

Mobility & Politics

Series editors: **Martin Geiger** (Carleton University, Ottawa, CAN), **Parvati Raghuram** (Open University, Milton Keynes, UK) and **William Walters** (Carleton University, Ottawa, CAN)

Global Advisory Board: Michael Collyer, University of Sussex, Brighton (UK); Susan B. Coutin, University of California, Irvine (US); Raúl Delgado Wise, Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, Zacatecas (MEX); Nicholas De Genova, King's College, London (UK); Eleonore Kofman, Middlesex University, London (UK); Rey Koslowski, University at Albany, State University of New York (US); Loren B. Landau, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (ZA); Sandro Mezzadra, Università di Bologna, Bologna (IT); Alison Mountz, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo (CAN); Brett Neilson, University of Western Sydney, Sydney (AUS); Antoine Pécoud, Université Paris 13, Villetaneuse (F); Ranabir Samaddar, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, Calcutta (IN); Nandita Sharma, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Honolulu (US); Tesfaye Tafesse, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa (ET); Thanh-Dam Truong, Erasmus University, Rotterdam (NL).

Human mobility, whatever its scale, is often controversial. Hence it carries with it the potential for politics. A core feature of mobility politics is the tension between the desire to maximize the social and economic benefits of migration, and pressures to restrict movement. Transnational communities, global instability, advances in transportation and communication, and concepts of 'smart borders' and 'migration management' are just a few of the phenomena transforming the landscape of migration today. The tension between openness and restriction raises important questions about how different types of policies and politics come to life and influence mobility.

Mobility & Politics invites original, theoretically and empirically informed studies for academic and policy-oriented debates. Authors examine issues such as refugees and displacement, migration and citizenship, security and cross-border movements, (post-)colonialism and mobility, and transnational movements and cosmopolitics.

Other Titles include:

Tanya Basok, Danièle Bélanger, Martha Luz Rojas Wiesner and Guillermo Candiz
RETHINKING TRANSIT MIGRATION
Precarity, Mobility, and Self-Making in Mexico

Liz Montegary and Melissa Autumn White
MOBILE DESIRES
The Politics and Erotics of Mobility Justice

Vicki Squire
POST/HUMANITARIAN BORDER POLITICS BETWEEN MEXICO AND THE US
People, Places, Things

Antoine Pécoud
DEPOLITICISING MIGRATION
Global Governance and International Migration Narratives

Nicos Trimikiniotis, Dimitris Parsanoglou and Vassilis Tsianos
MOBILE COMMONS, MIGRANT DIGITALITIES AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Chris Rumford
COSMOPOLITAN BORDERS

Also by Suwendrini Perera

REACHES OF EMPIRE: The English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens

ASIAN AND PACIFIC INSCRIPTIONS: Identities/Ethnicities/Nationalities (*ed.*)

OUR PATCH: Enacting Australian Sovereignty Post-2001 (*ed.*)

AUSTRALIA AND THE INSULAR IMAGINATION: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies

Mobility & Politics

Series Standing Order ISBN 978-1-137-34594-3 hardback

(outside North America only)

You can receive future titles in this series as they are published by placing a standing order. Please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address, the title of the series and the ISBN quoted above.

Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS, England

palgrave▶pivot

▶ **Survival Media:
The Politics and Poetics
of Mobility and
the War in Sri Lanka**

Suvendrini Perera

*Professor of Cultural Analysis, Curtin University,
Australia*

palgrave
macmillan



SURVIVAL MEDIA

Copyright © Suvendrini Perera, 2016.

Foreword © Sandro Mezzadra, 2016.

Afterword © Vasuki Nesiah, 2016.

‘Ten Songs: I’ and ‘Ten Songs: III’ by W.H. Auden. Copyright © 1936 by W.H. Auden, renewed. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

‘Ten Songs: I [Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky];’ and ‘Ten Songs: III: [Warm are the still and lucky miles]’ from W.H. AUDEN COLLECTED POEMS by W.H. Auden, copyright © 1976 by Edward Mendelson, William Meredith and Monroe K. Spears, Executors of the Estate of W.H. Auden. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited. Interested parties must apply directly to Penguin Random House LLC for permission.

All rights reserved.

First published in 2016 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin’s Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world, this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN: 978-1-137-44463-9

ISBN: 978-1-137-44464-6 PDF

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

First edition: 2016

www.palgrave.com/pivot

DOI: 10.1057/9781137444646

Contents

Series Editors' Foreword	vi
In Lieu of . . .	ix
Preface: The Location of the Aftermath	xi
List of Abbreviations	xvi
Introduction—Lethal Imaginaries of Nationalism: A Brief History in Checkpoints	1
1 Lines of Flight: Survival Media	19
2 Missing in Action: By All Media Necessary	33
3 White Shores of Longing: Castaway Stories and Nation Dramas	54
4 Accounting for Disposable Lives: Visibility, Atrocity and International Justice	73
5 Territory of Ashes: A Disjointed Unfolding	93
Conclusion—‘From What Has Happened to What Will Come’	112
Afterword	116
<i>Vasuki Nesiah</i>	
Bibliography	119
Index	131

Series Editors' Foreword

It was in 1985 that large groups of Tamils who had fled following the pogrom of 1983 in Sri Lanka, the immediate antecedent of the war that had just begun in earnest on the island, arrived in Britain. Their stigmatisation as 'illegal arrivals' was an early episode in the escalating campaign against asylum seekers and refugees in many parts of the world in the decades to come. As far as Tamil asylum seekers are concerned, this campaign has been particularly virulent in Australia since the late 1990s.

► *Survival Media* is 'located in the space-time of the aftermath' of the war in Lanka and is written from within the experience of the Tamil diaspora. Although the war did not strike the author 'with the same direct and ferocious violence that so many others have experienced', Suvendrini Perera calls it 'the determining factor' of her life. This gives an idea of the intensity of her engagement and writing. Words of poets, sounds, images draw lines of flight, which end up bringing the reader back to the scene—to the 'fatal shores'—of the war.

The colonial past of Lanka, as the author effectively shows in the introduction, intertwines in Lanka with a postcolonial landscape crisscrossed by 'lethal check-points of Sinhala nationalism', by the rise of a twin Tamil nationalism, by failed development and modernisation projects, which further nurtured the nativist imaginary and 'a favourite myth of Sinhala ethnonationalism: that of a Buddhist age of plenty before the arrival of Tamils on the scene'. A 'relentless ethnicization of everyday life at the levels of the social landscape' sets the stage for the war,

with anti-Tamil pogroms in 1958 and 1983 being matched by the rise of a Tamil nationalism that, in the 'exclusionary imaginary of separatism practiced by the LTTE', ended up refracting 'the Sinhala supremacism it took up arms against'. The massacre of Mullivaikkal in the last days of the war, the genocidal violence of the Lankan army, the 'callous indifference' demonstrated by the LTTE towards Tamil civilians, suicide bombings, and mass rapes build the 'horrorist' and 'necropolitical' thread that runs through the pages of *Survival Media*.

'This is not a story to pass on,' Toni Morrison writes in her novel, *Beloved*.¹ Seaming together 'then' and 'now', working the boundaries between 'there' and 'here', the distances and proximities, Perera stages in this book an intense dialogue with 'diasporic Tamils' who, like herself, have tried to cope with the trauma of the war. The logics of translation and entanglement that make up the diasporic, according to Stuart Hall,² shape the writing and the language of the following pages. The rhythms of hip-hop and rap in M.I.A.'s music, the images of films and the words of Tamil diasporic writers compose a chorus that iterates the experience of the war, while at the same time, in a syncopated and abrupt way, opening up spaces of precarious hope.

This is a book about the war in Lanka and the cultural politics of diasporic Tamils. But war and diaspora are here also mirrors in which the experiences of dispossession and abjection of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are powerfully reflected. Perera describes the hardening of citizenship law in the UK and Australia, the persistence of colonial violence that targets non-white subjects in the global cities, and the 'theaters of cruelty'³ that are migrant detention centers, through embodied instances which resonate in multiple ways with the scenes of war in Lanka.

And yet the politics of migration that is at stake in this book is not only a politics of dispossession and abjection. At the borders of the political, in the 'enactments of citizenship' performed by migrants and asylum seekers, new political habitations of the world emerge; the nation's 'impossible subjects' as Mae Ngai refers to them, persist in inscribing their mundane and stubborn lines of flight from the cage and misery of what is currently politically possible. 'It is on lines of flight that new weapons are invented, to be turned against the heavy arms of the State', write Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁴ The survival media analysed here are such weapons: weapons of the weak, part and parcel of what Chela Sandoval terms the 'methodology of the

oppressed' that is 'formulated and taught out of the shock of displacement, trauma, violence and resistance'.⁵

Survival Media contributes to our *Mobility & Politics* series by opening new angles on diaspora studies, as well as on the politics of borders and mobility. It is compelling reading, which navigates through memories and images of war, movements and practices of flight from desperate situations, and 'the soaring hopes and aspirations of those in flight'. Is this not the stuff many experiences of mobility are made from in the contemporary world?

*Sandro Mezzadra, University of Bologna,
Member of the Mobility & Politics Global Advisory Board*

*The Series Editors:
Martin Geiger, Carleton University
Parvati Raghuram, Open University
William Walters, Carleton University*

Notes

- 1 Toni Morrison (1987) *Beloved: A Novel* (New York: Plume), 274, 275.
- 2 Stuart Hall (2012) 'Avtar Brah's Cartographies: Moment, Method, Meaning', *Feminist Review* 100: 27–38.
- 3 Joseph Pugliese (2001) 'Penal Asylum: Refugees, Ethics, Hospitality', *Borderlands* 1(1), http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1_2002/pugliese.html.
- 4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press), 226.
- 5 Chela Sandoval (2000), *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press), 77–8.

In Lieu of...

Already I begin with a stutter, unable to find a proper name adequate to the geography I wish to invoke. *Sri* (auspicious, blessed, holy) *Lanka* invokes a natural unity, an island-nation, in this instance one that also claims divine authorisation through its adoption of the Sinhala character, *Sri*, in its title. The introduction of this character on the licence plates of cars and buses sparked waves of protest in the Tamil areas of the country in the 1950s, almost 20 years before *Sri Lanka* replaced the colonial name *Ceylon* in 1972. But this already gets me too far into the story. *Ceylon*, *Lanka*, *Eelam* (and a whole prior genealogy of names: *Taprobane*, *Serendib*, *where man alone is vile*, etc.) are all too partial, too fraught, too freighted with bad history. As a poor compromise, I hit on *Lanka*, *Illangai* in Tamil, as distinguished from the separatist homeland, *Eelam*, sought by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). *Sri*, both as a compressed ideology and an aspiration or injunction, a little like the 'Great' in Great Britain, is mostly dispensed with in the rest of this book, except when citing official documents.

Equally difficult to designate are the subjects of this most banal of academic conventions, the list of acknowledgements. Many colleagues, friends and family, from Lanka, Australia and elsewhere, diasporic and otherwise, have contributed to the making of this book. I have chosen, after much hesitation and indecision, to name none of them here. Taking inspiration from T. Shanaathanan's *The Incomplete Thombu*, I offer instead a personal and partial inventory of places and objects lost and found in the writing of this book. *The Incomplete Thombu*, a register or

inventory, is a collection of hand-drawings by Jaffna residents displaced between 1983 and 2009, the duration of the long war. The pencilled sketches trace floor plans of houses lost and left, spare maps that situate homes that no longer exist in relation to adjacent buildings and to trees or rivers, the essential landmarks of a reconstituted landscape of loss and desire.

In lieu of names, then, an affective and intellectual cartography: the cause-way at Elephant Pass shimmering in the sunshine; the winding ascent home to Hatton from Colombo via the Ginigaththena Road; my grandmother's house in Chundukulli, and a circle of half-remembered family compounds in Eechchamattai, Kopai and Chavakacheri; Chithankerni, from where they fetched fresh water for me when I would not drink from the salty well; a red and white garden; the Peretha Canteen at Vidyalankara; Wellawatte beach, whose sunsets I sometimes recall from my desk in Fremantle, Western Australia. Other places, artefacts and metonyms, too, enter this wandering narrative: the orange-brick haven of Melbourne in 1983; a black swan cresting the leaden waters; great wrought-iron gates off Amsterdam Avenue; the rooftops of occupied East Jerusalem; a buried history in lemon trees; boats aflame in mid-ocean. Always, the smoke of burning bridges.

* * *

Grateful acknowledgements for permission to quote from their works to Jean Arasanayagam, V.V. Ganeshanathan, M. Kannan, the French Institute of Pondicherry and Penguin India; special thanks to the family of the late Rajani Thiranaganama for allowing me to quote from one of her poems. A number of sections in the book have been published previously and are presented here in extracted or revised form: 'In Flight: Castaways and the Poetics of Survival', *Griffith Review* 47 (2015); 'Missing in Action: By All Media Necessary', *Borderlands e-journal* 11.1 (2012); 'White Shores of Longing', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 23.4 (2009); 'The Landscapes of Massacre' in *Torture and the Human Body*, ed. Shampa Biswas and Zahi Zalloua (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011). A version of Chapter 4 was presented as a keynote address at the Postcolonial Justice conference in Berlin in 2014, and published in different form in *Borderlands e-journal* 14.1 (2015). Some of the research for this book was made possible by grants from the Asia-Australia-Pacific Institute at Curtin University and the Australian Research Council.

Finally, my sincerely thanks to the series editors for the invitation to contribute to the *Mobility & Politics* series.

Preface: The Location of the Aftermath

Shortly after the savage end to the savage 30-year war in Sri Lanka in May 2009, a video filmed on a phone camera made global headlines. It showed the naked, blindfolded body of a man, hands bound, legs spread-eagled, being forced down into marshy ground. It is a healthy, whole, body, muscled and well-fleshed, nothing like the wasted civilians who emerged from the war zone in their scraggly, broken groups, night after night on our TV screens in the global north. This one is fighting fit: a soldier, most likely a member of the defeated Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). There is a palpable squelch as the splayed body is violently pushed down into the mud. Seconds later, the man shudders, and we sense, rather than hear, the convulsive impact of bullet on flesh. This reflex of an imploding body, experts will later testify, is impossible to fake.

Another blindfolded and bound body buckles and falls on the marshy ground, next to the first. An unseen voice jeers, *How they jump*: this is easy work. The hand that holds the phone camera swivels slowly to show several more bodies, all naked, solid, prone on the ground, anomalously brown against the fresh green of the grass, the silver shimmer of water.

The video is replayed many times over ensuing months on the BBC, CNN and on various Internet sites, while the Lankan government persistently denies its veracity. Finally, the UN Special Investigator on Extrajudicial, Summary and Arbitrary Executions declares that a

succession of experts in forensics, photography and the movement of the human body have all determined that it cannot be other than authentic (UN 2010).

Whenever I see this execution video (often in the months after it was first released), I think of fragments from a poem copied on the door of a women's toilet at the university where I work in Western Australia: *Between the coconut palms the graves are full/of ruined bones, of speechless death-rattles... the dead voices... the blue mouths freshly buried.*

What was going through her mind, the woman who carefully wrote down in English the 20 or so lines of a Spanish poem, standing in the unquiet anonymity of a toilet stall? What welling up of emotions, what compulsion of pain or outflow of rage, compelled her to copy out, or perhaps rewrite from memory, in deliberate black texta, these precise and terrible lines?

There are days when I scrutinise the faces of the students and co-workers who go in and out of our building. We are from many places here, other places of war and death, a community of elsewhere that we acknowledge only furtively in quick second glances and half-smiles. Pablo Neruda wrote *Los Dictadores*, published as part of his Latin American epic, *Canto General*, in the 1930s and 1940s. It was published in Mexico in 1950. Anyone could have copied out these lines of English translation, or transcribed them from memory on a toilet door some time in 2008 or 2009. Is it the one place she feels free from observation, a survivor of some murderous quagmire? Or is she someone who coldly wills herself there, in a field of mud and coconut palms? Did her nostrils swell as she wrote, filling unbearably with that mix of *blood and body, a penetrating/petal that brings nausea?*

There are many places, too many to enumerate, poisoned by the penetrating petal that betrays the pervasive, unspoken presence of hidden graves. But Lankans make special claims on Neruda, who was Chile's Consul in Ceylon from 1927 to 1929. He would describe Ceylon later as the place where he spent his bitterest hours and wrote many of his best poems. It is an intimate landscape that those lines call up, one unseen, unspoken, yet too well known:

The weeping cannot be seen, like a plant
 whose seeds fall endlessly on the earth,
 whose large blind leaves grow even without light.
 Hatred has grown scale on scale,

blow on blow, in the ghastly water of the swamp,
with a snout full of ooze and silence.

Pablo Neruda, *Los Dictadores*¹

This book is located in the space-time of the aftermath. As described further in Chapter 1, the term ‘survival media’ is one I adopt to encompass the expressive forms through which Tamil migrant, refugee and diasporic subjects engage with the war in Lanka from the location of the aftermath. For many such, perhaps like the woman I picture above, the war is often an event known both intimately and at a remove, geographically and temporally distanced and textually mediated. Their preoccupations, hesitations, questions and hauntings cannot but diverge from those of subjects engaging with the imperatives and complexities of a troubled present and future in the former war zone and within Lanka.

The invitation by the editors to contribute to the *Mobility & Politics* series was an opportunity to bring together a number of questions that have preoccupied me over the years: on discourses and technologies of state terror, on geographies of violence and the policing of borders, on the cultural politics of asylum seeking and diaspora, on the limits of international justice. A frayed and sometimes imperceptible thread running through this body of work has been the 30-year war in Lanka. Yet I do not claim, in the terms of Qadri Ismail’s evocative formulation, to have ‘abided by Sri Lanka’ over those long decades (Ismail 2005). The chapters that follow are perhaps more properly marked ‘of no fixed abode’. Crisscrossing geographical, theoretical and disciplinary locations, they are offered here as a set of always partial and provisional reflections, intensities and hauntings from a state of absent presence and present absence, of being ‘missing in action’ (see Chapter 2).

At the same time, this book is grounded in the politics that surround the continuing presence of asylum seekers and refugees from the war in the global north. In these destinations, a clear understanding of the war and its aftermath is obscured both by the punitive approach of receiving states towards refugees and by the shallow rhetoric adopted by many opponents of state policies. As the triumphalist impunity assumed by the Lankan state finds ready partners in governments, such as that of Australia, desperate to ‘stop the boats’ and prevent the arrival of asylum seekers at any cost, opponents of these repressive migration policies all too often uncritically ally themselves with the destructive politics of remnants of the LTTE. In adopting a rhetoric that, as Rajan Hoole pithily

puts it, capitalises on the ‘afterglow of the LTTE’, progressive and radical movements remain resolutely oblivious to long-standing and sustained critiques of secessionist nationalism from Tamil voices, both in Lanka and outside (2015, 142). Through these adoptions of LTTE narratives, refugees themselves are typecast or silenced, their complex histories overwritten.

In her carefully layered and detailed mapping of violence against women in the war, Sumathy calls for a shift in emphasis from ‘rhetoric with its eyes turned on international agencies to a narrative form where the emphasis is on the “within”’, insisting that ‘the specificity of the struggle is waged at the nation, not outside its bounds’ (forthcoming). This is a necessary caution directed at unrepresentative diasporics who wield political influence in the global north. Yet, despite the dangers posed by such unrepresentative interventions, the bounds of the nation are precisely what have been and continue to be at stake in the war, and ‘the nation’ cannot be a self-evident and taken for granted entity in the aftermath. Refugee, diasporic and migrant subjects from a range of political positions—the line between the ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ departures and even between ‘refugee’ and ‘economic migrant’ are not always easily drawn—remain keenly involved in and are mobilised by the struggles ‘at the nation.’ The ethico-political force of their engagement is not easily dismissed. Rather than an attempt to distinguish between subjects from the standpoint of a geographically bounded national space, I propose a heterogeneity of diasporic voices as subjects implicated, from differential and always partial locations, ‘at the nation.’ This book refutes the notion of a singular ‘Tamil diaspora’ as deployed by both the Lankan state and ‘the international community’.

Questions of past and present can no more to be taken as given than those of location, of inside and outside, in the chapters that follow. Five years after its conclusion, the war continues to unfold across borders and in time: in the troubled passages of refugees and those asylum seekers held in the limbo of immigration camps in the global north or in secret security detention and other forms of statelessness; in the (albeit partial and compromised) form of transnational investigations and inquiries; in the unfinished stories of the disappeared and the unmarked graves of the lost. Even as weeds and victory monuments sprout on former battlegrounds, the location of the aftermath signals that here there is no clear sense of an ending. The aftermath is the site of an inability to draw a line, where the space of survival for the future cannot be disentangled

from an ethical responsibility to that which cannot be simply someone else's past.

Note

- 1 The translation I am citing here appears on a number of websites, but I have not been able to find its published source. See http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/pablo_neruda/poems/15737.

List of Abbreviations

COIN	counterinsurgency
CSZ	Civilian Security Zone
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICEP	International Crimes Evidence Project
ICG	International Crisis Group
LLRC	Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NFZ	No Fire Zone
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
ULF	United Left Front
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UNHCHR	United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNITAR/UNOSAT	United Nations Institute for Training and Research— Operational Satellite Applications Programme
UNRC	United Nations Resident Coordinator
UTHR [J]	University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna)