

Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts

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Abstract

This essay elaborates on the process of making the film *Lanka: The Other Side of War and Peace*. On the one hand, it discusses the intricacies of memory and reconciliation in the context of the Sri Lankan Conflict from the filmmaker's personal recollection. On the other hand, it provides a glimpse into the film's political aesthetics, camera work, protagonists, audience, and the conceptualization of the power of documentary film to open our collective imagination and create empathy. (abstract by editors)

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Film: <https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/article/view/19130/18645>

I shall not try to change anything that I think or anything that you think (insofar as I can judge of it) in order to reach a reconciliation that would be agreeable to all. On the contrary, what I feel like telling you today is that the world needs real dialogue, that falsehood is just as much the opposite of dialogue as is silence, and that the only possible dialogue is the kind between people who remain what they are and speak their minds.

Albert Camus

I completed and released the documentary film *Lanka — The Other Side of War and Peace* in 2006. The film, while tracing the history of overlapping conflicts in Sri Lanka, explores issues of memory and political violence. In course of making the documentary, I attended a fellowship program at the University of Brandeis entitled Brandeis International Fellowship (2003-2004): *Recasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts*. The fellowship aimed to explore the role of culture and the arts in promoting reconciliation among warring parties.

The following is excerpted from the transcript of a conversation conducted during the fellowship program. The conversation focused on my experience in the making of the documentary film *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace*. It was an attempt to reflect, to evaluate, and to theorize on the practice of documentary filmmaking: its ethical dimensions, its transformative potential, and its role in processes of dialogue and reconciliation. In the present day, as mass media is manipulated by vested interests, whether ideological, political or economic, information and entertainment coalesce into a spectacle, foreclosing any possibility for critical engagement with issues that impact our world and the people living in it. On the contrary, a documentary is an ever-evolving creative endeavor that has the potential for responding to events and situations in a nuanced and thought-out manner. A good documentary film is designed to tickle the critical sensibility of its viewers and to humanize its subjects by creating empathy for them. The objective is to create space for a sensible and meaningful conversation.

On coming to Sri Lanka

I traveled to Sri Lanka for the first time in January 2000. The tiny island in the Indian Ocean has about 22 million inhabitants (2022), with a majority of those, about 74 percent, being Sinhalese, and the rest mainly Tamil and Muslim. The year 2000 was a time of war and siege, fear and uncertainty, anger and bitterness—a time when checkpoints and bomb blasts were the norm. Coming from Indian-controlled Kashmir, which has experienced unmitigated conflict since 1947, it seemed as though I was shuttling between war zones.

I spent three months working in Colombo at Young Asia Television (YATV). YATV is an independent media house where more than a 100 young men and women worked together, apparently in a spirit of cooperation and friendship, to create television programs for Asian youth. Most of these young men and women were students taking

a break from their education to train as media professionals. Within a few days of my joining, I noticed that those speaking Sinhala and those speaking Tamil formed separate enclaves, did not understand each other's language, and seldom sat together. The Tamils were conscious of being a minority in a Sinhala-dominated country and huddled together. A few Muslims could understand and speak both languages, and they seemed to be moving from one group to the other. All this occurred before the backdrop of a violent ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils. For decades, the conflict has been relentless and bloody with large-scale killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and displacement—the scars of battle meted everywhere in the form of memorials and cemeteries. War widows and orphans bear testimony to the havoc wreaked on this island country.

Although Sri Lanka is a highly diverse society, the Sri Lankan state is unitary, wherein the Sinhala language and the Buddhist religion have a special status. The Tamils and the Muslims saw Sri Lanka as a Sinhala Buddhist country where the minorities had to compromise and accept the hegemony of a Sinhala majority. They each felt the pressure of being a minority and resented it. Being Tamil meant they could be detained, disappeared, arrested, and killed lawfully under the prevailing regulations for the prevention of terrorism.

Although most Muslims in Sri Lanka (about 7 percent of the total population) are Tamil-speaking, many of them can speak Sinhala quite well, and those in YATV were comfortable speaking English. It was interesting to see these young Muslims struggling to find their bearing within the Sinhala/Tamil polarization by aligning themselves with the majority Sinhalese while remaining conscious of their minority status.

During my three-month stay at YATV, I made the 10-minute video *We the Subjects*, which probed the polarization of identities in Sri Lanka. While conducting research for the video, it became evident that YATV reflected the larger reality of ethnic polarization in Sri Lanka. Although the Sinhalese, the Tamils, and the Muslims live in the same country and work in the same establishments, there are deep divisions that run between them.

I returned to Sri Lanka in April 2002 to work on a project in which I sought to research the prevalent structure of formal education in Sri Lanka and its role in shaping ethnic identities. Education in Sri Lanka is entirely state-controlled and segregated along ethnic and religious lines. This means that Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims are educated in separate institutions. Within themselves, these institutions are “islands of solitude,”

where students as well as teachers of each community assemble and group. They have a sense of being bound and committed to the identity into which they are born; they remain exclusive and insulated. Each “island of solitude” is identical in that they mainstream students into the dominant ideologies of their respective group. It was a revelation for me to learn that many students I spoke to, even those living in areas with mixed communities, had never interacted with students from communities other than their own.

In 2002 there were no checkpoints. The presence of armed personnel, which had been so ominous and alarming during my last visit, was minimal. Earlier that year, the warring parties signed a ceasefire agreement ending the two-decade-old civil war. A road known as the A9 highway, which links Sri Lanka’s war-torn North with the country’s South, was opened to civilian traffic after almost 12 years.

In January 2002, I met Lisa Kois, a lawyer and human rights researcher/activist from the United States, in Colombo. Struck by the potential of that moment in history, Lisa and I decided to take a trip together. So we packed ourselves and our equipment into Lisa’s pink jeep and set out to travel from the southernmost point of Sri Lanka to the northernmost, and to make a documentary film in the process. Eventually, two films were made, my *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace* and *The Art of Forgetting* by Lisa Kois.

On reconciliation

I feel that justice, or the perception of justice, is something that is imperative for reconciliation. Reconciliation may not be possible in a state of status quo. Something has to change; some transformation has to occur either at an individual or a political level for a process of reconciliation to take place. In this project, I interacted with people who have suffered a significant personal loss due to political violence. Having felt myself the extent of their pain and suffering, reconciliation seemed to me in such cases almost impossible. However, in the very process of articulating their experiences through narrative, ritual, memorializing, art, and other modes, those who have suffered tremendous pain and loss seek validation and healing, which are imperative for reconciliation.

There is also the question of distinguishing between community healing and individual healing. Individual healing is always personal and may or may not be dependent on

community healing. It's a lonely process that tends to become marginalized or even inundated by the politics of community reconciliation. Healing at a personal level need not be permanent; any incident or event can reawaken feelings of pain and anger experienced previously. While traveling and talking to people, I had a disturbing thought: By stirring up memories, were we not renewing palpable and intense pain that many had perhaps buried? However, I could feel that we enabled those we engaged with to talk about and vent their feelings. They spoke, hoping that their voices would reach outward. In fact, many of them spoke about their need to give expression to their emotions, which had not yet found a platform. They make a political decision to assert their sense of injustice and helplessness. It is a decision for their voice to be heard and transmitted and for an injustice suffered in some way to be conveyed with the hope that it may not recur.

On my work

I started making documentary films in the 90s. To be able to work as an independent documentary filmmaker is a struggle but even more so a privilege. It has given me an opportunity to explore issues and subjects that are of interest and important to me. For me, what is most valuable about making documentary films is that it has given me access to individual lives and situations, which is immensely educative and enriching. It's a vantage point that brings one to think and rethink, to make sense of what is happening around one, on one's own terms. To make autonomous choices and create a piece of work in a way one thinks appropriate is both an entitlement and a responsibility. Challenges and risks are part of a process and have to be negotiated as they arise.

As a filmmaker, much of my work looks at cultural overlaps and historical meetings. Culture or artistic expression is not derived from one pure source. Still, it is a living organism, fluid and in a state of motion—interacting and responding to cross-currents, in the process of synthesizing and regenerating itself. It is interesting to unravel these layers and work to present them in an aesthetic form that subtly and poignantly reveals them to those who engage with it. In a dynamic world, ideas, concepts, and thought processes travel and interact in a complex and indeterminate manner—specially in a world of internet connectivity. It happens in the subterranean folds, hidden in the masses. It is complex and not easy to fathom or analyze. As the saying goes, “when a butterfly flaps its wing the vibrations are felt in distant places.”

I did a series of films on *Amir Khusro*, the famous 13th century Sufi poet and scholar from the Indian subcontinent. Amir Khusro embodies a multi-dimensional human being engaged with his social milieu at multiple levels. As a poet and an artist, he represents the confluence or the syncretization of the two divergent traditions, Islam and Hinduism. By providing a critique of cultural insularity, the notion that culture is immovable and fixed in time and space, he explored the possibilities of art and culture to be a reconciliation process. Khusro is highly revered by both Muslims and Hindus on the Indian subcontinent, and thousands of devotees throng his tomb in Delhi every day.

On the making of *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace*

While doing my project on education and intercommunal relations, the idea for the movie first emerged. Then I was not then thinking of making a film, but I did have a camera and plan to use it for collecting and documenting my impressions while doing my research. After the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2002, areas hitherto inaccessible were opened for travel, and it seemed like a momentous time when things were ideally poised for a change. I began to see the contours of a film, but it was not well-defined. It was then that I met Lisa Kois, and we discussed the ongoing peace process in Sri Lanka and the possibility of doing a film about the A9 highway, which connects the country's North and South. For years it had been a zone of a bloody war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Parts of it were controlled by the LTTE and parts by the government of Sri Lanka. It was opened to civilian traffic after a peace accord had been signed, generating a lot of hope and optimism. It became the highway to peace. The idea of making a film on the A9 and collaborating with Lisa Kois, a human rights lawyer, seemed very exciting to me. I imagined a short film on our travel experience through an area opened after years of war.

During this period, Lisa was living in the South of Sri Lanka. She had worked on human rights issues in Sri Lanka during the period 1987-1989 when the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) led insurrection had plunged Sri Lanka into three years of violence and terror, during which thousands of Sinhala youth had been disappeared, tortured, and killed. We talked about the complete silencing of that period. The commission reports had implicated many politicians, military, and other officials involved in the ongoing peace process. It seemed ironic. My optimism and hope in the peace process was tarnished, and the complexity of issues confronting Sri Lanka came to the fore. I began

seeing the connections in the use of violence in politics for the perpetuation and assertion of power. An idea for a more significant film, which could traverse the South and the North, started to emerge: a film that could substantially contribute to the ongoing debates over peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.

Embarking on this film was different. I always used to have with me a professional cameraperson and a sound technician. Here we were limited to maybe two or three women. We had a high-end digital camera, a microphone, a tripod. We kept a low profile, minimizing the spectacle of a film crew.

But we kept coming up with more and more ideas. We were following a road. We were looking at life along the route. We were observing. We were filming. We were talking to people. We would go to places with stories to tell—stories of violence—and we would stop. We would sit. We would look around. We would start asking questions. These questions would lead us to other places, other people, and new stories to tell.

On memories and moments from the filming

Something that stands out in my mind is the beauty of the southern part of Sri Lanka and the sense of it being settled. The sea... the feel of the sea... even the smell of it. It has been there; it is continuing, it is beautiful. People are going along with their lives. Those lovely sights... the pottery shops. All these and much more. They come as images, as pleasing images. The sound of the sea rings nicely in my ears.

And then I think of the complete contrast to it in the North.

The A9 highway was both a physical and an emotional strain. This was a highway on which a bloody war had been fought for 20 years. The road was long and war-torn, arid, and dusty. I felt the strain of traveling with the camera as we kept stopping at regular intervals. The sun was scorching hot, and our bodies were coated with dust. We had to stay alert to our surroundings, which were littered with the remnants of war. There was devastation and destruction. Bombed, bullet-ridden, abandoned houses, ruins of temples and shrines, destroyed schools with small children in their white uniforms curiously peering out, rows and rows of headless and distorted Palmyrah trees on both sides of the highway. Signs of death—flak jackets, destroyed tanks, unexploded shells. After every half kilometer: warning signs for landmines, detonated explosives, and for some undetonated, as well. It was all highly volatile and overwhelming. My gaze kept shifting from one object to another—it seemed like a scenario recreated for a film.

There were many other travelers with different objectives looking at the same images. Along the way, at several points, many of them would stop and take photographs—it was war tourism and quite disorienting.

While driving on the A9 highway through the LTTE-controlled area, the militaristic and totalitarian nature of the LTTE struck me. There were visible signs of it in the form of large billboards displaying the tiger (LTTE emblem), the architecture of memorials, cemeteries, shrines, all fetishizing martyrdom. Everything was owned and controlled by the LTTE, even the food joints, guest houses and buses.

But there were also some beautiful moments in the North... when someone would just talk to us, when we would just enter someone's house. It's this thing about the camera. It opens up these spaces where you can have intense moments with people which are really wonderful. If there is one thing about documentary filmmaking that attracts me, it is this privileged access to people's lives. People just open up and are willing to participate in a sort of experience with you. I really love that. Those moments stand out.

Like Sansi Nona from Matara, in the South. I remember Sansi Nona. How could I not? She is such a force, such a tremendous force, there is something so very intense in the way she talks. Having deeply suffered state violence, she understood the destructive repercussions of suppressed memory. She spontaneously responded to our project. She took it. She owned it in a way. She shared it.

Interview: Sansi Nona from Matara, South Sri Lanka

It's not just my children who fell prey. I think in this Kottagoda area alone, the throats of thousands of children were slashed, and their bodies were put into sacks. I think the child next door to our house also was taken, he was 18 or 22. His neck was cut, and he was put into a sack. His mother is still crazy. This government should be [held] responsible for all these forms of injustices. I pray that in the future, our future generations don't have to face these types of injustices ever again. I cannot talk much more because I feel like something has happened to my chest. Stop here; something could happen to me; I have high blood pressure. When I keep thinking of these things, something might happen to me... That's all I have to say, I can't say anything more, my head is hurting, just thinking about it since morning. I had almost erased it from my mind previously, for the last ten or twelve years, but today it feels like everything has

been let out again. Because of that, I can't talk much. I remembered my child, my precious child. I pray that he may attain Nirvana. I will not talk anymore. My talk is now over. I hope that this does not happen to other children and to mothers like me. I hope that he's born as my son in all my future lives. They killed my child, who was a blessing to the house. They killed my best child, my best child. I always say curse them. I don't care five cents for anyone in the army because it was the Sinhala who killed the Sinhala. The Sinhala killed these Sinhala. I saw a boy who was forced to put his neck on top of the well and it was cut with a knife. I pray that such things will not be seen again. If I talk anymore, I don't know what will happen to me because I have pressure. I took medicine in the morning because I had to talk with you. I won't talk anymore. I'll stop here. I won't talk. (47:34)

You think of these things—war, violence, destruction. You read about them. You discuss them. But the experience is different. When you meet people, when you enter their homes, when you enter their lives, when you are actually seeing and experiencing them at that level, then these things don't remain abstract issues. Then it becomes the people, what they are experiencing, and nothing else matters. The impact of it is so real. State crises and crises of democracy, majority/minority crises, all these things seem to be intellectual debates. Still, the impact is on such a deep emotional level. Like that woman in the North who lives in a shell of a house. She's saying that only "the government and the Tigers know what the war is about. All we know is run, run, run, and we have no idea what it's all about. It's crazy." There is this saying or proverb, "When two elephants fight, the crops are bound to get crushed," which, in some ways, legitimizes it. You know, some people have to die. Some people have to be killed. It's just that these things happen. The striking reality of what that means, what it entails, that's something that has stayed with me.

On dilemmas, ethical and otherwise

People shared so much. They handed us these precious gifts—pieces of themselves, their stories, their pain. And we had to find a way to honor what they had given us. In some ways, I think an aspect of that honoring came through the questions we asked; or the mere fact that we were asking. The fact that we wanted to know, that we wanted to talk, that we wanted to listen and document. That alive and potent process, in itself, was essential and central to our objective of reaching out with the camera. It couldn't be fueled exclusively by the imperative of the final film. There was a certain level of

acknowledgement and validation conferred through our presence and our purpose. In the context of political violence, in the context of the abuse of state power, in the context of so much silent suffering, there is dignity in being able to tell your story. There is dignity in having someone listen.

There was always a choice that we presented. And we worked hard to create spaces in which people didn't feel coerced. But there was not always the time; there was not always the attention. And we didn't know what, exactly, the interpreters were saying—or how they were saying it. We were asking people to remember. Not just to remember but to remember intentionally and to narrate an act of violence perpetrated against them. We were asking people to engage in an intensely political act—they were consciously choosing not only to narrate an act of violence, but they were also exposing the perpetrators of the acts of violence—the perpetrators, who continued to wield power. In doing so, they were holding those accountable for the acts of violence committed by them. There is a personal decision involved when people speak about these things. They do make a personal choice, and in making that choice, they seek accountability and justice not just for themselves but for all those impacted by the acts of violence.

On the power of the medium

In talking about themselves, I imagine those who are victims of violence acquire agency; in a way, I think they are aware of it. Especially when they are talking to a camera. The camera does come with a certain amount of power. However, if you honestly explain your objectives and then leave the choice to the person to tell whatever they want to within that context, I suppose it's a mutual relationship at that moment. I think that, in a way, they seize that moment to express something that lies suppressed. In some ways, maybe it empowers them. It occurs at that moment, when they are narrating their stories to the camera. I think they somehow willfully appropriate the camera's power; they acquire agency. It gets them out of their victimhood in a way. Once the film is made, the agency's power has been transferred there, into the film. When you say it's a powerful film, what do you mean? Essentially, the power of this agency is reflected in the movie.

Then there is its audience. Even if it's only for the period during which the film is watched and the viewer participates in that moment, I think there is a transfer. This means, in a sense, that the camera has empowered the subject, and then you hope

that the viewer feels impacted and empowered by the story. Empowered enough to communicate the story. I believe that one creates some sort of space and an understanding, perhaps, in people's minds. I think that, within that moment, perhaps, something happens, even in terms of just watching. You are putting something out there and trusting that something will remain. I suppose this is what one hopes for, aspires to with filmmaking. It becomes a medium to transfer a message or power from here ... to there. It's a moment-to-moment transfer. I guess that is what, in some way, justifies the camera's intrusion into people's lives.

On being an outsider

At some level, I'm not sure I understand, or for that matter, accept, the dichotomization of insider and outsider. You are one or the other. It is crucial to locate oneself in one's context and examine and understand one's subjective position within that context. And I do believe that one's location must inform one's choices about whether and how one engages within that context. But that position, that location, is not static. It's subjective. It's relational. It does not exist—I do not exist—outside that ever-changing context. At any given moment, I am neither insider nor outsider, and I am both. I do not speak Sinhala. I do not speak Tamil. Does this make me an outsider in Sri Lanka? In most ways, yes. But spoken language is merely the most obvious indicator of belonging. But it's not as simple as that. Language is more than the words that we speak. Language is the ability to understand and read unspoken signs that define community—a silent dialogue—the dialogue in which one engages and interacts in making films. Silent dialogue sounds rather dramatic, but there may be something to it. There is exchange. There is sharing, listening, and caring, which is simultaneously intuitive, conscious, and deliberate.

In certain situations, the insider becomes an outsider: traitor, terrorist, informant, fanatic, conspirator, rebel, collaborator, and s/he is killed or imprisoned or disappeared. What does this do to the notions of insider and outsider?

On the intention of the film

I keep coming back to Alex Boraine's wonderful phrase, "the intentional act of remembering." I think that was and still is the intention... to do that ourselves, and to ask others to do that with us.

The film is largely an act of recalling and remembering decades of violence in Sri Lanka by bringing the warring communities face to face with their own practice of violence. In doing so, our objective is to facilitate a conversation in the public arena, within and between communities separated by geographic, linguistic and ethnic differences, and to stimulate a discussion and dialogue between parties to the conflict.

In the film, we wanted to complicate the rosy and relatively simplistic notion of peace that hovered around us in 2002. As hopeful as it was, there was something unreal, and at times disingenuous, in the discourse about peace in Sri Lanka. Anyone who offered a critique was labelled a spoiler. There was intense pressure to conform and not to rock the peace boat. And yet, there was so much to critique. There were so many voices that were not being heard. There was so much that had not been addressed about the past. How do you make peace in situations marked by deception and hypocrisy?

Dialogue has been a crucial motivating factor in this work. This dialogue happens on at least three levels. The first is the dialogue between the people we worked with and ourselves. This entails the process of describing our work to them, the way we frame the issues, etc. The fact that we say *we think these memories are important. We believe they deserve space in the public debate.* These are all part of the exchange. The stories that people tell us in response are—first and foremost—a level of dialogue. The second dialogue is between the filmmaker—as embodied in the film, and the various audiences who will see the film. The final level of dialogue, we hope, is the dialogue that takes place *afterward*. Some of this will be facilitated dialogue in controlled settings. Some, we hope, will occur in people's homes, in social settings, on the bus, at school, maybe in the press... Who knows. We just want to get people talking—really talking.

Post script

In April 2003, the peace talks between the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE broke down, and the peace process stalled. In July 2006, after a fragile four-year ceasefire, the war resumed. It formally ended on May 18, 2009 with the killing of the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. The Sri Lankan Army gained control over the entire territory held by the LTTE in the North and East. Tens of thousands of civilians are believed to have been killed in the final months of the battle. The government has denied allegations by the U.N. and human rights groups of committing war crimes and abuses

during the final offensive against the Tamil Tigers and ignored international demands for an independent investigation.

After the war, I travelled to Sri Lanka in 2015. Much has changed. The 2004 tsunami devastated large parts of the southern coastline. The LTTE has been vanquished, and post-war reconstruction reshaped much of the country.

After all these years, traveling on the A9 highway from Colombo to Jaffna was surreal. The highway, rebuilt at a tremendous cost, is completely transformed. All traces of years of strife are erased, and a pall of normalcy was deliberately left hanging over it. The changes are most dramatic on the 100-kilometer stretch that runs through the Vanni, the site of many bloody battles for over 25 years. Along with the Tamil Tigers and tens of thousands of civilian lives, every memorial, every cemetery, every shrine along the road is destroyed. It was frightening. The road on both sides overlooks flat land. What has happened to the slashed Palmyra trees with bullet holes in them?

Nothing of the war remains there, having been entirely dissolved in asphalt and paved with pebbles and stones. Except the huge water tank scarred by bullets—a poignant reminder of the deep scars in the collective body of the Tamil survivors. After decades of displacement, death, and destruction, they struggle to put together the shredded threads of their lives. As new episodes of violence begin to surface, large parts of the past become erased from the public domain and public discourse. As Milan Kundera says, “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” The film *Lanka – The Other Side of War and Peace* remains a valuable account of personal narratives, images, spaces, and places linked to Sri Lanka's long history of violent conflict, which is being officially and deliberately obliterated from public discourse.