

M. Neelika Jayawardane

“This is not the correct
history”: Lacunae,
Contested Narratives, and
Evidentiary Images from
Sri Lanka’s Civil War

Ejecta
Ari Larissa Heinrich

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and Evidentiary Images from Sri
Lanka’s Civil War
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“This is not the correct history”:
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Images from Sri Lanka’s Civil War

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A note to the reader: Some of the photographs used in this essay are not attributed. The photographer has chosen to remain anonymous for their safety, so that they will be able to continue their work. I'm grateful to be able to include their images here.

An image, and an absence

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It was Rahul, a friend I met while I was doing postgraduate work in Colorado, who handed me Anita Pratap's book *Island of Blood* (2001). It's not a subtle title. Each chapter consists of Pratap's reportage from several recent "flashpoints" in South Asia, and the book details her personal recollections as a journalist who worked on the frontlines of these conflict zones. Pratap's chapter on Sri Lanka includes an anecdote about how she scored an interview with Velupillai Prabhakaran, the founder and leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—his first ever with a journalist.¹ At the height of the civil war in Sri Lanka, Pratap was taken to meet "the elusive guerrilla leader" at "a [Tamil] Tiger safehouse in Madras"² that faced "the deep blue waters of the Bay of Bengal."³ The cover image of Pratap's book is as severe as its title. Inside, on the copyright page, the image is identified as a photograph by Robert Nickelsberg⁴ of

1. The LTTE was an insurgent group founded in 1976 that pushed for the establishment of a separate, independent Tamil nation on the island, in response to legislation—orchestrated by Sri Lanka's ruling majority, the Sinhala—that increasingly marginalised and disenfranchised Tamil people.
2. Madras's name, in July 1996, was changed to Chennai, part of a nationwide trend in India to use less Anglicised names. Chennai is the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu in India.
3. Anita Pratap, *Island of Blood: Frontline Reports from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Other South Asian Flashpoints* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2001), 66.
4. Robert Nickelsberg is a US photojournalist who, as a *TIME* magazine contract photographer, has specialised in documenting political and cultural shifts in a wide range of countries in the Global South. From 1988–99, Nickelsberg operated out of New Delhi, following the rise of religious and political extremism in the region, including the civil war in Sri Lanka. See <https://www.robertnickelsberg.com/about>.

ISLAND of BLOOD

FRONTLINE REPORTS FROM
SRI LANKA, AFGHANISTAN AND OTHER
SOUTH ASIAN FLASHPOINTS

ANITA PRATAP



Author's copy of *Island of Blood*, Penguin Books
India, 1st edition

M. NEELIKA JAYAWARDANE

“a woman in Lunuganwehera, Sri Lanka, whose husband was arrested for interrogation during the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna⁵] insurrection in 1989. She knows she will never see him alive again.”

Four people appear on the cover of *Island of Blood*. They are set against dusk-falling darkness. On the left is an elderly woman wearing a simple white blouse, traditional in style and commonly worn by widows, with a faded print of pink and lavender flowers wrapped around her waist. She holds a younger woman by the arm, whom we may assume to be the female subject identified in the photograph’s caption. This younger woman is standing with her mouth agape. A boy clings to the polka-dotted yellow cotton lungi wound around her slender frame. To her right is another boy, older, but young enough to still be in his school uniform. He is gripping the woman’s hands as though to prevent her from being swept away. His uniform is not bright white and starched stiff like the smart uniforms worn by the country’s middle-class students, washed daily with Harischandra Blue soap. The older boy’s school shirt is unbuttoned, revealing an undershirt. Perhaps he came home late, without enough time to change out of his clothes before the unbidden arrival of the police.

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5. Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—the People’s Liberation Front—arose, among several other leftist parties, as a result of internal schisms within the Ceylon Communist Party in the early 1960s. The JVP espoused radical Marxist politics that resonated during a period when the country’s economic crisis was worsening, and it grew into a successful political party. It attracted mainly disaffected Sinhala youth, especially those who had completed their secondary education or had university degrees, but could not find employment under the dire economic conditions the country faced. In 1971, its charismatic leader, Rohana Wijeweera, tried to direct an insurrection from prison, where he was already serving a sentence for previous activities against the state. This revolt was put down quickly, with several thousand men, all purportedly JVP members, killed by government forces. The JVP staged another, longer-lasting insurrection in 1987–89, attempting to overthrow the elected government. See also note 16.

They cleave to one another as if they are on a capsizing boat, grabbing on to each other for life. The two women and the small boy's eyes look left, towards the scene of terror. All the momentum in the image is to that left, which we, the audience, cannot see. Only the tall young man stands upright, his face to the right, eyes looking heavenwards. Perhaps he is appealing to the gods who reside in the forests surrounding Katharagama, to whom his mother and sister have, no doubt, faithfully made daily offerings of flowers, incense, sweets, and prayers.

The high contrast of the image on the cover of Pratap's book makes it appear as though the night that surrounds them is so opaque that it absorbs the rich black of their hair, the darkness taking them hostage.

*

When Rahul gave me this book, I knew little about the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka, or even what the initials JVP stand for. But I remembered, vaguely, my mother making a passing comment about the holy Kalani River that flows behind her ancestral home running red with the tortured, bloated bodies of university students suspected—by the local police, or the army—of being JVP insurgents and dumped in the river that would carry them out to the ocean, and then further, into oblivion.

For months, people who picked lotuses to sell at the great temple of Kelaniya, the Raja Maha Vihare, found bodies caught in the river's reedbeds, resting among the blossoms—white blooms with yellow centres that close at night and open in time for the morning puja. In Buddhism, and in the Hindu belief systems that precede Buddhism, the lotus symbolises the enlightenment we are all capable of achieving. Though its roots are

mired in mud and filth, the lotus reaches up high, for the clarity offered by daylight; there, it blooms, expressing the beauty of liberation, before letting go of its attachment to life.

*

11

My paternal grandmother's house was built on a hill, on land adjacent to the University of Kelaniya's cricket grounds. She made daily offerings of incense and flowers to the Buddha. After she lit clay lamps, she prayed to the deities protecting the island: just as the lotus seeks the light, may those that we have lost find their way. May the Triple Gem protect them, and may they be free from samsara.

Lunuganwehera⁶—where Nickelsburg photographed his terror-stricken subjects—is a small settlement in the island's deep south. It is not far from Katharagama, where devotees gather every July and August to celebrate the Esala Perahera, a festival and procession in the region. Some believers, said to be taken by spirits, seek atonement from their earthly sins by performing mortifications of their flesh. They push iron spikes through their cheeks and arms, then walk along with the procession, eyes wild, as if feeling no pain at all. Others fast, abstain from bodily pleasures, or meditate. They cleanse themselves in the Menik Ganga—the River of Gems—after they've "treaded the flowers," a euphemism referring to the ritual of walking barefoot across burning coals. These displays of devotion mark a festival honouring one of the most powerful guardian deities of the island, Katharagama Deviyo, whose presence predates Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity.

6. Also written, in English, as Lunugamvehera.

But when the island's powerful men unleashed their armies, neither St. Anthony of the shrine at Koch'chikadé, beloved of the island's Catholics, nor the Buddha's teachings were there to protect anyone. No pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses, those who camouflage their awesome fires behind cherubic faces, appeared. Not even Katharagama Deviyo arrived to wrest devotees from the hellish trajectory towards which this island seemed destined.

Twenty years after Rahul handed me *Island of Blood*, I return to its cover image. The four figures remain there, stilled in the moment of agony—screaming, clutching one another, forever hoping to escape being given this unbearable burden by looking to the other side of pain—even as their beloved is already traversing another realm of existence, becoming, in absence, the location of a wound that does not heal. Their grief and helplessness in the face of power, propelled by terror towards their beloved—he who is already beyond the frame of the photograph—has accompanied me over two decades, through my own small upheavals.

As winter begins to fall, this image becomes insistent, returning again and again from the recesses of memory. I'd ended a long, dislocating relationship and moved to a new home in December. The young men I'd hired through a local company carted my things from the U-Haul lorry to the house the day before the first big snow arrived. My books were still in boxes, shoved together in the spare room. Late one night in January, I find Pratap's book, its cover image as startling to me as it was decades ago. I go online, scouring the internet to discover details about the family. On the Getty Images website, I find an archive of works by the photographer, Nickelsberg. I search till I find the photograph of the family in Lunuganwehera. I also come across the photographer's own description of the scene: "The grieving family of a policeman killed by a land mine blast set off by rebel JVP-Sinhalese People's Liberation Front receive his body, Sri

Lanka, April 1989.⁷ It is only then that I realise that the caption used by Penguin India, the publishers of Pratap's book, turned my perception of the image—and the truth I presumed it to document, if truth can be said to exist in a photograph—upside down. The caption in Pratap's book identifies the individual outside the frame of the photograph as having been “arrested for interrogation during the JVP insurrection in 1989.” That caption, along with the framing of the cover image, suggests that an innocent man was being dragged into the darkness—by the police, or goons sent by the state in its all-out war against the JVP—away from his family, never again to be seen. He would have shared his fate with thousands of other men who were forcibly disappeared across the southern regions of Sri Lanka.

During this period, the government-sponsored death squads often made no attempt to hide the bodies of the men they broke. In a society with careful rules and taboos governing how and when the body should be seen in public, bodies were stripped naked, dumped on the sides of roads, turned into spectacle. The goons distorted their victims' faces and bodies, using petrol and matches so that those they killed would never be identified. That way, the authority of the state over every individual's thoughts, actions, and political beliefs, as well as over their bodies and identities, would—even once they were dead—be plain to see. The message laid out, for the living, was unmistakable: you, too, could be desecrated and erased.

Nickelsberg's description of this photograph tells a different story. This is not the scene of a police abduction, as Pratap's book had led me to believe. The caption I see next to the photograph

7. See “Terrorist Killing,” Sri Lanka, April 1, 1989, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/the-grieving-family-of-a-policeman-killed-by-a-land-mine-news-photo/186501408?adppopup=true>.

on Getty Images states that those pictured are the family of a state policeman killed by a landmine set by the JVP. The label above the online photo reads “Terrorist Killing,” pointing a finger at the JVP insurgent group as the culprit for the man’s violent end. They, then, would be the terrorisers, and this image a scene of retribution exacted from the state.

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This discrepancy between Pratap’s publication and the photographer’s own description—which, he adamantly assures me over email, is indisputable—leaves me uneasy.⁸ Given the caption in the book, I’d always presumed it was taken by some white photographer, commissioned by a news magazine or agency, who happened to be in a poor Sri Lankan family’s home after dark as the state police spirited away someone’s husband or brother or son.⁹ That

8. I contacted Robert Nickelsberg via email in January 2021. He wrote back, stating that the caption on the Getty site, which he had written, is accurate. “[This is] the first mention I’m seeing of the error,” he noted. He “was surprised to see the glaring miscaption” and found the error “odd given that a fact checker should have proofed the copy and caught the mistake.” He added, “There was never any doubt as to what transpired that day when the body of the police officer was brought back to the family’s home resulting in this reaction when the truck arrived carrying the body.” Email to the author, January 22, 2021.
9. Adding to the confusion, Nickelsberg’s series of photographs taken in Lunuganwehera is given varied labels on Getty images, including also “Terrified women and children after army took their husbands for interrogation after terrorist land mine blasts set by extremist JVP-Sinhalese People’s Liberation Front” (<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/terrified-women-and-children-after-army-took-their-husbands-news-photo/50661481?adppopup=true>), and “Sri Lanka Terrorists Killing: A woman cries after her husband is taken for interrogation April 4, 1989 in Lunuganwehera, Sri Lanka. The JVP, a Buddhist-Sinhalese Nationalist Marxist organization, is fighting for the removal of Indian peace keeping force and attempting to overthrow the government” (<https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/woman-cries-after-her-husband-is-taken-for-interrogation-news-photo/741099?adppopup=true>). Nickelsberg’s extended series is available at <https://www.gettyimages.com/search/more-like-this/50661481?assettype=image&family=editorial&phrase=robert%20nickelsberg%20sri%20lanka>.

story I'd told myself suddenly unravelled. It felt like a fiction of my own making rather than a photographed truth. How, for instance, would a white man have been able to photograph this scene without the goons taking and smashing his camera, unspooling his film right there?

16 The version of Nickelsberg's photograph available on Getty Images reveals textures that are reduced on Pratap's cover, such as the intricate pattern of cracks in the mud plaster on the wall behind the family. The photograph also seems to have been taken while there was still daylight. A fifth person stands on the far left: a woman with an embroidered bag hanging on her shoulder, her lips drawn over her bared teeth. Her face is presumably turned towards the body of the policeman who was killed in a landmine, as he is being brought to his family. She is a spectator, and does not appear to be directly affected by the horror of what she is seeing or the pain of loss. All we see is that she is witnessing something terrible.



Photo: Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images

“THIS IS NOT THE CORRECT HISTORY”

Anatomy of doubt

18 In his book *This Divided Island* (2014), the Indian journalist Samanth Subramanian writes that “in conversations about politics in Sri Lanka . . . rumour forms the chief currency. Everybody appears to have their own particular runnels of information, flowing from indistinct sources. Even the newspapers, rather than investigating rumours, just transmit them onward.” Perhaps, he offers, during the war rumours kept the trade in truth “liquid,” without “requir[ing] you to commit to an opinion or to modify your views.” This, he concludes, “must have been a useful quality” in wartime.¹⁰

The overlapping narratives about Sri Lanka’s civil war include those reported by local and foreign journalists; those disseminated by politicians and commanders in the armed services; those passed on by ordinary island people, some of whom who were forced to endure the bombs and guns on the frontlines and in bordering villages; and those told by island elites and the upper middle classes—people who lived in relative safety during the war years, protected by class, ethnicity, and region, with greater or lesser damage to their property, bodies, and psyches. Adding to the cacophony of storytellers are those of the diaspora, the majority of whom have relocated to Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, including the often more affluent Sinhala economic-migrant diaspora in those same countries.

10. Samanth Subramanian, *This Divided Island: Stories from the Sri Lankan War* (New Delhi: Replica Press Pvt., 2014), 13.



The acrimony, the mistrust, and the doubt created by conflicting information shared across global channels generates ripe conditions for conspiracy and denial. Discordance and uncertainty fill the perverse requirements of Sinhala nationalism, which deploys doubt as a fault-free alternative to concrete evidence of civilian torture and systematic sexual assault, the use of government death squads, and indiscriminate bombings by the army. My extended family in Sri Lanka tells me that, as a person who has lived abroad all her life, I only know what the Western journalists—who don't get the complexity of the situation or the daily realities—have told me. Anyway, they say contemptuously, those Western journalists are fools who fall for misrepresentations and propaganda spread by the Tamils who got into England and Canada by “claiming” to be refugees.

Some among my relatives' social circles express envy, in their asides, of the sheer luck of *those crafty buggers* who are managing—through sleight of narrative hand—to live on the dole in the West.

I grew up outside of Sri Lanka. My parents immigrated to Zambia in the late 1970s, years before anyone in Sri Lanka could imagine there would be a civil war that would last over a quarter of a century. They left the island before the most infamous pogrom targeting Tamil people, Black July, took place in 1983, and the years of war that followed. Occasionally, on the BBC World Service news at 6 a.m., we would hear a sentence about a bombing, a burning, or a spate of killings, in between the crackling and popping of the shortwave radio, muffled further by my father's frantic attempts to call his brothers in Colombo.

These spare dispatches about an island devolving into rebel attacks, state-sponsored murder, and endless calamity soon receded into the back of my consciousness. I grew up in a different political cauldron: to the south, apartheid in South Africa and Ian White's poisonous, white supremacist regime in Rhodesia; to the southeast and southwest, respectively, civil wars in Mozambique and Angola, with the clandestine involvement of South African special ops in both countries. At home—where my parents entertained Cuban doctors working at the state-run hospital, Russians who worked at the copper mines as technical specialists and advisors, and South Africans living in exile—rumours abounded of Soviet training programmes for soldiers engaged in each of these wars.

The lingering sense of otherness, a reminder that my face and my body did not belong in the locations where I lived, that I was only ever temporarily and conditionally welcome, is my most persistent childhood memory. I spent much of my youth trying to erase evidence of that unease in myself. By the time I went to university in the 1990s—in Ames, Iowa, in the United States—the realities of Sri Lanka's present had receded into a background hum. The spiciest food I ate was the \$3.14 Chinese takeaway. The vocabulary and grammar of my first language retreated like a vestigial organ in the body of my memory.

21

*Photographing lacunae: Tracing histories,
locating remnants*

22 A few years of hustling as a literary scholar left me bored, unable to focus. What did it matter if I contributed a paper to a small scholarly journal—probably never to be read by anyone—about some niche characters in a novel, I thought. By the mid-aughts, I began to work with the artists and photographers who were part of my life, writing alongside images. For my university webpage bio and grant proposals, I refashioned my statement: As a scholar of images, and as a writer who collaborates with photographers, I'm interested in exploring the role of photography in disputed narrative terrains. I focus on the politics of images, and on narrative. What stories are told, and by whom? How do images frame and reframe what people believe they know? What do photographs leave out, and what do they bring into focus? And how does a photograph's movement through different contexts—geographic, social, temporal—shift the stories that it tells?

As a scholar with a background in literature, I came to photography with the understanding that individuals and communities co-create meaning within a given text. I knew that the meaning of an image can vary, just as it can with written text. But how to engage beyond the flatness of looking? How to get through the ideological and context-specific weeds that block our ability to see past the delimitations set by a photograph's frame?

The scholar Tina Campt suggests moving beyond looking. As she attends to seemingly banal vernacular visual archives “mobilized by black people in the diaspora,” Campt *listens* to photographs, and reads them as sites of “felt sound.” She focuses

on how photography allows its subjects to sound themselves out, becoming part of an “everyday strategy of affirmation” and locations of “a confrontational practice of visibility.” She also points out that those images that are far more “quiet” than others require that we “embrace a different understanding of ‘sound.’” Sound, Camppt notes, is “defined as a wave resulting from the back and forth vibration of particles in the medium through which it travels.” The lower, inaudible-to-the-human-ear effects “register as . . . ‘felt sound’”—as something one *feels*, as vibrations, upon contact with our bodies.¹¹ They necessitate an awareness of frequencies beyond our hearing.

I attune myself to sound, relearning how to see—by listening to images.

*

In my early years as a scholar and writer on images, I jumped without a parachute, held aloft by the heady rhetoric of the South African photographers whose archives I was looking at and whose work I was writing about. Anti-apartheid photographers were driven by the imperative to make the violations of the state visible and transparent. They aimed to position themselves as witnesses. Many took on a more radical approach. At the influential Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival held in Botswana in June 1982,¹² the South African photographer

11. Tina M. Camppt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 7.

12. The Culture and Resistance Symposium and Festival was organised by *Staffrider Magazine* and the Medu Art Ensemble (a cultural association operating in Botswana, formed by Botswanan and South African artists and writers who opposed the apartheid policy of racial segregation and violent injustice in South Africa). Hosted by the Botswana National Museum in Gaborone, the event brought together a large cohort of activists, political party members living in exile, and

Peter McKenzie famously stated, in no uncertain terms, that the “committed photographer” must not only “take sides” and “accept their responsibility to participate in the struggle,” but also use their cameras as “weapons” in the struggle for liberation.¹³ Like them, I thought that “truth” could be gleaned from photography—that photographs, coupled with the narratives of those experiencing loss and injury most acutely, would create an indisputable body of evidence.

This generation of documentary photographers held fast to the truth-quality of the photograph; they knew its potential for challenging a powerful racist regime. Peter Magubane, who regularly had to enter spaces where members of the press were banned, is legendary for his inventive strategies. At times, he hid his Leica IIIg in a hollowed-out Bible. At others, he concealed it inside a loaf of bread he’d scooped out and proceeded to munch on as he watched; in this way, he surreptitiously photographed proceedings in courtrooms where no cameras were allowed. He knew that white people would not question why a Black man was eating a cheap white loaf or carrying a bible. Both are consumer objects, used to pacify the natives.

I was taken by these photographers’ impudence, and their single-minded dedication to documenting truth. But their work also helped me see that photographs may selectively tell a version of a truth, and that photographers, too, are limited by their level of knowledge about a particular context, or by their own unexamined biases. It should go without saying that it was imperative that Black photographers were present to photograph their own communities’ experiences. But I also realised that the

self-identified “cultural workers”—artists, photographers, writers, musicians, and performers. Included in the festival’s programme was an exhibition of photography.
13. Peter McKenzie, “Bringing the Struggle into Focus,” *Staffrider* 5, no. 2 (1982): 18.

photographer's knowledge of a particular geography, or their political allegiances, mattered little when they were also limited by the sensational image vernaculars that the news agencies they worked for demanded.

Observing and listening to contemporary audiences as they experienced photographs from the years of struggle against apartheid, I saw that the "truths" a photograph may communicate often take place durationally; it is an accretive process dependent on what a person may have recently endured in their personal life, or lived through in their own particular sociopolitical geography.

25

When I first met the photographer and activist Gille de Vlieg, we spent entire mornings, spilling into afternoons and evenings, speaking about her work with the women's anti-apartheid group the Black Sash, and about how she, then in her forties, taught herself how to use a camera to document what she was seeing. (De Vlieg is now in her eighties and in great shape, which she attributes to decades spent running around with camera equipment on her shoulders.) She did not know then if her photographs would have an impact. But she knew it was necessary to do the work.

De Vlieg's images are factual, matter-of-fact, with little of the spectacle or spectacularisation of apartheid violence to which many other photographers from the same era resorted. Her photographs document what's in front of the camera, without trying to convert the audience with overt affective signals. One image is of a mother in Tembisa—a township on the East Rand, located on the northeast outskirts of Johannesburg—who is in mourning, her head covered. It was taken on June 12, 1985, the day before her son's funeral, and she is holding up the blood-soaked, oversized t-shirt her child wore when he was shot in the

back by the police.¹⁴ De Vlieg has titled the photograph as matter-of-factly as she photographed her subjects: *Mrs Mazibuko holds the bloody t-shirt of her son Flint, who was shot and killed by police.*

It is plainspoken, this photograph. But sadness at another's loss—an emotion that speaks of the viewer's distance from the subjects in a photograph—isn't the only response it elicits. Rather, anyone whose history is embedded in this region will read, within the iconography of grief, a story with many threads. Some will know, instinctively, that they are implicated in the long trajectory of the bullet that killed Flint and caused his mother unwordable grief. Most will note the story of the second-hand t-shirt, too large for a young boy, no doubt a handout from a white person. That t-shirt is now limp, a drying bloodstain spreading like the stigmata of a saint's suffering. There is the story of the child—so many children—running, running, unable to outrun the blasting violence of apartheid; there is the story of the expendability of their bodies and lives to a system that saw them as *things* to be monitored, controlled, and eventually instrumentalised for labour; there is the story of his mother, and a grief beyond tears, holding up that t-shirt she refuses to wash or throw away. It is defiance, and a dismissal of those that look at her—a face, as the South African photography scholar Kylie Thomas writes, that “does not receive [her interlocutors].”¹⁵

Thomas states that many of de Vlieg's photographs “do not portray violence as it occurs but document the events before

14. The black-and-white photograph by Gille de Vlieg can be seen on the South African History Archive (SAHA) website at https://www.saha.org.za/tembisa/mrs_mazibuko_holds_the_bloody_t_shirt_of_her_son_flint_who_was_shot_and_killed_by_police.htm.

15. Kylie Thomas, “Wounding Apertures: Violence, Affect and Photography during and after Apartheid,” *Kronos* 38, no. 1 (2012): 208.

and after”; they provide a record of events that are “not otherwise visible to us, for which we would otherwise have no visual trace.”¹⁶ Instead of resorting to an idiom of “spectacular” conflict photography, or an appeal to pity and sentimentality as a means of communicating how the oppressive structures of apartheid affected the daily lives of Black South Africans, de Vlieg’s collaborates with student organisations—notably the Congress of South African Students (COSAS)—and local activists. (She felt protected as a photographer by the students and local activists who invited her to townships and locales designated for “Africans,” where she was often the only white person present.) They—she and the activists who invited her—were aware that the presence of white people, especially a white person with a camera, could deter further police violence.¹⁷

These abiding relationships meant de Vlieg could document how community-based organisations fought against forced removals and land grabs in distant, rural locations that foreign photojournalists chasing front-page-worthy photographs of conflagrations were not interested in covering. Instead of scenes evoking pity or terror, one-note emotional responses, what we see are powerful visuals depicting everyday strategic resistance in collaboration with everyone from leftie journalists and South Africa’s resistance press to church-based organisations, NGOs, and sympathetic diplomats.

For over forty years under apartheid, South African documentary photographers steadfastly believed, however hopeless their situation seemed to be, that there was value in their documentation. Rolls and rolls of film presented evidence that would puncture apartheid structures, skirting the censorship laws that

16. *Ibid.*, 209 and 214.

17. Gille de Vlieg, interview with author, Johannesburg, October 23, 2018.

were used to suppress any narratives that countered the state's propaganda. Photographs were meant to close the sociogeographical distances between white communities and Black South Africans' day-to-day realities; they could circumvent the psychological methodologies of obfuscation that were integral to maintaining the idyll of apartheid within its privileged white enclaves.

Power was not in any singular, spectacular image. It was in the accumulation of images: thousands of images layered over more images. Images, and the narratives they carry, accrue like deposits of silt that will eventually redirect the course of a river. At least, that is the story we tell ourselves, when we take images, when we document.

They can also become detritus, shoved into the landfill of the mind.

In the years immediately after the official end of apartheid, many white South Africans claimed not to have comprehended the everyday nature and brutality of apartheid violence; this remains a common declaration, a verbal antidote used to nullify questions about what they did not do to oppose the white supremacist regime.

I returned to Sri Lanka the year the Sri Lankan armed forces began their final onslaught against the insurgent Tamil Tigers in the north of the country, under the direction of then-president Mahinda Rajapakska. In response to the brute force of the government, the Tigers bombed train cars and passenger buses in the capital and in other areas where the majority of the Sinhalese population in Sri Lanka reside. In Colombo, the commercial capital and the largest city in Sri Lanka, the rhetoric of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism was pronounced, evident in throwaway comments, contesting, for instance, that Sinhala armed forces went on murderous rampages—by air, land, and sea—against Tamil civilians; or that government-sponsored death squads were carrying out extrajudicial killings of anyone, Tamil or Sinhala, who got a little too free in their criticism. Local journalists were frequent targets, but again, they were framed as troublemakers who should have known better.

29

I took lessons in Sinhala grammar from an affable woman who lived in a house on a small side street off Galle Road. The tuk-tuk always dropped me off at the main intersection, and I walked a few metres down to her house, with the sea and the sky at the horizon. Once, during a lesson, I ventured to make a political opinion. She responded with a half joke: “Don’t say that in front of other people! The white van will take you away!”

In the muggy heat of a Colombo afternoon, I read up on the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna¹⁸ and learn about the Marxist-Leninist philosophy of the JVP. The JVP's leaders positioned themselves as men who spoke on behalf of Sri Lanka's exploited working classes and its unemployed populous; they, alone, represented the poor, disenfranchised people among the Sinhalese majority who had studied at a government schools or were selected to attend university, but for whom there existed no employment.

The JVP leaders' rhetoric was not entirely incorrect, either; at the time, powerful politicians came from the well-connected upper classes. They would make public appearances wearing immaculate, white national garb, and address the masses as *sahodarayo*, their fellow Sinhala Buddhists. But the people who came to these rallies, Independence Day, and May Day events knew that the men on the podiums were not anyone's brother or sister. Occasionally, the ruling-class-accented Sinhala betrayed their English educations. "You needed to know someone," my Sinhala tutor told me, "and those *someones* are the wealthy people who live in the capital, in Colombo 7, or those old families in the hill country near Kandy!" She said this in a joking

18. The JVP's first insurrection, against the Dominion of Ceylon in 1971, began as quickly as it ended, at the will of brute government force. But the organisation survived and in the late 1970s "re-create[d] itself as a parliamentary electoral party" that by 1980 had "established itself as the third largest political force in the country." Rajesh Venugopal, "Sectarian Socialism: The Politics of Sri Lanka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (2010): 568. The second insurrection—more protracted, organised, and violent—took place during the late 1980s. See also P. Gunasekara, *Sri Lanka in Crisis: A Lost Generation, the Untold Story* (Colombo: Godage, 1998); C. A. Chandraprema, *Sri Lanka, the Years of Terror: The J.V.P. Insurrection, 1987–1989* (Colombo: Lake House, 1991); R. Gunaratna, *Sri Lanka: A Lost Revolution? The Inside Story of the JVP* (Kandy: Institute of Fundamental Studies, 1990); and A. Attanayake, *Sri Lanka: Constitutionalism, Youth Protest and Political Violence* (self-pub., Colombo, 2001).

tone, but it was pointed. She knew that after my tutoring sessions, I went to have lunch with my punchi amma—my mother’s younger cousin—who lived on Barnes Place in Colombo 7; she also knew that I’d been away for a fortnight, traveling upcountry on the picturesque observation car of the train to Kandy to visit my bappa—my father’s younger brother—and his wife, who lived in Matale, a nearby town with a legendary cave temple and renowned Buddhist scribes. These were not people who would be attracted by the JVP’s rhetoric.

My uncle—a tall, handsome man with an immaculate pompadour—had been the district governor of the area for a period of time. When I asked him about the JVP, and about how they reinserted themselves into the political sphere in the 1980s, his explanation was rich in euphemism, and rang like a parable. “Duwa”—daughter—he began, “just as house serpents take up residence in the rafters and in the coconut frond thatch, valued by human residents because they catch and keep out rodents... that is how the JVP inserted themselves into people’s homes.” The JVP spoke to the needs of poor citizens in rural areas and the urban unemployed; the party had made itself necessary, indispensable—even if, as everyone knew, it also came with the threat of poisonous fangs.

Back in Colombo, I spent my days reading newspaper articles at the National Archives and my nights tending to migraines.¹⁹

19. The National Archives in Colombo still maintain physical copies of newspapers. Amalini De Sayrah tells me that there are “blocks of months where there aren’t any [archival records] of certain papers . . . because printing/publication stopped during the 2nd insurrection.” She learned about these gaps in publication during her own research, when “an uncle who manages the paper archives” at the National Archives told her “*Harthala nisa paththara gahuwe naha*”—that the reason papers were not printed during these months was because the JVP’s demands meant that workers were forced to stay away from work, ostensibly on strike. WhatsApp conversation with the author, August 21, 2021.



Sri Lanka, August 1989. Photo: Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images

In the 1980s, severe economic desperation inflamed the resentment felt by the Sinhala Buddhists on the island, who remained in poverty, unprotected by policies made by the ruling elite, leading them to join the JVP in its then newly resurrected form. The incendiary nationalistic rhetoric of politicians in the then ruling United National Party (UNP), led by J. R. Jayewardene (and after him, Ranasinghe Premadasa, followed by Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga), escalated tensions. A slew of policies were passed, designed to systematically marginalise Tamil people, including the removal of Tamil as one of the official languages of Sri Lanka. The language of instruction had to be in Sinhala, even in Jaffna, where schools were almost entirely attended by Tamil-speaking students. In Jaffna and surrounding areas, Tamil political candidates seen as UNP stooges were

attacked, and these attacks were followed by arbitrary arrests under the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act.²⁰

The following chronology is generally agreed on as the sequence of events that led to the beginning of Sri Lanka's civil war.²¹ On May 31, 1981, a group of unidentified men (believed to be from a rival political party) attacked and shot to death two Sinhala policemen on duty at an election meeting in support of candidates of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF)—a party that had swept the parliamentary polls in predominantly Tamil areas in 1977, buoyed on a platform that included demands for secession; the TULF's stronghold was, by 1981, declining, because of their inability to deliver on promises.²²

That night, and for the following four days, hundreds of Sinhala police and paramilitary forces descended on the area, going on a rampage of killing. They destroyed property: the head offices of the TULF; a Hindu temple; the offices of the Jaffna daily newspaper *Eelanadu*; and private homes, including that of V. Yogeswaran, member of Parliament for Jaffna. On one of these nights of terror, a large group of Sinhala men—some in plainclothes, others in uniforms that clearly identified them

20. Initially, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) was enacted by the Sri Lankan government as a temporary measure in 1979 under the presidency of J. R. Jayewardene; subsequently, it was made law, in 1982.
21. The national newspapers printed in Colombo chose to leave out crucial details in their reporting. For instance, the killings of the Sinhala policemen were mentioned in the mainstream newspapers and on radio broadcasts and televised news. However, what was not reported was that a Tamil policeman also died and that a Muslim policeman was injured. For a detailed history of events preceding Black July, see People for Equality and Relief in Lanka (PEARL), "Black July: A Tamil Genocide," <https://pearlaction.org/rememberingblackjuly/>.
22. Santasilan Kadirgamar, "May 31 – June 4 1981: Five Days of State Terror in Jaffna," *Colombo Telegraph*, February 3, 2013, <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/may-31-june-4-1981-five-days-of-state-terror-in-jaffna/>.

as security forces—torched the Jaffna Public Library.²³ At the time, the library was the largest in Asia, containing over 97,000 books, irreplaceable records of the island's earliest newspapers, one-of-a-kind historical records, and scrolls of rare palm-leaf manuscripts.

34

Respectable Sinhala had always referred to *rasthiaduwo*—unemployed loiterers who hang out on the streets with nothing to do—as *useless buggers who get drunk on cheap raa and kassipu cause trouble*. No one could explain why those useless men suddenly knew exactly when to gather, where to get a litre of petrol, and whose businesses and homes to set aflame.

The island descended into civil war.

*

When J. R. and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi of India signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord of 1987, it was an attempt to find a way back to sanity, to prevent the escalation of a war already out of control. Some say the big country to the north of the island pressured J. R. into signing this treaty, that he was left little choice. There was a real possibility that the island would be sectioned off, with the northeast region governed by Tamils and the rest of the island under Sinhala control. Talk of dividing the island angered the Sinhala chauvinists, who saw the island as their rightful inheritance, their Buddhist *urumaya*.

1987 was also the year that the military contingent known as the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) came to the island to enforce the conditions of the agreement, stoking old fears in the Sinhalese majority that they were going to lose sovereignty

23. The date on which the Jaffna Public Library was set on fire is usually recognised as May 31 or June 1, 1981.

to their powerful neighbour. After the arrival of the IPKF, the JVP leader Rohana Wijeweera set aside the “Marxist elements [in the JVP’s] doctrine and practice” in favour of instituting a “Sinhala-chauvinist and indigenist” programme that was “directed against both Tamil ethnic groups within Sri Lanka and against the Indian armed forces which were occupying the Tamil areas of the north and east.”²⁴ Since its inception, the JVP had consistently resorted to anti-Indian rhetoric in order to mobilise its followers, but this time, threats against Indian civilians and their businesses were all too real.²⁵

JVP cadres threatened those who did not observe their organised strikes, and—“emulating an LTTE tactic”—they “embarked on a program to assassinate political moderates,” eliminating rivals and other public figures who might get in their way.²⁶ According to Charles Haviland of the BBC, they also killed “monks, academics, union leaders, even a popular politician-film-star, Vijaya Kumaratunga, whose wife Chandrika later became president.”²⁷ Cadres scoured military bases for arms, and a “raid on the Pallekele army camp near Kandy netted the group some automatic weapons.”²⁸ The Pallekele raid, in particular, evidenced the possibility that army personnel in the camp may have aided in the attack; thus, paranoia intensified about

24. M. Moore, “Thoroughly Modern Revolutionaries: The JVP in Sri Lanka,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 3 (1993): 599.

25. Shelton U. Kodikara, “The Continuing Crisis in Sri Lanka: The JVP, the Indian Troops, and Tamil Politics,” *Asian Survey* 29, no. 7 (1960): 717.

26. Bryan Pfaffenberger, “Sri Lanka in 1987: Indian Intervention and Resurgence of the JVP,” *Asian Survey* 28, no. 2 (1988): 139.

27. Charles Haviland, “Rohana Wijeweera: The killing of Sri Lanka’s Stalinist icon,” BBC News, November 13, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30017905>.

28. Pfaffenberger, “Sri Lanka in 1987,” 139.

all facets of government and military being infiltrated.²⁹ In a coup de grâce, the JVP called for the “boycott of buses—mostly Tata-Benzes made in India,” which workers used daily. These actions, along with wage-raise demands, brought Sri Lanka’s transport sector, factory production, and businesses to a standstill in 1989.³⁰

People in small, rural settlements like Lunuganwehera were caught in the middle of all this: between apparatuses of the state—the police, army, and various death squads—and the do-or-die tactics of the JVP.

According to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, Sri Lanka has the second largest official number of outstanding cases of enforced disappearances in the world, recorded at 6,259; this number is second only to Iraq, which recorded 16, 427 enforced disappearances.³¹ But Amnesty International estimates that Sri Lanka has accrued “a backlog of between 60,000 and 100,000 disappearances since the late 1980s.”³² One small island in the Indian Ocean has one of the world’s highest numbers of enforced disappearances—beginning in the 1980s and ongoing—on public record. Locals in the south of the island refer to the period between 1988 and 1990, in particular, as the Bheeshana Yugaya, or “Age of Terror.”

29. Ibid.

30. Shelton U. Kodikara, “The Continuing Crisis in Sri Lanka: The JVP, the Indian Troops, and Tamil Politics,” *Asian Survey* 29, no. 7 (1960): 717.

31. Report of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, August 2021, A/HRC/48/57, <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/48/57>: 34, 32.

32. “Still No Answers: An update on the rights of victims of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka,” Amnesty International, March 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ASA3752782022ENGLISH.pdf>: 4.

In October 2007, when reporters with the *Asian Tribune* put questions to Mahinda Rajapaksa, the wartime president, he responded:

Some have gone on their honeymoon without the knowledge that their household is considered missing. Parents have lodged complaints that their children have disappeared, but in fact, we have found, they have gone abroad. . . . These disappearance lists are all figures. One needs to deeply probe into each and every disappearance. I do not say we have no incidents of disappearances and human rights violations, but I must categorically state that the government is not involved at all.³³

37

How to hold accountable a man who can look another in the eye—a reporter—and say, in lilting island-uncle English, that those who had been disappeared must have eloped and are probably in the throes of a passionate honeymoon? Here, Rajapaksa turns to a rhetorical device Sinhala uncles love to fall back on, alluding, with a light touch, to a tiny fraction of their massive wrongdoings. Because his opening salvo is so ridiculous, you know your question isn't taken seriously. It's a ploy to shut you up and to let you know who is in power, and just how much power they have.

33. Quoted in Anna Neistat, "Recurring Nightmare: State Responsibility for 'Disappearances' and Abductions in Sri Lanka," Human Rights Watch, March 5, 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/03/05/recurring-nightmare/state-responsibility-disappearances-and-abductions-sri-lanka>.

38 A fortnight after my arrival, my punchi amma, whose home is in Colombo 7—still one of the most fashionable residential areas of the city—invites me to dinner. One of my childhood memories of this aunt is that she was so wealthy that when her family visited my family's modest home ten kilometres outside of Colombo, she brought a small television set with her. Her boys couldn't live without watching their shows. We knew what a television was, but to my family it was both unfamiliar and unaffordable.

Over dinner, we casually discuss the fears they say they experience from one day to the next. They warn me against taking the bus or the train to Kandy. There were a spate of bombings both in the capital and in Kandy just before my arrival. I realise early that the way this talk is being fashioned is about centring *us*—read: Sinhala—as the primary victims of Sri Lanka's raging war. As a way to counter their rhetoric, I tell them about my colleague, now a mathematics professor at a US university. I describe how he was beaten and chased out of the University of Peradeniya, a state institution set in the idyllic hill country, during the pogroms that took place in the 1980s. How lucky he was, I emphasise, to have escaped with his life. I tell them about his elderly mother, who was killed in her home in Jaffna by an air force bomb, a fire that fell from the sky before she could think to escape.

The middle son, now a working doctor at an army hospital in Chilaw, is quick to respond: "The LTTE were hiding amongst the ordinary people, so that's why your friend's mother's house

was bombed and she was killed. We also lived in fear every day, here in Colombo. Those people you are feeling sorry for, they were bombing buses and trains.”

At first he makes an emotional appeal, referring to the injuries and suffering of the gallant Sinhala army: “Let me take you to see injured soldiers I treat at the army hospital. You should see them—arms and legs blown off—then talk about feeling sorry for the Tamil Tigers.”

39

His brother chimes in, with reference to the United States and its imperial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “Ha! But sister! The US is droning innocent Pakistanis. Just look at Guantanamo! Always banging on about *huuuman riights*. Never mind George Bush. Even that Hillary Clinton. She called the Tigers ‘freedom fighters’ and a ‘resistance organisation.’ We are not going to forget that.”

In a 2007 interview with Michael Tomasky, for the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper, Hillary Clinton flippantly offered a definition of what should be considered a “terrorist organisation.” Terrorism, Clinton said, “is a tool that has been utilized throughout history to achieve certain objectives . . . you can’t lump all terrorists together. [W]e’ve got to do a much better job of clarifying what are the motivations, the *raison d’être* of terrorists. I mean, what the Tamil Tigers are fighting for in Sri Lanka, or the Basque separatists in Spain, or the insurgents in al-Anbar province may only be connected by tactics.”³⁴

For my Sinhala cousins, Clinton’s statement, with its single sentence referring to the Tamil Tigers, energised a terrorist

34. “‘You can’t lump all terrorists together’: Michael Tomasky asks Hillary Clinton about Iraq, the legacy of the Cold War, Mukasey and ceding executive powers,” *The Guardian*, October 23, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/23/usa.hillaryclinton>.

organisation with her explicit support. That one sentence led some Sinhala to believe that her presidential campaign was partially funded by wealthy Tamils in the diaspora.

40 I try to fend off their conspiratorial logic, explaining that from the point of view of the imperial and economic agendas of the US, Sri Lanka has little to offer—at least as far as I can see. Maybe, I say, the island has more of a significance to Great Britain because of its imperial history and its more recent history as an asylum for Sri Lankan refugees. The US has no reason to strategise for or against Sri Lanka. Whatever Clinton said does not mean much to most people there. They wouldn't even know about a small island and its war.

This displeases all three of the brothers at the table.

“Api pukeng hinawenawa,” my middle cousin retorts, using a vulgar statement to shut down any further conversation.

*

Colombo is a maze of traffic and billboards depicting the faces of cricket stars hawking Horlicks, and adverts for high-end watches, and light-skinned models selling Fair & Lovely cream. Several prominently placed billboards have images of the mustachioed, smiling visage of Rajapaksa in a loose, white sarong with his shirt buttoned to the neck and a jocular red scarf—the white signifying purity of intention, and the brick red of his *sataka* a symbol of his solidarity with impoverished millet farmers.³⁵ Rajapaksa raises an arm in victory in many of these images. In

35. See Michel Nugawela, “Symbolic power of Rajapaksa brand,” *Daily Mirror*, January 9, 2019, <https://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Symbolic-power-of-Rajapaksa-brand-160860.html>.

some, he is accompanied by his son, dressed in the fashion of his father, the iconography of a dynasty in the making.

The streets leading to the city centre are cordoned off by metal gates; armed forces in forest-green khakis and combat boots stand guard with automatic rifles. Everywhere, soldiers in fatigues doing everyday things—getting money from ATMs, milling about at markets, conversing with the doorman outside the Galle Face Hotel, where I go to swim.

41

Away from the centre of the city, the presence of the police and the Sri Lankan Armed Forces (SLAF) is not as heavy. But when I go for early morning runs before the traffic becomes murderous, rounding through Independence Square, Viharamahadevi Park, embassy buildings, and back to Suleiman Terrace in Colombo 5, where I have rented a flat, I make sure I carry my US driver's license and a list of people to call. Just in case.

One time, I forget to take my driver's license. When an SLAF troop member carrying a semiautomatic weapon motions me to stop, I stop. He asks the same questions I am now used to being asked by these men: To which Jayawardane clan do I belong? Is my mother foreign? Where is my father's maha gedara located? When I tell them that my family's ancestral homes are in Kelaniya, there's a smile of recognition. They can now place me: "By the temple and the river."

One soldier asks, "Madam, have you been to the Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihare in January, to see Duruthu Perahera, with the elephant carrying the Holy Relic Casket?"³⁶

36. The relics inside the casket are much revered, containing—according to legend—one of the handful of the remnants left behind in the fires that consumed the body of the Lord Buddha upon his ascent into Nibbana. (It is said that unlike ordinary mortals, who leave behind many bones and teeth in cremation fires, He who carried nothing of the weight of his past lives left little behind.)

I remember a moment from childhood, before my family emigrated out of Sri Lanka, and before I became too foreign to offer opinions. I was carried on my father's shoulders, eating pink marshmallows, watching stilt walkers, drummers, fire dancers, and lesser elephants go by, followed by the great tusker, who promenaded down the street draped in a bejewelled cloth; he was guided by his mahout, and he carried on his back the Holy Relic, safely enclosed in its golden house.

I tell the soldier, "Yes, sir. I have seen it, when I was very little." He jokes that I should stay on a few more months, so that I can see the Duruthu Perahera again. After a moment, another soldier chimes in to say, "We will return to how things used to be—a Sinhala country, and you can be safe again."

Witnessing: Testimonials and documentary images,
Part I

In the vast field of images that claim to document Sri Lanka's 43
disputed narratives, I can identify three broad categories.

First is the category of images approved by the state: photos that unequivocally maintain the heroic stature of the state's armed forces. They depict victims of bombings of Buddhist temples, train stations, and buses in predominantly Sinhala regions, and of Tamil opposition party leaders and dissidents who were killed by the Tigers to silence the opposition to insurgents' tactics from inside the Tamil community.

Second is the significant body of images produced by war photographers that stands witness to the lie created by the state's propaganda, maintaining a record of the brutality that the island's smiling people are capable of carrying out. Some of these photographs—if the photographer was from the geopolitical West, and was formally attached to a major international news agency or publication—are kept in archives owned by the commissioning agency or publication. Or if the photographer had the money and time, they may have created their own archive. Photographs taken by Sri Lankan photographers—even those who were employed by newspapers—were left to decay in offices and in their homes.

The third category includes images that began to circulate in the early aughts: pixelated digital camera and grainy cell phone photos taken by soldiers as they brutalised, shot, and pushed bodies—some still living—into shallow graves. Despite their degraded quality, these emerging images explicitly show graphic evidence of mass killings.

Over the past twenty or so years, blogs, Facebook, and WhatsApp groups have become the sites where Sri Lankan diasporas create vernacular visual and narrative archives. Increasingly, I turn to these personal archives: scanned collages of studio photographs from the early and mid-twentieth century, Polaroids from the 1970s, and faded colour photographs taken using a family camera in the 1980s. They offer respite from the state's propaganda and the Sinhala-friendly mainstream media's rhetorical circumvention of what seems to be obviously damning evidence.

Alongside social media platforms, blogs became the go-to newspapers for Sri Lanka's many diasporas. For the first time, troves of scanned photographs of family life reappeared: of birthday parties, weddings, and of ordinary days spent flying kites at the beach. Many of these photographs were taken by the generation of family members that came before the advent of the blog post, even though they are created by generation that came after, who were too young to remember what was left behind or were born in the countries their parents fled to.

These electronic repositories of mourning are trafficked by the diaspora. For the second-generation children of war and exile, they are ephemeral locations of both longing and resentment. The scenes in posted photographs are visual evidence of locations into which they can only imaginatively insert themselves. But imaginary pilgrimages are a poor substitute for circumnavigating dislocation.³⁷

37. On how the traumatic memories of survivors of the Jewish Holocaust are "received" by subsequent generations, see Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," *Poetics Today* 17, no. 4 (1996): 659–86. Without the literal ability to return to the past, to the sites of trauma that have been physically destroyed, second-generation children live at a "temporal and spatial remove" from their parents. Because they grow up "dominated by narratives that preceded their birth," their own narratives are "displaced" by the experiences of their parents (662); as a consequence,

And yet, even these archives remain incomplete and uneven; they don't exist for the thousands of families who too poor to own a camera, whose identities went uncaptured by the lens of a family photographer. The goal of the state was to erase them. But in the tide of images, these unimaged identities, inarticulate and discordant, continue to rise to the surface; despite their absence from the electronic visual repositories, their voices hum, even if at the lowest of frequencies.

*

In 2009, a number of videos—most likely taken by a member of the Sri Lankan armed forces—are leaked. Some are posted on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. In August 2009, three months after Mahinda Rajapaksa ebulliently declares his victory over the Tamil Tigers, Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka (JDS) obtains a video showing men in Sri Lankan Armed Forces uniforms firing assault rifles at two naked, blindfolded, and bound men sitting in mud. As an organisation of journalists, writers, and human rights defenders, JDS had been forced into exile due to persecution; the group's media release for the video states that they "are not in a position to disclose the way we received it but we can say that the video was captured during the month of January in 2009."³⁸ The video is distributed and

they experience feelings of inadequacy and alienation, having not been present for the traumatic event but rather its aftermath. Yet, the depth of this trauma, this combination of "mourning and memory," imparts "something akin to memory" onto the second generation, something Hirsch calls "postmemory" (660–62).

38. Executive Committee of Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka, "Video evidence of extra-judicial executions in Sri Lanka," August 25, 2009, available at https://www.tamilnet.com/img/publish/2009/08/JDS_letter.pdf. For more on JDS, see <http://www.jdslanka.org/index.php/2012-01-30-11-50-09>.

shown on news channels across Europe—notably, on Channel 4 News in the UK, where a significant portion of the diaspora, both Tamil and Sinhala, lives.³⁹ Channel 4’s Jonathan Miller describes the footage: a major general is present at the scene of a mass execution; mostly naked bodies, blindfolded, are strewn nearby, bleeding into puddles of water.

All of the men lying in the mud are in their youth, long limbed and broad shouldered. One naked man is led to the scene of execution and pushed forcefully to his knees; a man in full army-camouflage uniform steps back a foot or so and shoots the kneeling man in the back of his head. The kneeling man falls backwards, but is not fully prone at first. His bound hands, behind him, prevent him from hitting the ground. Because of that, blood and other material pour out of his head onto the ground.

One year later, additional footage of the same incident is broadcast, this time showing more naked bodies, some of women with their hands bound behind their backs. The digital date stamp on the video shows that the recording was made on May 18, 2009.⁴⁰ You can hear soldiers making crude remarks and suggestive comments in Sinhala. One of the dead, a woman, is later identified as Shoba, a twenty-seven-year-old singer, dancer, and actor who became a newsreader for National Tamil Television, a network run by the LTTE and a central target for the island’s government.⁴¹

In response, an official representing Mahinda Rajapaksa’s

39. Jonathan Miller, “Sri Lanka execution video: Evidence of war crimes?,” Channel 4 News, August 25, 2009, <https://www.channel4.com/news/sri-lanka-execution-video-evidence-of-war-crimes>.

40. Jonathan Miller, “Sri Lanka ‘war crimes’ video: Woman’s body identified,” Channel 4 News, December 8, 2010, <https://www.channel4.com/news/sri-lanka-war-crimes-video-womans-body-identified>. The video is no longer available through this site.

41. Shoba became better known by her nom de guerre, Isaipriya.

administration dismisses the “foreign interference” into their inquiries, casting doubt on the authenticity of the footage. They announce that four of their own “hand-picked local investigators, two of whom were government officials,” have reached a consensus, “that the video was ‘fake.’”⁴²

Despite what seems to be incontrovertible proof that the SLAF violated Geneva Convention rules protecting prisoners of war, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has filed no charges. And even though very grave-looking white British men on Channel 4 News announce, using stern and authoritative voices, that finding this kind of “astonishing” visual material will “comprise powerful evidence” against the Sri Lankan troops, command leadership, and Rajapaksa’s government, each of those actors remains free.⁴³

In September 2009, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremnayake, in attendance at the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, tells the leaders of the world how much they can learn from Sri Lanka, given its “success in defeating terrorism.”⁴⁴ It is as if he is drawing a sharp line: a “before” on one side (when terrorists ran amok); an “after” on the other (terrorism itself, vanquished). But this delineation has become porous; A profusion of images and narratives permeate through the boundaries erected by the state.

Local activists, writers, and organisations—such as the International Truth and Justice Project (ITJP), founded by the

42. “Sri Lanka: Army Unit Linked to Executions: New Evidence Reinforces Need for Investigation of Wartime Atrocities,” Human Rights Watch, December 8, 2010, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2010/12/08/sri-lanka-army-unit-linked-executions>.

43. Miller, “Sri Lanka ‘war crimes’ video: woman’s body identified.”

44. “Address by Honourable Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka, Prime Minister and Head of Delegation of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka,” Sixty-Fourth Session of the United Nations General Assembly, September 26, 2009, available at https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/64/64_LK_en.pdf.

South African human rights lawyer and transitional justice expert Yasmin Sooka—speak out via Twitter.⁴⁵ Articles on wartime abductions and disappearances, postwar military and police abuses, and land grabs in the north of the island are published online. Occasionally, rows and rows of photographs of the disappeared are posted, alongside adamant assertions by government officials that no evidence exists to substantiate either the images or the number of bodies depicted in them.

On the ground, the mothers, sisters, and wives of the disappeared organise, making their voices heard. In August 2019, two Sinhala activists and writers, Amalini De Sayrah and Pasan Jayasinghe, writing for *Groundviews*, a citizen-run media group and online publication in Sri Lanka, travel to Hungama in the Southern Province.⁴⁶ They sit on plastic chairs under a faded, flamingo-pink veranda and speak with U. P. Somaseeli, K. D. Jayantha, A. T. Hemalatha, K. P. Somawathi, and S. M. Pemasili; the husbands, sons, and brothers of these five women were rounded up by the police or grabbed from their own homes, likely never to return. Violence, remember the women, “came from many sources.” State actors including paramilitary squadrons, police, and army men abused their powers, “abducting, torturing, and killing anyone suspected or simply accused of being JVP supporters.” Each actor, in other words, aped the other’s despotism.

45. A leading human rights lawyer, activist, and international expert in the field of transitional justice, gender, and international criminal law, Yasmin Sooka served as the deputy chair of the Human Rights Violations Committee of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. She was appointed in July 2010 to a three-member panel of experts advising the UN Secretary General on accountability for war crimes committed during the final stages of the war in Sri Lanka. She is director of the ITJP.

46. Amalini De Sayrah and Pasan Jayasinghe, “30 Years, and Still Waiting,” *Groundviews*, August 30, 2019, <https://groundviews.org/2019/08/30/30-years-and-still-waiting/>.

“The road that runs there, the next road from here,” Jayantha says to the two writers, as she points into the distance, beyond the thickets that grow nearby, “there were so many bodies along that road, they were doused with petrol and just left to burn.”

From a plastic bag, Jayantha pulls out a pristinely kept sepia-toned photograph of her husband, to show De Sayrah and Jayasinghe. Somawathi exclaims, “Everyone used to say Jayantha’s husband was handsome like a movie star!” Peering at it, she adds, “But how do you still have this?” She is surprised, because during that time, the JVP would collect people’s identity cards, driver’s licenses, and photographs. Jayantha’s response is firm: “They came and asked for it, but I refused to give it, they can’t take this from me as well.”

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De Sayrah and Jayasinghe ask the women if it is not unsafe for them to have their names published and their photographs included in the report for *Groundviews*; after all, the police and armed forces have not stopped retaliating against truth tellers. They respond defiantly. The loss they carry, and all that they have lived through, has pushed them to find strength. They are loudest when they insist that they have nothing more to fear.

“We have already lived through so much . . . ,” they say.

“What worse is there that could happen?”

Witnessing: Testimonials and documentary images,
Part II

50 On February 20, 2021, I see a photograph posted by the *Tamil Guardian* on Twitter.⁴⁷ It is an image of the aftermath of violence: the buttocks and upper legs of a youth's body beaten so severely by intelligence officials patrolling the roads near Vettrilaikeeni that his smooth brown skin is crisscrossed with black welts. In the areas of his legs that immediately border the concentrated areas of blue and black, small veins bleed out, forming a network of tributaries.

The tweeted image reminded me of Gille de Vlieg's 1985 series of photographs documenting the torture and severe beating of a youth named Paulos Mohobane. His back is a network of flayed skin—a sjambok's heavy leather will do that. The caption that accompanies the photograph is simple: *The wounds on Paulos Mohobane's back after he was beaten by vigilantes employed by councillors*, in Thabong, on the third of June that year.⁴⁸ De Vlieg's aim is to foreground the what, who, when, and where of the scene photographed: to document, name, and locate.

The two photographs—one broadcast on social media in 2021, for the world to see; the other, an image shot on black-and-white film almost thirty-five years prior and smuggled out of South Africa to be published in niche anti-apartheid

47. @TamilGuardian, Twitter, February 20, 2021, 1:32 p.m., <https://twitter.com/TamilGuardian/status/1363240166144561154?s=20>.

48. The black-and-white photograph by de Vlieg can be seen at https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-wounds-on-PaulosMohobanes-back-after-he-was-beaten-by-vigilantes-employed-by_fig3_262099576.



“Looking for their loved one for years, yet no answers.”

@IsharaDanasekara, Twitter post, February 19, 2020.

Mullaitivu, Northern Province, Sri Lanka

publications—were both taken to document extreme violence. In both cases, the violence was carried out by individuals who cannot be easily identified but were employed as arms of the state. In both, the severity of the beatings indicates that the violence was meant to terrorise young people into compliance, to teach them a lesson they would carry for life, and to send a message to the larger communities from which they came: The state has ultimate authority over your body. It authorises your life, and it will authorise your death.

Without the presence of photography—the spool of film in a camera; an image-making device in a cell phone—and without

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the ability to broadcast the injustice of such a severe beating, both communities would have been cowed into silent endurance. If these violent events were disseminated by other means—through spoken narratives or writing alone—they would be subject to ridicule or doubt. But neither set of images is able to provide any immediate solution to the problem documented. De Vlieg’s photographs did not magically release the community in Thabong from the grip of apartheid violence, and her larger body of work hardly ever had immediate impact.

The *Tamil Guardian*’s initial tweet with the photograph garnered 215 likes, 227 retweets, and 30 quote tweets—without creating a stir significant enough to challenge the violent authority and impunity enjoyed by the SLAF and its shadow forces.⁴⁹

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What seems like evidence is not evidence. All visual narratives are perforated with lacunae.

The documentary carries no power of its own, if the civil contract with their audiences is weak.

Evidentiary images pour through the large holes of a sieve that was meant to hold them in.

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49. Relational politics between Black residents and activists in townships and white photographers went largely unquestioned and were seen as productive and strategically *necessary* in 1980s South Africa; however, these practices are no longer viewed as acceptable in the same ways. The same relationalities and interpersonal politics certainly cannot be superimposed over the specificities of Sri Lanka, at any period of time.

By the early 2000s, the euphoria of the Mandela years was still palpable, but fading. In spite of the attempt of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to stage an exercise of excision, catharsis, and healing, and the hopes of the ruling African National Congress for a united-in-difference “rainbow nation,” these efforts had done little but gloss over deep social and economic ruptures inflicted over four hundred years of colonial, white supremacist violence and forty years under apartheid. It became clear to many South Africans that those who benefitted from apartheid, as well as their new government, would rather subsume—under feel-good rhetoric—all unruly remainders of colonial genocide, all violent reminders of apartheid and of the neoliberal present. Even when some form of truth or reconciliation proffered, it was doubtful whether it would offer the healing that the state, church, former apartheid-era leaders, and a myriad of actors who would benefit from this sleight-of-hand wanted South Africans—and the world—to believe.

If South African photographers were once idealistic about the nobility of their mission, and the promise of documentary photography, under the shifting conditions of the 2000s, artists began responding, instead, to their doubts. Artists like Jo Ractliffe began to produce photographic work that addressed the legitimacy of the medium, circumventing the processes of documentary image-making in order to hint at the elusiveness of “truth.” To produce *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (drive-by shooting)* (1999–2002), Ractliffe used an inexpensive Holga film camera, known for creating images with a low-fidelity aesthetic. While working on a previous project, she “found that the plastic framing plate could be removed; this took away the separation between frames and allowed the edges of each image to spill over into the next”; she could “shoot an entire roll of film in one uninterrupted sequence. This simple adjustment also

gave her the leeway to “narrate space . . . ‘in camera,’ rather than manipulating the image on a computer,” she notes.

54 Ractliffe used this same photographic method for *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (drive-by shooting)*,⁵⁰ printing the full strip of film on cotton paper as a stream of grainy black-and-white images forty centimetres tall and nearly two and a half metres long. The sequence of impressions shows the bushveld west of Pretoria, close to a farm called Vlakplaas.⁵¹ This farm was used as the “headquarters of C1, one of the apartheid government’s state security or ‘counter-insurgency’ units,” where the notorious Captain Eugene de Kock oversaw a torture camp sanctioned by the apartheid state and its leaders.⁵² During the TRC hearings, everyone who knew, tacitly approved, and authorised de Kock’s activities hid behind him as the sole engineer of this horror. But when Ractliffe got to this location—a place that purportedly embodied evil—intending “to make a video work, something forensic,” she was “stunned by the banality of that façade.”⁵³

50. Jo Ractliffe, “Port of Entry, 2000–2001,” in *Jo Ractliffe, Photographs: 1980s–now* (Gottingen: Steidl; Neu-Ulm: The Walther Collection, 2020), 129.

51. An image of *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (drive-by shooting)* can be seen at http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/ractliffe/index_vlakplaas.html. Ractliffe states: “There are three versions of this work. For *Truth Veils*, I made a set of nine silver gelatin contact prints, which were presented in nine black boxes, each print nailed at the corners to the back of the box. In 2000, this work was reconfigured for the exhibition *Kwere Kwere: Journeys into Strangeness*, curated by Rory Bester. The photographic contact prints were stripped together and filmed onto video. The accompanying soundtrack was sourced from Vlakplaas co-founder Dirk Coetzee’s testimony during the TRC hearings and excerpts from an interview between FW de Klerk and former Vrye Weekblad editor Max du Preez. Additional sound—my footsteps along the gravel road next to the farm and my car engine—was arranged by Philip Miller. In 2002, I scanned the entire strip and printed it in one continuous sequence on cotton paper.” Ractliffe, “Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (drive-by shooting),” in *ibid.*, 117.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*

Ractliffe's washed-out, moth-wing-soft images, framed by dark-shadows, do not do much in the way of revelation or truth telling. They allude to narrative seepage, and to things that resist coming into focus. Aided by the failures of her leaky camera, Ractliffe's oblique storytelling draws out the incalculable suffering absorbed by the walls and the concrete floors of a death camp, now unkempt and overgrown with tall grass. Writing about *Vlakplaas*, Yvette Greslé notes that given the determined level of obfuscation by the apartheid state—including the absence of an official public archive documenting who was brought in for torture and “information extraction,” who was employed to extract information, and what happened to the bodies of those who did not survive this processing of truth—the secrecy and erasures alluded to by Ractliffe's images “might be imagined as an alternative archive.”⁵⁴

In using “poor” tools to create only a blurry record, and in dismantling the documentary fidelity promised by the photographic apparatus Ractliffe's work purposefully obfuscates the vista before her. Her use of a “toy” camera signals the childlike naivete with which one inevitably approaches such an impossible investigative mission, in locations that do not tolerate inquiry, where one can only expect to collect a verisimilitude of truth at best. This is a conversation about opacity, about the illusion of access to objective truth via a camera lens, and about the hopelessness of finding a final place to rest one's grief.

Perhaps the reasons that led Ractliffe to turn away from documentary photography towards her work with this “alternative

54. Yvette Greslé, “‘Empathic Unsettling’ in the Field of Vision: Jo Ractliffe's *Vlakplaas* in Photographs and Video,” *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 29, sup. 1 (2015): 73.



Jo Ractliffe, *Vlakplaas: 2 June 1999 (drive-by shooting)* (detail)



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archive” overlap with my own motivations for moving away from documentary images.

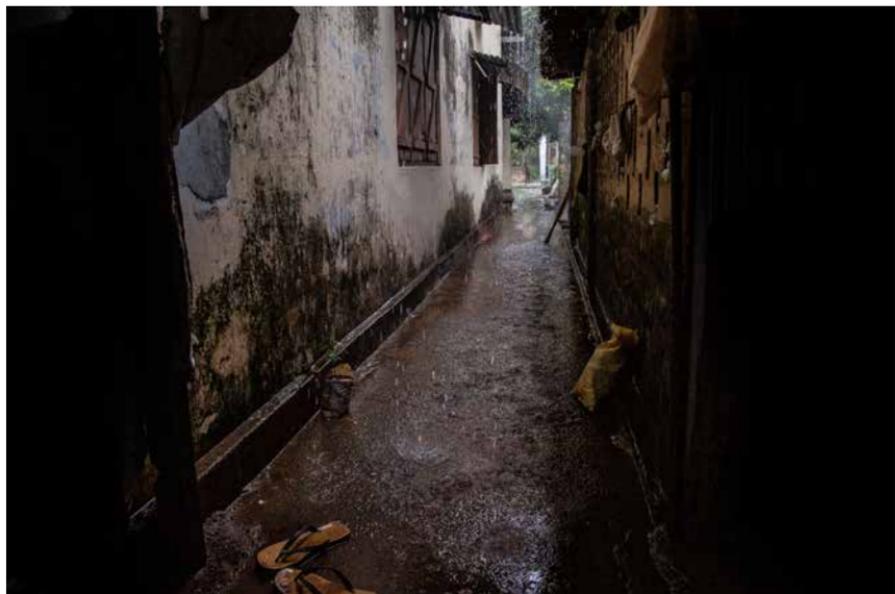
A documentary photograph calls for accountability. Sri Lankans prefer to forget. An almsgiving meal for the village monks, followed by a good bottle of arrack.

58 This is not a country in which people speak directly. They are masters of allusion, and of illusion. They will offer small insights into truth, only to wrest it away.

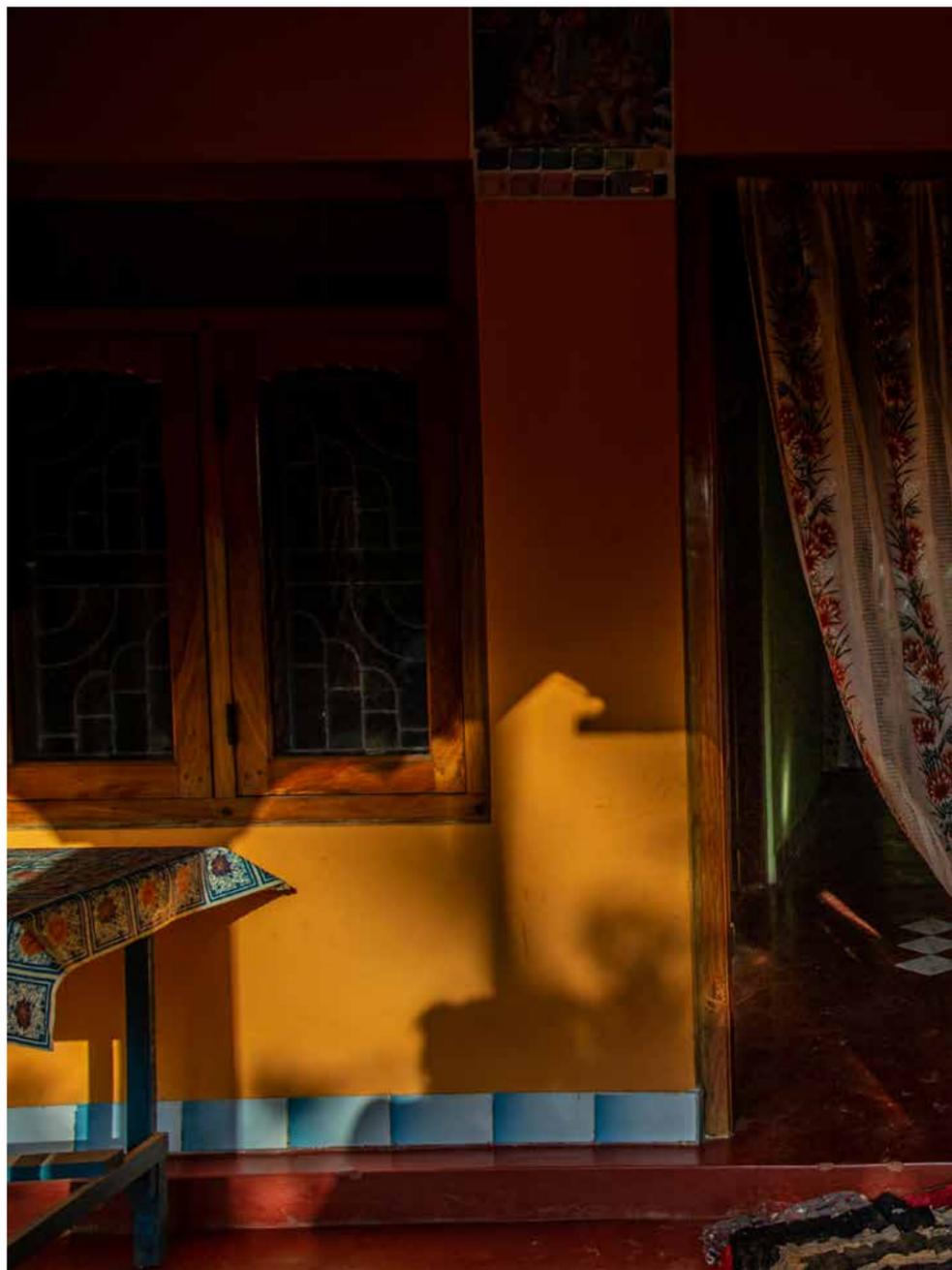
What good are documentary images, for an island like this?

If you wish to find something before it slips away, you must approach in low-light conditions. Whatever counts for truth may flit behind the shade of an interior, just as a doorway curtain shifts in the breeze. Something may come into focus, only to ghost itself out of the frame.

Looking for truth here will be an exercise in circumambulation that will yield no tidy closure.



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Someone tells you, on your first day on the island, that there “were so many bodies, so many.” He tells you that even though he tried to find spaces on the gravel road where he could navigate his bike, eventually getting off to try to walk with the bike on the path’s uneven borders—even then he could not find any open spaces. After that you notice all the island’s bicycles. Rusting, leaning against shacks, along small pathways, everywhere.



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Go to the seaside. Focus your camera and take a tourist picture to show your friends at home. Fishermen. Boats. Colourful ceremonies and temples. Shy women with braids thrown over shoulders, boys lithe like young coconut palms. Families that shield sons who have bludgeoned their neighbours.



What a beautiful island.

*

For his artist book *The Incomplete Thombu* (2011), the Sri Lankan Tamil artist Thamothearampillai Shanaathanan worked in collaboration with eighty Tamil-speaking civilians who had been forcibly removed from or had to abandon their homes in Jaffna and the surrounding areas between 1983 and 2009.⁵⁵ The word “thombu” arrived in Sri Lankan vocabulary in the sixteenth century, during the Portuguese colonial period, after the colonial

55. Thamothearampillai Shanaathanan, *The Incomplete Thombu* (Colombo: Raking Leaves, 2011).

government introduced the concept of individual ownership of property and boundaries. In common use, it means, simply, “land registry”—a record of who owns what. It may also signify a person who opens up to tell their whole story. Shanaathanan’s “incomplete” thombu consists of 180 pages collating three related elements. First, there are “ground plans of houses drawn from memory by displaced civilians (with interview notes on reverse)”; second, “renderings of collected ground plans” on translucent architectural drawing paper, created by a professional architect; and third, “dry pastel drawings made in response to all of the above,” expressionistic mixed-media works made in response to testimonies of traumatic encounters with armed forces at checkpoints, emotional responses to loss.

The drawings of homes, Shanaathanan notes, are “subjective images of properties and houses lost, abandoned, destroyed, or seized.”⁵⁶ Some of these drawings include everyday objects of private landscapes—parrots, a murunga tree, an upright piano with a conical shell piercing it, a pregnant Jersey cow that one family had to abandon in its shed. On the reverse of the pages with drawings of homes, Shanaathanan included small sections of narratives—memories associated with “home,” smells, objects, the stories of events—mundane and ceremonial. In some brief passages of *The Incomplete Thombu*, the narrator details something significant they left behind, and how they survived that leave-taking. One person says:

I have my ancestral house in Colombuthurai. My elder sister’s marriage took place in that house. I was in charge

56. T. Shanaathanan, “From ‘The Incomplete Thombu,’” *Brick* 89, June 26, 2012, <https://brickmag.com/from-the-incomplete-thombu/>.

of decorating it. Now it is a military training camp. Once, when my family visited, we received guest treatment. We sat in our own living room tasting cool drinks and biscuits. Later, when I attempted to see the house, my request was rejected on the grounds that I did not have the right. Now I watch my sister's wedding video to see my own house.⁵⁷

67

According to Nia Thandapani of Studio Carrom, who designed *The Incomplete Thombu* for the publisher Raking Leaves, the book is structured “to feel like a bureaucratic file, using multiple paper stocks and a deep exposed binding to give a sense of a stack of papers.”⁵⁸ Within the strata of papers, histories, narratives, and memories, perhaps the sense of ownership and belonging survives, in the way that stone is created in layered sheaves, with evidence of living creatures fossilised in between.

Shanaathanan's *Thombu* is “incomplete” since it records only a sliver of the properties and memories that were destroyed, looted, or confiscated by the military. This is the cartography of displacement, the emotional architecture of loss. The density and strata of *The Incomplete Thombu* gesture towards all that the state attempted to erase, and towards what remains, in spite of those efforts, layered over what was bombed, razed, expelled. Even if a home, a school, or a temple was shelled to oblivion—and is now the site of “development” owned by the military or a crony of the ruling elite—the former lives of that landscape continue to be present.

57. For details of the narratives, see S. Senthair, “Meet the Tamil artist who is preserving memories of ‘surviving the war’ in Sri Lanka,” *Scroll In*, December 15, 2018, <https://scroll.in/magazine/902229/meet-the-tamil-artist-who-is-preserving-memories-of-surviving-the-war-in-sri-lanka>.

58. *The Incomplete Thombu* can be seen on the Studio Carrom website at <https://www.studiocarrom.com/the-incomplete-thombu-1>.

68 A delayed flight takes me from New York City's JFK Airport to Dubai International, with a connection to Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in Mumbai. I fly out of Mumbai and make my descent into Colombo well past midnight, just two nights shy of Christmas.

I am now a veteran of returns.

Some tinsel and Santa Claus decorations lightly adorn the Bandaranaike International Airport, which includes a duty-free mall, at the centre of which sits a massive statue of a Buddha. The weak Christmas decorations are supposed to celebrate Nath'thala—a word derived from the Portuguese *natal*, for Christmas, which comes from the Latin word *natus*, for birth. The Portuguese were the first European colonisers who thought this island an idyll that would be easy to control.

My cousin picks me up from the airport and drives me to my mother's house in Kelaniya. But first he takes me past the new Colombo waterfront, talking excitedly as he points out all the changes. Enormous cranes are busy constructing high-rise hotels, luxury condominiums, office spaces, and American-style shopping areas on the land facing the lazy green, protected from the sea by a stone wall. Once, there was nothing there but a row of Dutch and British breech-loading cannons that were meant to stave off attacks by the Portuguese or Japanese. There is no longer a curfew and the roadblocks have all been removed. My cousin is excited about the potential for advancement, for catching up with other countries: "Finally, akka, raṭa diyuṇu vēyi."



The building projects, the gleaming new bridge across the Kalani River, and the Chinese-funded tarmac roads all seem to say, this is a new era, with Mahinda Rajapaksa, the leader who claims to have defeated terrorism, at the helm.

*

My mother's ancestral home is located in earshot of Kelaniya Raja Maha Vihare's temple bell. My father's home is about three kilometres away, on Wewelduwa Road. According to Lankan Buddhist lore, Kelaniya was sanctified by the Buddha during his third and final visitation to the island, eight years after attaining enlightenment. Though Kelaniya is only about ten kilometres from the heart of the port city of Colombo, it still maintains its rural nature. People recognise you, or they ask whose family you

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come from. They know your familial network, identifying you by the clan name that precedes your first and middle name. They tell you about how, even after the unexpected death of her husband left her with ten children's mouths to feed, your grandmother saved one fistful of her family's daily ration of red samba rice for those "who had even less."

At my mother's house, every morning, a line-up of birdlife comes and goes as the sun moves above the horizon and up, past the coconut palm fronds. In the early morning, arboreal hanging parrots and Layard's parakeets rabble and squeal raucous communiqués from the highest echelons of the treetops. Then come the cooing doves. Two scuffle over a favourite spot on a coconut tree, till one chases the other off. Later, clever mynahs arrive, and a solitary crested drongo, who stands sentinel on clotheslines and electrical wires, calling out in its harsh voice as if issuing a warning. A coucal's large and cumbersome body crashes into the foliage of a mango tree, where it hides from the sun, singing, *Coha! Coha! Coha!* On the ground, orange-billed babblers and brown-capped babblers scamper in pairs, looking for crumbs of yesterday's rice. Sinhala still refer to these birds as demalitch'cho—a word that is not often used by my family—denoting their supposedly cacophonous chatter. Sinhala people use the pejorative word "Demala" to denote the ethnic Tamils on the island. Sometimes I hear Sinhala people say that, to their ear, Tamil bhasawa—the spoken language—is displeasing. To linguistic historians, however, Sinhala and Tamil are undeniably interrelated. Either language may sound cacophonous, as if the speaker is irritable, unless it is being used to wheedle something out of someone.

Even though I no longer have a Sri Lankan passport, I am still easily identified—or, to be clear, categorised—as Sinhala. I will remain Sinhala, and Buddhist, identifiable the moment

anyone in Sri Lanka or in the diaspora sees or hears my surname or my clan names. I will be claimed by those with privileged citizenship on the island and in its diaspora, and reminded to “not forget where [I] came from.” This seemingly warm embrace, often given without my acquiescence, can be withdrawn as fast as it is offered. When I address the broken contract between the nation and the people the state has violently un-citizenized, I am told that I do not have the right to speak of these things. Talk like this puts into relief the fact that I reside outside the borders of this nation-state, delegitimising any contribution I might make.

71

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One night, I take an Uber from Nawala, where one of my aunts lives, back to Kelaniya. My driver, Thilanka, arrives in a Suzuki Wagon, and as we make our way past police officers directing traffic around a new flyway construction, he shares local drivers’ lore and cracks jokes about how they deal with corrupt cops. I sense that, from my hesitant conjugations, he knows I’m either the rare foreigner who speaks Sinhala relatively well, as others have mistaken me to be, or a second-generation diasporic returnee, one of many who have been arriving in Sri Lanka since 2010. In the dark car, it is difficult to tell from my appearance where I might fit in. Perhaps the outlandish and clichéd stories he regales me with are part of the repertoire he reserves for outsiders.

It is a long way to Kelaniya. So I play along.

“The police,” he says, “are as corrupt as any mafia. They can go into any of the small restaurants and food stalls dotting the roadways, and demand to be fed.” He points at shuttered restaurants as he drives through the night.

“Restaurant owners keep a special tea they call ‘police-tea.’

And a special koth`thu they call police-koth`thu, and police-thé. Does madam know what this is?”

72 My cousins have regaled me with the same stories when we’ve stood in queues for koth`thu, a late-night specialty—flash-sautéed vegetables, egg, and godamba roti julienned into paper-thin strips, slapped searing-hot into Styrofoam disposable containers dripping chilli oil. I humour Thilanka and say that I do not.

“Why, it’s all the tea that people leave in the bottom of their cups, and all the stir-fried koth`thu customers leave on their plates, gathered together and warmed up, served up fresh to these criminals,” he tells me, referring to the cops.

Encouraged by my laughter, he goes on. “Miss, these police are the worst. They don’t understand how to treat our own people.”

Before I’d arrived, Sinhala mobs had carried out planned attacks of small businesses owned by the island’s Muslims, burning down stores, defacing mosques, harassing, and, in some instances, severely beating people they identified as Muslim. I ask Thilanka what he has noticed.

“No, that isn’t the case,” he quickly corrects. “Let’s not forget, madam”—amathaka karannya epa—“this is the land of the Sinhala. But most of us don’t realise that. Even our own people do not know the correct ithihasaya.”

I don’t know the word ithihasaya, so I ask him for a translation. “Madam,” Thilanka offers, beginning a string of narratives that will take us to the gates of the historic temple that borders my mother’s ancestral home, “it means *history*. We Sinhala are unaware of our own history; all the history we are taught about Sri Lanka, about our origins, is completely wrong”—sampur-nayenma waradi—“That is not the correct history. The *real* history”—*ath`tha* ithihasaya—“is that there were four groups of people on this island, who lived in four different areas: Deva

helaya, rulers of the land; Kumba handa, those who aided the rulers in governing the island; Naga helaya, those who worked with ocean-going vessels; and Yaksha helaya, those who worked with iron and fire. The steps that lead up to the ancient rock fortress at Sigiriya, for instance, with its many reservoirs for collecting rain water—you know the Sigiriya fort on the rock, madam? That was built by the Yaksha. Those are the groups we are made of and together they make, what? *Siyu helaya*.” He emphasises this word. Without waiting for a response, he adds, “*Siyu* means *all* the groups together, from which came the word Sinhala.”

He carries on, happy to play the role of history teacher. His narratives and theories, which have stretched from the absurd to subtle apologies for genocidal nationalism, now leap into speculative fiction. “Did you know, madam, King Ravana’s flying vehicle, the dandu-monara”—the wooden peacock—“traversed above land and sea, propelled by a rasadiya yāntraṇaya?” For him, all fantastical elements in island folklore, including the alchemical wonder that was an engine powered by mercury, could be explained as scientific fact, evidence of the glory of the Sinhala nation.

When I finally interject to ask him where he learned what he calls his correct version of history, he tells me that all one needs to do is search for it, that there are people who have always known this history and have protected it.

“But when people from Engalanthaya conquered us,” he explains, “when the whites came and suppressed us”—suddo apiwa yatath karapu kale—“they spread this incorrect history, it is only part of what they did to us. They destroyed our true history and taught us an incorrect version of it. They told us the Buddha was born in India, but of course this is not true!” he exclaims. “But let

me tell you, Budhu Hamuduruwo's birth, enlightenment, death, and ascent into Nirvana *all* took place in Lanka"—Habai budhu hamuduruwo ipadune Lankawe, budhuwune Lankawe, parinirvana wune Lankawe. "And I," he adds, sounding quite pleased, "I, too, have gone to these locations, madam."

I cut him off only to direct his gaze back to the road. He's become so distracted by his own monologue that he's missed our turn. "Miss, I am not surprised if you don't believe me. But I was taught by Pathira Arat'chige. I was about five years old when I met him at a temple in Padukke. He was not a monk, but a teacher, a nice man who liked to talk to us kids and he was the adult who would tell us any of these details and stories, madam. If you saw him, you wouldn't pay him any attention"—ganang ganne-na—"He is just an old village man in a sarong, spending his days chewing on betel leaves. But he knew all the correct history."

I direct him onto a small road, just past Kelaniya Temple. As he navigates the narrow road, he coalesces his stories, emphasising the right of the Sinhala to this island, our shared glorious history, inventions, might. He returns to my original inquiry regarding recent attacks on Sri Lanka's Muslim community, but not before taking me across a series of unexpected narrative gullies.

"Madam, you travel everywhere, so you have to be careful. Many foreign men want to talk to you. Same in the old days. When Muslim kat'tiya came from Arabia, it was only men that came"—velandam karan'ne—"to trade. Only then were Lankan women tricked into starting a life with these men. Why? How? Because of money . . . and bangles, necklaces. Those men had many jewels and gold, and our women were easily tricked"—lankawe ganu ewatta ravatuna. "So you have to be careful, madam."

He drives along at a slug's pace on the narrow road bordered by property walls, speaking a mile a minute.

“Oh yes, you might doubt me. But this is how Muslim people got into our country. Tamil people, on the other hand, were only brought by the whites”—suddo—“from England, to work on their plantations.”

I can see the light on my mother’s veranda. I pose a question as I look for my keys. “So, what you are saying is, there were no Tamils in Sri Lanka before the British?”

75

“Wait, madam, wait. I know we have reached the destination. But *this* is how it is. Tamils came during King Dutugamunu’s rule to beat us. But we, Siyuhelaya—Sinhala—we chased them away or else we or killed them”—apita gahanna awata egollo hitiye na. “Otherwise, before the whites came, there was no one from India. No Tamils. This is *Sinhela*-diva, our *heladiva*,” my driver concludes. “This is Sinhala-country.”

*

If you Google “Black July,” you’ll notice that nearly every blog post, news article, and website dedicated to the anti-Tamil pogrom in Sri Lanka in July 1983 uses the same image to accompany reports of violence that took place over a week’s time. It is a photograph of a slim, young man (a boy, really) sitting naked on a raised concrete step, crouched with his head cradled in his hands, as though he has just received terrible news and is taking a seat to absorb the shock. Something has provided a light source—possibly the headlights of a passing car—enabling the photographer to document this murder.

Only part of the boy’s face can be seen, not enough to identify him. His fingers are sunk into his rich mop of hair, in disarray. The boy’s legs are thin, and very long, out of proportion with the rest of his body, maybe because he’s just had a growth spurt. His

skin stretches over the bones of his hips; there is little flesh where his buttocks should be. It must have been painful to have been pushed onto that concrete, hitting bone, scraping flesh.

A small gathering of fully clothed men stand facing him (one is cut almost entirely out of frame). They wear trousers and short-sleeve shirts. Away from the foreground, a man in a checked shirt has his eyes locked on the naked boy in front of him, his expression appearing eager. Another slim youth, with a pubescent moustache and spectacles, steps towards the boy, his left hand curling into a soft fist. His upper teeth are showing, so that—strangely—he appears to be smiling in the direction of the camera. But maybe that is not a smile on his face after all; maybe he has taken his lower lip in his teeth, as if preparing to kick. A third man, about to step off the raised concrete, looks forward—that is, in a direction away from the men surrounding the naked boy. He appears disinterested, oblivious to what is happening right next to him.

The men in the photograph, the killers, are identifiable, but no one has yet definitively named them. The young man who is about to be beaten to death may also be identifiable, by a loved one, who can see him—through his terror, blood, and tears—moments before his death. No one has named him. It is reported, however, that his body was found by Borella Bus Station, where some of the worst violence took place.

Many of the Tamil people that gangs of Sinhala men beat to death that night were stripped of all their clothes, even their underwear. It takes time to do that—to strip a struggling boy of each item of clothing; to beat him up; to insult and intimidate him; and finally, to shove him, onto the bare concrete. What does it take, to live with the intimacy of such a murder—where death by fists and feet is prolonged, and purposeful.

In a commemorative article published in a 2006 article run by the *Tamil Guardian*, the writers state that this “single image, above all others, has come to represent the traumatic events of ‘Black July’ 1983 for Sri Lanka’s Tamils.”⁵⁹

Despite how often this photograph is used, there is typically no attribution naming the photographer. A deeper dig leads me to a blog post on a website titled *Iconic Photos*, where he is identified as Chandragupta Amarasinghe.⁶⁰ Afraid for his life, Amarasinghe kept quiet about the nine photographs he took that night; he waited fourteen years to publish them in the radical Sinhala newspaper *Ravaya* in July 1997. After that, they became public property, free to circulate via blogs and on Wikipedia without attribution.

Five years later, in 2012, Amarasinghe sued the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon, which published his nine photographs in the *Daily News* and *Dinamina* newspapers without attribution or compensation. It became a landmark case, going all the way to the High Court of Sri Lanka. In a groundbreaking judgement, “the first of its kind in Sri Lanka . . . a three-judge bench of our Supreme Court recognised the ‘Economic Rights’ of a newspaper journalist to nine exclusive photographs taken by him.” On October 5, 2012, Supreme Court Justice Shiranee Tilakawardane awarded Amarasinghe damages of one million Sri Lankan rupees—what in US dollars, at the time, amounted to just over \$7,000.⁶¹

59. “Icon of 1983,” *Tamil Guardian*, July 29, 2006,

<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/icon-1983>.

60. “Black July | Sri Lanka,” *Iconic Photos* (blog), August 29, 2017,

<https://iconicphotos.wordpress.com/tag/chandragupta-amarasinghe/>.

61. Wickrema Weerasooria, “Sri Lanka: Landmark Supreme Court Judgment Upholds Journalist’s Ownership of his Photographs,” *South Asia Citizens Wire*, October 22, 2012, <http://www.sacw.net/article3202.html>. Originally published in *The Island*, October 20, 2012.

I learn that in July 1983, Amarasinghe was working for the Communist Party newspaper *Āiththa* (meaning “truth”). The paper’s offices were a stone’s throw from Borella Junction, where several bus routes converge for people to transfer or to shop nearby.

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I learn that Amarasinghe had left his office that afternoon with a colleague. They moved slowly through the conflagrations and murders as they were happening.

I learn that he took one photograph per roll of film before unloading the film and putting the roll into his colleague’s bag, in case his camera was spotted.

Ruling in Amarasinghe’s favour, the court recognised that these were “exclusive photographs,” not “merely photographs of the aftermath of the riots [as with other photographers’ images], but of actual live incidents that took place in the Borella area in real time”; the judgement also noted that though Amarasinghe was “subjected to assault, intimidation and threats, and in fact his camera was destroyed during the course of taking the photographs,” it was clear that he was there out of a sense of duty.⁶²

62. Ministry of Justice, “Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. vs. Chandragupta Amerasinghe,” *The Sri Lanka Law Reports* (2013), 302, <https://www.lawnet.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Law-Report-part-11-2013.pdf>.

I arrive back the US from Sri Lanka, but cannot focus on preparations for the semester of teaching ahead. Instead, I make cakes as a meditative practice. The precision it takes to measure ingredients in grams—to whip one item before folding in another—takes a form of concentration I find to be one of the few antidotes to anxiety.

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But the image of the boy returns. There is so much I cannot prove but remain sure of. I know the men surrounding him are most likely his murderers. I force myself to remember the faces of the men in the frame of the photograph, and the presence of the men immediately outside the frame. Then there are the men far beyond the frame: the men in police stations or government offices, wearing khaki uniforms or the gentlemen's pure-white national dress; the men who tallied the names and addresses of Tamil people and directed goons with petrol cans, batons, and matches.

There's an incoming blizzard. I put on long underwear, thermal running gear, woollen hat, and a long, hooded coat, and I leave my house. I go out as far as I can into the dark night, my shoes slipping on the road where snow has accumulated to form icy patches. I do not want to go back to the warmth and security of my home with the knowledge of those fragile arms holding up a tousled head, as if to express horror and disbelief.

For weeks I cannot eat or sleep. At other times, I feel hollow, a void. I overeat, stuffing myself with food I cannot even taste, till

I'm nauseous. Whatever critical acumen or carefully constructed "civil contract" with which one might come to the boy's image, it is obviated by the terror in his person.⁶³ Nothing provides escape or absolution, especially not the unflinching, obsessive behaviour we call "remembering." This heavy, shrieking something always returns. It is there when I stand in my kitchen, measuring out ingredients to make soft genoises with brown butter and ground cardamom. It is threaded through the hunger I feel when I cannot face food, and the nausea I feel when I eat till my craw brims. When it becomes unbearable, I suit up again in my thermal running gear to perform some sort of self-flagellating exercise. Out there, it competes with the roar of the wind. When I return to the safety of a fire, it shears through the house.

*

63. I borrow the concept of the "civil contract" from Ariella Azoulay, who emphasises that as "citizens of photography" we hold civic duties and obligations towards photographed persons. Even—or especially—under fraught conditions, the civil contract between the spectator and those who are photographed—relational and horizontal—remains. When the state partitions those it deems noncitizens from citizens of the state by using incendiary nationalistic rhetoric and incitements to violent action in order to mobilise one group of people against another, our civic duties and obligations towards photographed persons becomes especially important. Crucially, Azoulay maintains that the "point of departure for . . . mutual relations cannot be empathy or mercy"; she employs the term "contract" (shedding terms such as "shame," "pity," or "compassion") to create the foundation of such uneven relationalities. Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone Books, 2012. See pp. 12, 14, 16, 17.

The first week of July 2021, a friend who maintains a private Twitter account tweets a two-part thread:

Fine. It's fine if you want to share what you experienced as a Sinhala person during #BlackJuly. But if you weren't the targets of state violence, please stop centring the narrative about you. If your aunty sheltered Tamils, good on her

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We're still being monitored, discriminated against, and violated. Our land is being confiscated by the armed forces. There's no "both sides" to this one.⁶⁴

64. So that they cannot be tracked, both tweets have been reworded (though the meaning of the original tweets remains).

Incantation

82 When I return to Sri Lanka, I stay in the house in which my mother grew up. I wake up to Kelaniya Temple monks chanting Pirith: the recitation of the words of the Buddha forms a pearl necklace of protection around the sangha, and the island. It is a beautiful and meditative act, to sit with one's legs folded beneath one's body, to close one's eyes and be transported by the blessings invoked by the sutra. Waking up to the monks' rhythmic voices through the chants of tree frogs, night birds, and the sweep of fruit bats, I find it is difficult to dismiss the mythical ability of poetic language to alert, direct, and, yes, transform the supplicants who prostrate themselves before the dharma.

What to do with all this detritus, the terror and the beauty?

Every day at dawn, I meditate on what it means to be part of a tradition-bound, privileged community who reinforces their power over a small island, imparting violence on those who, they believe, a good reminder. I think about how easy it is to trace the threads of militaristic rhetoric in Sri Lanka to ancient religious texts, written by monks who lived in safeguarded, elite temples, and about the tangled version of history that those texts impart. I think about the monks who represent the religious practice of renunciation. Their incendiary political rhetoric, beatific faces, and poetic words expounding on the right of Sinhala Buddhists to this paradise have laid waste to the lives of the island's others.

Exhausted by "Sri Lankan middlebrow" equivocations and

attempts to “rescue Buddhism” from all its “objectionable” and “tacky or ugly parts,” which, “depending on the objectors, might be the old-fashioned ritual trappings, the pogroms, the philosophical or salvific failures, or the politicized establishment,” Colombo-based writer Vajra Chandrasekera writes that he now chooses the word අබෞද්ධකම (*unbuddhist*), rather than the mild නිරාගමික (*nonreligious*) to describe his practice.⁶⁵ How does one call oneself a Buddhist, Chandrasekera asks, knowing that Buddhism in Sri Lanka is attached to one’s ethnic identification and to one’s language? He recalls one short prayer of praise for the Buddha which was routinely “used as a shibboleth to distinguish Tamil speakers from Sinhala speakers during the 1983 pogrom.” Born in the late 1970s, just as the Prevention of Terrorism Act was being passed, Chandrasekera has “never known a Sinhala Buddhism that was free of this violence”; one may even venture to say that no living person in the country has ever known any differently. Terror has been chained to Buddhism, with a “pedigree [that] goes back decades, arguably centuries,” he writes. Despite this, “people constantly appeal to the spectre of [a ‘pure’ Buddhism], something clean and untainted whose abstract purity in a higher realm justifies the violence in its defense in this one.”

*

This island is a graveyard. Secrets lie uneasy in its forests, in its paddy fields, in the waters of the Kalani and Mahaweli rivers.

65. Vajra Chandrasekera, “අබෞද්ධකම/unbuddhism,” author’s blog, October 27, 2021, <https://vajra.me/2021/10/27/%E0%B6%85%E0%B6%B6%E0%B7%9E%E0%B6%AF%E0%B7%8A%E0%B6%B0%E0%B6%9A%E0%B6%B8-unbuddhism/>.

I know it's getting late when I hear the yellow bulbul. It sings somewhere in the trees' midlevel foliage. When I finally catch a glimpse of two of them dancing between dappled leaves (they love to sing together), I notice that they are bright little yellow delights, monks in saffron robes intertwining their songs into a harmony.

The other birds seemed to have hushed. Together, the trill of the bulbuls' harmonised notes carries far beyond the trees in front of me, as if through a loudspeaker, beyond the perimeter of my mother's land and into the homes of others.

Here, in this place of my ancestors, I learn that it is not enough to focus on the sharpest or sweetest of trills, the loud voices that insist on one's attention. The quiet frequencies—the ones that only ever make their existence felt beyond the known senses—still make their presence known, though they are almost impossible hear. They speak to me about duty, about what needs to be done in this life.

After more than a decade under the Rajapakse family's crony capitalism, endemic corruption, and catastrophic economic policies, the island arrived at a breaking point. The coffers ran out of Forex and the value of the Sri Lankan rupee crashed. The price of petrol, cooking gas, and food soared. Some, waiting more than twelve hours in queues, died of heatstroke. As I write, hospitals and pharmacies have run out of medicine. Too many are living on one meagre meal a day.

In March of this year, desperate people gathered to protest in front of the official residences of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse. The protesters set up an encampment on the iconic Galle Face Beach, in front of the Parliament and Secretariat buildings, and it came to be called GotaGoGama. The protestors have withstood monsoon rains, water cannons, tear gas, and government-sponsored thugs bussed in to destroy the encampment and beat the crowd into submission. Sri Lankans are all too aware of how regime after regime—each ostensibly democratically elected—has used un-ruliness as a reason to unleash armed forces, and with them, violence and death.

I began writing this essay in January of 2021, unsure where Sri Lanka was headed. Now, the country's trajectory is even less clear. A million individuals are already malnourished and near destitution. Thousands more will likely die without access to vital medications. From the first days of the protests, myriad photographers have been documenting what they witness. I don't know how this tragedy will show itself when we look back at the records.

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To the photographers—South African, Sri Lankan—and the one I cannot name in this narrative: It was your work that gave me words.

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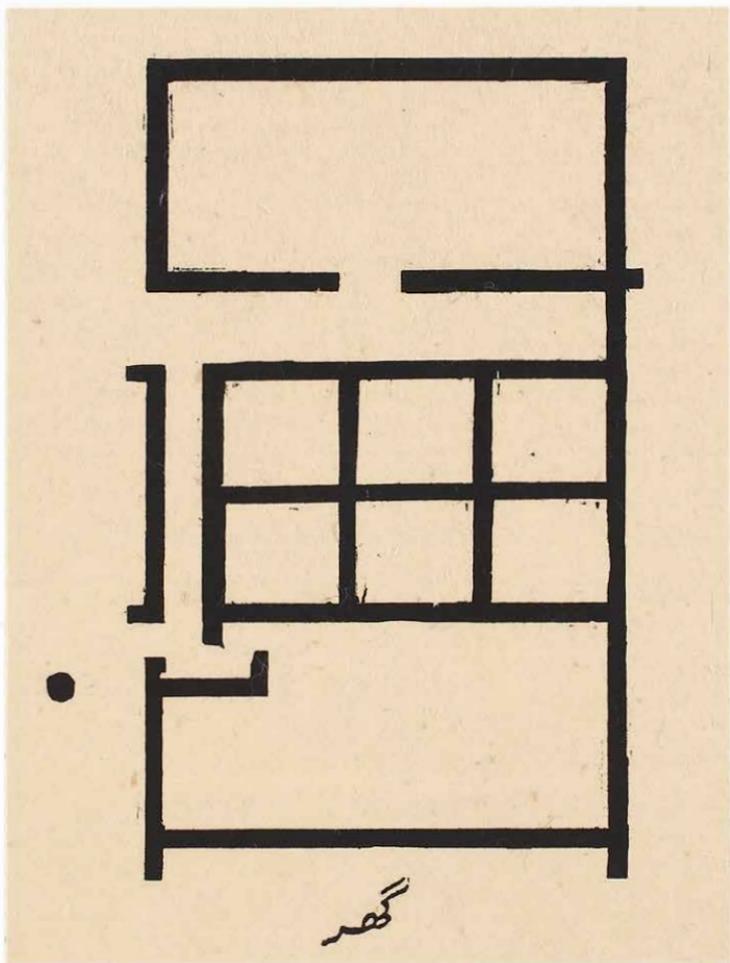
The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant

15 Maiden Lane, 18th Floor

New York, NY 10038

cookiejar.artswriters.org

M. Neelika Jayawardane is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York-Oswego and a Research Associate at the Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD), University of Johannesburg. Her writing and research is centered on South Africa and her scholarly publications focus on the nexus between written texts, visual art, photography, and the transnational/transhistorical implications of colonialism, ongoing forms of discrimination, displacement, and migration on individuals and communities. She is a recipient of a 2018 Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for a book project on Afrapix, a South African photographers' agency that operated during the last decade of apartheid. Jayawardane was born in Sri Lanka, raised in Zambia, and completed her university education in the United States.



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Home

Zarina 99

Front cover: Zarina, *Home*

from the portfolio *Home is a Foreign Place*, 1999

Portfolio of 36 woodcuts with Urdu text printed in black on

Kozo paper and mounted on Somerset paper

Edition of 25 and 5 Roman Numeral sets

Image size: 8 x 6 inches (20.32 x 15.24 cm)

Sheet size: 16 x 13 inches (40.46 x 33.02 cm)

© Zarina; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Photo: Farzad Owrang

Cookie Jar, a pamphlet series of the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, gathers five new pieces of writing by grantees that take on home as the unruly site of inheritance, memory, and imagination. In “Ejecta,” Ari Larissa Heinrich reflects on artist Jes Fan’s melanin sculptures and the geology of metaphoric language. Tan Lin’s “The Fern Rose Bibliography” is a meditation on the loss of his parents through an olfactory exploration of his family’s books. M. Neelika Jayawardane’s “This is not the correct history” questions the evidentiary nature of documentary photography foregrounding the slippery ethics of reading images of the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka. In “He Brought a Swastika to the Summer of Love,” William E. Jones closely reads the fascist iconography in the films of Kenneth Anger for their prescient, unnerving connections to our contemporary political moment. In “Racial Chain of Being,” Shaka McGlotten updates the chart of representations that was Donna Haraway’s provocation in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in the process forging connections between familial legacy, Black radicalism, and the classroom.

In her masterwork *Home is a Foreign Place* (1999)—from which we borrow the title for this volume and cover image for this volume—artist Zarina wrote, “The titles of my work always come to me before the image. Language ties my work together. Urdu is home.” Titled *Home*, this is the first of thirty-six woodblock prints that recall the artist’s childhood residence in Aligarh, India. Even a partial list of Zarina’s titles—*Threshold*, *Courtyard*, *Shadows*, *Fragrance*, *Despair*—reveal how the viewer is invited into the sensorium of Zarina’s elusive idea of home. The essays in this first volume of *Cookie Jar*, varied in scope and approach, illuminate the interior landscapes associated with home. Collectively, they demonstrate the fearlessness—and the tenderness—with which writing may yet encounter art.

—Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha



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Andy Warhol spent his weekends scouring flea markets, thrift stores, and estate sales for specific items like Navajo blankets, watches, and cookie jars. He collected 175 unique cookie jars in his lifetime, which depicted homes and animals, bodies and faces. When Claude Picasso asked Warhol in 1972 about his fascination with cookie jars, Warhol responded, “They’re time pieces.”

cookiejar.artswriters.org

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