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“The Missing Are Considered Dead”: Reflections on a Declaration

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Do people's memories carry them or do they carry their memories?

Minoli Salgado, *Twelve Cries from Home: In Search of Sri Lanka's Disappeared*, 134

The disappearance might have occurred in the past, but the disappeared is always present.

Ather Zia, *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation And Women's Activism in Kashmir*, 160

Introduction: Counting Days of Protest

The early months of 2022 saw mass protests erupt against Sri Lanka's Rajapaksa government against the backdrop of the country's worst economic crisis.¹ Protests eventually led to the ousting of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, as protesters stormed and occupied the Presidential palace in Colombo and the official residences of the President and Prime Minister. While seated comfortably in California, I watched these events unfold in the place I call home. I was struck by the global attention garnered by the #GotaGoGama protest sites in Colombo, especially considering that long-standing continuous protests in the country's north-east have received much less recognition. On 12 August 2022, Tamil families of the forcibly disappeared in Sri Lanka marked 2,000 days, or five years, of continuous protest demanding knowledge about their loved ones who were disappeared by the government.² In the face of ongoing denial and state repression from a government responsible for the genocides of Tamils in 1983 and 2009,³ Tamil families of the disappeared have consistently called on international entities to support their demands.⁴ The

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¹ “Joint Tamil Civil Society Statement: Sri Lanka's Political and Economic Crisis,” *Sangam*, 14 July 2022, <https://sangam.org/joint-tamil-civil-society-statement/>; “Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis: A Feminist Response to the Unfolding Humanitarian Crisis – Feminist Collective for Economic Justice,” April 2022, <http://ssalanka.org/april-2022-sri-lankas-economic-crisis-feminist-response-unfolding-humanitarian-emergency/>; Sonali Deraniyagala, interview by Himel Southasian Editors, “The Human Dimension to Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis,” *Himal Southasian*, 14 October 2022, <https://www.himalmag.com/sonali-deraniyagala-human-dimension-to-sri-lankas-economic-crisis-2022/>.

² “Association for Relatives of Enforced Disappearances Reiterates 6 Key Demands Ahead of UNHRC Session,” *Groundviews*, 15 August 2022, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/association-relatives-enforced-disappearances-reiterates-6-key-demands-ahead-unhrc-session>.

³ “‘The OMP is an inactive mechanism’ – Tamil Families of the Disappeared Speak to Tamil Guardian at the UNHRC,” *Tamil Guardian*, 19 September 2022, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/omp-inactive-mechanism-tamil-families-disappeared-speak-tamil-guardian-unhrc>; “The Tamil Genocide,” *PEARL Action*, <https://pearlaction.org/tamil-genocide/>; Callum Macrae, *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka*, Channel 4, 3 November 2013, <https://nofrezone.org/>.

⁴ Dharsha Jegatheeswaran, “Heeding Victims' Voices: The Struggle of Tamil Families of the Disappeared in Sri Lanka,” *Just Security*, 3 March 2021, <https://www.justsecurity.org/75095/heeding-victims-voices-the-struggle-of-tamil>.

international community, however, mobilized much more quickly and substantively to the #GotaGoGama protests than to the ongoing protests by Tamil communities.⁵ Many have highlighted the divergence in demands – with the predominantly Tamil protesters in the north-east calling attention, as they always have, to the government’s war crimes and Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy, while protesters in Colombo focus largely on the economic crisis – as well as in the brutality of police and military response they each receive.⁶ As the world’s attention – and mine – was captured by news of the mass protests in Colombo, I began to wonder about the visibility of one protest drowning out another. I thought about the erasure of a five-year-long protest on behalf of the disappeared.

An Incomplete Portrait of Enforced Disappearance in Sri Lanka

Enforced disappearance has been, and continues to be, one of several tools of state error systematically employed by the Sri Lankan government.⁷ The first documented enforced

[families-of-the-disappeared-in-sri-lanka/](#). As Jegatheeswaran notes, the families of the disappeared in Sri Lanka are not one group but several. On the histories and specificities of such groups, see Kumudini Samuel, *A Hidden History: Women’s Activism for Peace in Sri Lanka 1982–2002* (Sri Lanka Social Scientists’ Association, 2006); Neloufer de Mel and Chulani Kodikara, “The Limits of ‘Doing’ Justice: Compensation as Reparation in Post-War Sri Lanka,” in *Violence and the Quest for Justice in South Asia*, ed. Deepak Mehtal and Rahul Roy (India: SAGE Publications, 2018): 39–73; “Decades on, Southern Mothers of the Disappeared Look for Truth, Justice and Relief,” *Groundviews*, 30 August 2020, <https://groundviews.org/2020/08/30/decades-on-southern-mothers-of-the-disappeared-look-for-truth-justice-and-relief/>.

⁵ “They care about the economic crisis but not the lives of our relatives’ – Tamil Families of the Disappeared,” *Tamil Guardian*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/they-care-about-economic-crisis-not-lives-our-relatives-tamil-families-disappeared>. My use of the phrase “Tamil communities” should not be taken to mean that Tamil people are a homogenous group. Though not an exhaustive list, some of the specific contexts within which distinct local and global Tamil communities might claim a relationship to Iankai/Eelam/Sri Lanka can be seen through: “Topic: Tamil Eelam,” *The Funambulist*, <https://thefunambulist.net/topics/tamil-eelam>; Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah, “Tamil Diaspora Politics,” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, ed. Melvin Ember, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard (Boston: Springer, 2005): 493–501, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-29904-4_50; Øivind Fuglerud, *Life on the Outside: The Tamil Diaspora and Long Distance Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press, 1999); Rachel Seioighe, “Tamil Separatism and Commemorative Practices,” in *War, Denial and Nation-Building in Sri Lanka: After the End* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 193–246; Sidharthan Maunaguru, “Brides as Bridges? Movements, Actors, Documents and Anticipation in Constructing Tamilness,” in *Pathways of Dissent: An Introduction to Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka*, ed. R. Cheran (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009): 55–80.

⁶ Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, “Joint Tamil Civil Society Statement: Sri Lanka’s Political and Economic Crisis,” 14 July 2022, <http://adayaalam.org/joint-tamil-civil-society-statement-sri-lankas-political-and-economic-crisis/>; “We Want the Power of Equality, Justice, and Love. Not Love for Power,” *Groundviews*, 26 April 2022, <https://sway.office.com/ILeUEvEa0DNbnZC5?ref=Link>; Mario Arulthas, “Sri Lanka: Gota Needs to Go – But So Does the Ethnocratic State,” *Al Jazeera*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/4/5/sri-lanka-gota-needs-to-go-but-so-does-the-ethnocratic-state>; Pallavi Pundir and Kumanan Kanapathippillai, “Why These Women Aren’t Joining Sri Lanka’s Massive Anti-Government Protests,” *Vice*, 25 May 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7n8jx/tamils-sri-lanka-protest-rajapaksa-crisis>; Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, *Situation Briefing No. 6: Deteriorating Security Situation for Families of the Disappeared in the North-East of Sri Lanka*, Adayaalam, 16 May 2022, <http://adayaalam.org/situation-briefing-no-6-deteriorating-security-situation-for-families-of-the-disappeared-in-the-north-east-of-sri-lanka/>.

⁷ Enforced disappearance has also been used by non-state actors such as the JVP insurrectionists, the Indian Peace Keeping Forces, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and anti-LTTE militias. This essay focuses on the systemic use of enforced disappearance by the Sri Lankan government forces, which are emboldened through presidential immunity, emergency rule, and the Prevention of Terrorism Act. On enforced disappearance in Sri Lanka, see Jane Thomson-Senanayake, *‘Not even a person, not even a word...’: A Sociological Exploration of Disappearances in Sri Lanka* (Hong Kong: Asian Human Rights Commission, 2014); Human Rights Watch, *Recurring Nightmare: State Responsibility and ‘Disappearances’ and Abductions in Sri Lanka*, *Human Rights Watch*, 5 March 2008, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/03/05/recurring-nightmare/state-responsibility-disappearances-and-abductions-sri-lanka>; United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances on its Mission to Sri Lanka*, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 8 July 2021, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/33/51/Add.2; Human Rights Watch, “In a Legal Black Hole”: Sri Lanka’s Failure to Reform the Prevention of Terrorism Act, *Human Rights Watch*, 7 February 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/>

disappearances occurred in 1971, during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) Marxist-Leninist armed insurrection against the United Front (UF) coalition government. Late scholar Malathi de Alwis notes that despite Sri Lanka's history of anti-Tamil pogroms, a 26-year civil war, and a tsunami, "the highest number of 'disappearances' within the briefest span of years [occurred in] the southern regions of the island where during the years 1987–1990 around 35,000 predominantly Sinhala youth and men went missing" as the government brutally suppressed a second JVP insurrection.⁸ Estimates for the number of enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka since the 1980s, which includes the country's twenty-six-year civil war, stand between 60,000–100,000.⁹ The last three official days of the civil war – 17–19 May 2009 – saw approximately 500 Tamil people disappeared, marking the "largest number of disappearances in one place and time in the country's history."¹⁰ Since the war's end in 2009, enforced disappearances and other human rights abuses have continued to be perpetrated by government forces.¹¹ In January 2020, then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa stated that more than 20,000 missing Tamil persons who surrendered to the Sri Lankan army in May 2009 would be declared dead and that death certificates would be issued for them.¹² Tamil families who had demanded accountability and information about their loved ones for years were furious and protested the decision.¹³ They have similarly protested against and rejected the government's multiple attempts over the years to force a closure of one of the most enduring traumas of war and militarization, instead continuing to fight for accountability, justice, and knowledge about the whereabouts of the forcibly disappeared.¹⁴

02/07/legal-black-hole/sri-lankas-failure-reform-prevention-terrorism-act; Amnesty International Publications, *Sri Lanka: Extrajudicial Executions, 'Disappearances' and Torture 1987-1990*, Amnesty International, 1 September 1990, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/021/1990/en/>.

⁸ This number, de Alwis notes on 387 of "'Disappearance' and 'Displacement,'" is the estimate used by most human rights organizations, though journalistic sources use 40,000 and families of the disappeared in the south use 60,000.

⁹ Amnesty International, *Only Justice Can Heal Our Wounds: Listening to the Demands of the Families of the Disappeared in Sri Lanka*, Amnesty International, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa37/5853/2017/en/>. On the Sri Lankan civil war, see Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham, *Assembling Ethnicities in Neoliberal Times: Ethnographic Fictions and Sri Lanka's War* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019); Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Dysfunctional Democracy and the Dirty War in Sri Lanka," *Asia Pacific Issues* 52 May 2001, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/dysfunctional-democracy-and-dirty-war-sri-lanka>; Neloufer de Mel, Kumudini Samuel, and Champika K. Soysa, "Ethnopolitical Conflict in Sri Lanka: Trajectories and Transformations," in *Handbook of Ethnic Conflict: International Perspectives*, ed. Dan Landis and Rosita D. Albert (New York: Springer, 2012): 93–119; Sumantra Bose, "Sri Lanka," in *Contested Lands: Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Bosnia, Cyprus, and Sri Lanka* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007): 6–54.

¹⁰ Patrick Ball and Frances Harrison, "How many people disappeared on 17–19 May 2009 in Sri Lanka?", *Human Rights Data Analysis Group*, 12 December 2018, <https://hrdag.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HRDAG-ITJPSL-2018-12-12-1.pdf>; "Disappeared Website," *International Truth and Justice Project*, 12 December 2018, <https://itjpsl.com/reports/disappeared-website>.

¹¹ Watchdog, "A Disappearance Every Five Days in Post-War Sri Lanka," *Groundviews*, 30 August 2012, https://groundviews.org/2012/08/30/a-disappearance-every-five-days-in-post-war-sri-lanka/#_ftn1; Human Rights Watch, "Sri Lanka: UN Report Describes Alarming Rights Situation," *Human Rights Watch*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/03/sri-lanka-un-report-describes-alarming-rights-situation.2>.

¹² Maria Abi-Babib and Dharisha Basitnas, "I Can't Bring Back the Dead: Sri Lanka Leader Ends Search for War Missing," *New York Times*, 21 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/21/world/asia/sri-lanka-civil-war.html>.

¹³ "Families of Disappeared Protest in Front of OMP Office in Batticaloa," *Tamil Guardian*, 19 January 2020, www.tamilguardian.com/content/families-disappeared-protest-front-omp-office-batticaloa.

¹⁴ "Sri Lanka to Issue Death/Missing Certificates to Disappeared, Pay 100,000 LKR to Next of Kin," *EconomyNext*, 15 March 2022, <https://economynext.com/sri-lanka-to-issue-death-missing-certificates-to-disappeared-pay-100000-lkr-to-next-of-kin-91667/>; "Sri Lanka's Decision to Issue 'Missing Certificates' to Families of Disappeared is Met with Outcry," *Tamil Guardian*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/sri-lankas-decision-issue-missing-certificates-families-disappeared-met-outcry/>; "We are not protesting for compensation, we are protesting for justice: Tamil Families of the Disappeared React to Sri Lanka's Budget," *Tamil Guardian*, 15 November 2021,

In counting days of protest and attempting to illustrate the scope of enforced disappearance in Sri Lanka, I have been dealing, clumsily, with numbers and history while not trained to work with either. As primarily a scholar of literature, I am better at thinking about what words and language offer us in approaching these same problems.¹⁵ As I observed my Women's Rights After War colleagues collect quantitative and qualitative data, I learned how the fiction I read offers texture, critique, and even clarity, to policy and research about the "real world." In the rest of this essay, I examine the words of Sri Lanka's ex-president, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, for what they reveal about how the forcibly disappeared haunt his statements. I then turn to a short story, "The Missing are Considered Dead," by Ilangai Tamil American author, V. V. Ganeshanathan, to show what fiction can teach us about the shaping power of language and about the stakes of theorizing within disciplinary fields that make violence, and those who survive it, objects of study.

Official Narratives of the Disappeared

On 5 March 2020, a media representative asked Gotabaya Rajapaksa how he intends to provide compensation for parents of the disappeared.¹⁶ In his response, the ex-President begins with denial, swiftly resituating the issue from his government's vantage point: "No ... for *us* it is like this" (emphasis mine). He then pauses and asks the representative, "When you say 'the disappeared,' what do you think? What is your analysis about disappearance?" The representative offers two definitions, using his own imagined disappearance as an example: "Going by my age, it could either be a disappearance after being abducted by a certain group of people, or it could be going somewhere and disappearing." Though the representative's response identifies "the disappeared" as primarily those who have been forcibly disappeared or, secondarily, those who have gone missing of their own accord – which could arguably be a euphemism for the former – Rajapaksa works with a different definition, stating, "Now when we say disappeared, there are disappeared in the army as well. Why did they disappear?" He denies that people are abducted: "This is not about someone who came and abducted, is it? ... [W]e are talking about those who disappeared due to war, isn't it? Then, why disappear in a war? I have very good experience ... " Speaking to a room of mostly men, he embarks on an illustrious recollection of him and Sarath Fonseka taking back the Jaffna fort in the Second Eelam War (1990–1995). Using this war story, he constructs a different definition of the disappeared that elides the use of enforced disappearance by his government: those soldiers who died on the battlefield and whose bodies could not be retrieved. He demands that, without knowledge of the battlefield, one should not generalize disappearance as a widely occurring incident.¹⁷

<https://www.tamilguardian.com/content/we-are-not-protesting-compensation-we-are-protesting-justice-tamil-families-disappeared>.

¹⁵ On the complexities of accounting in the aftermath of genocide, see Diane M. Nelson, "Before and After-Math," in *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life After Genocide* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 37–60.

¹⁶ "For Sri Lanka's President 'Disappeared = Dying in the Battlefield,'" *Vimeo*, 15 May 2020, <https://vimeo.com/396415392>. The conversation takes place in Sinhalese, and I use the English closed captioning provided by JDS Lanka for my analysis.

¹⁷ Sri Lanka has the second highest number of enforced disappearances worldwide. See United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, United Nations*, 4 August 2021, <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F48%2F57&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False>.

This instance is not Rajapaksa's first deflection of this question. But despite such seasoned denials,¹⁸ I want to note how the forcibly disappeared intrude into his statements. At one point, he utters, "[t]here are disappeared," and quickly stumbles back to the safety of the army and the battlefield: "But that general ... disappearance is a separate issue. Even in the army more than 4,000 have disappeared. What disappeared means is, after meeting with death in the battlefield, his body has not been received by the relatives. ... When there is a war [there is an] inability to recover [the body]."¹⁹ Rajapaksa paints war and battlefields as passive constructions, the result of no man's doing: one casually "meet[s] with death," and sometimes there simply "is a war." Disappearance, he further clarifies, is caused by nature: hungry crows consumed the bodies of soldiers, something he saw "with [his] own eyes." Citing these experiences, Rajapaksa encloses the physical battlefield as being the only space where war – and thus where his definition of disappearance – occurs. By limiting "disappearance" to the decomposition of soldiers' bodies left behind in battle, Rajapaksa avoids attending to the people – both civilians and combatants – that were forcibly disappeared by the government in spaces and times outside of battle.²⁰ His deflection attempts also to deny the larger state-supported ethnocentric project of Sinhala-Buddhist supremacy to which enforced disappearance contributes.²¹

This attempt to confine "disappearance" to the battlefield crumbles fully when Rajapaksa mentions the parents who wait to receive their children's bodies. He repeats twice after stating that bodies decompose on the battlefield: "For their parents they have disappeared. For their parents they have disappeared."²² Given how badly he emphasizes that "the disappeared" refers to the mere fact of decomposition, Rajapaksa could have omitted mentioning the parents of dead soldiers. In failing to make this omission, Rajapaksa subconsciously recalls those other parents and relatives that he refuses to acknowledge – the ones who wait for answers regarding those forcibly disappeared by the government. That he is compelled to include the laments of the parents of dead soldiers reveals a conundrum that any entity complicit in enforced disappearance must contend with: that there exist people to whom the disappeared – in any form, and on any side of the war – matter and belong. In mentioning those parents and their act of waiting, Rajapaksa unwittingly calls forth the local and global communities fighting for the forcibly disappeared. In this way, his circuitous evasion of enforced disappearance

¹⁸ The Sri Lankan government has historically denied enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings, mass atrocity, and war crimes. See Chulani Kodikara, "What is the Question?: The Matter of Surrendered and Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Response," *Groundviews*, 17 October 2019, <https://groundviews.org/2019/10/17/what-is-the-question-the-matter-of-surrendered-and-gotabaya-rajapaksas-response/>; Seioighe, "The End: Atrocity in a State of Denial," in *War, Denial, and Nation-Building*, 93-143; "Who is Lasantha?" *YouTube*, BBC Interview with Stephen Sackur, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq8f4waVIPE>.

¹⁹ "For Sri Lanka's President," 2020.

²⁰ Ball and Harrison, "How many people disappeared?"; International Truth and Justice Project and Journalists for Democracy in Sri Lanka, "Gotabaya Rajapaksa's Role in 1989 Mass Atrocities," *International Truth and Justice Project*, 10 May 2022, <https://itjpsl.com/reports/gotabaya-rajapaksa-the-sri-lankan-presidents-role-in-1989-mass-atrocities>.

²¹ Neloufer de Mel reminds us that it would be "inaccurate ... to consider Sri Lanka's battle zones as its only militarized one, or to suggest that 'civil society' ... remains unmilitarized" in "Between the War and the Sea: Critical Events, Contiguities and Feminist Work in Sri Lanka," *Interventions* 9, no. 2 (2008): 238-54, 10.1080/13698010701409178 at 242; Sri Lanka Brief, "Sri Lanka: Militarization, Sinhala-Buddhist Supremacy and Absence of Rule of Law – A Deadly Combination," *Sri Lanka Briefing Notes*, no. 17 (July 2020), <https://srilankabrief.org/sri-lanka-briefing-note-no-17-a-deadly-combination-militarisation-sinhala-buddhist-supremacy-and-absence-of-rule-of-law/>; Seioighe, "Post-war Lived Experience: 'Sinhalaisation,'" in *War, Denial and Nation-Building*, 153-91.

²² "For Sri Lanka's President," 2020.

is haunted by the people who lay claim to those who have been forcibly disappeared. Through them, his denial is haunted by the disappeared themselves.

A Literary Response to Official Declarations

One week after Rajapaksa's declaration in January 2020, *Coppernickel* published a short story by Ilangai Tamil American author V. V. Ganeshanathan titled "The Missing are Considered Dead."²³ In noting the publication's timeliness,²⁴ Ganeshanathan shares that she began writing the story in response to then-Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's 2016 statements that the disappeared "are most probably dead."²⁵ The story is narrated by an unnamed Tamil woman living in the Batticaloa district of the Eastern province²⁶ of Sri Lanka, whose husband Ranjan is forcibly disappeared by the Sri Lankan army. Her narration, which traces the three years that must pass before the government will compensate her for his disappearance, illustrates how enforced disappearance stretches the boundaries of time, personhood, and family. It registers with complexity the resistance and pain of those who search for their disappeared loved ones. In a context such as Sri Lanka, where non-fiction accounts can be dangerous to survivors, fictional stories become a way of reiterating truths that are otherwise silenced.²⁷ In imagining the narrative of the Tamil wife of a man who has been forcibly disappeared, the story honors a figure that Rajapaksa's statement – and that Sri Lankan government writ large – wholly dismisses. Ganeshanathan's story is thus an indictment of Wickremesinghe's words in 2016, Rajapaksa's statement in 2020, and the response of successive Sri Lankan governments to the demands of the families of the forcibly disappeared. In sitting with the language and implications of this phrase – *the missing are considered dead* – so often uttered by presidents and prime ministers, the story elucidates the contradictions that post-war reforms and policy struggle to hold together. And, if we read carefully, it also makes ethical demands of each of its ordinary readers.

The story begins with the narrator balancing the contradictions of certainty and murkiness engendered by enforced disappearance. The first line establishes Ranjan's disappearance with the definitive "when" and the narrator's neighbor as a witness: "When my husband disappeared, my closest neighbor, Sarojini, hurried over from her house ... to tell me she had seen him being picked up and taken away." Sarojini is certain about

²³ <http://copper-nickel.org/the-missing-are-considered-dead/>.

²⁴ V. V. Ganeshanathan (Sugi Ganeshanathan), "I started writing this story in response to something then-Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said in 2016, but it's timely once more," *Facebook Post*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/vasugi/posts/pfbid032jsQJ3t9WxYPJaNUWSqu1nSLAXAtkbnxLf8wkuEwDGDekJK5AfS7VVvhHmEPU4Svl>.

²⁵ "Sri Lanka's disappeared 'probably dead' – Prime Minister." *YouTube*, Channel 4 interview by Jon Snow, 26 January 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKkhLIBRzyc>.

²⁶ On resistance and organizing in Batticaloa, see Thavarasa Anukuvi, "Economic Crisis and Resistance in Batticaloa, Eastern Sri Lanka," *Social Scientists Association Sri Lanka*, 2022, <https://ssalanka.org/economic-crisis-and-resistance-in-batticaloa-eastern-sri-lanka-thavarasa-anukuvi/>; A. Rameez, "Post-War Development and Women's Empowerment in Eastern Sri Lanka: A Case Study of Batticaloa District in Eastern Province," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 9, no. 4 (2020): 133–49, <https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2020-0068>; University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna), Sri Lanka, "The Quest for Economic Survival and Human Dignity: Batticaloa & Amparai Districts: June 1996," *University Teachers for Human Rights*, <https://uthr.org/bulletins/bul11.htm>.

²⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes that "history and memory are woven through numerous genres: fictional texts, oral history, and poetry, as well as testimonial narratives – not just what counts as scholarly or academic ('real?') historiography," in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 80–1.

what she saw, claiming, “I saw them! ... The STF²⁸ boys came and took him.” Still, the narrator soon undercuts Sarojini’s version of Ranjan’s disappearance by thinking to herself: “The army, which was not the Special Task Force, had come three times before taking Ranjan. I did not correct her.” The story thus begins by privileging the narrator’s knowledge about her husband’s disappearance, which reflects the reality that many who fight for their disappeared relatives possess specific details about the disappearance, despite the government’s dismissal of such evidence.²⁹

Next, the narrator begins justifying her delayed course of action following her husband’s disappearance: “To account for the gap of thirty days between the actual and official dates of disappearance, I can only tell you that even though I had seen Ranjan being taken away, even though Sarojini, too, had come to verify it, it took me a week to believe. I did not officially report that he was gone for another three weeks, because I could not bring myself to leave the house.” She issues a plea – “I can only tell you ...” – knowing that her month-long delay, caused by disbelief and fear, will not stand up to the bureaucratic accounting demanded by an official report. Her use of “you” is the first time she refers directly to the reader, an invitation: can we listen to and make space for her story when official forms cannot? When the narrator finally leaves her home, she describes her situation to Thushara, a Sinhala youth who guards the Army sentry point nearby. Thushara, in turn, brings a colonel to her home, who explains the process: “They had, [the colonel] said, no record of my husband being taken in, so he was missing. He might turn up again at any moment. Three years would have to elapse before they would give me anything for losing him.” This strategic use of missing as a liminal category – one that doesn’t force the government to take any legal or formal steps, and one that keeps families and loved ones in a perpetual state of unknowing – is a common feature in many recent wars and genocides.³⁰ Without her husband’s income, the narrator begins cleaning the school she had once attended to provide for herself and her one-year-old son, Krishan. Over the next three years, it becomes increasingly difficult for her to feed her son, who begins to shrink into thinness, while she has less time to inquire into her husband’s whereabouts.³¹ The narrator also reveals that she is subjected to sexual violation by the school’s headmaster. In these instances, she once more calls upon the reader: “You understand what I’m saying,” she states, before noting that the headmaster needed “odd tasks” done and mentioning, “if [the headmaster] needed me to come somewhere that Krishan couldn’t follow, my baby could wait quietly. He knew how to do that.” In urging us to read between the lines, the narrator’s request blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality, mimicking “real life” first-person narrations and interviews where women must speak in code to relate immense violence.

²⁸ On Sri Lanka’s STF units, see International Truth and Justice Project, “The Special Task Force,” *International Truth and Justice Project*, 23 April 2018, <https://itjpsl.com/reports/the-special-task-force>.

²⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Recurring Nightmare*, 5.

³⁰ James P. Brennan, “Dictatorship: Terrorizing Córdoba,” in *Argentina’s Missing Bones: Revisiting the History of the Dirty War* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018): 19–35; Jacqueline Adams, “Enforced Disappearance, Family Members’ Experiences,” *Human Rights Review* 20 (2019): 335–60, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-019-0546-6>; Salman Hussain, “Violence, Law, and the Archive: How Dossiers of Memory Challenge Enforced Disappearances in the War on Terror in Pakistan,” *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 42, no. 1 (2019): 53–67.

³¹ On the risks women face in a militarized landscape, see Ambika Satkunanathan, “Sri Lanka: The Impact of Militarization on Women,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict*, ed. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin et al., 6 December 2017, Oxford Academic, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199300983.013.46>.

A similar blurring occurs when the narrator utters the phrase “the missing are considered dead,” which reaches us through several layers of translation. One month before the three-year mark at which the narrator would be labelled a widow, a “government man” delivers a speech at the school. The speech is given in Sinhala, a language that neither the narrator nor the crowd gathered understands.³² The purpose of the speech becomes clear to the narrator, and then to us, through Thushara’s translation: “What the government man said was that now, all the people who are missing are considered dead, ... and that we all know this.” The narrator asks Thushara, who is holding back tears, to repeat the phrase in Sinhala so she can learn and remember it.

Finally, a week before the three-year anniversary of her husband’s disappearance, the colonel visits her with a man she does not know: “I had waited for Ranjan, and one week before the third anniversary of my husband’s disappearance they brought me another man.” The colonel states, “This man is saying that he is your husband. ... We wanted to bring him to you, so you would know what we are fair.” The man is handcuffed, his face and body bruised and swollen from beatings and torture. The narrator thinks she hears the man utter, “*Tell them it’s me, darling, tell them, sweetheart,*” but she cannot recognize him as her husband. The colonel offers her land in the next village in exchange for her current home and this man. As the narrator contemplates her decision, her inner monologue expands to note the callousness of the government’s arbitrary statement: “The missing *should be* considered dead. You *have to* consider them dead. You *can* consider them dead, the government man had meant. Had he thought he was freeing us? ... But no matter which words they used, I didn’t want to leave my home with this stranger.” Alongside this conviction, the narrator also makes space to think about the suffering stranger brought before her, as she considers the stakes of her refusal:

I wished I could ask the stranger where he had been, what had been done to him, what would happen to him if I said no, what would happen if I took him in. If I walked out of my house with this beaten man, even to save him, my husband would never walk back in. ... But this strange man, too, was a man, and belonged to someone, and if I did not claim him now, it was possible that no one ever would, and that I would send him back only into the darkest kind of dark.

The narrator wishes to hear the tortured man’s story, as she imagines the family that she knows is somewhere looking for him. Through her desire, we, too, are tasked with remembering him. The narrator’s consideration of collective and interconnected trauma, in the face of impossible choices, unravels uncomplicated theorizations of love, belonging, and responsibility, as she considers saving this man at the cost of her husband. For a moment she must ponder in what (path)ways love must originate and flow, for “this strange man, too, was a man.” She might technically claim him, knowing he might belong to someone else, or perhaps to no one at all. Against the notion of sending him back to “the darkest kind of dark,” belonging opens up for a moment.

³² That the government man speaks in Sinhala in a town with a largely Tamil and Muslim population registers one of the ways that Sinhala Buddhist supremacy targets multiple ethnic and religious minorities. See People for Equality and Relief in Lanka, *Sinhalization of the North-East, PEARL Action*, <https://pearlaction.org/sinhalization-of-the-north-east/>; Sharika Thiranagama, “Claiming the State: Postwar Reconciliation in Sri Lanka,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 93–116, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2013.0011>; Ria Samuel, “The Current State of the Freedom of Religion or Belief in Sri Lanka,” in *Muslims in Post War Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance & Reform*, ed. Shreen Abdul Saroor (Alliance for Minorities, 2021): 14–25.

As the narrator struggles with these thoughts, her son puts his hand into hers and asks, “Amma, is that my father?” Before responding, the narrator adds to the infamous statement: “The missing are considered dead, the government man had said, but he had forgotten to say: except by those who love them.” Her addendum strengthens her resolve once more, and she answers her son: “No, baby, ... No.” She repeats to the colonel that she is sure that the man isn’t her husband, but remains troubled by the ethical implications of her decision: “I also knew that I would never be sure that what I had done was right. I would be afraid of looking at that stranger again, but he seemed just then to have no face, and they took him away.” In making her decision, she has defaced this tortured man further, refusing him an identity that might have saved his life. She is too afraid to look at him, but she must witness him being disappeared in front of her as they take him away. That “he seemed just then to have no face” relates the difficulty of the moment, her mind attempting its forgetting of the intricacies of his personhood.

The story, which is structured around the passing of the three years following Ranjan’s disappearance, ends with the narrator’s commitment to the longevity of the struggle before her: “When they were gone, I went once more to the calendar and thought not of rupees, but of the feeling around my chest someday loosening. They had told me the number of days left until the government would call me a widow, but no one could measure the many years stretching ahead of me still, the whole long life I could wait.” These final lines register that the ability of people to continue to demand accountability for their disappeared loved ones will remain unquantifiable by the government.³³ The story reminds us of this similarity among various communities experiencing enforced disappearances, from Bosnia to Argentina to Iraq to Kashmir: that waiting and remembering are ungovernable acts.³⁴

Conclusion: Returning to a Memory

I joined the Women’s Rights After War project based on insights from the Sri Lankan Anglophone literature that is the object of my study. In the stories I read, there is sometimes no clear division between the world inhabited by the dead and the living, just as there is no easy division between the fictional and the real. As demonstrated in this essay, Ganeshanathan’s story is a literary refraction of acts of resistance taken up by communities in Sri Lanka and in other parts of the world who do indeed spend their entire lives fighting for their disappeared loved ones.³⁵ However, the history and presence of such acts, and of larger, women-led activism towards peace in Sri Lanka, is “for the

³³ See Selvarajah Rajasegar’s photo series, translated into English from Tamil, documenting how families of the disappeared remember their loved ones through their most treasured possessions: <https://groundviews.org/2017/12/10/in-their-absence-families-of-the-disappeared-share-treasured-keepsakes/>.

³⁴ On waiting and memory, see Ather Zia, “The Politics of Mourning,” in *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women’s Activism in Kashmir* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019): 30–49; Shifa Haq, *In Search of Return: Mourning the Disappearances in Kashmir* (London: Lexington Books, 2021); Laura Menin, “A Life of Waiting: Political Violence, Personal Memories, and Enforced Disappearances in Morocco,” in *The Social Life of Memory: Violence, Trauma, and Testimony in Lebanon and Morocco*, ed. Norman Saadi Nikro and Sonja Hegasy (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 25–54.

³⁵ To date, over 100 family members of the disappeared have died without knowledge of what happened to their loved ones. Fifty such parents are commemorated in K. Kumanan’s *The Departed While Searching For Their Disappeared Loved Ones*, <https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn%3Aaaid%3AAscds%3AUS%3AA344a9a2-4325-45ae-84e7-351eb51aa8f2#pageNum=13>.

most part unknown, unacknowledged, or forgotten.”³⁶ The specificity and presence of their stories, in multiple formats, is therefore a vital archive. Through such stories, we are reminded that people navigate conflict and its aftermath in ways that move beyond the figure of the perpetually traumatized victim-survivor, despite the persistence of that figure in various disciplines with colonial underpinnings, including my own.³⁷ To work towards justice based on people’s varied lived experiences, Chulani Kodikara and Sarala Emmanuel insist that accountability in Sri Lanka needs to have a “diversity of meanings.”³⁸ In stressing the value of remembrance in the absence of such accountability, they also remind us that “the question of *how* we remember is important.”³⁹ Here, I turn to fiction, which can teach us to remember, and to do so carefully and with ethical intention.

It has been over a decade now since I last encountered women looking for the disappeared in Sri Lanka, on occasional family trips to different parts of the country – long before I entered graduate school, read Sri Lankan Anglophone literature for the first time, and learned that Sri Lanka was studied as place/object. In my family, we did not speak openly about the different periods of violence in Sri Lanka. I recall only whispers about people being burned in tires at the neighborhood intersection and tortured at the nearby army camp, or a close escape from a bus bomb that had exploded on the route my school van took. Thus, during those family trips, when those mothers placed photos of their disappeared into my hands, I replicated silence and asked no questions. I do not remember where we were, if they were mothers from the south or the north, or if their loved ones had been taken from them during the civil war, the JVP uprisings, or somewhere in between. I was aware only of my discomfort at having these precious photos in my uncertain hands, and of my confusion about what seemed an impossible task: to remember if I had seen these faces somewhere, or to hold these faces in my memory from now on in case I might find them in the future. Now, I understand that those women were perhaps demanding something else: that I amplify their work of memory against institutional erasure, that I join in their call for acknowledgment and certainty when it is refused to them. It is a demand they continue to make of ordinary citizens and those with political power alike.⁴⁰

If I am less naïve today, it is primarily because of my entry into literature, specifically literature that encounters the war, the Indian Ocean tsunami, and other kinds of

³⁶ Samuel, *A Hidden History*, 2.

³⁷ Some texts that register this complexity: Minoli Salgado, *Twelve Cries From Home: Searing Accounts from Families of the Disappeared* (Watkins Media, 2022); Aparna Surendra, “Mothers in the Hague,” *The White Review*, September 2022, <https://www.thewhitereview.org/fiction/mothers-in-the-hague/>; Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, “Stories of Resilience,” <http://storiesofresilience.com/>.

³⁸ “Global Discourses and Local Realities: Armed Conflict and the Pursuit of Justice,” in *The Search for Justice: The Sri Lanka Papers*, ed. Kumari Jayawardena and Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016): 1–36 at 24. Kodikara and Emmanuel are writing with regard to survivors of sexual assault, but their call applies to post-conflict considerations more generally. See also Simon Robins, “Towards Victim-Centered Transitional Justice: Understanding the Needs of Families of the Disappeared in Postconflict Nepal,” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5 (2011): 75–98, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijq027>; Vasuki Nesiiah, “Uncomfortable Alliances: Women, Peace, and Security in Sri Lanka,” in *South Asian Feminisms: Contemporary Interventions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 139–61.

³⁹ Kodikara and Emmanuel, 24.

⁴⁰ I initially registered these reflections upon reading Kate Cronin-Furman and Roxani R. Krystalli’s “The things they carry: Victims’ Documentation of Forced Disappearance in Colombia and Sri Lanka,” *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 79–101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120946479>; On the political work of such photographs, see Vindhya Buthpitiya, “Absence in Technicolour: Protesting Enforced Disappearances in Northern Sri Lanka,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28, no. 1 (2022): 118–34, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13758>.

ongoing violence in and in relation to Sri Lanka without rendering its survivors as endlessly traumatized victims. These stories, which are invested in honoring the lived experiences of the communities by which they abide,⁴¹ are often better equipped to teach scholars what it takes to approach negotiations of war and its aftermath more ethically, both from the privilege of distance and from spaces of deep connection. For me, this negotiation means acknowledging that I have edited for space many things that ought to be present, and that any mistakes in what is present are mine alone. To end, I borrow once more from Ganeshanathan, who notes the difficulty of attempts to adequately attend to atrocity, specifically in relation to the deaths of Eelam Tamil civilians at the “end” of the civil war: “the words of this history must be carefully negotiated, and even then, the ones I choose will fail in one way or another, because they cannot be exhaustive.”⁴² In light of such failures, which include my own, I urge us to reach for as many and as varied ways as possible to encounter the problems of the real world – perhaps venturing into, and staying awhile within, fictional ones.

Notes on Contributor

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⁴¹ I use the term “abide” here as inspired by the work of the late Qadri Ismail in *Abiding by Sri Lanka: On Peace, Place, and Postcoloniality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

⁴² “The Politics of Grief,” *Granta*, 28 August 2011, <https://granta.com/the-politics-of-grief/>.