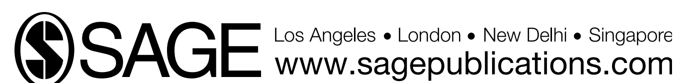
Spatialising Politics

Culture and Geography in Post-colonial Sri Lanka

Cathrine Brun and
Tariq Jazeel



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4
The Distance of a Shout

Sharon Bell

We lived on the medieval coast
south of warrior kingdoms
during the ancient age of the winds
as they drove all things before them.

Monks from the north came
down our streams floating—that was
the year no one ate river fish.

There was no book of the forest,
no book of the sea, but these
are the places people died.

Handwriting occurred on waves,
on leaves, the scripts of smoke,
a sign on a bridge along the Mahaweli River.
A gradual acceptance of this new language.

(Michael Ondaatje, 'The Distance of a Shout',
in Ondaatje 1998: 6)

Perhaps it is the demands, the anxiety, and the uncertainty that leave indelible yet hidden markings on the ethnographer who undertakes field-work in a foreign society. These markings are rendered more complex over time as lives unfold unpredictably in two separate but inextricably intertwined places. This paper explores these complexities and the play of distance and time with geopolitical reality. The context is my 30-year relationship with Sri Lanka, which began in 1976 with myfirst 'fieldwork' sojourn in a rural village south-west of Colombo. The relationship has

been maintained through the close friendships formed at that time with 'significant others'—the individuals who have enabled continuing intellectual and scholarly engagement with Sri Lanka,[1] the playing out of continuing obligations to my rural hosts, and through the renewed connections and engagement generated by sporadic, and often insultingly short, return visits. But over the three decades of engagement with Sri Lanka, the 'foreign researcher's' interest and involvement, framed by spatial and cultural distance, has also been regularly tested.

The period since the mid-1970s have been turbulent years for Sri Lanka. Ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil populations experienced as 'flashpoints' since independence grew into a civil war that continued through the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. An insurgency movement generated what has become known as a 'time of terror' in the late 1980s.[2] And, shortly after the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002, which is widely believed to have brought about a 'state of no war' rather than a state of genuine peace, a devastating tsunami hit the south and east coasts of Sri Lanka, killing thousands, leaving many more displaced, and destroying infrastructure. Over the past two decades, as Sri Lanka oscillated in and out of civil war, and more recently following the carnage and social upheaval of the 2004 tsunami, the import of this distance has also had another dimension. As the 'outsider', the 'other', the researcher's experience has been tempered by the knowledge that her homeground is territory that is safe—the 'immersion', even the heightened concern, is temporary and superficial.

In this chapter the evolving nature of my lived experience with Sri Lanka is explored through auto-ethnography—a reflection on the processes of a foreign researcher negotiating relationships and struggling to find a legitimate voice. The chapter also explores the changing defence of that voice: defences that have had to be moulded to the changing socio-political environment, and defences that have matured with time. The structure of the chapter is built around the most critical 'signposts' of my Sri Lankan journey: incorporation into 'the field' and exposure to ethnic conflict in the 1970s; the emotional and intellectual distance experienced through the decades of the civil war and 'time of terror' that enveloped Sri Lanka in the 1980s and 1990s; and the equally devastating impact of the 2004 tsunami.

This reflection is provided by a conceptual framework proposed by Professor Ghassan Hage (2002). He has developed this framework in the context of his study of migration, in particular of globally dispersed Lebanese families. This framework provides a tool for exploring the

notion of shifting geopolitical *affective and symbolic distance*. In so doing it moves beyond the current important interest in migration, movement, and transience[3] to acknowledge that relations are not simply dictated by space, nor borders, nor by the conventions of 'belonging' to a given society or group within society. This chapter explores my earliest fieldwork experience as a time of *incorporation* into a rural community. In tandem with incorporation, the experience of being an 'insider' is also seen as generating *communal indebtedness* to members of a materially disadvantaged community. The development of *intense relations* both in the village, but also with critical friends, colleagues, academics, and political activists during this time is contrasted with later experience of *intense exclusion*, both during the 'time of terror' and more recently after the tsunami. It is hoped that this discussion will generate further understanding of the complex question of the place and potential role of the oft-maligned foreign researcher in the post-colonial environment:

> To go beyond a solipsistic dwelling on one's own experience in the field which is hardly sufficient. The point is not, simply, to position oneself within the text… but to engage in a critical reflection on one's relationships with others, as circumscribed by institutional practices and by history, both within and outside the academy. (Young and Meneley 2005: 7)

That said, auto-ethnography risks slipping into a confessional mode of discourse and narcissistic reconstitution. Exposure of the fieldwork markings presents a rather difficult task for a number of reasons. Ethnographers have never been entirely at ease with including the 'self' in frame. As Shaffir and Stebbins (1991: 1–2) note:

> The process of leading a way of life over an extended period that is often both novel and strange exposes the researcher to situations and experiences that usually are accompanied by an intense concern with whether the research is conducted and managed properly. Researcher fieldwork accounts typically deal with such matters as how the hurdles blocking entry were cultivated and maintained during the course of study; the emotional pains of this work are rarely mentioned.

The essential conundrum of the ethnographic experience, that it is intensely personal and individualistic, and yet designed (certainly in its modernist form) to produce at least generalisable, at best verifiable, data and analysis, is one that has generated heated debate over the past three decades[4]. Dumont (1978: 7) has noted the paradoxical consequences that the more 'empathetic involvement' and the more that 'involved sympathy'

emerge during the fieldwork experience, the more 'disciplined detachment' is found in the published reports 'under the pretext of objectivity'.

The ethnographic experience is also defined by what is expected/accepted within the academic discourse, creating a geopolitical fiction—the fieldwork site, in this case the village, as the source of knowledge and understanding. Even when we do include/explore 'empathetic involvement' in our scholarship, it is invariably restricted to relationships with the appropriate 'subjects' of our study (in this case rural women). Yet our knowledge of another place/society is gained through numerous experiences and a variety of sources. Undertaking research in a rural village provided me with information and data. Close relationships with a handful of village women generated a modicum of understanding. Critical friends, largely urban (extra-village) relationships with university colleagues and political activists provided me with a broader understanding of the socio-political map of my community of incorporation and constant dialogue regarding my modus operandi and my place as a foreign researcher. It is the latter relationships, those based on critical dialogue but grounded in common interests, values and intellectual traditions, that have been sustained over a lifetime. Those with my 'host village' are, in comparison, a polite form—in an essentially hierarchical relationship I offer patronage, as other wealthy/powerful members of Sri Lankan society do, to their supporters, clients and the needy. I may do so in the context of a moral rather than instrumentalist relationship, but this does not alter the fact that I do not share the same, or similar, life experiences, values or aspirations as my village friends.

Incorporation

When I left Australia and went 'to the field' in Sri Lanka for the first time for two years in 1976 my modus operandi was, I suspect, little different from my colleagues—I was learning, with minimal prior preparation or direction, to be an ethnographer. I spent several months learning the Sinhala language, I 'chose' a village in which to live and work in the (then understudied) south-west lowlands of Sri Lanka, I 'found' a family who was happy to accommodate me, and later I 'negotiated' a house where I could live relatively independently. As long as the local police and the *Grama Sevaka* (village headman in the bureaucratic rather than democratic sense) agreed, there was neither formal nor informal negotiation with the community I was to study. I was there to observe, to learn and to 'write a book about the women' and then to 'make some films'. I was entering/

being included in a society, which, although very different from my own, for the most part, followed the rules of 'civility' that I took for granted.

In fact, despite the political tightrope I trod amongst my Marxist colleagues in Colombo, the village I had chosen was delighted to have a foreign visitor in their midst. From the point of view of the 'significant others' within the village, the women I came to know as friends and 'relatives', I was there to amuse, as someone on whom to practise rudimentary English, to show a keen interest in the women and the everyday (not expected of foreigners who invariably sought out the exotic), as a potential source of then scarce foreign 'luxury' items (like blocks of Kraft cheddar cheese, batteries, matches and soap), to talk about the deserts of Australia, to explain why my country is not peopled by ghosts and demons as Sri Lanka is, and, of course, the photos (the copious images that I was to produce in a land, at that time, without disposable cameras).[5] I was also to find out, many years later, that the small number of 'significant others', those to whom I became close in the village, expected much more—my hosts' simple hospitality and countless small, kind deeds would result in lifelong social obligations.[6]

When I look back, and it is important to emphasise that I am playing with memories and the capricious processes of recollection,[7] I am taken by the fact that people bothered to devote time to my incessant questioning and welcomed me into every event, every celebration and every crisis. For, in the villagers' eyes, I was just a young female without status, except as the 'other':

> After it became apparent to people in the village that I was a semi-permanent guest it was easy for them to rationalise this by saying that I must have been Sinhalese in a previous life. Nonetheless I was not Sinhalese. In the village I was [and am] always known as *sudu nona* (the white lady). In many superficial ways I lived as the other women of the village did. I looked after my own house and did my own cooking. I ate rice and curry and bathed at a well. I was not conspicuously wealthy although I possessed the technical trappings of camera and tape recorder. Ultimately though I was very different—often a source of amusement, sometimes concern and sometimes pity.
>
> In the villagers' eyes I was young, female, and although married,[8] much of the time I was alone, and childless, which made me an anomaly. Personally I knew that in many crucial respects I was far removed from the life of the village. Although my research grant was not large, I never suffered the economic uncertainty that plagued most of those with whom I lived. Although I followed national politics at election time, I knew my future career was not dependent on the success of a particular party at the

> polls. Although I was told that my world was now populated by a variety of supernatural beings, many of them malign, I never experienced the real fear of possession nor the anxiety associated with displeasing the dead. (Bell 1986: 5–6)

Most people in the village did not, and do not, know my name; yet they were, and are, intensely interested in when and what I have eaten, my weight (then too thin, now sufficiently plump to be worthy of comment), my children (why did it take so long, and why were you so old when you had them?), my mother (is she still alive?), and my horoscope (you still do not know exactly what time you were born, it cannot be, contact your mother and find out immediately!). There remains little interest in what I do (I simply work at 'the university'), but a huge amount of interest in my comings and goings: then from the village to Colombo, more recently to and from Australia. My incessant mobility remains noteworthy for a woman.

Then, as now, beneath the ethnographic façade lay the impurities of the fieldwork experience: 'finding' a village was hellishly difficult (I had absolutely no idea as to how to go about this crucial task when I landed in Sri Lanka)[9]; gaining any sort of independence of movement was frowned upon (especially by middle-class villagers who were busily protecting the virginity of their daughters); any hint of privacy impossible (young women should never be alone); surviving without electricity or running water, not so much arduous as unbelievably time consuming; the 'wet' (south-west monsoon)— experienced only once as it was too wet, too thunder-storm dark, too hot to do anything productive. There were no telephones to alleviate intense loneliness and anxiety, except through a complex process at the local post office, requiring all the skills at one's disposal to negotiate a remarkable post-colonial bureaucratic legacy. No wonder there were constant bad moods (on my part), impatience when I should have been grateful for the watchful gaze of my neighbours, frustration at being fed yet again despite pleas that I had just eaten, lack of interest in sickly warm soft drink and stale packaged cake demanded by the rules of Sinhalese 'short visit' hospitality (the purchase of which was likely to have impacted severely on my hosts' finances), and, of course, despair that the 'real work', the ethnography, was not progressing at the pace I (or my academic supervisor) had imagined it should. Add to this an unavoidable entanglement with a post-colonial bureaucracy that had carefully honed the skill of putting foreigners in their rightful place: the endless delays in processing applications and approvals; the ability to render invisible the foreigner in the corner of a government office or

archive; the ubiquitous mites (one began to believe deliberately cultivated) in rattan office chairs that left the victim's thighs covered in itchy welts that took weeks to disappear. But the greatest challenge came from the broader context for which this foreign researcher was not at all prepared—a cosmopolitan urban intelligentsia who incessantly questioned the 'right' of the foreigner to be a researcher in their country, who questioned premises and assumptions, and exposed ignorance. The need for close relationships with academic/urban colleagues was as often a source of discomfort as reassurance.

None of these dimensions of the field experience appear in the written or visual documentation of that time. As with my colleagues, these 'impurities' were relegated to field diaries, to letters home, or simply mentally stored for later reference. The eruption of post-1977 election ethnic violence was intriguing, but pragmatically more significant for its disruptive impact on my fieldwork.[10] It is not surprising then that I was unable to see the decline of the people and society I liked to think I was a member of into a state of civil/ethnic war. Nor is it surprising that I was insensitive to the formative nature of the relationships with colleagues involved in the national socio-political struggle.

Yet these experiences and 'markings' from the field have shaped my life. From the first fieldwork experience, I was acutely aware that my Sri Lankan friends and neighbours were giving me the gift of their knowledge, and doing so generously, even though they had never read Mauss on reciprocity.[11] From the time of my first fieldwork I experienced what Ghassan Hage (2002: 204) identifies as *communal indebtedness*:

> Feelings of indebtedness are not restricted to one communal formation. One can belong with equal or varying intensity to several communities. Furthermore, the gift of social life is not offered to individuals only in the process of being born in a specific community. One can incur the debt of communality by voluntarily becoming part of a community that accepts one in its midst.

It might be assumed that incorporation into 'the field', another society and community, and the concomitant communal indebtedness is determined by spatial and temporal dimensions—where you are in relation to your community of incorporation, and how long you have been present or absent. More useful in deconstructing this relationship of geopolitical distance/closeness is Hage's articulation of *affective and symbolic distance*. As he elaborates:

> We all go through our daily lives knowing and/or feeling that some things leave in and on us a much deeper impression than others, that certain realities are experienced more intensely than others. Intensity as I will describe it here is not primarily physical, although it is also that. It is primarily affective. An intensely experienced reality is not the same as a 'hard hitting' reality. Intensity has more to do with the extent to which a reality is involving and affecting…. An intense reality is primarily an intense *relation* where the person's engagement in reality contribute [*sic*] to construct its intensity. (ibid.: 193–94, emphasis added)

Reflection on my sense of belonging to the distant (from Australia) community of Sri Lanka reveals the critical importance of this affective and symbolic distance. The defining moments of *intense exclusion*, later transformed by me into *intense relation*, driven by feelings of *communal indebtedness*, have been defined not by geographical distance conceived as Euclidean space, but by geopolitical distance in terms of relationality and connection—the first during the period of the ethnic conflict, and most particularly during what has become known as the 'time of terror'—the late 1980s, and then after the December 2004 tsunami.

Ethnic Conflict: Intense Relation

To contextualise the first period, the ethnic conflict and the resultant 'time of terror', it is salutary to note that my earliest impressions of Sri Lanka in the late 1970s were signposted (now unsurprisingly) with discussions about violence, murder, and torture in the context of everyday discourse. One of my earliest recorded experiences in Sri Lanka was to walk along the beach in a waterfront Colombo suburb with a young companion who recounted tales of babies being killed by their mothers, young girls committing suicide over young love, bodies being washed ashore during the (1971) insurrection, and people being drowned 'all described with gory detail'.[12] Later in the village south of Colombo in which I lived for two years I was told stories of a handful of violent, apparently unpremeditated, murders (invariably brutal, hacking to death of a neighbour). And one memorable evening, following a funeral, the three teenage girls in the family with whom I was staying provided a graphic account of the stages of the burning that the body would be progressing through, given the time elapsed since the lighting of the pyre…. As I choked on my rice and curry, I was coolly told that the skull would now be exploding.[13] At this time I also became familiar with the 'urban myths' (in some senses an inappropriate label in a predominantly rural country, but strangely applicable to the

manner in which verbal communication fuelled widespread ethnic hostility within the densely populated south-west) that related, enlarged and reinvented incidents (real or imagined) of Tamil perpetrated violence and torture (dismembered bodies packed and despatched on busy train services as fish to the market).

What was clear, even at the time of my first fieldwork in Sri Lanka, was that in the aftermath of the 1977 national election political violence had the potential to spiral out of control, and that a significant part of that violence was directly or indirectly state sponsored. During this period, when post-election violence broke out throughout many parts of Sri Lanka, primarily instigated by Sinhalese (and much of it aimed at Tamils), the then new (United National Party) government found it easier to give free reign to such 'bloodletting' than to face the real issues that may have fuelled the violence—the systemic economic and social problems the country was facing in its post-independence phase of nation building. Perera (1998: 20) asserts that:

> Immediately after its massive electoral victory in 1977, the newly installed UNP government decreed that police officers were entitled to leave. Usually, in the pre and post election contexts such leave is cancelled in order to maintain law and order given the known potential for violence. Taking complete advantage of the new government's apparent invitation to engage in violence UNP thugs [many of them] roamed electorates setting fire to and looting properties of supporters of the opposition. In a sense, this was the first step taken by the UNP to redirect political violence in a new and dangerous direction with state sponsorship.

In retrospect, it is difficult to know whether such aspects of my first fieldwork experience were significant or whether they have gained significance as political violence has become such a dominant feature of Sri Lankan society. For in the decade after these early days of *incorporation*, the first phase of my *intense relation* with Sri Lanka, a political environment perhaps characteristic of the local level of the rural community, became entrenched at the national level. This was an environment in which the violent settling of old scores was condoned, political jealousies and caste rivalries condemned individuals, and local level factional disputes were inflamed and reinvented as part of broader political movements.[14]

In the two decades following my fieldwork (1980s and 1990s) Sri Lanka transformed into a country where ethnic conflict dominated local and national politics, and political assassination became commonplace. Successive governments proved incapable of restoring peace, and the

norms of civil society were eroded.[15] The 'war' in the north and east that pitted the Sinhala majority[16] against Tamil nationalists was a shocking conflict that claimed over 65,000 lives over 20 years.[17] It was also a war that provided the justification for political repression, extraordinary police and defence force powers, media censorship, and during the late 1980s, generated the reign of terror and counter-terror by Sinhala extremists in the south of the island that left a further 40,000 dead and thousands of others disappeared (Perera 1998: 44). But for the rest of the world it was a conflict that was not strategically important enough to warrant too much attention—on the strategic scale, tea is less important than oil.

Over the past two decades numerous writers[18] have explored the conundrum of this underbelly of violence, and indeed the resonance of violence within, and often perpetrated by, a nominally predominantly Buddhist society. Fonseka (1990: 109) argues that:

> The rage for murder in the country has been generated and fuelled by several inter-related conflicts: between ethnic groups (primarily Sinhala and Tamil but also historically with Muslims and Malayalis); between India and Sri Lanka; between the haves and the have nots; and between political parties and alliances cutting across ethnic groups, religious affiliations and social classes.

Perera (1998: 1) observes that:

> Sri Lanka in recent times has become synonymous with political violence and terror.... In fact, Sri Lanka's claim to be a paradise in the Indian Ocean has been overtaken by the harsh reality of being a case study in conflict formation and mis-management, where the much talked about paradise is clearly lost.

Tambiah (1992: 181) contends that it is because the political parties have by and large 'failed to build reliable, systematic integrating structures between themselves and the local level' that the national political elections generate 'a cycle of soaring expectations and bitter disappointment' as ruling parties change position and fail to deliver on their promises. It is, therefore, no accident that Sri Lankan national elections have frequently served as occasions for manifesting as well as generating ethnic and insurrectionary violence.

Post-election violence has become the norm since independence, as have 'ethnic riots', the most destructive of which took place in 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983.[19] But it was the signing of the 'Peace Accord' between India and Sri Lanka in July 1987 that became a flashpoint for terror and

intimidation on a scale never before experienced in this one time island paradise.

This terror was primarily driven by the Deshapremi Janatha Viyaapaaraya (the Patriotic People's Movement, a front for the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna or the People's Liberation Front), with the state responding with equal terror and intimidation. This was a period during which state terrorism, state-sponsored gangs of killers operating with seeming impunity, and armed death squads of 'patriots' eliminated the possibility of any type of democratic activity. Indeed, in 1989, with an estimated murder rate of 100 per 100,000 of its population, Sri Lanka became 'the bloodiest place on earth' (Fonseka 1990: 109).

A Time of Terror: Intense Exclusion

From 1988 to 1990, the violence in Sri Lanka was so widespread that it became known as the *bhisana kalaya*—the time of terror. During this period I simply had the choice not to 'engage' physically and to distance myself intellectually and emotionally. I was, for some time, able to maintain the distance of safety, civility and humanity. I was aware that many of my friends were at risk, that many had fled the country, and that those who remained were hidden in a network of 'safe houses'. But in 1988, one of my 'Colombo friends', Vijaya Kumaratunga, screen idol and emerging political leader, was assassinated. The report of the Special Presidential Commission of Inquiry (1997: 9) concluded that:

> The assassination of Vijaya Kumaratunga was a cruel and shocking act of violence directed against a man, a family and the peace loving people of this country. He was ascending as a charismatic political leader at National level with a firm commitment to socialist ideals and National reconciliation... On the 16th February 1988, shortly after 12 noon he stepped outside his house at No. 22/4 Polhengoda Road, Narahenpita in the company of his small son and daughter. He was unarmed and had in his hand a drawing book of his child. An assassin who came on a motor cycle ridden by an accomplice shot him at close range. The assassin did not make any attempt to disguise himself.

Thus, the Commission found that readily identifiable hired killers in front of a number of witnesses had gunned down Kumaratunga.

Kumaratunga's death was the event that for me rendered the political personal and made me painfully aware of my intense exclusion. Having said that, there is no doubt that his life and death is a cultural window

that prompts reflection and warrants analysis. The irony, as someone who once repudiated the value of anthropologists focusing their gaze on myths, rituals and cultural symbolism, in favour of the everyday, the pragmatic, the material, is not lost on me. Vijaya Kumaratunga, it may be argued, was 'not a victim but a symbol'.[20] Each year on the occasion of the anniversary of his death there are numerous commemorative newspaper articles, and the government broadcaster *Rupavahini* compiles a documentary celebrating his life and times. I ask myself, have I been caught up in Sri Lanka's collective infatuation with this one time screen idol? Was I, as a strident young feminist, dismissive of a man I knew to be charming, but also an egotistical womaniser? Why, so many years since his assassination, does he remain so much a part of my Sri Lankan experience? Why do I/we continue to struggle to make meaning?

> The rich and purposeful life of this much loved actor, humanist and politician was snatched away by a band of bloodthirsty barbarians on February 16, 1988 putting millions of fans and the whole country in eternal grief…. A true humanist, Vijaya was a sensitive artiste and politician who loved peace and despised violence and killings. He realised that the have nots were being exploited by the rich and powerful due to some fault in the socio-economic and political structure…It is only a handful of people who become immortal after death. Veteran actor Vijaya Kumaratungsa was one among such prodigious people. (*Sunday Observer Magazine* 1999)

What is obvious is that Kumaratunga's life and death have assumed a symbolic significance that outstrips his mortal achievements.

Mindful that we were less easily seduced by 'fame' in the 1970s and 1980s than in the 21st century, I will set aside the notion of collective (and personal) infatuation. What then did/does Kumaratunga represent that has ensured the collective mourning of his death and his increasing symbolic significance? One might speculate that he represents a time of trust that, if it did not actually exist in Sri Lanka, certainly is believed to have existed—a state of relative civil peace. Kumaratunga was perhaps perceived to be capable of restoring (the concept of) a society based on trust; a society in which, just as in his films, essential good triumphs over evil. Perera (1998) contends that Sinhala rural society has been represented in most local discourses at the popular and scholarly level, as well as in numerous ethnographies as constituted by cohesive social units. Such descriptions 'disregard the serious cleavages and animosities that were well enmeshed in these communities':

> It is difficult to trust strangers when people had lived through a situation in which they could not even trust members of their own community. Security forces compelled people to supply lists of others who were deemed to be anti-government. On its own side the JVP also maintained death lists compiled with the help of local people. The collapse of trust may be graphically illustrated by evoking the *goni billo* during the period of terror. The *goni billo* were masked men who assisted the army to identify people who were arrested to be later interrogated, tortured and murdered. They became 'the disappeared'. For the local community, the identity of the*goni billo*—were they friends, relatives or neighbours—made everyday relations fraught with apprehension and distrust. (ibid.: 79)

Kumaratunga also presented as an inspired, and inspiring, young politician who was, and is, popularly believed to have had the capacity to radically reshape his country's destiny; he represented promise in a time of desperation. The fact that his political potency was never really put to the test in the formal role of government, or even opposition, means that his reputation remains untainted. He was never forced to make the pragmatic—or worse still—politically expedient, decisions that all those (including his widow) in political leadership positions in parliamentary democracies face. Indeed, political leaders over the past two decades have proven themselves impotent to address the long-running ethnic conflict, as well as the unaddressed systemic issues of education, economic development, unemployment and governance appropriate to a multi-ethnic society.

I was to find out later that Kumaratunga's murder was just one in a spate of political assassinations in Sri Lanka that continued until 1990. Hundreds of politicians, government officials, intellectuals, academics, and students were murdered, while thousands morefled to other countries or moved into networks of 'safe houses'. An anonymous report in 1988 documents the death of Vijaya Kumaratunga as one of 270 political murders reported to Parliament for the period 20 December 1987 to 15 October 1988. At this time, those under threat were listed as: members of the then ruling party, the United National Party (UNP); all members of local government bodies; members of the Armed Forces; all members of the left and progressive circles who supported the Peace Accord and contested the Provincial Council elections (based on the concept of the devolution of power); and activists of the Independent Students' Union, the All Lanka Peasants' Congress and other human rights, and mass organisations that supported the Peace Accord. As the campaign of terror grew in scale and intensity the targets of this campaign became increasingly broad:

> There is an aura of vindictiveness that marks many of these killings… on several occasions when attacks have been launched on homes there has been no regard for innocent bystanders. Old persons, infants, children, stray visitors, all have fallen in the hail of random bullets. Victims have been burnt to death, stabbed, hacked, decapitated. The common practice at present is to shoot and then to stab. The 'patriots' also introduced the infamous 'lamp-post' killing to the south of Sri Lanka. They often leave behind posters or leaflets acknowledging their hand in the killing and stating reasons as to why, in their opinion, the person deserved such a fate. (Anon. 1988)

It was in this climate of terror and fear that numerous acts of terror were perpetrated at the local level to 'settle old scores':

> The worst form of terror was what came to be known as *ussanyanava* (abductions). The possibility of nightly visitations from either the Tigers, the JVP, the army, the police, or para-military vigilante groups, any of whom could walk into a house and abduct a person with impunity, was a reality that almost everyone lived with. The Emergency Laws and the Prevention of Terrorism Act meant that anyone could be arrested and held without trial for an extended period of time. The mass graves now being uncovered (1994) clearly show that many of those abducted by police, army and para-military groups were summarily killed.... No wonder then that a society that had been avidly interested in politics, where in every home, in private or public gatherings, in the press, in journals, in buses or trains, the main subject of conversation had been politics, by the late 1980s, suddenly went silent. No one dared to talk; no one expressed a political opinion, not even among friends. (Obeyesekere 1999: 45–6)

The complexity and intrigue surrounding political alliances between the state, law enforcement agencies, political parties and individual politicians at this time is difficult to unravel. The *bhisana kalaya* created an environment in which ordinary people as well as their leaders could take extreme steps to vent their anger and frustration, not just against old enemies, but also against colleagues and neighbours.[21]More recently it has become not uncommon for members of the UNP government, who during this time were also targets of political violence, to be named as those directly responsible:

> The President said the bodies of a majority of youth killed during that period were missing and their grief stricken parents went from one army camp to another in search of them in vain. The UNP, she said, was afraid of upcoming youth leaders even from its own ranks so it was bent on eliminating them. One youth leader the UNP most feared was the late Mr Vijaya

> Kumaratunga. So the UNP used every possible trick to prevent him from winning a parliamentary seat. The President said the commission which probed the Vijaya Kumaratunga assassination had concluded that the late President Premadasa was responsible for planning his murder with the then JVP leadership. (*Daily News*, 3 March 1999)

The ongoing violence in Sri Lanka, awakened in me a sense of ethnographic impotence and professionally paralysing *intense exclusion*.[22] At another level it was a simple emotional journey that others have captured more eloquently than I—the vain attempt to come to terms with a friend's death: 'First it was somebody's somebody. Then it was a friend's friend. Then it was a friend. It goes on and on. I am overwhelmed with sadness...'[23]

A decade ago in the village I had often wished I had some practical skills or knowledge that would actually help the people who so generously shared their lives with me. I naively wished I had studied medicine or agriculture; even veterinary science would have been useful. Now I felt guilty—the familiar sense of *communal indebtedness*. I had done very little to engage with the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka. Although I had made the mandatory return to the village in 1985 to show off my two sons (I was now a 'real' woman),[24] as they were so young I had taken a deliberate decision not to put their lives or mine at risk by travelling to Sri Lanka during the late 1980s. I did not re-engage in a serious way with Sri Lanka until the ground was relatively safe after a change in government that brought Kumaratunga's widow Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga to power in 1994. In the period since, the culture of violence and its tragic manifestations have been the centre of my intellectual and emotional engagement with Sri Lanka. I now ask myself, to what degree is my intellectual and academic interest an attempt to create an *intense relation* with a politic in which I did not directly participate?

If so, I must claim a degree of success as I am now regarded as having a certain degree of expertise, which does not sit entirely comfortably with me.[25] The news of the assassination of Dr Neelan Thiruchelvam (a moderate Tamil politician and international human rights activist) who was killed by a suicide bomber whilst travelling to work was a reminder of my ambiguous relationship with my community of incorporation—fluctuating between *intense relation* and *intense exclusion*. It was not that the death of Dr Thiruchelvam was unusual—his murder was one of a series of assassinations of moderate Tamil political leaders and rival militant leaders eliminated by the LTTE in recent years, even since the 2002 ceasefire agreement. It was rather the manner in which it was communicated to me

via e-mail, as I had returned to Australia a few days previously: 'The news of the death of our mutual friend... sending shocks, tremors, convulsions into our systems.'

This statement resonated, as whilst I had met Dr Thiruchelvam, it would be inappropriate to describe him as a 'friend' in the literal sense. The communication, and use of the word 'friend' I think was to imply 'comrade', someone of like mind. Nor could I claim to have experienced the same 'shocks, tremors and convulsions'. I certainly felt shocked, I felt deeply saddened, and I felt depressed by the loss of such an individual who was playing a critical role in the process of political reconciliation. But I could not claim to experience the same, or even similar, loss of his real friends, nor the impact of uncertainty (even fear) that my Sri Lankan colleagues must feel with the passing of every such murder.

This difference, the view from outside, from safe ground, in some ways parallels the issues explored in Sasanka Perera's essay 'On Feeling and Not Feeling Others' Pain', in which he examines the question of our ability to 'experience' others' pain, especially extreme pain such as that experienced under torture:[26]

> There is a vast difference between understanding the reality of torture, that is understanding the reality that torture exists, and actually knowing what it is like. On some occasions, individuals whose testimonies we read in the discourse of human rights would be able to describe the methods used in torture. But the listeners or readers of such descriptions will not feel the pain residing behind those descriptions unless they have also undergone similar experiences. Thus language has merely been successful in describing the fact that people are in pain, not what it is like. (Perera 1999: 51)

Every time I return from Sri Lanka I am asked whether I experienced fear, whether there was any immediate threat. My response has always been negative, 'of course not': one quickly (all too quickly) adjusts to the military presence, the check points, even the body searches. What I am moved to say is, that as someone who is privileged to be able to choose the geopolitical space with which she will engage, that experience is also tempered by the knowledge that one's community of birth is territory that is safe, a society following the norms of civil peace—the 'immersion', the heightened concern, the *intense relation* is something that can be managed, even manipulated. My relationship with my community of incorporation allows me to create and extend the *intense relation.* When I choose, geopolitical intensity overrides geographical distance.

When the tsunami hit Sri Lanka in 2004, I hoped, along with other optimists, that this devastating event may have fractured the established dynamics of the ethnic conflict:

> My dear friends,
>
> I won't bore you with the chronology of my reactions over the past week as my experience pales in comparison to your own which is so immediate! Nonetheless I am moved to write as I am overwhelmed by deep sadness and plagued by the ambiguity of being an insider/outsider. Perversely I wish I could be there with you to share your sadness andfind ways to comfort you in your distress. Selfishly my family and I say thank goodness the tsunami did not strike a week earlier when I was there with you....
>
> In response I found myself recanting familiar place names in a sense to hold on to what was once a different reality. Or was it to hypnotise, to dull the senses? Mullativu, Nilaveli, Kalkudah, Matara, Polhena, Galle… realisation that these once familiar haunts are now places that if they still exist I would not recognise. That many of the people who made them the places they were are no longer....
>
> …These were the places, the sites of the unique, dare I confess, exotic, experiences that frame me and my relationship with you. They were the places that the foreign anthropologist writes large in the fashion of: I was there, I did that, my experience was truly out of the ordinary (and it was!). They were places where once the greatest threat came from mosquitoes or snakes or the heat. Where danger was defined in the more remote reaches by the need to enter the coastal jungle to defecate—but even then there was a friend in tow to stand guard….
>
> Of course in the East this idyll had already been lost through the decades of war—Mullaitivu long since a jungle for human tigers and land mines, not straying '*sudus*'. Another cruel irony: the Sri Lankan tsunami death toll has taken only half the number of lives claimed by the ethnic conflict over the past two decades. The world remains largely oblivious to the latter no less real toll—slow, barely perceptible from the outside, bleeding, versus unabashed, in our faces carnage.
>
> My heart goes out to you. Like other optimists (fools, do I hear you say?) I harbour the vein hope that the enormity of events will sufficiently change the political landscape, that my and your comrades will revalue the cost of a life, any life—how else can I restore my faith in humanity if not in the gods? (Letter from author to Colombo, 5 January 2005)

After the Tsunami

Since the devastating tsunami hit the south and east coasts of Sri Lanka in December 2004 killing over 35,000 and leaving another half a million

people homeless, the geopolitical landscape of Sri Lanka has again dramatically and irrevocably changed. There is now a 'joke' that circulates amongst Colombo's intelligentsia: did you know there were three equally devastating tsunami waves? The first was the sea. The second, the invasion of 'relief' forces. The third, the numerous foreign NGOs who are effectively removing what remains of community sustainability, resilience and capacity building. In many ways this joke, not out of character coming from my old Marxist colleagues (one has to remember that Sri Lanka is still nominally a socialist state), symbolises the frustration, the distance and the impotence that so many feel 'after the tsunami'. Such jokes trivialise a profound and life-changing experience, and the way the 'other', my community of birth—the West—has responded to this event. Such jokes are also an expression of the complex ways in which we human beings respond to impossible circumstances.

Like so many others in Sri Lanka, and around the world, late December 2004 and much of January 2005 was for me a time of anxiety and uncertainty. But in marked contrast to the 'time of terror', thanks to technology, news of friends came as swiftly as media images to our screens. This generated an impression of a close, *affective relation*. Much of the news was 'good' news, of friends and families who survived. This added reassurance to the ubiquitous, and shocking, media coverage, and the daily increasing death toll.[27] Yet some correspondence, particularly from colleagues working with women's groups, added a sickening, inhuman, incomprehensible dimension—a dimension that was not captured in mainstream media:

> Now the stories of sexual abuse and violence begin to trickle in. We have sent out teams to check on these stories... and will have a full report by Saturday, we hope. Also, there are fears of girls being kidnapped from the camps... because there is still no security provided to the camps to speak of. Although we have petitioned the Women's Ministry today and hope it will change. (E-mail from Colombo, 4 January 2005)

For months I again experienced disempowerment and*intense exclusion*, tempered now by continuing, if not unproblematic, media coverage. Interestingly, this exclusion was compounded, rather than alleviated, by the experience of geographical proximity. Six months after the tsunami the experience of being a 'tsunami tourist', albeit a well-intentioned one, was a journey through a zone of profound discomfort. To find myself back in Sri Lanka, regarded by those who do not know me as just another well-meaning foreigner with so little to offer in the context of so much need, or

worse still, with so much to offer but having to compete with all the others engaged in a similar humanitarian mission, was profoundly unsettling.

Notwithstanding the impressions generated by the media, the coastline was not uniformly devastated. Local topography was a decisive card played in this cruel game. Some coastal communities remained intact whilst neighbouring areas were completely devastated. ‘Being in the wrong place at the wrong time’, something we had learnt to live with through the decades of Tamil Tiger terrorism and Sinhala nationalist retribution, now had new meaning. Everyone, it seems, has a story of disaster or escape, and these small narratives are quickly becoming set pieces to engage the foreigner: ‘We were supposed to travel south to visit our in-laws, but we were late and missed the bus’; ‘That child went to visit her grandmother for Christmas, if she had remained here she would not have been killed. But her grandmother was old and frail. It might have been her last Christmas. It was their last Christmas.’

As these stories are told and retold, it becomes difficult to know what is real and what in the retelling is a reflection of enduring politics: ‘Everyone in this village survived, except those who went to the Christian church for shelter. The priest told them that God would look after them. He [*sic*] didn’t. They were all killed.’ For the benefit of visitors, complete strangers graciously count the number of family members lost: ‘two daughters’, ‘two sons’, ‘my mother and mother-in-law’, ‘every family here is the same’. But that loss, and the accompanying grief, is no longer tangible to the visitor, who did not know these people who are no longer as real, living human beings—who cannot fathom how one goes about grieving when the scale of loss is so great. And that grief, the grief of incomprehensible loss, is compounded by trauma and guilt that is also beyond the reach of the visitor: ‘His little girl was missing all night. They thought they had lost her, but in the morning they were reunited’. ‘I was minding the children. They were in my care. They were all lost…’

One’s gaze seeks to penetrate the now-benign landscape. Is that debris and rubble the norm in a poor community, or was it the wave? There a fibreglass boat ripped in two. Overhead, watermarks that lap at the ceilings of still intact buildings. There, unbelievably, a steel railway line 50 m from its original position. Everywhere wells now offer residents only saltwater. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of families are still living in tents and makeshift wooden houses—small huts stamped ‘temporary dwelling’—‘gift of the people of’ Denmark, or Japan or Ireland or Turkey. How temporary these ‘microwaves’ in the 30 degree heat?

One also, involuntarily, scours the roadside graveyards: a fresh grave there, several more here. Are these ‘victims’ or just the ordinary, everyday

dead? In the war-ravaged east this becomes a profound question. Tsunami damage looks like war damage, or poverty. Orphans are orphans, but the mass of orphans in many institutions are war orphans, and they have been there for years. Why does the world only want to know about the tsunami orphans? As a war orphan, is my case less urgent, less appealing?

In the east the growing military presence might generously be construed as protection and reconstruction, but the military's omnipresence and vigilance speaks of another life-threatening danger that does not come from the sea. How does the visitor understand the recent loss in the context of families that may have been dislocated three or four times by war, each time losing everything? How does one retain the will, the resilience to start again? As a 'tsunami tourist', how does one find the point of meaningful, negotiated, humanitarian contact, of *intense relation* that you have at times enjoyed and at other times deftly constructed?

Like war zones, post-tsunami communities are characterised by the fact that, despite everything, life (on the surface at least) goes on, as it must. Trains run on rebuilt lines. Overcrowded buses thunder down chaotic and inadequate roads, competing now with shining UN and OXFAM four-wheel drives. Children in neat white uniforms go to school, their laughter and childish chatter not revealing those who are now missing from their midst. Small, makeshift shops offer essential goods for sale to even poorer neighbours, as they have always done. The elderly and the unemployed sit on porches watching, but perhaps not seeing, the much more diverse passing parade—so many *sudu*s ('whitefellas' to use the indigenous Australian vernacular).

For those, like myself, who were not there to experience the moment of destruction; for those whose visit post-dates the ensuing days and weeks of fear, despair and hopelessness; for those who have not experienced the overwhelming stench of death and the visible signs of carnage, there is an inevitable lack of connection.[28] Reality does not mirror the indelible media images locked in one's mind. This new reality is an imperfect fit—despite geographic incorporation, it does not translate into the *intense relation* that was expected.

Back in Colombo, at a dinner with friends, I yet again occupy the position of 'other' as I am aware of the powerful cultural shaping of what I, as a foreigner, see and feel, or rather don't see and don't feel, in this landscape. The talk is of spirits of the dead who must now populate those tsunami-ravaged coastal strips. My friends express discomfort about returning to once loved beaches, not just because of physical damage, but because the invisible landscape of the afterlife has also changed. They recollect the unsettling atmosphere at the time of the tsunami—towns filled with dogs

inexplicably howling. Their conclusion, the presence of spirits of the dead, is not one I would have naturally drawn, although this was a dimension of the carnage, of which I was culturally aware. In a land where relatives go to great lengths to ensure the transition of the deceased from one world to the next, I in my rusty Sinhala, had (inappropriately?) asked strangers still living by the sea whether they were worried about the spirits of the numerous dead. Of course, they said no they were not, but then quietly, uncomfortably added 'some people may be thinking like that, but they don't say anything.' This was the skill of silence, of speaking only in whispers—a skill finely honed during the 'time of terror'.

I am reminded of Kevin Clements' reflections on the overwhelming significance attached to 9/11 in the West—a terrorist act that is a mere speck in the morass of global, more often than not national, rather than international, terrorism. In this context Clements raises the important question 'for whom do we grieve', 'for whom do we mourn'?[29] Why is it that 20 years and over 65,000 deaths as a result of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka failed to be worthy of our, the 'other's' collective attention, yet when half that number of the same people, in the same place are killed or 'disappeared' by a big wave, we very publicly grieve and our response is generous? Are the victims of the tsunami less implicated than those of war? Or, following Lederach (2005), are we more capable of extending our empathy, exercising our moral imagination in a way we could not in the context demanded by breaking a culture of violence:

> The moral imagination rises with the capacity to imagine ourselves in relationship, the willingness to embrace complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity, the belief in the creative act, and acceptance of the inherent risk required to break violence and to venture on unknown paths that build constructive change. (ibid.: 5)

Perhaps it is not just that there is a strong feeling of an *affective relation* amongst us coastal dwellers, sometimes Asian beachside tourists, that this might have been us, simply 'in the wrong place at the wrong time' (as some of us were), but that for most of us, our empathy did not involve inherent risk, nor a political stance, nor indeed a creative response.

Postscript

It is unnecessary to say that the definition of 'otherness' is context specific. Just because as a foreign researcher I have been *incorporated* into a rural village, may have been exposed to more facets of 'traditional' culture, and

have detailed knowledge of the lives of a number of rural poor women, does not mean that my understanding or expertise equals that of my Sri Lankan counterparts whose life experiences in their own society have obviously been very different to my own. In many ways, despite the long period of time involved, the sum total of my experiences 'in the field' remains, in relative terms, a thin level of exposure very different from colleagues who were born, educated and subtly inducted into the mores of their own language, literature, religion and society.[30] Nonetheless, the fact that I see through a different cultural lens can be advantageous—I ask different questions (some that perhaps shouldn't be asked), I interpret answers differently, I give different weight to the outcomes of analysis, and I am appalled by a culture of violence that many of my colleagues now accept as the norm. This difference, together with my capacity as an outsider to 'imagine myself in relationship' (Lederach, ibid.) with a wide range of people (perhaps a wider range than if I was more sensitive to social nuances of class, caste and ethnicity) underpins my potential to contribute. It is my 'otherness' that is simultaneously a strength and weakness—an 'otherness' far more complex than implied by the simplistic label 'foreign researcher'.

On the other hand, I cannot deny that much of my Sri Lankan experience is shaped by the legacy of colonialism and my own society's positioning as a Western state,[31] and, therefore, my identity within that context. As *sudu nona* I am (generally) accorded deference and respect. I am socially accepted where, were I from a different ethnic background or non-Western state, I might be excluded. My 'intellectual tradition' is firmly located on the dominant Euro-American axis, as is my cultural baggage.[32] But in untangling this dynamic of identity it is important to recognise the differential privilege that I enjoy. A significant part of my 'otherness' is due to two critical elements: the freedom to exercise choice and my relative mobility. Both of these factors are fundamental to my engagement with Sri Lanka, particularly at times of political unrest. Unlike many of my colleagues, I am free to divorce myself from intractable social and political problems, and even physically leave, or not engage, if I feel at risk. This is *incorporation* from an extraordinarily privileged position; any pretext to equality is shallow.

When experiencing a state of *intense relation*, such as when I am in Sri Lanka or, indeed, interacting with the Sri Lankan community in Australia, I do not see myself as a 'foreign researcher'; rather I am a member of a community into which I have been *incorporated* as professional colleague, friend and 'relative'. In each of these roles I have accumulated a mantle of

communal indebtedness that shapes my engagement with my Sri Lankan colleagues and friends. Nonetheless, I remain *sudu nona* and that ambiguity of positionality—of simultaneously being self and other, of being at times included and at others excluded, by agency, circumstance, or intellectual construct—is a terrain worthy of nuanced analysis. I am left reflecting on my limited understanding as the 'other' of another country's complex socio-political map, and of the unpredictable playing out over a lifetime of *communal indebtedness* and the profound impact of the conditions of civil peace and civil war—perhaps wanting/needing to shout but only generating a whisper, daring to reject this new language.

Notes

1. I am particularly indebted to colleagues attached to the Social Scientists Association Colombo, the University of Colombo and the University Grants Commission.
2. There was an earlier insurgency in 1971 that had many of the same hallmarks, and ostensibly driven by the same Marxist 'youth movement'—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—but the more recent was triggered by very different circumstances, defending very different (Sinhala chauvinist) values. The JVP is now a legitimate political party.
3. See for instance Clifford 1997.
4. See Okely, Judith and Callaway, Helen eds. (1992) *Anthropology and Autobiography*.
5. Remarkably well-preserved old Polaroids carefully wrapped in plastic sleeves are still pulled out of cupboards to remind me of 'those days'.
6. My neighbour's daughter, once a precocious 4-year-old, 'adopted' my partner and I as surrogate parents after the untimely death of her father. Over three decades we have provided for her education, arranged employment opportunities normally reserved for the Colombo elite, helped find her a husband, and then covered the cost of her marriage. We provide small gifts towards the house she is struggling to build and cover the costs of inevitable 'emergencies'. We are now 'grandparents' to her daughter and look forward to helping meet the needs of the next generation—a small price to pay for a whole village's care and hospitality.
7. Robins (1995: 204) reminds us that memories lack the stability of geological strata, but rather need to be seen in terms of an active past–present relationship.
8. I had married as an undergraduate, but like many students in the early 1970s was caught up in the feminist debate about the questionable role of the nuclear family. On the bookcase of my student share house the O'Neills' book *Open Marriage* (1973) had a prominent place, just as it did in influencing how (some of us) played out our lives and relationships.

9. In those days we were 'prepared' for the field in an avuncular sort of way, with minimal linguistic skills, strong recommendation that we should complete the short course on tropical medicine, instructions to situate (read build/procure/insinuate) ourselves at the epicentre of our chosen society, dispense cargo and even modern drugs with appropriate confidence and authority, and return from the field as experts (Bell 2004: 19).
10. I was not only 'protected' by villagers, but by a wonderfully concerned and supportive Australian High Commissioner Alexis Borthwick, who, on one memorable occasion as post-election ethnic violence broke out, sent, to the astonishment of my new-found village friends, his black Mercedes to the village to collect me and take me to the relative safety, certainly less isolated environs, of friends in suburban Colombo.
11. Mauss' seminal 1924 *Essai Sur le Don* explores the moral obligations attendant upon giving gifts. The work has generated a wealth of scholarship in anthropology and related disciplines, influencing leading scholars such as Levi-Strauss, Godelier, Derrida, Bourdieu, Polyani and Strathern. Recently Mauss' concepts have been adopted by scholars conceptualising the knowledge economy such as Gibbons (see Mauss 1990).
12. Diary entry, 23 October 1976.
13. Diary entry, 27 April 1977.
14. As Paul Alexander (1981: 113) has observed in his analysis of the 1971 insurrection: 'Studies of Sri Lanka, as with other post-colonial societies, have equated politics with the concerns and activities of a small urban-centered elite…political activities amongst the peasantry—at least 70 percent of the population—are seldom mentioned…. Peasants seldom write accounts of their political activities and it is more difficult to gather accurate data on a disaggregated rural movement…. Academics and the local intelligentsia—from Left, Right and Centre—have consistently used models of political action which presuppose that the rural population is an undifferentiated and residual category: an amorphous mass serving as a colourful backdrop for more important events on centre stage.'
15. This is reflective of Hobbes's emphasis on the importance of the sovereign's ability to reward and punish. His' civil society is constituted and held together by state power (Hobbes 1994: xiii, 3–9). For a discussion, see Ehrenberg (1999).
16. Seventy-four per cent of the population compared with 18 per cent Tamil minority.
17. Amnesty International is concerned that continuing human rights abuses are part of a systematic campaign by the LTTE against other Tamil political groups opposing them (ASA 37/004/2003).
18. Fonseka (1990), Hoole (2001), Jayawardena (1986), Kapferer (1988), Obeyesekere (1984), Perera (1998), Tambiah (1992) and Uyangoda and Biyanwala (1997).

19. Tambiah (1992:49) provides an even earlier example of complicity of government (in this case, the UNP) in inflaming ethnic conflict: 'Toward the end of March 1958, the National Transport Board sent a fleet of new buses to the north with Sinhalese letters on the license plates, and the Federalists defaced them and substituted Tamil letters. Wriggins relates the sequel as follows: "Over one hundred and fifty Tamils were arrested. In retaliation in the south, Sinhalese gangs smeared tar over Tamil lettering on stores run by Tamils. The police were slow to restore order" (Wriggins 1960: 267). Manor continues the story thus: "Within twenty-four hours, things in the capital had got out of hand. Two large groups of defacers, one of them lead by bhikkhus, systematically combed the city, and even managed to obliterate the Tamil section of a sign in three languages on Bandaranaike's official Cadillac which read 'left hand drive'." Police were instructed to show restraint and, while guarding Tamil and Indian shops in central Colombo from attack, were lenient about other actions (50), such as the stopping of vehicles with Tamil lettering and the assault of Tamil truck drivers in Sinhalese majority areas. As a result "some Sinhalese lawbreakers assumed that 'our government' did not object to such doings." (Manor, The Expedient Utopian: Banaranaike and Ceylon, 1989, p. 285) … It was in this atmosphere of the weakening of law enforcement agencies that the riots of 1958 exploded around the time that the Federalists were preparing to hold their annual convention in Vavuniya in the north preparatory to launching a campaign of non-violent protest.'
20. This phrase is drawn from the work of Nayanananda Wijaya Kulatilaka, who had been a participant in, and a victim of, the violent 1971 JVP insurrection as a young man. In 1972 he was 'betrayed by a comrade' and was held in remand for almost two years by the CID in Colombo (Growney 1999: 13). During this time, and throughout his lengthy trial, Kulatilaka used his art to express his feelings and to record aspects of the brutality of the environment in which he was confined. His series of pastels on paper depicting the rape of Prema Manamperi at Katharagama, bearing the inscription 'not a victim but a symbol', powerfully express the desire to overcome political and sexual impotence (ibid.: 26). Kulatilaka's view on the collective amnesia (even denial) that surrounds the violence of the 1980s is that people continue to live in fear of speaking out, despite the changed political circumstances and mood.
21. Sri Lankan villages are highly factionalised with bitter disputes occurring over scarce resources. One of the most tragic and widely publicised cases of this playing out of national politics at a local level was that of what has become known as the Embilipitiya massacre. At a court case in February 1999, following the exhumation of mass graves it was revealed that the architect and the prime hand behind the brutal massacre was none other than the Principal of Embilipitiya Maha Vidyalaya [Embilipitiya High School] of which 25 victims were students. It also transpired that these poor children had paid with their lives because of a joke which they played on the son of

the Principal Lokugalappatti in the form of a love letter. The principal then went berserk and turned his wrath on the students for this innocent little prank (*Daily News* 17.2.1999). Lokugalappatti's fabrications ten years earlier, that the students were members of the JVP, led to the death of the twenty-five seventeen year olds, their mutilated bodies 'dumped like garbage into a mass grave.'

22. The doctoral thesis that I had successfully completed a few years previously in my mind was rendered meaningless—I had written about another time, another political era; it may as well have been another place. I could never bring myself to publish from it.
23. Artist Anoli Perera on the occasion of the assassination of Dr Neelan Thiruchelvam, a moderate Tamil politician and international human rights activist and close friend, who was killed by a suicide bomber whilst travelling to work in Colombo in 1999.
24. In Sri Lanka spinsters are traditionally despised, and barrenness is considered a bad omen.
25. Not least as in 1999 I was able to spend another long period in Sri Lanka (six months). During this time I researched a documentary on Kumaratunga's life and death, *The Actor & the President* (2000) for Australia's multicultural broadcast network, SBS.
26. The late Susan Sontag has explored similar themes more recently (2003, 2004), particularly in relation to the power of photographic images of torture and war.
27. This is also in marked contrast to the 'time of terror' when deaths/murders were either brutally public or were whispers rather than statistics—the process of 'confirmation' of the fate of the thousands of 'disappeared' continues.
28. I had left Sri Lanka the week before the tsunami following one of my regular 'short visits'. These days when Sri Lanka competes with numerous professional obligations, close colleagues say I am 'like a shower of rain' (I suspect a tropical downpour)—a short period of intense engagement and I disappear.
29. Presentation at the Griffith University Multi-Faith Centre UNESCO International Symposium 'Cultivating Wisdom, Harvesting Peace', August 2004.
30. When not interacting with English speakers, I negotiate a linguistically challenging environment in a second language—closer to the level of a 5-year-old than an academic, and with all the hallmarks of the Sinhala language spoken by young village women.
31. Robinson (2003:273–76) reminds us how much the influence of the colonial past persists, especially with reference to Western academic hegemony and the resultant marginalisation of all other scholarship.
32. Even my physical traits (fair skin, light brown hair that may be considered 'blond') are generally considered desirable, although one colleague does wonder when I will be rid of my 'skin disease' (typically, Australian freckles, the trophy of too many hours in the sun).

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