PERFORMING ETHNIC IDENTITIES IN GLOBAL ECONOMIES:

POWER AND RESISTANCE IN SRI LANKA’S DIRTY WAR

by

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A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English

Written under the direction of

Elin Diamond

And Approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October, 2013
This dissertation explores the aesthetics of contemporary globalization and ethnic war. It analyzes how literary texts and performances express the relationship between neoliberal doctrines, the idea that economies work best when least regulated, and ethnic wars in the global south. This work uses cultural examples from Sri Lanka as it was the first country in the South Asian region to open its economies to neoliberalism in the 1970s, and subsequently experienced thirty years of brutal ethnic war between the Sinhala majoritarian state and the minority Tamil Tigers. The cultural and aesthetic examples I analyze also demonstrate how both global forces and ethnic conflicts rework colonial and precolonial forms of power. Using an expanded definition of literature that takes us from
the page to the stage and beyond, my chapters consider state-sponsored village festivals, workers’ plays and everyday practices, high-culture performances, and diasporic prize-winning fiction. Each chapter illustrates how transnational networks linked to neoliberal doctrines—such as development aid into rural villages, multinational capital into export processing zones, and human rights regimes into conflict zones—are interpreted and performed, and how local conditions may change the character of neoliberalism. When I investigate creative expressions that refuse the logic of war and nationalism, I point to cross-cultural exchanges that provided artists with models for social protest. Sri Lankan examples add to literatures on globalization by scholars like Frederic Jameson, Gayatri Spivak, and David Harvey by expanding their theories of late capitalism to study its relationship to ethnic wars. Similarly, my work expands arguments made by scholars like Mahmood Mamdani, and Valentine Daniel by expanding their arguments about ethnic and communal violence by linking them to late capitalism.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation has been germinating in some form or another well before I came to Rutgers for my PhD. Hence, many people in Sri Lanka helped me in my thinking over the years. The International Center for Ethnic Studies was central to this process, and helped me begin my academic research while I was employed there between 2003 and 2006. I must especially thank Radhika Coomaraswamy for her generous support and guidance during my years there. Other senior scholars Neloufer de Mel, Sunil Bastian, and Gananath Obeyesekere were extremely supportive of my work. Mr. Thambirajah, the Center’s invaluable librarian, has been a strong source of support while I worked there, and even after. I returned many summers to the Center’s library and Mr. Thambirajah was always ready to answer questions and suggest readings.

Many people helped me write the different chapters of my dissertation. Sumanasiri Liyanage had a wealth of information he shared with me regarding the history of the Left Movement in Sri Lanka, and Gam Udawa festivals. He directed me to various archives and introduced me to Dharmasiri Bandaranayake. Director, playwright and actor Dharmasiri Bandaranayake was also extremely helpful in sharing his time and experiences with me. Chapter Three, based partially on his staging on Trojan Women came to life for me because he discussed the play at length. The committed activists at the Sthree Kamkaru Madyasthanya or Women’s Center also shared their experiences, time, and plays with me. Chapter Two could not have been written without their
willingness to share their plays and years of experience. I will be always very grateful that they took me in.

At Rutgers University, many friends and colleagues were central to my thinking. Shakti Jaising and Candice Amich were crucial intellectual interrogators and readers of my work. I owe them a great debt for the intellectual, emotional and activist support they gave me. Both Shakti and Candice were part of the English Department’s Postcolonial Studies Interest Group, and these sessions helped me in my work greatly. I wish to thank the many people who participated in the group’s sessions over the years.

Other friends were important in numerous capacities over the years. I thank Debapriya Sarkar, Katherine Chaap Williams, and Mary-Rush Yelverton for the many girls’ nights and discussions. Octavio (Tavi) Gonzalez and Phil Longo have also been invaluable friends and intellectual allies.

Within Rutgers University, Indrani Chatterjee, Mathew Buckley, Carter Mathes, John McClure, Stéphane Robolin, Ann Jurecic, Anjali Nerlekar, and Allan Isaac have read my work, listened to my ideas and given me generous feedback.

I must thank my committee Richard Dienst, Sonali Perera and Sumit Guha for the many years of patience, guidance and direction they have given me. They have read numerous drafts of my work, debated ideas with me, disagreed with me and written numerous letters of recommendation for me. Most importantly, I must thank Elin Diamond for her amazing insights and wisdom. Over the years she supported my efforts in writing about the cultural logic of late capitalism as it intersected with ethnic war in Sri Lanka. She helped me place my work in relation to important conversations, and most
importantly sharpened my capacities to analyze theater and performance. Her unstinting generosity toward me helped me develop many of my literary and performance studies skills.

My partner and companion Gerard Gaskin has been at my side over the last few years, and now travels with me to the next stage of my academic life. I am ever thankful that he is willing to change his life so I can do the work I want to.
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Introduction

**Intellectual Investments: Ethnicity, Class and Globalization**

Sri Lankan born writer A. Sivanandan’s novel, *When Memory Dies*, chronicles the history of Sri Lanka from the late nineteenth century to 1983. Through the lives of three generations of men—Sahadevan, Rajan and Vijay—the novel documents the emergence of Ceylon’s first labor movement at the end of the nineteenth century. The novel moves through a period of successful labor organization at the turn of the twentieth century that won crucial workers’ rights and mobilized against colonialism, and concludes with the pogrom of July 1983, after which ethnic war began in Sri Lanka. Through the life-stories of father, son, and grandson, we see the interplay of political economy, class and ethnicity in nationalist anticolonial movements, and in the rise of post-independence ethnic nationalisms. During the course of the novel, we see how class and ethnicity are social categories that co-exist and are equally related to political economy, even as one category (ethnicity) overdetermines the other (class) during the course of the twentieth century. Sivanandan’s narrative about colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka highlights the interconnected nature of these categories, complementing Cedric Robinson’s argument in *Black Marxism* that racial/ethnic differences were integral to the emergence of capitalism and the working classes in Europe. My dissertation pursues the argument that capitalism produces categories of difference and, further, that contemporary forms of capitalism, namely neoliberalism, exacerbates ethnic difference and contributes to the breakout of ethnic wars. My arguments will be developed in the context of the long standing ethnic
war, (1983 to 2009), between the Sinhala Majoritarian Sri Lankan state and the separatist Tamil Tigers.

This dissertation also argues that literatures and performances are key to understanding the relationship between neoliberalism and ethnic war. We can use Raymond Williams’ concept ‘structure of feeling’ (Drama 10) to explore how aesthetics function. Williams uses the term to explain how personal and private emotions and experiences are connected to political and economic structures. Williams defines structure of feeling as “the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period” (Ibid., 9). This dialectical movement from the specific to the general allows When Memory Dies to capture both individual experience and changing historical social relations in Sri Lanka. The beginning of the novel, for example, gives us access to Rajan’s feelings of shame and connects this shame to structures of political economy, class and ethnicity.¹

My memory begins as always, with the rain—crouched as a small boy against the old wall of the colonial building that once housed the post office. It frightened me, the great monsoon downpour, and saddened me too, threw me back on my little boy self and its lonelinesses, the growing things in myself I could not tell others about, the first feel of the sadness of a world that kept Sanji from school because he had no shoes. And I welcomed the lightening then, not frightened anymore, for it would strike me dead and Sanji would have my shoes, and I would be sad no more. (5)

Book One of the novel entitled, “Forgotten Mornings,” begins with Rajan’s first memory. It is a rainy morning and Sanji, his school friend, has been disgraced. Book One is about Rajan’s father Sahadevan, but Sanji slips into the narrative, and haunts the text

¹I am indebted to Qadri Ismail’s reading of the novel for my own analysis, though I disagree with his argument that the novel is not historical (Abiding, 169-210).
throughout. We only encounter Sanji later, but this brief mention highlights what Sanji symbolizes for the story. Sanji, we learn later, is the son of what Sri Lankans refer to as “an Estate Tamil,” “an Indian Tamil,” “an Up-Country Tamil,” or “a Plantation Tamil.”

These are South Indian laborers who were brought to Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century by the British to labor in tea-estates (Daniel, “Violent Measures, Measured Violence” 74-76). Often tied to the land and of low caste, they were indentured laborers. Sanji, as the novel later reveals, had come to school one day after his father’s death without shoes, and had been sent home for good because of it.

Through a reference to a personal memory filled with sadness and shame, the novel moves us to understand how Rajan’s feelings are deeply connected to structures of exclusion that exist in Sri Lanka. In Rajan’s memory of this incident, he is crouched against the backdrop of an old colonial building, reminding us of colonial structures that brought Sanji’s ancestors to Sri Lanka to be exploited. These include how colonialism organized Tamil plantation workers as ethnically different from and inferior to other ethnic groups, even Sri Lankan Tamils. This was done through policies of divide and rule, and methods of classification such as the census. Sanji, whose expulsion from school shames Rajan, holds the novel’s analytical categories together. For Sanji is the low-caste, working-class, minority Tamil figure whose labor produced tea for the British to sell in global markets. Hence, Rajan’s little boy feelings hold the weight of exclusionary structures. Through Rajan we imagine Sanji’s suffering after he had been expelled from school so soon after his father’s death. So, while capitalism differentiates between groups, the affective economies of the novel reconnect these categories and

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2 These terms are all in some way or another pejorative toward Tamils who work on the estates, signaling that they are outsiders who do not belong fully to Sri Lanka.
illustrate the nature of their connections. The linked but separate relations of the boys are rooted in modern Sri Lankan history.

Sanji is treated badly not only because of the legacies of colonial exploitation and racism, but also because of postcolonial chauvinism. Sinhala nationalists revised history by making Sri Lankan Estate Tamils outsiders; they were disenfranchised soon after Ceylon gained independence in 1948. This was done by then prime-minister D. S. Senanayake because he and his party, the United National Party (UNP), wanted to break working-class power and workers’ electoral strength. Branded as outsiders, Estate Tamils became non-citizens who had no avenues of participating in electoral politics, and no rights except as indentured workers in the tea plantations. In 1964, many Estate Tamils were “repatriated” to Southern India because again it was claimed that they were not real Sri Lankans. Even though Estate Tamils had lived in Sri Lanka for generations, they were branded as outsiders and deported to a country they had never been to. Sanji’s lack of shoes marks not just his poverty as the son of an estate laborer, but the exclusion of Estate Tamils from the nation, and Rajan’s shame about this exclusion. Racism and the exploitation of the working classes make it acceptable for a school to send home a child without shoes, as if it were Sanji’s fault that he was too poor to buy them.

The expulsion of many Estate Tamils from Sri Lanka foretells the manner in which ethnic minorities and the working classes would be rejected and reconfigured for nationalist purposes again and again. As the novel details the rise of communalism in Sri Lanka, the figure of Sanji remains essential for understanding the intersection of class, political-economy and ethnicity. At the time when Sanji was expelled from school, in the 1930s or early 1940s, anti-Tamil sentiments may not have been dominant, but were
clearly emergent and in the process of consolidating themselves. If, at the time, ethnic nationalism had consolidated itself against Estate-Tamils, these sentiments broadened against all Tamils by the 1970s. The Estate Tamil is the paramount subaltern figure whose deplorable treatment by the state and the people of Sri Lanka registers the failures of postcolonial independence to deliver its promise of equality. Instead, postcolonial Sri Lanka has a very different legacy: ethnic polarization, a communalized, nationalist working class, and prolonged ethnic and insurrectionary violence.

This dissertation, however, is not about the Estate Tamils of Sri Lanka. Indeed most of it is not directly about Tamil minorities who have been victims of decades of ethnic majoritarian and racist politics. Most of this work critically explores how and why ethnicity overdetermined other differences and concerns in the post 1977 era. The year 1977, as I will explain below, marks the beginnings of neoliberal economic policies in the country, and as such contemporary globalization’s relationship to ethnicity and violence will frame the arguments in the following chapters. In other words, this dissertation explores what Fredric Jameson has called, “the cultural logic of late capitalism” (*Postmodernism*) as it intersects with ethnic wars. My first argument is that ethnic war in Sri Lanka must be understood as linked to globalization. Globalization in the form of neoliberalism consolidates and entrenches long-standing ethnic tensions. In other words, ethnic tensions became reanimated in specific ways in the post 1977 era and needs to be taken into account when writing about ethnic war. This argument emerges in the context of what Sivanandan argues: the centrality of race/ethnicity to the formation of capitalism and class. This introduction will look at how performances and literatures illuminate the relationship between these categories.
As such, the second main concern of this dissertation is to explore how aesthetics help us understand the relationship between ethnic war and neoliberalism. The dissertation locates aesthetics in two specific ways. The first is by locating neoliberalism and war as imbricated in cultural practices. Hence, using a performance studies approach, each chapter asks again and again what neoliberalism and war look like and mean in different contexts to different groups. This is to think of neoliberalism as more than a set of economic or political practices, but also as a set of cultural processes that enable a certain outlook or understanding of what a good life is. Ethnic nationalisms and war are also often negotiated within cultural and aesthetic spaces that create consent for war, and analyzing literatures and performances can illuminate how both war and globalization are normalized through culture. The second way in which literature and performance operates is in the realm of resistance to war and neoliberalism. If Williams’ term “structure of feeling” helps us think of how aesthetic texts and performances capture the multiple processes at work in society, attention to aesthetics lets us grasp the nature of protest performances and literatures.

To make my claims, the three chapters of this dissertation have been organized as follows. Chapter One, “The Factory is Like the Paddy Field: Gam Udawa Performances, Ethnicity and Neoliberalism in Sri Lanka,” focuses on an annual cultural festival and housing project called Gam Udawa that enabled the state to interpret neoliberalism and Sinhala Buddhist nationalism according to its needs. Chapter Two, “Tactics of the Everyday: Working-Class Performances in Times of Ethnic War,” focuses on a working class theater group that performs in the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in Sri Lanka. These are special zones set up with neoliberal reforms to produce commodities for export
to the West. Finally, Chapter Three, “Embedded Witnessing: Human Rights, Narrative, and Performance,” explores questions of witnessing, trauma and violence in the context of human rights violations, ethnic war and neoliberalism.

**Ethnicity as a Cultural Category**

To highlight how race scholars separate ethnicity from political economy and class, I turn to a different context that can help us understand this as a general tendency in scholarship. In his important work on the Rwandan Genocide, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Mahmood Mamdani explains why it is important to separate ethnicity, and ethnic violence from questions of political economy and class. The central question that Mamdani poses in his book is as follows: “Just pointing at the leadership of the genocide left the truly troubling question unanswered: How could this tiny group convince the majority to kill, or to acquiesce in the killing of, the minority?” (7) While Mamdani insists that one has to understand colonial categories and knowledge production to understand the Rwandan genocide (9), he argues that using political economy and class will obscure our understandings of majority Hutu violence against minority Tutsi. Because Mamdani’s refusal is important for our understandings of how scholarship on ethnicity and ethnic violence has developed since the 1970s, I quote him at length.

In the decades that followed African political independence, militant nationalist intellectuals focused on the expropriation of the native as the great crime of colonialism. Walter Rodney wrote *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. But no one wrote of how Europe *ruled* Africa. The great contribution of underdevelopment theorists was to historicize the construction of colonial markets and, thereby, of market-based identities. The popularity of political economy
spread like a forest fire in the postindependence African academy precisely because it historicized colonial realities, even if in a narrowly economic way.

The limits of political economy as a framework for political analysis became clear in the face of postcolonial political violence. For political economy could only explain violence when it resulted from a clash between market-based identities: either class or division of labor. From this point of view, political violence had to be either revolutionary or counterrevolutionary. In the face of political violence that cut across social classes rather than between them, and that was animated by distinctions crafted in colonial law rather than those sprouting from the soil of commodity economy, explanations rooted in political economy turned arid. Animated by non-economic distinctions, this violence was neither revolutionary nor counterrevolutionary, it was simply nonrevolutionary. It is this limit that seems to have provided an opening for a second coming of cultural explanations of political conflict. (19)

Mamdani makes important distinctions about analytical categories. The most obvious is that political economy and class cannot explain ethnic violence in the postcolony because postcolonial violence has sprung from identities created or consolidated by colonial law. Market identities or classes are produced by modes of production, but what he calls political identities or ethnic identities are produced outside of the influence of economics.

The second important distinction Mamdani makes is regarding what political economy can explain. An analysis of political economy can explain class-based identity conflicts, but only in terms of revolution or counter-revolution. However, ethnic violence is non-revolutionary and rooted in culture, and needs a different kind of analysis. Stuart Hall categorizes two main trends on race writing in, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance" that are helpful to us. According to Hall’s classification, Mamdani’s method is sociological, with its scholars “agree[ing] on the autonomy, the non-reductiveness, of race and ethnicity as social features” (306). The second “economic” method of Walter Rodney and militant nationalist intellectuals “take economic relations and structures to have an overwhelmingly determining effect on the social structures of such formations. Specifically, those social divisions which assume a
distinctively racial or ethnic character can be attributed or explained principally with reference to economic structures and processes” (Hall, 306). According to Hall’s categorization, Mamdani’s arguments are symptomatic of how some scholarship has responded to questions of racial or ethnic formation: by insisting that race and ethnicity are autonomous of political economy and class. Later in the Introduction, we will see how Mamdani and Hall’s two-type model is realized in the Sri Lankan context.

**The Disarticulation of Race and Ethnicity from Political Economy**

On the other hand, scholars of neoliberalism like David Harvey and Samir Amin generally see race and ethnicity as incidental or as a wrong response to globalization. While neither of these scholars explicitly explores the aesthetic and cultural aspects of neoliberalism, their insights allow me to argue that neoliberalism is also a cultural process.

Before I define key terms, or explore how central aesthetic processes are to neoliberalism, and link these processes to heightening ethnic tensions and war, I highlight how Harvey analyzes ethnic conflict in non-Western countries. While colonialism, imperialism and slavery are referred to in Harvey’s work, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and *New Imperialism*, he does not discuss in detail how racial or ethnic stratification may be integral to neoliberalism. Harvey argues, for example, that neoliberalism is a process by which the ruling classes have restored their power (*A Brief History* 16), but does not explore the racial or ethnic character of these ruling classes. Categories of ethnicity, race and ethnic war in non-western countries are gestured to in
Harvey’s work briefly. In the chapter entitled, “Freedom’s Prospect,” Harvey looks at contemporary social movements that have emerged since the 1970s. He recognizes that these movements seem very different from the class-based movements that dominated protest movements from the turn of the twentieth century. He states, “neoliberalization has spawned a swath of oppositional movements both within and outside its compass. Many of these movements are radically different from the worker-based movements that dominated before 1980” (Ibid. 199). He states that,

the variety of these struggles is simply stunning, so much so that it is hard sometimes to even imagine connections between them…. They have degenerated into inter-ethnic violence and civil war as accumulation by dispossession produced intense social and political rivalries. The divide-and-rule tactics of ruling elites or competition between rival factions (for example French versus US interests in some African countries) have more often than not been central to these struggles. (Ibid. 200)

Harvey makes these observations about neoliberalism and its relationship the outbreak of ethnic wars, but does not delve into them beyond this. Ethnic war remains for him a wrong “degenerate” kind of struggle, while class struggle is the right kind. Ethnic struggles are not integral to struggles against capitalist exploitation. Similar claims may be seen in the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in Empire. This dissertation uses many of their astute definitions and descriptions of neoliberalism, while exploring how neoliberalism may entrench and exacerbate ethnic tensions and facilitate ethnic wars.

Samir Amin actually explores the relationship between neoliberalism and ethnicity in extremely helpful ways, while defining ethnicity as,

an ethnic group constitutes no more than a ‘race’ or any other ‘non-reality’ invented to serve the cause of the social organization of the precapitalist world (61) …. It is only the standardizing practices of the capitalist market, generally
educating in a so-called national language, and the ideology of the nation which accompanies this, which, in the modern age, have transformed certain groups into new minorities(62)…. The practices of colonial domination have played a determining role in the creation of ethnic realities (63)….

While recognizing how capitalism consolidates ethnic difference, Amin defines ethnic identities as somewhat false, while retaining class as the proper and correct form of collective struggle in response to globalization.

The arguments Mamdani makes on the one hand, and Harvey and Amin on the other, emerge because of an inaccurate and specific understanding of the emergence of capitalism. Some scholarship has pointed to a more integrated approach. As Cedric Robinson has pointed out in *Black Marxism*,

the Atlantic slave trade and the slavery of the New World were integral to the modern world economy. Their relationship to capitalism was historical and organic rather than adventitious or synthetic. The Italian financiers and merchants whose capital subsidized Iberian exploration of the Atlantic and Indian oceans were also masters of (largely ‘European’) slave colonies in the Mediterranean. *(Black Marxism 4)*

This is a point that that Giovanni Arrighi largely ignores in *The Long Twentieth Century* as he theorizes the emergence of capitalism as a world system. Robinson captures scholarly biases that ignore the central role ethnicity played in the formation of capitalism as follows: “Wallerstein in his otherwise quite detailed study of the origins of the capitalist world system, can devote a mere page to this phenomenon, including a single paragraph on the ethnic divisions of the sixteenth-century immigrant labor” (Ibid. 23).

According to Robinson, scholars like Harvey and Amin, understand race and ethnicity as an external category to the development and functions of capitalism. Robinson adds that,

the historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism…. The process through which the world system emerged contained an opposition
between the rationalistic thrusts of an economic worldview and the political momenta of collectivist logic. (Ibid. 9)

This meant that racial and ethnic differences played key roles in the gradual organization of capital from mercantilism to industrialization. Robinson highlights how from the Middle Ages onwards, armies, domestic service, handicraft, industrial labor consisted of racialized immigrant workers. The working class too had “the appearance of rather extreme forms of racism among” them (34), displayed most intensely toward the Irish in the 18th and 19th centuries. “The Irish worker having descended from an inferior race, so his English employers believed, the cheap market value of his labor was but its most rational form” (Ibid. 39). Hence, the revolutionary working class that Marx and Engels wrote about was also a racist working class. Such forms of differentiation were further systematized under colonialism, and continue today under neoliberalism. Sivanandan reiterates this as his novel repeats the centrality of ethnicity in the development of capitalism in postcolonial Sri Lanka.

Despite the assumptions and limits in both Harvey and Amin’s work, their definitions and descriptions of neoliberalism remain important to my work. Some of their claims, I suggest, are realized and organized within aesthetic and cultural realms, and need to be integrated with ethnic differentiations.

Culture, Neoliberalism, and Ethnicity

One of the strengths of a term like “structure of feeling” is that it can capture both the conventions and dissenting aspects of aesthetic forms and collectives. Neoliberalism, I have been arguing, consists of political, economic and cultural forces that have created norms. Williams’ definition of the term convention will help us understand how
aesthetics and culture create consensus and common sense. Williams’ defines convention as “tacit agreement” or “accepted standard” that is generally unconscious and so has become common sense (*Drama* 4). Neoliberalism too demands a shift in our common sense to make its rules and beliefs acceptable. These shifts Harvey concedes occur in the realm of culture.

For a shift of this magnitude to occur required the prior construction of political consent across a sufficiently large spectrum of the population…. What Gramsci calls ‘common sense… typically grounds consent. Common sense is constructed out of long standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions…. In seeking to understand the construction of political consent, we must learn to extract political meanings from cultural integuments (39-40).

Harvey refers to the concept of hegemony to explore how crucial cultural spheres were for neoliberalism to become a dominant form and belief system. Williams’ term “structure of feeling” helps us understand neoliberalism as a complex process of meaning making within cultural spheres. Hegemony helps us understand neoliberalism as “cultural work” as more than simply a reflection of economic process, but as “the basic processes of the formation itself” (*Williams, Marxism and Culture* 111).

In his writings Harvey argues that neoliberalism emerged not as a well-thought through strategy from the outset, but through various experiments and trials from the late 1970s, which cohered only by the 1990s through the Washington Consensus. It is through somewhat add-hoc, piecemeal experiments by Ronald Reagan in the US, Margaret Thatcher in England, and Deng Xiaoping in China that neoliberalism came eventually to consolidate itself. The first neoliberal experiment was carried out by the US in Chile as Salvador Allende was deposed in 1973 and Augusto Pinochet replaced him to carry out economic policies defined by “the Chicago Boys” and Milton Friedman
By 1977, many of these economic changes were introduced to Sri Lanka too as the Sri Lankan economy was opened to global markets with fewer and fewer state regulations imposed on these economic and political transactions. This dissertation focuses on three neoliberal interventions into Sri Lanka. Chapter One looks at how financial aid and loans flooded the Sri Lankan economy after 1997, and how such finances were used to reinterpret the meanings of neoliberalism. Chapter Two focuses on a key feature of neoliberalism, the setting up of Export Processing Zones and factories to provide cheap labor and commodities for corporations to export to the global north. Chapter Three explores how global narratives of justice are disseminated by international human rights law and institutions into Sri Lanka. This chapter elaborates on how international institutions spread norms to Sri Lanka.

What Harvey defines as neoliberalism, as Chapter One of my dissertation makes clear, is implemented through a series of cultural festivals. He defines neoliberalism as,

in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. (A Brief History 2)

This has resulted in “deregulation, privatization, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (Ibid., 3). One of the key beliefs that neoliberals hold is that “the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market” (3). Neoliberal theory supposes that “privatization and deregulation combined with
competition… eliminate bureaucratic red tape, increase efficiency and productivity, improve quality and reduce costs, both directly to the consumer though cheaper commodities and services and indirectly through reduction of the tax burden” (65).

Often Harvey uses terms such as “social good will” and “human well-being,” and draws our attention to the importance of consent for the realization of neoliberalism. To do this, he argues, “human action,” which includes aesthetic practices and beliefs, had to be brought into the realm of the market. Chapter One explores how this happens.

Chapter One explores how performances of neoliberalism are produced by the state through Gam Udawa festivals. These festivals were held annually for approximately fifteen years in different districts of Sri Lanka and were part of a program that provided housing for the poor. These festivals ran for 11 days and were elaborate performances of state power. Through Gam Udawa festivals, the state interpreted neoliberalism as having the opposite qualities of Harvey’s definition above. If Harvey argued that the neoliberal state dismantled the welfare state, in the Sri Lankan context, neoliberalism was performed as an extension of welfare. Furthermore, through these festivals, a predominantly Sinhala Buddhist state exploited the foreign aid and loans given to it by institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to consolidate Sinhala ethnic identities. Hence, neoliberal aid empowered a chauvinist state to intensify its exclusionary visions of national belonging. What is key to my arguments about neoliberalism is that it had to be first made common sense within cultural spheres and then implemented as such.
While consent or common sense is created within cultural and aesthetic spaces
and texts, formal aesthetic responses also help us understand how neoliberalism functions
to entrench ethnic nationalisms. In *The New Imperialism*, Harvey elaborates on why
neoliberalism leads to imperialism similar to the manner V. I. Lenin did in *Imperialism:
the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Harvey argues that capitalism leads to crises of over-
accumulation, a problem often resolved through the creation of new markets.
Capitalism’s search for new markets, he argues, creates spatio-temporal fixes, whereby
the geographical expansion of capital is achieved (139).

The spatio-temporal fixes, essential for capitalism to expand, have created certain
changes in aesthetic space-time relations. Fredric Jameson defines these forms as
postmodernity (*Postmodernism*). Harvey explores the culturally dominant forms of late
capitalism as fragmentary, ephemeral and chaotic in relation to the intensification of
space-time compression (*Condition of Postmodernity*). These scholars explored forms in
the context of western literary and dramatic traditions. Drawing from their insights, I
demonstrate how these forms may be transformed in postcolonial contexts to boost ethnic
nationalisms.

Chapter One explains how postmodern aesthetics respond to ethnic nationalism.
Each festival site saw the repetition and replication of precolonial and modern
monuments and statues. The repetition of these religious and secular structures created a
certain sense of dizziness and confusion about what was original and a copy on the one
hand, and about what was precolonial and modern on the other. These structures
conflated the differences between forms and periods. This corresponds quite clearly to
what both Harvey and Jameson claim about postmodern space, time and forms. For them
postmodern aesthetics lost their referential capacities and created dizzying effects and confusion (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 38-45). While the Gam Udawa festival grounds created a sense of aesthetic mélange and confusion, the overall result was the production of an abstracted precolonial golden past which celebrated Sri Lanka as Sinhala Buddhist. Postmodern aesthetic forms were used in this instance to strengthen Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

Chapter Two gives us other insights into how neoliberalism was operationalized. Workers theater and the organization of factory spaces illustrate how discipline and control in the EPZs are created through images about fashion and bodily practices. As the chapter on workers illustrates, factory spaces were often organized to produce consent to harsh labor practices through aesthetic images that tantalized workers, while disciplining and controlling them. Workers’ theater illuminates how bodies are trained and retrained to perform tedious, repetitive, and difficult labor practices. Bodies are made to perform in certain ways, and these forms of discipline permeate even the boarding houses of workers. Not incidentally, these female bodies trained in sweatshops belong to Sinhala females. Neoliberal labor practices are used to create a mono-ethnic working class that shows solidarity for Sinhala nationalism.

**Ethnic Nationalisms: July 1983 and After**

Samir Amin provides us with another excellent example of the relationship between globalization and ethnic war in, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization: the*
**Management of Contemporary Society.** His arguments about ruling class practices can be located in Sri Lanka since independence.

He asks at the beginning of his chapter, “The Rise of Ethnicity: A Political Response to Economic Globalization,” why in circumstances where capital is becoming increasingly internationalized, are the peoples of the world not responding to this by internationalizing themselves, that is, by affirming their class allegiance across national boundaries? Why, instead of asserting itself, is class consciousness giving way to self-identification by ‘race’, ‘ethnic group’ or religion?” (55)

Ethnic struggles have increased, argues Amin, as the nation-state model of capital accumulation has collapsed under globalization. In the post WWII period, the nation-state was a model that united various collectives. The bourgeoisie that controlled the nation-state was able to obtain consent from populations under the banner of nationalism, especially while national economies grew. The Nehruvian state model is an excellent example of this. National unity became difficult as “every region of the globe was plunged into a profound and lasting structural crisis, with no indication of any light at the end of the tunnel” (Ibid., 60) by the 1970s. This has led, Amin argues, to a crisis of the nation-state, to the delegitimizing of the national bourgeoisie, and to transformed ways of capital accumulation that bypasses the nation-state. These combined factors have led to the rise of ethnic nationalisms as the ruling-classes have turned to ethnic politics to manage these crises (71). This description fits well with the situation in Sri Lanka, where the Sinhala ruling classes used and still use ethnic nationalisms to remain in power and overcome the challenges posed to them.

In the Sri Lankan case, however, the ruling classes used ethnic politics to consolidate themselves long before the 1970s. Ethnic tensions emerged as Sinhala
Buddhist policies excluded Tamils since independence. The expulsion of Estate Tamils, discussed in this Introduction through Sivanandan’s novel, is a prime example of this. Subsequently, guarantees of minority rights were systematically removed from the constitution. As such parliamentary democracy or representative democracy strengthened majority rule. The two main ruling parties in the country, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), contested with one another to win the Sinhala electorate using increasingly virulent anti-Tamil rhetoric and reforms. Crucial historical moments of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism are the 1956 Sinhala Only Act, which claimed Sinhala to be the state language, and the 1972 first Republican Constitution, which gave Buddhism prime place as the state religion. The Sinhala Only Act, passed by prime-minister S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, removed many Tamils from state and civil services in Ceylon because Sinhala became the language used for official work. Changes to the constitution in 1972 made Sri Lanka a Buddhist nation-state, and limited the number of Tamils who could enter university. Tamils responded to these changes by organizing to first demand a federal state that devolved power to the regions through the Federal Party, and by the late 1970s, to demand a separate state through the Tamil United Liberal Party (TULF). Tamil Eelam, a separate state of the Tamil people, was mapped onto the Northern and Eastern regions of the country where Tamils were either a majority (in the North) or were of equal population with Muslims (in the East), (Bastian, “Political Economy of Ethnic Violence”).

Both Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms were possible through massive transformations within aesthetic and cultural realms. An excellent example of this is the reinterpretation of myths as histories about the origins of the Sinhala race. These were
myths refashioned from chronicles dated from 6 A.D. such as the *Mahavamsa* to claim a long-standing coherent Sinhala Buddhist nation. Through selective re-readings and interpretations of the *Mahavamsa*, two coherent and antagonistic ethnic groups were produced. The Sinhalese were claimed to be the original people of Lanka, constantly embattled by invading Tamil forces. Tamils were produced as outsiders who plundered the ancient hydraulic kingdoms of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Mythic or literary narratives were transformed into historical documents, and reinterpreted to claim that Sinhala-Tamil enmity has a long history (Gunawardena). Within Tamil communities too, parallel arguments about the autonomy of the Tamil kingdom were created. It was argued that a separate and coherent Tamil kingdom with its own culture and literature existed until the British forcibly united the Tamil Kingdom to the Sinhala Kingdoms (Wilson).

While ethnic war was a result of cumulative processes of ethnic nationalisms, the break out of frequent violence occurred, as Amin argued, parallel to neoliberal changes in the country. There were a series of attacks on Tamils after 1977—August 1977, August 1981—, and the largest and most significant of these riots was July 1983. The 1983 pogrom is the end point of Sivanandan’s novel and registers a dominant moment in ethnic nationalism and violence in Sri Lanka. During the pogrom of 1983, Sinhalese mobs killed thousands of Tamils, looting their homes, and burning their property. This pogrom began in the capital Colombo and spread to other parts of the country, and continued for approximately a week. It is now generally believed that the state not only turned a blind eye to the violence, but in some cases, members of parliament actually facilitated it by providing Sinhala mobs with government lists of Tamil houses, and by organizing mobs
Subsequent to 1983 and for the next fifteen years, cultural sites and texts were deployed vigorously to promote warfare and militarization. Neloufer de Mel’s excellent work, *Militarizing Sri Lanka: Popular Culture, Memory and Armed Conflict*, documents how military valor was promoted through media, advertising, and films.

**Ethnicity as an Overdetermined Category**

The significance of July 1983 for Sri Lankan scholarship cannot be underestimated. For the year 1983 officially saw the beginning of separatist war in Sri Lanka, and shifts in Sri Lankan scholarship. These shifts map onto the two model separation in scholarship that I have already pointed to. Hall called the two types “economic” and “sociological.” This split developed in Sri Lankan scholarship chronologically. The pogrom of 1983 separates the two categories.

The rupture that 1983 created within intellectual scholarship is registered in Newton Gunasinghe’s essay, “May Day After the July Holocaust.” In it, he marks a shift that the pogrom of 1983 created in the intellectual landscape of Sri Lanka. Gunasinghe claims,

> It is now clear that anti-Tamil riots of July ‘83 constitute one of the most important turning points in the recent history of Sri Lanka…. Within the context of a heightened ethnic consciousness among the masses, the left and the democratic forces are in a situation of theoretical disarray. One symptom of this disarray is the dominant tendency in the old left to sweep the ethnic issue under
the carpet, and to raise ‘safe’ economic and class slogans.” (Newton Gunasinghe, 204)

If left scholars and activists had up to this point focused on class and political economy, this became impossible with 1983. Pradeep Jeganathan locates a parallel shift within the field of Anthropology, and comments on how violence emerges as an analytical problem for Sri Lankan anthropologists only after July 1983. Even violent events, such as the Sinhala-Tamil riot of 1958, did not draw anthropologists to work on questions of ethnicity and violence; they focused instead focused on rural village communities, on “caste, kinship and marriage” (“Violence as an Analytical Problem,” 21).

The 1980s decade saw scholarship that attempted to explain ethnic war in relation to economic and class structures (Jayawardana, *Ethnic and Class Conflicts*; Bastian, “Political Economy of Ethnic Conflict; Abeysekere, *Facets of Ethnicity*; and *Ethnicity and Social Change*) for a brief period of time. By the 1990s, however, a younger generation of scholars began doing research on ethnicity and violence as cultural categories. This is what Hall defined as “sociological.” For example, by the time issue XI of *Subaltern Studies* entitled *Community, Gender and Violence*, with several essays on Sri Lanka, was published, a materialist reading of ethnicity, violence and nationalism had become unimportant. The conference that presented these papers was held at the International Center for Ethnic Studies, in Colombo, a center that had come to work on scholarship related to ethnicity and violence. The shift in scholarship in issue XI intersects with a larger shift that had been occurring in the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective. Sumit Sarkar defines it as follows:

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Domination is conceptualized overwhelmingly in cultural, discursive terms, as the power knowledge of the Post-Enlightenment West. If at all seen as embodied concretely in institutions, it tends to get identified with the modern bureaucratic nation-state: further search for socio-economic interconnections is felt to be unnecessarily economistic, redolent of the traces of a now finally defeated Marxism, and hence disreputable. ‘Enlightenment rationalism’ thus becomes the central polemical target, and Marxism stands condemned as one more strand of Eurocentrism. Radical, left-wing social history, has in other words, been collapsed into cultural studies, and critiques of colonial discourse, and we have moved from Thompson, to Foucault, and even more, Said. (84)

Sarkar argued that religion and community-consciousness were valorized by the Subaltern Studies Collective, which replaced an earlier Marxist scholarship that had existed while Ranajit Guha played a leading role in the collective. His observations about the turn to culture in Subaltern Studies is similar to the turn Mamdani advocates. Sarkar argues that this is related to a decline in Marxist scholarship. Other scholars like Jameson have argued that a focus on postmodernism and on poststructuralism has shifted scholarship away from materialism (*Post Modernism*). In the Sri Lankan context, questions of ethnicity, ethnic nationalism and violence came to be interrogated independently of material and class considerations.

**Literature as a Site of Protest and Resistance**

I have demonstrated thus far that exploring aesthetic and performance sites and texts can help us avoid the pitfalls of prioritizing either ethnicity or political economy and class. Literary sites, such as festivals and workers’ theater, illustrate the centrality of aesthetic processes and spaces for the consolidation of both neoliberalism, and ethnic difference and war. As Williams claims in relation to “structures of feeling,” terms such as emergent and residual allows us to track forces and forms that have some autonomy
outside of dominant forces. The emergent and residual can be spaces of resistance. N’gugi wa Thiong’o articulates the central place of theater in traditions of resistance as follows: “The real politics of the performance space may lie in the field of its external relations; in its actual or potential conflictual engagement with all the other shrines of power, and in particular with the forces that hold the keys to those shrines” (“Enactments of Power” 13). What happens on stage in a play can be a critical commentary of and is influenced by society and its forces.

The literary and performance texts and practices I explore in Chapters Two and Three illustrate questions of protest and resistance in the following ways. First these literatures allow us to critically examine what resistance is in the context of neoliberalism and war. Secondly, resistant literatures and performances emerge out of everyday embodied practices; and finally, these performances and literatures reference and allude to political protests to both war and neoliberalism.

Sri Lankan theater has a vibrant history as critique. During the ‘70s and ‘80s, Brechtian and other left plays were translated and performed. Street theater too, which the EPZ workers often perform, has an enormous presence in Sri Lanka thanks to the dedication of performance artists like Gamini Haththotuwegama (Dharmasiri). External relations have set limits on performances in Sri Lanka, even as theater has responded critically and in engaging ways to these limits. One of the constraints placed on Sri Lankan theater is its poverty. Sri Lankan theater has remained a largely non-profit industry in Sri Lanka. While some funding may be secured for performances from funding agencies, corporations and private donors, Sri Lankan theater exists largely because of the commitment and dedication of its artists. Profits are impossible to make
from such a small industry. This has prevented the development of full-time theater professionals. Actors and the crew most often make their incomes from the film and television industries. An example of this is in the production and performances of the translated version of Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, which I focus on in Chapter Three. During my interviews with the play’s director Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, he explained to me how all the actors, musicians and other non-acting members of the play volunteered their services for the production. None of them were paid during the eight months of rehearsals in 1999, nor for the subsequent performances of the play. While Bandaranayake obtained some funds from individual donors and some private enterprises to cover costs, the caste and crew volunteered entirely. Such commitments are the norm in Sri Lankan theater and Tickets are generally priced to cover the costs of paying for the hiring of the theater.

Yet, despite these funding limits, Sri Lankan theater has remained critically engaged with ongoing political crises. In fact theater groups have used their non-profit nature to their advantage. Ranjini Obeyesekere in *Sri Lankan Theater in a Time of Terror* narrates how a critical and vibrant theater scene remained alive during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrectionary period of the late 1980s, despite terrible state repression and terror. When most news and media agencies were severely censored, criticism and satire were mainly circulated through the theaters, which drew in large audiences to them. Theater performances would pop up with only a day’s notice to its audiences, and would be dismantled without much warning if necessary. Bills advertising specific plays were pasted on walls just before performances. Many of these
performances were free or sold tickets for a very nominal price. In this way, Sri Lankan theater has remained vibrant and alive during times of terror.

The theaters and literatures under consideration in this dissertation enable a critical evaluation of the term resistance in relation to globalization and war. Chapter Two and Three interrogate the conditions of possibility for resistance, highlighting how both ethnic war and neoliberalism need to be taken into account when considering this question. Export Processing Zones are extremely repressive spaces, consisting of very poor working conditions. Under war conditions, these zones have been designated High Security Zones and are routinely checked by the police and army. In the actual factory floors and in these zones, workers have difficulties in collectivizing and resisting discipline and control because of extreme forms of repression. Despite both direct and indirect forces of repression, workers’ theater and everyday practices illuminate high levels of consciousness about and refusals of neoliberal, patriarchal and bourgeois common sense. This theater has emerged out of everyday experiences and embodied practices. These theatrical and everyday practices consist of fragmentary, temporary, and hidden performances such as abandonment, theft, interruption, laughter, laziness, and folk forms. While these practices illuminate workers’ creative escapes from power, Chapter Two also asks if these tactics can be called resistance. I ask what and who such tactics transform.

If Chapter Two explores workers avenues of refusal in light of neoliberalism, it also considers these refusals in relation to ethnic war. As I have already mentioned, these zones consist of a largely all female, all Sinhala working class. Chapter Two describes how minorities have been driven out of these zones. Hence, this chapter contextualizes
workers’ theater in relation to minority rights and ethnic war. I ask if workers’ theater is a theater of resistance in relation to workers’ espousal of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Placing workers’ practices and performances in relation to both globalization and ethnic war can illuminate what resistance can mean.

In contrast to the two earlier chapters, Chapter Three moves directly to confront the legacies of ethnic war and violence. I have argued thus far that globalization is more than a set of economic practices. Globalization is also a world-view often negotiated through culture. Chapter Three considers one of the most enduring narratives of globalization: human rights rescue narratives. Chapter Three asks how human rights discourses and institutions frame resistance and justice. I critically examine human rights claims about its own practices. Analyzing a human rights documentary film, *The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka*, and Michael Ondaatje’s novel, *Anil’s Ghost*, this chapter turns to questions of human rights, witnessing and testimony to ask how the testimonial form is defined in human rights discourses. Human rights discourses, this chapter argues, narrows the testimonial form and content to produce truth, facts and evidence, and by doing so displaces local witnesses while prioritizing Western rescuers as the true heroes of human rights regimes. Such narratives produce the non-West as violent and the West as consisting of freedom and peace.

Rather than defining testimony as human rights evidence, Chapter Three argues that testimony can be located within literary and performative registers. Testimony as narratives and performances of trauma can provide us with ways to remember the dead and the violence suffered by survivors. Using a series of Sinhala language performances of Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, this chapter also illustrates how testimony should be
interpreted as embedded witnessing. Embedded witnessing frees testimony from objectivity and fact, and moves it toward narrative and performance. As such embedded witnessing can register and sustain multiple conflicting forms of remembering. As these testimonies in *Trojan Women* are unrestrained by a need to provide accurate evidence of Sri Lankan terror and violence, they quote and reference social movements like the Mothers’ Fronts. The Mothers’ Fronts were some of the most powerful and popular protest movements in Sri Lanka during the 1980s and 1990s. These movements emerged in Sri Lanka in the contexts of the disappearance of young men to both ethnic war and the state’s brutal response to the JVP insurrection of the late 1980s. By commenting on the Mothers’ Fronts, *Trojan Women* collates the contradictory and historically separate narratives of women who rejected the violence of ethnic war and neoliberalism.

My research fills a lacuna in contemporary scholarship on literatures and performances of neoliberalism and ethnic war. I show the importance of artistic expressions and cultural formations in understanding how ethnic war and neoliberalism are both normalized and resisted. While globalization and ethnic war radically alter the meanings of time, space, form, and history, my work demonstrates how artists resist these forces by creating alternative forms of creative expression. Hence, while this project is about globalization and war, it is also about the possibility of cross-cultural connection and action.
From 1978 to 1994, villagers in Sri Lanka experienced the annual celebration of a massive cultural festival called the *Gam Udawa Jayanthiya*, or Village Awakening Celebrations. The festivals were held in a different district each year. The celebrations continued for eleven days every year, beginning on the 23rd of June—the birthday of Ranasinghe Premadasa, the prime minister and later president of Sri Lanka, and the architect of the Gam Udawa. Millions flocked from neighboring villages and towns to celebrate this massive festival. The festival grounds were as large as 100 acres some years, and the target number of houses expanded from its initial 100,000 to a million by 1985. The grounds had replicas of historic and modern civic monuments built at great cost by the state. These consisted of statues of pre-colonial kings and imitations of important Buddhist pilgrimmage sites, on the one hand, and replicas of modern structures like the Colombo Town Hall on the other. Villagers, who could otherwise not easily travel to see some historic sites in Sri Lanka and South Asia, such as the pre-colonial Kings Meeting Hall in Kandy or Bodhgaya in Varanasi, could access them in miniature form at the Gam Udawa. Some years, villagers could board a model airplane of the national carrier Air Lanka and be served by a steward. There were food stalls, trade stalls, educational stalls, health clinics, plays, dances and magic shows for people to visit. The entrance doorway could be elaborate: “50 feet high, 60 feet wide [embodying] ancient Sinhala architecture” (Correspondent, “Gam Udawa” 19). The opening of these festivals
were carried out by Premadasa himself. He and other important ministers presided over an impressive parade, very much like a traditional *perehara* or procession used by kings on important occasions.

Image 1: Replica of Adam’s Peak
Adam’s Peak is a pilgrimage site at the top of Samanala Mountain. Popular belief claims that Lord Buddha set foot on the top of the mountain.

Image 2: Replica of the International Airport in Katunayake

Image 3: Replica of the Colombo Town Hall
Images Courtesy of *Dinamina*. 
The splendor of these celebrations was so enormous that the main aim of the Gam Udawa, to build houses for the poor, seemed almost secondary. The festivals, though they were meant to commemorate the successes of the housing project, themselves became the focus.

Gam Udawa began and consolidated itself during a time when the party in power, the United National Party (UNP), directed the country toward neoliberal reforms for the first time in the post-1977 era. This was also a time when insurrectionary and separatist war threatened the authority of the state. Gam Udawa helped create and consolidate state ideologies within the realm of culture during this period. Each year, a specific underdeveloped area within a district was targeted for housing and amelioration. Each year, the Gam Udawa festival created condensed spaces of cultural behavior that echoed those of the previous year, in effect serializing the thrills for local villagers. But Gam Udawa celebrations were carefully orchestrated performance and narrative events. Their pilgrim sites, effigies, and monuments were deployed by the state to transmit neoliberalism and Sinhalese Buddhism into rural Sri Lanka, often using the language of post- and anti-colonialism. Even though the state used massive international loans and aid to complete these building projects, Gam Udawa celebrated village self-sufficiency and the restoration of pre-modern, pre-colonial Buddhist lineages.

There were three kinds of structures found at or adjacent to these enormous festivals, and each had a performative role within the grounds and as endless reproductions in Gam Udawa images, plaques, and political speeches. The first type of structure consists of monuments and demonstrates what performance studies scholars call “surrogation”—the process of finding substitutes for real or imagined loss. The
monuments were modern and pre-colonial surrogations in miniature. The second category consisted of houses built in new Gam Udawa villages, or renovated houses in re-awakened villages. The state provided re-awakened villages with raw materials so that residents could rebuild or renovate their houses, or directed villagers to use local raw materials while the government provided some financial support. The final kind consisted of neoliberal factories introduced by 1990 under the 200 Garment Factory Program (GFP) as part of the second phase of neoliberalism (Lynch 8). Some of the residents of Gam Udawa villages ended up working in these factories.

Analyzing these three kinds of structures as sites of performance and narration, this chapter explores how Sinhalese Buddhism and neoliberal economics were promoted through three processes. The first was through the simultaneous process of restoration and erasure. Restoration always implies a previous loss and the need for a surrogate, or substitute, to fill the now-empty space. In Gam Udawa, the state restored idealized, mythic versions of traditional self-sufficient village life, pre-colonial monarchical power, and Sinhalese Buddhism. But surrogation is a lethal process: restorations always bring erasure. Restoring these idealized forms of life erased economic realities, multiple histories, and ethnicities. The second transformation occurred because the festivals transformed history into myth and myth into history. If Gam Udawa restored the past as myth, then myths such as The Ramayana were reinterpreted as a form of subaltern folk history to consolidate Buddhist nationalism. During the process of restoration and erasure, the differences between original structures and replicas became difficult to distinguish. As monuments and temples were replicated over and over, the differences between ancient and modern aesthetic forms were also collapsed. These simultaneous
processes changed the meanings of terms, and enabled a third kind of transformation: neoliberal economies came to be interpreted as a form of pre-colonial welfare. Here, the festivals changed opposites into identities to help the state overcome the contradictions of its policies. The meanings of a self-sufficient agricultural economy, symbolized by the paddy-field, and neoliberal economies, symbolized by the export-oriented factory, were transformed from opposites to synonyms. Narratives of anti-colonialism and post-colonialism were mobilized to justify neoliberalism.

This chapter then explores a series of negotiations and translations made in the realms of culture, narrative, and aesthetics that helped the state promote market economies and consolidate Sinhalese Buddhist identities. The arguments that follow do not suggest that villagers were “duped” into believing state ideologies. They often openly challenged the claims made by the state. This chapter undertakes the limited task of explaining how political authority was exercised by the state in the domain of culture in its attempts to construct consent for the massive and disruptive changes it undertook.

Development aid and neoliberalism need to be understood as they operate within specific cultural fields that change their meanings. Both neoliberalism and ethnic identities were constituted in and by Gam Udawa festivals, and exploring these sites as performance sites may help us understand how this was done. I use David Harvey and Saskia Sassen as exemplary theorists who define neoliberalism as a global system that emerged against an older model of capitalism. Using their general theories, I explore their manifestations at specific sites in Sri Lanka.

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4 See Mosse and Lewis for excellent examples of how aid is implemented and negotiated at different sites.
I have already outlined Harvey’s definitions of neoliberalism in the Introduction. One of the key features that differentiates neoliberalism from the earlier economic system is that neoliberalism desires to eradicate social provisions. As such for Harvey, neoliberalism and social provision (20) are opposites. The neoliberal state destroyed an earlier model of state social provision, which he defines as embedded liberalism (11), in which certain key sectors of the economy had been removed from market controls since World War II and protected by the state. Echoing Harvey, Sassen argues that the organization of post-World War II economies had two key features that distinguished them from neoliberalism: “States a) developed capabilities for multilateral action and did so to protect their national economies from international forces, and b) worked for a stronger multilateral system and did so without relinquishing policies calling for governments to manage their economies and functions as significant economic actors” (161). Neoliberalism does away with these two ideals.

Harvey qualifies his general theories about neoliberalism by looking at their application in specific locations. For example, in the US, the capitalist class popularized neoliberalism by “capturing ideals of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory practices of the state” (42). In Sri Lanka, neoliberalism was introduced in the context of social provision being extended through highly symbolic and often expensive programs like Gam Udawa, which allowed the state to maintain its role as a provider of resources for people at a time when it was dismantling welfare services in several areas. Furthermore, Gam Udawa tells us how antinomies such as free markets versus social provision and government-managed economies versus open economies can lose their oppositional meanings as the relationships of these terms to
each other are changed in cultural terrains. Taking Harvey’s own advice that we pay
careful attention to differences between neoliberal doctrine and its implementation, this
essay explores how these festivals were able to celebrate a self-sufficient economy
removed from market forces even as the opposite was taking place.

Scholars who work on Sri Lanka have looked at Gam Udawa and similar
development projects to explain their ideological content. They have carried out
ethnographic work at Gam Udawa villages and village factories, but have failed to look at
the actual festivals as sites which disseminated ideals. For example, in *Demons and
Development: the Struggle for Community in a Sri Lankan Village*, James Brow carried
out ethnographic work in a Gam Udawa village called Samadigama in the Anuradhapura
district, tracing the ways in which the implementation of the housing program fell far
short of its aims, and how patronage politics created tensions among villagers regarding
who got houses. For Brow, Gam Udawa specifically and development projects more
generally were “centrally implicated in the imaginative construction of the Sinhalese
nation”—incorporating lower class, lower caste, and other marginal Sinhalese identities
into the nation-state (105). Brow argues that ritual and demonic possession channeled
and challenged state ideologies, but fails to interrogate how festivals created in
conjunction with these villages consolidated Sinhalese Buddhist ethnic identities and
neoliberalism simultaneously.

More than a decade after Brow’s work, Caitrin Lynch carried out ethnographic
work in two village factories close to the Gam Udawa in Pallekele, Kandy, but also failed
to notice how the festivals changed the meanings of factory work and village life. Her
ethnographic accounts in *Juki Girls, Good Girls: Gender and Cultural Politics in Sri
Lanka’s Globalized Garment Industry help us understand how female workers interpreted factory labor, nationalism, and their village identities under neoliberalism. I add to her nuanced analysis by exploring how Gam Udawa facilitated the incorporation of factories into villages through practices such as surrogation and restored behavior.

Gam Udawa: Restoring Village Self-Sufficiency

In 2009 and 2010 I visited two major Gam Udawa sites. The first, Pallekele, where the 1990 Gam Udawa was held, is 11 kilometers outside of the city of Kandy, the second-largest metropolitan urban space in Sri Lanka. It is considered one of the central Buddhist sites on the island because Kandy houses the Dalada Maligawa or the Temple of the Tooth, where the Buddha’s tooth relic is believed to be kept. The second site is in Mahiyangana in Badulla District in central Sri Lanka, where Gam Udawa was celebrated in 1989. I also watched video footage of the festivals stored at the archives of the state-owned television station, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), and read the many pamphlets and commemoration booklets published to celebrate Gam Udawa, stocked today in various libraries in Colombo and at the archives of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon.

As I walked through these sites, spoke to residents, and read textual material, it became clear that the restoration of Sinhalese village life was one of the core aims of Gam Udawa. The entranceway to the Mahiyangana site has a plaque (Image 4) announcing the aims of Gam Udawa as “gama hadaa rate hadamu,” meaning “build the village to build the nation.” As the official logo indicates, the village unit with houses is
on the bottom half, while a *stupa*, a Buddhist temple, is the central structure on the top half. The two halves are separated by a river, marking village life as primarily agricultural. The circle encloses the two halves to form a contained unit.

The plaque draws inspiration from claims made for years in postcolonial Sri Lanka and South Asia that restoring traditional village life was the responsibility of the state. Each government that ruled Ceylon or later Sri Lanka subsidized the rural economy and reproduced the small land-hold farmer as the authentic figure of community. Political scientist Mick Moore explains:

> there is a strong sense that the leading actors see themselves as fulfilling an historic mission which involves the recreation of an authentic, traditional village, family-farming and rice-based Sinhalese society. The state is pursuing an enterprise which has a moral and historic justification extending beyond immediate political necessity or economic rationality. (188)
This process was carried out by Sri Lanka’s first Prime Minister, D. S. Senanayake, who “was obsessed with the grand design of reclaiming the Dry Zone [historically the heart of rice production in Sri Lanka] from the jungle, settling the landless from the Wet Zone, and converting the area into a vast smiling rice bowl” (Hennayake, 78-79). Similar ideologies about traditional village life being the core of the nation were expressed by Mahatma Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* (55). Gandhi too saw the village as the core unit of the nation. The recreation of authentic and traditional village life in this manner is linked to what Richard Schechner defines as restored behavior, a process that gives “both individuals and groups the chance to re-become what they once were—or even, and most often, to re-become what they never were but wish to have been or wish to become” (38). Schechner describes the creative and imaginative processes by which communities selectively reproduce their past. This selective recreation is captured by an idiom frequently used in the Sri Lankan context to describe village life as being about the “‘wewa, chaithiya, yaya’—‘(irrigation) tank, temple, paddy field’” (Moore 190) that fixed village life as a self-contained, self-enclosed, bounded structure in which paddy cultivation was the central mode of production, and Buddhism the central religion. So even as self-sufficient economies became impossible to sustain in any way under neoliberalism, Gam Udawa promoted it as the desired way of life.
Image 5 helps explain how pre-colonial, self-sufficient village life was naturalized by Gam Udawa. The image naturalizes a certain kind of village couple, living in empty harmonious time. An implicitly perfect heterosexual couple is bent over rice fields, reaping the fruits of agricultural labor. The image removes any patriarchal or caste hierarchies that may exist in villages as the man and woman labor together equally. As their bodies and faces are turned down and away from us, expression and fatigue are erased. Beyond the fields we see a low hill on which Gam Udawa houses are nestled among trees, submerged into the wilderness, making them appear organic. The image has no markers of historical specificity, placing the agricultural self-sufficient village within mythic time. I use the term myth, as Roland Barthes does, to identify a semiotic system that “transforms history into nature” (129) as innocent speech without motivation, and as
a form of representation that removes images from their historical specificity toward abstracted empty time and space.

While such images of restored village life proliferated, these symbols simultaneously performed erasure. These closed symbols erased from state discourses the increased state penetration and restructuring of villages. As Rajesh Venugopal explains, “the UNP bought support for the market reform programme by implementing massive rural development schemes along highly compressed deadlines, expanding the scale, depth and sheer concentration of state patronage down into the village as never before, much of it funded under a massive foreign aid extravaganza” (91). We can obtain a sense of state penetration if we take into account how Gam Udawa architectural structures have come to function in the aftermath of these festivals. Replicas of modern and pre-colonial structures such as the Town Hall, the Public Library, and the Temple of the Tooth are used today as government offices and public buildings. For example, the Temple of the Tooth serves as a public library for the village (Image 6), while the replica of the Parliament building serves as an office of the Environmental Authority (Image 7) at the Mahiyangana site. Hence, structures built for the festivals operate as both state offices and public service buildings. These dual functions make both historic and modern structures serve the state bureaucracy and enhance state penetration into villages. Sunil Bastian in his writings on foreign aid in Sri Lanka argues that vast amounts of money were given to Sri Lanka in the 1970s and 1980s by the IMF, World Bank, and other donor countries and institutions to buy consent for neoliberalism (Bastian, The Politics of Foreign Aid 112-129). These loans and aid enabled the state to carry out its development
programs while actually dismantling the welfare state. Again, Gam Udawa denied these realities as the program performed itself as reproducing self-sufficient village life.

Image 6: Replica of the Temple of the Tooth. The building functions as a public library for the Mahiyangana Gam Udawa villages.

Image 7: Replica of Sri Lankan Parliament.
Incurring huge debts for public housing did not redistribute wealth downward but worked in the opposite direction. As I walked through Gam Udawa villages in 2009 and 2010, I saw how these village communities were further penetrated and displaced by middle-class families, who bought many of the original houses and replaced them with large, expensive mansions. The house in Image 8 is only one among the many that have replaced the original small two roomed Gam Udawa houses. When I visited the Pallekele Gam Udawa site in 2009, it had been acquired in full by a private housing development company. The company was constructing luxury houses for families who worked in the over-populated city of Kandy, and needed residences within a drivable distance to it. A realtor at the Mahiyangana Gam Udawa site explained to me that because these houses were alienable (able to be sold) ten years after they had been given to villagers, many had been sold. The paved roads, pipe-water and electricity provided under Gam Udawa had made the properties attractive. This is similar to the changes made in Britain under Margaret Thatcher, whereby, working-class housing was privatized and then gentrified. Harvey explains it as follows:

At first blush, for example, Thatcher’s programme for the privatization of social housing in Britain appeared as a gift for the lower classes, whose members could now convert from rental to ownership at a relatively low cost, gain control over a valuable asset, and augment their wealth. But once the transfer was accomplished housing speculation took over, particularly in prime central locations, eventually bribing or forcing low-income populations out to the periphery in cities like London and turning erstwhile working-class housing estates into centres of intense gentrification. (A Brief History 164)
At the Mahiyangana housing scheme house-owners told me that some of them had to pay small amounts of money per month for some years to lay claim to the properties. Similar to the case of London public-housing, such payments for housing in Mahiyangana seemed a benevolent effort by the state to provide low-income housing for those who would otherwise not own a house. However, Crown land, or public property had been used to create Gam Udawa villages; these lands increased in value because they had been provided with certain facilities, which were in turn sold by villagers to middle-class families and property developers. At the end of this process, the commons had been partially transferred to private hands. This is what Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,” a primary method of capitalist accumulation (Brief History 160-165).

Image 8: A new house that has replaced the original two-roomed Gam Udawa house in the Mahiyangana complex
Image courtesy of Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham

How were such contradictions erased or reconciled? How did the state promote the building of public houses while empowering and enriching the wealthy? How did a
state espouse neoliberalism but camouflage its aims as welfarist and dedicated to principles of self-sufficiency? We can begin to answer these questions if we return to our performance sites to explore other kinds of restoration and erasure.

Performing Monarchical Power: Surrogation, Mythic Time, and Space

Joseph Roach defines surrogation as a process by which cultures reproduce themselves when “actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (Cities of the Dead 2). When there has been loss or change, for example, substitutes are put forward as a way of filling that loss. These substitutes or surrogations are “public enactments of forgetting” (Ibid., 3). Effigies are one such form of surrogation, which function “to evoke an absence, to body something forth, especially something from a distant past…. [they fill] by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of an original” (Ibid., 36). In Sri Lanka, the state championed the process of restoring colonial loss through Gam Udawa to claim moral authority for its actions. The restoration of a self-sufficient folk ideal is an attempt to restore some form of perceived loss, and involved erasing how these housing projects and festivals were funded. Similarly, surrogations of effigies at the festival sites performed selective memory as they restored lost pre-colonial lineages. If Gam Udawa claimed that village self-sufficiency was one of its aims, then this was to be achieved by restoring the lineage of the pre-colonial monarchy in contemporary Sri Lanka.
While the identities of the effigies changed at each festival site to reflect the kingdoms that once existed close to the area, Gam Udawa celebrated monarchical power continuously. The clay effigies in Image 9 are of the kings of Kandy, who ruled in an unbroken line until the last king of Kandy was overthrown in 1815 by the British. Their orderly, stately, and upright postures signal great authority and power. The caption introducing the effigies in Pallekele reads: “this monument is established to commemorate the kings of Sri Lanka who ruled from year 2135 to 2358 in the Buddhist era (1592 to 1815) from the Kingdom of Kandy. In 1815, the last king of Kandy, Sri Wickrama Rajasingham, lost the Kandyan Kingdom to the British.” The caption goes on to say that the 12th anniversary of the Gam Udawa was inaugurated by R. Premadasa, the President of Sri Lanka. Colonialism put an end to this royal lineage, but the lineage is performatively restored through the insertion of Premadasa into the space left empty next
to the last king of Kandy. Monarchical authority thus blesses Premadasa. He is a surrogation of the kings lost to us, even as he is the creator of these effigies.

A consequence of surrogation is that differences between time periods and spaces are erased. Similar to the manner in which village life was restored without history, the surrogation of pre-colonial forms of power made it appear as if postcolonial forms of statehood were restorations of a glorious pre-colonial past. Similar forms of restoration were performed at other parallel development programs, such as the Mahaweli River Development Program. Politicians often defined these water irrigation schemes as restorations of the engineering feats of the great kings of ancient Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Serena Tennekoon defines performances such as jala puja (water offerings) carried out at these dams as “development rituals” (295), where “the past is imagined as realizable in the future” in cyclical time (Ibid., 297). In the same way, Gam Udawa took the form of royal welfare. Such performances erased the differences between times and spaces, transforming the contradictions between self-sufficiency and neoliberalism into synonyms.

It is within this configuration of restored village life and monarchy that we must place the different structures built within festival sites. As I mentioned before, along with surrogations of pre-colonial structures, Gam Udawa also featured replicas of modern buildings such as the Parliament, the National Museum, the Independence Memorial Hall, airplanes, and ships. Because Gam Udawa had so effectively restored the ideology of self-sufficient villages and monarchical forms of power, modern structures could be absorbed with relative ease. Hence, I disagree with Nalani Hennayake’s claims that the festival grounds had no coherent ideological content, but were an “ambiguity of
symbols.... [consisting of] contradictory meanings” (149). For her, “each of the symbols are interpreted differently by the viewers” (Ibid., 149) and cannot be understood as anything but an incomprehensible totality. As my next example will illustrate, modern, colonial, and pre-colonial surrogations form constellations to produce consensus. These replicas restore selective pre-colonial lineages and erase the multiple ethnicities and religions of the island.

Surrogation and the Erasure of Minorities

Gam Udawa festivals were held during the years of separatist war carried out by Tamil groups who challenged the racist ideology of the state. In the south, too, there were many political groups and social movements that challenged the state’s legitimacy. The state thus needed to establish its political authority at a time when its actions were being severely criticized. The state carried out military offensives in the north to repress Tamil militancy and brutal repressions in the south of the violent insurrectionary group the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The state claimed violence was necessary to protect the Sinhalese people and their religion from unpatriotic and terrorist elements. Within Gam Udawa festivals, the state performed its legitimacy by stressing Buddhism as the religion of Sri Lanka, and itself as the guardian of Buddhism. Pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial monuments were synthesized to perform state authority.

One of the main monuments I encountered when I walked through the Pallekele site (one that is found in almost all Gam Udawa sites) was a surrogation of the Independence Memorial Hall. The original Independence Memorial Hall was built in Colombo to commemorate Sri Lanka’s independence from British rule in 1948. The
The Memorial Hall in Pallekele is part of a cluster consisting of 1. the Independence Memorial Hall; 2. the effigy of D. S. Senanayake, the first prime minister of independent Sri Lanka and considered the father of the nation (also found at the Memorial Hall in Colombo), and 3. the Devanampeytis stupa.

The Memorial Hall has pillars to hold up the roof but no walls on three of its sides (Image 10). If you stand at the Senanayake statue and look into the Memorial Hall, you see a statue of a seated Buddha at the rear of the structure, which suggests that the first prime minister of independent Sri Lanka was blessed by the Buddha. Today, the Pallekele Gam Udawa ground has been converted into a Buddhist meditation center. The
*stupa* is behind and above both structures and overlooks them. A stupa is a dome-shaped building with a pointed sharp spire on top of it. Stupas were built by pre-colonial kings to house Buddha’s relics, and are sites of Buddhist pilgrimages even today. This stupa is a surrogation of an older structure called the Isurumuniya, and is named Devanampeythis Seya at Pallekele. The Isurumuniya stands in the ancient city of Anuradhapura and is said to have been the first resting place of the Buddha’s tooth when it was brought to Sri Lanka. Protecting Buddha’s relics was one of the sacred tasks of Sri Lankan kings; placing a stupa above the Memorial Hall and the Senanayke statue connects postcolonial leaders to pre-colonial kings. Democratic rulers are restorers of the lineages of pre-colonial kings and carry out the sacred task of protecting Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

This formation erases the multi-ethnic and multi-religious history of the Hall, which belongs to a long series of surrogations. The structure at Pallekele is a surrogation of the Independence Memorial Hall found in Colombo, which in turn was inspired by an Anglican chapel and meeting hall in Kandy. The Memorial Hall at Pallekele invokes these complex histories even as it erases them.
Image 11: The Good Samaritan
Walking through Trinity Chapel helps restore the historical texture erased at Pallekele. The chapel is located in the gardens of Trinity College, an Anglican missionary school founded in 1872, and was designed by Reverend Gaster. Drawing on vernacular forms of architecture from the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, its open form welcomes in all elements and peoples. Inside and outside are only minimally separated, and the structure expands to the outside world. The enormous paintings on the back wall of the chapel (its only wall) also testify to multiple histories. The artist David Paynter himself was of mixed blood, the child of a British father and a Sri Lankan mother (David Paynter).

Image 12: *Washing the Disciples’ Feet*
Pictures courtesy of Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham
The vernacular paintings perform a local embedded Christianity, and a certain form of liberation theology can be read into the paintings. All the figures in the paintings are dark-skinned men, while the backgrounds of some of them, such as in *The Crucifixion*, consist of tropical foliage like mangrove trees. In the painting of the *The Good Samaritan* (Image 11), for example, the Samaritan is Sri Lankan and pronouncedly working class, adorned in shirt and sarong. Those who walk away from the sick man belong to a wealthier class, as can be seen from their attire. In *The Crucifixion*, local colonized subjects are wrongly condemned to suffering and death. Christ is also dark-skinned. *The Crucifixion* and *The Good Samaritan* endorse working class and vernacular forms of piety in the context of colonial suffering. When Christ washes the disciples’ feet in Image 12, he pays homage not to colonial rulers but to dark-skinned, colonized men. Colonial sovereignty is displaced through attention to collective, democratic forms of religiosity. The building in Image 12 echoes the open form of Trinity Chapel. Paynter’s art and the chapel indigenize Christianity, promoting a complex, heterogeneous orientation toward religion, race, and form.

In comparison to the original Trinity Chapel, the replica at Pallekele is noticeable for what it erases. In place of these beautiful aesthetic experiments and indigenous forms of religious art, we find a statue of a seated Buddha. Cultural and aesthetic syncretism and co-existence are replaced by a single religion. The critique of colonialism offered by the paintings is replaced by Buddhist nationalism. The restoration of Sri Lanka’s pre-colonial lineages erases the country’s multiplicity, replacing heterogeneity with homogeneity.
Aesthetic Forms: Mythic Time

The processes of restoration and erasure that this paper has mapped also homogenized aesthetic forms. The process of endless surrogation and replication resulted in structures that could not be identified as either modern or ancient. The aesthetic structures in Gam Udawa reproduced history as myth and collapsed different historical times. This collapse of historical difference was brought into sharp relief as villagers began to worship at the replicas, just as they did at the original sites. This leads me to consider the aesthetics of late capitalism in relation to form, as Fredric Jameson (1991) has done in the context of late capitalism in the West. For Jameson, the serial nature of postmodern aesthetic forms signals the disappearance of history and an expansion of space. But in the postcolonial context of Gam Udawa, repetition is used to erase the presence of minorities in the island and to rewrite history. To explore the seriality of aesthetic forms and their negotiation of history and space, I turn briefly to two types of figures, the stupa and the boe tree.

The stupa form is repeated and generalized even as each individual stupa is supposed to reference a specific, historical original. I have already examined the use of a stupa in the replicas of Independence Square and Trinity Chapel. There, an imitation of a pre-colonial stupa was placed above the Independence Square replica to signal how Buddha blessed the structure and the effigy of D. S. Senanayake. There are many other instances of such replication. For example, in Kamburupitiya, in the Matara District, the Gam Udawa was celebrated in 1991 with the erection of Dharmapala Maha Bodhi, a stupa that celebrated Anagarika Dharmapala, the father of modern Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The Dharmapala Bodhi is said to be a copy of Mihintale, a pre-colonial structure
built in 719 AD to commemorate the site where King Devanampiyatissa converted to Buddhism (Anagarika). The original stupa was itself renovated and restructured over the centuries. While each stupa at each Gam Udawa has an original it is meant to imitate, the stupas at each Gam Udawa also tend to imitate one another. Each Gam Udawa festival began to imitate another, replicas replicating replicas. The result is a series of simulacra. Prime Minister Premadasa and the UNP regime built these structures to reconstruct a present based on the mythic past and to manage social upheaval. But the aesthetic result is a series of monuments that blur the ancient and the modern, the original and the imitation. It becomes difficult to distinguish twentieth century monuments from pre-colonial ones.

In contrast to modernism, which valued originality and individuality, Jameson argues that postmodernism dispenses with originality and instead celebrates endless reproducibility. According to him, under postmodernism,

meaning on the new view is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier. What we generally call the signified—the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance—is now rather to be seen as a meaning-effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves. (Postmodernism 26)

Hence, we find the massive serialization of all objects which have no original. In the postcolonial and Gam Udawa context, replication and serialization lead to these objects losing their originality and consolidating Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.
The purpose of the replica stupas becomes clear when we consider their reproduction in Gam Udawa booklets and newspaper images. In Image 13, Premadasa descends from a hill after praying at a stupa. The stupa is indistinguishable from any other of Sri Lanka’s ubiquitous stupas. This image suggests that Premadasa is blessed by the Buddha to carry out his sacred role of protecting the state religion. The stupa is highly stylized and mysterious; it is open to the sky and marks history as a distant reference point. In the image, the present and past are merged into mythic time, which allows
postcolonial leaders to become surrogations of pre-colonial kings. The stupa evokes a glorious past when Buddhism held its rightful place, and presents Premadasa as Buddhism’s contemporary champion. However, Premadasa is not dressed like a king but like a man of the people. The contemporary setting of the photograph is indicated by the men in trousers on the margins, sidelined. We are offered a future modeled on a glorious past, which erases the different religions of Sri Lanka by positioning Buddhism as the genuine faith.

Jameson calls this “the cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (18) by postmodernism. In the photograph, postmodern aesthetic strategies are deployed to promote neoliberalism and Buddhist nationalism. We saw how historic monuments were used by the festivals to justify the political regime, and how they became enmeshed in tasks such as building houses for the poor and industrialization. As we’ll see, these forms also destroy the possibility of simple periodization.

The second type of structure I reference is the boe tree, the tree under which Buddha is said to have meditated. The tree and the replica of the Bodhgaya temple at the Mahiyangana site provide more evidence of how replicas came to function as religious sites of pilgrimage. Again, the differences between festival structures and original pre-colonial pilgrimage sites disappear. A sapling of the original boe tree from Bodhgaya is supposed to be in Anuradhapura, one of the ancient cities of Sri Lanka. This temple is now under the care of the Raja Maha Vihare and has been converted into a pilgrim site. The inside of the temple features frescoes that imitate those found in Anuradhapura.
When I visited the Bodhgaya temple at Mahiyanganaya (Image 14), I noticed that the Boe tree at the back of the temple had hundreds of puja (offerings) made to it. One of the offerings by the tree read, “May Indika and his family’s bad omens pass him and may his enterprises be successful.” There were hundreds of such requests tied to the tree. Propped upon the trunk of the tree were fragments of statues of the Buddha and an image of a deity that I could not make out because it was so badly damaged (Image 15). The body parts of the Buddha resemble ruins found at historical sites. The image, in contrast, resembles a modern poster of a god/dess left by a devotee; after all, the image is a colored print inside a gold-plated frame. The image, statue, temple, and tree are products of
modernity, but their historicity is not easy to discern. Image 15 shows how the mélange of styles collapses historical periods.

![Image 15: Fragments of statues and photo found at the Boe tree by the Bodhgaya in Mahiyanganaya. Image Courtesy of Nimanthi Perera Rajasingham](image)

Again we see how Gam Udawa replicas become indistinguishable from pre-colonial Buddhist sites. Time is flattened out and emptied of its very historicity as we observe these spaces. Sri Lankan politicians and public figures have strategically used mythic time from the beginning of the twentieth century; what’s significant about the Gam Udawa is how it illustrates the prevalence and intensification of this strategy under neoliberalism.
Mythic Pasts and Buddhist Nationalism

As much as the present was made to refer to a mythic past, the mythic past was transformed to serve the present, as illustrated by a booklet printed to mark the opening of two housing complexes. In this case, local and alternative histories, which are often used by subaltern historians to challenge dominant narratives of history, were used by the regime to consolidate its power.

The booklet was issued in 1980 to celebrate the construction of two housing schemes, Dimuthugama and Divurumgama, in the Velimade District. The booklet commemorates local village histories and cultures, explaining that the two new villages are adjacent to the site where the battle between Rama and Ravana in the Ramayana took place. According to the booklet, when Ravana brought Rama’s wife Sita to Lanka (a story recounted in the Ramayana) he hid her in a hill called Sthri Pura, meaning women’s village, next to these two Gam Udawa villages. As the text says, “every hilltop between Velimada and Nuwara Eliya is connected to the popular myths regarding Ravana and Sita” (Jayakody, no page numbers). This retelling of the myth of Rama and Ravana departs from the traditional interpretation of the Ramayana, according to which Ravana is the villain. According to this version, Ravana abducted Sita because Rama raped Ravana’s sister, and Rama was only able to defeat Ravana because Ravana’s brother Vibhishana helps Rama. Rama’s victory is downplayed, and while the place of battle is noted as being destroyed, the burning of Lanka by Hanuman is completely left out. This narrative retells an old myth from the perspective of the defeated.

The booklet claims that Divurumgama is the site where Sita had to jump into a fire to prove to Ram that she had not been violated by Ravana. Sita’s test of purity has
been seen as an ideal for Hindu women in South Asia for many decades. For Sita proved her purity and emerged from the fire unscathed. A photograph reproduced on the inside front cover of the booklet shows a Boe tree growing at the site. In the retelling of the local histories of Dimuthugama and Divurumgama, the site of Sita’s trial by fire becomes a shrine to Buddhism. The trace of her act is embedded in the Boe tree, a marker of Buddhism.

Here, the dominant narrative of Rama, Sita, and Ravana is retold from the perspective of the defeated, and a grand mythic narrative is incorporated into village life. The villagers are interpellated by the booklet as descendants of Ravana fighting against invading Indians. Myth is resurrected to serve political purposes. Village histories that were not necessarily Buddhist are retold within a Buddhist framework.

The Factory is Like the Paddy Field

In 1990, the Sri Lankan government announced that factories would no longer be confined primarily to Export Processing Zones, but would be opened throughout the country. The 200 GFP was officially launched in 1992 and aimed at exploiting the villages’ large labor reserves. By the time these factories penetrated villages, Gam Udawa had already helped mediate anxiety around neoliberalism because neoliberalism was compared to pre-colonial welfare. Therefore, when factories were opened near Gam Udawa festival sites, they were easily absorbed into the villages. Just as the state built houses to provide shelter to villagers, now it was building factories to provide employment. According to the government, the factories were built in villages to reduce unemployment and social unrest (Lynch, 32). The violent insurrection against the state
carried out between 1987 and 1989 by the JVP, even though it was ultimately suppressed, exposed the state’s fragility. Only once the insurrection was crushed could neoliberal reforms proceed. The insurrection was in fact used to justify setting up the village factories. According to the Multi-Fiber Agreement, each developing country had a guaranteed quota for exports to the US. Since the United States was responsible for 63% of Sri Lanka’s exports at the time, this quota system ensured a steady and reliable market for the country’s factories (Kalegama, 51-67). The state promoted factories in villages by rewarding owners who agreed to open factories under the 200 GFP with assured quotas.

The speech made by Premadasa at the opening of TriStar Garments at the Gam Udawa site at Kamburupitiya demonstrates how discourses of restoration, postcolonialism and anticolonialism were used to justify neoliberalism. Premadasa claimed that “we were colonized by the Portuguese, Dutch and the British. This ended in 1948. We must get back at least half the wealth they stole from us. We can do this by exporting our products abroad” (Perera, 15). Here, economic restoration equals neoliberal economics. Premadasa could claim that postcolonial freedom was to be obtained through factory work because Gam Udawa had already redefined neoliberalism as a way to achieve self-sufficiency. Lynch writes extensively about Premadasa’s ability to reconcile the contradictions of his economic policies. Premadasa was able to state the following without irony:

now, with the export orders being filled . . . the sweat that the factory girls shed has received the value it deserves—they have not shed their sweat in vain. Aren’t these factory workers earning valuable foreign exchange? Is this not the way to recover something of the vast wealth that went into foreign hands when we were under colonial masters for 450 years? (Lynch, 69)
In this quote, oppositions are erased. Working in the factories, Premadasa claims, helps the country recover the wealth stolen by the West during colonialism. Hence, factory work is a form of anticolonial labor that could restore pre-colonial lineages in the present. Working in these factories, for approximately $40 a month (in 1992), is described as valuable work for the mostly female workforce. Premadasa positions himself as a benefactor who looks after children when he refers to female workers as girls. As commentators and labor activists have explained to me, employers used the excuse that workers lived at home and commuted to work to pay them even less than workers in Export Processing Zones. Indeed, the speech elides how much of this wealth was actually paid to workers and how much of it was kept by factory owners. Neoliberalism is justified in the vocabularies of anti- and postcolonialism by reading neoliberalism as restoration. Neoliberalism is the means to postcolonial freedom, and factory work is a form of welfare. Such claims are possible only because modernity and industrialization had already been defined as a continuation of self-sufficient village community. Because surrogations at the Gam Udawa festivals had performed the restoration of pre-colonial forms of welfare and power, markers of modernity such as ships, trains, and planes did not rupture that order but were absorbed organically into villages. The factory could also be absorbed into villages as a means of welfare rather than a threat to self-sufficiency.

Like housing for the poor, factories, often built on or close to these Gam Udawa sites, were seen as a kind of welfare. If the core of the village had been wewa, chaithiya, yaya (tank, temple and paddy-field), Gam Udawa added the factory to this litany. Wewa, chaithiya, yaya, and karmanthaya now constituted the village. The factory had become like the paddy-field.
Conclusion

My analysis of how Gam Udawa translated neoliberalism into welfare should alert us to how development aid and neoliberalism are configured at local sites through aesthetic, cultural, and performative processes. This reading does not suggest that these processes were uncontested. Rather, the state performed such elaborate festivals and development programs to create consensus in light of many challenges to its authority. I close with a vignette about a Gam Udawa recipient to illustrate my arguments about how Gam Udawa created the conditions of possibility for people to live out their dreams. I entered one house in Mahiyangana in 2010 because the house still remained very close to its original structure, though a room and a bathroom had been added to it. Pushpa was a Sinhala mother of three who had received the house in 1989 after becoming a widow. She wrote to the president, and after a few weeks received a response saying she would get a house. She told me how, contrary to popular claims that only UNP party supporters got houses, she was a member of the opposition party, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), and had still obtained a house. She was grateful that Premadasa was not partisan. Pushpa left her mother and children in that house and worked for many years in the Middle East as a housemaid. For some time she also worked at a factory called Gabo Textiles, which had been set up as part of the 200 GFP. In 2000, she was paid Rs. 2000 ($40) per month, inclusive of overtime. When I spoke to her in 2010, her daughter, son, and daughter-in-law all worked in garment factories in Mahiyangana. A few years before, she had returned from the Middle East to her Gam Udawa house, where she now cares for her grandchildren. Gam Udawa had channeled the family’s aspirations for a better future through factory labor. The state gave them housing while it had simultaneously created
the conditions of possibility for their livelihood through neoliberal forms of work. Factory labor became a kind of horizon for their aspirations. In this way, Gam Udawa provided both opportunities and limits for those it claimed to benefit. Gam Udawa celebrated self-sufficiency, welfare, and the restoration of a golden monarchical past, even as it erased the county’s history of pluralism, and penetrated villages with neoliberal factories. These massive contradictions were synthesized at the cultural and performance sites of Gam Udawa.
Chapter Two

Tactics of the Everyday:

Working-Class Performances in Times of Ethnic War

As I walked down the factory floor, larger-than-life images of models in lingerie stared at me from every corner. These images, which I later secretly photographed with my phone camera, were mostly of white models, staring provocatively at workers in line-rooms. As Images 1 and 2 make clear, such enormous visuals were not confined to the line-rooms, but were propped up by elevators, by storerooms, in offices, and many random spaces throughout the factory complex. I was in a factory in Biyagama, Sri Lanka, in February 2010. While this factory produced lingerie for GAP, Calzedonia, La Senza, and Marks and Spencer, it did most of its business (90%) for Victoria’s Secret (VS). It was run by one of the largest national garment corporations in Sri Lanka, MAS Holdings. Biyagama is 24 kilometers outside of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. It is the second-largest Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in Sri Lanka, and opened in 1985. It employs close to 30,000 workers, of whom 80% are young women who have migrated from villages to these semi-urban zones (Board of Investment). The factories in the EPZs produce large quantities of clothing that are exported to the global north, and are part of Sri Lanka’s attempts at neoliberalism.
Image 1: Larger-than-life photograph of model near factory elevator and stairway.

Courtesy of Nimanthi Rajasingham

Image 2: Image in the store section.

Photograph Courtesy of Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham
In Chapter One, I explored how the Gam Udawa festivals translated neoliberal factories to mean welfare for rural villages. This chapter looks at another set of important neoliberal sites. These sites are the EPZs in Sri Lanka, instituted after 1977 as part of the state’s efforts to restructure the national economy toward global markets. As a student of literature and theater interested in understanding aesthetic and cultural aspects of neoliberalism, I followed a workers’ theater group in the Katunayake EPZ in Sri Lanka from 2009 until mid-2010. Katunayake predates Biyagama as the oldest EPZ in Sri Lanka. It opened in 1978 and presently employs 50,000 workers (Board of Investment). The theater group was organized by the Stree Kamkaru Madyasthanaya, or Women’s Center, which was formed in the early 1980s and run by ex–factory workers. One of its founding members still directs the Women’s Center and its branches; she was radicalized during the Polytex factory strikes in the early 1980s (Gunawardana, “Struggle, Perseverance and Organization”). These were some of the first strikes that workers organized after neoliberal factories were introduced to Sri Lanka. The Center often trained workers in theater productions such as veedi natya (street theater), and for special days like May Day, Women’s Day, and Human Rights Day. Many of their Sinhala language plays are collectively written and improvised during rehearsals. I analyze three of their plays in this chapter: Boadim Lokka or Boarding-House Boss, Avashyathavaya or Necessity, and Yakku or Demons. These three plays focus on the home, the factory, and the public sphere, respectively. These plays and my observations on a factory floor in Biyagama allow me to understand some of the aesthetic practices that have emerged under neoliberalism as tactics that refuse discipline and control in the zones.
What can working-class performances and aesthetics teach us about the making of neoliberal female workers and the zones they work in? Writings on workers in these labor zones generally highlight the terrible plight faced by women workers in the third world, and delineate them as victims of multinational corporations and neoliberalism. Working-class literature and trade union writings, in contrast, have often focused on workers’ revolutionary and rebellious actions. This paper departs from these two kinds of writings to explore performances and practices of class, gender, and ethnicity embedded in the everyday. As I will detail below, in these neoliberal zones in Sri Lanka, organized resistance is often severely repressed. In the context of prolonged ethnic war and high levels of militarization, these zones have been designated High Security Zones and have been intensely monitored by military and police forces (see section “Organization of EPZs”). In this context, workers’ refusals of capitalist, military, and patriarchal forms of power are often carried out in the realm of culture and everyday practices. As will become clear during the course of the chapter, workers’ theater often emerges in close relations to their everyday practices on the factory floor. Hence, practice and performance share a close relationship as embodied tactics of refusal. In the context of war, such tactics are not always progressive forms of refusal, but may conform to nationalist exclusionary beliefs about minorities.

Paying close attention to embodied practices and theatrical performances, this chapter maps the organization of different kinds of power, and tactics of refusal/resistance and complicity. To do so, this chapter is divided into three loose sections. The first section highlights the disciplinary and repressive forms of power that operate within the domestic sphere or the boarding houses in the zones through a close
reading of the play *Boarding-House Boss*. This play also illuminates the influence of Brechtian aesthetics in working-class theater in Sri Lanka. By comparing *Boarding-House Boss* to the Brechtian learning play *Measures Taken*, I highlight how *Boarding-House Boss* registers changed conditions of possibility for action. Instead of collective actions such as organizing to strike, the play privileges tactics such as refusal and abandonment. If the first section illuminates the organization of power and tactics within the domestic realm, the second section demonstrates how power operates on factory floors through subtle and coercive performances of discipline and control. In this section, using both the play *Necessity* and practices on the floor, I highlight how different kinds of power reinforce each other and how workers respond through tactics of theft, laughter, bawdiness, interruption, laziness, and desire. In the final section, I demonstrate how, in the context of ethnic war and minority rights, folk theater illuminates workers’ hostility toward minority Tamils. Through a close reading of the play *Demons*, I will demonstrate how workers display hidden, subtle forms of intolerance toward minorities. Hence, tactics or practices of the everyday are not always uncomplicated avenues of resistance or refusal, but reproduce some of the racist, nationalist ideologies that are part of how these zones are organized.

**Tactics of the Everyday**

This chapter speaks to two kinds of representations of working-class women. These writings on the working class define the figure of the worker as either victim or as revolutionary figure. The first kind points to exploitation and violence in these zones.
The most infamous examples of such violence are in the Maquiladoras in Ciudad Juarez so powerfully captured in Gaspar de Alba’s novel Desert Blood: the Juarez Murders. Another example is the general reporting on the Bangladeshi factory collapse of 2013 (Burke, Wright). While this approach draws much-needed attention to the terrible conditions in these zones, it also potentially reinforces stereotypes of passive third-world women that Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticized over twenty years ago in her essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” The second representational strategy used by socialist and leftist writers has focused on the revolutionary potential of the working classes. The revolutionary figure has historically been male, even in nuanced writings on the working class from scholars like E. P. Thompson. Such writings look to histories of mass strikes and unionizing that could potentially rupture the smooth functioning of capitalism.

As Sonali Perera has argued in the context of creative writing by Sri Lankan EPZ workers, female workers’ non-revolutionary, everyday practices have been left out of such scholarship (2008). My paper draws from her turn to female labor and workers’ writings and elaborates on it by asking what theater and embodied practices tell us about power, working-class culture, gender, and ethnicity under neoliberalism. To do so, I draw inspiration from Michel de Certeau’s writings on everyday practices. De Certeau looks to everyday practices or tactics to understand how, in the face of enormous structures of repression, powerless groups dissent and refuse dominant ideologies in their everyday practices. Reactions against disciplinary power can create certain spaces, even if they do not transform structures and systems of power. He defines tactics thus:
I call a ‘tactic,’ on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to circumstances. The ‘proper’ is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities.’ The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. (xix)

Tactics or practices by marginalized and oppressed groups give us insights into their consciousness and avenues of resistance, which we may otherwise miss because these tactics do not consolidate themselves into large-scale, visible movements. Some of de Certeau’s key ideas about the results of using these tactics—about the fragmentary and incomplete nature of these victories, the temporariness of these winnings, the lack of concrete ground from which tactics are launched—will be key ideas for my own analysis of workers’ tactics in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Two key arguments he makes about tactics being grounded on placelessness and time are crucial for workers’ everyday practices of resistance.

Organization of EPZs

These plays and everyday practices need to be contextualized. This brief, inadequate summary of how these zones are structured is intended to illuminate contradictory forces that operate in these zones. These zones are not only special labor zones that are outside the purview of labor laws that apply to the rest of the country, but are also security zones that are specially monitored and highly militarized. In addition, they are mono-ethnic zones. The description below will lay the groundwork for us to
understand why workers can have strong criticisms of capitalist and gendered forms of exploitation while simultaneously being insensitive toward ethnic minorities. Hence, their subjectivities are produced through two simultaneous processes. One process exploits, marginalizes, and disciplines workers; the other empowers workers as ethnic subjects who have a privileged position in society because they can work in these zones. Workers’ practices need to be understood in the context of these contradictory forces.

As I mentioned earlier, Katunayake is one of many EPZs set up by the Sri Lankan state after 1977 with the liberalization of the economy. It is the oldest and largest free trade zone, opening in 1978. Biyagama was opened in 1985, and is the second-largest zone. With agriculture being neglected under a neoliberal economy that supported an export-import model, many female villagers have migrated to these zones of production to support their families. Exporting garments to the West is the biggest driver of the Sri Lankan economy. Men often find it difficult to find jobs, but women are more easily employed in these zones. Hence, women’s employment has become a key means of families earning necessary incomes.

These zones are typically marked off by barbed-wire fences, and are extremely well-organized, immaculately-clean spaces. All workers and staff need permits to enter the zones. These permits are often in the form of factory identity cards that tell security officers at checkpoints which factory each worker belongs to. No outsiders are allowed in without pre-arranged passes. Workers’ lodgings are located just outside the zone fences in the neighboring villages. These lodgings themselves do not belong properly to the villages; they are most often line rooms constructed in the backyards of villagers’ houses, or in once-vacant fields. Many villagers have become prosperous from renting
out rooms to workers and providing services such as food and transport for them. Often, these line rooms remind us of shanties hastily put together to provide accommodation. To save money, a number of women workers normally live together in one room. This enables workers to send a substantial part of their salaries home. The large room in Biyagama that I lived in for a few months was a shed that had been converted into a room for eight workers. It had electricity for light bulbs but no other power source.

Both Katunayake and Biyagama are designated as High Security Zones. In addition, Emergency Regulations (ER) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) can be imposed on them at any time. The designation of these zones as High Security Zones, and their management through executive power means that workers are outside civil laws that operate in these zones, and have an inverse relationship to sovereignty. Often these laws have been used to arrest and harass leaders of collective struggles (Gunawardana, “Struggle, Perseverance” 83). The PTA and ER allow the state to clamp down on union leaders and protests because no warrants need be produced at the time of arrest, and no charges need be framed for up to one and a half years subsequent to arrest. These two provisions, meant to curb terrorist activity, have been used to clamp down on workers’ protests. Furthermore, because EPZs are categorized as “essential services,” work in these zones cannot be stopped under any circumstances. Often, armed forces have been used to break strikes and protests using the Essential Services Act (Biyanwila and Gunawardana, 177-198).

Because these economic zones are also security zones, over the years, minorities have been expelled from them. Padmini Weerasooriya, the coordinator of the Women’s Center, explained to me that while some Tamils did work in these zones when they were
first set up in the late 1970s, once the war began these zones were checked so often and Tamils harassed so frequently that most Tamils had to leave. Boarding houses refused to rent spaces to workers, and factories were increasingly reluctant to employ them because they often missed work due to problems with police and military forces. As Weerasoriya explained, some young Tamil women were part of the Women’s Center in Katunayake, but had to leave the zone eventually (Personal Interview).

I argued in Chapter One that despite village factories being run by multinational and national corporations, the state promoted these factories as its way of providing welfare. The same ideology was at work in the EPZs; political parties claimed to provide their followers with employment in these zones as rewards. As Hema Goonatilake and Savitri Goonesekere tell us, as early as 1988 women workers drawn into the FTZ came from all districts in Sri Lanka, except from the North and East, which are predominantly Tamil and Muslim…. One significant feature of worker recruitment in Sri Lanka is the role of political patronage. The establishment of the FTZ was seen as a solution to the problem of heavy unemployment and this opportunity was seized by Government Members of Parliament who provided letters of recommendation to the educated females in their respective districts, who in most cases belonged to families of political supporters (193).

In addition, because these zones are located in majority Sinhala areas, minorities are generally discouraged from working in them as they feel extremely outnumbered and marginalized (Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities* 11).

Because neoliberalism was promoted through state patronage politics, the zones came to be organized in accordance with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Many of the workers in these zones admire and support military violence against minorities. This is an argument made quite succinctly by Caitrin Lynch:
On the surface, these managers and industrialists seem to own to the very same assumptions about gender that have contributed to the feminization of labor across the globe. However, the government’s ongoing war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) provides a key context for the Sri Lankan employment of women in the garment industry. A significant reason that the garment industry in the 1990s was targeted toward women employees was because the government needed men to enlist to fight in the war…. Many workers understood that because garment revenues are a major source of foreign exchange for the state, and because the war is a major expense, garment revenues are used by the state to fight the war. By this reasoning, many garment workers claimed that they were doing a service to the country by working in the 200 GFP factories. Explaining the importance of earning foreign exchange, they proudly compared their national service to that of their boyfriends, husbands, and brothers who were in the army…. We must understand that the capitalist need for cheap docile women laborers coincides with the nationalist need for aggressive army men (Juki Girls, Good Girls 27).

In a sense, the interests of the Sinhala Buddhist state converge with the corporations’ need for cheap labor. Because workers come from the same rural communities as soldiers, their solidarity with the state and Sinhala nationalism is very strong. Often, workers’ siblings, lovers, husbands and neighbors are Sri Lankan army soldiers, and soldiers visit these zones often during their vacation time. During my visits to the Katunayake and Biyagama zones, I saw evidence of the intimacy between soldiers and EPZ workers. Anton Marcus, the president of the Free Trade Zones Workers’ Union was often dubbed and harassed as Kotti Anton or Tiger Anton if he participated in anti-war or peace protests or assemblies. Workers saw his demands for minority rights or arguments in support of a federal system of power as a betrayal of the Sinhala nation (Interview). The popular mantra that free markets promote democracy needs to be disputed in relation to these zones. In Sri Lanka, free markets have actually led to the creation of ethnically homogenous zones, a point that will become clear as I turn to the final play under analysis, Demons.
In addition to the ethnic aspects of organization, these zones are governed by a body that is extra-parliamentary, the Board of Investment or BOI. The BOI is answerable to the president only. The president in Sri Lanka is an executive who stands above parliament as a kind of sovereign. Hence, workers are controlled by the decisions of the sovereign and a board assigned by him to run these zones. Despite parliament having very little control in how these zones are run, it often passes laws and bills that suspend labor and civil laws that apply to the rest of the country. One of these laws has been the abrogation of the right to unionize, which may explain why collective responses to disciplinary power are not an option in the plays I turn to below. Even though a union for Free Trade Zone workers was finally founded in 2000, subsequent to an amendment to the Industrial Disputes Act passed in 1999, unionizing and organizing remain extremely difficult (ITUC-CSICIB).

An indirect way in which workers are disciplined is keeping them constantly preoccupied with work, through legal amendments that allow for extra-ordinary hours of overtime work. As Chamila Thushari Attanagala explains,

The country’s legal framework was altered several times in order to facilitate the investors of export-processing industries. For example, the workers’ right to organize within the EPZs is systematically banned in Sri Lanka through the introduction of Employees’ Councils Act in 1979. The Introduction of the Night Work Act in 1984 allowed employers to let women undertake night work, which was necessary for the MNEs [multinational enterprises] to maintain their efficiency and supply production to the global market at the time. Further, in August 2002, the government amended the Factory Ordinance of 1942, primarily to increase the number of overtime hours for EPZ workers. The government’s argument for the amendment was based on the fact that women workers (as well as men) would be able to earn extra income through increased overtime, which was impossible under the existing ordinance. (113)
As a result, yearly work limits have been extended from approximately 100 hours to 7,200 hours per year for EPZ workers. This means that work is not regulated by a 40-hour week, but by overtime. Massive increases in work hours have meant a decrease in time to organize, for leisure, and for privacy. When I turn to the play *Boarding-House Boss*, the lack of private time and the extension of work time into the domestic sphere will become clear.

These zones are different from working environments in the rest of the country because of the enormous tax breaks given to multinationals that wish to invest in the zones. It is through exemption from responsibilities that corporations organize these spaces. To attract multinational corporations, “the package of incentives offered… includes exemption from import duties and exchange formalities, free transfer of shares, capital and proceeds liquidation without any tax and tax holidays up to 10 years” (Goonatilake and Goonesekere, 186). These tax holidays are automatically renewed every ten years. Because of complete tax exemptions, these factories do not have to contribute toward the maintenance of the local populations, and are relieved of all social responsibility in the places where they set up factories. Often, workers’ living conditions in these neighborhoods are extremely poor as a result. The local governments in these areas do not have money to maintain roads, sewage facilities, garbage collection, etc. because none of the factories pay taxes to the state.

Coercive and subtle arrangements of power make collective organizing difficult. As a result, workers turn to different tactics when faced with difficult situations. These tactics, though, can also be complicit in dominant ideologies. The first play I discuss,
Boarding-House Boss, highlights how refusal and abandonment may be viable tactics in the face of such overwhelming forces of repression and discipline in the domestic sphere.

Section One

Boarding-House Boss and New forms of Domesticity

The Women’s Center workers’ theater group was initiated in the early 1990s by H. A. Perera, a well-known actor, heavily influenced by Brechtian theater. He and others like Henry Jayasena participated in translating and performing Brecht in local vernaculars in the 1970s and 1980s (Interview with Mapitigama). Today, Perera’s student Ravindra Mapitigama oversees the Women’s Center performances. Many of the workers’ plays are influenced by Brechtian aesthetic practices even as these plays critically transform and refigure Brechtian theater to respond to neoliberalism. The play Boarding-House Boss fits most closely to a Brechtian learning/teaching play or lehstrucke. In the tradition of a lehstrucke, Boarding-House Boss provides us with a situation and a resolution and asks us to consider whether the resolution is just. We are given access to different points of view through the different characters and asked to decide who are correct. Measures Taken is one of Brecht’s best-known lehstrucke; comparing it with Boarding-House Boss shows how the workers’ play is indebted to Brechtian aesthetics, while also allowing us to observe the different conditions under which Boarding-House Boss was written. If Measures Taken shocked audiences by asking if murdering a dissenting comrade was admissible in the context of organizing a revolution, Boarding-House Boss asks if abandonment and disavowal are just responses in a post-revolutionary period when
organized resistance does not seem like a viable option. Placing the two plays next to each other highlights the changed conditions of possibility in EPZs from earlier periods of working class action. As I argue throughout the course of this chapter, tactics of abandonment, rupture, and refusal come to replace an earlier model that promoted revolution, organizing and unionizing in the face of management’s repression of workers.

*Measures Taken* was first performed in Berlin in 1930 and was written by Brecht in the same year. The play begins when four agitators who belong to the Communist Party in Russia travel to the city of Mukden in China to organize workers for a revolution. There they meet and begin to organize with a character referred to as Young Comrade who is a member of the local Community Party. All five wear masks as disguises and begin to organize. There are four attempts to organize workers, and at each round the Young Comrade fails to carry out the orders given to him. In each instance, he lets his emotions and human feelings dictate his responses. This leads him to act humanely in response to the suffering he sees around him and neglect the discipline necessary to achieve revolution. As a result, the five of them have to abandon their plans at every round of planned action. Each time, the Young Comrade admits that he made a mistake and that he has learnt his lesson, but the very next time he disobeys orders and acts out according to his emotions. In the final round, the Young Comrade decides to immediately join workers revolting even though the workers are not prepared and have no knowledge of the enemy’s power. The Young Comrade refuses the revolutionary program that demands acts of discipline and patience for the greater good. He takes off his mask to bare his real identity. As a result, all five of them are exposed and pursued by the authorities. To escape this situation, the four agitators decide to shoot the Young
Comrade and throw him into a lime pit. The play asks us to reflect on the justice of killing for the greater good of world revolution.

Like Measures Taken, Boarding-House Boss provides us with a dilemma. The plot revolves around the living conditions of a boarding house run by a factory. The opening scene consists of the boarding-house mistress forbidding workers from using electrical items such as irons, hotplates, etc. as the hostel’s electricity bill has increased. Angered by such an unfair rule, workers decide to complain to an outsider about their boarding-house conditions. While the script does not directly say that the Representative is a union leader, we can deduce from the script that the “medihat karuva” or “Representative” belongs to a union or a government office that listens to, notes down, and files workers’ complaints. When these complaints are delivered to factory management, the manager decides to get rid of these workers, and employ others waiting in line for these jobs. Rather than firing them immediately, the boarding house manageress decides to push them out by making their living conditions intolerable. The workers realize what is going on, and instead of organizing together to protest, or returning to the Representative, they decide to leave the factory and look for another place to live and for new jobs. The play ends at this point; we do not know if the workers will be successful in their attempts. The open-ended conclusion of the play asks us to question whether the decision to abandon the hostel is correct. Questioning this decision makes us interrogate the conditions in the boarding houses and in the free trade zones generally. We are asked if collective organizing, once successful in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena, 1972), is still possible in the context of neoliberal zones and prolonged ethnic war.
Boarding-House Boss is a play that I found in the office files of the Women’s Center in Katunayake. The play was never performed—written by (an) unnamed worker/s, filed away, and forgotten about. This is not surprising, since escape and abandonment are not endorsed by the Women’s Center or the Free Trade Zones Workers’ Union (FTZWU) that the Center works closely with. Hence, while some of the workers’ plays, poems, and short stories are published in the Women’s Center journal Shramika, or Woman Worker, Boarding-House Boss was completely forgotten.

Boarding-House Boss was written in the post-Brechtian, post-revolutionary period of neoliberal capitalism. The repressive conditions of the zone penetrate not only the workplace but the domestic sphere as well. Hence, a distinction between the workplace and the private sphere of the home is hard to maintain. This brings to mind arguments made by postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee about early modern India under colonial rule, which, he argues, made an important distinction between the public and private spheres. Chatterjee argues in, “The Nationalist Resolution to the Women’s Question,” that the modern domestic sphere was marked off as spiritual and gendered while the world outside was deemed materialist and a place in which the colonized had to accept his inferiority in the face of advanced colonial technology (151-166). In contrast to such a description, the domestic sphere in Sri Lanka’s EPZs is wholly devoid of spirituality and is deeply penetrated by the disciplinary ethic of the work-place.

The opening of the play provides a prime example of how disciplinary regimes have penetrated the domestic realm.

Child 1: We need to use the iron
Manageress: Management has decided that using irons is to be stopped. So, no child can iron her clothes.

Child 2: Then, when the supervisors iron their clothes, doesn’t the bill go up?

Manageress: Oh… is that the problem? We are staff.

Child 3: Oh really, so if it’s staff, the electricity bill does not go up? Iron, hotplate, heaters, night bulb can be used. Only when we iron our clothes, it’s not good.

These opening lines tell us something about the production of subjectivity within the zones. This opening has two gestic moments that create defamiliarization. The first instance is when workers are called children. It is shocking that grown women are referred to as children! While I lived in these zones between 2009 and 2010, I too was startled to realize how workers were called children or lamai instead of kamkaruwo or workers. Hence, their subject positions as adults are denied. If the usual stereotype of the male worker is as a militant, then the new stereotype of the woman worker is as a child. This interpellation makes the manageress the adult voice, while the workers seem like complaining children who do not like discipline. It is no accident that the title of the play is Boarding-House Boss, signalling how the factory and the boarding house are managed along similar lines through the enforcement of order by a boss. The boarding house for workers then seems like a hostel or boarding house for children. Disciplining them and controlling their access to resources are naturalized, since they are portrayed as child-like figures.

Workers point to the fact that supervisors and staff are allowed to use all kinds of electrical items. Here, the term “supervisor” is a form of interpellation that marks the difference between workers and normal subjects. The manageress affirms this by pointing out that they are allowed to use electrical items because they are staff. In the original Sinhala text, the terms supervisor and staff are in English. Using English
defamiliarizes the terms from the other Sinhala words in the play, emphasizing the differences between the two groups. The term “staff” in English is a term of authority and is gender neutral. *Lamai* on the other hand is vernacular, powerless, and gendered. Throughout the play, these staff members never appear on stage and are clearly housed in a different part of the boarding house where these restrictions do not apply.

The second moment of defamiliarization is when we realize that workers are denied the use of simple items such as irons, hotplates, heaters, and light bulbs. Workers are deprived of even the rudiments of modern technology. As we will see when I turn to Section Two, factories use modern technology to increase efficiency, but this same technology is denied to workers in their hostels. Irons are essential on factory floors to ensure that garments look neat, yet workers cannot use them. Factory discipline and control pervade the domestic realm even as factory technology is denied to workers.

The opening dialogue about basic electrical items confirms how impoverished and constrained workers’ economic conditions are. Their incomes are so meager that they must live in conditions where even using an iron is a luxury. In the original script, the English terms are used for these electrical items. Because the workers’ primary language is Sinhala, referring to these items in English may symbolically mark how these objects are alienated from them. The workers are deprived of these objects both linguistically and materially. At the end of the introductory scene we come to realize how workers are disciplined through mechanisms that infantilize them and deprive them of the use of basic modern commodities.
In *Measures Taken*, the Young Comrade is similarly treated like an infant, and is often scolded and disciplined for not being sufficiently revolutionary-minded. The Young Comrade is constantly defined by the other four as acting unwisely when faced with human suffering. Our first encounter with this is in the scene with the rice barge coolies who suffer, slip, and are whipped as they pull the barge upstream from the banks. The abominable labor conditions are emphasized:

The rope cuts into our shoulders
Holds longer than we do
The Overseer’s whip has seen four generations
We are not the last. (86)

Working conditions are feudal and workers are whipped by an overseer. Their songs echo slave laments. Such terrible labor conditions move the Young Comrade into action, and he decides to immediately help them. This angers the overseer, who chases after all five of them, forcing them to abandon their effort to organize the rice coolies. The problem in *Measures Taken* is that human suffering is so intense that it moves the Young Comrade to too much action, to have too much emotion. He cannot sit silently and watch others suffer, even for a greater good.

In *Boarding-House Boss* too we are given details of the terrible living conditions workers face. In this scene, the Representative as witness is a mute figure who notes the complaints silently. Unlike the Young Comrade, the Representative is not moved to action or emotion. This may signal some of the changed conditions for action. In *Measures Taken*, the Young Comrade expresses his anguish upon witnessing workers’ suffering, while in *Boarding-House Boss*, the witness or Representative seems almost
emotionless in the face of workers’ despair. It is almost as if immediate action is not an option at all.

Some of the workers’ complaints are that:

The boarding is extremely dirty, when it rains, we all get wet.
About 80 children come after work at the same time and have to line up till 10 pm to shower. There are only two taps. Only 5 toilets.
In the morning, we have to take our buckets to line up outside the toilets.
When we cook, it’s the kitchen. When we sleep, it’s the bedroom.

The vicious physical abuse of Measures Taken is replaced in Boarding House Boss by discipline and control. Workers are not whipped as the rice coolies were, but they must live in conditions of intense deprivation. This list is stated by the different workers who form a chorus at this point. In the actual script, they are just referred to as child 1, child 2, and eventually by just a dash (“—”) preceding the statements. This moves these claims from personal to social and generalized claims about the objective conditions in this boarding house, and in many of the housing arrangements in the zones. Notice how the workers refer to themselves as children, internalizing a derogatory term used for them. Despite the use of the term lamai, however, they are not ignorant of how badly they are treated. They accept the interpellation, but deny the very childishness it is meant to instill in them.

The extreme deprivation in the hostel shows how the domestic sphere is not a space of leisure or privacy in these zones. Lining up to shower, to use the toilet, and to brush their teeth reduces the amount of leisure time they have, and controls it through routine, regulation, and deprivation. If workers in these zones work far in excess of a 40-
hour week, then the discipline of the factory has entered the domestic sphere as well. Even an act as private as ablution becomes public as it is regimented. When workers return from work, they must line up to use the toilet; when they wake up, they must again wait their turn. Deprivation and discipline prevent workers from relaxing, as they are constantly made aware of how little time there is.

In the next scene, we come to know from the conversation between the factory manager and the hostel manageress that the Representative has filed a formal complaint. Otherwise, we have no insights into the Representative’s actions, feelings, or responses. Hence, those meant to organize workers and hear their suffering respond in the most formal, routine and regulated manner. The Representative files an official complaint with the factory, and with that his role is fulfilled. There is no question of organized resistance, a strike, or revolution.

As a result of these complaints, the factory manager decides to fire the workers. The factory manager tells the boarding-house manageress that new workers will be brought in to replace these workers. Workers are easily expendable or disposable because an ever-ready reserve army of labor can be found. Because labor laws within the zones are so slack, there is little recourse for dismissed workers.

The manageress proceeds to get rid of these troublesome workers by increasing deprivations in the boarding house. First the workers are told that ten workers have to move into one room because of renovations. Then they are told that they cannot cook in their rooms, but only outside. Workers are agitated by this because there are many flies, crows, and insects in the yard, making it difficult for them to cook outside. Then they are
told they cannot leave the boarding house without permission. Finally they are told that if their parents come to visit, they cannot stay in the workers’ rooms. This last prohibition is especially harsh because family members often come from distant villages to visit workers and need accommodation with their children. Parents do not have disposable incomes to find accommodation in nearby hotels or rooms. As in the opening scene, these adult workers are made to adhere to rules akin to those at strict boarding schools. They pay rent for the rooms but are treated as if the hostel is a charity house for the poor. These workers live in conditions that mark their inability to access certain provisions regarded as normal in other spaces.

Such rules and regulations resonate with real living conditions in factories. The factory I observed during my research ran hostels for its workers. When I asked a Human Resources Manager in MAS Holdings why the company did so, he answered:

Well, it’s for the workers’ safety. These zones are dangerous for young children. A few years ago there were some abductions too. We want to protect (rakinna) them because their parents sent the children for us to protect. When we hire these children, we also bring in their parents so they can visit the factory, the hostel and see where their children live. Also, it’s better for us to keep the workers in our own hostels. Because we organize transport for them too, we can monitor them better. When they live in outside boarding houses, there is higher absenteeism and more ways by which they refuse to come to work. This way, we can control them better (Personal Interview).

Relationships between workers and management are based on paternalism, both of which can be easily achieved at these boarding houses. Workers are disciplined and their movements restricted because management claims it wants to protect women workers. Men are not allowed into these boarding houses, and workers cannot be out of the hostel after 6 p.m. without written consent from the Human Resources Division in the factories,
except when they work overtime. Hence, they have almost no leisure time outside and are constantly encouraged to be *honda lamai* or good children who stay indoors except for when they work. Indeed, when they leave the hostel even during daytime, they must inform the security guards where they plan to go. There are buses that carry them to and from the factory and hostel to regulate their movements. Gendered discourses of protection, safety, and mobility allow for increased levels of discipline and monitoring. Such pretenses of care and protection also intersect perfectly with management’s desires to reduce leisure time and make workers ever-ready for work. As the quote above demonstrates, workers who live in private rooms have more control of their time and may be less compliant.

Brutal living and working conditions are discussed in *Measures Taken* also. In one scene, the Young Comrade is asked to befriend a wealthy merchant, flatter him, and persuade him to arm the coolies. This is possible because there is an ongoing power struggle between the British and the city’s merchants. The four organizers attempt “to exploit this rulers’ quarrel for the benefit of the ruled” (*Measures* 93), and get the coolies armed so that they can successfully overthrow the ruling classes. During the meal together, the merchant references various deprivations he forces onto his workers to make greater profit. He hides food in his warehouses so that there is a food shortage and he can sell it for increased profit. During winter he hides fabrics so demand goes up. The Young Comrade is so disgusted with the merchant’s attitudes toward workers that he refuses to eat with him and persuade him. He abandons his task. The cumulative result of a series of tests and experiences with workers is to radicalize the Young Comrade toward collective action. Human suffering around him makes him act urgently to promote a
revolution, so he decides to support the agitations carried out by the unemployed. As he says, “the new leaders of the unemployed came here today and convinced me that we begin by taking action right-away. We want to hand out the propaganda leaflets. We led off by calling for a general strike” (*Measures* 98). When asked by the Three Agitators “to postpone armed action till the delegates of the farmers’ organizations have arrived in the city” (99), the Young Comrade refuses to wait. He wants to act immediately and rejects Party logic.

This is both linked to and radically different from the emotions that the workers in *Boarding-House Boss* have. They react immediately to the pressures and greater discipline, but not by organizing to resist. The action they take is not to fight for their rights by protesting and organizing against the disciplinary rules of the boarding house, but to actually leave the boarding house. This decision seems to suggest a capitulation to management’s intentions and desires. However, one of the workers explains that since they pay money to board, they are not under any obligation to stay there. Another comments on how promises for change are always lies. This decision marks an aporia or surprise that needs to be interrogated further. They function almost in the manner of a Brechtian A-Effect, a performative act that surprises and confuses us.

The decision to abandon their boarding house is a sharp contrast to the sociological observations made by scholars regarding organized action within the zones. Samanthi Gunawardana, for example, in her writing on the Women’s Center, highlights moments when the Women’s Center has enabled workers to collectively bargain with management. In an essay entitled “Struggle, Perseverance, and Organization in Sri Lanka’s Export Processing Zones,” she highlights how workers struck at the Jaqalanka
factory in Katunayake in 2003 because the factory refused to pay workers their regular 
Sinhala New Year bonus. Gunawardana documents how workers joined the FTZWU and
were intimidated consistently thereafter. Forms of intimidation included refusing
workers entry into the factory because of their attempts to organize, demanding that
workers write letters of apology for striking and admit that striking is illegal; refusing
leave-time for workers to attend union meetings; members of the BOI and the Labor
Department insisting that workers amicably settle the dispute instead of attempting to
organize; union officers being harassed and intimidated; office members being asked to
resign from their jobs; members of management threatening to resign if workers joined
the union; and threats that union activities could shut down the factory and deprive
workers of jobs. Gunawardana tells us that Jaqalanka workers were able to persevere
despite such intimidation because of the support they obtained from the Union and the
Women’s Center. She also highlights how “the Women’s Center provided a safe and
open space for workers to meet and discuss the campaign. Previous training and ongoing
work with the Center and the FTZWU enabled them to sustain their struggle” (90). For
her, the successes of workers remain dependent on their capacities to unionize to resolve
their problems, despite the low level of union activity within the zones, and despite
intimidation by state actors and factory management.

Gunawardana’s writings are very typical of the ideology promoted by the
Women’s Center, and the FTZWU. Yet in the play Boading-House Boss, workers do not
choose and seemingly obvious course of action, despite the anonymous playwright
probably being a member of the Women’s Center. If in Measures Taken organized
resistance and collective protest were so necessary and urgent that the Young Comrade
could not wait for the orders and rationale of the Party, then in *Boarding-House Boss*, collective resistance is reduced to a somewhat mundane attempt to complain, and then is abandoned altogether.

One way to understand the changed conditions of possibility for action is by paying attention to how both plays focus on the notion of the human. Both plays are motivated by one question in the face of almost total repression: what is it to be human and act humanely? In *Measures Taken*, the Young Comrade cannot carry out party orders because the party demands calculated decisions, while the Young Comrade acts according to the dictates of his humanity. The scene with the cruel merchant is actually entitled “What is a Human Being Actually.” The Young Comrade’s disgust with the merchant and refusal to eat with him to further the cause is seen by the other four comrades as an act of betrayal. As they claim,

> With whom would the right-minded man not sit
> To help the right
> What medicine would taste too bad
> To a dying man?
> What baseness would you not commit
> To root out baseness?
> If, finally, you could change the world
> What task would you be too good for? (96)

These lines signal some of the problems of communist parties that demanded unquestioning agreement and obedience to their orders. Criticisms and disagreement were seen by communist parties as acts of betrayal. Brecht asks us to think critically
about unquestioning loyalty to a cause that promises a future utopia grounded on
everyday acts of baseness.

Our Young Comrade refuses such unquestioning obedience and defies Party
orders. He cries out that:

Looking at the struggle as it is now, I throw away all that was good yesterday. I
reject every agreement with everybody and do what alone is human. Here is
action. I place myself at the head of it. My heart beats for the revolution and the
revolution is here. (101)

Revolutionary action is linked by him to humanity and delinked from disciplinary
obedience.

Similarly, in Boarding-House Boss workers pose the question of their humanity,
and react as their humanity demands. The workers state, “We are not dogs or cats just
because we came to work in the zone…. How can ten of us sleep like chicken in a coop
(kukul kooduvaka) stuffed together?” They refuse the base treatment they have received
thus far, and insist on their human worth. They expose the pretenses of the managers by
explaining,

They came from the factory and told our villagers that we will be given good
good housing. There will be few children in one room, We will be given water,
lights, good sleeping facilities with beds. That parents could come visit us when
they needed.

In contrast to the promises of full rights and comfortable accommodation, reality is quite
different. Not only are the workers treated like children, they are often treated like
animals. Their Humanity is denied. Workers’ abandonment of their workplace, and their
flight in search of another place of accommodation and other work, is a human response to inhuman conditions. Like the Young Comrade in *Measures Taken* who refused to listen to the dictates of the Communist Party, the workers in *Boarding-House Boss* refuse the logic of organized resistance as the solution to discipline in their boarding house. They do not return to their representative who had filed a complaint on their behalf earlier. Escape is instead a vital option.

While in both plays the main characters refuse what is considered common sense by others, and desire a different kind of action, *Boarding-House Boss* highlights the changed conditions of possibility for action and the different kinds of action available in these zones. In the play, organized, collective responses seem impossible. In *Measures Taken*, the possibility, necessity, and urgency of organizing are unquestioned; it is the method of organizing by the Party that is questioned. When the workers decide to abandon their living and work spaces at the end of *Boarding House Boss*, we ask ourselves if this is a correct response. Whatever our answer to that question may be, we are also given insight into the practice of abandonment as a tactic. Here, I point to an argument made at the beginning of the chapter. This is that in the face of enormous oppression, in contexts in which organized resistance is brutally destroyed, we must look to alternative, hidden avenues of resistance such as embodied tactics. These tactics may not transform the system, but, as de Certeau argues, they register refusal using the coordinates of the very system of oppression. These tactics allow workers to absent their bodies from further discipline, even if only temporarily.

These acts are similar to walking in the city, which de Certeau describes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* as “opaque and blind mobility” (93). For de Certeau to be
mobile and to walk the city is to have no-place, to be nowhere (103), and to be in constant flux. Such mobility is gestured to in the play; the workers choose to move and be in flux instead of being stuck in a boarding house that disciplines them. The term *kukul kooduwa* or chicken coop tells us how trapped they feel in their living spaces. Mobility then releases them toward a nowhere, a place that is uncertain. Yet despite this uncertainty, walking the city can allow pedestrians opportunities to make certain choices in fragmentary ways. As de Certeau says, “the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else” (98). All this happens within the disciplinary space of the city, and yet the unexpected can occur in these maneuvers as well. In the play, organized collective resistance traps workers in a situation of further deprivation; escape sets them in motion toward something open-ended and uncertain. While this movement elsewhere may not offer them a radically new living space, movement and mobility may get them to a different, undefined space. The play ends at the moment of departure, so we don’t know what this new place will be. Hence, we are left in limbo as readers. We too are in no-place, uncertain of what will happen to these newly homeless and unemployed female workers. Yet abandonment and movement keep alive the workers’ search for alternatives to their present place of discipline. The workers register their desire for an alternative future in their act of departure. Abandonment registers the workers’ refusal to be hard-working capitalist subjects, and opens them up to the search for alternatives.
Section Two

Disciplinary Power and Control in the Workplace

The first part of this chapter highlighted the nature of discipline in the domestic sphere. It also argued that comparing the learning play Boarding-House Boss with another classic learning play, Measures Taken, tells us much about the conditions of possibility for action. Organized collective action, so possible and urgent in an earlier historical period, has become difficult in the highly-militarized neoliberal EPZs. Section Two turns toward the factory floor and the workplace to understand the operations of power there, and to explore different tactics used by workers to refuse forces of discipline and control. To make my arguments, I use ethnographic materials gathered while on the MAS Holdings factory floor, and the play Avashyathavaya or Necessity. I ask at the end of this section if these tactics do create some changes in an otherwise seemingly impenetrable structure of discipline and control. Can these small acts become forms of resistance? Or do they actually consolidate workers’ powerlessness?

The MAS holdings factory I observed in early 2010 employed approximately 1,000 workers, mostly young women who had migrated from villages to the semi-urban EPZ to find employment. The factory I observed had two sections. One was the bra section, which molds cups (see Image 3) to make padded bras. The other was the panty section, which uses silicone and a technique called flogging to glue together panties instead of stitching them. In Victoria’s Secret catalogues these are referred to as seamless panties.
The repressive discipline practiced on women workers’ bodies is well-documented (Gunawardana, Hewamanne, Lynch, and Perera). It was no different during my stay on the factory floor in Biyagama. Yet we need to remember Foucault’s argument that disciplinary power is not implemented through repressive forces alone, but also involve regulative norms and technologies of the body (72). Deleuze, developing Foucault’s arguments, argues that today we live in a world where control rather than discipline is the primary form of power (1992). To understand how power is deployed on today’s factory floors, we will need to hold onto both forms, for, as I demonstrate below, both operate simultaneously. A shift from disciplinary power to control has not necessarily occurred in the factories in the global south.
The role of discipline becomes signally clear in Foucault’s comments on the “prison factory” that emerged as the model for disciplinary society from the late 18th century onwards (172). According to Foucault, disciplinary society did not operate by simply repressing bodies:

the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs…. The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence (1984, 172).

Discipline not only confined bodies to spaces like the prison, the barracks, the hospital, the school, and the mental asylum, but also produced communities organized around norms that regulated what was right and wrong.

Deleuze furthers Foucault’s arguments, suggesting that institutions of disciplinary society are today in crisis, signalling our transition to a society of control. For Deleuze this change has occurred because of shifts in capitalism from industrialization to neoliberalism. If disciplinary society was organized in enclosed spaces to manage production, today capitalism’s focus is not directly production itself:

But, in the present situation, capitalism is no longer involved in production, which it often relegates to the Third World, even for the complex forms of textiles, metallurgy, or oil production. It's a capitalism of higher-order production. It no longer buys raw materials and no longer sells the finished products: it buys the finished products or assembles parts. What it wants to sell is services and what it wants to buy is stocks. This is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed. Thus it is essentially dispersive, and the factory has given way to the corporation (Deleuze, 6).

Deleuze refers here to the deindustrialization of the global north and the industrialization of the global south. Production is relegated to the global south, and is no
longer the direct focus of capitalism. The centers of capitalism focus more on selling the end-products for consumption, and making profits on the stock exchange by buying and selling these products. Recent speculative activities around the securitization of mortgage and insurance markets that led to the economic recession are examples of how capitalism’s energies under neoliberalism are centralized around financial markets and not around production. One crucial result of this new organization of capital is the change in the organization of space. We will see in the three examples below how factories in the global south use technologies and reorganize space as societies of control do. However, control reinforces disciplinary power rather than displacing it.

Example One

According to Sri Lankan labor laws, once employees are made permanent in their jobs, they have a method of saving for retirement called the Employees Provident Fund (EPF). Both company owners and employees must contribute a monthly percentage of worker salaries toward this. In the factory in Biyagama, these EPF numbers were used as worker codes and replaced the use of their names. Codes or passwords are a key method of organization in societies of control. They manage movement rather than the walls or doors of disciplinary society that block entry and exit (Deleuze, 7). An equivalent of this in the US would be Social Security Numbers. These codes operate as passwords to give workers access to the factory, to access transport, and to access online information about wages, overtime, and allotted vacation time. On the factory floor, once a worker concluded an allotted task, she had to attach a barcode and EPF number to
identify her work. For example, a packer would pack ten bra-cups as a set, and place the set in a plastic bag with a barcode attached to it. An identical copy of this barcode would be attached to a separate sheet of paper that had the worker’s EPF code written at the top of the sheet. One worker’s only job was to scan these barcodes, along with the EPF numbers, into a computer. If a consignment were faulty, management could immediately trace it to the exact worker, making it possible for a worker to be disciplined at any time for making errors. Furthermore, a worker’s savings, usually money put aside for a time after factory labor, is connected to present regimes of discipline and control.

This factory projected an air of equality and openness. Unusually, staff, management, and directors ate the same food in the same room, using common plates, cutlery, and mugs. Workers and staff were not separated from each other in a hierarchical manner. The kitchen was open and I could see how food was cooked. The meal room was open to the outside and not closed off from the street. Despite these projections of fluidity and openness, I saw that these codes and passwords actually increased the levels of discipline imposed on workers.

Example Two

The second example of how discipline and control are entangled on the factory floor is related to how production is organized. The factory in Biyagama followed what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* call the Toyotist model of production in which markets are always the priority and in flux. For factories to cater to the constantly-changing demands of markets and consumption, they need to re-negotiate labor rules and
regulations to fit. Since production is organized in countries that are far away from the sites of consumption, market demands may conflict with workers’ customs and other cultural codes. We will see how mechanisms of control (here, merit-based pay) actually converge with disciplinary forces to enhance management’s capacities to reach its production targets and break attempts at collective negotiations.

The Toyotist model is best described as, “the inversion of the Fordist structure of communication between production and consumption. Ideally, according to this model, production planning will communicate with markets constantly and immediately” (Hardt and Negri, Empire 290). This new model puts markets prior to production and is a network model with little time-lag. This model is usually referred to as just-in-time production. One of the first stores to perfect this model was Zara, a retail chain with its headquarters in Spain. Zara alters fashions immediately, and replaces its store racks with new stock almost twice a week. Employees of Zara stores provide constant feedback to the company regarding what fashions are popular, what news styles are in vogue, and how customers respond to Zara clothes. Computers enable staff in stores to e-mail new trends to its design section to change and alter factory designs. Zara’s production time is two to four weeks, and it can alter production according to markets almost immediately (Dutta, “Retail and the Speed of Fashion,” Parts I & II). Similarly, orders for lingerie in the Biyagama factory were dependent upon sales and popularity in the markets. The director of the factory explained to workers one day that the new orders from VS were a result of good sales in US stores a few weeks prior. Once VS realized that certain designs sold best, they placed a turn-around order with the factory.
Constant change and variation in orders according to markets mean that new methods of control and discipline on the factory floor are also necessary. This emerges for Deleuze in societies of control through new methods of pay, given according to merit rather than as stable salaries, encouraging workers to compete against one another and to work overtime without complaining (5). A system of merit-based pay is ideal for the Toyotist model that needs constant adjustments in working hours. Merit-based pay is also an ideal means by which management can disrupt collective efforts by workers to obtain rights. The following example illustrates how merit-based pay enhances management’s capacities to divert collective efforts because it can deal with workers through individualized incentives. This is another example of how control mechanisms increase management’s disciplinary capacities.

Sinhala and Tamil New Year is in April in Sri Lanka. This is one of the most important holidays, for which vacation can be granted for up to ten days. This is the longest time workers can return to their villages all year. To celebrate New Year, workers buy new clothes for weeks, for themselves and for family members. I went on various shopping trips with them and experienced first-hand their excitement as they bought new clothes and gifts. For some weeks prior to New Year, workers had been asked to work every Sunday, to do double shifts, and to work overtime on weekdays to ensure that they made up for the holiday they would soon be taking. While Sri Lankan labor laws stipulate that workers should be paid overtime for these extra hours, management did not fully comply, arguing that the extra work was to make up for lost hours of work during the holiday.
As the New Year approached, management started to panic as it had yet to fulfill recently-placed VS orders. It gathered workers together in the meal room and announced that holidays would be canceled. I remember worker reactions to this announcement. They were shocked and deeply angered, as they had accepted such a brutal regime of work so that they could go home. Workers protested against such draconian decisions, stating they would quit their jobs, or would not turn up for work en-masse. Management realized that workers were collectively expressing their frustrations, and that it had to find an alternative method of negotiating to make workers change their minds. They organized buses to take workers home to their villages and bring them back within a day or two. The director of the factory visited the floor to persuade workers. Using terms of kinship to obtain consent, he argued that they were all “one big family” and that the factory would survive only if they pulled together. He reminded workers of how they had lost many orders because of the recent recession, and how they should be thankful for work. He further suggested that if they angered the big bosses in the US, orders could be cancelled, and this could lead to the factory closing. He praised workers who put the factory first, and called them *honda nangila* (good younger sisters) who *garu karanawa* (respected) management and worker ethics. By framing labor relations in terms of family responsibilities, he attempted to obscure the fact that they had already made up for the holidays that were entitled to them by law.

While management used kinship associations as one strategy to obtain collective consent, the most powerful strategy was to individualize worker gains according to merit-based pay. During the same talk he had with workers, the director also announced that those who would give up their holidays would be paid Rs. 500 (US$5) each and be given
an additional Rs. 500 bonus per day of work. The pay on offer was more than four times the income that most workers usually earned per day, and persuaded many to acquiesce to work. Working overtime has become a regular feature in factories in the EPZs since base salaries are insufficient to live on. As Deleuze argues, pay is given for competitive work, good behavior, and few absences. Though overtime is presented as a matter of choice, workers cannot retain their jobs if they stick to a forty-hour week. In this instance, extra pay was offered in the language of choice to obtain worker consent. What is extremely debilitating for workers about merit pay is how this method destroys collective will. Because management deals with collective demands (entitled vacation) by negotiating individually (higher rates of pay for those who choose to work), worker solidarity can be broken. Hence, management uses merit-based pay as a strategy that disciplines workers to accept the flexible and unpredictable working hours that a Toyotist model demands of them.

Example Three

The third example I use turns to performances of discipline and control that use images and fashion. This example highlights how aesthetics participate in managing workers and producing certain kinds of desires in them.
Figure 4: Image of Western model in lingerie surrounded by workers at the Biyagama factory. Photograph courtesy of Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham
The MAS factory space had enormous images through the floor walls. These images, I argue, discipline and control workers to succumb to labor practices. This is produced through performances of opposition. Workers appear disciplined and fixed to their machines, in contrast to the women who wear the lingerie. The women in the images are sexy, relaxed, and have attractive, exposed bodies. Their hair flows and their skin is luminous. They seem to have all the time in the world to pose and gaze. Workers, in contrast, are not fortunate enough to enjoy this world of sexuality and freedom. Their bodies are fully clothed and they are constantly working at their machines.
The images of Western women placed above workers perform as panopticons that discipline workers through their gaze and exposed bodies, or perform more subtle forms of erotic control. This is similar to the practice in many factories of hiring young, attractive male managers and supervisors to ensure that the young female workforce willingly does what is asked of it (Hewamanne, *Stitching Identities* 68-72). These larger-than-life images stare at the workers, watching them, ensuring their conformity to normative labor practices. In Figure 4, the woman on the wall seems to demand discipline, and workers conform with bent heads. In Figure 5, the two workers gaze at the image, tantalized and enraptured by the sexuality of the woman. The boundaries between disciplinary power and control are difficult to disentangle.

Figure 6: Image on Factory Wall.

Courtesy of Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham
Figure 6 is placed along the corridor, above the entrance to one of the factory rooms. The woman in the image functions like an effigy, a goddess who would normally bless a factory space. She gazes out, enormous, in sexy lingerie, but her body is a secret, covered by her leg, which blocks a full view of her body.\(^5\) Even the view of her bra is partially blocked, and this hidden provocation increases desire. This image teases the viewer, inviting her to participate in the sexual play that is being offered, which is ironically to work at the machines that produce this lingerie. Her coolness is in sharp contrast to the extreme heat in the floor rooms. Molding machines, which are necessary to produce padded bras, must operate at oven-hot temperatures.

While a first reading of the images reveals the differences between the idealized, perfect world of the wearers in contrast to the laboring practices of workers, we can also locate the images within a common circuit. This circuit is neoliberal capitalism, which uses images to hide the gendered social relations between people. Hence, we can argue that both the consumer and producer are disciplined through these images. The images are not of happy, smiling Western women, but of women being objectified—frozen and fixed in time. Their faces are often turned to the side or pushed back, exposing body parts: breasts, cleavage, thighs, back, and pelvis. Women in these images are strapped into lingerie and subject to foot fetishes. As each worker performs one fixed function over and over, alienated from the larger production process, so the images of the women consist of commodified body parts, not whole women. We can compare this to what

\(^5\) Jane Juffer argues that VS has been so popular in the West because of its capacity to espouse a certain Victorian ideal of moral correctness and prudery. She contrasts VS with Frederick’s of Hollywood to argue that VS is more correct and respectable. VS has secrets it hides, and only reveals them in a proper fashion. It is ironic that in the factory floor in Biyagama, the images operate as sexually provocative in contrast to local conventions of good behavior for women. See Juffer.
John Berger says in *Ways of Seeing* about how women are often painted as objects to be gazed at and to be objectified (47-63). In Figure 4, the worker stitches parts of lingerie, and the model on the wall wears the end-product to sell fashion. They are worlds apart, but both participate in a common circuit of production. If bodies of workers and Western models are mutually disciplined, the play *Avashyathava* can illuminate how bodies are performatively disciplined and controlled, and how workers use embodied tactics to refuse such forces.

*Avashyathava: Desire for Revenge*

The play *Necessity*, set on a factory floor, further highlights the operations of discipline and control, and tells us how astutely workers understand their working conditions. The play also demonstrates how workers refuse power by using tactics that transform mechanized bodies into desiring, affective, open, fluid, and porous bodies. Small acts such as farce, laughter, bawdy humor, illness, defecation, and interruption enable such transformations. These become crucial avenues of action to refuse bourgeois common sense. As abandonment and escape were used in *Boarding House Boss*, in this play too workers resort to a similar set of practices.

This is a play that has been performed regularly by the workers at the Women’s Center and was first scripted in the early two thousands. I found the script in a file at the Center office. It had multiple insertions and edits, made as the script emerged during rehearsals, suggesting the collective subjectivities that were formed through such collaborations. The play is set on a factory floor; we are shown the extent of factory
discipline and control as workers are neither allowed to talk to each other nor use bathrooms without permission. One female worker in the play breaks these rules and escapes to the toilet, is caught as she returns, and is reprimanded by a male manager for slowing production. As he abuses her for being lazy and needing too many toilet breaks, the play’s denouement reverses the structure of power. If we had, up to this point, seen workers disciplined to such an extent that all their bodily movements and needs were severely controlled, we are also shown how the manager cannot follow his own prescriptions. While reprimanding the worker, the manager starts moving up and down the stage, faster and faster, looking flustered. Suddenly, he stands still, and the last line in the play signals the rupturing of his body. Unable to control his bowel movements, the manager has defecated in his trousers. The play ends at this moment, and as members of the audience our bodies too are opened up with laughter as we side with the female worker and take pleasure in the humiliation of a cruel boss.

The play begins with a poem:

Even if we do not have the blessings of Saraswathie
How can we wait just
Because we are women, we cannot simply cover ourselves with a sheet
And sit in the corner of the kitchen

Even though we women of the zone have no status
We are all good women in every way
We are all good women in every way
We send the clothes we have stitched to other countries
Then we return to the village

This poem operates as a summary of the workers’ lives, highlighting workers’ awareness of their marginalization and their insistence on their goodness. Poverty brings them to the zones, where they are treated as women without status. Then, after years of laboring,
they return to the village, having stitched clothes for export. The second line of the poem is a play on words. The word used in the Sinhalese original is *bakannila*, which means wait just. The term used normally is *nikanbala* or just wait. The inversion of the two parts of the word—*nikanbala* to *bakannila*—places this term as a watchword about what workers can and cannot do, should or should not do. They cannot/should simply sit and wait because women are meant to occupy the domestic realm or the kitchen. In case the audience forgets the significance of their sacrifices, and their limited options, we are reminded of it by the inversion of the term. The poem also registers the first meaning of the title of the play, *Avashyathavaya* or “Necessity.” Workers have to work because of poverty, to wait just is to “wait without acting”—to just wait, is to be hungry. For they are unfortunate and do not have the blessings of Saraswathie, the goddess of fortune, nor are they women of high caste or status. The word used in Sinhalese to signal caste status is *nambuva*, which defines the poverty, the low social status and caste inferiority of these women. They repeat that they are good women, even though they work in the zone, refusing social stereotypes of them as “women of the zones,” a status akin to that of “fallen women” (Hewamanne, “City of Whores” 35-59). The marking of the cycle in the average life of a worker is a sharp contrast to the actual setting of the play on the factory floor and the rigidity of the workers’ movements on the factory floor. The poem is sung and performed with dance, and its fluidity stops abruptly in the next scene set on the factory floor.

Attempts to fix workers on to their machines through discipline becomes immediately clear as we watch them take their places at the beginning of the play. Since the actors are workers in real life, they are workers performing on stage as workers,
illustrating the performative aspects of working-class discipline. Their movements on stage mime mechanical and technical machine functions, echoing how capitalism attempts to transform humans into machines, and reminding us of modernist plays such as *Woyzeck* by Georg Buchner. They are workers/performers/workers/machines. Through the performances of mechanical movements, we see again how subjectivities and bodies can be produced and changed by labor practices. One of the workers punches buttons, the other sews, yet another irons collars over and over. In the script, workers have no names but are referred to as A, B, C, D, and E. They are codes or letters without identities. Workers belong to an economy that regiments their bodies to the maximum, depriving them of individuality and fluidity. Workers are not allowed to even speak to each other on the floor, as this could distract them. They are actually forbidden from using toilets other than during designated times, such as lunch and tea time. If they need to use the toilets at other times, they must obtain passes from the supervisor. At the end of this scene, the floor supervisor arrives to reprimand workers for not working fast enough.

This description fits the stereotypical conditions of the ‘prison factory’ that Foucault has written about. The play illustrates how integral performance is in creating the subjected and productive body that Foucault discusses. Yet attempts to discipline the body in this way also produce the very conditions of possibility for strategies of escape from discipline. Bodies can both carry out labor and plot against such labor. The workers take risks, such as taking unsanctioned breaks, to escape forces of power. Furthermore, workers disrupt discipline by opening their bodies to pleasure through performances of rupture.
The general structure of the play demonstrates how management uses needs, such as defecation and hunger, to discipline and control workers, while workers use their desires to break through such disciplinary regimes. The title of the play, *Necessity*, is a reference to bodily needs and desires, drives and affects. Here I use affect as defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Irving Alexander. In their chapter “What are Affects?,” the authors define drives as those responses that are less free and determined by bodily needs, such as the need to eat, drink, and breath. Motives that are more free and outside the realm of needs are affects (33-74). These include shame, desire, interest, and pleasure. The play explores how management and workers struggle to gain control of desires and needs, highlighting again the significance of embodiment in the making of female workers.

The errant worker, who has taken an unsanctioned toilet break, is caught and taken to the manager. While waiting to meet him, she overhears the manager speaking to his mistress on the phone, setting up a secret rendezvous. Negative stereotypes about female workers are reversed onto the manager, and desire mediates this transference. Workers are often stereotyped by society as morally loose women because they are outside the supervision of family, but this is repudiated because it is the manager who has a secret love affair with a married woman. Our first impression of the manager is not as a figure of power, but as a lecherous and highly sexualized man. The words coming out of his mouth are not about factory work, but about his fears that his mistress Suramya may reveal their affair to her husband, and thereby, get him into trouble with his wife. Suramya, who never appears on stage, is the only named figure in the play, and has power over the manager. The boss is made as human as the workers, as burdened with
desire as they are. His desires may land him in trouble the same way that workers’ needs have landed them in the manager’s room. In the performance, the manager is comical—overweight, begging his mistress to meet him, and desperate to set up their secret rendezvous. Two women off stage (the wife and the mistress) are shown to be more powerful than this male figure.

Next, the manager reprimands the worker for breaking factory discipline. Again, bodily necessity is used to discipline the worker.

Boss: Oh, you, with needs. I was waiting to meet you. *I say* this is a company. You cannot go to this room, that room, sickroom, bathroom here. You better attend to these things at home.

Worker: Sir, it is because of the food we got from here.

Boss: What! There are no problems with the food here. I will stop the food today.

Worker: Oh sir, please do not stop the food.

Boss: *I say,* I do not know how to make you happy.

The boss refers to the errant worker as an *avashyathakaraya,* a person who has too many needs, and condemns her for taking unnecessary breaks. One can translate *avashyathakaraya* as gendered, for women are often described as being needy and irrational. Her bodily needs, such as sickness or ablutions, have no space in the factory. In the script, the terms “company,” “sickroom,” and “bathroom” are in English. Sickroom and bathroom have become spaces of brief leisure for workers to use in their attempts to escape work. If you work for the company, your bodily needs must be disciplined, and access to these spaces limited.
Factory food, mentioned in the lines above, allows us to understand an instance of how cultural norms or traditions are used as a tool by management to control workers. Workers get meals at work, which allows management to use meals as acts of Buddhist generosity and keep workers in the factory for overtime work. According to Hewamanne, giving food can reinforce karma or the notion that workers should be happy with their fate. She mentions how workers are generally reluctant to complain to management about food because, as one worker tells her, “didn’t our Lord Buddha say that we should be happy and not complain about what is given free? Didn’t he eat anything that was given as alms, and he a member of royalty?” (Stitching Identities 74) Hence, even when workers know that food is not free but part of their salaries, they hesitate to complain to management.

If the body is central to disciplining workers, workers escape such forces by expressing their desires. Food is a vital bodily necessity that is essential for labor; hunger is a bodily drive and the mouth is an orifice that opens up the body. Food that is tasty is food that is desirable and part of the body’s affect system that exceeds bodily needs. In an earlier part of the play, one worker had been disciplined for snacking secretly on the floor. This was her method of breaking factory discipline. For example, she snacks on raw, sour veralu (olives) that the manager complains can damage fabrics by staining them. Her secret snack, its sourness, and the potential of its juices bleeding onto the fabric, makes her act something pleasurable and part of an affective economy. In the play, the reprimanded worker mentions that factory food is causing her to run to the toilet at the risk of having food stopped for all of them. Such complaints refuse management
ployed to defining factory food as ‘free food’ to keep workers from complaining about what they are given to eat.

The denouement of the play is about bodily necessities and the manager’s incapacity to discipline his own body. Using bawdy humor, workers perform revenge on a cruel manager by reversing the power he has over them. During the exchange between worker and manager, we see the manager becoming increasingly uncomfortable. He burps, looks flustered, attempts desperately to control himself, but to no avail. In the performance of the play, he fidgets, holds his stomach, and races around anxiously on stage. In the final lines of the play, the supervisor asks the manager if he has either cut the worker’s pay or fired her. The manager replies

“I didn’t cut pay, nor fire anyone. I say, get lost”

The humor of these lines can be understood in Sinhala, and through performance. *Yanava yanne*, can be literally translated as get lost, or go on. However, in Sinhala, this has the double meaning of diarrhea. *Yanava yanne* can mean one is going. In other words, the manager has defecated in his trousers, unable to control his bodily needs/drives. His orifices too are open and out of control. We realize what has happened because we see his bodily movements on stage. It is a performative rupturing of his power to discipline. He had denied workers toilet breaks and had refused to accept that there was anything wrong with factory food, and now he becomes grotesque as he cannot control his bodily needs. He is what he accused one worker of being: an *avasyathakaraya*, or a person who has uncontrollable, constant bodily needs. The
gendered neediness of workers is reversed onto the boss. He is made effeminate and effete because his orifices are open.

The manager’s bodily drives intersect with the workers’ desires for revenge to produce the moral of the story, which is that bodies are in excess of total discipline and control. Laughter is a powerful means of rupturing the mechanized, regulated, and disciplined body. Laughter, desire, and interruption belong to an economy of the tactics of everyday life. The workers’ desires to ridicule a cruel manager are realized, and the forces of power in the factory are temporarily broken.

We hear echoes here of what Achille Mbembe describes as the role of laughter and vulgarity in the postcolony. He argues that beyond the particular sites represented by the mouth, the belly, and the penis, the principal locus of both the self-narration of power and the places in which it imagines itself is the body…. The body to which we are referring is, foremost, the body that eats and drinks, and which (in both cases) is thus open. Hence the significance of orifices - and the central part they play in popular laughter. (9)

This is a definition of an open and sensual body that cannot become a machine and will always remain in excess of power. The body and its orifices are crucial to an aesthetic of vulgarity because it is through the body that power is expressed and parodied. The play *Avashyathavaya (Necessity)* comments on this open, porous body, filled with needs and desires.

**Reinterpreting Meaning: Theft and Desire**

The play illustrates tactics of refusal through laughter and embodied practices. Workers perform similar everyday practices on the floor in relation to the images we
discussed earlier. One of the claims of this chapter is that workers theatrical performances have close affinities to their everyday practices on the floor. In a first reading of the images, workers were contrasted to the images of the models who were the opposite of workers. If the models were free and powerful, workers were in contrast bound to their work stations and had very little movement. In a second reading, I argued that we could see the models and workers as being mutually disciplined and controlled, and put in the service of commodity and fashion production. A third way of reading these images illustrates strategic choices and practices made by workers according to their cultural needs and gendered desires, even as their desires are produced by the images on the walls. We see that class and gender are performances and practices that can offer choices for workers to expand the rigid boundaries of their lives. We have seen thus far how images of women in lingerie produce certain kinds of identities on the factory floor. These images draw from certain conventions of what is desirable in advertising and consumerism, which Sri Lankan patriarchs conveniently claim are “Western” ideas that corrupt young village girls. Working-class practices illustrate how workers’ tactics complicate such labels.

Workers make choices within a climate or culture that polices their behaviors rigidly. Workers in EPZs belong to an economy that generally stereotypes them as *kalapé kello* (girls of the zone), who are corrupt because their bodies and morality are unsupervised. Women in the zones are seen as operating at the limits of *lajja-baya* (fear-shame) or respectability because they work away from home and parental supervision, and because they are financially independent. We can compare what women in Sri Lankan EPZs face with the stigma and violence women in Juarez, Mexico face when
working in the maquiladoras set up in accordance with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Further examples of how factory work is supposed to corrupt village women’s morality is discussed by Lynch. She observes how the issue of lingerie production initially set off anxieties in villages, and was even taken up in parliament. One opposition party politician lamented that “our innocent girls are sewing underwear for white women” (92), claiming that village girls were being corrupted by producing sexuality for white women. Sandya Hewamanne, in her essay “City of Whores,” demonstrates that the Katunayake and Biyagama zones are seen as sites of corruption that expose innocent women to the evil influences of the city (39).

Workers repeat these attitudes when they claim the status of being “good girls” to avoid the stigma attached to their work. During one of the conversations I had with workers from the Biyagama factory, I asked them what they thought of their work walls being covered with images of women in lingerie. One of them replied,

When we were recruited for this job, we were told we would be stitching t-shirts. No one told our parents who came for the job interview with us that we would be sewing lingerie. When we started work and found out what we had to sew, we were ashamed. But then we got used to it. We have told our parents the truth, but people in our village do not know.

Another woman answered,

When we were in the village we did not even buy our underwear. Our mothers would do it for us. We would only buy white, black or pink. Now we sew colors I cannot imagine. These Western women have no shame wearing such underwear.

These claims show us how workers position themselves as innocent victims of lies told to them by factory management. They accepted work at the factory because they thought they would be stitching t-shirts. They would never have accepted such an
immodest job if they had known they would be stitching lingerie. They are under such
careful supervision that their parents accompany them to job interviews. The second
quote illustrates how they are so modest that even buying lingerie at a store was not a
habit. Their lingerie consisted of dull colors, and it was not something they considered
important in their lives.

While they were speaking, however, they giggled, laughed, and asked me if I
owned such underwear since I live in America. Workers often laughed at how elaborate
the lingerie was. They did not understand the various cuts for panties. They thought
thongs were swimwear, and wanted me to explain why these different kinds of underwear
were worn by Western women. While the images enable workers to define themselves as
good girls, they also allow workers space for desire and transgression because these
images inspired curiosity.

Instances of such desire were communicated to me by women under their breath,
or while giggling shyly. Workers demonstrated their ability to overcome shame through
practices/performances that risked their bodies. Workers secretly wore the lingerie they
were forbidden to have, refusing the definition of these commodities as private property,
and rejecting claims about theft being wrong. Some of them hid the items under their
clothes, and wore them in the toilets. In the play, toilets are a means of interrupting
discipline on the factory floor, while in this instance toilets became spaces to transgress.
As a result, women security guards were employed to make sure workers did not steal
lingerie. All workers’ bags and bodies were checked as they entered and exited the
factory, and they had to put their bags in lockers before entering the floor. If their labor
was doubly alienated because they were not allowed to own what they produced, and
because their salaries were too meager for them to purchase these items, then they smuggled them out. Management stigmatized such practices as theft and labeled such women as morally corrupt. Workers stole what they were not given: the end products of their labor. Despite discourses that shamed Sri Lankan workers for desiring the corrupt objects of Western fashion, their desires were alive. In this way, workers ruptured the disciplinary and control mechanisms that alienated workers from the products of their labor. Workers refused the patriarchal coding of desiring women as morally loose, Westernized women. The smuggling of the lingerie echoes the laughter at the end of the play *Avashyathavaya (Necessity)*, for both mock the forces that forbid workers from expressing their desires. Workers’ hidden practices move them away from being fixed to the factory floor.

**Bodily Practices and Resistance**

The play *Necessity* and the VS images illustrate how workers understand and explore complex forms of power that operate in the EPZ factories. What do the uses of vulgarity, humor, and theft tell us about the conditions of possibility for action and resistance?

Workers’ theft resists management rules and cultural codes that define respectable women as modest. While these surreptitious practices/performances signal how workers desire these beautiful, soft commodities, these acts of resistance lead us to another question in relation to capitalism: do these acts of ‘theft’ conform to the logic of consumer capitalism? Does the desire for lingerie merely heighten worker assimilation
into a global consumer society? In other words, do they remain at the level of tactics that de Certeau write of, as acts that show us how marginalized groups may refuse, but tactics that do not transform systems? I explore consumer capitalism by turning to Retort’s comments on consumption. In their chapter “Modernity and Terror,” they say,

Let us accept that consumerism—the gearing of commodity production (of course not exclusively, but in ways that genuinely alter the tempo and structure of economic life) to the provisions of the disposable, ‘personal,’ fashion stamped goods—is the form of capitalism now presenting itself, worldwide, as the threshold to the future. And as a vision of desirable life it has at present no rival; or no rival that does not promise a Going Back, a sloughing off of appetite and futurity altogether…. It offers its adepts a seeming solution to the disenchantment of the world; it promises to fill the life-world with meaning again, with magical answers to deep wishes. (178)

For Retort, the danger of consumerism, however, is not primarily that it offers a false solution to disenchantment, and that it has no rival to oppose it, but that increasingly these commodities are invested with desires that are “endlessly parasitic on the values of a vanishing sociality…. It travesties the values it cannibalizes” (180), thereby making human alienation and commodification complete. Stealing lingerie deepens workers’ reliance on consumerism.

Considering Mbembe’s theorization of the body may help us answer questions regarding the play and resistance. Mbembe comments on the use of laughter, the grotesque, and the vulgar to revise Mikhail Bakhtin’s suggestion that laughter is a form of resistance used by subcultures to challenge dominant power structures. While Bakhtin theorizes laughter and farce as forms of resistance, Mbembe sees instead mutual powerlessness for all those involved in laughter. Mbembe’s arguments contest de Certeau claims that these everyday strategies signal some kind of temporary, partial or fragmented refusal. He states instead that,
we must go beyond the binary categories used in standard interpretations of domination (resistance/passivity, subjection/autonomy, state/civil society, hegemony/counter hegemony, totalization/detotalization). These oppositions are not helpful; rather, they cloud our understanding of postcolonial relations. (3)

For Mbembe, the grotesque and vulgar are not acts of plebian resistance. Laughter does not remind us of the vulgarity and ephemerality of the dominant power. Rather, he states,

the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration, but is rather best characterized as a promiscuous relationship: a convivial tension between the commandement and its ‘targets.’ It is precisely this logic of familiarity and domesticity that explains the fact that acts of the dominated do not necessarily lead to resistance, accommodation, ‘disengagement,’ the refusal to be captured, or to an antagonism between public facts and gestures and those sous maquis [of the underground]. Instead, it has resulted in the mutual ‘zombification’ of both the dominant and those whom they apparently dominate. This ‘zombification’ means that each robbed the other of their vitality and has left them both impotent [impouvoir]. (5)

For Mbembe, acts of laughter function through a continuum rather than through oppositions. They are forms of mutual impotence. For de Certeau too, everyday practices were not strategies of resistance, but marked marginal practices of refusal that never consolidated themselves into large-scale and permanent shifts in a system. Mbembe sees laughter as paralyzing both the powerful and powerless, with very little else occurring in these interactions.

We can interpret laughter in the play according to Mbembe’s arguments. In the play, workers ridicule the boss and level the ground between boss and workers, but only temporarily. If we ask ourselves who laughs at the end of the play, we can say for sure that the audience does. We do not know if the worker and the supervisor in the room laugh at the boss. Perhaps they do, because it is impossible to avoid laughing at a man defecating in his trousers. We know that this may result in future disciplinary actions
taken against both the worker and the supervisor. Surely we can assume that in the world of the play, this story will spread to the other workers on the floor, and that they will ridicule and mock the boss behind his back. This may not, however, rob the boss of any real power over their lives, and power structures within the world of the play will remain the same. The disciplinary regime of the factory will be unaltered in the long term.

Yet, Mbembe’s theorizing of laughter as a tactic that reinforces powerlessness seems overtly pessimistic. For laughter forges an imagined community that rejects the bourgeois morality of the manager. Breaking discipline through humor and refusing to work by taking unsanctioned breaks are ways to create an alternative morality to that of the ruling classes. As we watch the play and laugh, our bodies too become open and porous, and we connect with the workers on stage. We are not as fixed to our seats as we had been throughout the play. This moment reminds us of theater for the masses during industrialization in Europe, where playwrights like Bertolt Brecht wrote to incite critical thinking. The ending of the play can be read as a moment of alienation, and the manager defecating is a gesture that ruptures time and space (Brecht on Theatre). The audience and actors form a collective that rejects bourgeois ideologies, the individual dignity of the manager, and overall the superiority of the ruling classes. We are also asked to critically evaluate the conception of workers as highly sexualized, promiscuous women. Bodies on stage appropriate meaning-making through performance.

Such tactics signal workers’ attempts to refuse dominant systems and make us as readers aware of their desires for alternatives. When we turn to the topic of ethnic violence, tactics of refusal may conform to dominant ideologies rather than challenge them.
Section Three

Working-Class Theater in a Time of Ethnic War

If abandonment, theft, laughter, interruption, and laziness have been key strategies used by workers to refuse bourgeois common sense and socialist norms, then workers’ theater also turns to the folk form as a tactic of refusal. The final play I turn to, *Yakku*, or *Demons*, uses *jana kavi* and *jana natya* or folk song and dance to criticize gendered and other forms of violence in the zones. In some ways, *Demons* is quite different from the other two plays because its conclusion turns toward a performative, poetic, and spiritual collective. Workers participate in a collective exorcism to rid the nation of contemporary demons plaguing it. Even though this may appear to be a different kind of response to power than abandonment, theft, or bawdy humor, folk forms and the supernatural are spaces of alterity that are not typical avenues of workers’ resistance. As scholars like Aiwa Ong in *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* and Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* have highlighted, the use of spirits may be pre-capitalist tactics that are sources for workers. The play’s extended critique of violence allows us to also interrogate workers’ perceptions of ethnic violence in the context of the long-running war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Tamil Tigers. I read the play as complicating theories about the vernacular, the folk, and the spiritual put forth by playwright and postcolonial theorist Ngugi wa Thiong’o. I wish to suggest that the local, the folk, the traditional, and spiritual cannot always be considered as tactics of resistance to forces like neoliberalism, neocolonialism, and racism. *Demons* highlights how tradition and the folk
can work in collaboration with neoliberalism to reenact and consolidate the exclusion of minorities. In a context like Sri Lanka, where protracted ethnic strife has taken place, the local is a site of both resistance and collaboration. To understand why workers could be critical of neoliberalism, discipline, control, and patriarchy, yet be ambivalent at best about questions of minority rights and state violence toward Tamils, we need to always keep the economic and spatial organization of the zone in mind. As I explained in the section “Organization of EPZs,” these zones are mono-ethnic and workers have familial and intimate relationships with soldiers in the army.

The workers’ play *Demons* has been widely performed in the EPZs and hailed as one of the best plays of the Women’s Center. The play is a performance of a *yakthovil* or exorcism, usually held when a person has become possessed by a demon, and an exorcist is called to hold a ritual that negotiates and asks the demon to leave the possessed patient. Often the entire neighborhood and extended family participate in a major exorcism that begins toward evening and continues overnight until dawn. The play uses many elements of a *yakthovil* such as folk songs, drums, comedy, and dance.

The plot begins with a man warning a female colleague about the danger of being out alone at night, when women can be raped and their bodies subjected to various forms of gendered violence. The chorus performs and sings about the various demons that trouble women in the zone. As the workers blame demons for their problems, two demons—Bahirava and Riri—appear on stage to refuse any responsibility for the problems workers face. Their humorous refusal of responsibility for the evil in the world tell us that their powers have waned in the modern world. Modernity and globalization are so terrible that their powers to shock are no longer effective. Workers realize that
these demons are correct, and begin to reflect on modernity and terror. They discuss the nature of different modern demons and modern forms of violence in the zones and society. The play ends with the actors performing a new kind of collective exorcism to rid society of modern demons.

At first glance *Demons* demonstrates many of the features that wa Thiong’o claims for folk, village theater. In his texts such as *Decolonizing the Mind*, *Barrel of a Pen* and *Moving to the Centre*, wa Thiong’o argues for a turn to the vernacular and to traditional theater to resist neocolonialism and to continue the project of anti-imperial nationalism. Wa Thiong’o argues that postcolonial literature in English and urban theater have dominated academia and have been wrongly privileged as sites of resistance. His reasons for giving folk and vernacular theater a privileged place are that they organically emerge out of village rituals and everyday practices. These rituals connected the villager to a holistic way of life. He highlights his argument by using compelling arguments about oral story telling or orature:

> We spoke Gikuyu as we worked in the fields. We spoke Gikuyu in and outside of the home. I can vividly recall those evenings of story-telling by the fire-side. It was mostly the grown-ups telling the children but everybody was interested and involved. We children would re-tell the stories the following day to other children who worked in the fields picking pyrethrum flowers, tea-leaves or coffee beans of our European and African landlords. (*Decolonizing the Mind* 10)

The image is of a community bound to the different parts of their lives, such as labor and leisure, through a common language and through shared stories. This romantic world is separate from the world of the colonizer and landlord. Hence, even as peasants are compelled to work for the colonial/capitalist master, they have lives very separate from him. A common language connects a community and is a carrier of culture.
Colonial and capitalist forces attempt to destroy this alternative world by promoting the English language and discrediting folk theater as backward and primitive (*Decolonizing* 11). If this collective organic world has been ruptured because of colonialism, returning to these lost or belittled legacies is crucial for the project of decolonization and anti-capitalism.

Exorcisms are one of the local vernacular oral traditions that the British demonized in Sri Lanka. David Scott makes this clear in *Formations of Ritual: Colonial and Anthropological Discourses on the Sinhala Yaktovil*:

*Yaktovil* were used by colonial authorities to demonize Buddhism as a backward religion and local populations as devil worshippers. Reclaiming this tradition, as the workers do through the play *Demons*, participates in decolonizing the mind as wa Thiong’o claims vernacular theater can.

Wa Thiong’o highlights a second important contribution that folk, community theater makes to communities through references to his own involvement in the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Center in Limuru, Kenya. He argues that village and community theater can restore the neglected history of working-class and peasant struggles because village theater emerges out of the lived experiences of workers and peasants. As wa Thiong’o explains, when an actor crafts a fake gun for a play, he
will do so out of the experience of making guns for the Mau Mau who fought against the British colonialists for Kenyan independence. So folk traditions can absorb and represent modern issues and struggles correctly. (Decolonizing 55) This fact is borne out in the play Demons, for even as folk forms are used in the performance, the issues it highlights are contemporary problems relating to globalization and gendered violence that workers have experienced everyday.

Wa Thiong’o also argues that because community theater is so different from the proscenium stage and colonial and urban theater, it demystifies the process of theater making. Performances were carried out in the open, villagers observed rehearsals, and often villagers and performers are one and the same. Hence, the audience is neither detached nor mystified, making folk theater deeply democratic and participatory (Barrel of a Pen 42-43). I often attended workers’ rehearsals and observed how these plays were scripted and performed through collective participation. Theater practices and scripts emerged through conversation and discussion.

Demons: Resistance and Complicity

The opening exchange between a young man and woman on the street highlights a typical scene of engagement in an exorcism where the problem is discovered through question and answer, and the exorcist identifies the key reasons for possession.

Man: Oh small sister, just stay a little 
Please tell me where you are going
Young woman: Oh, you! I am going for a meeting on gender issues
Man: At this time in the evening?

Woman: Of course. They don’t hold meetings when I want. I have to go when they hold them.

Man: But you are alone?

Woman: Of course alone. Do you think I should have a security guard to take with me? Don’t I have a right to go alone?

Man: You do, you do… but the problem is you cannot go alone.

Woman: Why not?

Man: Dark clouds are emerging

Your hands and neck are shining

Go carefully little sister

Danger is all around you

Woman: So, is this something wrong? I earned these things through a lot of pain and hard work. These are not things I got unfairly.

The woman is on her way to a meeting on gender issues, and the man clearly disapproves of her feminism. Indeed, women in these zones are generally stigmatized as kalape kello, girls of the zone who are morally and sexually promiscuous and break gender norms.

The man is both the exorcist and a typical patriarchal figure who uses concern to restrict her. He calls her little sister (podi nangi) and he sings his questions in poetry, revealing his sophistication. He asks her where she is going, and then is surprised at her being out in public toward night, especially with gold jewelry on. He uses words such as hitapan, kiyapan (stay, say). The pan ending to the verb instead of inne in spoken Sinhalese is a colloquial form used toward inferiors. His reference to “dark clouds” (karuvala guli ebenava) signals dangers that are approaching. In the context of an exorcism, his warnings resonate with the commonly-held notion that women are more vulnerable to
demon possession than men if they are out at night (Kapferer, 92-110). Hence, the young man’s warnings refer not only to worldly dangers, but other-worldly ones as well.

In contrast, the woman’s voice is matter of fact in tone. She responds by dismissing him in prose. To his condescending little sister tone, she responds by saying “oh, you” (ah, meyanê) as if he were someone incidental, mocks him, and thus exposes the irrationality of his advice. For example, when he asks why she is going out late, she mocks him by asking if she should take a security guard with her. This claim is especially interesting as security guards are normally set up at the entrances to the zones and factories to safeguard the factories. Often workers are searched when they enter and exit factories to make sure that they do not steal anything. Hence, she uses the term ironically to highlight how safety in zones are secured to protect capitalism and not workers. When the young man warns her of the danger of going out alone at night dressed up in finery, her response is mocking, but direct and honest. She defends herself, saying that she has worked hard to earn money to purchase the gold she wears. Her labor is honest; it is not theft. She has to work hard to earn; others may earn without working. Her responses constantly reveal the ideological underpinning of his questions.

The different scenes in the play move outward like concentric circles. From a discussion of the personal and individual dangers she faces, we are then exposed to the dangers women as a group face in the zones. Many kinds of violence are exposed humorously and through performance. The lines that follow provide an example of some of the problems workers face in public. This scene is performed in verse and dance.

When we are on the bus, they sit next to us these demons
From the time they get on, they fall asleep
these demons
In their sleep, their bodies come to lean on us
these demons
Those, they rub those on our bodies
these demons

One important formal reversal is that while the play began with the everyman singing in verse and the woman worker speaking in prose, by this scene, the women sing while the man speaks in matter-of-fact prose. He has lost his confident, poetic voice. Here the everyman’s warning that it is unsafe for women to be out in public is refuted by the women who expose how male behavior makes it so. Furthermore, the humorous performative depiction of men pretending to fall asleep on the bus so that they can lean on women and touch them inappropriately transforms something fearful into something comic and manageable. When the last lines of the stanza are sung, the women gesture to what is rubbed on them and laugh bawdily, making the audience laugh with them. As the play continues, everyman asks questions that might normally seem innocent and rational, but are increasingly revealed to be ignorant and biased.

At this point in the play, two demons, Riri and Mahasona, appear onstage to remonstrate against being blamed for contemporary gendered and zone-related violence. They explain that the harm they do is trivial compared to the forms of violence that exist in the contemporary world. The yakku on stage are funny-looking figures with unkept hair (Image 7).
Their protests of innocence use humor and expose their declining power. They are not terrifying but comic.

Ririyaka: well, once in a way we tease young women for fun when they are on a lonely road. That is true.

Mahasona: but we have never injured or troubled them, have we? Have we even touched one of their hands? No! Have we ever raped a woman?

Ririyaka: You should know. There are many yakku far worse than us today. The things they do and say... there, you should teach the others about them.

While they may scare young women, they never actually molest them. Hence, the real dangers come not from supernatural demons, but from other kinds. While this scene illustrates how contemporary demons are far more dangerous than supernatural demons,
another lesson it teaches us is that ideology blinks us to reality, and causes us to fear wrongly.

In the next scene the circle of violence expands further and further. The dangers to a specific woman expanded to women of the zone, and now expand to violence women face in general. Then, violence women face is linked to material or economic conditions. For “as the dollar value goes up/ and the rupee value comes down/ the cost of living is as high as our heads/ humanity is worth nothing.” These lines comment on how an export-import economy has destroyed humanity. Under a neoliberal economy the Central Bank of Sri Lanka in the 1980s delinked the rupee from the gold standard and instead linked it to the US dollar. As a result the Sri Lankan rupee is today a floating currency that cannot be protected by the Sri Lankan government. Furthermore, as the economy becomes increasingly transformed to an import-export one, the devalued rupee makes it difficult for the state to purchase needed import items. This leads to a cost of living “as high as our heads.”

In addition to these comments on violence, political violence is also the focus of the play: “waves of rape…waves of terror…. waves of killing…. waves of the underworld.” In the Sinhala script, waves of killing is described by the term Bheeshana rella, which is a specific term used to refer to the insurrectionary violence of the late 1980s when the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna attempted to overthrow the state and was brutally destroyed by the state. The EPZs came under severe suspicion at this time for harboring JVP supporters, and many members of left-leaning organizations and unions within the zones were arrested and disappeared.
While the play incorporates modern content into folk forms with great versatility, what is obviously and clearly missing in this otherwise astute analysis of violence and globalization is the place of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. In a play that is an extended commentary on different forms of violence, the lack of engagement with ethnic violence and minority rights during a period of protracted war in the county is significant. The play ends with a utopian gesture toward harmony, as a new collective comes together to perform a ritual to exorcise society of violence and exploitation. This echoes the great harmony that wa Thiong’o demands among workers and the peasantry to overthrow neocolonialism. But while the folk can be radical in its critique of neocolonialism and globalization, it can be simultaneously racist toward minorities.

There is only one moment in the play where the otherwise silenced Tamils are indirectly invoked. You will recall that at the beginning of the play the young man warns the young female worker not to walk out in public late at night with her gold jewelry on. An old crone suddenly appears on stage at this point and mumbles the following lines before she disappears from stage:

> Why in the past, in the past, from the northern most tip of the island, *(Peduru Thuduva)* to the southernmost tip of the island *(Devundara Thuduva)*, a beautiful woman could dress up to the hilt in gold and travel alone on the streets. Even late at night… But but… today….

The northernmost tip, called Peduru, is in Jaffna and is the heartland of the Tamil people, the minorities in the country. It also forms part of the separate state that the Tamil Tigers demanded for the Tamil people. The southernmost tip, Devundara, is where the dominant ethnic group, the Sinhalese, are a majority, and is the heartland of Sinhala nationalism. Hence, when the old woman speaks of how a woman could travel from the
north to the south safely, she may be gesturing to better times before the war when the
two communities could travel across the island without war and danger separating them,
a time when a minority Tamil woman could travel safely to the south without fears of
being harassed by army personnel at checkpoints. Yet the reference to a golden past
before war can also be read as a menacing desire for a utopian future when the minorities
and their resistance can be wiped out so that the majority Sinhala ethnic group could
again travel across the island and claim it as only theirs.

Hence, if the play keeps asking who the modern-day demons are, the last lines of
the play can now refer to more than neocolonialism, patriarchy and globalization. Tamil
minorities could well be the demons that the workers wish to get rid of.

The workers sing:

Come… come….come, let’s chase out the demons, come
They harm the entire country, let’s chase them out, come //
Come-from all directions, let’s all unite, come
Let us form an unbroken human-chain, let us be as one, come
Come from all direction- let’s chase out the demons, come
They harm the entire country, let’s chase them out, come //

The term entire country can invoke what Sinhala nationalists desire, an undivided
country. An undivided country is only possible if the aspirations for a separate state are
relinquished. A nation that is deeply divided can only be one if those who are unhappy
with majority rule are driven out. I wish to suggest that scholars who theorize practices
and tactics of the everyday like de Certeau on the one hand, and vernacular and
community practices on the other must also investigate the negative ideologies such
practices can forward. The play’s unconscious explores the difficulties of ethnic co-
habitation. These zones were set up to offer employment to workers of the dominant ethnic group, the Sinhalese. Tamils were excluded as potential terrorists from these zones as the war escalated. As multinationals and the state have collaborated to offer employment to only the dominant group, these zones have come to operate not only as export processing zones, but also as ethnic zones. Hence, everyday vernacular and folk practices provide insight into tactics of resistance, but also into the inner workings and power arrangements around questions of diversity and ethnicity.
Chapter Three

Embedded Witnessing: Human Rights, Narrative, and Performance

Millions of men perpetrated against one another such innumerable crimes, frauds, treacheries, thefts, forgeries, issues of false money, burglaries, incendiaries, and murders, as in whole centuries are not recorded in the annals of all the law courts in the world, but which those who committed them did not at the time regard as being crimes.

Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* 645.

At the end of 1999, Dharmasiri Bandaranayake staged a translated Sinhala version of Euripides’ * Trojan Women*. The play was immediately successful, and I remember watching a moving performance of it at the Lionel Wendt, one of Colombo’s old theaters. Bandaranayake staged the play largely as a period piece, and the performance questioned the validity of choosing warfare and military solutions in the face of grievances between communities. Performed first at a time when Sri Lanka was completing two decades of warfare between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the separatist Tamil Tigers or LTTE, the performances spoke unabashedly of the horrors of military warfare. The laments of the women on stage resembled those of the mothers and wives who had lost their lovers, husbands, and sons to violence in Sri Lanka. The performances ruptured the unity of space and time as the women on stage could be from Troy and Sri Lanka. *Trojan Women* has been performed numerous times since this original staging in 1999, and the troupe has travelled to places such as Jaffna, Vavuniya, and Batticaloa, where war-torn Tamil communities live. At these venues the performances became a testament to the suffering Tamils had endured for decades (Krishnakumar, 5). The play also
travelled to many places in the south as Bandaranayake attempted to engage with Sinhala communities, questioning their acceptance of war as a just resolution to ethnic and minority grievances.

By mid-2009 the predictions Bandaranayake made, through Euripides and the voice of Cassandra, about the bloody ends of the Sri Lankan war had come to pass. Eelam War IV, the final battle for a separate state, had ended in 2009 with the LTTE being completely defeated. Killinochchi, the capital of the Tigers, had been destroyed. The Tamil Tigers, many of whom had fought to their last breath in the Vanni jungles, had kept more than 300,000 Tamil civilians trapped with them for months. Thousands had been forcibly dragged by the Tigers and were used as human shields when state forces bombed LTTE soldiers. The Tigers forced many young children to fight for them, many of whom were killed. The Sri Lankan army killed many civilians in no-fire zones and in hospitals so it could win the war as quickly as possible. Indeed, it seems these state-designated no-fire zones were a means of getting civilians into one place, so that they could then be targeted easily. When the war was officially declared over, the Tigers’ iconic leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran was found dead in the Vanni battle-fields, and approximately 250,000 Tamil civilians were subsequently interred in camps without freedom of exit for over six months. In those months, the state carried out various forms of “interrogation” and cleared “Tigers” from among civilians. Needless to say, many disappeared and suffered various forms of injury in these camps. There are no official counts of the numbers of dead, for it is said that mass burials were carried out to hide their bodies. The government of Sri Lanka has denied any blame for the death of Tamil
civilians, stating it carried out a zero casualty rescue mission. Estimates of the dead, however, range from 40,000 to 70,000 (United Nations, 40–41).

Three Texts and Testimony

_The Trojan Women_ is a play about witnessing. It is about how to bear witness and testify to the suffering and death of others, and to one’s own experiences of brutality and pain. Much scholarship has commented on the difficulties of bearing witness as survivors struggle to recount the trauma they have seen and experienced. For example, Ariel Dorfman’s _Death and the Maiden_ is a rumination on the im/possibilities of bearing witness, remembering and telling the world about trauma and pain, especially when it is one’s own. The play considers how experiences like trauma and rape can create a psychological vortex in the mind of the victim. To make matters worse, given the brutality of their experiences, many victims’ accounts are not easily believed by others (Caruth, “Disappearing History”).

Difficulties of witnessing raise productive questions about testimony and its relationship to evidence, truth, justice, and humanity. Because testimony is never a simple act of retelling the truth, it has been linked to the processes of story-telling, narrative, and performance by trauma-studies scholars (Agamben, Felman, and Laub and Caruth). The relationship between testimony and narrative form is expressed by Shoshana Felman as follows:

‘If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet,’ as Elie Wiesel has put it, ‘our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony. We have all been witnesses and we feel we have to bear testimony for the
future.’… [This] Age of Testimony [is] an age whose writing task (and reading task) is to confront the horrors of its own destructiveness, to attest to the unthinkable disaster of culture’s breakdown, and to attempt to assimilate the massive trauma, and the cataclysmic shift in being that resulted, within some reworked frame of culture or within some revolutionized order of consciousness. (“Camus” 113-114)

According to Felman and Wiesel, testimony is the dominant creative, literary, and narrative form of our time, but it is also linked to truth because witnesses can tell us about atrocities first-hand. So, while testimonies are implicated in complex processes of storytelling, they are sometimes the only way by which the details of an event can be known and recorded. The links testimony shares with narrative and performance, on the one hand, and to evidence, truth, and history, on the other, are the focus of this chapter. This chapter will explore how testimony loses its performative potential and narrative richness if it is confined to providing evidence and truth. Instances of reducing witnessing to reportage can be found when testimonies are provided in the context of international human-rights law. Two texts—one a documentary film directed by Callum McCrae, *The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (hereafter *The Killing Fields*); and the second, Michael Ondaatje’s novel, *Anil’s Ghost*—help us navigate the relationship testimony shares with discourses of international human rights, evidence, and truth. An analysis of these two texts shows us how human rights provide us with global models of justice and truth, while denying its own political investments, and its reliance on fiction and narrative. The third text considered in this chapter, comprised of a series of performances of Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, offers us an alternative model that I call embedded witnessing, which connects testimony to its creative potential. Embedded witnessing releases testimony from being used or seen as simple evidence-giving, and connects it to its narrative and performative aspects. I argue that Euripides’ tragic drama exemplifies an embedded
model of witnessing *avant la lettre*. In our own time, *The Trojan Women*’s contemporary stagings respond to important local social movements in Sri Lanka. These are a series of Mothers’ Fronts that responded to state and paramilitary violence by protesting the death and disappearance of young men. Reading contemporary reenactments of *Trojan Women* as narrative and performative responses to the Mothers’ Fronts in Sri Lanka allows us to imagine a potential community of those impacted by ethnic war and neoliberal transformations. *Embedded witnessing* as a concept offers a different way of thinking about testimony: not as evidence, truth, or objective history, but as narratives and performances of imagined communities.

The three texts under consideration also allow us to complicate the roles of insider and outsider. The roles of insider/outsider are vexed in Postcolonial Studies because of ongoing struggles around issues of representation and colonialism/imperialism.

Bandaranayake is a director, activist, and actor who has lived most of his life in Sri Lanka and works in the Sinhala language. He is clearly an insider who speaks the dominant language, and is part of the dominant ethnic group. He does not speak Tamil, but has engaged with Tamil artists throughout the years, even at times when doing so was extremely risky for him (Badaranayake, “Defend”). He uses a tragic drama that is a Western classic, one that has travelled globally to articulate his criticisms of war. Yet, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, borrowing a globally popular play allows Bandaranayake to present an anti-war platform through his theater, and to respond to embedded local protest movements. Bandaranayake finds no difficulties in borrowing from any context if it allows him to explore what he wishes to. He asks, “What does originality mean? We choose a foreign play because it is good, and it is better to choose
a good translation than a weak indigenous play…. We cannot do art stuck in an island mentality” (Thilakaratne “Twelve Questions”). An “island mentality” signals a certain patriotism that rejects foreignness as always bad. Bandaranayake uses the term to speak of ethnic nationalism, which has constantly made outsiders of insiders. Far-right ethnic nationalists have for years attacked him for betraying Sinhala culture by collaborating with Tamil artists, and using foreign theater. Hence, as a postcolonial director and artist, Bandaranayake does not reject Western forms and canonical works, but works through them to get across his message.

Michael Ondaatje was born Sri Lankan, but lived in England for many years, and now resides in Canada. Some may consider him an outsider because he is an expatriate and a Burgher. Burghers are descendants of the Dutch and Portuguese colonizers. When Anil’s Ghost was first published, indeed many Sri Lankans critiqued the text, calling it an inaccurate representation of war in Sri Lanka. Some of his critics dismissed the novel because they considered Ondaatje to be an outsider who got it wrong (Kanaganayakam). Yet, deciding who counts as an insider or outsider may depend more on the kinds of interventions and engagements a given text produces, rather than simply the ethnicity or geographical location of its author. As Bandaranayake found no difficulties in borrowing from Western classics, Ondaatje, even if considered an outsider, can and does represent the role of witnessing and violence in a sensitive manner.

Finally, Callum Macrae’s documentary film, The Killing Fields, revisits the question of insider and outsider from the perspective of human-rights witnessing. My discussion of the film will outline how categories of insider and outsider matter a great deal when it comes to analyzing how human-rights institutions determine who counts as a
credible witness. I will ask how and if the film allows Tamil civilians who were trapped in the Vanni to speak. In other words, I will interrogate how human-rights regimes, such as the United Nations (UN), produce truth, witnesses and insiders and outsiders.

Human Rights and Witnessing

*The Killing Fields* was first released on June 14, 2011, by the British Channel 4, and focused on possible crimes against humanity and war crimes committed by the government of Sri Lanka between 2008 and 2009. The main narrator of the documentary is the well-known British Independent Television News (ITN) presenter, Jon Snow. The documentary is 49 minutes long and had close to a million viewers when it was first broadcast in the UK. Subsequently, Channel 4 waived its international copyright on the film, and it was made available for downloading on Channel 4 and uploaded onto YouTube. The film created enormous controversy in Sri Lanka as the GoSL denied state responsibility in the killings of civilians, and claimed that the footage had been doctored (Ministry of External Affairs). *The Killing Fields* has to date won many accolades, such as the “Current Affairs—International” category of the Royal Television Society’s Television Journalism Awards 2010–2011, and two One World Media Awards in 2012, in the categories “Television” and “Documentary.” In 2012, Channel 4 aired a follow-up film called *Sri Lanka’s Killing Fields: War Crimes Unpunished*, which was again directed by Callum Macrae.

The evidence in the documentary consists of testimonials regarding the killings that happened in the Vanni during the final months of war between the GoSL and the
Tamil Tigers. The film compiles footage from victims who recorded events on phone or video camera, UN staff interviews, and leaked video recordings by state soldiers of their trophy acts, such as summary executions and rapes of surrendered Tiger soldiers and personnel. The film reconstructs a possible narrative of what happened in those months of battle in the Vanni, from the time when the UN staff left the Vanni to when the war ended. The film is a human-rights documentary that demands justice and accountability for the victims of war. It demonstrates how central testimonials are for human rights. An analysis of the structures of testimony, of how testimonies are deployed within the film, will help us understand how human-rights discourses produce truth and evidence. Because human-rights discourses create norms about global justice, understanding how these discourses operate will reveal the functions of globalization also.

How *The Killing Fields* uses testimony to produce truth and evidence can be placed within the well-known discussion between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky on human nature and justice. Chomsky’s definition of human nature is as follows.

If … a fundamental element of human nature is the need for creative work, for creative inquiry, for free creation without the arbitrary limiting effect of coercive institutions, then, of course, it will follow that a decent society should maximize the possibilities for this fundamental human characteristic to be realized. That means trying to overcome the elements of repression and oppression and destruction and coercion that exist in any existing society, ours for example, as a historical residue. (Chomsky and Foucault, 37–38)

Such a definition locates humanity in its creativity. Justice, then, should maximize possibilities for humans to live creatively and work against institutions that oppress human capacities. Free speech could be an example of human creativity. Testimony, as free speech, connects to what Chomsky sees as an essential characteristic of human
nature. We can argue that a film like *The Killing Fields* provides avenues for humans to speak freely about their experiences of violence—experiences that the GoSL has denied.

Chomsky provides us with avenues for how to “overcome the elements of repression and oppression and destruction and coercion.” One way to overcome these elements is by using international human-rights law. As we see below, Chomsky does not valorize international law, but places it within its dual function, both positive and negative. Its negative function is that it is a tool of oppression.

[I]nternational law is, in many respects, the instrument of the powerful: it is a creation of states and their representatives. In developing the presently existing body of international law, there was no participation by mass movements of peasants.

The structure of international law reflects that fact; that is, international law permits much too wide a range of forceful intervention in support of existing power structures that define themselves as states against the interests of masses of people who happen to be organized in opposition to states. (Ibid 48)

Chomsky claims further that international law suppresses and restricts human creativity and potential. And that it is in opposition to the interests of the masses and the oppressed. Those aspects of international law form part of its negative function. Despite these limits, Chomsky insists that international law can play a positive role, and that it can deliver justice.

But, in fact, international law is not solely of that kind. And in fact there are interesting elements of international law, for example, embedded in the Nuremberg principles and the United Nations Charter, which permit, in fact, I believe, require the citizen to act against his own state in ways which the state will falsely regard as criminal. (Ibid 49)
International human-rights laws allow space for critical engagement. Humans can use international law against repressive state practices. Hence, when the witnesses in the film accuse the state of atrocities, they are acting in accordance with international law.

According to this argument, international law is both a repressive and an enabling force. Laws generally can function in this dual manner and can protect the oppressed. Hence, law can provide us with some forms of justice.

The concept of legality and the concept of justice are not identical; they’re not entirely distinct either. Insofar as legality incorporates justice in this sense of better justice, referring to a better society, then we should follow and obey the law, and force the state to obey the law, and force the great corporations to obey the law, and force the police to obey the law, if we have the power to do so. (Ibid 49)

There is an ideal of justice that the law strives toward which redeems international law from its otherwise oppressive character. Therefore, the protocols of international law, despite its limits, create space for victims of violence to testify against the crimes of the state, and to obtain some form of justice. This is what Chomsky calls better justice.

*The Killing Fields* attempts to create some pressure on an oppressive state regarding its violent acts against its own citizens. The film also lays some of this responsibility on the international community, wanting it to act in consequence of what the footage shows them. Ultimately, *The Killing Fields* attempts to deliver better justice for victims of war, by bringing to light important footage about state and LTTE atrocities. The film allows even the dead to speak to us.

At the theoretical level, the documentary makes an important contribution to our understandings of who a real witness is. Giorgio Agamben makes the following
observation about witnesses in his writings about Auschwitz in *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*. He argues that the real witnesses to violence are not survivors, but those who died during the atrocity. Those who survive speak only as proxies (33–34). Agamben calls those among the living but closest to true witnesses “the living dead men,” those who were often referred to as *muselmann* in the camps. Agamben defines the muselmann through descriptions made by survivors. These include “the prisoner who was giving up and was given up by his comrades…. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions,” or “the mummy-men, the living dead” (54). Agamben describes how there were only a few rare films that captured them in camps soon after the camps were liberated at the end of World War II.

Because of technological changes, today similar footage is now available, and *The Killing Fields* provides us with access to these real witnesses. Using video and phone cameras, civilians caught in the Vanni recorded what was happening to them. There was a total blackout inside the Vanni during the Eelam War IV. No journalists were allowed in and all Internet connections were cut. Footage from cameras was circulated later, when the blackout was lifted. Many of those who recorded these scenes of brutality were possibly dead by this time. The footage includes poignant recordings of the “living dead,” malnourished and injured. Some civilians are caught lying on their hospital beds, dazed, silent, and waiting for the end. They stare blankly at the camera with no comprehension of being filmed. They do not speak. They are often injured, or lying in a pool of blood, but seem oblivious to their pain or condition. These are haunting images of corporeal life at its minimum. They speak to us from the dead as their silence is turned
to language by technology and circulated virtually. We have no idea who shot this footage. Perhaps the camera-men themselves died in the Vanni killing fields and their testimonies are these recordings left for us to see. The images in the film remind us of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream,” in which a man’s screams can only be captured on canvas through the painted ripples. His inability to scream out loud traps him within the canvas, even as we sense his suffering through art. These victims’ pain is captured through their silent stares; these muselmann do not even attempt to scream. Yet, their silence is turned to language as we see their faces months, and now years, after their deaths.

The footage provides an avenue for the dead to speak to us from their graves, and is one of the most evocative and important aspects of the documentary film. And yet, we can ask what these silent witnesses are allowed to say in the film, and for whom they perform. For this painful footage is structured within the narrative of the film, in order to tell a certain kind of story about who can truly tell the truth reliably about what happened in the Vanni.

Ironically, the testimonies of the living dead, of those trapped in the Vanni, are given space—even as they are simultaneously displaced. In the early stages of the documentary, we are introduced to two UN workers who recall events just preceding the final war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers. These UN workers were told in 2008, prior to the government’s massive offensive to take control of Kilinochchi (the headquarters of the Tamil Tigers in the Vanni jungles), that they must leave Kilinochchi, as the government could not guarantee their safety any longer. What we are made to understand very quickly is that it is the international staff members who
are asked to evacuate. The two voices we hear explaining the evacuation process are of Gordon Weiss, the UN official spokesperson for Sri Lanka at the time, and Benjamin Dix, former UN staffer at Kilinochchi. They are both two foreign workers. The following lines are the exchanges that occur between Weiss and the interviewer:

Weiss: The government regarded the UN as an impediment to their conquest of the Tamil Tigers.

Interviewer: That’s a very serious charge in fact because what you’re saying is that if they didn’t want witnesses there, clearly they were going to do things they could not afford witnesses to see. There was an intention to do those things.

Weiss: I think they intended to remove independent witnesses to what was coming.

The claim Weiss makes is important because it places the footage of the muselmann and other victims in relation to UN workers as witnesses. For Weiss argues that the GoSL wanted the UN out of Kilinochchi because the UN staff were “independent witnesses.” At one level, the term “independent” reminds us that human-rights protocols require outside observers or witnesses to collect evidence. This is often how human-rights investigations are carried out. At a second level, however, the term “independent” also suggests that outsiders, those least involved in the conflict, are the most reliable. Hence, while local witnesses and their narratives are essential as evidence, the most reliable witnesses are outsider. Perversely, this suggests that those most impacted are least reliable even if their testimonies are the ground upon which international human rights reporting can take place.
In that sense, the hierarchies of evidence-gathering tell us about the imperfect nature of international human-rights institutions and their instruments. This is a point made by Foucault in his responses to Chomsky, when he says, “But I believe that political power also exercises itself through the mediation of a certain number of institutions which look as if they have nothing in common with the political power, and as if they are independent of it, while they are not” (40). In light of this argument, when human-rights investigators claim neutrality and distance from power or involvement, we should interrogate such claims. We should ask who is served by such claims. Questioning such claims also points us toward understanding how concepts are produced within discourses of power and can forward the aims of power rather than justice. This is a point reiterated by Foucault:

[I]f justice is at stake in a struggle, then it is as an instrument of power; it is not in the hope that finally one day, in this or another society, people will be rewarded according to their merits, or punished according to their faults. Rather than thinking of the social struggle in terms of ‘Justice,’ one has to emphasize justice in terms of the social struggle. (50)

We see an instantiation of the interrogation of the normative notion of justice in the example below.

In the documentary film, two UN workers narrate their experiences of leaving Kilinochchi. The narrative is of chivalry gone wrong and good intentions failed. They wish that the UN had stayed on in Kilinochchi, and one of the workers, Dix, laments their departure as one of the worst days of his life. He displays clear signs of shame that he and the others left. In fact, we are told that once evidence of the UN departure was reported to the local populations, they surrounded the UN compound asking the UN staff not to leave. Dix, despite his shame or to mark his shame, goes outside with his camera
and captures the masses protesting the imminent UN departure. This footage is perhaps another example of “independent witnessing.” This scene produces again a narrative of the UN staff members as outsiders, as people who could tell the truth because they are objective and could bear witness to the world. The video footage of the protesting masses, however, captures the paradoxes of terms like “independent witnesses.” For the scene produces the local populations gathered outside the compound as undifferentiated brown bodies, reminding us of so many films we have seen in which the local population is undifferentiated and unnamed, while the white protagonists are named and individualized.

The overall structure of this scene tells us about Dix’s shame and failure. He is the protagonist who regrets his hasty departure. The local populations captured on video reinforce Dix’s shame and failure; in part, then, the film is a correction of that failure, and Dix participates in it in order to make amends. Human-rights trauma narratives with heroic human-rights actors transform trauma from tragedy to the sublime. This transformation occurs, Dominick LaCapra tells us, when

> the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy. Even extremely destructive and disorienting events, such as a Holocaust or the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, may become occasions of negative sublimity or displaced sacralization. They may also give rise to what may be termed founding traumas—traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity. (23)

Dix’s shame about his failure to stay, and the impulse to correct that failure, transform a tragic war story into a story of renewed heroism starring a Western hero. Throughout the film, its Western heroes promise to act, or are asked to act, and deliver justice. Tragedy is transformed into romance.
In sum, Western outsiders are privileged as independent, reliable, and trustworthy over and over in the film. The pain of the local population trapped within the Vanni is transferred onto independent witnesses who also become the voice that can confirm what local witnesses say. In this way, even as local witnesses testify, they are made into passive victims. What they hear, record, see, and say are secondary, and need explanation and crediting through the voices of objective, cosmopolitan human-rights witnesses like Amnesty International Advocacy Director, Steve Crawshaw, and Professor William Schabas, an International Human Rights Lawyer. They, along with Jon Snow, the narrator, explain the footage and frame what we see.

The film’s narrative frame, representing a fraught dynamic of Western outsiders witnessing non-Western or “global” atrocities, exemplifies what Foucault means when he claims that justice is an instrument of power. For, human-rights institutions use/exploit the violence and trauma of certain subjects for their own purposes. In a sense, trauma performs a certain kind of labor. It does work for human-rights institutions. Without the labor of the traumatized in the global south, powerful networks of international human-rights entities and actors could not survive. Ironically, global human-rights witnessing is structured to carefully limit the importance of the voices of those who have suffered, while presuming to act on behalf of this suffering.

In counterpoint, however, as Chomsky insists, human-rights institutions and films do not necessarily have to function as instruments of power. They can be critically engaged and promote a better justice. An earlier film, a landmark documentary that shares the same title, reveals how films can and do operate with critical self-awareness. I refer to the 1984 Roland Joffe film on Cambodia, and on the US imperial war in the
region. The original *Killing Fields*, loosely based on true events, narrates the relationship between American *New York Times* journalist Sydney Schanberg and his Cambodian fixer, Dith Pran. The Cambodian killing fields consist of a massive field of dead bodies, hundreds of Cambodians killed by Polpot. In contradistinction to the documentary on the war in Sri Lanka, this earlier film differentiates between the international journalist who can exit difficult situations, and Pran, who, as a local, cannot. The original *Killing Fields* critically discusses what the Sri Lankan documentary represses: the privileging of outside witnesses. As violence escalates, Pran is left behind while Schanberg and other foreign war journalists leave. Schanberg is racked with guilt that he used Pran and left him behind. This is similar to the guilt that Dix and other UN workers felt at having to leave Sri Lanka. In the original film, however, this guilt does not displace attention away from Pran. The earlier film remains critically engaged with white privilege, and with the US’ imperial role in the region. Schanberg is aware of how he has exposed his friend to risk, and how he is part of a system of imperial violence. There is one important episode in the film that centers on US airplanes bombing a village by mistake. Hundreds are killed and many wounded as a result. At one point, once Schanberg has returned to the US, he watches the horrifying scenes of US planes bombing Vietnam and Cambodia. Furthermore, the native figure, Pran, is not passive once he is left behind, but actually escapes his confines and finds his way out of a difficult situation. He finds his way into an International Red Cross camp, and is capable of maneuvering his way out of dangerous situations. His subject position as witness to the killing fields, as victim of violence, and as agent of action and change are explored.
The documentary on Sri Lanka, however, continues to privilege the outsider as savior, and so turns the focus of the film away from human free speech and justice toward a valorizing of the West as subject. Footage about local populations is used to further a narrative centered on the heroic Western subject. The concluding scenes of the documentary help clarify this aspect of my argument.

Snow (voiceover): So, will anyone be brought to justice for these crimes? That depends to a great extent on the international community and the United Nations itself. But the UN’s record so far has not been reassuring.

Weiss: I think that the tens of thousands of people we believe died inevitably begs the question of the UN. What were we doing at the time and was it enough?

Interviewer: And was it enough?

Weiss: No, it wasn’t enough.

These lines open us to the possibilities of a discussion about the failures of UN and other human-rights entities to provide justice, even as the conversation positions the UN as the provider of justice. Subsequently, gruesome details of Tamil civilians in internment camps, and their ongoing repression by the state, are discussed. Toward the end of the documentary, Amnesty International Advocacy Director Crawshaw asks why there has been so much action concerning Libya, but so little regarding Sri Lanka. This lack of intervention, he says, is morally unjustifiable. We have here an unnerving link made between Sri Lanka and Libya. We see through this linkage how imperialism and human rights are connected to each other. Intervention into Libya occurred because of a long history of US imperialism in the region. To demand a similar intervention into Sri Lanka links human-rights organizations with imperial power. The documentary ends with
Snow’s final question: “The survivors are now looking to the international community for justice. Will they be failed again?” If we read this sentence next to what Crawshaw says, then justice by the international community sounds exactly like imperialism. Yet, even as I do not argue that human-rights organizations are the social wing of imperialism, the film implicitly produces such connections for us. For the film continues to argue that the shame of the West is its failure to intervene.

The notion of intervention connects directly to terms like independent witness. Both terms suggest that the West or the international community have not intervened in Sri Lanka thus far. The film’s end point is not military intervention in Sri Lanka but rather a more modest suggestion for an International Commission of Inquiry to be set up, and that the killings in Sri Lanka be referred to the International Criminal Court. While these are laudable objectives, the film sees an abstracted community, called the international community, as being uninvolved in violence in Sri Lanka up to this point, except as those who wish to do good. Hence, the film projects the war as an ethnic conflict between two groups, the Sinhala and Tamil people, whereby the majority has tyrannized the minority. The world by and large has failed Sri Lanka by not intervening, by not being active enough, by not caring enough. The problem with the world, the UN, and the human rights community is that they did not act and are still not acting.

Yet, such an argument is impossible to sustain if we understand the transformations that neoliberalism has created in the country. Instead of agreeing with the arguments made in the film, what if we were to argue that the West and the international community have long been involved in the war in Sri Lanka? What if the right of intervention that is rallied upon here as a human right is paradoxical? What if
various forms of intervention had been already ongoing, and had actually made the crisis in Sri Lanka worse over the years?

In answer to these questions, Randall Williams explains what is at stake in demanding intervention in the context of the film *Hotel Rwanda*: “the ‘we who should have done something’ are already involved in the production and reproduction of postcolonial violence” (54). The documentary on Sri Lanka’s *Killing Fields*, thus, performs amnesia by refusing to acknowledge a long history of colonial and imperial intervention, and we can view its shame in not intervening as a “performative ruse” (Williams, 54). Turning to Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* will make even clearer how independent witnesses and greater intervention are terms that mask neoliberal interventions into Sri Lanka that have been ongoing.

*Anil’s Ghost*, the Postcolonial Novel, and Neoliberalism

Macrae’s *Killing Fields* promotes a certain uncritical attitude regarding independent witnessing and international intervention. In contrast, Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* self-consciously complicates categories such as insider/outsider, and subjective/objective. The novel critically engages with human-rights norms and international law through the titular character of Anil. It also explores how ethnic war and neoliberalism are deeply intertwined, because the novel’s focus, I argue, is largely on the insurrectionary violence carried out by the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP) in the late 1980s, and the brutal state responses to it. As I will detail later in the chapter, bringing both ethnic and insurrectionary violence against the state into once frame of reference establishes a relationship between neoliberalism and ethnic violence. While the
novel is critical of human rights interventions, one of its most important contributions is exploring the importance of witnessing as narrative and performance, as creative testimonials to the suffering of others.

The novel begins with the entrance of a human-rights expert, Anil, into Sri Lanka to investigate state violence. Anil was born and lived in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, until she was 18 years old. Subsequently, she trained in England and then moved to the US. We encounter Anil as a human-rights worker who has recently been hired by the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva to investigate disappearances and killings that have been ongoing in Sri Lanka. She arrives in Sri Lanka in the early 1990s, and is assigned to work with local archeologist Sarath Diyasena. Together they discover a modern skeleton buried at a medieval burial site guarded by the Sri Lankan government. Anil wants to identify this skeleton they call Sailor, as this could prove government culpability since only state officers have access to these grounds. She believes that one body can speak for many. During her stay in Sri Lanka, she bears witness to the killing of Sailor and others. However, her plans to find evidence of state culpability backfire toward the end of the novel. Her life is threatened and she has to leave Sri Lanka abruptly.

The novel, at first glance, fits in well with what Joseph Slaughter argues as the function of the postcolonial novel. In Human Rights Inc.: the World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law, Slaughter claims that if the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel was central to the creation of bourgeois reading publics integral to the formation of the modern nation state, then the postcolonial novel is best suited to normalize the values put forth by international human rights law. He argues that “human
rights law lacks the executive, judicial, and regulatory apparatuses that traditionally give domestic civil law the force of law” (24), but that despite these shortcomings, human rights discourse has become hegemonic and common sense because in contrast to the weaknesses of legal apparatuses, cultural forms like the novel have cooperated with human rights to naturalize their common sense…. I consider the bildungsroman to be a particularly dependable ally in human rights law’s globalizing designs, a sort of novelistic wing of human rights… that disseminates its norms. (25)

Slaughter further argues that “one of the primary carriers of human rights culture, the bildungsroman has been a conspicuous literary companion on those itineraries, traveling with missionaries, merchants, militaries, colonial administrators, and technical advisors” (123). Edward Said argued this in *Culture and Imperialism*. Slaughter then claims that one of the main tasks of the postcolonial novel is to naturalize the paradoxes of human rights laws and norms that would otherwise appear irrational and illogical to us (11–14). *Anil’s Ghost*, I argue, denaturalizes assumptions that have become common sense in human rights discourses. While Slaughter argues that even novels that critique human rights actually reinforce their importance by asking for better human rights, I disagree with his claims and argue that *Anil’s Ghost* does not recuperate human rights norms and laws. Instead, Ondaatje’s novel provides us with alternative ways of bearing witness as a form of creative remembering.

There has been a great deal of writing on human rights and *Anil’s Ghost* in addition to Slaughter’s own writings on it. Many of these criticisms have centered on Anil’s character and her symbolic role as a human rights activist (Higgins and Leps, Mullins, Derrickson, Halloran, Ratti). Alternatively critics have analyzed the novel’s
treatment of Buddhism and monasticism (Bolland, McClure). I add to both these types of accounts by linking human rights to questions of witnessing. To do so, I ask what kind of witness Anil is. Agamben offers two other definitions of the term “witness,” which find their roots in Latin:

[T]he first word testis, from which our word ‘testimony’ derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of third party. The second word, superstes, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it. (17)

The first definition is that of a witness who is an observer, an outsider. This can be translated as an independent observer or an objective witness as used to refer to the UN workers in The Killing Fields. The second definition is that of an insider, someone who has experienced or seen, and is implicated in the process. In the documentary on Sri Lanka, the second type of witnessing is represented by the local populations, those who had been trapped in the Vanni but had survived to tell us about what happened. In the novel, Anil performs the function of both testis and superstes, and tests the limits of each category, showing us how porous the boundaries between the two can be. And yet, central to this chapter is my argument that human rights discourse prioritizes the outside observer. By contrast, Ondaatje’s novel illuminates the problems that arise when trying to separate the two.

At first glance, Anil’s objective, independent status seems fairly straightforward. The beginning of the novel takes great pains to establish her foreignness to Sri Lanka. Even though she was born there, Anil has no connections to Sri Lanka when she returns as a forensic anthropologist. Her parents are dead, and “she had now lived abroad long
enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze” (11). “Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe. She felt completed abroad” (54). She can be objective because she is uninvolved in Sri Lankan issues despite being a Sri Lankan. Although international workers are not chosen to work in their mother countries as a norm, Anil is hired because she is disconnected from her country of birth. Her rootlessness is her virtue. She is in fact a foreigner in the world, and can move from place to place freely. She is the cosmopolitan subject par excellence. Her objectivity and independence appear to be derived from her placelessness.

More broadly, in our contemporary context, the term cosmopolitan can be interpreted to signal extra-national spaces created by globalization. Arjun Appadurai, for example, talks about how patterns of mass migration under globalization have created spaces and peoples whose affinities are beyond the nation-state. Jurgen Habermas is perhaps cosmopolitanism’s best contemporary theoretical advocate. He applauds the global civil society that has been created as a result of globalization. For Habermas, one of the better outcomes of neoliberalism has been the creation of a world community that can hold states and people accountable from outside of the nation-state. Habermas claims that globalization has developed “new forms for the democratic self-steering of society” that will bring about a “renewed political closure of an economically unmastered world society” (qtd. in Cheah, 49). Hence, human rights and cosmopolitanism have provided us with tools to hold global capital and states accountable. A similar case was made by Chomsky about the potentially positive role international law could play in relation to state and corporate violence. Anil figures this cosmopolitan, global, moral subject;
international human rights laws are the instruments at her disposal. She travels from place to place, and holds different groups who have committed violence accountable for their crimes. She reports on human rights in different places, and moves constantly according to the requirements of her professional itinerary. Sri Lanka is one stop along her line of stops from Guatemala to Africa. Through her progression in the novel we come to understand symbolically what cosmopolitan subjects can and cannot achieve.

In Slaughter’s reading of *Anil’s Ghost*, Anil also figures as a cosmopolitan subject and independent witness. Slaughter argues that Anil’s task in the novel is to reconstitute a liberal public sphere, which had dissolved under Emergency Regulations (ER) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Slaughter reads allegorically, viewing Anil as “a narrative device to study the mechanics of [public] sphere–making and the discursive conditions of possibility for forming democratic, paranational collectives in the absence of both a legitimate democratic-state formation and an operative egalitarian national public sphere” (187). The novel includes many examples of how little public space there is for the country’s citizens: “[I]n a fearful nation, public sorrow was stamped down by the climate of uncertainty. If a father protested a son’s death, it was feared another family member would be killed” (Ondaatje, 56). Hence, citizens of Sri Lanka had for all purposes become subjects or populations controlled by the fear of state reprisal and even death. One of Anil’s main goals is to speak truth to this enforced silence, and through it expand possibilities for witnessing human rights violations and re-creating the besieged nation’s public sphere.

While the novel establishes Anil’s independent status and objectives at the beginning of the novel, subsequently, it engages critically, with the protagonist’s human
rights framework. As mentioned earlier, Anil wishes to identify a recently murdered skeleton exhumed from a medieval burial ground accessible only to state officials. Sarath, her local partner and archeologist, has found this skeleton and indicates its value as evidence to her. Hence, if she can identify this modern skeleton they call Sailor, she can prove state culpability. The dead cadaver, and the search for its identity, signifies how the body and its skeleton remains, representing the human subject, are invested with multiple meanings. Foucault explains this in his response to Chomsky as one of the difficulties of defining what human nature is, because it is produced through our own political investments. Foucault captures this notion by invoking the following distinction: “Mao Tse-Tung spoke of bourgeois human nature and proletarian human nature, and he considers that they are not the same thing” (44). Hence, what human nature is will be invested with meanings differently, according to dominant social forces. Anil invests Sailor with certain beliefs she holds because of her investments in human rights. One such belief is that “to give him a name would name the rest” (56), or prove that “one village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims” (275; italics in original). Throughout the novel, we see Anil repeat various human rights mantras. Another of her sacred beliefs is that “the truth shall set you free” (102). Many of these claims we accept without question because, as Slaughter argues, literature has normalized the paradoxes of human rights.

Through the course of the novel, these paradoxes are brought to light. I turn to the scenes in the novel that illuminate the intrinsic contradictions of human rights witnessing and objective truth. For instance, once Anil and Sarath identify Sailor to be one Ruwan Kumara, a young Sinhala man probably disappeared by the state, Sarath asks
Anil to wait behind in the rural village they have been working in, while he finds safe ways to disseminate their evidence. Sarath explains to her that their evidence could place them in danger. Upon his departure, however, Anil’s mistrust of Sarath resurfaces. She wonders, “was the partner assigned to her neutral in this war? Was he just an archeologist who loved his work?” (29) His localness, his embeddedness in Sri Lanka, makes him untrustworthy. Despite her knowledge of Sarath’s own suffering during the war, and their shared experiences of witnessing violence, she is unable to believe in his sincerity. Unlike Anil, the cosmopolitan, diasporic subject, Sarath is too rooted and therefore not to be relied on. Because he does not have direct answers to questions of culpability and guilt, she mistrusts him. As a result, she takes matters into her own hands, and returns with Sailor/Ruwan Kumara to the city. There, she presents her evidence before state officials. This hearing is her attempt to testify and reproduce a public sphere in which global human rights norms reign. But, instead of confirming human rights laws, this scene illuminates the paradoxes of human rights norms.

Most of this scene is a dialogue between Anil and members of the audience, and includes Sarath. It is interesting that at this crucial moment of bearing witness to Ruwan Kumara’s death, the novel turns toward the performative mode, as if this were a necessary reformulation to capture the intensity of the moment. This is a moment in the novel when Anil’s secure status as someone detached from Sri Lanka temporarily breaks down. Her presentation of evidence vacillates between objective and subjective witness and she is unable to hold on to her claims of being a third-party observer. This oscillation is clear when Anil claims that, “I think you murdered hundreds of us” (273). When she claims that the state killed hundreds of us, we see Anil position herself as an insider, a
native of Sri Lanka, emotionally traumatized as a witness to violence. Indeed, by the

time she presents her findings, she has witnessed various scenes of violence. One of the

most prominent has been encountering a truck driver nailed to the road in crucifixion, and

left to die. Anil and Sarath rescue the driver and drive him to a hospital. Anil has,

therefore, in Agamben’s terms, survived to tell the story of witnessing the death and

suffering of others.

Yet, her experience as an insider is useless, for when she positions herself in this

way, her testimony is called false, ironically enough. As tensions escalate and her

audience becomes increasingly angry and hostile, Sarath decides to protect her, not by

seconding her findings, but by arguing that her case is false. If she can be proven wrong

in front of the audience, and quickly taken away to safety, he believes she has some

chance of escape. Unaware of his thinking, Anil refuses to submit to his arguments,

claiming,

Mr. Diyasena, I’d like to remind you that I came here as part of a human rights
group. As a forensic specialist. I do not work for you, I’m not hired by you. I
work for an international authority…. We are an independent organization. We
make independent reports. (274)

As Anil feels cornered, she turns toward her official status as an independent witness and

global citizen with the backing of “international authority.” This is her fall back when

situations become difficult, and is useful to her as a defense against accusations of

falsehood. Tracing this movement, however, helps us see how the distinctions between

independent and subjective witnessing become unsustainable. While living in Sri Lanka,
she feels like she belongs. While this may be because she identifies with her country of

birth, she also feels an investment in what is occurring in Sri Lanka. She is no longer a
transitory visitor who enters and exits spaces according to an impersonal itinerary prescribed by an independent authority.

The novel also denaturalizes human rights norms by illuminating their paradoxical premises. Her belief in one victim speaking for many fails to deliver justice for the one, and leads to the death of another: Sarath saves her from this hostile dangerous encounter, helps her leave the country, and for this he is killed. Anil’s lack of understanding about the dangers in Sri Lanka leads her to foolishly present her case in the pivotal witnessing scene. Here, her cosmopolitan placelessness means she does not fully understand the terrain upon which she operates. She, as an outsider and part of the international community, backed financially and politically by them, at least has an exit route. However, the person to pay fully for Anil’s actions is Sarath. He is her co-investigator, and is also responsible for the evidence they have located. Because Anil holds on to the belief that the truth will set her free, she presents her evidence and disregards Sarath’s safety. As Sarath says “this afternoon, he had returned to the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths. He has acted in such a light. He knew he would not be forgiven that” (279). His actions, to protect her, lead to his death. This points to the brutality of politics in Sri Lanka, and the ease with which human beings are killed and disposed of. But more importantly for this reading, the novel also points to the paradoxes of human rights beliefs. One victim’s story does not necessarily speak for others. In fact, it can lead to the death of others. The truth, as Sarath says, “was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol,” (156), and Anil had set a match to the fire and escaped. Sarath is not so lucky.
Given these details, the novel’s attitudes toward human rights regimes and actors are captured best through the figure of Gamini. Gamini is Sarath’s brother and the doctor in the novel. Once when Gamini, Sarath and Anil were sitting together at Galle Face beach, a promenade in the heart of Colombo, Gamini says:

‘American movies, English books- remember how they all end?’ Gamini asked that night. ‘The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That’s it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He’s going home. So the war, to all purposes is over. That’s enough reality for the West. It’s probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.’ (285-286)

These words, in all their irony, appear as Anil is leaving Sri Lanka on a plane. They raise interesting questions regarding the politics of human rights regimes. Wars in the global South appear all the same, comprising a list of places that can be placed seamlessly together. Cosmopolitan subjects like Anil fly from one place to another to find the criminals of violence, shadowing the manner in which global capital and free markets enter and exist spaces. Human rights actors see themselves as the heroes of these wars, and as the only involvement the west has to these conflicts. Entire histories of colonialism and imperialism are erased in this global narrative. And yet, this passage is not only about human rights actors, but also about reading publics in a globalized world, that consume books written about non-western countries and their violence. Western readers only see themselves as participating in these wars through the narratives of these selfless actors, and by reading such books. Such reading practices transform these sites from spaces of terror to those that create elation, even a sense of the sublime, where a
reading public can feel secure in the global human-rights order. Gamini’s statement on the issue of insider and outsider seems to comment on the deeply implicated politics of human rights activists themselves. What human rights activists do after their momentary sojourn in the wilderness of the third world, and upon returning to the West, is to write a book, and “hit the circuit.” The deeply cynical tone in Gamini’s words locates the high morality of human-rights activism to material gains and stardom.

This commentary is reminiscent of Upendra Baxi’s arguments regarding human rights organizations. In his chapter on “Human Rights Movements and Human Rights Markets,” Baxi analyzes how market rationality has taken hold of many human rights institutions (18). One way that human rights regimes reproduce themselves is through financial flows from the global North to the global South; this already creates a series of dependencies on funding agencies to obtain money from Northern-based countries. Furthermore, many organizations remain bound to tight competition over limited funding that necessitates that the organizations appeal to donor demands. Baxi calls the U-turn to market-oriented forms of rationality as “the privatization of the United Nations,” a turn that “stress[es] the notion that corporations and other economic entities ought to remain equal partners to human-rights realization” (219). Such competition for funds also makes human-rights organizations reluctant to critique neoliberalism and corporations as part of the problem. Indeed, Baxi’s arguments about how human rights are indebted to corporate funding relates to the novel’s own engagements with neoliberalism and ethnic war. I extend Baxi’s insight to analyze the forces of neoliberalism in Anil’s Ghost more fully in the next section.
Neoliberalism and Ethnic War

Perhaps fittingly, given its narrative focus on the paradoxes of justice, witnessing, and human rights, *Anil’s Ghost* represents ethnic war and neoliberalism in unexpected ways. One such moment is when Sarath explains to Anil that:

[He]he bodies turn up weekly now. The height of the terror was ‘eighty-eight and ‘eighty nine…. Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it’s secret gangs and squads. The government was not the only one doing the killing. You had, and still have, three camps of enemies—one in the north, two in the south—using weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship. Importing state of the art weapons from the West, or manufacturing homemade weapons. (17; original emphasis)

This narrative appears, at first glance, to be a testament to the notion that all sides in the Sri Lankan conflict are to blame. Sarath is more specific than that, though, and identifies four main political groups who commit violence. These are the state and the insurrectionary JVP in the South, and the LTTE in the North. The time period (1988–89) that he refers to coincides with the peak of the JVP insurrection. Hence, the violence in Sri Lanka is about a separatist struggle in the North carried out by the LTTE against an ethnically chauvinistic state; but it is also about a JVP–led youth insurrection against the state in the south. In the passage above, the importation of arms is highlighted as part of what extended and intensified the war. The West is the fourth group that contributes to the wars by making profit in arms dealing. Large-scale violence is possible because of the weaponry made freely available. This passage indicates that, according to Ondaatje’s novel, the West had already resided within the ethnic and insurrectionary in Sri Lanka.

The reference to the JVP tells us that the novel is not necessarily about the ethnic war, as most critics of the novel presume it to be. The main focus of the novel is what Sri
Lankans call the *bheeshana samaya*, or the era of terror, during the late 1980s. On the 29th of July 1987, the President of Sri Lanka at the time, J. R. Jayawardana, had signed a peace agreement with the Tamil Tigers, the Indo–Sri Lanka Accord. Rajiv Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, brokered the agreement. The Accord agreed to the Indian Peace Keeping Forces (IPKF) de-arming militant groups in the North and monitoring the peace agreement. The arrival of the IPKF in Sri Lanka triggered the JVP insurrection of the late 1980s. By then, the JVP had become a Sinhala nationalist organization, and saw the IPKF intervention as a breach of Sri Lanka’s sovereignty. The party membership of the JVP consisted of both petit-bourgeois and peasant youth who had been deeply affected by neoliberal reforms such as the removal of subsidies, the neglect of agriculture, and increased unemployment. Among its membership were the many educated youth who were unemployed, and had few options under the ongoing neoliberal economy. One can say that the JVP fed on the frustrations and needs of young dispossessed men and women. Hence, perhaps the best way to describe the JVP is as a nationalist socialist party (Chandraprema; Venugopal, “Sectarian Socialism”; and Moore, “Thoroughly Modern Revolutionaries”). One of the state’s responses to insurrectionary terror was to kill close to 60,000 youth, many only remotely identified as JVP rebels. This is why this period is called the *beeshana samaya*, or the era of terror.

I came to realize that the focus of *Anil’s Ghost* is the JVP insurrection when taking note of the fact that Sailor, the skeleton that Anil finally identifies as Ruwan Kumara, is a Sinhala man, probably killed because he was suspected of being a JVP member. On Page 41 of the novel, we encounter a list of names that Anil finds at the Civil Rights Movement Office in Colombo. The names on the list are of the Sinhala men
and women who were disappeared at the peak of the state repression of insurrectionaries. Anil’s arrival in Sri Lanka in 1992 coincides with the time when the state was slowing down its violence against insurrectionary forces. Hence, she investigates both ethnic and insurrectionary violence. The state’s involvement in mass killings in the North and South remain the problem for her.

Consequently, the novel’s focus on the JVP insurrection and the ethnic war brings globalization and ethnic war within one frame of reference. And, if we understand Anil’s *Ghost*’s characterization of violence in Sri Lanka as naming both insurrectionary and ethnic violence, then we cannot ignore the contributions neoliberalism has made to increasing violence in Sri Lanka. Indeed, the novel makes very different claims about war in Sri Lanka from the claims made in *The Killing Fields*. Hence, when Jon Snow, at the end of the *Killing Fields*, asks for greater intervention into Sri Lanka so that justice be delivered, this seems a strangely misplaced sentiment, considering how involved various international forces already were.

International aid in Sri Lanka, a subject I touched on in Chapter One, illuminates how deeply involved the international community has been in Sri Lankan affairs. Writing about foreign aid to Sri Lanka in the post-1977 era, Sunil Bastian states that “foreign aid now seems to be concerned with the total transformation of Sri Lankan society” (*The Politics of Foreign Aid* ii). While, as Bastian notes, foreign intervention in Sri Lanka has existed during 500 years of colonialism and neocolonialism, perhaps marked by different or lower involvements during the non-alignment period of 1956–1977, foreign intervention in the neoliberal period, dating from the late 1970s, marked the acceleration of funding to the country to reform its economy for the benefit of global
markets. Sri Lanka’s transformation to fit within the global economy had multiple impacts in relation to social tensions. First, it destabilized the agricultural sector, because neoliberal policies were oriented toward an import-export economy. Second, the international community and the aid community during the initial years of ethnic conflict ignored the war and the authoritarian manner in which the state dealt with dissent in their eagerness to promote market reforms. Bastian characterizes the West’s engagement in Sri Lanka at this time as “funding insecurity” (112–129), because foreign aid strengthened a brutal authoritarian government (GoSL) that also spent some of these funds to arm itself against minority resistance to its regime. From the 1990s onward, the political violence escalated to such an extent that donors began taking note of violence in Sri Lanka. Bastian points out how the West’s shift in emphasis was influenced by the optimism of post–Cold War politics, but also by the concerns of foreign donors that conflict and violence were undermining the possible successes of neoliberalism (The Politics of Foreign Aid ii). Hence, from then on, some donors began funding projects to promote peace, while supporting neoliberal reforms. The final ceasefire between the GoSL and the LTTE promoted such reforms as a political vision of unity for post–civil war Sri Lanka. A neoliberal peace made possible by the party in power at the time, the United National Party (UNP). We can see this in the party document for the peace agreement, Regaining Sri Lanka. Needless to say, the peace process failed under such conditions. I point to the history of foreign aid to Sri Lanka to illustrate how international intervention and involvement do not constitute a demand human rights actors can make without considering how deeply the international community has already intervened in local events under the aegis of economic development. Often, such
involvements have promoted and heightened political conflicts. To cite the right of intervention as a means of delivering justice is to perform an act of unconvincing amnesia on the part of human rights actors. It is not surprising, however, that many of the hundreds of human rights documents and reports on Sri Lanka have rarely looked at how promoting and establishing neoliberalism has been a contributing factor to violence, as demonstrated by Baxi above.

In Ondaatje’s novel, Anil’s own short-sited attempts to deliver global justice illustrate the novel’s refusal to legitimize a global human rights regime. Unlike popular films such as Hotel Rwanda that use human rights violations to demand greater international intervention, the novel highlights the problems of human rights witnessing and intervention. Some notable formal aspects of the novel—its movement from abrupt scene to abrupt scene, its crisscrossing across time and space, and its refusal to provide us with a dominant voice—serve to rupture the frame of the traditional bildungsroman, and instead invites us to bear witness in alternative ways. Here, I disagree with Slaughter’s reading of the novel. While he argues that the novel’s critique of human rights ultimately demands better forms of human rights, I suggest instead that the novel looks outside the human rights frame altogether.

Embedded Witnessing: Narrative and Performance

The alternatives offered in Anil’s Ghost remove us from a focus on human rights laws, testimony, and justice to forms of embedded witnessing. Sarath, true to his profession as an archeologist believes in truth and history as textured and layered in the landscape. Reminding us of W. G. Sebald’s Emigrants, where trauma is embedded
within the landscape, and in the mundane of the everyday, Sarath sees the landscape as bearing witness to a different past—one where violence and killing were not the norm.

He would hold statues two thousand years old in his arms. Or place his hand against old, warm rock that has been cut into a human shape. He found comfort in seeing his dark flesh against it. This was his pleasure. Not conversation or the education of others or power, but simply to place his hand against a *gal vihara*, a living stone whose temperature was dependent on the hour, whose look of porousness would change depending on rain or a quick twilight. (279)

The past, the ruins of a stone temple, provide Sarath with glimpses of an alternative world, one that comforts him, so he can bear the suffering of the present. These ruins also remind us of what will endure to testify of our own suffering, not laws and justice, but art and artifact.

Witnessing as creative remembering is figured in the actions of the character Ananda as well. Ananda becomes the figure who finds some form of relief from having endured and witnessed violence. He is an artist who used to perform the ritual eye painting of the Buddha statues (see below for explanation), but who had given up this practice once his wife Sirissa had been disappeared on her way to work. Ananda had subsequently taken to working in underground gem mines, and to drinking heavily.

Ananda and his wife Sirissa are both Sinhalese. Sirissa is disappeared during the JVP insurrection. One day on her way to school, where she works as a servant, Sirissa sees the decapitated heads of students of the school. As she runs, attempting to escape, she is picked up. She, other staff, and 46 students are disappeared by a yellow lancer without number plates. This van is later seen inside the army camp in the area (185).

Having lost his wife, by the time Ananda becomes part of the team that searches for Sailor’s identity, he has little to live for. As he is tasked by Anil and Sarath to recreate Sailor’s face so that they can identify him, Ananda re-creates not a real likeness of
Ruwan Kumara to provide human rights evidence, but rather “a serenity in the face she [Anil] did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself… It’s what he [Ananda] wants of the dead” (184). And so, Ananda’s release of creativity does not, or cannot, provide justice for his Sailor or his dead wife, but it does try to bear witness to their lives through creative remembering.

Once Anil is forced to leave the country, and Sarath is killed, Ananda returns to his traditional profession as eye painter. He is the only figure in the novel who finds a certain semblance of peace by the end of the novel. The netra mangalya, or eye painting ritual, is part of the inauguration of a Buddhist statue, whereby the Buddha is transformed from molded clay to a sacred, living deity.

At the end of the novel, Ananda is employed to reconstruct a destroyed Buddha statue, and to perform the nethra mangalya. Qadri Ismail, criticizes the use of the nethra mangalya to end the novel, because Buddhism in Sri Lanka has a reactionary, nationalist form, and is used to oppress minorities (“A Flippant Gesture” 89-94). For Tamils, Ismail argues, Buddhism signals dominance, intolerance and racism. Indeed, this is so. But we can draw a different conclusion, if we consider the reconstruction of the statue as an attempt to negotiate community among the Sinhala people in the south, those who have been subjected to mass killings and disappearances by an authoritarian state and JVP insurrectionaries. The statue is reconstructed in a field in Buduruwagala, which was “a region of desperate farming” (299), far away from organized and reactionary Buddhism. For it was a “solitary Buddha” (299) that had been destroyed: and not because of ethnic and religious conflict, but because “the men were trying to find a solution for hunger or a way to get out of their disintegrating lives” (300), and thought the inside of the statue
may possess hidden treasure. This Buddha was a poor, broken, defenseless Buddha. The symbolism, then, is not of a powerful Buddhism, but a Buddhism in crisis. Its constituents are poor farmers and peasants, those neglected or dispossessed by neoliberal economic reforms. They were also betrayed by the insurrectionaries who used their poverty for political mileage, with little regard for their lives.

As Ananda and the villagers form a community to rebuild the Buddha statue, they find many bodies dumped in the “killing field or burial ground” (301) that this area had become. Hence, the process of reconstructing the Buddha statue is concurrent with retrieving corpses and burying the dead. Both are integral to reconstructing community. A process of healing begins, as villagers bear witness to the dead by recovering their bodies. What restores Ananda at the end of the novel is thus a ritual or a performance. *Anil’s Ghost* gestures toward the restorative capacities of creative work in remaking the world, and the importance of performance in social restoration through embodied practice. The ending of the novel signals this conception of embodied witnessing as creative and performative.

Permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy

*Anil’s Ghost*, 64.

**Trojan Women and Witnessing**

Are the truths of war timeless as Ondaatje’s novel suggests? At first glance, one of the strengths of *The Trojan Women* is its seemingly general applicability to so many contexts across the world. It has been globally performed as an anti-war play. Yet, while
its strong anti-war message and formal features make the play portable, different performances will adapt and perform it according to local contexts. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre adapted the play during the Algerian war of independence against colonial France to communicate an anti-colonial message. In that instance, the adapted play illustrated the violence of colonial war; as an avid supporter of the Algerian Liberation Front (ALF), Sartre used the play to gain support for ALF’s revolutionary struggles for independence. He affirmed his commitments to revolutionary violence in the colonies in his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* (1-31). Another adaptation of *The Trojan Women*, Femi Osofisan’s *Women of Owu*, describes the destruction of the Nigerian city of Owu by the Yoruba under the pretext of liberating its flourishing markets in the pre-colonial period.

*The Trojan Women* is organized around a series of witnesses who narrate their experiences of war. These witnesses provide us with multiple and conflicting points of view regarding the reasons for war. No character in the play is an outsider to the conflict or an independent or objective witness. Even the gods are embedded within the violence and have participated in the destruction of Troy. Even we, as the audience, are drawn in as insiders, and asked to reflect on why we may have indirectly supported such terror. Hence, *The Trojan Women* enables an embedded and engaged understanding of historical events, thereby opening possibilities for dialogue, however conflicted. In the Sri Lankan version, the performances are powerful because they resonate with and respond to local collective movements organized by witnesses to violence. The play performatively creates a potential imagined community consisting of both Tamils and Sinhalese. This version is notable for the way it references and responds to the Mothers’ Fronts in Sri
Lanka, which were a series of protest movements by Sinhala and Tamil mothers. Mothers’ Fronts were an organized collective of concerned women who protested against state violence and the disappearance of Sri Lankan youth during various stages of the ethnic war and the JVP insurrection. By responding to the historical events of the Mothers’ Fronts, the play creates the possibilities of a collective future.

Image I: Poster for *Trojan Women*. Starting from left, Anoja Weerasinghe as Hecuba, Yashodha Wimaladharma as Andromache, and Meena Kumary as Cassandra. Image Courtesy of Dharmasiri Bandaranayake.

**Historical Contexts and Performing Peace**

Let me begin by contextualizing the time period in which *The Trojan Women* was first performed. The play was translated and performed in Sri Lanka at a time when the state had exhausted its energies on war with the Tamil Tigers, and had suffered very heavy losses. It was a time when war weariness had set in on both sides. By 2000, a ceasefire was being put in place between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the LTTE, with the Norwegians as peace monitors. It was also a time of great disillusion
regarding southern politics. President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunge (CBK, as she is usually referred to), who led the People’s Alliance party (PA), had come into power in 1994 with promises of peace and justice for Tamils. But these promises were not kept by Kumaranatunge and her party, and, soon after the PA took control of the state, the GoSL engaged in yet another series of battles with the LTTE. The playwright Bandaranayake, who had supported CBK’s PA government in 1994, lost any faith in her capacities to deliver a just peace by 1999 (Bandaranayake, Personal Interview). Ironically, CBK had come to power using her position as a war widow and mother to increase her credibility as a candidate who could deliver peace.

Bandaranayake staged *The Trojan Women* in this national climate of exhaustion and lack of faith in CBK’s promises, on the one hand, and, on the other, hopes for change because a ceasefire was being discussed by 1999. His adaptation was immediately successful yet controversial, and won 10 awards at the 2000 State Drama Festival. Bandaranayake’s script remained for the most part faithful to the original, and the only alterations were performative. Keeping the script close to the original meant that it passed the censorship board that may have otherwise seen the play as anti-state. During the ceasefire years up to around 2006, the play often toured war-torn parts of Sri Lanka, such as Jaffna, Batticaloa, and the Vanni. During this period, there was greater openness between the state and the LTTE than before, and people from both communities could to visit each other. The LTTE, which had its headquarters in the Vanni, invited Bandaranayake to stage the play at Pongu Tamil in Killinochchi, the LTTE capital. Pongu Tamil is a festival organized to celebrate Tamil culture and the Tamils’ right to self-determination. Bandaranayake accepted the invitation as a way to open
communications with Tamils in the Vanni, who for years had been cut off from the populations in the south. Bandaranayake told me he was surprised that the LTTE had invited him to perform a play that was so critical of war, but hoped that it would help promote a climate of peace. So that a Tamil speaking audience could understand the Sinhala play, Bandaranayake decided to include in the playbill a translated summary of the play and some reviews for his Tamil audience. As he said to me, the play transcended the barriers of language and communicated the horrors of war to Tamil audiences. He told me that, often, Tamil audiences who seemed suspicious of him and his group before the performance would stay behind after to talk to him. He often organized a discussion period after the performance so that audiences could talk about the play. Bandaranayake meant for his *Trojan Women* to bridge the enormous gaps between the two communities during a period that offered some hope for reconciliation (Personal Interview).

**Embedded Witnessing**

The original setting of the play is the aftermath of the Trojan War, once Troy has been ransacked by the Greeks. *The Trojan Women* has very little movement and action, and consists of a series of laments by the women of Troy, who relate the fate of Troy and its men. After the war, only Troy’s women survive, and in the play they await to be assigned as slaves to the Greeks. Hecuba, the queen of Troy, remains on stage for most of the action, and engages with three other women of Troy. The first woman she speaks to is Andromache, who enters the stage with Astyanax, her son, to lament the death of her husband, Hector, a fallen prince of Troy. During the course of the play, Astyanax is
murdered so that he cannot grow up to take revenge on the Greeks. His murder causes
great despair to Andromache and the other women of Troy. After Andromache, Hecuba
speaks to Cassandra, the famously unheeded seer and priestess of Apollo, who is to be
taken to marry Agamemnon, the Greek king of Argos. Cassandra prophesies the
destruction of the Greeks, Agamemnon’s murder, and her own death along with his.

Third, Hecuba encounters Helen, the Greek queen and wife of Menelaus, who ran away
with Paris to Troy and began the Trojan War. She is given an opportunity to narrate her
perspectives of the war and recount her personal history. In the final scenes of the play,
Astyanax’s body is brought on stage, and Hecuba buries him, and watches the burning of
Troy. She is led away to a ship to be a slave to Ulysses.

In the first part of this chapter, I argued that prioritizing independent and objective
witnesses means deprioritizing and delegitimizing victims of violence and their
experiences of suffering. By contrast, an embedded model of testimony can offer
witnesses better ways of listening to each other, and forbearing one another’s claims.
For, in the context of prolonged warfare, irrespective of who is victor and who victim,
claims about historic events and accuracy are heavily contested. All parties to the
conflict will feel that their pain and suffering has been ignored. What constitutes an
event and what characterizes such an event will be heavily debated. A model of
embedded witnessing, as offered in The Trojan Women, can accommodate multiple and
conflicting claims about truth and history, without forcing a synthesis toward a final
truth.

An important scene in the play that demonstrates multiple versions of historical
truth is the scene when Menelaus, Helen’s husband, appears on stage to claim his
runaway bride. He is victorious and arrogant as he enters the scene. Helen responds to Menelaus and Hecuba’s taunts by pleading for her life, stating that she is not guilty of starting the Trojan War, nor of running away with Paris. She bears witness to incidents that led her to Troy with Paris. Subsequent to Helen presenting her case, Hecuba refutes Helen’s version and presents her own version of events. This scene thus highlights how witnesses produce contesting versions of the past, and how they are managed and negotiated within the frame of the play. Moreover, since the scene occurs in the aftermath of the war, one can argue that it models for us how subjects who are deeply alienated and hostile to each other can begin a process of speaking to each other.

As Menelaus reclaims Helen, he explains that, though people accuse him of warmongering because his wife ran away, in reality he prosecuted the war because “he [Paris] came as a friend, and tricked me / he stole my wife, when I was not there.”

According to Menelaus, Paris had broken the laws of hospitality by stealing Helen, and so turned himself from friend to enemy. And so, Menelaus explains and justifies the death and destruction as seemingly necessary outcomes stemming from the breakdown of social codes of friendship and honor (Croally, 115-116). For Menelaus, killing Paris and defeating Troy are part of his revenge for this insult. Hence, he is determined to take Helen back so she can be publicly killed for her crimes.

During the course of the scene, however, we see Helen make her claims to truth and historical interpretation using rumor/hearsay and religion as composite parts of her witnessing. We are given an opportunity in literature to see the structural parts of witnessing. If conventional historical writing evacuates its narratives of contradictions, this scene places the contradictions of historical interpretation before us unsynthesized.
What these testimonies allow us to see, then, is that the past is not reconstructed in a straightforward manner. Moreover, Helen’s individual interpretation and experiences of past events are shown as intrinsically social, for they are informed by social truths and religious beliefs.

In bearing witness to her experiences of the past, her first argument is that Hecuba is to blame for the Trojan War.

This Hecuba is the first to blame for this enormous destruction. She raised Paris! If he is kept alive, he will entirely destroy this city and its people, So the oracles declared that he should be killed as a child. Priam did not listen to these predictions, and they raised him. And so this city and I are destroyed.

Here, the possible future murder of Helen and the destruction of Troy are joined together through hearsay and rumor. Either the narrative of Paris’ birth and the destruction of Troy are rumors that have spread in the Trojan community, or part of common knowledge that Helen has learnt about since her arrival in Troy. Either way, she draws on parts of history that she has not personally experienced to make her claims. This gives us access to how witnessing is created, through the process of mixing and making sense of one’s own experiences of trauma within a larger social context, where rumor or generally believed stories from the past inform those experiences and the witness’ reconstruction. One possibility Helen presents to us here is that Hecuba’s excessive love for her son is responsible for Troy’s destruction. This places maternal love and love for country as two opposed forces, thereby denaturalizing nationalism. This first act of witnessing potentially reduces Helen’s guilt, for, according to this argument, the Trojan war was set in motion when Paris was born.
Helen’s subsequent explanation of her personal experience interprets history through the lens of myth. She implies that her fate was beyond her control, because of the mythic beauty contest in which Paris stood as judge, famously known as the Judgment of Paris. Drawing on myths, Helen relates how Paris was asked to select the most beautiful goddess from among Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, and was promised various gifts depending on whom he chose. Paris selected Aphrodite, who had promised him Helen as a “gift.” Helen explains how Paris was only able to take Helen out of Sparta because Aphrodite allowed it. If not, she could never have escaped the guards and gotten out of the palace alive. Therefore, she asks Menelaus to “curse Aphrodite / forgive me.” Helen’s fate is thus tied to a mythic contest, and in light of Helen’s own status as a mythic figure, history and myth are linked. She then accuses Menelaus for having “left me alone with him without shame / and sailed to Crete,” effectively shaming him for neglecting his duties toward her.

Helen then explains how she often had attempted to escape from Troy during the long years of war, especially after Paris’ death.

How many times I tried to escape,  
Throwing a rope down from the fortress walls  
I tried to escape many times but was caught by soldiers.  
They can confirm this.

She repeats the phrase “many times” to emphasize her attempts to flee, to stop the war.

But, after Paris’ death, she is forced to marry another, suggesting that her marriage to her new husband involved force and violence. Helen not only relates her embedded version of the Trojan War, but also reveals that the Greeks profited from this war, because it destroyed any threats against Greece from Asia. “[H]appiness-peace has space now / the gain was for Greece, for me it has meant great loss.” She interprets the Trojan War as
one that brought Greeks peace and dominance in the region, explaining that the main
motivation for war was political gain, even as women bear the blame for it.

Helen’s role as witness performs a series of functions and makes the audience
aware of how witnesses negotiate facts. Witnessing is not simply telling the truth of what
happened, for both an event and its re-narration are processes that involve memory and
remembering. Her act of witnessing performs multiple functions. She exonerates herself
from being responsible for warfare; she provides us with information from first-hand
experience that could not be told without her; she bears witness to the trauma of being
forced into marriage to a man and being trapped in Troy against her will; and she presents
herself as a strong personality who reveals how wars are the affairs of men who use
women as scapegoats. Interestingly, Helen’s interpretation of events also changes
according to her audience, showing us how witnessing is performative and not a narrative
representing a stable or objective truth. When Helen testifies in front of Menelaus, she
glorifies the Greek victory in Troy. All together, these functions allow us to see her as a
composite character with multiple motivations for her actions. She is not simply a
victim.

Once Helen’s testimony is offered, Hecuba disputes Helen’s claims. For Hecuba,
Helen is the reason for the destruction of Troy and its men. Her anger leads her to desire
extreme forms of violence upon Helen. Hecuba’s narrative, thus, points to the complex
emotions that witnesses have, and to how victims of violence can also perpetrate it.
David Stuttard tells us that Hecuba, who performs the role of mother of the nation and
ultimate victim of war in The Trojan Women, can be understood in her full complexity by
looking at another Euripidean play written in 425 BC, Hekabe. In it, “Hekabe [is] not
only the passive victim, the weeping widow, the grieving grandmother of *The Trojan Women*, but the cruel and implacable revenger… Ready to be as treacherous as Odysseus… and to kill anyone who comes between her and her ambitions for her family” (34). We see a glimpse of that angry, vengeful figure in *The Trojan Women*, when she demands Helen’s death and angrily contests Helen’s claims. When Hecuba first hears that Menelaus has come to take Helen away, she thanks the gods for this day of judgment and asks Menelaus: “Do not look at Helen / Order the soldiers to kill her.” Plainly, Hecuba’s victimhood is mixed with desire for revenge and hatred for the enemy.

In her act of witnessing, Hecuba begins not by recounting her experiences, but by contesting the veracity of Helen’s claims regarding the Judgment of Paris. She suggests that the gods are not so foolish as to ask Paris to evaluate them. She asks why they would not ask Zeus if they needed to—why they would ask someone as trivial as Paris. Hecuba then mocks Helen by exclaiming, “To cover your own faulty actions / you are attempting to show us that the gods are foolish / only fools will listen to you.” She belittles Helen by calling her lustful, and suggests that Paris’ beauty and Troy’s wealth lured Helen to run away with Paris. Hecuba, interestingly, refers to Helen in the vernacular, vulgarized version of you, or *numba*, which is generally used for an inferior, or to express contempt. She then argues that over the ten years of war, she had often advised Helen to leave the palace and return to the Greeks to end the war. After asking Helen why she did not hang herself or stab herself to death to end her life and the war, Hecuba exclaims that never in all those years did Helen leave, that it was her greed and lust that brought her and kept her in Troy.
And yet, despite all this *sturm und drang*, Hecuba’s witnessing does not replace Helen’s claims. For, although Hecuba says that the gods would not be foolish enough to ask Paris to judge their beauty, she cannot disprove that the event actually happened. Furthermore, she remains completely silent about the oracle’s predictions regarding Paris’ birth and the destruction of Troy. These two versions of truth and history, Helen’s and Hecuba’s, are allowed to co-exist, with gaps and elisions that cannot be proven, or disproven, or resolved.

Once Hecuba and Helen narrate their versions of the past, Menelaus passes judgment on Helen, accepting Hecuba’s interpretation of events. He orders Helen to be taken to one of his ships to be punished properly in Greece. Menelaus’ judgment, we must notice, does not draw on objective and independent truth, but stems rather from his own embedded position, as one who has been insulted and then takes revenge. At no point in this exchange is objective, uncontested knowledge prioritized. Rather, embedded, political forms of knowledge are preferred. In short, history does not become the narrative of the victors. Such polyvocal and polyvalent versions of history—even informed by forms of nontruth, such as myth or rumor—allows victims to speak of their own traumatic experiences, and to debate the reasons for war.

These multiple truth claims and testimonies illustrate for us that all social actors have political stakes and claims in their narration of past events. Embedded witnessing, thus, provides us with thick descriptions filled with contradictions and refusals. These multiple narratives coexist with one another, providing us with robust and full details of the conflicting narratives of war and violence. Because the past is opened to multiple interpretations, we can acknowledge the suffering of multiple parties. This polyvalence
does not exonerate the oppressors, however, for the play reveals, through the predictions of Cassandra, that violence and warfare bring no victories. This scene indirectly shows how rich multiplicities are lost when we use the logic of objective truth.

**Rupturing Time and Space**

_The Trojan Women_ was performed in Sri Lanka in its original Greek setting. Further, the script was not greatly modernized, and even the translated Sinhala was close to classical Sinhala in style, to remain close to the original Greek in terms of tonality. Modernization occurs only in the performance on stage. By inserting modern elements of war in the stage performance, the play creates two temporalities on stage, and so speaks to embedded histories in Sri Lanka. For example, at one point, the chorus sings of the final destruction of Troy, or of the arrival of the Trojan horse that hid Greeks soldiers inside. While the chorus sings of Troy’s destruction in the foreground, the scene is performed in the background. We see soldiers exit the horse at night to plunder Troy. Suddenly, we also see modern army soldiers in camouflage uniforms with guns attacking the Trojans. Their khaki uniforms bring to mind state violence in Sri Lanka. And, later on in the play, the Trojan horse is doubled by a modern day tank that appears on stage.
As the drama unfolds, at various moments, Greek soldiers and modern-day-army soldiers appear. The Trojan horse is a tank that can kill many in one blow. If we think of
what the Trojan horse can symbolize in the Sri Lankan war, it is the superior military
power of the state forces, and during the final battle, the bombing of no-fire zones by
state forces. Often, during the final months of the war in the Vanni, civilians were told
by state forces that certain spaces were no-fire zones and safe spaces. Civilians tended to
congregate in these areas for safety, and hospitals were set up there. State forces then
bombed these areas with their planes, tanks and missiles. This is similar to how the
Trojan horse, a weapon masquerading as a token of peace, was meant to signify safety
and the end of the war. Trojans believed the horse to be a gift from the Greeks, and not
only gathered around it to celebrate the end of the bloody conflict, but also took it inside
their city. The Trojans and Tamil civilians, in the two temporalities and localities
juxtaposed in this version of The Trojan Women, became sitting targets, tricked by the
Greek soldiers and the Sri Lankan army.

Hence, two historical times brought together perform space-time compression,
whereby ancient Troy becomes modern Sri Lanka, allowing the play to have multiple
points of signification. The modern elements in a period play rupture the play’s unity and
act as a Brechtian gest, a moment of alienation, that forces us to ask who the army
soldiers are attacking, and who the victims of their attacks are. The audience is forced to
ask whom the women on stage represent. And, I would argue, this moment of rupture
also enables an imagined community of women. For, these women are not only victims
of war, but also mothers and widows. The child on stage, Astyanax, signifies not only
the symbolic loss of the future with his death, and the end of Troy, but also marks the
foundations upon which war cannot be justified and political protest made possible. That
is to say, if Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms use the rhetoric of valor and patriotism to
justify young men dying for their country, the killing of the young child ruptures nationalist narratives by showing us how violence is destructive rather than regenerative. The performance asks us whose body the women of Troy lament. Whose body does Hecuba bury in a performance that multiplies the signification of events?

**The Mothers’ Fronts and Imagined Communities**

In answer to that question, one could argue that Astyanax embodies more than himself; he also embodies the bodies of dead Trojans, the dead bodies of ancient Greeks, and the thousands of disappeared and dead in modern-day Sri Lanka. The appearance of present-day army soldiers in modern camouflage uniforms allows the women on stage to embody more than their figurative, ancient, individual selves: they also represent the contemporary mothers of war-torn Sri Lanka. One of the conditions of possibility for the prodigious performance of *The Trojan Women* is its resonance with, and response to, local contexts and disparate historical events. Much of the language of the play is dedicated to lamenting the death and destruction of Troy and its men: Hecuba mourns the loss of Priam, her husband, her son Hector, and Polyxena, her daughter. Andromache and Hecuba lament Astyanax’s murder and curse the Greeks for their brutality. Cassandra performs a joyful exultation of the death of Agamemnon, along with her own death. These laments and protests remind us that mourning in public, historically, has been women’s domain; and, in ancient Greece, public laments were performed by great mother priestesses and ordinary women alike, who sang, danced, and chanted in the streets to mourn and protest the death of their men (Weinbaum). In the Sri Lankan
context, this performance of public protest as mourning echoes not only the private lamentations of women when their men died or were disappeared, but also represents their public, organized forms of protest in the form of Mothers’ Fronts.

Indeed, this ancient Greek tragedy plays so well in this context partly because in Sri Lanka, some of the most powerful and vibrant protest movements have emerged from the Mothers’ Fronts of the Sinhala and Tamil communities. In 1984, for instance, Jaffna women formed a Mothers’ Front to protest state arrests and disappearances of young Tamil men. In Batticaloa, in the east of Sri Lanka, mothers stormed into the camps of the LTTE in 2004, to demand that their children be released from fighting as child soldiers. Hundreds of mothers screamed outside the camps refusing to allow their children to kill and be killed (Perera-Rajasingham, “The Politics of the Governed”). In addition, the southern Sinhala part of Sri Lanka also witnessed powerful protest movements in 1991–1992, by thousands of mothers who demanded that the state return their sons, who had been disappeared during the JVP insurrection (De Alwis, “The Language of the Organs”). As noted earlier, CBK won election in 1994 using the southern Mothers’ Front as a platform. She used the language of motherhood, and leveraged the assassination of her husband to link herself to this powerful protest movement.

Because *The Trojan Women* employs and echoes many of their conceits and performative aspects, the play doubles as a composite representation of the numerous Mothers’ Fronts in Sri Lanka. As noted, because the play allows for different kinds of embedded testimonies to co-exist, the performances interact with multiple historical events. The women on stage embody multiple forms and tropes of maternal protest, such as the lamenting mother, the angry demonic mother, and the mother burying the dead. I
argue that, in an important sense, this performative alignment of literary testimony with historical events creates an imagined community of mothers across ethnic lines. For, in reality, the Mothers’ Fronts in Sri Lanka remain ethnically separate, despite both Tamil and Sinhala Mothers’ Fronts’ demanding a stop to state and para-state atrocities. The performance allows a cross-ethnic collectivity to be imaginable because the modern soldiers on stage can be interpreted as killing both Sinhala and Tamil men, and harassing both Sinhala and Tamil women. Astyanax symbolizes both the Tamil and Sinhala young men killed and disappeared by the state and separatist groups.

Further, *The Trojan Women* echoes, responds to, and uses much of the characteristic language present in the real political movements of mothers in Sri Lanka. For instance, Andromache, Astyanax’s mother, laments the killing of her son. She curses her fate, and curses the Greeks who would destroy his innocent life. In bearing witness to her experiences of suffering, Andromache describes herself as a virtuous wife and mother. She recalls how she, “to suit Hector’s status, became a good, virtuous wife / I avoided going from place to place like other women, gossiping / but stayed at home.” Andromache describes herself as *vineethe*, which in Sinhala means well-behaved and respectful, because she wanted nothing more in life that to be a good wife and mother. This rhetoric of good wife and mother is one of the key claims of the Mothers’ Front in the south. Malathi de Alwis, who has done extensive research on the Mothers’ Front in the south, explains that the primary demand of the movement is for “a climate where we can raise our sons to manhood, have our husbands with us, and lead normal women’s lives” (“Motherhood as a Space of Protest” 185). Andromache’s demands are no greater than what patriarchy demands of women as mothers and wives. That she adhered to all
the virtues necessary for a good mother and wife, but still had to face not only the death of her husband Hector, but also the killing of her son Astyanax, allows us to pity her deeply. The Sinhalese mothers of the south, similarly, used the social and moral authority of motherhood in its most conventional forms to open up spaces for political protest, at a time when violence was so pervasive that no one dared speak out in public.

In another context, Diana Taylor writes that, in the case of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, despite using conservative ideologies of motherhood, “the role of mother was attractive … because it was viable and practical. It offered the women a certain legitimacy and authority in a society that values motherhood almost to the exclusion of all other women” (“Trapped in Bad Scripts” 195). In a climate where all other forms of protest were impossible, motherhood, because it was so non-threatening, could shame the state. In Sri Lanka, it became a means by which, as De Alwis tells us, “[mothers] revealed the ultimate transgression of the state: it was denying women the opportunity to mother, by its resort to clandestine tactics” (“Motherhood as a Space of Protest” 188). As Andromache used her testimony to shame the Greeks who denied her modest demands, so, too, did the Mothers’ Front in the south shame the state and show up its contradictions.

The figure of Cassandra, in turn, echoes another important aspect of the Mothers’ Fronts. Cassandra appears onstage to predict the destruction that is to come upon the arrogant Greeks, such as Agamemnon’s murder by his wife Clytemnestra, and Odysseus’ ten-year struggle to return home after the war. She appears on stage dressed in bright yellow, with yellow flowers in her hair and torches in her hands. Among the grieving widows, she is a bright, happy, yet demented presence. Her hysterical, angry laughter
produces a testimony of what has not yet come. She performs testimony as the future.

So, when Hecuba cries about Cassandra’s fate, “oh my child! my child! my innocent child / what kind of terrible marriage have you claimed?”, Cassandra shows no grief. Instead, she tells her mother what is to come: “I will not sing about the smashing of Agamemnon’s family.” By so doing—or not so doing, as the negative construction of the previous phrase indicates—Cassandra declares the potential future, paradoxically, as a negative affirmation. Her dramatic, religious prophesies and performances resemble many of the actions of the Mothers Fronts. For instance, her figure performs ritualistic revenge on stage. Casandra’s exuberant and ecstatic performance of anger and revenge resonate with the temple oracles, the prophecies and performances of Sri Lankan mothers. As Patricia Lawrence writes, in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, Tamils who suffered the brunt of the army and the LTTE turned to their local amman (mother) goddesses to voice their frustrations, anger, and desires. The oracles in the temples became possessed by the amman, enabling local Tamils outlets to express anger (Lawrence). In the protest carried out by the mothers in the East in 2004, they surrounded the Tiger camps, beating their heads and hands against the barricades, screaming and cursing the LTTE for using their children (Perera-Rajasingham, “The Politics of the Governed” 134-136). In the south too, Sinhala women would often visit the temples of Kali Amman to curse then-president Premadasa, whom they held responsible for the deaths and disappearances of their children and husbands. And so, Cassandra’s possessed anger, and her demented performances of power, resonate with mothers who had been transformed—from being women who cried and mourned the loss of their men, to women who empowered themselves through sacred possession. De
Alwis, for instance, tells us of Asilin, one of the mothers who “chanted over and over ‘Premadasa, see this coconut all smashed into bits. May your head too be splintered into a hundred bits, so heinous are the crimes you have perpetrated on my child’ ” (“Motherhood as a Space for Protest” 191). This resembles Cassandra’s claims that Agamemnon would be stabbed to death by his wife. Cassandra and Asilin use the same word, sunu visunu, which can be translated as “splintered into pieces” and is onomatopoeic in Sinhala. Both figures and their language bear proleptic witness, to that which is not yet, but is to come. From Aeschylus’ play Agamemnon, for example, we know that Clytemnestra traps Agamemnon in a net, and stabs him brutally and multiple times. Cassandra prophesies this future in The Trojan Women. Closer to our own time, President Premadasa was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber, and De Alwis tells us how Asilin declared triumphantly how “he died just like the way I cursed him” (191).

One of the strengths of the Mothers’ Fronts, then, is their capacity to find hope in future possibility, and both Cassandra and Asilin do so. Hence, even if maternal politics may not be subversive or radical as a critique of conservative ideology, their use by the Mothers’ Fronts, in modes of performance and religious ritual, transformed these women from being pathetic, tearful, mourning mothers to becoming powerful, angry, and demonic figures.

The Actor and the President

On a more intimate note, Hecuba’s performance of grief and loss as embodied witnessing is very personal for actress Anoja Weerasinghe, who performed the role. The
incident of Weerasinghe’s own suffering was first told to me during the summer of 2011 by the director, and later I found out more through newspaper reports of it.

By the end of 1999, and early 2000, the PA government and CBK were severely under attack for waging an unwinnable war, and were generally very unpopular. The main opposition, the United National Party (UNP) and its leader Ranil Wickremasinghe, was attempting to impeach CBK. Weerasinghe was actively supportive of the UNP, and spoke out in criticism of CBK. The music director of the play, Rukantha Gunatillake, had also supported the UNP. Both artists were attacked by masked and unnamed assailants for backing the opposition. Weerasinghe’s native home in a small village in Moneragala district was burned down, with all her possessions in it. In an interview with journalist Kumudini Hettiarachci of The Times, she spoke about how many of her costumes, souvenirs, books, and films were kept in this house (1, 11). She had meant to convert this home and its possessions into a museum for the villagers, and so had kept many items from her acting life in it. Once her house and her possessions had been destroyed, and complaints to the police proved futile, she fled the country to stay in India for a while. Moreover, the musician Gunatillake and his wife Chandraleka Perera were also abducted, tied up, and beaten, as a warning that they should stop publicly supporting the opposition. They too had to go into hiding after they were released.

This posed two problems for the director of The Trojan Women, Bandaranayake. One was, of course, that the performance of the play would be impossible without these principals; but, more importantly, that he had to find ways to protect his main actor and music director. As mentioned earlier, Bandaranayake had initially supported CBK when she first came into power in 1994. He had, by the year 2000, however, distanced himself...
from her because she failed to deliver a just peace as she had promised. Bandaranayake was a witness to the violence that both Weerasinghe and Rukantha faced because of his close relations with them. So he, too, witnessed events as an embedded political figure. He used this personal involvement to resolve the tensions that two members of his theater group faced. And he did so strategically, by speaking directly to the president. At no point was Bandaranayake able to state that he felt the government was responsible for the violence against Weerasinghe and Gunatillake, for such accusations would not have served anyone, and would have stopped any dialogue between him and CBK. Rather, he discussed with the president how she might use state forces to protect them. He leveraged his position as a well-known cultural figure, and the popularity of the play, as reasons for why the two ought to be protected. Bandaranayake insisted that he needed to be assured of their safety in order to stage the play. He ultimately managed to secure a promise from the president that Weerasinghe, Gunatillake, and his wife Perera would be protected and safe if they came out of hiding. This was indirectly a promise that those who had attacked the artists would not do so again. To cement this promise, the president printed a testament to the fact in the government newspaper *The Sunday Observer* (President). Those in hiding were then able to return to a normal life in Sri Lanka, and were not harmed thereafter. At a meta-textual level too, then, the play performed a political reconciliation of sorts, securing the safety of its artists even if the characters in the play are sent off as slaves to different Greek islands.

By the same principle, the fear and violence that Weerasinghe experienced in her real life transferred into her embodied performance for some time after when she performed as Hecuba. As Bandaranayake told me, often when she performed as Hecuba,
Weerasinghe’s own fears, her feelings of intense pain at the burning of her home, and the threats to her life, enabled her to connect to her role directly. Often, she would have tears streaming down her face during a performance. As a well-known film actor, the story of her harassment had been national news. For those who watched her perform as the grieving Hecuba, she was also the grieving actor who barely escaped with her life. Hence, she broke the boundaries of mimesis to actually embody the pain of loss.

At the end of the play, Troy is burnt down by the Greeks and they set sail for home. Hecuba laments the burning of Troy as she is chained and dragged on to a ship.

Wings of smoke and dust mix together to fly into the sky
I can see nothing with my two eyes
The whole world is covered in smoke, nothing can be seen

Listen carefully friends, did you hear that sound?
Our great palace has just come crashing down
That sound was the shuddering of the thick walls
of our beautiful palace Pergamon
The whole world collapses in fire!

As Hecuba cries these final lines of the play, her grief, and Weerasinghe’s own, are connected in mourning the loss of their beloved home. The world is covered in smoke as both Hecuba and Weerasinghe’s homes are burnt to the ground. The beautiful palace Pergamon is also her village home. Both actor and character fuse at this climactic moment to become one.

Performing the Impossible

Recomposition through art functions as a kind of mourning-an obituary- that completes the life-death cycle and restores a sense of wholeness to the
community. But recomposition is also a disavowal: the dead do not come back to life except as icons.

Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts* (221-222)

Historically, of course, the mothers of Sri Lanka, like the mothers in Argentina, were disappointed. The many disappeared young men never returned to them, and were probably buried in anonymous mass graves. Often, it is not simply the death of a son that was painful to bear, but the very impossibility of mourning, as there was no body. Mourning rites provide comfort and closure for the families of the dead: they are performative acts of release. When there is no body, there is no certainty of death, and no way to mourn, and thus no eventual release from the painful attachment to this great loss. Against the backdrop of the thousands of disappeared bodies of dead youth in Sri Lanka, we find that art provides a way for us to perform the impossible. The stage presents us with a body to grieve, to bear witness to, and to bury.

By the time Astyanax is thrown off a high precipice in Troy, and his body is broken to pieces as he falls, his mother Andromache has already set sail. While his murder happens offstage, we see his dead body brought on stage upon Hector’s shield. He is a young child, approximately 12 years of age, killed only because he may be dangerous if allowed to live. His body is received by Hecuba, and the women of the chorus. They are given an opportunity to bury his small body. At the moment of burial, the women of Troy bring the garments of the dead to bury along with him. His burial thus symbolizes the ritual burial of the many Trojans who may not have received funeral rites.

These rags cover your naked body
As the blood flows from the different parts of your broken body
I will heal and care for you
In part, Astyanax’s burial also performs the impossible communal burial and mourning of the many who were killed and disappeared in the late 1980s during the JVP insurrection, the young Sinhala and Tamil soldiers killed over the years as they fought against each other, and the many young children the LTTE recruited as child soldiers. Finally, Hecuba and the women of Troy also mourn and ritually bury those that the victorious Sinhala state has made impossible to bury, the many thousands who were killed in the killing fields of the Vanni. The interment ritual on stage creates substance out of absence, as it symbolically buries those without bodies, the disappeared. The play performs this impossible act of mourning, and remembrance, and we as the spectators participate in a collective burial of the dead. As Antigone insists on burying her dead brother as a natural right, we, too, are given a body to mourn (Sophocles). As Ananda in Anil’s Ghost finds solace by recreating a peaceful face out of Sailor’s skull, The Trojan Women represents a monument by Bandaranayake to remember the dead and disappeared. Both novel and play provide us with examples of how to bear witness to the dead, how to remember them. This may not be through global narratives of human-rights triumph, but through embedded narratives, testimonies, and performances that pay close attention to the brutal consequences of ethnic war in Sri Lanka: Testimonies that are repeated and remembered in all their fullness as creative monuments for the dead.
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