

The cover art features a close-up of a woman's face. The right side of her face is covered in bright red face paint, while the left side is in grayscale. Her dark hair is visible on the left. The background is a light, textured surface, possibly a wall or a piece of fabric. Several red circles of varying sizes are scattered on the white background to the left of the woman's face.

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Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

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The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal that promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence. Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

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COVER IMAGE

'Apitaw-Picikwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:

Lana Whiskeyjack,

Photo:

Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between
Edmonton-based photographer
Rebecca Lippiatt and
art actionist / educator
Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego,
'Apple', in Cree, 'Picikwas'.

Cover page design:
Seraphina Nicholls

I Want to Tell You A Story: Reflecting on the Practice of Teaching the Sri Lankan Genocide in Toronto

Aparna Halpé

BIOGRAPHY

Aparna Halpé is a Sri Lankan poet, musician, and scholar living in Toronto. She holds a doctorate in postcolonial literature from the Department of English and the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Toronto. Aparna's research focuses on the function of myth in contemporary fiction from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean, and her scholarly work has appeared in *Moving Worlds* (Leeds, 2010), *Mythe Mode d'Emploi* (Interférence Littéraires, 2015), and *Confluences 2: Essays On the New Canadian Literature* (Mawenzi House, 2017). She is the author of a collection of poems, *Precarious* (2013), and is currently co-editor, with Michael Ondaatje, of *Lakdhas Wikkramasinha: A Selection of Poems*. Aparna is currently a professor in the Department of English and ESL at Centennial College, Toronto.

Article II of the United Nations document on the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide states the following:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. (UN 1948)

Introduction: What's In a Question?

Sri Lanka July 1983–May 2009. Civil war or genocide?

In my role as a postsecondary educator teaching a course on genocide literature, the scholarly exploration of this question proves productive, if fraught. It offers my students the opportunity to engage rigorously with the concept of definitions, and the imperialist practices by which naming conventions surrounding war, conflict, and genocide, are often propagated by coalitions of nations, and their representative organisations and institutions.¹ Such conventions often obtain currency, because victims of genocide do not have the political agency to reclaim the narratives that define them. The responsibility that comes with teaching a course on genocide literature involves a kind of radical teaching practice, which scrutinizes teleological assumptions about histories of violence, specifically genocide, and offers differing, destabilizing ways of reading that can lead to a more nuanced, and perhaps more balanced, comprehension of genocidal events.

July 1983, commonly referred to as “Black July”, marked the first wave of pogroms against Sri Lankan Tamils carried out by majority Sinhala mobs, who had the sanction and backing of the government, led at the time by President J.R. Jayawardene and the United National Party. The purpose of these pogroms was ethnic cleansing, and this is why I consider these events to be the first wave of the Sri Lankan genocide.

The violence of this period led to the mass exodus of Tamil refugees to neighboring India and other nations, including Canada, which is now home to the one of the largest Tamil diasporas. The ensuing period of ethnic strife in Sri Lanka saw systematic disenfranchisement and continuing pogroms against the Tamils by armed forces, and the rise of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and their retaliations against Sri Lankan armed forces and civilians. During the leadership of President Mahinda Rajapaksa and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, this conflict culminated in 2009, with a second wave of far more deadly violence against the Tamil people; however, to date, this conflict is not officially recognized by the Sri Lankan government as a “genocide”, and is commonly referred to, instead, as a “civil war.” This difference in labels marks the dividing line between two ideological positions: one that acknowledges that the Sri Lankan government, under various political parties, systematically sought to eradicate the Tamil people and usurp the territories traditionally held by them, and in effect, perpetrated genocide; and the opinion that the government, acting under the mandate of a Sinhalese majority, was within its rights to wage a just war to protect the majority national and ethnic interests. This begs the question, in situations where minorities can never wield democratic power, which version of the events gains legitimacy?

In her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1985), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks a question that became a defining frame for postcolonial literature: “... inside and outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, can the subaltern speak?” (283). It is this question that frames my approach to teaching genocide literature, because arguably an extreme example of the subaltern, from an economic, political, and historical perspective, is the victim of genocide. In the case of Sri Lanka, it is precisely because Tamil communities are violently contained within this circuit of othering by the state, and their voices silenced, that it becomes necessary to begin with understanding and evaluating this very process of silencing. To do so within the context of narrative provides an unusually rich foundation on which to build this encounter.

Genocide Narratives: One Story Among Many

I begin my exploration of Sri Lankan genocide literature with my students using the following story:

In 1983, I was a skinny, perennially snot-nosed ten-year-old, growing up like a mouse in a tiny apartment, filled with an extended family of three generations. Our home was loud and messy, and being the youngest, I would frequently escape to other apartments in the stretch of university residences that housed the families of the academics who taught at the University of Peradeniya.

Our next door neighbours were Tamil; although, when I was ten that didn't really mean anything—it was as abstract an idea as saying that I am Sinhalese (and I still don't quite know what that means either). There were two girls next door, both older than me, and wiser it seemed to me. They were quiet, neat, studious—pretty much everything that I was not. And they bestowed a gentle acceptance of my chaotic presence in their heat-soaked, late afternoon garden, often sharing food and toys with me. I admired them greatly, and secretly wished that I could magically transform into their youngest sister. I was sure that if I had been born into that family, I would not be so wild, so uncontained. Our childhood together seemed largely uneventful until one day, without warning, they were gone.

The mother and two young girls had departed by night, and it appeared that the house itself was deserted. But absences like that do not appear ominous when you are ten. I thought perhaps they were visiting family. It was not until I began to observe the tense attention with which my parents and grandparents were gathered around the radio, the reports about mobs and looting, and eventually, cars burned with families inside, that I began to experience the first settling in of fear. But they were not coming for us, I was told—we were Sinhalese. The reports were clear: the Sinhalese had been sorely provoked. This was simply what the Tamils had brought on themselves.

We soon realized that there was someone in the house next door. Behind the shuttered windows, someone was trying to be absent, erased. But in small communities erasure is hard to come by.

I woke the next morning to piteous howling in the garden next door. Running outside, despite my mother's insistence that it was dangerous to show my face in the garden during a curfew, I noticed that there were four mongrel pups abandoned next door. They were tiny, their eyes as yet unopened. They howled from hunger, or fear, who could tell? And the carrion crows had started circling.

One by one, I coaxed the pups over into our garden, eventually bringing all four to safety. With us, they found warm meals, beds, and eventually stable homes. Many days later, my grandmother would wonder if the pups had been used as a ruse to lure our gentle neighbor out of hiding, in the hopes that he would reveal himself. A ruse by whom? Who was watching?

Those are answers I would never learn. I would subsequently hear that a few years later, our neighbor was assassinated in Jaffna by persons unknown. To this day, I do not know whether my childhood friends made it to safety.

But that night, the silence in the house next door was complete.

Teaching Practice: Destabilizing Bias and Authority

When the story is done, I ask my students two questions:

“Who gets to speak in this story?”

“What characters are spoken for in this story?”

The answer to “Who gets to speak in this story?” is simple. The story is narrated entirely in the first person, and thus the narrator’s biases and perceptual limitations shape the entire story; of course, the narrator is myself. I then ask my students whether they trust that this story is true, to which most answer that they do, and I then point out that they have no means to objectively evaluate that response, and that they are perhaps led to trust my version of this story because I present it from a position of trust and authority. I then proceed to outline the ambiguities and potential falsehoods in the story, including the fact that the climax, which narrates the assassination of my neighbor, is based on hearsay as to his whereabouts and fate, albeit one based on the assassinations of prominent Tamil intellectuals and academics that took place in the late 1980s, such as Rajani Thiranagama, whose life story is narrated in the documentary *No More Tears Sister* (2005), and *The Broken Palmyra* (1989), both of which are foundation texts for my course. In this moment, the students experience the powerful mythology of truth-telling at work in narration, and they learn to exercise caution and critical analysis in their responses to any such narrative, even when the source appears to be authentic.

The answer to “What characters are spoken for in this story?” is just as simple. Even though the first person narration is supplemented towards the end with the reported voice of my grandmother, there are no speaking characters in the story other than the narrator. This hits right at the heart of the issue of representation in genocide narratives. If none of the Tamil characters in the story actually speak, and if this story has been narrated entirely from the perspective of a Sinhalese protagonist (employing cultural stereotypes, such as descriptions of the two young Tamil girls as “quiet, neat, studious”), can it be a valid representation of the events that took place? The answer, quite simply, is that it cannot.

The narration of this anecdotal story allows me to demonstrate, in a very concrete manner, the issues of power and persuasion that can frame narratives of genocide; what’s more, it ensures that my students learn to destabilize my authority as teacher, native informant, and conveyor of representational fact. Such destabilization of pedagogical authority was not afforded to me as a student in Sri Lanka, where state-authored school textbooks propagate versions of historical facts that were selectively chosen, or revised, to foreground the preeminent right of the Sinhalese majority to claim the nation as their unified Sinhala Buddhist state.

Reggie Siriwardena (1992) observed, in his seminal critique of post-independence educational practice in Sri Lanka in the period leading up to July 1983,² and the decade that followed, that with the emergence of free education in the post-independence nation, government-issued readers, or textbooks, were segregated according to language into Sinhala and Tamil mediums of instruction. The ostensible purpose of the texts was to provide Sinhalese and Tamil students with content that was culturally sensitive to each group; however, Siriwardena points out that what emerged was a form of educational siloing, where Sinhalese students learned nothing of their Tamil compatriots, and vice versa. In revisions to these texts in the post-1983 era, when I was a student in the Sri Lankan primary school system, the focus of these readers was to propagate a certain form of state-sanctioned nationalism that was monocultural and based on a model that largely conflated nationhood with majority Sinhalese ethnic identity. As Anne Gaul (2017) points out in her study on nationalism and education in Sri Lanka, later revisions enacted in 2007, a decade after the educational reforms of 1997, further cemented this monocultural narrative of the nation (165).

Decades of education that encouraged Sinhalese students to fix the notion of Tamilness within certain monolithic referential frames have ultimately fostered the continuity of the notion that the Sinhalese fought a just war against the Tamils in order to protect their homeland. In a recent public opinion piece, Dr. Sarath Gamini de Silva (2020) outlined the lasting effects of this kind of ideology on young hospital workers who had obtained the Ordinary Level (Grade 10 qualifiers): “Their knowledge of history is confined to the ethnic conflict and winning the war against the LTTE. Even that knowledge is acquired by listening to utterances of politicians and others and not by reading documents on the subject.” It is telling that Dr. de Silva and these young workers frame the conflict as a war; the notion that it could have been a genocide in which thousands of Tamil civilians were killed does not enter the narrative at any point. Dr. de Silva goes on to point out that in public consciousness, those responsible for “winning the war” receive unthinking veneration, a familiar consequence of the notion that history is (re)written by the victor.

To return to my classroom—by destabilizing the voice of the narrator in the anecdote through analysis, and by fostering critical suspicion and curiosity in my students regarding the position of the educator as purveyor of truth/knowledge, I practice a kind of revisionist teaching methodology that shifts agency to the learner, that encourages the learner to inhabit the uncomfortably productive space of doubt, and also demonstrates the necessity for rigorous scholarly engagement with narrative that must emerge out of a resistance to its powers of persuasion.

Possible Conclusions on Authority and Agency

As I prepared this introduction to my course for the first time, I asked myself, why this story? Why locate myself within this moment of personal and collective history? And the answer lies in the fact that I am a Sri Lankan Sinhalese.

As a diasporic Sri Lankan academic who teaches literature in a community college in Scarborough, Ontario, I will invariably teach young Tamil students purely through the demographics of place, as one of the highest populations of Tamils outside Sri Lanka is located in Scarborough. The reason a Tamil student ends up in my class is because their families have escaped genocide, a genocide enacted by my people, and here in this supposedly safe space in Canada, they must negotiate this narrative of collective trauma with me, of all people. It is impossible to ignore the complexities of their position, and mine. Within this classroom, I must first acknowledge a history in which my people have been responsible for their collective disenfranchisement and genocide.

In “On Responsible Distance” (2015), an interview that I conducted with Tamil poet and activist R. Cheran, he identifies the fact that “the Tamilness of our generation—and the generations that followed immediately after—cannot be understood or explained without discussing violence” (92). To Cheran’s words, I would add, that the Sinhaleseness of our generation cannot be understood without discussing our complicity in genocide, and our inability, or lack of political will, to ensure that this traumatic history is accounted for, and the perpetrators brought to justice. Cheran’s words echo in the account of a Tamil poet who, witnessing the tragic exodus of 2009, told me that she had not encountered a single woman or child who had not experienced sexual violence in their journey as refugees; in the tears of a Tamil colleague, who, speaking against systemic racism in the college system, broke down as he spoke of the triggering effects of casual racism that invokes the deeper, more pervasive trauma of having lived through the pogroms of the 1980s in Sri Lanka; and in the silence of a Tamil student, who witnessed her five-year-old brother die from a gunshot wound as her family fled their home in the face of advancing government troops. These stories in Tamil voices, unofficial, anecdotal, and lived, are also sources that inform my understanding of any work of literature on the Sri Lankan genocide.

For me, as a diasporic Sinhalese academic teaching within the largest Tamil diaspora, this process of reconciliation begins with my acknowledging the inheritance of responsibility, and the creation of a hopeful teaching practice that can begin to undo the hegemonic othering of the Tamil nation, at least in my classroom.

1. For example, the “Comprehensive Report of the Office of United Nations Commissioner on Human Rights on Sri Lanka” (2015) provides some outline and analysis of the systemic atrocities perpetrated by the Sri Lankan government against Tamil civilians (as it likewise reviews human rights violations by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) from 2002--2011. Though the report provides an overview of steps taken by the government to address human rights violations within the Sri Lankan legal system, it notes that such steps are dogged by a lack of transparency and accountability. Of interest is the fact that although the report names “system crimes”, it does not refer to the events in Sri Lanka as a genocide: “Effective prosecution strategies for large-scale crimes, such as those described by the investigation team, # focus on their systemic nature and their planners and organizers. The presumption behind such “system crimes” is that they are generally of such a scale that they require some degree of organization to perpetrate them” (UNHCR 17-18).

2. The period leading up to racial pogroms of Black July 1983.

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