Gihansa Galhenage

2025

where do we go

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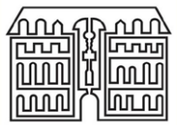
by Gihansa Galhenage
Cape Town, South Africa, 2025



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Dedicated to my ammi and thathi

Introduction

The history of Sri Lanka's tea plantations is intrinsically woven with the legacies of its colonial past. These verdant terrains are imbued with narratives of an enduring legacy from which the British colonial governance built to extract economic gain from the natural resources provided by the island. As tea cultivation expanded, the British entrepreneurs capitalised on the emerging trade and branded it under Sri Lanka's colonial name Ceylon, essentially marking the establishment of Ceylon Tea. In addition, the British had introduced many Eurocentric ideologies and hierarchical structures within the plantations which formed violent ethnic tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority. Large numbers of oppressed caste Malaiyaha Tamils (Up-country Tamils) were brought from Southern India as indentured labourers to work in the island's central highlands. Despite the Up-country Tamils' integral and significant contribution to the country's economic pedestal, they continue to be one of the most ostracized communities living in the marginalised state of Sri Lankan politics. Sri Lanka gained independence from the British Colonial rule on the 4th of February 1948, one of which the first acts of the government was the Ceylon Citizenship Act, which denied citizenship to the majority of the Up-country Tamils. This marked the beginning of post colonial resonances where access to citizenship and rights were filtered through ethnic identity, furthermore these tensions ultimately led to the Sri Lankan civil war of 1983, which lasted from 1983-2009. My identity as a Sri Lankan, Sinhalese woman was rooted in my daily consumption of tea which encouraged me to delve into how my identity and Sri Lanka's global identity have been shaped by the history of tea.

My praxis of visual and conceptual interventions stands as critical articulations of the collective imaginaries shaped by histories of subjugation and migration within Sri Lankan tea plantations. My primary material, used teabags, function as both a literal and metaphorical conduit for the colonial and post colonial histories of Sri Lanka. Through this material, I embody Sri Lanka's deep entanglement with colonial ideologies whilst also depicting the significance of tea as both commodity and national identity. What is ordinarily discarded becomes a vessel of memory and a site where histories are reviewed and contested.

The sculptural form of the suitcase recurs throughout my practice as a central metaphor. The suitcase is an object of transit, associated with migration, travel and temporality. The Up- country Tamils lives have been dictated and defined by mobility from forced migration, repatriation, and internal ethnic conflict. These suitcases constitute a state of perpetual movement and unsettling, yet they simultaneously exist in a paradox of impracticality. Several of these suitcases are transformed into theatre scapes that house the intricacy of shadow puppetry. Within these ephemeral objects, shadow puppetry becomes an act of memorialisation and remembrance of suppressed histories. These shadow puppets are materialised through integral accounts of research and archival material; therefore, memory operates as a point of access where each source embodies a distinct register of remembrance. My body of work operates as a space for representation and critical reflection of the ongoing conflicts in my country, further interrogating how the oppressive systems of marginalisation continue to shape how memory, labour and identity are continuously performed and reimagined.

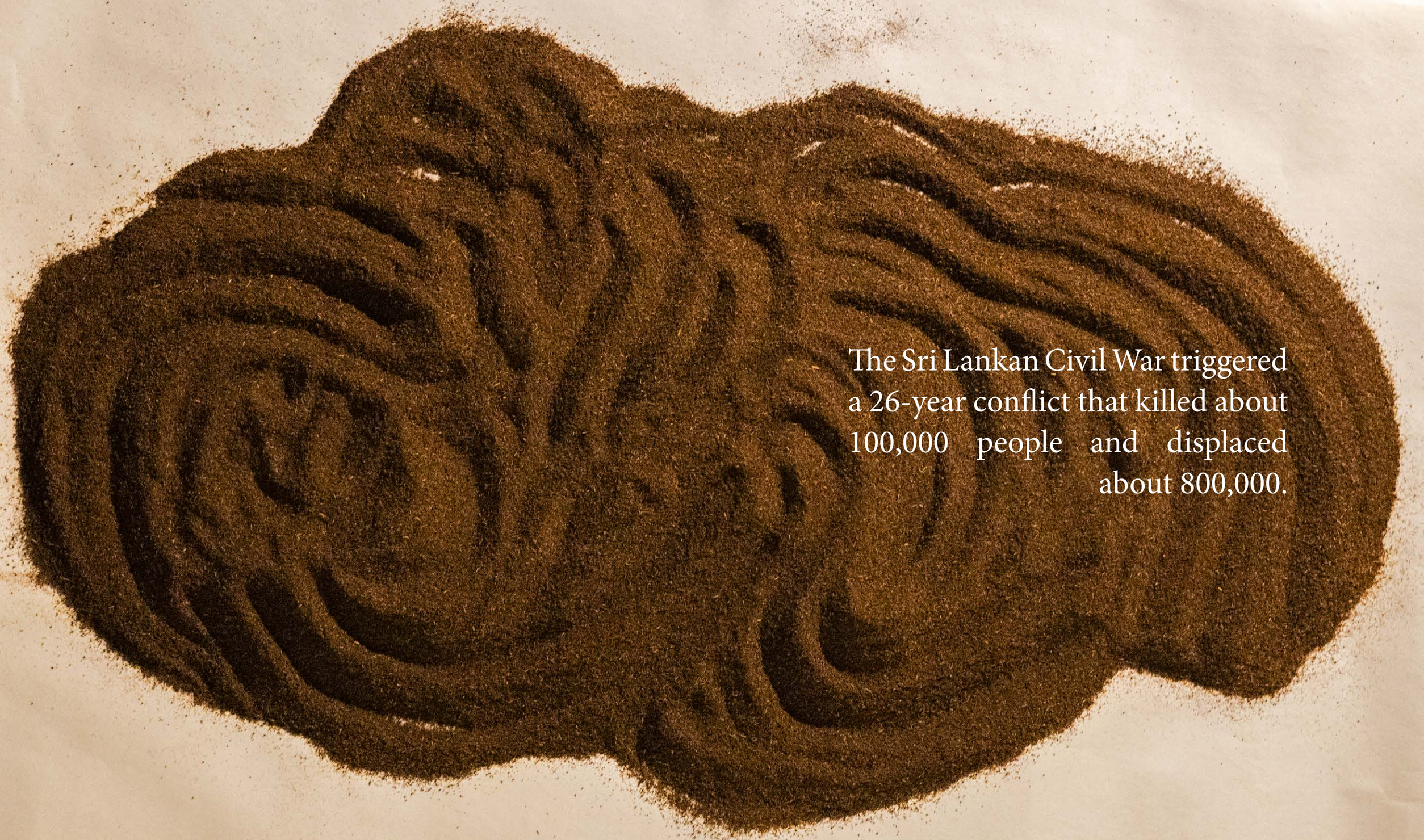
02

The Aesthetics of Memory, Labour and Identity in Postcolonial Sri Lanka

The British Colonial legacy over Sri Lanka had the most significant impact on the country's history through the introduction and cultivation of the cash crop, tea- a plant that later defined Sri Lanka's global identity. The British empire began its first successful commercial planting of coffee which later collapsed due to a fungal attack. This called for an alternative crop to replace the downfall of the industry. The first commercial planting of tea was established by a Scottish man, James Taylor in 1867 in the central highlands of Sri Lanka where tea would grow best in the highest elevation. Gill Juleff states that the British "transformed the inaccessible and pristine natural environment of the central highlands of Sri Lanka into the manicured and gentrified plantation landscapes of today (Juleff, u.d). Moreover, the foundation of the tea industry rested on the infrastructure set up by the coffee plantations in the 19th century. Being a high-maintenance crop, the history of the labour force of the Sri Lankan plantation worker marked an important canon event in Sri Lankan history. Following the Slavery Abolition Act.1 (1833), the British were unable to find workers for the plantations. As Salam and Maynmai write, "the Sinhala peasantry owned and cultivated their own land, and were unwilling to work on the new estates for low wages (Salam and Maynmai, 2024). Therefore, large numbers of oppressed caste Malaiyaha Tamils (Up-country Tamils)2 were brought from Southern India as indentured labourers to work in the island's central highlands. Despite the Up-country Tamils' integral and significant contribution to the country's economic pedestal, they continue to be one of the most ostracized communities living in the marginalised state of Sri Lankan politics. The power structures created by the British were foundational to colonial governance to create hierarchies and further adopt caste systems that enforced clear status distinctions. These hierarchical foundations created under colonial rule would then continue to reverberate long after Sri Lanka gained independence resulting in systemic oppression. Ivana Wijedasa expands on this and writes:

Colonialism has created beliefs about racial superiority and identity as well as contributed to the creation of distinct social classes, which resulted in the rise of two opposed nationalism in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese people and the Tamils (Wijedasa, 2022:13).

Sri Lanka gained independence from the British Colonial rule on the 4th of February 1948, one of which the first acts of the government was the Ceylon Citizenship Act, which denied citizenship to the majority of the Up-country Tamils. The consequences of this Act as Kalupahana Senevirathne, Annette Quayle and Andrew West describe meant "the descendants of Indian-original Tamils who were born in Sri Lanka became stateless, as they were not recognised as citizens by either India or Sri Lanka" (Senevirthne et al., 2025:135). This exclusion was not merely bureaucratic but profoundly social as the Up-country Tamils were viewed as 'others'. While some were repatriated, many remained in a condition of legal and social precarity. This marked the beginning of post colonial resonances where access to citizenship and rights were filtered through ethnic identity, furthermore these tensions ultimately led to the Sri Lankan civil war3 of 1983, which lasted from 1983-2009.

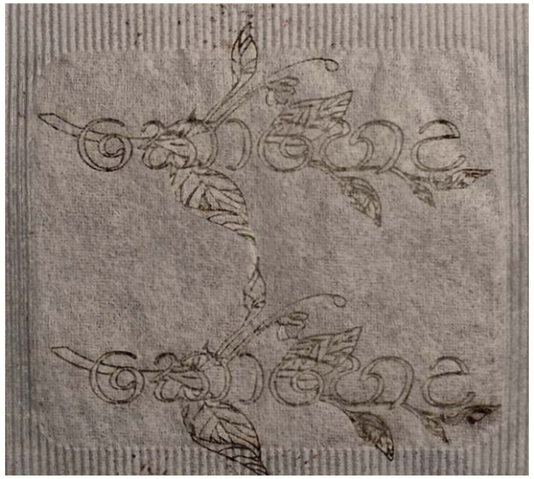


The Sri Lankan Civil War triggered a 26-year conflict that killed about 100,000 people and displaced about 800,000.

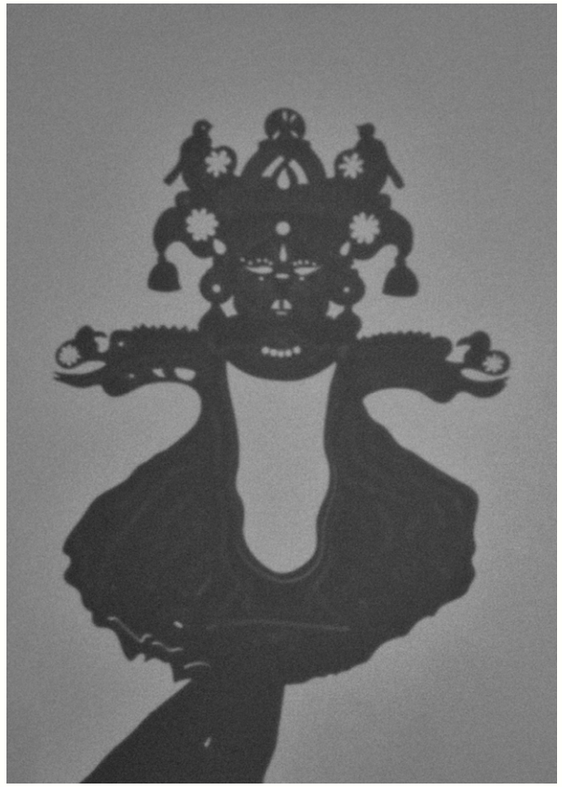
03

Studio Praxis

My studio praxis engages directly with the material and symbolic legacies of the tea plantation as a site of colonial labour and ethnic segregation. As a Sinhalese Sri Lankan woman that was born and raised outside of Sri Lanka, I did not grow up with much knowledge of the Sri Lankan civil war. My Sri Lankan identity was rooted in my daily consumption of tea which encouraged me to delve into how my identity and Sri Lanka's global identity have been shaped by the history of tea. However, through producing my 3rd Year's body of work that dealt with the unethical living conditions of plantation workers, I began to unpack the ways I unconsciously absorbed generational biases as a Sinhalese person. Ivana Wijedasa reflects of their experience as a Sri Lankan immigrant and states, "I have been exposed to narratives of the Sri Lankan war that depict the Sinhalese as protectors of a land being infiltrated by Tamil terrorists (Wijedasa, 2022:1). These narratives of dominant discourse were the reasons I viewed Sri Lankan Tamils as different, thus exposing the generational impact of rooted segregation. My primary material, used teabags, function as both a literal and metaphorical conduit for the colonial and post colonial histories of Sri Lanka. My main medium allows me to embody Sri Lanka's deep entanglement with colonial ideologies whilst also depicting the significance of tea as both commodity and national identity. By repurposing used tea bags, I attempt to narrate the legacies of forced labour embedded within them. What is ordinarily discarded becomes a vessel of memory and a site where histories are reviewed and contested. The sculptural form of the suitcase recurs throughout my practice as a central metaphor. The suitcase is an object of transit, associated with migration, travel and temporality. The Up- country Tamils lives have been dictated and defined by mobility from forced migration, repatriation, and internal ethnic conflict. These suitcases constitute a state of perpetual movement and unsettling, yet they simultaneously exist in a paradox of impracticality, thus the suitcases reinforce dual symbolism. These sculptures are constructed by metal round bars to form frames that are welded together to give the overall shape of a suitcase. They are then enclosed by panels of sewn teabags that are stitched around the borders with the remaining details of the suitcase also constructed from teabags. The suitcases are trademarked with a logo written in Sinhalese, 'Koheda' that translates to 'where to'. It is a phrase that echos both a literal and metaphorical question of movement.



A few of the suitcases are transformed into theatre scapes that house the intricacy of shadow puppetry. Shahid Amin's book Event, Metaphor, Memory 1995 is a seminal text in postcolonial historiography that interrogates how historical incidents are mediated and remembered. Amin's central argument is that history is not a neutral record of facts, but a discursive and ideological act shaped by dominant narratives (Chaturvedi, 2019:130). This framework allows me to understand how shadow puppetry in my practice works as an act of memorialisation and remembrance of suppressed histories. These shadow puppets are materialised through three integral accounts of research: written histories of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, my mother's fragmented recollection of the brutalisation of the Tamil civilisation during her teenage years, and the novel Brotherless Night by V.V Ganeshananthan. Through these accounts, memory operates as a point of access where each source embodies a distinct register of remembrance. By utilising distinct imageries of violence, I create silhouettes similar to that of temple murals to form a fluid narrative and to interrogate historical and ongoing constructs of visibility and erasure.



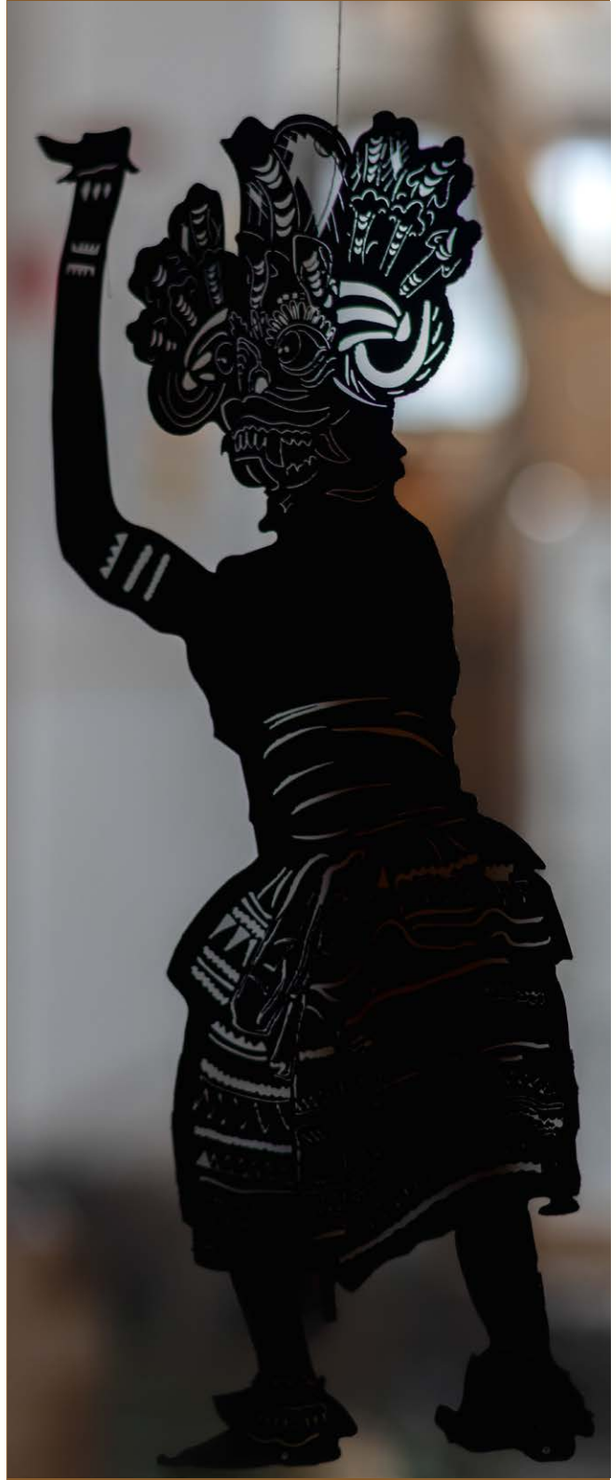
04

Memory as a Point of Access

By working with my mother's trauma-blocked recollections, my practice acknowledges the subjective and intergenerational transmission of memory. This functions as a form of postmemory. Coined by Marianne Hirsch, postmemory as Mrinalini Bondyopadhyay describes, "is the memory of events we did not experience; circumstances and situations which precede our birth. We might have not lived through them, but they leave a mark in our lives" (Bondyopadhyay, 2024). Postmemory functions as an imaginative mediation where projection is a process to construct a way into the inaccessible past. It is an emotional transmission that encapsulates forms of empathy that re-frames personal archives. Ganeshananthan's novel is set during the Sri Lankan Civil War and follows a 16-year-old Tamil girl who finds herself radicalised with the growing political tensions and the violence against Tamils. The novel shows how violence shapes identity and how storytelling becomes a way to mourn and remember when official accounts of written history fail to acknowledge the narratives and experiences of those who were violated. The novel's explicit depictions of violence elicited a visceral response, allowing me to engage with the characters' experiences emotionally. Brotherless Night has allowed me to imbue connotations of empathy in my work by having some of my suitcases embody an anthropomorphic shape, such as a child's backpack. By allowing the viewer to empathise with an object of familiarity, I am able to encapsulate the emotional weight of the riots of the civil war and the masses it had affected. By utilising memory as a point of access, my sources become narrative forms that mediate the war. Merin Raj quotes, "It is possible to explore the 'event' per se only by approaching it through a narrative form, because events are never accessible outside the process of their narration (Raj, 2011:11). This means the Sri Lankan civil war as an event is never directly accessible through historical facts, but the study of how the event is represented, and transformed through discourse. Moreover, shadow puppetry acknowledges that the war cannot be depicted as it was but can be remembered through stories told and re-imagined.

The ideological framework of my shadow puppets is influenced by the practice of Kara Walker, whose silhouette installations critically examine race, memory, and historical trauma. Walker utilises black cut-paper silhouettes and transforms these

iconographies into a confrontational narrative space. Veronica Bremer states, “Her silhouettes become a method of dismantling the landscape of American history- the idyllic, pastoral visions of the American dream are interrupted by grotesque, disturbing representations of racial violence, exploitation and dominance” (Bremer, 2025:3). This means that the viewer is forced to face the uncomfortable truths embedded in the legacies of slavery. My work situates these ideas within Sri Lanka’s post colonial context, where memory functions as a shifting trace and delineates the line between visibility and erasure. The suitcases act as vessels where personal and collective histories can be re-enacted and imagined.



“ memory functions as a shifting trace and delineates the line between visibility and erasure ”

05

'Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka' Daniel Bass

Daniel Bass' book Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Up-country Tamil Identity Politics provides a critical framework for situating my practice within the histories I draw upon. Bass contests essentialist thinking by arguing that identity is not fixed in Up-country Tamil communities but is rather performed and negotiated in response to systemic marginalisation. Bass focuses on issues of agency, citizenship, displacement and emplacement to enunciate the formation of a diasporic community that facilitated the development of the identity of Upcountry Tamils. Their negotiation of ethnic identity unfolds in everyday practices which would include a determined set of rituals, values, and mythic stories that people will collectively establish and affirm as a sense of belonging (Younger, 2010:7). Bass states that identity within the Up-country Tamil community is not static nor monolithic but are rather developed complex strategies to reconfigure a sense of belonging within the margins of Sri Lanka. In his book, Bass writes, "in order to emphasise their political belonging on the island, Up-country Tamils tended to stress their current connections with Sri Lanka much more than their historical links with India or other plantation diasporas" (Bass, 2013:48). These were responses to the exclusion from the nation-state where emphasising Sri Lankan identity was a form of resistance to being outcasted as foreign or 'others'. An integral aspect of my artistic practice is the use of repetition. The performative language of repetition and laborious sewing imitates the monotonous labour of a plantation worker where each stitched teabag is synonymous of the endurance of repetitive picking in the fields. The act of repeatedly stitching tea bags becomes ritualistic and within Daniel Bass' context, the slow meditative ritual conforms to a sense of identity within the scope of labour. In Event, Metaphor, Memory, Shahid Amin also speaks about affirming identity not in the grand scheme of events, but in routine and overlooked practices of labour. The idea of repetition manifests into a myriad of suitcases constructed and stacked on top of each other to further contextualise the numerical amount of people that were displaced. Bass' ethnographic account of everyday ethnicity becomes a theoretical lens of how labour functions as a lived practice through which people articulate memory and community. Qadri Ismail's notion of minority perspective from his book Abiding by Sri Lanka further extends Bass' analysis of Up-country Tamils.

The minority perspective is argued to be a conceptual space and epistemological stance that resists the homogenising logic of majoritarian nationalism This means viewing the minority from the margins and to read the nation from the position of those excluded or made invisible by nationalist discourse. John Rogers claims that "for Ismail peace is more than the absence of violence. It also requires the dismantling of power structures" (Rogers, 2006:849). Ismail's argument provides structural dimension to Bass' work as it reveals how everyday negotiation becomes a mode of resistance. This is synonymous with my body of work as repetition transforms a mundane, laborious gesture into a political statement.

"So,
here you are
too foreign for home
too foreign for here.
never enough for both."

-Ijeoma Umebinyo

Bass' notion of Diaspora Next door is crucial to understanding the complex position of the Upcountry Tamil community in Sri Lanka. Traditionally, the term diaspora refers to communities living outside their homeland, often separated from its geographic place of origin. However, Bass argues that Up-country Tamils embody a unique form of diasporic identity. This entails to having lived in neighbouring nation-states for generations whilst being geographically near the homeland but to Bass this ideology of diaspora next door highlights the power relations between the homeland and the new home. Bass claims:

In introducing this concept of diaspora next door, I argue that the key elements for analysing a community as part of a diaspora are not solely the distance traveled but also the ways they form attachments to both their homeland and new home (Bass, 2013:48).

This framework helps understand the notion of emplacement where a community is simultaneously integral to the economy of the country and is also, in all irony, deliberately excluded from the place they inhabit. The sculptural formations of suitcases decode metaphors of constant mobility and the condition of unsettled belonging. The suitcase exists in a state of paradox where they are simultaneously rooted and uprooted, functional and momentary. Bass' insistence on identity as dynamic, contested, and lived in the everyday allows me to frame my praxis not only as a reflection of history, but as critical enactment of how belonging continues to be constructed. Belonging is also constructed through reclaiming the narratives of the oppressed people whose stories were told for them. The nature of shadow puppetry in my practice contests the dominant and judicial narratives by rendering the unseen and unheard visible. Bass's theoretical insights inform and actively shape the conceptual underpinnings of my work by visually encapsulating the negotiations shaped by histories of marginalisation.

Conclusion

My artistic practice is positioned within the historical and political frameworks of Sri Lanka's tea plantations, exploring how materiality and performance can enact critical engagement with labour, migration, and ethnic marginalisation. My work materialises histories that are often overlooked, misunderstood and are less globalised in the face of media. My praxis functions as a visual framework for negotiating identity, where memory and repetition operate as central strategies for articulating layered and complex narratives. By critically engaging with Daniel Bass' Everyday Ethnicity in Sri Lanka, his articulation of fluid identity and diaspora next door, illuminates the dynamics of belonging and exclusion. My work translates these theoretical insights into material forms furthering reframing my praxis as a memorial site. My body of work operates as a space for representation and critical reflection of the ongoing conflicts in my country, further interrogating how the oppressive systems of marginalisation continue to shape how memory, labour and identity are continuously performed and reimagined.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Acknowledgments

This body of work is dedicated to the memory of my father.

To my mother, thank you for always being my guiding light and biggest supporter. To me, home is always where you are.

To my sister and brother, I love growing through life with you- thank you for everything you do for me.

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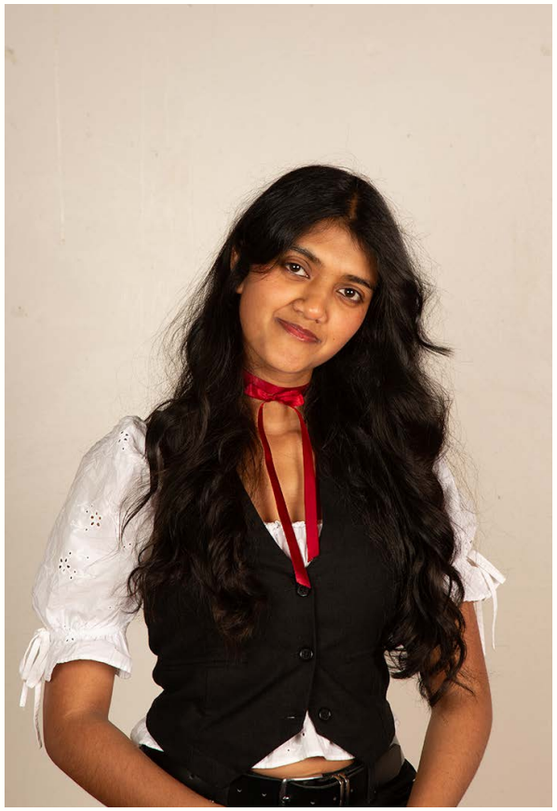

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