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# Forms of Dissent: Resisting the Trauma Narrative Through Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature

by

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This dissertation engages Sri Lankan Anglophone literary texts to propose how we can attend to war and disaster without using totalizing narratives of grief and loss. With the help of several texts—Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, V. V. Ganeshananthan's "Hippocrates," Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*, Jean Arasanayagam's "All is Burning," Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*, Simon Harris and Neluka Silva's *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the* Tsunami, and Hasanthika Sirisena's "The Other One," "Third Country National," and "War Wounds"—my project illuminates how contemporary moral and political economies around trauma manifest in problematic ways, and celebrates how literary representations of those excluded from institutionalized knowledge can dismantle these economies. My research urges academics situated within postcolonial studies and critical trauma studies to disrupt the myths of our disciplinary training. I underscore the reminder that trauma and its effects should not be universally cast as pathology or permanent condition. Moreover, my dissertation alerts us to the transformative power of attending to a diversity of stories about experiences and meanings of what we understand as trauma.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# Introduction(s): Productions of Place, Field, and Trauma

> There is a history of censorship and self-censorship that runs through the course of the war, even abroad, because of pressure that the Tigers, successive Sri Lankan governments, and various other actors have exerted. People of all ethnicities and especially those in minority communities suffered enormously, and many of the stories of what and how they suffered were denied or silenced. Complicated stories of community strength and survival, too, were ignored or erased. This flattening of narrative is deeply dehumanizing. In this context, the remembrance and even imagining of other people's feelings becomes especially important; it's a way of trying to understand and listen, rather than to erase and silence. For me it's a form of dissent.
>
> ~ V. V. Ganeshananthan, in conversation with Dashini Jeyathurai, p. 308

> What is this object, Sri Lanka, in the first place? What kind of a place is it? Do you know it? Really? How do you know it? Did you hear or see or read about it? Did you pause, consider, however briefly, that different disciplines might produce it differently? That anthropology might see one thing, produce a certain object when it apprehended Sri Lanka, history another, and literature yet another?
>
> ~ Qadri Ismail, *Abiding by Sri Lanka: Peace, Place, and Postcoloniality*, p. xx-xxi

In her 2012 monograph, *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature, 1983-2009*, Maryse Jayasuriya writes that the trauma of the Sri Lankan civil war, despite occupying space in the country's Anglophone literature, has remained largely invisible to much of the world. In one sense, Jayasuriya's statement is accurate: the troubles of this small island, and variously positioned communities within and in relation to it, do not often linger in the imagination of the larger globe. In a contradictory sense, however, the Sri Lankan civil war, alongside events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2019 Easter Day bombings, and the 2022 #GotaGoGama protests, can be considered flashpoints through which Sri Lanka becomes intensely visible—through momentary and spectacular segments—to the rest of the world. This type of visibility, often refracted through the lens of endless trauma, poses a problem: how can we respond

to tragedies such as war and disaster without using a totalizing narrative of trauma through which to understand them?

In my initial conception of this dissertation, I set out to illustrate how literary representations of war and disaster can offer responses to this question.[1] In its final format, this project is undergirded by an additional awareness that several aspects which I approach through literature, such as "trauma," "natural disaster," or "the Sri Lankan civil war," are shaped by various hegemonic institutions with an investment in defining these terms in a specific manner. Shaped by an awareness of such constructions, this dissertation examines how literature contends with such multiply-layered productions of certain events in Sri Lanka as a country that is both a lived social reality and an ethico-political problem. I contend that these productions arise as much from an academic discipline like trauma studies as they do from the country's own (post)colonial history and government. I argue that literature can work to disrupt, if not entirely displace, such productions, and demand something more ethical in their place. Towards this end, I look to works of narrative—novels, short stories, and memoir—to guide me as I trace how they muddy the boundaries of what forms of knowledge and practice are accepted and privileged in responding ethically to different kinds of violence, disaster, and loss. Thus, I understand these narratives as not simply a reflection or record of trauma in a clinically

[1] In this task, I am inspired by the work of several scholars, writers, and collectives who bring attention to both the Orientalizing ways in which a global audience responds to events such as the civil war and the tsunami in Sri Lanka and to the way that multiply marginalized communities in the country face the material conditions engendered by these events. For instance, Arudpragasam complicates approaches to the Easter Day bombings, de Mel ("Between the War and the Sea") draws connections between women's experiences of the civil war and the tsunami, and reframings of the 2022 economic crisis and #GotaGoHome protests are set forth in works by Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, Arulthas, Deraniyagala ("The Human Dimension"), the Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, and Sangam.

diagnostic perspective, but rather as representations of trauma that invite different epistemological and ethical understandings of storytelling and knowledge production as avenues for sociopolitical critique.

As such, I illustrate how the works I explore posit themselves as subjects that carry varied, legitimate forms of knowledge that stand counter to official narratives of events that have taken place within Sri Lanka. In wresting Sri Lanka as object away from the discourses that produce it as such, I argue that these texts perform what late scholar Qadri Ismail calls a practice of "abiding," whereby texts have "an epistemological relation to, or intervention within, a place that foregrounds, explicitly or otherwise, the ethical and political interests at stake in such a relation/intervention" (xxxii). Following Ismail's lead, my dissertation is guided by the question of what is at stake when different sites of power produce Sri Lanka differently. In foregrounding such stakes, I trace the multivalent reverberations that counter-narratives offered by literature can surface in different institutional spaces of power and privilege that produce Sri Lanka in ways that can cause, and have caused, harm.

Among the scholarship in Sri Lankan Studies that looks at Sri Lankan Anglophone writing, there is not yet a book-length project that brings together these works of narrative to trace their depictions of the civil war, the tsunami, and the violences of patriarchy, ethnoreligious nationalism, and global capitalism in relationship to the academic discipline of literary trauma studies. The work that provides the closest model to my thinking is Jayasuriya's, where she traces how literary representations of the civil war create "counter-moments / spaces" for alternative narratives that assist readers and

writers in coping with trauma and dislocation. I extend Jayasuriya's analysis to illustrate that literature, while certainly able to serve as a coping mechanism, can also simultaneously resist established understandings that have come to define trauma and its subject, and in this resistance imagine other ways of knowing and relating to Sri Lanka. These works provide counter-narratives that imagine spaces of healing, and they also demand that trauma studies be reformulated in light of literature depicting postcolonial subjectivities that evince different kinds of considerations during and in the wake of conflict and disaster.

## Journeys Into Critical Trauma Theory

> When you embark on an exercise that seems, to you, unusual, perhaps unique, you begin by congratulating yourself on having discovered something new, a new approach, new material, a new way of looking at things. And, in the mistaken conviction that yours is the unique perspective, you begin by asserting that no one has looked at things in quite this way before. Yet research is a humbling thing, as I found out. Nothing is really new, other than your interpretation (and sometimes not even that): you simply train a different eye on the past.
>
> ~ Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, p. 277

In the third year of my graduate study at the University of California, Riverside, in preparation for my Ph.D. exam the following year, I began reading about the history and development of the field of trauma studies. Repeatedly, I found a certain story of the field's development summarized in many prominent texts,[2] which I naturally began to consider the story of the field's development. That story is generally narrated as the following: Trauma studies develops in the early 1990s, with an interest in representations of trauma in literature, film, and other cultural productions. The beginning of the field is

[2] See Andemahr, Craps' "Introduction" in *Postcolonial Witnessing*, Buelens, Durrant, & Eaglestone's "Introduction" in *The Future of Trauma Theory*, Craps and Buelens, Rothberg, and Visser.

often credited to Cathy Caruth, and some other influential scholars often cited as leading the field are Lori Daub, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra. Given its connection to disciplines like psychoanalytic theory, memory studies, and Holocaust studies, early trauma studies scholarship carries, and eventually comes under critique for, a Eurocentric bias in its approaches to thinking about the self in relation to traumatic experience. In the 2000s, there are calls for a radical re-routing of the field, one that would allow it to become more cross-culturally informed. With an acknowledgement that Euro-American theorizations of trauma do not adequately inform the lived experiences of trauma in non-Western contexts, one of the suggestions for a potential future, corrective direction for the field is a merger between trauma studies and postcolonial studies.[3]

Simultaneously, I read a text that one of my advisors, Dr. Traise Yamamoto, had brought to my attention: Kalí Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma,* published in 1996—the same year as Caruth's influential *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Tal's monograph considers the relationship between individual stories of trauma articulated by survivors—which are what Tal designates as "literatures of trauma"—and cultural representations of three distinct events: the Holocaust, the Vietnam war, and sexual violence against women and children in the U.S. Tal's goal is to "force readers to question the 'sacred' nature of the Holocaust as subject matter, to encourage them to be critical of the recent tendency to elevate the American veteran of the Vietnam War to the status of 'hero,' and to acknowledge the existence of an

[3] See Andemahr, Craps, Craps and Beulens, and Visser.

ongoing campaign of sexual violence and oppression waged by many men against the women and children of the United States" (4). She illustrates three forms of "cultural coping" for how survivors' stories about these events are revised by the dominant culture: mythologization, medicalization, and disappearance. Through these methods, Tal argues, "[t]raumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention." I find Tal's argument compelling because she acknowledges that "[o]nce codified, the traumatic experience becomes a weapon in another battle, the struggle for political power" (6). Tal outlines, for instance, how Felman and Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* performs a problematic reification of the hierarchy between analyst and analysand: "The survivor herself has disappeared from the picture, reappearing only as a device for pushing the listener to self-examination, to allow him to participate in 'the reliving and reexperiencing of the event'" (57). Tal also brings our attention to how the definition of PTSD relies on a normative measure of "usual *white male* experience" (136, emphasis in original).[4] In being grounded in an awareness of the power dynamics behind the interpretive act of reading, *Worlds of Hurt* is an important critique of contemporary approaches to trauma theory.[5]

[4] Later, I would find scholars such as Laura S. Brown, Allan Young, and Derek Summerfield, among others, who also critique ubiquitous use of PTSD in ways that are removed from an understanding of its original formation.

[5] In a more recently version of her 1996 book, now available on her website, Tal includes a third chapter titled "Remembering Difference; Working Against Eurocentric Bias in Contemporary Scholarship on Trauma and Memory." This chapter outlines how trauma studies scholarship leaves out work by African American, postcolonial, and feminist critics of trauma, offers a more direct critique of Caruth's approaches, and outlines what African American writing illuminates about approaches to trauma.

Reading *Worlds of Hurt* transformed my thinking. It also confused my understanding of *when* critiques of trauma studies came about, since it contains vital critiques of one of the main methodologies of trauma studies—the interpretation of story—and yet was not cited significantly by trauma studies scholars, despite being published alongside other texts important to the field around 1995.[6] Curious about this discrepancy, I decided to create a database of all the works I could find that could be categorized under "trauma studies" in its most expansive definition. By noting the title, author, year of publication, the main premise of the work, and the field and institutional connections of the author(s), I wanted to attempt to capture the diversity of trauma studies scholarship. This database, which is still ongoing, helped me surface another, different timeline of trauma studies. It helped me see that, like Tal, there were other scholars critiquing the premises and methodology of the field at its inception, rather than several years afterwards. Though not an exhaustive list, I came across work by scholars like Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran, who question the ethics behind calls of "cross-cultural" knowledge production within neocolonial disciplines in *Native American*

[6] In 1997, James Berger published a review where he praises texts by Caruth and LaCapra while denigrating Tal's. Berger argues that Tal's focus on individual stories of trauma prevents her from seeing traumas in their broader social and historical forms, when in fact Tal's focus on *how* individual stories are taken up by society allows precisely for this larger understanding of how individual and collective traumas circulate as political commodity in broader socio-cultural forms. Berger states that Tal has no sense of the return of the repressed, symptoms, or of the role of trauma in ideology, despite Tal's approach foregrounding trauma as an ideology and, more importantly, working to make the construction of that ideology visible. Berger also disagrees with Tal's critiques of psychoanalysis, claiming that modern day psychoanalysis is no longer patriarchal, but simultaneously levies patriarchal and queerphobic critiques against her work: he finds it "absurd" that Tal quotes approvingly a tarot card interpreter who articulates tarot as an instrument for women's self-discovery and self-exploration, and claims that Tal's editors should have protected her from certain "embarrassments." Despite positive reviews of *Worlds of Hurt* by Williams, DeRose, and Jaffe, it is conceivable that Berger's unfair review of *Worlds of Hurt* might have contributed to it not being as widely cited as other texts in the field. On her website, Tal notes her awareness of these citational impacts, but also believes her work "is reaching the people it was intended to reach," and I am inclined to agree.

*Postcolonial Psychology* (1995); Allan Young, who outlines the creation and harmfulness of PTSD as a diagnosis in the US and globally in *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (1996); Hortense Spillers, who critiques psychoanalysis in "All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race" (1996); and Barbara Johnson's *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (1998). As a third-year graduate student who was still figuring out what one did in graduate school, I simply did not take for granted that a field would have multiple origin stories, and so I struggled to understand the existence of these two contradictory timelines: one where trauma studies finds its critiques half a decade or so after its inception, and one where critiques exist at, and even before, its so-called beginnings.

## A Detour: Citational Journeys

> Words are material, like pathways: once they leave a trail, they clear a way and we tend to follow them, and in following them, we are directed that way.
>
> ~ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, p. 203

As I wrestled with these questions and continued populating my database, I found Ethan Watters' *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*. In this text, Watters criticizes the export of particularly Americanized psychic conditions to other parts of the world, namely Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Zanzibar, and Japan. Watters's second chapter, "The Wave that Brought PTSD to Sri Lanka," focuses on the influx of Western trauma counselors and researchers to Sri Lanka after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. In it, he cites a collective memo written by faculty from the University of Colombo and emailed to "the arriving army of counselors," acknowledging how "disaster zones attract

‘trauma’ and ‘counseling projects’” and asking such visitors not to reduce the experiences of differently-positioned communities in Sri Lanka “to a question of mental trauma” or the survivors themselves to “psychological casualties.” Watters notes how “[t]hey went on to make an argument that fundamentally undercut the certainty that Western ideas about trauma are universal,” noting that

> A victim processes a traumatic event as a function of what it means. … This meaning is drawn from their society and culture and this shapes how they seek help and their expectation of recovery.” Trauma reactions aren’t automatic physiological reactions inside the brain, they suggested, but rather cultural communications. … What was required before any organization could offer meaningful help, the professors wrote, was a deep understanding of ‘what the affected people were signaling by this distress.’ (63)

Watters’ description of the confusion of reporters and clinicians who arrived in the country the days after the disaster indicate that they did not heed this important communication.

Consequently, in their rush to “demonstrate their acumen in healing trauma or perform large-scale studies of PTSD,” these counselors committed various kinds of harm. Against these versions of “assistance” and “aid,” Watters outlines Sri Lankan professor of psychology Gaithri Fernando’s creation of the Sri Lankan Index of Psychosocial Status, a twenty-six-item measure of the local indicators of distress, which helped her recognize two ways in which Sri Lankans’ experience of trauma differed from Western conceptions of it. First, “[w]ithout the mind-body disconnect common in Western thinking, these Sri Lankans reacted to the disaster as if they had experienced a physical blow to the body.” Second, “Sri Lankans tended to see the negative consequences of an event like the tsunami in terms of the damage it did to social relationships” rather than internal states

like anxiety, fear, and numbing (Watters 73). Overall, "[b]ecause the Western conception of PTSD assumes the problem, the breakage, is primarily in the mind of the individual, it largely overlooks the most salient symptoms for a Sri Lankan, those that exist not in the psychological but in the social realm" (Watters 78). Watters also engages with insights by other scholars that disrupt other assumptions about responses to trauma, such as Alex Argenti-Pillen's work on how and why, during the JVP insurrections in the 70s, silence is deliberately employed as a protective measure in certain villages in the Sri Lankan south to keep further violence at bay.

Watters text inadvertently offered a way for me to reconcile the two divergent stories of the development of trauma studies. I say inadvertently because I did not seek out Watters' text but found it through Stef Crap's *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, a text which outlines the need for a more ethical, cross-culturally relevant trauma studies. To this end, Craps examines literary and cultural productions that depict the experiences of non-Western subjects ethically for how they illustrate a postcolonial trauma studies praxis. In his introduction, Craps dedicates two paragraphs to cite Watters' text, and in particular, the story of Western trauma counselors in Sri Lanka. As I continued populating my database, I found other monographs and collections in trauma studies and adjacent fields that mention the same example of the Western therapists in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, all of which cite Craps to cite the story of Watters' chapter.[7] I noticed that, with each instance of citation, the example that Craps originally cites in two paragraphs, becomes increasingly shorter. A chapter that required Watters to provide

[7] See Buelens, Eaglestone, and Durrant, Eaglestone, O'Brien, Rajiva, Romdhani and Tunca, and Meretoja and Davis.

seven pages of citation of local and global experts and survivors on various approaches to grief, trauma, loss, and selfhood in this post-tsunami context, eventually becomes mentioned in just a sentence or two.

Initially, I was untroubled by this truncation. As someone who relies on footnotes to point to countless other (hi)stories to which I cannot do justice, I understand deeply the problem of not being able to cite everything one would like. Craps' point in the aforementioned section of his text is to remind us of the harmful material effects of trauma theory's Eurocentric assumptions, which he does successfully. But what did sit uneasily with me was that the two paragraphs where Craps cites this information do not include the fact that Sri Lankan psychiatrists, professors, and mental health practitioners had something to teach their Western interlocutors. Furthermore, none of the texts that use Craps' citation of Watters mentions this fact either. When such texts take as one of their main investments the reshaping of trauma studies into a space that can account for the traumas of non-Western cultures, the missing mention of non-Western experts who reached out to their Western counterparts with important warnings and refusals suddenly becomes a glaring curiosity.

I now understand that the discomfort I felt at what these citations chose to leave out was my reaction to the power and politics of citationality. I was witnessing trauma studies operating as a site of power, and in this instance, as a site of power that inadvertently turns a country's post-tsunami struggles into a convenient and—dare I say

it, fashionable—academic anecdote.[8] In order to function as an anecdote meant primarily to bemoan the harms of Western scholarship, it must consistently leave out the fact that there was a crucial attempt at dialogue initiated by Sri Lankan experts and ignored by Western ones. In this anecdote, there are no local Sri Lankan psychiatrists or practitioners to aid victim-survivors in times of suffering, there is only the Western expert that must do better to understand traditional, religious, and spiritual approaches to the self and suffering in Sri Lanka.

My citational tracing did more than simply point me to the familiar story of the well-intentioned but flawed Western savior. Rather, this particular production of Sri Lanka helped me contextualize the contradictory stories of the development of trauma studies. Through trauma studies' use of this story of post-tsunami interventions in Sri Lanka, I began to understand how the citational gaps in the narrative that trauma studies tells of itself uphold a story of linear development. In other words, the narrative maintains that the field of trauma studies began, encountered criticisms of its shortcomings a few years later, and is now on course to correct itself via cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary conversations. This narrative manifests a certain investment in recuperating the field of trauma studies, an investment explicitly held by several scholars in the field. Craps, for instance, asserts his conviction that "trauma theory is not irredeemably tainted with Eurocentric bias but can indeed stay relevant in the globalized world of the twenty-first century" (125 *Postcolonial Witnessing*). Similarly, in "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A

[8] Additional texts in which I have found this story cited are Carey's *Patient-Perspective Care*, Lundy's *Social Work, Social Justice, and Human Rights*, Muller's *Trauma and the Struggle to Open Up*, Newman's *A Culture of Second Chances*, Sered and Norton-Hawk's *Can't Catch a Break*, and Meineck's *Theatrocracy*. The single text that cites the memo from the University of Colombo faculty is Hessamfar's *In the Fellowship of His Suffering*.

Response," Michael Rothberg ends with the injunction that "[i]n the interest of decolonizing trauma studies, we may want to maintain a grasp of ambiguity, hybridity, and complicity while simultaneously daring to generalize and build theoretical models" (232). I situate myself with resistance to such calls to "decolonize" trauma studies, not only because Indigenous scholars such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us that decolonization is not a metaphor, but because these calls require, to a certain extent, more of an investment in recuperating a field than in centering the experiences and voices of those who, both within and outside the field, reveal the very notion of "trauma" as a constructed one. While Rothberg urges us to generate more theoretical models for comprehending trauma, I am invested in attending to various *modes* of representing and recognizing trauma as it comes to be contextualized within specific texts, locations, and bodyminds.[9] Thinking about modes rather than models allows me to note the linear story of the development of trauma studies while simultaneously foregrounding the silences within that disciplinary (his)tory. Additionally, rather than reify the notion that the generic postcolonial, Indigenous, global South (or otherwise-marginalized) scholar can offer correctives to trauma studies' problems merely by their mention within or inclusion into the field, I work from the position that trauma can and does mean differently in different contexts. Rather than provide a postcolonial supplement to the field of trauma studies, my approach is both an intervention into trauma studies and a call for more abiding reading practices when engaging with cultural productions that represent events which can be considered as having traumatic effects.

[9] I use the term bodymind, coined by Margaret Price, as a materialist feminist disability studies concept to refer to the ways that the body and mind are inextricability enmeshed.

My approaches are inspired by scholars such as Maurice Stevens and Michelle Balaev, among others who are keenly aware of how academic and institutional knowledge production reproduces existing hegemonies and hierarchies. Stevens reminds us that, when it comes to critically examining trauma, we must "keep one eye on what trauma does, while keeping another on *how* it does it, for whom, and with what consequences" ("Trauma Is as Trauma Does" 36). Stevens' project has similarities to Tal's in that both are invested in recognizing the political exigencies of an academic discipline. Balaev articulates the usefulness of a "pluralistic model of trauma [which] suggests that criticism may explore trauma as a subject that invites the study of the relationship between language, the psyche, and behavior without assuming the classic definition of trauma that asserts an unrepresentable and pathological universalism" (4). Such an approach "acknowledges the variability of trauma in its definition and representations, and may emphasize the active potential for meaning in the moment of harm" (6). Most appealing to me in Balaev's formulation is that "[r]ather than claiming that language fails to represent trauma, pluralistic approaches consider linguistic relationships but not at the expense of forgetting that trauma occurs to actual people, in specific bodies, located within particular time periods and places" (7). In each of my chapters, I enact a reading practice that is undergirded by a similar conviction to remember that differences exist in how individuals and communities codify their experiences in the aftermath of events that involve loss and harm.

In taking this pluralistic route, I am aligned with scholars such as Jeffrey C. Alexander, Angela Carter, Ann Cvetkovich, Ron Eyerman, Didier Fassin, Avery Gordon,

Judith Herman, Dhana Hughes, Susannah Radstone, Richard Rechtman, and Yasmin Nair, all of whom, in different ways, helped me become cognizant of the historical and contemporary moral and political economies around constructions of trauma and victimhood. In attending to literary representations of those whose lived experiences are excluded from institutionalized knowledge, my dissertation contributes towards dismantling these economies while being aware of how our acts of knowledge production come to be intertwined in those same economies. This contribution is a necessary one because trauma is both a literary and a theoretical concern that also circulates via a global medical industry that facilitates imperial projects furthered by tourism, foreign policy, aid distribution, and peace and security agendas. In attempting this task, I am also deeply indebted to scholars who illustrate how gender and culture shape understandings of violence, such as Alex Argenti-Pillen, Nancy Gates-Madsen, Grace M. Cho, and Jasmina Husanovic. From these scholars, I learn how to engage productively with academic disciplines despite their colonial underpinnings. In following their footsteps, I attempt to listen to those figures—both ghostly and embodied—that shape the aftermath of war and disaster into different and productive spaces both within and outside academic institutions. In doing so, my project alerts us to the transformative power of telling, and listening to, a diversity of stories about this thing we call trauma.

**Methodologies: Theory as Story, Story as Theory**

> I know the use of fiction in a world of hard truth, the way fiction can be a harder piece of truth. The story of what happened, or what did not happen but should have—that story can become a curtain drawn shut, a piece of insulation, a disguise, a razor, a tool that changes every time it is used and sometimes becomes something other than we intended. The story becomes the thing needed.
>
> ~ Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know For Sure*, p. 3

Through my engagement with the histories of trauma studies, I began to understand theory as a form of storytelling. This understanding helped me become more comfortable with my own methodology, which, following the tradition of Black, Indigenous, and woman of color feminist approaches to academic research, treats storytelling, and therefore literature, as a form of theory.[10] Letting literature guide my theorizations is one of the ways in which I hope to enact ethical engagement with events such as the Sri Lankan civil war and the 2004 Indian ocean tsunami. I read literature to attend to the grievances of survivors in literary depictions of war and disaster, and to search for the indelible presence of joy and healing that lies outside the frameworks of suffering and victimhood through which Sri Lanka is often produced and presented to the world.

One of my guiding methodological questions is to ask how the narratological or therapeutic aspects of what is known as trauma change once we look at specific literary texts and their depiction of historical and political events. How might terms like trauma, violence, and recovery—as the academy understands them—change if we paid attention to how both fiction and non-fiction strive, through different means, to answer similar questions of living through and after catastrophe? While clinical practitioners approach these terms in one way, and while literature provides resonances that are not reducible to

[10] I am particularly drawn to Nadar's acronym for STORY, a process which encourages the following: Suspicion of master narratives of knowledge; Tools of knowledge gathering and dissemination; Objection to objectivity; Reflexivity of the positioning of researchers; and Yearning for and working for transformation and change" (23). Other pieces of scholarship that helped me recognize storytelling and narrative as legitimate forms of theorizing are Christian's "The Race for Theory," Amoah's "Narrative: The Road to Black Feminist Theory," de Nooijer and Sol Cueva's "Feminist Storytellers Imagining New Stories to Tell," Million's "Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach to Affect and History," Smiley's "'Our Stories Are Our Life Blood': Indigenous Feminist Memory and Storytelling as Strategy for Social Change," and Chatterjee's *A Time for Tea*.

the clinical, I link the two by expanding the significance of Ismail's concept of abiding to bridge the clinical and the literary via the work of narrative. I find Ismail's method—to determine whether works abide by or anthropologize Sri Lanka—inadequate for my project, since the works I look at can be said to be doing both at different moments textually. Rather, I am interested in the impact of these works as they oscillate between these two modes of existence. I therefore adapt Ismail's concept of abiding by and combine it with Rajini Srikanth's articulation of reading as "a just act—doing justice to the context from which the writing emerges and challenging one's imagination to encounter the texts with courage, humility, and daring" (1). This combination forms the conceptual apparatus and a mode of reading that binds my dissertation: I work to encounter texts as and through a just act by letting them guide my thinking, in hopes that such a reading practice will allow me to foreground the context in which each text lives and circulates while I listen to the counter-narratives they offer as praxis that can be taken up in the world outside the text. As such, with great respect and gratitude to Ismail, I go beyond asking if these texts abide by or anthropologize Sri Lanka. Instead, I, as reader and scholar, abide by the texts, reading along their grain, in hopes of drawing attention to both the text's possibilities and limitations regarding Sri Lanka and those in relation to it. My attention to alternative narratives in literature are consonant with the thinking of key postcolonial literary critics, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's articulation of the importance of tangential narratives (253) and Edward Said's practice of contrapuntal readings (19). I borrow from such theoretical lineages in an attempt to ethically foreground alternative narratives that reside in these texts.

One such narrative that I trace as being retold in these texts is that of the war. Though the beginning of the Sri Lankan civil war is often located in July 1983, several leading figures of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam[11] (LTTE) cite the Sri Lankan state's anti-Tamil pogroms of 1958 and 1977 as fueling their demand for a separate Tamil state in the north-east of the country (Bose). Ambalavaner Sivanandan locates the growth of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist racism as an even older legacy for the war, born of colonialism and underdevelopment. Similarly, though the war's official end is marked by the killing of LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran and the subsequent defeat of the LTTE by the Sri Lankan army in May 2009, war drags on in the fact that enforced disappearances and other human rights abuses continue to be perpetrated by government forces,[12] and in the fact that there has been no accountability for war crimes committed by both actants during and after the war. For instance, the last three official days of the civil war—17 to 19 May 2009—saw approximately 500 Tamil people disappeared, marking the "largest number of disappearances in one place and time in the country's history."[13] In January 2020, then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated that more than 20,000 missing Tamil persons who surrendered to the Sri Lankan army in May 2009 would be declared dead and that death certificates would be issued for them.[14] Tamil families who had demanded accountability and information about their loved ones for

[11] Established in 1976, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam secured prominence over several Tamil separatist groups that demanded a separate homeland for the Tamil people along the northeastern parts of Sri Lanka. For more on the Sri Lankan civil war, see Bose, de Mel, Samuel, and Soysa, DeVotta, Perera-Rajasingham, Rajasingham-Senanayake, Rasaratnam, Thiranagama, Seioghe, Somasundaram, and Wilson.
[12] See Watchdog and Human Rights Watch.
[13] See Ball and Harrison and "Disappeared Website."
[14] See Abi-Babib and Basitnas.

years were furious and protested the decision.[15] They have similarly protested against and rejected the government's multiple attempts over the years to force a closure of one of the most enduring traumas of war and militarization, instead continuing to fight for accountability, justice, and knowledge about the whereabouts of the forcibly disappeared, marking 2000 days, or five years, of continuous protest on August 12, 2022.[16]

Alongside the civil war in the north, the southern regions of Sri Lanka experienced violence during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) Marxist-Leninist armed insurrections against the United Front (UF) coalition government, first in 1971 and again from 1987-1990. The first documented enforced disappearances, in fact, occurred in 1971 in relation to this insurrection. Late scholar Malathi de Alwis notes that despite Sri Lanka's history of anti-Tamil pogroms, a 26-year civil war, and a tsunami, "the highest number of 'disappearances' within the briefest span of years [occurred in] the southern regions of the island where during the years 1987-1990 around 35,000 predominantly Sinhala youth and men went missing" as the government brutally suppressed a second JVP insurrection.[17] Estimates for the number of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka since the 1980s, which includes the twenty-six-year civil war, stand between 60,000 – 100,000.[18]

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[15] See "Families of Disappeared Protest in Front of OMP Office in Batticaloa."
[16] See "Sri Lanka to Issue Death/Missing Certificates to Disappeared, Pay 100,000 LKR to Next of Kin," "Sri Lanka's Decision to Issue 'Missing Certificates' to Families of Disappeared is Met with Outcry," "'We are not protesting for compensation, we are protesting for justice': Tamil Families of the Disappeared React to Sri Lanka's Budget," and "Association for Relatives of Enforced Disappearances Reiterates 6 Key Demands Ahead of UNHRC Session."
[17] This number, de Alwis notes on p. 387 of "'Disappearance' and 'Displacement,'" is the estimate used by most human rights organizations, though journalistic sources use 40,000 and families of the disappeared in the south use 60,000.
[18] See Amnesty International.

In these ways, through the hauntings of the dead who remain unable to be properly laid to rest and the continued protests of those demanding justice and accountability for crimes committed over several decades, there is much to complicate about the "start" and "end" of protracted periods of violence in Sri Lanka. The texts I engage with in this dissertation reveal, in various ways, the existence and continuation of terror and violence past the confines of the battlefield and official periods of war, such as in the lack of closure for families still searching for loved ones taken by state forces, in a lack of accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and in a lack of justice for Tamil communities[19] that suffered and survived genocide at the hands of the Sri Lankan government in 1983 and 2009.[20] The narratives I read also point to an asymmetry, to use Viet Thanh Nguyen's terms, with which the war is remembered. Following the lead of scholars such as Nguyen, Rachel Seoighe, Nancy Gates-Madsen, and Urvashi Butalia, I examine how these works respond to this asymmetry by questioning us-them binaries. While Nguyen articulates an "ethics of recognition" (19) that argues for the importance of recognizing the humanity and inhumanity in all of us, I find that the narratives I'm working with both illustrate and extend this type of recognition. These works certainly contend with the humanity and inhumanity in some of its characters. At the same time, they suggest an important counter to Nguyen's insistence that there exists in each of us the capacity for inhumanity by presenting characters whose

[19] My use of the phrase "Tamil communities" should not be taken to mean that Tamil people are a homogenous group. Though not an exhaustive list, some of the specific contexts within which distinct local and global Tamil communities claim a relationship to Ilankai/Eelam/Sri Lanka can be seen through Amarasingam, Fuglerud, Jegathesan, Krishnakumar, Maunaguru, Rajasegar, Rasaratnam, Sriskandarajah, Thiranagama, "Topic: Tamil Eelam," Seioghe's "Tamil Separatism and Commemorative Practices," in *War, Denial and Nation-Building in Sri Lanka*, and Wilson.
[20] See "The Tamil Genocide" and Macrae.

complexity resides in their ability to remain steadfastly ethical and refusing to take the inhuman route that might have been available to them. Through such characters, the literature I engage honors the lived convictions of real people who show us that inhumanity need not be inevitable.

In foregrounding this fact, I find that the works put forth a second counter-narrative about the responsibilities of singular individuals within larger structures, and about complicity, responsibility, and forgiveness in the hold of violence. By consistently reminding its readers of the larger structures that impact any individual, the literature I have collected here highlights a recognition of each individual's capacity to be both human and inhuman in order to ask what about the state of the world we have created enables such inhumanity to be cultivated as a viable option in response to different kinds of violence and harm. I learn from thinkers such as Dhana Hughes, Veena Das, and Kamala Visweswaran, who engage in theories of the everyday to attempt an anthropology of violence that thinks ethically about the quotidian manifestations of violence alongside the event-based, episodic violence that has taken place, and continues to take place, in Sri Lanka. I examine how these texts perform this careful balancing act in order to honor the complexity of what agency, complicity, and responsibility look like on both the individual and communal level. I bring attention to how these narratives tell a story where small, individual acts matter, even, and perhaps most, when they seem futile in response to larger and more powerful structural systems.

This focus on the ordinary person embroiled in the forces of the mundanely quotidian and the colossally historic, has led me to a third narrative of how we can think

about loss and mourning differently. Violence, loss, mourning, and recovery—these narratives argue—is not always what Western academia tells us it looks like. In this third story, joy, happiness, and pleasure sometimes sit alongside trauma. In this space, cycles of violence are broken, often through the stories that linger outside the official narratives of institutions, and through the individual acts of an ordinary person whose ethical decisions reach beyond their own personhood. In reading this literature, I reach into clinical practice to the extent to which it helps me think about the relationship between narration and trauma. While Western psychotherapy privileges narrative as a necessary part of grappling with and recovering from trauma, scholars such as Sri Lankan psychiatrist Daya Somasundaram and clinical psychologist Gaithri Fernando attest that Western psychotherapy cannot adequately address the different conceptions of self and practices of meaning-making that exist for Sri Lankans. In her work on testimony, for example, Danish psychologist Inger Agger articulates how countries in South Asia have adapted the Western form of testimony to confront the aftermath of violence. The insight of clinical practitioners articulates how culturally-specific practices are being created or have always existed to honor the psychic and social worlds of individuals and communities outside of Western contexts. These practices can and should be considered viable forms of articulation for the injury and suffering experienced by an individual or a collective, not only because it allows survivors to successfully organize for their exigencies in terms legible to institutions of power, but because such practices challenge and break apart hegemonic Western understandings of the relationship of narration and storytelling to trauma.

**Chapter Descriptions**

Chapter One engages with Nayomi Munaweera's 2014 novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, and V. V. Ganeshananthan's 2010 short story, "Hippocrates," a short story published in *Granta* that is now also a chapter within Ganeshananthan's 2023 novel, *Brotherless Night.* Both works tackle questions of voice, appropriation, and silencing, specifically in relation to thinking about the motivations of those who become suicide bombers. One of the two narrators in *Island* is Saraswathi, a teenage girl who becomes a suicide bomber for the LTTE. My analysis of *Island* focuses on the narrative space charted by its two characters, and ends with a recognition that the primary narrator, Yasodhara, can feel compassion and mourn all those lost to the war save for Saraswathi, whom she can categorize only as the murderer of her sister, Lanka. "Hippocrates" features a young woman who is a medic for the LTTE and is thrust into the most intimate of relationships with another young girl, Saavi: she must tend to Saavi after soldiers rape her, she must stitch parts of Saavi's body back together. She and Saavi become quick friends, and the narrator later hears that a pregnant Saavi became a suicide bomber. Unlike the two narrators who are starkly contrasted in *Island,* the narrator in "Hippocrates" is aware that she could so easily have been Saavi, which forms part of her rumination throughout the story.

My analysis explores how both texts employ what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls a complex ethics of recognition in writing a just memory of war, and how they complicate narratives around the spectacular figure of the suicide bomber. I think about how the texts implicate the reader's position in relation to an unfinished war. I argue that *Island* gives

readers knowledge that Yasodhara is not privy to that would undo the clear divide she builds between her sister and the woman she considers her sister's assassin. In "Hippocrates," the reader is called upon by the narrator directly: "I want you to understand," she says multiple times. Right before she describes what she heard about Saavi's suicide bombing, she urges: "I want you to imagine this, as I did when I heard that." While conversations in postcolonial trauma studies attempt to foreground issues of complicity, agency, and responsibility within the literature, I argue that these texts ask the reader to have a stake in such questions both within and outside of academic discourse. What is a reader to do with the secret knowledge that a part of Saraswathi lives on in Yasodhara's daughter? How does a reader respond to a narrator who believes that we must share in the knowledge she carries of a violence she can only imagine? Ultimately, this chapter argues for how these works remind us of the war's continued presence in our world as we consume stories that will always sit somewhere between fiction and reality.

Chapter Two discusses Shyam Selvadurai's 2013 novel, *The Hungry Ghosts*, and Jean Arasanayagam's short story, "All is Burning," from her 1995 short story collection of the same name. Both texts have characters who struggle with what justice, repair, and ethics looks like in the wake of long-standing cycles of violence and more immediate atrocity. Additionally, both texts are concerned with counter-narratives specifically in relation to Buddhist doctrine, which in Sri Lanka is taken up for Sinhalese nationalist aims resulting in the ongoing marginalization of and violence against Tamil and Muslim populations.

My analysis of *The Hungry Ghosts* centers on how the protagonist, Shivan, decides to return to Sri Lanka to take care of his dying grandmother, Daya, despite the violence and loss he has suffered at her hands. I examine how his mother, Hema, shows Shivan a way out of the destructive path he was on due to his inability to forgive others their mistakes and to account for his own. She manages to teach him this partially through her return, while in Canada, to a form of Buddhism that stands in direct opposition to the ethnonationalist form of Buddhism espoused by her mother in Sri Lanka. In "All is Burning," I follow the path of Alice, a mother who modifies a Buddhist sermon when it cannot provide her solace in the midst of what she terms a "death walk" (173). She must walk through a field where 200 of the village's men lie murdered, in order to find Sena, her son-in-law. Her commitment to the task is grounded in her desire to provide some certainty for her daughter about Sena's whereabouts. I borrow from Shameem Black's notion of the crowded self to illustrate how both texts illustrate the self as porous and fluid, capable not only of change but of bridging gaps and of adapting narratives in order to ethically provide comfort and solace to those who are suffering, both on an individual and collective level. Additionally, I consider how Arasanayagam's short story makes space for a subaltern subject who remains in the sidelines in Selvadurai's novel, so as to acknowledge both the importance and difficulty that exists in reading these two works together.

Chapter Three reads two literary works, Sonali Deraniyagala's 2013 memoir *Wave* and a 2008 collection of short stories by Simon Harris and Neluka Silva titled *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami,* in order to consider how the 2004 Indian Ocean

tsunami becomes an event through which different stories surface—stories that reveal important nuances about our response to this disaster. In the tsunami, economist Sonali Deraniyagala lost her husband, Stephen Lissenburgh, her two young sons, Vikram (age 7), and Nikhil (age 5), her parents, and her friend Orlantha. *Wave* tells the story of her recovery in the years following that day, put together from pieces of writing she created at the advice of her therapist, Dr. Mark Epstein. While readers seem to want to tell a specific story about Deraniyagala and *Wave*, I consider how the memoir offers a narrative that refuses the healing arc of the grief memoir while simultaneously refusing to capitulate to the notion of Deraniyagala as a permanently wounded subject. In honoring the family she lost, Deraniyagala's memoir functions as a container that holds space for love alongside—and at times, against—catastrophic loss. The memoir presents an account of individual loss and grief that, in the context of its popular circulation, complicates how we engage and understand the person who is the subject of grief. *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami* features fourteen stories that are written alternatingly by husband and wife, Simon Harris and Neluka Silva. The stories feature a variety of characters spanning different religious, class, and ethnoracial backgrounds, but each of them considers how the tsunami coincides with or leads to a moment of personal revelation for the characters. I explore how this varied collection holds quotidian moments together with the spectacular event of the tsunami. The collection skillfully shifts the focus of the lens of trauma from the disaster event to the myriad of ways in which life continues alongside and after it. In doing so, it honors how the tsunami can and does mean differently to different individuals and communities, and it asks us to focus on

the people at the heart of the event rather than the event itself. Through these characters, the collection, rather than focusing on the shock of the tsunami alone, allows us to grasp what Neloufer de Mel calls "the production of disaster," where "prior economic, political, social, and cultural environments [can] determine how and why certain communities are exposed (or not) to greater risk when disasters occur, and carry social vulnerability that makes their capacity for recover more hazardous" ("A Grammar" 75).[21]

Chapter Four focuses on three short stories from Hasanthika Sirisena's 2016 collection, *The Other Ones: Stories*: "The Other One," "Third Country National," and "War Wounds." I focus on each story's use of metaphor to expand my frame of analysis outside of the war and tsunami to the country's present-day problems. "The Other One" narrates the story of Sebastian, a Tamil Christian living in North Carolina, USA, and enamored with cricket. I explore the gendered dynamics of Sebastian's cricket team and his claims about cricket as an equalizing force in relation to theorizations on nationalism and cricket by Sri Lankan studies scholars Qadri Ismail and Suvendrini Perera. "Third Country National" tells the story of Anura, a janitor at a U.S. air force base in Kuwait, who struggles to capture a mantis shrimp that has taken over a fish tank at the base. Anura relates the many forms of violence he attempts to escape, allowing me to analyze the way that global capitalism and the U.S. war on terror ensure that Anura's escapes remain temporary and continue to place him in immense vulnerability. In "War Wounds,"

[21] Scholars such as Mark Schuller, Charley Cray, and Claudia Felten-Biermann use the phrase "disaster after the disaster" to refer to the systems by which marginalized populations are subjected to even more vulnerability in post-disaster aid processes (Gunawardena and Schuller 18). My approach is inspired by texts such as Gunawardena and Schuller's *Capitalizing on Catastrophe* and Middleton and O'Keefe's *Disaster and Development*, both of which outline how sociopolitical infrastructures contribute to the devastating impacts of 'natural' disasters, thereby emphasizing the socially differentiated impact of natural disasters.

Anoja struggles to take care of her younger brother, Ranjith, who suffers brain damage from his time in the Sri Lankan army, and so is unable to join her husband, who has secured permanent residency in Australia. I explore how the story illustrates the multiple failures of governmental policy in Sri Lanka, specifically in relation to the care of war veterans, and more generally for the care of disabled and mentally ill persons. It also registers how the intersecting harms of patriarchy and toxic masculinity cultivated within the smaller space of the family contributes to militarism and nationalism.

In ending my dissertation with these stories, I am guided by a reminder from Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena and Kumari Jayawardena in *The Sri Lanka Papers: The Search for Justice* that we cannot consider the different kinds of violence that occur in Sri Lanka as uniquely a product of war. Rather, they must be understood as an ongoing struggle due to both the legacy of a long-standing war as well as a result of everyday (mis)understandings of and hatred towards women, LGBTQ+ people, people with mental illness and disabilities, and other marginalized communities, all of whom are seen as not deserving of rights, justice, and safety. These three stories index how different circuits of violence intersect with those that contributed to the devastation wrought by the civil war and the tsunami. These persisting and quotidian violences must be acknowledged, even as events such as the war and tsunami remain as ever-present specters in Sri Lanka. In considering the problems the country has to contend with outside of the spectacularized frames of war and disaster that make up the focus of the previous chapters, this chapter resists the idea of the event and its ability to foreclose questions about ongoing forms of violence. The precarity of marginalized groups in Sri Lanka is exacerbated by war and

disaster, but that such groups exist daily in a country that endangers them must be accounted for outside of such event contexts.

In expanding the frame to consider these more pervasive and long-standing circuits of oppression that are tangled up with issues of gender, labor, and migration, this chapter allows me to follow the lead of scholars such as Asha Nadkarni, Junaid Rana, Kumarini Silva, Lavina Dhingra Shankar, and Rajini Srikanth, who read the postcolonial alongside the diasporic to examine the local and the global together. Postcolonial and diasporic thinking provide a contrapuntal approach to the nation-centered conceptions of race and ethnicity and of home and abroad as they are represented in literary narratives. By paying attention to these nuances, I engage the ways in which the lives of resident and diasporic communities in the present are predicated on contemporary imperialism in ways that are not disconnected from the legacies of postcolonial violence. Given the current crises[22] in Sri Lanka, which appear in global media only momentarily to cheer on the spectacular images of protesters swimming in the ex-President's pool, my hope is that this dissertation can remind us why it is important to consider how we look past the immediacy of any event—wars, climate disasters, global pandemics, economic crises, and political revolutions. We exist amidst multiple and ongoing aftermaths, and my dissertation, in being written inside these aftermaths, is invested in considering how we digest the immense number of lives that are lost in various forms of immediate and slow violences, how we centre the human amidst calculations of "loss and damage,"[23] and how

[22] See Feminist Collective for Economic Justice and Sangam.
[23] See Deraniyagala's "The Human Dimension."

we ask ethical questions about these events in their immediacy, and for many years afterwards.

## Conclusion: To Insist That Nothing Go Without Saying

There are many ways to write a dissertation depending on its imagined readership. I can write in one way for my interlocutors "in the field," another for those academics who know little to nothing of Sri Lanka, and still another for those who might be victim-survivors of the country's wars, genocides, and disasters, the literary representations of which are the objects of my study. Though I will continue to struggle with the question of how to write about things like war, disaster, and violence beyond the scope of this dissertation, in this introduction I have chosen to take the easy way out by beginning with words that are not my own, but those of Ilankai Tamil American author V. V. Ganeshananthan and late Muslim Sri Lankan scholar Qadri Ismail in my epigraphs. Ganeshananthan's words inspire the title of my dissertation, and both Ganeshananthan's and Ismail's literary, scholarly, and activist work inform my awareness of and attention to how different kinds of knowledge production (including my own) tells a kind of story about the events that have taken place, and continue to take place, with relation to Sri Lanka. With a similar idea about the ways that any object of analysis is constructed by hegemonic structures, American trauma studies scholar Kalí Tal reminds us that "the responsibility of the cultural critic is to present a continuous challenge to the assumptions upon which any communal consensus is based – to insist that nothing go without saying" (5). I, too, want to "insist that nothing go without saying," and so I end this introduction

with a set of clarifications that make visible my own relationship to Western academia, and through them, my approach to the contents of this dissertation.

I was born in Wellawatte, Sri Lanka, in 1988 to Muslim parents—a mother who is Malay and a father who is Moor.[24] I grew up in Moratuwa, sheltered, to a certain degree, from the various periods of violence that were occurring, partially because we did not speak about them openly in my family. The censorship and self-censorship that Ganeshananthan mentions in the epigraph to this introduction occurs not only at the level of government and cultural production, but at the site of the family as well. Thus, I only retroactively remember staying home from school on certain days due to curfews, whispers about people being burned in tires at the neighborhood intersection and tortured at the nearby army camp, and, at one point, a close escape from a bus bomb that had exploded on the route my school van took.

A second form of this sheltering came from the fact that I consistently attended English-medium international schools in Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Dubai, where my parents had initially migrated to work in hotel and service industries following the Arab oil embargo in the 70s. By 2006, we were back in Sri Lanka, and I had obtained a two-year scholarship to Elizabeth Moir Senior School for my final years of high school. I graduated in 2008, and applied to and got rejected from several Ivy league institutions; I applied only because my classmates were doing the same—I had no conception that my application would never have made the cut at such institutions. A year later, my high school counselor, Sonia Jayasinghe, found a white, middle-class, American family who

[24] For more on these identity categories in Sri Lanka, see Ali, Hussainmiya, Mahroof, McGilvray, and Ricci.

offered to host me if I could gain admittance to and pay tuition at the local community college in Ventura, California. My parents sold our home, which was meant to be my dowry, to show the one year of community college tuition required to obtain a visa. In January 2010, I arrived in America.

After my first year at Ventura College, where I was a biochemistry major, I worked as a Supplemental Instructor at the suggestion of an English professor, and also worked at the Tutoring Center and the Reading and Writing Center to pay the rest of my tuition. I soon came to realize that I was running out of money, and would be unable to complete the units needed to finish my A.A. if I remained a science student. Knowing that I excelled in and enjoyed tutoring English, I decided to change my major to English, primarily because I would need far fewer units before I could transfer to a four-year college and complete the second half of my B.A. At CSU Channel Islands, I was a diligent English major, but was unaware of graduate school until English faculty became adamant that I apply during my last semesters, going to great lengths to foster opportunities that, once listed on my resume, would make my application legible to graduate programs. I applied not because I knew what one did at graduate school, but because I was told I would excel at it, and primarily because it would guarantee me six to seven years of my livelihood. I applied to programs that did not require the Literature GRE, for I had little knowledge of traditional U.S. and British literary canons and no money to acquire the textbooks or tutoring required to earn a high enough score.

My higher education in the U.S., therefore, only became possible only through the legacies of colonial English education in Sri Lanka, the selling of the childhood home my

parents had built after decades of labor in South West Asia, and the enduring kindness of those who offered me places to live, study, and work in the U.S. as an F1 international student for thirteen years. My entry into academia is, in these ways ways, non-traditional and accidental, secured in 2010 primarily as a means of escape from Sri Lanka. Financial precarity has been the primary factor that has shaped my educational journey while in the U.S., over and against the desire for any form of intellectual and/or theoretical expertise. As a result, I initially felt great discomfort about being situated as a "postcolonial Sri Lankan studies" scholar, a scholar studying Anglophone literature from one of the places I call home, a place whose peoples and whose violences, once I entered graduate school, became, through literature, the object of my study.

This discomfort, at least for me, became, and continues to be, a site of productive and ethical struggle. I have not been thinking about the literature or theory for longer than the past seven years—I had not even read a work of Anglophone literature until the tail end of my undergraduate schooling when Dr. Sofia Samatar gave me Michael Ondaatje's *Running with the Family*, which I promptly read and did not understand. There is much more work that I wish I had the time, money, and energy to have done in order to nuance and clarify the conversations I undertake in this project. For example, there is much left to do in expanding (or perhaps dismantling) what Sri Lankan Anglophone literature means, including acknowledging and problematizing the category of "Sri Lankan." I do not do a good enough job of this task, but would like to express the importance of the contested state of the term, given that what constitutes "Sri Lankan" can be and is understood differently by the various communities who resist the country's Sinhala-

Buddhist ethnonationalism in multiple ways. Relatedly, there are many works that I have not engaged with due to my positionality within various spaces of privilege. These include works by authors writing in languages such as Malay and Tamil, languages I no longer have fluency in.[25] Non-Anglophone writing does not have the privilege of circulating as widely as the work of some of the authors I have chosen to write about, who, aside from Jean Arasanayagam, are educated in global North universities and writing workshops and who reside in the global North either temporarily or permanently.[26] While I engage with the literature I have chosen because I believe they form a vital collection in furthering questions about thinking about what it means to live on in the wake of violence, there is more work to be done in dismantling the asymmetry of different registers of literary and cultural production that exist in relation to Sri Lanka. This kind of dismantling is happening in various kinds of research, scholarship, and creative work, and I have cited in my chapters whenever these other conversations provide expansion and clarity to aspects to which I cannot do justice at this moment. This dissertation, then, is not only a piece of knowledge that I have produced, but one through which I continue to learn what it means to move about ethically in the world, to "abide" from where I am.[27]

[25] See Muralidharan and Nazim.
[26] Though more directly thinking about language study and the "language" that is Sri Lankan English, Sivamohan's "'my teacher talks of a sri lankan english": questing the literary" brings attention to the political construction of Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan English.
[27] I use the term "abide" here as inspired by and in honor of the work and praxis of Qadri Ismail.

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## Looking For, At, and Away: Practicing a Different Kind of War Story

> Listening is … intimate, life-changing and involves an unforeseeable visceral, psychic and epistemological impact. The transformation in self and other and other others is powerful, unprepared for and does not promise a brighter future. Instead, all those gathered listen, share, exchange, get things wrong, try again and importantly keep on listening, talking and seeking out innovative forms of communication. It is all a bit queer in that the paths taken may diverge from the norm, while being haunted by what others have previously done.
>
> ~ Donna McCormack, *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing*, p. 23

### Introduction: On the Search for Motive

When Anita Pratap recalls interviewing members of the Black Tigers, the suicide division of the LTTE, she seems most struck by their lack of emotion: "I talked about childhood memories, missing their mother, giving up life's pleasures, fear of imminent death. But I got nothing. No reaction at all. They sat, still and clear-eyed, answering calmly and dispassionately" (103). Pratap also recounts the tale of a dying cadre to describe the strength of their loyalty to LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran: "With her final breath, this fatally wounded Tigress called out, not to her mother, not to her father, not even to God, but to 'Annai, Annai!'" (104).[28] It is a rare access that Prabhakaran allowed Pratap to speak to the Black Tigers in 1991. Since this exclusive interview would have been a highly mediated encounter, Pratap's explication highlights the assumption that the body language and speech of her interviewees reflects their inner emotions (or lack thereof).

This moment elucidates how conversations about the act of suicide bombing carry significant stakes. Scholars continue to grapple with how the suicide bomber, both real and imagined, asks important questions about the ethics of representation and knowledge

[28] "Annai," Tamil for "older brother," became Prabharakan's nickname (Pratap 92).

production.[29] Uncomplicated discourse around the suicide bomber tends to polarize between affirmation of their sacrifice for a larger cause or a dismissal of them as fanatical monsters lacking humanity. While Pratap's description does not quite fall into the latter category, her wonder at the LTTE cadres' presumed lack of emotion could be read as coming dangerously close to it. Pratap's own admittance—"I got nothing"—reveals, in one sense, the ways in which we might project our own desires onto suicide bombers. Her list of talking points—meant to evoke a reaction from the cadres—moves through what we might want these women to express: nostalgia about their childhood days, love for their mothers, desire for joy and pleasure, and, perhaps to ascertain that they are no different from us, a fear of what comes after death. In another sense, Pratap's phrasing suggests her own awareness that despite these provocations, the women she interviewed *chose* to refuse her coaxing. The scope of this choice and refusal is, of course, complicated given the context of the interview and the complexity of what constitutes "choice" for women and girls within landscapes of war, occupation, and militarization.

Yet the fact remains that Pratap did not get what she was searching for, and it is the ethical dimensions of this search, and its failures, that bring me to the potential of fiction, where there are similarly no guarantees of authenticity or accuracy, and to the characters that populate this chapter. The first is Yasodhara Rajasinghe, a Sinhalese Buddhist woman who narrates the majority of Nayomi Munaweera's 2014 novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, from the dual locations of Sri Lanka and the United States. Interloping into her narrative is Saraswathi, a sixteen-year-old Tamil girl living in the

[29] See Abu-Lughod, Asad, de Mel, Gowrinanthan, Hage, Herath, Mahmood, Parashar, Perera, and Rajasingham-Senanayake for such scholarship.

northern region of Sri Lanka during the war. After two Sinhalese soldiers rape Saraswathi, her mother compels her to join the LTTE. Within it, she seeks and secures for herself a place among the Black Tigers. Through Saraswathi's first-person narration, the novel imagines the personal and political history of a young girl who becomes a Black Tiger. The result is a figure who sits in deep contradiction to Pratap's portrayal: Saraswathi is far from the emotionless, reticent soldier that Pratap describes. In her final moments, when she is both violently powerful and immensely vulnerable, it is not "Annai" she thinks of, but her mother.

I then turn to the unnamed nineteen-year-old narrator of V. V. Ganeshananthan's 2010 short story "Hippocrates,"[30] whose day is interrupted by a radio news report of an attempted suicide bombing by a woman at a government office in Colombo. The narrator surmises from the reportage that the suicide bomber was her friend, Saavi, and begins to imagine the explosion and the moments leading up to it. She then recalls the day she first met Saavi when she treated Saavi's wounds after soldiers had raped her. The narrator tries to evoke from Saavi some comfort for the difficult task of treating her first rape victim. Like Pratap, the narrator does not get what she is searching for. Furthermore, the narrator's story renders Saavi's refusals in ways that are both agentive and emotional, and urges readers to complicate how we approach thinking about the act of suicide bombing.

In turning to these works, I take my first lead from Neloufer de Mel, who paraphrases Abu-Lughod to remind us that productive conversations about the suicide

[30] Ganeshananthan's 2023 novel, *Brotherless Night*, in which this short story forms a chapter, reveals this narrator's name as Sashikala Kulenthiren, or Sashi for short. Throughout this chapter, I refer to the narrator as unnamed in an attempt to honor, as much as possible, my understanding of the short story before the novel's publication.

bomber have less to do with "an emphasis on an 'authentic' subjectivity that continues to elude us (not to be conflated with her having nothing to say), or the plotting of agency that may or may not be part of her consciousness and politics." Rather, what is at stake is "how sites of power and speech produce her for the public" (*Militarizing Sri Lanka* 200). *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* and "Hippocrates" are two such sites of power and speech that produce this figure in a manner that is aware of that production and of how we respond to literary representations of this figure, and that asks what we can learn from such representations. Therefore, alongside engaging with the character in each text who becomes a suicide bomber, I examine how other characters, and sometimes the authors themselves, choose to create and imagine the subjectivities of these young women. Both texts feature characters who struggle to apprehend the woman who becomes a suicide bomber. In *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, Yasodhara's failure in this respect is perhaps more expected; she holds multiple, immense privileges in relation to the character of Saraswathi, who she comes to see as her enemy. In "Hippocrates," however, both the narrator and Saavi grew up in the same village and served the LTTE in different roles, and yet the narrator struggles with the knowledge of Saavi's choices in the aftermath of the suicide bombing.

In thinking about how both Yasodhara and the narrator of "Hippocrates" attempt to see and understand Saraswathi and Saavi respectively, I illustrate how these narratives foreground the flawed, human desires of their characters in order to suggest what these failures might reveal about our own responsibilities in attending to these stories as readers. I analyze how these texts attend to the figure of the woman militant before and

beyond the spectacular acts of suicide bombing, so as to think of her in relation to her past and to her (imagined) futures. I hope to approach her not in isolation but in relation to her loved ones and her enemies. In doing so, I illustrate how these texts demand from us a practice of care: one where we take up our ethical responsibilities as listeners and witnesses to the ongoing legacies of unfinished wars, of which the Sri Lankan civil war is only one example. These texts suggest how literature might confront the specific legacies of war while complicating how we think about the trauma of long-standing war and the quotidian effects of patriarchy and militarization more generally as they affect present day communities both within and outside Sri Lanka.

## A Complex Ethics of Recognition in Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*

In Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, its primary narrator, Yasodhara Rajasinghe, reveals the potentials and limitations of storytelling in the construction of her individual and social worlds. In this section, I consider how Yasodhara holds together the competing stories through which her family and community attempt to crystallize or reconcile ethnoreligious divisions. It is important to think about the narratives we produce around this figure because such narratives impact our ability to cultivate what Nguyen calls a "complex ethics of recognition" about how we remember and interact with those we consider our own and those we consider strangers, both during and in the aftermath of conflict. In arguing for the importance of such an ethics, Nguyen reminds us that "[w]e continue to think that those of our side are human, demanding understanding and empathy as people endowed with complexities of feeling, experience,

and perspective. Those of the other side, our enemies, or at least those unfriendly or alien to us, lack those complexities" (28). Yasodhara's story illustrates the dynamics that Nguyen theorizes, as her family privileges those considered their own, over and against those who they consider not their own. As such, Yasodhara narrates both her family's belief in Sinhalese superiority alongside her resistance to and questioning of such narratives. Despite such resistance, she still demonstrates an ethical limit when it comes to approaching the figure of the Tamil woman militant and suicide bomber, one of whom becomes responsible for the death of her sister, Lanka.

Interlopers Into History, Interlopers Into Familial Fictions

In Chapter One, the narrator begins by complicating her declaration of self: "My name is Yasodhara Rajasinghe and this is the story of my family. It is also one possible narrative of my island. But we are always interlopers into history, dropped into a story that has been going on far before we are born" (7). Consequently, Yasodhara relates the history of the past two generations of her family, showing us how their lives, and their stories about their lives, have come to shape her own. Her narration repeatedly makes visible the storied process through which we establish and negotiate an understanding of who we love versus those we fear. Nguyen reminds us that our relationships with family, friends, and countrymen does not occur naturally: "these bonds must be made by us with people who are originally other to us. We solidify these bonds over time with stories we tell ourselves ... But under the sway of patriotism and nationalism, we forget that we have learned how to remember these others, that our love is acquired rather than spontaneous" (55). It is these "stories we tell ourselves," stories that have been forgotten, and the

impact of such telling and forgetting on her understanding of others, that Yasodhara relates. Her narration privileges her struggles as a Sinhalese woman and those of her family, and it illustrates both their discrimination of and compassion towards their Tamil counterparts.

Irene Visser and Heidi van den Heuvel-Disler consider how families and their fictions "form the links in the chain between the past and the present and the future, in an ongoing narrative of both individualistic concerns and pursuits, but also, and perhaps more importantly, of the larger interests of the community and social environment." Yasodhara traces a linking between past, present, and future by illustrating the space of family as "transmitting and mediating the memories, mores, and myths of the preceding generations and the community" (Visser and Heuvel-Disler 5). Indeed, the investments of Yasodhara's middle-class Sinhalese grandparents uphold notions of colorism, casteism, and Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. After her husband's death, Yasodhara's maternal grandmother, Sylvia Sunethra, is loath to rent out the upstairs of her house to the Shivalingham family because they are Tamil, succumbing only out of financial need. Yasodhara marks this moment as the "beginning of what we will come to call the Upstairs-Downstairs, Linga-Singha wars" (36). The household's domestic drama over mangoes, music, and morals comes to reflect some of the deeper conflicts of the nation. While the novel upholds a Sinhala-Tamil binary that does need to be complicated,[31] I trace how the novel depicts the undermining of this specific constructed ethnoracial

[31] For scholarship that outlines how the Sinhala-Tamil binary makes invisible other communities impacted by the civil war, see Ali, Arudpragasam, Imtiyaz, Jayasuriya, McGilvray, Saroor, Shah and Jayasinghe, Sivamohan,

division through storytelling, not only because the realm of storytelling is taken up as a response to the trauma and violence of war, but also because it teaches us how we, as readers, might account for the limitations of such projects.

This undermining is visible when what Visser and van den Heuvel-Disler call "individualistic concerns and pursuits" come up against "the larger interests of the community and social environment" (5), an opposition occurring most directly when the teenagers who will become Yasodhara's parents, and their siblings, fall in love with people they are not supposed to establish kinship with. Sylvia Sunethra is infuriated when her son, Ananda, falls in love with a Burgher girl while studying in England, who he eventually marries. Her daughter, Visaka, has a secret romance with Ravan, the Tamil teenager from Upstairs, but initially declines his proposal because her mother would never approve (43). When she changes her mind, it is too late: a heartbroken Ravan denies her and later marries a Tamil woman whom the author does not name. Visaka eventually marries Nishan, a Sinhalese man, and each couple lives in their section of the Upstairs-Downstairs household. Visaka and Ravan's wife become friends, brought together in the pains of labor and motherhood. Their children grow up hearing their mothers "chatting in a mixture of Tamil, Sinhala, and English": Yasodhara and Shiva, Sinhala and Tamil, are thus "twinned from birth" (61).

Sylvia Sunethra is first to materialize division between the two friends when she slaps Shiva after hearing him teach Yasodhara Tamil. Yasodhara recalls: "It was the first time we knew without question that we were different, separate, and that this difference was as wide as the ocean" (62-3). For Yasodhara, Sylvia Sunethra conjures an oceanic

difference between her and her friend, both of whom consider their friendship the most natural thing. That the differences they absorb had to be taught reveals the shaky ground on which such teachings stand, and Yasodhara soon voices doubt about such arbitrarily constructed differences. When Sylvia Sunethra tells Yasodhara not to get too fond of Shiva—"Can't you see, child? They're darker. They smell different. They just aren't like us," Yasodhara asks, "What has he done?" before adding, "Anyway, he's not as dark as Mala Aunty, so that dark-skinned thing can't be right" (74).

Yasodhara's memories of the anti-Tamil pogrom of July 1983 further illustrate the constructed nature of ethnic purity as an organizing principle. Sylvia Sunethra scolds the man who inquires about a Tamil family living with her, using "a gaze that does something to him, reminds him that before this business with the Tamils, there were other, older differences, distinctions of blood and caste that would have made his ancestors drop their eyes before her" (83). With her privilege as an older, upper caste Sinhalese woman, Sylvia Sunethra "for three days turns away the mob by the sheer force of her will" (84), while around them houses burned and Tamil families fled, were hidden, or faced injury and death. During the pogrom, Yasodhara's aunt Mala goes into labor. On route to the hospital, Mala's husband Anuradha stops the car when an injured Tamil schoolboy falls upon its hood, chased by Sinhalese men. Anuradha leaves the car and places himself in front of the boy, interjecting: "This child. He has done nothing" (86). The men kill both Anuradha and the boy, and Mala watches as her husband dies in an attempt to protect not a loved one, but a boy he does not know.

The violence that affects Yasodhara's family finds its way into her individual life long after her uncle Ananda sponsors her family to come to the U.S. following the 1983 pogrom. As an adult, she finds that her family's outward movement cannot evade collective trauma, and so she gradually turns back towards Sri Lanka at her sister Lanka's request, where she encounters a limit to her understanding of collective trauma, especially as experienced by a Tamil girl like Saraswathi. But as a teenager in the U.S., Yasodhara learns that a civil war has begun in Sri Lanka, and of her family's complicity through their monetary contributions to the Sri Lankan army (124). A young girl repeatedly begins to visit her dreams:

> She stands before me and her large, bruised eyes do not leave mine. When she unpins the sari fold at her shoulder and pulls it away from her, I see sunset-colored bruises on her delicate clavicles. When she undoes her sari blouse, I see the grenades tucked like extra breasts under her own. It is grotesque. I wake trembling, and her eyes stay with me for hours. (125)

This girl makes silent but potent demands of Yasodhara: she holds Yasodhara's gaze through the dream and for hours after she awakens, and she reveals her hurt through her bruises but also her ability to kill through the grenades she is carrying, making both no longer "secret wound[s]" (121) but openly shared representations of her grievances. This dream ends Part One of the novel, pausing Yasodhara's narrative. Munaweera's decision to have the novel open and close with Yasodhara is complicated by the appearance, more than halfway through the book, of Saraswathi, its second narrator. Though Saraswathi's first-person narration does not take up the same space in the novel as Yasodhara's, it manages to attend to Saraswathi's life before and beyond the confines of her final moments.

Inventories of/as Knowledge

Saraswathi begins Part Two with a story of her immediate family, a story peppered with absences: of her three brothers, of friends and children in the playground, of prawns in the lake. Unlike Yasodhara, who has experienced long periods of peace and prosperity, Saraswathi cannot remember extended kinship networks. When her father tells her the names and stories of neighbors whose houses now lie abandoned, Saraswathi nods but reveals to herself, and to us, "But I remember none of these people. I remember nothing from the time before people started dying" (137). When she encounters victims of the war, Saraswathi employs and complicates what Francois Debrix and Alexander Barder call "an ethics of inventorying the scattered" (129). Debrix and Barder propose this ethic as a way to think critically about violence and horror within biopolitical frames of representability, but I am interested in how Saraswathi performs this inventorying quite literally, in response to materially confronting scenes of violence. When she sees a "lamp-posted" man's body in the village market, she describes it:

> I am overtaken by the smell of shit and death before I see it. A man's body sagging forward, held against a lamppost by arms tied behind and a thin piece of wire that bites into the mottled scarlet skin of his neck. Popeyed, open-mouthed, as if he had been taken by surprise last night, while eating with his family, or maybe later while walking outside to the toilet.
>
> A wooden tablet balances sideways on his stomach, hung from the knotted black string around his neck. It lists, in careful chalk letters, the crimes for which this justice has been enacted. Under that, his intestines burst forth, like an intricate and exuberant flower. Flies buzz within the coils. (139)

Saraswathi's listing of what she encounters first—"the smell of shit and death"—and what has been done to the man make up an ethical "inventorying" in response to the mutilated body before her. Her attention to the minor details makes her description matter

of fact, except for when she nestles within it her visions of what quotidian things the man might have been engaged in when captured. Here Saraswathi departs from Debrix and Barder's ethic, where "restoring a unity or a uniqueness, whether human or not, is in no way the objective" (130). Saraswathi, through her imagination, *does* restore the tortured body before her to its unity, granting the dead man a memory of him as he might have lived.

There is a progression in her inventorying as on closer inspection, Saraswathi realizes that she knows the man: "I make myself look more closely at the slightly squashed tomato face. It is my friend Yalini's father" (140). By forcing herself to look even closer, she recognizes the man and is able to honor his connection to a family that now attempts to remain whole while they attempt to escape without their father. Saraswathi acknowledges a scattering that has befallen this family: "I know that I won't see [Yalini] ever again. That even now, she and whoever's left of her family are running, out in the open land, like animals scrambling for whatever shelter they can find" (140). Her inventorying has lead her, almost mathematically, to a kind of knowledge—"I know"—as she imagines the family in search of safety. But she is straying farther now from Debrix and Barder's definition of the ethics of inventorying the scattered, which, in order to expand the confines of our disciplinary thinking about violence and horror, refuses to return the scattered body to uniqueness and individuality. Saraswathi's form of inventorying reminds us of the material stakes of such an ethics. Giving up the uniqueness and wholeness of the human body might be productive within theoretical conversations regarding the conceptualization of biopolitical notions of the human, but

for a character who directly confronts or survives violence, the ethical act might lie in wanting to remember and bury people as whole, unique, and named human beings.

In her acts of inventorying, Saraswathi also complicates and resists notions of unknowability that persist on from traditional trauma theory. The idea of unknowability is grounded in Freud's suggestion that a bodily threat is only recognized by the consciousness "*one moment too late*" (qtd. in Caruth 25). This notion of belatedness requires the presupposition that bodily harm comes to a person in a sudden, unexpected moment. Such a claim might describe the minds of people privileged enough to live in a world of relative safety, but this condition fails to describe Saraswathi, who is aware of multiple, constant threats to her life. Her narration intertwines life closely with death, and in her response to this intimacy emerges one way in which she resists the claim of the trauma paradox where "the experience of [trauma] is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life" (Caruth 25). Saraswathi survives precisely by confronting the various possibilities for her own death and the death of those around her. Her approach to inventorying the scattered supports her in this quest for survival, by reminding her that behind the quotidian acts of daily living lurk the possibilities of violent torture and death. She delivers what Nguyen calls true war stories that are "capacious enough to include the blood and guts as well as the boring and the quotidian. True war stories acknowledge war's true identity, which is that while war is hell, war is normal, too. War is both inhuman and human, as are its participants" (231).

"But here, Amma's voice is loud and clear."

Saraswathi's narrative highlights the human and inhuman aspects of both war and its participants simultaneously, first through the violence to which she is subjected and then through the violence she commits. The novel contextualizes these acts as occurring within a landscape of war and sexual trauma that is not unconnected to the legacies of colonialism. Before Yasodhara begins Chapter One, a description of a "retreating Englishman" (6) points to Sri Lanka's colonial history. Tamara Herath explains how the notion of Tamil women's bodies as sites of purity and honor were transplanted from Victorian notions of purity and morality, "with the bodies of women being turned into sites of male moral consciousness" (49). This embodied legacy of colonial contact—another of which is the civil war itself—becomes vital to a nationalist project that "renders the male as the author and subject of the nation, while the female stands for the nation itself" (de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative* 2-3). When two Sinhala soldiers capture Saraswathi while she is home alone, it is under the guise of interrogating her and her brothers' involvement in the LTTE. In repeatedly calling her a "*Tiger bitch*" (152) they bolster themselves to act with impunity under the protection of the Sinhala state. Saraswathi describes the soldiers as a "many-clawed, many-toothed beast" (152), linking their violence to her description of the violence of war itself: "Sometimes I get this breathless feeling that the war is a living creature, something huge, with a pointed tongue and wicked claws" (130). Consequently, I want to problematize scholarly claims[32] that suggest that rape or the loss of loved ones are personal/private motivations that are

[32] See Heidemann, Jayasuriya, and Meegaswatte.

removed from or lessen a subject's political motivations. Since the existence of Sinhalese soldiers in Saraswathi's village, the loss of her brothers, and the loss of her community's ability to live safely and securely are direct results of the civil war, I find no clear separation between the personal response to sexual violation and the political conditions that engender such violence. Rather, Saraswathi's political ideology is co-constitutive with her experiences as a raced and gendered subject. The sexual violence she experiences as a result of her subject position are not additional motivations to her political ones, but rather are inseparable from each other.

Saraswathi herself contextualizes her individual trauma within the collective grievances of her community. While held captive by the soldiers, she contemplated those others who had suffered like her: "I know other people have been hurt in this room. Many have died" (153). While the soldiers rape her, she imagines herself as a crane: "So high and so far away, reveling in the freedom of air against my body, cavorting in the pleasure of it, while far, far below, far away, unimaginable things are happening to the girl I used to be" (153). In contrast to the literal plane journey that Yasodhara's family takes, Saraswathi's flight must remain metaphorical. It takes her high enough to escape both the room she is in and the militarized landscape of war that has impinged on her life. In the aftermath, Saraswathi believes she can find solace at home, but while her mother attends to her immediate wounds and subsequent nightmares, home cannot provide sanctuary in a space where women's worth is tied to their sexual virtue.[33] After sexual violation, "women become socially stigmatized as polluted beings that do not deserve care and

[33] See Mukherjee for a discussion of unhomeliness in Munaweera's fiction.

respect" (Herath 128) and are rendered abject. Saraswathi sees this process occur with her friend Parvathi who is ostracized after soldiers rape her, and who takes her own life by jumping into a well.

The stigma of rape similarly alienates Saraswathi from her family and community. The village schoolteacher, Miss Rajasingham, is the lone skeptic to Saraswathi's mother's assertion that her daughter is "only a little sick these days" (156): "She says even if something has happened, it is alright. I must return to school immediately, start studying for the teacher's examinations …. She will help me catch up" (157). Miss Rajasingham's promise is unfeasible for a community that shuns girls who have survived rape, and that cannot even speak the word. Once "something has happened," it certainly is *not* alright, despite Miss Rajasingham's attempts to make it so. Saraswathi is too ashamed to face her teacher and eventually surmises "that the Teaching Certificate has slipped through [her] fingers" (159).

Before the soldiers raped Saraswathi, her mother had vowed that the LTTE would not take her daughter. Like Miss Rajasingham's statement, this promise is incapable of being borne out. In a village whose infrastructure is compromised by war and patriarchal norms, her mother is unable to change what it means to survive rape. She eventually tells Saraswathi that she must "go to the training camp. Learn to fight. Become a hero" (159). Saraswathi's pleas do little against her mother's logic of survival: "What will you do here? What man will take what the soldiers have spoiled? Who will give their son for your sister? If you don't go, you will ruin us all. … You must go. It is the only way" (159-60). Saraswathi approaches their well and ponders suicide as "one way out,

Parvathi's way" (160). However, Saraswathi instead simply bathes herself so her mother can cut her hair before her father takes her to the LTTE camp. In a moment that highlights the inhuman conditions in which a family must make such decisions, the novel highlights the utterly mundane, human act of Saraswathi bathing before her mother cuts her hair. These are the quotidian bargains necessary for a monumental undertaking: a sixteen-year-old who cannot wage war with her too-long hair.

At the LTTE camp, Saraswathi is taught hatred: "I learn the ways in which [the Sinhalese] hate us. I had not thought that such ferocious hatred could exist. But the memory of bullet-riddled cement walls, a perfect square of sky, reminds me that hatred is real" (181). In choosing to remember the "bullet-riddled cement walls" and "a perfect square of sky," Saraswathi refers to the individual violence she faced alongside the larger destruction of home, space, and mind caused by war. Before the soldiers took her to that house, fighting had torn the roofs off and splattered the walls with bullets. The expansiveness of Saraswathi's language and connections as she relates these lessons of hatred suggests that she complicates them. Rather than cultivate hatred solely towards the Sinhala state and people, Saraswathi directs it in an additional direction: towards the enterprise of war more generally, because she understands that war causes various harms to all people.

Saraswathi renders her belief in the fight for Eelam in similarly complex ways. She is inspired by Prabhakaran's speech about how the seeds of the LTTE's fight will grow into a luxurious tree, but ponders, "And yet, it is a tree that feeds upon blood at its roots; I wonder about the taste of its fruit" (191). Nonetheless, she writes to Prabhakaran

repeatedly, declaring her intent to be a Black Tiger. She is ecstatic once chosen, but soon notes a transformation in her nightmares, where the soldiers raping her morph into Prabhakaran: "The dreams come every night now. And it is always Him pushing and breaking into me" (194). That these two forms of militaristic, patriarchal violence—the Sinhalese soldiers and the LTTE leader—become condensed in Saraswathi's dreamwork reveals her knowledge of their connection.

Fourteen months after her arrival, Saraswathi accepts a vial of cyanide around her neck from the Commandant. Meant to be bitten into in case of enemy capture, it is a sign that the LTTE combatant is superior for having conquered the fear of physical death. Saraswathi claims, "I am fearless. I am free. Now, I am the predator" (185). But this claim of predation follows her articulation of two simple, human desires: to be free of fear, to be free. In her new role, she finds freedom in acts of violence that she compares to dance: "It is just like dancing under the mango tree, the weight of the machete pulling my body as I cut and weave and twirl through flesh. Flying blood splashes across my face, my mouth. I have learned to lick it from my lips. Now I am not just dancing a part. Now I *am* the Shiva Nataraja, the dancing face of death" (186). Saraswathi becomes the Lord of Dance, Shiva Nataraja himself: human, inhuman, and a god. In taking up the role of an LTTE combatant, Saraswathi emerges as a subject constituted in and by various historical and political forces around her, but who illustrates her agency within structures that severely limit her choices. In doing so, she illustrates moments of "ambivalent empowerment" that I have lingered on because they "challenge our certain certainties about war and peace" (Rajasingham-Senanayake 129).

The complexity of Saraswathi's subject position within a structure of simultaneous empowerment and containment[34] is illustrated in the moment of her explosion out of the narrative. On board the bus, strapped with explosives, Saraswathi is excited at how she "will cut and lacerate and denotate" as she will "explode in a hundred directions" in her mission to kill a Tamil politician sympathetic to the Sinhalese government. She is one stop away from her destination when Sinhalese soldiers board the bus, resulting in an immediate and crippling fear in her. She is transported mentally to "another place, a bullet-splattered cement room open to a perfect square of sky," which signals her flashbacks to the scene of the rape. Her narrative begins to fragment: "I cannot tell where the wall ends and the sky begins – *Tiger bitch* – and … where I begin or end, and I am tearing into shreds … *Tiger bitch Tiger bitch Tiger bitch!*" (216). She detonates the explosives, and since she does so before she reaches her target, Saraswathi does not fulfil the mission for which she was so proud to be chosen.

Her early triggering of the explosives, brought on by the presence of the soldiers, reveals that during her most destructive act, Saraswathi is also deeply vulnerable. In her last moments, she is more than "either martyr or mass murderer" (121).[35] Her last words in the novel are presented in italics:

> *Blinding light, cleansing pain, and I am dancing under the mango tree, branches spreading tenderly over my head, sunshine pouring through the leaves like emerald-flavored rain. Somewhere, there is anguish, ripping metal, and unbearable shrieking, keening, moaning, fierce shouting, chaos, and scurrying*

[34] de Mel explicates how, within militant groups like the LTTE, "there is a containment of women … at the very moment of their most innovative empowerment" (*Women and the Nation's Narrative* 212).
[35] Ransirini articulates this moment as one of "multiple becomings in militancy, South Asian dance, and suicide bombing [that] produce[s] an explosive excess: a violent dissolution of the self that explodes in the face of current ethical and juridical boundaries and is at the same time thrown into crisis by its constitutive killing" (21).

> *feet. But here, Amma's voice is loud and clear. She calls out the steps to the slap of her fingers on her palm and my feet move. The Shiva Nataraja is watching and I am dancing, swirling and stamping. My fingers opening like the petals of a lotus bud. My eyes long and fish tailed. My braid whipping past me in a blur. I am in motion. Unstoppable and Immaculate*. (216)

In this elsewhere, it is her mother's voice, not the weight of the machete or the bomb itself, that moves Saraswathi's body. Multiple, co-constitutive forms of violence—colonial, patriarchal, and militaristic—have stopped Saraswathi's dreams as she lived "inside this war" (130), a space where justice and a just life are foreclosed to her. Saraswathi's desire to be "immaculate"—to be unstained and free from sin—is fulfilled in death, specifically a death as a Black Tiger, that releases her from the earthly burdens that should never have been hers to carry. That dance becomes a conduit to establish some distance between war and peace implores us to consider what it takes to create a world where Saraswathi might have existed without the threat of any violence whatsoever: a world where the sounds of war are not only distanced by her mother's voice, but where they are non-existent, where she can truly be "*Unstoppable*." In pushing the limits of available avenues of discourse for such a character, the novel maintains a heteroglossic capacity to draw on the discourses of terrorism studies, trauma theory, feminist studies, and postcolonial theory to construct Saraswathi as a complex figure who demands that we expand theoretical frames out of their usual foci. This image of Saraswathi continues to remind us of the challenges of thinking about representations of life and death, of self and other, of violence and love that move together in one space, even if that space cannot hold for too long.

Voice, Space, and Dramatic Irony

Saraswathi's death ends her narrative, and the rest of the novel returns us to Yasodhara. There are stakes to this shift in perspective. Munaweera, a Sri Lankan-American Sinhalese author writing in English and situated in the U.S., has penned the narration of an Eelam Tamil girl living in the north-east of Sri Lanka. Munaweera understands the privilege that allows her to safely write this character, a safety not afforded to many Tamil survivors of the war ("Nayomi Munaweera: A Reading and Conversation"). Simultaneously, the remainder of the novel reminds us that "speaking for others is a simple and insufficient notion" (Nguyen 222) by being unevenly split between its two narrators: Yasodhara has the prologue and all of Part One to herself, while Saraswathi has only chapters eight and ten to herself. Chapters eleven and twelve intersperse both narrators' voices. Once Saraswathi detonates the explosives in chapter twelve, Yasodhara tells the remainder of the story of that day and finishes with an epilogue that maps out the years that follow. The interweaving of these two narrative strands, first at the level of the chapter, and then within the paragraphs of each chapter, elucidates how the lives of these two characters who are born into different circumstances were initially disconnected but come to be entwined. But there remains the difficulty of ethical recognition: though Yasodhara dreams of the existence of young women like Saraswathi, her dreaming cannot change the conditions under which Saraswathi must attempt to live and under which she dies. The recognition and exploration of these limits that exist in Yasodhara's frameworks, and ours, form part of the larger ethical work of the novel.

When Yasodhara arrives at the scene of the bomb in search of her sister, Lanka, she sees Saraswathi's decapitated head. She describes it as "a round object, atilt, like a child's toy dropped and forgotten" before identifying that it belongs to a person: "A woman's head. On the ground. Trailing tendrils of black hair and wisps of ribboned flesh. Translucent jellyfish tentacles dripping deepest scarlet, eyes gazing up into the sunlit sky, dust on her features. …. vanquished Medusa, death dealer, serial killer …" (219). This description mirrors her description of Lanka's body at the mortuary: "The mass of her hair. Her face. A bruise on the left temple like a huge crimson rose. Eyes focused on the ceiling in wonder, mouth puckered. …. Dust on her features, sediment on the whites of her eyes, the wet shine of them dulled, immobile. Transformed into stone" (222). Yasodhara's descriptions pit Saraswathi—"vanquished Medusa"—against Lanka—"[t]ransformed into stone"—even as she registers the similarities of their bodies in death.[36]

What Yasodhara cannot know, however, is that Saraswathi had noted another girl at the bus stop: "[L]ike me, she is an imposter from somewhere else" (214). She acknowledges how familiar the girl looks: "The angles of her face, as if I have seen them over and over and over again, and she must feel this, too, because she looks my way often" (215). They exchange glances through several stops. When the soldiers board the bus and Saraswathi panics, she manages to notice, "From the corner of my eye, I see the girl start towards me and I know her, but it is too late and my fingers are reaching down, feeling for the wires, and now it really is too late…" (216). The narrative does not

[36] See Ransirini and Wanninayake for discussions of the references to Medusa in this scene.

explicitly signal that this girl that Saraswathi sees on the bus is Lanka. Later, we learn that Lanka usually takes a bus home from work when Yasodhara hears of the bombing and thinks: "Her bus, coming this way, after work" (218). Suspending the ambiguity of the moment, I want to consider that the girl Saraswathi sees *is* Lanka.[37] Such a possibility asks us to undercut the division that Yasodhara puts up between Saraswathi and Lanka. In Lanka's "too late" reach towards Saraswathi, we instead witness a moment of missed connection located just outside the framework of war and violence that catches up to both women in the imminent explosion. Within this fleeting space between the two women, a moment that Yasodhara cannot witness and does not imagine, we are left with a desire for Saraswathi and Lanka to have met differently.

There is more that Yasodhara is unable to know. Years later, in America, Yasodhara and Shiva are married and have a daughter, named Samudhra. Samudhra paints like her aunt Lanka used to, and wants to learn to dance bharatnatyam, the dance that Saraswathi's mother teaches. Samudhra is adept at it, so that, unbeknownst to Yasodhara, Samudhra has traces of Saraswathi in her. Yasodhara also notes how Samudhra's teacher pushes "down [Samudhra's] shoulders so that she must dance from an even lower squat" (228). This exact phrase was spoken by Saraswathi when she describes how she helps the girls who learn dance from her mother. Yasodhara is speaking words previously uttered by the woman she considers an enemy. It is we, the readers, who must consider what it means to hear Saraswathi's words uttered in

[37] See Piyasena for a discussion of dopplegangers in this scene and in the novel more generally.

Yasodhara's voice. We must carry the knowledge that one of Saraswathi's beloved passions lives on in Samudhra.

Even later, Yasodhara and Shiva hear the official declaration of the war's end. Yasodhara wonders how to mourn for the 80,000 people lost, before stating: "I dream of the one I can give a name to: my sister, Lanka Rajasinghe. And that other, her unnamed, unloved assassin" (237). She does not count Saraswathi among those lost to war, for she can only encounter Saraswathi as an anonymous, unloved enemy. She is unable, ultimately, to develop a complex ethics of recognition with regards to Saraswathi. Though Yasodhara keeps Lanka and Saraswathi separate, one deserving of mourning and the other not, we are tasked with mourning them both. We know Saraswathi's name and her story, and we know that, in fact, she was deeply loved. It is this love that she returns to at the moment of her death and that renders her humanity and inhumanity at once. It is a moment that refuses to freeze Saraswathi's final act as one that highlights only her capacity for inhumanity. In setting this violent act beside her love for her family and her desire for freedom, the novel moves us to an elsewhere that we must continue to ethically contemplate, theoretically and materially.

**Care, Listening, and Refusal in V. V. Ganeshananthan's "Hippocrates"**

The demands that *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* makes of its readers are arguably subtle. The secrets that Yasodhara is unaware of, left behind for a conscientious reader, could go unnoticed by the casual reader not in search of such ghostly traces. Such a reader might finish the novel and find, in its final images of waves washing away Samudra's footsteps, an uncomplicated closure unbefitting the lingering legacy of the

war. I now turn to a text whose unnamed narrator speaks to the reader in a much more explicit manner, making her requests harder to miss or ignore. “I want you to imagine this,” demands the unnamed narrator of V. V. Ganeshananthan’s 2010 short story, “Hippocrates,” as she visualizes the moment that a woman suicide bomber attempts to detonate the explosives strapped to her body. The narrator begins this visualization after hearing a news report of the attempted suicide bombing, which takes place at a government office in Colombo, Sri Lanka. As the “voice on the radio” delivers the news, the narrator interrupts this reportage by imagining the ordinary moments before the explosion and then the explosion itself. As the narrator arrives at the moment of detonation, she invites us along: “I want you to imagine this, as I did when I heard that: the bomb blew up, but not completely, not enough to kill them quickly as she had intended.” She proceeds to describe the deathly dance taking place between the woman, who tries to finish her mission despite the bomb’s faulty wiring, and the two security guards trying to stop her. When “the voice on the radio” reports that the woman’s pregnant belly was real and not a cover for the explosives, the narrator vomits as she realizes that the woman was a friend named Saavi: “I knew how she had become pregnant; I had to tell her that she was. And I knew the bomber had to be her. Anyone but Saavi would have faked it.”

The narrator then recalls that Saavi was the first rape victim she had ever treated at a medical tent outside an LTTE camp in their hometown of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Her recollection of this first meeting forms the second half of the story. Before she describes that meeting, she warns her readers: “I want you to understand: I was not born to fight for

a political cause. I did not feel chosen. And this woman was not born this way. She was not chosen. She was born in a village in Jaffna, and soldiers raided her house, and she was gangraped, and she watched the men who raped her kill her four brothers. I want you to understand: this is not an excuse, or an explanation. It is a fact." What does it mean, then, to attempt to understand the catalogue of violences listed by the narrator of "Hippocrates" *as fact*—rather than as excuse or explanation—for the political act of suicide bombing? How can we, as readers and scholars, respond ethically to this demand? These questions, that are at once about our practices of reading and scholarship and about the ethics of representation, form the basis of my exploration.

The narrator's simultaneous invitation and warning makes "Hippocrates" into what Donna McCormack calls a "queer postcolonial text," one that can "reach to bodies to explore epistemologies that undo the colonial endeavour to gaze at, categorize, own, and catalogue things and people" and that instead offers "an invitation to the reader—a demand and a responsibility placed on the reader—to respond and thus act upon the narrative" (5-6). In this section, I consider how we might respond to and act upon the narrator's story and the stories contained within it through McCormack's lens of queer postcoloniality, which "refers not only or simply to the presence of evidently 'gay' characters," but also "examines how reading itself is reconfigured in texts that call upon the reader to take responsibility for the stories being told and the livability of marginalized being" (5). I examine how not only reading, but *theorizing*, is reconfigured for me as I try to take responsibility for the stories that the narrator and Saavi relate from positions of marginality. Consequently, I begin my analysis of "Hippocrates" not at the

moment of violence into which its narrator invites us. Rather, I turn to the epigraph that begins the story to guide my gaze: “Pain informs. Pain draws a map. Doctors resolve to relieve pain, but pain is information, and to lose it is to lose something valuable.” The narrator speaks these words in the second half of the story, but in making them the epigraph, Ganeshananthan ensures that they frame how we read the first half of the story before it even begins. One way of reading this epigraph, then, is as a map of where we might begin: at the source of Saavi’s pain, rather than at its spectacular effect—the suicide bombing.

As such, I look first at the second half of the story, when the narrator recalls having met Saavi after soldiers have raped her. In doing so, I hope to delay my entry into the spectacularized moment of violence that takes apart Saavi’s body. Instead, I sit with Saavi as the narrator did in their first meeting: in the aftermath of rape, another form of both ordinary and militarized violence, as she attempts to carefully put Saavi’s body back together. In looking around the moment of suicide bombing rather than directly at it, I foreground an approach to care and listening that sits outside Euro-American understandings of pain, agency, and trauma. I take inspiration from scholars situated in postcolonial studies, trauma studies, and medical anthropology to help me understand how these two characters enact care within a landscape of war and militarization where no one is left unharmed, and when no “expert” can offer aid or protection. As they trouble the relationship between the trauma victim and the trauma witness, and between physician and patient, they also extend a critique of war and the ordinary violences of patriarchy, militarization, and ethnonationalism that uphold it. Finally, in attending to the

story's formal organization to see how it tells a different kind of war story, I argue for how our practices of reading and scholarship can better honor stories about the impacts of war and militarization.

To Care on Behalf of Another

The narrator's description of meeting Saavi maps out both the larger gendered sociopolitical relations surrounding them and her attunement to Saavi's individual experience. The narrator notes: "She did not tell me what had happened to her; the sentry who brought her in did so that she did not have to repeat herself." She admires the sentry, a classmate of one of Saavi's brothers, for this act: "He spoke more calmly and professionally about what had happened to her than I could have managed myself, if I had already known her." The sentry performs an act of care, relieving Saavi of the burden of having to repeat what the soldiers did to her. The narrator describes that the sentry had known Saavi from his village "from before the soldiers came to keep peace and to rape women," linking the three of them through the shared experiences and knowledge of growing up in a war.[38] With these simple facts, she outlines interpersonal relationships and a sociopolitical timeline, turning her recollection into what Nguyen calls a "true war story," one that "should also tell of the civilian, the refugee, the enemy, and, more importantly, the war machine that encompasses them all" (224). Nguyen notes how the most common war stories in America usually feature the soldier and prefer to leave to the

[38] The phrase "keep peace" suggests a reference to the Indian Peace Keeping Forces that were deployed in Sri Lanka in 1987 following the Indo- Lanka Accord. The IPKF withdrew in 1980 having not only failed in its mission of "keeping peace" but leaving behind a trail of human rights abuses. See Rubin and Ghosh.

margins how both the extreme violence of rape and the banality of the everyday are constitutive of war (229).

This war story, on the other hand, has as its center a civilian and her medic, the latter of whom displays a great deal of what she considers to be professional ineptitude. The narrator acknowledges that she remembers Saavi because she was the first rape victim that she had ever treated, and that, in retrospect, the care she administered is different to what she provides in her current job as an emergency room physician: "Back then, in Tiger territory, treating girls from the villages, I did not have rape kits. I did not know that there was an order, a procedure, to the cataloguing of a body that has suffered this most particular trauma; I did not know that there is a script of things that are proper to say and to do." Her repetition of all she was lacking—"I did not have," "I did not know"—suggests how badly she wishes she had possessed these "proper" forms of guidance. Without them, she was left to improvise in response to her patient's needs, all the while referring to herself as a "half-doctor," "a medic," and as "not yet a doctor." The narrator's lack of technical and medical knowledge helps remind readers that Saavi is a person, not merely a patient waiting to be diagnosed. As readers, we watch a map unfold of both Saavi's pain at physical violation and the narrator's discomfort at feeling inadequately trained.

While the narrator does not provide psychiatric care that is institutionally legible or sanctioned, her presence as a young girl who shares similarities with Saavi adds an important psychological element to the medical attention she provides. In place of "a script of things," she attempts to prioritize listening to her patient, which materializes in a

form of care that ties her intimately to the many forms of distress Saavi expresses. This reorientation indicates why the story is titled "Hippocrates," a reference to the relationship between doctor and patient and the medical oath. While the story is thematically about Saavi and the suicide bombing, it also theorizes about the ethics and limits of medical care. As such, it is not *only* Saavi's distress that the narrator is attuned to; she is also deeply aware of Saavi's beauty and imagined future. It is the narrator's ability to hold these multiple aspects together that I examine next.

In relating the story of how she followed her intuition, the narrator first locates Saavi's survival within the intergenerational and communal scripts that warn girls of the ever-present threat of rape and its socially constructed meanings: "This was what our mothers had warned us about: men and their desires, men and their wills, men and their bodies encroaching on ours. Some man had taken everything inside her house that was sacred; some man had taken everything inside her that she thought sacred." These lines remind the reader that the sexual violence that Saavi faces is not an aberration but a quotidian tool of patriarchy, pervasive enough that knowledge of it has been repeated, handed down from mother to daughter for generations. What the narrator expresses here in the collective voices of "our mothers" is also a true war story because it acknowledges the ways in which war is both extraordinarily violent as well as boringly quotidian, taking place not only on the battlefield but also in our homes (Nguyen 231). The narrator locates this script within the mother-daughter relationship and reaches for it now to help her attend to her first rape survivor. Although the use of the collective pronouns—"us" and "ours"—binds the narrator, Saavi, and their mothers together against the violence of men,

the narrator simultaneously resists these socially constructed ways of understanding rape: "She was wrong, of course; she had not lost her value. But we were not in a world that knew that. Even I, the medic, the half-doctor, did not know enough to say that." The narrator's knowledge that Saavi's worth is not tied to her virginity or virtuousness is quickly rendered powerless against the reality of the world in which they exist, a world where the narrator's half-prestigious titles—"the medic, the half-doctor"—cannot change what it means for Saavi to be a survivor of rape.

Against the strength of such dictates, the narrator proceeds to care for Saavi as if she might be able to change the consequences of her life and future, enacting the knowledge that surviving rape does not take away one's value. She befriends Saavi and treats her as she deserves to be treated—with kindness and carefulness. Therefore, alongside all that the narrator claims she did not have or did not know, I examine what she *does* provide Saavi with. First, she performs a cataloguing of what she notices on Saavi's face:

> I was too young and stunned, unrolling gauze and tapping alcohol gently on it to clean her face. Not yet a doctor, I already knew bones: I could appreciate this face, or what this face had been until very recently. I could see in the wreckage of its topography where its lines had fallen before: the high, shattered cheekbone, the formerly slender nose, the bloodied row of teeth, the small, red tongue, which she had bitten deeply. She had long eyes with very fine lashes, eyes that stared at me almost without blinking. She was unusually fairskinned – a coveted marker of beauty, except in this time, when coveted markers of beauty made women targets. I felt suddenly grateful for my own dark face, mannish bearing and awkward, unfeminine height.

Though she begins by processing her own feelings at witnessing, for the first time, the face of someone who has survived rape, the narrator begins to see in Saavi's face "where its lines had fallen before." She situates the injuries that Saavi's face has borne, injuries

she is trained to notice and treat in isolation, alongside the presence and beauty of the person underneath these visible markers of violence. In mapping the unbroken structure of Saavi's face, the narrator enacts the kind of care espoused by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, rephrased here by Veena Das and Clara Han: "as I sympathize with a man who has pain in his hand, I do not look at the hand but look at the face or in his eyes—for I take it for granted that it is not the hand that suffers but the person who suffers" (16). As the narrator traverses the topography of her face, Saavi returns her gaze without blinking, refusing the narrator any privacy as she witnesses its damage. The narrator's attention to what lies beyond "the wreckage of its topography," perhaps, has prepared her to meet the human behind such an inquiring gaze.

The narrator's acute awareness of Saavi's face and stare, and Saavi's returning of this gaze, paints this moment as one meant to focus on these two characters. However, her next words expand back out to the socio-political context of their meeting by pointing out how a feature as benign as fair skin makes women targets. While her modifier—"in this time"—suggests that the immediate space of a war zone has turned fair skin into an extra form of risk, that fair skin is considered beneficial at any time hints at persisting notions of Eurocentric beauty that exist in Sri Lanka and South Asia more generally. Even as the spectacular violence of the civil war is a legacy of colonialization, so is the quotidian preference for fair skin. The narrator's sudden gratefulness for her own dark skin—even as it offers no protection against rape—is at once a private moment of youthful self-consciousness and a gesture to the legacies of colonialism that create this colorism, legacies which are now combined with the state power and patriarchal violence

that brought them to this tent and that will continue to impact them outside it. Soon after, the narrator switches back to noticing their immediate environment and all the mundane things the medical tent lacks. She apologizes for being unable to offer Saavi any more privacy and comfort than a sheet laid on the floor at the far end of the nearly empty tent.

The narrator's ability to consider multiple spaces at once—the personal space of Saavi's body and her stare, the semi-private space of the medical tent, and the landscape of war, militarization, and sexual violence that circumscribes them both—is important because it is precisely her lack of institutionalized training that allows her to pay attention to the multivalent forms of harm that Saavi has suffered, is suffering, and might suffer into the future. In lacking "a script of things that are proper to say and do," the narrator is guided by something much more valuable: an inherent awareness of how medical care is deeply tangled with our everyday social worlds, such that what takes place in each realm informs and impacts the other (Lock and Nguyen 53). This awareness of the interconnectedness of the physical body with the social world becomes apparent as the narrator relates how she "did not bother to save and bag the evidence" of the perpetrators from Saavi's body: "I left the blood under her fingernails; I untangled a long black hair from her clenched right fist and threw it away. It would not have done any good to keep it."

What is left on Saavi's body are her physical wounds, which are not as easily removed: "I held the pieces of her ear lobe together and tried to make the stitches small. I do not know why I thought about making her scar as small as possible. It should have been obvious to me that she no longer cared about the evidence of damage. But perhaps

that was part of my job: to care on her behalf." In caring about the precision and size of each individual stitch, the narrator reckons with what justice, or the lack of it, will mean for Saavi outside the tent. Most illuminating in these sentences is its conclusion: "But perhaps that was part of my job: to care on her behalf." To care about the visibility of a scar when Saavi cannot is another intervention that the narrator makes on Saavi's behalf. The narrator is guessing here, again, for better or for worse, since she does not know what kind of person Saavi is, or what she would want, outside of this moment. Choosing to err on the side of caution, or perhaps on the side of *care*, the narrator assumes that after the shock of what she has survived, Saavi might wish that the scar was less noticeable. The narrator tries to secure Saavi a future where a small a scar as possible will potentially lessen the stigma she will face from those around her, or lessen her more private, internal distress. In the face of Saavi's apathy, the narrator attempts to care, on Saavi's behalf, not only about her body's wounds in the present but *about her quality of life in the future*. In doing so, the narrator allows Saavi a chance at "just living," defined by Sameena Mulla as the ability "to put aside, or from time to time delight in forgetting, or not remembering, and even to carry on outside of the shadow of violence and its consequences. It is an ideal, perhaps unattainable, of a life unconscripted by the harm of others" (291). The narrator has given Saavi a chance to partake in this delightful "forgetting, or not remembering." Even if such a life is "an ideal, perhaps unattainable" goal, the narrator has reached for such futurity in a moment when Saavi could not.

Rethinking Pain and Trauma

Saavi's refusal to care about the evidence left on her body does not render her as a passive recipient of the narrator's care. Rather, she chooses how to engage with her body and its pain in a manner that actualizes Talal Asad's suggestion about alternate possibilities of understanding pain: "To suffer (physical or mental pain, humiliation, deprivation) is, so we usually think, to be in a passive state—to be an object, not a subject. … Pain is something that happens to the body or that afflicts the mind. … Yet one can think of pain not merely as a passive state (although it can be just that) but as itself agentive" ("Thinking about Agency and Pain" 79). I am not suggesting that we romanticize pain and suffering as distraction from other harms, or that we eschew medicine as a remedy for pain. Rather, I am interested in how these two young girls choose to negotiate with pain as something that can be useful in specific circumstances, when one can exercise a kind of agency in relation to it. In their powerful encounter in the wake of massive bodily and emotional harm, pain becomes an empowering force, rather than a diminishing one.

When the narrator warns Saavi before she starts to stitch together her genitals—"This is going to hurt you more"—Saavi's response is initially dismissal: "It doesn't matter now." The modifier "now" indicates both the present moment at which Saavi does not care about the pain and that there is a before and after, a point beyond which pain could have mattered to her. But her indifference to pain changes later in the story, after the narrator has sewn together Saavi's "most private wound" and begins to stitch the more publicly visible wound on her earlobe. At this point, Saavi starts talking, telling a

story of a family torn asunder: “I had four brothers.” The narrator, after hesitating, says, “I had four brothers, too.” Saavi asks, “What did they do to yours?” After this recognition of another commonplace result of war—that brothers cannot be kept safe—the narrator provides the facts: one killed by the army, one who died as a Tiger, one overseas, and one who killed himself. Saavi’s story is simpler: “The army killed all four of my brothers.” The narrator acknowledges, “I know. … I am very sorry.”

In the aftermath of a most profoundly intimate violation, Saavi chooses to speak out loud not the story of her rape, but that of the loss of her brothers, leading her to a more communal lament: “What about their bodies? she said. What will happen to their bodies? What will my parents do?” Saavi’s focus on the absence of her brothers’ bodies and the impact of that lack on her parents reveals the links between “her most private wound” and a war that leaves a family unable to properly mourn and bury their sons. This exchange also prompts from Saavi a physical reaction to the pain of the needle through her earlobe: “She had made no noise before, but now she hissed at the pain.” The narrator offers more morphine, to which Saavi replies, “No. … I am feeling something, you know? I want to know what is happening and if the pain goes away then that might be worse.” Saavi’s rendering of pain as feeling and as information clarifies that she is not a passive object of suffering. Rather, her decision to desire pain and recognize the information it provides her makes her an actant who takes pain as more than merely something that happens to her. Her consideration of what might happen “if the pain goes away” attributes to pain a will of its own, but she meets it with her own will about whether to accept or refuse more morphine, which the narrator does not force her to take.

And though the pain Saavi experiences as information cannot alleviate the other loss she is mourning—that of her brothers—telling the narrator about her brothers is the map through which Saavi makes her way back to her own body. As the narrator stitches her earlobe, Saavi shows more interest in her body and its feelings, asking the narrator, "Am I bleeding inside?" and then declaring, "It hurts when I breathe," and "I am afraid of falling asleep."

For Saavi, then, "[m]aybe pain doesn't shatter language; maybe instead it is a language—one that needs to be learned" (Livingstone 200). The narrator has less to learn, perhaps, than we do; she is able to listen to Saavi differently to how a doctor, a therapist, or a scholar might. As a "half-doctor," the narrator has heard and borne witness to the story Saavi chose to articulate alongside the one relayed by her injured body and the sentry. The narrator performs a form of embodied witnessing in listening to Saavi's story and its silences, and in grappling with both the ethical dilemmas and emotional turmoil it brings up in herself. Although Saavi is the wounded patient, Ganeshananthan's choice to have the narrator serve as reader-surrogate allows us a proximity to Saavi that does not ventriloquize or romanticize her as a suffering, traumatized survivor. Saavi's refusal to voice the story of rape, which the narrator hears only through the sentry and does not repeat in her recollection, resists the notion that narrating the trauma event is always therapeutic. Saavi does not adhere to what trauma studies might expect of a survivor, and neither does the narrator perform the empathetic listening that is privileged as necessary for processes of recovery and healing. For instance, in response to Saavi's expressed fear of falling asleep, the narrator says, "Talk to me," which prompts Saavi to say more about

her brothers. However, the narrator does not recall Saavi's words because she fails to listen, of her own admission: "I did not listen to her, I thought about my own [brothers]." Her failure, however, is important; it reminds us that this caregiver suffers her own pain and—perhaps because of her lack of formal medical training—cannot adequately separate her own pain from Saavi's.

These "failures" of listening, response, and separation can then be understood as examples of what listening and caring can and must sometimes look like within a landscape of war, when no one has escaped unharmed in ways that would allow care to be administered from a purely institutional and detached positionality, a positionality which might not be useful in such circumstances anyway. The narrator and Saavi are indeed interacting as medic and patient, but that they live precariously in a war zone complicates that dynamic. In the shared grief over the brothers they have lost, they are both survivors who grieve the cohesion and safety of their families and larger social worlds, even as one must provide medical care for the other. As a result, it is not the narrator alone who must attend to Saavi's distress, and it is not Saavi alone who suffers. Rather, the narrator and Saavi *both* feel their way through multiple forms of distress and suffering, some of which—like their grief over their lost brothers—are shared, and others—like the rape for which the narrator treats Saavi—are not. As much as the narrator tries to focus on Saavi, then, she finds herself tending to her own feelings about what Saavi has suffered, and to her own losses as well.

These negotiations and connections attest to the kind of listening that McCormack argues is demanded by a queer postcolonial text which "does not propose an ideal listener

who is an enabler of testimony, full of knowledge, in control and confident in [her] task. Listening is a much more tentative process and involves those who are uncertain of where this sharing may lead" (23). The narrator's tentativeness and uncertainty are most revealed in the moments when she prepares to witness the damage the rapists have done to Saavi's genitals, which she knows she will have to mend. As she unwinds Saavi's skirt, the narrator admits: "All right, I said, but this was just as much to reassure myself as her." She then wishes that "the morphine would help [Saavi] go to sleep, to forget that [she] was retracing the path of violation," which indicates her discomfort that Saavi remains awake and aware of her proximity and touch. The narrator once more recalls the worry she experienced: "I wondered if I could stand to sew this most private wound together, and then, with a sudden rush of something that was not quite terror, I knew that I could. This knowledge was terrible, and to keep my grief for her—for us—to myself, I folded my lips together." While the narrator begins by centering her own fears about her abilities to perform this task, she soon reorients this inward turn back to Saavi, who needs her care. She is aware that her grief is not commensurate with Saavi's, but in noticing that she must keep this grief to herself not just "for her," but "for us," she recognizes the ways in which their feelings interact with each other. Any grief she expresses will hurt Saavi and make the task harder for both of them, and so she prevents it from leaving her body: "I folded my lips together." There is an anatomical correspondence here that illustrates the deep, visceral connection between the two young women despite the lack of dialogue or verbalization. The narrator is sewing Saavi's genital lips and, in the process, she must fold her facial lips shut to contain her own grief at Saavi's injuries. The pain in one part

of Saavi's body generates a somatically sympathetic reaction in the narrator's, revealing the moment as one where listening proves itself to be "intimate, life-changing and involves an unforeseeable visceral, psychic and epistemological impact" (McCormack 23).

Despite steeling herself so, the narrator issues one last plea to Saavi before she proceeds: "This is going to hurt you more." There is ambiguity in this line; it could be understood as the narrator warning Saavi that the stitches will hurt more than the rape, or that they will hurt Saavi more than they will hurt the narrator. But the narrator's intention matters little, since Saavi responds with dismissal: "It doesn't matter now." The narrator then offers Saavi more morphine, which Saavi looks away from, so that she must finally admit: "There was nothing to wait for. I lit the match to sterilize the first needle. I wished then, as I do now, that I could have held her hand, but I needed both of mine for this." This simple, persisting wish that she could have held Saavi's hand is indicative of the burden the story highlights consistently: the two young girls are utterly alone. There is no one present who might have held Saavi's hand, a small gesture which might have comforted not only Saavi but her half-doctor. As a result, the narrator attempts to invoke some comfort from Saavi back towards herself. Saavi, however, offers none: she does not respond to the narrator's apologies, she seems uninterested in the possibility of more morphine, and she signals no desire to fall asleep or otherwise delay the pain that is imminent.

The narrator's consistent expansion of her and Saavi's semi-private interaction into a larger critique of the enterprise of war reveals how and why neither the narrator nor

Saavi fulfil Euro-American theorizations around care, trauma, and redress as they are understood by "experts" whose expertise becomes transplanted globally in ways that harm the "patients" they purport to help.[39] In eschewing these theorizations, the story illustrates the potentials of care and connection that lie outside of hegemonic institutions that continue to fail ordinary people. In the way the story is written, no one except the reader can witness the empathetic link that bonds these two characters in this instance, even if neither of them is fully capable of articulating that bond to each other.

The Work of Memory, Maps, and Refusal

At the end of her recollection, which also ends the story, the narrator remembers the hope she had initially felt at her ability to treat Saavi, and balances this hope against the knowledge she now carries of Saavi's death:

> Sitting with her in the tent, at that moment, I thought that finally I had a patient whose treatment itself held no consequences, a patient who could go back to her village and lead a life – a damaged life, but a life made slightly more bearable by what I had done. I thought, truly, that someday we might both be able to return to the places where we had been born. I did not know then that I would leave. I did not know that she would go into that building, that she would ride the elevator to the top floor.

These last sentences amplify the narrator's disappointment at how Saavi's life did not turn out the way she had imagined it. This disappointment seems to arise from the fact that her treatment of Saavi, which felt to her like "pure medicine" and which she trusted had "no consequences," is now part of a story that ends in death. Moreover, it is not an ordinary death, but a death by suicide bombing that both harm others and tears apart Saavi's body, a body that the narrator had once carefully sewn together. She returns once

[39] See Brown, Fernando, Somasundaram, Summerfield, Watters, and Young for discussions problematizing the harmful import of Euro-American theorizations of trauma responses such as PTSD into global contexts.

more to feelings of lack as she processes this knowledge: “I thought…” and “I did not know” reveal that she is grappling with her certainties coming undone. Her assumptions about the result of her efforts on Saavi’s future, and about the similarities between them, were ultimately not as she predicted. This discomfort seems only somewhat alleviated for the narrator by the elegiac quality of her narration, where the flashback works to commemorate Saavi’s past because she now has no present or future. Despite this discomfort, her reflection seems to accept, or at the very least, suggest, that there is no medical treatment that can be “pure,” and that its consequences might need to be accounted for through something like what she provides: narrative, memory, empathy. This lesson is one that the narrator holds in present time, where her diasporic self recognizes that such purity is impossible, such that she instead opts for storytelling and memory as a reparative mode that can attend to Saavi and the narrator’s experiences together. Such a suggestion also serves to counter the logic that the treatment of an injury can be isolated to treating the body or mind that carries it without attending to the social world outside that person.

The narrator’s wish for Saavi, which once again is focused more on the narrator than it is on Saavi, who is now dead, reminds us of the complicated stakes of thinking about a person’s choice to become a suicide bomber. “Hippocrates” theorizes about this problem in an ethical and complicated way: it problematizes both the order in which we approach this figure and plays with multiple forms to bring her into existence. Just as we do not hear the details of the rape that Saavi survived, the death of this character, who we only retrospectively understand is Saavi, is also separated from us by multiple textual

layers. Her death is reported by "the voice on the radio," but the narrator repeatedly interrupts that reportage by imagining the mundane, human aspects of the woman's day, her outfit, and her preference for the sweetness of her tea as she waits inside the government building.

Once the narrator realizes that the bomber was Saavi, she chooses to deliver a memory of Saavi as she lived to replace her own imagination, and ours, if we had indeed taken up the call to imagine alongside her. This formal replacement of the narrator's imagination in the first half of the story with her memory in the second is one of the ways in which "Hippocrates" works to complicate our sedimented approaches to thinking about the spectacular violence of suicide bombing. The narrator distances herself and us from the reported details of the moment of the explosion, and she also ensures that she does not freeze Saavi in the act of suicide bombing. Through the narrator's memory, we are asked to witness Saavi in a moment of vulnerability and survival that is deeply connected to her political awareness, but that should not, as the narrator reminds us, be assumed as excuse or explanation for that awareness.

**Conclusion: Attending to "the endings that are not over"**

In considering what it means to think about ongoing wars, I am inspired by Yến Lê Espiritu's words for "tellers of ghost stories:" "that we always look for the 'something more' in order to see and bring into being what is usually neglected or made invisible or thought by most to be dead and gone—that is, to always see the living effects of what seems to be over and done with" (187-8). For Lê Espiritu, it is not enough to simply see the something more but, she proclaims: "We need to see, and then to do something with,

*the endings that are not over*" (188). In this chapter, I have tried to take up this imperative because I think both Munaweera and Ganeshananthan are tellers of ghost stories. These stories are also war stories and stories of what happens "after" war, which is where our responsibility as readers and scholars of these stories comes in.

In *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, reading the ending of the novel as only "one possible narrative" (Munaweera 7) of the outcome of the war allows us to glimpse the humanity and inhumanity of its characters, who are exceedingly ordinary despite the different subject positions they occupy. Yasodhara ends the novel with a vision of her daughter, Samudhra, emerging from the island's ocean with "the sand retaining no record of what came before her" (237). Official histories and government narratives would prefer the war be remembered this way as well. Yet, Munaweera has experienced considerable criticism and even threats from government representatives for what they consider the novel's sympathetic portrayal of the LTTE (Munaweera, "A Reading and Conversation"). Such resistance indicates the ways in which the Sri Lankan government continues to attempt to control the narrative of this war and its actants.

Our task, as part of the "living effects" of this war, and all wars, is to continue to make space for what such attempts try to hide. In this novel, it is an understanding of Saraswathi as something other than a monstrous enemy, and of how the traces of her live on though she might be considered to be "dead and gone." It is no wonder, then, that the novel requires help from its readers to witness its untold and hidden stories: moments of quotidian humanity, the weight of broken promises, and the potential of missed

connections. We are given secrets that its primary and final narrator cannot hold and cannot honor.

In “Hippocrates,” the narrator’s mourning for the kind of life she imagined Saavi to have demands at once our understanding and imagination with relation to specific figures: the woman or young girl living in a war, who may or may not survive rape, who may or may become a militant. These figures are often produced and theorized as one and the same, but the narration of the story attempts to understand them as separate but connected, and honors them each. As readers, we become aware of the choice we have in deciding how we, too, will honor the demands of both Saavi and the narrator, who speaks directly to us.

For me, this awareness has led to a questioning of my scholarly tendencies. While I had initially assumed I would arrive, or return, to the moment of Saavi’s suicide, something about the narrator’s recollection of that pained first meeting with an injured Saavi urged me to look there first, rather than focusing yet again on the depiction of a character’s last, violent moments of life. In attempting to read and theorize differently, I have arrived, I suppose, at my response to the narrator’s demand, “I want you to imagine this.” While I have read and listened to her story, I do not linger on the moment of Saavi’s death as I did with Saraswathi’s. I refuse to return to mine that scene of death, as carefully and richly written as it is, for intellectual prosperity, just as I refuse to abide by Yasodhara’s hope that the ocean will wash away memories of the violence that took place on its shores. That violence still exists and is carried by those continuing to search for

their loved ones, a grievance that Saavi voices in her family's search for her brothers' bodies.

My refusals are uncertain, and they will perhaps come to exact their own price, but they are one of the ways in which I confront my responsibility towards the ghosts of this war and its living survivors as I read narratives that will always sit somewhere between fiction and reality. My analysis of both these works has been driven by my conviction that what is at stake is not only how the figure of the suicide bomber is produced, but how we consume and engage with such productions. At the risk of becoming, then, in the eyes of our last narrator, a half-scholar, I ended the second section of this chapter by looking at something other than the spectacular violence of suicide bombing. In looking elsewhere, I am able to see how both these texts highlight ethical attempts at care and connection even if they cannot hold for very long under the multiple, layered forms of oppression created by war, militarization, and occupation. These depictions are vital in helping us imagine and bring into material practice more permanent solutions to violence and oppression, both spectacularized and ordinary, that feel overwhelmingly powerful. Given that our current moment of pandemic is filled with stories of the untimely, painful, and inequitable deaths of the global poor at the hands of the rich and the powerful, I have attempted to share what these texts teach us about what we might miss from our positions of privilege, and about the potentials of care and connection provided gently, uncertainly, and with great difficulty. In Lanka's too-late reach for Saraswathi before the moment of detonation, and in the careful, determined

stitches of Saavi's half-doctor, we can glimpse what it takes to care for someone you do not know, someone who needs your help but whose hand you cannot hold.

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## The Stories We Tell (Ourselves): Ordinary Spaces of Memory and Care

> What we learn in crafting the story of our lives is some way to love ourselves even in the midst of our horror. To forgive ourselves, our broken damaged hurt places, an appreciation for the muscle we have created in order to survive.
>
> ~ Dorothy Allison, "A Cure for Bitterness," p. 252

### Introduction: The Stories of Mothers

In Chapter One, I read Nayomi Munaweera's novel, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, and V. V. Ganeshananthan's short story, "Hippocrates," as literary depictions that challenge discourses around suicide bombing and the figure of the woman militant. I also considered how, through their form and content, these works make ethical demands of their readers. These demands ask us to consider how disciplinary conversations shape our everyday responses to violence. They remind us that how we narrate stories, even to ourselves, can influence how we understand the stories of others. This chapter attempts to think further about such acts of narration with the help of Shyam Selvadurai's 2013 novel, *The Hungry Ghosts*, and Jean Arasanayagam's 1999 short story, "All is Burning." Together, these texts help me expand upon two threads that appear momentarily in Chapter One: the interventions attempted by mothers on behalf of their children and larger communities, and characters' own attempts to enact a different kind of future against a history of violence.

I turn to mothers in this chapter to honor the way that mothers, both literary and real, have interrupted my scholarly thinking often. In sudden moments of epiphany, I realize that my argument hinges entirely on the decisions of mothers. Like the protagonist of Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* states about moments of clarity regarding his life, "[t]his understanding has revealed itself to me not in a flash, but slowly through

the course of the night, like the persistent lap of waves that wear down the surface of a rock to reveal the glittering mica beneath" (370). Slowly, over these past few years, I realized that these moments were not as sudden as they might have first seemed. I find that, really, I have been thinking about mothers all along, including my own, without whose sacrifices and interventions I would never have had access to pursuing higher education in the U.S., which created for me a very different life than her own.

There are other mothers that I am less acquainted with, but whose presence haunt this dissertation: those of the forcibly disappeared in Sri Lanka, who continue to search for their loved ones, marking 2000 days, or five years, of continuous protest on August 12, 2022.[40] While this search is of course taken on by the loved ones of the forcibly disappeared more generally, scholars have written extensively on the various iterations of the Mothers' Front that arose in different regions in Sri Lanka over the past few decades.[41] Initially, the mobilization of motherhood as a form of protest was initiated by mothers in the north and east of the country, as well in the south during the JVP uprisings. It is against this backdrop of mothers and their activism that I explore the two texts in this chapter. Both the novel and short story focus not on public displays of protest and grievance, but rather on moments where mothers attempt to make private decisions to remove their children from spaces of violence and create for them a different kind of life in its aftermath. Moreover, both the novel and short story I explore in this chapter

[40] See "Sri Lanka to Issue Death/Missing Certificates to Disappeared, Pay 100,000 LKR to Next of Kin," "Sri Lanka's Decision to Issue 'Missing Certificates' to Families of Disappeared is Met with Outcry," "'We are not protesting for compensation, we are protesting for justice': Tamil Families of the Disappeared React to Sri Lanka's Budget," and "Association for Relatives of Enforced Disappearances Reiterates 6 Key Demands Ahead of UNHRC Session."
[41] See de Alwis, de Mel, Kodikara, and Thiruchandran.

examine an individual's capacity to forge different paths to the ones already available, with the hope that it can result in communal change and remedy. Both texts provide counter-interpretations of Buddhist doctrine, indicating that though they are published eighteen years apart, the authors are aware of the violent ways in which Sinhala-Buddhist fundamentalist nationalism operates in the country.[42] They both imagine avenues of remedy to communal harms already committed in the name of religion and nation.

Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts* is made up of its queer protagonist, Shivan Rassiah, reminiscing about his life while performing a simple, solitary task: cleaning his mother's kitchen in Toronto, Canada. His reminiscence takes places over the course of a single evening, before he flies back to Sri Lanka with his mother to bring her ailing mother to Canada to live out her last days. Shivan has spent the majority of his life feeling anger, resentment, and even hate towards his controlling grandmother, who becomes indirectly responsible for the death of his first love, Mili Jayasinghe. At the end of the novel, however, Shivan arrives at a surprising decision: he will not return to Canada and his partner, for it is his duty to stay with his grandmother so she can die in her own home in Sri Lanka. Over the course of this single night, Shivan's recollections are meant to help us understand how he comes to this surprising and painful decision that nonetheless has the potential to free him from years of suffering.

In Jean Arasanayagam's "All is Burning," the protagonist, Alice, takes on a similarly solitary but more devastating task. The previous evening, soldiers arrived at her village, rounded up all 200 of its men, and murdered them in a nearby field. Now, before

[42] See Bartholomeusz and de Silva.

the sun rises, Alice is determined to find answers for her daughter, Seela, about the whereabouts of her soon-to-be-husband, Sena. Alice heads to the field and walks carefully, barefoot, among the mass of dead men, searching for Sena's face. She finds a young man who is not yet dead and holds him until he dies, falsely promising him some water. As she performs these duties, Alice questions Buddhist teachings of detachment and thinks about her own life and the life she had imagined for her daughter.

To understand how the characters in each text narrate their way through and past immediate and long-standing atrocity, I turn to Shameem Black's notion of the crowded self. I argue that these characters illustrate the self as porous and fluid, capable of change, of bridging gaps and adapting narratives in order to offer remedy and release to others. Though narrated by a single character, both *The Hungry Ghosts* and "All is Burning," through their use of crowded selves, offer important commentary on communal struggles. They demonstrate an ethics that carries characters forward through catastrophe while also illustrating how these ethics emerge outside moments of heightened trauma, during the mundane spaces of the everyday.

**Storytelling as Memory Work in Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts***

*The Hungry Ghosts* borrows its name from the Sri Lankan myth of the *perethaya*. In Hinduism and Buddhism, a perethaya refers to the "disembodied soul of a dead person, especially before the completion of funeral rites and ceremonies allowing it to leave the world of humans as an ancestral spirit, frequently imagined as a ghost tortured by hunger and thirst" ("preta"). The protagonist, Shivan, explains that "perethayas that appear to us are always our ancestors, and it is our duty to free them from their suffering by feeding

Buddhist monks and transferring the merit of that deed to our dead relatives" (30). Shivan recalls a peretheya story that his grandmother Daya used to tell him: The victorious king Nandaka is riding back from battle with his troops when they reach a crossroad. The king chooses a paved and shady path, unaware that it leads to a haunt of peretheyas. On the path, they encounter a beautiful man clothed in silks and jewels. He welcomes the king and his troops to partake of an incredible feast before him. The king, amazed, asks the man if he is a God. The man replies, "I am a perethaya." He explains how, after his death, his daughter had asked a monk to transfer the merits of her good deeds to him, so that his sins were forgiven. While the king becomes distracted at this feat, his troops notice the smell of rotting flesh and sounds of wailing rising around them. They try to turn back but the path they had arrived on has disappeared. They lament, "In front of us the way is seen, but behind us the road is gone."

Shivan recalls this story in the second chapter, but this last line returns in the novel's last two pages, when he decides to return to Sri Lanka to take care of an increasingly frail Daya. He hears a voice in his head urging him to "[t]urn back, turn back." To this voice he responds, "the road behind me has disappeared" (447). The trepidation Shivan feels is partly because he is about to leave behind his comfortable life in Canada with his partner of two years, Michael, for "a world of security checks, disappearing Tamils and suicide bombers" (447). Moreover, Shivan and Daya share a troubled past. Daya's domineering presence during his childhood was so distressing that when he learns from his friend, Mili Jayasinghe, that Canada is expediting the asylum process for Tamils after the anti-Tamil pogrom in July 1983, Shivan picks up the

paperwork from the embassy himself. He tells his mother, Hema, that they should emigrate for the better quality of life and education, and also reminds her that it would free him of Daya's grasp: "'Think,' I held her gaze, 'of the freedom for me'" (82). Four years after they immigrate, Shivan returns to Sri Lanka after Daya suffers her first stroke. During his stay, Daya has Shivan followed and learns of his same-sex relationship with Mili Jayasinghe. She turns to her thug, Chandralal, who in turn hires his thugs to kidnap Mili and give him a scare for having "corrupted" Shivan. Chandralal's thugs are careless as they rough up a blindfolded Mili, who falls, hits his head on a table, and dies. They dump his body beyond a reef so it cannot return to land. After Daya tells him what happened, Shivan severs ties with her and returns to Canada. The novel begins seven years later, on the evening before he and his mother are set to return to Sri Lanka.

Unlike King Nandaka, who chose a shady and paved path, Shivan is aware that he is choosing a much less comfortable one. While Michael worries that Shivan will not win his grandmother's forgiveness, Shivan disagrees: "She will take me back, because I am to her like rain on parched land. The true question is how I will deal with her refusal to admit culpability in Mili's death, her impenetrable self-righteousness. I don't know how I am going to bear it, how I am going to keep loving and caring for her. I fear my failure, my anger" (438). Given this awareness, Shivan's reiteration of the troops' lament—"the road behind me has disappeared" (447)—registers differently from the original Buddhist tale. The road behind him is not a victorious one but one filled with mistakes driven by anger, guilt, and selfishness. And so, whereas the troops desire the path they traveled on so they might safely return back on it and avoid the rotting flesh and wailing moans

ahead, Shivan is not interested in avoiding the difficulty that he knows is ahead. If the road behind him has disappeared, he cannot repeat the mistakes of his past. At the end of the novel, his refusal to return to traverse this well-travelled path signals his commitment to save himself and his loved ones from the destruction they have faced so far.

Before they leave for Sri Lanka, Shivan is supposed to clean his mother's kitchen so that her partner, David, can have it fumigated for cockroaches while she is away. Shivan dawdles on his task by getting drunk and taking a walk before beginning. As he does so, he recalls the course of his life—beginning with his thirteenth birthday in Sri Lanka all the way up to the present moment. By the end of the novel, which is also the end of this evening of recollection, Shivan has cleaned the entire house and has, for the first time, entered the room meant to be Daya's. Sitting on the bed, he describes the room as "joyless, despite [his] mother's attempts to make it cheerful" (370). He remembers Daya's room in Sri Lanka, and then declares:

> Yet I know by now that my grandmother will not use this room, will not die in this country. This understanding has revealed itself to me not in a flash, but slowly through the course of the night, like the persistent lap of waves that wear down the surface of a rock to reveal the glittering mica beneath. It is my fate to remain in Sri Lanka so she can pass her last years in her own home. It is I who must give up Michael, not he who will leave me; I who must break us out of our cycle of anger, then peace, then anger again. This time, I will save the person I cherish most by giving him up. … And I, like that naked perethi, will find release only by offering it to another, by putting another before myself. (370)

Shivan is still thinking about his own actions, but largely in terms of how they will affect *others*. It is not his grandmother who will be moved to Canada, but rather he who will return to her. Similarly, Shivan must be the one to leave Michael, rather than the other way around. His assertion—"This time"—indicates both how deeply he regrets the paths

he might have taken to save Mili in the past as well as his commitment to save the person he loves most in the present by removing himself from Michael's life. In reflecting on his own past, Shivan comes to see himself, like his grandmother, as a "naked perethi." He acknowledges his own mistakes and attempts to account for them.

This reorientation is cultivated through Shivan's ability to revisit the past and, in so doing, imagine the lives of the other actants in his life. In Shivan, Selvadurai has embedded what Shameem Black calls a crowded self, that is, a self with an ability "to see the world as another does without wholly letting go of [his] own original vision" (47). Shivan inherits this imaginative ability as a result of Daya's storytelling, a formative aspect of his childhood. He remembers how she would deftly extract multiple Buddhist tales from an original by "bringing a different angle to it, filling out a scene until it became a subplot, giving a minor character greater presence on stage, or sometimes simply retelling a scene as the full tale—these variations so numerous, I am not sure today what the original story is, and where my own interpretation veers off from hers" (22). The multivocality of Daya's storytelling sets a precedent for Shivan, whose narration often revisits multiple angles of a single scene from the viewpoint of different characters. As a result, different parts of the novel mirror each other with slight variations in them. Even Shivan's reflection on how he came to understand his mother's life echoes his description of Daya's storytelling: "I've thought about her story often …, imagining how she felt and thought, picturing moments, expanding scenes she only mentioned briefly, filling in things she did not touch on but which I knew had to be part of her

journey, inventing and elaborating the story, like my grandmother with her Buddhist tales" (338).

But while Daya's storytelling is meant to both entertain Shivan and impart what she considers the Buddhist tale's morals, Shivan tells stories in an attempt to understand others and his own history and sense of self. Using this method of storytelling, the novel progresses through a narration that belongs to Shivan but manages to focalize through the other characters in the novel. His narrative embodies their emotions, thoughts, and motivations, so that the novel carefully balances the story that is Shivan's, those that belong to the crowd of actors in his life, and the Buddhist tales themselves. The Buddhist tales are sometimes incorporated into Shivan's narrative as he recalls how someone narrated it to him, or through their appearance in his dreams. Occasionally, there is no explicit incorporation of the Buddhist tales into the narrative; they stand alone, appearing at the end of a chapter after a stylistic icon. To tell, and retell, the story of his life, Shivan reaches into these Buddhist tales to identify himself or those around him with its characters: the naked perethi, the thieving hawk, King Nandaka's soldiers, the demoness Kali. In thinking through these imaginary characters, and in being able to imagine the thoughts and feelings of the real actants in his life, Shivan's narration culminates in his own form of recuperative ethics that might have looked quite different without the inclusion of the Buddhist tales in the novel.

Shivan's work of elaborating stories comes to mirror the working of memory itself. Daniel L. Schacter clarifies that rather than obtaining a clear-cut moment such as might be captured in a photograph, we "recreate or reconstruct our experiences rather

than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes, in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtained after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past by attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquired after the event" (9). Shivan's revisiting of the past is also a reconstruction. He uses the knowledge he possesses in the present to infuse his memories of the past with an understanding he did not have in that moment. The revelations that come to Shivan slowly, "like the persistent lap of waves that wear down the surface of a rock to reveal the glittering mica beneath," work similarly to this process of reconstructing the past based on present knowledge. On the eve of his return to Sri Lanka, the ordinary task of cleaning the kitchen allows Shivan the time and space to let his present knowledge jostle against the surface of the past, wearing down its surface so that he can understand it better in retrospect. More importantly, "the glittering mica beneath" reveals to Shivan an ethical path into the future, clear now in light of these combined knowledges.

Shivan is not the only character in the novel who attempts to better understand themselves and the course their lives have taken. My analysis will thereby focus on the extent to which Shivan, Daya, and Hema all become "crowded selves" (Black 20) as they search for release from their painful memories and as they try to remedy the harms they have committed against themselves and others. I examine how the novel complicates the idea that the revelation of long-held secrets inevitably leads to catharsis, healing, and repair. I argue that, instead, the novel proposes that the intention behind the offering of stories, and the act of telling of stories itself, is more important to initiate repair and forgiveness.

Storytelling as Failed Transaction

Before I examine the interventions that Hema makes to save her son, I examine a story that Daya offers to Shivan in a last, desperate attempt to seek his forgiveness after she reveals that Mili has died as a result of her actions. Shivan describes Daya in this moment as "a modern day Scheherazade who hoped telling her story would keep at bay the death my departure would bring. And her desperation brought a great clarity about herself—that lucidity we always seem to find when at the end of our rope" (302). Because of this clarity, the story helps us understand Daya, who is arguably the most unlikeable character in the novel, and as such, it helps us place Shivan's decision to return to her in greater context. More importantly, because this story is one that Daya was never given the opportunity to tell until this moment, I retell it here so that she can be heard once more.

As Shivan makes hotel reservations to get away from Daya after he learns that Mili has been killed, Daya watches him pack his things, and predicts, "If you leave, you will never return." When Shivan does not respond, she begins, "That man, Charles, my cousin, whom everyone said I loved, whom everyone said I compromised myself with, the story was not like that at all." And so Shivan listens as she reveals to him "the secret that had contorted her life" (301). Daya recalls her middle-class childhood in a large compound run by the family matriarch, Thushara Nanda. With the men away working as civil servants and the boys at boarding school, Daya "enjoyed great freedom in this world ruled by women" (302), even sneaking out on hot nights to swim in her underwear in the nearby reef.

Into this world arrives Charles, Thushara Nanda's nephew, who was taken to England as an infant by his father after Thushara Nanda's sister, Visaka, died in childbirth. Charles claims: "I want to know who I am, where I come from." The women, however, sense a defensiveness in him. Daya perceives that "Charles would never get what he wanted. He had been away too long to establish the connection he sought. He should not even stay amongst these women." Charles becomes discomfiting to the household. Later, Thushara Nanda would declare him to have been "[l]ike a peretheya, … come to haunt us with his silent, starving presence" (305). Daya, however, took pity on and befriended Charles, acknowledging now, to Shivan, that she "should not have ignored that craving in him to belong" (306).

Soon, the arrival of Mr. Ariyasinghe, cousin to Charles' father, reveals the true reason for Charles' return: he had fallen in love with a white woman who had used him to amuse her friends, "all of them entertained by the temerity of this dark colonial" (307). Not long after this visit, an embarrassed Charles waits for Daya after one of her night-time swims and declares his love for her before proposing marriage to her. Daya rejects him, claiming, "You are only wanting to belong and be like us. But marrying me will not make it so" (309). Charles tries to kiss her as she tries to leave, and the ensuing scuffle tears the collar of her nightgown and wakes the compound's dogs. The barking wakes up the household, and soon "the women charged out, some with rifles, others holding up lamps, accompanied by male servants with sticks and scythes. The women converged from all directions until they were a circle around Charles and Daya. Her mother, her

aunts, her cousins, were ghostly in the lamplight. Charles pushed past the women with a cry of despair and ran into his room" (309).

The next lines of the story shift from being told by a third person omniscient narrator to being told in Shivan's first-person narration: "My grandmother was left alone, the women staring at her as if she were a stranger. 'Amma,' she whispered, and held out her hands. But she might as well have been invisible to her mother. She turned to her aunts and cousins. Some averted their faces, others backed away." The shift in point of view here indicates that Shivan, at least in his imagination, is telling a part of the story that Daya is perhaps skipping over quickly. His possessive claim over her—"My grandmother"—stands stark against the rest of the sentence that describes how Daya's maternal kin, including her mother, turn away from her for fear that she was involved with Charles. Shivan narrates how it was instead Rosalind, the family's ayah, who "came forward and put her arms around my grandmother, who had begun to shake, her breath stuttering. It was the ayah who led her mistress to their house, the other women following behind in silence as if trailing a hearse, my great-grandmother weeping softly" (308). The image of a funeral procession is fitting, for Shivan continues his imagination of Daya with her social life effectively ended as a result of Charles' advances: "After that my grandmother became a spectral thing who stayed in her room or the back garden of her parents' house. She was their only child, and they alternately wept and railed at her. 'No one would listen to me, Shivan. No one would let me tell my story. It did not matter. The damage had been done. Because, by the next morning, the servants had spread the word

throughout the village. The marriage prospects of my unmarried cousins were in jeopardy" (309).

Daya's long-held secret is a part of the story of her life, but it is also the story of the careless privilege of a Sri Lankan man struggling with his rejection from the British society in which he was raised. Charles' desperation to secure a sense of belonging and family leads to him intruding into a family run by women and acting in ways that remove Daya from the safety and freedom she enjoyed within her family. And while the protection of this matriarchal space is proven to be limited and contingent upon notions of virginity and virtue, Charles' actions nonetheless change the future that might have been secured for Daya under the protection of her mother and aunts. Daya's story can be understood as reflecting the society she lives in. More specifically, it is a story about the ways in which patriarchy and the legacies of colonial contact continue to limit the avenues of love and freedom women can experience and extend to each other. Daya's mother is forced to choose between her family's honor and her daughter's well-being, and she chooses the former, alienating her daughter, now "a spectral thing," from the world.

Shivan continues: "So my grandmother lived like this, in seclusion. Sometimes she would stare at herself in the mirror feeling as if she had been hollowed out, no longer a young woman but a ghost" (309). Four months after Charles leaves, Mr. Ariyasinghe returns to inform Daya's grandfather that, as a childless widower, he would be "'honored and delighted' to marry his granddaughter." Her grandfather accepts without consulting Daya. She describes her husband as a good, kind man: "He never treated me as if I were soiled. Yet he never asked what happened. … And living each day with that unspoken

thing, the daily knowledge that to my family and the world I was guilty of something I did not do, corroded me" (310). Daya's husband's attempt to remedy the harm that Charles had caused is limited. That Daya is married to a reputable, albeit much older, man might salvage the family's reputation, but the fact that he can never bring himself to ask her about what had happened means that he does not allow Daya to tell her story. She remains unheard, unable to correct the version of the story that was silently agreed upon by those who found her and Charles that night, a version so powerful in its illicitness that it did not need to be questioned, confirmed, or spoken about, and that removes Daya from the protection of women who had previously encouraged her wildness.

This story of illicit love, despite being false, becomes the truth through which Daya is ostracized from her family and community, and comes to deeply impact the person she becomes. Much of her unkindness towards Hema, Shivan, and his sister, Renu, arise out of a desire to not be mocked, for trailing her was "that unspoken thing" that marked her as weak against the desires of a single man: "'I am, after all, a woman. Men, by their very nature, will always try to take advantage of me. If I am not strong with them, they will rob me. And,' a steeliness would enter her voice, 'no one is going to shame me by taking advantage and then laughing behind my back, telling everyone I am some gullible, pathetic fool'" (54). And so Daya lives a life that might speak back to the falsehoods about her by distancing herself from being seen as such a woman. She becomes the dominant person in her marriage and, after her husband's death, takes on tasks that men would traditionally be in charge of, such as owning property. Though the Daya that we meet at the start of the novel is anything but a ghost, consistently running

errands, going to the temple, and taking care of her many properties, she remains isolated once she returns home, containing herself to her bedroom, and "[running] the household from there." Throughout the novel, her family members and Rosalind encounter her first by navigating the "curtained doorway" to her room (32).

Through a disavowal of womanhood and through instilling fear in her tenants and family alike, Daya commands power. She consistently uses her interpretations of Buddhist teachings to absolve herself of any guilt with regard to her wrongdoings. Her access to this masculinity and power is enabled by her thug, Chandralal, who acts as her go-between when she needs to threaten and forcibly remove poor tenants unable to pay rent or who request repairs to her dilapidated properties. During the July 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, Chandralal had made a deal with the local gang leader to guarantee Daya's street would be safe, and posted two henchmen at her house. Shivan admits, "We didn't question why Chandralal had gone to such lengths to save us, or what deal he had made. Perhaps we didn't want to know." This feigned innocence, however, is interrupted when ordinary markers of destroyed Tamil homes—"birds feathering their nests with crisped book pages, squirrels carrying cupboard knobs and buttons to bury in our flower beds, or an occasional bone whose provenance we did not want to guess"—make their way into Daya's garden (79).

Chandralal has connections to the government, indicating how Daya's access to masculinity is enabled in and through a country where middle- and upper-class Sinhala-Buddhist lineages garner impunity and security through such connections. Chandralal, who is loyal to Daya insofar as her money and influence can aid his own upward

mobility, joins Daya in constructing narratives of karmic consequences to paint their harm towards others as kindnesses. Together, their use of Buddhism in this manner amounts to what Stanley Tambiah has identified as political Buddhism, or Buddhist nationalism, which, after being "progressively removed from its original inspiration, both the doctrinal texts and the mytho-historical chronicles come to have value as sacred objects, serving as fetishes imbued with power and acting as markers of special ethnic entitlement, self-respect, and identity" (59). Through the protection and entitlement they garner as Sinhala Buddhists, Daya and Chandralal have no trouble cutting costs, extorting, blackmailing, and otherwise threatening people in order to achieve their goals. Because Daya and Chandralal act as arms of the government, Shivan's struggles in his personal life echo the condition of the country at large. When Shivan finds that he is unable to escape either the problems of his family or of the nation, he must return and deal with what has taken place in each realm.

Daya closes her story by attesting to Shivan's importance to her: "And so I was never happy; that is, until you came into my life. When I looked up and saw you standing in my room, sniffling, my heart broke with happiness. You were like rain soaking a parched land" (311). Though she ends her story with her oft-used line of love for Shivan, Shivan is unmoved: "By offering this secret she was hoping to tie us close again. But all I wanted was to be free of the suffocating weight of our past together. 'Why are you telling me all this now?' I asked harshly. 'It's too late. Nothing you can do or say will fix what has happened'" (311). Shivan's admonition, that demands first her *motivation* for telling the story, indicates how little any story of hers could reach him in this moment. Still

reeling from the aftermath of Mili's death at Daya's hands, Shivan has room for only one, impossible kind of story: one that will reverse the fact of Mili's death. In his desperation to escape Daya once more, Shivan delivers "a fatal blow" (311) by revealing a secret of his own: that it was his idea for them to immigrate to Canada, not his mother's. To protect him many years ago, Hema had made it seem as if immigrating to Canada was her decision. After searching his face for a lie, Daya, with "an ancient, tired expression" on her face, walks out of his room. Shivan leaves for Canada and does not return for the next seven years.

Storytelling as Ultimatum

Shivan's attempt to release himself from the "suffocating weight" of his past is difficult because of the many ways in which his life and relationships come to mirror Daya's. Shivan, in some instances, is like Charles. Though his first return to Sri Lanka is prompted by his obligation to visit Daya after her first stroke, he does end up wanting to belong to Sri Lanka, particularly when he falls for Mili and sees what good Mili wants to do for the country. And while Shivan is happy with any time that he and Mili get to spend alone together, he begins to feel increasingly restless at having to hide their relationship. And so, as he temporarily took over maintaining Daya's properties, he had become enamored at the power he wielded. He imagines the ease with which he and Mili could live in a penthouse suite in one of Daya's apartment buildings. Eventually, Daya's move to break up Mili and Shivan confirms the ways in which queerness is seen to be compromising masculinity. After Mili's death, both Daya and Chandralal ask Shivan why he has to leave, since "everything is back to normal now" (294, 295). To Chandralal,

Shivan responds, “But the man I was in love with has been killed,” and the simplicity of this statement of love breaks Chandralal’s composure, and “left him speechless” (295).

Simultaneously, Shivan is a version of Daya, unable to save Mili just as Daya was unable to save herself. These similarities might be why Daya offers Shivan her story, to tie them together in the understanding that they both were helpless to do anything about what was done to them. Just as Daya recognizes that Charles will never find the belonging he seeks, it is Mili’s friend Sriyani Karunaratne, a human rights activist, who reminds Shivan of his privilege as a Canadian citizen, a safety that Mili does not have. She also reminds Shivan that there is a law against homosexuality in Sri Lanka that, though outdated, is kept in the books to imprison those that the government finds troublesome by giving them a “jolly good scare,” which is the same language Daya uses to talk about the reason she had Mili kidnapped. Shivan brushes Sriyani off, suggesting that she is being queerphobic by asking her if she would ever warn her heterosexual couple friends to give each other up in the same way.

Despite this statement, Shivan ends up feeling responsible for Mili’s death, engaging in counter-factual thinking to imagine the possible routes he might have taken to save Mili. After Mili’s death, Sriyani encourages him to return to Canada, and offers him a way out: “You could not have known it would come to this. If you don’t mind me saying, you misjudged this country, because you are now foreign to it. You wanted poor old Sri Lanka to love and accept the person you had become in Canada. But it cannot. That does not make you responsible for Mili’s death” (289). Here, Sriyani both accepts the reality of Sri Lanka as not being a safe country for queer people and acknowledges

Shivan's misplaced hope for Sri Lanka. In reminding Shivan he is not responsible for Mili's death, she affirms his desire for Sri Lanka to be a place without such prejudice.

Just as Daya attempts to reach Shivan with the truth about her life, Shivan attempts to reach Michael with the truth about his. After Hema and Renu first visit to them in Vancouver proves to be a tense one, Michael gathers that there are things Shivan is keeping from him, and asks for the truth: "Shivan, if you love me, if you value the life we have built together, I beg you to tell me the truth. The truth that you have, I know now, hidden from me for as long as we've known each other." Shivan describes himself once more like his grandmother when she told him her story: "I was at the end of my rope, and there was nowhere to go except to the truth or its alternative, the end of our relationship … And so, palm resting on [Mili's] obituary as if taking an oath, I told Michael my story in a last attempt to keep at bay the death of all that was good in my life" (405).

Like Daya's failed attempt at reaching Shivan, Shivan's story does not help his relationship with Michael in the way that Renu and Hema both promised him it would. After revealing the truth, he and Michael sleep apart in their home for the first time. Michael is understandably angry at Shivan having kept this part of his life from him: "You brought your grandmother, and your fucking lover into my life, into my apartment. You've soiled it with these people. I don't even know what they look like, and I've been living with them for the past two years. And all the while here I was thinking it was just us. Just us" (411). But this lament illustrates the fact that Michael and Shivan are ultimately incompatible not only because of Shivan's withholding of his past but because

Michael is unable to accept that his partner carries a complicated personal history that is tied to the trauma of a larger community.

That Michael should be so surprised that Shivan shares history with his grandmother, a family member, suggests the isolated nuclear family which Shivan recognizes is the model of family Michael has seen growing up: “He desired our relationship to have the undivided focus his parents had” (380). The discomfort Michael feels that it isn’t “just [them]” in the apartment belies his belief that we need not carry the ghosts of our past with us, and that for Michael, there is no way to live in the present while doing so. Mili’s ghost does in fact spoil Shivan’s time with Michael, contributing to his restlessness and depression, and so Shivan attempts to tell Michael the whole truth. His efforts are thwarted, however, by his own anger: “I described, instead, to an aghast Michael, what had happened to Tamil people, my voice ringing with the real anger I felt towards my country and all that had occurred to me there, but also hoping that the tide of my angry words would carry me to a place where I was able to tell the full truth. It didn’t” (375). Shivan continues to shift the focus of his pain, ending the story with his mother’s unhappiness and her rejection of him when he told her he was gay.

This initial revelation, offered before Michael prompts Shivan for the whole truth, seems to bring them closer together, with Shivan moving into Michael’s apartment. But this closeness is short-lived, as Shivan’s dreams of Mili continue to add onto his restlessness and small resentments towards Michael. And though Michael notices these moments, he, somewhat like Daya’s husband, does not ask Shivan anything more:

> After the one time I told him of my past, he never questioned me more about it. Terms like “your mother’s issues,” or “1983,” became a shorthand between us for

> that history, and he explored no further. I think he understood, without daring to articulate it to himself, that to press for more information, to look more keenly at my odd family relations, would be to confront the disparities in my story—and that the truth, once revealed, would destroy the bond he was trying to so hard to create. (383)

Thus, while Shivan finds it difficult to tell the whole truth, Michael refuses to inquire into the discrepancies to confront the existence of a truth he knows is being kept from him.

When he realizes Shivan plans to return to Sri Lanka, Michael issues an ultimatum: if Daya doesn't forgive him, their relationship is over. This ultimatum reveals the simple, transactional way in which Michael attempts to grasp Shivan's complicated past with his grandmother and his own relationship with Shivan. It implies that the sacrifice Shivan is making by returning to his grandmother must have some returns: his grandmother must forgive him. If not, Shivan's return is a waste and, thus, he would have risked leaving Michael for no worthy reason by Michael's standards, which voids their relationship for him. He cannot understand why Shivan needs to go back at all: "Why do you have to go back? All that is past. Put it behind you and move on." Shivan responds, "But you can't just put things like that behind you, Michael. I must come to terms with her, with everything that happened, otherwise I, we, will never move on" (417). In adding "we" to his statement about moving on for himself, Shivan recognizes that his actions will always impact Michael. But Michael, at the end of his own rope, is now attempting to limit the ways in which Shivan's past comes to haunt him, too: "Do whatever you like. But that is my condition. I am sick of taking the consequences of your actions. I don't want you coming back a wreck and burdening me anymore" (418). In this way, the act of

storytelling that Shivan thought would unburden them both only adds more complications to their strained relationship.

Storytelling as Reparative Offering

In contrast to these two moments where the offering of a truth does not amount to reprieve, Hema's interventions into Shivan's life take place through a more reparative form of storytelling. Hema is perhaps the most important representation of a crowded self in the novel. Her "self" becomes socially shaped by exterior spaces (Black 35), specifically Canada itself. A significant part of Hema's new outlook on her life and her relationships is cultivated through a Buddhist meditation center in Toronto, where she becomes spirituality oriented towards escaping suffering through compassion and acceptance, and starts following the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. Hema's new belief system, Shivan recognizes, allows his mother "to step beyond her history, to see her life clearly, with all its problems and mistakes" (361). In thus being able to view her history from a different vantage point, Hema can step beyond it rather than be consumed within it, and finally be able to gain clarity about her life in a way that doesn't erase her mistakes but accounts for them and ensures she does not make them again.

After Hema's first failed attempt at a truce with her mother, Shivan imagines her resolve: "If my mother had been her old self, she might have given up now, accepted that this return [to Sri Lanka] had been in vain, that its central mission to save her son would never succeed, … But Canada had wrenched some new self out of my mother" (351). With the use of "wrenched" and its connotation of a violent twisting, Shivan understands that his mother's transformation was not immediate or easy. Shivan recalls,

> What had driven my mother to reinvent herself, she told me many years later, was a realization that came to her, not in a flash, but slowly—revealing itself the way the persistent lap of waves gradually wears down the surface of a rock to expose glittering mica underneath. … the realization grew clearer until she finally understood that she had repeated her own history. She had tried to escape her mother and ended up in a worse place. (146)

This moment is followed by Hema attempting suicide, and then years of anger and depression meted out onto her children. Eventually, once Renu is at Cornell and Shivan in Vancouver because he is unable to live with her in Toronto after Mili's death, Hema decides: "She'd had enough of the past's grip on her. It was time to take her failures and bend them to something better. She would return to Sri Lanka and her mother. It was the only path that would save her son" (345). The metaphor of shaping is repeated here when Hema decides to forcefully "bend" her failures to something better. Hema's decision establishes her as a site of porousness: on one side of her, in Canada, is Shivan, and on the other, in Sri Lanka, is her mother. If Hema is to save her son, she must not only reconcile with her mother, but also extend that reconciliation onwards to Shivan, through herself as a conduit.

Hema's desire to save Shivan is driven by her knowledge of her past mistakes, namely that she sacrificed a young Shivan to regain access into Daya's life and financial stability after her husband's death. The result was that Shivan was pulled two ways, negotiating between his grandmother who "had chosen him" (39) on one side and his mother and sister on the other. Shivan's anger takes root here, through his awareness of this exchange: "I developed a seething anger towards my mother and sister. By my early teens, this anger had grown so powerful, I could barely bring myself to speak to them. … Their lives, despite drawbacks, were free of my grandmother; their lives were actually

better for us being here. And this happiness, I saw, had been won at my cost" (46-7). By returning to Sri Lanka, Hema is now attempting to remedy this past mistake and stop Shivan's anger in the present.

Hema's ability to commit to this task is helped by the fact that her new self does not seem to be concretized, hinted at by Shivan's appositive "some" to describe it. Rather, it contains a sense of "fluidity and provisionality" through which it operates, having become "porous and flexible" by jostling against Canada itself (Black 35, 47). This malleability allows her to commit to her plan to repair her relationship with her mother, who is much less malleable. In response to her mother, who she recognizes is "so wounded she would never admit she had done wrong" (351), Hema responds with a self that is flexible to being changed according to the needs of the situation. She consistently reminds herself of a Buddhist saying from *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*: "When the mind burns with anger, immediately cast aside those angry thoughts or they will spread the way an unchecked fire travels from house to house" (402). She stays away from Chandralal, knowing that "an accidental meeting … would lead to a confrontation, and her rage would fracture all she was working towards for her son" (354). Over the course of a few months, as Hema takes over her mother's properties except for the apartments in which Chandralal has a share, she succeeds in repairing her relationship with her mother, but finds that her mother's acceptance of her does not extend to Shivan.

Back in Canada, Shivan feels that Hema's repaired relationship with Daya has, once again, come at his cost. Shivan threatens to cut Hema out of his life if she ever speaks of Daya, and Hema acquiesces. However, she reaches a limit during her and

Renu's first visit to Vancouver, when she realizes that Shivan has not shared the whole truth of this past with Michael. Shivan remembers how, during this visit, Hema makes one last attempt to intervene in his life, a moment where she literally blocks his path: "My mother asked me to walk her down to English Bay for one last look at the ocean. We were silent all the way there, and she rested her hand on my elbow as if needing support. When we were on the beach, she let go and we walked in tandem, a little apart. Finally, she overtook me and blocked my path" (402). At this point, Hema encourages Shivan to tell Michael the truth, and promises that Michael will forgive him. Shivan is unwilling to listen, and remembers how he "moved away, not daring to look at her, for I didn't want to see the desperation in her face" (402).

Then he recalls: "Yet my mother wouldn't give up so easily on me. She went to sit on a nearby log, hands clasped in front of her, waiting, and when I came at last and sat by her, she said, quoting the *Guide to the Boddhisattva's Way of Life*, 'When the mind burns with anger, immediately cast aside those angry thoughts or they will spread the way an unchecked fire travels from house to house.'" Hema then tells Shivan "the story of her early life and mistakes." He recognizes her gesture as something different than Daya's attempt to keep him with her: "By offering me her stories I could tell she was hoping I would start to forgive, and not let acrimony ruin my life as it had hers; hoping also that opening her secrets to me would give me courage to do the same with Michael." Still, Shivan notes that he "could only listen dully, overwhelmed, carried along as if caught in a current out at sea" (403).

Before she gets on the bus to the airport, Hema offers one last utterance to her son, taking his face in her hands and claiming, “Son, you are to me like rain soaking a parched land.” The expression is one that Daya used with Shivan when he was a child held captive under her domineering presence. Hema’s decision to reclaim the expression excises it from what Shivan calls Daya’s “malformed thing she called love” (32). Hema offers a counter-reading of its history so that it loses, in a sense, the path before it, associated with manipulation and dominance, and has the potential for being used in a new way in the present and into the future. Shivan is not opposed to Hema’s second attempt to reach him: “I knew that by redeeming this expression of love from its history, she was trying to put me on the path to doing the right thing” (403). Later, Shivan uses the expression to describe his love for Michael, revealing that he is able now to use the expression in a new form, and that, in the face of a traumatic family history, Hema’s stories have shown him a path towards repair.

Through these acts, Hema is also changing the trajectory and results of her mother’s past decisions as well. Daya is unable to do many of the things that Hema does. Daya’s literal and metaphorical isolation within her bedroom, curtained away from others, forecloses for her the opportunity to become a crowded self, which is the reason, perhaps, for her feeling of being “parched” in the first place. For rain to soak into a parched land, the land must be porous, cracked, and open to let water in. Daya’s refusal to become porous in this way is why Hema is initially unable to “soften” her mother through her return (357). But Hema becomes malleable and porous, facilitating reconciliation even if Shivan and Daya are not ready for it. Unlike Daya, who kept the

true story of her and Charles away from Hema, Hema tells Shivan the story of her life and its failures of her own accord. Hema's interpretation of Buddhism, too, stands in direct opposition to Daya and Chandralal's self-serving and violent interpretation of Buddhist philosophy. Finally, Hema tells Shivan that she has sold their share of the flats to Chandralal, and that she is looking for the Tamil family who Daya had extorted out of their home in exchange for safety during the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom. Though this task is not complete at the end of the novel—all she has is a lead for the family in Australia—she has at least begun.

Storytelling as Rebirth

Throughout the novel, Daya frequently refers to herself as a hungry ghost, unable to enjoy any good thing in this earthly realm. At the end of the novel, Shivan acknowledges that his desire to maintain his relationship with Mili was part of his own blindness. In this manner, he feels that he is not so different from his grandmother: "I know now that part of my anger is because my blindness mimics hers" (437). Consequently, Shivan's description of himself in the final scene of the novel mirrors his description of his grandmother he provides in the very first page of his narration: "That drive through Colombo comes back to me now, the image of my grandmother as she was then, chin jutted as if holding her own in an argument, back settled confidently into the base of her spine" (3). In contemplating the difficulty of his return, Shivan notes: "Taking hold of our suitcases, I settle my back into the base of my spine. Then, chin lifted, I pick up the bags and go towards the door, staggering under the heavy load of them" (448). Shivan keeps his "chin lifted" in the same way that Daya's is "jutted." He also has his

back “settled into the base of [his] spine” as his grandmother does, albeit with less confidence than her.

However, the end of the novel also points to a significant difference between Shivan and his grandmother. In his first description of Daya, Shivan includes why she never carried a handbag: “My grandmother was a woman who had others carry things for her” (3). On the other hand, by the end of the novel, Shivan “pick[s] up the bags” and “stagger[s] under the heavy load of them” (448). The act of carrying one’s own bags can be read as a metaphor for taking responsibility for one’s actions. Daya, Shivan knows, will not admit her culpability in Mili’s death. Yet, Shivan’s return to her, carrying his own, staggering load of bags, signals that he will no longer force others to carry blame for his own misgivings. Shivan claims to have “finally given up” in the fight against karma (448), but because of Hema’s interventions into his life, he is nonetheless able to make a choice about how he will conduct himself in the wake of his trauma: “And I, like that naked perethi, will find release only by offering it to another, by putting another before myself” (446).

Through the clarity he has gained, Shivan decides to put before himself not only his grandmother, by returning to care for her, but Michael as well, by extracting himself from Michael’s life: “This time, I will save the person I cherish most by giving him up. My past has tainted Michael …[into] becom[ing] someone he does not recognize, twisted by his longing for something I cannot give him” (446). Since the merging of their lives and selves has come at a harmful cost to Michael, Shivan makes an ethical decision to remove himself from Michael’s life in order to end their “cycles of anger, peace, then

anger again" (446). This decision on Shivan's part reveals how the novel makes an important distinction between morality and ethics. Shivan's decision involves ending a path that cultivated harm through moral judgements issued towards his grandmother, his mother, his sister, and his partner. In place of morality, which had led him only to anger, Shivan now constructs a new path, one of ethical conduct that involves stepping away when one is harming another, and stepping in if one can offer release to another, however difficult each decision may be.

And so, over the course of his narrative, Shivan comes to reinhabit his past with the possibility for forgiveness that memoirist Dorothy Allison outlines in the epigraph to this chapter: "What we learn in crafting the story of our lives is some way to love ourselves even in the midst of our horror. To forgive ourselves, our broken damaged hurt places, an appreciation for the muscle we have created in order to survive" (252). In the novel's final chapter, Shivan seems to forgive himself once more through the work of his imagination as he visualizes different paths for those he has hurt and lost, including himself. He imagines Mili, alive and well, as if Shivan had never met him; he imagines Michael, also without Shivan in his life, happily putting up wallpaper in Vancouver; finally, he imagines himself, similar to his grandmother in several ways but one.

**Caring for the Dead and the Living in Jean Arasanagayam's "All is Burning"**

Though not herself a mother, another caregiver in *The Hungry Ghosts* captures my attention: Rosalind, ayah to Daya since childhood, and the only one who cares for Daya after her family ostracizes her. Rosalind has a permanent place beside Daya and is loved deeply by Hema, Shivan, and Renu. While preparing meals for the family and

taking care of the house, she offers advice to each of them as she observes their fights and attempts at reconciliation. And yet, because she is the servant to the novel's principle characters, she remains on the margins both figuratively and literally: she sleeps on the floor beside Daya, and eats by herself in the kitchen after everyone else finishes their meals in the dining room. Shivan never imagines moments from Rosalind's life the same way he does with his mother, grandmother, Michael, Mili, or even Chandralal.

While this lack could arguably be an ethical limit that Selvadurai places into the novel, Shameem Black reminds us that "although imagining alterity is often vexed, *not* writing about others ultimately exacts its own ethical price." Black understands "writing about others as a responsibility that attends to the nuances of historical, intellectual, and material privilege" (251). In fact, the little we do hear from Rosalind alerts us to critical nuances about what it means to take up resistance or escape violence from the perspective of someone as poor as Rosalind. Unlike the family she serves, Rosalind migrations remain internal: she lives with Daya in urban, metropolitan Colombo, but comes from a small village in the southern town of Ratnapura. During Hema's first return to Sri Lanka to attempt reconciliation with her mother, Rosalind calls Sri Lanka a "country that gobbles up its own young," as she describes to an aghast Hema the details of torture endured by three university students in her hometown before they were burned to death under suspicion of being insurrectionists. To save her grandnephew, Saman, from a similar fate, he is sent to Colombo to work for Daya. He is also a university student in his first year, but Rosalind argues that "it's better to be uneducated than dead."

The violence Rosalind is referring to is that of the Marxist militant uprisings in 1987-1990 led by the People's Liberation Front or Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), made up of predominantly Sinhala university students, against the government of then-president J. R. Jayawardene. Their insurrections were quickly and brutally suppressed by the government through enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings, and intimidation. de Alwis notes that despite the history of anti-Tamil riots, an almost 30-year civil war, and a tsunami, "the dubious honor of recording the highest number of 'disappearances'[43] within the briefest span of years goes to the southern regions of the island where … around 35,000 predominantly Sinhala youth and men went missing"[44] ("'Disappearance' and 'Displacement'" 380).

Rosalind registers the complicated nature of blame from her perspective as she concludes her thoughts on the JVP with a criticism: "This movement is supposed to benefit us poor, but as always, we pay the price" (349). Rosalind's voice reminds us of what Gayatri Spivak terms a "tangent narrative" (249) to the main one. While Shivan and Hema occasionally mention the JVP insurrections taking place in Sri Lanka at different points in the novel, Rosalind is the only one in the novel who comes from a town whose residents are directly impacted by it. In official histories and other discourse around Sri

[43] de Alwis uses the word disappearance with quotation marks to note the contested political nature of the term, "to call attention to the violent circumstances within which it has taken place, and to refuse the project of censoring memory entailed in the insidious practice of making unavailable the violated body as evidence" ("'Disappearance' and 'Displacement'" 379).

[44] In Sri Lanka, though enforced disappearance has been used by the JVP insurrectionists, the Indian Peace Keeping Forces, the LTTE, and anti-LTTE militias, it is the Sri Lankan government forces that use enforced disappearance in a widespread and systemic manner, emboldened through presidential immunity, emergency rule, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act. For more on enforced disappearance in Sri Lanka, see Thomson-Senanayake, Human Rights Watch (*Recurring Nightmare* and *"In a Legal Black Hole"*) and Amnesty International Publications.

Lanka, too, the JVP insurrections remain liminal, overshadowed by the civil war due in part to its much longer duration and the international attention it garnered.

And so, in addition to the important avenues of repair and forgiveness that are offered by *The Hungry Ghosts*, I think further about the implications of Rosalind's words by turning to Jean Arasanayagam's "All is Burning" and the perspective of its protagonist, Alice. I do so not with the implication that Alice and Rosalind are interchangeable figures, but instead with the understanding that in our reading practices we must also "move beyond visions of otherness that only mirror the self or vanish beyond the power of representation" (Black 251). To do more than leave Rosalind's voice unaccompanied in this manner, to let it not "vanish beyond the power of representation," I follow her traces to Alice.

At various points in both texts, Alice and Rosalind describe similar occupations as women who have worked in other people's homes their entire lives, with similar limitations on their mobility, both physical and financial. This lack of mobility is important, as Maryse Jayasuriya notes of Arasanayagam's life and work: "Arasanayagam makes it clear that exile is not always the answer or the obvious solution to those who have experienced the devastation of the ethnic conflict" ("Violence spilt blood smashed glass" 95) particularly since many do not have the class privilege or other resources that would help them leave the country. Unlike Hema, Renu, and Shivan, but very much like Rosalind, Alice cannot migrate to a safer place where, however haunted by the past she may be, time and distance allow her to tend to the difficulties of her past and present life.

"All is Burning" begins with Alice and her daughter, Seela, contemplating their next steps following the events of the previous evening, when all two hundred and fifty men in their village were forcibly taken by armed men and murdered in a nearby field, including Seela's soon-to-be husband, Sena. Though Seela offers to accompany her mother in the search for Sena, Alice tells her to stay while she goes out in search of Sena on her own. During her search, Alice speaks to the dead men and simultaneously struggles with her spiritual beliefs. She finds little relief in the memory of the Buddhist Fire Sermon that was recently delivered by the village priest. The story does not resolve the search for Sena. Instead, it ends with Alice finding and comforting an unnamed young man in the throes of death, after which she contemplates how the women of the village will live on without their men.

In this section, I examine how Alice's "death walk" (Arasanagayam 173) constructs her as a crowded self, one that is attuned to her own body and needs in the midst of atrocity while also extending care to the dead and dying men before her. Alice's acts of care towards the bodies she must touch illustrate connection in place of Buddhist teachings on detachment as a way out of suffering. I locate the moments in Alice's self-narration where she moves through the immense difficulty of her task by focusing simply on the next thing that the moment calls for. In doing so, Alice is able to hold communal and individual grief and mourning together. Finally, I illustrate how the story, through Alice and the reader as witness, reminds us to look outside the frames of the civil war to account for multiple occasions of violence in the past and their legacies in the present.

Crowded Self as Connection to Community

"All is Burning" is told through a third-person omniscient narrator whose point of view stays close to Alice. This narration is occasionally interrupted by Alice's internal monologue, where the narration switches to either first-person singular or first-person plural. These moments allow Alice's voice to emerge more directly. Through this internal monologue, the story displays a literal iteration of Black's metaphor of the crowded self in Alice, particularly since her body quite literally "jostle[s] against the edges of others" (47). In this instance, the others are the dead bodies of the village's murdered men that she must navigate through in search of Sena. Alice steps out of her hut with bare feet to avoid detection, and later finds that her "hands were stained with blood. She wiped them slowly but the blood felt sticky, oozing into her skin, her flesh" (175). That she must make her way through the bodies than around them because she must search for Sena, and that the blood of others seeps into her flesh rather than simply remaining on its surface, indicates a porousness that dissolves the boundaries between Alice and the dead men.

As her search progresses, Alice is described as experiencing something like death or the process of dying herself. When she notes the presence of bluebottle flies already collecting around the dead, she notes how "[t]he smell of death, it was choking her. She felt suffocated but could not stop" (174-5). By the time the blood of the dead seeps into her clothes, she "felt dead, her limbs numbed" (174). As her live body starts to feel dead and numbed and gathers the blood of the dead, Alice's condition not only blurs the boundaries between herself and others, but between life and death. This blurring allows

Alice to extend several of the modes of care that Michael Lambek identifies in connection to the act of remembrance: "to care for and to care about; but also to take care of someone; to take care, as in to be careful; to have cares, as to be full of care; and to be vulnerable, to care what others say and do" (220). Alice cares for and about herself and her daughter, who she has taken care of her whole life and who she is determined will not perform this task. She is careful about the act of walking among the dead, and as she does so she narrates her many cares, which are connected to the cares of the remaining women in her village and what they will have to say and do to survive the murder of these men. I examine each of these moments of care in turn to illustrate what they teach us about how Alice faces atrocity alongside the immediate practical needs that arise in its aftermath.

As Alice makes her way through the mass of bodies, she meditates on the Buddha's Fire Sermon from which the short story borrows its title and epigraph: "The country was on fire. Everything was on fire. All was burning, burning." The sermon, which preaches detachment from desire as the remedy to one's suffering, was delivered by a monk on the full moon day to "bring some relief for [the villagers'] suffering minds." However, Alice's response to the memory of the sermon, in light of her current position, complicates this avenue of relief: "And what do we do? Alice thought to herself. Become dispassionate, detached? To reach that liberation must I first go out among the dead" (169)? Alice's questions highlight how she finds detachment incompatible when set against the catastrophe of mass murder, an act that causes suffering precisely because families and communities are connected to one another rather than being detached. Even if she were to attempt a philosophical or emotional detachment in this moment, it would

be hindered by the fact that her every footstep results in her physically touching the bodies of the dead. The idea that liberation can be reached at all in such a situation does not seem within reach after this night. Alice knows that the traumatic event before her will intrude into her psyche, that she will "relive this experience for ever," and suffer "dreams that will visit [her] night after night" (171, 174). While Hema's encounter with religion via the Buddhist center in Canada brings her compassion and relief in *The Hungry Ghosts*, for Alice the priest's Buddhist sermon cannot offer such release, in part because what must be faced with religion as bolster is so different for her.

What Alice displays instead of detachment, whether consciously or not, is simply, kinship and connection with the dead men. In having to physically move through the men and wipe the blood off their faces once she turns them towards her own in an effort to recognize them, Alice notices the softness of their bodies, "even the sinewy ones" (173). She senses a certain impropriety in the intimacy of her touch: "Men who belonged to other women. I would never have touched them at any other time" (173). By ruminating on the transgressive act of touching the men, Alice registers the extraordinary violence before her, an act that would not have happened "at any other time." Because she is walking amongst the mass of dead bodies, even the touch of her feet becomes improper to her. When she stumbles against the men, she reminds herself, "I'll have to be careful. I mustn't jostle them, even in death. Perhaps some of them still have that last breath…the soul that's reluctant to leave the body" (173). For Alice, death does not reduce a human being to a mere body, detached from personhood, which is how the men before her were treated at their mass execution.

As she turns the men up "face after face," she contemplates how "[a]ll she recognized were the empty faces of men. Men who were all akin, all brothers, husbands, fathers. All gone. To leave life in so unfinished, so haphazard a manner" (173). The repetition of "all," four times in these short, fragmented phrases, sounds close to a mourning cry. The last fragment matches the "unfinished" and "haphazard" manner of death, indicating the difficulty of accounting for what it means to be killed in this way. Alice's inability to articulate her feelings in complete sentences registers the unspeakable way in which the basic right to a natural death was taken from these men, which is perhaps the reason she is careful about wanting not to interrupt "that last breath," for fear that her stumbling touch might rush the departure of a soul that is not yet ready to leave the body.

When she does, inevitably, stumble against them again, she whispers: "Forgive me, … Respect for the dead, incantations, prayers, I can't forget it. Forgive me, son, brother, father, husband, forgive me for touching your sleeping body with my foot, it is not that I mean to insult you…" (174). Alice's internal monologue breaks here as she speaks directly to the men as if they are merely asleep and might be disturbed by the touch of her foot. That Alice pretends they are asleep, even if for a moment, reminds us that Alice is being profoundly impacted by the atrocity before her, resorting to such pretense in a way to avoid its traumatic reality as she continues her search for Sena. Simultaneously, her request for their forgiveness includes a recognition of the men's relationships to their loved ones—"son, brother, father, husband"—even if she doesn't know their names. In affirming their connection to others, Alice individuates the men.

The act of speaking out their familial roles in this manner is a further practice of connection as counter to the preaching of detachment, which proves inadequate for Alice to face this moment.

The care that Alice displays in her movements is accompanied by her utterance of prayers for the dead because she is also thinking about what limited forms of burial and mourning can take place in the aftermath: "No funeral orations for any of them. Individual burials are no longer practicable. It is within our minds that we carry those reminders of what each man was to each woman. Till each one is claimed, if ever they are claimed, they are anonymous. It's happening elsewhere too, perhaps at this very moment" (173). Murdered in a mass, the men will likely have to be buried or cremated in the same, rushed way. Even though Alice is only one woman, here she considers "what each man was to each woman." With the other women of the village absent from the scene, this moment constructs Alice's mind as becoming crowded with the knowledge of how her community, as a whole, will suffer. Her narration here shifts into first-person plural, even though the start of the passage, where she was worrying about stumbling into the men, had begun in first-person singular, as an indication of this crowding. This task of carrying connections in her mind, however, would be hindered if performed alongside a practice of detachment from one's feelings, desires, and relationships.

Thinking Things Through as an Ordinary Woman

Though her care for the dead and dying suggests how Alice troubles the preaching of detachment associated with the Fire Sermon, the story contains many allusions to the metaphors of the burning of sight and visuality that are also a part of the sermon: "the eye

is burning, visible forms are burning, visual impression is burning" (166). The story begins with Alice blowing out the light of their bottle lamp, "leaving the room in darkness," which is how she asks Seela to remain until she returns (166). Because Alice begins her journey before dawn, she cannot see as she steps outside: "Her instincts alert, she must let herself be guided by odours—unusual odours of gunshot, of blood, borne by the slight, chill tremors of the wind. There would be that human odour too, of fear, that rank smell of bodies through whose pores fear had breathed" (167-8). Rather than privileging sight, Alice uses touch, smell, and hearing to guide her in her mission and to keep herself from being found.

In being attuned to the sounds around her, Alice hears a groan and immediately understands, "Not all are dead then." She kneels down and "felt the man's breath touch the palm of her hand like a slight vapour, a cobweb of mist that faintly wreathed round her fingers." Though only a vapor, his breath is imagined by Alice as having just enough strength and will to reach out for her the way a hand might. She promises him, "I won't leave you alone. I'll stay by you," and cradles his head in her arms, wipes his face and pushes his hair off his forehead. He manages to say, "Mother," twice, and then, "Thirsty" to which Alice responds, "Wait, I'll bring you a sip of water. I'll go back to my hut. Wait. Don't move." As in the moments when she treats the dead men as if they were asleep, here Alice speaks as if the young man can choose the moment of his death or has the ability to get up and leave.

Though she does stay by him, the second promise of water, Alice knows, is a lie: "No, there wasn't time to go back, to fetch water, to give him that drink. Life-giving

water? No. It would soon be over." After he dies, she directs comfort towards herself: "All she could give him was the hope of that sip of water. And he had called her Mother. That was enough. She was a comfort to him and that was more than all the others had on all the battlefields where they gasped out their lives" (175). Alice repeats the word "all" again in an attempt to encompass the limitations of what she can provide—a singular moment of hope and a mother's cradling arm during the throes of death—against the vastness of the violence she knows is occurring across the country, of which this massacre is only one instance. Alice's attempt to balance these varying registers of violence, some of which she is not privy to, reminds us again of the multiplicity of narratives that exist with relation to conflict in Sri Lanka and of the stakes of where we let our attention be directed and in what ways.

Compared to the metaphor of thirst and parching in *The Hungry Ghosts*, in this short story, the need for water is a dire, material one that can only register as a question—"Life-giving water?"—because Alice knows she cannot bring the young man a sip of it. Fire, too, becomes a material consideration in light of what has taken place in the village: putting out a lamp may mean prolonged safety for Seela inside their hut, and fire will be needed for the funeral pyres. What moved "unchecked from house to house" in this story is not fire as a metaphor for anger, as Hema quotes to Shivan in *The Hungry Ghosts*, but anger and revenge intensified into murder. And while the material reality of the anti-Tamil pogrom does impact Shivan's family, they are protected from the literal burning of Tamil people and houses that takes place in the streets around them by the power of Daya's caste, class, and ethnicity and the workings of Chandralal.

Arasanagayam herself is a Burgher of Dutch ancestry and she is "therefore a descendent of the agents of colonial rule" (de Mel 162). She is a Christian who marries into an orthodox Hindu-Tamil family from Jaffna. In the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, Arasanagayam has to flee temporarily to a refugee camp with her husband and two children (de Mel 174). Maryse Jayasuriya marks this event as resulting in an "epiphanic moment" that begins to color Arasanayagam's fiction, which often features "a single protagonist (usually the first-person narrator) going through an epiphanic moment or at least making use of an opportunity to think things through" (97). Jayasuriya's description of Arasanayagam's prose accurately describes the mental processes that Alice moves through as she searches for Sena. It also points to the striking way in which looking inward helps Alice cope with external events. In spending time with the arc of the short story, my goal here is to understand how Alice is able to move through the catastrophic event before her by "think[ing] things through."

Jayasuriya notes that "Arasanayagam emphasizes that when one is living with death and danger, one needs to look inward, to consider things carefully without being swept away by external events. There is usually little plot development; instead, the first-person narrative enables readers to see the protagonist coming to certain realizations" (97-8). Though there is little room for plot to develop in such a short story, Alice's narration, and specifically her turn to memory, makes the reader feel as if much more has taken place within its short pages. As she steps outside her hut, Alice recalls the ordinary events of the evening: bathers returning from the river, her preparation of their evening meal, Sena and Seela in conversation. In reflecting on Seela's upcoming marriage, Alice

looks back on her own husband who abandoned her when she was pregnant, and all the work she has done in other people's home to ensure that Seela could have a different and better life. She then returns to thinking about the arrival of the jeeps of armed men the previous evening.

At the moment she decides to go out in search of Sena, Alice turns inward again: "She thought of herself. An ordinary woman. Very ordinary. Even the name Alice did not matter to anyone. She knew she had to do it. Even if there were a vestige of life left she would confront those last moments. And she would have to do it alone" (169-70). When she comes across a space where the grass is flattened, Alice embarks on the longest of her monologues, spoken entirely in the first-person singular, which begins with the same refrain:

> I am an ordinary woman, she told herself. I have been a servant in other people's homes for the greater part of my life. Always subservient, obeying orders. Eating after everyone else had eaten. Sleeping on my mat in a corner of a room, seeing that other people were comfortable. And now, now that I had hopes for a different kind of life, now when I thought things would change—but no, things *have* changed, though not for the better. Yet I have to do this for my daughter, look at the faces of the dead and the dying. No, Seela couldn't do it. I'll do it for her. I am her mother. Who else has she had all her life? Myself and her grandmother. Two women. There has never been a man to give me strength. I have done things I never believed possible for a woman to do. No, it will never end for me. My strength grows with each crisis. I've been well trained through the years. There's no one else I can turn to. I'll do it by myself. I can't help it if my mind keeps going back to all the events of the night. I'll relive this experience for ever. (170-1).

Between these two instances, we begin to understand what Alice means when she refers to herself as "an ordinary woman." In one sense, she considers herself ordinary because her name does not "matter to anyone." In another, she is referring to the ordinariness of her job as a servant in other people's homes who always obeys orders. Both articulations

of ordinariness suggest that what Alice means here is that she is a woman who will be forgotten. As a servant, she aims to be unseen in service of comfort for her employers. In implying that her name does not matter to anyone, she suggests that there is nothing for which she will be remembered. And yet, Alice's claims to ordinariness are spoken so close to claims of the extraordinary things she is performing and all the things she has done in the past that she "never believed possible for a woman to do."

In living the life of "an ordinary woman" whose life has been difficult, Alice possesses a knowledge that loss and trauma do not arrive with the luxury of a choice to abstain from making decisions about how to continue on with life, or even how to finish the immediate task at hand. Thus, in the midst of catastrophe, Alice's epiphanies take the shape of ordinary reminders that help her move from one task to the next, alongside her declarations of self: "I am her mother." As soon as the young man dies in her arms, Alice reverts back to her search because she is determined to give her daughter the certainty of knowledge regarding Sena. Though Seela herself had claimed, "Mother, our generation, my generation, we know the consequences. We are not afraid," (170) Alice is determined to search for Sena alone. Her conviction to do this herself indicates that, despite all that has happened, she is not yet willing to give up on changing her daughter's future. Seela is deeply impacted by the events of the night, but Alice ensures her daughter will at least not have had to "look at the faces of the dead and the dying" (170).

Throughout the rest of the task, Alice's commitment to her daughter is expressed in sentences that shift from a contemplation of what she must accomplish to reminders that she cannot reach that goal without completing the task at hand. For example, she

comes to her decision by realizing, “She knew she must go among them. How else would she find Sena? … I’ll have to turn them over. I have to see the faces. How else can I recognize them? How can I recognize Sena?” (172, 173). Alice’s narration shifts from third-person omniscient to first-person singular, as she recognizes that the first step is to go out among the dead men, and then later realizes that in order to find Sena, she will have to turn over each man and look at each face. The shift in point of view indicates, once more, a move from detachment to involvement as she contends with the fact that her task will perhaps be much harder than she had first imagined. The imperative mood in which Alice speaks about what she has to or must do indicates an ethical refusal to do anything less than what is required. Though she repeatedly asks, “How else…?”, she does not seem to be looking for another way. Rather, the repetition of “How else?” reminds Alice that she is capable, as an ordinary woman, of forcing herself to do one more thing that she “never believed possible for a woman to do” (170).

Mother(s) of the Forcibly Disappeared

Even as the story begins with Alice and Seela in the aftermath of the massacre of the men, Alice’s individual musings as she performs her search connects her not only to the dead but to the living—the rest of the village. She also continually gestures to the fact that similar atrocities are taking place in communities “elsewhere” that she is not a part of, which could arguably be confusing, given that there are no ethnic, racial, or religious markers for the characters in the story. It does not say explicitly what role the men who arrive in the village occupy. Alice does not refer to them as soldiers or any other denomination; she refers to them only as “they” throughout the story. They have guns and

jeeps, but in Sri Lanka this does not necessarily isolate the men as being connected to the government. The JVP were a militant uprising, and so were armed themselves.

Depending on who is reading the short story, then, this lack of both geographic location and identity markers has different effects. For those who know little of the background of the story or its author, this lack of boundary marking might render its subject matter "unlimited and universal," as Anders Sjöbohm notes of much of Arasanayagam's poetry (36). This universality allows it to accomplish what Jayasuriya considers Arasanayagam's "most pressing concern," which "is to highlight the carnage that occurs whenever people—no matter if they are Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, or Burghers, representatives of the state or militants—forget their humanity and take up arms for whatever cause they support" (94).

Despite the lack of such identity markers for her characters in "All is Burning," Arasanayagam hints at the specificity of what takes place in the story with a single Sinhala word when Alice describes what had thwarted her plans for a different kind of life for Seela: "But it had come to their hamlet too—the *bhishanaya*, the trouble" (168-9). The *beeshanaya* or *beeshana samaya* also translates to the "reign of terror" used to refer to the period of JVP uprisings. The presence of this word makes me more inclined to agree with Minoli Salgado's articulation that "[Arasanayagam's] work … is directed at those who are all too aware of the political violence in Sri Lanka; to be admitted entry into it automatically results in an interpellation that thrusts upon the reader a moral responsibility and social conscience, enforcing an understanding of the borderlessness of political agency" (86).

Rather than becoming merely unlimited and universal in its story of political violence visited upon the poor, then, the story is one that seeks to speak directly to those who have a responsibility towards the country, who have at least enough connection to know what this single word denotes. The address to such a reader requires that they respond to a story depicting this historical moment by connecting it to the present condition of the country, where government corruption, impunity, and suppression of dissenters continues while ordinary men and women continue the search for the forcibly disappeared. Because enforced disappearance has been an endemic tool of Sri Lanka's political governance for decades, the concerns of those searching for the disappeared are thus linked through multiple generations as well as across ethnic and religious divides.[45]

Alice, above all, wants the truth about Sena's condition for both herself and Seela: "She was a woman who needed certainty. The certainty of truth. It had to be one way or another" (172). Without knowing "one way or another," Alice and Seela are unable to know how to proceed. Through Alice's desire for this certainty, which is foreclosed to her and to us at the end of the story, Arasanayagam manages to make space for the reality of enforced disappearance throughout a story focused on her tending to the dead and the dying. Alice's main task, in fact, is that of a *search*, during which she finds herself performing burial rituals in whatever way she can. But as long as the men's bodies are gathered in a mass, the living will have to walk among them, recognize them, and claim them, as Alice attempts to do by herself. In thus suspending any information about Sena's

[45] Sri Lanka has the second highest number of enforced disappearances worldwide. The Sri Lankan government has historically denied enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings, mass atrocity, and war crimes. See United Nations Human Rights Council, Kodikara ("'What is the Question?'"), Seoighe, and "Who is Lasantha?"

whereabouts by the end of the story, Arasanayagam links Alice's determination to that of the families of the forcibly disappeared through one of their main demands: certainty regarding the death or whereabouts of their loved ones.

The first Mother's Front in Sri Lanka began in the south of the country, inspired by the Madres of Plaza del Mayo in Argentina, in response to the extrajudicial kidnapping, torture, and murder of those suspected of being JVP militants. Later branches of the Mother's Front arose in the north and east of the country as the civil war continued. Chulani Kodikara argues that this "history of the Mother's Front and the violence that catalysed it, has been all but erased from our collective memory and history," despite which it "still weighs on our present." Since 2017, multiple communities in the north and east of Sri Lanka have come together in days of continuous protest to seek justice for the disappeared.[46] Many of these protesters are dying without answers about the whereabouts of their loved ones.[47] The history and presence of such acts, and of larger, women-led activism towards peace in Sri Lanka, is "for the most part unknown, unacknowledged, or forgotten" (Samuel 2). "All is Burning" becomes one avenue through which the memory of these historic and present violences, and the persistent resistance to such violences, is honored.

## Conclusion: Ordinary Spaces of Remedy

Valerie Shaw compares the modern short story to an Impressionist painting in its being "something complete yet unfinished" (13). "All is Burning" adheres to this formal

[46] See "Association for Relatives of Enforced Disappearances" and Jegatheeswaran. As Jegatheeswaran notes, the families of the disappeared in Sri Lanka are not one group but several. On the histories and specificities of such groups, see Samuel, de Mel and Kodikara, and "Decades on."
[47] To date, over 100 family members of the disappeared have died without knowledge of what happened to their loved ones. Fifty such parents are commemorated in Kumanan's work.

characteristic because the story ends without Alice having found Sena, which was the purpose of her mission. We do not know if he managed to escape the execution, if he is among the dead, or if he is one of the disappeared *and* dead. But *The Hungry Ghosts*, too, leaves plenty of aspects unfinished despite being 448 pages long. The novel ends not at a close, but at the beginning of Shivan's return to Sri Lanka, which might yet be the most difficult part of his journey. Mili's death is confirmed, unlike Sena's, but there is no body to provide a proper burial for him. Finally, while Hema is trying to track down the Tamil family that Daya had extorted out of their home in exchange for their safety during the anti-Tamil pogrom of 1983, her act of reparation has only just begun; at the end of the novel, she has a possible lead for this family in Australia. What becomes of the dead, the disappeared, and the fleeing, is thus left out in each text.

Though written eighteen years apart and from writers in such different contexts—Selvadurai moves to Canada following the anti-Tamil pogrom in 1983 and Arasanayagam remains in the country until her death—both texts explore similar avenues of thought. Selvadurai, with the privilege of Canadian citizenship, is much more explicitly critical of the nationalist ends to which Buddhism is being put to in the country, but Arasanayagam, even as a resident writer, registers the inadequacy of Buddhist sermons in helping Alice understand and respond to the violence that has taken place. Shivan's retelling of his life leaves him at a place where the lines between victims and perpetrators are blurred, as he recognizes his own varying forms of complicity in committing harm. Alice does not know much about the world outside her village, but is deeply aware that similar atrocities are being visited on the poor and the innocent regardless of ethnicity or religion.

Both *The Hungry Ghosts* and "All is Burning" suggest that one way in which people move through atrocity is by focusing on the ordinary, quotidian, next step. In suggesting how post-conflict regions require us to rethink what counts as feminist activism, Rebecca Walker emphasizes the work of the Valkai group, a collective of mothers in the east of Sri Lanka who describe their work as "active living" where choices are made "based on a set of practices grounded in what could be done in the present context" (161). A post-conflict setting is an inadequate comparison for what Alice must perform in the midst of immediate and ongoing conflict. However, "active living" describes much of Alice's deliberations while she deals with the trauma before her. She is grounded in what must be done given the present context she finds herself in.

Alice's inward turn to "think things through" (Jayasuriya 97) from one moment to the next occur in a much more traumatic situation, but, like Hema, focusing on the immediate needs of the present context helps her cultivate the strength she needs to continue on with her task, both for herself and for her daughter. Her movement from one task to the next also echoes what Hema in *The Hungry Ghosts* tells herself when she first returns to Sri Lanka to attempt to reconcile with her mother and finds "the task before her impossible": "The next thing, Hema, … do the next thing, and then the next thing" (Selvadurai 347). This mantra gives Hema the strength to step through the curtain and into her mother's room to announce her arrival, an act which changes the course of their relationship. Even before Hema is able to return to her mother, her epiphanies about her life occur to her during the boring task of filing papers and making copies at her job in Canada. Shivan, too, gains the strength to face the past and remedy his mistakes through

the revelations that come to him during the task his mother has set him of cleaning her kitchen. In these ways, the novel and the short story highlight the possibilities nestled in ordinary spaces of reflection and remembrance for dealing with immediate atrocity and long-standing histories of violence that are at once individual and communal.

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“The Disaster After the Disaster”: Writing the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami

> Mother and father, I ask for forgiveness for not
> being able to save you the day the ocean
> encroached the land. The tears that started flowing
> from my eyes that day are still flowing today.
> I do not value any other love aside from yours.
> You, the sun and moon of my world were
> extinguished. Your youngest daughter is left on
> her own today. The hopes and dreams you had for
> your youngest daughter, did not sink along with
> the waves. The day those hopes and dreams are
> fulfilled, you will be smiling down from the
> world of the Gods. That is why I am still alive.
>
> ~ A poem by Priyani, “Metonymic Objects, Cultural Practices and Narrative Repair: Sri Lankan Responses to the Indian Ocean Tsunami,” by Cassim, Stolte, and Hodgetts, p. 979-80

## Introduction: Writing the Impossible

The above poem, written by Priyani, is at once a love letter to and a request for forgiveness from her parents whom she couldn’t save during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Priyani’s language begins to meld together the water of the ocean and the water that flows through her own body. As she notes the endless flow of tears that began that day and continues on, she links her love for her parents to the permanence of the sun and the moon, despite their physical bodies being “extinguished” by the force of the water. Death, in this rendition, is a form of separation that does not sever connection. Despite her despair at their loss, Priyani remains steadfast in her communication with her parents: she assures them that their hopes and dreams “did not sink along with the waves.” Here, her dreams, through her ability to hold onto them, become more powerful than the waves, which must inevitably sink back into the ocean. In this short poem, Priyani offers her parents the fulfilment of those dreams with great certainty, and she is able to end with the image of her parents smiling down at her from another world. Her last line—“That is why

I am still alive"-- is both reason and hope, salve and promise. It is Priyani's narrative of life, death, and disaster, all at once, and it encapsulates how both the texts I engage in this chapter are similarly able to hold life, death, and disaster together simultaneously.

The Indian Ocean tsunami that took place on the morning of December 26, 2004, killed approximately 35,000 people in Sri Lanka alone, rendered 800,000 people homeless, destroyed 78,000 homes, and decimated 70 percent of the coastline (de Mel, "Between" 240, Ratnasooriya et al. 22, and de Mel, Ruwanpura, and Samarasinghe). In all regions impacted by the tsunami, more women died than men, largely due to cultural gender norms that rendered women less able to swim, climb trees, remove their clothes, or leave their homes behind when the waves came. In Sri Lanka, 8933 women died, compared to 7581 men (de Mel, 240, "Between"). This chapter considers the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as a flashpoint through which Sri Lanka commonly comes into view. My aim is to think about how the tsunami becomes an event through which different stories surface. These stories are as much about Sri Lanka and the tsunami as they are about different understandings of the self, of the world, and of trauma. This chapter engages two literary works: Sonali Deraniyagala's 2013 memoir *Wave* and a 2008 collection of short stories by Simon Harris and Neluka Silva titled *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami*.

In the tsunami, economist Sonali Deraniyagala lost her husband, Stephen Lissenburgh, her two young sons, Vikram (age 7), and Nikhil (age 5), her parents, and her friend Orlantha. *Wave* tells the story of her recovery in the years following that day, put together from pieces of writing she created at the advice of her therapist, Dr. Mark

Epstein. The memoir facilitates important questions around issues of trauma and representation. My cursory research on *Wave* for Dr. Yamamoto's seminar on autobiography and memoir led me to pictures of vacationers in Sri Lanka taking Instagram pictures of the memoir as they lounged on the beach, along with pictures of Deraniyagala with her current spouse, actress Fiona Shaw, whom she married in 2018. *Wave*, as the only Anglophone memoir written by a Sri Lankan, tends to circulate as *the* story about the experience of the tsunami in Sri Lanka. Deraniyagala, in turn, circulates as an unbelievable figure, her story at once nightmare and fairytale: the woman who lost *literally* everything but overcame her trauma to find love again. While readers seem to want to tell a specific story about Deraniyagala and *Wave*, I consider the ways in which the grappling of trauma that abound in the memoir offers a narrative that refuses the healing arc of the grief memoir while simultaneously refusing to capitulate to the notion of Deraniyagala as a permanently wounded subject. In honoring the family she lost, Deraniyagala's memoir functions as a container that holds space for love alongside—and at times, against—catastrophic loss. Deraniyagala's memoir presents an account of individual loss and grief that, in the context of its popular circulation, complicates how we engage the person who is the subject of trauma.

*The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami* features fourteen stories that are written alternatingly by husband and wife, Simon Harris and Neluka Silva. Three of the fourteen stories are situated in London, while the rest take place in Sri Lanka. The stories feature a variety of characters spanning different religious, class, and ethnoracial backgrounds. All the stories consider how the tsunami coincides with or leads to a

moment of personal revelation for the characters. For example, in "Day of Reckoning," a couple realizes that their marriage is over via a recognition of their different responses to the tsunami. In "Becoming a Big Girl," a young girl loses her father to the tsunami and must immediately grapple with the milestone of her first period. "Some Kind of Hero" presents a wife who blames her husband for the loss of one of their sons, whom he let go of during the tsunami, an act for which he also cannot forgive himself. "Beyond the Rolled Back Beach" features a ghost narrator who is distraught as he watches his wife submit to the sexual advances of one of the dignitaries in charge of distributing reparations to those who lost their homes to the tsunami. What entices me to consider this varied collection is its ability to hold quotidian moments together with the spectacular event of the tsunami. The collection skillfully shifts the focus of the lens of trauma from the disaster event to the myriad of ways in which life continues alongside and after it. In doing so, it honors how the tsunami can and does mean differently to different individuals and communities, and asks us to focus on the people at the heart of the event rather than the event itself.

## **"To live in both worlds": Holding Love, Grief, and Trauma in Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave***

In a rare video interview for Canadian booksellers *Indigo*, economist Sonali Deraniyagala mentions the accident by which her 2013 memoir, *Wave*, came about: "Initially I was writing very much for myself. I was writing to explore and to unravel what happened to me firstly in the water … because it was so bewildering and I was so stunned by it even two years later" ("Sonali Deraniyagala Talks about Her Memoir,

*Wave*"). Deraniyagala and her family were on their annual Christmas vacation to Sri Lanka, and the tsunami struck while they were in their hotel near one of their favorite locations, Yala National Park. In the aftermath of the tsunami, Deraniyagala realizes that her husband, Stephen Lissenburgh, her two young sons, Vikram (age 7), and Nikhil (age 5), her parents, and her friend Orlantha, are dead. Deraniyagala is found alongside a lagoon not far from the hotel, after having hung onto a branch at some point during her being dragged along in the water. She is found, according to her rescuer, covered in black mud and spinning in circles (130).

Deraniyagala writes of what happened to her: "It still seems far-fetched, my story, even to me. Everyone vanishing in an instant, me spinning out from that mud, what is this, some kind of myth?" (220-1). If there is a mythic quality to Deraniyagala's survival, a similar quality can be attributed to her story of meeting and falling in love with Irish actress Fiona Shaw. Shaw was so moved when she read Deraniyagala's memoir in 2013 that she became determined to find a way to meet Deraniyagala through mutual friends (Chaudhary). In 2018, Shaw and Deraniyagala were married. I learned of their official union only through online Sri Lankan news outlets, all of which mention Deraniyagala's tragic past to extol how her journey shows a measure of hope and healing after tragedy. *The Sunday Times*, for instance, asks a queerphobic Sri Lankan society to grant Deraniyagala—nicknamed 'Tsunami' Sonali in the article titles—"after all the hell she has been through, that little piece of heaven in the arms of her love Fiona Shaw" ("'Tsunami' Sonali finds love"). An article on Pulse declares how news of her marriage gives us "a story of courage and healing to hold on to" (Weerawardene). The story of

Deraniyagala's marriage, and specifically the way in which it circulates through the fairy-tale-like trope of her having found love again after tragedy, becomes complicated when seen in light of Deraniyagala's *Indigo* interview, where she states that her memoir is "essentially about love and the endurance of love," which she says "never dies" ("Sonali Deraniyagala Talks about Her Memoir, *Wave*").

The way in which news of Deraniyagala's marriage to Shaw circulated in various publics is deeply connected to how her story is understood as one of triumph and perseverance through unimaginable loss. Not surprisingly, a Google search of the book reveals its placement in booklists that bring together works on grief, loss, bereavement, trauma, and recovery. In her article, "The Way We Grieve Now," Sandra M. Gilbert considers *Wave* an outlier in the grief memoirs that have proliferated in the past few decades, but limits her reason to the fact that it deals with multiple losses as opposed to the other grief journals she traverses in her article that tackle a singular loss. I explore the several more ways in which Wave becomes an outlier within both grief memoirs and trauma narratives more generally. I consider the ways in which the reception of the memoir and of Deraniyagala herself, along with the grappling of trauma that abound in the memoir, offer a narrative that refuses the healing arc of the grief memoir while simultaneously refusing to capitulate to the notion of Deraniyagala as a permanently wounded subject. In honoring the family she lost, Deraniyagala's memoir functions as a container that holds space for love alongside—and at times, against—catastrophic loss. In its depiction of an individual mourning multiple losses, the memoir facilitates important questions around issues of trauma and representation.

The Problem of Representation in the Trauma Memoir

Deraniyagala's losses are multiple, and the unexpected nature of those losses deepens its unfathomable nature: "When that jeep turned over, we dispersed. We just slipped out, I guess, no moment of separation, not one that I was aware of anyway. It was not like I tried to cling to my children as they were torn from my arms, it was not like they were yanked from me, not like I saw them dead. They simply vanished from my life forever" (125). The moment of the jeep toppling over becomes a repeated metaphor for Deraniyagala, a moment that marks the beginning of "this knocked-down world" (13). She returns to the image of being toppled in order to represent the way in which she cannot locate a moment of painful separation from her loved ones. Her repetition of "not like" in these sentences points to the refusal of what happened to conform to the 'usual' ways in which we imagine we would have to be wrenched away from our loved ones in the midst of disaster.

In an interview with Jeanie MacFarlane, Deraniyagala mentions this lack of referential knowledge again: "It was so bewildering, so unknown. It was not like we were in a car crash and you can see it coming toward you and you know what it is." The lack of any frame of knowledge except that "[s]omething came for [them] … something so unknown" (*Wave* 38) amplifies Deraniyagala's belated grappling with the tsunami, a force of nature that she could not have recognized the way she would have understood the impending doom of a car crash. As opposed to the fear and apprehension of a form of harm for which she might have had a framework, Deraniyagala's language when she

says, “We just slipped out, I guess, no moment of separation,” denotes a sense of simpler, softer dispersal that separates her family from her.

That her family “simply vanished” from her life in this way leads to lack of continuity in her life, such that her world becomes split between what it was before the wave, and what it becomes after it. Consequently, she struggles in the ensuing years with the moments of slippage that occur, where she would often forget that her family is dead. Their deaths become facts that she must force herself to learn: “They are my world. How do I make them dead? My mind toppled. In a stupor I began to teach myself the impossible. I had to learn it even by rote” (40). That she must “make them dead” in her mind when they are dead in fact reveals the extent to which she has not absorbed their losses because she did not see them dead. That the bodies of her parents and Malli are found, that Stephen and Vik are identified through DNA testing four months later, matters little. Such evidence, no matter how scientific and material, does not stand up to the challenge of Deraniyagala feeling their presence one moment and their absence the next. In not being able to identify a violent moment of separation, Deraniyagala spends years in an attempt to “indelibly imprint they are dead on [her] consciousness, afraid of slipping up and forgetting, of thinking they are live” (89).

Deraniyagala’s statement—“They are my world”—indicates the way in which her days and her world, and, indeed, her sense of self, were organized around her family. This notion of selfhood aligns with the view of self that Susan J. Brison argues for in *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, one that is “fundamentally relational—capable of being undone by violence, but also of being remade in connection with others”

(xi). *Wave* poses a more complicated question about self-making in that those in connection to whom Deraniyagala's self was already established are lost in the same traumatic experience. As bereavement counselor Debra Oryzysyn notes in her review of *Wave*, "Had [Deraniyagala's] parents been the only ones to die, she would have had the love and comfort of spouse and children. If her parents had lived and her husband and sons had been killed, she might seek solace from her mother and father" (620). Without either of these options of familial linkage available to her, Deraniyagala comes to be understood as someone drastically untethered to the world, having lost both her parents and her family of procreation in the same moment.

Deraniyagala's experience of trauma and its encapsulation in *Wave* illustrates the way in which trauma narratives intensify the "autographical paradox of representativeness" (19) as articulated by Leigh Gilmore in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Specifically, this paradox is that "the autobiographer [must] be both unique and representative" (8), but Deraniyagala pushes the boundary on both these counts. While it is clear that readers are interested in Wave due to the uniqueness of the trauma it depicts, the story is also one that illustrates a reality that few of us would want: the total and inexplicable loss of our loved ones in a single experience. Oryzysyn notes how the "magnitude of these multiple losses" (620) makes Deraniyagala a unique case in terms of her grief, such that even a practiced counselor like herself is left "desperate to discover at last the secret of how Deraniyagala not only managed to live beyond this experience, but how she survived and moved forward so as to be able to sit down and write this tale of horror in so beautiful, present, and honest way" (619). Oryzysyn, in

approaching the book from her "professional perspective," wonders if Deraniyagala, in contending with the magnitude and multiplicity of her loss, can "at last" unveil the "secret" to how one might recover from such devastating horror. The uniqueness of Deraniyagala's trauma thus makes her into someone who is almost too unique in that her intensified losses cannot be viewed as analogous to other representative cases of grief which, despite being traumatic, must not hold this "secret." Insofar as no one wants to find themselves represented in this way, Deraniyagala becomes a marker for the kind of excessive loss that few people anticipate experiencing in their lives, and in doing so she meets the limit of representativeness even as her memoir makes its way into what Gilbert calls the "Bereavement Book Club."

In *Wave*, Deraniyagala writes of a moment in the days following the tsunami when she was taken to an aunt's house in Colombo: "The women began to lament my plight. Never in their lives had they heard such a story, everyone dying and just one person left. She's lost her children, she's lost her world, how can she live?" (31-2). What becomes pronounced to these women alongside—and perhaps even more than—the loss of family members is Deraniyagala's reaction to the loss itself. Her reaction of "sitting quietly" is understood as inappropriate or lacking—or not understood at all—in light of the loss of an entire "world." Despite their professed inability to imagine such an unheard-of story, Deraniyagala's presence before them urges them to compare what they certainly would and wouldn't do in her position: "If they were me, the women wailed, they wouldn't be sitting quietly, they'd be out of their minds, most likely they would have died of grief (32). That Deraniyagala has not died of grief, that she exists, becomes a

morbid fascination as the women lament and wail around her. Her survival, rather than something to be attended to, becomes a fascinating social outlier.

What feels unimaginable shifts from being located in the tsunami, and the death and destruction it brings, to Deraniyagala's existence, situating her as an object of curiosity and pity: "[t]he front door of the house was open, neighbors and relatives wandered in. They were told about me. Everyone looked at me aghast. She's lost her children? And her husband and her parents? Some of the visitors left quickly and returned with more people saying, look at this poor lady, isn't it unbelievable, her whole family is gone" (32). As the boundary between private and public space comes apart in this scene, so too does Deraniyagala's act of "sitting quietly" in her grief become exposed to the community around her aunt's house that cannot fathom the story of "this poor lady." This moment within the memoir evinces one of the challenges of the autobiography of trauma as outlined by Gilmore, in that it "forces the reader to assume a position of masochism or voyeurism. The reader is invited to find himself or herself in the figure of the representative, or to enjoy a kind of pleasure in the narrative organization of pain" (22-3). By depicting for her readers those members of her own family who treated her in this voyeuristic way, Deraniyagala presents her readers with the problem of ethically encountering the aftermath of her trauma as we read it.

As the neighbors and relatives gather and stare collectively at the unbelievable fact that is Deraniyagala herself, their speech about her existence against the death of her family compounds her own understanding of who she might be without her family, leading her to question: "Is this me they are talking about?" (32). That Deraniyalaga is

talked ‘about’ and looked at in this way, and that she ends the scene with this question, returns me to Brison’s articulation of the difficulty of being able to narrate traumatic experience. In thinking about how trauma survivors need empathetic listeners, Brison contends that “[t]he relational nature of the self is also revealed by a further obstacle confronting trauma survivors attempting to reconstruct coherent narratives: the difficulty of regaining one’s voice, one’s subjectivity, after one has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or, worse, made into someone else’s speech, an instrument of another’s agency” (55). Brison’s theorization of the self in the aftermath of violence are linked to her own survival of rape and attempted murder. Thus, she is referring in this quote to the difficulty of regaining voice after a perpetrator has dehumanized a victim, but Brison’s theorization can be extended to think about how Wave depicts and complicates the processes of the self being undone and then remade. Specifically, Deraniyagala must confront the difficulty of finding voice after the tsunami renders her untethered to family and must subsequently navigate the ways in which that untethering further silences her by producing her into a spectacle of loss to those around her. This process becomes complicated in *Wave* since there is no perpetrator responsible for the tsunami that renders Deraniyagala speechless in her trauma. Rather than a violent perpetrator connected to the original experience of trauma, then, it is the ensuing response of the public—and possibly her own readers—that becomes a locatable as perpetuating Deraniyagala’s silencing. An example of such a moment is described in the memoir, when Deraniyagala first encounters a picture of her sons online while searching for ways to kill herself:

> [T]he London Evening Standard screamed, 'I watched as my whole family was swept away,' alongside a large photo of Vik and Mal. … My mind had not fixed on their faces since the wave, and it couldn't endure them. I fell on the bed and pressed a pillow over my face. And that headline, 'I watched'? I hadn't spoken to any journalist, I had barely left that room. How dare they? I seethed. If Steve was here, if Steve was here, I'd tell him to go find those Evening Standard journalists on a dark night and beat them to a pulp. (47)

In this scene, it is the *London Evening Standard* that has voice and gall enough to "scream" while Deraniyagala, in the deep end of her trauma, has not spoken to any journalist or even been able to bear seeing her son's face. Yet, she is forced into seeing them without any preparation due to the way in which her story became a sensational news item for a media outlet to capitalize upon. As Deraniyagala absorbs the headline, she turns the statement it makes into a question, adding a question mark after "I watched?" to illustrate her desire to question their claim of what she did or didn't do while simultaneously grappling with her own inadequate knowledge of precisely what did occur in the water. For anyone to speak about her story in this way muffles her, as she presses a pillow over her face, and resorts to imagining a violent and retributive act towards the journalists for usurping her voice. And yet, in her repetition—"If Steve was here, if Steve was here"—Deraniyagala is admitting that such an act requires her husband whom she does not have beside her any longer, meaning that this act, meant to assuage her anger, could never come to fruition.

In the challenge of bearing witness to what they consider unimaginable, and in responding to the difficulty of this task by creating a spectacle of Deraniyagala, people's reception of her story participates in a kind of silencing that makes it difficult for Deraniyagala to reconcile that she is the one being talked about. Similarly, there is a way

in which the media outlets that report on Deraniyagala, even to relate happy news of her marriage to Fiona Shaw, can't seem to wrench their attention away from Deraniyagala as someone who experienced a tragic loss, such that any story about her includes the story of her loss. In another moment in the memoir that takes place in New York in 2008, Deraniyagala contends with the paradox of existing as this unimaginable person: "I am in the unthinkable situation that people cannot bear to contemplate. I hear this occasionally. A friend will say, I told someone about you, and she couldn't believe it was true, couldn't imagine how you must be" (114). Deraniyagala's story, the very confusion of how she "must be," circulates in this moment by word of mouth as much as it does through her memoir.

Deraniyagala is aware of her own ambivalence towards occupying this twisted mantle: "And I cringe to be bereft in a way that cannot be imagined, even though I do wonder how impossible this really is. Occasionally an insensitive relative might walk away if I mention my anguish, and I reel from the humiliation of my pain being outlandish, not palatable to others" (114). While Brison contends that self-narratives need an audience through which a survivor of trauma can remake the self, she also "highlights how this dependency … helps to explain why it is so difficult for survivors to recover when others are unwilling to listen to what they endured" (51). Deraniyagala's response to those who are unwilling or unable to listen to her anguish seems to be to cringe at her own unpalatability to people. Yet, nestled within this quote is an expression of doubt that she might not be such an unthinkable object: "even though I do wonder how impossible this really is." This sentence indicates the way in which Deraniyagala acknowledges that,

after all, survive she did, regardless of how impossible that survival might seem to people, and even to herself. In this fleeting sentence, mentioned in passing in between moments of others' inability to imagine how she "must be," Deraniyagala pushes back against the unthinkable subject position to which she is relegated through her loss. This moment resonates with a scene in the memoir, a year after the tsunami, when she returns to the beach in Yala with her father-in-law, Peter, and sister-in-law, Jane. Deraniyagala walks down to the ocean by herself and ruminates: "I stood there taunting the sea, our killer. Come on then. Why don't you rise now? Higher, higher. Swallow me up" (72). In her taunts to the sea, she reckons with her own survival, but in thus challenging the ocean—"Swallow me up"—she must reaffirm her own existence, that she is a "me" that can be swallowed up. In a similar way, her aside where she wonders "how impossible this really is" performs a similar affirming of her own existence. She cannot be, according to those she encounters, according to her insensitive relatives, and according to the media's version of her. And yet, here she is.

For Brison, the "working through, or remastering of, the traumatic memory involves going from being the medium of someone else's (the torturer's) speech to being the subject of one's own" (54). In Deraniyagala's case, the torturer would be the tsunami itself, an entity to which she attempts to speak on her return to the ocean in Yala. The ocean cannot speak back to Deraniyagala, however, which leaves the subsequent treatment of her as spectacle by those around her to be foregrounded as a different but connected form of speaking on Deraniyagala's behalf. As such, Deraniyagala's memoir performs a double movement: it situates Deraniyagala as the subject of her own speech

against the ways in which she is talked about as a spectacle of grief, and it tackles the traumatic experience itself and the losses it entails through a return to love in the face of enormous grief.

Memoir as a Space of Containment and Recovery

In writing about a conversation with Deraniyagala, Tim Adams shares how the writing that becomes the memoir was a way for Deraniyagala "to collect up all the dispersed traces of her family, the innumerable scattered fragments that proved they had lived and loved, and hold them in one place again. Her world as a result is steadier, has stopped spinning so wildly." In writer Sunila Galappatti's review of *Wave*, she writes: "We recognize a tragedy not by its losses but by its endurances, by the capacity of human beings to contain what they could never have imagined." In Kathleen Fowler's article on grief memoirs, she considers the way in which "grief can become almost unlivable and the memoir becomes a means to try to contain it, to comprehend it, to make it bearable" (547). What becomes foregrounded in these two reviews and in Fowler's article is the way in which memoir becomes an attempt to collect, to gather, and to contain the shattering experience of grief. To "hold them in one place again" (Adams) implies both a piecing and holding together of a shattered world but also that each individual person can be in place within the larger web that made up their family. Galappatti, too, in considering an additional layer as to why Deraniyagala's story is moving, uses the language of volume and containment in referring to people's "capacity to hold what they could never have imagined."

In Deraniyagala's own explanation of her process of writing *Wave*, she employs the same metaphors of containment, but does so in a way that goes beyond Fowler's conception of the memoir as a bearer of grief: "Each thing I wrote was entirely self-contained. In the beginning I just wrote about my children; there was no Steve or my parents. I can only hold some of this at one time. What I've learned over time is to hold the loss rather than trying to bear it, to live in both worlds" (Cole). In being unable to hold all her losses at once, the memoir becomes a space in which each self-contained piece of writing came together to hold her grief over the multiple losses that spill over from her own self. When Deraniyagala refers to "each thing [she] wrote," she is revealing a lack of formal categorization that would neatly label what "each thing" was. The labeling of these things does not seem to matter; whatever "each thing" was, it existed as an entity on its own, as portions and memories of the moments of her life with each member of her family, before they were gathered into what becomes formally known as the memoir. Deraniyagala's experience of multiple losses had to be compartmentalized, each contained in its own section of writing and grieving, such that she could contend with the compounded nature of her loss only one person or layer at a time. Most interesting to me in her explication of what she learned through her writing process is in the distinction she makes between what it means "to hold the loss rather than trying to bear it." To try to bear a loss implies a sense of burden, and such an attempt contributes to the ways in which Deraniyagala becomes viewed as someone pitiful or unthinkable. Her bearing becomes difficult for those around her to bear witness to. On the other hand, the image of holding lends itself to a notion of care and love, and this notion is one that

permeates the memoir. The memoir, then, in addition to being a space that collects for Deraniyagala "each thing" she wrote in order to tackle her losses one at a time, also functions to hold all those pieces together in a way that she finds herself, at moments, unable to.

The metaphor of containment and holding returns in one of the most interesting and important scenes for illustrating the ways in which Deraniyagala renders her trauma in this memoir. In the penultimate chapter of the book, titled "Off the Mirissa Coast, 2011," Deraniyagala details a whale-watching trip before recalling her early relationship with her husband. As she describes the present moment on the boat, Steve and her boys make their presence into the narrative in the form of memories—Steve and her wanting to buy a house on this coast, the image of three additional pairs of flip flops that should be piled on top of hers on the boat. Deraniyagala becomes captivated by the blue whales swimming around the boat, despite her not wanting to enjoy these whales without Vik. She writes:

> I want to stay on this boat forever. I am lulled by the breeze from the sea and the rocking boat. In this endless expanse of ocean, I feel snug. These blue whales are unreal and baffling, yet surrounded by them I settle awhile. Somehow on this boat I can rest with my disbelief about what happened, and with the impossible truth of my loss, which I have to compress often and misshape, just so I can bear it—so I can cook or teach or floss my teeth. Maybe the majesty of these creatures loosens my heart so I can hold it whole. (203)

This moment offers a rich collection of the various aspects of her trauma that Deraniyagala must cope with. The startling nature of that first simple sentence—"I want to stay on this boat forever"—illustrates Deraniyagala's return to the site of trauma as her memoir is about to end. It is the vastness of the ocean that first prompted her to call the

boat the she is on “insubstantial” (197) in comparison to the ocean it now traverses, the ocean in which she is currently amidst. In this particular moment, this ocean is more immediately associated with the particularity of her trauma, as the men who work on the boat mention the strange activity of the whales given the tsunami in Japan that had occurred only five days before this trip. Deraniyagala mentions how the footage of the Japan tsunami brought her a sense of clarity regarding what it might have looked like when she had encountered the one that hit Sri Lanka: “So this is what got us, … This is what I was churning in. I never saw the scale of it then. This same ocean. Staring at me now all blue and innocent. How it turned” (203). Only in relation to the videos of the tsunami in Japan is she able to comprehend visually what might have happened to her and her family. Despite the knowledge that this is the same ocean that took her family from her, and the knowledge that it could again turn against her, she feels a sense of comfort and snugness in its midst.

Rather than bring her to a sense of fear, or return her to the violence of her trauma, then, the ocean in this moment becomes a space of reprieve for Deraniyagala as it metaphorizes that which she struggles to find a language for: the enormity of her loss. Whereas she would usually have to “compress often and misshape” her loss in order to be able to get through her day, here, in the vastness of the ocean, accompanied by the surreal presence of the blue whales, Deraniyagala finds a space large enough to hold her loss. The use of the spatial works to capture her grief in a way that language cannot. This task is one that she admits not all environments can manage: “In these six years since they’ve died, I’ve found it hard to tolerate this landscape. I spurn its paltry picture-postcardness.

Those beaches and bays are too pretty and tame to stand up to my pain, to hold it, even a little" (199). While certain spaces are too picture-perfect to hold Deraniyagala's loss, the whales and the depths of the ocean in which they live, are not. In having found a space in which she can let her loss be as massive as it is, she can now "[loosen] her heart so [she] can hold it whole." This image of her heart needing to be loosened conjures up the idea that her heart, in both her love for her family and in her grief over their loss, has grown rather than shrunk. Thus, in the midst of the ocean that claimed the lives of her loved ones, Deraniyagala goes from being "cradled by shock" (227) to being able to grasp the "impossible truth of [her] loss" (203). Just as the memoir is one container for holding together the memories she collects of her loved ones, the expanse of the ocean becomes a similar container that can hold—however precariously and temporarily—her trauma.

It is through this process of collecting and holding that Deraniyagala becomes able to "live in two worlds," a claim which pushes up against theorizations of trauma that insist on the notion that healing involves a leaving behind of the past in order to venture on into the future. Wave establishes Deraniyagala's present as fully peopled with those she has lost. In the last section of the memoir, titled, "New York, June 22, 2012," Deraniyagala begins by admitting to still "trip[ping] up constantly, between this life and that" (224). The separation between before and after the wave, between past and present, still exists for her, a slippage occurring, for instance, whenever she hears a rush of footsteps in the apartment above that will return her "at once into our home in London" (224). But Deraniyagala also marks a certain stability and purposefulness that exists alongside these moments of slippage:

> But our banter doesn't subside in me. This is very different from those early months after the wave, when all I heard was a sudden whisper, some snatches of sound. Their voices have doubled in strength now, not faded with time. … And I am sustained by this, it gives me spark. … I know it is true that they are not here. An unfathomable truth, but maybe I am more accustomed to it" (224-5).

It is in New York that Deraniyagala establishes the distance she needed "from which [she] could reach for [her] family" (225). For Deraniyagala, becoming more accustomed to the "unfathomable truth" that "they are not here" does not involve establishing only their absence. Rather, that their banter "doesn't subside in [her]" is important in that it reiterates how much their presence through memory—despite and alongside their absence—sustains her. She learns the truth of their deaths, however incomplete that learning might be. The use of the word "subside" is likewise relevant for the way it recalls the images of water subsiding after a flood. While she is careful to mention that the sense of equilibrium she has reached shifts constantly, she has settled on one aspect of which she is certain: "I have learned that I can only recover myself when I keep them near. If I distance myself from them, and their absence, I am fractured. I am left feeling I've blundered into a stranger's life" (227).

This sense of strangeness connects to Deraniyagala's struggle to find a sense of self without her family. In fact, she chooses to end her book while turning to her family with the question, "Who am I now?" (227). It is Malli who answers:

> And now I remember. How Malli would describe and define me. And how I'd protest. 'We are three boys and one girl, three boys and one girl,' he'd say, explaining his family, working out our composition as he hopped across the pacing stones on the patio. Then he'd recite our names, …. 'Stephen Lissenburgh, Vikram Lissenburgh, Nikhil Lissenburg, and Mummy Lissenburgh.' He'd announce us with aplomb. Mummy Lissenburgh? I'd roar in exaggerated objection. My new credentials. Me having no identity without these three boys to

> whom I was merely tagged on. 'Malli, why do you get both my names wrong? You got everyone else's right. That's not me.' (227)

It is significant that Deraniyagala chooses this memory to close the book, in that it directly recalls a moment of silliness within her family that indexes the problem of her loss of identity via her loss of them. The simple counting that Malli does—math itself—is no longer true once the three boys are taken out of the equation. Grammar fails as well, since there is no more "and" between "three boys" and "one girl," leaving only Deraniyagala: one girl. Malli's playful composition, a clearly repeated ritual in their family, becomes a reminder of how she was once labelled only "Mummy Lissenburgh" in being granted neither of her names. In the aftermath, it is a title she struggles to claim throughout the book as she deals with her shame: "I let my children go, when I was their mother" (124). It becomes clear in this moment that it is not that she had "no identity without these three boys," but that it was perhaps one of her most cherished threads of identity. Her playful retort—"That's not me"—recalls the moments throughout the memoir in which she has wrestled with the ways she was talked about or talked around as spectacle, such that she would not recognize herself. Deraniyagala chooses a moment in which she allows herself to be hailed by those most dear to her as "Mummy Lissenburgh."

Memoir as a Space of Rescue and Love

To end the memoir, Deraniyagala uses language to perform a simultaneous holding of the past and the present: "Now I sit in this garden in New York, and I hear them, jubilant, gleeful, on our lawn" (227). Though she is in the present in New York, where her family has never lived, she hears them "on [their] lawn" that would be situated

in their home in London. In this way Deraniyagala illustrates the one aspect of her journey of which she claims any certainty: “I have learned that I can only recover myself when I keep them near” (227). Despite her moments of slippage, she has come to understand that it is in cultivating their loudness in her memory, and in journeying into their absence rather than distancing herself from it that allows her to be who she is now, and who she was, at one and the same time.

Teju Cole writes of *Wave*: “In accurately describing her family’s life—and I’m drawn here to the root word “cura,” care, from which we get “accurate”—she rescues her family from uncaring, careless fate. Losing them plunged her into darkness. Writing about what happened brings them back into the light, a little.” The attention that Cole brings to the word accurate and its connection to care aligns with Deraniyagala’s distinction between what it means to hold loss rather than bear its burden. Indeed, *Wave* is filled with the facts and details of her experiences with her family members. In filling the book up with these moments, Deraniyagala rescues them, as Cole imagines, in writing, in a way that she was unable to during the tsunami, when they “simply vanished from [her] life” (125). Against this vanishing, Deraniyagala employs memory to establish that they were all once present in this world. This act of care also ensures her survival beyond an existence as a specter of grief that haunts others.

When Cole mentions the “uncaring, careless fate” to which her family is lost, he is gesturing toward more than the tsunami itself. A destructive force of nature, after all, is not responsible for caring for those whom it destroys. Rather, it is the response to Deraniyagala, perhaps, that relegates them to this fate, in the way that their lives become

overshadowed by the mere fact of Deraniyagala's existence in the face of her having lost them. It is *we* who might be careless, who, in staring "aghast" (32) at Deraniyagala, risk forgetting about the people she lost. It becomes significant, then, that the tsunami itself, and Deraniyagala's rescue from the lagoon, ends by the eighteenth page of the memoir. If a reader starts this book with a masochistic or voyeuristic eye, they would be bored before they reached the second chapter. They might be confused by an entire page dedicated to the way that Vik savored a rare snack of crisps, how "he took a single crisp out of the pack, savored it with his eyes, lowered it into his mouth, and munched" (34-5).

Deraniyagala's version of holding her family close against their being forgotten becomes intimately connected to writing, which she calls "a better quality of agony than trying to forget" (MacFarlane). Her writing thus makes available to readers not the spectacle of loss but the character and personhood of her husband, her sons, and her parents, alongside how she lives on without them. This sharing of first-person trauma narratives is an act that Brison considers important to make unimaginable experiences much less foreign to its readers as well as to challenge the ways in which trauma is understood by professionals (27). Fowler, too, mentions the lack of attention to narratives of grief such as memoir by thanatologists, who study and work with death, dying, and bereavement (526). In her interview with MacFarlane, Deraniyagala acknowledges how she often gets letters from those who have read her memoir and want to share their own stories with her:

> There was one note I was very moved by. A man said, 'I am writing from a pediatric intensive care unit where my son had been for 40 days and people say that I have strength, but mine is miniscule compared to yours. Whenever I am feeling low I look to your book.' It wasn't written for that purpose, but that's

> wonderful. I only know what happened to me; I'm not in a position to give advice or to console.

The father observes a relationality with Deraniyagala that illuminates how her memoir helped him, despite Deraniyagala's claim that it was not intended to provide advice or consolation. Fowler exhorts her readers to contemplate the privilege of being able to read grief memoirs because we might "find ourselves humbled and transformed by their anguish, their courage, and their resilience" (547). Fowler cites memoirist Nancy Mairs who considers how the memoir participates in the turning into public artefact of private experience: "All of us who write out of calamity know this above all else: There is nothing exceptional about our lives, however they may differ in particulars. What we can offer you, when the time comes, is companionship in a common venture. It's not a lot, I know, but it may come in handy'" (qtd. in Fowler 527).

However, if *Wave* offers readers companionship, it must be a limited one because it is our responsibility to consider the ways in which trauma narratives complicate the relationship between text, author, and reader. Deraniyagala, for instance, in saying of the father who writes to her, "It wasn't written for that purpose," reminds us that her memoir was borne out of self-contained pieces she wrote first for herself. Fowler maintains that the core of grief memoirs is grief itself: "What distinguishes the grief memoir from other literary treatments of grief is that the death, the loss, the grieving is the defining reality—the heart of the text" (527). Deraniyagala's memoir, in being so filled with the facts and details of her lost loved ones, diverges from the grief memoir as Fowler describes it. At the heart of *Wave* are the quotidian details that bring into the present her sons, her husband, and her parents and that lead us to her love for them. Love, not grief, is the heart

of Wave. Given this fact, the question that rises to the surface is how we might attempt to ethically honor what becomes contained in a memoir of trauma; how we might attempt to hold, carefully, what it asks us to help carry in its reading.

## **Displacing the Tsunami in Simon Harris and Neluka Silva's *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami***

I have no memory of when or where I first acquired Sonali Deraniyagala's *Wave*; I only know it happened in America. I read it only in preparation for a graduate seminar on autobiography and memoir, taught by Dr. Traise Yamamoto. Though the text was not on her syllabus, Dr. Yamamoto had read the memoir and helped shape my seminar paper on it. The memoir's next appearance in my life was at an English department book sale at UCR, when the Writing Program donated a shelf of books with several copies of *Wave* that prompted my curiosity: How is this book used to teach composition? Why are so many copies available for donation; was there a lack of instructors teaching it despite it being on the list of approved whole texts? Rather than obtain answers to my queries, I settled for recommending the memoir to potential buyers, mostly undergraduate students rushing to class. But I soon found myself deeply uncomfortable with performing a sales pitch for this text: how do I account for *Wave* as it circulates as global commodity, a task it already performs quite successfully?

Against this question, I now turn to a book that doesn't circulate quite as easily: Simon Harris and Neluka Silva's *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami*. I had decided to pair this collection with *Wave* after reading a review of it on an obscure blog on Sri Lankan literature, the link to which is now expired. I soon learned that no

combination of search phrases could locate a vendor in the United States. I left to Sri Lanka in the summer of 2019 certain that I would find it at a bookstores or via Facebook groups selling used books. But few bookstores, large or small, had the book in stock, used or new. I tracked down a single copy at Vijitha Yapa, a well-known bookstore, but their single copy was at their airport branch, which I couldn't get to without a flight ticket. I called the store, and someone assured me they would set the book aside until the date of my return flight to the U.S., some three months later. Despite my doubt that the book would survive until then, I stopped by on the day of my flight. I began to explain to the clerk at the register, in awkward Sinhala inflected with my diasporic oddities: "I called about three months ago about a book. I was told you all would keep it aside for me." He smiled and said he had the book, and proceeded to confirm it was the right one by speaking the title, written on a small piece of paper, in a carefully labored tone that told me he was not used to reading English: "The Rolled Back Beach?" When I nodded, he picked up the slim book, a mere 98 pages, from a shelf behind the register. Someone, perhaps the clerk himself, had wrapped it carefully in plastic and secured the wrapping with tape, an act that endeared me to the book and to the person who had cared for it over the past three months. The clerk, smiling still, asked me why I wanted this book so badly, adding that he had never received such a request before. I answered, "Truthfully, I don't know. I'm going to read it and see how it can be useful to my studies." I did not then, and still do not, possess the fluency in Sinhala to say that I'm searching for what it might say about life before and after the tsunami.

These stories of circulation are an important aspect of the work that literature and stories do in the world. How the world came to understand the Indian Ocean tsunami, that was primarily broadcast in the immediate moments of its destruction via social media and news coverage, changes through the literature that circulates about it. Deraniyagala's memoir provides a certain picture of her unique losses following the tsunami. It is a text that is easily available to the English-speaking world and that has also been translated into several languages. This circulation has contributed to what we now see as the enormity of Deraniyagala's story, and her life in the wake of it, which made her into a peculiar sort of celebrity, especially since her marriage to Fiona Shaw. But Deraniyagala's story is not all that extraordinary. In his team's work with tsunami survivors, who are also survivors of the war and militarization, Daya Somasundaram writes about Ariyabalan, a fisherman in the northern district of Mullaitivu who lost his wife, two children, seven grandchildren, brother, sister, and other relatives for a total of thirty-five people in his family (147). Somasundaram collects many similar stories. Even before the tsunami, people in the northeast of the country had already lost people to the war. The narratives Somasundaram collects in his research are related by individuals but almost always focused on the impacts of the tsunami on families and communities. By pointing out these other experiences of loss, I do not mean to minimize Deraniyagala's experience or her writing of it. Rather, I am interested in how other narratives, both psychiatric and literary, can provide us with a more expansive view of the impact of the tsunami on both a personal and communal level.

*The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami* provides this expanded view through the multiplicity offered by the short story form. Co-authored by Simon Harris and Neluka Silva, the stories are organized alternatingly between each author. It begins with Simon Harris' "The Night the Dog Ran Away," and ends with Neluka Silva's "The Dancer." Nine of the fourteen stories are told from a third-person point of view, and the remaining five are in first-person. The stories focus on exceedingly ordinary aspects of life: adults navigating the complexities of romance and marriage; children learning about loss and grief amidst their parents' strained relationships; individuals trying their best to aid people both near and far. The event of the tsunami becomes subsumed within these personal and communal circumstances, and this shift in focus allows us to witness the tsunami differently because the stories come together to highlight what Neloufer de Mel calls "the *production* of disaster," where "natural events impact[] on prior economic, political, social, and cultural environments [] determine how and why certain communities are exposed (or not) to greater risk when disasters occur, and carry social vulnerability that makes their capacity for recover more hazardous" (75). In this section, I engage the collection for how it represents the impacts of the tsunami through its closing snapshots. I argue that these stories illuminate new ways to understand the impact of the tsunami on Sri Lanka's most marginalized communities while also engaging the viewpoint of more privileged witnesses who experience the event from a distance. This dual view allows the stories to expand into a subtle critique of the intertwined workings of the Sri Lankan government, the humanitarian industrial complex, and disaster capitalism, all of which lead to what scholars call "the disaster after the disaster"

(Schuller 18).[48] In doing so, the stories help us understand how interlocking axes of privilege or marginalization change how and what the tsunami means to different people.

The Tsunami as Minor Event

The collection begins with Simon Harris' "The Night the Dog Ran Away," which is narrated by a third person omniscient perspective that stays close to Quintus, an old man who claims he "already knew that this day was going to be his last" (9), because his dog, Samson, has run away. He embarks on his daily walk near the old Dutch fort, calling for Samson and recalling how he had rescued the stray puppy. Placed into this memory is one of the collection's few explicit references to the civil war: Samson is found among old newspapers reporting on "another mysterious disappearance, or tyre rung body, burning by the side of the road" (10). In the remainder of the story, Quintus recalls his romance with and marriage to Kanthi, a fisher girl that his parents didn't approve of. At the story's end, Quintus doesn't find Samson, who we learn is hiding under the stone steps of the rampart, and sets out to meet Kanthi at the fish market, "as the sea rolled back from the shore and gathered itself up into a terrifying wall of death" (12). Until this last ominous line, the tsunami's approach is suggested in three ways: Samson's unusually disobedient act of running away, the absence of stray dogs on Quintus' walk, and the lack of the sea breeze that usually provides Quintus and Samson the motivation to complete the last steps of their walk up the ramparts. These absences simultaneously register these

[48] I borrow this phrase from Mark Schuller's chapter in *Capitalizing on Catastrophe*, where he cites others who also use this phrase: Charley Cray, Claudia Felten-Biermann, and the Florida Interfaith Networking in Disaster (FIND).

aspects as consistent presences in Quintus' life for the past fifteen years: this walk is his daily routine, both Samson and the sea are trusted companions.

The collection thus begins with the mundane routines of life itself, which become severely disrupted by the tsunami's sudden arrival. The word tsunami was unknown to most people in Sri Lanka (Somasundaram 144). The morning of the tsunami was both the day after Christmas and a Poya, or full moon day, which are holidays in Sri Lanka and considered sacred by its Buddhist population. In beginning with the routine of daily life, the collection to simultaneously bring attention to the tsunami's impact on those more distanced from its material devastation and on some of the country's most marginalized populations. The focus on the former is located in stories relating the internal dynamics of a family or marriage, with the tsunami appearing momentarily to catalyze or solidify conflicts and resolutions within relationships. At the same time, these stories reach out beyond such internal family dynamics to ask larger questions about privilege and complicity in how we respond to disaster.

Neluka Silva's "Day of Reckoning" narrates from a third person perspective that stays close to Gihan, a banker and wildlife enthusiast. Gihan's recollection of the day highlights how he and his wife, Kishani, had different reactions to the tsunami: Kishani stayed at home to field calls from the five-star hotel in Colombo where she works as a PR manager, while Gihan left immediately to help recovery efforts in Yala. Upon learning that the animals had, like Samson and the stray dogs in the first story, found safety by fleeing into the jungle hours before the tsunami, Gihan's main task becomes the recovery of the dead. He cannot bring himself to share what he is witnessing when Kishani calls,

and he is soon let off the call when she answers a call from the hotel. The story's title, "Day of Reckoning," refers to what the day of the tsunami becomes to Gihan, who recalls looking to the sea on a past trip to Yala "to find an answer on how to get his wife back to him." The tsunami, in revealing the distance that had always existed between him and Kishani, provides Gihan with an answer, which he speaks as the last line of the story: "Yes, his marriage was definitely over" (18).

"The Gender Officer" by Neluka Silva approaches the tsunami in a similar manner: as an event that catalyzes personal events in the life of its main narrator, Kesh, who begins the story with an admission of guilt: "if it wasn't for the tsunami, I may never have been able to fulfil my dream of becoming a mother" (72). She recalls her relationship history and her decision to become a Gender Officer at an international NGO, a job title that disinterests any future romantic prospects. But the tsunami brings Fazal Ahmed, a doctor from London, to Sri Lanka, with 4500 GBP in donations from his workplace. Struggling to find a place that will use the funds ethically, he approaches Kesh after overhearing her in a conversation about the politics of aid. Kesh and Fazal begin a relationship and eventually marry. The story ends in the present time, four years after the tsunami, when Kesh and Fazal have a son and another child on the way, and Kesh is on a plane waiting to fly to England to be with Fazal. She reflects while looking out the window: "The coconut trees beyond in the dark night also make me shudder because it reminds of the tsunami that changed my life." Like Gihan and Kishani, Kesh and Fazal are situated in positions of relative privilege in comparison to others who lost

homes and loved ones in the tsunami, making it primarily an event that brought Kesh to Fazal and to motherhood.

Three more stories treat the tsunami in a similar manner, but from the vantage point of characters situated outside of Sri Lanka, presumably in London. Simon Harris' "Beth's Bear" is the first story narrated in the first-person perspective, that of seven-year-old Beth. The story follows her mother's efforts to secure her an ordinary-looking teddy bear from a toy shop that she names Randolph Bear and to whom she attributes life-like qualities. Randolph brings Beth great comfort during her parents' separation, which, over the course of the story, transforms into a reconciliation. To celebrate this reconciliation, they plan a trip for the upcoming year, and Beth chooses Sri Lanka as their destination from various travel brochures. The tsunami hits before they can travel, and the neighborhood organizes a toy donation for tsunami-affected children in Sri Lanka. Beth donates Randolph, explaining to him that there is a child who needs him more than she does. With a letter from Beth around his neck, Randolph is packed into a donation box.

"Toys Appeal" by Neluka Silva returns us to the third person omniscient narration and is also centered around a family's attempt to collect and send toys to Sri Lanka's tsunami-impacted children. Much of the story is made up of flashbacks, through which we learn that this family is grieving the loss of their seven-year-old daughter, Alice. Her death has severely strained Karen and Dave's marriage in recent years, but in organizing the toy donation, Karen, becomes better able to cope with the trauma of her daughter's death, which helps repair her marriage. Finally, "The Shaker" by Simon Harris, is narrated by Evans, who, for eighteen years, has stolen donation funds when disasters

occur by posing as a charity worker and soliciting funds from passers-by outside department stores. According to him, the tsunami garnered one of the largest responses in donations he had ever seen, but is also when he gets caught. The court magistrate orders him to six months of community service at a local charity shop while wearing a t-shirt with "I STOLE TSUNAMI FUNDS" emblazoned on it. Though he initially expresses shame at the responses he receives from customers, Evans soon maneuvers himself to the back of the store, where he continues to steal "forgotten change, crumpled bank notes, and the occasional well pressed wad" (84) from the donated clothes he is sorting.

These stories remain focused on individual decisions, interpersonal relationships, and personal traumas that its characters are navigating in the moment, but the references to the tourism and aid industries expand the stories out from being a mere depiction of the lives of their narrators. For example, in "A Day of Reckoning," Kishani's complaint—"This damn tsunami, there's chaos with the tourists, no"—can certainly be read as a criticism of her callous attitude and a reminder of her relative privilege in relation to those communities who lost everything to the tsunami.[49] But this difference also gestures to the ways in which the Sri Lankan government pivoted their concerns to the recovery of the tourism industry rather than to attending to those communities trying to rebuild their lives amid the loss of their homes, families, and livelihoods. Rather than provide such assistance, the government actively worked to disenfranchise fishing communities by designating 100-meter "buffer zones" in the west and south, and 200-meter buffer zones in the east and north in which homes could not be reconstructed, supposedly as a

[49] Of the approximately 35,000 dead in Sri Lanka, 107 were tourists. Another 6,000 people went missing, of whom 65 were tourists (Gunawardena 74).

safeguard from future tsunamis (Cohen 233). In actuality, these buffer zones kept "30% of the tsunami-affected population from returning to their land" (Leonard 59) in order to secure that land for the building of "a spa, multinational hotels, a yacht marina, and other facilities catering to up-market clients" (Gunawardena 81). Compared to the scale of such systemic exploitation, Kesh's response to the tsunami, or even Evans' stealing of tsunami funds, become much less monstrous acts, reminding us that capitalist exploitation does not stop for disaster, but rather looks to disaster as an opportunity to continue accruing wealth.

Alongside these gestures to larger hierarchies of power, these stories also ask readers to think about their own positionalities by featuring characters who are more alike than different to those who witnessed the tsunami from positions of relative privilege, both in Sri Lanka and abroad. While the first story in the collection, "The Night the Dog Ran Away," ends with the tsunami's approach, the second story, "A Day of Reckoning," skips over the tsunami's arrival and is narrated from a point much later in time. Somewhat like Deraniyagala's move to enclose the tsunami itself and its immediate aftermath in the first chapter, the collection seems aware of the voyeurism that representations of traumatic events invite. It avoids careless depictions of trauma, which is much of what news reportage delivered during the tsunami, whether consciously or not.[50] In "A Day of Reckoning," an image that haunts Gihan is presented with care and placed within a scene of mourning: "the [image] of six grown men weeping around the body of a child. It was the first time they had recovered the body of a child. Ajith had first

[50] See Murthy.

found the little boy and they had all stood around the pathetic, mangled body and cried. But this turned out to be the first of many and then they got used to seeing more and more" (17). Kishani, who refuses to go to Yala and watches the tsunami on TV before turning it off because "[i]t's just never ending, no" (17), registers the difficulty of bearing witness to such tragedy from a space of relative comfort, even from a position of proximity to its victims. The break between Kishani and Gihan, two people who know each other intimately, manages to reflect the distance that exists not only between victims and survivors of the tsunami, but among those who were witness to the event, those who bore the weight of recovering the dead and injured, and those who continue to search for their missing loved ones in the present.

Gihan is perhaps the most proximal to the trauma of the tsunami for having recovered dead bodies in Yala, but he, too, acknowledges how that day brings him to end his unhappy marriage to Kishani. Kesh's guilt at having met her husband and at becoming a mother as a result of tsunami relief efforts similarly registers how the life she always wanted unfolds because of the events following the tsunami. These characters' expressions of guilt also signal the physical distance, even if within the same country, that they occupy from the coastal regions impacted by the tsunami. Though Gihan is fond of Yala and leaves immediately upon news of the tsunami, he lives in Colombo, as does Kesh, even though she works for an NGO, and neither of them are part of Colombo's sizeable population of urban poor.[51] The characters in the stories that take place abroad are further removed as non-Sri Lankans who become audience to the tsunami's

[51] For more on the various types of forced displacement caused by war, infrastructure, and the tsunami, see de Mel, Ruwanpura, and Samarasinghe's *After the Waves* and Caron's "Left Behind."

destruction through news and media, or who, like Evans, is so removed from feeling empathy for any disaster-stricken population that he can steal from them. Whether situated in Sri Lanka or in London, each of these stories keeping the tsunami at a distance from its characters.

The Disaster After the Disaster

The stories outlined above articulate the tsunami as a minor, but significant, event in relation to its characters. I now turn to the stories that focus on characters more materially impacted by the tsunami because they were situated in poor and/or coastal communities. A "majority of the fatalities in Sri Lanka were among low-income fishing communities situated by the coast. About 20,000 were from the predominantly ethnically Tamil north and east, while low-income Muslim communities along the southeast coast were also severely affected. In addition, the number of individuals displaced by the tsunami is estimated at half a million people, of which 90,000 were from fishing communities" (Gunewardena 74). Overall, Muslims were the worst impacted community, accounting for nearly half of the deaths and being most affected in terms of losses to land and buildings (Ranawana 35). Early in the collection, Simon Harris' "The Boat Baron's Daughter" features a fisherman, but this story is soon followed by those focused on middle- or working-class families situated in Sri Lanka and abroad. Together with "The Boat Baron's Daughter," the last three stories in the collection focus on characters who are from fishing communities or are economically marginalized, and they illuminate how socially vulnerable communities faced even more precarity in the aftermath of the tsunami.

"The Boat Baron's Daughter" is narrated from a third person perspective that stays close to Mano, a nineteen-year-old fisherman who desires Sashi, the boat baron's daughter. This story is third in the collection and the first one that begins at the immediate aftermath of the first wave: "Someone needed to save Sashi as she lay unconscious drowning in just a foot of water. Someone, who had no fear of the sea." These lines, which situate us in the immediate aftermath of the first wave, are quickly interrupted by a description of Mano's difficult life: "Like Mano, who saw it all happen and had fished for her father—the malu mudhalali boat baron—ever since he'd been old enough to haul one of the heavy tuna filled nets out of the water and in over the bow" (19)." For Mano, there is no separation between life and work: it is fishing, since he was old enough, that sustains life for him and his family. The tsunami brings Mano and Sashi into the first and closest contact they have had with each other; as the sea recedes and Mano considers the strangeness before him, Sashi runs into the ebbing tide and asks him what is happening. Mano calls it a miracle and attempts to take advantage of the easy fishing opportunity before him.[52] When Sashi sees the tsunami approaching, Mano yells at her to run.

The story skips the moment the wave hits them and moves to the silence of its aftermath: "After the wave there was sort of silence in which sounds, like the gentle lapping of receding waters or foot-fall crunch of sand-wet steps, had lost their meaning" (20). The story then returns us to its beginning, where Mano sees Sashi face down in

[52] Many fishermen, when the sea rolled back, staked posts in the sea ground to claim ownership of the land along the coastline, much of which is considered freehold government land. In Sri Lanka, most landowners are upper caste, and most fishermen own no land. Many children ran into the water to catch fish (Karan and Subbiah 138). Poverty is endemic to most Sri Lankan fishing communities, which are associated with the Karave (Karaiiyar in Tamil) caste, secondary to the agricultural caste, and are also Tamil or Muslim (Gunawardene 79). These communities thus experience multiple levels of disenfranchisement.

water. Mano runs to her and turns her over to find that she is still alive. As she struggles to speak, Mano rips the gold chain from her neck. The story ends here, and the brevity of this moment, where we might expect Mano to have done anything other than steal from a drowning Sashi, suggests how quickly the concerns of poor people who survived the tsunami turned to concerns about how they would live on in its aftermath, suddenly without their loved ones, but also without their homes and fishing boats.

The first in the trio of stories that end the collection is Neluka Silva's "The Red Sari," which begins with a single paragraph set in the present time, where a woman named Karuna approaches the red cloth of a sari that is caught on a broken fence, avoiding debris and broken glass to walk towards it, an image that hints of the aftermath of the tsunami. The story launches into Karuna's memory of buying the red sari for her daughter, Samanmali's wedding. Though Samanmali has insisted on something cheaper, Karuna becomes determined to buy it for her although her meagre life's savings aren't enough. Karuna pawns her mother's wedding ring, the single piece of gold she owns, for Rs. 6000 to buy the sari. After their wedding, Samanmali and her husband, Janaka, move to his hometown, the coastal village of Seenigama. The story ends with another single paragraph that returns us to the present moment: "Now, as she stood outside the bits of brick and wood that once was her daughter's home, she looked out to the sea as she fiercely clutched on to the torn bit of red sari, the only thing left of Samanmali, after the gigantic wave had engulfed the pregnant girl, her husband and all their possessions" (87).

Karuna's memory relates not only the details of sari-shopping and the wedding, but the exhaustion of "her miserable existence, the desperation of trying to eke out a

living. The daily, relentless struggle that was interminable" (85). She had wanted a different life for her daughter, and was pleased when Samanmali finished her education and secured a low-paying factory job close to their hometown of Kandy, situated in the middle of Sri Lanka. The tsunami appears only in the two short paragraphs that frame Karuna's memory, so that the majority of the story focuses on Karuna's life of poverty and her dreams for her daughter. This imbalanced focus suggests what marginalized communities in Sri Lanka have lamented: that the tsunami is one of several disasters they have encountered and lived with, and in some cases, it is not the worst disaster to them.[53] Karuna thus grieves multiple losses: the loss of her daughter's life and Karuna's hope that her sacrifices would give her daughter a less difficult life. This double loss is signified in the last lines of the story, which mourn not only the loss of lives but also the loss of material well-being, signified by the "bits of brick and wood" that built their home, and the loss of "all their possessions."

The problem of what it means to survive the tsunami when one is economically disenfranchised is most exemplified in Simon Harris' "Beyond the Rolled Back Beach." This story is the only one that engages what some might consider a speculative literary device in being narrated by a ghost. The ghost begins by lamenting what he has seen his son witness: "Three months ago, Saman, my six year old [sic] son, saw death for the first time whilst searching for my missing body with his mother through the remains of our village. Since then he as not slept a full night nor spoken a single world. Every time he closes his eyes he can see again the small child entangled in the barbed wire of a fence by

[53] See de Mel's "Between the War and the Sea" and Somasundaram's chapter on the tsunami in *Scarred Communities*.

the side of the road" (88). The presence of barbed wire is one of the only other images that hints at the civil war and ordinary forms of militarization, where barbed wire fencing is synonymous with security checkpoints and, for those in internally displaced camps, a reminder of their imprisonment.[54] The image that haunts Saman is one where a child's body, already lost to the tsunami, becomes mutilated by the enduring presence of barbed wire, signaling the intertwining of these two types of disasters.

The ghost father laments how he "could do nothing but watch them, dead, and helplessly unfound" (88) while they searched for him. He then describes three men that he refers to as "the three vultures" who visit his wife and son in their temporary shelter, a tent. The vultures are the father's childhood acquaintances who are now government officials exploiting survivors in the tsunami's aftermath. One of the three vultures solicits sex from the narrator's wife in exchange for the relief money that she is owed, and the story ends with Saman witnessing his mother having sex with this man while the narrator screams, unheard. The narrator describes such exploitation as a widespread occurrence that takes place "whilst we who died can only watch and listen in anger and dismay, lost somewhere, neither here nor there, but condemned to be silent spectators, out beyond the rolled back beach" (89). Peter Buse and Andrew Stott note that "ghosts do not just represent reminders of the past – in their functional representation they very often demand something of the future" (14). In the ghost's lament about being unable to do much besides watch, there is certainly a demand of the future as well as a critique of the present. At the end of the story, he is being dragged unwillingly and painfully into the

[54] See Marshall.

realm of ghosts proper, so he will no longer be able to agonize over the sexual violence his wife must face to access the meagre financial compensation she is promised. His screams, which represent the anger and dismay of real survivors who are ignored by the government, are heard only by the reader.

The final story in what I consider the collection's closing trio is Neluka Silva's "The Dancer,' which begins with a young girl, Kamani, declaring her one desire in life: "to dance" (93). But in her village school near Weligama, there is no one to teach dance, let alone "the major subjects like Maths and English, so dancing was totally out of the question" (93). Even outside of school, dance is an endeavor that remains extravagant to Kamani's life more generally; between school and helping her mother make stringhoppers to sell, she has little time left for dance and can only watch dance shows on their small, black-and-white television. As she gets older, her mother considers stopping Kamani's schooling so she can help care for her younger siblings or help her make more food to sell. The tsunami destroys the home that her family was renting, displacing them to a temporary shelter in a temple. One of the foreign aid workers is a dance teacher in search of children interested in dance. Kamani unabashedly raises her hand, and her enthusiasm encourages other children around her to volunteer as well. Kamani must ask her mother permission to participate in this dance production, but is afraid because her mother is distraught at having to fight to be given a home.

She is thus surprised when her mother "shrugged and said, 'It's not as if we have any home or livelihood anymore. But you will have to stop this if they give us a house and we have to start earning again" (95). Without the looming commitment of rent, her

mother is now indifferent to how Kamani spends her time. Because they have no home, Kamani is allowed to dance. Kamani is so talented that she is given a solo dance in the production, which is about the sea. Though initially hesitant, she eventually agrees because "deep down she also knew that if she did not take this chance, there might never be another one, and the memory of her life before the tsunami, the life that she would still have to go back to, gave her the courage to nod" (97). To Kamani, the life she led before the tsunami was so unappealing that she would rather not return to it. She knows that once her mother secures them a home, they will have to eke out a living again. Consequently, Kamani narrates the tsunami not only as an event that destroys their home and stability but as an event that provides a reprieve from her previous life, which she found so mundane without room in it for dance. After her performance, Kamani glimpses her mother in the audience and panics. But when she finally sees her mother's face, Kamani utters the last line of the story, and the collection: "It was going to be alright" (98).

"The Dancer" is not the only story in the collection that thinks about the place of art, performance, and the body in the aftermath of the tsunami. Neluka Silva's "It's a Small World, After All" is about Kiara's desire to play the violin. Her parents agree to let her learn under the guidance of Natasha Rodrigo, an American who has come to Sri Lanka to set up a violin camp. The story traces how beloved Natasha by her students. Natasha and her mother are killed in the tsunami, and her students play "It's a Small World, After All" at her funeral. The song itself, which circulates globally as a Disney commodity, becomes transformed with an actualization of its lyrics that celebrate the

unity of the small world we all share, and honors the way that the tragedy of the tsunami itself brought people together in witnessing its horrific impacts, if only momentarily. Similarly, Simon Harris' "Comic Relief" suggests that, alongside the basic necessities, laughter is a common need that can be useful in disaster recovery spaces. The story is narrated by Elwood, whose services as a clown are loudly rejected by a Chief Minister: "Are you mad? These people don't need laughter, they need livelihoods. And the only thing that will cheer them up is a roof over their heads. Fool! This is an emergency, not some kind of pantomime we're having!" On Elwood's way out, an ordinary man asks him to visit his camp, where he performs, "all around him a sea of faces cried, their cheeks drowning in the happy tears of laughter" (35). Like in "The Dancer," the last line of this story changes metaphors of the sea and drowning into something positive: tears of laughter. "Beth's Bear" and "Toys Appeal," too, insist on the reminder that toys provide children a necessary comfort in the aftermath of both ordinary and spectacular forms of disaster.

Neluka Silva's "Becoming a Big Girl," like the story that begins the collection, works to situate the tsunami as a devastating event that occurs within the larger background of everyday life. But in being narrated by a twelve-year-old girl, Sumudhi, it also highlights the continuation of life beyond the tsunami through her increasing curiosity about what it means to "become a big girl." A majority of its nine and a half pages describes Sumudhi's obsession with finding out why one classmate after another in her all-girls school stays home for a week, only to return acting, somehow, different. The tsunami, which appears in the middle of the eighth page, destroys their home and kills the

men in Sumudhi's family. While helping to arrange their funerals, Sumudhi learns that she has "become a big girl" with the onset of her first period. The tsunami has disrupted life and left this family without its men, but despite these facts, life continues, and Sumudhi grows older.

Tiny Seeds of Possibility

In every single country affected by the tsunami, more women died than men (de Mel, "Between" 240). Sunila Abeysekera ties this loss of women in Sri Lanka to the quotidian exercise of gendered norms:[55]

> On the south-western coast, from predominantly Sinhala-Buddhist communities … we heard that men survived because they could swim and because they could climb trees. These are two life skills never taught to women'; in fact, most women are actively encouraged by their families and by the community not to engage in these pursuits, which are thought to be masculine and unsuited to women. … In the predominantly Muslim parts of the Eastern Coast, we heard women tell us that it was mostly young unmarried women who perished in the waves. They had internalized the community and family dictat [sic] that they should not leave the house unaccompanied by a male relative and stayed inside their homes as the waves approached, waiting for a male family member to come to their rescue.

Across religious and ethnic lines, the tragic similarity here is the impact of gendered inequality on the number of women lost to the tsunami because of the shame imposed on the idea of women swimming, climbing trees, or going outside without a man. Abeysekera also notes how "women who had their clothes ripped off their bodies by the first wave, crouched in the waters, covering their bodies with their hands and refused to walk out of the water and run away as men were doing all around them. Deeply ingrained

[55] I want to note the problematic ways in which various discourses produce the essentializing notion that all men in the global South are necessarily and always practicing toxic and oppressive forms of masculinity. de Alwis, for instance, has written on how "other, less negative masculinities and masculinized practices" tend to be "rendered invisible by hegemonic narratives" such as aid and humanitarian discourse ("The Tsunami's Wake" 93) and in "A Double Wounding?".

notions of shame and traditional prohibitions on exposing their bodies in public acted against these women who fell prey to the second wave." Furthermore, "traditional views of women's dependence on men led to the cases in which some women were raped and sexually abused as they were being 'rescued' from the tsunami by men whom they perceived as being their 'protectors'." Like Mano, who must secure himself some gold to survive the aftermath of the tsunami even if he must rip it from a drowning Sashi's neck, women were forced to choose death rather than emerge naked out of the water or risk sexual violence; the shame of either situation is not something that can be lived down, or lived with.

But Abeysekera also finds a path for hope in the aftermath of such loss by alerting us to the shocked responses of men who had survived but lost the women in their lives:

> Along with the pain of their bereavement was the regret, that if women had been able to swim, climb trees, to hang on, to challenge tradition they may have been alive. Hiding away somewhere at the heart of these stories is the tiny seed of possibility. Things may change for the women who are left alive, especially for the younger women, perhaps families and male relatives may allow them more space to grow and explore their potential, perhaps societies and communities will learn that equality for women is a matter of life and death and survival.

The last story in the collection, "The Dancer," becomes poignant in light of the facts that Abeysekera highlights. Like in "Becoming a Big Girl," only a mother and daughter survive. And beyond imagining bare survival, which her mother must attend to via securing them a house, Kamani dares to experience the luxury of dance. Although she is aware that she might have to give up dance if they have to earn a living to pay rent, the last lines of the story—"It was going to be alright"—return us to other seeds of possibility that emerge in the aftermath of disaster; namely, that post-disaster recovery

requires a provision of material and economic needs and that surviving disaster might also involve laughter, the comfort of toys, or the joy of dance. Alongside the knowledge of the women who died as a result of the intersections of gendered and economic constraints, the collection's attention to embodied experiences of pleasure reminds us that girls should be able to swim and climb trees not only because it might save their lives, but simply because they might desire such things as joyous experiences, ones that are not considered extravagant, but vital, to one's well-being.

Critics have often considered how the form of the short story has been seen as inadequate in comparison to more expansive form of the novel, and offered rebuttals to such claims. Adrian Hunter notes how the short story form is particularly useful in regions with low capital and slower publishing industries, which is the case with Sri Lanka. Simultaneously, she also finds inadequate the claim that short stories are particularly important to the representation of liminal and marginalized subjects. *The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami*, through its depiction of what Henry James calls a "multiplicity" of viewpoints, practices such a refusal. The characters it traverses are not all marginal: some occupy immense privilege in relation to others, and this presence acknowledges the authors' distance from those who would be considered marginal in Sri Lanka. Harris is educated at Bradford and Oxford universities and at Trinity College, and Silva was educated at the universities of Colombo, Leeds, and Oxford. In writing from positions of privilege, the authors are careful to craft a collection that uses a range of characters to demand that we practice Edward Said's contrapuntal

reading to notice the multiple and overlapping networks at play when we think about disaster.

Irish writer Frank O'Connor suggested that rather than have a single hero, short stories opt for "collective groups of submerged populations" as its protagonists (qtd. in Patea 7). *The Rolled Back Beach* attempts to represent several such groups of "submerged populations": those inundated with news of the tsunami, both near and far, and who attempt to help in whatever ways they can, those who lose loved ones, homes, and livelihoods to the waves, and those who are literally submerged by the water. Interestingly, the backdrop to these characters is rarely the tsunami, but their ordinary lives and struggles. The choice to delegate the tsunami to the background illuminates how the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism of the government marginalizes people consistently, a marginalization that becomes amplified greatly during and after disaster. The quick mention of tourists and tourism in the collection does precisely this work by reminding us that, as a postcolonial nation, the Sri Lankan state is always working to "craft and disseminate a particular image of an idyllic and exotic island nation, of immense appeal to the escape fantasies and consumption desires of North American and European audiences" a project that works in tandem with the state's "intense opposition to the claim for a separate Tamil homeland" (Gunawardene 82). Gunawardene further notes how, in this image,

> "[t]he sandy beaches, the coconut trees, and the warm currents of the Indian Ocean are placed at the consumption beck and call of the tourist, while the local, a figure whose historical presence along the coastline is replaced and often erased, has become constructed as the intruder. … The tourist industry thus casts the local landscape of ordinary life into the shadows, rendering them invisible and immaterial" (85-6)

In contrast to these widely found images of Sri Lanka, the collection provides a counter-image that centers the local figures who live in community with the sea, and chooses to let their voices close the collection. Moreover, the collection's depiction of those abroad who could be tourists does not paint them as villainous and uncaring. Rather, they are explored as full human beings undergoing their own struggles and who attempt to help in whatever way they can as they witness the tsunami. In rendering both the local and the outsider/tourist as complex characters, the collection shifts our gaze to the larger, intertwined structures that leave ordinary people vulnerable during and after disaster: the Sri Lankan government, the tourism industry, and the aid and humanitarian industrial complex. Metaphors of waves were often used colloquially in the aftermath of the tsunami to describe how the government took advantage of aid flows to the country at the expense of its tsunami-impacted communities, which makes a short story collection an apt space to bring to light some of these criticisms.[56] More importantly, the collection exists and circulates, even if in limited ways, even after news of the tsunami recedes, reappearing on its yearly anniversaries. Because "post-disaster interventions are important sites of scrutiny" (de Mel, "A Grammar" 75), the collection attests to the work there is still to be done in dismantling not only bureaucratic sites of capitalist power, but in ordinary spaces such as the school or the home where we establish what is acceptable and available to people based on their subject positions.

[56] In "A Grammar of Emergence, Culture and the State in the Post-Tsunami Resettlement of Burgher Women of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka," de Mel notes how many referred to the post-tsunami economic boom as a 'golden wave,' and to the frustrations experienced by tsunami survivors navigating the bureacracy around aid funds as 'the tsunami of discontent' (78).

## Conclusion: Writing One Disaster Over Another

Aside from cursory mentions that gesture to the civil war, *The Rolled Back Beach* does not explicitly mention the ethnic conflict in the country. *Wave*, too, is understandably focused singularly on Deraniyagala's working through of her loss and grief in the aftermath of the tsunami. But de Mel writes of the experiential link that marginalized women have of the tsunami and the civil war as two sides of the same coin, arguing for how the two events are "intimately linked rather than differentiated as a political disaster, on the one hand, and a natural one, on the other," particularly for those populations in the northeastern province who were already impacted by the war ("Between" 240, 241).[57] Although the shock brought on by the suddenness of the tsunami, which lasted two hours and took 35,000 lives, is overwhelming, de Mel reminds us that the 26-year civil war involved the "willful killing of over 67,000 people. The war also saw entire villages and communities displaced and affected through shelling and bombing raids, and people traumatized by the sudden loss of loved ones, livelihoods and homes" (241). She highlights the way that Sri Lankans "naturalized the war and legitimized its inevitability," … "to the extent that shock became possible only with a fresh disaster" (242). Minoli Salgado and Daya Somasundaram note how the enormity and shock of the tsunami made people forget, momentarily, their ethnic, religious, and political divides because the destruction of the tsunami left everyone vulnerable in different ways. Eventually, as both governmental and non-governmental entities began to

[57] Somasundaram relates how the "loud hissing sound" that hinted at the onset of a tsunami was mistaken for a Kfir bomber plane, such that people "thought the war had begun again" (149). For more, see collections such as de Alwis and Hedman's *Tsunami in a Time of War*, de Mel, Ruwanpura, and Samarasinghe's *After the Waves*, and Fernando, Fernando, and Kumarasiri's *Forced to Move*.

encroach upon the aftermath, these divisions reappeared, culminating in corruption and bribery of aid funds.

*The Rolled Back Beach: Stories from the Tsunami* erodes the freshness of the disaster by situating the tsunami amidst the mundane details of Quintus walk, of Sumudhi's curiosity about her first period, of Beth's goodbye to her bear. *Wave*, too, centers the ordinariness of the sensory details of Deraniyagala's loved ones and her life with them. Together, these quotidian moments explore different aspects of what it means to be human before, during, and after disaster. In telling stories of the tsunami that remain in the realm of the ordinary rather than the shocking, both texts attempt to lessen the spectacular effects of the tsunami, such that we might cultivate more consistent ways of attending to lives lost to political and capitalist violence.

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## Metaphors as Guide: Facing the Inescapable Past, Present, and Future(s)

> Fiction cares for others; it is compassion, and gives others voice. It time-travels the past and the future, and pulls the not-now, not-yet into existence.
>
> ~ Maxine Hong Kingston, *Fifth Book of Peace*, p. 62

### Introduction: Escapes

For as long as I can remember, Sri Lanka has been a place that you try to escape. On more than one occasion, when my mother recalls the home that she and my father sold in order to send me to America—a home that, over many decades, housed different families alongside ours—she mentions that every man who had ever lived in it managed to leave Sri Lanka. Where they went, or how they fared there, tends to matter little: the important fact is that they found a way out, facilitated by the magic of our home. Though her statement describes this as a particularly gendered undertaking in our family, where men leave and women stay behind, the truth is more complicated, not only because this house and all of its prosperity was given up to send their only daughter to college in America, but also because in their early twenties, both my mother and father migrated to South West Asia and worked in the hotel and service industries. They would spend a majority of their lives there, earning enough to buy a home in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka, and later send back enormous boxes of cargo that would fill our home with luxuries like a desktop computer and a commode, and upgrade the red cement floors that used to stain our feet and clothes to pristine, unstaining, white tile.

This personal anecdote registers both the individual and collective problems that are the focus of the short stories I engage in this final chapter and that are relevant to the

current economic crisis contributing to a youth exodus in Sri Lanka:[58] how are we shaped by the places in which we were born, and what does it look like to disentangle our sense of self from histories that refuse to let us go? This chapter traverses three short stories from Hasanthika Sirisena's 2016 collection, *The Other One: Stories,* to consider their use of metaphor in answering questions of the self in relation to history, place, and community. Each story features characters with different relationships to Sri Lanka as place, and through those relationships, they provide what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls a "true war story" that "acknowledges how war exercises the entire body politic, the squeezing of the trigger hardly possible if the rest of the body was not involved, all of its organs and parts working in conjunction with mind, memory, imagination, and fantasy" (224). Simultaneously, through the use of metaphor, the stories allow us to zoom out of the frame of war in order to highlight the present-day challenges faced by ordinary people within and outside the country.

## Cricket as Story and Self: Promises Beyond the Boundaries of Nationalism

The titular story, "The Other One," is told from the perspective of Sebastian, a Tamil Christian man living in Edenboro, North Carolina, America. Sebastian is captain of the Edenboro Warriors, the team that represents the Edenboro regional cricket club. He has a fifteen-year-old daughter, Mythri, who is part of a junior women's cricket team. At her request, Sebastian visits their cricket practice and watches some impressive bowling by a woman named Elaine King, who has just been hired to teach Mythri's team spin bowling. At Sebastian's request, Elaine is integrated into the Edenboro Warriors, and the

[58] See Deraniyagala ("The Human Dimension"), Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, Sangam, and "Youth Exodus Continues."

story proceeds through Sebastian's narration of what her inclusion does to the team's dynamics and his own attraction to her, alongside his disappointment that she is more interested in Sahid, a friend and fellow Edenboro Warrior. Because the story primarily revolves around cricket, Sebastian offers a clarification in the middle:

> Why do I go on so much about cricket? Because I can't talk about my past life in Sri Lanka, not to my ex-wife, not my friends or teammates, not to Mythri. Where would I start for one thing? Should I say that I had once a loving mother and father, a wonderful childhood with dear friends, caring schoolmasters. Or should I explain that I grew up Tamil and Christian in a country that had, still has, very little tolerance for either? Maybe I should recount the war stories? I can describe the night my life in Sri Lanka ended, the night of the riot.
>
> Or maybe we could skip all that misery and start with one of the happiest times in my life, the year I spent in a refugee camp in India, because it's there where I met two of the finest cricket players I've ever played with and where I really perfected my cricket game. There's a long list of events I can relate to you, and you'll pat my hand kindly and tell me that I'm strong, assure me I'm brave and extraordinary for surviving—as my wife did. Surviving isn't enough.
>
> This is why I need cricket: cricket is my explanation. Cricket allows me to sit in a room of Sri Lankans and talk about something, other than pain and anger. It gives me some way to relate, to no longer be enraged, murderous. Cricket provides extraordinary feats to recount with good humor and good nature—no bitterness, no rancor. My cricket stories will make you laugh, groan, cheer; they won't ever make you weep. Cricket is the link between my childhood, my time in the camp, my university, even fatherhood. You see, for me, every tragic story is a story told in past tense: a recounting of sorrow done never to be undone. Every sports story, on the other hand, is, like all good love stories, a story told in present tense: when the ball twists and arcs and sails and dances, bobs and weaves, there is, in that second, a hundred different happy endings. (89-90)

I quote Sebastian's ode because in its entirety, it intersects with theorizations on cricket posed by two Sri Lankan studies scholars—Qadri Ismail and Suvendrini Perera. Through different methods, Ismail and Perera both advance C. L. R. James's arguments about nationalism and cricket. In "Battling Against the Break: Cricket, Nationalism, and the Swashbuckling Sri Lankans," Ismail is interested in the "identification, if not construction, of a space for the spectator unmarred by nationalism, that is, for the

spectator who would cheer the team but not the nation." Though he is unsure if his essay succeeds in making this space, Ismail insists on playing with the possibility of a "tenuous, slender, precarious space unmarred by nationalism," (47) one that can attempt to escape the way that nationalism "produces a continuity *and* insists upon an analogy between team and nation" (36). In "Cricket, with a Plot: Nationalism, Cricket, and Diasporic Identities," Perera responds, in part, to Ismail's question of the possibility of a theoretical space for the unmarred spectator. Embarking on a similar project to get outside the grasp of nationalism, Perera "examine[s] the possibilities of a viewing position constituted by wider relations of power, and by forces of diaspora, history and identity" (17). Thus, Sebastian's musings allow us to investigate these scholarly calls for a space, or a spectator, unmarred by nationalism.

In the first section of the story, Sebastian declares, "I loved my daughter. She ruled my day-to-day life. But Cricket was God" (81). Sebastian's allegiance above "day-to-day life," and as such, even above his daughter, is to Cricket, which he associates not with any kind of nationalism, but with God. His invoking of a God here can also be understood as one way in which he bypasses one of the salient oppositions in Sri Lanka—the correlation of Buddhism with the Sinhala population, and that of Hinduism with the Tamil population, of which a significant percentage are Christians. The only regional pride he claims is towards South Asia more generally, when he describes how players have surpassed the British in their skill, such that cricket is "our game now—the Subcontinent's" (85). He describes the Edenboro Warriors as "an eclectic group representing nearly eleven nations" (81), made up of two Americans, a Muslim Pakistani,

and players who, based on their names, might be from or have some relation to South Asia: Raj, Sareth, and Patel. The Edenboro Warriors reveal how "factors such as diaspora and migration destabilise and challenge the idea of the nation." Rather than replicate the exclusions that cricket perpetuates in the colonies,[59] the Edenboro Warriors are able to come together on a shared love of the game. Sebastian, in being thus situated in the U.S., is the spectator that Perera theorizes: "the spectator who is *both* inside and outside the space of 'the nation', the spectator produced through migration, diaspora, and dislocation" (Perera 15).

Though Sebastian witnesses his daughter's and his own team play cricket, and though he mentions iconic games that pit the "Subcontinent" against the British, he does not mention being a spectator of the Sri Lankan team specifically. Sebastian is also a player, not merely a spectator, of cricket, and, if cricket is God, then he is a devoted follower. As such, he claims cricket for himself in ways that divests it from Sri Lanka. In applying an Althusserian take to his study of Sri Lankan nationalism's use of cricket, Ismail reminds us that for the hailing of this particular interpellation to be successful, "every spectator must acquiesce to Sri Lankanness, must cheer as Sri Lankan nationals. … Most importantly, the Tamil must do so; but Tamil nationalism disrupts the Sinhala nationalist story and hegemonic move" (42). Ismail notes that, because Tamil people

[59] Perera notes that, "Contrary to imperial mythologies, cricket in the colonies, as in the colonising country, has been a source not of unity and cohesion, but of division and antagonism. Gyan Pandey and other historians have demonstrated that the ethnic and sectarian divisions that operate in contemporary India were often produced and reinforced in the colonial period. … In Sri Lanka, the most prestigious cricket clubs in Colombo still have names like 'Sinhalese Sports Club' and 'Tamil Union'. Similarly, as James reveals in *Beyond a Boundary*, West Indian clubs were divided according to minute gradations of race, colour, class or 'caste'" (22).

refuse this kind of interpellation, Sinhala nationalism "cannot escape its own history" and in fact, "can never do so" (43). Sebastian, however, never claims a particularly Tamil nationalism. More interestingly, his diasporic location suggests that he need not claim such a nationalism in order to refuse cricket as a tool of nationalism. Rather, he uses cricket for more individualistic purposes, specifically as a way to escape his own history, which includes the violence of Sinhala nationalism. Through cricket, Sebastian attempts to tell a different history, one with "extraordinary feats to recount with good humor and good nature—no bitterness, no rancor." As such, cricket allows him to offer his reader a promise: "My cricket stories will make you laugh, groan, cheer; they won't ever make you weep."

At first glance, the title, "The Other One," which is a translation of the Pakistani spin bowling technique titled the "doosra," situates the story as a sports or cricket story. However, it is narrated in the past tense, and therefore doesn't adhere to Sebastian's own rules of storytelling: "You see, for me, every tragic story is a story told in past tense: a recounting of sorrow done never to be undone. Every sports story, on the other hand, is, like all good love stories, a story told in present tense: when the ball twists and arcs and sails and dances, bobs and weaves, there is, in that second, a hundred different happy endings" (90). Though Sebastian sets forth these demarcations, the story he narrates belies a complexity that reveals a story's ability to perform multiple and overlapping functions whose "hundred different" endings may not all be happy. In other words, his story is both a sports story and a love story, but it is also a tragic story told in past tense: "a recounting of sorrow done never to be undone." As such, Sebastian's narration aligns

with Edward Said's description of contrapuntal narrative. Though Sebastian explicitly refuses that his story might be about the tragedies and sorrows wrought by nationalism and war, it is impossible to read his story without becoming keenly aware of these elements lurking within his story and interrupting his promises.

The inconsistencies between Sebastian's rules of story and his actual storytelling can, in one sense, be understood with a consideration of Sebastian as very much marred by the two kinds of nationalism—Sinhalese and Tamil—that resulted in a life touched by war. Perera notes that "[i]n colonial discourse, cricket works in contradictory and complex, even protean, ways as a practice that both substitutes for war and transcends it. … At the same time, cricket, as a memory of childhood, safety and innocence, is also imagined as an interlude or respite from conflict and 'polities', a space that should be kept decently apart from war" (20). Sebastian complicates this contradiction even further when he describes his unwillingness to recount his life in Sri Lanka: "Or maybe we can skip all that misery and start with one of the happiest times in my life, the year I spent in a refugee camp in India, because it's there where I met two of the finest cricket players I've ever played with and where I really perfected my cricket game." The "misery" he wants to skip over is that of the war that displaced him to India as a refugee. Rather than understanding his time in the refugee camp as contiguous with the war, Sebastian creates a rupture between "the night [his] life in Sri Lanka ended" and the refugee camp in India where he can begin anew: "*start* with one of the happiest times of [his] life," (90, emphasis mine) which situates cricket as a space aside from, or outside of, war, when, in fact, it was war that displaced Sebastian and brought him to one of the happiest times of

his life. That this period was in India also does not change the fact that India itself is not removed from or impartial to the war in Sri Lanka, through the Indian Peace Keeping Forces that were responsible for deaths, disappearances, and sexual violence in Tamil regions of the north.

Against a life disrupted by war, cricket tells Sebastian where and who he is in life: "Cricket is the link between my childhood, my time in the camp, my university, even fatherhood" (90). In claiming that cricket allows him "to sit in a room of Sri Lankans and talk about something, other than pain and anger," Sebastian also attributes to cricket a therapeutic force: it rids him of the "pain and anger," and the need to "be enraged, murderous." That he can now approach Sri Lankans without these emotions implies that he had felt such potent rage towards them in the past, before—or without—cricket as mediator. What cricket has allowed Sebastian could be named anything from forgiveness to acceptance to denial—it is difficult to locate because Sebastian does not himself complicate this allowance. He claims that cricket gives him "some way to relate," which suggests that cricket is his attempt at community. Yet, the depth and complexity of the community he has created comes into question in the story, when Elaine notes that Sebastian never talks about himself or his past, thereby not truly allowing her, or anyone, to get to know him beyond the confines of this sport. As a result, when Elaine sets down her own rules of storytelling—"No cricket. I want you to tell me something about yourself,"—Sebastian "froze" and eventually responds, "There isn't much to me other than cricket" (92). Here, Sebastian voices an epiphany, realizing that cricket is the contrapuntal mechanism that allows the parts of his life that he keeps separate to relate to

one another: his pain and anger at his forced displacement and the ways in which war has impacted his life, and his desire for community with other Sri Lankans and South Asians. Cricket is the force that helps him mediate these tensions, but in letting cricket occupy this position, Sebastian seems to have lost his ability to relate who he is apart from it, and in particular, his ability to relate to Elaine.

In fact, it is Elaine's presence that begins to unravel Sebastian's story the most, not merely because she refuses discussions of cricket as a form of connection, but because that refusal signals how her presence upsets the male-centered dynamics of the Edenboro Warriors. Her presence reveals what Perera calls "styles of racialised masculinity," in cricket where, for instance, "images of the Australians maintaining a 'stiff upper lip' and 'taking it on the chin' [are] pitted against allusions to the hysterical oriental, or an emotionally uncontrolled, feminised, excess" (20). Elaine's presence forces a reconfiguration of this masculinity, which multiple members of the team display, and that is also hinted at in Sebastian's jealousy that she might be attracted to Sahid. Sebastian seems aware of cricket as a masculine space only to the extent that it can be manipulated as a form of diversity. To convince the reluctant vice president of the club to let a woman join the team, Sebastian plays up the "potential publicity it might generate—a Southern woman playing for an all male, mostly immigrant club" (84). Despite his awareness of how these optics of diversity and inclusion were needed to secure Elaine's place in their all-male club, Sebastian maintains that "cricket is also a great equalizer" (85) that allows Elaine to fit seamlessly into the Edenboro Warriors. However, soon after this statement, Sebastian immediately outlines what keeps Elaine apart from the team by

noting that Elaine's "one fault" was that she was "a little too serious—tough physically and too determined emotionally." Because "[t]his determination intimidated the other men, and [ ] shamed some of the less dedicated players," (85) Sebastian decides to urge Elaine to "have a little more fun" (86). Elaine resists his suggestion with her specific experiences: "My father told me if I wanted to play on the same level as men, I had to do everything better. Bowl better. Bat better. Take the pain." Sebastian does not recount his immediate response to her in this moment, but reveals his own recent awareness of gender inequality: "I admit now that it's only in the past few years that I've paid attention to the ways this world humiliates women. From the Bratz dolls that Mythri used to play with to the war photographs of Tamil women from villages not very far from where I grew up stripped naked, legs splayed, genitals exposed raw and bleeding, bullet holes in their foreheads."

Sebastian's delivery of this violent image of murdered Tamil women is jarring, arriving suddenly following his mention of his daughter's playthings—Bratz dolls. The violence of the image keeps accumulating as Sebastian lists the graphic details of the women's bodies. Despite the image's discomfiting presence in his monologue, Sebastian continues as if he has not said anything that far out of the ordinary. His next sentence turns to the past, recounting a denigrating comment that Sahid had made a year ago about women. To end his reflections, Sebastian states, "We were all of us trying to work our way out of some darkness. I didn't think what Elaine's father had told her was right, but I admired the strength it gave her. I didn't mention my concern again" (86). The memory of the war photographs, and the war itself, might be the darkness from which Sebastian is

"trying to work [his] way out." In this instance, the darkness makes its way into a seemingly innocent reflection where Sebastian refuses to acknowledge the gendered dynamics of the sport he considers "the great equalizer." It is around the axis of gender, then, that I find Sebastian both breaks his promise about the potentials of a cricket story and reveals how his escape into cricket is unsuccessful. Elaine's presence as a skilled cricket player introduces the axis of gender more squarely into a part of Sebastian's life that he thinks exists outside of such discrimination, but his inability to register gender inequality disrupts the equalization he imagines exists in cricket. In attempting to broach the subject of Elaine's serious approach to the sport with her, Sebastian inadvertently brings up the axis of gender that causes the gendered violence of both past and present—though of course as different kinds of violence—to emerge in this conversation. Though the entire story is filled with the casual misogyny of the Edenboro Warriors, it is the presence of the violent image of murdered Tamil women ensures that Sebastian's story will remain a tragedy, "a recounting of sorrow done never to be undone."

And yet, I am reluctant to give up on Sebastian entirely, and so I borrow once more from Perera, who reminds us of the story of Chelliah Anandarajah, principal of St. John's College in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and a member of the Jaffna Citizen's Committee. On June 26, 1985, the LTTE shot Anandarajah dead for having organized a cricket match in Jaffna between Jaffna schools and the Sri Lankan army to mark the 1985 ceasefire (Swamy, qtd. in Perera 21). One way to approach this story, Perera writes, is that "Anandarajah was a casualty of the colonial mystification of cricket, … [a yearning] to take 'the politics of nationalism, out of cricket'. Further, she asks: "Between the

murderous nationalism of the LTTE and the murderous nationalism of the Sinhala state, is one much better than the other?" Perera then offers an alternative possibility: "Rather than yearning to take the politics of nationalism, out of cricket, I think he was acknowledging the inescapable implication of politics in cricket. His action, as the LTTE well understood when they killed him on the streets of Jaffna, was a political one, rather than any wistful gesture to transcend politics through cricket" (22).

I am tempted to read Sebastian's story through a similar lens: to ask whether, in his attributing of only goodness to cricket, he, too, is wrestling with "the inescapable implication of politics in cricket." I sense this possibility in Sebastian's attempt to honor Elaine's request for a real conversation by prefacing his difficult history. But when he tries to tell her, "Yes, but the only thing, … It's hard for me to always tell all the things--," Elaine interrupts him with an easy assumption: "All you jocks—." Her response oversimplifies Sebastian's desire not to recount the events of war, displacement, and survival that are a part of his past, so it is not surprising that Sebastian protests, "No, … There's more to it than that" with such intensity that Elaine's eyes "widened momentarily" before she softens, smiles, and tells him, "Yes, I'll go for a drink with you, and don't worry so much, Sebastian. As my father used to say, it's only cricket." To Sebastian, "it's only cricket," is also an oversimplification. This moment, which presumably begins Sebastian and Elaine's romantic relationship, suggests that like his ex-wife, Elaine might be unable to hold the details of Sebastian's past. She displays a certain imperial privilege through her blithe ignorance of what might be contained in the past of a Sri Lankan refugee.

But perhaps I am rushing to hastily to judge a relationship that is only just beginning. After all, this moment is situated at the end of the story, when Sebastian finds out that he had misunderstood Elaine's relationship with Sahid; they were not a couple, and Sahid, in fact, is getting engaged to another woman. This plot twist revives a sliver of Sebastian's promise of a good love story: "when the ball twists and arcs and sails and dances, bobs and weaves, there is, in that second, a hundred different happy endings," (90). At the story's end, Sebastian, in his attempts to be with Elaine, might be seen as moving away from the silence that he feels has protected him thus far. Though this single attempt cannot undo the heteropatriarchy to which Sebastian subscribes throughout the story, it is, like Ismail says about his own essay, an important attempt, both "in the interest of cricket but as part of the critique of nationalism" (33). Rather than cricket as a metaphor that can contrapuntally reconcile two strands—pain and anger with laughter and cheer—the real promise might lie in Elaine's challenge to get to know Sebastian beyond cricket, which offers him a third narrative through which to reach for, if not a "hundred different happy endings," at least one. This promise is for Sebastian alone but also makes demands of anyone who claims a kind of American innocence of what occurs in the rest of the world: the promise of a listener who will attempt to bear whatever his stories might contain, to know who he is outside of, and alongside, cricket.

**Labor as Escape: Exposing the Logistics of War and Militarism**

The first story in the collection, "Third Country National," features a main character, Anura, whose escapes are much more tenuous and dangerous than Sebastian's. Anura works as a janitor at a U.S. army base in Kuwait, and the story begins with him

noticing the sickly appearance of a puffer fish in the tank he volunteers to clean at the DFAC (Dining Facility). Two lieutenants, Diana and Khan, also notice and become concerned about the health of the fish. Over the next few days, Anura, Khan, and Diana try to understand why the fish are also disappearing. Eventually, Diana spots a creature in the tank that is unrecognizable to any of them. She takes a photo of it, and they learn that the creature is a mantis shrimp, which tend to find their way into tanks during transport, and that it is likely eating the other fish. Anura develops a great dislike of the mantis shrimp, which he believes "is a result of his karma, all he'd done—and hadn't done—reified" (11). Following this musing, eleven pages into a sixteen-page story, we finally learn what Anura is running from, with a section that begins: "A man can escape only so many times. Anura had already escaped twice: once from Sri Lanka to Kuwait and once from the army fort in Ampara" (11). This section details the conditions of his escape from the Sri Lankan army fort following an LTTE air raid, and a final section describes his battle with the mantis shrimp, which he loses as the tank and its console break apart, letting the mantis shrimp escape.

Sirisena's choice to have Anura so bothered by a mantis shrimp seems arbitrary until we understand more about the mantis shrimp, which is neither a mantis nor a shrimp, but is actually a stomapod crustacean that lives in shallow tropical marine waters (Patel et al.). Known for their extremely fast punches, mantis shrimp are "top predators with excellent vision that hunt over considerable distances, requiring them to evaluate and memorize complex features of their environment" (Wolff et al.). Much scientific conversation exists around the mantis shrimp's highly advanced compound eyes with

twelve different photoreceptors, or light-detecting cells, in its retina. For comparison, humans have only three photoreceptors sensitive to red, green, and blue light, while birds, reptiles, and many fish have four—an additional one to detect ultraviolet right. As a result, mantis shrimp have "the most extraordinary eyes in the animal kingdom," and can see the spiraling "circularly polarized light," which no other animal can see (Yong).[60] While scientists initially expected that these excessive photoreceptors would render mantis shrimp extremely adept at discriminating between different colors, experiments found that they are actually *worse* than humans, honeybees, and butterflies at telling different colors apart. It seems that "rather than *discriminating* between colours [sic] like we do, their eyes are adapted for *recognizing* colours [sic]" (Yong). In favoring a recognition of colors over a discrimination between different colors, it is thought that the photoreceptors skip sending signals to intermediary neurons, which allows for efficiency in gaining information—through color—to ambush their prey. Other research suggests that mantis shrimp privilege identifying the shape of objects over their color, for a similar purpose: the efficient identification of important landscapes and other animals (Patel et al.). The brains of mantis shrimp are similarly surprising because they have been shown to possess mushroom bodies, which are largely found in insects and function to form and store memories. Though insects evolved from crustaceans, most crustaceans do not possess mushroom bodies. It is thought that mantis shrimp might have retained their mushroom bodies while other crustaceans lost this ancestral mechanism because they

[60] This special capability has inspired scientists to create a sensor capable of detecting cancer and helping surgeons be able to see the edges of the tumor they are removing with much more clarity. See Blair et al. and Kennerson.

hunt over significant distances from their lairs, and thus need brains "equipped for memory of places, territories, and individual recognition" (Wolff et al. 3).

Each of the mantis shrimp's unique features is tied to its survival in shallow waters, "where color and light can be skewed by water reflection as well as refraction" (Faulhaber and Beasley). In being equipped to survive treacherous surroundings where things may not be what they seem, the mantis shrimp becomes a suitable metaphor for Anura's position in Kuwait as a TCN—an acronym that, like the mantis shrimp, doesn't quite describe the living entity to whom it is ascribed. TCN stands for third country national, a term commonly used in the U.S. military to refer to the tens of thousands of people that are trafficked every year through defense subcontractors to support U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since 2001, "[f]or the first time in American history, private-contractor losses are now on a par with those of U.S. troops in both war zones" due to the presence of TCNs at military bases (Stillman). TCNs are often referred to as "the army behind the army," since they provide the non-military labor needed to keep bases running (Hunter et al. 5). They are recruited from developing countries such as Nepal, India, the Philippines, and Uganda, often after being tricked into giving exorbitant funds to brokers in exchange for visas and jobs in lucrative locations in South West Asia like Jordan or Dubai (Hunter et al. 15). In the story, Anura is approached by a Sinhala man with a British accent while working at the Cinnamon Grand, a five-star hotel in Sri Lanka, where for years "[h]e had slept tucked behind an industrial dryer in the laundry facility and sent what money he earned to his family" (7). To extricate himself from this situation, he decides to take a risk: "Anura had heard the stories, but he didn't

ask questions. He needed to leave Sri Lanka—he was tired of hiding in the laundry room—and it no longer mattered to him much if he lived or died" (7). In Kuwait, Anura's passport is taken from and later returned to him by his employer, a common tactic used to threaten and hold TCNs captive (Hunter et al. 26), and he signs a contract that he cannot read because it is in English.

Like the mantis shrimp that has inadvertently made its way into a tank that was never meant to be its home, Anura, an escapee of the Sri Lankan civil war, finds himself trapped within a system of American military outsourcing in which his status within Kuwait, by design, offers him little to no protection. The story outlines how he attempts to survive this exploitative landscape by making decisions based in recognition over differentiation. In Anura's case, he must learn to recognize simple facts in order to keep his livelihood rather than ponder over, or differentiate between, complex considerations regarding what is *ethical*. For example, during his first evening at the base, a fellow TCN from Sri Lanka, Ibrahim, reminds him that things could be worse: "They could have sent you to Iraq, machan. People get killed there. Nobody gets killed here. Not unless he gets hit by a sharif's limousine while crossing the highway to the Burger King" (8). Ibrahim asks Anura to recognize the simple difference between what happens "there" versus "here," between getting killed and not getting killed.[61] Despite living in horrendous conditions inside a cramped tent with twelve other TCNs, Anura is to be grateful for the simple fact that he is not in a location where he might be risking his life. Similarly, when

[61] Ibrahim's mention of Iraq gestures to both the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990, where thousands of Kuwaiti and TCNs were detained in Iraq (Amnesty International 1), and to the fact that the existence of U.S. bases in Kuwait is tied to the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. See Saab for an understanding of the relationship between Kuwait and the U.S.

Anura is confused about his paycheck showing inconsistent amounts each week, Ibrahim advises him, this time in English: “Who the fuck knows? Truth is they could do anything they want to us. No one knows. No one cares. We’re lucky to be paid at all” (8). Once more, Ibrahim’s reminder is based on recognizing that their mere survival is one they should be grateful for because it could easily be taken away by their employers, and that paying attention to the differences between his weekly paychecks could be dangerous. Ibrahim teaches Anura that surviving the networks of imperialist war and global capitalism within which they work requires first and foremost a recognition of their immense vulnerability. Specifically, he preaches a kind of recognition meant to disallow a questioning of their unethical treatment and any desire to focus on the material evidence of their differential treatment. Like the mantis shrimp, Ibrahim’s exhortation to Anura recognizes present vulnerability and past adversity; it prioritizes survival above all else, with justice and equality being distant and secondary considerations.

Ibrahim’s lessons in survival by favoring recognition over differentiation extend to their interactions with the soldiers at the base. He warns Anura not to make assumptions about the soldiers’ ethnic or racial identities: “These Americans, they can tell each other apart, but you cannot” (3). Anura himself admits that he “couldn’t tell them apart to fear them” in the way that Ibrahim does, but he quietly disagrees with Ibrahim’s belief that “the soldiers hated the TCNs, called them names—hajis, other things.” Anura does not consider that Ibrahim, as a Muslim, is registering the general Islamophobia that undergirds U.S. militarism in the treatment of the TCNs by the soldiers. Ibrahim’s vulnerability is amplified as a Muslim TCN contributing his labor to the global War on

Terror, a war "that targets the racialized Muslim as an enemy" (Rana 54). Rather, Anura believes that "most of the soldiers looked right through the TCNs and never saw them at all. It was some solace Ibrahim needed, to believe he mattered enough. Truth was they didn't" (4). Despite their differing opinions, Anura's and Ibrahim's readings of the soldiers' reveal how war, too, requires its own (mis)recognitions: the soldiers simultaneously render TCNs invisible because of the care labor they provide and render them hypervisible by broadly racializing them—via the use of Islamophobic slurs—as Muslims, despite the fact that not all TCNs are Muslim.[62]

Anura's conviction that the TCNs didn't actually matter to the soldiers at all registers a complex understanding of the machinations of war writ large. In Anura, Sirisena embeds what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls a "panoramic optics, an ethical one and an aesthetic one that allows us to see everyone and everything involved in war" (227). For instance, Anura disavows the notion that war depends solely on hatred or evil of the other. He recognizes that the Sri Lankan soldiers he had once worked for were motivated by material comforts promised to them by the government: clay floors, land, and money (5). In noting how many of the soldiers on the U.S. base are in their late teens, Anura understands that many of the soldiers are too young to possess any capacity for hatred as a motivator for war. He calls them "child soldiers" whose behaviors are predictable in the way that all children's behaviors are predictable based on their surroundings and upbringing. This label is also tragically ironic, because it is often used to describe children from countries in the Global South who have been forced into military service;

[62] Li notes that the term TCN is also used by the U.S. military to refer to Muslim detainees captured in Iraq and Afghanistan who are neither local to the country in which they were captured nor American (173).

this appellation suggests that even American youth cannot escape the inhuman nature of modern warfare. Anura attributes their presence at the base to the fact that "following the others [children] was the only way any of their actions made sense." Consequently, Anura doesn't fear the soldiers, but feels sorry for them (5).

In these observations, Anura illustrates a capacity to understand those around him as complex human beings whose motivations and actions inside a war cannot be reduced to simple narratives of good versus evil. Despite his ability to extend this kind of understanding to Ibrahim and to both the Sri Lankan and American soldiers he has worked for and with, Anura does not show himself a similar compassion. He judges harshly his own actions within war, which are revealed as the mantis shrimp becomes increasingly unsettling to Anura: "Diana had called it beautiful, but Anura could barely stand to look at it. This thing was not just destroying the tank by itself. Anura was sure he had himself somehow created it. It was a result of his karma, all he'd done—and hadn't done—reified. It had come because of him. It had come for him" (11). These sentences launch Anura into the story of his escape from the Sri Lankan army base in Ampara, where he had been the lone survivor of an air raid by the LTTE. After finding his way to safety in Batticaloa, he becomes convinced that the Sri Lankan army would never believe his report that he alone had survived. Fearing that he would be labelled a coward and executed, he runs away once more. At one point during Anura's attempt to capture the mantis shrimp, the creature looks directly at him with a gaze that evokes all that plagues him about his escape following the LTTE air raid:

> The creature was trying to tell him something. It was trying to tell him it knew everything. It knew about the Tamil girl splayed in the dirt at Elephant Pass, a

> bullet in her forehead. It saw, as Anura often did in his nightmares, the girl's bike lying beside her, front wheel still spinning. It knew how the soldiers had pointed and laughed and how when they turned their slant eyes to Anura, he had forced a chuckle, to prove he was one of them. It knew the rumors about Brigadier Commander Peiris were still true. He was still alive being held in the jungle by the Tigers. The mantis shrimp knew about the camp dog. How it had been waiting for Anura when he left the base at Batticaloa and how it had followed him, limping, most of the way. The mantis shrimp knew how the camp dog's wounded leg slowly developed gangrene until it was too ill to walk. Anura had left the dog in a roadside ditch, still alive, ants filing toward it, crows gathering alongside. One crow pecked at the dog's head. The dog tried to bite but couldn't even manage a nip. Anura should have found a rock and killed his companion, to relieve its pain. But he hadn't had the stomach. And the mantis shrimp was telling him it knew the most important thing of all. Anura had never been quite brave enough. (15)

Placed almost at the end of the story, this paragraph reveals that Anura was already accustomed to practicing recognition over differentiation as a method of survival long before his arrival in Kuwait as a TCN. In each of the situations for which Anura feels the mantis shrimp is holding him accountable, Anura had to recognize the option that would further his survival following the LTTE air raid. Anura's discomfort at these forms of violence arising from two opposing sides—the Sri Lankan army murdering a Tamil girl or killing Anura himself for not laughing at her body and the LTTE torturing a Sri Lankan commander—likens him to Sebastian from "The Other One," in that Anura's loyalties do not seem tied to any nationalist formation, despite technically being on the Sri Lankan side as the cook at the army base.

Rather, in deciding to leave Brigadier Commander Peiris behind and to force a chuckle at the murdered Tamil girl's body, Anura is consistently interested in something more basic—his own survival. Consequently, he seems most perturbed by, and goes into the most detail about, the fact that he let the camp dog suffer, since killing it would not

have jeopardized Anura's life; he simply "hadn't had the stomach." That he could not bring himself to kill the dog even if it would have been a kindness to the animal suggests that Anura cannot stomach the indignities of war more generally, which he witnesses firsthand during and after the air raid. Thus, when he laments that the "most important thing" the mantis shrimp knew is that he "had never been quite brave enough," Anura is referring to the kind of bravery he would have needed to not compromise his ethical beliefs in such moments. As a result, Anura is unable to forgive himself for the choices he made to save himself because they do not constitute what he considers the ethical choice, which might have involved risking his own life, or actively committing violence in order to save himself. But unlike the mantis shrimp,[63] Anura is no great predator or fighter. In wanting to *live* for himself and provide for others, both animal and human, Anura is ill-equipped for war, which offers neither life nor sustenance for its victims. What Anura considers his greatest weakness—his lack of bravery—illuminates a lingering refusal of the nationalist stories told to justify war—stories that rely on dehumanizing (mis)recognitions of a country's enemies and unkept promises to its youth. Though Anura's story is not the story of the war soldier, his journeys tell the kind of true war story that Nguyen advocates for, told from "the high ground" where one can "see a vast landscape if one wants to comprehend the war machine in its totality and its mobility, as well as the war machine's other, the movement for peace" (264). Anura's investment in a

[63] Having what is known as the fastest punch in the animal kingdom, the mantis shrimp can strike "with the same velocity as a speeding bullet, hitting prey at 30 metres a second, generating 1500 newtons of force—the same as a tiger's bite—all in less than three-thousandths of a second." Moreover, this speed can make the water around the mantis shrimp boil, creating "an underwater shockwave that can kill prey even if the shrimp's bludgeons don't make contact" ("The Mantis Shrimp's Violent Punches"), suggesting that even a missed punch can result in the mantis shrimp killing its prey.

peaceful world, filled with the simple act of providing for others, is reflected in his jobs, which, though certainly chosen from a limited set of exploitative options, are consistently in circuits of care labor where he either cooks or cleans.

Moreover, the story suggests that Anura is also interested in what *kind* of life he lives. Though he claims to have taken up the fraudulent job offer that brought him to Kuwait because "it no longer mattered to him whether he lived or died," once he arrives in Kuwait Anura is, at the very least, curious about how he is living, for he notes the TCNs' deplorable living conditions and exploitative wages. He becomes indignant about the quality of his life, even if he repeatedly silences that indignation after consultation with Ibrahim. But Anura's silence does not secure him his job, because the arrival of the mantis shrimp leads to Anura's obsession with capturing it. That Anura inadvertently risks his livelihood to achieve this goal hints that perhaps mere survival is no longer sufficient for Anura. The mantis shrimp, carrying memories that Anura has been running from, might then be understood as forcing Anura towards a third escape. Anura's returning memories of his actions in Sri Lanka bring him shame, but they also extricate him, even if forcibly, from conditions of exploitation he himself was willing to accept and endure. At the story's end, the mantis shrimp strikes the tank with its claw twice and cracks it, as Anura tries to capture it, even climbing onto the console in his desperation. The tank's eventual collapse, however, comes at Anura's hands—his weight tips over the console and the aquarium breaks, allowing the mantis shrimp to escape, at which point Anura predicts: "It was going to find the one place, hidden far in the Kuwaiti desert, the one small pond of water, where it would thrive. And, as Anura fell, just before his body

hit the ground, he understood that he, once again, would have to leave" (16). Anura has lost his battle and makes a delineation here between him and the mantis shrimp. Where the mantis shrimp will thrive, Anura himself would "have to leave." This final sentence of the story registers how Anura's mobility is circumscribed by his position as a TCN. And though the end of the story imagines a more prosperous life for the mantis shrimp in Kuwait than it does for Anura, there is, in the moment of suspension before Anura's body hits the ground, room for us to imagine for Anura a different life where he, too, might thrive rather than merely survive.

**Constrained Caregiving: Undoing the Violences of the Heteropatriarchal Family**

While both Sebastian and Anura are outside Sri Lanka, the final story I engage is about a character still struggling to leave the country. The second story in the collection, "War Wounds" is focused on Anoja, a woman torn between caring for her younger brother Ranjith, who is recovering from a traumatic brain injury sustained in war, and joining her husband, who has secured a permanent visa in Australia and is increasingly impatient for Anoja and their two sons to join him. Her husband has been in Perth for two years, and now only asks about immigration forms when he calls: "You have the forms? You have filled them out?" (17). Anoja has delayed this task because she wants to evaluate two options for Ranjith's care if she were to leave: a mental hospital, and her older brother's family. Anoja comes to understand both these options as unviable and unethical, and so decides that she must be the one who cares for Ranjith. Though one might expect a story titled "War Wounds" to be told through the perspective of the person who suffered the wounding, the story's third person narration stays close to Anoja's

perspective, and through her highlights both the aftermath of Ranjith's war injuries and what Anoja imagines might have driven Ranjith to join the army in the first place.

In the war, Ranjith had suffered a blown-out eardrum, a fractured skull, and contusion on his brain when the truck he was in was hit by a Claymore mine while traveling through Vidattaltivu. Ranjith returns home to Anoja's care six months after her husband had left for Australia. For a year and a half, Anoja has facilitated Ranjith's rehabilitation, but he regularly forgets to do certain things, like shave the left side of his face and comb the left side of his hair. This occurrence reminds Anoja of a book jacket of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde: "The same man split in two halves—one sane, one mad" (19). This metaphor of duality and splitting runs throughout the story, both in terms of Ranjith and in Anoja herself. Anoja describes how she and Ranjith "might have been twins" save for the scarring on the right side of Ranjith's face and the scars on his scalp (20). Ranjith, at times, cannot remember who he is. When Ranjith sees himself in the mirror and demands, "Who is that man? … He looks familiar," Anoja replies first with an affirmation of his beauty against the scar on his face, and ends with her love for him: "It's a beautiful man. His name is Ranjith. … He is my malli.[64] … And I love him.' Ranjith considers this information, repeats the term of endearment that links him to Anoja—"I am your malli"—before continuing on to make the connection that the man in the mirror is himself: "This man is me?" (20). Ranjith's relationship as Anoja's younger brother is vital to his ability to return himself to who he is, and as if to center the importance of this relationship, Anoja and Ranjith are the only two named characters in the story; everyone

[64] "Malli," in Sinhalese, means "younger brother."

else is referred to by how they are related to Anoja. This decision also mirrors Anoja's struggle to split her care both to the family she has created by marriage and to Ranjith. Through this metaphor, the story reflects on both the literal wounds that Ranjith sustained in war as well as the familial and societal woundings that existed prior to war and that persist into the present day despite the war's official end.

The option of relying on the government for Ranjith's care is refused early on in the story, when Ranjith's doctor warns her against leaving him in a mental hospital after she inquires into the possibility: "Being part of society, the normal flow of it, is very important for someone suffering what he is suffering from. … a mental hospital is a place of last resort. It is a place the sickest people go. If Ranjith was violent with you, if he was liable to hurt himself then I would say hospitalize him. But know that such a place will hurt him more than help" (24). The doctor's advice points at the spectrum of problems that exist with relation to mental health care in Sri Lanka, which often works to separate those with severe mental health concerns from the rest of society rather than offer care and rehabilitation. In part, this approach is a legacy of colonization when the British transplanted such approaches into practice alongside their creation of mental asylums.[65] Ranjith's doctor doesn't diagnose or name what Ranjith might be suffering from, but instead affirms that his suffering is eased, in part, by being included in society and its normal flows, which was a common way in which mentally disabled and ill persons in Sri Lanka were cared for. Damani de Silva outlines that before colonization, Sri Lankan medicine was based on Ayurveda, herbal medicine, astrology, folk practices, and religion

[65] Mentally ill persons were also routinely jailed in accordance with the British imposition of the Lunacy Ordinance of 1873 (de Silva 66).

which “appear to be less sophisticated, [but] have a rich tradition and a complex system of reasons and logic” (66). Through these methods, mentally ill persons were attended to with a “‘community care model’ owned and administered by the locals themselves” (Kathriararchchi et al. 57). Kathriararchchi et al. also note that such forms of treatment did not fixate on the idea of a permanent “cure” for mental illness. If the methods employed did not abate a person’s mental illness, they were integrated into society with tolerance. Sri Lanka’s inability to have maintained these types of models is tied to years of brain drain and a lack of government investment in returning doctors.[66] Consequently, medical spaces are not the ones where the kind of care that has helped Ranjith can be found, and the doctor recognizes that his remarkable progress thus far has been due to Anoja’s care. Against the harm of mental institutions, he hoists the burden of Ranjith’s recovery, progress, and care entirely onto Anoja.

Anoja, however, does not have the support of an entire community to care for Ranjith. Her older brother claims to have no money after investing in Golden Key, a reference to one of the largest instances of credit card fraud in the country that left poor depositors struggling to make ends meet, with some committing suicide.[67] She considers that her husband could return, but quickly admits that “[t]here was nothing in Sri Lanka for Anoja’s husband. There were no jobs” (18). Despite loving her husband, she laments her dependence on him:

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[66] Despite the country’s establishment of psychiatry departments in major universities and a focus on community care starting in the mid-70s, many psychiatrists chose to secure their futures overseas, impacting the development of psychiatric services (de Silva 67). Even when foreign-trained psychiatrists returned, attrition became a problem because specialists who practiced psychiatry in remote areas were given low priority by policymakers (Kathriarachchi et al. 57).

[67] See Sirimanna and Keerthisinghe.

> Her house, her money, her sons, everything stemmed from him. When she was young, she had thought it romantic—entirely normal—when people described their spouses and children as limbs of a body. Now she knew how horrible a concept that was. Lose a limb, lose a part of your body, and you ceased to function normally, not just for a short period. Your loss was irrevocable. Anoja had seen that first hand. (19)

Anoja reckons with the knowledge of how her personal, and her family's, well-being depends deeply on the social and political structures required to sustain them. While Ranjith's grooming splits his visage in two, Anoja becomes an amalgamate of a multiplicity of roles.[68] Her commitment to her roles as Ranjith's sister and caregiver forces her to compromise in her other roles as wife and mother. She cannot join her husband in Australia, and their relationship becomes increasingly strained as a result. She struggles to parent her sons, and after slapping her eldest son for laughing uncomfortably at Ranjith's half-groomed appearance, feels a desire to explain to him that "[s]he had hit him because she could not hit her brother. But he was far too young to understand" (20). Relatedly, her husband's steady income in Australia does not necessarily translate to a healthy or stable home life for his family, illustrating an example of how labor migration has meant that for Sri Lanka, "[f]inancial gains for families and enhancement of the national economy were seen at the cost of negative health and social effects on the families left behind" (Kathriarachchi et al. 58).[69] These negative effects are also bidirectional: Anoja's husband is deeply unhappy as he secures their financial stability and a prosperous future for them outside of Sri Lanka. Though he is in a far safer and more privileged situation than Anura in "Third Country National" as an accountant in

[68] In Sri Lanka, over twenty-five percent of households are headed by women (Ratwatte).
[69] While this research is referring specifically to the negative impacts on children of parents leaving them behind, I extend this understanding to kinship relations more generally.

Perth, they share certain similarities. He lives with three other Sri Lankan men, and Anoja notices his weight loss when she speaks to him. Though we hear little from him outside of his frustration that Anoja is yet to fill out the immigration forms, we become sympathetic to his search for stability for himself and his family because we have met Anura, whose presence opens the collection and looms over this second story.

Perhaps because of all that Anoja has to juggle, there is an aspect of Ranjith's post-injury behavior that she is unwilling to acknowledge, which are his instances of sexual aggression towards women. When the doctor asks her if Ranjith had done anything that was "out of sorts" or "unduly hostile," Anoja shakes her head, but remembers that early on in his recovery, one of the nurses at the hospital had accused him of being "sexually aggressive" with her. Anoja responds to this by stating that "[t]here was no proof, and the nurse was later sacked for other lies" (23). Upon his initial return, Ranjith had accused Anoja's maid of being LTTE, and the servant had left the next day, afraid that the police might question her as a result of his accusation.[70] In the present time of the story, Anoja walks into the kitchen to find Ranjith standing behind the maid, at whose feet lay the broken shards of a saucer. When Anoja enters and picks up the shards, the maid leaves to go to her room. After reminding Ranjith that he can't hurt or scare people, Anoja leaves to listen outside the servant's bedroom door but does not knock, and tells herself, "The girl hadn't yelled or spoken out. Surely, if she were being hurt she would have screamed for help, out of fear" (26). This other side of Ranjith that Anoja

[70] The vulnerability of Tamil women in relation to the Sri Lankan state—both the army from which Ranjith is discharged and the police which his accusation risks bringing to the house—always includes the threat of rape and sexual violence. As a result, even though Ranjith's claim that the maid is LTTE is not explicitly sexual, I include his accusation as another instance of his sexual aggression.

doesn't want to witness reveals a duality in Anoja, who is at once a loving caregiver to her family but treats the maids she employs as second-class citizens.[71]

Anoja attributes her lack of inquiry into these instances of Ranjith's sexual assault instead to the fact that "[s]he was far too easily willing to think the worst of Ranjit. She always had been" (26). The next two paragraphs describe a memory of how, when Anoja was fourteen and Ranjith was eight, the family had suffered through a burglary where one of the burglars, a young man no older than nineteen, had watched the family while the others ransacked the house. The young man had started talking to Ranjith about movies and superheroes after noticing Ranjith holding onto a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figure. As the burglars were leaving, having taken all the valuables and having slit the throat of Anoja's pet dog, Ranjith gave the young man his Donatello action figure, an act for which the family had mocked him:

> Anoja's father had called him too sweet and accused him of being feminine. The mother wouldn't talk to Ranjith for days after. Anoja tormented him the most. She blamed him for the death of her dog. She accused him of being its killer. She accused Ranjith of helping the thugs—maybe he'd been the one who let them in. He'd left the gate open. She had despised him for being so weak, for being stupid enough to like a man who was harming them. She had told the story to everyone who would listen, visitors and relatives. She brought her friends home, and they mocked him also. Her torment continued for months after her parents relented and started treating Ranjith kindly again. (26)

Immediately after this memory, the narration shares why Anoja is so haunted by it:

> Anoja wondered now if that was why Ranjith had joined the Sri Lanka army. Ranjith had wanted to prove he could fight. He wanted to prove how strong he could be. She wondered if it was her family who made him like this. Not the war. Not the Sri Lankan army. Not the LTTE. Not the Claymore mine. Her family had

[71] In Sri Lanka, internal domestic workers are often outside the scope of legal protection due to domestic work not being formalized (Arsecularatne 1-2). For more on domestic work and unpaid care labor in Sri Lanka, see Verité Research, Nelis, and Withers and Piper.

> taken a boy who was sweet and gentle, who thought about others, and made him into a person who swore at people, who could not control himself, his body or his temper. She was the one who had brought this man about. (26)

As an adult, Anoja is able to consider the detrimental impacts of her family's tormenting of Ranjith. Perhaps because her own mocking of Ranjith was exceptionally cruel in that it not only lasted longer than that of her parents but also involved people outside the privacy of their home and immediate family, Anoja feels she must atone for her past sins by overlooking Ranjith's present ones because she "brought this man about" (26). This interplay between past and present is also illustrated in Anoja's memory, which includes reflections she might not have had during the incident. Anoja herself was fourteen at the time, and given her own terror during the incident, it is unlikely she had the capacity to think compassionately about the young man watching over them. However, her recollection includes this kind of compassion, as she repeats how young he sounded and all the indicators of his fright—his pacing, his sweatiness, and even the possibility that he might have wet his pants while breaking in because he smelled of urine. These moments indicate how Anoja's traumatic memory works as "an imaginative reconstruction rather than a reduplicative action … that is shaped as much by the present as it is by the past" (Baleav 30). That the present influences Anoja's rendering of the past is illustrated by the sentences which she rejects as all the obvious explanations for Ranjith's condition in order of their occurrence—"Not the war. Not the Sri Lankan army. Not the LTTE. Not the Claymore mine." Influenced by the present impacts of what the aftermath of war has meant for their family, Anoja remembers the past differently, imbuing it with the knowledge she has now. In looking to their internal family dynamics and history as the

motivator for Ranjith joining the war, Anoja takes a powerful step towards recognizing the toxic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality that might have solidified for Ranjith the harmful notion that he needed to prove himself to his family, and the idea that fighting in a war was one way to do so. In a similar manner, her recollection also identifies the conditions of the society outside their family unit that force a scared teenager to resort to theft.

Anoja eventually admits Ranjith's aggression towards women only because, at her older brother's house, she realizes that her niece is maturing. While helping the young girl with her math homework, Anoja notices her full hips and poses a question to herself: "What had she seen?" She then recalls the truth of what she had witnessed the previous evening: "Ranjith had pinned the servant to the kitchen counter with his body. He had one arm blocking her so she couldn't leave. His other hand covered the servant's mouth." Though she asks herself, "Why had she not understood earlier?", she still tries to convince herself that she is exaggerating the extent of the problem, once again revealing how her concerns are for the women and young girls in her family and not those she employs: "Ranjith was never aggressive with the boys or with Anoja, and Ranjith would never mistreat his own niece. … Yet every time she assured herself, Anoja felt a churning in her stomach. What would she tell herself if something happened? What excuse would she give then? (30). Given her realization that the possibility of Ranjith hurting her nieces is inexcusable to her, and given that her older brother is interested in taking in Ranjith only because he assumes he will have access to Ranjith's pension funds, Anoja realizes she cannot leave Ranjith with her older brother. Rather than be angry at the fact that she

cannot rely on her older brother to "make the right choice, for the right reasons" (30) Anoja feels anger at her niece: "She wanted to shove her niece away, to snap at her that she was a stupid little thing for not knowing the answers already. If the girl had not come to her at that moment, Anoja would have left the house ready to go to Australia. At the very least, Anoja deserved to see the girl blink back tears" (31). Similar to how Anoja had slapped her son when she was angry at Ranjith, here Anoja's anger at her niece for "not knowing the answers already" indicates that her frustrations are misplaced. The "answers" or knowledge that the young girl will come into as she matures is that of gender-based violence and the impunity with which it occurs in Sri Lankan society (Pinto-Jayawardena and Anantharajah 46), a knowledge which Anoja inevitably possesses and which undergirds her desire to protect her nieces. In this scene, too, the intimate interaction between aunt and niece is shaped by the harms caused by the patriarchal society in which they exist.

When Anoja returns home with Ranjith, the woman she employs as her maid is gone. Anoja realizes that she will have to make the evening's dinner, which is perhaps a hint that her feminist ethics might at least result in her forgoing having a servant while Ranjith is with her. She decides on her plan for her husband's phone call: "She would send him the children—her sons. This would be her promise to him. … She would promise him that she would work hard to make Ranjith better. She would work hard to find him another home, a good one where he would be safe. Once this was achieved, then she would come" (32). Like "The Other One" and "Third Country National," this story ends at a beginning, with Anoja embarking on the next phase in her life, one without her

sons but with a promise renewed to her husband and to Ranjith. It is an ending that illustrates how someone with Anoja's specific privileges might choose to stay in the country despite having avenues to leave it. More importantly, it allows us to glimpse both what is lost and gained by her presence at both individual and communal levels. Similar to "The Other One," this story depicts the consequences of patriarchy and masculinist ideals for both women and men. In imagining the private life of a wounded soldier, and the sister who takes care of him, the story works as a counternarrative against the linear, nationalist, and public pronouncements by the Rajapaksa government that depict soldiers' sacrifices as having allowed the nation to rise (Weisdorf and Sørensen 103). It also acknowledges the reality of injuries sustained in battle while illustrating the importance of seeing wounds whose origins lie beyond official dates of war or spectacular injury—wounds created in childhood or cultivated in patterns practiced daily. Anoja and Ranjith's story is characteristic of the other works I have highlighted in this dissertation, all of which help me argue for the ways in which trauma, rather than resulting always from a single event, embraces a continuum of intersecting experiences, each of which contributes to the specific form and meaning of responses to those experiences. Through the intimate dynamics of this individual family, the story demonstrates what a holistic and radical approach to a nation's problems might look like.

**Conclusion: Promises**

Each of the characters this chapter has spent time with offers a promise within their story. Sebastian promises to make us "laugh, groan, cheer" with stories that "won't ever make [us] weep" (90). Anura promises a miraculous third escape. Anoja sends her

sons to her husband as a promise of her desire to be reunited with him. These stories also offer a collective promise to the world in which they exist, and the country to which they are all tied: they index various circuits of violence, harm, and redress that need to be addressed alongside the legacies of war and disaster through which the problems of Sri Lanka are often discussed. “The Other One” centers the potential for diasporic spaces of healing and connection outside the shadow of displacement and war, and beyond the grasp of nationalisms. “Third Country National” brings into focus the often-obscured migrant workforce in South West Asia that contributes remittances to their families while being deeply marginalized and endangered at the hands of U.S. imperialism and global capitalism. This particular flow of capital and people is one that falls easily out of frames that focuses singularly on the aftermath of the war or the tsunami without an attention to the ways that global capitalism is at play in both. “War Wounds” is as much about Ranjith’s literal war wounds as it is about the wounds perpetuated by a society steeped in heteropatriarchy and ableism, which are often not discussed as the root causes of sexual violence in Sri Lanka (Satkunananthan). Given the current crises in Sri Lanka, which appeared in global media only momentarily to cheer on the spectacular images of protesters swimming in the ex-President’s pool, these stories remind us of the importance of learning how to stay on past the immediacy of any event—wars, climate disasters, global pandemics, economic crises, and political revolutions. By moving outside the frames of spectacularization to consider more pervasive and long-standing networks of oppression in Sri Lanka, this chapter is an attempt to honor the ways in which the lives of local and diasporic communities are predicated on contemporary imperialism in ways not

disconnected from the legacies of postcolonial violence. In ending with promises, it is also my attempt to abide by the myriad of ways in which people maintain hope, connection, and kinship to imagine other, more just worlds that have yet to come into existence.

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