizing cannot be easily extracted from the sensory dimensions of collective identity formation.[67]

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[64] Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996).
[65] Lok Siu, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (Stanford University Press, 2007).

[66] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997).
[67] Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

Scholars who have explored the political subjectivity of the second-generation of a diaspora community have often found that navigating multiple cultural and political contexts leads their political attitudes and sense of transnational identity to form differently than their parents.[68] My exploration of the second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora also reveals that their lived experiences and new contexts mean that though they are influenced by the political articulations of the first-generation, they also develop new perspectives of what a diasporic Tamil articulation of identity can look like.

Placemaking: claiming space and navigating a visual landscape

Among the Tamil diaspora, a common conversation starter when meeting another Sri Lankan Tamil is to ask *"entha ur?"* or *"evadham?"* both meaning something like, "which place are you from?" each using a different conceptualization of 'home' and 'place.' Sharika Thiranagama explains that *ur* means 'home' and refers to one's village in Sri Lanka.[69] She explains how *ur* comes to be understood as the basis of one's identity since "persons who came from the same Ur shared characteristics through their nourishment in the same soil." Cheran Rudramoorthy also adds that to stay away from one's *ur* is considered a supreme form of punishment, almost more severe than 'social death' itself.[70] This ancestral land is thus deeply rooted as part of Tamil identity, and losing it through war and migration has profoundly impacted the diaspora. The loss of this land and its ties to Tamil identity have only been emphasized by the LTTE's thirty-year-long fight to carve out and liberate the independent state of Tamil Eelam from Sri Lanka.

Through the creation of this imagined state that existed suspended in both time and place, this ancestral land became elevated to more than just the soil of north and east Sri Lanka; it became a transnational home existing in the in-between, both far-reaching and powerful, but still somehow unsatisfying. This imagined home did not provide the rights and safety the Tamil community craved, but it did provide a sense of belonging, community, and a sense of resistance to the powers and structures that made them feel home-less. It also constituted a collective dream, one that honored their fears and hopes and kept their collective memory and consciousness rooted in something.

Aside from this transnational placemaking that emerged in reaction to exile and dispossession in Sri Lanka, the diaspora also finds itself in a new place: Canada. Here, in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), they have been tasked to create a new sense of *home*, to engage in

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[68] Peggy Levitt and Mary C. Waters, *The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).; Steven Vertovec, "Migrant Transnationalism and Modes of Transformation," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 970–1001, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00226.x.

[69] Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). 18.

[70] Cheran Rudhramoorthy, "Citizens of Many Worlds: Theorizing Tamil Diasporicity," in *Histroy and Imagination: Tamil Culture in the Global Context*, 2007, 150–68.

placemaking projects that allow them to belong to this place while not losing their connection to people and memories in Sri Lanka, or to the rest of the globally dispersed diaspora. This goal is met with the challenge of Canada's myth of multiculturalism which purports to support just such a task, while actually allowing for very narrow articulations of immigrant identity that are legible to the state and fit Canadian narratives of inclusion.

Placemaking scholars have mainly focused on localized and specific places in which communities come together to create belonging, informed by the dominance of fields like geography and urban planning on the concept.[71] However, some key work has been done on placemaking to help expand the boundaries of this concept. For instance, Rios and Watkins look at the Hmong diaspora to try to understand placemaking as a "translocal" process that is attuned to the way that placemaking is tied to "both local and extralocal policies and actions in shaping place."[72] Badescu, writing about Latin American memorialization, also approaches place-making in a new way, analyzing memorial architecture to think about transnational place-making as it relates to memory after violence.[73]

Placemaking for the Tamil-Canadian community is not just restricted to one site or method but features a multi-layered approach of different interconnected spaces that are influenced simultaneously by other places. Accordingly, this dissertation explores a variety of spaces in which place is claimed by this diasporic community. First, Chapter 2 explores the news media and its public comments as a public space upon which the belonging of the Tamil diaspora, but also immigrant communities at large, are contested. Chapter 3 then explores the space of the 2009 protests as a space of rupture and transnational connection. It also simultaneously explores the space of the body as a site of embodied memory and a site unto which the diaspora maps out its search for belonging and healing. These themes continue as Chapter 4 explores the space of the commemoration event, *Maaveerar Naal*, as ritualized space of community memory-work that creates and maintains a highly regulated relationship with the land of Eelam and Tamil identity. Finally, Chapter 5 also explores the space of media circulation, both in-person and virtually, as a space through which a visual landscape of

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[71] Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong, *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).; Bronwyn Bragg, "Making Home in Little Syria : Gendered Geographies of Refugee Placemaking" (University of British Columbia, 2020), https://doi.org/10.14288/1.0395001.; Wesley Attewell and Danielle Wong, "Donut Time Refugee Place-Making in 24/7 Afterwar.," *Canadian Literature*, no. 246 (December 22, 2021): 15–40.; Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Religious Placemaking and Community Building in Diaspora," *Environment and Behavior* 41, no. 3 (May 1, 2009): 307–37, https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916508320459.

[72] Michael Rios and Joshua Watkins, "Beyond 'Place': Translocal Placemaking of the Hmong Diaspora," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 35, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 209–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X14568023.

[73] Gruia Badescu, "Transnational Place-Making after Political Violence: Agencies and Practices of Site Memorialization in the Latin American Southern Cone," in *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*, ed. Jenny Wüstenberg and Aline Sierp (Berghahn Books, 2020).

diasporic Tamil identity is created, maintained, and contested.

Placemaking is a sensory project as much as it is a political one. Belonging is felt, and home is created through the sensory memory of hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, and seeing.[74] I concentrate on this element: the *seeing*. Before our world became highly traversable and filled with visual technologies that changed how we move through the world and what we see on a daily basis, our locality uniquely shaped what we see as *home*. Yet, the landscape of *home* has changed, and our local experience is layered with other visual experiences from different times and places. This dissertation asks, given this new lived reality, how do diasporic subjects *envision* home?

In the foreword of *A Sense of Viidu*, a collection of scholarship on the (re)creation of *home* by the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Australia, the editors write:

> …the everyday Jaffna Tamil idiom with which I grew up, the word *viidu* (more phonetically, *vuudu*), was often paired with another term, *vaasal*. Usually translated as "house and home" or "house and property", the alliterative phrase *viidu-vaasal* perhaps more closely evokes "household": the tangible and intangible attributes, belongings and relations that make up a home. On its own, however, *vaasal* denotes a spatial feature such as a door-step, entry-way or threshold, an intermediate space between the world outside a house and its interior. *Vaasal* is that which distinguishes outer from inner, demarcates the familiar and domestic and orders the space between home and not-home. To lack *viidu-vaasal* is not only to lack a roof over one's head, but to be more deeply disoriented, to have one's boundaries displaced; it is to be profoundly unhomed in the world.[75]

The distinction they raise reflects what I have also witnessed in the way the Tamil community thinks of these concepts. When I hear Tamil people talk about their homes 'back home,' I have commonly heard people say a version of "the home, everything, has gone/been destroyed" in Tamil. If they just use the word for house, *viidu*, then, I know they are only referring to a material loss of the structure, but if they use *viidu-vassal* (the house with its entry way), they are implying a larger loss: everything within the house and the very power to *access* what makes it *home.* Even when I saw my father's childhood home in Sri Lanka for the first time, I witnessed his dismay over the missing veranda, the porch that was part of his home's *vaasal.*

In this way, the *vaasal* or entryway becomes a crucial part of Tamil people's conception of *home.* This in-between space is what bridges "home and not-home." For the diaspora, so far away, I argue that the visual landscape created by forms of media and the community's interaction with them create a makeshift *vaasal* for them to interact with feeling of *home*. Just as *vassal* implicates the "intangible attributes, belongings, and [social] relations that make up a

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[74] Nira Yuval-Davis also divides the concepts of 'belonging' and the 'politics of belonging' with the first referring to an emotional attachment, "feeling 'at home'" and the latter being used to interrogate the way nationalism, racism and other contemporary politics complicate belonging. See: Nira Yuval-Davis, "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging," *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (July 1, 2006): 197–214, https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331.

[75] Niro Kandasamy, Nirukshi Perera, and Charishma Ratnam, *A Sense of Viidu: The (Re)Creation of Home by the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Australia* (Springer Nature, 2020).

home," this visual landscape is not just a compilation of media objects. Instead, it is subsumed by the mediations of a community that has created, circulated, consumed, and (re)imagined them. These mediations create access; they create a way in – a different type of connection – but one that connects this diaspora to its memory, to a sense of home, and to each other.

Media studies/visual culture

I am particularly interested in the way media objects and the visual have grown in prominence, affecting how identity and memory are created and maintained in this community. I believe this is due to a few key reasons. First, since images are commonly understood as memory-objects, images are seen to be able to function as facilitators for memory and, thereby, identity. As collective memory is a living entity that is being made and remade within a community, images, through their ties to memory can function as tools that both influence and complicate this process. I say "complicate" because images and the media technologies that facilitate them cannot be simply understood as memory technologies that can hold and re-visualize memory faithfully. Just as collective memory is defined by a collective process of re-remembering and forgetting where memory is being re-created, changed, and mutated through each iteration, images, and their false equivalency to memory only complicates this process. Marita Sturken argues that "cultural memory is produced through objects, images and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning"[76] Therefore, these media objects are not simply produced and circulated but mediate our interactions with past, present, and future, and are able to develop a life of their own and act upon those that engage with them as active memory objects.

Second, our modern age features a proliferation of visual media that comes to structure our everyday experiences. We can refer to Arjun Appadurai's work on the globalization of cultural flows here.[77] In speaking of *mediascapes*, he refers to the landscape of images produced and disseminated throughout the world through private and public interests that blur the lines between the realistic and fictional landscapes audiences see and interact with.[78] However, all the different landscapes he describes - *ethnoscapes, ideoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes* - are ultimately intertwined flows of capital, technology, ideas, and imagined worlds that are being continually co-created through these bidirectional flows.[79] What they collaboratively speak to, is the way landscapes that shape individuals and communities in the modern globalized world are not just local, but created through these complicated and mediated flows of culture and capital.

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[76] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997): 9.
[77] Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory Culture & Society* 7, no. 2–3 (1990): 295–310.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid.

The power of a media-produced landscape is further exacerbated for the second-generation of a refugee diaspora that does not have many, if any, memories of the homeland. The visual landscape of diasporic identity produced through the diaspora offers a rich source of collective memory and cultural production that can serve as its connection to the homeland, to other parts of the global diaspora, and even to older generations. This is further underlined by Marianne Hirsch, who, in speaking about *postmemory*, the concept that memories can be transmitted intergenerationally, uses Barthes' metaphor of a photograph serving as an umbilical cord within a family.[80] Through the metaphor, she illustrates the power of photographs to become a powerfully visceral connection to collective memory, familial affect, and life itself, even through its mediated form.[81] Relatedly, Guy Debord argues, "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." This dissertation, therefore, seeks to understand this social relationship within the diaspora by following the flows of mediated visual material that the diaspora creates, circulates, and engages with.[82]

Third, new media technologies have not only enabled certain types of media flow but new configurations of space itself. Virtual space represents a new space that communities such as diasporas can inhabit and traverse. As Ella Shohat argues, internet networking "reshape[s] geography" by not just connecting dispersed communities to their supposed 'center,' but giving power to peripheral and alternative spaces and connections that de-center this 'center.'[83] Yet, virtual space has also been heralded as a democratization of public space where virtual bodies can discard social identities at will.[84] However, the internet, like all spaces, is regulated and mediated by structures of power and by the very technologies that enable them. Certain populations have more power to access, create, and moderate virtual spaces than others, creating new unequal flows of power that reflect and/or exacerbate existing power structures from the material world.

Fourth, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's visual landscape has been overwhelmed by the images used in their human rights activism precisely because of the deep ties images have to the human rights process. Media technologies have been incorporated into the practices of providing evidence for human rights claims since the rise of human rights discourse in the wake

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[80] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

[81] Ibid.

[82] Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Unredacted Word, 2021).

[83] Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, UK: Duke University Press, 2006).

[84] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community, Revised Edition: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (MIT Press, 2000).; Robert M. Kitchin, "Towards Geographies of Cyberspace," *Progress in Human Geography* 22, no. 3 (June 1, 1998): 385–406, https://doi.org/10.1191/030913298668331585.

of WWII.[85] This is tied to what Barthes called the "special credibility of the photograph."[86] Understood as devices capable of recording reality in its true form, photographs came to be seen as the perfect memory technologies for the active witnessing and testimonial processes of human rights procedure. Developing the study of human rights media, Meg McLagan and Leshu Torchin both speak to the ability of visual media to speak the language of human rights not just through the ability to produce 'evidence' but to evoke embodied and felt reactions that produce sympathetic viewers.[87] This Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora sought the affective power of images in making their rights-claims, but as Chapter 3 will explore, the community's continual engagement with this visual landscape has a marked effect on the community's diasporic consciousness.

Fifth, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is deeply invested in navigating the politics of representation. As Critical Visual Studies illustrates, the politics of representation are intertwined with the politics of the visual, which shape the demand to be seen, who can be seen, and who has the right to look.[88] This points towards the larger forces and unequal power that shape the contexts in which media objects are engaged with and how. However, opposed to seeing these contexts of power as a unilateral flow of manipulation, "visual culture discourse has concerned itself with the complex dynamics of audience reception, suggesting the ways in which the consumers of hegemonic corporate and governmental visual materials might variously refuse, resist or recode those materials for their own purposes"[89] These theoretical underpinnings form a foundation for how I approach my larger question of how the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora forms, understands and articulates its identity through the way it engages visual practices. My research reveals that 'to see' and 'be seen' are fundamentally connected to this community's placemaking projects, their quest for belonging and connection, and their articulations of political subjectivity.

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[85] Leshu Torchin, *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

[86] Roland Barthes, "From Camera Lucida," in *Theatre and Performance Design* (Routledge, 2010). 194.

[87] Leshu Torchin, *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).; Meg McLagan, "Principles, Publicity, and Politics: Notes on Human Rights Media," *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 3 (2003): 605–12.

[88] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize," in *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*, ed. Aidan McGarry et al., Visual Culture and Communication (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 11–14, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvswx8bm.5. Xxxiii.

[89] Meg McLagan, "Introduction: Making Human Rights Claims Public," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (2006): 191–95, https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2006.108.1.191. 12.

Defining the subject: second-generation-Sri Lankan-Tamil-diaspora in Toronto

An important issue that arises in setting out to do this research is the question of how I define this community. I have chosen to use the term "Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora" to identify this community of ethnic Tamils who fled from Sri Lanka to form pockets of diaspora in several countries across the world. A primary issue is my use of the term 'Sri Lankan,' which I find necessary to contextualize the origins of this diaspora even though many in this community do not consider themselves "Sri Lankan" because of the violence and persecution they suffered at the hands of the Sri Lankan state. An alternative is to call them Eelam Tamils. Eelam refers to the imagined nation-state that the LTTE sought to carve out of Sri Lanka's north and east. This is the region of Sri Lanka heavily populated by Tamils. However, the use of "Eelam Tamil" would also make invisible those in this community who do not identify with the dream of Eelam.

Although I slip into the use of just "Tamil" without the national referent throughout the dissertation, I find it necessary to forefront the national referent to make sure it is clear that I am solely focused on Tamils from Sri Lanka and not addressing the large population of Tamils from India. India has a large population of ethnic Tamils, mainly in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Tamils from India have also migrated internationally and have settled in places like Toronto. They often become part of the transnational "Tamil diaspora" through the shared language, overlapping culture, and the fact that Tamil Nadu produces mass amounts of Tamil-language entertainment from music to movies to TV shows, which is a significant source of the cultural content consumed by Sri Lankan Tamils living globally. However, because of my focus on how the conditions of dispersal and the relevance of the historical and political context of Sri Lankan Tamil migration, I do not explore this facet of the larger "Tamil diaspora."

Next, even though I want to understand the diaspora as one that is globally dispersed, I have grounded my study of this population in the Tamil-Canadian diaspora. It is the largest community of Sri Lankan Tamils outside of Sri Lanka, and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) serves as a central place for community organizations that function transnationally. I also focus specifically on the second-generation to explore the ways that the community's context of refugee migration and war affects this diaspora intergenerationally. I define the 'first' and 'second' generations of this diaspora according to how members of Tamil diaspora most commonly refer to each generation: second-generation refers to the generation born/raised in the diaspora, while first-generation refers to the first generation that emigrated from Sri Lanka.

I also temporally define my research around the watershed moment of 2009 when Sri Lanka's military offensive sparked an outcry within the Tamil diaspora over the human rights violations that Sri Lanka's army was committing against Tamils in Sri Lanka. 2009 was a moment of rupture in the diasporic community that led to mass activism and pulled the second-generation into the diasporic consciousness in a way it had not been actively involved in before. It was also the year when this decades-long conflict ended, ushering in a post-war era that changed the very foundation of the dynamics that had been solidified within the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora's narrative about itself, its purpose, and its future. My research therefore builds around that moment, investigating the histories that informed it as well as the tendril of futurity that can be understood as forming from that time. Since I approach 2009 as a watershed moment, I made sure to interview two age groups within the second-generation: the first group

was composed of those that were in their twenties during the 2009, while the second group was composed of those who were younger and came of age in a truly post-war era.

While focusing on ideas of collective memory and identity means that I focus on those who feel belonging within this community and/or readily communicate their identity through the prism of being Tamil from Sri Lanka, I am keenly aware of the many that are Tamil from Sri Lanka but do not find belonging in the diasporic community. As I will explore, there are numerous sources of pressure to conform to certain articulations of identity, and sometimes the loudest conversations about identity silence others that are operating at the margins of this community. Ideas of 'community' are also consciously and subconsciously constructed through politics, structures of power and specific histories that can at times limit the inclusion and support they offer their members. As this dissertation explores, the political needs of this community and the avenues that could offer them legibility and power to influence nation-state systems helped shape the organizations and ideologies that build the boundaries and animated the goals of this 'community.' Scholars such as Frances Peters-Little, who looks at Aboriginal communities, help point to the problematics of the way government policies and community organizations can impact the "shaping of 'who' and 'what' constitutes [a community]."[90] Explorations of community formation should always address the ways that communities and shared identities are built not only through connection and support, but through simultaneous means of exclusion and pressure to conform to narrow definitions of community identity set by the majority and those in power. Consequently, one of the elements I am most interested in is following how the post-war era and the second-generation are slowly pushing open the boundaries of how this 'community' self-defines itself.

Here it is also important to address the ways LTTE articulations contend with, subsume, and also overlap with the Tamil diasporas' articulations. There is an understandable urge to separate LTTE ideas, arguments, and culture from those of "Tamil civilians." There has always been a broad spectrum of those that are critical of the LTTE, from those who are critical but sympathetic to those who have suffered at the hands of the LTTE and are fiercely against the organization. The LTTE has been able to dominate the space of Tamil ideology and political articulations about Eelam Tamil identity; they have used tactics and strategies, both violent and ideological, to quell criticism and induce conformity. However, after decades of the strength of the LTTE voice, what is solely of LTTE origin and what is 'purely' Tamil becomes hard to decipher. The LTTE is, of course, made up by Sri Lankan Tamils. (almost 1 in 5 in Sri Lanka). Virtually all Tamil families have had direct interaction with them, through pressure to donate and support the cause, yes, but also because most either have a direct or extended family member who was a Tiger or one that was killed by a Tiger.

Tamil-Canadian poet and scholar R. Cheran, who has been a vocal critic of LTTE in the diaspora, felt prompted to ask new questions about diasporic morality in the din of a post-war era. In an interview, he says:

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[90] Frances Peters-Little, "The Community Game: Aboriginal Self Definition at the Local Level," in *The Indigenous Welfare Economy and the CDEP Scheme*, ed. F Morphy and W.G. Sanders (Canberra: Centre for Aboriginal Economic POlicy Research, 2001).

> Where did LTTE come from, if not from within us, from within the Tamil society in Sri Lanka? I think the entire Eelam Tamil community is responsible for whatever had happened in Sri Lanka. The society has a collective responsibility. Writers and artists have a moral responsibility.[91]

The LTTE and Tamil people are irrevocably tied, both part of each other, even through contestation and internal conflict. Influence does not flow in just one direction, and Tamil civilians and their renderings of Tamil identity have also shaped LTTE messaging.

Furthermore, the Tamil diaspora has also shaped the trajectories of how the LTTE came to view Eelam as a transnational project, not just a local one. Post 9/11 rhetoric has limited how we perceive and understand the terrorist figure as a figure of pathology: unknowable, inhuman, indoctrinated, mentally ill, and not acting of their subjectivity. Lauren Wilcox talks about the metaphor of the insect 'swarm' used for conceptualizing the terrorist figure. She says:

> In these instances, figurations of the swarm are used as instruments of sovereign power to kill and manage other populations figured as inhuman 'swarms'. The threat of terrorism is figured as the threat of the multitude, of the swarm, of the concerted action of that which does not necessarily have a single head.[92]

Yet, this is not true; those we label *terrorists* also have humanity. They also have subjectivity, and in the case of the Tigers, they also contribute to the story of the Tamil community, even if through violence. This dissertation does not excuse the atrocities the LTTE carried out, not just against the Sri Lankan army, but also civilians, often even those it claimed to protect. It also does not excuse the way it hampered and shut down discussion, debate, and multiplicity within the Tamil community. However, this dissertation will also refuse to paint the LTTE as a purely villainous monolith that can be seamlessly extracted from the Tamil community, its imaginings, its articulations of political subjectivity, or its evolutions as a community shaped by war, violence, and a liberation struggle.

While I have endeavored to seek out minority voices and have them represented in this dissertation, the focus of this dissertation is on trying to capture how the collective identity produced by the Tamil-Canadian diaspora has led to a privileging of majority-aligned articulations of this diasporic identity. This landscape of this collective identity is ever-changing and fluid, and for a long time, certain voices and articulations have built it more than others. The LTTE has been intentional in trying to build a collective consciousness among the Tamil diaspora and making sure that this collective consciousness is focused on ideas of Eelam and Tamil nationalism, but in the post-war era and with new generations including their experiences and perspectives in this collective consciousness, a different balance will be possible. I believe that further studies are necessary to capture how this collective consciousness can stay coherent while changing, expanding, and shifting.

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[91] Kavitha Muralidharan, "War And After: How Poet Cheran Mapped The Sri Lankan Conflict Through Verse," *HuffPost* (blog), February 10, 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/archive/in/entry/war-and-after-how-poet-cheran-mapped-the-sri-lankan-conflict-through-verse_in_5c5d316fe4b03afe8d6645eb.

[92] Lauren Wilcox, "Drones, Swarms and Becoming-Insect: Feminist Utopias and Posthuman Politics," *Feminist Review* 116, no. 1 (July 1, 2017): 25–45, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0071-x.

Methodology

The experience of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is not linear but one that functions through an overlapping and complex network of cultural flows and mediations. To study this subject, I felt I needed to develop a methodology that reflects and attends to the interplay of different forces within this diaspora. This dissertation, therefore, seeks to develop an interdisciplinary methodology that blends the methods of ethnography, participant observation, interviews, digital ethnography, and forms of media and visual culture analysis. The triangulation of these methods is helpful in exploring the ways in which expressions of community identity and memory in the Tamil-Canadian diaspora overlap between spaces that are in-person, online, and in the collective consciousness. Using individual interviews and focus groups, as well as less direct forms of participant observation and digital ethnography also balances what is directly articulated by this community while leaving room for the aspects that are not.

I drew from theories born out of visual and digital ethnography to ground this multidisciplinary approach to methodology. In line with Sturken and Cartwright, I approached media objects through the assumption that meaning does not lie within media objects unmediated.[93] Instead, it is through "the context in which an image is seen" and the way "viewers interpret or experience the image itself and its producer" that meaning is continually created and (re)created.[94] Gillian Rose's work on visual ethnography was especially helpful through her exploration of how the complex conceptualization of *practices* can be useful to visual culture.[95] As she notes, the idea of *practices* as developed by Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, Certeau, Appadurai, and Ingold, centers specific places, sensorial engagement, and embodied performances.[96] Referring to the way *practices* are at the heart of visual culture, she quotes Mieke Bal, who says, "performing acts of seeing' produce[s] both seer and seen."[97] Sarah Pink also elaborates on the visual ethnography of place-making by saying that "if place is

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[93] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 45.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Gillian Rose, "The Question of Method: Practice, Reflexivity and Critique in Visual Culture Studies," in *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, ed. Ian Heywood and Barry Sandywell (London, 2012), 542–58. See Also: Mieke Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2003): 5–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/147041290300200101.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid. See also: Sarah Pink, "Experience: Digital Ethnography," in *Innovative Methods in Media and Communications Research*, ed. Sebastian Kubitschko and Anne Kraun (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 161–65.

seen as "event" or process – something that is constantly being made and remade – the one task of the visual ethnographer is to understand this process, and in particular the roles of audio-visual experience and media in it."[98] This points to three key assumptions in digital ethnography that inform my project: (1) the visual is tied to an embodied experience connected to how one performs identity and engages in everyday practices, (2) media objects are actively mediating both places and bodies, and (3) there is spillover between physical spaces and virtual ones that need to be attended to through a multi-sited approach.[99]

These theoretical approaches to visual and digital ethnography helped shape my project into one that explores the *visual landscape of identity* among the Tamil-Canadian diaspora. I see this *visual landscape of diasporic identity* as one that encompasses the way media objects and virtual spaces co-mingle with memory as well as the local, transnational, and imagined spaces of 'home.' Diasporic identity is produced through mediations of multiple types of memories (collective/individual) and various types of spaces/places. In order to explore a *visual landscape of identity*, I organized my research around both offline and online sites centering the way the community engages in visual practices of representation and with visual-based memory/identity objects. For example, in Chapter 2, I examine media representations of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, historically contextualize these patterns, and use interviews with second-generation participants to see how they interact with these representations and how the concept of 'refugee' functions in their families. In Chapter 3, I look at the visual politics of protest and focus in on protest images as active objects that act upon the diaspora that tries to use them as tools. In Chapter 4, I analyze visual rituals of commemoration and how photographs and media reproducibility come into play in the way diasporic communities create and maintain memory. In Chapter 5, I look at virtual and digital extensions of memorialization as well as how the second-generation thinks about the visual politics of representation in challenging existing ways of narrating the Sri Lankan Tamil conflict for memorialization. From media objects to interviews to moments of live performance and ritual, I chose my central objects of analysis by trying to identify different entry points to sites of mediation that offer a rich place from which to address my research questions about diasporic community identity among the second-generation of a refugee diaspora.

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[98] Sarah Pink, "Mobilising Visual Ethnography: Making Routes, Making Place and Making Images," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 9, no. 3 (September 28, 2008), https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-9.3.1166.

[99] Pink, "Mobilising Visual Ethnography;" Pink, "Experience: Digital Ethnography;" Rose, "The Question of Method: Practice, Reflexivity and Critique in Visual Culture Studies;" Bal, "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture;" Christine Hine, "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, ed. Larissa Hjorth et al. (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

The basis of my dissertation was born from five years of fieldwork and research. My ethnographic work in Toronto consisted of extensive participant observation at public community events as well as in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, and follow-up interviews with second-generation Tamil-Canadians. In line with my focus on second-generation Tamil-Canadians, I recruited thirty-five participants who identified as "second-generation Tamil-Canadians from Sri Lanka" for either individual interviews or focus groups. I made sure that there was representation from both genders and that roughly half of my participants were eighteen to twenty-five years old, while the other half were twenty-six to thirty-five years old, in order to get a full picture of second-generation identity across these age groups as the older cohort were heavily impacted by the events of 2009 while the younger cohort came of age in the shadow of 2009 and in a truly post-war era. I began recruiting by reaching out to community groups such as Tamil students' associations and then used purposeful sampling and the snowball method to recruit other participants. My priority was to create a representative sample, and other than age and gender, I also aimed to include both participants that were involved in the community as well as those who were not. One limitation of my recruitment was that the nature of my project attracted more participants that felt comfortable reflecting on their Tamil-Canadian identity. All participant names included in this dissertation are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

The internet was also a vital interrelated site of fieldwork in my research and where I searched for the types of conversation and identity articulation that reveal how new media technologies mediate how this diaspora see and articulate themselves in relation to Tamil-Canadian identity. The media objects I analyze come from a combination of these two sites, both physically and virtually manifested, and sometimes manifested in memory itself, surfacing when participants would talk about media objects they had interacted with while reminiscing. In line with Pink's insistence on an ethnographic methodology that allows for the active participation of research subjects, having my interviewees interact with websites and other media objects in my interviews became a way to bridge these two types of sources and reveal other observations about how they interact with these media objects and technologies.[100]

Lastly, both Sarah Pink and Christina Hine underscore that reflexivity in visual and digital ethnography is especially important. Hine describes that when the research site is created by a combination of online and offline spaces, the "field" becomes constituted through the active and uncertain choices of the researcher about where to go and why, making examining these choices and assumptions critical to researching such a site.[101] I attended to this by centering my own positionality as part of this community and reflexively situating the way I as a researcher, was choosing and navigating between these different sites and why. I have found that the answers I am most drawn to are the ones that emerge from the interstices between these varied approaches and this diverse set of objects for analysis.

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[100] Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (SAGE, 2007).

[101] Christine Hine, "From Virtual Ethnography to the Embedded, Embodied, Everyday Internet," in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, ed. Larissa Hjorth et al. (Taylor & Francis, 2017); Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography* (SAGE, 2007).

My positionality: perspectives, responsibilities & limitations

In providing a thorough look at the underpinnings of the existing nature of the diasporic consciousness, my own positionality as part of the community I am studying is important to note. Both my parents left Sri Lanka because of the war, and both their families directly experienced the violence of several anti-Tamil riots as well as the intimidation and shelling of the Sri Lankan army, compelling them to leave. They were both able to immigrate to Canada because each had a sibling that had already migrated there and were able to use family reunification pathways to bring their families to Canada. Other family members had harder journeys, navigating the refugee claims systems, often going through other countries before gaining citizenship either in Canada or in other countries like the U.K., Norway, and Australia. I have family members who are anti-LTTE, neutral, and staunchly pro-LTTE, and my grand-uncle now serves as an elected member of parliament for the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam. I grew up in a suburb of Toronto that had the largest concentration of Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada and went on to be active in a Tamil Students' Association and other community organizations during my undergraduate degree. I experienced the 2009 protests firsthand, and it was in the sudden and jarring moment in which the Sri Lankan conflict ended, harkening a post-war era that shattered the dynamics and narratives built in the diasporic consciousness until that point, that I began to explore the questions that led me to this dissertation.

The long individual interviews I conducted with second-generation members of various ages helped me understand my own experience as just one among a massive well of experiences in this population. I believe that being part of this community has given me unique access to the community and helped me be aware of the layered nuances that exist among this diaspora. It made me acutely aware of the insecurities and hesitations my interviewees might have in answering questions about the diaspora (ideas of not performing Tamil-ness correctly, being too anti-LTTE, being too pro-LTTE, not knowing enough about the community, war, language…etc.). However, there are, of course, limitations to my ability to assuage these anxieties, and I can only hope that by being aware of them and trying to create a safe space, I was able to soften some of these hesitations. I have also tried to protect the privacy of my participants and consequently, all the names of interviewees included in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

There is also an added pressure to studying one's own community, the responsibility to be fair in my representation of a community embodying complexity and difference. There are voices from different sides of the community that push for scholarship in this field to lean in one direction or another, and I often struggled to cut through these voices and write to represent the community as a whole in a way that I can stand behind. Despite my own changing and evolving relationship with the Tamil-Canadian diaspora, I am deeply indebted to this community for what it has given me as a scholar and as an individual. My lasting hope for this dissertation is that if a second-generation Tamil-Canadian happens to one day stumble upon it, they will be able to see themselves represented in these pages.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 contextualizes the Sri Lankan Tamil refugee diaspora through its Sri Lankan and Canadian history. It first traces the history of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict to contextualize the diaspora's forced dispersal as well as the way the Tamil nationalism that grew out of this conflict shapes the diaspora's collective memory and identity. Subsequently, I explore how Canada came to be home to the largest Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora through both the evolution of Canadian immigration policy and the advocacy and individual agency of the migrants trying to navigate international migration. Finally, this chapter provides a snapshot of the major hubs of the community and its organization in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

Chapter 2 explores what happens when a moment of rupture bridges the distance between the first and second generations of this diaspora by turning to the 2009 protests. The violence in Sri Lanka from January to May 2009 caused a moment of rupture in time and place for the diaspora, transforming the space of the protests into a transnational space. This chapter explores how the body becomes a central site for diaspora activism. First, through the ways the protestors used their bodies for visibility and then later through the ways the 'suffering body' was relied upon in human rights activism. Using 'images of suffering' as a key object of analysis, this chapter traces why they had such affective power, the limits of this power, and the way they came to affectively act upon the bodies of protestors, creating, however problematically, a medium for community connection and collectively held trauma that was shared between the generations. Through the act of trying to claim public space and affect both national and international discourse, these experiences created lived memories for the second-generation while also significantly shaping the larger collective memory of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

Chapter 3 is shaped around how the second-generation's relationship to how it views Tamil-ness and Canadian-ness is shaped by the narratives the Canadian media constructs about this community. While Chapter 2 references the disillusionment in the second-generation over the Canadian reception to the protests, this chapter aims to contextualize Canada's response by exploring the limits of Canadian multiculturalism and Canada's specific history with refugees. This chapter investigates the news media as a reflection of Canadian narratives about the diaspora and as another type of public space within which the Tamil diaspora is being interrogated and assessed for its value, its danger, and its assimilability into Canada's neoliberal concept of multiculturalism. I reference three periods when the Tamil diaspora was heavily featured in the news: (1) the xenophobic coverage of the arrival of two Tamil refugee boats in 2009-2010, (2) the racialization of Tamils as criminals and gang members during 1990-2000, (3) and the depiction of Tamils as 'bad' Canadians during the 2009 protests. This chapter asks how this news media reporting and the narratives it writes about this refugee diaspora affects the second-generation. Through my interviews, I explore how this history of refugee migration and the stereotypes depicted of refugee criminality inform how second-generation Tamil-Canadians come to see each part of this hybrid identity. While their articulations of Canadian identity rest on claiming their rights granted by citizenship and pushing for Canada to uphold its purported values of multiculturalism and inclusion, their Tamil identity is instead conceptualized as an

active choice to pursue Tamil-ness and embrace refugeeness amid the silent *postmemories* offered by the first generation.

Chapter 4 centers the memorial event, *Maaveerar Naal* (Hero/Martyr's Day), that has been held every November since 1989, both in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora. It is a highly structured commemoration that involves a deep commitment to the politics and aesthetics of Eelam and the Tigers. While the protests demonstrate the conversation the Tamil diaspora was trying to have with Canada and the rest of the world, this event reveals the conversation about memory, identity, and envisioning the future that was being regulated within the Tamil community. Questioning how the memorial functions as a politicized placemaking project, I use participant observation at the 2022 official *Maaveerar Naal* and confront some of my own positionalities as I experience the commemorative ritual. This memorial once again raises the body as a central site, this time through the ways the rituals of *Maaveerar Naal* engage and reimagine the dead body, tying it to nation and transferring its affective power through embodied memory for those that participate in the event. This chapter also asks why the memorial ritual engages certain practices of viewing and being viewed, as well as why visual memory objects are so manically reproduced in this memory-work.

Chapter 5 continues to explore the memory-work within the Tamil diaspora post-war, starting from the evolving forms of *Maaveerar Naal* media that incorporate the fears, desires, and positionality of the diaspora as one physically and culturally tied to Canada. This chapter asks why and how the virtual becomes an important space for a diaspora that has been spatially, temporally, and generationally cleaved by war and migration. Second-generation debates over refashioning *Maaveerar Naal* are also considered to explore the ways the second-generation's relationship with Sri Lanka and Tamil-ness is evolving in tandem with its complex hybridity. A key example of this is M.I.A's music video for her song *Borders*, which was released on *Maaveerar Naal* but takes up the violence of refugee subject-hood instead of Sri Lanka's violence and the dream of Eelam that has been so dominant in Tamil memory-work until this point.

The Conclusion wraps up of the key contributions of this research project and considers the changing landscape for this community to identify areas for further study. Finally, ***the Epilogue*** opens with a film written and directed by a second-generation member of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada. I use this film to bring together the themes this dissertation explores about the ways the second generation understands and contributes differently to the collective memory and identity of the larger diaspora.

Chapter 1: Ethnic War & Refugee Migration: Contextualizing the Tamil-Canadian Diaspora

"Where once we sought shelter in the Nallur Kandaswamy temple in Jaffna, we fled to seek safety at the crosswalks of McCowan and Finch."[102] *– Mirusha Yogaraj*

It is estimated that 25% of all Sri Lankan Tamils now live outside of Sri Lanka.[103] If the hundreds of thousands of Tamils who have been internally displaced by the war are added to this figure, more than half of this population has been displaced. This is a community that is shaped by its history of displacement and its current transnational diasporic nature. One estimate from the early 2000s, credited to the UNHCR, estimates that there are about 400,000 in Canada, 200,000 in Europe, 67,000 in India, 40,000 in the United States, 30,000 in Australia, and another 80,000 spread among another dozen or so countries.[104] Even with estimates that are believed to skew lower than the reality, Canada boasts by far the largest population of diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils and has consequently become home to the large-scale organization and mobilization of this diaspora. The following chapter will explore (1) the ethnic conflict that spurred this community's mass emigration from Sri Lanka, (2) the conditions that enabled settlement in Canada, and (3) paint a picture of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) today.

Part I: Sri Lanka: ethnic war and the conditions for forced migration

Sri Lankan Tamil emigration from Sri Lanka is tied to Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict, which disproportionately affected its Tamil population. While Tamil is a language and culture, and there is a large Tamil population in India as well as Sri Lanka, this dissertation looks at the Sri Lankan Tamil community specifically. This is because Sri Lanka's war has had a heavy hand in shaping the unique sense of what 'Tamilness' is to the Tamils of Sri Lanka and this particular Tamil population's growing diaspora. For this diaspora, Tamil ethnic identity is not just tied to language, food, and culture, but has also been molded by the warring nationalisms of Sri Lanka and the shared experiences of violence and displacement. Part I of this chapter will explore the history of Sri Lanka's ethnic civil war, tracing the politics and events that have shaped this diaspora's collective memory, identity, and the forces behind its emigration.

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[102] Mirusha Yogarajah, "When Memory Outlives," *Briarpatch* (blog), April 27, 2020, https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/when-memory-outlives-toronto-tamil.

[103] Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, "Tamil Diaspora Politics," in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard (Boston, MA: Springer US, 2005), 492–500, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-29904-4_50.

[104] Ibid.

The story of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict begins with an understanding of Sri Lanka's demographics. The Singhalese are the ethnic majority of Sri Lanka, making up roughly 72-75% of the country, and speak the language Sinhala. They are mainly Buddhist but also include a small Christian population. The largest minority ethnicity is the Sri Lankan Tamils, who constitute 10-13% of the country, speak Tamil, and are mostly Hindu, with a significant Christian population as well. They mainly reside in the north and east of Sri Lanka, in the area that the LTTE would come to claim as Tamil Eelam. Making up about 8-9% of the population are Muslims (also referred to as Moors), and although many are Tamil-speaking, they are popularly considered a separate ethnic minority based on religion and ethnic ancestry. They

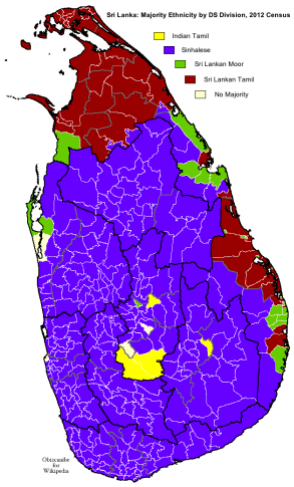

Figure 1: Sri Lanka's ethnic distribution (Based on 2012 Sri Lankan Census)

lived in significant pockets in the north and east of the country until a mass Muslim exodus by the LTTE forced Muslims out of the northern Tamil-dominated region.[105] There is also an Indian Tamil population making up 4-5% percent who live in the hill country in the middle of the nation. They are the descendants of plantation workers from India that were brought to Sri Lanka by the British during the 1800s, and they too are classified as separate from the larger northern-based Sri Lankan-Tamil community because of the difference in their ancestry and mode of arrival. Other ethnic minorities include the Burghers (descendants of Dutch and Portuguese intermixing) and the Veddas (an aboriginal population). Figure 1 shows the general ethnic distribution by region based on the 2012 census, which is the basis of most of these demographic percentages as well.[106]

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[105] Sharika Thiranagama's book, In my Mother's House delves into experience of the Muslims in North and Eastern Sri Lanka, excavating the way they were uniquely positioned during this war, caught between the exclusionary politics of both the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. See: Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

[106] This data is from the post-war period, and it is important to understand that the war had an effect on both population numbers and the areas of settlement, especially in and around the north and east, where the land was actively being fought over. Census data collection during and

Postcolonial era and the rise of Sinhala nationalism

In the last half-century, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has produced an elaborate myth of a primordial ethnic conflict between Tamils and the Sinhalese that links back to the very initial arrivals of each group to Sri Lanka over a millennia ago. However, these nationalism-based narratives based on 'origin' and mythological histories have been mostly debunked by scholars.[107] Sri Lanka is a postcolonial state, and its ethnic conflict can be understood as a product of the intertwined rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and Tamil nationalism in the postcolonial era, which pitted the majority population against the minority population. This is not to say that colonial powers *created* ethnicity in Sri Lanka, but the postcolonial era is key to understanding the way ethnicity in Sri Lanka is understood in the present. It is important to also acknowledge that even though Sri Lanka's other ethnic minority communities might not have taken center stage in this armed conflict, they were certainly also affected by these warring nationalisms, some more than others, depending on their location and the way nationalist rhetoric and policies from both sides were used to further exclude or sideline them.

Sri Lanka went through over four centuries of European colonization, first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch, and finally by the British. Yet, the British were the first to centralize the country under one administration, bringing together the different ethnic and regional populations that had long been self-governed under distinct zones of the country. Like in many British colonies, the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka can be understood as stemming at least in some part from the 'divide and rule' tactics of the British empire that disproportionately placed the Tamil minority in political and administrative positions during the colonial period. The anti-colonial movement in Sri Lanka soon took on the shape of a Singhalese nationalism that viewed Tamils as another de-facto colonizer in the wake of the British leaving.

Many scholars have continued to add nuance to the way the colonial and postcolonial eras bred ethnic tensions.[108] Stokke, for instance, argues that a 'politics of alliances' forged in

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after the war has also been limited by access and the politics of collecting ethnic data in the shadow of ethnic war. Figure 1 is from: Obi2canibe, *Map of Sri Lanka Showing Majority Ethnicity by DS Division According to 2012 Census. Data Taken from Department of Census & Statistics, Sri Lanka*. February 10, 2013.

[107] Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Sri Lanka--Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 1986); Jonathan Spencer, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (Routledge, 2002).

[108] Wikramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age* (London: Hurst and Company, 2006); Kristian Stokke, "Sinhalese and Tamil Nationalism as Post-Colonial Political Projects from 'above', 1948–1983," *Political Geography* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 83–113, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(96)00070-4; Neil Devotta, "Control Democracy, Institutional Decay, and the Quest for Eelam: Explaining Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Pacific Affairs* 73 (March 1, 2000): 55–76, https://doi.org/10.2307/2672284.

the early postcolonial period to ensure political participation and social redistribution led to the radical nationalisms of the late postcolonial period. He argues that Sinhalese and Tamil nationalism represent postcolonial projects where dominant classes have utilized nationalist discourses to mobilize political alliances.[109] The class difference between the elites at the center of Colombo politics and the lower-class agriculturalists and laborers that made up the nation led politicians to lean on populist and nationalist rhetoric to connect with and create political mobilization for elections, which then fired up nationalist ideologies that were fed by historical narratives of ethnic difference.[110]

Thus, the postcolonial era created a vacuum of national identity that political leaders tried to fill through nationalist renderings of Sri Lankan pre-colonial history and what being Sri Lankan was based on. Singhalese nationalists would turn to the ancient Buddhist text, the Mahavamsa, in which Buddha is described as visiting Sri Lanka and ridding the island of forces unfavorable to Buddhism before instructing the ancestors of the Singhalese people to protect the country as a place for Buddhism to flourish.[111] The Mahavamsa, treated as history by Singhalese nationalists, became a larger symbolic mythology that fueled Singhalese-Buddhist nationalism to reclaim the island back from its recent colonial past and, by extension, from the undue

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[109] This reflects what Devotta called the "ethnic outbidding" of the mid 1950s. See: Neil Devotta, "From Ethnic Outbidding to Ethnic Conflict: The Institutional Bases for Sri Lanka's Separatist War," *Nations and Nationalism* 11 (January 1, 2005): 141–59, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2005.00196.x. One major example of this was how one of the first acts of the Singhalese majority government after independence was the disenfranchisement of citizenship for Indian Tamils, most of whom had been born in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan Tamils, split between two factions at the time failed challenge this disenfranchisement at the time. Sri Lankan Tamil politicians who felt strongly about opposing this action, did so based on the desire to maintain the power of other minority voices against the majority Singhalese, but these Sri Lankan Tamil elites like the Singhalese elites fighting for power during this time both ultimately saw the Indian Tamils in central Sri Lanka as 'recent' arrivals and not 'native' to the nation. See: Kristian Stokke, "Sinhalese and Tamil Nationalism as Post-Colonial Political Projects from 'above', 1948–1983," *Political Geography* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 83–113, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(96)00070-4.

[110] Ibid.; Jonathan Spencer, *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (Routledge, 2002); Neil Devotta, "Control Democracy, Institutional Decay, and the Quest for Eelam: Explaining Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka," *Pacific Affairs* 73 (March 1, 2000): 55–76, https://doi.org/10.2307/2672284.

[111] Spencer, *Sri Lanka*; Judy Carter, George Irani, and Vamik D. Volkan, *Regional and Ethnic Conflicts: Perspectives from the Front Lines, CourseSmart ETextbook* (Routledge, 2015); Patrick Grant, *Buddhism and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (State University of New York Press, 2009).

influences of minority populations like the Tamils, Muslims, and Christians who were not the "rightful custodians" of the nation.[112]

Rise of Tamil nationalism and birth of the Tigers

Two key policies that led the Tamil minority to feel disenfranchised and stoked a Tamil Nationalism in response to Singhalese-Buddhist Nationalism were the *Official Language Act (1956)* and *"Standardization Policies" (1971)*. The Official Language Act, also referred to as the "Sinhala Only Act," named Sinhala as the new official language in Sri Lanka, with the intent to replace English but simultaneously subverted any official use of Tamil. This put thousands of Tamils who worked in the civil sector at risk of losing their jobs and became a larger symbol of the cultural, linguistic, and economic disenfranchisement Tamils were beginning to feel in the era of postcolonial Singhalese rule.[113] The backlash was immediate, and Sri Lankan Tamil politicians organized a public protest guided by Gandhi's principles of satyagraha (nonviolent protest).[114] The nonviolent protestors were soon mobbed by Singhalese protestors, who "pelted them with stones" and began a larger anti-Tamil riot that "killed nearly 150 Tamils across the country."[115] The LTTE and other Tamils would popularly refer to this incident to justify why a peaceful solution was never possible in Sri Lanka.

While the postcolonial decades of the 1950s-1960s saw the rise of tensions between the majority Singhalese and minority Tamils, the 1970s's quickly cemented these ethnic differences through the political trajectories of both communities. In 1972, the country was officially renamed Sri Lanka, replacing the colonial name, Ceylon, and a new Constitution that "was clearly written by the majority community for the majority community" was established.[116] Yet, what many Tamils speak about the most from that period, was the enactment of "Standardization Policies," which the government implemented as a form of affirmative action to help boost university acceptances among the majority Singhalese population, especially in economically disadvantaged areas.[117] While the Tamil minority, as a percentage of their population, was largely overrepresented in universities until that point, pursuing higher education had been fused into the culture of the Northern Tamils for generations. The result was that the Tamil minority felt targeted and severely disadvantaged by these policies, which

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[112] Ibid.

[113] Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford University Press, 2004).

[114] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*

[115] Ibid.; Michael Edward Brown and Sumit Ganguly, *Fighting Words: Language Policy and Ethnic Relations in Asia* (MIT Press, 2003)

[116] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*
[117] DeVotta, *Blowback*.

effectively "mandated that Tamil students score over twenty points higher than their Sinhalese counterparts…to gain university admittance."[118] This policy had a real impact on the everyday lives of Sri Lankan Tamils and impacted their ability to envision their futures in Sri Lanka and consequently began the tides of Tamil emigration. It was still a small trickle at this point and was marked by those who were privileged enough to have the resources to leave for reasons like attaining an education.

The Tigers or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) also started to form in the 1970s but were just one of many militant Tamil groups such as Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) and People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), which all grew out of the political organizing and student movement in the wake of these political shifts in Sri Lanka.[119] While Tamil militarism was on the rise, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), a non-militarized political party, was also being formed, uniting several Tamil political groups. The TULF also held a large political convention and wrote a pre-election manifesto calling for a "Free Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of Tamil Eelam" in order to safeguard Tamil rights in the country.[120] While former TULF leader Chelvanayakam was committed to non-violence, after his death, the new leader Amirthalingam saw the TULF and the LTTE as "two sides of the same coin, one political and ideological and the other armed and military," helping the rise of the LTTE in the following decades.[121] By the end of the 1970s, the ethnic and political divide between the Tamils and the Singhalese had been cemented, and the Tamil commitment to an independent state of Tamil Eelam had become a large part of the Sri Lankan Tamil consciousness.

The 1980s: escalation of violence and beginning of mass displacement

The 1980s featured an intensification of violence which began mass emigration by Tamils trying to escape this bloody civil war. This included (1) the anti-Tamil riots of 'Black July' and (2) the LTTE's solidification of power through fratricide and ideological influence. In July 1983, a series of anti-Tamil riots swept the country, now referred to as "Black July." Colombo, the capital city that had existed as a multi-ethnic hub of Sri Lankan diversity for centuries, was particularly hard hit. Tamil homes and shops were targeted, and Tamils

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Vellupilai Prabhakaran, the infamous leader of the LTTE from its start to its demise had actually started his journey into Tamil militancy at the age of fifteen as a part of the student movement and was a member of TELO before founding the LTTE. See: Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*

[120] "Vaddukoddai Resolution" (TULF, 1976).

[121] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*.

inhabitants that were trying to flee the city were beaten, burned, or shot in the streets.[122] While some Tamils were protected by their Singhalese neighbors who hid them from the mobs, other Singhalese neighbors gave information to the rioters to help target Tamil homes, creating a lasting ethnic distrust in the Tamil community.[123] The violence continued for over a week in the form of sexual and physical violence, destruction of Tamil property, and mass displacement as Tamils fled to the safety of the Tamil-dominated North.[124] The estimates of the number of people killed in the riots range drastically from two hundred to four thousand.[125]

Since the riots were a major inciting incident that affected the choice of much of the Tamil diaspora to leave the country, there has been an active effort in the global diaspora to document the stories and history of Black July.[126] Prior to Black July, while "many sympathized with the idea of separatism, most were wary of an armed struggle against the Sri Lankan government."[127] However, with the widespread suspicion that these riots were state-sponsored and with the government's failure to later address the violence in a meaningful way, Black July galvanized the Eelam separatist movement and increased support for an armed Tamil resistance.

As the LTTE amassed power, it focused on becoming the "sole voice of Tamils" in Sri Lanka, cracking down on differences within the community. Scholars have explored how the Tigers did this by ideologically influencing dramatic changes in how Tamils viewed differences within the community along generational, gendered, and caste lines, promoting an approach to

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[122] Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), "Black July '83 - Library," Black July '83, accessed June 12, 2023, https://blackjuly83.com/Events.htm#.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*. Also, many of the displaced fled on boats that sailed around the country to the North instead of taking the far shorter and less circuitous journey through the country because of the sheer risk of travelling through Singhalese-dominated villages and towns.

[125] Ibid.; People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL), "Black July: A Tamil Genocide," pearlaction.org, accessed June 12, 2023, https://pearlaction.org/black-july-a-tamil-genocide/

[126] The popular book and film of the same name, Funny Boy features a chapter focused on the events of Black July: Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy* (McClelland & Stewart, 2013).
Other examples of forms of Black July in diasporic memory-work includes: Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC), "Black July '83 - Library."; People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL), "Black July: A Tamil Genocide."; "Remembering Black July 1983," Tamil Guardian, June 12, 2023, https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/remembering-black-july-1983-1.

[127] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics, 32.*

personal identity that places Tamil-ness above all else.[128] The LTTE also centered themselves at the center of this ethnic identity production by "set[ting] up an office to research Tamil culture to self-consciously evoke and borrow from cultural themes" creating ideological and ritualized messaging that felt intrinsically *Tamil*.[129] The rituals and symbols the LTTE designed around the envisioned homeland of Eelam and how they came to shape the diasporic consciousness will be further explored in Chapter 3.

However, the LTTE also created this solidarity through explicit violence and intimidation. 1986 marked a year of intense fratricidal conflict when the LTTE declared that one was either "with them or against them," forcing all the other Tamil militant groups and their supporters to either join them or die as "traitors to the Tamil Nation."[130] The bloody aftermath continued with intense intimidation against anyone who spoke out against the LTTE and led to the emigration of Tamils targeted by the LTTE, who were either members of other groups or independent critics.

As Tamil-Singhalese relations worsened, the idea that creating an independent nation of Tamil Eelam was the solution to safety for Tamils in Sri Lanka gained widespread buy-in from Tamil civilians across the country. It came to represent the heart of Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism. Moreover, with the LTTE now emerging as the main force that was fighting for this goal, LTTE ideology and Sri Lankan Tamil nationalism became increasingly entangled and, from this point, grew intertwined with each other.

The 1990s – 2000s: civil war and failed peace negotiations

The 1990s saw the military and political rise of the LTTE, with the armed force gaining control over a large part of the land it dubbed Tamil Eelam. It went on to build out different military and non-military divisions of its organization, such as implementing its own police force, taxation, and other administrative components to oversee the region.[131] With the LTTE now an established military and political entity that was well-funded and supplied by its network of transnationally placed operatives and the Tamil diaspora, which donated millions to the cause every year, a harsh period of civil war ensued where the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE

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[128] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Sri Lanka--Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 1986); "Reasons for Violence: A Preliminary Ethnographic Account of the LTTE: South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies: Vol 20, No Sup001," accessed June 12, 2023, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00856409708723308?journalCode=csas20.

[129] Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*. 28

[130] Ibid., 24.

[131] Ibid., 25.; Kristian Stokke, "Building the Tamil Eelam State: Emerging State Institutions and Forms of Governance in LTTE-Controlled Areas in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 27, no. 6 (September 1, 2006): 1021–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590600850434.

fought over amassing territory under their respective control.[132] Tamil civilians suffered at the hands of the Sri Lankan military in the form of harassment at army checkpoints, sexual violence, food scarcity, armed robberies by pro-government paramilitaries, extrajudicial killings, and white van disappearances. They were also affected by the authoritative rule under the LTTE, with threats of torture and death for army collaboration, pressure to donate money, information, and resources, and forced recruitment (including of child soldiers) to the LTTE.[133] This double-sided pressure maintained a steady stream of out-migration by Sri Lankan Tamils, some claiming refugee status and others using alternative pathways to emigrate. However, most of my respondents, even those from anti-LTTE families, highlighted the Sri Lankan state's violence as the main reason for their families leaving. This is to say that even though Tamil civilians indeed experienced a double-sided pressure, I want to be careful not to create a false equivalency between the threat of the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE that many in the Tamil diaspora would feel unrepresented by.

In the early 2000s, Norway brokered a ceasefire between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE and began peace negotiations between the parties.[134] However, the UNP party that initially signed the ceasefire came under fire from the opposition parties and Singhalese Nationalists who accused the UNP of "capitulating to the LTTE" in negotiations and "dividing the nation," and eventually lost power.[135] On the other side, The LTTE struggled to compromise their vision of Tamil Eelam as a separate state, which was unacceptable to the Sri Lankan state, who would not compromise Sri Lanka's territorial integrity.[136] This peace process was also tied to an economic package of aggressive market reforms, and the heavy influence of corporate and international interest groups affected the peace agenda.[137] For instance, the LTTE's status as a terrorist group in several countries meant they were not invited to the fifth round of peace negotiations held in the U.S., where the U.S was considering pledging an additional 3.5 billion toward the country, leading the LTTE to pull out of peace talks in reaction

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[132] Sarah Wayland, "Ethnonationalist Networks and Transnational Opportunities: The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (July 2004): 405–26, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210504006138.

[133] Ibid.

[134] Gunnar M. Sørbø et al., *Pawns of Peace. Evaluation of Norwegian Peace Efforts in Sri Lanka, 1997-2009* (Norad, 2011), https://open.cmi.no/cmi-xmlui/handle/11250/2475172.

[135] International Crisis Group, "Sri Lanka: The Failure of the Peace Process," *Asia Report* 124 (November 28, 2006), https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka/sri-lanka-failure-peace-process.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Rajesh Venugopal, "The Making of Sri Lanka's Post-Conflict Economic Package and the Failure of the 2001-2004 Peace Process," February 1, 2009.

to the slight.[138] While the precarious ceasefire held in place a bit longer, the devastating tsunami of 2001 hit both Tamil and Singhalese areas of Sri Lanka hard, leading to military losses, mass displacement, and an incredible loss of life.[139] The Sri Lankan government proved ineffective at handling the crisis. With the country divided between the government and the LTTE regarding who had control and access to different regions, these politics affected the reach of foreign aid to affected areas and communities.[140] Tension and distrust rapidly re-heightened in the wake of this unexpected natural disaster, leading the ceasefire and this chance at peace to break down during the early 2000s and war to ramp back up.

2009: war crimes, destruction of the LTTE, and diaspora protests

In 2005, President Rajapaksa was elected to office through a campaign that differentiated him from the UNP through his unwillingness to negotiate with the LTTE or acknowledge the North and East as a part of a Tamil homeland.[141] The Rajapaksa administration only officially ended the ceasefire in 2008 after both sides had already breached it, but this marked the moment from which the Sri Lankan army ramped up a fierce and merciless military campaign to rid the country of the LTTE, which it squarely defeated in May 2009. Although European and U.S. powers seemed interested in keeping Sri Lanka in peace negotiations, regionally, Sri Lanka found significant support from China, which offered to "provid[ed] millions of dollars' worth of other military equipment and about $1 billion in overall assistance."[142] Pakistan also supported Sri Lanka; and India, who had a significant Tamil community who had been supportive of the Sri Lankan Tamil cause in earlier decades, had been scarred by its own attempt to broker peace in the 1980s-1990s. India's peacekeeping mission had played both sides and led to a surprising, one-time collaboration between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to get India out of Sri Lanka and ended with the LTTE assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, turning many Indians against the LTTE.[143]

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[138] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*. 55.

[139] Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Ethnic Conflict, the State and the Tsunami Disaster in Sri Lanka," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 6, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 341–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370500169979.

[140] Ibid.

[141] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*. 58

[142] Sumit Ganguly, "Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War," *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 84.

[143] For more information about the Indian Peace Keeping mission in Sri Lanka, see: Jyotindra Nath Dixit, *Assignment Colombo* (Vijitha Yapa Bookshop, 2001);
Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

India also had the issue of trying to keep its own ethnic nationalist movements under control and thus had many reasons to stay neutral in the region as this military onslaught took place.

The LTTE had been weakened by the tsunami and also suffered a major splintering between North and East in 2004 when a former right hand of Prabhakaran, Karuna, defected from the LTTE, taking with him 6000 cadres and collaborating with the Sri Lankan army.[144] This internal splintering, combined with this intense military offensive, caused the LTTE to grow increasingly desperate, and its treatment of the civilians under its control demonstrated this. The Human Rights Watch found evidence of the LTTE engaging in ongoing forced recruitment, use of forced labor, and systematic control over the free movement of civilians under its territorial control.[145] From January 2009, the military started closing in on the LTTE, and the LTTE began using civilians as human shields, moving with civilian populations to prevent the Sri Lankan army from bombing their camps.[146]

However, this tactic did not deter the Sri Lankan army, which has been accused of bombing indiscriminately and even targeting civilian areas out of the chance that LTTE cadres may be using these areas for refuge.[147] Some of the most egregious war crimes committed during these final months of the war were when the army shelled civilian landmarks such as orphanages and clearly marked makeshift hospitals killing thousands of wounded civilians, doctors, nurses and children.[148] The military would also declare safe zones for civilians to retreat to, then shell these 'safe zones.'[149] This flagrant disregard of the established norms and conventions governing the use of force in war led to criticism that the Sri Lankan government shut down by targeting journalists and other critics. In 2008, the Sri Lankan government had

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[144] Sumit Ganguly, "Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War," *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 78–89.

[145] "War on the Displaced," *Human Rights Watch*, February 19, 2009, https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/19/war-displaced/sri-lankan-army-and-ltte-abuses-against-civilians-vanni.

[146] Neil DeVotta, "Sri Lanka: From Turmoil to Dynasty," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 130–44, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0019.

[147] "War on the Displaced," *Human Rights Watch*, February 19, 2009, https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/19/war-displaced/sri-lankan-army-and-ltte-abuses-against-civilians-vanni.

[148] Ibid.; UNICEF, "Sri Lankan Schoolgirls Killed and Injured amid Escalating Violence" *Reliefweb*, August 22, 2006, https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/sri-lankan-schoolgirls-killed-and-injured-amid-escalating-violence-0; Neil DeVotta, "Sri Lanka: From Turmoil to Dynasty," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 2 (2011): 130–44, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0019.

[149] "War on the Displaced," *Human Rights Watch*, February 19, 2009, https://www.hrw.org/report/2009/02/19/war-displaced/sri-lankan-army-and-ltte-abuses-against-civilians-vanni.

also tried to push out all international witnesses for the coming months of the military offensive by "forcing NGOs operating in LTTE controlled areas to disband and forc[ing] many Ngo personnel off the island by refusing to renew their visas."[150]

It was clear that both sides were willing to sacrifice civilians in the pursuit of their military goals. Actions and comments by Sri Lankan military officials revealed that, at best, they saw civilian casualties as unavoidable when targeting the LTTE, and at worst, they saw all Tamil civilians as potential future LTTE combatants, legitimating their deaths as the deaths of future 'Tigers-to-be.'[151] The LTTE, on the other hand, seemed willing to keep Tamil civilians in positions of danger as their end neared in hopes that the world would see Sri Lanka's human rights abuses, and intervene with a ceasefire, giving the LTTE some breathing room and more moral high ground to the cause of Tamil Eelam.[152]

The result was an incredibly violent final stand that killed hundreds of thousands of Tamil civilians, not to mention the Sri Lankan soldiers and LTTE cadres that were also killed in mass. The Sri Lankan Civil War was effectively ended when LTTE leader Prabhakaran was killed in May 2009. The Tamils left alive in the north and east of Sri Lanka were displaced and starving and held in camps for internally displaced peoples (IDPs) for years after the war.[153] These IDP camps separated families, were rampant with sexual and physical abuse, and many were "disappeared" or tortured or killed during their time there, extending the violence of the war into the post-war era.[154] Though the military conflict was now over, "peace" never seemed in sight as legitimate Tamil grievances were never addressed, and military colonialism in the north and east created a stifling and dangerous lived reality for Tamils who had survived the final phase of the war.[155]

The Tamil diaspora had always been deeply involved in activism against the abuses of the Sri Lankan government, but this final onslaught and the attendant human rights abuses created an intense time of international protest in all the major cities that had a significant Tamil

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[150] Neil DeVotta, "Sri Lanka: From Turmoil to Dynasty,"

[151] In response to the Senchcholai Massacre where the Air Force dropped bombs on a childrens' home killing over fifty school girls and staffers, Minister Rambukwella claimed that it was a LTTE training camp (against all evidence) and said, "we cannot look at their age, but instead at what they were aiming to do." See: Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*.

[152] Sumit Ganguly, "Ending the Sri Lankan Civil War," *Daedalus* 147, no. 1 (2018): 78–89; Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*.

[153] Yasmin Sooka, "An Unfinished War: Torture and Sexual Violence in Sri Lanka 2009—2014," *The Bar Rights Committee of England and Wales (BHRC) and the International Truth & Justice Project, Sri Lanka*, March 2014.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Neil DeVotta and Sumit Ganguly, "Sri Lanka's Post–Civil War Problems," *Current History* 118, no. 807 (2019): 137–42.

population. Canada, home to the largest Sri Lanka Tamil diaspora, was at the forefront of this activism to try to get the international community to intervene as their loved ones were being killed. The diaspora, which had started to really grow in the decades between the 1980s and 2000s, now had a flourishing second-generation that was coming of age, many of whom were suddenly learning about and confronting the war in Sri Lanka for the first time. For Tamils in the diaspora, intimate networks in the community were trying to get and disseminate information about what was happening in the warzone. At the same time, the lack of international media and NGO presence in Sri Lanka meant that mainstream news outlets were not reporting accurate numbers and facts. Much of the diaspora also had family still trapped in the warzones, with whom they had lost contact, creating a life or death situation they were helpless to affect thousands of miles away, creating a palpable sense of desperation. Chapter 2 will explore how this humanitarian crisis and the resultant diaspora protests brutally shaped the Tamil diasporic consciousness through war, violence, and disillusionment with their new countries of residence and the "international community" at large.

Part II: Sri Lankan Tamil immigration to Canada

While Part I of this chapter looks at the conditions of war that created out-migration by Sri Lankan Tamils, Part II will try to answer why Canada, a country so far away, became home to the largest Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. From its history as a fellow commonwealth country to the evolution of its immigration policy (specifically for refugees), immigration to Canada became a prime route out of Sri Lanka for Tamils. However, the conditions of these favorable policies were also shaped by Sri Lankan Tamils advocating for themselves within Canada alongside the advocating of many other immigrant groups, demonstrating the agency of immigrants to navigate their own pathways in the state-governed international migration system. Part II also paints a picture of the current cultural and political geographies of the Tamil Canadian diaspora in Toronto, Ontario, from where the community resides and gathers to the political organizations that set nationalist understandings within the community.

The first Sri Lankan Tamils immigrated to Canada in the 1950s when there was an immigration quota for 50 immigrants to come from Sri Lanka per year. In 1967, Canada introduced the points system to replace the quota system, which constituted a major change in immigration policy. The new policy was similar to America's 1965 Immigration Act in that it purposefully replaced explicitly racist policies with a system that was intended to covertly keep encouraging similar immigration results even though that was not the ultimate result.[156] This new points system also intimately tied immigration policy to Canada's economy and labor needs in a neoliberal shift that can still be seen today.[157]

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[156] Kenneth Taylor, "Racism in Canadian Immigration Policy," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 23, no. 1 (1991).

[157] Gerald E. Dirks, *Controversy and Complexity: Canadian Immigration Policy During the 1980s* (McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 1995).

Between the late 1950s and the 1970s, there was a relatively small number of Sri Lankan immigrants in Canada (less than 5000) made up of different Sri Lankan ethnic groups, including only a small number of Tamils.[158] What this group of Sri Lankans had in common was their relative class position, which enabled them to have the resources to emigrate.[159] This immigration was largely facilitated by the pursuit of studies and the relationship that existed between the countries as fellow commonwealth nations. This link between commonwealth nations was essential in creating the foundation of relationships between these countries, and similar initial flows were created in the U.K. and Australia. Not only did being a member of the commonwealth help with mobility across commonwealth nations, but English also served as a language bridge as the British had implemented an English-based education system in Sri Lanka that lasted from the late 1700s until independence in 1948.[160] This type of emigration continued in the 1970s when many middle and upper-class Tamil youth started seeking opportunities to go abroad to study in countries like India, the U.K., Canada, and the U.S. when Sri Lanka's "standardization policies" and the "Sinhala Only" policy continued to threaten the economic futures of Tamil youth in the country.

In 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau ushered in the modern era of Canadian multiculturalism by making Canada the first country ever to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy.[161] Under him, The Immigration Act of 1976 was passed, which drastically changed the landscape of Canadian immigration. Led by the lobbying of many ethnic minority groups in Canada, the 'family class' under this new policy did not only define family as members of the nuclear family as it had done in the past but extended the definition to accommodate other relatives as well.[162] This change allowed immigrant hopefuls, particularly refugee populations, to effectively bypass the pressure of the points system as part of family reunification efforts. While Canada had signed the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1969, until the Immigration Act of 1976, the country had no formal measures for examining refugee claims.[163] Starting in 1979, refugees were defined as a unique

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[158] Sarath Chandrasekere, "Inventing the Sri Lankans: Construction of Ethnic Identity by Immigrants to Ontario," *PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto*, 2008.

[159] Ibid.; Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

[160] Kariyawasam Sittarage Prasangani, "Overview of Changes in the Sri Lankan English Education System: From the Colonial Era to Present Day Sri Lanka," *Modern Research Studies* 1 (January 1, 2014): 193–202.

[161] Stephen J. Tierney, *Multiculturalism and the Canadian Constitution* (UBC Press, 2011).

[162] Dirks, *Controversy and Complexity*.

[163] Gerald E. Dirks, "Immigration Policy in Canada," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, accessed June 7, 2023, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/immigration-policy.

category of immigrants under Canadian law, and Canada created a special program allowing the private sponsorship of refugees (facilitated mainly by churches and ethnic community organizations), which has settled many more refugees than government-assisted channels have to date.[164]

Through a case of happenstance, the 1980s became an era where Canada was opening up key channels of refugee migration while Tamils in Sri Lanka were experiencing mass displacement and an intensification of violence in the ethnic conflict. By 1978, the first distinctive Sri Lankan Tamil organization was formed and named the Tamil Eelam Society of Canada (TESOC).[165] This organization was pivotal in lobbying the Canadian government to bring about a Special Measures Program for Sri Lanka in September 1983 following the aftermath of Black July earlier that year, which had produced many Tamils who wanted to flee the violence of Sri Lanka. Under Canadian Immigration policy, a Special Measures Program created a "bonus points" system for individuals trying to immigrate under a family sponsorship claim from countries determined to have particular circumstances (mostly war) that necessitated a more sympathetic consideration.[166]

Amarasingam argues that the "Tamil community also benefited from what scholars have called the "turbulent" 1980s in Canada, during which the refugee determination system underwent a period of instability set off largely by the Supreme Court 's *Singh* Decision in April 1985."[167] The court decision in this case, changed the way refugee status could be claimed under the refugee convention, granting those seeking refugee status rights comparable to those bestowed unto citizens, such as the right to an oral hearing before the Immigration Appeal Board. The Board quickly became overwhelmed, and in the attempt to address the backlog created, refugee claimants that arrived before May 1986 were allowed permanent residency after minimal technical requirements.[168] Raphael Girard, who was the Director of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration as well as the Executive Coordinator of the Refugee Determination Task Force during the 1980s, said that "the most numerous beneficiaries of the ADR were Sri Lankans because they were one of the bigger populations in the backlog. But it wasn't for them. It was simply to clear out the backlog of cases that we would never have time to deal with."[169]

Between 1980 and 1993, the vast majority of Tamil immigrants arriving in Canada used the family class and convention refugee categories to enter.[170] Subsequently, when the

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[164] Ibid.

[165] Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*. 71.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid., 76

[168] Ibid., 77.

[169] Ibid.

[170] Ibid., 78.

Immigration Refugee Board (IRB) was created in 1989, the precedence set by the Special Measures Program for Sri Lanka in the early 1980s, combined with the 1988 Backlog Clearance program that granted permanent residency to so many Tamil refugee claimants, led to Tamil refugees claimants maintaining an 80% success rate, which was higher than other refugee groups from 1989-1998.[171] The 1980s and 1990s saw a massive boom in the Tamil-Canadian population. By 1991, there were an estimated 37,000 Tamils in Canada, and by 2001, that number had jumped to over 111,000.[172] During these two decades, Sri Lanka was in the top five countries providing immigrants to Canada and the vast majority of these Sri Lankans were Tamil, and more than half of these Sri Lankan Tamils entered as refugees, with the rest entering through the other channels created by family reunification policies.[173]

The unique nature of Canadian policies for immigration and refugee claims enabled the growth of a large Tamil-Canadian diaspora. However, Sri Lankan Tamils were also actively and consciously navigating the pathways that existed for them to escape the violence of Sri Lanka and find new places that could become home. This is shown in the many pockets of diaspora created across the world through different uses of national policies as well as in the way Sri Lankan Tamils navigated the Canadian system, (1) individually, (2) as families, and (3) through community organizations that sponsored refugees and lobbied the government for more lenient refuge determinations.

When talking about why their parents left, most of my respondents spoke about needing to escape the war. Many were unsure if their parents had officially claimed refugee status or came through the family reunification system. Still, they all referenced the war as the glaring factor influencing their departure. Older members of the second-generation I interviewed (ages 30-35) would often talk about Black July, their family's experiences with anti-Tamil riots, and the discriminatory standardization policies. The younger second-generation members I interviewed would talk more about the escalation of war and the threat of army violence. Indhu, whose father left in 1995, said:

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[171] Ibid., Sarah V. Wayland, "Immigration and Transnational Political Ties: Croatians and Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal* 35, no. 2 (June 22, 2003): 61–87.

[172] Statistics Canada, "Knowledge of Languages," 1993, https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.676075/publication.html.; Statistics Canada, "2001 Census Topic-Based Tabulations," 2001.

[173] Kitana Ananda, "Politics After a Ceasefire: Suffering, Protest and Belonging in Sri Lanka's Tamil Diaspora," *PhD Dissertation, Columbia University*, 2016; Daphne Jeyapal, "'Since When Did We Have 100,000 Tamils?' Media Representations of Race Thinking, Spatiality, and the 2009 Tamil Diaspora Protests," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 38, no. 4, accessed June 8, 2023, https://www-jstor-org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/stable/canajsocicahican.38.4.557.; "How Many Tamils Live in Canada? The Limitations to Official Data on Tamils," TamilCulture.com, accessed June 8, 2023, https://tamilculture.com/the-limitations-to-official-data-on-tamils.

> My grandmother really pushed my father and his sister to leave. She was so worried that my father was going to be killed by the army, since they were killing Tamil boys to stop them from joining up. And she was afraid of that too, that he would end up becoming a Tiger…there was no future for them there, it was fight or die… or leave I guess. I don't know all the details, but he left Sri Lanka to get to Canada and claim refugee status here, but he was detained in Russia without a proper visa. He was with two of his friends there, I don't know how they managed things, but he had to jump through a few more countries before making it to Canada. I think this was all when he was 18. It's wild. But he had his cousins and his aunt here, so it was all okay once he made it… He ended up sponsoring my aunt, his sister to do a college course here once he gained citizenship. When she came they tried to get her married to someone here, so that she could stay, but she didn't want to. I only learned about all that later, through my cousins and I felt so bad for her, all the pressure she got, but I mean seeing what happened in Sri Lanka, I get it, they wanted to protect her, keep her here. She ended up going back though before 2009 though. Thankfully she and my grandparents were safe in the capital city away from the violence.[174]

Indhu's father's story reflects the stories of many young Tamil men trying to claim refugee status to escape the threats of both the army and recruitment by the LTTE. The story of his failed attempt to get his sister Canadian citizenship also highlights the different methods and pathways Tamils were trying to utilize to bring their families to Canada. Another respondent talked about how his grandfather saw sending one of his daughters to Canada as a "backup plan;" "if the family did have to leave, it would be easier with her somewhere else to sponsor them."[175] This plan highlights how war became a social condition of life in Sri Lanka that rendered their futures in the country uncertain. Creating routes of emigration was one way for families to safeguard their loved ones in the face of war's ever-changing landscape.

Another respondent, Thevan described his parent's choice to immigrate to Canada specifically, similarly to many others, he said:

> [they chose Canada] mainly because of the connections they had, a lot of their relatives and cousins were already here, so they knew they had people to rely on, people to support if they were to come here. It was either here or U.K. Because the U.K already had a lot of Tamil people. But Canada happened to make sense. When they were seeking refuge, there were already large groups of people going towards Canada.[176]

Thevan's parents immigrated in the early 2000s, and through his description, we can see the snowball effect of the immigration boom among Tamil-Canadians in the 1980s and 1990s. These early decades of refugee migration had created a supportive community base that set the stage for Canada to become and remain an ideal destination for Sri Lankan Tamils seeking to leave the country.

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[174] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 22, 2022.

[175] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, February 7, 2023.

[176] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 31, 2023.

Geographies of Tamil-Canadian settlement

On a hot summer weekend in late August 2022, thirteen years after the end of the bloody Sri Lankan war, a long Toronto street in the suburb of Markham is closed off to traffic, and hundreds of thousands of Tamils and non-Tamils fill the street along with a series of vendors and performers for Tamil Fest. There is a schedule of performances taking place on the main stage featuring top-notch Tamil singers and dancers, some local and some arriving from abroad for the occasion. Yet, one dance performance by a bunch of Tamil teenagers on the side of the street amasses a large crowd. As the Tamil pop music blasts, these amateur dancers combine hip-hop moves with moves from a Tamil folk dance style as the crowd sings loudly along. Beside me, a group of elementary school kids yells in support as they eat "Jaffna fries" (a carton of fries piled with Tamil-inspired condiments and toppings inspired by the French-Canadian dish, poutine). Beside them, an older woman is balancing two plastic containers of mango smothered in salt and chili powder on top of a container filled to the brim with another Tamil-Canadian favorite, *kottu roti*. For several hours, 'What I ate at Tamil Fest' videos trended on TikTok while Tamils and non-Tamils alike documented the different Tamil foods, snacks, and desserts at the festival. Tamil Fest follows the long tradition of ethnic food festivals celebrated in Toronto on the streets of major ethnic enclaves. While a decade or two previous, many Torontonians would only hear and know of cultural street festivals like Taste of Italy, Taste of the Danforth (Greek), and, of course, Caribana, other minority communities like the Tamil community are now putting on large festivals that invite not only their own community, but the wider Toronto population to participate and celebrate as well.

According to 2021 census data, there are now an estimated 238 000 Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada, with the vast majority residing in the GTA. However, this census data has been regularly critiqued over the last few decades because of the lower response rate among immigrant populations and the technicalities of having Sri Lankan Tamils self-identify through census questions. Not all Sri Lankan Tamils check off that they are "Sri Lankan" because of their complicated relationship with the country, and not all Sri Lankans in Canada are Tamil anyways. When looking at the category 'language spoken in the household,' it is important to remember not all Tamil households will be *Sri Lankan* Tamil households. Even in Sri Lankan Tamil households, many do not put "Tamil" as the primary language spoken in the house because of the prevalence of English being spoken or a mixture of Tamil and English. There is also an implicit message at work that fluency in English makes one a "better" immigrant. Thus, when a family uses both languages in the home, they will sometimes automatically and proudly put down that English is the primary language spoken. When the 2009 Tamil protests brought hundreds of thousands of Tamils out on the streets of Toronto (which will be further explored in Chapter 3), suddenly, it was plainly obvious that the actual numbers of Tamil-Canadians may be closer to double what the census data had been reporting until that time, and a number of scholars and journalists have subsequently explored this issue with quantifying the Tamil-Canadian population.[177]

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[177] Chandrasekere, "Inventing the Sri Lankans: Construction of Ethnic Identity by Immigrants to Ontario."; Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*.

What we can ascertain from the data, however, is that the largest concentration of Tamil Canadians is located in the province of Ontario (at least 83%), and within Ontario, the vast majority reside in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).[178] From the beginnings of this diaspora, there has also been a sizable population in Montreal, Quebec, estimated to be around 20 000. There are also more recent populations at about 10 000 each in Alberta and British Columbia.

Toronto has drawn in Canadian immigrants at outpaced rates, with the percentage of immigrants in the city hovering around 46% of Toronto's population over the last two decades.[179] Another statistic reveals that 51.5% of Torontonians identify as a visible minority, far more than that of other metropolitan cities known for multiculturalism.[180] Consequently, Toronto's suburbs have always been a beacon for new immigrants, representing a multicultural hub with jobs, access to language and immigration services, as well as robust immigrant communities for community support. As the Tamil community in the GTA grew in the early 1990s, particular suburbs of Toronto started to become the center of the community. Tamil shops and services began to crop up to support the growing Tamil population, creating a reinforcing loop that led to more Tamils choosing to reside near these shops and services. While an east-end Toronto suburb called Scarborough started as an initial center of this community, Markham, a neighboring suburb, soon became an even bigger hub. Currently, the Tamil population resides in concentrated zones in both these suburbs and the fast-growing suburbs surrounding them, like Ajax and Pickering to the east and Brampton to the west.

Markham is known as the most diverse suburb in Canada, with over 78% identifying as a visible minority. It is most heavily dominated by the Chinese-Canadian diaspora, but certain pockets of this suburb have been densely populated by Tamil-Canadians as well. The presence of several plazas entirely catering to the Tamil community led to these pockets being termed "Little Jaffna," referencing the capital city in the Northern province of Sri Lanka, which functioned as the influential center of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. The reference "Little Jaffna" has been used to describe several different streets over the last five decades, from one located in downtown Toronto that catered to not only Tamils but to many South Asian cultures to other streets around the GTA, as the population grew and shifted. Now, these Tamil-centric

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[178] Statistics Canada, "Knowledge of Languages by Age and Gender: Canada, Provinces and Territories, Census Metropolitan Areas and Census Agglomerations with Parts," August 17, 2022, https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810021701.

[179] City of Toronto, "Backgrounder: 2021 Census: Citizenship, Immigration, Ethnic Origin, Visible Minority Groups (Race), Mobility, Migration, Religion," n.d., https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8f69-2021-Census-Backgrounder-Immigration-Ethnoracial-Mobility-Migration-Religion-FINAL.pdf; Ninette Kelley, M. J. Trebilcock, and Professor of Law and Economics Michael J. Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (University of Toronto Press, 1998).

[180] Julia Whalen, "Census 2016: More than Half of Torontonians Identify as Visible Minorities," *CBC*, October 26, 2017, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/census-visible-minorities-1.4371018.

plazas boasting different restaurants, grocery stores, saree shops, jewelry shops, and other services like tutoring, barbershops, and more, have become the main hub of the community as one-stop shops for the everyday staples of Tamil-Canadian living. As described at the start of this section, the relatively recent phenomenon of Tamil Fest (the largest Tamil street festival outside South Asia and the largest festival in the Greater Toronto Area's east-end) has also taken place in Markham every summer for the past few years.[181] The festival features performances, street food, a pop-up museum of Tamil-Canadian history, and various other Tamil-Canadian vendors and entertainment. Markham is also home to Markham fairgrounds, where the Sri Lankan Tamil memorial event, *Maaveerar Naal* (explored in Chapter 4), takes place every November.

Other spaces that function as places of community to this population include temples and churches, co-op buildings for Tamil families, certain subsidized buildings for seniors that have become Tamil-dominated, and Tamil event spaces used for weddings, fundraisers, and other community events. Among first-generation immigrants 'home village associations" called *ur sangams,* along with "old school associations," function almost as social clubs for people from the same villages and schools in Sri Lanka and create a broad network through which political organizing and fundraising for charities in Sri Lanka was managed. Child-centered programming also creates a space of Tamil community, like the Saturday Tamil classes that are held at public schools around the city and classes for Tamil classical arts like Carnatic singing, Bharatanatyam dancing, and playing traditional instruments. These classes help keep the Tamil language and traditions alive, but they are also places that create connections between the Tamil children who attend and the parents who catch up with each other while waiting in parking lots and waiting areas to pick up their children.

Political organizing and youth organizations

While these spaces – from Tamil stores to home village associations to cultural classes – created and maintained a network of Tamil culture, the community was also held together and influenced by formal organizations since as early as the 1960s. By the 1970s, the nature of these organizations took a turn from cultural projects to socio-political ones. And while early organizations were more broadly "Sri Lankan," "Ceylonese," or Tamil culture-based alongside Tamils from India, soon Sri Lankan Tamil-centric and politically inclined groups with a clear sense of ethnic identity and purpose took over. This diaspora's experience in Sri Lanka as a minority group constantly needing to fight for its rights meant that political organizing and advocacy became an intrinsic part of this community early on.

Several Sri Lankan Tamil organizations were formed to focus on projects to provide services for and advocate for new Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants in Canada. The Tamil Eelam Society of Canada (TESOC) was formed in 1978 and developed a strong relationship with the Canadian government, enabling it to lobby for and achieve the Special Measures Program for Sri Lankan immigration that helped many Tamils immigrate to Canada after the Black July riots

[181] Tamil Fest started in 2015, taking place in Scarborough, before moving to its resident home now on Markham road since 2019.

of 1983.[182] Another organization, the Society for Aid of Ceylon Minorities (SACEM), worked to create the Tamil Co-op Building in west Toronto to help with the housing issues faced by new immigrants.[183] SACEM's projects shifted as the community's needs shifted, from housing to providing job skills training and helping small businesses get started.[184] When Toronto began having a major problem with Tamil gang violence in the 1990s, the Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CanTYD) was created. It was very effective in mentoring Tamil youth and creating other outlets and services for them, helping to bring the issue under control within the decade.[185]

However, the most influential organization in the Tamil-Canadian diaspora was the World Tamil Movement (WTM), that was created in 1986 as the Canadian arm of the LTTE.[186] It raised money for the LTTE, but also quickly worked to nurture connections between existing Tamil organizations in Canada and tried to influence the way these organizations spoke about the Sri Lankan conflict. Amarasingham explores how TESOC's original members felt that the WTM had slowly been able to infiltrate other Tamil organizations, getting their own people elected, changing the landscape of Tamil organizational diversity in Canada.[187] The Tamil Resource Center (TRC), a left-leaning organization that was founded in the late 1980s by former members of other Tamil political and militant groups in Sri Lanka that had been targeted by the LTTE, tried to offer an "alternative voice" that criticized the Sri Lankan government while also criticizing the LTTE. They received intense retaliation, and their offices and library were targeted twice by LTTE-supporting arsonists.[188] However, the complicated nature of the relationships between these groups and the overwhelming consensus that the Sri Lankan government and army were the most egregious enemy of the Tamil people is elucidated by events such as when the Canadian government banned the LTTE as a terrorist group in 2006, and the TRC actively criticized the ban as a sign that Canada was not acknowledging the similar humanitarian violations of the Sri Lankan government.

Nevertheless, the TRC could never grow as significant as other organizations that took on narratives consistent with LTTE ones. Some scholars chalk this up to intimidation and the power that the LTTE wielded in the diaspora. Although this is definitely a factor, I believe that this assumption can also be an oversimplification that diminishes the agency of the Tamil

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[182] Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

[183] Ibid.

[184] Ibid, 84.

[185] Ibid., 89.

[186] Ibid., 82.

[187] Ibid., 83

[188] Ibid., 89.

diaspora.[189] Though there have always been critics of the LTTE within the diaspora, the diaspora has also overwhelmingly supported the LTTE as their political representatives in Sri Lanka, although this cannot be characterized as blind support. Many of my interviewees talked about how they or their families disagreed with the things that the LTTE did and described ways in which family members had suffered certain forms of intimidation by the LTTE. However, these interviewees would also tell me that until the end of the war, the threat of the Sri Lankan army and government contextualized the LTTE as what many called a "necessary evil." It is also important to note that the diaspora does not directly represent the perspectives of Tamils in Sri Lanka, among whom, support for the LTTE might have been waning in the last decade of war due to the sheer cost of war and their wartime tactics.[190] The Tamil-Canadian diaspora, most of whom had arrived in Canada decades earlier, did not experience the same aspects of war and the LTTE that those trapped in the region at the end of the war did, creating a divergence of perspective.

Another reason organizations and individuals who strayed from LTTE narratives could not gain traction within the diaspora is that over the decades, Tamil nationalism and LTTE narratives had fused together, difficult to tease apart. The LTTE and its supporters were not separate from the greater Tamil community, but part of it, if not making up a majority of the community, and messages about Tamil identity in the diaspora, justice for Tamils in Sri Lanka, and a political solution for Sri Lanka's conflict were unavoidably influenced by the lens of the LTTE, which not only had a strong political voice, but had consciously built a sense of Eelam Tamil identity through rituals of commemoration, and outlets for cultural and post-traumatic expression.[191]

Tamil political organizations struggled in the early 2000s amid growing international scrutiny over the LTTE as a terrorist group in the post-9/11 era. The Federation of Associations of Canadian Tamils (FACT), which was created in 1992 in an effort to create an umbrella group to try to bring together the Tamil-Canadian organizations, folded in the early 2000s amid accusations that WTM and FACT were fronts for the LTTE. While WTM continued to function, it did so behind the scenes dues to its unshakeable ties to the LTTE. The Canadian Tamil Congress (CTC) was founded in 2000 by some members of CanTYD and eventually grew into the leading organization responsible for advocating on behalf of the Tamil community in Canada through a rights-based approach.[192] It too, was accused of being linked to the WTM and the LTTE, but it has tried to keep itself separate enough to maintain standing and focuses on Canada-based projects.

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[189] Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). 17.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Chapter 4 will delve more into this through the memorial day, *Maaveerar Naal*.

[192] Ibid., 90.

After the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, there was a fracturing in the networks of power that undergirded these organizations. Until that point, there was a strong and central message about the conflict in Sri Lanka and where the Tamil diaspora should stand in relation to it. These messages had been carried through the LTTE, the WTM, and those connected to it in other Tamil organizations. Key to the LTTE's ability to maintain one message until its fall, was its charismatic leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, who was treated almost as a deity by the LTTE and its supporters. He set the agenda and the narrative for Eelam politics until his death in 2009. In the face of this vacuum, infighting rose within the Tamil-Canadian diaspora as different individuals and groups vied for power and influence.

Amid these power struggles, the Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) was created, even though infighting continues to plague it into the present. With the demise of the LTTE representing the failure of a military solution to create Tamil Eelam, the Tamil diaspora turned back to a political solution for self-determination. The TGTE asserts itself as a nonviolent and democratic government formed to represent and advocate for the aspirations of political sovereignty of Tamil people from Sri Lanka's North and East. Its Constitution and Charter draw heavily from scholarly discourse on transnationalism and diaspora in developing the justification for their position as representatives of a transnational diaspora who are the citizens of the envisioned state of Tamil Eelam.[193] The TGTE held worldwide elections across the transnational diaspora to elect its members of parliament who currently represent Tamil diasporas from twelve different countries, with Canada having the most representatives at twenty-five.[194] However, as Brun and Van Hear note, the TGTE had "little purchase among the Tamils in Sri Lanka whose cause they claimed to espouse," very clearly embodying the growing chasm between diaspora politics and the on-the-ground politics of Tamils in Sri Lanka in the post-war era.[195] Young people and the next generation are also not represented well by the TGTE.

Youth groups have always been at the center of the growth of Sri Lankan Tamil movements, from the way Tamil student groups in Sri Lanka were the breeding ground of both nonviolent political groups as well as militant groups like the LTTE. The Tamil Youth Organization (TYO) was created in Canada in 2003 and maintains a strong link to Tamil Student's Associations (TSAs) formed at universities and colleges across Ontario.[196] TYO acts as an umbrella youth organization that provides resources and guidance to TSAs, but also tries to heavily influence the agendas and political outlook of these student associations.

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[193] Brun Catherine and Nicholas Van Hear, "Between the Local and the Diasporic: The Shifting Centre of Gravity in War-Torn Sri Lanka's Transnational Politics," *Contemporary South Asian* 20, no. 1 (March 2012): 61–75.

[194] "Members of Parliament," Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam, accessed June 14, 2023, http://tgte.ca/members-of-parliament/.

[195] Ibid.

[196] Other national chapters of TYO also functioned in other Tamil Diasporas, like in the U.K.

In my research, I have found that TSAs are a key space through which the second-generation consciously connects to the larger Tamil diaspora and finds their place within it as second-generation Tamil-Canadians. Some of my interviewees also spoke about the politics that seems to surround how Tamil identity is expressed and performed, which came up in discussing the tensions and pressures between TSAs and the TYO, which maintains a strong commitment to Tamil nationalism and LTTE-based narratives and goals. In talking to one former TYO member, she said:

> It's the generational gap. Tamils who grow up here don't know the history, don't understand the politics, and the TYO really cared about helping them connect to and learn what it means to be Eelam Tamil. The responsibilities that come with it. They are the future, they can impact change. It's important that TSAs aren't just a place for Tamil kids to socialize, being Tamil is about more than that.[197]

How she expresses TYO's goals underlines the way Tamil identity, as conceived by Tamil nationalists and pro-LTTE groups, is heavily shaped by "a responsibility" to the political aspirations of Eelam. The generational gap she refers to is one that separates the first and second generations through the lack of memories of war in Sri Lanka and ties politics to identity more strongly than other notions like a shared culture or language.

However, even among those critical or neutral about the LTTE, this idea of Tamil identity as inseparable from its experience of violence and war persists. In fact, it also persists among the second-generation who did not directly experience the war. The woman from TYO who speaks about this "generational gap" is actually second-generation herself and has blurred the lines of how she experiences her place in the community through her advocacy work and work with the first-generation.

In this dissertation, I argue that this idea that Tamil identity is inseparable from its experiences of violence and war persists because this diaspora is defined by its refugee-ness as the histories of the Sri Lankan conflict and Canadian immigration covered in this Chapter should begin to illustrate. War, violence, homeland politics, and refugee immigration have shaped this community's diasporic consciousness, which is shared between generations. And while the second-generation has started to expand the ideas and experiences within this diasporic consciousness, they are actively interacting with its past forms as they evolve new ways of seeing Tamil identity in the post-war era. Chapter 2 will dive into a moment of rupture where the first and second generations created shared memories of the Sri Lankan war during the military offensive of 2009 and the diasporic protests it generated.

[197] Interview with second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 4, 2023

Chapter 2: 2009 Activism: Protesting Bodies & Active Images

"…bodies are figured as a natural touchtone, a spark for shared experience, a bedrock of truth and authentic experience."[198] *– Lori Allen*

This chapter will explore the 2009 protests as a temporal and physical space that pulled the second generation into the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic consciousness. While *postmemories* trickled down through the family and the community, this time of upheaval in Sri Lanka and the mass protests in Toronto marked a watershed moment when many in the second-generation were learning about the conflict for the first time. The protests were a space of fighting for their community 'back home,' a moment where they could not help but confront the violence in Sri Lanka, which for these months of protest filtered their everyday lives. The protests were also a space where they reckoned with what it meant to be Tamil-Canadian as they tried to leverage their Canadian-ness to ask Canada and the international community to intervene in Sri Lanka. Finally, the protests also became a space of community mourning and building.

I will first dive into one specific protest during this time to provide a grounding of the heightened emotions that affected both generations of the diaspora during this period. I will then explore how the protests became a space of rupture and analyze the visual politics the diaspora engaged in to make human rights claims and interact with both Canada and the international community. I argue that these visual articulations of political subjectivity are connected to the way the body emerged as a central site where collective memory and mourning were crystallized. Finally, by investigating why images are so relied upon in human rights activism, I explore how protest images also gain the power to act upon the protestors that wield them. It is through these interrelated elements that I argue that the protests became a space of collective mourning and community formation for the Tamil Canadian diaspora that was able to bring together the first and second generations through new and shared experiences of collective trauma.

Panic, desperation, helplessness

It was Mother's Day in 2009. Protests had been ongoing throughout the city since January that year. The Tamil diaspora was desperately trying to bring awareness to the humanitarian crisis in Sri Lanka as the military onslaught continued in Tamil areas with little regard for the lives of civilians.[199] There was growing panic in the community as family members were only getting snippets of news from inside the country about thousands being killed, while the Sri Lankan state's efforts to push journalists and international organizations out

[198] Lori A. Allen, "Martyr Bodies in the Media: Human Rights, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Immediation in the Palestinian Intifada," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 1 (2009): 161–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.01100.x.

[199] More detail about the events in early 2009 that sparked the protest can be found in Chapter 1

of the region meant that mainstream news organizations were reporting none of this. Padmani, a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, recalled:

> I heard my mother crying on the phone. Her cousin had made it to a safe zone with her family but lost contact with my grandmother. They knew [my grandmother] was trapped in the place that was being bombed. I could hear [my aunt] trying to reassure my mom that it would all be okay…they had survived so much…. Etc., etc.… they were all praying… But my mother was just silent…listening. I didn't even know what to say to her. I didn't know how to comfort her. I felt completely useless.[200]

At the peak of this crisis, there was a brimming sense of desperation in the Tamil-Canadian diaspora. Feelings that the protests thus far had not achieved their goals and that time was running out to stop the massacre of Tamils left in Sri Lanka were heightening. The morning of May 10th, the diaspora was receiving news that the military was openly shelling an area they previously deemed a safe zone, and while mainstream news sources were reporting casualties in the hundreds, the information the diaspora were getting indicated that deaths were in the thousands. Many could not reach their loved ones, and being in the dark about what was happening on the ground was unbearable.

Siva, another second-generation Tamil-Canadian, reflected on the feeling around this time, saying:

> They were dying in Sri Lanka. They were being murdered… We had to do something, do what we could. Maybe we could get the Canadian government to support a ceasefire in Sri Lanka. Maybe we could push the tide to get more nations to do the same, or maybe the U.N. would put pressure on Sri Lanka to stop. But no one was accepting the numbers and the facts we knew were true. No one was even paying attention. I mean…. we did what we could.[201]

The protest that day started as many others had during these last few months, but numbers swelled, hitting over an estimated 12,000 protesters. The protestors were mostly Tamil-Canadians and consisted of all ages, including children and the elderly. This was not the largest Tamil protest from this time period, but the energy of the protestors was intensified with the recent news. The protest started to move through downtown Toronto, seemingly trying to force the city, its inhabitants, and lawmakers to stop and watch. It was early evening when the protest moved up on the Gardiner, a major highway leading into the Toronto core. Blocking the Gardiner shut down the main valve into the city, bringing movement into the city to a standstill, and was covered by every media outlet. Siva spoke about the feeling on the Gardiner by saying, "It was crazy, I can't quite remember when we realized, but suddenly we were going up that ramp, and you know, in that moment, it felt like we were really doing something. It felt like a reflection of the feeling we were all feeling, the intensity of that feeling." His body tightened up as he sat up straighter; it looked like that 'feeling' he kept referring to was re-inflating him as he reminisced. He continued:

> Standing there, it felt like we were taking a last stand. It was for hours, I think…the police were pressuring us to leave, but we couldn't, you know? We all knew, we had to

[200] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, Dec 10, 2022.

[201] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, Dec 12, 2022.

> stand there. We were like human shields protecting them…ironic right? But that was the feeling, that as long as we stood, we were doing something to protect them.[202]

Siva physically slumped back into his chair as he finished this last sentence. The air that filled him seemed to dissipate. The turn in his energy happened after he described him and his fellow protestors as 'human shields," and I presume that what he referred to as "ironic" was the fact that the LTTE was accused of using civilians as human shields in the military confrontations that ended in the deaths of thousands. I followed up by asking him why he seemed so deflated at the end of describing this, and he answered, "Well we didn't protect anyone did we? We thought we were doing something… but Tamil people were killed, point blank, the world didn't care, life went on… it's just…*sad*."[203] The word seemed to taste bitter in his mouth, marked by disillusionment, a strong pattern I came across when interviewing second-generation youth who were part of these protests.

Rupturing 'place' and creating transnational 'space'

Siva and others like him painted a picture of what motivated so many of those protests, the feeling of being "human shields." This idea of using their bodies to stand and protect, as well as the idea of being the "voice" for the "voiceless," came up repeatedly in interviews. Both metaphors evoke how they tried to transform their bodies to be stand-ins for those in Sri Lanka. The image of becoming 'human shields' also suggests how the space of the protests became a transnationally imagined space. Tamil-Canadians standing on the Gardiner often re-envisioned that space as a transnational one, ruptured in both place and time. They felt they were safeguarding Tamils in Sri Lanka behind them as they physically stood in front of cars (which represented the Canadian public), and the police (who represented the Canadian federal state and maybe even the violence of the Sri Lankan state). This re-imagining of space created a live parallel to the Tamil civilians that were, in that moment, being placed between the Sri Lankan State and the LTTE.[204] In this transnational space that bridged these two nations, these protestors were willing themselves into a spatial possibility of imposing themselves on and in front of these civilians. In describing their motives for participating in this protest, many interviewees described the desperation and desire to feel connected to those "back home," and this imagined space that connected them spatially seemed to assuage their need to know what was happening, face it, and proactively use their relative freedom to help.

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[202] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, Dec 12, 2022.

[203] Ibid.

[204] The issue of the LTTE using civilians as a 'human shield" is controversial in the Tamil community. With many that supported the LTTE either denying it or excusing it. A common defense is that the LTTE did not believe that the world would let the Sri Lankan state kill those they knew to be civilians on such a mass scale. This would name the tactic as one that demonstrated the ruthlessness of Sri Lanka and the "international community" and blame the LTTE only for the idealism and faith they put on the human rights system to protect Tamils.

Toronto was not the only place these protests were being held. They were also happening in other cities across the world by other Tamil diaspora communities, and there was a semi-permanent encampment at Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada. These protests were always aimed at many audiences at once: the Canadian public, Canadian officials, the "international community," the United Nations, even the United States, etc. It is telling that many of the protests took place outside the U.S. Consulate in Toronto before marching up to Queen's Park, where the Canadian Legislature is located, trying to get its message heard by both nation-states. This diaspora has always felt its transnationality. Two factors help explain why. This was a globally dispersed diaspora with families split across different countries in North America, Europe, Australia, South Asia, and South-East Asia. It was also influenced by the fact that activism aimed to change politics in Sri Lanka was always directed at political powers that seemed capable of either intervening or legitimating the desired separate state of Tamil Eelam as an official state representing the Tamils from this region.

The statelessness of refugeehood led these diasporas to, at times, feel more connected to being citizens of the state of Tamil Eelam, an imagined state, than the nations they were now citizens of. This helped tie together these diasporas in their common experience and shared goals for the future of this imagined state. But belonging to an imagined state does not confer the power and rights that citizenship is associated with, and this is why they often came to project themselves as "subjects of human rights" instead. This was appealing because it gave them access to the rights conferred to them *purely as humans* in a global, internationally recognized system of law and justice. The national identities of the countries they were now living in could not unite them in a shared identity or unified political claim, not only because of national boundaries and different national agendas but because not all those who are a part of the global Tamil diaspora had attained official citizenship where they were now located. The community came to define themselves through their shared status as Eelam nationals fighting for "human rights" and "self-determination" since this spoke to their shared experiences and offered them tools to fight for the recognition and justice they desired.

The way these protests created a transnational space that connected these disparate diasporas and those in Sri Lanka into one imagined and co-existing reality can be seen in how they were re-visualized through Tamil T.V. channels. Tamil channels and Tamil media consistently covered the protesters with localized information about where to go alongside any news from inside Sri Lanka. The news of this war and its violence radiated through the community, across its globally dispersed elements, and alongside news of the reactionary global protests. In the visual storytelling of that time, these channels were placing these protests in the same physical realm as what was happening in Sri Lanka. Tamil T.V. Channels are vital in producing a visual landscape of identity, culture, and continuity for Tamil diasporas, and often the clips from different countries were mixed together, the literal location of the protests became less important than the '*what'* and '*why'* portrayed in these video clips. The '*what',* of course, was the visual act of Tamils protesting and demanding action against the human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, and the *'why'* was the emotionally charged appeal to human empathy.

The transnational identity of this diaspora was also being visually articulated very purposefully by the diaspora. Along with placards with images and messages, protestors also carried thousands of Canadian and LTTE/Eelam flags. Many carried both flags. This seemed to be a clear attempt to communicate that the protestors were tied to both places, and it was these

mutual ties that legitimized this protest. Being Tamil gave them the right to speak to what was happening in Sri Lanka, a country they left, and being Canadian gave them a right to speak about that here, on the streets of Toronto. Both sets of national rights were not assumed and were being actively debated in the public discourse. The first notable protest of 2009 took place in front of the Sri Lankan Consulate in Toronto. The consul general Bandula Jasekara reportedly refused to address the demonstrators, claiming, "I'm not talking to terrorists," and called the police. In a later interview, he responded by reminding the interviewer that the LTTE was a banned organization and "these people are clearly their sympathizers."[205] From there on out, Sri Lanka was no longer treated as a primary audience for these demonstrations, with protests being held largely in front of the U.S. Consulate or places of prominence for Canadian politics. This exclusion of the Sri Lankan state as an authority to be in conversation with, highlighted how the Tamil diaspora sees itself as stateless, and feels an urgency to use other transnational avenues in creating and projecting a political identity.

Judith Butler, in talking about the rights of refugees and the stateless, says, "[t]hose who are excluded from existing polities, who belong to no nation-state or other contemporary state formation, may be deemed "unreal" only by those who seek to monopolize the terms of reality. And yet, even after the public sphere has been defined through their exclusion, they act."[206] Tamils in Toronto seemed to be fighting their sense of statelessness and inserting themselves into the public sphere by actively using their citizenship to politically assert rights conferred by each nation (Canada and Eelam). The only nation they rejected association with was the state of Sri Lanka; the Sri Lankan flag was never carried. In contrast to the flags of Eelam and Canada, the Sri Lankan flag represented no jurisdiction over them and no possibilities for their future.

Instead of accepting the logic that protests merely bring together bodies that make claims in a public space, Judith Butler argues that protests can *create* public space. She suggests that this presumption that "public space is given" would lead us to "fail to see that the very public character of the place is being disputed, and even fought over, when these crowds gather"[207] In the 2009 Tamil protests, the very nature of public space was indeed being fought over, which becomes apparent through the controversial public debates over the demonstrations that happened in the Canadian media, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. However, I argue that during these protests, the public space that was being created was not simply a *Canadian public space*, but a space of rupture and transnational possibility.

> In his preface to *Aesthetics of Global Protests*, Nicholas Mirzoeff writes that:
> "Rupture is a place of density and proximity, a stepping outside the boundaries proposed by the society of control. In a moment of rupture, even such non-space can take on new

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[205] Aulackh, Raveena and Taylor, Lesley Ciarula, "'They Are Killing Innocent People,'" *Toronto Star*, January 28, 2009, sec. GTA, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2009/01/28/they_are_killing_innocent_people.html.

[206] Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2015). 80-81.

[207] Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. 70-71.

> meanings and temporalities become uneven. People claim that space to invent the commons of the future."[208]

Throughout these protests, spaces on the streets of Toronto were rendered places of such "density and proximity," where both space and temporality were de-stabilized. The scene on the Gardiner highway, for example, involved a cross-section of the country: a few hundred Tamils of all generations occupied a narrow raised portion of this highway, taking up space between cars full of Canadians on one side and a cavalry of police and Royal Canadian Mounty on horseback on the other side. Hundreds of onlookers watched from the towering condos that overlooked this section of highway as helicopters circled. Different relationships between *seeing* and *being seen* were layered in this confrontation, and within the cluster of Tamil-Canadians, the ghostly presence of all those 'back home' they stood for, complicated this network of relations. While the Tamil diaspora was actively engaging in visual tactics to create this public space of rupture and possibility, Mirzoeff also points out the limits involved in these protest aesthetics. In appropriating Hannah Arendt's term, "the space of appearance," he argues that this space that is created as 'public' is not one that all can enter equally:

> "…because history and ancestry cannot be abolished. To appear here is not optical. It is the combination of the embodied mediation of appearance; an awareness of time that respects ancestors and remembers the future; an engagement with the land on which the appearance takes place; and a commitment to the reciprocity and consent of that appearance."[209]

Indeed, all the actors involved and present in the space of that protest would not be recognized equally. The ghostly presence of the Tamils left behind was only felt by one group, the power to shut down these protests was only bestowed unto another, and the hushed context of the stolen indigenous land upon which this all took place went unnoticed.

Intergenerational bonds in the face of media narratives

While the news-media coverage of the protests will be further contextualized in Chapter 3, here, I would like to explore one aspect of that debate that reveals the ruptured way the Tamil diaspora was experiencing that moment of time and the failure of this public "space of appearance" to be one that rendered all subjects equal. Many of the opinion polls and public debate over what Torontonians thought about the protests exposed extreme vitriol against the community for blocking a major highway on Mother's Day, a busy Sunday. However, Padmani's quote from the start of this chapter about watching her mother cry on the phone hints at the very different context this Mother's Day had for her. There was a huge chasm between the Canadian public's conceptualization of Mother's Day as a particularly "inappropriate" time and the Tamil diaspora's gut reaction that it was the "most appropriate" time. Many

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[208] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Preface: Devisualize," in *The Aesthetics of Global Protest*, ed. Aidan McGarry et al., Visual Culture and Communication (Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 12.

[209] Mirzoeff, "Preface." 13.

Torontonians felt that the Tamil community was 'selfish' and 'unlawful' in their protest. For example, in the comments of an opinion poll over the protests, Elena writes:

> "How can the police & government be proud of a job well done when a group of people brought Toronto traffic to a halt on Mothers' Day of all days, while police and government did nothing to protest the rest of Toronto's residents? I firmly believe that the lack of authoritative proactive reactions sets a negative precedent for future protests, as summer is just gearing up."[210]

Elena emphasizes the special anger she had towards this happening on "Mother's Day of *all days*."[211] She even communicates her support of more "authoritative reactions" by the police to prevent protests like this in the future. However, Sharanja, a Tamil-Canadian, responded to Elena and others in the comments:

> Tamils protested peacefully for too long and nothing has gotten accomplished. That's why I feel that drastic measures like yesterday's protest were acceptable. Tamils were left with no other option. And finally, a member of parliament has said that they would at least consider something. Yesterday was Mother's Day, yet *thousands were made motherless*. We as a world should not tolerate genocide.[212]

Here, Sharanja points out why speaking out against violence against mothers on Mother's Day feels entirely appropriate.

Like her, Padmani also felt the intergenerational context of her mother's pain and the danger her mother's mother was in and could see nothing else that made sense to do that Mother's Day than to be out protesting. She said:

> [the protests] gave me something to do. I didn't want to be home. I remember thinking about the look on my mother's face [on that phone call] when I was out there. It felt hopeless though. We were all just yelling until our throats were sore. Just hoping the international community would do something.[213]

Padmani's experience speaks to the relational dynamics of sharing loss intergenerationally with the women in her family. Unable to comfort her mother and unable to keep her grandmother safe, she uses the protests as an outlet for the pain of her helplessness, "yelling until [her] throat was sore." Vivetha Thambinathan, another second-generation Tamil from Toronto, wrote an article about the Mother's Day protests, honing in on the intersectional nature of social movements that are led by racialized women and the way they are ignored and undercut by media coverage.[214] She highlighted the connection between these protests and protests that were

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[210] Elena, "Comment on," News Staff, "Tamil Protests: Your Reaction," CityNews Toronto, May 11, 2009, https://toronto.citynews.ca/2009/05/11/tamil-protests-your-reaction/.

[211] Ibid.

[212] T.Sharanja, "Comment on," News Staff, "Tamil Protests: Your Reaction," CityNews Toronto, May 11, 2009, https://toronto.citynews.ca/2009/05/11/tamil-protests-your-reaction/.

[213] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, Dec 10, 2022.

held in Sri Lanka by mothers and grandmothers of the disappeared.[215] Avoiding the narrative about the way women and mothers are the backbone of such social movements in favor of charged headlines about terrorism and unlawfulness reveals the undercurrents of the way racialized women are sidelined in mainstream narratives.

While the protests highlighted a chasm between the Tamil-Canadian diaspora and the Canadian public, it also wove the first and second generations more tightly together in their shared experience of both the horror of watching what was happening in Sri Lankan, but also facing a shared disillusionment with their acceptance and belonging in Canada.

Visual politics: visible bodies & mapping resistance

Speaking about the Mother's Day protest, one second-generation woman, Kavitha, described the turnout for the protests in a very particular way:

> We took up space and made it so that they couldn't ignore us. We were everywhere, filling up these streets. People had to see us and face what was happening on their way to work, school or lunch. We made the news and people at home actually heard about what was happening, People at work asked me about it and I was happy to have the opportunity to explain.[216]

Kavitha notably uses the pronouns "we" and "us" repeatedly in this quote, revealing how she saw herself as part of a whole. This was a case of the community acting together, their bodies unified in their protest's goals. She also uses a number of active verbs in her description of events; her pride in what they had accomplished is evident in the way she emphasizes the act of forcing the Canadian public 'to see' them. Her quote highlights how the notion of visibility directly impacted the value she thought the protests had. She describes the protests as an act of taking up space, overwhelming public spaces with a sheer saturation of bodies. This paralleled the general belief among the protestors that a large enough mass could not be ignored. It was the visual deluge of Tamil-Canadian bodies "filling up these streets" that helped stoke media coverage and helped the protests penetrate the public discourse. The goal of getting media coverage also led to a highly conscious and targeted effort to create a visually large mass of people that was not just visually dominant on the street but that could be mapped from above as helicopters captured the scene.

This goal of visibility is revealed through how another Tamil woman, Kiruthiha, describes the moment the protests moved from the streets to blocking the highway. She describes the move as organic, saying, "It was a visual outpouring of intrinsic grief and the grief

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[214] Vivetha Thambinathan, "This Mother's Day, Pay Attention to Racialized Women Leading Resistance Movements, like Tamil Mothers," *The Conversation*, May 6, 2021, http://theconversation.com/this-mothers-day-pay-attention-to-racialized-women-leading-resistance-movements-like-tamil-mothers-158675.

[215] Ibid.

[216] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, March 14, 2023.

overflowed on the Gardiner [the highway] and coagulated on Spadina [a major Toronto road]."[217] Her emphasis on the visual nature of this protest again captures the fight for visibility that the protest was engaged in. Whether consciously or subconsciously, Kirtuthiha uses metaphors of liquid in her description of the Mother's Day Protest, portraying the community's "grief" as something that "overflowed" and "coagulated."

Intriguingly, her metaphor was paralleled in the aerial photos of the protest, such as this one below (Figure 2). In images like this, the protestors are depicted as a sea of blood that floods through the streets of this city. The consistency of the red was created by the blending of the large flags the protestors carried. Both the Canadian flag and the LTTE/Eelam flag, comprised of a bold fiery red that, in turn, happened to support this metaphor of a flood of blood as protesters marched down the streets of Toronto's downtown core. Even news articles fed into

Figure 2: A chopper view of a Tamil protest in Toronto in March 2009 from CTV News

this metaphor, referring to the protests as blocking "the downtown artery." The next image (Figure 3) was shown on CTV News and its website alongside the aerial shot above (Figure 2). Here, CTV has created a map of downtown Toronto where the path taken by the protestors is again outlined in red. Both images parallel each other and together present downtown Toronto as a body and its roads as arteries that are being clogged by the blood of Tamil protestors. While the Tamil conception of nation is tied to the body through symbology and ideology (further explored in Chapter 3), this mapping reveals how Canada is also conceptualized as a national body. While Tamil-Canadians see themselves as belonging to this body, animating it through their life-blood, the same metaphor of blood and nation is simultaneously taken to

[217] Mirusha Yogarajah, "When Memory Outlives," *Briarpatch*, April 27, 2020, https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/when-memory-outlives-toronto-tamil.

interpret Tamil protestors as a dangerous, uncontrollable 'flood of blood,' or a 'clog,' that threatens the city and nation.

The body has always been a tool as well as a site of action for activist movements. Key methods, such as civil disobedience, self-immolation, and hunger strikes, take the violence of the state onto the body to urge the bystander/witness/perpetrator to recognize the mutual humanity shared between them. Aside from the Mother's Day Protest in 2009, diaspora protestors made many other attempts to center the body. A series of 'human chains' began in January, where protestors would be spaced out, one by one, to take over as much of the city as possible. During a human chain protest, Tamils would stand, hands clasped with fellow community members that were strangers to them mere minutes before. This act of intimacy visually appealed to the humanity, strength, and solidarity of the Tamil community, standing together. The human chain of January 30th, 2009, was one of the earliest large-scale Tamil protests and was estimated to have been attended by 30,000 Tamils.[218] Protest organizers directed the protestors along the main subway lines for maximum visibility throughout the downtown core. In the busiest places, protestors would stand close together, holding hands. In less dense areas, they would be more staggered, yards apart, creating the feeling of continuity while not wasting the resource of protestor bodies in less visible areas. This human chain protest was organized to be at its height at 6 pm and with the most visibility at Union Station, the central station that accommodated buses and trains from the downtown core to the suburbs.

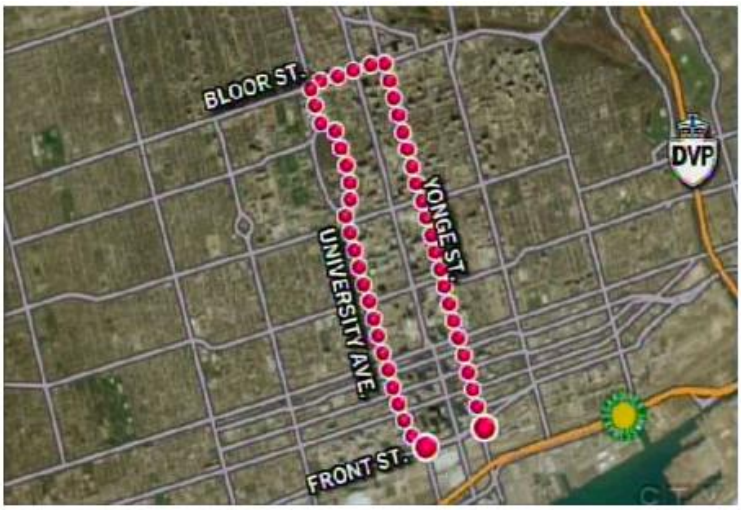

Figure 3: Map of the pathway of March 2009 Tamil protest from CTV News

[218] Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015). 102.

Targeting a time when commuters were leaving the city to get to their homes in the suburbs made for maximum interference with the daily lives of Toronto commuters.[219]

Interestingly, this human chain protest also engaged a parallel sense of targeting 'in-between' places. These protestors, who saw themselves as in-between this new place of belonging and a home that they felt helpless to affect, were standing face to face with citizens trying to get *home* from the "Toronto" they only worked in. While most Tamil-Canadians also lived in the suburbs of Toronto, the protests took place downtown Toronto or in Canada's capital city, Ottawa, which was a five-hour drive away. For them, downtown Toronto was a public stage and the site of capitalist work culture. It was the place they could occupy in their claims for visibility and rights as Canadians and as subjects of human rights, but it was somehow differentiated from the "Toronto" they lived in and thought of as home. In this way, the protests reveal the way a city is a multilayered place, and how residents conceptualize the city lends itself to the way they navigate it.

This section also demonstrates how the visual politics of trying to use mass visibility to gain political traction and attention ended up working against the community in various ways. They were able to become part of the national discourse but could not control the direction of that discourse. Their visibility worked against them, creating fear, annoyance, and criticism of their political tactics. This highlights how for racialized bodies, the line between invisible and *hypervisible* is thin and precarious. While theories about *hypervisibility* speak more directly to the way bodies of black women are racialized, sexualized, and made the objects of surveillance in their representation, it does help in understanding how the dichotomy between visibility and hypervisibility is experienced similarly by other racialized groups.[220] The same metaphor of the protestors as a sea of blood in the streets of Toronto was understood drastically differently by the diaspora itself and the Canadian viewers presented with these images.

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[219] In his book, Amarasingham interviews one of the organizers of the human chain protests and delves into their motivations and the extreme logistics that went into the protests. The interview reveals how organizers researched the numbers of Torontonians who commuted into the city each day and were trying to calculate how many flyers to print and how many placards to create to hand out to human chain participants. See: Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics*.

[220] Safiya Umoja Noble, "Google Search: Hypervisibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible," *InVisible Culture* 19 (2013); Rasul A. Mowatt, Bryana H. French, and Dominique A. Malebranche, "Black/Female/Body Hypervisibility and Invisibility," *Journal of Leisure Research* 45, no. 5 (November 1, 2013): 644–60, https://doi.org/10.18666/jlr-2013-v45-i5-4367; Andrea Brightenti, "Visibility: A Category for the Social Sciences," *Current Sociology* 55, no. 3 (May 2007), https://journals-sagepub-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/doi/abs/10.1177/0011392107076079;

Protest performance & embodied memory

In another form of protest that centered the body, a tent was set up in front of parliament in Ottawa, where hundreds of protestors set out to do a hunger strike that went on for months. Similar hunger strikes were conducted on university campuses across Ontario and Quebec (the provinces with the largest Tamil populations). The hunger strike itself is a form of protest that takes the violence of the state unto the bodies of protestors to utilize this context of rights, optics, and the political capital of the human body to heighten the message for its audience.[221] Abrahamsson and Danyi's work on hunger strikes, for example, explores how passivity and weakness are mobilized and weaponized through hunger strikes though trying to reorient its audiences to become sensitized to new modes of doing.[222] The image below (Figure 4) blurs

Figure 4: Photo of Hunger Strike in Toronto Canada. Courtesy of Ninaivukal.

[221] Gandhi's style of civil disobedience often tried to engage the irony of the British rhetoric of colonization as a civilizing force for the betterment of its subjects, putting strikers' lives in the hands of state officials. In a similar vein, hunger strikes have often been in prison to highlight the way prisoners are devoid of any rights, even the right to their own bodies when hunger strikes are broken up through force feeding. See: Guy Aitchison, "Fragility as Strength: The Ethics and Politics of Hunger Strikes*," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 30, no. 4 (2022): 535–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12261.

[222] Sebastian Abrahamsson and Endre Dányi, "Becoming Stronger by Becoming Weaker: The Hunger Strike as a Mode of Doing Politics," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 22, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 882–98.

together a hunger strike that took place in front of Queen's Park in Toronto with a piece of performance art, illustrating how hunger strikes are also an embodied form of protest performance.

This image blurs the boundary between those striking in hunger under the tent and the performance art of protestors lying in bloody heaps at the center of this photo. The performers that are alive and grieving the deaths of the other performers also blur into the standing protestors who are not technically part of the performance but serve as an extension of the scene, performing/living their role as the witnessing public to this performed violence. This performance seems directly inspired by the many images of suffering coming out of the warzone at this time. Specifically, it seems to recreate an incident where the Sri Lankan army shelled a hospital in an area they had declared a safe zone, killing nearly a hundred civilians and patients.[223] The Tamil diaspora was desperate to draw attention to this war crime. They recreated and performatively embodied the dead and wounded, while the tent of hunger strikers mimics the makeshift hospital that was bombed. The way hunger strikes work to weaponize weakness and the suffering body is underlined and emphasized by this performance art. While the hunger strikers lay down, devoid of energy after days or weeks of being fasted, performers lay beside them, wrapped in white gauze and fake blood. Images from the war often featured families crying over their loved ones who lay bandaged or bloody on the ground, and this, too, was re-created. But where the 'performance' starts and ends is blurred. Those sitting next to the bandaged bodies are also grieving their own losses in real-time, with these performative bodies acting as placeholders for the loved ones missing in action in Sri Lanka. Even those performing death are performing their own felt sense of helplessness, illustrating their experience of 'social death' as they see Tamil lives being devalued by this violence.[224] The hunger strikers, too, are not 'performing' their pain and weakness but rather choosing to take on the pain of hunger to more closely embody the experience of those trapped in the warzone.

Diana Taylor argues that traumatic memory "often relies on live, interactive performance for transmission" because its transmission involves a shared act of telling and listening that is participatory.[225] She continues, "Bearing witness is a live process, a doing, an event, that takes place in real time, in the presence of a listener who comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event."[226] By performing and embodying this trauma, both the hunger strike and the protest performance emerge as an act of trauma transmission, whereby the diaspora becomes live participants and "co-owners" of this trauma. The collective memory of this moment is being created and shared through their bodies and the emotions they engage. Taylor also argues

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[223] Nick Paton Walsh, "'Sri Lankan Army Hits Hospital' - Channel 4 News," *Channel 4 News*, May 2, 2009.

[224] Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (NYU Press, 2012).

[225] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003). 167.

[226] Ibid.

that performance protest can help "survivors cope with individual and collective trauma by using it to animate political denunciation."[227] In this way, the trauma is not transmitted unmediated but is re-contextualized through the act of resistance these protests embody. Thus, this collective trauma is being shared, not as a burden, but as an opportunity to engage it and heal it, or at least fight the conditions that cause it.

"Images of suffering"

Tied to the way protesters were using their bodies to gain visibility, they were also relying on what I refer to as 'images of suffering' to communicate their message. By the term 'images of suffering,' I am referring to the jarring and explicit images of the dead, raped, and injured from the Sri Lankan conflict that were (and continue to be) circulated online through blogs, community news outlets, chain emails, and social media. These images have also been printed in ethnic newspapers, magazines, and on pamphlets, posters, and protest placards.[228] The constant barrage of these chilling images can be analyzed as part of an emotionally charged effort with both direct and indirect goals and results. On the one hand, disseminating these photos is part of a deliberate campaign to charge Sri Lanka with human rights violations (influenced by both Eelam nationalism and humanitarian concerns). On the other hand, the circulation of these images, at least within Sri Lankan Tamil networks, became part of a collective ritual of mourning and community support building.

Images from the Sri Lankan conflict have been circulated among the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora since the beginning of both the war and the mass migration of Tamils to foreign countries. 2009, however, did, of course, mark a significant moment of activism in the diaspora in reaction to the intensification of violence in the country. As stories and images from the war zone began to leak out through family and community networks, the Tamil diaspora used these images heavily in their activism, both to rally the community and to move the publics they were trying to engage. In the production of protest materials and the sustained engagement with these images both at the protest sites and through the new media technologies used for simultaneous online activism, these images took center stage as active objects of power and resonance in the diasporic community.

Images as human rights evidence

When I asked one interviewee, Siva, about the images used during the protests, he said, "The evidence was all there. We printed them out, large and clear. I don't get it, how can you turn away after seeing something like that? But we just kept hearing that the war crimes

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[227] Ibid., 166.

[228] Thusiyan Nandakumar, "Political Activism in the Tamil Diaspora," in *Diaspora Dialogues for Development and Peace Project* (Berlin/Luzern: Berghof Peace Support and Center for Just Peace and Democracy, 2011).

'weren't proven.'"[229] He shook his head in disbelief. His frustration stems from feeling that these photos were visible evidence being willfully ignored. Understanding why these graphic images were embraced and so heavily relied upon in this activism is tied to the historical role of 'images of suffering' in human rights systems. Photographs and other visual media have been incorporated into the human rights regime since its inception.[230] Their use can be broadly divided into two intertwined roles, one as evidence and the other as a part of activism. Both these roles are deeply engaged in the acts of witnessing and giving testimony that are crucial to the human rights framework and in line with its positivist inheritance.[231] These forms of evidence-gathering are vital in official human rights processes that aim to reveal and establish 'truth claims.'[232] Media technologies have been incorporated into the practices of witnessing and providing testimony since the rise of human rights discourse.[233] Like with Siva, media technologies were commonly understood as devices capable of recording reality in its true form, and were adopted as ideal tools for the active witnessing and testimonial processes of human rights procedure. This is tied to what Barthes called the "special credibility of the photograph."[234] Marita Sturken expands on this idea, describing how "One seemingly cannot deny that the camera has 'seen' its subject, that 'it has been there.' One looks through the image to the 'reality' it represents, forgetting, in essence, the camera's mediating presence. Thus, the camera testifies to that which has been"[235] Sturken captures the way cameras are understood as personified technologies that have the power to witness through their physical presence and ability to view. Yet, Sturken is also attempting to complicate the assumption that cameras have the power to capture 'reality' and communicate that reality without interference. She argues

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[229] Interview with a second-generation Tamil Canadian, Toronto, December 12, 2022.
[230] Meg McLagan, "Principles, Publicity, and Politics: Notes on Human Rights Media," *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 3 (2003): 605–12.

[231] Leshu Torchin, *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012). See Also: Meg McLAGAN, "Introduction: Making Human Rights Claims Public," *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 1 (2006): 191–95.

[232] There are a myriad of scholarly works that attempt to complicate the ability of testimony and witnessing to produce truth, for example: Nora Strejilevich, "Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth," *Human Rights Quarterly* 28 (2006): 701; and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Taylor & Francis, 1992).

[233] Torchin, *Creating the Witness*. 65.

[234] Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation* (University of California Press, 1991). 10.

[235] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997). 21.

that images are not neutral vessels for memory or historical reality; instead, they are active objects, which "create, interfere with and trouble the memories we hold…"[236]

Nevertheless, in many communities engaged in an appeal for human rights, images are still perceived as unmediated forms of evidence. In Tamil diaspora activism, for instance, a key set of images that came to be heavily relied upon by the community can be traced back to an article in an online news source written by a journalist going by the pseudonym, Muthamizh Vendhan (though it is unclear where he got the images from). His article aimed to present evidence that the Sri Lankan government was committing genocide and other war crimes, and he featured a series of extremely graphic photos along with the article.[237] The images featured soon took on a life of their own and were catapulted into widespread circulation that developed unattached from his written arguments.[238] Whereas Vendhan used both words and images to build 'evidence' and substantiate his argument about Sri Lankan war crimes, many of the individuals and groups that coopted these images created photo albums instead or simply posted the graphic images one after another with minimal text to distract them from that task. For instance, many identical Flickr photo albums were created independently by different users to showcase these photos.[239] The layout of both blogs and photo albums forces the viewer to scroll down or click through, imitating a chronological retelling of the event where the text only supports the story painted by the photo evidence. The editing of Vendhan's original report for use in these alternative sites illustrates the way images are assumed to be able to speak for themselves through the language of human rights.

Suffering & the ideal victim of human rights

Vasanthan, a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, used terms specific to the human rights language of war crimes as he described what was happening during those months:

> They tried to make it a war on terror. Say that it was a government fighting the terrorism of the Tigers, but they were killing *indiscriminately.* They bombed safe zones. Even the IDP [internally displaced people] camps afterward, they separated women and men and children. There's still so many missing. Parents who can't find their children, but yeah,

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[236] Ibid., 20.

[237] Muthamizh Vendhan, "Grisly Photos Reveal Genocide by Sri Lankan Government Against Tamil People," *Www.Salem-News.Com* (blog), 2010, http://www.salem-news.com/articles/august072010/srilanka-violence-mv.php.

[238] The two websites bellow are examples but have since become broken links: http://www.eelamhomeland.com/gallery/thumbnails.php?album=35; http://www.warwithoutwitness.com/index.php?option=com_phocagallery&view=categories&Itemid=54

[239] This flicker page offers an example: https://www.flickr.com/photos/38006479@N08/

> I'm talking after the war, during the war, they were just shelling everything. Women…children…[240]

Vasanthan describes the government's violence as "indiscriminate" and focused in on the bombing of "safe zones," pinpointing the fact that war crimes were being committed. He is painfully aware that the deaths that matter are the ones of civilians, not of the Tigers. Yet, he doesn't just describe civilians broadly, instead highlighting "women" and "children." He mentions children *three* times in this passage. Children are universally accepted as innocent, and their deaths universally accepted as the most horrific. Though this is a common way to measure the extent of atrocity and the level of inhumanity in war-time violence, it reveals much about our unsaid understandings of victimhood and how we narrow our definitions of such a category.

Christine Shwobel-Patel, in her work on ideal victimhood, outlined three particular problematic characteristics of ideal victims: "(i) weakness and vulnerability, (ii) dependency and (iii) grotesqueness.[241] In this definition, she emphasizes weakness and highlights how the "unpleasant," "empathy inducing" spectacle involved in the grotesque aesthetic of the victim is key to their ideal victimhood. Shwobel-Patel is also working off the definition of ideal victimhood conceptualized by Nils Christine, for whom the victim is constructed through weakness as well as the criminality of the perpetrator and the social respectability of the victim.[242] It is not just the crime, then, that creates a victim, but this set of social and aesthetic circumstances that produce ideal victimhood. Makau Mutua similarly argues that the human rights movement is oriented around a *savages-victims-saviors* metaphor, which encourages a neat, black-and-white construction of the relationship between the perpetrators, subjects, and enforcers of human rights.[243] This delineation obscures many of the complex relationships of power and control between these categories. Despite such criticisms, there seems to be a sustained instinct that the concepts of ideal victimhood create and shape the mold of who a rights-deserving subject can be. The Tigers and the way they blend into the Tamil polity complicate the narrative of state violence because they are, at worst, seen as bloodthirsty terrorists and, at best, a liberation army. Making a human rights claim against Sri Lanka requires an ideal victim – one that is unimpeachable and does not blur the lines between savages-victims-saviours. In line with Vasanthan's instinct, children are often turned to in these contested spaces where ideal victims are depended upon to write a legible human rights narrative.

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[240] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, February 3, 2023.

[241] Christine Schwöbel-Patel, "The 'Ideal' Victim of International Criminal Law," *European Journal of International Law* 29, no. 3 (November 9, 2018)

[242] Ibid

[243] Makau Mutua, "Savages, Victims, and Saviors: The Metaphor of Human Rights," *Harvard International Law Journal* 42 (2001): 201.

Scholars in human rights media, such as Lori Allen and Meg McLagan, extend this work on the rights-deserving subject to argue that this subject is often understood visually as the victim or the suffering subject.[244] The suffering victim-body is often relied upon to create an affective tie between the victim-subject and the viewer in human rights activism. Vinoshi, another member of the second-generation who spoke to me about the 'images of suffering' circulated in the diaspora, had a difficult reaction to thinking about the photos. She said, "I can't look at those kinds of photos. It does something to me."[245] She grimaced; just talking about the images affected her physically. "Just blood, and death and so much pain…."[246] She trailed off, unable to continue thinking about the photos. Her reaction signals the presence of the "grotesque," while also hinting at how the aesthetics of victimhood affects her physically and emotionally. Jane Gaines introduces the term, 'political mimesis,' to capture the relationship between bodies on the screen and in the audience.[247] As a concept, it builds off of Linda Williams' discussion of how certain film genres can make your body do things "horror makes you scream, melodrama makes you cry, and porn makes you come."[248] Images are able to produce an "almost involuntary mimicry of emotion or sensation of the body on the screen," which can result in the creation of sympathetic, politicized witness-viewers, who are inculcated in the traumatic experiences of the bodies on screen. Political mimesis thus makes "an appeal through the senses to the senses," which sets off a chain reaction from seeing to feeling to 'knowing.'[249] Therefore, the visuality of pain, suffering, and violence to the body speaks particularly well to the empathetic mimesis involved in transforming viewers into secondary witnesses who are compelled to act on behalf of the rights-deserving subjects presented.

Memory transmission: creating new witnesses

Part of why the suffering subject becomes a compelling subject of human rights visually is in the ability of images to speak the language of human rights as testimony and in the creation of further witnesses. Witnessing and testimony are twin processes in human rights evidence collection. Since images are often understood as speaking for themselves, they often serve as testimony for the abuses suffered by those featured in the images. The ability of images to

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[244] McLagan, "Principles, Publicity, and Politics."; Lori A. Allen, "Martyr Bodies in the Media: Human Rights, Aesthetics, and the Politics of Immediation in the Palestinian Intifada," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 1 (2009): 161–80.

[245] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, March 7, 2023.

[246] Ibid.

[247] Gaines, "Political Mimesis," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, vol. 6 (U of Minnesota Press, 1999). 90.

[248] Ibid.

[249] Ibid., 92.

involve themselves in human rights activism then comes from their ability to not only be part of the testimony process but also in the creation of new witnesses. The testimony of a witness is thought to 'hail' its audience into action.[250] For instance, Felman and Laub describe giving testimony as a 'speech act,' one that does not merely involve a narration, but also a commitment from both the speaker and the audience.[251] Creating listeners through the act of testimony is part of the larger reflexive process of producing new witnesses by inducing the audience to also 'bear witness.' Images, especially those of suffering, have special power in this act of 'hailing' and producing witnesses. When one views images of the suffering subject, which they see as 'evidence' of 'reality,' they consequently become witnesses to these abuses and thus become more invested in the process of seeking justice for these abuses by now being able to speak and act as 'witnesses' themselves.

The visual nature of images allows for the audience to become secondary witnesses by "seeing" it for themselves, and the affective power of the suffering depicted, aids in hailing the audience into action through the physical and emotional discomfort produced through meditating on the pain of the victim-subject portrayed. Vinoshi, with her deep physical discomfort with viewing these images, demonstrates that through viewing them, she experiences pain herself, becoming a secondary witness to the crimes at hand. During the mass protests conducted by the diaspora, many placard signs would feature an image of suffering with a written statement. One such photo from the protests shows three children standing in front of who can be presumed to be their parents on the street during the 2009 protests. They each have a large placard hanging in front of them with a string used to loop around their necks. One has an image of the mapped outline of Tamil Eelam with a child's face looking up in the middle of it. The next says, "STOP Tamil Genocide in Sri Lanka," in bright red letters. The third placard shows a woman with her face in her hands, crying over a child's bloodied and bandaged body lying across her lap. Above the image, the placard reads, "DO NOT IGNORE US." Here, the image of a woman's suffering is personified even further, with the text serving as her voice. The image is deeply unsettling on its own, but its affective power is amplified by hanging on the chest of what looks like a 5-7-year-old child with her own mother's hand gently resting on her shoulder. There is a mimetic mirroring of the relational despair captured in between the protestors and the images they hold from the war. Together, the image and text communicate pain and dually hail the audience to not only witness the suffering captured in the image but to also 'do' something about it. Both the image and the audience attain their subject position in relation to the victim through the display of pain, a process that uses the marked body of the victim to claim truth, (re)construct memory, transfer that memory experience, and demand action. The message "DO NOT IGNORE US" becomes the voice not only of those in Sri Lanka but the protestors themselves, who are experiencing the trauma of living with these images, fears, and guilt together as families. Once again, children are centered as the ideal conduit for sending this message. Their parents hold them in front of them, mirroring the way the children have placards in front of them. The image of these children is serving as their parents' placards;

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[250] Torchin, *Creating the Witness*. 4.

[251] Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.

these parents seem to believe that the message means more coming from their children than from them. These children then hold images of other children on their placards, creating an intense layering of the same tactic and a consistent aesthetic of victimhood that cannot be denied.

Failure of the image in human rights activism

The last few sections explored why and how 'images of suffering' came to be relied upon in the human rights activism of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. However, in many cases, like in the case of these particular protests, the widespread dissemination of these types of human rights media did not have the intended consequence of 'hailing' its general audience to act. Again and again, in interviews with the second-generation diaspora, they lamented that the "world did not care" about Tamil suffering. Most left the protests highly disillusioned with the international human rights system, and many (not all) were also disillusioned about the potential of social movements in general to enact change. What explains the failure of media technology to deliver the change it promises? The answer perhaps lies in the ability of the viewing public to read the suffering of the victims in these types of images as the deserving subjects of human rights and their empathy. Yet, the legibility of this subject-hood hits unyielding limits.

Arthur Kleinman argues that "over time… we alter the social experience of witnessing from a moral engagement to a (visual) consumer experience. We consume images for the trauma they represent, the pain they hold (and give?)."[252] Here, Kleinman suggests that in the act of witnessing, a commoditized consumption of trauma develops as a separate and conflicting phenomenon in relation to our morally-oriented engagement with the image. This is tied to the popular idea of "desensitization" of grisly depictions of violence. Yet, it is vital to attend to the ways that public consumption of these types of images is shaped by the post-colonial legacies of how race, gender, and sexuality are viewed. Allen Feldman uses the term 'cultural anesthesia' to explore how the objectification in mass media depictions of the 'Other' only "*increases* the social capacity to inflict pain upon the Other – and I would add – to render the Other's pain inadmissible to public discourse and culture."[253] Cultural anesthesia normalizes and promotes the suffering of the racialized 'Other," banishing and delegitimizing other perceptual options.[254]

In fact, in theorization over the subject of human rights within human rights discourse, this very dichotomy is revealed. Jacques Ranciere, in trying to answer, "Who is the subject of the rights of man?" comes to understand these rights as fundamental rights: the rights of the

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[252] Kleinman, Arthur, "The Violence of Everyday Life: The Multiple Forms and Dynamics of Social Violence," in *Violence and Subjectivity*, ed. Veena Das (University of California Press, 2000). 232.

[253] Allen Feldman, "On Cultural Anesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King," *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 2 (1994): 406.

[254] Ibid.

unpoliticized subject, the subject who is left with nothing but their humanity to claim.[255] Ranciere also incorporates into this theorization Jean-François Lyotard's dual idea of the "inhuman." Lyotard splits the idea of the 'inhuman' to first refer to the cruelty of 'inhuman' acts and, second, to refer to the figure of the "good inhuman" who is an *Other* that is able to claim human rights through the cruelty that has rendered them less than human. In these theorizations about who the rights-deserving subject is, we can see a reflection of the way photographs that depict extreme suffering are claiming human rights through bodies that they are simultaneously rendering sub-human.[256] The connection that threads these two ideas together is the simultaneous victimizing and othering of the subject claiming human rights.

Extending the notion of consumption that Kleinman presents, Weheliye's exploration of *pornotroping* – Spiller's term for the depiction of black suffering – helps explain the way racialization, sexualization, and gendering intertwine in the multilayered creation of the subhuman.[257] *Pornotroping* captures the paradox of the suffering body's "irresistible, destructive sensuality" and its reduction to a thing, that is, the simultaneous distance and intimacy it shares with the original subject position of full personhood.[258] He argues that forces of political subjugation "often produce a sexual dimension that cannot be controlled by the forces that (re)produce it."[259] Indeed, Swathi, another of my interviewees, when speaking about the images from the war, said:

> I get that they were trying to show the world what was happening, but I felt like protecting those people in the photos. I don't think people [other Canadians] just saw them and cared. It felt dehumanizing to see naked and raped women. Like they're someone's daughter.[260]

Like Vinoshi, Swathi was deeply uncomfortable with the use of these gruesome images. She felt it was dehumanizing to Tamils, and women in particular. To her, it felt like a secondary act of violence to show and circulate this image to an uncaring public.

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[255] Jacques Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?," in *Wronging Rights?* (Routledge India, 2011). 302.

[256] Similar to the paradox of the clinical process described by Dufour in: Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" 307-308.

[257] Alexander Ghedi Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke University Press, 2014).

[258] Ibid., 104.

[259] Ibid., 72.

[260] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, Dec 12, 2022.

Images as active objects: acting upon the diaspora

If the images of suffering did not fully succeed in stirring the international community to 'act' in the way intended by the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, the images did surely stir the diasporic community to act. For the Tamil diaspora, the images were not of a brutalized 'other,' but were reflections of themselves and the trajectories of their own lives if they had stayed in Sri Lanka. Thus, the way the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora extends Kleinman's notion of trauma consumption is tied to their specific positionality in relation to the photos. Whereas Kleinman was critiquing the way Western viewers may 'consume' and commodify the suffering of the Other,' the Sri Lankan diaspora's positionality results in a slightly divergent viewing experience. Among Sri Lankan Tamils in the diaspora, a pervasive sense of survivor's guilt filtered the community's engagement with images of suffering.[261] One Tamil-Canadian speaks to her reaction to viewing these 'images of suffering' by writing:

> They lay lifeless. Row by row, lines upon lines, bodies of young Tamil women draped in cloths, as horrified family members search frantically for their daughters, nieces, and sisters, fearing the next covering they lift up will expose the face of their loved one. I was disgusted. Disgusted with myself, disgusted with what the world had become, I was at disgust with myself, for I was behind a computer screen, in the safety of my own home."[262]

Her continuous use of the "disgusted" illustrates their struggle with a deeply and physically felt survivor's guilt, which was only exacerbated by the computer screen that doubly distanced her from the violence. Her interpretation of the photos, "as horrified family members search frantically…" sounds as if she is talking about a video image instead of a still, a phenomenon we can interpret to demonstrate how the affective power of the photo can push her to imagine the scene as if witnessing it live. The idea of images creating secondary witnesses is strongly achieved here in this kind of emotionally charged interaction with photos. The writer's instinct to create a live reel of the moment captured in the photos points to the desire to take on the victim's pain through becoming a secondary witness, and, in this way, she also becomes akin to a secondary victim.

Relatedly, Michael Drake speaks about the politics of mourning, discussing how the bodies of the dead come to stand in for national imaginaries and the body public.[263] By re-imagining the scene in the photo and becoming a secondary witness/victim, this young woman

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[261] Patricia Lawrence, "Violence, Suffering, Amman: The Work of Oracles in Sri Lanka's Eastern War Zone," in *Violence and Subjectivity*, ed. Veena Das (University of California Press, 2000): 187.

[262] Anonymous, "Maveerar Naal Booklet," *Tamil Youth Organization*, 2006. 13.

[263] Michael S. Drake, "The Returns of War: Bodies, Images and Invented Ritual in the War on Terror," in *Violence and War in Culture and the Media* (Routledge, 2011): 131.

is entering the national imaginary of the Sri Lankan Tamil experience. In a similar vein, an article by another second-generation Tamil states:

> I sit here in front of my computer, surfing the net, messaging on Facebook, clicking through websites to see if there is any improvement on our situation back home. I feel guilty every day for waking up, coming to work, talking to employers, going for lunch with co-workers, then going back home and hitting the gym. I make the effort to go to every rally possible and every meeting held by youth. I follow the news every day with my family, and sadly our family time has been all about discussing the fate of the Tamil community.[264]

In this excerpt we see survivor's guilt once again, but we can also see how the act of viewing and interacting with these images colors the balance of the writer's everyday life. The images influence their use of new media technologies, lead them to attend rallies with other diasporic youth, and compel them to discuss the conflict with their family. Thus, the photos that they start the day with come to orient their relationships with their peers, family, and community.

Connected to Drake's argument about the relationship between the politics of mourning and national imaginaries, Judith Butler discusses how loss "made a tenuous we of us all," referring to the intimacies and connections loss and death create within publics.[265] Furthermore, Mark Seltzer illustrates how a "torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual," facilitates a notion of sociality.[266] He asserts that trauma becomes a critical switch point between the private and the public.[267] Together, Drake, Butler, and Seltzer highlight how suffering can orient a community, allowing for a collective community to form through the politics of grief and mourning. Accordingly, the interaction of the two second-generation Tamil-Canadians with 'images of suffering' can be seen to hint that the process of disseminating and ruminating on these images is not a purely individual one. Instead, these images serve as part of a larger ritual of mourning which fights against becoming passive bystanders and instead tries to use the confrontation of shared suffering to build affective ties among the transnational Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

I spoke to Geetha, a second-generation Tamil woman who grew up in a family that never talked about the war and who only started to learn about the war during the time of the 2009 protests.

> We never talked about Sri Lanka at home, when the protests started coming on the news, my parents dismissed it. They were embarrassed of Tamil people. They would

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[264] Anonymous, "Second-Generation Diaspora Reflects Trauma and Hope," *REACH: Tamil Youth Organization Newsletter*, accessed May 8, 2023, https://www.tamilnet.com/art.html?artid=28711&catid=13.

[265] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004): 20.

[266] Mark Seltzer, "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere," *October* 80 (1997): 3–4, https://doi.org/10.2307/778805.

[267] Ibid., 5.

> mutter things about the Tigers and thought their supporters were stupid. But seeing all of this [on the news] made me curious. I never grew up with a lot of Tamil friends, I realized I didn't know anything about where I came from. I ended up going by a protest with one friend I kind of knew from school and it was so emotional. It made me learn a lot and I felt like really connected to the people there. They cared so much and people would tell stories about what was happening, or about their families and they were so passionate. I just listened a lot. Having a poster in my hands, I felt like I was doing something.[268]

When I asked her if she remembered any of the placards she held, she said, "Oh, I don't' know. But I remember the ones with the photos, like of mothers crying over dead babies. I couldn't believe that stuff like that was happening, you know?"[269] She suddenly seemed to get a little choked up and then continued:

> I think it was seeing things like that that made me go out and want to know what was happening. Seeing what they were doing to Tamil people, it was like I have to do something. But now, I can't look at photos like that anymore. They were all around us at the protests. That whole time, I was surrounded and it made me want the world to see and help, but it was so painful. I just can't look at that kind of stuff anymore.[270]

When we were talking about her parents and how they did not interact with any of the activism in 2009, she connected things back to what she was saying earlier:

> Yeah, I didn't tell them that I went to the protests. I would mention things here or there, like that I thought one of my cousins was going to test their reaction. Like I wanted to know why they could just ignore it all. I really wished they would talk to me about their experiences in Sri Lanka. I always thought that they were just embarrassed of Tamil people and the fact that Tigers were seen as like gangsters and creating trouble and stuff they didn't want us to be associated with. But I feel like I understood it more after like going and learning about stuff. I think they just felt hopeless and it was too painful to think about. Like my mom would flinch when the protests were on tv, and I think it was all those images [photos of the placards]. Like seeing all that pain and the gruesome images and all these Tamil people all huddled in the cold begging Canadians to care. Like I understand now. Like I was saying before, I can't look at those kinds of photos anymore. I didn't get it before. You know, I want to talk to her about it. We never did, but maybe now… yeah, it makes me sad.[271]

I asked her what made her sad, and she thought a moment before replying,

> like this huge gap between us. Everything we don't talk about. She's just alone in her feelings and I'm alone too, but talking about it right now, I realize that we must have

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[268] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 15, 2022

[269] Ibid.

[270] Ibid.

[271] Ibid.

thought and felt similar things about Sri Lanka and Tamil people and all that, but we've just never talked about it.[272]

Geetha pinpoints the images from the protests as a key object at the center of all these experiences. She describes the role images played not only in the act of protesting, but in mediating her relationship with the community and her family. The images first compelled her to be curious about the protests. During the protests, she felt like she was "doing something" by just holding a placard. Even though she does not remember the ones she held, the photos around her are imprinted on her memory in a way that makes her viscerally react to the memory even now, so many years later. Like with many participants, talking about this time of protests seems to affect them physically in a way that other questions did not. When they try to think back and remember things about that time, they seem to relive that time more vividly, and their answers and descriptions come from a raw place that has not healed.

Later in the interview, she connects her own inability to look at those photos to a newfound empathy and connection felt towards her mother, suddenly seeming to recognize a shared trauma. Where she used to see shame, she could suddenly recognize the layers of trauma and pain that might exist for her mother. The protests had made her feel connected to her community for the first time in her life but had strengthened her sense of disconnection with her family at the time. However, now looking back, she reflected on how interacting with the war through those painful images made her feel, and how this ultimately made her feel more connected to her mother. This connection she feels is a tenuous one, one that is so far unspoken; it is not a connection that had been borne through a mutual interaction between them, and it is one created through her guessing at things her mother might have thought and felt, but it seemed so powerful to experience in our interview. I got to share this moment with her, where she felt rooted enough in her own experiences as a Tamil woman who was exposed to the terrible violence of the war in Sri Lanka that she felt she could see new layers and feel new connections with her mother. And now, for the second time, I had shared space with a young second-generation woman, processing all that is unsaid between her and her mother through the memories of a protest that happened to fall on Mother's Day. It feels like more than a coincidence.

Bodies and images as active memory-objects for a diaspora

Even though the circulation of these images was made possible because of an existing national imaginary and networks of circulation, these images also contributed to the affective linkages that maintain the feelings of connection within the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic community. Similar to how the images of suffering can speak the language of human rights, these images also become a universal language for the dispersed community it brought together. This is especially the case for the second-generation, who may not have their own memories of the 'homeland' or have fluency in Tamil. The language of images of suffering is tied to a collective trauma that can be felt and shared viscerally, helping to bridge the cultural and communicative gaps among a scattered and intergenerational community. Relatedly, Wasserman (2007) talks about photographs as an "enduring umbilical connection to life," a

[272] Ibid.

medium that connects the first and second generation, memory, and postmemory.[273] An image can transcend the boundaries between memory and postmemory and thus help connect the first and second generations.

However, I hesitate only to paint a celebratory picture of this diasporic engagement with images of suffering. Because even though these images might facilitate connection and a sense of community among the diaspora, this engagement might also ironically create more distance between them and those still in Sri Lanka. To use Gayatri Spivak's term, the Tamil diaspora uses 'strategic essentialism' to make human rights claims, and these images illustrate a jarring form of this essentialism, where the diaspora focuses not on essentializing itself but their counterparts in Sri Lanka.[274] The people featured in these images are stripped of their individual identities and used to represent all Tamils instead, through an idealized form of victim-subjectivity. Though most of the diaspora have real connections to individuals and communities 'back home,' those featured in these images are abstracted from these real connections. Their pain and bodies are propped up as a tool for activism, and they are rendered voiceless victims of the Sri Lankan state. Appropriating the pain of the Sri Lankan Tamils that were "left behind" can create a paternalistic relationship between diaspora communities and their counterparts in Sri Lanka. Earlier, I tried to extend Kleinman's thoughts on consumption through the diaspora's unique positionality to this pain. However, it is essential to remember that the diaspora still forms a consumptive relationship with the pain of those who remain in the homeland. This consumption is, however, shaped by a deep desire to collectively share the burden of the pain and trauma experienced by those 'back home.' Though at times problematic, the motivations and deeply felt survivor's guilt of the diaspora complicate this relationship between them and those still in Sri Lanka.

Engaging with the human rights system demanded the diaspora's use and interaction with these images, and this social activism also irrevocably shaped the contours of how this community interacted with thes types of images. The protests created an in-between place borne from rupture where the diaspora could transport themselves to be with Tamils 'back home.' At the same time, they simultaneously engaged in a diasporic place-making project on the streets of Toronto, claiming their rights to inhabit this space. Within this space of the protest, whether physical or virtual, they engaged with these 'images of suffering' as active memory-objects that acted upon them affectively, engaging them as secondary witnesses and co-participants in a collective community trauma. Their protesting bodies and the bodies of those in the images of war also became active and dynamic vessels for felt memory that

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[273] Tina Wasserman, "Constructing the Image of Postmemory," in *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*, ed. F Guerin and R Hallas (London: Wallflower Press, 2007). 161.

[274] Spivak uses the term, "strategic essentialism" to describe how subaltern groups adopt an essentialist identity position in order to mobilize a collective consciousness to achieve certain political ends. See: Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (1993): 24–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/303357.

affectively tied together a community in their reactions to placelessness, racism, and the cruelties of war. Consequently, these images and the streets of Toronto, together, offered a dynamic physical site, a visual landscape through which to viscerally and communally engage with actively produced memories and collective identities.

2009 Protests: a moment of rupture

Unlike the ritualized commemorations of *Maaveerar Naal* that will be explored in Chapter 4, 2009 was a moment of rupture where violence, mourning, and disillusionment were all happening in the moment and from a place of rawness in the community. This in-the-moment processioning interrupted the patterns of family silence and cleanly narrativized memory that had been built up in the community as the common way to deal with traumatic memories. The memories of this time represented what to many of the second-generation was the first set of memories about Sri Lanka that they actively lived through. These memories were traumatic in many ways for the second-generation and brought them into the Tamil diasporic consciousness in an embodied way that suddenly felt like a direct, lived experience, and connection. The protests created a space of rupture that helped bridge the space between the diaspora and Sri Lanka. It also helped bridge the space between the first and second generations. Protestors would often stay in the streets into the late hours of the night, when the viewing public had all gone home, sitting with each other in collective mourning. This is where members of the first generation would share their stories and grief with members of the second-generation, oftentimes strangers to each other, yet connected by this communal trauma and shared helplessness that had no other outlet besides taking part in these protests. The embodied acts of protesting and inhabiting this communal space gave the second generation deeply rooted memories of their own to tie them into the collective consciousness that had before this, been made up mostly by the *postmemories* of the first-generation.

The shared trauma of the protests lay not only in witnessing the mass genocide of Sri Lankan Tamils but in the heavily felt disillusionment over the protests. This disillusionment was layered. To many, the end of conflict and the LTTE represented the end of the dream of Tamil Eelam, which was the hope that the community could hold onto through decades of war, sidelining their trauma for purpose. There was also mass disillusionment about the effectiveness of human rights activism as the community felt that the "international community" they had continually turned to had let them down. Finally, there was a localized disillusionment with Canada because of Canada's response to the protests. Chapter 3 will explore Canada's response to the protests by contextualizing it through Canada's specific history with racialized refugee populations and considering how Canadian media narratives about the Tamil-Canadian diaspora affects how the second-generation approaches its Tamil-Canadian identity.

Chapter 3: A Refugee Diaspora Navigates the Limits of Canadian Multiculturalism

"I am a bad refugee because I insist on seeing the historical reasons that create refugees and the historical reasons for denying refugee status to certain populations."[275] *- Viet Thanh Nguyen*

Chapter 2 explored the 2009 protests as a watershed moment, not only for Sri Lanka, but also for the second-generation of the Tamil diaspora in Canada, who were pulled into the diasporic consciousness through creating their own live memories and sharing the collective trauma of witnessing the mass atrocities and the failed protests. I touched upon the Canadian news media reporting within that chapter, but the extreme media reaction to these protests needs to be interrogated further. In this chapter, I explore the Canadian news media as part of the Canadian public sphere where Tamil-ness is actively narrativized – this time not by the diaspora but by journalists, politicians, and other Canadians. The news coverage about the protests was just one distinct period where Tamil-Canadians were heavily featured in the news, their Canadian-ness being dissected and analyzed in the coverage and the online comments that they propelled. Before these protests, there had been a long history of news coverage of the Tamil gangs in the 1990s. After the protests, Tamils were once again featured in the news when two refugee boats arrived on the shores of British Columbia seeking asylum, setting off a xenophobic panic across Canada. Even though the arrival of the refugee boats was chronologically the most recent period of media coverage of this community, historicizing this media reaction reveals much about Canada's historical relationship to this refugee population and the unsaid through-lines that existed beneath the surface until the arrival of these boats.

This chapter will explore how the diaspora comes up against the limits of Canadian multiculturalism as a refugee community and how that shapes the way the second-generation conceives of themselves as part of this diaspora, while differently positioned in regards to the Canadian state. I will start by deconstructing the myth of Canadian multiculturalism, leading into Canada's specific history with the figure of the refugee through tracing Canada's history with "boat people." This will lead into what happened in 2009 and 2010, when two boats of Tamil refugees made it to Canadian shores and set off a media panic that spread a specific narrative of the Tamil refugee as threat, as criminal, and as terrorist. I will subsequently thread this narrative with the interrelated ones peddled in the Canadian media about the Tamil gangs of the 1990s and the 2009 protests. This chapter will end with an exploration of how the second-generation grapples with these media narratives, with their parents' silences around refugee-ness that it produces, and finally with how it informs the way they approach each part of their hyphenated (Tamil-Canadian) identity differently.

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[275] Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Viet Thanh Nguyen on Being a Refugee, an American — and a Human Being," *Viet Thanh Nguyen* (blog), February 6, 2017, https://vietnguyen.info/2017/viet-thanh-nguyen-refugee-american-human.

Canadian exceptionalism: the myth of the multicultural mosaic

Canada's narrative about immigration is tied up with its relationship of comparison with the United States. My first understanding of multiculturalism came in elementary school, where I distinctly remember learning about Canadian multiculturalism through its divergence from how Americans see it. The story starts with the belief that the United States is a "melting pot," where everyone goes into a pot where differences are melted away until they all come out, newly minted Americans. In contrast, Canada is understood as a mosaic, where everyone who comes remains who they are, with their differences intact, while coming together to make a beautiful and cohesive mosaic. Indeed, many of my respondents used the term "mosaic" in describing Canadian multiculturalism. This enduring narrative about Canadian immigration has obscured the fact that Canada, like the United States, has had similar immigration policies as part of its history of exclusion and fear of the *other*.

Jodi Melamed discusses American exceptionalism as tied to the neo-liberal creation of the concept of multiculturalism. She argues that it is through the appearance of a racially inclusive national culture that America would establish the "moral legitimacy of U.S. global leadership" by proving "the superiority of American democracy over communist imposition."[276] Melamed also notes that in this new racial liberalism, white privilege is not dismantled. Instead, it is renewed by "constituting the white liberal American as the most felicitous member of the U.S. nation-state on the grounds of his or her liberal antiracist disposition"[277] Canadian exceptionalism grows out of the same geopolitical and neoliberal frameworks.

While optimism about immigration has always been high in Canada compared to similar immigrant-receiving Western nations (one poll in 2010 showed that only 27% of surveyed Canadians thought that immigration represented more of a problem than an opportunity), this does not show the whole picture of Canadians' commitment to the values of inclusion and multiculturalism.[278] Another poll showed that while "54% of Canadians held multiculturalism to be a very important element of Canadian identity…50% believed too many immigrants were not adopting Canadian values.[279] Triadafilopolous and Taylor argue that Canada maintains majority support for immigration by selecting "immigrants likely to succeed" and with "minimal

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[276] Jodi Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism," *Social Text* 24, no. 4 (89) (December 1, 2006): 4-7

[277] Ibid, 7.

[278] Irene Bloemraad, "Understanding 'Canadian Exceptionalism' in Immigration and Pluralism Policy," in *Rethinking National Identity in the Age of Migration: The Transatlantic Council on Migration*, ed. Migration Policy Institute and Bertelsmann Stiftung (Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012).

[279] Triadofilos Triadafilopolous and Zack Taylor, "The Political Foundations of Canadian Exceptionalism in Immigration Policy," *Canada and International Affairs*, 2020. 19.

social costs or impact on expenditures required to maintain the welfare state."[280] Between these polls, we see the emergence of a key set of characteristics that produce acceptable immigrants: (1) how well they can assimilate/integrate by adopting "Canadian values," (2) their ability to "succeed" or economically contribute, (3) and their ability to not cost the state or require anything from state services.

The model minority myth has perpetuated this type of discourse, particularly for Asian American/Canadians. The origin of the term can be traced to the 1950s and 1960s when Japanese Americas were being celebrated in the media for the "achievement" they were able to accomplish despite their "bitter war experience" and being "almost totally unaided."[281] However, this celebration has to be understood in the context of the African American Civil Rights movement, which was at the time highlighting America's structural racism. Responding to accusations of racism, the state propped up Asian Americans to prove that the problem lay not with the state, but with the racialized individual. In her book, Helen Jun shows that this period of *Asian uplift* "entails the production of Asian Americans as idealized subjects of a neoliberal world order, which not only pathologizes the racialized black poor but also reproduces a neoliberal episteme that has devastated the global south since decolonization."[282]

> In relation, Bhairavi, an interviewee, said:
>
> A lot of [the message of Canada being great and full of opportunities and inclusion] comes from parents, but parents are getting it from politics, politicians. Because their main goal is to make [immigrants] believe they are being given this golden opportunity, which is like true to an extent. There is a lot of opportunity that they're giving. But it's more… A lot of it comes from back home too – like '*we're going to send my kid to a foreign country, give them a better opportunity*.' I feel like it's the global mindset. That Western countries are going to give them a better opportunity because we're more 'progressed' as a society."[283]

Bharavi made it clear that she disagreed with this definition of "progressive." She describes Tamil people as being in the middle of "global" narratives about the East and the West, the 'progressive' North and the 'backward' South. She points out that there is a limit to the "golden opportunity" extended to immigrants, hinting at the pressure to conform to the model minority stereotype, despite uneven opportunities. Yaso also adds to the way the Tamil community tries to fulfill this role as a model minority. She says:

> The Tamil community always tries to project itself as the ideal immigrant community. 'Look at how many doctors and engineers we have.' My parents are always so proud when the top performers at every high school are printed in the news. They just point out

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[280] Ibid., 22.

[281] Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (Routledge, 2013). 262-263.

[282] Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (NYU Press, 2011). 9.

[283] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 6, 2023.

all the Tamil names, and feel like 'see, Tamil kids are so smart and hardworking, we just needed a chance.'[284]

What she alludes to at the end of this quote is that Tamil people were not given this chance in Sri Lanka. A major policy move that deeply impacted the feeling of disenfranchisement Tamil people in Sri Lanka felt was the "standardization policies" of the 1970s. Through this series of policies, the government created restrictions on university admission through a district basis to address the proportionally low admissions of Sinhala youth compared to Tamil youth by population size. This meant that even when Tamil youth scored in the country's top percentiles, they still struggled to get university seats in science, engineering, and medicine (the most competitive and highly prized fields to pursue).[285] Yaso's quote demonstrates that this specific Sri Lankan context only further inculcates the way the Tamil community desires to prove their ability to reach this standard of "success" and demonstrate themselves as an "ideal immigrant community." They are not only trying to prove their value to Canada but to themselves in order to legitimize the sense of injustice they suffered in Sri Lanka.

Returning to the model minority myth, one reason it is, in fact, a "myth" is that it erases parts of the Asian-American or Asian-Canadian population that do not live up to these expectations. Bloemraad presented a polling result that showed that Canadians were comparatively "optimistic" about immigration. She goes on to show that this general optimism about immigration is limited to a certain kind of immigrant. She references a poll where "a majority of respondents still agree that many [refugee] claimants are not "real" and acknowledges that the "periodic public outcries" over irregular immigrants like asylum seekers "reveals fear over 'unwanted migrants.'"[286] Along with Bloemraad, Triadafilopolous and Taylor also argue that Canada's ability to project this story of multicultural exceptionalism is rooted not only in its selective immigration policies that favor economic priorities, but also in its geographic isolation.[287] By geographic isolation, they are all pointing to the fact that Canada has only one land border, and that is with the United States, leaving its only other borders ocean-bound. This might also explain the special panic that 'boat people" have held for the Canadian public. Unlike other countries that deal with migrants regularly attempting to cross its border, Canada really only experiences this incursion on its borders through boats seeking asylum.

Refugees have always maintained unique relationships with nation-states because of their special status and the conditions of their dispersal. In *The Gift of Freedom,* Mimi Nguyen

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[284] Focus group with second-generation Tamil-Canadians, Toronto, December 19, 2022.

[285] S. Anuzsiya, "Standardization in the University Admissions and Ethnic Crisis in Sri Lanka," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 57 (1996): 799–807.

[286] Bloemraad, "Understanding 'Canadian Exceptionalism' in Immigration and Pluralism Policy."

[287] Triadafilopolous and Taylor, "The Political Foundations of Canadian Exceptionalism in Immigration Policy." 21.

explores how the refugee enters a state of contractual debt by receiving the "gift of freedom" that is entrance to the nation-state.[288] Through turning freedom into something that can be given, and therefore, something that produces indebtedness, states create the perpetual condition of "unfree-ness" that marks the refugee body.[289] Nguyen argues that "under liberalism's purview, the transmutation from possession to personhood (at least to "full" personhood) is impossible because there is no gift without debt – which is to say, no gift without a claim on the other's existence."[290] In this way, freedom within liberalism is a manufactured form of bondage that comes with set relations of inclusion and exclusion.

This is related to Lisa Cacho's assertion that for racialized populations, their very humanity is "represented as something that one becomes or achieves, that one must earn because it cannot just be."[291] She identifies that national belonging and the right to have rights are shaped by neoliberal ideologies of social value as accumulated social capital. Refugees must go through this attempt to earn rights multiple times. First, asylum seekers must prove the validity of their refugee claims to be given refugee status. Then, as part of a refugee diaspora, they must shed the identity of 'need' associated with refugees and instead assimilate and be absorbed into the model minority narrative. It is only through being "productive" and properly inhabiting the space of marginalized inclusion that the national rhetoric has carved out for them, that they can *earn* personhood. In the next sections, the myth of Canadian multiculturalism and the criminalization of the Tamil refugee will be further excavated by interrogating the lasting legacies of 'boat people' in Canada's history and the combined media and government-led response to two such Tamil boats that arrived in 2009-2010.

The continuing legacies of "boat people"

Even more specific to Canada's reception of Sri Lankan Tamil immigrants is Canada's history of panic and xenophobia towards refugee populations who came as "boat people." Both Canada and Sri Lanka were former colonies, and while they were under the crown, British subjects were supposed to be afforded the right to migrate throughout the empire.[292] Nevertheless, with a series of race-based laws, a xenophobic tradition of limiting the movement

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[288] Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Duke University Press, 2012).

[289] Ibid.

[290] Ibid., 17.

[291] Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (NYU Press, 2012). 6.

[292] Vinh Nguyen and Thy Phu, *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada* (University of Toronto Press, 2021). 12

of racialized British subjects began even before Canada became an independent nation-state and only continued after.[293] One of these race-based laws was the Continuous Journey Regulation, which "prohibited migrants from landing in Canada who did not travel directly from their country of origin." The regulation was first tested on the *Komagatu Maru*, a Japanese ship that carried 376 Indian migrants (mostly Sikh, but also Hindu and Muslim) and was refused the right to land in Vancouver, Canada.[294] The incident has become an infamous example of racial discrimination within Canada's immigration policy and, in the century since, has been taken up through scholarly work, film, and literary works, speaking to the mark it has made on the collective consciousness of South Asian Canadians.[295]

The 'Continuous Journey Regulation' was a consciously created policy that used a technical loophole to try to stop the entry of racialized populations, namely migrants from Japan and India, who happened to use routes that stopped in other port cities before reaching Canada.[296] Anti-Asian sentiment had been growing to a fever pitch in the early 1900s, with violent riots like the riots of 1907 (motivated by a sudden surge of Indian migrants in the year before) leading to the conceptualization of the exclusionary policy.[297] Ironically, Sikh migration to Canada had begun precisely because of exclusion acts that had been enacted to bar Chinese migration in the late 1800s, leading agents of the Canadian Pacific Railway to seek new migrant populations to replace this labor.[298] The *Komagatu Maru* example, therefore, illustrates the interconnected nature of racist sentiment against both East Asian and South Asian populations, even though the Canadian state often pitted these populations against each other to vie for entry and rights in Canada.

In 2008, almost a century after this incident, the Harper government finally met the long-standing demand for an apology for the Canadian government's handling of the *Komagatu Maru*.[299] That apology wove a narrative about Canada's evolution into a beacon of

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[293] Ibid.

[294] Ruth L. Almy, "'More Hateful Because of Its Hypocrisy': Indians, Britain and Canadian Law in the Komagata Maru Incident of 1914," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 304.

[295] Rajender Kaur, "The Komagata Maru in History and Literary Narrative: Cultural Memory, Representation, and Social Justice," *South Asian Popular Culture* 10, no. 2 (July 1, 2012): 151.

[296] Hugh J. M. Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru: The Sikh Challenge to Canada's Colour Bar, Expanded and Fully Revised Edition* (UBC Press, 2014).

[297] Subhas Ranjan Chakraborty, "The Journey of Komagata Maru: Conjuncture, Memory and History," *South Asian Diaspora* 8, no. 2 (July 2, 2016): 112.

[298] Johnston, *The Voyage of the Komagata Maru*. 11.

[299] Kaur, "The Komagata Maru in History and Literary Narrative."

multicultural acceptance and painted the Sikh-Canadian community as one deserving of this apology through the trope of "successful integration" and the model minority stereotype.[300] A year later, the *Ocean Lady*, carrying 76 Tamils fleeing Sri Lanka at the height of the war and asking for asylum in British Columbia, Canada, was met with a litany of discursive, legal, and policy tactics to stop their arrival by the same administration.[301] A year after that, in 2010, *The MV Sun Sea* also arrived on the coast of British Columbia carrying another 492 Sri Lankan Tamils and intensified public debate and state tactics to quell the surge of refugees from this region.

A damning report published five years later by the Canadian Council for Refugees stated:

> The response to the two boats, especially the Sun Sea, was massive. The passengers were subjected by the government to prolonged detention, intensive interrogation, and energetic efforts to exclude them from the refugee process, or to contest their claim if they succeeded in entering the refugee process. Canada's immigration legislation was amended to give the government extraordinary new powers, many apparently unconstitutional, to detain people and deny them a wide range of rights… There was loud and strident public messaging about the alleged dangers presented by the arrival of the passengers. Yet, few have been found to represent any kind of security concern and almost two-thirds of the passengers whose claims have been heard have been found to be refugees in need of Canada's protection.[302]

The report also proved that the Canadian government had been preparing to declare their claims for asylum inadmissible on grounds of "criminality or security" *before* the boat had even arrived, through a memo sent to Canada Border Services: "Marine Migrants: Program Strategy for the Next Arrival."[303] This memo also assured officers that their attempts to argue for continued detention would be supported by senior management.[304] The passengers of both boats were detained in correctional facilities located far from Vancouver, splitting up families and "making it particularly difficult for NGO workers, lawyers, translators, and others to assist them."[305] Furthermore, government officials approached former members of the LTTE already settled in Canada to testify that individuals on the boat were LTTE members, subverting their

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[300] Ibid.

[301] Nadia Hasan et al., "Borders, Boats, and Brown Bodies," in *Unmooring the Komagata Maru: Charting Colonial Trajectories*, ed. Rita Dhamoon et al. (UBC Press, 2019). 128.

[302] "Sun Sea: Five Years Later" (Canadian Council for Refugees, August 2015). 1

[303] Ibid., 4

[304] Ibid.

[305] Ibid., 2

right to privacy and directly putting them in danger of targeting by the Sri Lankan state if they were to be deported back to Sri Lanka.[306] The releasing of names also meant that those on the boat that claimed to be fleeing from the LTTE might suffer similar reprisals from the other side if sent back.[307] There was also evidence that government officials were working with the Sri Lankan government and sources close to the administration about the refugee claimants, completely undermining their rights as refugees seeking asylum *because of* the Sri Lankan state's violence and human rights abuses.[308]

Criminalizing the refugee part I: Tamil refugees as 'boat people'

News media coverage and the hypervisibility of the Tamil body in the news can be broken down into three particular periods of time. In chronological order, they are: (1) the coverage in the 1990s to the early 2000s about Tamil gang violence and organized crime; (2) the coverage over the 2009 Tamil protests over the Sri Lankan war; and (3) the coverage of the new arrival of Tamil 'boat people' in 2009-2010. What all these periods of news media coverage have in common is the multi-layered criminalization of not just the Tamil body, but of the refugee body, the non-model minority body, the racialized body, and the protesting body. We will start here from the coverage of the Tamil 'boat people' and work our way backwards to contextualize the other two periods of media coverage.

Returning to the report from the Canadian Council of Refugees, it is significant that it went on to analyze the ways that the Canadian government intentionally stoked the anti-refugee sentiment that exploded in the Canadian news media coverage of the arrivals.[309] They note that as soon as the boat was reported to be heading for Canada, government officials presented the passengers to the Canadian public "as suspected criminals or terrorists…coming here was characterized as an abuse of Canadian generosity, rather than the exercise of their basic right to seek asylum from persecution."[310] Over the following years, this anti-refugee rhetoric and the symbol of the *MV Sun Sea* "continued to be exploited for public relations purposes" by politicians vying for election and painting themselves as tough on "criminals who target Canadian generosity."[311] These were the themes that were then picked up and built upon in the media. These narratives of refugee boats being sources of "threat" and "criminality" were then cemented into Canadian structures of power through the precedent set by the state's handling of

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[306] Ibid., 7

[307] Ibid.

[308] Ibid.

[309] Ibid., 16

[310] Ibid.

[311] Ibid.

the refugee boats and the creation of new policies and legislation to prevent more boats; demonstrating how state actors, even in a democracy, are able to leverage the news media to create the national narratives that shape the future trajectories of the country. The way the Tamil asylum seekers were racialized as criminal figures in the public discourse was layered, from ideas that they were illegally subverting the immigration system to assertions of human smuggling and terrorism. Beginning with this idea of subverting the 'legal' immigration system, both Krishnamurti and Brandimore argue that the media reporting of these asylum seekers levied accusations about the illegitimacy of their claims through repeated use of terms like "queue-jumper," "alien," and "illegal."[312] One news article, for instance, was titled "Government 'concerned' about Canada-bound illegal migrants."[313] This blatant use of illegality as fact, not speculation, was not abnormal in the news coverage.

Mae Ngai, in tracing the creation of the 'illegal migrant' as a category in American law, maintains that race and legal status cannot be separated in this history and that racially-based "immigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a *new legal and political subject*, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility – a subject barred from citizenship and without right."[314] Similarly, Lisa Cacho, in exploring how racialization is already implicitly criminalized, argues that being an "illegal alien" is essentially a *defacto status crime*, shedding light on the way the status itself renders law-abiding actions irrelevant.[315] Though refugees accepted into a nation are not legally marked as "illegal," their refugee-ness becomes a parallel form of '*defacto status crime,'* when popular narratives erode refugee protections by questioning the legality of how migrants seek asylum. For instance, in an article from *CityNews* about the Tamil asylum seekers, Safety Minister Vic Toews is quoted as saying:

> Abuses of Canada's immigration system cannot and will not be tolerated. As we deal with the current situation under Canadian law, Canadian officials will look at all

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[312] Sailaja Krishnamurti, "Queue-Jumpers, Terrorists, Breeders: Representations of Tamil Migrants in Canadian Popular Media," *South Asian Diaspora* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 139–57; Ashley Bradimore and Harald Bauder, "Mystery Ships and Risky Boat People: Tamil Refugee Migration in the Newsprint Media," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 36, no. 4 (January 26, 2012): 637–61.

[313] Kathryn Carlson, "Government 'concerned' about Canada-Bound Illegal Migrants," *National Post*, August 10, 2010, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/government-concerned-about-canada-bound-illegal-migrants.

[314] Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America - Updated Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

[315] Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (NYU Press, 2012).

> available options to strengthen our laws in order to address this unacceptable use of international law and Canadian generosity.[316]

Here, Toews does not argue that Tamil asylum seekers are committing illegal acts according to Canadian or international law, which offers them the right to seek refugee status in this way. Instead, he argues that Canada should change its laws, breaking with its commitment as a signatory of the Refugee Convention, because it feels like an "abuse" of "generosity." Audrey Macklin, a Canadian legal scholar argues that this is precisely how nation-states "discursively disappear" the legal category of the refugee and the protections it offers.[317] She says, "Most states deplore the arrival of asylum seekers. The spontaneous flow of non-citizens possessing a limited legal claim to entry represents a threat to sovereignty-as-border-control, even though it is an exception to which states voluntarily bind themselves by signing the Refugee Convention."[318] She describes how states try to control how asylum seekers enter in order to avoid having to recognize them as refugees, which is a concerted strategy to avoid bestowing the rights associated with being a refugee.[319]

Media narratives that link the modes of entry of these Tamil asylum seekers to illegality or "abuses of generosity" fundamentally misunderstand the avenues available to such communities to seek asylum and attach notions of illegality to refugee processes, discursively disappearing the possibilities of the *legal* refugee, as Macklin argues.[320] For instance, the term "queue-jumper" was used countless times in the news coverage of the Tamil asylum seekers, implying that asylum seekers were trying to "cheat" and circumvent the official processes of migration that determine whether migrants are *deserving* of the rights of entry and citizenship. This popular rhetoric completely erodes the way refugees are legally protected and conceived of in the 1951 U.N. Convention on Refugees by not recognizing that there is, in fact, no "queue." Krishnamurti also points out that the term "queue-jumper" was utilized to cut through to a sense of incompatibility with 'Canadian culture:' "Queuing, of course, is most Canadian of social graces; Canadians are fond of their reputation as patient, polite waiters-in-line."[321] Hence, these asylum seekers were being presented not only as criminally abusing "Canada's generosity," but also as distinctly un-assimilable.

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[316] News Staff, "Canadian Navy Intercepts Tamil Migrant Ship: Toews," *CityNews Everywhere*, August 13, 2010, https://toronto.citynews.ca/2010/08/13/canadian-navy-intercepts-tamil-migrant-ship-toews/.

[317] Audrey Macklin, "Disappearing Refugees: Reflections on the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* 36 (2005 2004): 365.

[318] Ibid.

[319] Ibid.

[320] Ibid.

[321] Krishnamurti, "Queue-Jumpers, Terrorists, Breeders." 146.

The topic of "human smuggling" also pervaded the news coverage, with many headlines presenting the very act of the boat's journey as criminal. For instance, two such headlines read: "Human smuggling suspected: 76 men aboard ship seized off Vancouver Island," and "Mystery ship suspected of human smuggling."[322] At best, this sidelined the voices and stories of the asylum seekers, and at worst, it cast them as the human smugglers themselves. In their discursive analysis of the news articles about the *Ocean Lady*, Bradimore and Bauder conclude that the discussion in these articles "established security – rather than human rights – as a focal point." Speaking to the potentially enduring effect of such discourse, refugee scholar, B.S. Chimni, argues that the "ideology of humanitarianism has used the vocabulary of human rights to legitimize the language of security in refugee discourse," and this normalization has eroded the category of the refugee and its associated protections worldwide.[323] Audrey Macklin also discusses the way

Indeed, in the years since the arrival of these two boats, a series of legislative attempts have been made in Canada to prevent similar situations from reoccurring, obfuscating the anti-refugee sentiment that fuels them through the guise of fighting human smuggling instead. In a media release condemning the series of bills and provisions, the Canadian Council for Refugees states, "[d]espite the government's claims that it is targeting smugglers, the people who will suffer if this bill is passed are the people fleeing persecution, including children."[324]

Finally, the most common way media reporting of the boats criminalized these Tamil asylum seekers was through the specter of terrorism. "Terrorist" was used in many headlines and almost all the news coverage, ensuring that the asylum seekers would be assumed to either *be* terrorists or *have* terrorist ties. An expert that was popularly used as a source for articles about the ships was Rohan Gunaratna, who threw out many different accusations of the criminality represented by the ship, from claiming the ship was being used to traffic weapons and bombs, or a Tiger vessel, full of terrorists who wanted to use Canada to reconstitute the terrorist group.[325] In his investigation, Peter Cronau warned the media about Gunaratna's close relationship with the Sri Lankan President, and accused Gunaratna of "extravagant claims…without offering any evidence."[326] Yet, the damage of his 'expert' testimony within the flood of xenophobic narratives in the press had already been done.

The specter of terrorism has taken on special power post 9/11. Brown bodies are racialized as undifferentiated and have been marked by the danger and criminality of the figure

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[322] Bradimore and Bauder, "Mystery Ships and Risky Boat People." 646.

[323] B. S. Chimni, "Globalization, Humanitarianism and the Erosion of Refugee Protection*," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13, no. 3 (September 1, 2000): 251.

[324] "Sun Sea: Five Years Later."

[325] Bradimore and Bauder, "Mystery Ships and Risky Boat People." 653

[326] Peter Cronau, "The Legitimizing of Terror Fears: Research or Psy Ops?," *Pacific Journalism Review* 9 (2003): 201–7.

of the Muslim terrorist, the excessively othered body of threat and danger through which Western liberal nation-states justify the continuation of violence abroad and domestically. The Tamil diaspora has always fought this label, trying to flip the narrative by pointing at Sri Lanka's 'state-terrorism.' However, in a post-9/11 world, terrorism takes on a specific meaning, one where the brown body, the non-state actor, is inseparable from the terrorist. Jasbir Puar describes the efforts of Sikh-American communities to center the "story of mistaken identity' as a major part of their lobbying efforts to be seen as good, loyal citizens.[327] She describes how the Sikh community would "releas[e] photos explaining the difference between "those turbans and Sikh turbans," as turbans became an "object of assault" in the war against terror. This instinct speaks to the way the state blurs together all brown bodies as Muslim bodies, and all Muslim bodies as bodies of terror.[328] This was actively being fought against by the Sikh community, claiming their separation from these criminalized Muslim bodies through visual cues.[329] Similar things happened during World War II when Chinese communities would wear lapel buttons proclaiming them as Chinese to differentiate themselves from the Japanese, the targeted ethnic-enemy of the U.S. state at the time.[330] In both these situations, however, it is key that the state's racialization of these communities relied upon its difficulty and apathy toward differentiating between ethnicities. Anti-Japanese sentiment was, of course, just a symptom of the anti-Asian sentiment that had existed for centuries before America was at war with Japan. In the case of Sikhs, the turban itself, a symbol of Sikhism and not Muslim identity, was construed as a symbol of Muslim otherness, and of a dangerous and un-assimilable risk.

In the case of Tamil-Canadians, they were already racialized as brown bodies, marked by the specter of terrorism. Still, the LTTE's status as a terrorist group only furthered this association between brown bodies and terrorism, localizing and proliferating the visuality of terror as racially encoded. The Tamil diaspora had been actively fighting this label since before Canada had officially labeled the LTTE a terrorist organization in 2006. Yet, in a post-9/11 world, terrorism takes on specific meaning, one where the *brown body*, the *non-state actor*, is inseparable from the terrorist. Puar uses the example of how the *National strategy for combating Terrorism* laid out the U.S. blueprint for re-working the definition of terrorism. By creating a list of terrorist attacks on the U.S. that excludes the Oklahoma City bombing, she argues that the U.S. "relegates terrorism to the unknowable and inchoate non-white outside and

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[327] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007).

[328] Ibid.

[329] Ibid.

[330] William Gow, "I Am Chinese: The Politics of Chinese American Lapel Buttons in Los Angeles during World War II," *Western Historical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (February 1, 2022): 47–75, https://doi.org/10.1093/whq/whab114.

evad[es] the knowledge of an internal threat.[331] She describes the U.S. efforts at global surveillance to discipline global terrorist cells as a form of quarantining "the perversion and pathology of the stateless, uncivilized, unrecognizable."[332] Indeed, speaking to the way the perversion of the stateless extends and pervades Western thinking, R.Cheran, a prominent scholar in Tamil diaspora studies, critiqued the writing of human rights scholar and former leader of Canada's liberal party, Michael Ignatieff.[333] While Ignatieff warned about the dangers of diasporic nationalism, Cheran argued that Ignatieff's conception "fails to appreciate the distinctions between groups such as Al Qaeda on the one hand and other non-state actors which may be engaged in legitimate struggles for self-determination."[334] Along these lines, Tamil efforts to change the way the LTTE was perceived might have been doomed from the start; as *non-state actors* and *non-white outsiders*, they could not be recognized outside of the prism of the pathological, uncivilized terrorist.[335]

Criminalizing the refugee part II: Tamil Tigers/ Tamil gangsters

In a news article about the ships, Mr. Thompson, a security expert, is quoted at the very end, giving a:

> dead-certain guarantee that there are members of the Tamil Tigers aboard the [MV Sun Sea], and said that while these people may not pose a direct threat to Canadians, many are skilled in organized crime and could pursue violent activities.[336]

Here, he broadens the criminality of terrorism, connecting it to "organized crime" and other "violent activities, " contending that the violence of the terrorist escapes containment. Mr. Thompson is also prompting the public to remember other headlines, popular decades earlier, about gang violence and organized crime in the Tamil-Canadian diaspora.

In my interviews, I heard several variations of a similar story: one about first-generation parents not wanting their children to be identified as Tamil because of how the intertwined figures of the *Tamil Tiger* and the *Tamil gang member* affected how Tamil-ness was perceived.

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[331] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007): 51

[332] Ibid

[333] Cheran Rudhramoorthy, "Diaspora Circulation and Transnationalism as Agents for Change in the Post Conflict Zones of Sri Lanka," *Berghof Foundation for Conflict Management*, January 1, 2004.

[334] Ibid.

[335] This is not to make light of the atrocities and violences committed by the LTTE, but to challenge the way the label of terrorist is wielded in a post 9/11 era.

[336] Carlson, "Government 'concerned' about Canada-Bound Illegal Migrants."

The problem of Tamil gangs in Toronto was at its height in the 1990s, and has largely been diminished, thanks to the diligent work of the diaspora community to create CanTYD (Canadian Tamil Youth Development), an organization that aimed to tackle the issue of Tamil gangs directly and provide resources and community support for Tamil youth.[337] Still, this time-period and the stereotypes it conjures have had a long-standing impact on the Tamil community. Ragu, one young man I interviewed, said:

> I remember in high school, my mom telling me to just tell people I'm Indian. Let them assume it. She was like, I could get away with it and it would be easier for my teachers and stuff to not know I was Tamil. She was like, 'it's only bad that your sister won't be able to get away with it, she's too dark, but at least she's a girl.' Yeah. It was more important for me to not be seen as Tamil because, you know of all the stupid Tamil thug stuff that people knew about.[338]

This description harkens back to examples of Sikh and Chinese attempts to separate themselves visually from their criminalized ethnic counterparts. Yet, in this example, the Tamil community was trying to use this racialized blurring to strategically distance themselves from their own ethnicity to protect against harmful stereotypes. Ragu also highlights the way criminalization is gendered, rendering young male bodies as in need of policing.

Throughout the war and after, the Sri Lankan state has targeted young Tamil men, as those that would be most likely to be radicalized by the LTTE. To escape this state targeting, many young Tamil boys were sent overseas to both protect them from being killed by the army and being recruited to the LTTE.[339] Ironically, this is also what led to a large number of young Tamil teenagers and young adults being suddenly ripped from their families and social networks to be sent to live with a relative that had already immigrated from Sri Lanka to countries like Canada. In other situations, it was one parent who would leave with the child(ren), leaving other family and support behind.[340] These make-shift and torn-apart families would also be part of a new refugee community in Canada, struggling to make ends meet and raise children in homes that were marked by war trauma, financial insecurity, and communication gaps because of the language and cultural gaps between the generations.[341] Many of these youth found refuge in male youth culture, forming bonds with other boys who shared their anger and frustration of having experienced the trauma of war and were struggling to fit into Canadian

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[337] Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

[338] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 21, 2022

[339] Suthargini Balasingham, *Toronto Tamil Youth : The Realities* (Canadian Tamil Youth Development Centre (CanTYD), 2000).

[340] Ibid.

[341] Vappu Tyyska, "Parent-Teen Relations in the Toronto Tamil Community: A Research Report" (CERIS, 2005).

society. In the time when these gangs were forming, many Tamil youth were struggling with anger about being seen as 'FOBs' (a discriminatory term meaning 'fresh off the boat') and inter-ethnic conflict with other immigrant groups. These gangs often represented an outlet for these frustrations and a new, secondary family forged through the values of loyalty, brotherhood, and Tamil pride, as well as the opportunity to make money through illegal means.

Returning to Ragu's quote, the way he talks about skin color is notable. He implies that being lighter-skinned would let him 'pass' as Indian instead of Sri Lankan Tamil. Having darker skin is a visual marker of Sri Lankan Tamil-ness, part of what separates Sri Lankan Tamils visually from the wider South Asian diaspora. Like in many colonized communities, politics of fairness reign powerful within the Tamil community, and "not looking Tamil' is often described as a positive characteristic. Another young woman, Rohini, talking about colorism in the community, said:

> I grew up always being told by my family members that I didn't look Tamil, I could pass for Indian, I could even pass for Spanish….and it was supposed to be a *compliment*. It was so clear that looking Tamil was a negative. What does that say about us… that we hate ourselves so much?[342]

This interviewee acknowledges how deeply the community has internalized the racism of *shadeism* and laments about the self-hatred it breeds. Skin tone has always been racialized, measured in its proximity to blackness. Even though it must be acknowledged that Black bodies are circumscribed and read differently than non-Black bodies of color, non-Black bodies of color often get caught between the politics of whiteness and blackness and end up accepting and upholding these categories and their implicit racism themselves. Relatedly, scholars have looked at the "ideological blackening" of some Asian diaspora communities (usually refugee diasporas), where these populations "are "Whitened when they are successful but are "Blackened" when they step outside of the behavioral expectations of the model minority."[343] Blackness is racially coded, and while brown bodies are commonly read as terrorist, *blackened* bodies also bring with them layers of criminalization. Both types of bodies are seen as bodies of danger and threat, and Tamil bodies borrow from both these forms of racialization, carrying a particular form of racial visuality on their dark skin.

Criminalizing the refugee part III: un-Canadian Tamil protestors

The news coverage of Tamil 'boat people' and Tamil gang violence has been addressed in the previous paragraphs, but there is one more distinct period of news media coverage of the Tamil diaspora, and that is the coverage of the 2009 Tamil protests. As Chapter 2 explored,

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[342] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, Jan 12, 2023.

[343] Stacey J. Lee, Eujin Park, and Jia-Hui Stefanie Wong, "Racialization, Schooling, and Becoming American: Asian American Experiences," *Educational Studies* 53, no. 5 (September 3, 2017): 492–510. Also see: Aihwa Ong, "Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States," *Current Anthropology* 37, no. 5 (1996).

starting in January 2009, Sri Lankan Tamils began organizing a series of large-scale protests that markedly affected the Canadian cities of Toronto and Ottawa.[344]

The backlash against the protests was just as fierce as the defense of protests by members of the Tamil diaspora. Continuing the theme of criminalization, the media coverage of these protests accused the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora of several criminal behaviors. Public comments under numerous articles accused the Tamil diaspora of keeping the city "hostage" to its demands, a motif that other news articles then referenced.[345] There was also incredible negativity towards the fact there were multigenerational families on the Gardiner highway protest, including children and seniors. Public anger was directed at Tamil parents for taking children to these protests. For example, comments called for mass arrests: "If I were in charge? Every parent on the highway would have been charged with child endangerment."[346] And "The jails should be overflowing this Monday morning and CAS should be called in to investigate the parents who would place their children in harm's way."[347]

The vitriol was not aimed at just the 'criminal' act of "occupying" the highway but also at the mere act of inconveniencing other Canadians. Descriptions of the protestors as "noisy," "disruptive," "clogging" the streets, and "inconveniencing" hard-working Canadians were blended among harsher accusations of unlawfulness, demonstrating that part of the "crime" occurring was that Tamil-Canadians were taking up too much space. The act of taking space and fighting for rights was seen as unbecoming of a model-minority. Other articles interviewed Canadians who viewed the protests as un-Canadian. One woman said, "They have ruined their motherland and now that Canada has offered them shelter they are ruining it here."[348] Another of my interviewees shared that during the protests, other Canadians kept telling her that what was happening in Sri Lanka was not Canada's problem, and that Tamils should "leave their

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[344] There were protests in other Canadian cities as well, Montreal and Vancouver for instance, but the large encampment outside of parliament in Ottawa and the large scale street protests of Toronto were more impactful from the nature of their size and longevity.

[345]Shawn Micallef, "Tamil Protest: The Taking of the Gardiner Expressway," *Spacing Toronto* (blog), May 11, 2009, http://spacing.ca/toronto/2009/05/10/tamil-protest-the-taking-of-the-gardiner-expressway/; News Staff, "Tamil Protests: Your Reaction," CityNews Toronto, May 11, 2009, https://toronto.citynews.ca/2009/05/11/tamil-protests-your-reaction/; Dorothy Peter, "Media and Transnational Movements: A Content Analysis of the Globe and Mail's Coverage of the 2009 Tamil Protest in Toronto," *Master's Thesis. Ryerson University. Immigration and Settlement Studies*, 2009.

[346] News Staff, "Tamil Protests: Your Reaction," CityNews Toronto, May 11, 2009, https://toronto.citynews.ca/2009/05/11/tamil-protests-your-reaction/.

[347] Ibid.

[348] Star Staff, "Tamil Protest Winds down Peacefully | The Star," *Toronto Star*, May 13, 2009, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2009/05/13/tamil_protest_winds_down_peacefully.html.

anger in Sri Lanka, and be grateful for the safety they enjoy in Canada."[349] The narratives that Tamil-Canadians were hearing were that they were not performing their "gratefulness" to the Canadian nation-state by claiming this space and trying to fight for the visibility of the atrocities occurring against their families and community in Sri Lanka.

Of course, this news coverage, like both of the other periods of coverage, also highly centered the LTTE as a factor, with most articles referring to the LTTE in describing the protests, many of which focused on the use of the LTTE flag. As Amarasingham explored, the use of the flag became a key issue that was internally debated in the community.[350] The use of the flag was preventing politicians and the public from being sympathetic to these protests and causing the media coverage to be critical of the LTTE and Tamil-Canadians instead of focusing on the Sri Lankan war crimes that the diaspora was desperately pointing towards. Yet, for many of the Tamils attending the protests, the flag was not just representative of the Tigers, but was the national flag of Eelam, and they resented the idea that they needed to put it down for their cause to be heard.[351] Most protestors also were open supporters of the LTTE, at least in that specific period of military onslaught, when they felt that the "LTTE [were] the only hope for Tamil people being targeted by the Sri Lankan state."[352] Amid the violence in Sri Lanka making them feel as if their identity, community, and ancestral culture were being attacked, the idea of rejecting any symbol of that identity was emotionally unbearable for the community. Many of the protestors who were asked by journalists and scholars why they were unwilling to put down symbols of the Tigers in their protests, passionately expressed that it would be a betrayal of their identity: it would effectively tell the world that they agree with Canada's proscription of the LTTE as a terrorist group and betray those that were "sacrificing their lives for Tamil lives."[353] In contrast to the promise of Canada's multicultural mosaic, Tamil-Canadians felt that their acceptance by Canada was conditional on them laying down a symbol of their identity. The protests, therefore, highlighted all that made the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada feel misunderstood, ignored, and sidelined by the Canadian state. This was a feeling that did not

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[349] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 4, 2023.

[350] Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

[351] The Eelam flag and the LTTE flag can be differentiated through minute details but are very visually similar. Efforts to try to distinguish between them were not successful in affecting the news coverage that these were Eelam flags not LTTE flags. See: Staff, "Tamil Eelam Flag Flown in Toronto Protest Legal - Canadian Police," *Tamil Guardian*, March 31, 2009, https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/tamil-eelam-flag-flown-toronto-protest-legal-canadian-police.

[352] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, February 3, 2023.

[353] Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

surprise the first-generation as much as it did the second-generation, who grew up feeling Canadian and believing in the power of social activism.

Disillusionment with Canadian-ness

Notably, the news media coverage of the 'boat people' from 2009-2010 was a continuation of the media coverage of the mass protests of 2009. So, I was surprised to find that while talking about the news coverage of the refugee boats and the protests, those that I interviewed often seemed surprised that these periods of news coverage about Tamils had overlapped. It seemed that, to them, these periods of coverage had existed in separate temporal and situational periods. Their general reaction to both were very similar: (1) feelings of resentment over the way Tamil people were treated, (2) anger and sadness over a feeling of rejection by the Canadian public, and (3) a sense of injustice over these public reactions and depictions of who Tamil people were. The protests created resentment over the racist attitudes that led to stereotypes in the news and the aggressive tactics of the police, while the refugee boats created parallel resentment over other types of stereotypes and the prolonged detention and interrogation that occurred. The feeling of being rejected was also two-fold: the protestors were rejected as 'good Canadians,' and the boat refugees were rejected as legible subjects of human rights, who deserved safe haven. Finally, the protests created a feeling of injustice over Canadian apathy in the face of human rights abuses and the unlawfulness of the handling of refugee claimants.

However, the fact that so many had conceptualized these incidents as not overlapping sparked questions about why. In follow-up interviews, I tried to uncover reasons, and one respondent, Geetha said:

> I don't know, maybe everyone was just so disillusioned and tired from everything that happened at the end of war [early 2009]…I also think the community can sometimes be selfish, like parrot conservative talking points on immigration, forgetting how they became Canadian. I think they forget that we're all refugees. But, no, maybe that's more for other communities, these [asylum seekers] were Tamil people, I think [the Tamil diaspora in Toronto] did care… it felt more far away in B.C. and I think everyone was just spent, like emotionally.[354]

Geetha is communicating that the diaspora was tired. They were tired of being seen as bad citizens; they were tired of not being seen, period. They had come to doubt the power of protesting and social action. The protests raged from January to May 2009 when the LTTE was defeated, effectively ending the war.[355] The Ocean Lady arrived a few months after, in August 2009. In these few short months, the spatial rupture that made Sri Lanka so close had already closed. Even British Columbia seemed too "far away" to fight for the rights of these asylum

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[354] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 15, 2022.

[355] Some protests were ongoing about the state of internally displaced people in the north and east and the claims of charging the SL state with war crimes was developing. But the size and duration of the protests, dwindled with the need of the conflict and the simultaneous massacre of thousands of Tamils in the region, preventing which was a huge motivation to the protestors.

seekers. Of course, not everyone felt like this; the human rights abuses at the end of the war had radicalized and politicized large swaths of the diaspora that had not been politically motivated before, and they saw these refugees as the product of Sri Lankan state violence and tyranny as well as Canadian apathy for Tamil lives and rights. There were definitely organized community efforts to support these refugees and to try to change the narrative. But the scale was different, and it no longer took up visual space on the streets of Toronto.

The second-generation, then, was left with a strong sense of disillusionment over the power of social activism and their assumed acceptance within Canada's multicultural framework. As Bhairavi puts it:

> All of the media coverage about the protests was so racially coded, it was so clear that no one wanted to hear anything we were trying to say. Before that, I would have defended Canada, being like it's not perfect, but racism doesn't exist the same way as it does in America… but yeah, I don't believe that anymore, it made me more sympathetic to other minority groups in Canada too.[356]

Here, Bharavai once again harkens back to the way Canadians are conditioned to see its multicultural exceptionalism against the image of the U.S.. Yet, her experience with the media reception of the protests deconstructed her view of Canada, making her more attuned with the ways in which many different ethnic minorities are affected by the nation's underlying structures of racism.

Being Tamil, being Canadian

At the beginning of each of my interviews with second-generation Tamil-Canadians, I asked interviewees if they identified as being "Tamil," and if so, what this meant to them. I would then ask the same of being "Canadian." Often with the first question about *being Tamil*, I would get answers about the war, language, culture, food, and history. With the second question about *being Canadian,* it was surprising that many answered with "being born here" as a key determinant. While *being Tamil* seemed defined culturally, linguistically, and through experience, the most powerful determinant that they would establish for *being Canadian* was birthright. This might be because of the different relationships the first and second-generation have with Canada. The second-generation watched as the first-generation tried to earn, achieve and prove their Canadian-ness. At the same time, they were told by the first-generation that being "born here" made them Canadian. Yet, through experiences like the protests and reflecting on the media coverage about Tamil-Canadians, the second-generation also started to feel that they were expected to earn, achieve, and prove their Canadian-ness. Almost as a defense mechanism, their birthright offers an evidence-based and objective claim to belonging in Canada. By leveraging the fact that "being born here" made them unquestionably Canadian, the second-generation seems to be subconsciously countering the pressures that ask them to perform Canadian-ness.

In comparison, their answers showed that they did not automatically see their Tamil-ness as a birthright. Of course, "Tamil" is a marker for a language, culture, and ethnicity, not for national citizenship. Yet, ethnicity can also be claimed through birthright – through

[356] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 6, 2023.

bloodline – but those I interviewed rarely expressed that they felt Tamil because they were born to Tamil parents. They would instead reference history and ancestry as a part of a culturally subjective experience. This might again be because of the relationship they have with the first-generation, who viewed this second-generation as 'Canadian' and as losing their Tamil heritage. The second-generation thus comes to reflect on being "Tamil" as an *active choice*, while reflecting on being "Canadian" as *a right*. Conceptualizing "being Tamil" as an *active choice* suggests that they see responsibility carried by the individual to pursue "Tamil-ness," also implying a level of duty to make those choices. In contrast, they conceptualized "being Canadian" as *a righ,t* suggesting that they see responsibility in this scenario as carried by the nation to be inclusive of all its inhabitants.

A few participants did try to parallel the way they described "being Tamil" and "being Canadian" once they realized they had used cultural markers to define "being Tamil." They would pause to think about what it meant to be *culturally* Canadian. Their answers would then always highlight the idea of 'Canadian Multiculturalism.' As one participant said, "[being Canadian] is about being one of many groups, coming together."[357] Another respondent, Yaso, at one point in a focus group, shared:

> I don't feel offended when someone asks me where I'm from in Scarborough [a very multicultural suburb of Toronto]. It's just normal, it would be weird for someone to [answer that question by saying] 'I'm Canadian.' I feel like even white people feel the pressure to say where their great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents are from. There's an understanding, we're all from somewhere else."[358]

Even though all my respondents may not agree with her characterization of not being "offended" when asked where they are from, her answer reveals how she desires to frame Canadian-ness, not as an identity grounded in whiteness, but one grounded in the acknowledgment of transnational roots and multicultural ancestry.

Another interviewee, Thevan, responded to the question of what makes someone Canadian by saying:

> Someone that's born and raised here. Someone who's part of a diverse group. I would say that here we're in a *cultural mosaic*, we're a product of different cultures. I can say I'm proud of being in a culturally diverse space here in Ontario. In that way I can say I'm proud to be Canadian. There's just certain things that I don't agree with. Like some of the *history* and all that.[359]

I asked if he could say more about this history he was hinting at. He replied:

> Oh, I would say historical things, like the treatment of indigenous people, stuff like that. And that I can connect back to the treatment of Tamil people in history, so I feel for that. Minority groups, right, like how we're treated as a minority in our country. I can say that indigenous people have had that same treatment here and they continue to have that same treatment here in different forms. Even if there is approaches to help those

[357] Focus group with second-generation Tamil-Canadians, Toronto, December 19, 2022.

[358] Ibid.

[359] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 31, 2023.

> communities, I feel like there isn't enough. There's always so much more in that history that's been hidden from the rest of the public. Especially for second-generation kids. Like the idea that was presented to them was like "oh, we're here. …In a country that's giving everyone the best opportunities, or like the greatest country in the world. But I think it's important for people to also acknowledge what these countries have done and colonialism.[360]

Thevan, like others, confirms this conceptualization of Canadian culture being defined through its multiculturalism. However, he also goes on to critically deconstruct this idea of Canadian multiculturalism by acknowledging the history between Indigenous groups and the state. Multiculturalism is often seen as a synonym for immigration-friendly, perpetuated by the idea that Canada values multiculturalism because it is a 'land of immigrants.' This conceptualization of multiculturalism as tied only to immigration is common. We can see it in how Yaso talked about Canada as a place where "we're all from somewhere else" which is part of a narrative that has erased Indigenous populations from both the historical and present narrative of Canada.

Thevan instead places Canada and Sri Lanka together in the same intersectional story of the legacy of colonization. In his empathy for Indigenous people, he relates their treatment to the treatment of Tamils in Sri Lanka, hinting towards the land dispossession, lack of representative rights, and the violence both groups have experienced. His view of justice and what it means to be a good nation-state is informed by the war in Sri Lanka, and his view of Canada is then also seen through this lens. Another respondent brought up something that also speaks to the way each nation-state is understood in reference to each other for this diaspora. Swathi said:

> I mean I remember people talking about a provincial solution for Sri Lanka. Comparing the way the Quebecois have power and representation over their own province. They can center their language and culture, while still being part of Canada. A solution like that would make the most sense for Sri Lanka and Tamil people – a real Tamil province that gave representation and respect to Tamil people as a minority in the country. I still believe that that should be done in Sri Lanka. I mean, the problems aren't over just because the war is.[361]

Her quote reveals that the Canadian model of provincial autonomy frames the possibilities she is able to envision for a just system and a peaceful solution to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka. Her ideas of how minority populations that have cultural, linguistic, or ethnic differences can be treated as equals by majority populations within a democracy are defined by Canadian democracy.

However, while the diaspora expresses their appreciation for the political model of Canada and the narrative of inclusion, most like Thevan, also hinted at their qualms about the limits of this narrative of inclusion. Nirmala, for example, said, "Yeah, I'm proud that Canada is so multicultural and diverse, but I mean, it's not like racism and inequality doesn't exist

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[360] Ibid.

[361] Interview with a second-generation Tamil Canadian, Toronto, December 12, 2022.

here."[362] Together these second-generation Tamil-Canadians seem to be trying to sift and choose how they see Canadian-ness. The value of multiculturalism and inclusion that Canada promotes about itself is one that they care about. They choose to narrate Canadian identity through this lens, not because they believe that Canada has historically, or even presently upholds it, but instead, because it is the narrative they want Canada to strive for. Their experience as second-generation Sri Lankan Tamils in Canada leads them to choose to see being Canadian as *a right*, and to actively claim Canadian-ness to try to affect what and who the nation represents.

Refugee amnesia & silenced memories

Referring back to an earlier quote from Geetha, who was speaking about the community's disillusionment, there was something she slipped in that speaks to something else happening within the community. She had said, "…I also think the community can sometimes be selfish, like parrot conservative talking points on immigration, *forgetting* how they became Canadian. I think they *forget that we're all refugees*." This amnesia about the community's refugee roots might be tied to the silences and ideas of shame over the status that pervade the community. In another part of the interview, Bhairavi shared,

> I guess we don't really use the word refugee [at home]. We just use immigrant, maybe because we see ourselves as similar to all the other immigrant families here. Like we all have similar experiences, right? …but yeah...maybe it's a shame thing too… You know, when we're talking about growing up in immigrant families, we talk about strict parents, doing well in school, family pressure…like to get into medical school and stuff. But I think refugees are seen as not succeeding, at least at first…and needing lots of help.[363]

Bharavi starts by saying that the term 'immigrant' is used more than 'refugee' because of shared experiences with other minority communities.[364] Yet, she realizes that the model minority myth is at play in this differentiation. Here, 'immigrant families' are bonded through their ability to conform to the model minority myth, but refugees challenge this narrative, by "not succeeding" and "needing lots of help." Ragu shares something similar, saying:

> I believe both my parents claimed refugee status. But they don't like talking about it. Like I found out more about the way they came here, like more recently. I think my dad was stuck in Thailand for a while and was in the U.K. and some other countries too. He went through all these different countries to get here. I was shocked, like to me that sounds like a movie, going through all that. Like getting deported from one place and stuck in another place where he can't speak the language, doesn't have any money or a passport. I think it's like so cool that he experienced that, and survived and all, but I

[362] Focus group with second-generation Tamil-Canadians, Toronto, December 19, 2022.

[363] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 6, 2023.

[364] Ibid.

> think he's maybe ashamed. I think it makes him feel like a I don't know – a homeless mutt that no one wants and just snuck in to this country like a criminal. Yeah, I think it makes him feel less deserving of being here, less valuable. I think having kids born here, is what makes him feel Canadian.[365]

Ragu expresses that he thinks that his father feels like "a homeless mutt" because of the dehumanization that the refugee claimant system put him through.[366] His father's history of claiming refugee status seems to make his father feel that he can never truly be Canadian, and it is only through the osmosis of his kids that he can claim rights and provide value to the nation and gain belonging. The effect of the refugee process is part of the collective trauma carried by this diaspora.

To address the 10-year anniversary of the MV Sun Sea's arrival, the CBC did an article featuring an interview with Piranavan Thangavel, who was a passenger on the MV Sun Sea and still awaiting permanent residency.[367] He is quoted as saying, "We are not terrorists. We are not criminals. We are refugees…We came here to save our lives." He continues to explain that he "has been able to endure the long wait for status better than most because he is single, but others with spouses or children back in Sri Lanka have fallen into depression because of the uncertainty caused by immigration limbo."[368] The interview ends with him stating that he has only one aim. "I want to be a good Canadian citizen."[369] Thangavel's words highlight the toll that trying to overcome these undesirable labels of 'terrorist" and "criminal" can have in addition to the uncertainties of the process and the isolation of it. The process has taught him to project one clear message, one of his loyalty and value to the Canadian nation state in order to survive this ordeal. His story also speaks of the 'social death' experienced by first-generation immigrants who are constantly trying to prove themselves worthy in a system that is designed to keep them in that never-ending process. Cacho takes up Orlando Peterson's term, 'social death' to explore the state of non-personhood that racialized populations are relegated to because their value cannot be made intelligible.[370] Linked to Nguyen's work on the gift of freedom that refugees receive, Patterson explores how the act of 'giving" freedom to slaves meant that power

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[365] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 21, 2022.

[366] Ibid.

[367] "10 Years on, Some of MV Sun Sea's Passengers Still in Limbo after Entering Canada as Refugees | CBC News," *CBC News*, August 14, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/mv-sun-sea-anniversary-1.5685947.

[368] Ibid.

[369] Ibid.

[370] Cacho, *Social Death*. 7.

was not transmitted; instead, the slave's relationship with the master's power has only changed.[371]

This sense of 'social death' shows why the first-generation of the Tamil diaspora, sometimes experiences the amnesia that Geetha described as happening within the community around their status as former refugees. In his quote, Ragu also spoke about how he only recently discovered the history of his father's refugee struggles. This refugee amnesia is part of a generational silence that is layered by shame and trauma. Khatharya Um argues that for some refugees, "silence is a deliberate act to break the cycle of violence."[372] She continues, "Silence becomes a refuge against banal empathy, incredulity and the weariness of having to explain."[373] Similarly, Veena Das talks about poisonous knowledge, referring to the use of silence as an act of agency, not victimhood, indicating a refusal to perpetuate the victimization of this poisonous knowledge.[374]

Many of my respondents talked about the fact they grew up in households that did not really speak openly about the war or the immigration process. One respondent, Kavitha, said, "They didn't talk about it, but I always knew they carried pain. It was hard for them to talk about. They wanted to protect us from it."[375] Kavitha is aware that her parents thought of their experiences as 'poisonous knowledge' and were trying to use silence to "break the cycle of violence." Her response also shows that these silences created a ghostly presence for the second generation of this diaspora.[376] Kavitha could feel the pain they carried; it was affective knowledge that she carried with her as well. The specters of the war and the ghosts and traumas of this haunting can exist among families through silence.

This is also related to what Marianne Hirsch calls *postmemory*: "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."[377] Hirsch, in talking about the transmission of *postmemory* refers to the "nonverbal and non-cognitive acts of transfer" that occur through the body and through the family, "often in the

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[371] Cacho, *Social Death*. 8.

[372] Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (NYU Press, 2015). 194.

[373] Ibid.

[374] Veena Das, *Violence and Subjectivity* (University of California Press, 2000).

[375] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, March 14, 2023.

[376] See: Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[377] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 103–28, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019.

form of symptoms."[378] Even though Hirsh emphasizes the role of the family and photographs in this act of transfer, she also recognizes the way "even the most intimate familial knowledge of the past is mediated by broadly available public images and narratives."[379] This highlights how for a younger generation, family-based and ambiguous forms of memory entangle with their mediations of larger community narratives, that together produce their *postmemories*.

These *postmemories* manifest among the second-generation, affecting how they see themselves, even when that may be different from how the first-generation thinks of itself. The members of the second-generation I talked to understood that the term *refugee* might hold negative emotions and memories for their families, but it was clear that they saw the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora as a "refugee diaspora." Many talked about their parents being refugees until questions about how their parents immigrated made some realize that their parents had never formally claimed asylum. For the second-generation, the term "refugee" was not shrouded in shame, but a representation of what their parents had survived. It was also not solely a legal term, but one that captures the shared and continuing experience of having to leave one's homeland amid war and violence. In an earlier quote, Bharavi says, "I think that they forget that *we're* all refugees," where she identifies herself as part of that *"we"* even though she was born in Canada and later talks about her family using the term "immigrants" more than "refugees." This reveals that even though this diaspora is mostly silent about their experiences as refugees, the second-generation comes to see the community's relationship to refugee-ness differently, embracing it. Like her, Ragu sees his father as a survivor instead of the 'homeless mutt' his father felt like. Bharavi and Ragu also represent an overwhelming trend I observed among the second-generation in the way they see 'refugee-ness;' they embrace this history proudly and hold space for their parents' experiences even when their parents struggle to see it the same way.

When I asked Nirmala whether she thinks she sees being Tamil differently from her parents, she said:

> Yeah differently from my parents, they see it as the country, and their memories they left, and we see it differently, in that we're trying to learn our history, our values, learn our culture, we go more deep into that. They don't really like talking about their history is what I've noticed. I mean they've like had traumatic experiences or a lot of those things were taboo. They didn't grow up being able to talk about certain things like that. So, I obviously have different views than my parents when it comes to things like that or how I identify myself or like the things I participate in. Even just talking about genocide and things like that. Sometimes they don't really like doing.[380]

She, too, is aware of why there is silence about their history. Yet, she also talks about how her awareness of the trauma they carry leads her to "go more deep into" trying to learn about this history that is silenced.[381] She acknowledges that her parents have memories there that shape

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[378] Ibid. 112.

[379] Ibid.

[380] Focus group with second-generation Tamil-Canadians, Toronto, December 19, 2023.

[381] Ibid.

their experience of "Tamil-ness" and that she instead makes an active choice to explore "Tamil-ness" to gain her own memories. This is in line with the idea that while the second-generation sees being Canadian *as a right*, they see being Tamil as part of *an active choice* and *a duty*. The protests of 2009 became a moment when second-generation members of this diaspora like Nirmala could and did gain their own memories as this generational silence was broken amid the active efforts of the diaspora to try to stop the atrocities occurring in Sri Lanka in real-time.

Personal amnesia versus memorialized community grief

Even though Kavitha and Nirmala spoke about their parents' silence about the war and migration to Canada, my research reveals that there is a dichotomy between personal silence and community silence within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Even though there are silences among the first-generation, especially about personal experiences with war and migration, there is also strong tradition of communalizing traumatic memory in the form of memorialization. In many ways, the community is not silent about what is happened in Sri Lanka, but this manifests differently, being taken up on a community level instead of a familial or personal level. For this community, personal memory and trauma were not readily accessed and processed, but community trauma often was, since it was connected to a larger responsibility to keep advocating for those 'back home.' One reason the first-generation was not given the space for personal grief is because of the survivor's guilt that constantly reminded them that they were "better off" than those still in Sri Lanka. Both their relationship with those still in Sri Lanka and with the Canadian state taught them that they should be *grateful* to be where they are, and the only opportunity they had to confront their own trauma was through their advocacy and memorialization of the ongoing conflict. Their responsibility to Tamils in Sri Lanka often became the only outlet for the suffering they had themselves endured. This became apparent during the 2009 protests, when the first-generation broke its pattern of silence while on the streets protesting, enabling the first-generation to hear personal stories and grief, sometimes for the first time.

Chapter 4 will dive into the largest and most prominent memorial event held by this diaspora to understand the way the community's commemoration rituals both create and reflect the way the first-generation confronts the trauma of war and dislocation. A very clear and regulated narrative about the Sri Lankan war pervades this commemoration, along with the deep diasporic yearning for the homeland of Tamil Eelam. These politicized rituals and aesthetics of memorialization come to deeply ingrain themselves into the diasporic consciousness and the collective memory the diaspora shares with the second-generation. Chapter 5 will then trace how memory-work in this community is slowly evolving from this highly regulated form to one that is starting to be inclusive of new possibilities, including the voices of the second-generation.

Chapter 4: Maaveerar Naal: The Politics & Rituals of Memorialization

"Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance – as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior – disappears. Performances also replicate themselves through their own structures and codes. This means that the repertoire like the archive is mediated."[382] *– Diana Taylor*

If the 2009 protests represented a conversation that the Tamil diaspora was trying to have with Canada and the rest of the world, and the Canadian media reporting represented the narrative being told about them, then, *Maaveerar Naal*, a memorial event held across the diaspora each year, may reveal a glimpse into the conversation the Tamil diaspora was having with itself. *Maaveerar Naal* (translated into English as Martyr's or Hero's Day) was established in 1982 by the LTTE to function as a memorial day to honor the fallen soldiers *(Maaveerars)* in the liberation struggle to create the independent nation of Tamil Eelam. It takes place in November each year, traditionally amidst the cemeteries built for fallen soldiers, providing a ritualized opportunity for the community to grieve the dead and look to the future of the liberation struggle. The first *Maaveerar Naal* was held in 1989 to commemorate 1,307 LTTE soldiers who had died the previous year, and November 27th was chosen as the date to honor the day of the first LTTE soldier death (Lt. Shankar).[383] While the main event takes place on November 27th, commemorations happen for the week leading up to it, with November 25th devoted to young people in the community and November 26th falling on the birthday of Prabhakaran (Leader of the LTTE). The main event would also feature the only public address Prabhakaran gave each year about the state of the LTTE's aims, and because of this, it was keenly observed by those in Sri Lanka and abroad.

The memorial event is highly ritualized, and symbols are heavily relied upon in creating the aesthetics of Eelam nationhood. This nationalistic aesthetic is created through a layering of symbols, including the hoisting of the national flag, the use of a national flower (*karthigai,* which only blooms in November), the singing of the national anthem, the lighting of a ceremonial fire, and ritualized interactions with tombs of the fallen.[384] The ceremony has been

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[382] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Duke University Press, 2003), 20-21.

[383] Oivind Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom: The Celebration of Violent Death among the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," in *Violence Expressed* (Routledge, 2011).

[384] Bruland, Stine, "Being There While Being Here," in *Objects and Imagination: Perspectives on Materialization and Meaning*, ed. Øivind Fuglerud and Leon Wainwright (Berghahn Books, 2015).

carried out for decades in the diaspora, held by different community organizations. Those with strong connections to the LTTE held the largest and most 'official' events, and other organizations, like youth organizations, held smaller events at universities.[385] The longest-running "official" version of the event, run by Akavam Canada, is attended by thousands of Tamil-Canadians each year and broadcast through live weblinks and on TV channels catering to Tamil-Canadians to hundreds of thousands more. Promos and reminders about the event details and location are streamed on these channels throughout the month of November, and special broadcasting is built around the event. During that month, it would also be hard to miss the posters and flyers that take up space in most windows of Tamil grocery stores and other such small businesses serving the community. *Maaveerar Naal* is one of the most significant community events in the Tamil diaspora and by far the largest event with a political or commemorative focus. There have always been those within the Tamil diaspora who consider themselves anti-LTTE or uninterested in the politics of Sri Lanka or the war, and these groups understandably do not attend the event.[386] Even though people of all generations attend, and young people often serve as volunteers or performers, most attendees are from the first-generation who see the tradition as one that continues and extends the *Maaveerar Naal* events held at LTTE cemetery grounds in Sri Lanka.

As Khatharya Um argues, "If politics is a catalyst of mass dislocation, it also influences remembering and memorialization."[387] The political forces of Sri Lanka's conflict, namely the Sri Lankan state's dispossession of Tamils and the LTTE-supported idea that an independent state of Tamil Eelam was the only solution to the conflict, came together to manifest in the way this community memorializes the conflict. *Maaveerar Naal* demonstrates how memorialization and commemoration in a refugee diaspora can become inextricably tied up in politics, shaping a community's collective identity through the way it articulates its political subjectivities.

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[385] Akavam Canada, a group with ties to the WTM and the LTTE by association has been organizing the "official" *Maaveerar Naal* event in Toronto for decades. In the decade since the end of war, there have been new groups and organizations that have tried to fill the hole left by the LTTE in its overseas organization. The Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) has also organized a separate *Maaveerar Naal* for the past several years. In addition, the organizers from Akavam Canada is also connected to the Tamil Youth Organization which would help university campus Tamil Student Associations hold their own *Maaveerar Naal* events on their respective campuses.

[386] It is also important to add nuance to the moniker anti-LTTE or anti-Tigers, as it is loosely used in the community. There is a wide spectrum of beliefs held by those that might be identified as such and there is a large proportion of the Tamil diaspora that is critical of some LTTE tactics while still culturally and/or financially supporting the LTTE's goal to create Eelam and fight to protect Tamils in Sri Lanka.

[387] Khatharya Um, "Diasporas and the Politics of Memory and Commemoration," in *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, ed. Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer (Routledge, 2018).

This chapter will explore the memorial event of *Maaveerar Naal* as a primary site of the creation and maintenance of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora's collective memory. While Chapter 5 will dive deeper into the ways the second-generation may contest and re-interpret elements of the narrative of Tamil identity that *Maaveerar Naal* espouses, it is important to understand how this memorial event shapes and reflects the foundation of this diaspora's collective memory as a highly regulated and ritualized form of commemoration and identity articulation. In this chapter, I will first explore how *Maaveerar Naal* was created by the LTTE to consciously battle the erasure and dispossession Tamil people were facing in Sri Lanka. Then, after describing the contours of what the memorial event looks like, I will dive deeper into particular themes that the rituals of this memorial reveal. These themes include: (1) the attempts to re-create and re-claim the homeland of Eelam, (2) the effort to re-imagine death to transform loss and trauma into symbols of hope and future, and finally (3) the way visual rituals of 'seeing' and 'being seen' are at the heart of how memory-work is communalized in the diaspora both in the embodied present as well as through media technologies.

Responding to Sri Lankan erasure

The forms of political memorialization developed by the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora grew out of the Tamil response to efforts by the Sri Lankan state to erase their presence, dispossess them of their lands, and re-narrate their history. The creation of *Maaveerar Naal* coincided with the decision of the LTTE to start a coordinated process to bury the bodies of their fallen soldiers. Marking an aggressive push away from tradition, the ritualized burial of all LTTE soldiers in LTTE cemeteries (called *thuyilum illam*) departed from the cultural and religious funerary practices of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. While there are Christian and Muslim Sri Lankan Tamils who followed a tradition of burial, the majority of Sri Lankan Tamils are Hindu (80%), meaning that they cremate their dead.[388] However, the change was quickly accepted by the majority of the Sri Lankan Tamil community, and this acceptance is tied to the reasons the LTTE first sought to institute this change. One potential reason for the drastic change to funerary customs was explained by an official from the 'Office of *Maaveerars'* as part of the LTTE's wish "to be seen as a conventional army, as opposed to a group of terrorists," noting that burial was practiced in countries like America and England to respect dead

[388] "Sri Lanka : A Country Study | Library of Congress" (Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1990), https://www.loc.gov/item/89600372/; Also, while the Tamil Christian/Catholic population is sizable and well integrated with the Tamil Hindu majority, the Muslim Tamil population poses a controversial questioning of what creates 'Tamil' identity in Sri Lanka. While Muslim families might speak Tamil in the household and live in Tamil areas of Sri Lanka, they are often not seen as part of the 'Tamil' community in Sri Lanka and instead seen as another Ethnic minority of Sri Lanka. The LTTE forced a mass expulsion of Muslims in the North and East in the 1990s that changed the composition of the area dramatically and is seen as a major example of the LTTE's exclusionary politics. See: Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom;" Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

soldiers.[389] Cristiana Natali explores another reason, connected to Hindu tradition, where *Sannyasis* (ascetics who give up all material ties to life to achieve enlightenment) are also commonly buried since by having "annihilated their sense of Self before death, they have no need for the funerary fire."[390] Like these spiritual saint-figures, Tigers also come to be seen as figures who renounce the fixtures of civilian life and sacrifice their sense of self – not for enlightenment – but still for a larger sense of purpose: the realization of Tamil Eelam.

However, another interconnected reason could also be considered. The creation of these new funerary rites coincided with the rising era of Sri Lanka's forced disappearances. Often called being "white-vanned," the 1980s saw a rise of security forces abducting political dissidents in white vans, never to be seen again.[391] This tactic, shared by other repressive governments around the world, created a new and profound sense of ambiguous loss that pervaded the country. The uncertainty of death and the (im)possibility of return left families in an unending angst about their missing loved ones. As Um argues, in the case of disappearances, "the denial of the corporality of loss keeps survivors in a liminal state of impaired mourning."[392] Diana Taylor analyzes the disappearances of Argentina and the protests of the H.I.J.O.S (the children of the disappeared) by describing that the protests turned what she called "an interrupted mourning process" into "one of the most visible political discourses of resistance to terror."[393] I would argue that a similar reaction was happening within the LTTE in Sri Lanka. Even though civilians – not soldiers – were the most common victim of disappearances, the government's power to "disappear" people, information, and evidence was becoming a clear and existential threat to the liberation struggle. Like the H.I.J.O.S, the LTTE reacted to erasure through a turn towards the visual, namely, turning the bodies of the dead into critical visual evidence. In the fight to create a separate state, numbers became important. For instance, the larger the Tamil minority population, the more credence their claim for an independent state could be given. The LTTE was untrusting of any official sources from the government, which seemed intent on underplaying the significance of the Tamil population and systematically disappearing the existence of Tamils in the country using both violence and the administrative

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[389] Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom

[390] Cristiana Natali, "Building Cemeteries, Constructing Identities: Funerary Practices and Nationalist Discourse among the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka," *Contemporary South Asia* 16, no. 3 (2005), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09584930802271323.

[391] This was not just a tool against Tamils in Sri Lanka, but Sinhalese political dissidents as well. See Anna Neistat, *Recurring Nightmare: State Responsibility for "Disappearances" and Abductions in Sri Lanka* (Human Rights Watch, 2008).

[392] Khatharya Um, "Diasporas and the Politics of Memory and Commemoration," in *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, ed. Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer (Routledge, 2018).

[393] Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Duke University Press, 1997).

tools of documentation, official records, and statements. In the face of this erasure, the building of vast fields of cemetery space where LTTE soldiers are buried in six-foot-long, coffin-shaped cement tombstones with their names and information engraved, lucidly communicates the urge to protect against the erasure of state-written history.

If this is, in fact, one of the reasons the LTTE sought to change funerary practices and not only create these cemeteries, but also the ritualized memorial event of *Maaveerar Naal*, their fears have seemingly been realized. After the defeat of the LTTE in 2009, many of the LTTE cemeteries have been bulldozed by Sri Lankan Army forces.[394] In some instances, army bases have been built upon these sacred lands; in others, war monuments celebrating the Sri Lankan army's victory have been erected. The building of new military bases on these lands achieved a double purpose in reacting to the post-war era: (1) the memory of LTTE deaths is replaced by the live presence of Sri Lankan (mostly Sinhala) soldiers in a one-for-one trade, and (2) the militarization of these former Tiger-held lands creates a disciplinary gaze over this Tamil region, warning of what the consequences of new rebellion will be. Through these actions, the Sri Lankan government can be seen as recognizing the symbolic politics of these cemeteries and actively engaging in the visual battle over how memory and history are written upon this landscape.

In their study of the construction of post-war memorials in Sri Lanka, Jennifer Hyndman and Amarnath Amarasingam note that while the Sri Lankan Secretary to the Ministry of Tourism argued that this destruction was in the hope that the "LTTE and the violence which affected the public during the war should be forgotten," the violence of this war is still being remembered and narrativized actively by other government projects.[395] For example, the government "has kept the Tiger bunkers, training facilities, and the detritus of war built by the LTTE. It has constructed war museums showcasing LTTE weaponry and fire power…"[396] In contrast to the cemeteries of the LTTE, which were carefully erected to tell the story of the Sri Lankan war from the viewpoint of the Tigers, these other sites were kept because the government was able to inscribe onto these spaces their own re-telling of the Sri Lankan war as the ultimate victory against terror with new plaques narrating "official histories" without any mention of legitimate Tamil grievances, deaths or human rights abuses.

Memorial sites created by the government, such as the Victory Monument at Puthikkudiyiruppu, change the narrative of the war directly by reconstituting the landscape. This monument looms over an area where the final stand between the LTTE and the army took place and where the army killed thousands of Tamil civilians in the final days of the war (see: Figure 5). I visited this site in 2016, and while the family members I was traveling with stayed in the van, repulsed and uncomfortable by the depiction of victory on this ravaged land, I went

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[394] "Sri Lanka Builds Army HQ on Tamil Tiger Cemetery," *BBC News*, March 7, 2011, sec. South Asia, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12668613.

[395] Jennifer Hyndman and Amarnath Amarasingam, "Touring 'Terrorism': Landscapes of Memory in Post-War Sri Lanka," *Geography Compass* 8, no. 8 (2014): 560–75, https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12149. 564.

[396] Ibid.

out to it, curious about the information it would present. The makeshift museum to the side of the monument painted the war as one between "heroic Sri Lankan soldiers led by the Great President Rajapakse" and the evil, "vicious, violence of the Tamil Tigers." No mention was made of the mass killing of Tamil civilians or the unresolved human rights issues of the Tamil minority in the post-conflict era. As I made my way to the monument, the muggy heat of midday was softened by a gentle breeze that glided over the serene waters that lay to either side

Figure 5: Photo of the Victory Monument at Puthikkudiyiruppu. Photo by Ramya Janandharan

of the monument. Lily pads dotted the waters, and the natural beauty and ghostly silence of this place felt eerily disconcerting. A plaque asked that you remove your shoes before circling around the monument, and I felt pulled in opposite directions. The first was the impulse to not participate in and legitimize the message behind this memorial, and the other, quiet voice inside me did not want to disrespect any of the dead, knowing that war and the actions of armies do not reflect the personal stories of every soldier. I decided to take off my shoes. Up close, I could see the names of the soldiers inscribed upon the rocks and could not help but think of all the inscribed tombstones that had been demolished in nearby LTTE cemetery sites, let alone all the names of civilians that had never had the chance to be inscribed or recorded, whose bodies lay silent under the very ground I stood upon. The peacefulness of this place suddenly felt too violent, and I quickly turned to leave. As I hastily made my way back across the long platform, I turned to take a photo and realized there were two Sri Lankan soldiers stationed at the base of the monument whom I had not noticed earlier. For a second, my skin crawled with the fear that my parents had instilled in me for the Sri Lankan army. When I got back to the van, we drove in silence until we reached a Tamil temple at the northernmost tip of the island, where suddenly my family members could re-engage with their memories of childhood, free from the specter of war that hung above the lands of the final stand.

Along with these post-war re-narrations of history that were mapped onto the landscape of Tamil land, other forms of erasure continued as well. White van disappearances are also still

a specter of Sri Lankan life. During the end of the armed conflict, thousands were disappeared, including children. As part of a Channel 4 investigative documentary, *White Van Stories* follows the information gathered from almost five hundred families of the disappeared.[397] Even in the decade and a half that has followed, there have still been reports of forced abductions by Sri Lankan forces, and reports from those that have been returned show there is a pattern of torture, rape, and sexual violence that goes hand in hand with these abductions.[398] Moreover, since the end of the war, there has been a systematic process of land grabs by the Sri Lankan Army that dispossess Tamils in the North and East of their ancestral lands.[399] Lands that were first bombed by the military and evacuated during the war were later occupied by the military and, subsequent to the end of the conflict, reverted to agricultural lands still under military control.[400] This multi-pronged strategy to erase and re-narrate histories and memories while taking Tamil land and disappearing the bodies of Tamils is important to understand in recognizing the way in which it shapes how diasporic Tamils use memorial events to actively rebel against this erasure and dispossession.

***Maaveerar Naal* 2022**

It was a cold dreary day on November 27th, 2022. I drove to Markham Fairgrounds, the location that had held the 'official' *Maaveerar Naal* events for the last few years as well as some Tamil cultural events in the summer.[401] As I parked, I noticed that there was an absence of the usual lines of people around the building this year. This could not just be because of the rain, however. Before the war's end, even in snowy, below-freezing weather, there would be lines of people in the cold and wind, bundled up, waiting to get their turn to go through. I had gone to the 'official' *Maaveerar Naal* perhaps once as a child and then another couple of times

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[397] *White Van Stories* (Channel 4, 2015), https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3281094/.

[398] Yasmin Sooka, "An Unfinished War: Torture and Sexual Violence in Sri Lanka 2009—2014," *The Bar Rights Committee of England and Wales (BHRC) and the International Truth & Justice Project, Sri Lanka*, March 2014.

[399] Jeevan Ravindran and Kumaran Kanapathippillai, "Conflict Forced Them From Their Homes. Now the Military Is Occupying Their Land.," *Vice World News*, January 16, 2023, https://www.vice.com/en/article/88qpmk/palaly-jaffna-military-land-grabs-tamil-sri-lanka.

[400] Ibid.

[401] In the decade since the end of war, there has been new groups and organizations that have tried to fill the hole left by the LTTE in its overseas organization. The Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam (TGTE) has also organized a separate *Maaveerar Naal* for the past several years. In addition, the organizers of the original *Maaveerar Naal* that has been functioning for decades in Toronto was also connected to the Tamil Youth Organization which would help University campus Tamil Student Associations hold their own *Maaveerar Naal* events on their respective campuses.

around the end of the conflict (2008-2010), while participating in youth-held versions throughout my time as an undergraduate. Like the second-generation youth I interviewed, the event brought up a lot of mixed emotions for me. The Covid-19 Pandemic prevented this event from taking place live for a couple of years. Before that, I was out of the country in graduate school for several years, so going this year felt like an emotionally charged homecoming.

The event always seemed to stoke a sense of duty in me and a deep heaviness for all it represented (decades of war, violence, death, and loss). It felt painful and full of responsibility. I say painful because it was a moment when I had to reckon headfirst with all the complicated baggage and suffering of the war. There were so many unreconciled feelings, heaviness of the death toll, guilt for being safe and carrying on in my life, a sense of disillusionment about living through a time of failed activism, and hopelessness about the future as the country struggles through its post-conflict reality. I carry these emotions along with me, suppressed year after year without processing them. Instead, I focused on studying these very same themes, researching and interviewing others in the community to see how many of the things I struggle with are widespread in the community. All the while, I hoped to come out of this dissertation with a better understanding. Going to *Maaveerar Naal*, however, it strikes me that doing a dissertation about the community's processing of this conflict is not the same as personally processing it. Attending the event, I knew I could not be a pure outsider, making observations; the environment and the ritual of the event is an interactive, immersive one (and on purpose). I would be forced to feel things and confront the conflict in a way that triggered me, and I could only hope that it would help me process some part of those heaps of unreconciled feelings I had stored up.

The rain was hitting the windshield, and as I readied myself to get out, I tried to calm my nerves with a deep breath. I quickly made my way across the graveled parking lot with the bright bunting overhead leading me to the entrance. The sizeable temporary structure had been decked out in banners, posters, and large bright cardboard structures. Everything was the same shade of bright red and yellow, cutting through the dreariness of the gray skies, gray gravel, and grey cement floors inside the building. Once inside, young people (from about 15 to 25 years old) were serving as volunteers dressed in matching outfits of the same colors and guiding visitors on how to navigate the series of halls. The halls were divided into three main sections, the first being a long roped-off hallway.

In this first section, every visitor would walk by a long line of tables stacked with rows of black-framed photos of LTTE soldiers neatly standing on gold and red fabric. Strings of flowers were placed along the lower edge of all the photos. The tables were separated by a roped fence, and sand was filled under the tables with hundreds of tropical potted plants nestled in the sand along the rope. All visitors who enter are guided by volunteers and the roping to indicate the way they are to walk through. Ahead of me, older members of the diaspora walked slowly, still in their jackets, silently and solemnly gazing at the lines of black-framed photos. I followed the queue, beginning to walk beside this wall of photos single-file until coming to the edge of the memorial tomb. A recreation of the graveyards of the LTTE was erected ahead of us. Two-foot-high tombstones dotted the hall in neat rows in sections embedded in the sand, with a walkway made between to walk up to the final six-foot-long, life-size tomb at the end. In the middle of the walkway there were glass boxes filled with sand collected from the various LTTE cemeteries in Sri Lanka. A *karthigai* flower was laid on each glass case. As each visitor

gets to the end of the walkway, a volunteer hands them a fresh *karthigai* flower, and they have a moment at the final tomb to lay it there with a prayer or moment of reflection before walking back down the other aisle of the walkway. Another volunteer stands behind the tomb, asking those going through if they have a relative who died as a *Maaveerar* (hero/martyr), and there seemed to be avenues to get more time to grieve at the monument or have that grief acknowledged communally, if so.

Aside from this single file process, there were two auditoriums set up with a stage and a few hundred chairs set out for the audience. Cultural dances, songs, and plays were scheduled to perform throughout the day, and after showing respect at the tomb, visitors were free to sit and watch the performances. It was not a formalized setting that centered the performances, becoming more akin to an in-between space, where people sat scattered between empty chairs, sitting and watching, talking quietly amongst themselves, or seemingly just resting, not quite ready to leave. Performers also sat in the audience chairs, awaiting their performance time. A group of young girls about 10 years old sat huddled in matching red and yellow silk Bharatanatyam outfits, their eyes lined with kohl, looking around at who else was in the audience.[402] The third and final space is next to the exit, where market stalls were erected with vendors selling Tiger paraphernalia and community groups showcasing community projects they were organizing or fundraising for. This final space is filled with the sound of conversation, as people mingled with those they know and spoke to vendors and those they came with while the faint hum of Tiger songs played in the background. Below, I will examine these three different spaces of Maaveerar Naal through the themes they reveal about the diasporic memory-work taking place.

[402] Bharatanatyam is a form of classical dance. It originated from the area of Tamil Nadu in Southern India and has been practiced for over 2000 years.

(Re)creating and (re)claiming 'nation' through the body

The painstaking effort put into the construction of the memorial site is noteworthy. A special detail that stood out this year was the use of sand and plants (see: Figure 6). Under the long line of *Maaveerar* photos, sand was used to ground the tables, and tropical plants (all of which were native to Tamil regions in Sri Lanka) were used to line this sand. Whether intended for the visitors as a way to bring them back to a sense of "home," or an attempt to keep the

Figure 6: Photo from Maaveerar Naal 2023 in Toronto, Canada. Photo Courtesy of photographer.

Maaveerars in a space that constituted "home" out of respect for the land for which they had died, this recreation of such a specific landscape reveals the fervent longing and primacy of the homeland for the diaspora. The Sri Lankan war has always been a war over land and the right to it. Sassanka Perera, in his book about warzone tourism in Sri Lanka, describes the war as a contestation over nationalist renderings of cartography, where the Tamil nationalist imagination of Eelam conflicts with the Sinhala nationalists' insistence on the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka.[403] Just as the LTTE used the map of Eelam incessantly within all its political imagery, the government, and Sinhala nationalists also worked with maps and history to try to discredit ideas of ancient Tamil settlement as well as the ongoing inhabitation of different areas of Sri Lanka to undermine the idea of Eelam as a representation of Tamil land. Back and forth,

[403] Perera, Sasanka, *Warzone Tourism in Sri Lanka: Tales From Darker Places in Paradise* (SAGE Publications, 2016).

historians on both sides debate migration histories and the origins of the two ethnic groups. This academic battle over land and its boundaries implicates the way memory, history, and land are entangled in the rights over what can be called *home*. Hellmann-Rajanayagam, a scholar who explored how history is understood and weaponized in Sri Lanka, writes, "Whoever possesses the history, possesses the country, possesses the right to rule, *the right to exist...*"[404]

The symbols and philosophical roots of the Tamil nationalist movement in Sri Lanka were always deeply grounded in tying Tamil people to the specific land of Eelam in Sri Lanka. LTTE Leader, Prabhakaran, in his last *Maaveerar Naal* address before being killed, said:

> It was on this land that our heroes were born. They grew up here and lived here. It was on this land that their footsteps have their imprints. The air they breathed is mingled with this land. From time immemorial, from generation to generation, the Tamil people lived on this land. It was this land which our heroes loved deeply. Our heroes died for this land and are at rest in its bosom. The land where they are embedded, belongs to us. It is our own land.[405]

His impassioned depiction of the way *Maaveerars* are inextricable from the land that they fight for is not only part of a political argument for the right of self-determination over Tamil territory, but has also become an undeniable part of how Tamil people see their connection with the homeland. There is an interplay in how Prabhakaran describes this connection; one where the land becomes part of each Tamil person (the air they breathe), and they, in turn leave their mark upon this land (imprints of their footsteps). This symbiotic bonding between Tamil people and their land is then what creates their *right* to it, the fact that body and nation have become blended beyond parting.

The LTTE further ensconced these ideas of the land and people being inextricable from each other through other symbols and the language of the cause. When speaking of *Maaveerars*, it is said that they are *sowed (vithaika pattu iruk-kirarkal)* and not *buried (puthaithhal)*. Tombstones, called *natukal* in Tamil, also translates into English more directly as "planted stones." The verbiage of sowing seeds and planting reveals another symbolic reason behind the turn towards burial. Like seeds that will grow and flourish hand in hand with the land, their reunion with the land for which they fight is one that is promised to be fruitful one day. It turns their death into a symbol of life and hope.

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[404] Hellmann-Rajanayagam, Dagmar, "Tamils and the Meaning of History," *Contemporary South Asia* 3, no. 1 (1994): 5 *Emphasis mine.*

[405] "Leader V Prabakaran's Hero's Day Speech 2008," Translated by *Tamil Heritage* (blog), October 10, 2020, https://telibrary.com/leader-v-prabakarans-heros-day-speech-2008/.

In reaction to the bulldozing and desecration of the LTTE cemeteries by Sri Lankan forces, a new addition to the *Maaveerar Naal* setup came in the form of the small glass cases that carry soil from each of the LTTE cemetery sites from Sri Lanka. Carefully collected and displayed, these sand samples are labeled with the cemeteries they are from, with a single *karthigai* flower placed on top of each. The cases stand as the center of the aisle leading to the final tombstone. Figure 7 shows these glass boxes under the glaring red light that shines down on this part of the hall, evoking the visuality of blood that has been spilled in this sacrifice, infused into this sand. *Maaveerar Naal* is an event through which the diaspora is able to continually recreate the homeland and reclaim the land that they were dispossessed of. Through the ritualistic tying together of the Tamil body and nation, the homeland becomes both material and immaterial, bonded into the very blood, bones, and bodies of the Tamil community.

The impossibility of reclaiming and recreating the physical land of Eelam is ironically expressed through the layered attempts to manifest this land through sand, plants, and the reproduction of cemeteries. The attempt to restore and engage with this land reveals the ghostly haunting of this diaspora's dispossession from a specific rooting.[406] Bundled in coats and scarves, and crowded into a large temporary structure, the rupture between here and there becomes all the more prominent. All the material fixtures of *Maaveerar Naal,* from the bunting to the sand and tombstones are temporary, built and rebuilt each year, symbols of the impermanence of this site as a site of 'home.'

Figure 7: Photo from Maaveerar Naal 2023 in Toronto, Canada. Photo Courtesy of photographer.

[406] Avery Gordon uses *haunting* as a signifier of a "screaming presence" of that which appears to must be present, urging us to investigate what is missing to excavate the *ghostly matter* hidden by a history of white supremacy and state terror. See: Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (U of Minnesota Press, 1997).

Traveling through the spaces of an embodied archive

The purpose of *Maaveerar Naal* is, of course, not only to memorialize the past, but to shape this memorialization into a political project, one meant to mobilize the community into political action through rituals that highlight the loss not only of these lives, but of a homeland. Yet, this mobilization occurs through the unspoken; it occurs through the embodied interaction of visitors with this space, the media presented, the performances watched, and the community interactions that it facilitates. There is no clear narrative in written or verbal form that is presented as you go through the space. In the years before the LTTE was defeated, Prabhakaran's speech might have been televised, but otherwise, the messages of *Maaveerar Naal* have already been embedded into the event, its aesthetics, and its embodied practices. Contrasted with the Tamil community's engagement with non-Tamil outsiders, the event of *Maaveerar Naal* does not depend on the same types of representation to project and validate the idea of Tamil Eelam. While the facts and figures, the legal debates, and the human rights abuses are put front and center in contexts meant for external viewers, this space is one for the Tamil community to co-create the dream of Eelam through memory and commemoration work.

The space of *Maaveerar Naal* thus becomes akin to what Diana Taylor called the *repertoire*. In contrast to the myth of the *archive,* which traditionally contains "supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones)," the repertoire "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge."[407] Even though both the archive and the repertoire are mediated and subject to controlled selection and the limits of transmission, seeing the rituals of *Maaveerar Naal* as part of the Tamil community's repertoire, helps elucidate how cultural memory is being created and transmitted actively within the community through its interaction with each other and this space. Even though the LTTE created a highly structured style of memorial event with predetermined aims, the ephemeral and unstructured nature of this type of archive allows meaning-creation to be happening in the moment by the participants present and as grounded in a specific place.

From the time you enter to the time you leave *Maaveerar Naal*, you are engaged in a set of practices and exchanges that structure your experience and configure the space as a sacred site of memory production. Walking through the three different spaces of *Maaveerar Naal*, visitors are led through different dimensions of the imagined state of Eelam while existing in an in-between transnational place. In the first series of spaces leading to the main tomb, visitors slowly proceed in queue, in silence. The roping off of areas and the volunteers placed throughout the space help guide visitors through the lines of photos of *Maaveerars*, through the reconstructed cemetery, and past the main tomb into the staged area. During this queue, there is an implicit understanding of the contemplative silence required, filling this space with a shared collective consciousness focused on the individual relationships between each visitor and each *Maaveerar*.

In the second space featuring two staged auditoriums, an ongoing stream of performances take place in front of rows of assembled chairs. There are set times (10 am, 1 pm,

[407] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.,19-20.

6 pm) where a schedule of performances is lined up, but in the times in-between, the seats are not filled as visitors go past, maybe sitting for a few minutes to see one performance before moving through this space. Instead, families of performers or performers that will go on next take up many of the seats. Many of the performances are Bharatanatyam (a form of classical Tamil dance), with groups from different dance schools of all ages coming to perform.

While I sit in the audience, the group of 10-year-old girls in matching Bharatanatyam outfits are called to the stage. The five of them assemble themselves into a staggered 'w' formation, and when the *pulipattu* (a genre of song created by and for the Tigers) starts to play, they move in synchronized harmony. The song sings of the courage and dedication of the LTTE while facing life-and-death choices. The girls dance with strong postures, their shoulders back and heads held high as they try to embody a fighting spirit. As they pound their feet, their anklets add a structured chime to the beat of the song, and their faces try to hold looks of fierce determination. Bharatanatyam is a dance form that embraces story-telling and relies upon animated facial expressions and hand gestures to tell these stories through intensified portrayals of emotion.[408] While most traditional Bharatanatyam narratives are derived from Hinduism, with dancers *becoming* the deities they embody, Eelam Bharatanatyam has evolved to encompass the narratives of this war as well.[409] While some of the *Maaveerar Naal* dances from 2022 explored themes like the strength and resilience of the Tigers and Tamils, such as the one I described above, others explored the pain and trauma of war.

In Ann David's exploration of the art form among the Sri Lankan British diaspora, one girl she interviewed said, "In Bharatanatyam, every dance means so much, and every dance has a story. You become the characters in the dance… You become so involved in the dance. When you're being sad, you have to feel really sad inside, so the emotion looks right on stage."[410] Like the embodied re-enactments of protest performances explored in Chapter 2, these performers are engaging in a powerful form of cultural memory transmission, whereby they embody the collective memories of the war. As Taylor argues, this collective trauma can "be learned, enacted and passed on to others;" it "catches" like a "contagion," transmitting the "burden, pain and responsibility of past behaviors/events" to the audience who becomes a "participant and co-owner of the traumatic event.[411]

Pulipatukal ('Tiger songs') encompass another interrelated form of performance, used for some of the dances but also performed vocally. These songs have come to embody a new genre of war-time songs lamenting the journey of Tamil people and celebrating the Tigers. Unlike traditional Carnatic music, which is commonly studied within the Sri Lankan Tamil

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[408] Ann R. David, "Embodied Migration: Performance Practices of Diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil Communities in London," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 33, no. 4 (August 1, 2012): 375–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2012.693815

[409] Ibid.

[410] Ibid., 382.

[411] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*. 167-168.

diaspora and is Hindu-based, these songs borrow from the Carnatic style but are Eelam politics-based instead. All of these performances reveal the ways in which the war has bled into the evolution of Tamil cultural art forms, producing new genres and interpretations of ancient cultural expression unique to the Sri Lankan Tamil experience.

The third space near the exit feels like a marketplace. There is a stall selling books (from non-fiction about the war to Tamil poetry). Another is selling CDs of *pulipatukal* (tiger songs) and short films produced in Sri Lanka by the LTTE featuring re-enactments of Tiger heroism. One stall at the front has a large poster board about the tentative project to create a Tamil cultural center in Toronto, which will feature a genocide museum. As I pass by, the man standing there starts talking to another visitor explaining how donations would work and what the project needs to be finalized. T-shirts, calendars, and all other forms of Tiger paraphernalia are represented here.

While the first space of *Maaveerar Naal* is marked by a solitary ritual and the second space features a ritual between spectator and performer, the third space facilitates the ritual of community. People are talking, old friends reconnect, and everyone looks around to see who they know and try to place how they know them. Traveling through each space seems to represent three dimensions in the transnational imagined space of Eelam, with the first being consumed by trying to transport back to the homeland. This first space reveals the deeply felt loss of the *archive* for Tamils, while the next space tries to heal this loss by looking to the *repertoire.*[412] This second space of performance and the turn towards embodying memory starts to merge the lost land and territory of Eelam with the Tamil community in Toronto through the intermediary of the stage and evolutions of ancient cultural forms. And finally, the last space of the marketplace seems to comparatively embrace the localized space it is rooted in, accepting that Toronto is also a 'Tamil place' forged through these community connections. The memories and community narrative engaged here are not just of *there*, but also of being Tamil *here*.

Death reimagined: from memorial to monument to *murti*

Returning to the symbols of dead bodies and land represented in the first section of the *Maaveerar Naal* auditorium, the embodied ritual that is encouraged while going through this space helps elucidate how death is being reimagined by the Sri Lankan Tamil community. This in turn, helps to understand how the Tamil community is able to move through the temporal dimensions of this transnational space (past-present-future). *Maaveerars* are, by definition, dead. As Tom O'Neil puts it, "There are no living Maaveerars. To be Maaveerar, a guerilla must not only commit a fatal act of altruism, he or she must also be recognized for such by the LTTE Leadership."[413] What he is referencing here, is the idea of sacrifice that is embedded in the Tamil conceptualization of a *Maaveerar*. While paralleling Western ideas of martyrdom,

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[412] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

[413] Tom O'Neill, "In the Path of Heroes: Second-Generation Tamil-Canadians after the LTTE," *Identities* 22, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 124–39.

becoming a *Maaveerar* does not just rely upon an abstract notion of sacrifice but something more specific. The sacrifice needed is described by Schalk as "the voluntary abandonment of life in the very act of taking life, in the act of killing."[414] Consequently, some of the most venerated of the *Maaveerars* are the "Black Tigers,' the unit dedicated to suicide missions. It is also mandatory for LTTE soldiers to wear cyanide vials on a chord around their necks in case of capture, and Schalk reports the staggering statistic that, at least until 1992, approximately one-third of all dead Tigers had died from biting their cyanide vial.[415] Through this ritual "abandonment of life," the soldier simultaneously becomes both the *sacrificer* and the *sacrifice itself*.[416]

Death in this conception is not just an outcome but an active choice of agency, one that transforms the soldier into a *Maaveerar*. As Fuglerud puts it:

> To the soldiers in the LTTE death was not accidental, a result of carelessness, lack of intelligence, or surprise attacks, like the case is for western soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan – dying was what being a soldier was about; only as a dead did fighters realize their own potential. [417]

Wearing cyanide around their necks marked soldiers as liminal figures of sacrifice taking up space between the living and the dead because even if they were not yet dead, they had embraced their death as inevitable and necessary to the goal of Tamil Eelam. In death, they would be reunited with the land they had fought for as 'seeds,' their sacrifice nurturing the fertility of the motherland itself. *Maaveerar Naal* is also called *Elucci Naal*, which roughly translates to "Day of Rising," but in Tamil, *Elucci* carries with it a complex layering of ideas (ascent, elevation, origin, beginning, etc.)[418] Accordingly, the bodies of the dead become inextricably linked to the future, to the re-birth of Tamil Eelam, and to new beginnings for the community. Tamil Eelam, for *Maaveerars*, represented not only the reclaiming of their ancestral land but a transmutation of this land through their own sacrifice, which enabled it to become a safe haven, protected and able to nurture future generations.

> In discussing the difference between memorials and monuments, Arthur Danto argues: Monuments commemorate the memorable and embody the myths of beginnings. Memorials ritualise remembrance and mark the reality of ends…The memorial is a

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[414] P. Schalk, "The Revival of Martyr-Cults among Ilavar." *Temenos*, 1997.

[415] Ibid.

[416] Ibid.

[417] Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom." 13

[418] Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom."16.

special precinct, extruded from life, a segregated enclave where we honor the dead. With monuments we honor ourselves.[419] (47).

Marita Sturken also interacts with Danto's differentiation between memorials and monuments by adding that while memorials "seem to demand the naming of those lost,"… "monuments are usually anonymous." She also highlights the way the architectural form of a monument itself becomes part of the national imaginary.[420] The structures of *Maaveerar Naal*, namely the final life-size tomb, clearly blur the lines between monument and memorial. While the architecture of *Maaveerar Naal* leading up to this tomb concentrates on remembering individuals through the meticulous reproduction of photos and names, the final tomb becomes a larger symbol, anonymous and far-reaching. The final tomb is only used in diasporic *Maaveerar Naal* events since, in Sri Lanka, the families of *Maaveerars* sit by the real tombstones of their own loved ones during the mourning ritual. Yet, for the diaspora, in the face of this estrangement from the land and the bodies of their dead, this tomb comes to stand in as a symbol for sacrifices made, the dead to mourn, but also for the dream of Eelam itself. The body represented by this tomb is one not only one of death, but also one of re-birth, carrying with it the 'myth of beginnings" for Eelam.[421] In contrast to what Danto writes, this memorial is not "extruded from life" but one that structures memory and community identity in ways that seeps into the everyday life of Tamils instead of being relegated to a suspended time, or "segregated" space.

Many scholars have explored the secularization of Tamil culture by the LTTE. The LTTE's philosophical underpinnings were influenced by Socialism, Marxism, Anti-colonial movements, and different interrelated Tamil movements happening in India and Sri Lanka, such as the "Self-Respect" (anti-caste) movement, Tamil-language Renaissance, and Dravidian Nationalism. Together, these movements contributed to a more general rise in Tamil nationalistic frameworks, that the LTTE was not only shaped by, but actively utilized and developed through the particularities of the Sri Lankan context. The group leaned into a Tamil-first ideology that projected a secular understanding of Tamil-ness as a primary identity that could unite Tamils across historical differences maintained by understandings of caste, religion, class, and gender. The LTTE fought against these culturally sedimented historical divisions in the community through rhetoric and by creating new systems, rituals, and practices. A few examples include encouraging women-led military units, cracking down on caste and class discrimination in its ranks, and promoting secular Tamil/LTTE rituals in the place of religious

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[419] Danto, Arthur, "The Vietnam Veterans Memorial," *The Nation*, 1985, https://hettingern.people.cofc.edu/Aesthetics_Fall_2010/Danto_Vietnam_Veteran%27s_Memorial.pdf.

[420] Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997). 47-48.

[421] The ideas here about how a dead body becomes a politically charged symbol for nation link to Verdery's exploration of the political life of dead bodies. See Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (Columbia University Press, 1999).

ones. However, accepting the conclusion that the LTTE "secularized" Tamil culture is not nuanced enough an interpretation. It is instead useful to view LTTE practices and rituals as a form of syncretism that borrows from historical Tamil culture and ancient Hindu practices that have shaped the way Tamils have navigated ideas of connecting to higher purpose and the sacred for generations, leveraging them for a political project.

Cristiana Natali explores the idea of the *Maaveerar* cemeteries as temples, pulling from the idea of *Maaveerars* as *ascetics* who have achieved a sense of selflessness and are thus elevated to saint-like figures.[422] Even LTTE leader, Prabhakaran, proclaimed that "these magnificent individuals who give themselves, who are those that abandon life (tiyakal)…for the honor and security of our community are those who should be worshipped in the temples of our hearts throughout the ages."[423]

In Saiva Hinduism (the form most popularly practiced by Sri Lankan Tamils), the deceased go through a funerary process by which the final state of being is becoming the deity itself. Describing Saiva funeral rites, Davis explains, "Not merely the "last sacrifice," say the agamas, antyesti [funerary rites] should be understood as the "sacrifice" that leads to the "final," that is "supreme," state of being: namely to become a Siva [God]."[424] Here again, we see how deeply ingrained these notions of "sacrifice" and death as a transitory state of being are for this community. The setup of the final life-size tomb is very reminiscent of the structure inside a Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu temple. The tombstone is placed within an altar-type structure, similar to the way each deity in a temple is housed in an altar. In the common Hindu practice of this region, the way one interacts with a deity and altar is to begin by viewing it in prayer. After a priest performs a ritual with the deity, they will come down along the line of watching worshippers with a lighted lamp. As they passes in front of each worshipper, worshippers will hover their hands over the lamp and gently wave up the heat to their heads in order to receive the blessing. The priest may give the worshipper some flowers or sacred ash in return, and then, the worshipper will walk to the left of the altar, often touching it, or sometimes placing the flowers and ash back on the side ledge and continue around in a clockwise circle before continuing on to the next deity. Similar to this Hindu style of worship, each individual at *Maaveerar Naal* is given a moment in front of the altar of the final tomb and given a flower to place on the tomb. After this physical contact of placing the flower on the tomb, visitors proceed to walk around the altar, but in a counter-clockwise direction paralleling the Hindu tradition of reversing direction for funerary rites.[425]

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[422] Cristiana Natali, "Building Cemeteries, Constructing Identities: Funerary Practices and Nationalist Discourse among the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka," *Contemporary South Asia* 16, no. 3 (2005), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09584930802271323.

[423] Fuglerud, "Aesthetics of Martyrdom."14.

[424] Richard Davis, "Cremation and Liberation: The Revision of a Hindu Ritual," *History of Religions* 28, no. 1 (1988), 47.

[425] Ibid., 46

As I waited in line to approach the life-size tomb, I could not help but notice these similarities of practice. Ahead of me, an old woman clutched her flower against her chest in both hands, her hands folded over in the relaxed version of the prayer position. She gently leaned to the left to get a full view of the tomb as she approached. This posture was the same that I had seen over a lifetime of attending temple, the same gentle tilt and lean that oriented the body towards the deity. When she placed the flower on the tomb, she lay it with her right hand, her left hand supporting her right wrist. This exact maneuvering and use of left and right hand were unspoken forms of posturing that I had learned by osmosis in the space of temples, a way of acknowledging and respecting the sacred. Bringing her hands back, she did a quick tap to her head and brought her hands down into a relaxed prayer pose against her upper chest as she rounded the altar. These automatic rituals of interacting with sacred space are not something that is methodically taught among Sri Lankan Tamil Hindus, and so many of them will have different understandings of the meanings and purposes of these subtle movements, whether they are about how to show respect, how to receive blessings, how to connect thought to prayer, etc. However, the transference between temple rituals and *Maaveerar Naal* rituals demonstrates the way those who participate in *Maaveerar Naal* use these everyday practices to transfigure this space into something sacred. Memory scholar Pierre Nora argues that "true memory…has taken refuge in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body's inherent self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories and memory transformed by its passage through history."[426] *Maaveerar Naal*, through co-opting these Hindu "gestures and habits" and blending them into political rituals of commemoration have borrowed the resonant power of this embodied forms of memory transfer.

In Hinduism, the stone deity that is worshiped in this way is called a *murti*. Grieve explains, "*Murtis* are concrete signs of gods…They are ritually consecrated images at the center of the chief of Hindu religious practice, worship (puja)."[427] This means that not all statues bearing a deity's likeness become a religious idol for worship. Instead, *murtis* are made through ritual and through the way they are mediated through a set of social relations and practices. Grieve continues, "…instead of an iconic symbolic representation, a *murti*'s signification comes from giving life to a stone. In fact, a *murti* is 'dead' until life is put into it through ceremonies. Thereafter the image is not merely a symbol of that deity, but it *is* that deity."[428] Within the ceremonies and everyday practices involved in creating, giving life to and presenting a *murti*, priests, artisans, and worshippers perform formal and informal rituals that "give vitality" to the stone, bringing it to life as the deity.[429]

The way Hindus interact with and understand *murtis* reveals the way the memorial/monument of the final tomb in *Maaveerar Naal* becomes an active object for those

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[426] Nora Pierre, "Memory and History," *Representations*, Les Lieux de Memoire, 26 (1989). 13.

[427] Gregory Price Grieve, "Symbol, Idol and Mūrti: Hindu God-Images and the Politics of Mediation," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 44, no. 1 (April 1, 2003): 58.

[428] Ibid., 66.

[429] Ibid., 67.

who participate in the memory ritual. It is through the network of social relations and social meanings that are developed by those who build the monument and those that visit and pay respects to it, that the tomb takes on power and meaning. As a large cement/stone structure in the shape of a coffin, it signifies the dead, but through these rituals and this social interaction, the dead stone becomes a live *murti,* echoing the understanding that the dead that are being remembered are not confined to the past, but are linked to the lifeblood of the motherland and new beginnings. The final tomb is a living and embodied monument that signifies and manifests that the Tamil nation is still alive and fighting. Like a *murti*, it is given life by those who interact with it, but it also proceeds to return this spirit of life back to these participants. In this way, this Maaveerar Naal tradition also makes up for the lack of traditional cremation; it engages syncretic rituals that are built out of tradition while offering a different form of grieving that reimagines death through hope and a higher purpose.

Seeing and being seen

Linked to the Hindu rituals surrounding a *murti*, *darsan*, which literally means 'to see,' is one of the most common and fundamental of Hindu practices. Simply put, it is naming the practice whereby the worshipper gazes at the god-image, but its particularity emerges from the fact that in *darsan*, the god-image is also gazing back at the worshipper.[430] In constructing a *murti*, the final part to be constructed will be the eyes: "A priest will ritually scrape the eye with a golden needle, or add an extra flick of paint, and a figure cast in bronze, or carved in stone, a work of "fine art" in our dry vocabulary, becomes something else: a divinity who returns our gaze."[431] The power of the gaze between the viewer and the active object here is an energetically charged space of meaning-creation.

While visitors go through the *Maaveerar Naal* hall, there are multiple levels of viewing, gazing, and watching involved, and the ritual of *seeing* and *being seen* is baked into the ritualized process of the event. The first act of viewing begins as you pass volunteers who make eye contact and nod in the direction you should proceed in. This silent acknowledgment of presence, the act of welcome, and the regulation of movement happen multiple times as you go through. Second, while you are in queue along the long line of *Maaveerar* photos, you are meant to look. Meeting the gaze of each *Maaveerar* as you walk by is how you signal that you are acknowledging their deaths and demonstrating your respect. These photos become active memory objects, like a *murti*, standing in for that person, their body, and spirit, elements you can only interact with through the act of viewing. At the culminating tomb, you are given a moment for *darsan* with the tomb, the most actualized form of *murti* in the ritual. This moment is one where, as you gaze upon the tomb, the tomb gazes back at you. However, it is also a

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[430] Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

[431] Holland Cotter, "Looking Into the Divine Eyes of Spiritual Sculptures," *The New York Times*, July 22, 2005, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/22/arts/design/looking-into-the-divine-eyes-of-spiritual-sculptures.html.

moment in which you are also being watched by the volunteers and other visitors, who acknowledge this sacred interaction with their witnessing eyes.

In the second space of staged performances, viewing takes on a more formal role, and the performances demand to be viewed and create a relationship between performer and spectator, wherein the narrative of the performance is being accepted and received by the spectator. In turn the spectator is giving meaning and value to the performer, validating this narrative. Diana Taylor helps elucidate this dynamic as she writes:

> For many of these communities…when performance ends, so does shared understandings of social life and collective memory. Performances such as these…warn us not to dismiss the I who remembers, who thinks, who is a product of collective thought. They teach communities not to look away.[432]

In the case of *Maaveerar Naal* however, there is no clear distinction of when a "performance ends," since these performative moments are produced throughout the space and not just in the formalized space of performance. What Taylor argues about the way performance teaches "communities not to look away," is particularly insightful since *Maaveerar Naal* does seem to be driven by the need to directly grapple with the violence and legacies of war, especially for a diaspora population not living directly within the space of the war. Like the images of war used in Tamil activism, there seems to be a sense of duty fueled by survivor's guilt at play, a belief that they must look directly at pain and trauma and mimetically experience and share the burden of this legacy in payment for the relative safety they enjoy. Within performance, whether formal or informal, community members are forced to see and reckon with the past, present and future of Tamils, and through this interaction between performers and audience, shared memories and a collective consciousness of community can be produced.

In the third space, viewing takes on a new form, since, in this communal marketplace space, people are looking at each other through their social networks. It is a space of people-watching, where people are recognizing those they know and do not know, trying to place others, making note of new faces or missing ones. Two second-generation women I spoke to, shared their discomfort with the constant watching that took place in events like these. Kausalya said:

> I hate going to events like [Maaveerar Naal], I mean, I want to pay my respects and want to help memorialize and have a space to think about the war and stuff, but these things just turn into a social gathering. Everyone just going to see their friends, aunties just standing and judging the young girls that come through.[433]

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[432] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*., 21.

[433] Focus group with second generation Tamil-Canadians, Toronto, January 5, 2023.

Her friend cuts in, "Yeah, they like full-on stare."[434] They laugh, and then Kausalya continues, "They do… and I mean that's not just at *Maaveerar Naal*, it's everywhere."[435] I ask if the staring is any different at an event like *Maaveerar Naal*, and Kausalya says:

> Yeah, I mean, I think it is, I don't know if it's just in my head, but it feels like people are judging how much I care [about the war/*Maaveerars*]… instead of just like judging the way I'm dressed or something, they're judging if I'm a good Tamil…person?[436]

She ends this sentence almost like a question, and I realize that the pause before she says person is because she would more naturally say 'Tamil girl/woman' but decided to differentiate what is being judged here through 'person' instead. What Kausalya is communicating here suggests that while watching is a tool within the community that is consistently being used to judge 'Tamil-ness.' In other spaces, the qualities of 'proper' Tamil-ness feel dependent on her performance of gendered cultural norms, but in the *Maaveerar Naal* space, this 'Tamil-ness' becomes more narrowly defined through how one is engaging in the rituals of commemoration. Evidently, the glances received and exchanged during *Maaveerar Naal* are part of a social practice that exerts power through surveillance – an internal tool of ordering and creating the confines of community belonging – but one that adds a specific dimension to what it means to be a "good Tamil…person." The looks exchanged throughout the visit reveal the constant ways recognition forged between community members build the collective consciousness and belongingness in the community. It is in these gazes that social understandings or memory are shared and solidified, and through which social belonging is extended or limited.

Moreover, there is yet another type of viewing happening during *Maaveerar Naal*, this one involving screens and media objects. Throughout the space, there are several screens mounted, too many that I lost count while going through. In all three types of spaces, there are multiple screens of different sizes projecting media. Some screens, like one in the entryway, loops a general animation announcing *Maaveerar Naal*. Others screen a live feed of the performances being performed on the *Maaveerar Naal* stages, so that from any area of the hall, you can watch the performances. One screen was displaying clips from other *Maaveerar Naals* being held in other countries and from previous years, edited together into a compilation. Screening this compilation seemed to highlight the ways in which this space of memorialization seemed intent on bridging gaps in time and place. By being a space of memory-work, *Maaveerar Naal* uses tools like this to transcend the limits of bounded time and space and actively connect with others from this diaspora community, who may not be locally present, but who still inform and participate in the memory-work of *Maaveerar Naal*. A visitor could theoretically see a clip of themselves from a previous year, or see relatives or friends in clips from other countries. Still, most visitors do not actively watch these screens, and instead, the alternative times and places they display seem to constitute a banal, but crucial part of the background landscape of this Tamil-Canadian space.

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[434] Ibid.

[435] Ibid.

[436] Ibid.

There is a constant process of reproduction happening at all levels in the creation of *Maaveerar Naal*. The photos of *Maaveerars* are a media reproduction; the built cemeteries reproduce material space, and even the performances provide a mimetic interpretation of the past and present experiences of Tamils. Furthermore, the live feed of the performances reproduces and re-visualizes these embodied performances into media objects that are then looped and reproduced in different places and at other times. Being able to watch the *Maaveerar Naal* performances from so many vantage points: the queue through the photo wall and makeshift cemetery, each auditorium, at home on a Tamil TV channel, seemed to strongly express the anxiety of amnesia and erasure within this community. There was a sense that the continual temporal looping battled the existential dread over the possibility of forgetting.[437] Everything that happened at *Maaveerar Naal* would be recorded, documented, and preserved. However, it felt like it was not just the fear of erasure propelling these tactics, but also a related belief that there is power in re-production as memory-work. It seemed that the more these performances were viewed, the more political and cultural power they were seen as accumulating. Reproduction made it possible for an infinite number of moments of interaction between the viewer and the memory-object, and these moments were what fueled the lifeblood of the diaspora community. Reproduction also acted as a validation of the community's work, helping document the growth and progress of the diaspora(s) in ways that amplified its interrelated place-making projects.

Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," explores the idea that a reproduction would lack the "aura" of the original and argues that the significance of this "aura" is derived from the role of the original "in ritual;" "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be"[438] However in the case of *Maaveerar Naal,* it can be argued that the reproductions are also involved and contributing to the ritual; indeed, in this sense, these reproductions are part of the "original." While their presence in space and time is not bounded, their role in specific spaces and times is significant and contributes to the meaning creation happening during this event. The era of digital and electronic reproduction has created a new landscape of how images exist in our world and thus changed the way people and societies engage with these images and create social meaning. As Sturken and Cartwright state, "The meaning of the image in the age of electronic reproduction is…a radical change from the meaning of the image described in Walter Benjamin's treatise."[439] And yet, Benjamin does speak to something that still exists, "Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its

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[437] See: Andreas Huyssen, "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (2000): 21–38.

[438] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Zohn, Harry (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). 3-4.

[439] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). 149.

reproduction."[440] The act of re-production within the Tamil community does reflect a deep desire to "bring things 'closer,'" revealing the way re-production is tied to specific ideas of spatiality and originality. However, in this concerted effort to reach out to the original or preserve memory, these memory re-productions also create social meaning themselves and create new levels on which disporic desires function.

Memorialization as a regulation of diasporic collective memory

This chapter used a deep dive on the rituals of *Maaveerar Naal* in order to demonstrate the powerfully created sense of collective memory within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora memory-work grew alongside LTTE narratives about the conflict and in reaction to the Sri Lankan government's efforts of erasure. While many refugee communities suffer from fragmented memories due to the conditions of war and national efforts to narrativize a certain version of the war, the Sri Lankan conflict evolved over decades while a transnational diaspora was growing and interacting with the country. These dynamics created a concerted effort to "remember" in the face of this erasure. *Maaveerar Naal* represents the largest and most formalized form of commemoration in this community, and these commemorations reveal multiple themes that undergird the foundations of how memory and the collective consciousness of the Tamil diaspora have functioned for decades. *Maaveerar Naal* commemorations show how memory-work in the Tamil diaspora is preoccupied with (re)creating and (re)claiming space. It also reimagines death and the body to be able to project a future for the Sri Lankan Tamil community rather than be trapped in the trauma of loss. The politics of Tamil Eelam are maintained through this memory-work in powerful ways through incorporating embodied memory rituals and visual rituals of, "seeing" and "being seen" that lean on media objects and technologies, blending the embodied archive with more material ones. These rituals also lean on cultural and religious rituals that have been practiced for thousands of years, becoming easily incorporated into the embodied practices of Tamil culture and identity. The rituals and spaces that *Maaveerar Naal* create allows the diaspora (at least the first-generation) to use memory the way Um describes it, where "through remembering, [diasporas] can re-insert themselves into familiar frames that reaffirm their histories, genealogies and above all, sense of belonging."[441]

Even though war fragments and silences memory, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has actively tried to combat this directly through these types of commemoration. This is both because of the LTTE's conscious effort to politicize memory but also, more generally, to address the needs of a diaspora that longs for the land of Eelam and wants to see their memory as a place of repair instead of destruction. This means that during the multiple decades of war, these rituals and the narratives and ideologies they produced, have become central to the memory-work of this community, shaping the ways in which it confronts the war and the ways in which it does not. Grief is politicized in this community, and these commemoration rituals do

[440] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." 5.

[441] Khatharya Um, "Diasporas and the Politics of Memory and Commemoration," in *Routledge Handbook of Diaspora Studies*, ed. Robin Cohen and Carolin Fischer (Routledge, 2018).

not leave much room for personal mourning. Rituals like these, however, may, in some ways, help process trauma through contextualizing trauma within a framework of purpose and responsibility to advocate against the ongoing violences in Sri Lanka. Yet, it may also suppress other expressions for reconciliation and personal healing through the layered pressures of these political narratives.

While it seems that the first-generation deals with the trauma of war through silence or these political modes of community commemoration, the second-generation seems to be trying to approach the war and the trauma of the generation before it in slightly different ways. The post-war era and the destruction of the LTTE also put a wrench in the foundations of the narratives and rituals of this commemoration. The armed struggle for the land of Eelam has ended. This creates deep existential dread but also new possibilities for how collective memory among this diaspora can evolve in the future. Chapter 5 will look at the subtle evolutions of this memory-work since the end of the war, through first following virtual evolutions of *Maaveerar Naal* and then considering how members of the second-generation debate the meanings of *Maaveerar Naal* and envision new modes of commemoration that include their own perspectives and memories.

Chapter 5: A New Visual Landscape: Evolutions of Tamil Diaspora Memory-Work

"Politics dictate what and how survivors can remember and define what is to be considered legitimate, acceptable and safe discourse…. Where if anywhere within these narrow confines of state sponsored and otherwise dominant narratives do other articulations fit?"[442] *– Khatharya Um*

This chapter will explore the subtle ways memory-work in this diaspora is evolving. While the second-generation engages in traditional memory-work by bringing new perspectives and meanings to the work, the diaspora's use of virtual spaces and media technologies also affects the very way memory spaces are able to facilitate this, creating new limits and new possibilities for how the community creates, maintains, and debates the collective memory it shares. While LTTE aims and the interconnected ideologies of Tamil nationalism have factored heavily into the forms that Tamil-Canadian memory-work has historically taken, this chapter explores how new narratives are being integrated into existing narratives, expanding them. As an LTTE-created event, *Maaveerar Naal* has dominated the space of commemoration within the Tamil-Canadian diaspora while forwarding particular politicized themes. In this chapter, I follow different ways this memorial event gets taken up by the diaspora, through new media technologies, and through a younger generation, in order to explore how these mediations are broadening the political subjectivities animating the Tamil-Canadian diasporic consciousness.

First, I will explore a website created for *Maaveerar Naal* during the Covid-19 pandemic that struggles to maintain the existing rituals of the commemoration through a virtual format. I will then present another web-based video promo of *Maaveerar Naal* to reveal how new diasporic desires are revealed through these types of digital creations. After this, I will dive into the second-generation's ongoing debates over the themes and messages of *Maaveerar Naal*. These debates illustrate how they actively engage with diasporic collective memory through new perspectives and motivations. By then turning to a virtual memorial commemorating 2009, I use my interviews with members of the second-generation to see how both its virtual format and its alternative content, which includes their own lived memories, change the way they engage and respond to it. Finally, I look at M.I.A's music video for *Borders*, which was released on *Maaveerar Naal* to analyze it as a reinterpretation of the memorial event that is reflective of the second-generation's changing perspectives. While memory-work in this diaspora has been dominated by particular narratives and a specific form of politicization, these reinterpretations reveal the heterogeneity and complexity within the diaspora as it grows and evolves through new contexts and a changing diasporic landscape.

[442] Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (NYU Press, 2015).

Finding *Maaveerar Naal* online: part I

When I was trying to confirm the location of the 2022 *Maaveerar Naal*, I turned first to the internet for answers. I quickly found the Instagram account of the organization that hosts the "official" *Maaveerar Naal* in Toronto, and I clicked on the website they had linked in their bio.[443] I was immediately taken into what felt like a virtual portal into an animation of the LTTE cemetery grounds.[444] The graphics felt like being in a video game. Leaves rustled on the trees, and a great flame was burning on a stand, visible through the entrance archway of the cemetery. There was a yellow button that said "Step In Gently." I clicked the button, and an instrumental song in the style of 'tiger songs' started playing as I floated virtually through the grounds towards the flame. Gardens of beautiful pink, white, and yellow flowers moved gently in the breeze to either side, framing the lines of tombstones. I was once again given two options: "Search For a Maaveerar" or "Light a Flame." The first option let me type in a name to find profiles of *Maaveerars*, but as I tried to search, the site seemed to be glitching and would not lead me anywhere. When trying to get back to the second option of lighting a flame, the site zoomed in and out slowly through the cemetery grounds, not letting me exit or go backward.

Without navigation buttons, I felt trapped in this virtual world. I finally gave up and refreshed the page, and entered again to finally "light a flame." It took me in front of one of the tombstones to the left of the path and let me write a message before clicking "light a flame," after which, a small lighted lamp appeared on the tombstone. Suddenly with a blue flash, a *Maaveerar's* photo appeared on top of the tombstone where a *Maaveerar's* name and rank would go in real life. This picture started to change, flickering through other *Maaveerars*. There was no other information on the site, none of the practical information about where and when the memorial event would take place or information about who or what organization had created this site. Not only was this website an immersive virtual space, it was one that was tough to navigate. You are presented with only a few options, and between those options, you have no avenues to speed up the process of trying to find the information you want. There is no exit button, no back button. It seems to purposefully re-orient how you experience this virtual space, forcing the viewer to be present in the virtual space of this cemetery. You are taken to float slowly through – not straight through – but in soft curved lines, the music building while the movement of the trees and flowers stimulates the feeling of a Sri Lankan sea breeze. Bright overhead lamps illuminate the cemeteries while the twilight sky darkens. You are taken through the mourning ritual for a predetermined amount of time which you are not in control of.

I later put together that this virtual memorial was created in 2020 when the Covid19 pandemic would prevent *Maaveerar Naal* from taking place in-person. In a strange process of mimesis, I figured this out through a former Instagram post on the same page that featured a video of the website filmed on a phone showing the movement through the cemetery.[445] This video of a virtual animation on an Instagram account linked to the same virtual website, created

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[443] Canadian Tamils Remembrance [@akavamcanada]. Instagram, accessed July 1, 2023.

[444] "Maaveerar Illam," n.d., https://www.maaveerarillam.com/.

[445] Canadian Tamils Remembrance [@akavamcanada]. Instagram, accessed July 1, 2023.

a circuitous network of these images and this experience. Like being on the website itself, this circuitous network of links and videos made me feel trapped within the layers of this virtual moment.

Through media projects like these, the web becomes not a passive place for the diaspora to simply find information about community events, but an active technology in the attempt to mobilize and shape the contours of community participation. *Maaveerar Naal* is a memorial event created in Sri Lanka by the LTTE and reproduced pretty closely by the transnationally displaced diaspora. Even though there is adherence to many of the rituals and symbology, the diaspora's physical dislocation inspires evolutions of its form to emphasize the importance of the land lost. It turns *Maaveerar Naal* into not just a memorial-based event but one that is about place-making. When these place-making rituals were interrupted by the Covid19 Pandemic, it became all the more important to lean into virtual possibilities.

This virtual *Maaveerar Naal* was created with an insistence that the ritualized and participatory element of the memorial is crucial. Before and after the pandemic, *Maaveerar Naal* commemorations in Sri Lanka and abroad have always been filmed and shown on websites and TV channels as ways for those that cannot access them to feel connected. Yet, creations like this website demonstrate that viewing does not feel like enough at times, and that the space of *Maaveerar Naal* is important. If it is not possible to access the physical space of Eelam, the community turns to a Toronto-based physical space filled with symbols of the homeland. And if that is not possible, the community turns to a virtual space, which once again engages and materializes the original land of Eelam. This virtual space then feels unsatisfying for the desires that animate it, illustrating the limits of the virtual to address the deep longing within this community to be able to interact with the homeland physically. Yet, the limits it comes up against capture the diasporic experience of exile; that is – virtual spaces experience the very same limit that place-making projects in the diaspora do – nothing is able to fulfill the loss of the temporally and territorially ruptured homeland, which cannot be regained.

Finding *Maaveerar Naal* online: part II

Continuing my initial search to confirm the location of *Maaveerar Naal* that year, it dawned on me that this event is so large and so taken for granted in this community, that its details do not need to be publicized online. People usually *just know*. I tried to remember how I would have seen information about the event in years past, before the pandemic and being away from the city made me look to the internet first for answers. I remembered that this was an event internal to the community, and the spaces that governed community information were mainly Tamil diaspora-run TV channels and Tamil stores across the GTA, which would have posters and flyers displayed all over front doors and window sills. There were no Tamil stores close to me, so the next time I visited my parents' house, I turned on a Tamil TV Channel to look for the promotions of the event that I remember airing each year.

My parents had gotten a new satellite system, specifically catering to immigrant populations trying to access global and internet-based programming in other languages, and I

was struggling to find the usual Tamil channels they watch.[446] I stumbled across an odd channel where there was one video about *Maaveerar Naal* that was just looping again and again. Since this new satellite system connects to various channels through the internet, individuals and organizations are able to create their own unique channels to broadcast material for set periods of time, and it seemed that this anonymously-created channel was created just to play this *Maaveerar Naal* promotion on repeat.

The video opens on "November 27" written in Tamil. It fades into an animation of what looks like a bird's eye view of snow being blown away to reveal ice underneath. Underneath the ice, I can make out a single bud of Tamil Eelam's national flower, the *karthigai* flower. The flower glows as the fissures and cracks in the ice also light up. Then, this animation fades, as images and videos of city streets fill the screen. I try to identify where these city streets are located, it is not clear, but they are not streets in Sri Lanka. Instead, I realize these look like streets from cities in North America and Europe. In each photo or video, an image of a *Maaveerar* or LTTE-leader, Prabhakaran, seems to be edited in. The photo would appear as a poster on the side of bus stops, on billboards, or on electronic screens in busy intersections. After this series of city scenes, the video proceeds, leading the viewer into a live animation of what looks like a museum or art gallery featuring minimalist white walls and recessed spotlights. As the viewer is led through hallways and around corners, the only thing adorning the walls is the same style of images featuring *Maaveerars* or Prabhakaran edited into the space.

The beginning of the video seems to blend LTTE symbology with that of Canada. Ice and snow protect the frozen *karthigai* flower, sheltering it in full strength until the moment is ready for the ice to crack and thaw. The gentle glowing of the flower and the fissures gestures towards resilience and rebirth. Ice is not a common cultural symbol for a people from a tropical island, and is instead, one borne from the Canadian diaspora, which is engaged in a project of fusing the symbols of this new land into Eelam aesthetics. The image seems to communicate that, in the land of ice and snow, it is the diaspora who keeps the dream of Tamil Eelam alive, frozen underneath the protective ice of Canada, resilient and thriving. This symbolism speaks to the special power and responsibility that the diaspora feels to protect this dream of Eelam from their new home in a land of relative safety.

The next part of the video moves from this felt sense of responsibility to reveal the diaspora's deep longing for official and widespread public acknowledgment of Tamil nationhood through the respect of their fallen soldiers. *Maaveerar Naal* is an event that happens behind the closed doors of the community, and these images contrastingly show North American and European cities treating *Maaveerars* as they do their own war heroes. The strong

[446] The infrastructure of Tamil media accessed by diasporic Tamils is constantly evolving. TVI (Tamil Vision Incorporated) is a Tamil TV Cannel produced by and for Tamil Canadians and is available as an add-on to basic cable channel packages by most major providers. Tamil-Canadians often also get access to Tamil-language channel packages produced in Tamil Nadu, India. Now, there are also more programming options offered through VPN-based channels that specialize in certain types of Tamil programming and are sustained through ad buys. These internet-based, non-traditional channels, are coming out of different parts of the global Tamil community, mostly from South India or the global pockets of Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

desire burning behind these images is the right to pay respects to the dead publicly and to have the new publics these diasporas are a part of, also show respect and lend legitimacy to this fight.

In recent years, different municipalities across Ontario and other Canadian provinces have launched poster campaigns leading up to Remembrance Day (Veteran's Day in the U.S.), where posters of Canadian veterans were hung throughout different cities, on lamp posts and bus stops, paralleling the images from this video.[447] The experience of living amidst Canadian memorialization rituals seems to have inspired how the diaspora wishes to memorialize its fallen. One of the most public symbols of commemoration in Canada is the red felt poppy pin worn throughout November for Remembrance Day. Every November, these pins can be found at grocery store checkouts, and in exchange for a small donation, these felt poppies are taken to be pinned to jackets and coats to represent respect for the troops who fought in World War II. In a sea of bundled-up coats, as Fall turns to winter, little red poppies create a consistent visual among the Canadian public. The Tamil community, too, started to create similar red pins of the *karthigai* flower for Tamil people to wear in the month of November, borrowing and building off a Canadian tradition to create a Tamil-Canadian one.[448] One interviewee said, "I just wore both [poppy pin and *karthigai* pin]. It made explaining the situation in Sri Lanka easy. When someone asks what the [*karthigai*] pin is for, I can just say it's like the poppy, but it's remembering those who died in the Sri Lankan war and people… just *respect* it."[449] This interviewee is speaking to the way the respect and nostalgia for the poppy offer the power to reconstruct the LTTE as a legitimate army and not an armed group labeled by many countries, including Canada, a terrorist one. His choice to wear both pins side by side also reveals the way he is able to signal his hyphenated Tamil-Canadian identity in a way that is acceptable to other Canadians.

In the final series of scenes through the white museum, we can also glean another desire – one for permanence in the structures and rituals of memorialization. Compared to the *Maaveerar Naal* hall, which is built and rebuilt each year, the museum shown is a fully materialized structure with one purpose. It is also telling that the bright yellow and red bunting that informs the aesthetics of *Maaveerar Naal* is changed in this depiction of a museum. Instead, it seems more akin to a Western-style art gallery. The contrast of these aesthetics seems to suggest that this is not just a space just for Tamil people to commemorate, but one that follows the aesthetic standards of Western spaces of memorialization. Does this reflect the idea that the Tamil community might feel that borrowing these aesthetics lends added legitimacy and acceptance by Western societies? Or, maybe it is that these Western aesthetics have set the standard for what the diaspora believes permanence in memorialization looks like – that is,

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[447] "Canada's Veterans Honoured with Personalized Banners in Clarington, Ont. Community - Durham | Globalnews.Ca," accessed May 3, 2023, https://globalnews.ca/news/8266909/veterans-honoured-banners-clarington-ont/.

[448] The U.K. also celebrates Remembrance day and uses poppy pins and consequently the Tamil diaspora there too, uses these *karthigai* pins. The American Legion also uses poppy pins to honor the fallen, but in the U.S., "National Poppy Day" is May 26.

[449] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 12, 2022.

memorialization that no longer needs to be fought for. While *Maaveerar Naal* is engaged in the politics of the present to mobilize these deaths into political results, maybe the diaspora's imagination of what Eelam aesthetics could look like after achieving a legitimate state manifests differently.

Similar to the way the virtual *Maaveerar Naal* website creates a Tamil space within internet subspace, this 'channel' is also connected to this network of internet subspace where Tamil place-making is occurring. While the virtual website demonstrates the desire to ground memorialization spatially, even if that means using virtual space, this promo video of *Maaveerar Naal* suggests future imaginings of what memorialization could look like with the legitimization of Eelam. The diaspora's dream of achieving Eelam does not just affect the landscape of what Sri Lanka would look like, but would also change their experience of the landscape of the other western cities they now reside in as well. In fact, this suggests that the diaspora may no longer truly envision returning to Eelam as its desire for the future. Instead, it reveals that the diaspora's time in new countries and homes has shaped the landscapes of its envisioned future. In this envisioning, the idea of Eelam being achieved and being incorporated into the places they already are may represent a truer sense of their 'homeland' desires. In both these media representations of *Maaveerar Naal* on the web, we start to see diasporic interpretations and evolutions of what *Maaveerar Naal* is about for the diaspora and how these interpretations are fashioned by the unique temporal and spatial realities of the transnational Tamil diaspora.

Shifting perspectives of the second-generation

While the *Maaveerar Naal* promo video discussed above starts to reveal new interpretations of the memorial event that incorporates evolving diasporic perspectives, how the event is taken up by the second-generation helps to explore the trajectory and contestations over these new interpretations even more directly. While *Maaveerar Naal* stands as the preeminent way of remembering in the community, the event does not seem to resonate the same with the second-generation as it does with the first. The second-generation are impacted by the narratives, symbols, aesthetics, and diasporic memory the event cultivates through indirect exposure, but in many cases, they do not feel as connected to its rituals. It has grown into a first-generation place-making project that is very grounded in re-creating the land of Eelam, land which the second-generation does not have very much connection to, if at all. This section starts to explore the major debates that come up for the second-generation in thinking about *Maaveerar Naal*. In the last chapter, the discomfort some second-generation Tamils had with *Maaveerar Naal* was mentioned. I found that asking questions about the event brought out many different opinions in those that I interviewed. Here, I would like to explore the instances where I saw the second-generation reckon with the meanings of the memorial event and the internal contestations this revealed.

Most of the second-generation Tamil-Canadians I interviewed had only been to an "official" *Maaveerar Naal* once or twice (if at all), and of those, most have not been to one since 2009-2010. When I asked why, one interviewee, Vasanthan, responded:

> It felt pointless. After [2009], it felt like Maaveerar Naal was all about holding onto the idea of Eelam. It felt like out of time, just trapped in the past, you know? …They

> weren't facing what had happened. The genocide, it changed everything, and yeah, they had stuff about [May 2009] everywhere but it was just a continuation of what they had been doing for years. …That moment changed everything, it changed the conflict, it changed Sri Lanka, it changed what I felt like I could even hope for. I changed. I just felt like, guys, we need to re-evaluate…not just do the same shit.[450]

Another second-generation Tamil, Yaso, also said:

> I know it means a lot to my parents. It's like a duty they feel like they need to perform. They go there and I think it gives them relief. It makes feel connected. Maybe it helps them process some of their own trauma. But it's also just this routine they've been going to since they came to Canada and it's just another social event where they see people they know. I do think it means something to them, but it doesn't really resonate for me. I actually went to one years back at my uni[versity]. It was in the middle of everything happening in Sri Lanka [2009]. And that one, was like, really good. Their performances and the atmosphere and everything. …Maybe it's because it was all kids like me creating it. It felt close-knit. They had so much passion…there was so much pain…it didn't feel like just another Tamil event to me.[451]

Both Vasanthan and Yaso speak about the divide between the first and second generations and see *Maaveerar Naal* as a memorial created by and serving the older generation. They both mention ideas of *Maaveerar Naal* not changing or feeling "routine," which made it less resonant. Vasanthan was frustrated with the lack of change after the watershed moment of 2009, and Yaso compared the difference between the official memorial and student-run ones. The engagement and energy of the student-run event made her feel like she could connect, whereas, with the official event, she could only reflect on why and how she thought her parents connected with it. What is said between the lines of their words, however, are the power dynamics behind how *Maaveerar Naal* is run. The organization that hosts the event is connected to the WTM (World Tamil Movement), the Canadian arm of the LTTE. *Maaveerar Naal* is, at its core, an LTTE creation to memorialize LTTE soldiers, and thus this memorial event is planned and executed in a very specific way in line with the goals of legitimizing the LTTE, mobilizing support from the community, and ultimately achieving the independent state of Tamil Eelam. This is not an event that is actively trying to address the changing nature of the Tamil experience in the diaspora, and it definitely did not know how to respond to the military defeat of the LTTE. Several interviewees had never been to a *Maaveerar Naal* event, and some were unaware of what it was. These interviewees often fell into two camps, often but not always overlapping. The first camp included those with families who generally did not talk about the war or politics of Sri Lanka at home. The other camp featured those whose families were anti-LTTE and did not engage in LTTE-sponsored community events.

In this context, it seems appropriate that the second-generation, often more disconnected or unaware of the LTTE politics that backdrop the event, would more readily attempt to reshape certain parts of the memorial tradition. Kesavan, who was part of a Tamil Student's Association (TSA) back in 2010, described a debate that came up when planning their *Maaveerar Naal*:

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[450] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, February 3, 2023.

[451] Focus group with second-generation Tamil-Canadians, Toronto, December 19, 2022.

> I remember a big debate we had about the colors we would wear. We had already kind of designed what we wanted the event to look and feel like and we were using a lot of just black and white. So, we were going to have all our execs and the MCs dressed in black. But then, I think TYO [Tamil youth organization] said that we should be using red and yellow. You know, the colors of the flag. …From what I remember, I think they felt that that black seemed to just represent like death and defeat, but Maaveerar Naal was supposed to…like stir our passion and give hope and be about getting people to stand up and fight for Eelam?.... I don't know... I don't want to say it wrong…but I remember this led into a long debate.[452]

This debate about the messaging behind the colors of *Maaveerar Naal* highlights how important all the levels of Eelam aesthetics had become to the event and reveals the differing way the 1.5 and second-generation conceptualized *Maaveerar Naal's* purpose. The visual story of *Maaveerar Naal* was dependent on aesthetic choices as specific as what colors are used. Like in the video promo for *Maaveerar Naal*, explored in the last section, red and yellow symbolized the energy of "fight[ing] for Eelam," which was a present reality, while black and white was conceptualized as rendering this fight in the past (either in victory or defeat).

Prashanti, who was a member of a TSA in 2016, helps shed light on these differing conceptualizations as she describes how her team dealt with community pressures about *Maaveerar Naal:*

> I mean, it was a touchy subject. We knew what the community wanted from us, but our team felt like we had to do it consciously. You know, think critically about what we wanted to accomplish through the event as a team. Not everyone on our team was comfortable with the Tigers. And we wanted to respect that. We had all been affected by what happened in 2009 and we thought we could use Maaveerar Naal to help memorialize *all those who died*, not just the Tigers, you know? Like a real Remembrance Day. Our goal was to help everyone think about the *cost of war*, remember *all those who died and lost their homes and families*. And we wanted to have our non-Tamil friends come out to it and invite other groups on campus, but that meant we would have all of our stuff in English, not Tamil. But we wanted to make something that we believed in and that we could share.[453]

Prashanti is communicating how her team desired to expand the boundaries of what *Maaveerar Naal* could be. She and her team wanted to expand the category of *who* was remembered in the memorial from strictly LTTE soldiers to "all those who died."[454] She even seems to expand this net of people to also include those that "lost their homes and families," which means incorporating living people who experienced other kinds of loss through the war into this commemoration.[455] Instead of having the event center around the dream of Eelam, they

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[452] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 12, 2022.

[453] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 12, 2022.

[454] Ibid.

[455] Ibid.

conceptualized it as a "real" remembrance day, one directly about memorialization and the "costs of war" in contrast to the necessity of war that *Maaveerar Naal* strives to communicate. Scholar Tom O'Neil also found similar trends in second-generation debates over *Maaveerar Naal*, noting an incident where a TSA had created a poster for *Maaveerar Naal* featuring the standard LTTE soldier, but also including a Tamil mother holding an infant, implying that both were *Maaveerars*.[456] "Yet before the poster could be distributed, the TSA membership became embroiled in a dispute about what being a *Maaveerar* means, with some members arguing for the official definition and others insisting on a broader one."[457] Both this example and Prashanti's, illustrate that the broadening of this definition of who could and should be remembered became a really important sticking point for the second-generation.

However, not all those I spoke to felt the same. Thevan, a current student, said, "We try to follow [official *Maaveerar Naal* protocol] pretty closely. I mean, there are reasons behind how things are done, and we tried to learn as a team about all those meanings."[458] Another interviewee, Aruhn, who graduated a couple of years ago, described how he felt about certain TSAs changing elements of the event, saying:

> I get why they want to do that, but I think there's also some white-washing happening. Like there are reasons we do things, there's a purpose, and we should learn the purpose. I don't think we should just make things palatable for white people and like all these people who want us to not use the flag. Maaveerar Naal is about the Maaveerars, we can't act ashamed of them just because people want to call them terrorists. They fought for us.[459]

Here we see that re-interpreting the nature of *Maaveerar Naal* is not just seen as purely positive by all second-generation Tamils. Broadening a category comes with a watering down of the traditional elements and the political messages of Maaveerar Naal. Aruhn saw the desire to change what a *Maaveerar* was as a sign of shame and as part of an effort to re-narrate Sri Lankan Tamil history into something that was more easily digestible to other Canadians. By pinpointing the idea of "act[ing] ashamed," he is underlining the importance of perception involved. At some point, I realized that through my interviews, I had spoken to people who had been members of TSAs as early as 2009 to those who are currently members. During this long period of time (over 13 years), these debates and other similar ones were still being freshly deliberated. Something that both Aruhn and Thevan converge on, is how *learning* is an important part of being involved in *Maaveerar Naal,* and they both see it as part of a transmission of knowledge from the first to second generation.

Amarnath Amarasingham, who studied the social movements of the Tamil diaspora, argues that the 2009 protests were "a moment of transference," after which the diaspora took on

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[456] Tom O'Neill, "In the Path of Heroes: Second-Generation Tamil-Canadians after the LTTE," *Identities* 22, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 136.

[457] Ibid.

[458] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 31, 2023.

[459] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, March 3, 2023.

increased responsibility in guarding Tamil rights. He describes the protests as a place where many young second-generation Tamils first learned about the war, and through their experiences, became politically active Tamil diasporic subjects.[460] In my interviews, it seemed that being involved in TSAs created a similar space of "transference" for Tamil youth before and after this watershed moment. Joining and participating in a TSA was what many of them referenced as a definitive moment when they really thought about what it means to be Tamil and started learning about the history and politics of Sri Lanka. The act of 'learning' is a clear part of what creates this moment for second-generation Tamil youth, whether it is learning through the protests or learning from first-generation traditions the way Aruhn and Thevan describe it. However, Prashanti, who talked about the debate over the colors of *Maaveerar Naal*, also said something more about those debates that I believe reveals something important about this formative process of cultural learning. She said:

> It's kind of crazy looking back, how much we debated something like colors, but it all had meaning, you know? We debated a lot of things like that actually. I mean it's embarrassing, we took ourselves so seriously… But then, I like try to tell myself that it wasn't just dumb, all of that…being able to talk about stuff like that with each other helped me *learn* so much and really actually helped me feel *confident* in seeing myself as a *real* Tamil woman, you know?[461]

Prashanti emphasizes the space of debate among her peers as a place of learning about being Tamil for her. Similarly, Aruhn, in another part of his interview, talked about how even though he was raised to be proud of his Tamil heritage, his relationship with being Tamil became different when he joined a TSA:

> My parents always emphasized how important knowing and learning Tamil was. And I was always proud to be Tamil. I tried to be knowledgeable about my history and everything. But being part of TSA, it really felt like I was learning for myself, not just because the older generation is telling me it's important. And lots of other kids didn't know anything before coming in, but then we all kind of learned together and doing it for ourselves was really important.[462]

Like Prashanti, he emphasizes that there is a special phase of 'learning' that happens in community with his second-generation peers. It is clear that the learning and transmission from the first-generation is vital and important to the beginnings of Tamil identity formation. However, it was often moments like these, where the second-generation youth I talked to reflected on times of debate and peer collaboration, that seemed to be connected with strong feelings of *confidence* in this Tamil identity. *Maaveerar Naal* was one such point of tension, which revealed two prominent clashes within the community over what, how, and why the Tamil diaspora remembers: the first being a generation clash and the other being a clash

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[460] Amarnath Amarasingam, *Pain, Pride, and Politics: Social Movement Activism and the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in Canada* (University of Georgia Press, 2015).

[461] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 12, 2022.
[462] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, March 3, 2023.

between the strongest voices in the community that were often LTTE-supporting and the voices on the margin that were anti-LTTE.[463]

Remembering May 2009: A transnational virtual archive

While *Maaveerar Naal* represented the largest and most organized form of memorial among the Tamil diaspora, it was always a memorial event that centered the LTTE and the politics of Eelam in the nature of its memory-work. The genocide of May 2009 was a cultural moment of rupture for both Tamils in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora. The massive loss it represented in terms of both human lives and the dream of Eelam, became a moment in time that demanded reflection and memorialization. Since the activism of May 2009 focused upon the human rights abuses and mass killing of Tamil civilians, it brought together a wide spectrum of the Tamil community, from those who were pro-LTTE to those who were not. It offered a way to participate in the politics of Sri Lanka when this participation had historically been overpowered by those that were fighting for Tamil Eelam specifically. May 2009 memorialization, thus, offered a different space for the community to explore memory-work in new ways in the post-war era.

Many organizations and individuals created stand-alone events and exhibitions to memorialize May 2009. One that stood out was the virtual memorial project, "Remember May 2009" (remembermay2009.com), which was created by a collaboration of three organizations: The Adayaalam Center for Policy Research, The Tamil Guardian, and 47 Roots.[464] The Adayaalam Center for Policy Research is a think tank creating reports and creative projects focused on issues affecting Tamils in Sri Lanka. Their staff includes both first- and second-generation Tamils, transnationally located, with law and NGO experience. The Tamil Guardian is a news media website focused on Sri Lankan Tamil news and was often the only English source of breaking news during the height of the war. Even though it has expanded its content to world news and non-political news, the lens of its Tamil content is in line with pro-Eelam politics. Finally, 47 Roots is a digital magazine designed to provide a platform to discuss South Asian politics, culture, and social theory and seems to have a strong Tamil diaspora bent.

The website's stated aim is "to provide a resource that maps out the events that took place during the final months of the armed conflict and reflects on their impact 10 years later." The tabs that divide up its content are listed as "Reflections," "Art Gallery," "Timeline," and "Mapping Resistance." The first section, "Reflections," is divided into different stories from survivors of the final military assault in Mullivaikkal. Some are offered in Tamil, others in English, and some are translated, featuring both languages. All the stories are presented alongside images, either photos of those telling the stories, or art inspired by the stories.

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[463] To give more nuance here, support for the LTTE in the community is better understood as a spectrum, that had die-hard supporters and die-hard critics while most Tamils fell in between the two, critical of some of the actions and tactics of the LTTE, but feeling that they were the best option for Tamil people at the time.

[464] "Remember May 2009," accessed May 3, 2023, https://www.remembermay2009.com/.

The website's highly visual nature is continued through the next tab, "Art Gallery" where the page opens with the text:

> Art has always been an important tool in the Tamil struggle against oppression. We dedicate this page to the countless Tamil journalists, photographers and artists who risked their lives in Mullivaikkal, many of whom are tragically no longer with us, trying to document and raise awareness about the horrific atrocities that took place. Their work was the channel of communication to those in the Tamil polity outside Mullivaikkal and around the world about the atrocities taking place and forms the basis for much of the artwork on this page.[465]

The images below this text (also translated into Tamil) are presented in a grid style, the art taking different forms, from text to drawings and paintings to photography and multimedia projects. As you glide your cursor on top of the images, they darken and note the artist's name, the country they are from, and a link to their Instagram page. Even though the passage above can be interpreted to mean that much of the work included is from artists who were in Mullivaikkal, all of the countries attributed to the artists featured are in the diaspora: Canada, Switzerland, United States, France, Germany, United Kingdom, etc. It seems that in this context, "forms the basis for much of the artwork on this page" means that the work of artists in Mullivaikkal inspired this art. Noteworthy also, is how the website defines art in the passage above, pointing to art as an "important tool in the Tamil struggle against oppression," emphasizing the work of photographers who tried to "document and raise awareness of horrific atrocities" during Mullivaikkal.[466] Art's importance here, is framed through its role in human rights activism and its ability to document and communicate the violence of these atrocities. Its importance is also based on art's ability to be a "channel of communication," connecting those in Mullivaikkal to the diaspora.[467]

The art that is featured, however, is not photographic evidence, but visual depictions of a diaspora grappling with watching these atrocities occur. Most are either depictions of suffering and violence, or feature symbols of resilience and survival. Over half the images make reference to the land of Eelam, with many depicting the mapped shape of Eelam. In one art piece, the land of Eelam is depicted as a human face, whose bloodstained teardrops run in the shape of Eelam. Displaced people walk over the bridge of her nose; whether they walk in hope or hopelessness is unclear. This pattern of the shape of Eelam being mapped onto bodies is a common trope among the art pieces, in line with the imaginary of Eelam as the literal "motherland," being bound to the bodies of Tamil people. Blood is also a common visual, consistent with the symbolism of blood being both what has been shed in war and what binds Tamil people together. This art, labeled with the countries of the artists who created them and linked to their Instagram accounts, also creates a virtual map of the diaspora. From Switzerland to Canada, these fragments of transnational community share the space of this page and also open gateways outward to where they are located.

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[465] "Remember May 2009," accessed May 3, 2023, https://www.remembermay2009.com/.

[466] Ibid.

[467] Ibid.

The next tab, "Timeline," offers a detailed look at all of the events that happened in Sri Lanka from January 2009 to May 18, 2009. This section is also full of images, but the background image that is returned to, in-between evidentiary photographs, is a map of the North-East of Sri Lanka. The map centers on the region between Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu, where the majority of the final military onslaught took place. The areas that were under fire are highlighted in a large red swath that covers the green and brown geography of the island. The date, what happened, and a link to a source, are listed in order on the right side of the page as you scroll downwards through these months of violence. The images range from photographs giving context, to the gruesome photos of war crimes that were so heavily relied upon during the protests. Included on the timeline are statements by foreign governments and mentions of the protests of the global diaspora.

> This leads into the final section of the website, "Mapping Resistance," which states: In the face of the massacres taking place in the Tamil homeland, the diaspora proved to be a force of resistance. They resisted narratives that downplayed the scale of the atrocities. They resisted the hostility of their host countries. Amidst the grief and horror of genocide, they resisted.[468]

The page features a live map built from google maps. Small red circles seem stamped upon the map, some overlapping. Each circle represents a story or image of diaspora resistance. The viewer can zoom in on different places and click the hundreds of red circles to see dated images or descriptions of moments of protest. Zoomed out, the global reach of the Tamil diaspora is clear, with red circles stamped throughout North America, Europe, South Asia, South East Asia, South Africa, and Australia. Below the map is another tool, where you can search for events by typing in a location and seeing a list of entries for that location. Below that, is a tool where you can help build this live archive by providing a photo/video URL with some context to be included on the map.

This section of the website layers the experience of the transnational diaspora directly on top of what happened in Sri Lanka. The protests that took place are made a vital part of the story, bringing these places closer together and in one temporal/spatial zone. It speaks of the diaspora in the same terms of courage and resilience that other sections use to describe those in Sri Lanka who lived through the monstrous conditions of the war. Though they did not face the military violence of the Sri Lankan state, the passage references the diaspora's struggle with "the hostility of their host countries," speaking to the difficulties of protesting within these different diaspora cities.[469] Like the timeline, this section uses images and places to document this resistance as part of the larger story of what happened in 2009, creating a narrative that includes the way what happened in Sri Lanka rippled out and was felt multidimensionally through the different transnationally dispersed parts of what makes up the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Of course, this is also a diasporic re-telling of the event and may not reflect how those in Sri Lanka understand it.

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[468] Ibid.

[469] Ibid.

If the *Maaveerar Naal* virtual website mourned the destruction of the LTTE cemetery grounds and the *Maaveerar Naal* promotion video spoke to the diaspora's yearning for permanent spaces to memorialize within their new homelands, this virtual memorialization seems to be trying to respond to the fears that belie these losses and yearnings. At the root of these reactions to placelessness is the fear that memory cannot survive without being grounded materially. This fear evokes how Pierre Nora theorizes the tension between history and memory. He distinguishes *lieux de memoire* (sites of memory), from *milieux de memoire*, (the real environments of memory).[470] While *milieux de memoire* feature transmission of collectively remembered memories through the repetitions of rituals embedded in the every-day life of self-contained communities, *lieux de memoire* refers to the way memory can be torn from a particular historical moment precisely because of the fear of losing memory.[471] Both terms sketch out the spatial nature of how we understand memory as a site grounded in specific environments.

Even though the space that *Remember 2009* takes up is virtual, it grounds its memory in reference to physical space. It overloads the viewable space of the website with photos from Sri Lanka. The art gallery is organized through a mapping of where the artists are from. The timeline is built on top of a detailed map of where atrocities took place. And the final section, again, maps out the worldwide protests that brought together the diaspora. The entire virtual experience of the site is one that relies upon mapping one's place in the world, and it is only after rooting these memories in particular places that they are then tied together in a larger mapping of interconnection. The fear of losing memory that is not materially grounded is also answered by the form of permanence that the internet comes to represent through the mass accumulation of media. Even though the internet is ephemeral in the sense that things can be removed and become inaccessible, the technology soothes the fear of loss through mass accumulation and the re-producibility it offers. This website is a detailed documentation of the end of the war and compiles evidence and a visual narrative to embed this story into an internet space. As a live archive, its existence is already projected into the future, with memory being continually produced and reproduced through every moment added.

Andreas Huyssen speaks to the way media technologies in a post-modern era create amnesia, even as we demonstrate a "veritable obsession with the past."[472] He argues that the speed of media images and information "destroys space and erases temporal distance" by creating a "simultaneity of all times and spaces readily accessible in the present."[473] Leaving aside the crisis of amnesia that both he and Nora hint towards, this destruction of temporal distance and space might be exactly what the diaspora is striving towards. Their memory project is not one that cares about the protection of memory for memory's sake, but cares about

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[470] Nora Pierre, "Memory and History," *Representations*, Les Lieux de Memoire, 26 (1989).

[471] Ibid.

[472] Huyssen, Andreas, "Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 6, no. 2 (1993). 254.

[473] Ibid., 253.

memory in terms of (1) writing their version of the history of what happened to Tamil people and (2) using memory as a tool of connection between an internationally dispersed community. This memory work aims to collapse the temporal and spatial distance that separates this diaspora from other pockets of diaspora, from the land of Eelam, and from those still there.

In my individual interviews, I asked interviewees if they knew about this virtual memorial and had some of them scroll through and tell me things they thought as they did. Everyone I talked to, regardless of political leaning, expressed being impressed with the virtual memorial and the way it presented information. Padmani let out a heavy sigh as she scrolled through the stories in the first section. I asked her what she was thinking, and she paused a moment and said:

> No, I think it's really good. It's really necessary to have these individual stories. They are what gets lost in everything. Even during the protests, I felt like the moments that changed me were when a stranger would talk about their experiences in Sri Lanka, or about the loved one they didn't know was safe. It's these personal stories that make you feel connected. It hurts to read, it's so heavy, but yeah, we all know the mass extent of everything that happened, but then you read one story and it like hits you all over again.[474]

She and others spoke about how the timeline of events was complimented by these other sections that built out the personal dimensions of this experience, which made it feel different from other information-based sources. In a different interview, Kavitha said of the section "Reflections," "That's what people are looking for: to hear directly from the people who experienced it, not just us [the second-generation]."[475] Kavitha agrees with Padmani about the necessity of hearing "directly from the people who experienced it", and underlines that this is different from most of the information out there (which he feels comes from the second-generation). Padmani's quote also highlights how using individual stories made this virtual memorial suddenly feel like an intimate space, even when it connects so many. She relates it to her own personal experiences of connection at the protests and compares it to the kind of community and identity building that can happen in real-time and in physically shared spaces.

> Thevan, was particularly excited about the visual elements of the website. He said:
> I really like all the images. Like the maps really help give context to where this was happening and how big the impact [was]. And the art gallery. I think there's been a lot of interest in the art space. Showcasing war and genocide through artwork…is something that I think a lot of people [in the Tamil community] are interested in. Even for our own [TSA] events, we wanted a lot of artwork, but it was hard to find. I mean easier to find online, but….[476]

I asked why they valued having art at their events, and he replied:

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[474] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 10, 2022.

[475] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, March 14, 2023.

[476] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 31, 2023.

> I feel like it can really have a bigger impact on a person when they are viewing artwork. Especially someone who doesn't understand the importance of the issue, artwork can help them be more emotional or feel more connected to everything.[477]

His comments focus on how artwork can be used as a tool of mobilization for human rights issues and the special resonance of the visual to cut through to someone's emotions to both make them *feel for* those in Sri Lanka and *feel connected to* the larger Tamil community.

Another interviewee, Janani, who never actively participated in Tamil community events, spoke slightly differently about the website:

> I love seeing things like this. The individual stories with photographs of the actual people telling them and just the art…Tamil community events kind of overwhelm me. I don't know if it's just in my head, but there's a lot of pressure to be like a certain kind of Tamil person and I just avoid it all. But I do care. I want to know…and things like this help me.[478]

I asked her why it feels different from community events, and she replied:

> Oh, I mean… I feel like I can connect in my own way. I have like space to read these stories and not be told a bunch of facts. And the art… I mean, looking at art, everyone feels something different, sees something different, and it tells so much more to the story.[479]

To Janani, the virtual space of the memorial created a safer space for her to explore her Tamil identity. She felt un-restrained by the pressures of the Tamil community to conform to perform as a "certain kind of Tamil person."[480] In this virtual space, she could cultivate her own relationship with Tamil memory about what happened. This is because the material given – stories and artwork – had layers of nuance and were open to interpretation in a way that facilitated this. What she describes is the *space* to have *an individual relationship* with the memory material of the diaspora within the collective experience.

In comparison with *Maaveerar Naal*, this virtual memorial lacks the embodied and ritualized elements that made *Maaveerar Naal* a form of memorial that did not just commemorate collective memory, but actively created it each year. With each live interaction with the space and symbols of *Maaveerar Naal*, new memories were created, deepening the collective memories and the narratives the event espouses. While the virtual *Remember May 2009* memorial incorporated some interactive elements, it does not engage the body in community in the same way. Moreover, as a website and not a live event, this memorial is not marketed out to the community, compelling the community's participation and this results in a much smaller proportion of the community even coming across the memorial. Still, as Janani explained, the virtual space also allows for elements that a live community event like *Maaveerar Naal* does not enable: namely, the space for individual relationships to the collective

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[477] Ibid.

[478] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, February 16 2023.

[479] Ibid

[480] Ibid.

memory presented. This suggests that while virtual memorials like *Remember May 2009* might not have as large an impact on the diasporic collective memory as *Maaveerar Naal* has had, it might be symbolic of the opening up of discourse and multiplicity within the diasporic consciousness.

When Rohini clicked on the section "Mapping Resistance," she paused in surprise and said, "Oh, wow. They have all of this..."[481] Her eyes narrowed, and she leaned toward the screen, clicking through the red circles to see what they would include. I asked her why she seemed surprised, and she replied:

> I don't know, I mean I guess it's not surprising…but it feels good to see all of this about the protests. I don't know why… I guess it just reminded me of what it felt like …you know, seeing the photos from the war and then seeing photos of like us… I don't think I'm saying it properly.[482]

She paused again to try to collect her thoughts. "It's just, that's what it felt like, we were all experiencing it together, seeing it really just took me back… and seeing it like this makes it feel like it wasn't nothing, you know. All those people still died, but still…we tried."[483]

Rohini had a very emotional reaction to seeing the section "Mapping Resistance" as part of the larger story of what happened in 2009. I could see her internal struggle as she tried to process her emotions. Like many of those I interviewed who had been part of the 2009 protests, she seemed to struggle with feeling that the protests amounted to nothing because they were not effective in their aims. It seemed that seeing it as part of the story helped her see that it was part of a larger struggle and that the story of the protests had value. The diaspora seems to always be doing a push and pull over how to center themselves in their own story, at times, centering their own views as the views of those in Sri Lanka, and at other times negating their own experiences and struggles since they are the "lucky ones," and have not comparatively struggled. When Rohini faced this depiction of the protests, she was taken back to her own lived experiences of the emotions she felt during the protests: the grief, horror, anger, and helplessness. And she saw these experiences on a continuum connected to those who experienced the violence of 2009 in Sri Lanka. She suddenly saw her experience not as simply second-hand trauma, but a different form of trauma that existed *alongside* a multitude of different manifestations of trauma connected by this moment in history. It seems as though many of those in the diaspora have not made space for their own experiences and the emotional toll that time took on them, since it will always feel incomparable to what those in Sri Lanka experienced.

Susan Sontag writes, "The memory of war, however, like all memory is mostly local," and in this context, Meera's quote highlights the way that for the diaspora, the localized, lived memories of the protests and the personal connections to people and material from that time are

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[481] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, January 12, 2023.

[482] Ibid.

[483] Ibid.

the basis of their memory of 2009.[484] This, at times, clashes with their moral belief of the primacy and importance of the memories of direct violence that Tamils in Sri Lanka contribute to the collective consciousness and produces a push and pull of the memories that are shared and given importance in the larger community's memory-work. With both Janani and Rohini, we see glimpses of the importance of building personal, individual relationships with memory about this time, which create nuance and different versions of memory that can still exist in the larger collective consciousness.

M.I.A's music videos as an alternative visual landscape of Tamil identity

On November 27, 2015, while *Maaveerar Naal* was being observed by the global Tamil diaspora, M.I.A., a London-raised Tamil recording artist, released a music video for her song *Borders*.[485] The video immediately became controversial for its visual engagement with the Syrian 'refugee crisis' that was a hot-button issue of the time. However, by featuring a constant flow of young racialized males, who do not seem to represent just one race or ethnicity – instead blurring together, undifferentiated into a mass of brown bodies – the video seems to not only take up the Syrian situation but also engages overlapping issues of refugee-ness, global violence and M.I.A's own positionality and experience as a Sri Lankan Tamil.[486] Released on *Maaveerar Naal*, the music video lends itself to be explored as an alternate expression of diaspora memory-work that attempts to broaden the purposes and meanings behind the memorial event. Even though M.I.A is a member of the British Tamil diaspora instead of being Canada-based, my interviews with second-generation Tamil-Canadians about her and the video, reveal how second-generation perspectives of Tamil diasporic identity are shared and co-created across transnational lines.

M.I.A's music video, *Borders* engages with the way that the Tamil diaspora is marked by its experience of a multileveled sense of "placelessness," created by war, land dispossession, and forced migration. In the face of this placelessness, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has understandingly become highly invested in the place-making project of Tamil Eelam. *Maaveerar Naal* traditionally offers a ritualized opportunity for the diaspora to spatially interact with the imagined homeland through a multilayered reconstruction of the land and bodies of Eelam. In *Borders,* however, M.I.A reacts to her own placelessness as a part of this refugee diaspora, not through a placemaking project, but through a return to the very heart of placelessness itself. She dwells on and interrogates displacement by centering the figure of the refugee, the penultimate symbol of placelessness. And through this figure, she engages the contested and unclaimed space where the refugee actually exists: in-between space.

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[484] Sontag, Susan, "Looking at War," *The New Yorker*, 2002, 9 edition. 82.

[485] M.I.A. *Borders.* Directed by M.I.A, Sugu Arulpragasam and Tom Manaton. (November 27, 2015), Music video.

[486] Though she did not refer to *Maaveerar Naal* in this release, she dedicated the video to her uncle who migrated to the UK in the 60s and helped save her family by getting them to the UK, highlighting her personal investment in the video's message and its ties to the Tamil experience.

The key landscapes of the video, the large metal fence, arid empty land, and the sea, are all spaces of in-betweenness, places to travel through and not to belong to. In scenes featuring the fence, the young men are climbing it; in scenes amidst empty land, they are jogging through it; and in scenes of the sea, their boats are rocking along, presumably towards a shore that represents a destination of possible protection. The constant movement of their bodies is symbolic of the in-between space of refugees, who are in a perpetual state of displacement and movement. The sea and the fence also particularly demonstrate that these in-between places are spaces of danger and insecurity. Within a framework of biopower, they are the places where bodies are no longer under the auspices of "making live," instead inhabiting the space of "letting die." In this way, the in-between space that M.I.A visually engages, sheds light on the racialized terrain of the border and the ambiguous status of the nationless refugee. Instead of focusing on the state-sponsored violence that creates refugees, she points to the entire world structure that depends on these national boundaries as the ultimate source of violence.

Moreover, by centering in-between space – where there is constant movement and struggle – she can also be seen to be marking the way wars are not spatially and temporally contained. They expand outward and inward simultaneously, creating tensions and anxieties that co-mingle with histories of colonialism and geopolitical power. For instance, the wars of Sri Lanka and Syria have both been shaped by histories of imperial and colonial involvement, which expanded inward to create distinct processes of racialization, othering, and political violence and are now also expanding outward through the bodies of the refugees that flee that violence.

Borders takes up intertwined concepts of freedom and racialized violence through the figure of the refugee and the symbol of the border. The song begins with a questioning of how we conceptualize freedom. Her first stanza proceeds, "Freedom/I'dom/Me'dom/Where's the we'dom."[487] Here, playing off the word freedom, she changes the pre-fix 'free' to I and Me in the second and third line, to critique the way Individualism is at the center of liberal notions of freedom. She instead asks for a "re'dom" based on "we'dom," that is, a re-working of our conceptualization of freedom that is based on a collective liberation from the borders we erect to divide 'us' from 'them.'[488] Therefore, the border that she critiques is not just the political borders of the nation-state but the abstracted notion of the border as racialized divisions between human and non-human, free and unfree that the neoliberal world order is based upon.

To further illustrate the way the border becomes a symbol of racialized divisions, protecting 'us' from 'them' and those with rights from those rendered right-less, we can take a closer look at the large metal fence topped with barbed wire that represents the border in the video. In one scene, those representing the refugees climb upon the fence and upon each other to spell out the word 'life,' with their bodies directly heralding the functioning of biopolitics. Interestingly, the bodies are facing away from us, looking out past the fence. The camera and thus the viewer, are behind them as they spell out "life." If someone were facing them from the other side of the border, they would not see the word life spelled out because of the reverse

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[487] M.I.A. *Borders*. Directed by M.I.A, Sugu Arulpragasam and Tom Manaton. (November 27, 2015), Music video.

[488] Ibid.

image created. Instead, the word is only legible to those behind them, on their side of the border, powerfully demonstrating the way that the perception of humanity is only extended to 'us' by 'us,' and not from 'us' to 'them.'

Through exploring M.I.A's positionality and personal history in relation to being a Tamil refugee from Sri Lanka growing up in the UK, placelessness emerges as a central element of refugee-ness. Placelessness is one of the vehicles through which refugees are constituted; as they occupy spaces of non-being, they are accordingly rendered non-beings themselves. However, her song also introduces another form of space – virtual space – a space that may be able to offer the opportunity to reclaim in-between space as a space of generative possibility. In her second verse, she references popular hashtags of 2015, such as "queen," "slaying it," "goals," "making money," "breaking the internet," and "being real."[489] After each hashtag, she asks, "What's up with that?"[490] The reoccurring question posed in the song attempts to instigate a questioning of the ideas and norms we accept in our day to day.

By contrasting the violence of the border with the hashtags that flood the mainstream social media interaction of young people, M.I.A seems to be critiquing the lost potential of social media and virtual space as an in-between space for cross-racial coalition building and political engagement. For example, she continues in another verse to say, "We representing peeps, they don't play us on the FM/We talking in our sleep, they still listen on a system/We sitting on a stoop/Where we get a scoop/This is how we keep it cool/this is how we do."[491] These lines communicate how people from around the world can stay engaged in current events through new media, implying that messages that are not mainstream ("they don't play us on the FM") can still be shared and spread. Although her line "we representing peeps" in some ways maintains the divide between the refugee and the non-refugee by separating the first group as voiceless "peeps" and the second group as those with the voices and the agency to represent the voiceless, the song as a whole seems to be trying to reclaim a space of interaction and mutual empowerment.

When talking to second-generation Tamil-Canadians, I asked them about M.I.A and her work to get a sense of how they see it. The overwhelming response was positive. In a focus group, Nirmala said, "It's amazing to see a Tamil person making content on that level. I mean, I feel like she did more for awareness of what was happening in Sri Lanka than anyone."[492] Her friend Yaso also weighed in:

> Yeah, I mean, I don't stand by everything she's said or done, but… the Tamil community is like always going to support her. Just, someone who is at her level, and

[489] Ibid.

[490] Ibid.

[491] Ibid.

[492] Focus group with second-generation Tamil-Canadians, Toronto, December 19, 2022.

> willing to speak about everything, that's rare, and honestly inspiring. She's like…ours.[493]

Both Nirmala and Yaso speak directly to M.I.A's ability to break into the mainstream pop scene and feel a sense of pride and ownership over her as an artist from their community. Even though she is from the U.K., not Canada, being perceived as part of the same generation of Tamil diaspora seemed to be a more important factor of connection. Yaso refers to some of M.I.A's statements and stances that are controversial, but then flips it back by saying that those negatives cannot outweigh the value she has to the community. It is important to note that she expresses that this value is grounded in her ability to speak to the human rights issues affecting Tamil people on a world stage.

When I asked about the music video *Borders*, many were surprised to find out that it was released on *Maaveerar Naal*. I asked what they thought of it as an alternative form of memorial. And most respondents were generally in support of it, even those that voiced hesitations about second-generation changes to the traditions of *Maaveerar Naal*. Aruhn, who was critical of the "white-washing" of *Maaveerar Naal*, said:

> No , like I see it, it takes up different issues, that are completely relevant and important. Yeah, it's not about the Maaveerars, but I mean its saying something important and in a creative way…Also, I think of her other video, you know, the one in a tiger camp?

I asked him if he meant *Sunshowers*.[494] He responded, "Yeah, that one I think, she's just chilling in the trees with mangos and tiger girls. She's not embarrassed about her roots. She doesn't care how people are going to perceive her; she just explores things her own way." This harkens back to the ongoing debates in second-generation memory-work over how to value or challenge tradition. What Aruhn said touches on an essential touchpoint in this debate: those that want to continue traditions wish to show respect for it and demonstrate pride in the roots of these traditions and history, but might not opposed to new traditions and perspectives as long as this history is valued. Aruhn sees M.I.A as someone unashamed of the elements of Tamil history and culture that are perceived negatively by Western nations. Seeing her pride and her refusal to conform to Western pressures, he respects her unique interpretations and perspectives even as they challenge traditional narratives of Eelam identity.

Another interviewee, Swathi, who was critical of the Tamil Diaspora's "obsession with Eelam," said, "I really appreciate the [*Borders*] music video. She brings the attention to refugee issues. And not just about our community."[495] As we talked more, she continued, "Yeah, Eelam nationalism is still just nationalism. It's still exclusionary, the Tigers wouldn't have run this progressive utopia …The world has all of these real problems and we as Tamil people have

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[493] Ibid.

[494] *Sunshowers* refers to a song and music video M.I.A released as part of her first album. The music video was controversial for its depiction of a Tamil tiger camp. See: M.I.A. *Sunshowers.* Directed by Rajesh Touchriver. (June 2004), Music video.

[495] Interview with a second-generation Tamil-Canadian, Toronto, December 12, 2022.

to pay attention to them."[496] Swathi appreciates the way M.I.A calls out the violence of the nation-state system. She interprets it as almost a critique of Eelam nationalism, pointing out the ways in which the Tigers have engaged in exclusionary politics even as they stand in resistance to the Sri Lanka state doing so. Swathi feels in line with the way M.I.A connects issues that affect the Tamil community to issues affecting other communities around the world and passionately supports this idea of solidarity building. What she speaks to, is the struggle of the Tamil community to center its own experience while not creating boundaries between 'us' and 'them,' instead creating "we-dom" as M.I.A describes.

Swathi and M.I.A are come together in relation to the common themes that came out of Chapter 3 when exploring how the second-generation approaches Tamil-ness differently than their parents. Among the second-generation, there seems to be a growing pattern towards embracing refugee-ness as part of the Tamil diasporic identity as well as finding solidarities with other minority groups. Living in new multicultural sites that put Tamil experiences in context with those around them, the second-generation's unique political subjectivity is shaped by: (1) what they witness their parents going through, (2) their interactions with the new nation-states they call home, (3) the transnational Tamil diaspora, and (4) the other minority communities they live amongst. These newly embodied subjectivities represent some of the new perspectives that are being introduced into the collective memory of the Sri Lankan diaspora by the second-generation.

A new visual landscape?

The visual landscape of Sri Lankan Tamil identity and its expression has been molded by the decades of war and violence that still reverberate through our community. The images of horrific atrocities committed against Tamil people, along with the symbols of Eelam, came to form a strong foundation of what the visual landscape of Tamil identity looked like. With the growing dependence of the diaspora on new media technologies in order to engage with and communicate with its disparate parts, virtual spaces and new iterations of traditional spaces have started to enter in and change the nature of this visual landscape. In a context where the Tamil diaspora no longer shares a common place of being, instead interacting through international movement and communication technologies, the visual landscape of Sri Lankan Tamil identity is being constantly created and recreated through the images, sounds, and words it produces and shares.

Maaveerar Naal, the original and most substantial form of memorialization in the diaspora, has been slowly re-produced and re-shaped through its digital interpretations and through the second-generations' challenging of the definitions and understandings that ground it. The virtual *Maaveerar Naal* created by the same organizers of the official event, doubled down on its commitment to the *Maaveerars* and the land of Eelam, just through the new space offered by new media technologies. However, the video promotion of *Maaveerar Naal*, while still in line with the same political perspective, reveals new symbology from its diasporic contexts alongside traditional Eelam aesthetics.

[496] Ibid.

Looking towards the second-generation, it is notable that they are not just debating with the older generation, but amongst themselves about the intended meanings and value of memorialization. It is in this process that they are also creating new types of shared space for second-generation community building based on 'learning' and peer collaboration. Memorializing the watershed moment of 2009 also marks a point of departure, and websites like *Remember 2009* and the way the second-generation engages it, illustrate the role of new media spaces in creating new forms of connecting with the collective consciousness of being 'Tamil.'

Alternatively, M.I.A's work represents an example of visual story-telling by a Sri Lankan Tamil that has reached the mainstream and centers the refugee experience instead of the land of Eelam. Yet, for the Tamil community, her work exists among a layered landscape of many other creative works produced by the second-generation. M.I.A, like the second-generation Tamil-Canadians I interviewed in Chapter 2, approaches Tamil identity through new lenses, including the lens of refugee-ness and the lens of solidarity-building with other minority groups. These new expressions of the Sri Lankan Tamil experience from the second-generation will come to inform new ways of feeling 'Tamil' and connecting to the community that may transcend the constraints of war and Eelam that have so pointedly shaped the visual narrative of this community until now.

Conclusion: frameworks for an ever-changing landscape

In my undergraduate degree, I double majored in South Asian Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies, both interdisciplinary fields that I used to explore aspects of the Sri Lankan Tamil experience. Continuing this academic journey to Berkeley's Ethnic Studies department, yet another interdisciplinary field that instead centers communities of color in the United States, I found another lens through which to examine my research questions. It was in trying to reconcile all of the gaps between these already interdisciplinary fields that *refugee diaspora* emerged as a valuable framework for understanding the Tamil-Canadian diaspora. Investigating the Tamil-Canadian diaspora as a *refugee diaspora* highlights what makes this community unique while still enabling us to gain profound insights that apply outside of the community.

As I dove into this project, it became clear that in order to trace the evolutions and future trajectories of a diasporic community, it is crucial to investigate the way younger generations navigate, engage with, and re-interpret narratives within their diasporic consciousness. This realization led me to my focus on the Canadian-born, second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora. During my research with this community, it also became glaringly evident that media landscapes and new technologies were playing a major role in the creation and maintenance of collective memory and a diasporic consciousness for this community. Accordingly, one way I determined the sites, themes, and objects of analysis that ground this dissertation was by asking what the *visual landscape* of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic identity was made up of. Approaches from visual and digital ethnography thus came to inform my approach as I built an interdisciplinary methodology that could attend to the different questions and interstices between the fields I was working with. This aspect of my methodology ultimately helped me to discover how a diasporic community's collective memory and consciousness are compellingly tied to the way it engages with media objects, technologies, and visual politics. Collective memory, place-making projects, and political subjectivities become intertwined in how a diasporic consciousness manifests and shifts within communities; and the many forces that mediate these dimensions are critical to consider.

Below, I try to summarize these major themes that together, reflect the major takeaways of this dissertation. As I explore my intended contributions, I also identify the areas that are rich for future exploration.

New perspectives of the second-generation

My research reveals that the new generations of a diaspora community navigate a complex host of influences, forces, and their own experiences in their bid to contribute to and engage with the prevailing structures and assumptions of their community's diasporic consciousness. Contextualizing the Tamil-Canadian diaspora through exploring the historical context of the Sri Lankan war, refugee migration, and community organizations, helps elucidate the major structures and assumptions at the heart of this community's diasporic consciousness. While this history certainly influences the second-generation of this community, it was not until 2009 that we see this younger generation contributing to and critically engaging with this collective memory on a mass scale. 2009 was a major moment of rupture that, for many of the second-generation, created a set of vivid lived experiences that brought them into the collective

memory in an active and engaged way since they suddenly had their own memories of interacting with the war in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, protest spaces appeared to be able to bridge the miles not only between Canada and Sri Lanka but also between the first and second generations by creating a space for personal grief and a sharing of experience and memory that was a profound interruption of community practices thus far. However, the Canadian reception to the protests also had an impact on the second-generation, and I investigated this within the larger context of how the Canadian media and their stereotypes of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora created various interrelated narratives of threat and criminality over the decades of this diaspora's presence in Canada. Interestingly, watching their parents internalize many of these messages actually made the second-generation more likely to actively resist these narratives, and their political subjectivity became informed by these counter-narratives.

Maaveerar Naal represents a powerful force in the creation and regulation of the Tamil-Canadian diasporic consciousness through the way it politicizes commemoration and creates symbols and syncretic rituals of memory and home that engage the body through community. However, most of the second-generation participants I interviewed were less likely to engage in these types of heavily politicized commemoration events. The post-war era also impacts the effectiveness of the narratives and symbols of *Maaveerar Naal* in engaging future imaginings of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Thus, together, the post-war era and the second-generation that is coming of age within it, are starting to subtly re-interpret this memory-work in new ways that reveal their alternative perspectives while still respecting and working with the memory-work of the generation before them.

Some of the themes that arise in the ways the second-generation are approaching Tamil-ness differently are: (1) the way they embrace refugee-ness; (2) their motivation to create solidarities with other communities with shared experiences; and (3) their desire to create inclusion both within the community and through solidarity building. The political subjectivity of the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic consciousness has been dominated by a response to the Sri Lankan state's oppression and violence. However, the second-generation, while influenced by this inheritance, also develops its political subjectivity from the experiences of refugee-ness they witnessed their community go through and the shared experiences of oppression they witnessed other communities go through in their multicultural upbringing. They are also shaped by their engagement with other social movements like Me Too, LGBTIQA+ rights, and mental health awareness, just to name a few that came up repeatedly in my interviews. This dissertation did not have the space to explore all these issues and how the second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora engages them through their own unique lens, but these and many other issues deserve further exploration in future research. What this shows us, however, is that the second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian community is highly politically engaged, probably due to its inherited history of the Tamil community's political engagement. Yet, while the second-generation is shaped by this inheritance, it is not limited to the specific issues of the Tamil experience in Sri Lanka and consequently expands its articulation of political subjectivity.

There are three elements of the second-generation's political subjectivity that this dissertation emphasizes. First, they see refugee-ness differently than their parents' generation, embracing it and reclaiming it from the negative stereotypes that have been attached to the status. Second, they tend to identify with other communities that have shared experiences, leading to solidarity building. The inherited traumas of their community shape the way they see

themselves as part of larger groups, whether it be as people of color more generally or as Canadian minorities, South Asian Canadians, Refugee Canadians, etc. Third, as a generation that felt like Tamil-ness was not something that they could take for granted and instead needed to *actively choose* to pursue through a duty to the community and the generations before them, they have, in general, struggled to fully feel they are performing Tamil-ness 'correctly.' As they come to terms with their Tamil identity, they are therefore, more likely to be proponents of making the community more inclusive to difference, believing that there are many different ways to be "Tamil.' This shift in the second-generation coincides with the post-war shift, where the end of the war and the end of the LTTE changed the landscape of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic consciousness. In the questions it posed as to how the future could now be re-imagined by the Tamil diaspora, the postwar period and the growth of the second -generation allowed for existing voices from the margins, as well as new voices, to find their place in this evolving diasporic consciousness.

As I mentioned earlier, there were new trends and perspectives that started to reveal themselves in my research that this dissertation did not have the space or scope to explore further. As diasporic consciousness is an evolving, living thing, there is much more to learn and discover about the way the new generations are growing, changing, and reinterpreting the narratives in the Tamil diasporic consciousness. The transnational element of this diaspora is one prominent factor that contributes to the nuances of difference and heterogeneity that are burgeoning in this community, and further research is required to understand it. As a transnational diaspora navigating so many different forces of influence, a changing relationship to the homeland, and an ever-expanding set of localized and transnational experiences, the community still has a lot to teach us about the experience of transnational diasporic communities and how they interact with a changing world.

What it means to study a *refugee diaspora*

One of the leading assertions of this dissertation is that it is useful to use the framework of what it means to study a *refugee diaspora* in studying a community like the Tamil diaspora. By using this framework, I argue that there is value in looking at the term *refugee* as a subjectivity and continued social condition instead of limiting it to a legal term that retires when citizenship is gained. The second-generation is shaped by experiences of refugee-ness, and even the parts of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora that did not immigrate through refugee status are affected by the communal social condition of refugee-ness that the community shares. Refugee subjectivity encapsulates the collective memory of different types of trauma and rupture. Using *refugee diaspora* as a lens helps to contextualize the histories and intergenerational inheritances that future generations of a *refugee diaspora* are tied to and shaped by.

This framework allowed an approach that did not divorce the second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora from its historical, present, or specific context. By understanding that this community's diasporic consciousness is informed by (1) the violence of its dispersal, (2) its distinctive relationship with the homeland, (3) its experience of the refugee process and statelessness, (4) its uniquely developed relationship with the host nation, and (5) a collective memory shaped by specific traumas and ruptures, I was able to weave together how these

elements layer upon each other to produce nuanced experiences that while specific, might also have shared commonalities with other refugee diasporas.

This approach is also one that centers individuals and communities and lets their lived realities inform the methods and approaches used to study them. Accepting that many different forces shape a refugee diaspora calls for intersectional and critical methodologies that are capable of considering all the complexities, structures of power, and (counter)narratives involved. This framework also forces an interdisciplinary approach that works in the interstices between fields like South Asian studies, Asian American studies, Canadian studies, and Refugee studies. By engaging these different disciplines, studying a refugee diaspora can contribute something to each of these disciplines and help these fields speak to one another in productive ways.

The evolutions of collective memory

This case-study of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora demonstrates how regulated and politicized forms of collective memory can live among more amorphous forms of family and community memory. The Tamil-Canadian diaspora's particular history and political subjectification created highly political narratives of identity, history, and collective memory that were effectively embodied and ritualized within the community, producing a highly regulated sphere of community formation. Even though these narratives about Tamil identity are at the foundation of the diasporic consciousness that the second-generation interacts with, these narratives are still mediated by the second-generation's own experiences and evolving (re)interpretations. From the protests of 2009 that created live, embodied memories for the second-generation, to navigating their parents' trauma, and relating their community's experiences to the experiences of other communities around them, the second-generation's changing context impacts the themes and stories that resonate for them. Moreover, the role of new media technologies in their *visual landscape* of home and community further mediates the types of spaces they traverse in their place-making projects, the way they articulate identity, and ultimately how they find belonging. Thus, collective memory is a living entity that engages the body, mind, and heart through navigating and occupying different types of space, from imagined homelands to current localities to virtual worlds.

Aside from clear and articulated forms of collective memory, the amorphous memories that travel through generations as *postmemories,* even through silence, are crucial to attend to. Even though these types of memories are often uncontextualized or un-verbalized, they still manage to have an effect on future generations. The second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora was shaped by their glimpses into the first-generation's trauma, both from the war and from their struggle to see themselves as worthy within Canadian narratives about Tamil Canadians. The second-generation's political subjectivity is shaped by what they witnessed in this community, and this impacts how they proceed to re-interpret narratives within the diasporic consciousness and blend their own memories and perspectives into the collective memory. Therefore, as trauma flows through generations, it is not carried intact but is also mediated, changed, and re-experienced in new ways.

Through examining how the Tami-Canadian diaspora navigates these forms of collective memory (regulated and amorphous), there is much we can learn about the complexities of how

all refugee diasporas navigate collective memory in the shadows of war, violence, migration, and generational trauma. Even though not all refugee diasporas are politicized the same way, they are all subject to different forces of narrativization of their experience, whether by the strongest voices from their own communities, the nation they fled, or the nation they settled in. They all also live among the amorphous ghosts of memories and traumas that, while difficult to reconcile and process, are also changing as the community continues to re-experience them through new lenses. It is in navigating these different forces and an ever-changing landscape of collective memory that refugee diasporas piece together their evolving sense of identity, community, and political subjectivity.

Exploring the *visual landscape* of diasporic identity

Throughout this dissertation, I have been endeavoring to understand what makes up the *visual landscape* of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and how this impacts its collective memory and community identity. This question led me to lean on approaches from visual and digital ethnography when developing my interdisciplinary methodology. In line with these approaches, I think of the visual as embedded in everyday practices and embodied experiences of identity and community. I also think of virtual and media worlds as spaces that are experienced in ways that entangle them with physical and local spaces and that there is value in studying how communities traverse and overflow between these two types of spaces. Memory and identity formation are highly sensory experiences, and the Tamil diaspora's use of media objects and technologies made me curious about how regularly incorporating visual objects and technologies in their day-to-day experience of Tamil-ness would impact and shape their diasporic consciousness.

'Home' is informed by many factors, but one factor is the landscapes that we see on a daily basis: where we 'envision' ourselves and our communities to be. I believe that the 'home' and community for the Tamil-Canadian diaspora is made up of (1) memories of a 'home' in Sri Lanka that they are temporally and spatially ruptured from, (2) new landscapes of their Canadian localities, (3) the aesthetics of the imagined homeland, Eelam, (3) images of suffering that overwhelm the community's activism and commemoration, and (4) all the other types of media that are shared between the transnational pockets of Tamil diaspora globally. These different visual dimensions demonstrate the way modern diasporas live in and interact with a new type of landscape that blends together different forms of spaces and sensory experiences. Engaging with this visual landscape more concretely, ties the diaspora together by blurring the line between one's own memory and the experience of the diaspora as a whole, strengthening community bonds rooted in a shared experience.

The value of considering the *visual landscape of a diaspora* is that it acknowledges a diaspora's transnational experience as one ruptured from time and place, as well as one that is layered and shifting. It also acknowledges the way media objects and technologies mediate diasporic interactions with memory, identity, and community. In the introduction, I explored the Tamil concept of *viidu-vassal (entryway to a home)* to emphasize that part of what creates 'home' is the entryway or the "way in." What is the "way in" to 'home' for a transnationally dispersed diaspora? It is in trying to answer this that I saw the rising importance of the diaspora's visual landscape: what it sees, how it communicates, how it stores memories and

engages with these memories communally. Diasporic space is in-between space, and the visual landscape of the diaspora is part of this in-between space and part of its "way in."

Exploring the visual landscape of this diaspora prompted me to focus on media objects and the diaspora's engagement with them as a key thread that knitted together my chapters. This dissertation, in line with other media theorists, argues against thinking of media objects and technologies as passive. Media objects and their intimate relationship to memory and affective power, act upon those that interact with them, creating new memories and resonance through each interaction. This is illustrated most directly through the "images of suffering" used in the 2009 protests, which deeply and painfully affected the protestors that wielded them, leading to a communal sharing of trauma and grief between the generations.

The lens of visual culture also helped interrogate how the Tamil-Canadians navigate the politics of visibility in their self-representation by struggling to be rendered legible to the state or other structures of power. The acts of "seeing" and "being seen" also emerged as deeply embedded in many layers of community dynamics. For example, "seeing" and "being seen" were important dimensions for both memory and community formation during rituals of commemoration like *Maaveerar Naal*. In the context of activism as well, "seeing" had the power to induct members of the diaspora as secondary witnesses as they protested alongside images of suffering, while *not* "being seen" impacted their feelings of disillusionment post-activism. These insights reveal how refugee diasporas are particularly shaped by the politics of representation and engage in a collective consciousness that is heavily mediated by the use of media objects and technologies. Therefore, while visual politics is just one lens into the complicated way minority communities are positioned by structural forces of power, it emerges as one that is highly useful and productive in studying such dynamics.

My focus on understanding a visual landscape of diasporic identity also led to investigating the power of new media technologies to create virtual spaces. While virtual spaces can open up new forms of community space, the technologies that enable them also structures the types of connection and collective memory that these spaces can facilitate. My exploration of the virtual memorial, "Remember 2009," reveals how virtual spaces can create new dynamics and offer ways into the community for those that have felt excluded or not as individually engaged by other more regulated community spaces. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of new media technologies and virtual spaces in order to not fall trap to a celebratory and uncritical narrative that diminishes their particularities. The internet is not a purely democratic space and is mediated by different forms of power and access, meaning that people do not have equal power in interacting with and contributing to these spaces.

Another limitation is that though the second-generation members I interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about their experience with the virtual memorial versus the discomforts that arose when speaking about more traditional commemorations like *Maaveerar Naal*, my research reveals that the second-generation needed spaces and modalities like the virtual memorial *in combination* with lived experiences of community and embodied rituals in order to connect with the larger diasporic consciousness. It is through having their own experiences, such as living through 2009 with the previous generation and then seeing those experiences as part of the collective memory in the virtual memorial for "Remember 2009," that brought the experience full circle for them. From this case study, we can glean that while virtual spaces can be a powerful space for community identity formation, they are still just one

of many layered spaces where place-making projects are taking place. It is in their combined influences that a deeply felt and embodied connection to community identity is produced through.

Centering communities in research

Sri Lanka is a small country, often overlooked, and the Sri Lankan Tamil population is not large or as geo-politically relevant as other groups, but their experiences are able to reveal rich insights about what it means to be a refugee diaspora in a transnational and media-filled world. It is through both its uniqueness and its relatability that we may derive lessons and patterns that speak to different fields of study.

Growing up within this community, I have spent my whole life thinking about what it means to be part of this community and what holds us together. Like my research participants, I have learned about our community's history through a combination of regulated narratives and amorphous hauntings that were never verbalized. My experiences and questions led me on the journey to this dissertation, and I finish this dissertation with the knowledge that this community and its experiences – *my* experiences – will never be able to be distilled into a research paper. Nevertheless, as I have learned, trying to understand this community offers doorways and windows to understanding compelling aspects of the intersection between diaspora, media-worlds, and political subjectivity, as well as cultivating even more profound questions for the future.

While I hope that there is value in what this research contributes to the *refugee diaspora* framework, new understandings of collective memory, and thinking through *diasporic visual landscapes*, I believe that centering a community to further understand and validate their experiences is inherently valuable. Research that centers communities is not just a useful tool to provide insights on larger topics but is valuable in that it allows for communities to be reflected authentically in scholarship. The Tamil-Canadian diaspora is a community that has continually advocated for itself, its diasporic consciousness shaped by its attempts to be heard and seen while searching for belonging, home, and respect. My hope is that my community feels reflected in these pages and that future research continues to make this community feel represented and part of the conversation.

Epilogue: "Rooting" Tamil-Canadians in *This Place*

It is September 2022, and the lights are coming back on as credits continue to roll at the premiere of *This Place* at the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).[497] Applause rumbles in a wave through the room as the audience rises in a standing ovation, and the theatre feels filled with an intimate warmth, a shared sense of gratefulness for what has been shared here. As I look around the multicultural audience, filled with different communities of color, I realize that I'm surprised. I knew of this film because it was directed by a Tamil-Canadian and subconsciously expected the audience to be filled by the Tamil community – the community that I assumed would be the most invested and interested in a story told by one of its own. While Tamil-Canadians are definitely part of the audience, they are only one part. Instead, like the team behind the movie, the cast and themes of the movie bring together different communities by bridging the experiences shared between them. When V.T. Nayani, the second-generation Tamil-Canadian director, is called to the stage to answer audience questions, she insists on bringing the rest of her team with her. Embodying the way the second-generation Tamil-Canadians I interviewed leaned into seeing their experiences through solidarities with other minority groups in Canada, Nayani makes clear that *This Place* is a film about a shared community that was created *through* shared community, emphasizing that without diversity and collaboration, this film would not be possible.

The film tells the love story of two young women in Toronto, Malai, and Kawenniióhstha, as they navigate finding themselves amid their family and community inheritances. Malai is struggling with her post-university choices and her strained relationship with her alcoholic father, who came to Canada as a refugee from Sri Lanka. Kawenniióhstha, on the other hand, has newly arrived in Toronto from the Kanien'kehá꞉ka (Mohawk) community she grew up in near Montreal to search for her Iranian father, who she grew up not knowing. Their complicated relationships with two fathers who both came to this country as refugees parallel each other, but also tie together with Kawenniióhstha's and her mother's experiences as part of the Kanien'kehá꞉ka community in compelling ways.

When a TIFF audience member asks Nayani about her inspirations behind the film, Nayani recalls a young Tamil-Canadian woman she was interviewing about the Tamil protests in Toronto in 2009. The woman had asked her, "What does it mean to protest on stolen indigenous land for a homeland elsewhere that we are also being denied?" Nayani admitted that when this question was posed, it forced her, for the first time, to really consider what her responsibilities to the Indigenous communities of Canada might be as a child of refugees. This interaction between two second-generation Tamil-Canadian women reveals that the period of the Tamil protests was not just a time that ushered them into the collective consciousness of the Tamil diaspora, but was a moment of rupture in which they were forced to confront their own positionalities as Tamil *Canadians* specifically. The question led her to have meaningful conversations with Devery Jacobs, a co-star, and co-writer of the film as well as Goshal

[497] *This Place*, directed by V.T. Nayani (Hometeam Films and Mutual Pictures: 2022). 1:27:00.

Abdmoulaie, the third co-writer, bringing their respective experiences as Kanien'kehá꞉ka and Iranian Canadian to the script. The result was a film demonstrating that younger generations of oppressed communities in Canada share an eerily similar experience of living among the ghosts that haunt their parents. And while their search for identity, belonging, and love may differ slightly from their parents', sustained continuities thread together these collective memories and the particular struggles they navigate.

There is a moment in the film where Malai's brother, learning of her relationship with Kawenniióhstha, says, "This shit only happens here," which was greeted by knowing laughter from the Torontonian audience. While implying that a queer love story between a Sri Lankan Tamil and Kanien'kehá꞉ka-Iranian Canadian is only possible in a city like Toronto, seems at first like a simple nod towards Toronto's identity as a multicultural and progressive city, but it is in the specificities of these characters that his joke reveals something profound. These immigrant and Indigenous stories are specific to *this place*, and Malai and Kawenniióhstha's relationship is woven together through the particularities of their individual families, their own relationships with identity, and the spaces of Toronto that mediate their relationship with each other and to 'home.' Indeed, at times, this film feels as though it is about Toronto as much as it is about these characters.

Another audience member asks a question about Toronto's role in the film and part of Nayani's answer was that the team had intended to capture the city in such a way that those that are from Toronto would feel its familiarity, but it would not be obvious to those not from the city. She continued to say that for those not from Toronto, "it's actually not about seeing the city as a landscape, but seeing the city from the eyes of these two young women, whose perspectives you never get to see the city through and their experience of that city. So, we really didn't want to focus on here's the skydome, the CN tower, here's U of T, like that was not the goal."

Thinking about diasporic visual landscapes as part of this dissertation, this quote stuck with me. It captures the way that it is not the specifics of what we see that contribute to our personal and community visual landscapes, but *how* we see it, how we *interpret* and *interact* with it. Visual landscapes are mediated by individuals, communities, and the technologies that enable viewing, creating, reinterpreting, and sharing. Toronto felt like Toronto in this film because of the perspectives through which it was shown, as well as the audience it was shown to. The title of the film, *This Place* asks the audience to think about how Toronto shapes the experiences of the communities that live here and how in turn, they shape *this place.*

This dissertation argues that place-making is part of a conscious and concerted effort to claim space and belonging, tied as much to political subjectivities as it is to creating community and finding a 'home.' Goshal, in answering the question about Toronto and the film, speaks to this by saying, "I think it's important to ask how we can *root ourselves* to this place. As immigrants, a lot of times Toronto, Canada is temporary, a passing place…and as I'm growing older, I'm discovering that I have a responsibility to root myself here." In speaking to the "responsibility to root [herself] here," Goshal parallels the emotions that animate many of the second-generation Tamil-Canadians I interviewed. When thinking about Tamil-Canadian identity, they felt that Tamil-ness was both an active choice and a duty, and while they expressed Canadian-ness as a right, the way they grappled with Canadian histories of oppression and the limits of multiculturalism, illustrated that they felt that by owning and claiming their

Canadian-ness, they could help write Canada's future narratives. By "rooting" themselves to Canada, they made themselves part of its future, impacting both the possibilities for the inclusion of their communities as well as others.

Land and a community's relationship to it was an emerging theme throughout the film, since for both refugee diasporas and indigenous communities, the loss of land and its centrality to the creation of community is a continued struggle. The attempts to recreate and reimagine the homeland of Eelam in Toronto were emblematic of first-generation Tamil-Canadians attempts to "root" themselves to Canada through an imagined home. Yet, Goshal's description of "rooting" might offer another dimension to the relationship future generations of refugee diasporas experience with the land they grow up on and interact with. In this context, "rooting" themselves, captures an active choice to (re)claim and re(interpret) their landscapes of identity to reflect their beliefs, perspectives, and their hopes for the future.

This Place brings together many of the themes of this dissertation and nods towards the new perspectives and subjectivities that might reveal themselves in future cultural productions of the second-generation of the Tamil-Canadian diaspora. I look forward to witnessing the (re)imaginings and new interpretations of future generations as they engage in identity and memory work to create new forms of community. I also look forward to the way engaged scholars will continue to interact with this type of work, also mediating it and contributing to new conversations about community alongside the communities they center.

In the prologue of this dissertation, I explored my own relationship with memory inheritances from my family and how media technologies come to shape my personal engagement with this collective memory. The moments I strung together were more personal to me and my family as we grappled with intergenerational memory. These moments also came from a time near the beginning of my dissertation work, when I was first exploring these questions. There was much I had not processed and that I felt alone with at the time. Watching this film closer to the end of my project, helped bring together these themes and illustrated that I was not alone in grappling with memory and identity, but part of a larger generation and diasporic community that is engaged in this work. While this dissertation explores the ways in which this 'community' is consciously and subconsciously constructed through politics, structures of power and specific histories, this film and the voices of the second-generation I interviewed help reveal that the contours of this community and what animates it is *constantly being re-made*. There is such a sense of possibility in this: the possibility of more heterogeneity and inclusion, the possibility of being heard and represented, and the possibility for 'community' to continue being a source of support in the face of an ever-changing diasporic landscape.

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