

## Out of the Scar:

### Memory, Diaspora and the Cultural Politics of Reconciliation

Notes of a talk at the Sydney Reconciliation Forum, August 17, 2013

Suvendrini Kanagasabai Perera

*there is an unexploded land mine heart in us  
under every breast chest  
waiting for breath  
tears a moan  
to crack the land open  
and let the stories come walking  
out of the scar*

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha  
“Landmine Heart” 2006

My thanks to the organizers for this initiative. I know it must take a great deal of imagination, energy, resilience, courage and hope to make this kind of leap in the dark. I commend their faith in the future.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation on whose land we are meeting. I also acknowledge the Nyoongar people on whose lands I live and work. They have given me the closest thing I have to a home.

I only became aware recently that this was the thirtieth year since the pogrom of July 1983 when a young colleague of mine posted on his Facebook page. What we now call Black July happened several years before he was born, but he saw it as the event that changed his life, causing his parents to move to Australia after his father was attacked on the streets of Colombo. Black July in many ways signals the beginning of the war, and for many of us diasporic Sri Lankans, primarily for Tamils like myself, but for others as well, it is **the** formative event. I was not living in Sri Lanka at the time, but for me too it was a turning

point. Although this has only become clear in retrospect, from then on there was no going back for me, as for many of us.

This year there seems to have been an outpouring of commemorations of Black July, such as on the site *Groundviews*. What is the significance of this milestone? I've seen it suggested that it is now in some ways safe to do so without memory and analysis of what happened being conflated with the war or with LTTE propaganda. Or, it's been said that as there is greater global visibility of the atrocities at the end of the war, and the growing number of refugees flowing from it, there is also now a heightened awareness of the beginning of the conflict. A striking number of reflections have been by those who were not yet born in 1983. Does that mean it is now safe to remember? To let the stories come out of the scar? The image employed by the Canadian-Lankan poet Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha speaks of the unexploded landmines and bombs buried in us. What is the role of these withheld and untold stories? Is telling these stories a way of de-fusing explosive unspoken emotions? In what ways are the stories being told? And what are the stories that can't or won't be told?

So I thought we might discuss the dynamics of silence and speech today especially in the context of diasporic communities. Note that I don't speak of "**the** diaspora" because I don't believe there is any such entity. But how do the dynamics of speech and silence play out both within and among various diasporic groupings? These groupings may be defined by ethnicity, but as much by factors such as class or generation. I think these are important issues for a forum like this one to engage with. Rather than any academic exposition, I would like to offer a series of loosely linked questions, comments and provocations; in the spirit of a true forum I hope that the answers will come out in the discussion in the following sessions.

Let me first take you back to what I think is still one of the most powerful, emotionally fraught and politically complex works in English about Black July: Ernest MacIntyre's play, *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* (first performed in 1990, and written, perhaps, a couple of years prior to that). One of MacIntyre's enduring preoccupations through all his work is the complex relation between the written text, performance and life. In his introduction to the play, described as a "political fiction for the theatre," he makes what might at first seem the surprising comment that despite the real life and real death events that occasioned the play, "the vital space" for its creative conception was occasioned by a what was "a total lie in the context of Colombo's upper middle classes in 1983" (MacIntyre 1990: xi).

The “fictional behavior” that made possible the play, MacIntyre writes, was the possibility of the central character’s opening up of “her innermost thoughts and feelings on how July 83 came about”:

For soon after ... Colombo’s mixed society of westernized Tamils and Sinhalese tacitly settled on an arrangement that would enable it to continue functioning. Whatever was locked in their heads or embedded in their hearts, about which organizations and people were to be held responsible, they would not utter in public. Those seventy two hours or so were discussed as if it had been a ferocious event from nature. A cyclone, a typhoon [or as we would say now, a tsunami]. A kind of social mechanism that is naturally self-inventing and found to be the only way to carry on with vital day-to-day life ... Hence the central fiction in the play: getting people from that society to talk about subjects that had to be avoided in real life” (xi-xii).

And reflecting on this today, we might ask to what degree does avoidance, or silence still prevail in social situations, especially in circles where different Sri Lankan diasporas converge? What are the forms assumed by this silence? What does it conceal? What are the relations between memory, silence and speech in the context of diaspora and of reconciliation? Let’s briefly look at these two key terms first, diaspora, and reconciliation.

A sizable body of work exists on something called “the Tamil Diaspora,” considered as a distinctive formation that was a key driver of the war. Ahilan Kadirgamar gives an insightful account of this phenomenon, arguing that in the early 1990s a set of circumstances combined with shrewd manoeuvring by the LTTE to establish “separatist Tamil nationalism as dominant within the diaspora.” He discusses “this manoeuvre of the LTTE and the over-determination of separatist Tamil Eelam politics over other forms of collective politics both in relation to Sri Lanka and in the context of refugee life in the west”( 2010, 24). Other, less nuanced, analyses cast diasporic Tamils as a monolithic entity, united by unconditional support for the LTTE throughout the 30-year period of the war. Even after the comprehensive defeat of the LTTE in 2009, this bogey of an intractable, war-mongering Tamil diaspora is still invoked by Sri Lankan government spokespeople and Sinhala ultra-nationalists as a means to keep anti-Tamil sentiments at fever pitch and to drum up hysteria against moves such as the recent UN Resolutions. Instead of the singular term “*the* Tamil diaspora,” I prefer to speak of “diasporic Tamils.” This shifts us from the homogenizing (and often

Jaffnacentric) conceptualisations of Sri Lankan Tamils that have dominated current scholarship. Part of the work of post-war reassessment and reconciliation, then, calls for recognizing the ethnic, linguistic and geographical differences and fractures within diasporean groups: for example the different histories and struggles of the eastern coast and Malayaha Tamils; or the Tamil-speaking Muslims of the north and east where long-established practices of coexistence were deliberately targeted by both warring parties, with Muslim populations in the north and east subject to massacres and forced expulsions by the LTTE. Was the expulsion of the Muslims from Jaffna by the LTTE their Black July? Where are the stories and memorializations of that event?

At the same time, the term 'diasporic Tamils' allows for a more reflexive analysis of political and ideological categories within, and the range of attitudes and positions adopted by diaspora Tamils to the war. Although the war was the impetus for the forced or voluntary departure of over a million Tamils, their support for the war is by no means a given. Indeed, many disillusioned or dissenting members of Tamil militant groups were among the first to flee. Some of this internal dissent has not been able to be expressed even in the comparative safety of the west. The defeat of the LTTE opens the way for many of their stories to be told and analysed.

The cultural politics of diaspora Tamils engage people from a range of differing political positions who may selectively deploy the rhetoric and symbols of Tamil nationalism, both in order to engage with past and with continuing experiences of loss and trauma, and in more indirect ways to forge communities of affiliation within the hostile or alien worlds in which Tamil migrants and refugees found -- and find -- themselves. In particular, young people whose parents were refugees from the war absorbed the symbols and the habitus of separatism, without knowing much about the political detail. I've been looking, for example, at imaginative and expressive forms that include not only traditional forms like theatre or poetry or novels, but hip-hop, in the very influential work of M.I.A. (Maya Arulpragasam) who was described by the *New York Times* as the most influential diaspora Tamil (see Perera 2012).

These everyday cultural forms, practices and dynamics are key spaces where understandings of the war and its scars and trauma get worked through more effectively than in official reports and transitional justice processes. What is the role of cultural politics, in personal and

family stories; in national stories, and transnationally, as for diaspora generations in exploring and explaining their presence in their new countries? What is their role within and between diasporic communities? And perhaps most important for this forum, what is their role in reconciliation?

So this brings me to my second term, reconciliation; this again has multiple meanings. In the discussions of previous speakers we heard of the ways in which reconciliation has been deployed in various times and places. For me the term reconciliation is tied to its history here in Australia in the early 1990s – this was the decade that was intellectually and politically formative for me, when non-Aboriginal Australians were coming to understand the full enormity of colonization and dispossession, not as an event that happened long ago in 1788, but as something ongoing, especially in the experiences of the stolen generations. Yet even as these stories were being told and heard, there were also many Aboriginal leaders who remained very ambivalent about what reconciliation represented, and asked whose interests it served. There's a formulation about Australian politics in the 1990s by Gary Foley that I often think about: *Mabo is not land right and reconciliation is not justice*. Can we understand reconciliation as what we settle for in the absence of justice?

There are many critiques of reconciliation as it is undertaken as part of the machinery of transitional justice – very briefly, at the level of global governance we can think about it as a kind of project of national rehabilitation that brings a post-conflict state within the purview of a neoliberal international order. Much has been written about the failures and limits of transitional justice in a global context, Chile and South Africa are two I am very familiar with. At the domestic level, too, there are many critiques of reconciliation as a kind of drawing of a line, a sanitizing of what happened and a neat attempt to settle accounts of what cannot be settled. The title of the Sri Lankan government project – the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission – underlines this. You can identify the lessons, learn them and move on. We know that virtually none of this seems to have happened and that the Sri Lankan state has not acted on the recommendations of its own LLRC.

But there is another meaning of the term reconciliation that I think does have something more to offer, and again when I think about Australia in the 1990s, in this sense the term was helpful, not in bringing about justice, but in *clearing a space* for certain kinds of discussions to happen, for us all as Australians, including non-Anglo migrants who did not see

themselves as directly implicated in that history; to understand something of the violence of colonization as continuing and that engages all of us. This clearing of a space, an emotional as much as a political space, for the possibility of understanding is what a forum such as this one might achieve.

When I invited one of my Sydney friends to attend today he declined with the remark that “nothing was going to change on the ground in Sri Lanka.” Yet I think that gatherings like this, bringing together ethno-religious traditions, generations, people speaking from different institutional positions, with differing investments in the project of reconciliation, with the different meanings that that term has for us, does have the potential to make a distinctive contribution. Diaspora people and people in Sri Lanka are connected in so many ways and the “ground” between here and there cannot be so clearly demarcated. Though this forum may not be about achieving change “on the ground,” given the material emotional and economic ties between here and there, the possibilities can’t be dismissed out of hand if we understand change not as an event, but as a process that is ongoing; whose end point is not knowable. What are the possibilities of this kind of popular reconciliation or everyday reconciliation?

Here are some truncated thoughts, then, for how this kind of everyday reconciliation could work:

Firstly within diasporas: Instead of the kind of monolithic construct of a pro-LTTE Tamil diaspora, the stories *within* diasporas are important. They are critical to understanding what happened among the various strands of separatist politics. What internal and external factors contributed to this morphing of liberatory energies of the early 1980s into something else? Secondly, analysis of internal conflicts provides important insights into the broader question of how diaspora movements either adapt new strategies and structures or become enmeshed in their own self-enclosed worlds. During the 1980s and 1990s, East Timorese leaders in exile in Australia were able to harness new cosmopolitan vocabularies and neoliberal organizational modes, and to work with broad coalitions of local activists, NGOs and diaspora groups to achieve self-determination for Timor Leste. This contrasts with the inability or unwillingness of Eelamist leaders who failed to negotiate with the new institutions of global governance and peace-building that emerged in the 1990s (Venugopal 2009). So what are the *cultures* within diasporas—their modes of communication, fora for discussion and dissent, relationship to intellectuals and cultural producers and the

mechanisms by which authority is negotiated and reproduced between generations “born here” and “born there”?

Secondly, I’ve already touched on the role of cultural politics within and among diaspora groups. Media such as M.I.A’s extraordinary *Born Free* video also play a role in allowing unspeakable stories of war to emerge in all their complexity outside the sphere of official reports and resolutions. As forms of an embodied and confronting diasporic poetics, they interrogate the implication of multiple audiences in the histories and conduct of those wars. Precisely because they refuse to be contained by the conventions and limits of “witness narratives,” such texts are less easily appropriated or dismissed.

Thirdly, the exchange of stories between diaspora and host communities. These allow diaspora and refugee groups to understand each other better, on this shared ground on which we live. In a widely circulated opinion piece written shortly after the 9/11 terror attacks, the Canadian theorist Michael Ignatieff called for an end to the “tacit contract of mutual indifference” that enabled new diasporic groups and more established settlers to live in different worlds. In order to overcome indifference and ignorance between older and newer arrivals, Ignatieff asks, *what must we know about each other in order to be citizens together?* (2001). This speaks to what constitutes the *shared ground* of citizenship in diaspora countries: in the broadest sense, the consciousness of being participants and stakeholders together in a polity. Extending Ignatieff’s comments, for me the ability to tell and share histories has been particularly important in the relationship with Indigenous communities. Indigenous leaders have reached out with great generosity of spirit to other groups rendered homeless by violence. They have conferred Aboriginal passports on migrants and refugees as an act of symbolic acceptance and inclusion, as we in turn come to learn the meaning of Indigenous sovereignty over this land. I received an Aboriginal passport last year. It’s one of the most valued and meaningful possessions I have. Paradoxically, perhaps, it gives me the sense of a larger stake in Australia.

Important as these processes of speaking and opening out are between and within collectivities, however, I think there are also very difficult questions to answer about to what degree, and how, we uncover what is buried, hidden, unspoken, unspeakable about the decades of the war. I turn to these in the second half of my discussion.

One of the handouts I had for today was a poem by the diaspora writer V.V Ganeshanathan. This poem, *We regret to inform you* is one of the most moving and powerful responses to the war as a whole. The speaker in the poem articulates a lucid rejection of condolences on the first anniversary of the end of the war, suggesting the chasm that exists between the well-meaning expressions of sympathy and the enormity of what has befallen the bereaved and vanquished:

We regret to inform you that your condolences cannot be accepted at this time. At present, both our pain and our hope defy that word, which has been offered and denied us, which we need and do not need, and which in any case we cannot accept, because they (your condolences) will not reach from what has happened to what will come.

We find the word *condolences* stunning in its insufficiency for past and future.

We evacuated our homes in the light; we vanished from our homes in the dark; we walked away from our families, toward the weapons, and wished that we could turn around . . . By both dying in and surviving this place, we will live here long after your condolences become a ghost in your throat.

We joined others' battles, willingly and unwillingly; we walked forward on paths not our own when the paths we would have chosen were closed to us. We were incidental; we were vital; we were enemies; we were friends; we were disputed; we were uncounted. In a small country, we felt far away from you. In a small world, we felt far away from you. We were your people and not your people.

In the rush to escape this bloodletting, which has been its own kind of war, our ears fell to the ground, and so we cannot now hear your condolences. To survive, we had to shut our eyes, with which we would have seen what was in yours. We closed our mouths against hunger and anger; we knew and did not know our families, friends, fellows, and leaders, who hunted us, ran with us, and died with us. (Ganeshanathan 2013)

Having lost their ears, eyes and mouths in order to endure and survive the sufferings of the war, those who remain behind in this poem are rendered impervious to talk of condolence or

reconciliation, unable to respond to the enormity of what is being asked of them in the project of reconstruction. What languages other than those of silence, will be adequate to “reach from what has happened to what will come”?

Still, the poem does not entirely reject the concept of condolences – they are something “we need and do not need.” The poem carries the sense of a sense of a time when things could be different. *Your condolences cannot be accepted at this time*: is there a possibility that at another time the eyes, mouths and ears that have been sealed shut, rendered impervious by the horrors of what they endured, will be unblocked? Able to see, hear and speak? The question is left open. Perhaps the answer is that condolences and actions of reaching out cannot be a one-off and finite event, but a process that is incremental, iterative. What the poem brings out is the depth of suffering and the incommensurability of what has happened to anything else.

The second piece that I handed out is also about the sense of incommensurability. It is a more recent one, from the U.K *Tamil Guardian*, a publication with which I often disagree. Yet this is a powerful piece of writing suggesting the enduring sense of an inability among some diaspora Tamils to convey the scale of what has happened. When people, with the best intentions, compare what happened Weliweriya to the Mullivaikkal, the author argues that these experiences are fundamentally incommensurable, highlighting “the intractable fallacy of an equal or inclusive ‘Sri Lankan identity’”:

This indignation of the Sinhala nation [at the Weliweriya killings] belies a disturbing reasoning that Tamils, simply by virtue of their ethnic (and by extension ethno-political) identity are from the offset considered ‘not completely innocent’, or guilty. Thus, to be a Tamil, makes you an understandable target of the state, and to be a Tamil who calls for the nation’s right to self-determination, makes you a legitimate one. Most disturbingly of all, Tamil armed resistance - the eventual result of decades of oppression and the military’s quashing of non-violent Tamil protest - is accepted as a justification for the Sri Lankan state’s collective punishment and criminalisation of the Tamil nation. Hence the military occupation of the North-East is still accepted as necessary, whilst the militarisation of Weliweriya is abhorred; and the Weliweriya attack prompts immediate calls for accountability, whilst four

years on and despite the mounting body of irrefutable evidence, an international inquiry into the end of the war examining both sides is still overwhelmingly rejected by the Sinhala nation. Without any tangible action or shift on such fundamental issues of truth, justice and accountability, sympathy or statements of 'sorry' by a few well-meaning Sinhala people are rendered facile. The inequity of Tamil death continues. (*Tamil Guardian* editorial 2013)

One of my concerns with commemoration is how it fixes, and in the movement of fixing, telling, making available, renders what is unspeakable, incommensurable, into something less so. The task of fixing, managing and controlling experiences of terror is one of the dangers of both official and less official commemoration. It explains the slight unease I have about the dozens of recollections recently published on *Groundviews*. In many of these 1983 becomes a series of separate stories – often stories of individualized stories of escape or rescue – and stories that are mostly fixed on the past. In a fine reflection on this, also on *Groundviews*, Harendra Alwis suggests something similar: “with each attempt we make at reconstructing those memories [of 1983], we move away from their reality towards a constructed narrative and a new conception of how those events should be remembered” (Alwis 2013).

*Rasanayagam's Last Riot* is distinguished from many of the 1983 stories I have heard this year by the fact that, despite the efforts of a number of his faithful friends to save Rasanayagam, even all the machinery of their middle class Peradeniya network does not succeed in rescuing him from becoming a target of state-sanctioned terror. All honor is due to those who took put themselves at risk in 1983 and previous pogroms to save Tamil lives; their stories need to be told. Clearly, it's also vital to name, and to own, what happened during the days of Black July. But for the process of reconciliation, how does naming what happened in that moment connect to what happened next, and what was to come? A question that remains unasked is *what other, different, forms of courage and refusal were needed in the years and decades of war that followed? And what kinds of courage continue to be needed?* These are the more difficult questions that the project of reconciliation poses.

MacIntyre's play ends, after the murder of Rasanayagam on the streets as the police stand by, with the couple Sita and Philip, leaving for Australia. While they're in transit in an airport lounge in Singapore, they hear a report on TV about a massacre the LTTE has carried out

against innocent Sinhalese villagers, and a statement made by the then Australian Foreign Minister Bill Hayden (later our Governor-General) that this act removes “the moral edge that the Tamils had been claiming for themselves.” “ [I]t’s good to know,” Sita comments, “that the Australian Foreign Minister is interested in the moral edge, must be a nice place we are going to” (50). Thirty years later, I can only reiterate this. It would indeed be nice to believe that Australian Foreign Minister is interested in the moral edge; as some of you may remember Geoffrey Robertson, QC, recently said in the context of the unwavering support Senator Carr has shown for “engagement” with the Rajapakse government and for Australia’s attendance at CHOGM that Foreign Minister Carr wouldn’t “know a human right if he fell over it” (see Perera 2013).

As a diasporic Sri Lankan, and Australian-Sri Lankan, for me the process of reconciliation can’t be detached from an active politics that reaches all the way from 1983 into the present, and that reaches from there to here: for example, the readiness of my government, the Australian government, to support the regime in Sri Lanka; the legality of secret security assessments of people alleged to have been in the LTTE; the return of people seeking asylum without their being subject to due processing protocols (the so-called enhancing screening process adopted by DIAC by which over a thousand of Sri Lankans seeking asylum have been returned to an uncertain, at best, future without recourse to due process (Perera 2013). A 3-year old boy, Baremithan Balamanaran, died at sea in the waters between Australia and Indonesia only a month ago, while a second baby was Dead On Arrival at Christmas Island shortly before (Cuddihy 2013, Lawrennce 2013).

Such deaths continue to tie the past to the present, linking together the ground of here and there. They suggest that reconciliation cannot be seen as a visible telos or end-point but an ensemble of complex activities and actions, on multiple fronts, and radiating out in different, often fraught, risky and unknowable, directions.

## REFERENCES

Alwis, Harendra. “The Perpetual Conflict” *Groundviews* July 26, 2013  
<http://groundviews.org/2013/07/26/the-perpetual-conflict-part-3-2/>

Martin Cuddihy, "Father of child who drowned in asylum boat sinking off Java did not know his family was heading to Australia" ABC News July 26, 2013.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-25/father-did-not-know-child-was-on-doomed-asylum-boat/4844290>

Ganeshanathan, V.V. "We Regret To Inform You That Your Condolences Cannot Be Accepted At This Time" *Groundviews* May 20, 2010.

<http://groundviews.org/2010/05/20/we-regret-to-inform-you-that-your-condolences-cannot-be-accepted-at-this-time/>

Ignatieff, Michael. "The Hate Stops Here," *The Globe and Mail* October 25, 2001.

Kadirgamar, Ahilan. "Classes, States and the Politics of the Tamil Diaspora," *Economic & Political Weekly* xlv. 31 (2010).

Lawrence, Tess. "It's a boy! D.O.A. Christmas Island" *Tasmanian Times* July 25 2013.

<http://tasmaniantimes.com/index.php/?article/its-a-boy-d.o.a.-christmas-island-july-2013/>

MacIntyre, Ernest. *Rasanayagam's Last Riot* (Sydney: Wordlink, 1990).

Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. *Consensual Genocide* (Toronto: Tsar Books 2006).

Perera, Suvendrini "Missing in Action: By all Media Necessary" *Borderlands e-journal* 11. 1 (2012). [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol11no1\\_2012/perera\\_missing.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol11no1_2012/perera_missing.htm)

----. "Let Compassion Define Us Now" *New Matilda* May 7, 2013.

<https://newmatilda.com/2013/05/07/let-compassion-define-us-now>

Tamil Guardian, "Unequal in Death" Editorial, *Tamil Guardian*, August 5, 2013.

<http://www.tamilguardian.com/article.asp?articleid=8467>

Venugopal, Rajesh. 2009. 'Nationalism in the Era of Neo-Liberalism: The Changing Global Parameters of Self-determination and Statehood.' In Cheran ed. *Pathways of Dissent*, 198-207.

