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Absence in technicolour: protesting enforced disappearances in northern Sri Lanka

VINDHYA BUTHPITIYA *University of St Andrews*

This essay examines the political uses of photography in the protests of the Tamil families of the disappeared in northern Sri Lanka. Enforced disappearances have long featured as an instrument of state terror. Their lingering effects have been noted as a significant challenge to transitional justice processes in the aftermath of the island's civil war. By examining how protesters make their political demands and grievances known through photography, I explore the tensions between visibility and surveillance. The competing photographs of the protests subvert conceptual understandings of the medium as an ideological tool, but also complicate claims of its capacities for enabling emancipation. Against a backdrop of ethno-nationalist conflict, this mobilization of and through photography serves as a defiant articulation of post-war 'irreconciliation'. It is further tethered to a global visual vernacular of civilian resistance challenging state atrocity, as well as irreconcilable assertions of nation and state.

Photography in the hands of civilians has been central to making visible the violence of a perpetrator's peace that followed Sri Lanka's civil war (1983-2009). By examining the protests of the Tamil families of the disappeared, I consider the limits and the unlikely expansion of Azoulay's assertion of 'photographic citizenship' (2008). The photographs¹ that emerged out of these acts and spaces of resistance were notably diverse. Identity card headshots, formal studio portraits, and family album snaps were shown and displayed alongside grisly trophy images. Further entangled was the photography of journalists and activists, as well as state intelligence personnel who frequented the families' roadside demonstrations. In this setting, Tagg's (1993) claim of photography as an ideological tool and Azoulay's (2008) invocation of photography as a medium for emancipation tussled in a tension of and for visibility. In the shadow of a long-drawn ethno-nationalist conflict, these uses of photography also highlighted how competing claims of nation remained irreconcilable. This troubles and expands photography's possibilities for enhancing 'civic spectatorship' through 'de-territorialization' (Azoulay 2008: 25).

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Dominant theorizations have framed photography as furthering Foucauldian notions of governmentality and surveillance (Tagg 1993). In contrast, Azoulay proposes that photography serves as a mode of political mobilization available to the oppressed (2008: 12). Such a conceptualization transforms photography into 'a tool of a struggle' whereby a citizenship of photography bound to solidarity and responsibility might be fostered (Azoulay 2008: 14). This appeal is hopeful but ultimately idealistic in its formulation. However, it demands empirical investigation precisely because of the ways in which photography is actively utilized by a community seeking to hold the state accountable and reckon with a climate of impunity (see also Vaisman, this volume). Through this example, I highlight how these photographs of protest accrue new meanings and currency in their expedient and/or unexpected social and political mobilization and subversion in a vivid articulation of post-war 'irreconciliation'.

In northern Sri Lanka, the political uses of photography rendered multiple facets of 'irreconciliation' visible, challenging, foremost, the state's assertions of 'peace' achieved out of military victory. The protesters looked to international mechanisms for justice, having been repeatedly failed by successive governments. However, following Brudholm (2008), they were largely uninterested in the core logic of forgiveness that informed the design of such processes and well-meaning civil society initiatives for reconciliation. While 'civic spectatorship' may have succeeded in global visibility for their claims, little progress was achieved locally in terms of their demands to know what happened to their loved ones. The desire for 'never again' in this instance was also inextricable from the nationalist politics of liberation, where freedom from the oppression of an extant sovereign directly informs the political aspirations of another (cf. Azoulay 2008). The protesters' mood was one of resentment and frustration, noting that the war against them still continued by other means as harassment and intimidation by state security personnel persisted.

A short history of 'peace'

Sri Lanka has known 'peace' since the Sri Lankan state forces' military victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009. As the self-appointed militant representatives of the Tamil community, the LTTE's demand for self-determination, in response to decades of state violence and discrimination, took the shape of an independent homeland. The group's claim was no less authoritarian or violently contrived than that of the Sri Lankan state, featuring governance structures and a pervasive transnational cultural-ideological project that centred on the necessity for a sovereign Tamil Eelam (see Stokke 2006; Thiranagama 2013).²

Between 2006 and 2009, after the breakdown of the 2002 ceasefire agreement, armed hostilities between the military and the LTTE intensified. By 2009, over 300,000 Tamil civilians were trapped in the paradoxically (mis)named 'No Fire Zones' (NFZs) and subjected to indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombardment at the hands of the military. Meanwhile, the LTTE resorted to forced conscription and violently blocking those trying to escape in an effort to use the uprooted population as a human shield. It has been estimated that between September 2008 and May 2009, around 40,000 to 70,000 people were killed in what amounted to a deliberate and catastrophic failure by the Sri Lankan state to protect Tamil civilians. Credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity have been levelled at both the government and the LTTE (Darusman, Ratner & Sooka 2011; International Crimes Evidence Project Sri Lanka 2014; Petrie, UN Secretary-General & UN Internal Review Panel on United Nations

Action 2012). Politically vocal sections of the global Tamil diaspora have called for the atrocities of 2009 to be afforded formal recognition as an act of genocide. These indictments have been resolutely denied by the government, which has maintained the line of a 'humanitarian rescue operation', citing 'zero civilian casualties'.

It is necessary to preface the ensuing discussion on photography in the post-war period by briefly pointing to the wartime image regimes consolidated by both the government and the LTTE. The image world of the aspirant Tamil state was actively engineered by the LTTE as a means for political socialization, recruitment, and fund-raising. It featured elaborate memorial portraiture anointing fallen cadres as martyrs, and the extensive use of atrocity imagery to highlight Sri Lankan state violence as well as the group's own military prowess. Nitharsanam (Truth/Reality), the LTTE's broadcast media unit, included photography and frontline video and film-making divisions. This 'visual economy of the nation played a crucial role in the LTTE's nation-state building effort and tethering the Tamil community displaced and dispersed across the globe to the promise and necessity of Tamil Eelam (see Poole 1997). While the Sri Lankan state's efforts at mobilizing images were less coherent, it would actively adopt visual and media strategies that had been successfully manoeuvred by the LTTE. The circulation of atrocity images in the mainstream media served an important function in promoting both militarism and what de Mel describes as 'martial virtue' (2007: 13). A virtually cinematic record of what was named 'Eelam War IV' was narrated by embedded journalists who popularized a triumphalist account of the heroic defeat of terrorism and the battlefield benevolence of the armed forces (see Perera 2016).

This period between 2006 and 2009 also marked an important technical development in photography with the transition from analogue film-based practice to digital outputs. An unprecedented volume of images were generated at the frontlines by both victims and perpetrators. Significantly, the advent of mobile phone and compact digital cameras gave rise to graphic contra-narratives that disputed various official untruths concealing the extent of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the absence of independent witnesses.³ Thousands of trophy photographs and video clips captured by government soldiers celebrated vicious summary executions and sexual violence. State atrocities were actively documented by LTTE photographers as well as photojournalists and aid workers in the NFZs as the call for an internationally mediated ceasefire mounted to no avail. In the post-war period, these fragments visually enumerating Tamil death and devastation have continued to supplement demands for justice and accountability. They also bolster transnationally consolidated Tamil nationalist political claims sustaining the aspiration for an independent Tamil Eelam.

Nordstrom notes that 'there are layers of invisibility surrounding war' whereby 'complex relationships of truth, untruth and silencing' are produced by deleting frontline actors and actions from formal narratives and official accounts (2004: 25, 28). In the Sri Lankan post-war period, this invisibility was produced through concerted acts of erasure, silencing, spatial (re)organization, and embellishment. These relied not only on infrastructure development, heritage construction, and cultural production, but also on terror and suppression aimed at contriving a consensus of 'peace'. As remnants of the Tamil nationalist-liberationist struggle were assertively expunged, the state's post-war⁴ violence against the Tamil community was overlooked or denied. This history-making effort through visual-material manufacture and removal amounted to the cultivation of a 'public forgetfulness' comparable to Feldman's examination of post-apartheid South Africa, where silence was demanded by way of 'fear, intimidation, communal trauma,

disinformation and communicative distortion' (2002: 236). Yet in northern Sri Lanka, photography persists as a means of resisting state-mandated amnesia.

The end of the war went hand in hand with international appeals and assistance for establishing mechanisms for reconciliation and transitional justice in line with examples spanning from South Africa to Cambodia. The Sri Lankan government was demonstrably uninterested in such processes, which were also condemned widely by Sinhalese nationalists as a threat to its sovereignty. 'Peace building' had been a part of years of international intervention bound to securing a 'political solution' for the conflict and strengthening civil society for reconciliation (Orjuela 2008). As international pressure to address wartime atrocities mounted, a conciliatory domestic investigation took place in the guise of the 2011 'Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission' (LLRC). The LLRC did not constitute an accountability mechanism and offered instead a series of recommendations that remained unfulfilled emphasizing 'the need for an independent judiciary, a transparent legal process, and strict adherence to the rule of law' (Sooka 2014: 67). Further, the government's denial of war crimes and refusal to accommodate an independent international review, coupled with a pledge to protect its 'war heroes', served an important political purpose in strengthening electoral support from the island's Sinhalese majority.

Disappearing dissent

In the final years of war and its aftermath, thousands of Sri Lankans were forcibly disappeared. A vast majority of victims were Tamil. A large number vanished following their surrender to the state in cases that have been termed 'mass disappearances', while others were detained or abducted in the aftermath of the fighting due to alleged involvements with Tamil militancy, political activism, or criticism of the government.⁵ Enforced disappearances have been used extensively as an instrument of terror in Sri Lanka by state security forces and various insurrectionary groups. An estimated 65,000 enforced disappearances affecting Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim communities have been reported since the early 1980s, constituting, notoriously, the second-highest caseload globally (UNWGEID 2016).

Women-led civilian resistance against enforced disappearances began in northern Sri Lanka in 1984 with the formation of the Jaffna Mothers' Front and its opposition to the mass arrests and detention of Tamil boys and men (de Mel 2001: 230). De Alwis describes disappearances as 'a site of political contestation' given the violent circumstances within which these took place and the 'insidious practice of making unavailable the violated body as evidence' (2009: 379). The absence of remains results in families being unable to carry out funerary rituals to ensure a peaceful afterlife, rendering this practice particularly malicious. As will be explored later, the positioning of motherhood and gender cannot be disentangled from the visual and political representational dynamics of the protest. In this most recent incarnation, 'The Association for Relatives of the Enforced Disappeared, North and East Provinces' (ARED) was largely made up of mothers whose children had disappeared in the latter stages of the civil war. Activists documenting the government's continued human rights violations and enforced disappearances in the post-war period have themselves been intimidated, imprisoned, or disappeared.

Following several recurrent marches after the end of the war, a short-lived regime change in 2015 enabled the families of the disappeared to confront the government's failure to provide them with information about their loved ones.⁶ Sustained protests



Figure 1. Tamil families of the disappeared mark their 500th day of protest. Kilinochchi, 2018. (Photo by the author.)

began in February 2017 based on five demands, including a call to release lists of those who surrendered or were detained by the government forces, the locations of secret detention centres, and the names of detainees held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and various Emergency Regulations (ERs) (ARED 2017). The state undertook a number of piecemeal efforts bound to its vague international commitments to transitional justice by creating various commissions of inquiry, and most notably the Office on Missing Persons (OMP).⁷ Established in 2017, the OMP was intended 'to provide appropriate mechanisms for searching and tracing missing persons and to clarify the circumstances in which such persons went missing and their fate' and identify suitable avenues for redress (Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 2016). However, the OMP did not possess punitive powers to deal with investigations into testimony identifying perpetrators, its legal enactment patently stating that its findings should not give rise to any criminal or civil liability.

The families, misled and disappointed by various state promises and insincere institutional commitments over the years, demanded a more global audience, appealing to the international community. The iconographies of the protest charted these concerns. Alongside portraits of the disappeared, vinyl banners were printed with the flags of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. Hand-drawn cardboard signs declared a lack of faith in a domestic process and urged international attention (Fig. 1). Even as these images were mobilized in ways that affirmed Azoulay's theorization of photography's potential to create a 'space of political relations that are not mediated exclusively by the ruling power' (2008: 12), they simultaneously acknowledged the failings of existing mechanisms for redress. As the protests wore on, disappointment in the international community worsened. Despite their defiant visibility in an atmosphere of contempt and intimidation, protesters were left with no practical recourse or access, compounding sentiments of exasperation and

‘unforgiveness’ (Brudholm 2008: 16). Indeed, many felt that the onus on ‘reconciliation’, especially as advocated for by international organizations and civil society, was imposed on victims rather than the perpetrators themselves. The forcibly disappeared in Kilinochchi and Maruthankerny were among 23,586 individuals recorded as ‘missing’ between 10 June 1990 and 19 May 2009. Among the protesters were also those who had lost loved ones to the ‘shadow state’ well before 1990, and after 2009 through various means, including abductions and arbitrary arrest.⁸

The hollowness of institutional processes such as the OMP, accompanied by dismissive statements made by political figures, were seen by victims as confirmation of the government’s disingenuousness and lack of interest in Tamil grievances. This was reinforced by the fact that those who crossed over from LTTE-held territory to government-controlled areas at the end of the war were officially registered. A number of protesters had personally handed over their children and grandchildren to the military in 2009. The political leadership’s broken promises to release the names of the detainees and surrendeers endured as a significant point of frustration (Rajasingham 2018). Most recently, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, one of the architects of the final phase of the war in his previous role as Defence Secretary, stated, ‘The missing are in fact dead. I cannot bring back the dead’ (Abi-Habib & Bastians 2020). The tone of the protests also changed significantly since their beginning, becoming further ‘formalized’. The Kilinochchi protest tent, for example, morphed into an office, with continuous protests halting after the 500-day mark and regular demonstrations taking their place.

The failures of visibility

I examine the protests of the families of the disappeared through the photographs that threaded through the site as acts of mobilization, subversion, and surveillance. Here Tagg’s (1993) and Azoulay’s (2008) contrasting conceptualizations jostle in uneasy contention. Drawing on Foucault (1980) and Althusser (2001 [1970]), Tagg considers photography as solely reflective of ‘the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register as truth’ (1993: 64). In contrast, Azoulay argues for mobilizing the camera’s capacity to create ‘powerful forms of commotion and communion’ to overcome the confines set by the sovereign (2015: 15). Photography, she argues, is at times ‘the only civic refuge at the disposal of those robbed of citizenship’ (2008: 121). The use of photography at the protests of the families of the disappeared renders the limits and potentials of the medium visible in an articulation of discontent and irreconciliation. These uses are inextricable from an essential question of visibility, which affords both political possibility and risk where the struggle for self-determination is concerned. Visibility is also central to the design of truth and reconciliation processes, where violations and violences are required to be made visible. These centre either on confession, atonement, testimony, and forgiveness, in line with a Christianized ethos that is intended to foster cohesion, or on the legal, criminological, and forensic reliance on the presentation of ‘evidence’. The latter has historically depended on photography in its indexical capacity, informing, in turn, the medium’s Foucauldian assumption: as a tool of governance and surveillance.

In Nader’s (2001) understanding, processes intended to contrive harmony also involve coercion, which, within the Sri Lankan example determined by complex and impaired citizenship, amounted to the denial of freedom. Reflecting on the experiences of the LTTE’s role as a de facto state actor, Brun defines the position of the



Figure 2. Mothers with portraits of their missing children. Maruthankerny, Jaffna, 2018. (Photo by the author.)

northern Tamil community as one of ‘complex citizenship’, where there is a lack of ‘a clear-cut relationship between citizens and the state, but where there are several governing and uncompromising actors that people must relate to’ (2008: 401). Tamil demands for self-determination arose out of a situation of ‘impaired citizenship’, indicating the hierarchies and inequalities that exist within the category of ‘Sri Lankan’ (Azoulay 2008: 24). Where the aspirant Tamil state was defeated, Tamil citizenship in the post-war period was characterized by renewed complexity, inequality, and impairment, made visible in the protest photographs that punctuated the landscape of northern Sri Lanka.

At the time of publication, the Tamil families of the disappeared in the north and east of Sri Lanka had engaged in over 1,900 days of continuous protest. In meagre tents scattered across six towns pinned with the haunting photographic portraits of those subjected to enforced disappearance, elderly parents, grandparents, spouses, siblings, and sometimes young children sat in roadside vigil (Fig. 2). The images displayed were mostly formal studio portraits, poised, full-length, set against vividly painted backdrops that featured conventions of opulent stage curtains, grand arches, or lush Italianate scenery. Others were enlarged reproductions of National Identity Card (NIC) photographs valued for their frontality: headshots facing right in semi-profile with the left ear fully visible as per the official stipulation. A disconcerting number were pictured in school uniform. Several were more informal, tender moments clipped out of snaps from weddings, birthday parties, or gatherings with friends. In the absence of usable photographs, there were also black and white photocopies of identity documents revealing the interwoven realities of war, displacement, loss, and economic hardship.

In Barthes’s poignant terms, ‘every photograph [was] a certificate of presence’ (2010 [1980]: 87). These indexed lives violently and abruptly disappeared, while drawing

attention to the brutalities that necessitated their display. Among those pictured were young men and women who were forcefully conscripted by the LTTE to fill its depleting ranks, surrendered to the government forces, vanished during their internment at squalid 'welfare centres', or were never seen again following their 'rehabilitation' in camps set up for the 12,000 individuals identified as 'ex-combatants'. The portraits also served an important function of signposting for the disappeared. The fear of being forgotten was common among the protesters, especially in instances where the victims were young or wounded when separated from their families. These photographs were not merely visual articulations of resistance for the protesters, but also a guide for those who may not know how to find their way back home.

Photographs of the protesters themselves, mostly elderly parents and grandparents in their various media and civil society circulations, have become visual mnemonics for the failures of Sri Lanka's transitional justice processes. Yet, in contrast to Mookherjee's (2015) exploration of the iconicity of Bangladeshi 'war heroines', these protesters and their images appeared to be largely ignored within the island. The demonstrations were also the subject of a more insidious practice of photography. State intelligence operatives habitually captured the protesters' activities on mobile phones and digital cameras. In mutual awareness, the protesters, their supporters, activists, and government informers, along with their contending photographs, orbited one another. Where 'reconciliation' took the shape of new roads, white-washed government complexes, and grand victory monuments, these transient sites of civilian protest rendered 'irreconciliation' visible. It was incompatible with and opposed to the state's narrative of peace and victory. In these small roadside tents in the island's north and east, violent absence endured in technicolour.

Journalists and activists intermittently visited the sites to compile news items. On certain days, the family members were eager to narrate their stories. Heartbreak was rehearsed on demand for visiting writers and photographers. Each iteration was underpinned by inconceivable despair and desperation, but also a desire to be seen and acknowledged. Correspondence relating to complaints made to the state and the Red Cross and responses that arrived in languages they did not speak (English/Sinhala) were shown in frustration. Private photographs from tucked-away shopping bags emerged during conversations on quieter days to narrate cruelly disrupted lives. On some days, there were no words. Instead, photographs cupped in their hands were held up as offerings to the camera.

At other times, photographs were discouraged, and distaste and apprehensions around their possible uses and commoditization by photojournalists or entrepreneurial immigration brokers were expressed. These concerns hinted at the medium's perceived capacity to contract future protections, entitlements, and citizenships. Foreign correspondents demanded that their fixers organize assembly lines of hands, photos, and tearful faces for their cameras to add colour to global news explainers. These evoked what Kleinman and Kleinman describe as a 'dismay of images' that distilled suffering, situating the protesters within a global visual economy of resistance against state terror (1996: 9). Yet the protesters were anything but passive subjects in the making of these images, thinking through their efficacy and expediency, highlighting importantly the risk and agency involved in the performative politics of 'victimhood'. It was an understanding that demonstrated the global nature of their audience, and the language and visibility required by international apparatuses for attention and perhaps even redress. These photographs also signalled the failures of domestic reconciliation



Figure 3. Demonstration marking 365 days of continuous protest. Kilinochchi, 2018. (Photo by the author.)

processes and international civic spectatorship, as well as global governance and rights ideals and mechanisms.

On demonstration days marking significant international commemorations such as Human Rights Day or the protest's milestones measured by continuity, the families actively presented themselves to be photographed (Fig. 3). The 'chronic mourners' were snapped extensively (Schirmer 1989: 25). Their bodies were situated against photomontages of loss or holding pictures of their disappeared loved ones in their palms. These located the tent's occupants within a broader aesthetic of resistance against state terror and enforced disappearance. The portraits visually linked them to families of the disappeared elsewhere in the world, in a potent formation of Azoulay's (2008) photographic citizenship, transcending and challenging the violences of the sovereign (see also Clarke, this volume). Their defiant presence as a proxy for the absent bodies of the disappeared was also a reminder of the continued absence of justice.

As the protesters faced the cameras, their quiet sadness sometimes gave way to visceral rage and sorrow. They screamed their pain into unblinking lenses. Photographs and footage were compressed and linked to social media posts tethered to a series of dedicated hashtags (#disappearedsl [Disappeared Sri Lanka], #familiesofthedisappeared, #releasethehist, #nojustice, #tamilfod [Tamil Families of the Disappeared]) alongside others denoting ethnicity and location (#tamil, #eelamtamil, #kilinochchi). On Instagram and Twitter, these were re-posted and re-tweeted largely by diasporic Tamils and a small number of local activists. However, the social-media-enabled 'de-territorialization' of these images also reinforced ethno-nationalist claims and interlinked demands for alternative sovereignty rather than necessarily 'civil skills that are not subject to nationality' (Azoulay 2008: 26).

Interspersed among the photographs of the disappeared were more patent confirmations of state atrocity in the form of trophy images captured by government soldiers. In a powerful example of photographic contingency, family members found inadvertent confirmation of their loved ones in custody where arrests were denied (see Benjamin 2004 [1931]: 510).⁹ In Kilinochchi, an image of a group of men and a young boy in the custody of the army had been printed onto a vinyl banner. It was one of two photographs displayed at the site showing a group of captives huddled around a pit prior to what was believed to be their execution. The still image, one of the hundreds that emerged out of the final months of the war, was used most famously in the Channel 4 documentaries *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields* and *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished*. One of the men pictured was known to someone in the group, but they collectively wondered who the anonymous child was and whether he had survived. A year later in London, I learned that he had not. I was shown photographs of the boy's mangled body, identifiable by his blue shorts and a bandaged knee, piled into the back of a truck.

On other days, the protesters requested photographs from visitors to the site. Images of their activism were printed onto demonstration-day banners held up at marches. This was an important act of record-keeping where the progress of the protests was preserved as a part of its iconography. Here, photographs, both personal and those required by the state for identity documents, served as a means for remembering and a reminder of state terror and brutality, especially where government monuments to war victory did not acknowledge the losses of the Tamil community. The premise of photography as an ideological tool of the state, which wields power through documentation and surveillance, was subverted by this mobilization, whereby the protesters made themselves visible to and challenged the state.

The use of photography also permitted the protesters to overcome a language barrier. The state's marginalization of the Tamil language (and citizenship) was one of the most significant tensions of the postwar. 'I have never felt like a citizen of this country!' various interlocutors repeated in frustration, with others describing their status as 'second-class' or 'third-class' citizens. Inequalities instituted within the category of citizenship on account of ethnicity and language were a root cause of the conflict. Photographs enabled those who did not have a common language to communicate to the English- and Sinhala-speaking media and activists who documented and disseminated their stories and their losses. They offered an arresting visual to the largely uninterested or hostile mainstream refusing to overlook possible associations with the LTTE.

Anti-politics of solidarity

Media attention afforded to the protests was not without strain. While international transmissions elicited solidarity and support, little progress was made with regard to the protesters' actual demands. Photography of the protests, especially on demonstration days, was cautiously strategized by its proponents. Where the 'chronic' state of grief and devastation in which these protesters were suspended was largely unacknowledged by the state as well as the majority of their fellow citizens, its outpouring was directed towards the camera, where it might be acknowledged and recorded for posterity. This expands on Seoighe's consideration that these acts of resistance constitute a form of collective performative politics aimed at challenging the established 'state architecture of domination' (2016: 1, 3). It also echoes Clarke's consideration in this volume of *victim*

visibilization in Colombia as a refusal of state-sponsored truth commissions, signalling a new kind of accountability politics of the collective, which in this instance is made possible by photography.

The un/intentional centring of gender as well as 'victimhood' permitted an assertion of what was 'counter-political' in appearance, but inextricable from the anti-politics of the ethno-nationalist conflict within which the protesters' grievances were rooted (Spencer 2007). The protests were predominantly led by women, and certainly described as such. 'Motherhood' was notably emphasized. I highlight here Spencer's differentiation between the counter-political and the anti-political. The former seeks to defuse the effects of the political whereas the latter 'is rooted in paradox – the exploitation, for political purposes, of popular unease with the moral implications of actually existing politics' (2007: 177). The foregrounding of women – elderly mothers and grandmothers – and young girls in the protests and their photographic representations in terms of 'victimhood' sometimes afforded a counter-political veneer to what were perceived to be anti-political Tamil nationalist claims. As was the case during the war years, 'victimization' was a visual trope that was consciously mobilized to supplement the necessity for liberation and sovereignty. While the protesters exercised important, if ambivalent, agency in presenting themselves to the camera, the subsequently unruly circuits within which these images were transmitted varied in their political inscription, which troubled the ways in which the protests were received in Sri Lanka in particular.

Referring to the protesters as *Tamil ammas* (Tamil mothers) fortified expressions of solidarity, especially among activists in the Tamil diaspora, where the emphasis on Tamilness and motherhood affirmed kinship in ethnicized terms. The figure of the protesting mother was not without Tamil nationalist resonance, evoking particularly Annai Poopathy (1932–88), a mother of ten from Batticaloa who was a part of the Mothers' Front, having lost two sons to Sri Lankan state atrocity. In 1988, she fasted unto death demanding a ceasefire between the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) and the LTTE. Her death was assimilated into the Tigers' nationalist rhetoric on martyrdom, including annual commemoration events. Against the militarized, masculinized material incarnations of the Sri Lankan state, the largely elderly women comprised a transitory feminized formation.

In reality, the feminized nature of the protest was also determined by socioeconomic practicalities, where the elderly who were not employed or did not have care responsibilities were able to spend long periods at the protest site. It was these distressing realities of undertaking continuous protest that rendered the censure directed at the protesters deeply saddening. The photographs of the protests thus visually encompassed the tension between the counter-political and the anti-political permitted by the ambivalence of photography. Kannan Arunasalam captured this anxiety in his poignant film installation *The Tent* (2019). This consisted of two screens set up side-by-side. The first recorded a quiet day at the Mullaitivu protest camp, with the camera looking outwards from a tent onto the road as its residents contemplated the mundane, the war, and their future. On the second, by contrast, the camera turned to the 500th Day demonstration at Kilinochchi, where the protesters wailed in visceral grief, holding up photos of their loved ones.

In spite of the political risk and agency that underlies participation in these protests, the demonstrators consciously foregrounded their 'victimhood', a category that is often viewed as apolitical or marginalized because of its centrality to the discourses of

reconciliation and transitional justice. As noted by Jeffrey and Candea, '[V]ictimhood can be a prime way of suspending or attempting to suspend the political through an appeal to something non-agentive and "beyond" or "before" politics', although it also 'establishes a space for a specific kind of politics' (2006: 289). Terwindt, meanwhile, highlights how victim mobilization reliant on interlinked terminology can serve as an effective driver for processes of criminalization (2020: 66). However, where the state was the perpetrator, the centring of victimhood appealed most directly to international truth and justice mechanisms dominated by legal, criminological, and medical lexica and practice that are inevitably reminiscent of photography's Foucauldian co-option within these fields. Feldman critiques such mechanisms for 'truth', noting that they amount to the imposition of a pathologization on countries struggling with the aftermath of oppression, political terror, and violence. In the process, geopolitical inequalities and hierarchies are played on and exacerbated, permitting those in the Global North to absolve themselves from examining their own past, whereas the process ultimately needs to be 'transnational' to be effective (Feldman 2002: 235).

After many years of being ignored by the state within a context of complex and impaired citizenship, the protesters' demands for justice were directed not at the sovereign, but at the global as mediated by photography and its capacities for amplifying visibility, which powerfully speaks to its potential to de-territorialize 'citizenship' (Azoulay 2008). Here 'victimhood' must be performed, where photographs that situate protesters holding images of their loved ones as 'victims' position them in a new kind of globally determined and recognizable seriality that glosses over 'political' incompatibilities. Within the neoliberal framework of world peace and contexts of 'genocidal cosmopolitanism' emphasized by Mookherjee (2011), Azoulay's suggestion of solidarity and responsibility emboldens advocacy and accountability networks. Here, the photographs of these protesters demanded international governance commitments and action.

In this context of ethno-nationalist conflict, redress and solidarity were further complicated by the lingering effects of Tamils 'othered' by war, where ethnicity was conflated with 'terror' in the categorization of politically active Tamils as terrorists. Former in/voluntary affiliations to the LTTE have been a dominant reason as to why the protests have been dismissed, overlooked, or censored. Even though southern Sri Lanka was plagued with enforced disappearances, there was little compassion or solidarity and overwhelming silence. Perceived sympathy and support from the Tamil diaspora was also seen as a cause for doubt and criticism. Indeed, the protests were supported by various Tamil diaspora groups who, for example, sponsored representatives' travel to make submissions at the UN Human Rights Council sessions in Geneva as well as participate in a demonstration in London. These connections were both ambivalent and inevitable given the transnational character of the Tamil community, and were not without political expediency for various parties. However, 'the diaspora' had also long been demonized by the state and Sinhalese nationalists alongside civil society activism, non-governmental organizations, and international governance mechanisms during the war, and in relation to international pressure for investigations into war crimes in its aftermath.

Confronting the sovereign

Critiquing Tagg's theory that photographs are 'merely a "screen" onto which more powerful primary ideologies are projected', Pinney argues for photography's 'subversive

and unpredictable potential, the 'new kinds of juxtaposition and seriality' it affords that enable the world to be seen in fresh ways (2015: 24, 28). Similarly, Kalantzis stresses the ambivalence of the photographic image, the 'continuous [social] repossession and use' of the image that 'destabilizes the initial inscriptions, making them culturally [and, in this setting, politically] salient objects' (2019: 82). This observation resonates in relation to the assembly of photographs at the protest sites, but also in relation to the ways in which the protesters understood and wielded the potential powers of their images. They were intimately aware of the ambivalence of photography, fearing and desiring the power and the visibility afforded by the medium. The 'appropriation' of photographs both in Strassler's work on Indonesia (2010) and in these observations of post-war Sri Lanka highlights a departure from the 'official' narrative that photography has been theorized to reflect (cf. Tagg 1993). At the site of the protests, these theoretical leanings coexist in uneasy contention. Photographs of these photographs and their movement in expanded, globalized circuits of protest and resistance offered continuity not only to the images, those whose moments of life they captured, but also to the hope and struggle of these families of the disappeared in their quest to find answers. Yet the photographs of the protests also reveal inequalities of global news-image economies, producing distressing 'formative fictions', as explored by Gürsel (2016: 113).

The confrontation of the sovereign was enacted through the subversive use and political mobilization of identity documents and photography. Elsewhere, the NIC was actively appropriated into personal use by inclusion in family albums and reframed as memorial images in a manner comparable to the Indonesian *pasfoto*, whereby the state-bureaucratic and sentimental, repressive, and honorific became entangled (Strassler 2010: 145). This was further complicated by an ethno-nationalist conflict, securitization, and competing nation-state and citizen-making projects. Informed by this, the defiant use of the NIC asserted an absent presence that evoked an obvious strain of nation, state, and citizenship. NIC photographs and sometimes NICs and passport pages were wielded by protesters on demonstration days, evidencing the photographic image and presence of the disappeared as was once recognized and authorized by the state. The gazes of NIC portraits were reverted back at the state in a demand for accountability and justice. Here, photography's co-option into governmentality was defiantly appropriated and subverted. The state's narratives of reconciliation are actively challenged through images of its own making in this transient shrine for lives lost in a conflict precisely intended to weaken the state. The recasting of identity photographs was not simply about individual loss, but a collective, implicitly *national* confrontation of the politically constituted erasure instrumented by the Sri Lankan state.

Conclusion

They have not given us one reason to trust them and it is not for the lack of trying because we have done everything they have asked of us – write letters, go to this commission hearing there, this meeting here. We have been begging them for years. But what have we got? Nothing. We are looking to the UN, the international community, to give us answers, and they are our only hope now, but they, too, continue to disappoint us. Where can we go from here?

Such was the angry declaration of one protesting *amma* in Kilinochchi. Her son had been detained by the military in 2009 and was never seen again. The protesters resolutely confirmed their lack of interest in a local mechanism, explicitly articulated in the previously discussed iconography of the protests. Their mobilization of photographs

and their presenting of themselves to be photographed immediately evoked conscious participation in Azoulay's call to enact a new form of civil relations that was not mediated by the sovereign power (2008: 143). However, what of that enactment where mechanisms for justice and redress have been founded on global systems of accountability that are made up of and privilege the extant state? If accountability is contingent on states holding other states accountable within partial and unequal geopolitical relations, what justice and redress might civic spectatorship practically yield?

The aftermath of the Second World War was framed by a forward-looking global language of peace and aesthetic of governance bound to the establishment of an internationalized regime of responsibility espousing the idealized values of the declaration of human rights. It was also designed in a manner such that states would hold one another accountable for violations. While these circulations were intended to supplement promises of peace and dignity bound to international co-operation and governance, however, for those who were looking to such institutions for protection the realities were tenuous. Especially for populations in civil conflicts such as the Tamil families of the disappeared, 'reconciliation' remained elusive and improbable as it was left to the design and operation of state actors who were perpetrators of violence and faced little to no pressure for justice and accountability. Meanwhile, the families' mobilization of the visual intensified, signalling a recognition of the medium's powers to confront a peace constructed of erasure. The anger and devastation of these families in the deliberate making visible of irreconciliation thus pointed to the failures of responsibility and civic spectatorship.

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NOTES

¹ The term 'photographies' follows from Tagg (1993: 119) indicating a set of discursive practices informed by Foucault and Batchen's (2000: 57) consideration of vernacular photographs. I use 'photographies' in this instance to indicate the multiplicity of everyday photographic practices relevant to the protests of the families of the disappeared.

² About a quarter of the island's Tamil population live outside Sri Lanka, predominantly as a consequence of conflict-induced displacement and dispersal (Maunaguru 2019: 7).

³ The final months of fighting have been described as a 'war without witnesses' given the withdrawal of United Nations staff from the war zone in September 2008 and the government's prohibition on international media from entering the NFZs.

⁴ I use post/war as an abbreviation to combine war and postwar.

⁵ The International Truth and Justice Project and the Human Rights Data Analysis Group note that in a three-day period between 17 and 19 May 2009, a total of 503 individuals, including 443 persons named in various cross-referenced, crowd-sourced lists, were disappeared upon surrender to the state forces (Ball & Harrison 2018).

⁶ The opposition-led *Yahpalanaya* (good governance) coalition government of the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe was in power between 2015 and 2019. The 2015 presidential election marked an unexpected regime change from the previous government led by President Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-15).

⁷ Since 1994, successive Sri Lankan governments have established at least eight Presidential Commissions of inquiry into 'removals' and disappearances, including three zonal commissions. The most recent, the 2013 'Presidential Commission to Investigate Complaints Regarding Missing Persons', known as the 'Paranagama

Commission', and its subsequent expansions, which underpinned the formation of the OMP, inquired into abductions and disappearances related to the civil war between 10 June 1990 and 19 May 2009. The Paranagama Commission received 23,566 complaints, including approximately 5,000 from families of armed forces personnel.

⁸ Thomson-Senanayake (2014) describes the establishment of a 'shadow-state' by way of an economic, political, legal, and socioeconomic framework under which disappearances were carried out.

⁹ Walter Benjamin describes how the photographic image contains the 'spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality (has so to speak) seared the subject, . . . the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back may rediscover it', which in turn permits re-readings beyond what was framed and intended by the photographer (2004 [1931]: 510; see also Pinney 2012).

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L'absence en Technicolor : protestations contre les disparitions forcées dans le nord du Sri Lanka

Résumé

Le présent article examine les usages politiques de la photographie dans les protestations des familles de Tamouls disparus dans le nord du Sri Lanka. Les disparitions forcées sont depuis longtemps un instrument de la terreur d'État. On sait que leur retentissement durable est un obstacle notable aux processus de justice transitionnelle qui ont suivi la guerre civile sur l'île. En examinant comment les protestataires font connaître leurs exigences politiques et leurs doléances par la photographie, l'auteur explore les tensions entre visibilité et surveillance. Les photographies de protestations concurrentes subvertissent la compréhension conceptuelle de ce support comme outil idéologique, tout en compliquant ses aspirations

à devenir un moyen d'émancipation. Dans le contexte d'un conflit ethno-nationaliste, cette mobilisation de la photographie et par la photographie constitue la mise en forme vindicative d'une « irréconciliation » d'après-guerre. Elle est également liée à un langage visuel global de résistance de la société civile face aux atrocités commises par les États, ainsi qu'à des affirmations irréconciliables de la nation et de l'État.