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A Sense of Viidu

The (Re)creation of Home
by the Sri Lankan Tamil
Diaspora in Australia

Edited by

Niro Kandasamy

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Charishma Ratnam

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இலங்கையின் உள்நாட்டு போருக்குப்பின் வீடு எனும் உணர்வை
(மறு) உருவாகும் அவுஸ்திரேலியா வாழ் தமிழர்கள்

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FOREWORD

In the everyday Jaffna Tamil idiom with which I grew up, the word *viidu* (more phonetically, *vuudu*), was often paired with another term, *vaasal*. Usually translated as “house and home” or “house and property”, the alliterative phrase *viidu-vaasal* perhaps more closely evokes “household”: the tangible and intangible attributes, belongings and relations that make up a home. On its own, however, *vaasal* denotes a spatial feature such as a door-step, entry-way or threshold, an intermediate space between the world outside a house and its interior. *Vaasal* is that which distinguishes outer from inner, demarcates the familiar and domestic and orders the space between home and not-home. To lack *viidu-vaasal* is not only to lack a roof over one’s head, but to be more deeply disoriented, to have one’s boundaries displaced; it is to be profoundly unhomed in the world.

In the context of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic communities and individuals in Australia, the editors of this collection pose the question: *What are the different ways in which dislocation has shaped expressions of home?* As they discuss, experiences of dislocation and expressions of home are intimately bound up, the dimensions of the one defining the shapes and meanings of the other. *The Incomplete Thombu* by the artist T. Shanaathanan is an unbearably poignant, uncategorisable work that seeks to explore precisely these relational contours of loss and home. Remembered ground plans of their homes drawn by people displaced from the Jaffna region during the war are superimposed on to architectural plans of those same sites and are further layered with the respondents’ brief recollections of home and the artist’s own drawings in response to their stories. In this interplay of words and images—the embodied forms of the respondents’

own words and hand-drawings, the spare precision of the architectural ground plans and Shanaathanan's own visual commentaries—lost homes (including temples, orphanages, bunkers and farms) unfold in both their complex spatiality and their immateriality. They emerge as spaces that are at once deeply embodied and constitutively intersubjective. Trees, plants, household deities, animals and everyday objects, as much as family and neighbours, give shape and meaning to that which is lost and orient the speaker in space and time:

My grandfather's house is the house I always long for ... There was a medicine room in his house filled with all kinds of bottles and jars in unusual shapes with images of gods. In one of the rooms my grandpa used to keep popular magazines and books. I used to spend most of my time in that room. The room was also occupied by a hatching hen. People stayed at the house till late. At the time of their departure, looking over the palmyrah grove, I could see numerous stars dotted around the sky. (Shannathanan 2011, p. 62)

Bringing together multiple subject positions and approaches, this volume seeks to explore the ways in which diasporic Tamils who are refugees and migrants from the war shape their homes in Australia. As Ratnamohan, Krishna, Mares and Silove point out in their chapter, home encompasses both inner psychic space and anthropological place. The contributions explore both senses of home through lenses ranging from memoir and fiction to ethnography, cultural analysis and trauma studies, exploring specific diasporic formations ("the Tamil weekend") and groupings (Tamil-Australian activists, women displaced by the war). As the editors recognise, diasporic Tamils are not a unified or singular category. Dislocations over three decades of the war compounded and ramified to produce their own exclusions as well as new political and affective communities. Tamil-speaking Muslims expelled from the Jaffna peninsula in the early years of the war by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam constitute a distinct category of those displaced by the war. In Australia, Tamil asylum seekers and refugees caught in indefinite offshore detention test the limits of "diaspora" as an analytic term. New configurations like the latter in turn produce their own forms of cultural expression. Shaminda Kanapathi, effectively imprisoned by the Australian state on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, for more than six years, is a frequent voice for *Manus Alert*, an irregular form of digital telegram by which the men held on Manus

reach out to the wider world. Marking the sixth anniversary of offshore detention in July 2019, Kanapathi, who was in his early twenties when he sought refuge in Australia, made an impassioned plea in the national press calling for his long deferred future to be finally allowed to begin:

We are hoping against hope that this new government can finally recognise and admit this appalling waste of human life and offer us hope with positive action towards providing us with a future, a safe home to build our dreams. (Kanapathi 2019)

Edited by a collective of early career researchers, this volume itself represents a type of safe home for the aspirations and hopes of Tamil diasporic communities in Australia. As the work of a new generation of scholars of Lankan diaspora, *A Sense of Viidu* is to be commended as an inclusive, insightful collection of multifaceted reflections on new homes shaped by dreams lost, found and yet to be realised.

The routes we now retrace,
The boundaries and frontiers
Of our own making, efface the ancient
Markings of outdated maps,
Guiding once the archaic traveller.
And now, our own journeys.

Jean Arasanayagam, “Voyagers”.

Fremantle, WA, Australia
July 2019

Suvendrini Kanagasabai Perera

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This plant will never be what it once was nor will it ever again belong to one place alone. It will not grow into the shape it would have assumed in its native soil. Its flowers may assume an unnatural colour, the leaves may take altered shapes, and the branches a distinct body. Here it takes a new form, an unfamiliar face, it adapts, it changes, it blooms, it fades, it survives. (Balasubramaniam 2011, para. 3)

In the concept development for a dance performance entitled “An Unfamiliar Face”, Desh Balasubramaniam, a Sri Lankan Tamil living in Australia, uses the analogy of a plant to describe the evolvement of one’s identity in a new land, after arrival as an asylum seeker. The creative expression describes forced migration as a process of change and survival while noting that one is “not home” or in their “native soil”. This new reality of being “not home” in the sense of some original home forces change which means, in most cases, some combination of experiences of adaptation, marginalisation, reflection, growth and resilience. If we use Balasubramaniam’s conception of exile as a transformative process, then reconstructing home, in terms of being dislocated, can produce nuances that reveal the “altered shapes”, “distinct body” and “unnatural colour” that constitute the “new form”. This book aims to explore that “new form”, by examining the lives of Tamil people in Australia in the aftermath of Sri Lanka’s civil war that ended in 2009.

It would be misguided to argue a homogenous Tamil experience in Australia. The wide-ranging scholarly insights, empirical evidence and personal expressions underpin the messiness of home that we seek to amplify

through this book. In this vein, we begin the preface with a personal experience of one of the editors.

I was waiting at the signal lights on the corner of Elizabeth and La Trobe Streets in Melbourne's central business district on a winter's day in 2017, when I noticed a friend from the Tamil Refugee Council standing in front of me. Beside him was a man whose distressed appearance caught my attention. My friend explained that the man was a homeless Tamil refugee he had met at Southern Cross station a couple of days earlier. New to the city, the Tamil man, in his late twenties, was sleeping in a corner of the train station. He was also injured with a cut to his stomach. He had pawned his mobile phone for money and now only had a couple of dollars left. My friend was at a loss, as he was unable to convince the man to seek assistance. We continued walking behind the man to Bourke Street where he briefly stopped among the moving crowds. Seconds later, he disappeared into that crowd and my friend began chasing him. This experience, I quickly realised, was the first time that I had seen a homeless Tamil person in Australia. It unsettled my sense of home as a fellow Tamil living in Australia after fleeing armed conflict in Jaffna in the 1990s.

Ten years since Sri Lanka's civil war ended, the uncertain outcomes for Tamil people seeking refuge in Australia have become commonplace. As we write this Preface in May 2019, a Tamil family of four from Queensland, who have been locked up in a Melbourne detention centre for over 12 months, lost their bid for the High Court to review their asylum claims (Davidson 2019). This case echoes the ongoing plight of Tamils in search of safety to rebuild their lives, away from oppressive political regimes in Sri Lanka. The post-war context, during which the authors of this book conducted their work, remains a time of complex feelings regarding the transformation of the homeland and a sense of home. As emerging scholars, we arrived at this project and its theme of "home" through discussions about the need to interrogate, assist and inform the ongoing challenges that Tamils face in the post-war context.

Our ancestry from Sri Lanka brings another layer of purpose to this project. We, the editors, each carry with us the burden of reconciliation that the Sri Lankan and international governments speak of figuratively. As Tamil, Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Malay women, our voices are crucial to opening up new spaces for discussing refugee, migrant and diasporic meanings of home: How do we reconcile our colonial and war-torn past?

How does that past from a distant land shape our lives in Australia, and vice versa? The variety of perspectives in this edited collection mirror our Sri Lankan ancestry.

The legacy of war continues to cast a shadow in the lives of all Tamils. We do not seek to present a unified Tamil voice or a homogenous experience. Instead, we offer glimpses into the multiplicity of Tamil experiences and imaginations that historically and culturally construct the “post”-war context. Yet, despite the variety of experiences that are presented in the book, the representations of Tamil people have been, and continue to be, at stake in narratives of war. In Sri Lanka, non-government organisations such as the Adayaalam Centre for Policy Research, based in Jaffna, advocate against the ongoing oppression of Tamils in the North-East and highlight their resilience in the face of injustice. Similarly, in Australia, organisations such as the Tamil Refugee Council and Refugee Advocacy and Casework Service are key sources of legal and financial, among other, supports for Tamil asylum seekers and refugees.¹ While we do not seek to make a single political standpoint, we propose an approach that listens to the voices within the Tamil community whose personal experiences are always implicated in the political.

Finally, we gratefully acknowledge the book’s contributors without whom this collection would not be possible. They have enriched it in ways that exceeded our expectations, over the twelve chapters that follow. We would like to thank Vishal Dayanomel and Anushangi Weerakoon at Palgrave Macmillan for their editorial support. Also, thank you to the reviewers who provided useful feedback on our proposal. There were several colleagues, supervisors and friends who provided additional advice. Their encouragement and feedback are appreciated; thank you to Professor Suvendrini Perera, Padmani Sebastian OAM, Dr Selvaraj Velayutham, Professor Camilla Orjuela, Associate Professor Danielle Drozdowski, Dr Marilu Melo Zurita, Dr Louisa Willoughby, Professor Komla Tsey, Professor Joy Damousi, Dr Jordana Silverstein and Associate Professor Karen Soldatic. On a personal note, Niro would like to thank Dinesh and Praba, Niru would like to thank Al and the Perera/Navaratnam family, and Charishma would like to thank the Ratnam and Wijayasinha families.

¹The proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to the Tamil Refugee Council.

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A Note on Language in This Book

In acknowledgement of our individual contributor's proficiency in Tamil and Sinhala, the editors have reviewed their translations and transliterations into English and not attempted to modify them. There is not a standardised system of transliteration for either Tamil or Sinhala, and small variations in spelling and pronunciation exist. Thus we ask the reader to treat each contributor's interpretation and representation of language as they have explained it in the individual chapters.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Shankari Chandran is a lawyer in the social justice field. In 2017, her first two novels were published. Her historical debut, *Song of the Sun God*, was long-listed for the International Dublin Literary Award (2019) and short-listed for the Fairway National Literary Prize (2018). Her speculative fiction novel, *The Barrier*, was short-listed for the Norma K Hemming Award (2018). In 2018, both books were optioned for television. Shankari works for an international law firm, developing its law reform programme which aims to improve laws that affect vulnerable and marginalised people. She is the Create NSW Writer's Fellow for 2018/2019.

Niro Kandasamy completed her doctorate at the University of Melbourne in 2019. Her dissertation examines the role of memory in the life stories of young Tamil people resettled in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. She also undertakes research on the lived experiences of women with disability in post-armed conflict Sri Lanka. She was a student visiting fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre, the University of Oxford in 2018. Her works have appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2018), *Immigrants and Minorities* (2018), *Australian Social Work* (2017) and *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* (2017). Niro is a Senior Research Officer at the Brotherhood of St Laurence and teaches in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne.

Yalini Krishna grew up in Sri Lanka and migrated to Australia in her late adolescence. She works as a research assistant and interpreter on a range of

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Sarah Mares is an infant, child and family psychiatrist with an established clinical and academic interest in prevention and therapeutic intervention with families and young children with high and complex needs, including children in the child protection system, asylum seeking and refugee families, and Aboriginal children and families in remote communities. Her other professional interests include human rights and mental health and the wellbeing and conduct of professionals. Sarah is an experienced multidisciplinary educator, consultant and member of a number of expert reference groups.

Gary Paramanathan works at the intersection of arts, culture and community. Born in Sri Lanka and raised in Australia, Gary studied arts management, screen and media. He has written and directed a number of short films, including for *ABC iView*. He has written feature essays and recounted personal narratives including for *The Guardian*. Gary also runs a regular storytelling night focusing on People of Colour stories called *Them Heavy People*.

Paheerathan Pararasasingam (Para Paheer) is a human rights activist and author. He was born in 1978 to an impoverished Tamil family in Northern Sri Lanka. He was five years old when civil war erupted and engulfed the country for nearly three decades. He was forced to flee his homeland in 2007, boarding a tiny fishing boat bound for Australia. While in detention on Christmas Island in 2011 he began a pen-friendship with Alison Corke. Together, they wrote *The Power of Good People* published in 2017.

Nirukshi Perera received her doctorate in Linguistics from Monash University in 2017. Her thesis on language practices in a Tamil Hindu temple in Australia received the 2018 Australian Linguistics Society/Applied Linguistics Association Michael Clyne Prize for the best thesis on immigrant bilingualism and language contact. She is interested in how Sri Lankan languages work in societies—from language use by migrants in the diaspora to language policy and linguistic-related justice in post-war Sri Lanka. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of*

Multilingual and Multicultural Development and *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*. Niru is a research fellow in linguistic analysis at Curtin University.

Suvendrini Perera is a John Curtin Distinguished Professor and Research Professor of Cultural Studies at Curtin University. Her research areas are decolonisation, race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, refugee topics, critical whiteness studies and Asian-Australian studies. She is the author/editor of seven books, including *Reaches of Empire; Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies*; and *Survival Media: The Politics and Poetics of Mobility and the War in Sri Lanka*. She is co-editor of the anthology *At the Limits of Justice: Women of Colour on Terror*. She is the lead investigator on two Australian Research Council funded projects “Old Atrocities, New Media” and “Deathscapes”. She is a founding member of Researchers Against Pacific Black Sites.

Charishma Ratnam is a Human Geographer. Her research interests are in cultural geography, home-making and geographies of memory and identity. She focuses on how memory and identity intersect with home-making practices for migrants. Her doctoral research analysed these intersections among Sri Lankan refugees and asylum seekers resettling in homes in Sydney. Charishma employs visual and mobile methods including videography, photography and walking methods in the home with her participants to better understand their everyday routines, encounters and home-making practices as they resettle in host countries. Her research has been published in *Geography Compass* (2018), *Emotion Space and Society* (2019), *Urban Geography* (2019) and *Visual Ethnography* (2019). Charishma is a Research Fellow in Human Geography at The Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre at Monash University.

Lux Ratnamohan is a second-generation Australian Tamil. He works as a child and adolescent psychiatrist at the Rivendell Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Service in Sydney, Australia. He has an interest in cultural psychiatry, psychoanalysis and attachment theory. Lux is completing a PhD on intergenerational processes in Tamil refugee families at the University of New South Wales. His research has been supported by a Health Education and Training Institute Research Fellowship and a Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists New Investigator Grant.

Neeraja Sanmuhathan is a final-year PhD candidate at the University of Sydney researching post-traumatic stress and intergenerational trauma within the Sri Lankan Tamil migrant population in Sydney. This research aims to investigate the trauma experienced by the first and second generation of Sri Lankan Tamils who have been directly or indirectly impacted by Sri Lanka's civil war. She previously worked as a clinician at STARTTS (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors) for six years and is working as a senior clinician at Sexual Assault Counselling Service, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. Neeraja is also a lecturer at the University of Notre Dame.

S. Shakthidaran (Shakthi) is a Western Sydney storyteller with Sri Lankan heritage and Tamil ancestry. He's a writer, director and producer of theatre and film, and composer of original music. He was the inaugural Associate Artist at Carriageworks and is a recipient of both the Phillip Parsons and Kirk Robson awards. His most recent play "Counting and Cracking" with Belvoir and Co-Curious received community, commercial and critical acclaim at the 2019 Sydney and Adelaide Festivals and won seven Helpmann Awards. He is artistic director of Kurinji, is artistic lead at Co-Curious, and was founder and artistic director of CuriousWorks from 2003 to 2018.

Derrick Silove, MD is a scientia professor and Director of the Psychiatry Research and Teaching Unit at the School of Psychiatry, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

Sumugan Sivanesan is an anti-disciplinary artist, writer and researcher. His micro-publishing project *Theoretically Tamil* distributes texts and images from the margins of Tamil diasporas in the long aftermath of the civil war in Sri Lanka. His collaborative research project *Alex & I* (2013–2018) concerned the narrative of migration of the media figure and former Tamil refugee, Sanjeev "Alex" Kuhendrarajah. He holds a doctorate from the Transforming Cultures Research Centre at the University of Technology Sydney (2014). He was a post doctoral researcher at the Institute for English and American Studies (Cultural Studies), University of Potsdam (2016) supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). His website is www.sivanesan.net.