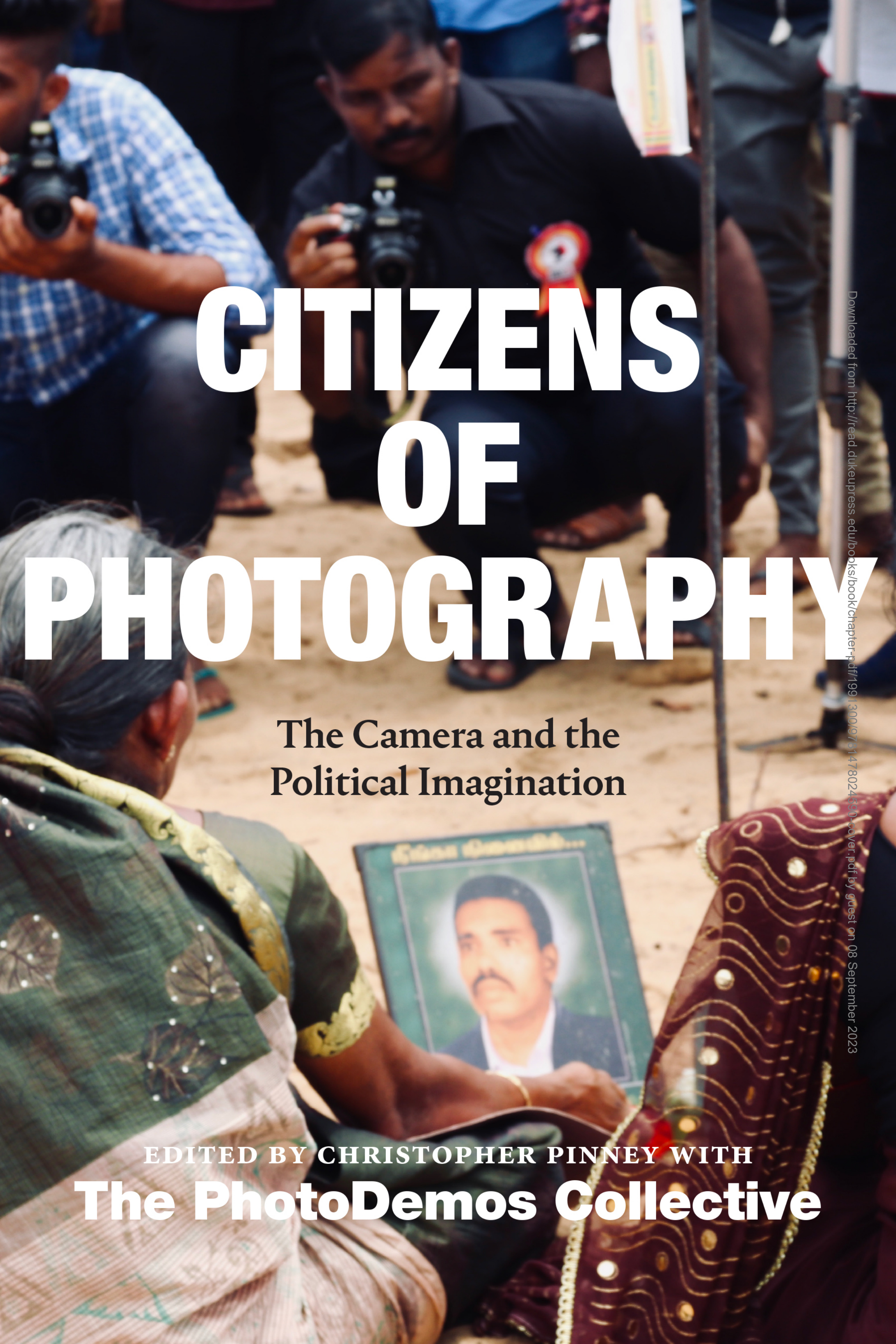

CITIZENS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The Camera and the Political Imagination

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER PINNEY WITH
The PhotoDemos Collective

CITIZENS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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The Camera & the Political Imagination

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER PINNEY
WITH THE PHOTODEMOS COLLECTIVE

(Naluwembe Binaisa, Vindhya Buthpitiya, Konstantinos Kalantzis, Christopher Pinney, Ileana L. Selejan, and Sokphea Young)

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—Christopher Pinney

1

"The Truth Is in the Soil"

THE POLITICAL WORK OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA

VINDHYA BUTHPITIYA

The Road to Mullivaikkal

On the 18th of May 2018, the road from Jaffna to Mullivaikkal was punctuated by small towns in mourning.

It was the ninth anniversary of the last day of war between the Sri Lankan state forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).[1] The intensification of hostilities between 2006 and 2009 fatally impacted the Vanni Tamil community, which was caught between the military's indiscriminate offensives and the Tigers' frantic last stand.[2] By January 2009, more than 300,000 displaced civilians were forced into government-declared "No Fire Zones" (NFZs) and trapped between the advancing army and the retreating combatants.[3] Many thousands succumbed to relentless state-directed artillery shelling and aerial bombardment. Essential humanitarian aid, including food and medical supplies, was curtailed, deepening the crisis. Not even hospitals and

medical facilities were safe from the armed forces' systematic attacks.[4] Neither warring party showed regard for international humanitarian law or civilian life. As the rebels' command structure collapsed, the able-bodied were drafted in desperation to fight for an independent homeland, Tamil Eelam, that they, like many thousands before them, did not survive to see. The final days of the three-decade-long insurgency led by the Tamil militancy unfolded in Mullivaikkal, where it was brutally extinguished. Between September 2008 and May 2009, an estimated forty thousand to seventy thousand civilians died in the Vanni.[5] Government statistics maintained that the number was no greater than nine thousand.[6] Credible allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity have been leveled against both the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE.

On Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day, upon which this chapter focuses, war losses were reanimated in makeshift monuments that mobilized photography in relation to a dissenting citizenry that the state had attempted to obliterate. Little roadside shrines were centered around assemblages of photographs. Small pandals showed the carnage of the final months of the war. Others housed portraits of the known dead and missing garlanded with peach hibiscus, white pinwheel flowers, and red Ixora—unscented, commonplace funeral blooms for lives lost. Clay oil lamps of mourning were lit. Shuttered shops draped with black flags announced a region-wide *hartal*.[7] The towns marked their protest with a day of Tamil grief. In the predominantly Sinhalese south, remembering the end of the war took on an entirely different tone indicative of the lack of consensus about the nature of atrocity. Preparations for the annual commemoration of "Victory Day" on May 19 were underway. As former president Mahinda Rajapaksa declared in his May 2009 address to the parliament, the celebration signified "the liberation of the whole country from terrorism."[8]

The photographic debris of war making up the transient memorials in the north challenged this proclamation of hard-won "peace." The government's projection of reconciliation took the form of new highways, ports, and stadiums in southern Sri Lanka and grand monuments in the north as a tribute to the bravery of the armed forces. For those gathered at Mullivaikkal, such concrete accolades amounted to exalting the perpetrators who were responsible for the deaths and disappearances of their family and friends. Until 2015, public gatherings to remember the Tamil war dead were prohibited, taking place in secrecy or hidden away in homes.[9]

Even where the visual and material remains of the *iyakkam* (movement) and the LTTE's efforts at state building have been razed, Tamil imaginaries of the nation and the imperatives of the Sri Lankan state persisted at troubled odds.[10]

In these divergences, the causes and consequences of the war and the contours and histories of the nation and state were quietly but resolutely opposed.

Photography and Nation Making in the Sri Lankan Post/War

Scholarly considerations of Sri Lanka's intractable politics and conflicts have significantly overlooked the possibilities for analysis afforded by the visual. In fourteen months of fieldwork carried out among members of the northern Tamil community, it became evident that photography offered a window into contested questions of war, nation-state, and citizenship. Everyday "photographing" and the endless recontextualization and rematerialization of photographic images presented a compelling means to illuminate both the effects of war and the lingering political frictions and grievances of the postwar.[11] Following Ariella Azoulay's provocations, the ensuing vignettes form an attempt to "watch" the types of photographs that made up the postwar image world of my interlocutors.[12] My analysis extends beyond what is shown in the image to reconstruct the photographic event and its subsequent circulations and reframings to account for the reinscriptions of time and increasingly borderless movement.

Photography was central to the nation-state and citizen-making practices of the island's competing state actors, the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. The medium was mobilized within personal and collective spheres to mediate both individual and shared political futures. Where sustained conflict resulted in mass displacement and international migration, these imaginings would become transnational in aspiration and character, escaping into a space of global circulation. These serve as an unlikely expansion to Azoulay's proposition of photography's capacity to "deterritorialize."[13] In post/war Sri Lanka, citizenship, as a practical pursuit to remedy inequalities of political status, was made possible by everyday photography.[14] Alongside the contingencies embedded within images, personal and political improvisations facilitated by photography played a crucial role in helping transcend the limits of the sovereign.[15] These enabled, in turn, greater amplification of a *located* claim for a Tamil nation-state and homeland by way of a "nation" deterritorialized through transnational dispersal.

Since gaining its independence from Britain in 1948, Sri Lanka has been troubled by a *longue durée* of emergency rule and increasing securitization and militarization. Two armed insurrections in the Sinhalese-majority south (1971 and 1987–89) and ethno-nationalist conflict fermenting into civil war (1983–2009) in the Tamil-majority north and east exacerbated by a hostile

"peacekeeping" intervention by India (1987–90) drastically transformed the island's socioeconomic and political climate. A governing logic of counter-insurgency was espoused by successive administrations to secure and expand state power. In this setting, promoting Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the demonization of political minorities served as an expedient tool to summon electoral support from the island's majority voter base.[16]

The photographs generated through the Tamil national liberation struggle and its aftermath make up the core of this chapter. In northern Sri Lanka, popular photographic practices have been defined by war in terms of what was photographed, why the photographs were taken, and how these photographs were displayed, shared, concealed, or destroyed. Conflict continues to determine the afterlives of these images, emphasizing how war-affected communities are actively engaged in the re/production, embellishment, and circulation of photographic images that pertain and respond to their civic and political status. Where "conflict photography" has been typically theorized through the lens of documentary images, this compels a necessary and important shift to our understanding of what "frontline" photography can constitute and demonstrates the medium's perceived power to confront harm and erasure and help materialize political aspirations and futures. This chapter speaks principally to the diversity and vibrancy of those photographies and their interminable conjugations. Within a landscape of loss, displacement, war death, and terror, the boundaries between the public and the intimate were blurred, and the social became inherently political.[17] Conflict necessitated the generation of new social, political, and institutionalized image making and expanded their transnational circulations as thousands of Tamils fled the island. As the war escalated, the internationalized social and political arcs and permutations of these images would become increasingly unruly. Following the 2009 victory, the oppression of Tamils under the guise of national security continued. The diverse photographies of the post/war began to reinforce new and competing political claims and demands, transitional justice grievances, and individual aspirations for parity of citizenship.

Karen Strassler uses the metaphor of "refraction" to examine how popular photography mediates between "widely shared representational forms and visual logics and more intimate concerns."[18] As they change contexts, photographs accrue new social meanings and functions. Sri Lanka's territorial boundary also served as a threshold between political suppression and possibility, defining the refractions of the images discussed in this chapter. Photographs that engendered silence or peril on the island conversely allowed for vocalizations of national liberation or pursuits for truth and accountability

outside its borders. While acknowledging the extensive visibility and impact of wartime images outside Sri Lanka, I focus on the uses of photography in Jaffna and the Vanni, where freedoms were limited and the risks remained constant. By centering the space of remembrance at Mullivaikkal as a point of departure, I explore the political work of photography in the shadow of ethno-nationalist conflict.

The Political Work of Photography

Writing on photography, Walter Benjamin highlights the "spark of contingency" linked to the "here and now" of a specific time and place that lingers in the photographic image where "the future nestles still today, so eloquently that we, looking back are able to discover it."[19] As elaborated in the introduction to this volume, photography's capacity for "contingency" is vital to its political possibilities. In the context of post/war Sri Lanka, the events of war and their truths were numerous and disputed. We should note also a powerful paradox: the scarcity of personal photographs compounded by loss, displacement, sparse access to cameras, and the costs of studio services coexisted with an excess of images documenting war and suffering. In acts of civilian resistance and remembrance in the postwar, my interlocutors' interests did not necessarily lie in the "punctum" found in a single meaningful image but in multiplicity and the potential for "remixing."[20] Single images were transformed into vibrant and renewed reincarnations and composites that blurred boundaries between genres as well as the public and the private.

The final phase of the Sri Lankan civil war was marked by a significant transition in the technics of photography. In the mid-2000s, analog practice became rapidly supplanted by compact digital cameras and mobile phone cameras. Unrestrained by the finite exposures and the temperamental qualities of film cameras, hundreds of images could be immediately generated, viewed, modified, and transmitted. A surplus of digital images recording the horrors and atrocities of the warzone captured by both victims and perpetrators were a direct result of this shift. Where these "events" were framed and atomized by multiple perspectives, lenses, devices, and image regimes, "contingency," understood as a future uncertainty demanding both personal and political invention, lends itself to grapple with photography's social and political "refractions."[21] Further, as has been highlighted by Konstantinos Kalantzis, who stresses the ambivalence of the photographic image, the "continuous (social) repossession and use" of the image "destabilizes the initial inscriptions."[22]

First, within the social conditions and transformations of the Sri Lankan post/war, new and responsive photographies were continually created in both intimate and official spheres.[23] A large number were intended to manage personal and political contingencies. A surfeit of photographic imponderabilia, as if to visually enumerate the pervasive terrors of the state, reinforced the collective imagining of a Tamil nation-state and its political necessity as well as possibility.[24] The medium's capacity to disturb and trouble was enabled by both volume and ubiquity, magnified by the digital re/production, enhancement, and circulation of photographs rather than a singular punctum or spark of chance.[25] Acts and spaces of Tamil civilian resistance as well as those declaring renewed claims of nation became saturated with images showing the devastations of war. Such photographs drew attention to the countless injuries inflicted on Tamil bodies and the Tamil landscape. These amounted to a visual inventory illustrating claims of genocide boldly papered onto the contested homeland, or pinned digitally onto user-generated maps on social media platforms. It served as a communal act of "evidencing."

The Sri Lankan state has continually expunged community histories and embedded the island's landscape with its violence against Tamil citizens. Within such a setting, an assembly of photographs formed in their fleeting mobilizations was a defiant act of making visible, *in numbers*, the resilience of the nation. Second, even within more intimate realms, seemingly "mundane" portraits, such as identity photography or the contents of wedding albums, performed an important function in aiding individual mobility that was ultimately bound to citizenship aspirations.

The Visual Debris of War

The small dirt road to the grounds of Mullivaikkal was brimming with hundreds of grievers (figure 1.1). The path was marked by flamboyant paper and vinyl pandals printed with photographs: maimed children, the injured elderly, the dismembered dead, hundreds fleeing for their lives with their worldly belongings borne on backs and bicycles, others, wounded and emaciated, queuing for *kanji* (porridge).[26] Photographers, both civilian and militant, trapped in Mullivaikkal turned their cameras onto their own suffering.[27] In Sri Lanka, the makers of these public images remained mostly anonymous. Photographers in exile occasionally stepped forward to claim ownership as they began to build lives in asylum elsewhere. Thousands of images circulated online and as part of displays built for commemoration events, echoing a civic demand

for recognition. These congregations of images often suggested that the Tamil community's "impaired civic status" can only be remedied by national self-determination.[28] A vinyl banner printed with images of suffering announced, "We will rise again!" (figure 1.2).

Necropolitics of Solidarity

Where death was insistently politicized and ritualized within the context of war, its influence on the visual-material world of the island has been extensive.[29] Effects included the building of cemeteries, the commissioning of cenotaphs, and the circulation of atrocity images and memorial portraiture.[30]

The photographs displayed in Mullivaikkal and in and around the north and east during the time of the commemoration were those captured by both "victims" and "perpetrators." As in the example of American military personnel torturing prisoners in Abu Ghraib, vicious, celebratory records of annihilation were snapped on cell phones and digital cameras by their executioners in the early years of portable digital image making.[31] The soldiers' exultant poses affirmed their heroism in "eradicating terrorism."[32] These men documented their own experiences and making of war on the front lines: compatriots killed by "terrorist" adversaries, rows of brutalized Tamil bodies, the stripped and desecrated "enemy" subjects of deliberate injury, the callous executions of prisoners, and army men posing triumphantly over piles of corpses and recovered weapons hauls. Such photographs, especially those of dead Tiger cadres, bolstered the state's own account of "liberation" and its assertions of a benevolent "humanitarian rescue operation."

Embedded media personnel staged scenes of combat and rescue with cinematic verve. Tamils were simultaneously framed as both victims in need of saving and culprits requiring total destruction. The line between civilian and combatant had been blurred by many decades of state violence coupled with voluntary and forced recruitment.[33] As a result of the state's rhetoric of othering and antagonism, the distinction was one that many southern Sinhalese were willing to overlook. Yet what was made apparent in the images produced during the final months of the war was the perpetrator state's willful and catastrophic failure to protect its Tamil citizens. This continued to permeate the postwar, where Tamilness and the expression of interlinked political grievances were regularly condemned and reprimanded as efforts to resuscitate the LTTE. State violence against those who were cast as threats or suspects persisted.

1.1 Mourners gather at Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

1.2 Sign displayed at Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day. The vinyl banner is made up of various photographs showing the atrocities, suffering, and displacement that the Tamil community trapped in the warzone was subjected to in 2009. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

Tamil photographers trapped in the warzone collectively drew attention to the plight of civilians in the NFZs. While the Sri Lankan state rendered Tamil victims invisible through claims of "zero civilian casualties," thus denying the vast losses that took place, soldiers photographed the brutalities that were deemed *necessary* to win the war. The Tigers, in turn, enhanced civilian visibility through photography to protect their interests. Photographs captured by emergency aid workers verified the government bombings of hospitals and designated humanitarian centers.[34] Journalists and photographers working for the Tigers documented the carnage for transmission to the outside world by way of newswire websites such as TamilNet.[35] These photographs showing the catastrophe of the warzone supplemented the LTTE's repeated requests for a ceasefire, confronted by an "unprecedented humanitarian crisis" weeks before the war finally ended.[36] The witness and testimony of the Tamil survivors of Mullivaikkal have been all-too-often silenced, denied, or rejected on account of their ethnicity and perceived allegiance to the LTTE. In the postwar, these photographs and footage, made with diverse intentions, endured in online and offline circulation. Such images simultaneously motivated contrasting readings and mobilizations: Sinhalese nationalist celebration, Tamil nationalist demands for a separate state, evidence of war crimes, and international calls for accountability, thus emphasizing the unruliness and "remixability" implicit in Benjamin's suggestion of photographic contingency.[37]

On occasions such as Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day, atrocity photographs were momentarily stitched into the landscape in acts of commemoration and resistance. Following the end of the war, the many visual-material markers of the aspiring Tamil nation-state were aggressively demolished by the Sri Lankan government. Resident Tamils described the recasting of the northern landscape under the direction of a military-heritage-development apparatus as a process of "Sinhalization." Such violations were documented by Tamil youth under hashtags on photography-centered social media platforms such as Instagram, registering complaints against the state's "colonial occupation." This is the essential context against which one must grasp the political power of claims upon this landscape.

In a black banner displayed at Jaffna University in May 2018, four photographs showed the suffering of the final months (figure 1.3).[38] A mother tended to a bawling, wounded child whose broken arm was in a sling. Stripped Tamil prisoners of war were rounded up near a mud pit. One appeared to be alive but collapsed into the water, holding his head. A few soldiers watched on, while another group led a naked man to the pit. Their execution was imminent. Among them was also a young boy. It might be readily inferred that this

1.3 Banner placed at Jaffna University marking "Tamil Genocide Day." Jaffna, May 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

was one of many trophy photographs captured by army personnel. The third photograph showed a pile of corpses half-folded into the soil, perhaps prior to a hasty burial or cremation. The fourth exposed a camp with injured Tamils sprawled on the ground. Where the building of new roads also seeded Buddhist shrines, and civilian land remained occupied by ever-expanding military camps housing the perpetrators of these violences, these images of atrocity directed attention away from the hegemonic script of a victorious peace.

Additionally, postmortem images taken by warzone photographers aided the subsequent identification of the dead.[39] In 2018 a downloadable archive of 577 photographs and 19 video clips taken from the digital camera of an anonymized Tamil humanitarian worker was published online by an exiled journalist, Suren Karthikesu. TamilNet, quoting Karthikesu, notes, "Apart from serving the purpose of documenting the genocide, the material would also be useful to the kith and kin of the victims who perished in the onslaught and to those who are searching for their loved ones."[40] Sightings of the abandoned dead were often conscientiously conveyed to family members outside the warzone. This was one aspect of an enduring preoccupation with the war dead, which was central to the Tamil struggle. The numbers remain the subject of considerable dispute: conservatively estimated by international organizations, deliberately minimized by the Sri Lankan government, and decried as too few by proponents of the Tamil nationalist cause. The losses experienced and remembered by survivors were suspended somewhere in between.

A Visual Economy of Death

Photographic funeral notices remain a highly visible aspect of the Sri Lankan image world. Even during the height of the war, local newspapers, constrained by the state embargo on printing materials, repurposed cardboard, brown paper, and exercise books for printing. At times, a mere two pages listing casualties were published so that relatives might know if a family member had been killed or wounded.[41] Memorial images, in the form of handbills, posters, flex banners, *ninaivu malar* (memorial booklets), and ornate portraits, were ubiquitous in northern Sri Lanka. Prior to the advent of the digital, photographs produced out of "copying negatives" were used to make photo-realistic impressions on zinc blocks that allowed the image to be printed as notices or flyers overnight. These announced the death and details of the funeral to the neighborhood. Copying negatives were typically stored by studios for future use. These photographs of photographs were often sourced from identity

cards when family members did not possess usable portraits of the deceased. Fragments of the National Identity Card (NIC) as official document and minutiae from this process endured in the negative: the logo of the state, the individual's unique NIC number indicating their year of birth, and the signature of the registrar of persons who hand-signed each card (figure 1.4a). The printed photographs were retouched and enlarged to erase any marks of the state (figure 1.4b). The resulting portraits were further embellished by overpainting or framing to be displayed and worshipped in households. This "remixing" involved the appropriation of state-mandated documentation for a very different political project. Portraits that had made subjects visible to the state now confronted the state with new demands.

Postwar memorial photography grew more extravagant with the possibilities afforded by the digital to remix, reformat, and reframe. Photographs were scanned, edited, and ornamented. Sedate black-and-white posters were printed in color or morphed into digitally printed decorative flex banners. The material form of the image was also frequently transformed; two-dimensional images transmuted into ostentatious new presences. Studios and framing shops produced lavish memorial frames embellished with electric lights, plastic flowers, and lamps and other elements of the iconography of funerals (figure 1.5). These material alterations also minimized the contingency of the photographic images through the application of bright colors, motifs, and templates.[42]

This economy of embellishment and remixing was also transnational, with overseas Tamils enlisting the cost-effective services of local practitioners. Ganesananthan, an elderly retouching artist in Jaffna, had customers send him photographs from France and Switzerland via WhatsApp. Sitting at a desktop computer that occupied the shrine room of his home, he patiently transfigured these photographs using a Photoshop equivalent. He wielded the mouse with the finesse of a sable brush to turn out digital memorial portraits and posters. The overlaying of saturated colors enhanced the visibility of these images, foregrounding and highlighting desired elements and minimizing the contingent "noise" of the original image.

Pathivu

The events at Mullivaikkal, by contrast, necessitated different sorts of remembrance imagery as a mnemonic of the nation, taking the form of those "martyred" on its behalf.[43] In the midst of shelling and gunfire, Arulraj, an exiled Tamil photographer from Jaffna, photographed the destruction of his

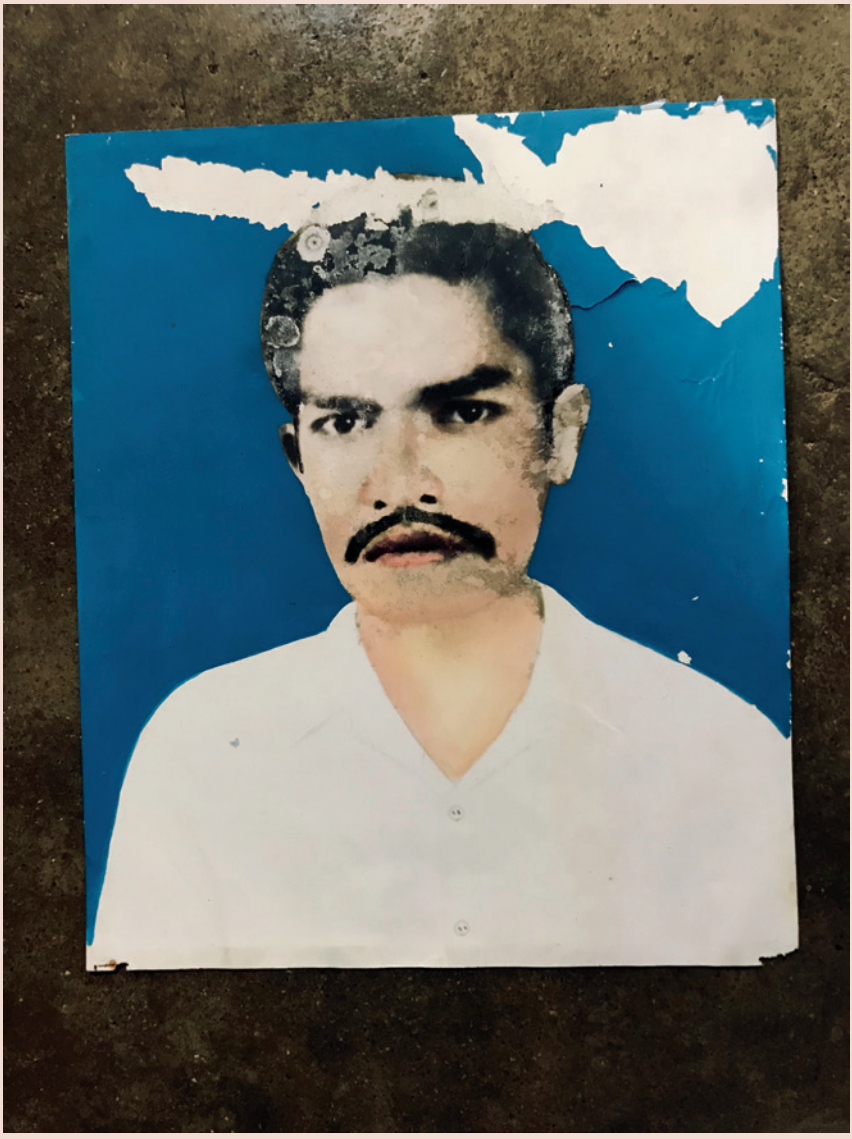
community. His family was among the thousands trapped in Mullivaikkal in the brutal final months of the war. Camera in hand, Arulraj climbed onto his motorbike and painstakingly snapped the devastations of war. He narrated his losses and his survival with filmic vigor, repeatedly making clear that his photography was intended to serve not the parties and politics of the conflict but the evidential *pathivu* (record).

"The world needs to know about our suffering," he said simply. Although Arulraj was unwilling to confirm how many images he had in his possession owing to fears for his safety, he hoped that their contents would serve as evidence of "what was done" to his people. Through his photographs, shot in color and sometimes edited into black and white, Arulraj sought to capture moments of stillness amid chaos. In a vivid Tamil image world that draws on Hindu and Catholic iconography and the flamboyance of South Indian Tamil cinema, it was the contrasting solemnity of black and white, a color scheme typically associated with mourning, that demanded the viewer's attention.

In Arulraj's photographs, now circulated and exhibited globally, the war was captured in intense detail. Huddles of young and old fled in chaotic processions, their belongings heaped onto the backs of bicycles and bullock carts. Black clouds of smoke billowed on the horizon, evidence of the shelling that the Sri Lankan state denied. A woman embracing a memorial portrait of a relative led a small convoy of exhausted escapees. Dogs and emaciated cattle followed at their heels. Reedy old men and women knee-deep in saltwater stacked cooking pots, plastic chairs, tin kettles, and old rice sacks full of uprooted possessions into small fishing boats on the lagoon. Young "birds of freedom," recognizable by their braided hair and checkered men's shirts belted around their waists, tenderly wrapped up a dead woman's body in polythene sheets.[44] This image evoked the ambivalence of even those whose who did not support the LTTE's authoritarian methods. The group's contributions to the nation were always recognized, especially in their struggle against the hostilities of the Sri Lankan state. Kovalan, a Tamil activist, who had been critical of the Tigers and had even been briefly forced into exile as a consequence, said, "In 2009, I felt very sad. Like we had lost something."

Other photographs emphasized the seemingly endless tragedy of the Vanni. Sarong-clad old men dug graves to bury the dead laid out on stretchers fashioned out of rush mats and whittled branches. Families sheltered and slept under the abandoned husks of buses or queued for water dispensed from a bowser with plastic buckets. A woman carried a rattan mat in the crook of her arm and a tiny pet monkey in a makeshift chicken-wire cage on her back. A stunned boy in a bright-orange shirt sat on the back of a tractor and cradled

1.4a (above) Copying negatives from the Kugan Studio archive. Jaffna, August 2018. Details of the individual NICs they were copied from, including the iconography of the state, are visible. **1.4b (opposite)** Hand-retouched memorial portrait from a Jaffna framing shop. The pose suggests that it was repurposed from a NIC photo. Photographs by Vindhya Buthpitiya.



1.5 Framed memorial portraits awaiting collection at framing shops. Jaffna, March 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

a baby in his arms: sleeping or dead, it was impossible to say. Two men on a Hero Honda bike gasped in horror at an event unfolding beyond the frame. Sandwiched between them was the half-concealed body of a girl in a blue teddy bear print dress. The jagged bones that jutted out made it difficult to gauge whether there was more of her than a pair of legs spilling over the side. A woman carrying a boy in a red bunny cap looked on at the two-and-a-half passengers in resignation. Amid this turmoil, there were also shy smiling toddlers sitting on sari swings draped on tree branches and tired grandmothers rocking happy babies. Life, too, persevered amid death.

"I wanted to capture the feelings of people through their faces, and so I photographed them directly looking at the camera. No words are required then," Arulraj mused nearly a decade after the war had ended.

> I don't support any side, but I see this as my responsibility to make sure that the injustices, the war crimes committed against the Tamil people, are brought to light. I see these photographs as evidence of genocide. I do not know whether we will get justice, but it is my *nokkam* [purpose]. These photographs must be seen and these injustices need to be inquired into internationally, but no one is speaking on behalf of us Tamils. This is *neradi sakshi* [direct witness]. There needs to be *neethi* [justice] and no one can deny that it happened. *Varalaruka pathivu senji vaikkaṇom* [We must record this for history].

Arulraj's photographs were among many thousands, claimed and unclaimed, mobilized and concealed, appropriated, exhibited, and disputed, that persevered in the aftermath of the armed conflict, speaking to a history and loss that had been silenced in Sri Lanka. As the material remains of war were covered up, the photographic debris continued to challenge the absences contrived by the state.

Arulraj was not alone in his pursuit of photography for the pathivu. Yet in its mimicry of "state" practice echoing that of an archive, the photographic record becomes a screen for ideology, legitimating the necessity of a sovereign Tamil Eelam.[45] The significance of the pathivu was not merely in its role as a source of historical truth. In its photographic incarnation, it was also politically expedient, to be read for its intentions, contingencies, and disturbances. The photographic pathivu was a repository of the past that not only pointed to the future in its present mobilizations but demanded a future alternative tethered to a political claim of the (Tamil) nation.

In the Vanni, Sivapragasam, a studio photographer who had occasionally moonlighted as a photographer for the LTTE, recalled the mass confiscation

of cameras by the latter during the final months. Cornered, the Tigers were using photographs from the war zone to both document atrocities by the state and strengthen the expanding appeal for an internationally moderated ceasefire. Photographs uploaded onto news websites such as TamilNet spurred the Tamil diaspora in Europe, North America, and Australia to undertake global protests, drawing attention to the plight of civilians trapped in the NFZs. Sivapragasam buried his cameras in the soil at Mullivaikkal, hoping that he might recover them one day. He had not returned to look for them but was certain that he would not be able to locate them. He reestablished his studio under a new name, looking to secure the future of his children. "We are a people who went to Mullivaikkal and came back," he pondered, implying something of his resilience in the face of adversity, as much as his community's.

Images produced by "victims" or those living in sites of active political violence and unrest in recent years such as Syria and Myanmar are yet to be afforded significant attention within the anthropological literature on photography or conflict.[46] Those like Arulraj, who were caught amid war, saw themselves as exercising something like Azoulay's call for responsibility. This was also central to their ethno-political identity. For the Tamil community confronted by the Sri Lankan state, the atrocity image demanded to be amplified. As perhaps inadvertently implied by Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, the "local population" is often tacitly categorized and homogenized as the passive, victimized subjects of such photographs.[47] They are seen and theorized as somehow separate from a "global audience" to which they do not appear to belong as producers, audiences, consumers, or intermediaries in their dissemination and circulation. Within this framing, they are also rendered apolitical and lacking in agency, often relegated within tropes of the "suffering other" as opposed to the makers, movers, and manipulators of images. This premise is rendered progressively unwarranted by rapidly expanding access to image-making devices. Their potentials and appropriations were enhanced with internet-based platforms available for the direct dissemination of images.

Un/Civil Spectators

Within the context of the Sri Lankan conflict, atrocity images have a complex history of political use by the state as well as aspirant state actors, notably the LTTE. Visuals of war and violence were actively incorporated into the Tamil image world through photography, film, and other forms of public art and used as a tool for recruitment and political socialization.[48] The "Truth

Tigers" or cadres trained in film and photography for the LTTE's Nitharsanam (Reality) Television Media Unit filmed its land and sea battles against the Sri Lankan armed forces. Central to this distribution were images foregrounding the Sri Lankan state's atrocities against and victimization of the Tamil community. These were featured in exhibitions and pamphlets, circulated online, and broadcast on television to enlist popular support and encourage recruitment locally. In an English-language interview with an Australian documentary crew, an LTTE videography coach noted, "We're looking for two aspects. One, the person has the potential and the courage to undertake this training. The second, film the fighting beautifully with artistic talent."[49] These visuals were also circulated internationally to secure support and financial contributions from the Tamil community abroad. The footage was used by the group's military strategists to assess performance and as instructional material. Moreover, the Tigers' victories over the Sri Lankan forces in various battles were documented often in the form of "kills" showing the bodies of dead soldiers to rouse nationalist sentiment and public motivation for the Tamil political cause.

The Sri Lankan state initially claimed to avoid using atrocity images in its official media campaigns. However, the intensification of the war between 2006 and 2009 saw its adoption of similar visual strategies. This coincided with the switch from analog to digital image making as well as growing access to personal cameras. Consequently, the war effort was enthusiastically documented by Sri Lankan soldiers. The performative "martial virtues" of young troops forced into military service from the rural Sinhalese south by poverty and unemployment animated the war for the screens of Sinhalese audiences.[50] This imagery was regularly revived in election campaign visuals, ranging from posters and billboards to music videos, to remind voters of the Sri Lankan armed forces' triumph over terrorism. Images of violation and violence underpinned ethno-nationalist political claims in which atrocities were not denounced but demanded and celebrated. Photographs became generative of further, future violence. Claims of nation served as a means of consolidating the martial imperatives and powers of the state, which also made visible the consequences to those who did not conform.

A short-lived informal economy of authentic and counterfeit visuals from the final years of war emerged, to satiate morbid public curiosity as well as political assertions, both in Sri Lanka and overseas. In the island's capital, Colombo, video CDs of bloodshed and conquest with Sinhalese titles such as *Ape Viruvange Veera Kriya: Prabhage Avasanaya* (The gallant deeds of our heroes: Prabha's end) sold for a couple of hundred rupees (US$1). The content

rejoiced in the grisly death of the Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran and his acolytes at Mullivaikkal. A Sinhalese journalist recalled that the CDs hawked in Colombo included news footage captured from TV broadcasts and "hand-out footage" from the Ministry of Defense. Film and stills were captured on low-grade phones and compact cameras as well as professional equipment and "leaked" for profit. A few months after the end of the war, the Sri Lankan army also hosted a grand exhibition that sought to "bring the heroism witnessed in the Vanni on the television screen" to the capital. The event, described as a *sonduru, sajeevi athdakeema* (beautiful, live experience), drew thousands of Sinhalese citizens to "experience" the war and the *vismitha vijayagrahanaya* (marvelous triumph) for themselves through a display of captured weapons, armored fighting vehicles, soldiers demonstrating their combat skills, and, most significantly, photographs. The images on display showed the visceral, bodily destruction of the LTTE, confirmed by the lined-up corpses of dead cadres over which the triumphant military leadership stood.

In Europe, however, visual evidence of war crimes was purportedly stashed away for future financial gain or secretly proffered for thousands of euros by enterprising soldiers—even though purchase would render them legally inadmissible. Alongside Tamil victims' and international aid workers' images and testimony, soldiers' trophy footage and photographs became the subject of investigative documentaries such as *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields* (dir. Macrae, 2011), *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished* (dir. Macrae, 2012), and *No Fire Zone: In the Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (dir. Macrae, 2013). Similarly, Tamil photographers' images of suffering were transformed into international exhibitions and publications.[51] While the films moved audiences abroad to outrage and advocacy, in Sri Lanka they became the focus of state-sponsored protests against the international community. Widely publicized efforts were made by the government to discredit claims of authenticity through the production of its own documentaries and publications, including *Lies Agreed Upon* (2011), *Ruthless* (2012), and *Corrupted Journalism: Channel 4 and Sri Lanka* (2013). These visuals remained colored by the politicized tensions between ethnic groups. Wartime atrocities, committed based on ethnic difference and a fundamental rejection of the notion of shared humanity and citizenship, continue to be dismissed by the government and the majority of the island's population.

The political work of these atrocity images of varied origin and intent far exceeded the island. Azoulay considers "citizenship through the study of photographic practices," suggesting that the medium affords new means for the photographed, the photographer, and the spectator to untether themselves

from the bounds of sovereign power or contracts of the nation-state and economy.[52] Drawing on the context of Israel/Palestine, where the Israeli state governs both citizens and "noncitizens" together even though the former are governed "differently," Azoulay emphasizes that "the nation-state (re)territorializes citizenship."[53] This provides "a protective shield to those declared as citizens within a certain territory, and discriminates between them and others, noncitizens, who are governed with them in the same territory, by the same power."[54] By contrast, Azoulay argues, photography "deterritorializes citizenship, reaching beyond its conventional boundaries and plotting out a political space in which the plurality of speech and action . . . is actualized permanently by the eventual participation of all the governed."[55] This premise, Azoulay suggests, allows for "civil skills that are not subject to nationality, but rather to borderless citizenship" that demands an ethical responsibility toward one another.[56] The deterritorialized circuits and proliferation of these images respond to Azoulay's appeal for civic spectatorship.

Images from the final phase of the war reinforced witness accounts, testimony, and international advocacy efforts that underscored state violations of international humanitarian law. Shared on Instagram and Facebook, compiled into YouTube clips or Flickr albums, printed onto vinyl banners at commemoration events and protests, they endured within political claims in the postwar. Tamils, both located in and dispersed from the island, continue to reimagine their shared political future/s for an independent nation through these images.

At the Mullivaikkal commemoration, photographic montages adorned banners and archways (figure 1.6). Embellished with digital graphics of blood, these installations dramatized Sinhalese state violence inflicted on Tamil bodies, asserting that these crimes would not be forgotten (figure 1.7). Here, the representational format was situated within a register comparable to those made in Jaffna's photography studios, intended to "enhance" eyewitness claims, thus heightening their visibility and effect rather than their "truthfulness." In other instances, the iconography of the Sri Lankan state was caricatured. On one banner, an illustration of the Sri Lankan flag's lion with a bloodied sword standing over an anonymous pile of bodies was superimposed over images of Tamil suffering drowned in flaming red and a photograph of a memorial shrine. The accompanying map of Tamil Eelam too was bleeding. Photographs of the dead and injured served as an index of past violence, signifying the community's grievances tethered to a desired, alternative political future. The caption read, "The martyrs died along with our dreams of a motherland. May 18th, the day we carried the pain."

Uyirayutam

The reference to *thyagi* alludes to the LTTE's vocabulary of martyrdom. An ethos of self-sacrifice was cultivated among fighters as part of the Tigers' single-minded commitment to securing Tamil Eelam.[57] A Tamil citizen's *kadamai* (duty) was total devotion and sacrifice of the self, drawing on ancient Tamil martial concepts. To this end, the LTTE created "new" terms, such as *uyirayutam* (life [as a] weapon) and thyagi (martyr, or one who gifts themselves, implying also an act of killing others while sacrificing oneself).[58] This was embodied in the creation of the Karumpuli or Black Tiger suicide squad. In the de facto Tamil state, photographs of atrocity and displays of ornate martyrs' portraits served as powerful tools for political/ideological inspiration. These were made and wielded to underpin demands for Tamil political

1.6 A temporary paper archway strung with banners showing the horrors of Mullivaikkal. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

1.7 Mullivaikkal genocide "martyrs" banner. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

self-determination. Such images also served as catalysts in motivating and necessitating politically generative violence: as essential to the liberation of the Tamil nation from the "oppressive" Sinhalese/Sri Lankan state, and the future formation and pictorial idealization of an independent Tamil ethno-state. Photography further underpinned validation for and celebration of the sacrifices expected of its dutiful (future) citizens as fighters and martyrs. Elaborate public rituals focused on death, funerals, and memorialization were established, transforming practices and iconographies in lasting ways. In the south, Tamilness and terror became intertwined in the state's visual narrative of war, mobilizing the menace and fear of death at the hands of the Tigers.

The commemoration of dead cadres reinforced a sense of solidarity among Tamils.[59] The vast LTTE *thuyilum illam* (heroes' cemeteries) were among the

first to be destroyed by the state in an act that qualifies as a war crime. These were hastily built over with no respect for those whose kin were interred there. As has been explored by Michael Roberts and Christiana Natali, the thuyilum illam were an important component of Tamil political socialization during the war years.[60] These served as communal spaces for mourning complemented by calendrical rituals such as Maaveerar Naal (Great Heroes Day), which encouraged the participation of bereaved families.[61]

The LTTE's iconography, steeped in the yellow and red of the national flower of Tamil Eelam, *karthigai*, drew heavily on stylized portraiture.[62] Photographic and sometimes painted portraits of men and women who epitomized this virtue of selflessness and loyalty were widely venerated in public. Martyrs' shrines adorned with honor rolls, godlike depictions, and cinematic cut-outs were integrated into local neighborhoods, encouraging memorialization, civic devotion, and voluntary enlistment. Such image making was undertaken by studio photographers and those involved in painting cinema hoardings for the South Indian Tamil films screened in Jaffna before the beginning of the war. Following the destruction of the cemeteries and the prohibition on mourning as well as any visible hints of the LTTE, commemorations took place in secret. In contrast, grand memorial events, centered around these martyrs' pictures, were organized overseas, where migrant Tamils could openly pay their respects to those who had sacrificed themselves for the nation (figure 1.8). These events also functioned as fundraisers for the war effort.

In the postwar, proscription by the state coupled with sustained practices of surveillance and intimidation of Tamil civilians and ex-cadres resulted in personal photographs, especially those indicating prior affiliation to the Tigers, becoming contraband, risking keepers' arrest or worse. For many, such photographs, especially those featuring LTTE uniforms, were all too often the only images available to them. Kanthan, an interlocutor formerly allied with the iyakkam, admitted to burying his albums, only to find much of his collection in a state of deterioration. Digital archiving also proved challenging due to the policing of online spaces such as Instagram. "Community guidelines" periodically restricted the use of content tagged under terms such as #TamilEelam due to associations with the LTTE. Effective bypasses were improvised by diasporic Tamils through the use of Sri Lanka–specific hashtags.

In these divergent, even contradictory, postwar registers, wartime images accrued new political meanings and mediated new political potentials for different audiences. For the Tamil community, they signaled the hostility of the state in both the past and the present, underpinning the necessity of a future Tamil nation-state. Within global frameworks of human rights and

1.8 Maaveerar Naal (Great Heroes Day). London, November 2019. Photographs by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

world peace, where Azoulay's notion of solidarity and responsibility emboldens advocacy and accountability networks, these photographs supplemented demands for international governance commitments and action.[63] The inclusion of these visuals within "Western" documentaries elicited outrage among predominantly Sinhalese Sri Lankans, where it was deemed an "international conspiracy" bolstered by LTTE supporters to undermine Sri Lanka's sovereignty. These visuals confirmed the defeat of the "other" who were a threat to the survival of the Sinhalese body and nation. Such photographs also served as a reminder of individual politicians' and military commanders' roles in vanquishing the enemy, becoming integral to their electoral influence. Elsewhere, these mementos of atrocity were transformed into visual accompaniments to songs of patriotism and lamentation by Tamils, echoing the LTTE's potent legacy of political-cultural production centered on atrocity and the violence of the Sri Lankan state (figure 1.9). The contending image regimes of war endured as Tamils sought to reimagine their personal and political futures in a postwar burdened by the grounds and effects of the extraordinary violence that begot "peace."

1.9 The cover artwork of music CDs being sold at Mullivaikkal. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

Materialities of Mourning

The complex iconographies of war were evident upon our entrance into the Mullivaikkal commemoration grounds strung with red and yellow flags, illustrations of the karthigai flower, and banners adorned with technicolor atrocities. "This is just like Maaveerar Naal!" Maanavi, one of my companions, exclaimed as we entered the grounds. The young woman employed in a community psychosocial support organization had survived the final phases of the war in Kilinochchi.

In another life, the sandy turf near the ocean may have played host to a game of cricket or football, but it remained irrevocably steeped in the detritus of war (figure 1.10). I was told that the military clean-up took two years and that there was not a human bone to be found. "They brought in an incinerator," someone whispered, "to burn all the bodies." The soil, however, was still tangled and scattered with the remnants of the NFZ. Children's shoes, women's saris, the plastic shells of battery-powered radios, men's rubber slippers, woven mats,

1.10 Material remains of Mullivaikkal. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

and blue tarpaulin all served as indexes of atrocity. Hundreds of mourners had gathered before a crop of metal rods that would be repurposed as torches. Here, they took off their shoes, toes digging into soil consecrated darkly by these relics of nation and violence as if to form an elemental tether to all that was lost.

Examining the everyday materialities of violence in Sierra Leone, Marianne Ferme considers how local histories are bound up in matter whereby, through objects, language, and social relations, "violent historical memory is sedimented and critically appropriated."[64] The visible world, Ferme argues, is "activated by forces concealed beneath the surface of discourse objects and social relations."[65] In Mullivaikkal what was buried, though only barely concealed, served as a material reliquary of the nation upon which political continuities and claims are built. Photographs of the soil, tangled with wartime residue, were posted on Instagram with captions demanding recognition of genocide against the community and justice for the victims.

Where ragged shirts, broken suitcases, and small school bags were half-buried in the dirt, mourners assembled makeshift memorials for their de-

parted loved ones (figure 1.11). Among these were those whose family members had disappeared in the hundreds following their surrender to the state. Flowers and incense encircled photographs. Elegant studio portraits, an occasional family snap, and staid headshots still laminated into identity cards were placed on mounds of soil resembling little graves (figure 1.12). Many were elderly women, often alone, weeping with visceral grief that hung heavy in the air. A stone's throw away, on the strip of beach where the final days of the war had unfolded, scraps of sun- and-salt-bleached family albums carried by victims had survived for many years, before they slowly deteriorated and washed away. Flex banners printed with brightly tinted atrocities were strung on tree branches and tents that offered sweet cordial to the participants.

Community organizers, some of whom wore T-shirts emblazoned with karthigai flowers, helped marshal a lamp affixed onto a truck that had been roving the Northern Province as a mobile temple. Activists quietly discussed the guaranteed presence of state intelligence men weaving in and out of the crowd incognito, photographing and documenting much like the sup-

1.11 A family mourns around a studio portrait at Mullivaikkal. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

porters themselves. The recruitment of "rehabilitated" LTTE cadres into informal state surveillance networks was common knowledge. Where social stigma and marginalization stemming out of fear were prevalent and opportunities available to them were minimal, many were absorbed into the Civil Security Force to carry out menial labor and information gathering. The line between citizen journalists, activists, state intelligence operatives, and even researchers like myself was blurred, generating a visible tension between the use of the camera as an instrument of the state and a weapon of emancipation.[66]

Visitors took mobile selfies destined for social media against the brightly colored banners printed with dead children and maimed adults to mark their participation in this new ritual of nation and survival. Tamil Eelam, a dispersed nation and desired "state," was thus sustained in hashtags and geotags that stake denied political claims: #mullivaikkal, #tamileelam, #eelam, #tamil, #freetamileelam, #tamilgenocideday, #may18tamilgenocide, #remembranceisresistance, #remember2009, #weremember, and #weresist tether these to a

1.12 A makeshift memorial shrine centered on a Workplace Identity Card (*left*) and a National Identity Card (*right*). Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

1.13 Photographers gather around a mourning family. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

global constellation of hundreds of images posted on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. They constituted, through virtual iconographies and cartographies at least, a legible nation-state, as it was imagined by hundreds of thousands of Tamils scattered far from their homeland.

A buzzing media drone upset a few elderly mothers, reminding them of the hum of falling shells. Local photographers, media workers, citizen journalists, and activists congregated around grieving families, looking for the most arresting of potential photographic evocations that would in the days that followed the event circulate around the local mediascape (figure 1.13). Little children cried over parents they had only known for a few months of their short lives. Graying mothers wept over dead sons and daughters who had not survived past their teenage years or had disappeared upon surrender to the state. A father bore in his arms a large picture frame enclosing multiple faces: a family tree of death. A mother mourned a photoshopped memorial portrait of her son, two images flanking a text that spoke to his memory (figure 1.14).

1.14 A mother mourns her son, pictured in a photoshopped memorial portrait. Mullaitivu, May 18, 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

Elsewhere in the northeast of Sri Lanka, the use of photographs in the yearslong demonstrations of the families of the disappeared was also notable (figure 1.15). Photographed extensively for the international press, images of the protests had become a visual trope for the failures of Sri Lanka's transitional justice processes.[67] Protesters themselves understood the ambivalence of photography, both wielding and containing its powers to make visible. In a context of heavy militarization, swift extrajudicial retribution by the state security apparatus, and impunity for human rights violations by state actors, visibility served as an unpredictable source of political esteem and political precarity. As protest leaders became recognizable by way of media coverage, visibility sometimes even afforded tenuous protection.

However, over many months of public demonstrations, their relationship to photography grew more complicated. What was once seen as a means of enhancing visibility, nationally and internationally, was sometimes also seen as a way in which their struggle might be co-opted or misused, politically, finan-

1.15 Protest tent of the Tamil families of the disappeared. Kilinochchi, June 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

cially, and otherwise, by photographers and other actors, including fraudulent immigration brokers. Many of these anxieties were tethered to and shaped almost entirely by the war, its "victory" by the Sri Lankan state, and how it emphasized the inequality and vulnerability of the Tamil citizenry. However, photography's ambivalent potential for both exploitation and managing social and political contingencies was recognized by those who mobilized the medium in their protest and remembrance. A number of these families had also gathered at Mullivaikkal that day to mark their losses.

As the Mullivaikkal commemoration proceeded, a sharp cry cut through the hum of mourning. "Intha mannukulla tan unmai irukkirathu [The truth is in the soil]," an *amma* (mother) in a brown sari keened. During this lament and curse, she despairingly grabbed at the earth with her hands. Photographers bunched around her. Two women held her up as she, a postwar Sita, clutched at the soil desperately, as if the earth might open up to offer her answers.[68]

The disquiet of the Tamil postwar is thick with photography.

Anticipation Nation

Although the Tamil community's relationship to the authoritarian Tigers was fraught at best, the group's effort at contriving a Tamil nation-state and ideal citizenry left an impression on the vocabulary and aesthetics of Tamil political articulation. At first glance, it might be argued that the Tamil public's continuance of the image-based practices instituted by the LTTE affirms John Tagg's proposition that photography inevitably yields to ideological imperatives.[69] Against this, we might underline the unlikely ways in which photography, in its everyday improvisations and mitigations, illuminated the entanglement of the personal and the political. The medium was appropriated in everyday expressions of individual political choices and the securing of personal futures in the face of uncertainty. Where Tamil citizenship during the war has been described as "complex citizenship," how might the future of the Tamil nation and citizenship be understood through photography?[70]

For Tamils, Sri Lankan citizenship, loosely defined as the relationship between the individual and the state framed by the constitution through franchise and fundamental rights, remained unequal. The mobilization of photography illuminated the tensions in this "impaired" citizenship, affording insight into personal and day-to-day reckonings with the state.[71] What the social and political life of popular photography revealed was that the Tamil

political future, in terms of nation/state/homeland and citizenship, cannot be easily parsed from the effects of conflict-induced transnational dispersal and a large deterritorialized population. The citizens of photography are now globally located.

In the postwar present, the intimate and the everyday refract the history and lingering possibility for a "national" future. For instance, the afterlives of those National Identity Cards (NICs) remixed as emblems of political protest echo Strassler's observations about the social life of the Indonesian *pasfoto*, but the politics of the Sri Lankan postwar rendered the uses of these photographs even more explicit and subversive. Strassler argues that in the Indonesian example, "ideologies and practices of documentation tied to state bureaucratic knowledge production also reverberate within the intimate realm of personal and familial memory."[72] This observation resonates in Sri Lanka, where the official and the intimate have been in constant exchange, as seen in the example of copying negatives turned into memorial portraits. At Mullivaikkal, NIC photographs took on a new political resonance, defiant of the category of "Sri Lanka" itself.

Where the Sri Lankan state persists as the perpetrator, the reorienting of its visual-material marker of citizenship in an explicitly Tamil space of memory and resistance announces a space of intense inversion (figure 1.16). In this setting, the refiguration or dramatic translation of NIC photographs pointed to a citizenship that eluded the Tamil community. Expanding on James Scott's consideration of the tools of legibility employed by the state, Veena Das and Deborah Poole examine how the state makes the population legible to itself through documentation.[73] While identity photography and its role in citizenship registration may, following Tagg, suggest how the state sees its citizens through photography, this does not exhaust the potential of photography. The potential that the NIC images have to write an alternative or double history is a function of their underlying trace, and of their contingency. Rather than Tagg's conclusion that photography "as such" has no identity, the diversity of its incarnations in Sri Lanka points to the exorbitance of its "political ontology."[74]

Through acts of state terror and violence, the lives and deaths of the Tamil community were subject to literal erasure, as evidenced by Mullivaikkal. The materialities and visibility of Tamil culture, polity, and history were also rendered invisible, if not destroyed, in what my interlocutors repeatedly described as "cultural genocide." The repurposing of identity photography and its incorporation into acts of resistance and "national" articulation against the state served as a powerful and poignant evocation of a political absence

and disparity (figures 1.17a and 1.17b). Here, the digital permits greater amplification, extending and consolidating the nation beyond the territorial limits of the state through a dispersed community as well as a network of hashtags.

In his study of transnational Tamil marriages, Siddharthan Maunaguru examines how the multiple involuntary displacements and voluntary migrations have formed the locally and globally dispersed Tamil social, economic, and political milieu.[75] The significance of "anticipation" in "the state of being Tamils have regarding movement, violence, social mobility" is also key to understanding photographic practices.[76] This observation offers an important way to reframe the category of risk and vulnerability saturating the language of conflict.[77] It points to the mitigation and maneuvering that are often overlooked in contexts where communities are positioned as passive "victims" or resilient simply in response to violence.[78] This sentiment resonated with a collective political outlook and aspiration, both past and present. It spoke to the desire for sovereignty and self-determination in anticipation of a future nation-state but also practical mediations of citizenship (figure 1.18).

1.16 Identity photographs used by the families of the disappeared in protest. Kilinochchi, June 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

1.17a & 1.17b Journalists and activists photographing the protesters and rephotographing the portraits of the disappeared. Kilinochchi, June 2018. Photographs by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

1.18 An immigration consultancy displays the visa photographs of those who successfully obtained American green cards. Jaffna, August 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

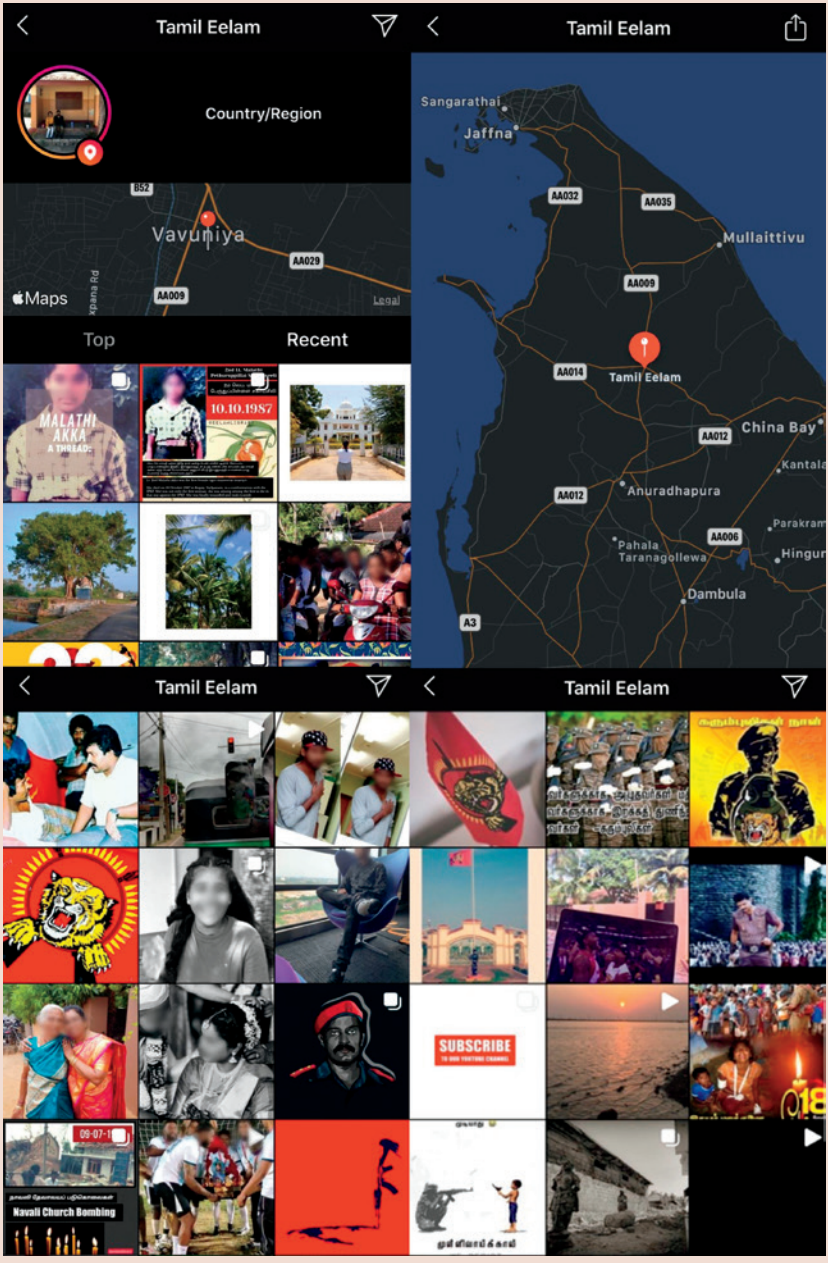
Examining the aspirations and liminality evoked in the photographs of Keralan migrants in the Arabian Gulf, Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil notes how in the absence of formal means of citizenship, photographs, through their movement between spaces, provide pathways for "other modes of belonging."[79] Studio portraits taken to ornament transnational marriage proposals; elaborate wedding albums authenticating relationships; passport and visa headshots paving the way to new citizenships, prospects, and mobilities' images of loved ones held up in protest to confront the erasures of the state or in efforts to preserve histories; and expressions of a desire for a different political future on Instagram all serve as spaces for the imagining and articulation of a future where parity of citizenship might come to exist. Though steeped in a history of violence, the lively confluence of everyday photographic practices

suggests the myriad ways in which the Tamil political imagination perseveres and how photography is oriented to the future.

Imag(in)ing Tamil Eelam

Truth is also imagined in digital "soil." Tamil Eelam is imagined through its eponymous geotag on Instagram, whereby the platform's globally dispersed Tamil users become linked to a map of photographs. Pradeep Jeganathan considers this early example of internet community formation as the "stretching, fragmenting form of the contemporary nation" to examine Tamil Eelam's relationship to "webspace."[80] Flagging the "rootlessness" of the LTTE, Jeganathan notes its placelessness "equidistant from everywhere, not quite anywhere," despite its hyperlocated claim.[81] "It cannot simply become an organization that intersects with 'Tamils' all over the world," he emphasizes, "for then it would lose that one idea, that so many of its supporters have died for and pay for: that small piece of land in north-eastern Sri Lanka—the nation as bounded territory."[82] Three decades later, with the advent of social media and user-generated capacities to augment online maps, Tamil Eelam found cartographic visual-political definition. It was made tangible by photographic accounts of "lived place" where largely young Tamils gave sociocultural and political texture to its virtual topography.

Posts include everyday photographs celebrating the beauty of the landscape, wedding and other family photographs, the victories of diasporic sporting teams, recirculations of protest and commemoration photographs, and selfies locating oneself in the homeland (figure 1.19). In this Instagram "country," bite-sized political histories and aspirations are mingled with personal recollections and tributes compiled by mostly young Tamils overseas. These are interspersed with the iconography and portraiture of Tamil Tiger heroes and martyrs. The history of the movement was often produced and uncritically glorified by Tamil youths abroad to cultivate communal learning and awareness. As Sharika Thiranagama notes, "The younger generations who grew up with the LTTE as a repressive quasi-state rather than a liberation group saw the LTTE not as a vehicle for meaningful utopianism but only as a pragmatic necessity. This means that they may not rush to resuscitate it now, unlike diasporic youth for whom it is utopian still."[83] The strains between those resident in Sri Lanka, for whom the stakes of political expression and negotiations of impaired citizenship are immediate, and those elsewhere, idealizing the political possibility of Tamil Eelam, played out in these compet-



1.19 Screen capture of the public images tethered to the Tamil Eelam geotag on Instagram, 2020.

ing social photographies. These illuminate a diversity of political desires and a citizenship that is doubly split, not only between Sinhalese and Tamil but also between the global and the local.

For Komathy, a young woman who mostly grew up in the Vanni, photography through Instagram became a platform through which she was able to draw attention to the challenges of navigating the postwar as a young Tamil woman and highlight the "forgotten" beauty of her home that had for so long been associated with the horrors of conflict: "I want people to see that my hometown is beautiful and that it has a history that is not just defined by the war. I want to tell the stories of its residents and how proud they are of their land and their heritage," Komathy observed. Others, like Arunan and Sulaxan, young Tamil men in their twenties resident in Jaffna, trained their camera lenses on the scars of war and the ongoing wounding of Tamil bodies and the landscape by the state. Through their photographs and choice of hashtags and geotags that connected them to a tenacious aspiration for a homeland, their political sentiments and allegiances became clear. Captions critical of the status quo or expressing political desires that might be viewed as threat or subversion in Sri Lanka were posted in Tamil (as opposed to English) to conceal in plain sight. Posts with Tamil nationalist hashtags are often reported by their Sinhala nationalist counterparts and taken down as violations of Instagram's community guidelines. These too reemerged through various improvisations.

What Instagram permitted was the grain of these political differences to coexist and jostle in a heterogeneous visual discourse. The aspirant nation is realized in spite of borders that separate its photographic citizens. Digitized family photographs became global conversation pieces for reflecting on displacement and dispossession. Street scenes offered prompts to critique militarization and "Sinhalization." Photographs of LTTE cemeteries destroyed by the state were turned into anchors for #resistance and #remembrance. Though the photographs were situated in Jaffna, Batticaloa, Zurich, or Toronto, the located claim of the nation was pinned onto the virtual map of Tamil Eelam. This enmeshing with conflict spoke to the dispersal of the nation in a manner that vitalized its territorial claims—locality, as Arjun Appadurai noted, being built on global foundations.[84]

Future Citizens/Citizen Futures

Everyday photographs that were unremarkable in their making and mundane in their circulation still contained extraordinary political promise. This was apparent in their uses within spaces of resistance but also in their mediation of the social and bureaucratic processes that paved the way for new citizenships. Images were often produced to fulfill the requirements of the state or state-like actors for registration, securitization, and immigration. Ghastly images of atrocity circulated in equal step with studio portraits, family photographs, and identity card headshots, their political work diverse but no less central to the possibility of emancipation—whether personal or political.

During the war years, photography played a central role in the mediation of not only state and citizenship relationships but interpersonal relationships. Identity photography projects, the registration of persons, and immigration and humanitarian documentation regimes undertaken by state actors were central to the making, demarcating, and mobility of existing or aspiring citizens. For Tamils, vulnerable in the face of the state security regime, this bore significant implications for their corporal well-being and survival. Personal photographs commemorating birthdays, weddings, and other life events took on new significance. These were treasured and exchanged among families displaced and dispersed across faraway borders. Grand studio portraits became integral to securing marriages that permitted safety, opportunity, and new beginnings elsewhere.[85] Even as personal devices with cameras grew more common, young men and women visited studios to have their photographs taken to be circulated by marriage brokers. The most desirable marriage for many was to someone with "status," that is, permanent residency or citizenship in the West, which enhanced one's prospects and mobility where Sri Lankan citizenship was "impaired." While a quarter of the Tamil population lived abroad as a consequence of war, transnational marriage constituted an important migration strategy whereby "homeland" might be re-created in their host countries.[86] Here, photographers played an important role in authenticating relationships through a series of visual markers, including intimacy between couples, the presence of family members, and the portrayal of Tamil traditions for the benefit of immigration officials (figure 1.20).[87]

1.20 Sample wedding album page display. Jaffna, August 2018. Photograph by Vindhya Buthpitiya.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of a political demand for emancipation in the form of a new nation-state, photography endured as a powerful mode of personal and communal political expression, solidarity, and imagining.

The photographies of competing nation-states in Sri Lanka, ranging from propaganda to public art and cultural production, shaped the local visual cultural environment and public sensibilities during the war. The state mandate for the "registration of persons" and associated photography also transformed the spaces, technologies, and capacities of studios, laying the basis for future materializations, conjugations, and circulations. Whether in the form of identity card photography remediated as ornate memorial portraits or the role of wedding photography in mediating new kinds of citizenship aspirations, the war continued to underpin the worlds of photographic production in extraordinary ways.

Notable was photography's uses within contexts of civilian protest and political claim making, echoing the medium's potential to foster borderless solidarity and civic duty.[88] Met with concerted efforts by the state to recast and erase counterhistories and narratives of the war, resistance also extended to remembrance and commemoration. Here, photographs evidencing individual lives and state-sponsored violence served an important political purpose. The visibility afforded and amplified by the visual was integral to the formation of transnational Tamil solidarities and political socialities and in contesting hegemonic projects of history making. Especially significant were the communal efforts within online spaces to navigate how Tamil political histories, identities, claims, and futures in the postwar might be expressed and imagined through images. Photography paired with social media platforms such as Instagram offered a compelling means to grapple with, interrogate, and respond to a convoluted past and present, and form and consolidate communities. These enabled the expression of belonging and un/belonging with respect to place and community.

The multitude of nations, states, and sovereigns and the competing registers of atrocity point to a fragmented world that contrasts with the space within which Azoulay calls for the spectator to "take part."[89] Where aspirations of nation and state were both conflicted and multiple, the categories of the "governed" and the "oppressed" were also problematized. In such a context, photography, even (or especially) in its "democratic" guise, became a medium through which political claims, as well as politically generative violence realizing acts of nation/state/citizen making, were stimulated and sustained.

Photography's capacity for producing and rationalizing violence, especially where ethnno-nationalist claims were at play, was also dramatized.

Photographic practices have been shaped by, interpreted through, contradicted by—and have contributed to—conflicting claims to citizenship and nation. Mapped against a war centered on a demand for political self-determination and the building of a nation-state, photography and related practices offer new insights into the lived experiences of conflict and the articulations of personal and political futures. The visual also serves as a lens through which to examine what being Tamil as a project of future *becoming* might entail. Here, photography serves as a dynamic means for making visible, claiming, demanding, and imagining in the wake of war and enduring oppression. The medium reveals, importantly, its role in the disruptive formation of borderless Tamil political socialities and solidarities that have, in turn, strengthened located claims of a homeland.

Notes

Interviews in this chapter were carried out between 2017 and 2018. Names, locations, and contextual information have been altered to protect interlocutors' identities out of concern for their safety. I am immensely grateful to those whose words, photographs, experiences, reading, and generosity informed this chapter.

1 In the epigraph, *Mullivaikkal* refers to the Karaiyamullivaikkal and Vellamullivaikkal areas located in the southern end of the Mullivaikkal peninsula in the Mullaitivu District where the third "No Fire Zone" was demarcated by the Sri Lankan state during the final weeks of the war in 2009. The strip of land spans about fourteen square kilometers bordered in the north by Valayanmadam and the sea and the Nanthikadal Lagoon and Vadduvakal (International Crimes Evidence Project [ICEP], *Island of Impunity*, 20).

2 See Frances Harrison's important contribution to documenting survivors' accounts in *Still Counting the Dead*. The Vanni is the mainland area of the Northern Province spanning the Mannar, Mullaitivu, and Vavuniya Districts and a portion of the Kilinochchi District. Forming the backdrop for the final phases of the war between 2006 and 2009, the Vanni was among the hardest hit in terms of war-related casualties.

3 Human Rights Watch, "Protect Civilians."

4 Between December 15, 2008, and May 2, 2009, Human Rights Watch recorded no fewer than thirty attacks on permanent and makeshift medical facilities in the Vanni that received hundreds of patients every day, even though their GPS

coordinates had been transmitted to the government by the doctors to ensure their safety (Human Rights Watch, "Shelling of Hospitals").

5 Estimate based on UN observations. See also International Truth and Justice Project Sri Lanka, "Death Toll."

6 See Haviland, "Sri Lanka Government."

7 *Hartal* is a South Asian term for a mass protest in the form of a shutdown of shops and businesses.

8 Weaver and Chamberlain, "Sri Lanka Declares End to War."

9 The prohibition on public mourning was relaxed following the unexpected electoral victory of the United National Party (UNP) and Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) coalition government led by common candidate and former president Maithripala Sirisena (2015–19). This marked a relative improvement to freedom of expression and civilian protest in comparison to the previous regime, led by former president Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005–15), under whose tenure the war ended. The Rajapaksa-led Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) returned to power in 2019 with the election of Mahinda's brother and former defense secretary, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, as president. Restrictions on public mourning have been reimposed.

10 See Stokke, "Building the Tamil Eelam State"; and Natali, "Building Cemeteries." *Iyakkam* is used in everyday conversation as synonymous with the Tamil militancy.

11 Pinney, "Introduction" (this volume).

12 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 14.

13 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 25.

14 I use post/war as an abbreviation to combine the period of war and postwar.

15 Cf. Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 15.

16 See Tambiah, *Ethnic Fratricide*; Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed*; de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka*; and Venugopal, *Nationalism, Development and Ethnic Conflict*.

17 Following Varzi, *Warring Souls*, 4.

18 Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 23.

19 Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1999), 510.

20 Roland Barthes describes the "punctum" of the photograph as the "tiny shock" of a "partial object" that haunts an individual viewer (*Camera Lucida*, 43, 49).

21 Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 23.

22 Kalantzis, *Tradition in the Frame*, 82.

23 See Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos*; and Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*.

24 Bronisław Malinowski's "imponderabilia of everyday life" comprised "a series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents" (or in this case the visual analysis of photographic images). See Malinowski, *Argonauts*, vii.

25 Pinney, "Seven Theses on Photography," 150.

26 Salt and rice porridge was the only sustenance available to those trapped in

Mullivaikkal and has subsequently become part of communal commemorative practice. Inspired by the Jewish holiday of Passover, partaking in Mullivaikkal kanji has been adopted by the global Tamil community to honor those who died.

27 While it remains challenging to categorize photographers by affiliation given the ways in which everyday photography practices were appropriated and administered by the LTTE, I have used the term *civilian photographers* to describe studio and other professional photographers, including photojournalists, who were not directly employed by or did not wish to be identified as having been directly tasked by the LTTE.

28 Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 14.

29 See Schalk, "Resistance and Martyrdom"; Schalk, "Revival of Martyr Cults"; and M. Roberts, "Saivite Symbols." The section title is inspired by Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

30 See Natali, "Building Cemeteries"; Perera, *Violence and the Burden of Memory*; and Perera, *Warzone Tourism*.

31 See Linfield, *Cruel Radiance*; Sliwinski, *Human Rights in Camera*; and Phelan, "Atrocity in Action."

32 The language of eradication relating to "anti-state subversion" evoking disease and pestilence features prominently in the vocabulary of the Sri Lankan state and security apparatus.

33 Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*, 26.

34 Human Rights Watch, "Shelling of Hospitals."

35 TamilNet has been the subject of anthropological inquiry and described as a site of "popular anthropology" by Mark Whitaker, who suggests that the website, although often presumed to be pro-LTTE, only shared a similar Tamil Nationalist ideology. The website remains banned in Sri Lanka. See Whitaker, "Some Reflections."

36 TamilNet, "Source Files."

37 Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1999), 510.

38 In 2021 the monument to remember the lives lost at Mullivaikkal on the Jaffna University premises was demolished by the government, which stated it was a threat to the country's unity. As a result of widespread outrage and a series of hunger strikes by students, a new "peace" monument is expected to be built in its place.

39 Pinney explores the studio practice of postmortem photography in Central India, where the subject was not photographed during their lifetime; the deceased would be photographed surrounded by family. See Pinney, *Camera Indica*, 205–7.

40 TamilNet, "LTTE Announces Unilateral Ceasefire."

41 Arunasalam, *Paper*.

42 Cf. Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" (1999), 510.

43 See Mookherjee, "The Aesthetics of Nations."

44 "Bird of freedom" refers to the LTTE women's wing. See Brun, "Birds of Freedom."
45 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*.
46 See Linfield, "Syria's Torture Photos"; and Smith and Siobhan, "Capturing Genocide on Their Cellphones."
47 Kleinman and Kleinman, "The Dismay of Images," 1.
48 See Brun, "Birds of Freedom"; and Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*.
49 Journeyman Pictures, *Truth Tigers—Sri Lanka*.
50 See de Mel, *Militarizing Sri Lanka*, 13; and Perera, *Warzone Tourism*.
51 See International Truth and Justice Project Sri Lanka, "War on Civilians Exhibition"; and Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice, "'Tamils of Lanka.'"
52 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 24.
53 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 25.
54 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 25.
55 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 25.
56 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 26.
57 See Schalk, "Resistance and Martyrdom"; Schalk, "Revival of Martyr Cults"; and M. Roberts, "Saivite Symbols."
58 See Schalk, "Resistance and Martyrdom"; and Schalk, "Revival of Martyr Cults."
59 McDowell, "Symbolic Warfare," 27.
60 M. Roberts, "Saivite Symbols"; Natali, "Building Cemeteries."
61 M. Roberts, "Saivite Symbols," 77–80.
62 The poisonous Gloriosa superba or karthigai flower also has an unfortunate local association with suicide due to the plant's toxic root. The flower's resemblance to a flame served as a symbol of the "flame of sacrifice" that featured in the Maaveerar Naal ceremony.
63 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*.
64 Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 2–6.
65 Ferme, *The Underneath of Things*, 2.
66 See Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*; and Azoulay, *Civil Contract*.
67 See Buthpitiya, "Absence in Technicolour."
68 Sita is a principal character in the Hindu epic *The Ramayana*, attributed to Valmiki. Sita is believed to be the daughter of the earth goddess Bhoomi. During her marriage to Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, they are exiled to a forest when she is abducted and imprisoned by the king of Lanka, Ravana. Following her rescue by Rama, Sita is asked to prove her chastity by way of a test of fire, which she does. In the *Luv Kush Kand*, the final book of *The Ramayana*, which has not been attributed to the original writers, Sita, plagued with continued questions about her purity, finds refuge in an ashram, where she gives birth to two children, Luv and Kush. In a final challenge by a detractor, overcome with emotion, Sita prays to Mother Earth. The earth opens up beneath her and she disappears. The legend of Ravana pervades the Sinhalese and Tamil nation-

alist and popular political imagination in Sri Lanka (Sanmugeswaran, Fredricks, and Henry, "Reclaiming Ravana in Sri Lanka"; Witharana, "Ravana's Sri Lanka").

69 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*.
70 Brun, "Birds of Freedom," 401.
71 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 14.
72 Strassler, *Refracted Visions*, 23.
73 Scott, *Seeing like a State*; Das and Poole, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*.
74 Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 118; Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*, 11–18.
75 Maunaguru, "Brides as Bridges?"; Maunaguru, *Marrying for a Future*.
76 Maunaguru, "Brides as Bridges?," 61.
77 Jeganathan, "On the Anticipation of Violence."
78 Cf. Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*.
79 Karinkurayil, "Reading Aspiration," 10, 15.
80 Jeganathan, "Eelam.com," 515.
81 Jeganathan, "Eelam.com," 525.
82 Jeganathan, "Eelam.com," 525.
83 Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House*, 40–41.
84 Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 297.
85 See Buthpitiya, "Naveena Camera."
86 Maunaguru, *Marrying for the Future*, 4.
87 Maunaguru, *Marrying for the Future*, 87.
88 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 23.
89 Azoulay, *Civil Contract*, 144.

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