

**“I CAN HEAR HER BREATHING...”: SECOND-GENERATION SRI LANKAN
TAMIL WOMYN REFLECT ON THE 2009 TORONTO TAMIL PROTESTS**

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ABSTRACT

Public activism in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora was demonstrated by the mass protests held in Toronto in 2009, in the months leading to the end of civil war Sri Lanka. Following the protests, research focusing on increased transnational participation, public performance of Tamil identities, and personal post-war feelings has emerged. Still, very little attention has been given to self-identified womyn's narratives and reflections. This paper and film focus on the experiences of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn¹, speaking specifically to gendered diasporic imaginations, subjectivities, and possible transformations produced through participation or non-participation in the 2009 protests. It argues how both protest and silence, in a transnational context, work to disrupt narratives of nationhood suggested by Canada, Sri Lanka, and the former de-facto state of Tamil Eelam.

¹ *womyn*: an alternative spelling for the traditionally used “women” and “woman” without the suffix “men” or “man”,

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

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I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee, the Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other than York University.

For my Sri Lankan Tamil sisters everywhere.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION – (RE)EXAMINING THE SRI LANKAN TAMIL DIASPORA

A Note of Reflection

Personal experiences – revised and in other ways redrawn – become a lens with which to reread and rewrite the cultural stories into which we are born. - Gloria Anzaldúa Anzaldúa, *now let us shift...*

It's been almost six years. Six years since I stood outside on these cold Toronto streets, in front of consulates and government buildings, beside my Tamil brothers and sisters, shoulder to shoulder with my elders, watching children running around us and sitting atop their parents'



Photo by Nayani Thiyagarajah

shoulders. Freezing, I stood with both family and friends. Crying, I moved alongside relative strangers, finding solidarity with those who were unknown to me, yet with whom I shared a common ancestral homeland. Tears fell from my eyes, for once unashamed with myself, but full of shame for the world that seemed to be doing nothing to help the Tamil people of Sri Lanka. At the end of a long and bloody war, which had already forced both the internal and external displacement of hundreds of thousands of Tamil people from the island, thousands more were caught in the crossfire of the final battle between the Sri Lankan army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who had been fighting for a separate Tamil state since the early 1980s.

From the outside, from within diaspora, thousands of native Tamils and their children worldwide were asking for support, for international powers to protect those innocent Tamil civilians caught in the middle. We carried signs, repeated chants, created human chains of protest, handed out flyers, took over city streets, spoke to media, all while organizing rallies and vigils alike. Throughout late 2008 and early 2009, in the dead of winter, diasporic Tamils in Norway, France, the UK, Canada, and so many other places, congregated to challenge their respective governments and other communities to support their calls for the protection of innocent civilians. And still, those cries and chants and challenges did not save the lives of Tamil civilians. On those

many days and nights, as we watched the cold air seep through our chattering teeth, moving despite our shuddering bodies, we watched worlds fall apart and our people lose their lives in a land physically far away from us, yet seemingly still within us.

What struck me then and sticks with me to this day were the countless young womyn I saw on those streets, the daughters of our diaspora. I saw womyn like me, children of Tamil refugees and immigrants, taking up space on city streets, making noise unapologetically, organizing vigils



Photo by Nayani Thiyagarajah

and leading protests, unquestionably committed to a cause with a consistent passion that was palpable. Some cried, many screamed, and others silently joined along, in public protests for a place and people largely removed from them. They fought for a place and people known possibly through their parents' stories, or through reading materials and the media, but not necessarily in a physically intimate sense. And yet they felt a connection to a homeland of the past, an almost mythical version of their parents' home, a version of which they would likely never be witness to again.

It was those same days and nights spent protesting alongside other Tamil womyn, which have inspired this graduate research. Through my work, I explore how the 2009 protests personally

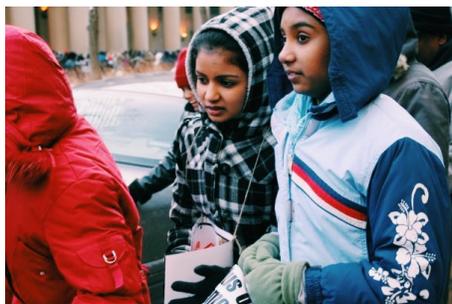


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impacted second-generation womyn of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and how their actions contested national narratives of Canada, Sri Lanka, and the former de-facto state of Tamil Eelam. For the purpose of this paper, I define second-generation as either born and raised in Toronto, Canada, or

raised in this city from a young age. To be more specific, I look at second-generation womyn between the ages of 26-29, exploring their participation or non-participation in the protests, the reasoning behind their decision, and if/how the protests contributed in shaping their agency in the diaspora. This work is also inspired by the disturbing fact that very little attention has been given

specifically to self-identified womyn’s narratives in diaspora during this current “post-conflict phase” (Bercovitch 33). I contend that more exploration and documentation is necessary where it concerns second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, as no work to date has focused specifically on this demographic of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Canada. Such a study, I propose, can offer much insight into the ways in which this specific group of second-generation womyn confront, negotiate, and transform their own sense of agency and possibility, in the relation to dominant narratives of nation and gender. In order to better understand the challenges of these womyn today, we must explore how the protests may have been a turning point in their lives, whether they actively participated or not.

Today, I wonder how those protests affected these womyn, whether they participated or not, in those specific moments and subsequently. I wonder about memories of those cold days spent outside and other memories of watching from a distance. I wonder what it meant for some to scream and to cry and to pray and to plead and to share publicly, amongst strangers and friends and family. I wonder what it meant for others to stand back and bear witness, and to publicly refrain from engagement in the protests and pleas for help. I wonder what it was like for those who I did not see on those streets, what they were thinking and how they were feeling. I wonder how in those moments of desperately organizing or “silently” standing back – as we watched worlds and lives fall apart in the homeland of our elders – we were changed as womyn. With that wonder, and with those questions, I begin this work.

Motivation, Location, and Research Questions

I had studied and watched this war for as long as I could remember, and still, the scale of the final battle, those last casualties, seemed different from any others. Never before had I seen such a catastrophe coming from so far away. It was avoidable. I spent much of the spring waiting or searching for news. The deaths were not widely broadcast as they happened, or even in the immediate aftermath; they happened on a small strip of beach and went mostly unseen. – V.V. Ganeshanathan, *The Politics of Grief*

When initially setting out to do this research, I wanted to look at the ways in which assumed cultural identities and related adopted modes of behaviour, are disrupted and allow for personal transformation, where we “come to voice” and develop independent ways of identifying as Sri

Lankan Tamil womyn, specifically those of us born and/or raised in Canada from an early age. I had hoped to document how, through public activism or the choice not to participate in ethno-cultural-political protests, self-identified second-generation womyn could develop open spaces for the articulation of our complex identities, an achievement of our own subjectivity. As Hall describes, this allows us “to see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call in retrospect our 'cultural identities'” (237). I wanted to better understand how second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn construct their cultural identities, and develop connections to both a foreign “homeland” and wider ethno-cultural community. Furthermore, I wanted to see if they felt that they were perhaps developing their own personal understanding of culture and finding their voice through the expression of their own imagining of possibility.

There were many questions that initially inspired this research. What weight do our voices carry in the wider community, as womyn? How do we engage our own bodies and voices in transnational activity and public activism, if we choose to do so at all? How does this affect us personally and politically? Reflecting on Stuart Hall’s suggestion that our transforming identities and sense of self are subject to “the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power”, I was interested in looking at how second-generation womyn of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora were transformed when challenging diverse sources of power, - including the pull to participate in the protests – gendered suggestions of appropriate public behaviour, and suggested ideas of behaviour for racialized young womyn within a Canadian landscape (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 225). I hoped to understand whether their personal sense of agency shifted, when challenging cultural and societal “norms” through protest or the decision not to participate.

bell hooks argues that through our struggles, we come to a space of transformation. She writes, “we are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our

sense of the world” (85). With this suggestion in mind, I wanted to explore how we were personally affected and possibly changed, both during and after the 2009 protests in Toronto.

Understandably, the purpose of this paper has transformed, especially following the completion of my interviews with second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn. As is expected, what was shared during interviews has informed and shifted the focus of this research in specific ways. I had originally assumed that the protests was a space and time in which those who participated had a chance to ‘come to voice’, while those who stood back chose to remain silent as a way of staying away from the public eye. Of course, after speaking with various womyn, I was then reminded of the myriad and complex reasons behind participation and non-participation, and given a chance to reflect on my own participation and latter non-participation. In what follows, I argue that that though the protests were a space in which many participants experienced a ‘coming to voice’ of sorts, this achievement of subject position was negotiated in relation to multiple and often conflicting ideas of nation, gender, and race, which have since constrained participants’ voice in diaspora. In particular, since the protests, many have felt silenced out of fear of the material and embodied affects of racialized and gendered nation-state narratives of both Sri Lanka and Canada. These protests were then, for some of the women, one moment in which transformation and the achievement of subjectivity could be enacted, but the capacity to sustain this achievement of agency beyond that time and place depended on the renewed negotiation of multiple conflicting and constraining realities in the everyday. Ultimately, this thesis has become an exploration of the diverse gendered, racialized, and national images, as well as narratives and opinions, which mediate experience and public activism amongst second-generation womyn of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Sharika Thiranagama writes that her book *In My Mother’s House* is “about war and the transformed physical, emotion, and social landscapes of civilians attempting to live through it” (Thiranagama 4). Similarly, yet very differently, my paper is about the displacement due to war, and the transformed physical, emotional, and social landscapes of young second-generation Sri

Lankan Tamil womyn attempting to live away from it in diaspora. As self-identified Tamil womyn living in Canada, we are undoubtedly marked in many ways: female, womyn, womyn of colour, Tamil, Sri Lankan, and South Asian, to name a few. And though we are marked by our gender, we are still different; we are not white womyn, we are not the “norm”. We are othered, not solely based on gender, but also on our race, ethnicity, culture, skin tone, language, ancestry, and many other factors. In addition to that, we are not what most people’s imagining of a “Canadian womyn” is – white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian, etc. Therefore, we already disrupt the idea of what “Canadian” is suggested to be. As a collective, we also displayed contrasting perspectives and experiences of “Canadian-ness” during the protests. Some of us, in our actions and words during that time, even participated in a public challenging of the Canadian state, one that was critical and questioning. Furthermore, with the public displays of support for the LTTE and rejection of the Sri Lankan State, as well as the private rejection of both the LTTE and Sri Lankan State, we reflected a wide spectrum of nationalized experiences and opinions, ones that impacted our feelings and decisions with regards to the 2009 protests.

Being a Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, who was born and raised in “Canada”, I am personally invested in creating literature that reflects both my experiences and those of other womyn in my community. As Jacqui M. Alexander describes, through engaging with this research, I’ve been learning “how to use flesh-and-blood experiences to concretize a vision”, how to draw from my real life and those of other womyn in my community, and create a body of work that reflects our current standpoints and visions of what is still to come (262).

All of the eight womyn I have interviewed for this research work are between the ages of 26-29. They represent a generation of womyn that I am a part of, including my friends, family members, and acquaintances, who were born either during the year of the 1983 Black July riots (see Chapter 1) or immediately following it. This is a point in time that many view as the official start of Sri Lanka’s civil war and one after which there began a mass exodus of Tamil people out of Sri

Lanka. My standpoint, or positionality, as a Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, who was born and raised in Canada, will frame my examination of the experience of being engaged in the protests in some way, as I was both an active participant earlier on in the 2009 protests and someone who later began to watch from a distance.

Before moving forward, it should be noted that for the purpose of this research, I refer to this specific group of womyn as Sri Lankan Tamil. I understand that this overarching term does not reflect the varying ways in which Tamil womyn from this region identify. There are myriad differences amongst Sri Lankan Tamils both within Sri Lanka and the diaspora, including religion (Hindu, Christian, etc.), geographic origin within the island (Jaffna, Eastern Sri Lanka, Colombo, etc.), and language (English-speaking vs. non-English speaking). My focus is more on a shared ethnic and cultural Tamil identity. My use of the term “Sri Lankan Tamil” is meant to refer to a shared connection to a specific region (Sri Lanka) as Tamil womyn. Through my study of their feelings toward Canada, Sri Lanka, and the imagined state of Tamil Eelam, I will attempt to further explore the different ways in which womyn from this group choose to identify and why.

Furthermore, this work is by no means an exhaustive study on the experiences of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn in Canada. As many of my participants noted themselves during interviews, this study is merely a start, an entry point into a diverse spectrum of gendered narratives from self-identified womyn within our diasporic community. As Diana Taylor suggests, with this study, I am only building “on what I have received from others” and attempting “to contribute to the debate and pass it back into the public arena for more discussion. The slips and misses are, of course, my own” (Taylor xx). I believe that in this paper, we are merely scratching the surface. Like all other womyn, we are each wells full of stories. And it is my hope that we continue to go in search of them, if and only when womyn are open for sharing.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One of this paper examines the history of Tamils in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan diaspora. It also explores existing literature focused on this diaspora in Canada and the present gaps where it concerns self-identified womyn, delving deeper into the largely undocumented gendered experiences of womyn within this diasporic community. *Chapter Two* provides the grounding theoretical framework, with emphasis on womyn of colour feminist consciousness; ideas of diaspora and transnationalism; discussion around women, voice, and nation; exploration of the intersections between performance and representation; and my self-reflexive approach to this research, which guides my decisions in both the examination and dissemination of my work. *Chapter Three* takes us into findings from my interviews with other Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, who I consider both family and friends, and their reflections on the 2009 Tamil protests. This includes reflections from my own experiences protesting in 2009. Furthermore, this chapter looks closely at feminism as a personal and political praxis; grief, guilt, and the politics of emotion; and how we decolonize diaspora and examine our positioning, while living in a white settler state. The central questions explored in this chapter include: What challenges do second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn in diaspora have to negotiate to come to voice and exercise agency in interests of justice in Canada and Sri Lanka? And how can both their identity and sense of agency be (trans)formed in relation to the kinds of power and representations in circulation? In *Chapter Four*, I continue exploring the testimonies gathered during interviews, and I examine the challenges that I encountered throughout that process. I also look closely at the role of silence both during and following the 2009 protests. To be more specific, I explore intergenerational silences and the impacts of limited community socialization; and the role of nation-state narratives in silencing individuals, which includes explorations of the former de facto state of Tamil Eelam, the Canadian State, and the Sri Lankan state. I also discuss silence, as it relates to my thesis film, and how I negotiated the process of producing the short experimental film. This includes a detailed sharing on

the challenges that came up both while conceptualizing and creating the documentary. Finally, in *Chapter Five*, I conclude by summarizing my research and my reflecting on why it is important. This chapter will call for the continued gendered documentation and publication/production of womyn's diverse stories from the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, and encourage us to continue exploring notions of silence and voice where it concerns gendered experiences.

CHAPTER 2: APPROACHES, ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

The room is dark. The air is thick, heavy with the scents of burning sandalwood and fresh jasmine flowers. There are tea lights, white candles, and rose petals, leading guests to three separate altars. One is an altar marked by old writings, notes to self, half-poems and interrupted prose. It holds photocopied black and white images of grandmothers, the elders left behind in Yalpanam, in Jaffna; the mothers my parents did not get to say to goodbye to as they passed on. The second holds a silver plate of unfinished food, curries boasting contrasting smells, sitting atop my mother's last gift from her mother; a bright pink sari. The last altar holds space for a statue of the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of abundance. With her, sit my old journals, fabric, books, and a suitcase. In the background, music is playing softly. As people walk into this world I am praying, then frantically packing my suitcase, then preparing to leave the room. I am my mother in those moments, leaving Yalpanam behind. I am trying to imagine what it was like to leave everything for the hope of something, for the promise of safety, of freedom, of some kind of liberation. As I walk out, I leave the audience alone, as a recording of my poem "that is not on me" plays, my voice echoing through the room. I take my body with me and leave them with my voice, leave them inside this world I've (re)imagined, wondering what they will take from it. – A reflection on my performance piece, "that is not on me" (2012), discussed at the closing of this chapter

Narratives of Cinema: Mapping Out an Interdisciplinary Theoretical Framework

My research begins with the contention that what took place during the 2009 Tamil protests can help us to better understand the journeys and realities of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn living in diaspora. More specifically, I seek to understand what challenges Sri Lankan Tamil womyn in Toronto have to negotiate, to come to voice and exercise agency in the interests of justice, where it concerns Canada and Sri Lanka. Furthermore, I focus on exploring how their identity can be (trans)formed in relation to the kinds of power and representations in circulation. There seems to me no better way to trace this process than through film, because film had been such an inspiring and informative medium for me as a storyteller.

In 2009, I saw the documentary *More Tears Sister*. Directed by Canadian filmmaker Helen Klodawsky, this film transformed my ideas of the work I could do as a Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, in relation to both the epistemic and the aesthetic. For me, it is an example of how we, as self-identified womyn, can perform gendered narratives in the diaspora through various mediums.

This film, which follows the story of Dr. Rajani Thiranagama, a Tamil womyn and human rights activist from Sri Lanka, is one where her daughters and sisters play an active role in sharing their own recollections, ultimately documenting a collective narrative of who Rajani was and what she stood for. It is an archive of her journey, a re-membering of her story. What was and still is particularly remarkable for me were the scenes in which her younger daughter, Sharika, re-enacts moments of Rajani's life, especially those leading up to her assassination outside her Jaffna home on September 21, 1989. In a mix of these haunting re-enactments, familial testimonies, personal photographs, and archival footage, the film is a visual re-membering of Rajani's life, 15 years following her passing.

In hindsight, there was one specific feeling that left me in awe after watching this film. It was the belief that we as womyn could publicly and sensitively talk about our lives as Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, about our feelings on the war that has plagued Sri Lanka for so long. I felt encouraged, compelled even, to finally start talking about how we, as second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, were affected by the end-of-war protests, about our journeys with our elders, and about how collective experiences inevitably intertwine with our own. We could perform and tell stories about the complexities of our feelings surrounding self, agency, and identity on our own terms. We could play a careful and active role in both re-membering the past, recounting our feelings and experiences along the way, and re-imagining the present moving forward. In other words, we could play a part in creating an archive that documents narratives of our community, contributing to an archival memory that “exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, cds, all those items supposedly resistant to change” (Taylor 19). Engaging in such acts of archiving could be our way of responding to life, of reflecting on it and re-membering it (Heddon 54). Through this, I was reminded of the value in slowly gathering testimony, sharing stories with each other, and carefully developing documentation on our community, specifically as Sri Lankan Tamil womyn.

In many ways, films like *No More Tears Sister*, and the artistic works of other womyn of colour theorists and artists, help me to (re)imagine what is possible through film. I could utilize my medium of choice, and play with lighting, sound, music, choreography, and set design, to create a self-reflexive exploration of my research, in a way that did not seek to reconstruct or appropriate the offerings of my interviewees (see Chapter 4). Reflecting on Klodawsky's film, I became intrigued by about how I could use film as an intervention and tool for dissemination in my own work, and the ways in which I could add to a continuum of contributions from womyn in our diaspora.

Ultimately, in reading and witnessing the works of elder womyn of colour, including other Tamil womyn, and reflecting on my own journey so far, I was inspired to once again take up space in a university, bringing my community and creative arts background along with me. Said's famous critique of Orientalism and its reproduction in Western films proposes that images of "the orient" are an ideological construction which make the "oriental" governable. Part of me wanted to take back the depiction and documentation of my own community into our own hands. Part of me wanted to participate in the coming together of the academic and arts worlds, in efforts to document and preserve stories. And part of me had accepted that I could carve out my own space here – albeit, not without difficulty – to explore my hxstory² and nurture my narrative.

Based on my creative interests and skillset, I decided to exercise the creative thesis option, as available to M.A. Interdisciplinary Studies students. I chosen to develop a short experimental film, which includes archive footage, choreographed movements, music, and themes and ideas gathered from research interviews with second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn in Toronto. I offer this film as a cinematic autoethnography, serving as a creative medium for self-reflexivity. As will be discussed later in this paper, I place myself as a subject of the research, who is also impacted by the issues presented in various ways and who is dealing with the many challenges raised by the

² *hxstory*: an alternative spelling of the traditionally used "history", without the prefix "his", which renders it gender-neutral, free from any specific gendered associations

findings. As performance autoethnographer Tami Spry describes, this style of autoethnography is a critically reflective narrative that allows my own personal and political intersections, engagements, and negotiations to intersect with those of other womyn who share my culture, hxstory, and society (51). I interact with the findings in an intimate way, reflecting on what's been shared with me and representing those reflections through the film.

In preparing for this film, I turned to the words of Roxana Waterson, who argues that film and video storytelling have become strong vehicles of memory for this generation, which are both viable in terms of resources at this present time, and “vital as a form of witnessing of current events and therefore of future historical evidence” (52). Through the production of this short film, I strive to personally reflect on the experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn and share it with others, to serve as hxstorical³ evidence of our collective and personal experiences.

Furthermore, by utilizing a creative method of dissemination, my goal is to make the findings of my research more accessible, not only to scholarly communities, but my own community and others as well. As Hill-Collins describes of her own work, “I felt that it was important to examine the complexity of ideas that exist in both scholarly and everyday life and present those ideas in a way made them no less powerful or rigorous but accessible” (vii). In reading and witnessing the works of other womyn of colour, and reflecting on my own journey so far, I was inspired to imagine different ways of sharing my research work, bringing my community and creative arts background along with me.

Moreover, engaging in my own praxis of archiving is also a way of documenting and preserving collective cultural memory. Taylor notes, “cultural memory is, among other things, a practice, an act of imagination and interconnection” (82). As such, we can look to cultural production as a space to continue that praxis of imagination and interconnection, preserving

³ *hxstorical*: an alternative spelling of the traditionally used “historical”, without the prefix “his”, which renders it gender-neutral, free from any specific gendered associations

memory through creation and/or documentation. By contributing to the archival of cultural memory, not only in text but also in film, I believe I can serve as both a scholar and a storyteller, to utilize my imagination and nurture continued spaces for interconnection, not only amongst those of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, but also between different communities.

Maythee Rojas writes, “part of the project of feminism has been to put women’s stories at the center, to understand the world through the perspective of women” (ix). On that note, I argue that part of the project of womyn of color feminist consciousness has and must continue to be the act of culling our own stories from the margins and placing them at the centre, performing them in whatever way works for us, to understand the world through our own offerings. This process of culling, documenting, mediating, and performing our stories is a continuous passage, made possible through various mediums. But what is a story? What, other than creative will, drives the assembling of the myriad elements that comprise the experience of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn to create a visual artifact? How do we “read” the experiences of womyn of colour in diaspora, specifically Sri Lankan Tamil womyn? As we know, experience is not transparent, therefore it needs to be explored and interpreted. Creating a story involves picking and choosing from the actions, characters, environments and desires that make up the lives of womyn in the everyday. But as Stuart Hall (1997) has so clearly shown, the choices we make depend to a great extent on the languages of meaning, which are in circulation and what they make both visible and invisible. The creator needs tools to help them make those choices, and so I turned to the work of scholars of feminism, diaspora, and performance to help me study the lives of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn before translating these into the medium of film.

Overall, this study takes an interdisciplinary approach, building a framework that references three key areas of research: Gender, Feminist, and Women’s Studies; Diaspora Studies, and Performance Studies. I start by utilizing Gender, Feminist and Women’s studies as a space in which to ground my research in feminist womyn of colour consciousness, which includes anti-racist,

transnational, and decolonizing approaches to feminism. I then turn to Diaspora Studies as a place to begin specifically examining the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, and exploring its transnational nature and the participation of womyn in diaspora politics. Finally, I look to Performance Studies as a place to examine the performance of “identity” in public and private spaces, the reasons preceding performance, and the subsequent effects on different individuals. Overall, the work of this specific chapter is to lay the theoretical framework that will frame my analysis of interviews conducted for this research. To better understand how second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn found themselves implicated in the 2009 protests, I need to understand the ways in which gender, race, culture, and nation structure Sri Lankan Tamil womyn’s agency in the diaspora. To do this, I will need to examine current thinking related to: gender, race and nation; diaspora and transnationalism, as it has emerged in the recent present; and the performance of identity in public and private spaces. Having done this, I will build on the literature to create and articulate a select methodology and set of methods, which I use to approach my subject.

As a whole, I believe each of the bodies of work outlined intersect and inform one another, especially where it concerns my research, writing, and creative interests. Through my proposed exploration, which will include a blend of diverse literature review, arts-based (performance) and qualitative research (first-person interviews), and self-reflexive writing (poetry, prose), my core work focuses on the gathering of personal testimony via interviews, comparative analysis of gathered testimonies, and a short film based on the themes raised amongst these testimonies.

I am a womyn. I am a daughter of Tamil refugees, both born in Sri Lanka. I am a “first-generation” child, born in Canada. I am a descendent of a land occupied and being fought over by the descendants of outsiders. I am living on a land occupied and being claimed by the descendants of outsiders. I carry a hxstory of settlement, both ancient and present. Some of my ancestors may have left other lands for Sri Lanka. My elders and parents certainly left Sri Lanka for Canada. Without documentation, I am eternally disconnected from some of my ancestors. Without conversation, I am somewhat disconnected from my elders. I am a womyn in between multiple worlds, lost in translation, due to disconnect from my mother tongue, and lost in trans-nation, due to multiple migrations. – Nayani Thiyagarajah, “Silenced Hxstories on Occupied Land” (2012)

Identity/Voice/Womyn

I was not a part of the sweat and fire that birthed a woman of color politics in this country in the 1970s and 1980s. This is why I want to remember that I have been shaped by it. It is why I am indebted to the women who literally entered the fire for me, on my behalf. What I found compelling was the plain courage and determination of a bunch of different women all tied to some kind of cultural inheritance, sometimes at a cost, sometimes isolated from it, at times yearning for it. – Jacqui M. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*

Working with Multiple Feminisms

A number of womyn of colour feminist scholars have helped us to understand the particular struggles of womyn of colour in diaspora. I will be drawing on their ideas to make sense of the issues emerging in my research, while also examining where existing work does not speak to the experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn.

To begin, it can be argued that the 2009 protests expressed a movement for transformation, a collective call to stop the killing of civilians at the end of Sri Lanka's civil war. I contend that possibilities for transformation like we see here often stimulate feminist praxis for some people, especially those who identify as womyn. I turn to Chandra Mohanty's suggestion around feminism of "common context of struggles against exploitative structures and systems" (49). Through that idea, I argue that feminism, broadly speaking, is a space from which people come together to challenge oppression, which includes both gendered oppression and human rights violations as a whole. The 2009 Tamil protests provided a context for Tamil people and allies in the diaspora, especially Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, to resist against that oppression collectively.

Naturally, there are multiple and varying forms of feminism, each birthed and nurtured by its own background stories and contexts. Ania Loomba notes that "scholarship by Third World and womyn-of-color feminists coined phrases such as 'feminism without borders,' 'transnational feminism,' 'relational and multicultural feminism,' and 'international feminism,' to capture the ferment of new approaches to feminism globally" ("South Asian Feminisms" 23). The continuous (re)imagining of new forms of feminism speaks to the fact that established schools of thought may not always speak wholly to any one individual, group, or movement. They also speak to the new

forms of subordination and resistance that emerge *hxstorically*⁴, as diverse womyn’s experiences change. As such, Grewal and Kaplan’s question of “how to link diverse feminisms without requiring either equivalence or a master theory” becomes important (19).

In the case of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn and the 2009 protests, I believe it is necessary “to map these scattered hegemonies and link diverse local practices” of feminism (Grewal and Kaplan 19). Feminism, as imagined by a collective of different womyn of colour theorists, will be employed as a guiding and grounding foundation throughout my work. When explored individually, none of the varying expressions of feminism wholly speak to the experiences of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn living in Toronto. Therefore, a layered approach, combining elements from various theorists and writings, is necessary in speaking to the experiences of these womyn. The documented research and writings of selected scholars and writers explore the relationship between identity and culture(s), and examine negotiations between journeys of decolonizing, feelings of belonging, and experiences of becoming. These offerings have continuously become sources of guidance and necessary reminders for young womyn of colour pursuing both academic and artistic paths.

Before moving onward, I will note that the term “womyn of colour” can be generalizing, grouping diverse experiences together under one banner. Examining the phrase “womyn of color”, Bannerji states, “At some point it travelled to us from below the 49th parallel and found a congenial home on our tongue” (28). Like Bannerji, I am not wholly convinced of the “capacity for resistance attributed to this notion”, at least not where the notion denies the nuanced and highly contextualized experiences of the many self-identified womyn it seeks to represent (29). It is not possible for this specific term to cover all non-white womyn, however I do feel that there exists possibility for solidarity within this idea, where difference is welcome and respected. Alexander reminds us that

⁴ *hxstorically*: an alternative spelling of the traditionally used “history”, without the prefix “his”, which renders it gender-neutral, free from any specific gendered associations

womyn of colour consciousness “requires collective fluency in our particular histories, an understanding of how different, gendered racisms operate” (269). In other words, an acknowledgement of the nuances in various gendered and racialized experiences is necessary, if we are to engage in any sort of effective solidarity work. As such, when using the term throughout this paper, I seek to strictly connect with a collective of racialized womyn-identified writers and theorists, with unique contributions to non-white feminist literature, instead of homogenizing them as one group without difference.

It is also important to note the enmeshment of these diverse experiences that emerge through historical legacies of colonial capitalism in many different forms. As scholars like Loomba have argued, colonization drew the colonized into a new relationship with their own people, as well as new relationships with the colonized. It is these new relations that created increased diversity among and between us, including what we share.

Feminism, as continuously re-defined by various womyn of colour, is respectful of the inevitable and on-going negotiation of multiple worlds, in which we balance between traditions that are inherited and inventions that are re-imagined for one’s self. As Bushra Rehman and Daisy Hernández describe in the introduction to *Colonize This! Young Women of Color on Today’s Feminism*, “many of us have been negotiating identities from the first time we step out of our parents’ homes,” being the daughters of refugees and immigrants (xxvi). Through diverse visions of feminism, as imagined by various womyn of colour, there is both supporting theory and a nurturing for praxis, which “allows women to retain their culture, to have pride in their traditions, and to still vocalize gender issues of their community” (Moraga xiii).

Hernández & Rehman describe how literature like “Alice Walker’s words about womanism, Gloria Anzaldúa’s theories about living in the borderlands and Audre Lorde’s writings about silences and survivals” have all inspired, nurtured, and supported womyn of colour over the past 30 years (xxv). Like them, I refer to a collective of works from various feminist womyn of colour,

which remain my wider place of reference for this research. I work specifically with bell hooks's idea of radical visionary feminism, Chandra Mohanty's "feminism without borders", Inderpal Grewal and Caran Kaplan's explorations of transnational feminism, and Himani Bannjeri's anti-racist stance.

As bell hooks describes in her idea of radical visionary feminism, there is no singular path to feminism, therefore "individuals from different backgrounds need feminist theory that speaks directly to their lives" ("Feminism Is For Everybody" 116). With that understanding, and similar to Hernández and Rehman's approach to feminism as a whole, I incorporate the ideas of diverse womyn of colour scholars and writers, with multiple articulations of feminism in my research. Over the years, womyn of colour have found support in the works of other womyn of colour, whose works are reflections and affirmations of their own experiences as simultaneously racialized, gendered, and othered bodies. I am no different, having found solace in the offerings of womyn of colour theorists and writers, whose have helped me move through challenges in the academic, artistic, and personal spheres of my life.

In her book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Chandra Mohanty stresses the need for an "antiracist feminist framework, anchored in decolonization and committed to an anti-capitalist critique" (3). In response to Mohanty's call, my work is specifically rooted in decolonization, with the understanding that it is an ongoing praxis without a foreseeable expiry date. When looking at diasporas like the Sri Lankan Tamil community, I am reminded that there is an "urgency of recognizing the persistence of colonialism's intersections with questions of immigration and citizenship" and other areas of concern, which exemplifies why a praxis of decolonization is still necessary in addressing the lasting effects of colonialism in today's society (Cho 13). It would be naïve to assume that today's immigration and citizenship policies are not free from their colonial roots, and that praxes of othering and oppression are not still part of today's policies, especially where it concerns people of colour.

Indeed, as Alexander notes, many believe decolonization to be a failed project, but I choose to look at it differently (270). Despite the often exhaustive nature of engaging in such work and its undeniable past shortcomings, it is important to remember that this is a long-term historical and collective process, which is necessary for the transformation of self, community, and governance structures (“Feminism Without Borders” 7).

Moreover, as Mohanty notes, while there are many more scholars and activists than those listed above, “I offer this partial history of ideas to anchor, in part, my own feminist thinking and to clarify the deeply collective nature of feminist thought as I see it” (5). Ultimately, I have built my own guiding framework rooted in diverse feminist thought, which creates room for a nuanced understanding and praxis of feminism, where it concerns Sri Lankan Tamil womyn in Toronto.

Migration and Feminism

In reflection of the experiences of first-generation racialized immigrants, Brenda Song discusses the process of examining identity “as shaped by the forces of assimilation, immigration, and racialization,” away from a homeland they were forced to give up, but one that many still maintain transnational ties with (11). In reading the ideas she presents, I feel that Sri Lankan Tamil womyn of the second-generation are also faced with their own journey of examining who they feel they are, which is not immune to the pressures of assimilation, racialization, and suggestions of otherness and foreignness. In some ways their experiences mirror those of their elders, and in other ways they are very distinct and reflective of being the children of those who engaged in the actual process of migration.

In her book, *Thinking through Essays on Feminism* Himani Bannerji writes, “My gender, “race” and class are not separate persona or persons — they make and re-present all of me in and to the world that I live in. I am — always and at once — there all together, for whatever that is worth” (12). Reflecting on Bannerji’s offering, I remember that within a Canadian context, second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn are simultaneously labelled as Tamil, Sri Lankan, South

Asian, and Canadian, in addition to being both gendered and racialized, all elements that interconnect, making and marking them. Their identity is inherently intersectional. In effect, their bodies are viewed as hybrids of sorts, not one thing or another, but instead a mix-up of many things, not fully “Canadian”, yet not also not belonging wholly to any other place, therefore possibly tied to multiple imaginations and realities. Furthermore, they are caught between conflicting discourses of nation (White Canada/Sinhala Sri Lanka) in which they are either not present, or represented in explorative or marginal ways. Reflecting on this and my research work, I am reminded that there continues to exist an “impossibility of separating these three: cultural memory, race, and gender”, amongst Sri Lankan Tamil womyn of the diaspora (Taylor 86).

DasGupta notes that, “our identities are affected intensely by our location and relocation in physical as well as psychological worlds” (7). Given our reality as second-generation womyn in Canada, it is undeniable that our physical and psychological locations, the spaces we occupy in both body and mind, will impact how we see ourselves, the ways in which we choose to act, and where our allegiances lay. With this in mind, I argue that the 2009 protests are an example of the ways in which gender, race, culture, and nation both reflect and structure womyn’s agency in the diaspora, and how that agency can subsequently challenge narratives related to those various markers. When examining their choices to participate or step back from the protests, we could see how they challenged suggested modes of behaviour and expected allegiances to a specific cause, and in doing so, disrupted multiple narratives of nationhood.

Narratives of Nationhood

Nations, as Benedict Anderson (1990) has reasoned, are imagined communities. That is they are not just essential or inevitable formations, or even just social and political creations. Nor are they necessarily coterminous with statehood, though they can be. They are powerful formations, which offer ideas of belonging based on the exclusions of others. These ideas about community are

based on stories of origins and belonging. Homi Bhabha proposes that ideas of nations are a collection of narratives and experiences:

It is in the emergence of the interstices-the overlap and displacement of domains of difference-that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nation-ness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated (2).

These stories become powerful ways to incite apparent unity, to obscure differences of class, colour, and belief. Through these stories, communities can be mobilized in affective ways in opposition to the threat of others. It is on the basis of these stories of identity and belonging that people come to know themselves as active agents. Narratives of nation are the stories through which people become mobilized for war, and motivated to kill others or to carry out acts of aggression, which rely on the threat of others outside the national grouping. As such, stories of nation have to be constructed through stories about past and future, through scenarios of action and symbols, which offers membership in groups. They are generated, shaped and shared to command particular loyalties and to divide the world into “us and them”. They are constantly changing.

Anderson points out that nationalism developed through the convergence of print technology with the rise of capitalism in Europe, and that in this way national bourgeoisies came to understand that they shared a community in opposition to older feudal communities (45). Loomba argues that anti-colonial nationalisms were "powerful vehicles" for mobilizing anti-colonial energies (55). In part, this was because the discourse of nation could be recognized by the old colonial powers of Europe and could become the basis for negotiating political autonomy.

Scholars like McClintock and Yuval-Davis demonstrate that nations are always gendered (1995; 1997). The land on which the nation is created is usually gendered as female – as motherland. It is womyn who pass on membership in the motherland through their blood. The nation itself is represented as a hierarchically ordered heterosexual family headed by a man. McClintock cites Anthias and Yuval Davis identification of five ways in which womyn are inserted into the discourses of nation. These are:

- a) as biological reproducers of nation
- b) as reproducers of the boundaries of national collectivities through restrictions on marriage and sexual relations
- c) as transmitters of national culture
- d) as (embodied) signifiers of nation and difference - which as Fanon shows become imagined as the property of men.
- e) as active participants in national struggles (355).

Womyn's membership in nation is complicated by the fact that their gender is the basis on which access to, and use of resources and services is determined. This access is often subordinate to that of men and their actual behaviour is governed by the regulations associated with their membership in specific religions, castes, classes, and other groups, which place conditions on their sexuality, education, and labour.

George Mosse's (1986) work on nationalism and sexualities argues that nationalism relies on the dominance of the image of male sexuality, because it is through the practice of "proper sexuality" that the ideal bourgeois subject can bring himself into being. This is the basis of his differentiation from subordinate others. It can perhaps be argued nationalism depends on dominant heterosexual masculinity, since it is through this that resulting social hierarchies in the nation become naturalized.

In anti-colonial nationalisms, many of these patriarchal dynamics were reproduced as many womyn of colour feminists have shown. On the other hand, it was through nationalist discourses that many womyn in the colonized world came to voice. Womyn such as Amy Ashwood Garvey, Pandita Ramabai, and other early feminists, achieved their coming to voice through a complicated negotiation between imperial feminist discourse and the struggles of nationalist men. Anti-colonial womyn's struggles as Kumari Jayawardena, Marial Mies, and many others have argued, achieved visibility through national liberation struggles.

Anne McClintock describes how "nationalism contains the very real risk of projecting the denial of difference onto a conveniently abstracted 'collective will'" (123). But as is the case with

all movements, there is always difference, whether publicly or privately. Individual perspectives breathe beneath any suggested idea of collective will. The same is the case with the 2009 protests, where everyone was not on the same page, nor did they support the protests wholly. The picture painted by the media was often negative, and suggested a united front of those supportive of a separate Tamil homeland and the LTTE. Based on the media content analysis completed by Dorris Peter in 2009, it was suggested that out of a collection of 29 news articles, 38% contained words and phrases about the transnational Tamil movement in Toronto, which were negative in tone (30). Selected phrases included: "...waging a ruthless campaign for Tamil independence..." and "local Tiger supporters to solicit 'war taxes'" (Peter 30). Such news reports failed to understand or document the nuances and the diverse perspectives of protestors. In the midst of these protests, though understandably overshadowed by LTTE symbolism, there existed varying allegiances, and personalized views on the LTTE and the Tamil struggle outside of that group.

Anthias and Yuval-Davis note that it is habit of "multicultural" nations to construct "members of minority collectives as homogenous, speaking with a unified cultural voice" (27). Where this practice fails is that it refuses to document the inevitable existing differences, between members of the same racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic group. Within the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, there does not exist a single unified voice, because there is no single unified community. As noted earlier, there are key differences, especially along the lines of religion, caste, class, political viewpoints, and geographic location of origin. These differences are maintained in diaspora and reflect long-standing factions within the larger Sri Lankan Tamil population.

With regards to the 2009 protests, false external assumptions of homogeneity amongst Toronto Tamils failed to acknowledge the ways in which individuals challenged suggestions of a collective identity, be it Tamil, Sri Lankan, or Canadian, especially as womyn. By participating, they disrupted the narratives propagated by the nation-state of Sri Lanka, countering their claims of not committing war crimes, and displaying a deep-rooted fraction amongst Sri Lankan people. By

participating, they also birthed new contradictions, disrupting notions of a collective Canadian identity marked by a continuous suggestion of multiculturalism, calling out the Canadian government for lack of action in the case of Sri Lanka and beginning to question what it means for them to be Canadian. From my research, it appears that this pushed some of the womyn I interviewed, including myself, to re-examine Canada's insistence on itself as a country committed to multiculturalism, when our requests for action as citizens were unmet. Later in this paper, I explore further how many of us were moved to re-examine our understanding and allegiance to this multicultural notion as Canadians. Furthermore, I attempt to re-work multiculturalism to show the variegated composition of "the" Tamil diaspora in Toronto.

Additionally, by not participating, some of us also disrupted the suggestion of a unified Tamil front in support of the LTTE and its goal for the imagined nation-state of Tamil Eelam. With its own history of human rights abuses, like the Sri Lankan state, and family trauma connected to the LTTE, some of the womyn interviewed, like myself, could not trust in the Tamil Tigers, believing that they too did not represent our own values and aspirations for the wider Sri Lankan Tamil community. Out of this arose a struggle as diasporic Sri Lankan Tamils, where we were not able to believe in the nation-building project as outlined by the LTTE, nor the possibility of a unified Sri Lanka.

*your history is only as good as your
memory
lost in a past,
we cannot retrieve
and they burned our library down, so that
they could make sure
we'd never remember
and i turn my head in every direction, trying
to find out about the past
where i can't
i can't save the past
that is not on me.*
– Nayani Thiyagarajah, "that is not on me" (2012)

Diaspora and Transnationalism

“What are diasporas and how do they emerge?” are much-debated questions that Fiona D. Adamson notes in her 2008 paper “Constructing the Diaspora” (4). Adamson argues that there is an “implicit, if not explicit, debate in the literature on diaspora regarding the extent to which diaspora are pre-political, “natural” entities or whether they are socially constructed (4).

The term diaspora is rooted in the Greek language, “based on *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over)”, and it was used in Ancient Greece to describe migration and colonization (Anteby-Yemini and Berthomière 262). In his 1991 essay “Diasporas in Modern Societies” William Safran defines diasporas as expatriate communities:

- 1) that are dispersed from a original ‘center’ to at least two ‘peripheral’ places;
- 2) that maintain a ‘memory,’ vision or myth about their original homeland
- 3) that ‘believe they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country;’
- 4) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland, and;
- 5) of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are ‘importantly defined’ by this continuing relationships with the homeland (83-4).

Alternatively, Michel Bruneau argues that groups can be separated into three types of diasporas: the entrepreneurial, the religious, the politic, and the race and culture diasporas, centred on racial and cultural pole (39-41). In his 2008 book “Global Diasporas: An Introduction”, Robin Cohen discusses five different types of diasporas, which includes: victim diasporas, labour diasporas, imperial diasporas, trade diasporas, business diasporas, and deterritorialized diasporas.

What is clear from the above examples is that the term diaspora has experienced many phases and attempts at (re)defining its meaning and constructs. In my approach to exploring the experiences of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, I employ the suggestion that the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is a victim diaspora, largely a result of Sri Lanka’s civil war. More specifically, it is a victim diaspora that is marked by its transnational activity and diaspora politics, both centred on separatist and humanitarian efforts in Sri Lanka. As Adamson suggests, “diaspora politics is a specific form of transnationalism that has as its primary aim the construction and

reification of a transnational ‘imagined community’” (2). This notion of the “imagined community” comes from Anderson, who argues that the nation itself is an imagined community, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them” (6). Reflecting on Anderson’s suggestion, I wonder if the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora is not itself a small scattered “nation” of its own, an “imagined community” that exists transnationally, disconnected from its own members both in diaspora and in the “homeland”. Operating across national boundaries and organizing for a homeland that most will likely never be allowed to reclaim, it appears that members of the diaspora hold onto an imagining of something likely impossible, but that which provides space for hope. With that thought, I argue that despite centuries-long class, caste, regional, religious, and other differences in the homeland, the Sri Lankan Tamil population living outside of the island (re)emerged publicly as a diaspora, a de facto nation of its own, due to its transnational organizing around humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in the homeland, as well as widespread dedication to the hopeful formation of an independent Tamil state. In this next section, I will explore this (re)construction and (re)emergence of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, as a result of its global transnational activity.

The Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora: A Transnational Collective

In his book *Life on the Outside: The Tamil Diaspora and Long Distance Nationalism*, which focuses on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in Norway, Oivind Fuglerud writes, “at a distance from the source of cultural values, migrants are forced to reconstruct imaginatively their cultural identity” (138). As a diaspora that was distanced from the homeland for over two decades, its members were challenged to, as Fulgerud suggests, reconstruct their cultural identity and personal subjectivities based on conditions in their host country, negotiating between the two spaces. This Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has, over time, grown into what can be described as an active transnational diaspora. This suggestion of its transnational nature is connected to Goldring and Krishnamurti’s notion that “transnationalism is generally used to describe people who feel they

belong to and/or organize their daily lives around more than one nation-state,” effectively organizing in the “host” country and maintaining current connections with their homelands (6). The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora’s history of supporting the armed struggle for a separate Tamil state, support for Tamil refugees displaced within Sri Lanka, rebuilding of infrastructure in the country’s northern and eastern regions, and widespread public engagement, can be used to argue that it is an active transnational diaspora. Despite settling outside their original homeland, the diaspora “acknowledges that the old country has some claim on their loyalty, emotions and level of possible support” (Bercovitch 18-19). Furthermore, while it is also a diaspora affected by “traumas of separation and dislocation”, there still exists “potential sites of hope and new beginnings”, where identity and culture may be expressed in new ways, both individually and collectively (Brah 193). Moreover, as Vertovec suggests, those of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora have proven to feel that they themselves are “legitimate members of the collective identity and social order” of their community in Sri Lanka, displaying very specific “homeland political allegiance and engagement” (Vertovec 982).

Through her concept of the *borderland*, Chicana feminist and writer Gloria E. Anzaldúa tell us “the future depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” and the creation of “a new mythos – that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave” (Rojas 14). In other words, she suggests that people are increasingly straddling multiple identities birthed from multiple cultures; that it is necessary that we embrace change in how we see the world, how we see ourselves, and how we move through the everyday. For a transnational diaspora like the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Canada, there exists a sustained reality of straddling multiple cultures and traditions, where there is “both a feeling of nostalgia and loyalty towards their country of origin, and a feeling of loyalty and gratitude towards their country of settlement” (“The Shadow of Terrorism” 132). And as Anzaldúa notes, they have had to continuously re-negotiate their place in diaspora. Though they have left their homeland due to

conflict, there is a sort of liminal space many still occupy, where they cannot fully disconnect from Sri Lanka, which was demonstrated by the widespread activism during the 2009 protests. As a result, they “challenge the socio-spatial/territorial assumptions of communities and public space by transcending physical space, reaching across physical space and incorporating members based on ethno-national identities” (Bercovitch 20). By engaging in large-scale collective demonstrations, utilizing local spaces for the expression of global struggles, they confront accepted norms related to public space, including who can occupy that space and for what reasons they choose to do so.

The experience of maintaining multiple connections and developing hybrids of identity, connects to Stuart Hall’s description of what he refers to as a second type of cultural identity, which recognises the process “of ‘becoming’ as well as of being” (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 225). In other words, it honours where the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora comes from and their transnational ties to their homeland, while also respecting the changes they experience while living as part of a diaspora and their relationship with their “host” country. As Brah describes, “the idea of identity, like that of culture, is singularly elusive” and as a social and psychological process, it innately defies any specific definition” (Brah 20). In that light, I argue that members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, by being part of a transnational diaspora and “becoming” in different spaces, defy any one specific identity or notion of culture. This allows for nuanced gendered narratives from within the collective, as will be explored further in this paper.

In the introduction to their book, *Uprootings/Regroundings*, editors Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier, and Sheller, ask us to “consider home and migration in terms of plurality of experiences, histories and constitutions, and the works of institutional structures” (1). In relation to the Sri Lankan-Tamil diaspora in Toronto, I ask us to do the same. Here exists a community, like countless others, where ideas of home and migration are unquestionably fuelled by diverse experiences from

within the group. Those within the community work with varying understandings and linkages to both the hxstories⁵ and constitutions of multiple nations, which continue to structure their journeys.

In this current space and time, the shadow of my family's migration follows me closely. While I slowly work to acknowledge the intimate effects of their trauma and feelings of homelessness, and grow more aware of the role of hxstory in our collective present, I often wrestle with the past. The war-induced and unwanted movement of my family from their believed ancestral homeland haunts the steps I take daily. I carry the imposed weight of a child of those forced to leave behind a homeland plagued by "postcolonial" conflict, and uproot to a foreign land that itself belongs to others, a land that has faced its own struggle with colonial rule. I find myself caught in a liminal state of being. – Nayani Thiyagarajah, "Silence Histories on Occupied Lands" (2012)

Research Methodology, Methods and Rational

Finally, writing this book has convinced me of the need to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity in producing scholarship. Initially I found the movement between my training as an "objective" social scientist and my daily experiences as an African-American woman jarring. But reconciling what we have been trained to see as opposites, a reconciliation signalled by my inserting myself in the text by using "I," "we," and "our" instead of the more distancing terms "they" and "one," was freeing for me. I discovered that the both/and conceptual stance of Black feminist thought allowed me to be both objective and subjective, to possess both an Afrocentric and a feminist consciousness, and to be both a respectable and acceptable mother. – Patricia Hill-Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*

For the purpose of this proposed study, I have employed autoethnography as my methodology of choice, which allows me to bring "together the study of self (auto) in relation to culture (ethnography)," thereby enabling my self-reflection to move "beyond field notes to having a more integral positioning" within the documentation process (Kovach 33). As a foundation for my work, I've turned to Carolyn Ellis's definition of autoethnography as "research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" (xix). Instead of just engaging in a solely autobiographical narrative account of my own journey, I position myself as a subject alongside my peers in this research, connecting our diverse personal, social, and political experiences and opinions, and subsequently exploring and interpreting those diverse accounts as a researcher. As Jacqui M. Alexander reminds us, "one of the earliest lessons we have all learned from feminism is that the personal is political: the insight that some of the most infinitesimal details of our lives are shaped by ideological and political forces much larger than our

⁵*hxstories*: an alternative spelling of the traditionally used "histories", without the prefix "his", which renders it gender-neutral, free from any specific gendered associations

individual selves” (283). This is something I reflect on as I delve deeper into this research, which continues to be inspired by my own personal, social, and political experiences.

Unlike the traditional personal memoir or autobiography, this methodology provides a space to bring together my peers’ narratives and my own, “to connect them to a series of investigations on cultural identity shaped by the forces of assimilation, immigration, and racialization in a multicultural landscape” (Song 11). In essence, I am writing and creating a film about specific social experiences and themes, by virtue of speaking with and creating documentation in relation to them – family, friends, and acquaintances.

Moreover, I employ content analysis, poetry and prose, performance-based analysis, and reflexive writing, and film, as my main methods of choice for this study, by exploring existing literature, analyzing life narrative testimonies through interviews, gathering responses through performance-based research, and positioning my experiences and myself in relation to my peers. I have conducted primary narrative research by facilitating in-person conversations and recording testimonies amongst second-generation womyn of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. Participants for these interviews were gathered from a group of my own peers and family members. I spoke with eight different womyn, who all self-identified as being Tamil, but not necessarily as Sri Lankan Tamil. Those interviewed formed a mixed group, some of whom participated in the 2009 protests and some who did not. The reason I focused on both womyn who participated in the protests and those who did not, was to ensure that I leave room for lines of comparison and diverse voices. As Avtar Brah reminds us, the subjectivity of different womyn is inevitably “inscribed within differing political practices and occupy different subject positions” (193). With this in mind, I was focused on emphasizing that to be of Sri Lankan Tamil heritage and to be a second-generation self-identified womyn does not make for a homogenous narrative, and that we possess a diversity of experiences and opinions as members of a diaspora.

Finally, while I share my academic research through this formal thesis, making it accessible to other scholars, I simultaneously seek to strike a balance in my work in which the information and narratives documented are also made available to those outside of the academic sphere, those who the work is actually about. I feel it is crucial to use alternative methods of dissemination, so we can work towards a more inclusive manner of knowledge sharing, one that is made more accessible to those it is documenting. Moreover, given that the focus of the research involves storytelling as a space for exploration, it feels only natural that the research be shared in the proposed audio-visual narrative format. As noted earlier, I've also developed a short film as a creative thesis option, where I explore the experiences of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, by drawing from the experiences of my participants, while also maintaining their anonymity and introducing alternative storytelling elements. In this way, these narratives can be documented in a way that honestly reflects real-life perspectives and stories, while not jeopardizing the privacy of young womyn in the community. In conversations following my interviews with participants, some participants also suggested this format to me, believing that it in addition to my written reflections, this film could serve as an audio-visual response to my interviews.

Narrative Research and Life Hxstory

Another prominent main method that I've utilized for the purpose of my work is narrative research and life hxstory. Sitting down one-on-one with second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, ages 26-29, I've listened to these womyn share about their participation or non-participation in the 2009 protests, reflecting on their past decisions and actions, as well as their current feelings and opinions.

Overwhelming as it may be, I know that both those providing the testimonies and those witnessing them are often transformed through that process. Such exchanges remind me "our words are not without meaning, they are action, a resistance" ("Choosing the Margin" 81). By sharing with each other, we are once again resisting within diaspora, as a collective of self-identified

womyn, congregating to share, release, and imagine ways of moving forward. We are, in essence, engaging in a decolonizing praxis, daring to discuss the private and comment on the public, affirming the significance of our narratives and the importance of being the ones to share those stories ourselves. It is not lost on me that each womyn who agreed to sit down with me, is resisting with courage, while they share their experiences, opinions, and feelings.

Heddon describes how “the responsibility of bearing witness to the personal experiences of ‘history’ passes to the second generation, passing through their bodies” (62). As second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, I argue that we carry a unique responsibility of bearing witness to not only our family’s journeys and histories, but also those of their community at large, as well as our own. As daughters of our diaspora, we act as a bridge between an elder generation that fled their homeland and settled elsewhere, and the future generations that are still to come.

Performance-Based Research

In addition to engaging in one-on-one interviews as a method of research, I have also completed additional performance-based research. I prepared and performed an autoethnographic performance installation workshop meant specifically for interview participants and other self-identified people of colour, where I carried out my last piece of participant research. Below, you will find my artist statement for the performance:

“that is not on me...” is a mixed-media installation and performance...it is an act of recovery and remembering the past. This piece subtly explores the lives of three generations of Tamil womyn, who seemingly have different experiences, but who are undoubtedly affected by each other. It weaves together the narratives of the grandmother left behind, the daughter who leaves, and the granddaughter born in a foreign place, all Tamil womyn connected to Sri Lanka, all affected by migration and memory... this specific narrative explores and expresses the thoughts of a young, second-generation womyn and her struggles with the expectations placed upon her, as well as the weight she feels as a result – perhaps a combination of what is imagined and what is real. It touches on the conditions of a layered identity.

Through a blend of audio recording, installations, and staged performance, *that is not on me* was an act of recovery and re-membering the past, one that is scarred by war and displacement. In ways, this performance installation workshop reflects how through my work, I had the opportunity

to engage directly in a process of performing from libraries of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic history and encouraging alternative active forms of participation in my research (Heddon 62).

This piece subtly explored the lives of three generations of Sri Lankan Tamil women, based largely on my own family, who seemingly have different experiences, but who are undoubtedly affected by and connected to each other. It weaved together the narratives of the grandmother left behind, the daughter who leaves, and the granddaughter born in a foreign place. The installation navigated and documented the thoughts of a young, second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil woman, as she struggled with her family's displacement and thoughts of what was left behind, playing with what is imagined and what is real. It touched on the conditions of having multiple identities, and its effects on one young woman's journey.

As Roger Simon writes, "within memorialization there is an attempt to hold the past, the present, and the future as co-terminus, most importantly, the past is not really past at all, but eternally present" (Simon 105-106). Through my workshop, I did this, utilizing performance as an autoethnographic research method to memorialize the narratives of my family, in order to open up a dialogue about the past and its implications in the present. Though it has been six years since the 2009 Tamil protests in Toronto, the reality is that what happened then is not foreign to what happens today; we, as a diaspora, are not immune from the effects of the protests and the war itself.

Preceding the workshops, I engaged participants in life history interviews, where we discussed topics related to their personal journeys, including displacement and diaspora, navigating multiple identities, second-generation experiences, gendered realities, and re-membering the past. The most crucial question I asked was what emotions, observations, and possible transformations emerged for them during the protests, whether they decided to participate or not, to which the answers will be explored further in Chapter 3 and 4.

Overall, in this chapter, I've explored the multiple areas of research that work together to provide a framework for my own research and analysis. Having discussed various women of colour

feminisms, explored suggestions of diaspora and transnationalism, examined narratives of nationhood, shared notes on my own arts-based research, and looked at how it all merges to inform my research, I will move forward into Chapter 3, where I begin to discuss the findings of my work.

CHAPTER 3: CONTRIBUTIONS, REFLECTIONS AND COMPLICATIONS

When sharing on a panel in late 2014, I realized why my graduate research took so long to finish. Doing work around our displaced diaspora is tiring. Every new passage read, image created, and paragraph written about us as Tamils unearths aches. It hurts to write about our war, about rupture, about protest, and about genocide.

In his 1992 Nobel Lecture, Derek Walcott said, “Break a vase, and the love that reassembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole” (“The Antilles”). For me, this is a reminder that though we experience a seemingly permanent brokenness as Sri Lankan Tamil people, we are in fact growing strong in new ways, as we work to pull pieces back together in some way. The broken vase that is our diaspora, like too many others, is not without love and reverence for our culture, our language, our history, and our ancestry. So when the vase breaks or cracks, as it has in our displacement, with people scattered across the world, the love doesn't disappear. It only transforms. And we see that love in action, a decolonial kind of love that crosses caste, class, religious, and homeland regional politics, to unite Tamil people in diaspora, as it so clearly did during the 2009 Tamil protests globally.

In a 2012 interview with Paula M.L. Moya, author and educator Junot Diaz asked the question: “Is it possible to love one’s broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person?” (“Decolonial Love”). When looking back at the 2009 Toronto Tamil protests and reflecting on my interviews with participants in this study, I am moved to say yes, in response to Diaz’s question. I believe it is possible. I’ve seen it. I saw it in 2009. It’s a new kind of communal love, pieces coming together again, – in very new ways, often reminding us of

how differently connected we are in this space and time in diaspora – broken through war and displacement, treading new territory to form a new whole with purpose.

When thinking about decolonial love, it is the possibility of continuing to come together that reminds me to keep moving forward; to push through the pains and act through the aches. I also try to remind myself that there is privilege in being here, in not really knowing my motherland. Indeed, that perhaps is the saddest part. Being displaced grants us some semblance of safety, while permanently rupturing us from our roots. Still, we continue working and sewing new seeds where possible. We may still be waiting for the sun to shine brighter, but we continue watering and hopefully keeping track of our growth.

“That’s What She Said”: Emergent Themes

As a womyn who was born in Canada to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, I was initially interested in speaking with other second-generation womyn born and raised in Canada. However, I later decided to also speak with womyn born in Canada, but largely raised here from a young age. My reasoning behind this was that those in that middle place were raised in a Canadian context with very little, if any, memory of their time in Sri Lanka. Their earliest memories and experiences, like those born here, were located in a Canadian context. This group is sometimes called the “1.5 generation”, people who came to live in Canada or another country before the age of thirteen.

For my research, I spoke with eight Sri Lankan Tamil womyn based in Toronto. They varied in age between 26 and 29, with a median age of 28. Out of the eight, three were born in Canada (hence, second-generation), while five others were born in Sri Lanka and arrived in Canada by the age of three (1.5 generation). Only one was born outside of both Sri Lanka and Canada, and she arrived by the age of 10. Amongst the eight participants, four womyn actively participated in multiple protests, two womyn attended one demonstration each early on during the protests, one chose not to participate at all, and the last person womyn supported behind the scenes, as she was unable to physically participate due to health issues.

In all cases, participants decided and selected personal stories to tell, “structured by particular political and social perspectives” (Thiranagama 5). As such, these conversations with participants gave way for several key themes to emerge from their shared life history narratives. Among these, which I’ve chosen to explore closely in this paper, includes: the development of a personal and political feminist praxis; the politics of emotion in relation to the Sri Lankan Tamil struggle, the protests, and opinions on other peers in the diaspora; the understanding of activism on occupied indigenous land and understanding of Canada as a white settler state; and the role of silence in protests and thereafter.

Among these themes, I also explore key tensions and conflicting emotions around feelings of disconnect with the Sri Lankan Tamil population and the idea of a homeland, negotiations around political allegiances and attitudes towards the Tamil Tigers, feelings of both gratitude and mistrust in the Canadian government and people, the questioning of Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, and possible shifts in attitudes and individual approaches. This highlights the “importance of understanding that diasporic communities engage in multiple ways, and their strategies for political involvement shift in time and space” (“The Shadow of Terrorism” 135).

Feminism as a Personal and Political Praxis in the Borderlands

Similarly, feminism as is articulated through a performance of the individual’s body also lacks credibility, as the body is reduced to the land and through land to the nation. This curious lack of available positions reasserts the viability of the borderland that Anzaldúa speaks of, for transnational women, transnational Sri Lankan Tamil women, who have lost all claims to the space of the national and yet are compelled to reimagine it. This space becomes an active and dynamic borderland of the transnational. – Sumathy Sivamohan, *The Middle Passage: Migration and Displacement of Sri Lankan Tamil Women of the Diaspora*

As Sivamohan highlights above, while empowering in some ways for the individual, performance of the womyn-identified body, specifically the womyn of colour-identified, is often questioned, bringing up suggestions of a lack of credibility in the transnational space. Reflecting on this suggestion, I argue that as womyn who are disconnected from their familial homeland and racialized in a Canadian context, Sri Lankan Tamil womyn occupy a specific and personalized

borderland space, from which both a personal and political feminist praxis is born and continues to grow, as the performance of both body and voice unfolds.

Among participants, there was a consensus that their feminist praxis and commitment to it was present from an early age, by virtue of feeling compelled to resist against notions of what being a girl or womyn means in Canada, as well as what being a girl or womyn means within the Sri Lankan Tamil community. Many of the participants recognized that in their own personal resistance of gender norms, they were challenging suggestions of acceptable behaviour by both family members and the state.

This brought to mind Massey's suggestion that "geography in its various guises influences the cultural formation of particular genders and gender relations" (177). For Massey, place is a site where political, economic, social, and cultural relations intersect, and with this coming together, meaning, affinity, and history emerge. The ways in which we continuously mark space and transform it through our struggles, works to remake that space to meet our own needs, thereby creating those new meanings, affinities, and histories around various spaces. With those interviewed for my research, this became clear, as participants discussed their place-specific negotiations of their gendered second-generation identities as Sri Lankan Tamil womyn in a Canadian context. As one participant described:

You don't really realize you're doing it, and when you challenge your role in society, you realize what kind of feminist you are. Like I don't categorize myself as a feminist, where I'm like standing in the front line of protest fighting for women's rights. But I feel like on a day-to-day basis I am. In the small acts that I do, or fighting myself to believe in or to achieve things women don't normally achieve...

From my conversations with participants, a commitment to previously initiated feminist praxes was especially evidenced in similar and yet nuanced ways during the 2009 Tamil protests. Collectively, there was agreement from all eight participants that the 2009 Tamil protests in Toronto gave way for themselves or their peers to take up new spaces as womyn by publicly performing their acts of protest. Through protest, they challenged notions of how womyn should

behave in public, as well as the silencing of womyn that occurs in both Canadian and Sri Lankan Tamil cultures. One participant noted:

You do get the stares, and people do still stare at you, especially when you're chanting, and marching, especially when you're marching alongside men and you're chanting and you're the only womyn, which has happened to me quite a few times, you do get stares, people are looking at you.

Participants also agreed that they felt a sense of pride in the actions and accomplishments of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn during the protests, especially in contesting patriarchal narratives around the "acceptable" behaviour of womyn:

I was proud of them for taking that courageous leap to do that, put themselves in this sphere that's of patriarchy, not just in the Canadian system, but in the Tamil culture, I think it's severely patriarchal. But being courageous enough to enter that dialogue, to lead protests, to visibly be out there, I found that incredible.

Three participants in specific all recalled seeing and saving one specific image of young womyn standing in a line facing the police, while protesting on the Gardiner Expressway.



Photo by Nick Kozak/Torontoist

For each of them, this image was a representation of something to be proud of, to draw strength from. As one participant described:

I thought it was very motivating, it was very powerful...I don't know who took that picture, I can't remember where I saw this, but I saved it. It's very powerful and says, 'you know what some of us might be timid and shy, but don't push us'.

Another said:

I thought it was pretty liberating, because most of the front lines were women and children, like some of the pictures from the Gardiner were women and children who were facing these cops, who were fully suited and armoured. That was powerful for me. It was really powerful and inspiring. It made me realize when our women mean business, they mean business, you know what I mean?

Overall, I also observed, in conversations, that many of the participants had very specific ideas and suggestions of what being both a womyn and a Tamil womyn meant for them. One respondent said:

I think, to be a womyn, is to be, um, the vessel for a culture, the bearer of stories, the sort of nurture for a family to, um, to, in a lot of ways, be the glue that holds a family together, that holds a culture together, that, um...that calls forth the past and helps to nurture the present and future.

Among participants' reflections, the notion that womyn are the storytellers, or the gatekeepers and bearers of the Tamil identity, also came up multiple times. According one respondent:

I see women as these story tellers, these carriers, but also these women with bodies that bear, not only bear children, but also pain, memories, like every part of journey to be who they are, because they face so many silences, so many oppressions in different intersections in their lives...they are these bearers as well.

Still, another participant contested this idea and noted that there is a flaw in this belief that womyn should be the gatekeepers and bearers of their community. She said:

There's a lot of pressure on women, Tamil women in the diaspora, to become the new gatekeepers, but a specific kind of gatekeeper, so again, supporting the men, but also aspiring to be that model minority, which is premised upon white supremacy...

From this response, we see the sentiments felt by Sri Lankan Tamil womyn to maintain a gendered and racialized role within their families, the wider diaspora, and Canadian society. Suggestions that they must be the gatekeepers and upholders of culture, who consistently support the men within that community, illustrates the power of patriarchy over their lives, which dictates their roles within both the home and wider community. Moreover, the notion that they must aspire to be a model minority as racialized womyn, shows us the influence of white supremacy. This highlights the

direct impact of white supremacy on the psyches and behaviours of racialized immigrants and their children, who feel they must maintain a subservient and ever-grateful attitude within the white settler state, in order to avoid questioning and further othering.

On a different but related note, this brings to mind Cheran's claim that "Ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and caste locate people unevenly within transnationalism and diaspora" (Cheran 131). It is a reminder that though womyn participate in diasporic transnational organizing, their position remains uneven, inequitable in how they are viewed due to gender.

Moreover, one participant also acknowledged that though she feels a strong connection to their identity as womyn, committing to a feminist praxis and feeling comfortable within her body is not without its own hurdles in her daily life:

I feel like identifying as a womyn through the feminist lens has made me be more conscious and empowered. But at the same time, there are times when I wish that me being a visible womyn wasn't such a thing, because it doesn't let me do the things I really wanna do on a daily basis.

When discussing migrant Tamil womyn, Sivamohan notes how "in the process of travelling across nations, literally invisible as illegal, and yet as the postcolonial subversion of the colonial, she redraws the contours of her own body, action, and discourse. It is her *praxis*" (29). Similarly, from what participants suggested, it is evidenced that second-generation womyn, in their straddling of multiple words and identities, can re-draw their own bodies, actions, and discourse through the protests specifically. As one participant described:

I think visually, it (the protests) challenged the constructed image of a young Tamil womyn, it broke the norm that young Tamil women, being docile women, couldn't be outside of their house past 8:00pm and couldn't be seen besides men, like some of these traditional rules. I think visually, it broke some of those constructed images.

Another noted:

And being in that space and being on the front lines and being a part of a movement like that, I think, really nurtured my womynhood in a way that I don't think I could have experienced anywhere else.

Ultimately, participants agreed that the protests were a specific point in time where a shift was possible, where both the external perceptions and lived realities of second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn were affected and (re)constructed by the womyn themselves.

sometimes, some of us just have to cry. because if we don't let it out, it will surely start to build up inside us, a well growing deeper and deeper. it doesn't always have to be a big heavy ugly cry. it can even be a few slow tears, sliding down your right cheek, weighted by pain. what i know is that if i never cried, the water would never have a chance to leave. it would turn old, waiting, sitting inside, eventually drying up. and with it, so too would possibilities for healing. they would evaporate. so i cry. unsure. unabashed. palms flat on the ground, my forehead just shy of the wooden floorboard beneath me, each falling tear underscoring a moment of struggle, an ache i wish to no longer carry. i cry because my body swells with water, bloated with heavy feelings. i have no choice but to implode with tears, chest heaving, random hiccups, a runny nose, the blending of snot and tears. and until it feels like there are no tears left for the night, i stay there, exhausting myself and letting myself go, making room for more love. through the pain, i know my heart is growing a bit bigger, surer of itself, preparing me for what i cannot plan. – Nayani Thiyagarajah, 2014

Grief, Guilt, and the Politics of Emotion

In a 2011 essay written “The Politics of Grief” by Sri Lankan Tamil scholar and author V.V Ganeshanathan for Granta Magazine, she writes, “Grief is a country that looks different to each person entering it, to be sure.” From my interviews with participants, I was reminded of this when hearing the multiple offerings made by the womyn I spoke with. There was a collective agreement that the 2009 Tamil protests left them feeling sad, discontented, and helpless. Furthermore, each participant’s perspective was influenced by her own familial hxstories, political allegiances, personal experiences of negotiating identity, and individual feminist praxis.

At the same time, while participants felt sadness, they also felt a strong connection to the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, through a shared hxstory, culture, and language. As Thiranagama describes, this reflects individual relationships that are perceived “between the self and the collective, in short, the production of selves and spaces with times of terror” (5).

In her book, "The Politics of Emotion", Ahmed looks at the connection between emotions, language, and the body. She explores the influence of emotions on the body, and how this impacts its internal relationship with the external world. The reflections highlighted above bring to mind Ahmed’s suggestion that “bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others” (1). In other words, everything we come into contact with, be it people, objects, or

experiences, has the potential to transform us. In the interactions with other womyn and the protests as a whole, as well as what they witnessed through the media about what was happening in Sri Lanka, there was a sense of oneness that arose. As one participant explained, when witnessing both images of Tamils in Sri Lanka and protestors in Toronto at the time:

There's an intimate part in my heart that will always be that. I can't explain how hurt, how much I empathize with their pain when they would call out...

Furthermore, participants also expressed an inexplicable sense of owing, of sorrow and guilt, which emerged out of their grief; that as members of the diaspora, they were the privileged ones whose families had the chance to leave:

Um, I also felt a little bit of guilt that I hadn't participated in those protests as much as I felt like I should have, because I am connected to this community. We are representatives...

Another participant described how guilt and feelings of helplessness started to affect her daily life and sense of priorities:

Everything I was doing in my day to day suddenly didn't seem like it was all that important...I wanted to be downtown in the protests, as trying to...you know...um...cause as much of a ruckus as I could, bring about as much awareness as I could... it was a funny combination of feeling helpless and empowered.

Connected to the grief, many participants also stressed how grateful they felt to be physically away from the war in Sri Lanka, for a variety of reasons. One respondent noted:

I recognize that I'm privileged and I'm lucky and I'm grateful and blessed to not have been born in a family that was more ravaged by what has happened and what is happening in Sri Lanka...because of that accident of birth and my close near shave with what's happening...

Moreover, as those who participated, when discussing their perspectives on other second-generation womyn who did not participate in the protests, many noted feeling frustration in the moment, but a greater sense of understanding behind different opinions and feelings in reflection:

I guess it's mixed emotions, in a way it's sad, because you didn't stand up for people suffering back home, but at the same time, it's your choice. I'm not going to judge you because you didn't... like some people might not have done it because they have family there, and they didn't want their family to suffer in connection to this.

Another stated:

Now looking back, in like having critically examined the events...I understand people's silences, I understand people's like not wanting to participate...that time was a particular narrative and not everybody fits into that narrative, so you start to understand why people felt not connected.

Among those who did participate, on the whole, there was again a sense of pride and respect for those who decided to participate on the frontlines of the protests. One respondent noted:

I was moved to see so many of me, there in one space, and everyone was coming together to draw attention to something that was really wrong.

Among the womyn who only participated in one protest, there were discussions around the threats the protests posed to their own emotional, mental, and physical well-being. They noted the pull between the personal and the social, and how ultimately their decisions were driven by a need to take care of themselves. As one womyn described:

I think that like I had to go that one time and me not going after that was important for my safety and my mental health.

The other participant stated:

I didn't feel like I could do it again, I didn't want to experience that again, I didn't want to be faced with such sorrow, again in such a public way...

Such responses bring to mind Ahmed's notion of the "inside out model" of emotions, where people have feelings about something, which then move outwards towards objects and others, and which ultimately they believe will return to themselves (9). As such, this understanding that the perceived emotional outcomes of participating in the protests, in addition to their existing feelings around the genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka, would negatively impact them is made evident here.

Furthermore, as noted above, there was a general consensus in the belief that the patriarchy embedded in both Sri Lankan Tamil and Canadian cultures impacted their experiences as Tamil womyn living in Canada. All interviewees came to a discussion of patriarchy on her own, each expressing her version of the role of patriarchy in the daily lives of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, as well as its influence on the participation and non-participation in the 2009 protests. The definition

of patriarchy I refer to for this research is one by bell hooks: “Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance” (“Understanding Patriarchy” 1). The womyn I interviewed discussed how the decision to take up space and participate in the protests actively worked to challenge this system of patriarchy existent in both the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, as well as wider Canadian society.

What was interesting were the varying ways in which they understood patriarchy to influence the emotional responses and views of other womyn’s responses. One participant noted:

Even though a lot of women were standing up and giving speeches...I think people were constrained, especially minorities, especially as gendered minorities, to say things for a specific audience, and it’s like that with anyone. But I felt like a lot of the women were, in the way that they were speaking, it’s like they had to be emotional because they were women... It’s not what you’re saying; it’s how you’re saying it.

She described feeling anger, believing that emotion was used to evoke more appeal, and that womyn were being used for their suggested gendered vocabulary. The participant added:

I don’t think that they need to be emotional in order to be heard.

This brings to mind Ahmed’s notion of the ‘soft touch’ as presenting not only the risk of becoming feminine, but also of becoming less white. She argues that “Within such a narrative, becoming less white would involve moving backwards in time, such that one would come to resemble a more primitive form of social life, or a ‘lower and animal like condition’” (3). Thus, I question how much of the participant’s discomfort with other womyn’s vulnerability may be connected to a larger colonial suggestion that emotion by racialized womyn is a sign of primitiveness and moving backwards.

While it was made clear and can be understood that the respondent felt the visible emotionality of womyn in the protests was a result of patriarchal suggestions of acceptable gendered performativity, her anger at the public display of emotions brings into question her inability to see emotion as a valid individual response from self-identified womyn, outside of

patriarchy. As Ahmed herself notes, “emotions are associated with women, who are represented as ‘closer’ to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment”, she also urges readers to examine how “‘emotion’ has been viewed as ‘beneath’ the faculties of thought and reason...it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous (2). In response to the participant’s suggestion, I urge us to question engaging in creating a dichotomy, where in order to challenge a larger patriarchal structure for the purpose of “progress”, a womyn must forgo emotions that have been stereotyped as “feminine” and lacking autonomy.



Photo by Nick Kozak/Torontoist

Decolonizing Diaspora: Refuge in a White Settler State as Racialized Womyn

Before beginning my qualitative research, I committed to a decolonizing approach. What this means is continuously engaging with the reality that as racialized womyn, we should actively work to disengage with the harmful holds of patriarchy and colonial-era legacies, which are found in governing structures, systems, and society at large.

Diana Taylor writes, “For all its different deployments— cultural, aesthetic, political— the hxstory of colonial violence, dominance, rape, and desire never quite frees itself of the gendered and racialized bodies that live it” (100). This remains true, exemplified by the ongoing global

process of decolonization amongst indigenous and racialized communities. Furthermore, as Ania Loomba notes, “We cannot dismiss either the importance of formal decolonisation or the fact that unequal relations of colonial rule are inscribed in the contemporary imbalances between ‘first’ and ‘third’ world nations” (“Colonialism/Postcolonialism” 12). This is crucial to remember for those of us born to elders who migrated directly from “third-world nations”, as negative suggestions made about bodies from these regions are inevitably transferred over to us in some way, even when born and raised in a Canadian context.

Sherene Razack describes a white settler society as one that is established by Europeans on non-European soil, its origins “in the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by the conquering Europeans” (1). In the mythology surrounding a white-settler state, such as Canada and the USA, it is suggested that white settlers came first, before anyone else, negating the pre-existence and land cultivation by indigenous communities. As this state grows, “a white settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy” (Razack 1). In this paper, I seek to challenge the effects of supporting the upholding of such hierarchies, of the unequal relations and imbalances between racialized settlers and indigenous peoples of Canada, referred to by the indigenous peoples as Turtle Island.

I could not engage in this work without acknowledging and incorporating the fact that as migrants, we cannot ignore the fact that we are still settlers on occupied indigenous lands. Taking that further, as the children of displaced diasporic communities like the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, which have fled post-colonial conflict states, we must work to remember that the Canada we have found refuge in is itself is a white settler state and also founded on colonial violence.

When beginning my interviews, I was not sure whether participants would engage in a conversation around decolonization and solidarity building with indigenous communities, in addition to acknowledging that our host country is an occupied territory. However, among the eight participants, three womyn actively engaged in conversation around this topic, noting how it impacts

their organizing and feelings around Canada, especially after the 2009 protests. One respondent stated:

I get really annoyed when people are like, “Oh you’re Canadian, you should be so happy.” First of all, I think it’s clear that we’re on stolen land and we are also settlers. So I challenge that notion. And I’m very weary of any form of nationalism. I think it’s really problematic because of the violence that is imparted in order to create that nation. So I don’t really believe in that term (Canadian).

A second respondent said:

We’re already on colonized land, that’s why I’m really active and I really try to have solidarity with indigenous community here, because our struggles are so alike.

Both acknowledgements of being on occupied land, as well as explorations around the notion of solidarity, reflect Alexander’s reminder that “As black people and people of color in this country, we are all living witnesses to the largely unfinished project of decolonization, some say a failed project” (270). While we continue to engage in transnational diasporic resistance on these lands, which also contests suggestions around how we must “behave” as bodies of colour, we cannot refuse to acknowledge that we occupy lands where resistance and decolonization by the indigenous peoples has been, and continues to be, dismissed and halted in various ways. As Razack reminds us, “to contest white people’s primary claim to the land and to the nation requires making visible Aboriginal nations whose lands were stolen and whose communities remain imperilled” (5). Therefore, we, as people of colour, must begin and/or continue to engage in solidarity work with indigenous communities, as we continue our own resistance, rendering more visible both the struggles of indigenous peoples and racialized settlers on these lands.

Alongside an acknowledgement of indigenous oppression, respondents also pushed further to discuss how this has left them questioning Canadian policies, and exploring their own existence and resistance in ways that engage in a process of decolonizing. This includes re-examining the existing national story of “bodies of colour whose labour also developed this land but who are not its first occupants” and critiquing “the racialized structure of citizenship that characterizes contemporary Canada” (Razack 5). One respondent noted:

It's a hystory of violence. And actually, an ongoing violence. Like, I don't recognize Canada as Canada, I recognize it as Turtle Island. And I see us all as visitors, quite simply put. I think that various identities and this idea of multiculturalism, this land of people coming here, was only because the immigrant body was exploitable. Right?

Another respondent even urged that we look at the Gardiner Expressway protest as:

A provocative thing, because colonialism created roads, so that capitalism and the colonial state can progress... It's about connection and communication... And the ability for a racialized minority, specifically a racialized minority, where the majority is working class, to disrupt that, it says so much about the power of mass mobilization...

But again, even with this example of mass mobilization, I urge us to remember that such activism is viewed as a threat to the nation-state and quickly shut down, and in most cases illegitimated and relegated to an act of disruption, rather than a call for action and justice by citizens. It relegates public suggestions of oppression and violence enacted by the nation-state as disruptive to the public realm, which serves to uphold the underlying narrative of a nation-state created through violence as valid. This highlights the disparity in power that exists, between indigenous and racialized peoples, and white Canada. As one respondent noted:

This idea of the nation-state itself is problematic, because it, it erases languages, hystories. It seeks to eliminate it, essentially, for a group who is not actually elected, who is self-identified to be able to maintain power... To be able to access that, you need privilege. You need money. You need all of these things. Nobody can *just* access it. And nobody's a part of the decision-making. And to be able to turn it into, I guess, the national industrial complex.

Lastly, while it is can be argued that migrant populations like the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Toronto "appropriate and transform cities and other locales in very different ways", including our public activism, we must recognize that this in effect supports the appropriation of continuously occupied lands that we become further complicit in (Burman 70). The need for indigenous solidarity, especially as we engage in resistance work on behalf of our own communities, is crucial if we are to maintain an active commitment to decolonization. Such a process does not just only involve our own ethnic communities and racial groups. It involves having difficult discussions with others, acknowledging the violent hystory of this state, and building with and participating in solidarity work with other indigenous and racialized communities. This is

suggested with the hope that one day, Canada “can transcend their bloody beginnings and contemporary inequalities by remembering and confronting the racial hierarchies that structure our lives” (Razack 5). As one participant highlighted:

I see myself connected to Caribbean, African heritage. I see myself connected to Hispanic heritage. I see myself connected to Indigenous heritage. That’s how I organize. And I can’t see it any other way.

one day, i hope to return to Yalpanam. it will have been 25 years since my first visit. i feel for a meeting that i can remember. my soul yearns to feel, to see, to taste the birthplace of my Amma and Appa, the home of my ancestors. i want to see the high-rise palmyra trees, to feel the ocean against my skin, to pray in my appama’s temple, to visit the Jaffna library my ammama loved so much, to taste the waters of a Yalpanam coconut. one day soon, hopefully. – Nayani Thiyagarajah, 2014

The Implications of Archiving Through Film

I had originally imagined that by utilizing film, I would not only be exploring the possibilities of storytelling, but also simultaneously challenging the common practice of silencing that womyn in the community experience on various levels. However, through the participants’ unanimous decision to remain anonymous during interviews and my own subsequent reflections, I learned that another form of silencing had followed the 2009 protests, a grand narrative from the nation-state of Sri Lanka that discursively and practically silenced the participants of my interviews, even those who admitted to “coming to voice” in some way as womyn during the 2009 protests. Out of fear of retaliation by the Sri Lankan state and concerns regarding travelling to Sri Lanka for both themselves and their families, and also for family still living back home, all eight participants chose to remain anonymous for this and other reasons. As such, new questions were raised about how we take testimonies and turn them into embodied narratives that cannot be told directly by the people to whom those stories belong. This will be explored further in Chapter 5.

By putting myself at the head of this research, which includes the sharing of both this thesis paper and my short film, I am subsequently placing myself at risk for backlash from the Sri Lankan state. By publicly admitting to participating in protests against Sri Lanka in 2009 and engaging in this work that interrogates the narratives perpetuated by this specific state, I out myself through the

dissemination of my research work. Simon writes that the re-memebering of hxstory as public memory through both writing and film is “a practice that seeks the recovery of what has been lost, neglected or misplaced”; it is “a reminder and a warning of what threatens to be forgotten or has already been forgotten” (Simon 105). Reflecting on this, I remember that when beginning this research, my intention was to document the stories that have been neglected and silenced, but not yet lost, not yet impossible to retrieve. We are not so far in the future that these narratives have been silenced forever. Therefore, it is important that we go in search of them and archive them, if we feel ready and willing to do so. This will also be further examined in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE OF SILENCE IN FAMILY, NATION AND FILM

It wasn't until 2009 that I started having more in-depth conversations about the war in Sri Lanka. It wasn't until I started reading about its hxstory through the internet, books, and articles, and having conversations with other Tamil friends and their families, that I developed my own awareness of the complex colonial hxstory that gave way to post-colonial war. It wasn't until I started asking my parents questions about their experiences and opinions, when I truly started to understand the traumas they themselves had both been carrying for almost 30 years. It wasn't until those requested moments of sharing turned into voluntary ones, where my parents openly shared their guilt around leaving family behind, their pain in being displaced from a home they referred to as a paradise once-upon-a-time, and their sadness about the racism and various forms of oppression faced here in Canada as racialized refugee bodies, when I really started to explore my own feelings toward Sri Lanka, position on the war, and shifting identity in a diasporic Canadian context.

During the 2009 protests, I was torn between showing up and standing back. My emotions around the LTTE had grown complex, at the time supporting their cause but not supporting their means. I refused to align myself with the Sri Lankan government in any way, believing a nation carrying out a state-sponsored killing of my ethnic community was not a country I could ever claim.

I was disgruntled with the Canadian government for their lack of concrete action. I was frustrated with the wider Canadian public and media, feeling unwelcomed and othered in new ways as a womyn of colour. I was saddened when referred to as a “Tamil Tiger” by strangers on multiple occasions. I was scared by rumours that the Sri Lankan state was documenting all those in the Tamil diaspora who participated through media coverage. I was tired of feeling helpless and unsure. But still, I continued to participate, not necessarily at the forefront, not loudly or especially visibly, but present nonetheless. I held hands with strangers and chanted alongside friends. I also took my camera with me and documented the activism, using my Facebook account to share photos and written notes of reflection on the protests. I suppose that was the beginning of this research work, of simultaneously participating and documenting from the sidelines.

When reflecting on my conversations with participants, I am reminded of the role of silence in my connection to the conflict in Sri Lanka. For me, it started during childhood. My parents rarely spoke of the war in Sri Lanka and the reasons they left. Aside from witnessing them listening to the Tamil radio station in Toronto or knowing as a fact that we were not going to visit Sri Lanka due to war (amongst other reasons), there wasn't much discussion of their experiences around the conflict. They would share stories about their childhoods, about their school days, about family, but never any mentions of government-enforced educational discrimination or state-sanctioned riots or the moment when war became imminent. They shared happy memories and shielded us from sad ones.

Looking back at my childhood and adolescence, it's clear to me that my lack of attachment and earlier ignorance toward Sri Lanka was due, in large part, to my parents' silence, and their decision not to engage in socialization with the wider Toronto Sri Lankan Tamil community family or transnational organizing around the war. As such, when the protests started, I, like some of those womyn I interviewed, was hesitant to participate. I was not previously active in the community, nor did I feel comfortable in being so, due to my limited grasp of the Tamil language and feelings of limited knowledge around the history of Sri Lankan Tamils. I also felt othered by the Canadian

government, and as a result silenced, feeling like my voice was unwelcome, even as a Canadian-born, Canadian-raised woman. My gendered and racialized existence became more real, but as a result, so did my growing anti-racist, feminist praxis.

In this chapter, I will explore the theme of silence and its role in intergenerational conversations and sharing (or lack thereof), and the gendered self-silencing that arises out of discomfort with other community members in a specific diaspora. I will also discuss the ways that the silencing power of nation-state narratives endures in diaspora, in ways that can constrain activism and possibility. Finally I will also discuss my creative thesis film, developed to compliment this paper, and the reasons why it has been impacted by that same silencing power and silencing practice of nation-state narratives.

The Impacts of Intergenerational Silences

Heddon writes, “the responsibility of bearing witness to the personal experiences of ‘history’ passes to the second generation, passing through their bodies” (62). When speaking with participants, this was made clear, in that they were constantly physically bearing witness to the histories of their parents and elders in the way that it was possible to fully engage, somewhat engage, or fully disengage with the war in Sri Lanka. They played witness to their parents’ experiences and traumas, by watching the ways their bodies chose to participate with the conflict, whether actively or passively; the ways their ears received questions about the conflict and chose to respond; and finally, the ways their ways mouths in/voluntarily shared their stories as time progressed. Not unlike myself, a few participants discussed how these intergenerational silences impacted their personal sense of connection to Sri Lanka civil conflict. As one respondent noted about her family:

They’re not big on talking about the things...on communication around the things that are most intimate to us...They never sat down and talked about it – this is what happened, this is what’s happening now, how do we get involved. It was more, “there are horrible reasons why we left...”

There was also a general belief among these participants that the reason for familial silences was trauma; they felt that their parents chose not to talk about the conflict because of the pain it reminded them of. One participated said:

And so looking at my dad, I think his resistance to talking about things...has a lot to do with trauma...not being able to reach his family or having family going through things, once he moved out of his country...he wasn't really able to do much about. I think a lot of his unwillingness to talk about things stems from a lot of emotion that he doesn't really want to talk about.

Furthermore, some participants noted suggestions made around moving forward and forgetting the past, which their parents maintained. When describing her own family's hesitance around conversations about the conflict, one respondent said her parents' general stance was:

We're not gonna talk about them...this is what it is. And now that we're here, let's move on.

According to a few participants, this silenced exercised by their elders was also about protection – their parents seemed to want to protect their children from the difficult realities of the conflict they left behind, protect them from their own traumas. As one womyn noted:

But at the same time, at least in our house, they tried to protect us from all of it, kinda like not remind us constantly about what they had to go through and all the things they had to leave behind...

While it is understandable that recounting the past can be traumatic and (re)triggering, and that the decision to protect one's children from both the memory and reality of war can be viewed as a means of survival, ultimately, this selective silence worked to create feelings of disconnect, unawareness, and confusion around conflict in Sri Lanka among second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn. And as I explore further in the next section, this in turn created a sense of discomfort for some womyn, when contemplating or actively engaging with the diaspora in Toronto.

Moreover, through the course of my interviews, a common theme that came up among both those who did not participate and those who participated only once in the protests, was feelings around not belonging. While they each expressed feeling various levels of kinship with other protestors and the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, these participants expressed not feeling

comfortable among other Tamils in Toronto, for reasons ranging from gendered notions about how they should look and behave, to feeling a lack of knowledge on the history of Sri Lanka and the LTTE in specific, to inexperience in socializing with the diaspora. One participant noted:

I told my friend I don't want to go. I don't feel comfortable in that space, I feel people will look at me like... Because I'm so... My bodily comportment and the way I present myself in social circles, especially in Tamil social circles, is frowned upon.

Here, this participant's offering exemplifies a discomfort around how other Tamils mark her gendered body as different or other, even within the community. This is not a feeling that she alone carries. Her fears around not being welcomed almost prevented her from participating at a protest, as it did for other womyn, even when they had seriously considered going and trying to take part.

Furthermore, the lack of socialization with the wider Sri Lankan Tamil community, as a result of their parents' emphasis on moving forward and decisions to disengage with community organizing, left one participant, in specific, feeling a sense of discomfort with the community:

I didn't really have many opportunities to socialize as Tamil. I didn't know what that meant outside of my family...I would like to know, but I am hesitant...I'm a little scared as to whether it is okay to be Tamil in Toronto and the rest of the world.

The Silencing Power of Nation-State Narratives

For several years now activists and cultural workers in Western Europe and Canada have met together to exchange ideas and narratives and to work together politically, examining the reimagining of the nation. The intermediate indeterminacy of the transnational space provides a space of praxis for women to reimagine the national transgressively. – Sumathy Sivamohan, *The Middle Passage: Migration and Displacement of Sri Lankan Tamil Women of the Diaspora*

Another key theme that emerged among participants was the suggested silencing power of nation-state narratives. Both during and after the 2009 protests, the participants expressed feeling silenced by the national/ist narratives of the former de-factor state of Tamil Eelam, the Canadian state, and the Sri Lankan state. In relation to each, participants felt as if they could not or should not participate in public discourse, for fear of being misunderstood, influenced, othered, or attacked. Below, I explore feelings among the womyn in relation to the varying narratives of nation, as initially explored in Chapter 2. Furthermore, I share reflections in response to the interviews. Ultimately, I explore how narratives of nation-states silence, both discursively and practically.

Under the LTTE Banner

First, where it concerned the LTTE, three participants felt silenced and shut out of the protests, to varying degrees, due to the widespread LTTE support made visible throughout protests globally. As mentioned in the last section, they expressed actively choosing not to participate, as a result of various factors, including: familial grievances with the Tamil Tigers; personal disagreements with the LTTE's use of armed resistance; the Tamil Tigers expelling of Muslims from Sri Lanka's northern region; and dispute with various tactics used by the group, including the recruitment of child soldiers, the silencing of other Tamil resistance movements (e.g. Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization, People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam), and crimes committed against innocent civilians in the last stages of war. One participant noted:

I was very weary of what I knew of Tamil Eelam and the LTTE and people who supported it. So I was like, no I don't want to go.

Participants also shared that they felt as if they did not know enough about the LTTE at the time, which impacted their decision in coming out to protests, where visible Tamil Tiger support became a staple element through the incorporation of LTTE flags. One respondent stated:

The first protest I went to, didn't really have any like Tiger logos or flags, but by the time I wanted give it another try, it had become a feature of the protest. And that's something that made me really uncomfortable...going to something under the banner of that.

As Thurairajah notes, "Members of diasporic communities differ across this spectrum in how they negotiate their loyalties both within and between countries of settlement and homeland" ("The Shadow of Terrorism" 132). Thus, for those who felt uncomfortable and unwilling to participate in the protests due to the heavy LTTE rhetoric, it was completely understandable, given the fact that there is no homogenous collective support for the LTTE, nor is there one specific way in which members of the diaspora in Toronto negotiate both their Tamil and Canadian identities. Like Thurairajah suggests, there is a spectrum along which all of us hold our own space. Ultimately, it is our choice that will dictate how we continue to feel and whether/how we engage in resistance work.

A Growing Disconnect with the Canadian State

When exploring the relationship between Tamil protestors and other members of the Canadian public in 2009, Thurairajah writes how “members of the diaspora were encouraged to go ‘back home’ if they were so anxious to engage in homeland politics. Their right to belong to Canada was being questioned, and an implicit message that their place was actually in Sri Lanka was also being conveyed” (“The Shadow of Terrorism” 147). This further emphasizes the notion that refugees and displaced migrants “threaten the calm, ordered spaces of the original inhabitants” (Razack 3). In my interviews, similar observations were shared by each of the eight womyn with whom I spoke. As one respondent stated:

As much as you consider yourself Canadian, are you really a Canadian? Do you really belong here? ‘Cause people here don’t think so.

Overall, they discussed how both during and after the protests, they felt as if their relationship with Canada had been strained. A few dismissed current Canadian policies like multiculturalism. Some questioned what it means to be Canadian and started to look more closely at the history of the state, and how it came to be. Many of them shared that they struggled to consider themselves either fully Canadian or even half-Canadian, while one person even shared that she rejected the notion of Canadian, due to its legacy of violence and oppression as a white settler state. Overall, what was clear was that a seemingly irreparable distance and weariness has been created, between these womyn and the physical space in which they were born and/or largely raised.

Thurairajah suggests that “Policies such as the Multiculturalism Act in Canada ensure that the rights of minorities are protected,” and that “the concept of multiculturalism has enabled immigrant communities to integrate into the wider Canadian context without having to abandon their ethnic beliefs or practices” (“The Shadow of Terrorism” 130). While one cannot deny that there are spaces afforded to racialized communities in Canada, especially those leaving situations of war and conflict in other countries, this notion re-affirms the colonial notion that people of colour must maintain a sense of constant gratitude to the Canadian state for taking them in and “letting

them” practice their beliefs. As Razack notes, Canada has narrated the idea that it is “besieged and crowded by Third World refugees and migrants who are drawn to Canada by the legendary niceness of European Canadians” (Razack 4). This contributes to an historically problematic dynamic in which indigenous and racialized peoples are expected to be grateful and compliant, while they are othered and experience systemic/societal oppression daily. Similar to Australia’s adoption of a multiculturalism policy, which Gunew describes as benefiting “from acknowledging realities of cultural diversity – but only within strict limits,” many respondents felt the idea of multiculturalism is not genuinely practiced and is only utilized in ways that serves the state (103). As one respondent expressed in her disillusionment and frustration with Canada’s policy of multiculturalism:

But, also just what does it mean, multiculturalism? And the term racialized or minority... When minority really isn’t applicable in so many ways, and it’s, that term itself is very oppressive... So I think it’s helped me take off my rosy glasses and really push myself... I think there’s a huge divide between what we think or hope and idealistically believe we are, to what we actually practice.

From this, we are reminded there exists a need to stop ignoring the full and complex history of Canada – not one that has been maintained as ever-benevolent and welcoming, where multiculturalism works perfectly, but instead, one that is undeniably marred by violence and oppression, one that continues to deny its dispossession of indigenous lands, and ignores necessary conversations around the complications of its past and present-day in/actions. As Razack stresses, a feature of white settler mythologies is “the disavowal of conquest, genocide, slavery, and the exploitation of the labour of peoples of colour. In North America, it is still the case that European conquest and colonization are often denied, largely through the fantasy that North America was peacefully settled and not colonized” (2). This denial serves to reproduce the narrative of “European settlers as the bearers of civilization”, thereby relegating indigenous peoples to a space in time in the past, and other racialized migrants being “scripted as late arrivals” (Razack 2-3). In this narrative, white European settlers and their descendants maintain a position of power as leaders of the land, maintaining white privilege in a system that is rooted in white supremacist beliefs. In such

a system, indigenous grievances, such as the ongoing murder and disappearances of First Nations womyn, are deemed not a priority by the government; while racialized migrants, especially refugees and displaced peoples, are expected to maintain a constant sense of gratitude to Canada. As one respondent noted:

You struggle because when you do identify with your other hyphenated identity, you feel the backlash, of the immigrant that doesn't embrace the identity of their new home, in a way you're forced to embrace this Canadian identity. If you're not, then you become othered right away.

Ultimately, indigenous peoples of this land and people of colour will continue to be othered, and face systemic and societal oppression in this country, unless we can have honest conversations with the state around the true history of Canada. However, with its 150th anniversary upon us in 2017, and the insistence that we begin “celebrations of white settlement” and the creation of Canada as a nation-state, while the government and much of the public continues to ignore or deny the violence that was enacted to create this state, it appears that the above-outlined narratives of this nation will continue to oppress, and effectively exclude indigenous and racialized peoples, as it has for centuries (Gunew 103).

Fear of the Sri Lankan State

When asking participants to reflect on their participation and/or non-participation in the 2009 protests and how they view that time looking back, a common theme emerged amongst those who protested: the fear of retribution by the Sri Lankan state, if they were discovered to be active in organizing work in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. With hopes to one day travel back to Sri Lanka or concerns around family members travelling back, in addition to fears around the safety of family members still based in Sri Lanka, participants requested that their identity be kept private, which they had the option not to do in this study. Some also discussed scaling back in their activism since 2009, hoping to distance themselves further from the protests. As one respondent noted:

I also realized a lot of the persecutions when going back home, people who were involved, now wanting to go back home, and the thought of not being able to go because of my involvement was my biggest concern because I had to go home, at one point or another.

She also shared that she had received indirect threatening messages from Sri Lankan state supporters for her active participation and leadership in organizing for a number of years:

I slowly started pulling myself out of a lot of things because of my own personal safety. There was a time when I was also threatened. The threat became very real. I was being singled and threatened...I had to back down and quiet down a bit.

This response exemplifies how even from across the world, the narratives around a nation-state and its policies, whether official or not, can incite fear in members of the larger diaspora, who chose to challenge its mandates and methods. It also reflects the power imbalance and oppression faced by the Tamil population in Sri Lanka and any attempts to question the government's actions. As Thurairajah observed in her study, the majority of participants in this study expressed sentiments that they likely "would not risk their positions and the security they had in Canada", especially not that of their family members ("The Shadow of Terrorism" 148). Such sentiments express the complicated nature of transnational activism, especially where it concerns a nation-state that is known to have committed war crimes, who continues to "deny any civilian casualties as a result of their actions, referring to a zero-casualty policy and humanitarian rescue project, and insisting that Tamils who had died were members of the militancy" ("The Politics of Grief").

Among second-generation members of a diaspora, there persists a desire among many to return and see the homeland of their parents. As Godwin describes, members of community possess "a collective myth of 'home', often with a desire to return" (Godwin 165). What's interesting is that despite expressing sadness for the Tamil population in Sri Lanka, acknowledging the continued oppression of that community, the importance of diasporic "safety" post-2009 was undeniable. As such, most participants discontinued engagement in transnational activism – their desire for safety eventually overrode internal pulls to continue organizing. For some of the womyn I interviewed, it appeared that the focus was shifting to diaspora-specific issues. For example, one respondent said:

I very much identify with being a part of the diaspora. And how I see myself in it is, especially as a womyn, is a like a straddle of cultures...The relationships that womyn hold as story keepers in their families is really big...That's how I see myself in the diaspora.

Another noted:

When I talk about being Tamil, for me it means belonging to a Tamil diaspora, rather than talking about what it might mean to be Tamil in Sri Lanka... because of my own changing relationship with Sri Lanka, I think I'm more invested in diaspora than I am in, like whatever point of origin.

Here, we are reminded that for Sri Lankan Tamils in Toronto, “post-migration life paths are marked by locales’ specific histories and policy frameworks” (Burman 70). While they will remain undeniably connected to the homeland, their current locale and growing history in the host country will inevitably also impact their decisions and focus. As second-generation women, their memories and personal life histories are located here in Toronto. Therefore, the decision by participants to focus on diaspora issues is understandable, given the very different set of realities they experience in Canada as gendered, racialized, and generally othered bodies, as explored earlier in this paper.

Overall, through the topics discussed above, I’ve explored the role of silence, not only amongst family members, but also in relation to nation-state and nationalist narratives. These stories work to discursively and practically silence Sri Lankan Tamil people, both in the homeland and across the diaspora, especially as women. Between intergenerational silences and those induced by fear of nationalist narratives, we see how silence can be a debilitating and powerful force.

In the next section, I try to extract these lessons about silences from my interviews as a way of thinking through the structure of my creative thesis film. Because those I interviewed asked to remain anonymous in my work, I struggled for a long time with how to effectively and ethically tackle the production of my film. Moving forward, I will discuss how I tried to translate some of these tensions into the filmmaking process and the actual film itself, and share on the ways in which my findings ultimately structured my film.

Silenced Testimony: The (Re)Imagining of a Short Film



This is a behind-the-scenes photo that captures a brief moment in the process of making my short creative thesis film. Here, you see the producer, Muna Ali, as well as the DP, Yannick Anton. The included objects – candles, bottles, stones, and shells – had a dual purpose. First, the candles were used as a way of commemorating all the loss that the Sri Lankan Tamil community has experienced. Secondly, the stones from my own personal altar, as well as the candles, were included to help support me, as I focused on sharing reflections through my body.

How do I translate into visual form the many conflicts and silences that structure the revelations of the womyn I interviewed? How does an artist such as myself negotiate the ethical dilemma of remaining truthful to the requirements of the interview subjects, while also speaking to the very critical and larger politics of creating a rupture in the narratives of nation that silence the agency of Sri Lankan Tamil womyn of colour? These were the main questions that structured my attempts to reproduce my findings in the form of film. As I stated at the start of my paper, I had originally imagined my work as one that would celebrate the possibility of struggle of collective courage in the way in which Klodawsky's *No More Tears Sister* seemed to do. However, the conditions and ethics circumscribing my film made it far less celebratory, and far more a document of tensions and silences.

Heddon writes that one context for our testimonial culture is “that of geopolitical upheavals which includes wars and genocide and have their related human costs such as displacement, mass-migration and the need for asylum” (53). For the purpose of my research, that specific testimonial

culture related to geopolitical upheaval was directly connected to the type of life history I had decided to do, as I gathered testimonies amongst second-generation Sri Lankan Tamil women in Toronto. Through these testimonies, I sought to document their thoughts on transnational activism, as well as personal perspectives and feelings regarding war crimes committed against the Tamil population during the last days of war. I was curious about the relationship between testimony and trauma, and whether what it was true what Heddon suggested, that the two were “frequently positioned as opposite sides of the same coin, the one being held as the mechanism of ‘recovery’ – individual and/or cultural – from the other” (Heddon 53-54).

In his classic essay on trauma and testimony, entitled “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening”, Dori Laub argues that it is only when there is an empathetic listener that the traumatic memory can find its way into narrative. He writes that when someone is providing testimony on trauma, the listener “is a party to the creation of knowledge *do novo*”, standing in as a blank screen of sorts onto which “the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (Laub 57).

When beginning each of my interviews, I was the listener. I was the person with whom they were sharing their private testimony of witnessing the Toronto Tamil Protests since 2009. At the beginning of each interview, I provided participants with the option of remaining anonymous, instead of assuming this would be their likely decision. My reason for this was that I had intended to produce a short documentary film, as creative thesis component to this paper. While I hadn’t assumed everyone would agree to publicly share their stories, I was challenged as both a writer and artist when each interviewee requested that their identity be kept private. The reasons for this are related to the topic of silence explored above. For fear of retribution from the Sri Lankan state, as a result of participation in the protests, and the questioning and challenging of that country’s actions in their interviews, none of the participants wanted the interviews to trace back to them. Moreover, out of discomfort with the idea of other members of the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora and wider public learning of their individual stories and perspectives, many chose the route of anonymity.

As a result, I was challenged to re-imagine plans for the film. While a documentary would have provided the space for interviewees to share their stories directly on camera, I was now left with the task of individually deciding how these interviews would be used to inform the project and determining what shape this short film would take. This was not a space in which “public testimony to traumatic events” could be utilized to have “some effect within the public sphere” in an obvious way (Heddon 59). As such, I began to think about how I could possibly extend my autoethnographic approach to this film as well. I started to wonder about what self-reflexive messages would be shared through this film and what methods storytelling could be utilized to reflect the research in some way. I started to imagine my film as a mode of autoethnography.



In the image above, I am shown against a white wall. Images from the 2009 Toronto Tamil Protests, projected onto the wall and my body, are made to appear like they are being inscribed onto my body. This image relates to the tension and connection, between my own personal agency, and that of the contradictory but collective power behind you.

It is only with the permission and active participation of the interviewees involved that I made the decision to continue my plan of sharing through film. While they were not directly involved in the filmmaking process, a mutual agreement has been made to share the film with them before sharing it with a public audience.

At multiple points, I first tried to build a narrative story based on the testimonies. As Laub writes, through my role as the listener, I somehow came to be “a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event” being share in each interview (Laub 57). But it was much more complex than that, given the fact that I myself am a Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, who also participated in the protests at various points. So while I was a listener, I was also someone who actually did share the experience of protesting and being a distant witness to the violence erupting in Sri Lanka at the time. As such, I knew intimately that I could not engage in a process of using the testimonies shared with me to build another person’s story. That did not feel ethical for three key reasons. First, it would, in effect, mean some kind of manipulation of the testimonies to create a whole story. My work as a filmmaker has never been about fictionalizing real-life events and testimonies, as I’ve never felt comfortable taking liberties on (re)imagining someone else’s stories. The only time I ever engage in such a process is when the stories I’m dealing with are my own. Second, I understood first-hand what it may feel like if someone were to manipulate my own testimony of the protests, and I could not imagine doing that to someone else. Lastly, even if I were to move ahead with this approach, I would have to use other Sri Lankan Tamil or South Asian actors, which may put those individuals’ safety at risk as well.

Over time, while I struggled to figure out how to approach this film, I also felt myself growing tired with my work. Perhaps, as Laub suggests, this was because through my listening to testimonies, I came to partially experience the trauma of others in myself as well (57). But I also believe it was because I myself was carrying trauma and pain from my participation and witnessing of the protests, as well as the violence in Sri Lanka from a distance. As Laub notes, the listener will “experience hazards and struggles of his own, while carrying out his function of a witness to the traumata witness” (Laub 58). In time, I came to understand that I was carrying hurt from my own journey, as well as pieces of pain that was shared with me, feeling “the bewilderment, injury, confusion, dread and conflicts that the trauma victim feels” (Laub 56-57). This further triggered my

own trauma. Eventually, it became clear to me that this was why I was feeling so tired and disengaged with my own research. As such, I took a break from writing for about six months, before eventually returning to my work. I made peace with the fact that it would take me longer to finish this research, but that it was in my best interest and that of the work to pause for a moment.

Ultimately, when I did come back to both my writing and production work on the film, what I decided was to develop and direct a short film that features myself in performance as the principal protagonist. As such, I employed an autoethnographic approach to the film. Without dialogue, I utilize a combination of music and choreographed dance/movements, as a means of storytelling and sharing my reflections on the findings of this research. Continuing with my chosen methodology of autoethnography, I worked to create a self-reflexive visual piece, which serves as physical and cinematic reflection of my own thoughts and feelings in response to this work, as well as a reflection on the themes that have emerged from the interviews.

Diana Taylor argues, “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity”, a mode of knowledge production that precedes verbal discourse (2). She also notes that events can be analyzed as performances as well, highlighting how “civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity” are all “rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere” (3). When analyzing the 2009 Toronto Tamil Protests, it can be argued that those events were performances, acts of resistance in the public sphere, in which participants performed various identities, challenging audiences to reflect and respond.

With that in mind, I started imagining my thesis as a performance on film, a chance to reflect the performance of protest and resistance, and represent my own reflections on the findings of this research. In the process of conceptualizing this film and (re)imagining how it would look, I eventually made the artistic choice to create an “act of transfer”, rather than a transparent literal testimony. This would leave the issues open to interpretation on the part of the viewer, and by drawing on dance, this scenario would act as a surrogate for verbal language. I understood that the

ways in which the testimony could be used would be very dependent on my capacity to perform it. Thus, the film then became a site for the performance of the both the listener and the teller in myself. This could be because the tellers did not believe they would consistently find empathetic listeners, and so in Laub's terms, could not verbally narrate their experience publicly.

An experimental diasporic film in nature, my short can be considered to be an example of what has been described as "accented cinema". According to Hamid Naficy, who coined the term, accented cinema is "an aesthetic response to the experience of displacement through exile, migration or diaspora" (11). As my film is a reflexive response to gendered diasporic conditions, imaginations, subjectivities, and possible transformations born out of displacement, it can fall into the category of accented cinema, which is comprised of "different types of cinema made by exilic, diasporic, and postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers who live and work in countries other than their country of origin (Naficy 11).

Working largely with a crew of other artists of colour, who chose to be public allies in the creation of this film, I took on the responsibility and risk of publicly creating this work. In the words of Regina David, "Deciding to fight, I escaped to a path of thorns, cutting and clearing a path toward justice and freedom for the next generation" (Sivamohan 24). Aside from myself, there is only one other Sri Lankan Tamil womyn who helped to produce this film, whose identity will remain anonymous by choice. I felt it was imperative that the other key storyteller, the choreographer, be a Tamil womyn with whom my hxstory, present, and future are intimately tied.



I call this still “where all the veins meet”. In this image, I am utilizing hand movements from the traditional South Indian dance form known as bharathanatyam, which many Tamil womyn grow up learning and practicing. As I stand in front of a visual of protestors from 2009, my body facing the wall, eyes focused on the them, hands in the air mid-movement, this still represents my own connection with the womyn I interviewed, both those who protested and those who watched from a distance. It also reflects my own experiences as a protestor and as someone who watched in front of television/computer screens. Moreover, the use of archive footage is meant to reflect the haunting nature of my memories of the protests and how I carry those experiences with me, as well as the ones that have been shared with me through testimony from this research.

Overtime, marked by conversations with my supervisory committee, friends, and family, I remembered that I was putting myself at risk for being excluded from Sri Lanka, as I am publicly sharing that I was involved in the 2009 protests in some capacity. For me, it is a scary decision, which has undoubtedly been marked by doubts at many points. Still, over time, what is possibly at stake for myself as an individual has failed to override what is at stake for womyn in my community, if they continue to be ignored and have our voices be suppressed by any one nation-state. Furthermore, I am continuously reminding myself that my own activism and beliefs would not mean losing my home here in Canada, as it must have for first-generation Sri Lankan Tamil womyn, like my mother, who had to leave their home in Sri Lanka. Reflecting on Patricia Hill-Collins’s decision to become “less preoccupied with coming to voice”, because she knows how fast

voice can be silenced or taken away, my focus has shifted to exploring effective ways to utilize voice through alternative mediums, whenever and wherever possible for myself (xiii).



This still above illustrates the self-reflexive journey that this research has taken me on. It reflects all the moments I was forced to confront my own traumas and complexities, as I worked to complete this research from 2012-2015. The white backdrop reflects a clean canvas, onto which I am positioning myself as a protagonist and utilizing it as a place on which to paint my own reflections on the findings of my work. It is, in many ways, a representation of the countless moments of solitude I experienced while doing this research.

It also helps to remember that I am not placing myself at risk in the diaspora, recognizing that I have the hopeful protection of the Canadian state. This in itself is a possible privilege that I can be afforded, in ways that my Tamil brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka cannot. Over the course of my research and writing, it has become incumbent that sometimes, we must exercise our honesty and self-reflexivity, putting ourselves at risk if it means that silenced narratives, especially those that are gendered, get told in some way, and that violence is simultaneously uncovered and remembered. Reflecting on Heddon's suggestion that "performance as a public act is perhaps its greatest potential in the realm of testimony and witnessing," I view this creative thesis as an autoethnographic offering, itself a public performance, which I feel has the strongest potential to both ethically and affectively tell a story that maintains the anonymity of participants, while still documenting the reality of the silencing Sri Lankan Tamil womyn continue to face (55).

I am following a path uncharted, with restricted support from both sides, and internally begging for both to innerstand me. And as I take the time and exhaust the energy to innerstand the hxstory of both the place my eldest known ancestors come from, as well as the hxstory of the occupied land on which I now reside, I find myself journeying along a complex route. It is a path full of terminal potholes, eroded edges, misleading signs (if any), and guides with only guesses as to what could come next and what came before. The journey backward in time is often confusing and overwhelming and difficult to comprehend, and once this path along the past is ventured, the future is inescapably altered. This is a series of truths I've come to trust at this time. – Nayani Thiyagarajah, “Silenced Hxstories on Occupied Lands” (2012)

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“... the desire to interpret and possibly remake his or her own world. So though we may not be creating as dangerously as our forbearers – though we are not risking torture, beatings, execution, though exile does not threaten us into perpetual silence – still, while we are at work bodies are littering the streets somewhere.” – Edwidge Danticat, *Dangerous Creation*

As Danticat suggests above, in our offerings, through various creative mediums including writing, film, and performance, through both unfolding public and private activism, we are at work. As members of diaspora engaged in transnational work, whatever the method, we are at work. As our focus seeks to find balance between transnational and local issues concerning our communities, we are at work. Though we may be the privileged children of those who left, though we may be the privileged ones who had the opportunity to leave ourselves, though we are not the not the ones left behind, we are at work. We likely escaped close shaves with torture, beatings, and murders, or avoided them all together by virtue of the privilege of birth location, but that does not mean we are not effectively silenced or separated from the source of struggle. As is evidenced from this research, we are active and at work, in whatever ways possible, undoubtedly facing challenges along the way, for whatever nuanced and complex reasons propelled us into action.

Ultimately, this is what I've attempted to speak to in this research. Through my reflections on the interviews, as well as my personal experiences, which are captured through the autoethnographic film, I seek to capture the dissonance that exists between one's experience and the different forces that are in conflict with each other. Moving forward, I plan to continue work on this film, as I reflect further on the findings of this research, and the responses of both readers and viewers of my work.

According to Proma Tagore, “bodies, themselves, are produced, invented and reinvented in and through the act of migration” thereby allowing us to possibly view “migrant bodies as remixed: simultaneously deconstructed and rebuilt, made up of bodies beside(s) and other than/to themselves” (1). If this is the case for migrant womyn’s bodies, then I argue that a similar version of this suggestion is true for the children of these migrants, specifically their daughters. Though the womyn I interviewed did not grow up in the context of war, their displacement due to war both makes and unmakes them continuously (Thiranagama 10). As Amarasingam suggests, “To the extent that Tamil youth (or any other ethnic group) wish to identify with their heritage, they must undertake a process of constant re-creation” (155). Through my research, what emerged was that these protests did give way for a shifting and re-creating of identity, a remixing of prior notions of self with new revelations, “producing new people, new possibilities of voice” (Thiranagama 12).

In the process of either participating publicly or witnessing from a distance, it is clear that all participants were affected deeply by the 2009 Tamil protests, moving them to re-negotiate their ideas of what it means to be Tamil, Canadian, and womyn. Sivamohan notes that the migrant woman, in her “process of travelling across nations, literally invisible as illegal, and yet as the postcolonial subversion of the colonial, she redraws the contours of her own body, action, and discourse. It is her *praxis*” (Sivamohan 29). Similarly, in her process of navigating between competing notions of home and negotiating her identity in her family’s place of settlement, the second-generation womyn redraws the contours of her own body, action, and discourse.

Future explorations and writings on the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora should include more detailed documentation of the gendered experiences of self-identified second-generation womyn. Such research will not only serve to strengthen available literature on this particular diaspora, but will also work to bridge the gap in literature that exists where it concerns second-generation children of refugees and displaced migrants. Questions we should keep in mind include: what is the praxis of negotiating identity for second-generation womyn, born to refugees and displaced

migrants, in Canada? How do their personal negotiations align and diverge from their peers, their elders, and extended family members?

With this in mind, I hope that future research engages in deeper dialogue surrounding the impacts and implications of forced displacement and transnational activity, among second-generation womyn who were raised solely, or for the most part, in Canada. To be more specific, there exists need for focused exploration regarding how such womyn engage in conversations about their feelings towards displacement and how they seek to address the unfolding effects of this lived reality. Ultimately, I hope prospective research contributes to a growing body of literature that focuses on our resilience and strengths, from our own viewpoints, rather than exclusively on our victimhood and oppression. And I hope we never forget that under the surface, there are stories that are still breathing – there are always more narratives to document, to create space for, to un/recover and share where possible.

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APPENDIX

Below you will find a secure link and password to my creative thesis film, entitled “...I CAN HEAR HER BREATHING” (2015), as discussed in this paper. I have also included a list of crewmembers that helped in the production and post-production of this experimental short film.

Link: <https://vimeo.com/123048005>

Password: 88t4k30v3r

Credits

Director: Nayani Thiyagarajah

Producer: Muna Ali

Cinematographer: Yannick Anton

Editor: Nicole Sison

Production Designer: Jade Lee Hoy

Production Assistant: Setti Kidane