

The London School of Economics and Political Science

‘Tigers On The Mind’: An Interrogation of Conflict Diasporas and Long
Distance Nationalism. A Study of the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora in
London.

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A thesis submitted to the Department of International Development of
the London School of Economics for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, London, January 2012.

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Abstract

In contrast to orthodox presentations of 'long distance nationalism' as an abstract politics without accountability or responsibility by theorists like Benedict Anderson, I argue that it is essential in the case of conflict diasporas to conceptualize the nature of diaspora support for homeland insurgencies as a contingent product of lived experience, perception, culture and history.

Based on qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork, including an analysis of in-depth personal narratives from within the London Tamil diaspora, I attempt to describe the (trans) formative effects of violence, loss and displacement. I contend that the resulting viewpoints and aspirations carry the imprint of the de-territorialised 'imagining' of relationships, belonging and moral community which define the content of long distance nationalism.

Using inter-disciplinary ideas from a range of theorists including Arjun Appadurai, I focus on a 'process of becoming' by which a specific transnational consciousness is engendered. The idea that conflict diaspora identity is defined by a complex interplay between a contextual and subjective understanding of political discourse; as well as the intellectual, moral, psychological and existential experience of being in diaspora is developed and held up against the current literature. Rather than seeing such displaced communities through the prism of a society in conflict in a distant homeland, I argue that we should consider how conflict has produced a particular epistemology of diasporic space and identity.

I conclude by arguing that diaspora identity has its roots not only in a distant homeland but also in the hearts, minds and imagination of diaspora Tamils, where the complex obligations of being human in a time of conflict, override that of being a citizen, physically emplaced within a particular territory. I contend that such a perspective is both essential and yet often overlooked when seeking to interrogate the content of long distance nationalism in the dominant literature.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor David Keen for all his support and encouragement over the years. I would also like to thank all those I have encountered within the Tamil diaspora in London over many years, who shared with me their songs of experience, trusted me with their stories of pain and suffering and guided me into an understanding of their lives and aspirations in diaspora.

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Chapter One: Encountering the Diaspora

1.1 A Diaspora Encounter

**‘Exile is the nursery of nationality’
(Acton 1985: 422)**

At night, sometimes I hear, like the floor is screaming...like that is home only calling (Sri Lanka)... Sometimes it is like I have ghosts inside, sometimes they are saying things, sometimes they are quiet, sometimes just calling only...’¹

On 27 November 2008, I found myself with thousands of Tamils in a convention centre in East London, commemorating an event referred to as ‘Mavirar Nal.’ (Day of the Great Heroes)² This is an annual event and its central highlight is the ‘Maveerar Nal Perurai ’ (Heroes Day Address), a speech by the leader of the LTTE³, Vellupillai Prabhakaran⁴, which is relayed live from Killinochi, the stronghold of the LTTE in Sri Lanka. This time unfortunately, we did not have a visual image of Prabhakaran speaking due to some technical faults. As his words filled the massive auditorium, the giant screens put up to relay his image instead showed images of the audience itself, all listening attentively, occasionally breaking out into cheers of approval as Prabhakaran urged defiance and the continuation of the struggle for self-determination. The giant screens also showed images of other diaspora communities at similar events being held across Europe, doing much the same thing in real time as our own gathering here in London. It was both an implicit and explicit ‘celebration’ of the links between the worldwide diaspora and the ideals and actions of the LTTE.

As before⁵, Prabhakaran made special mention of the diaspora:

¹ ‘A’: Tamil diaspora member, Interview: November 2008

² The event was held at the Excel Exhibition Centre. For discussion of the institutionalization of this event in a wider context, see Schalk 1997; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005:119

³ Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam – the insurgent group fighting for an autonomous homeland for the Tamil minority. The envisaged state of ‘Tamil Eelam’ would cover areas in the north and north east of the island, the traditional homeland of the Tamil people.

⁴ A detailed study of Prabhakaran can be found in Swamy 2003

⁵ see TamilNet 2006: “ We express our gratitude to the Tamil Diaspora, our displaced brethren living all around the world, for their contribution to our struggle and ask them to maintain their unwavering participation and support.”

“I would request Tamils, in whatever part of the world...to raise their voices... in support of the freedom struggle of their brothers and sisters... to strengthen the hands of our freedom movement and continue to extend their contributions and help.” (Prabhakaran cited in TamilNet 2008)

With Prabhakaran’s image substituted by images of the diaspora itself, it seemed like a mirrored effect, a community looking at itself, revealing itself to itself, as the words of a messianic figure put their own thoughts and feelings into words, a coming together of word and image, a blending of speaker and audience. I turned to A, one of my informants who had invited me along to the event and the tears running down his face were unmistakable. Hand raised, along with thousands of others, he was pledging a solemn vow to cherish the sacrifices of those who had died in the ongoing conflict, a war seen as a liberation struggle against the oppression of the state.

The sense of a ‘homecoming’, a ‘reunion of family’ was palpable. Throughout the day, people addressed each other as ‘brother’ or ‘son’, ‘sister’ or ‘mother’, a common enough usage in Tamil social tradition but somehow this felt different. What was being suggested was that even here, hundreds of miles away from ‘home’, amongst people who in the main held British citizenship, an alternate sense of ‘relationship’ was being celebrated, a relationship with a distant homeland and a relationship with a wider Tamil community spread across time and space. Durkheim refers to a state of being which he terms ‘collective effervescence’, an occasion of communal gathering where ‘the very act of congregating’ becomes ‘an exceptionally powerful stimulant’ such that all gathered ‘come to experience themselves as sharing one and the same essence.’ Such occasions are usually linked to religious rites but such feelings can also be engendered within more secular occasions where society ‘concentrates’ or ‘pulls itself together’, ‘thus becoming a unity in the real.’ Reflecting on my own experiences, there was indeed as Durkheim so aptly puts it, ‘a sort of electricity’ that seemed to launch all present ‘to an extraordinary height of exaltation.’ (Durkheim in Fields 1995: xli; 217; xli; xlii; 217)

‘What does this mean? How to say? Only thing is not to say. For me it is just to feel this thing... Tamil people now we have many problems. We thought peace but now surely will be war again. ... our people, our country so like that is our war only. So feeling is sad but also feeling is strong. Our Tamil people will not just give up

*only. We will fight also. Because we know what all we have been suffering, so many suffering you cannot know... Like that I feel proud. Proud to be Tamil.'*⁶

Later as we filed past photographs meant to commemorate LTTE fighters who had fallen in battle⁷, I got a sense of the ghosts that A often refers to, the ghosts that live inside him. I did ask A about his 'ghosts' in a later interview and he quickly put an end to my own perceptions regarding symbolic or metaphorical associations:

*'you see, even you also can feel (the) pain we have to suffer, that only is the ghost calling. But for me, this is my real life only...I know many people killed... My own family got people killed, some also 'disappear'⁸ All my ghosts I know very well only. This is like Sri Lanka time coming to the front door to visit.'*⁹

I begin with this ethnographic vignette in order to present an inroad into the emotionally charged landscape that has been the terrain of my research, an interrogation of a transnational consciousness during a time of war and its recognition and embrace by members of victim or 'conflict diaspora' communities. (Lyons 2007:530)¹⁰

My work is a study of the conflict diaspora condition and I have tried to bring together analytical frameworks and epistemological insights that are more often conventionally separated in an effort to argue that in order to understand the nature and basis of diaspora support for fellow ethnic insurgents in a distant war, one needs to engage with a contextual study of the diaspora in question. I bring together a set of ideas concerning violence, conflict, displacement, identity and belonging to argue that such an analysis involves an interrogation of the experiential lifeworld endured and the perceptual framework held by members of such communities regarding the conflict that has in essence, created both the content of the 'imagination' of identity

⁶ Conversation with A: November 2008

⁷ Unlike events in LTTE controlled parts of Sri Lanka where names and photographs of fallen fighters are displayed, the images displayed in London were those of the Tamil national flower.

⁸ 'Disappear' is a word used to refer to the abduction of Tamils by the security forces when they are suspected of involvement with the LTTE. For many of those taken in this way, even officially by recognized agents of the state, there is a high degree of risk that they would never be seen again, their whereabouts undocumented and unknown. For a review of 'disappearances' in Sri Lanka see Human Rights Watch 2008

⁹ Interview with A: November 2008

¹⁰ The term is derived from Lyon's definition of 'conflict-generated diasporas' - the 'networks of those forced across borders by conflict or repression'

and belonging that defines them as well as the epistemological meaning of the diasporic space they inhabit.

Studies of such diasporas are often analysed and theorised separately across a range of different disciplines. These include conflict studies, international relations, anthropology, geography, forced migration and refugee studies as well as the politics of migration and migrant communities. My work is thus an attempt to break down and transcend these disciplinary borders in order to conceptualise conflict diaspora consciousness as part of a broader chapter in both diaspora and civil war scholarship. My belief is that only such an interdisciplinary approach to the ontological nature of being in diaspora in a time of conflict, because of conflict, can encapsulate the experiences and responses that flow from fieldwork within such communities. My research is thus an attempt to interrogate what Sokefeld has referred to as the ‘discursive constructions of imaginations of community’ in order to define a particular diaspora identity. (Sokefeld 2006:267) I will argue that for many diaspora Tamils, an idea of society does indeed exist¹¹, except that society and the sense of community it celebrates, produces what Gilroy has termed, ‘an explicitly transnational... perspective.’ (Gilroy 1993: 15)

I will argue that rather than merely an additive state of being, the acquisition of a change of address on a global scale, living in diaspora, must be seen in transformative terms. In his study of conflict processes, Keen makes note of the fact that ‘part of the problem in much existing analysis is that conflict is regarded as simply, a breakdown in a particular system, rather than the emergence of another.’ (Keen 2008: 15) Keen’s insight can direct us to the fact that we should also approach diaspora theory not merely in the negative, in terms of loss but also as a study of a community created by the experiences and subjective interpretation of violence, loss, suffering and exile, which are transfigured into epistemological categories of meaning. I will seek to develop and sustain an argument that for many, the journey into a life in diaspora has come to mean a remaking of their very sense of self as they struggle to come to terms with past experiences of violence and conflict, present suffering in exile as well as hope for the future against the background of an understanding of a particular

¹¹ This is of course a reference to Thatcher’s infamous comment, ‘and who is society? There is no such thing!’ (Keay 1987)

narrative of war. It is the study, as Rushdie puts it, of the creation of ‘new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things.’ (Rushdie 1992:124) But more than just memories, I will argue that being part of a conflict diaspora should be seen in existential terms, as a search for meaning based on an engagement with a biographical tapestry of past, present and future. While conflict diaspora narratives are often stories of violence and loss, they also set the ground for a process of becoming and as Das has highlighted in her work on narratives of trauma, such stories can have ‘unintended consequences’. (Das 2003:301) To this end, a study of a conflict diaspora community requires a deeper understanding of the effects and consequences of conflict, war and violence and an appreciation that what is being studied is in actual fact, a community and a social space produced, structured and informed by war.

Contemporary studies of civil war bring a significant focus to the plight of civilians caught up in the horrors of war and a study of a conflict diaspora community will enable us to expand this focus, to confront and understand the links between conflict, the displacement and forced migration of civilians, their journey into diaspora and the resulting nature of a particular diaspora consciousness. In this sense, we need to reframe our understanding of conflict diaspora communities, to see them not merely as a-historical ethnic others in our midst but rather as representatives, creators and keepers of an ongoing narrative identity which they struggle to define in a time of personal crisis and conceptual turmoil. It is a definition that lends itself to further interrogation about that very essential aspect of what it means to be human; the search for a sense of purpose and meaning, a sense of justice and dignity as well as the discernment of a sense of identity, community and belonging.

While the physical movement of a journey into diaspora is a traumatic one, it is not just the ‘physical movement, or corporeal travel’, that is important. As argued by Wilding, when considering transnational ethnographies, ‘more important than the traversing of geography...is, rather, the movement of the mind or imagination’ which enables a shifting ‘perceptual framework.’ (Wilding 2007:332) It is accepted that ‘the migration of Tamils ...is intrinsically linked to a radical transformation of Tamil society’ but to my mind, this transformation needs to be more explicitly linked to the experience and context of conflict. (Fuglerud 1999:4). In essence, we need to

interrogate and make sense of the relationship between the social production of violence and conflict and its consequences across time and space, what Daniel in his study of the effects of violence, has termed another ‘way of being-in-the-world.’ (Daniel 1996: 67) While my focus is very much on the Tamil diaspora community in London, my work will also seek to address the need for a more theoretical and conceptual approach to the consciousness of ‘actually existing’¹² conflict diaspora communities in general, presenting us with another chapter in the discourse of conflict as I seek to theorize another way of being- in- another- world.

For many of my informants, the ‘we’ of a particular Tamil identity in diaspora is purposefully felt and articulated. When discussing the finer points of Sri Lankan political history and current affairs, it is a ‘we’ that inevitably stretches to include both fellow Tamils across the diaspora as well as those still ‘at home.’ Such articulation seems to me to represent both conviction and dialectic, an awareness of the inherent conceptual contradictions of the diaspora condition and an acknowledgement on some level that the possible incongruity of a relevant transnational diaspora identity means that there is a case to be argued, born out of experience and discernment, rather than one to be merely assumed. The key to the conviction of the pluralistic ‘we/our’ stance however to my mind, is revealed by a constant retreat to the singular and deeply personal ‘me/I.’ It is in the realm of the personal that diaspora conviction finds itself. The ‘I’ of diaspora narratives is a reflective self that seeks to find a sense of itself within past experiences, present perceptions and emotions as well as in future aspirations. It is the realm of the individual, struggling to find meaning in a time of crisis and transition.

As a prelude of things to come, I revert back to the ‘Heroes Day’ event mentioned above and Durkheim’s theory of ‘collective effervescence.’ While the feeling and rhetoric at such events is a powerful representation of diaspora sentiment, it is of course not a complete and coherent representation of the diaspora condition. When we consider the audience at such events, the sentiment expressed therein is best conceptualised as a sort of mirror effect – what we see is a reflection of what already is, enthusiastic expressions of support waiting to be offered and celebrated. What is

¹² This borrows an idea from Bahro’s (1978) concept of ‘actually existing socialism’

required therefore is a study that looks behind the veil, an investigation into the basis of diaspora passion and sentiment, a study of a 'process of becoming' at an earlier point, in order to understand the processes and histories that have produced individuals capable of such 'collective effervescence.' (Durkheim in Fields 1995: xli)

In my interaction with diaspora Tamils, what is often quite palpable is the sense that narratives of their past experiences have the power to transport them through time and space. This may seem quite prosaic as stories have long been recognised as having just such a potential, but what is significant, is how so many of my informants also seem to carry an alternate life-world inside them, embedded in their stories and reflections but more importantly perhaps, a liminal life-world that they themselves seem to live within and access on an almost daily basis. As one informant put it, '*My Sri Lanka is a place in my heart only. No need Sri Lanka Airlines to go.*'¹³ Stephen Crites defines the experience and formation of consciousness as the stories that 'live, so to speak, in the arms and legs and bellies' of those who tell them. (Crites 1971: 295) It is a life-world therefore that does not just represent the past, but one that is routinely used to inform and make sense of the present and point towards a possible future. This to my mind, is the realm of the diasporic consciousness, an engagement with a realm of experience, perception and existential questioning and reflection that informs how individuals view the world and their place within it and more importantly for my focus, how they view the 'world left behind' from the vantage of the 'new world' they now inhabit.

The existential nature of the diaspora condition and the importance of diaspora narratives in structuring and informing that condition is therefore an important part of this research for as put forward by Eastmond, such 'narratives and the discourse they engender can tell us something about how social actors from a particular social position and cultural vantage point, make sense of their world.' (Eastmond 2007:250) At the heart of the diaspora condition therefore are the narratives of individuals in crisis, seeking to make sense of experiences, images and events, whose relevance and impact cross borders of time and space.

¹³ Interview with AFF: June 2006

1.2 Violence And The LTTE: Contestation And Support

'The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in time of moral crisis preserve their neutrality.'
(John F Kennedy)

Tamil diaspora attitudes to the civil war and the extent and relevance of their support for the LTTE is an issue that has been raised in the literature and the popular media. Some commentators posit that while many do indeed support the LTTE, this support is misguided as it is built on a masterful and ruthless control of 'public politics' within the Tamil diaspora by pro-LTTE forces, a viewpoint also expressed to some degree by Fuglerud in his classic study of the Tamil diaspora in Norway. (Jeyeraj 2009; Fuglerud 1999:53) In similar terms, Rajasingam has alluded to the fact that,

'the LTTE has...sought to dominate the 'Tamil narrative' - with many tales of military valour, of brave conquests against a marauding Sri Lankan army, of resolute 'final wars', of 'operation motherland redemptions'. (Rajasingam 2009)

The success of the LTTE in this respect is underlined by Byman et al, who posit that 'the LTTE's experience is not typical but rather the apex of how an insurgent organization can exploit a diaspora for its own ends.' (Byman et al 2001:42) The LTTE is charged with a systematic programme of intimidation directed against those in the diaspora who disagree with its agenda and challenge its claim to be the 'sole representative' of the Tamil people. (Cochrane et al 2009: 688- 690, Orjuela 2008:441, La 2004) Based on fieldwork conducted in 2005 and 2006 in Canada and the UK, a Human Rights Watch report accused pro-LTTE factions in the diaspora of being responsible for 'severe beatings, death threats, smear campaigns, and fabricated criminal charges' creating 'a culture of fear within the diaspora, stifling dissent and discouraging individuals from organizing activities that are not sanctioned by the LTTE.' (HRW 2006: 1) While accepting that 'incidents of actual violence have been relatively rare', the report maintains that such patterns of intimidation 'reverberate strongly... and effectively discourage others from expressing views that counter the LTTE.' (HRW 2006: 14)

This report highlights one conceptual lens that seeks to provide an answer to the question of diaspora ‘support’ for the LTTE and its violent struggle for self-determination. While instances of harassment and intimidation do indeed occur, my own feeling is that a dependence on such an analysis to explain diaspora support is deeply flawed and fails to do justice to the question posed and in the process, misrepresents the motivations and sentiments held by a large section of the diaspora. By seeking to portray the diaspora as individuals and a community coerced and manipulated, such explanations marginalize significant competing sentiments and opinion.¹⁴ Rajasingam presents just such an explanation, arguing that, ‘the destructive logic of the Tiger cause is to annihilate political reason and progress in favour of a totalitarian fantasy of power and control.’ Referring to diaspora Tamils, she states that ‘those who dream from afar have a responsibility to think harder, to look deeper, and to break through to reality.’ (Rajasingam 2009)

Far from being disempowered and enthralled to a destructive fantasy however, I argue that many diaspora Tamils have already taken on the burden of an alternate sense of responsibility, morality and reality. Rather than because of coercion, propaganda or peer pressure from within the community, this expressed reality of ‘deeper’ feeling when they consider the nature of the conflict and their own experiences, is a genuine and passionately held belief that the LTTE represents a legitimate struggle on behalf of the Tamil people. Expressions of support for the LTTE and the goal of self-determination represented by the pursuit of Eelam therefore, are given freely of their own volition, in direct contrast to the logic of the ‘culture of fear’ highlighted by commentators above.

The legitimacy of the LTTE does indeed have its detractors within the diaspora community as well as many who only pay lip service to its goals but there is a sizeable majority who sincerely accept its claims, either passively, or actively and passionately to varying degrees. It is a cross section of this latter opinion that is the focus of my work. I do not make moral judgements about the validity or morality of beliefs that I have encountered because in the final analysis, my aim is to present a

¹⁴ Despite its own analytical focus, the report does concede and note in passing that ‘there was broad support among the Tamil community in the West for the LTTE’s fight for Tamil autonomy... they saw the LTTE as a legitimate representative of the Tamil people and their interests.’ (HRW 2006: 14)

study of the formation and basis of just such subjective beliefs and what they mean and represent to those who hold them. Following Durkheim, it is an approach informed by the logic that even atheists should ‘confront religion in the same mental state as the believer’ because otherwise a study of religion ‘is like a blind man trying to talk about colour.’ What is important to me is that such beliefs are sincerely held by those who have been generous enough to allow me a glimpse into their ideational and social life-worlds and this underlines my own point of departure; that a study of Tamil diaspora consciousness is a study of a very real and ‘eminently social thing’ with very real social effects and epistemological meaning. (Durkheim in Fields 1995: xvii; xix) The Tamil demonstrations mounted across the world throughout 2009 are a phenomenon that has taken a hitherto marginal group into the international limelight.¹⁵ As stated in an editorial in a British based Tamil newspaper,

‘The Diaspora has become an object of intense scrutiny and study. Western states, it appears, want to understand us: who exactly we are, how we belong, think, calculate and feel.’ (Tamil Guardian 2009)

My research is an attempt to answer just such questions and to reflect on and question the failure of mainstream and expert discourse to narrate the lived experiences and feelings of a group of ordinary people who situate themselves and their sense of being within the effects and consequences of political violence and conflict in a distant land. My first point of departure therefore will be an attempt to contextualise what Demmers refers to as the ‘young field of diaspora and conflict studies.’ (Demmers 2007:5)

1.3 Transnational Diasporas and Transnational Conflict Processes

Gilroy argues that the conceptual discourse surrounding the idea of ‘diaspora’ should force us to reconsider and ‘register the constitutive potency of space, spatiality, distance, travel, and itinerancy... that have been premised on time, fixity, rootedness, and the sedentary.’ (Gilroy 1994:207) This reconsideration has propelled conceptual fields of analysis such as transnationalism into the academic limelight. A key viewpoint derived from such trends and perhaps most famously stated by Glick-

¹⁵ For a review of the demonstrations see BBC 2009a; 2009b

Schiller and her colleagues, is that contrary to past assumptions, ‘migrants, exiles and refugees no longer break all ties with their homelands when they assimilate into their new environments.’ (Glick-Schiller et al 1992: 1) Rather, they develop ‘social fields’ and ‘multi-stranded social relations that link together ... societies of origin and settlement.’ (Basch et al 1997:7)

Despite the efforts of the Sri Lankan state and perhaps even the authorities of states which host Tamil diaspora communities, to limit and police such transnational links and influences with regards to the relationship between the LTTE and the diaspora, it is clear that for many diaspora Tamils, such links cannot be denied because of what the LTTE represents in the Tamil public consciousness. Indeed as I will try and show, it can be argued that it is the nature, content and meaning of such transnational relationships that inform and shape the very identity of such Tamil diaspora communities. The challenge we face in trying to bring to the fore the meaning of such transnational links and relationships however is underlined by Malkki, who argues that in much contemporary analysis, ‘what falls outside the national order of things seems to be perceived as systemic noise’ and as such, it is imperative in diaspora theory, borrowing Said’s words, that we take on board a fundamental ‘need to connect things with each other, and see them.... as they are ignored or denied.’ (Malkki 1998: 435; Said 1980: 46)

While many of the perspectives on transnationalism are of course relevant to my own work and will be incorporated and interrogated accordingly, my main focus will be to emphasize the subjective meanings of displacement and diaspora consciousness in a time of war. The phenomenon that most wars in the late twentieth century are within states and that they are often about the role and status of nations and communities within these states is therefore of great relevance.¹⁶ The perspective being offered however is that while such conflicts may indeed be intra-state conflicts, they are no longer ‘fought’ solely within the borders of a state at war as far as the existence of a community at war is conceptualized. The proliferation of diaspora communities in a globalized world has resulted in the rapid rise of political, social and economic transnational networks. The relevance and impact of such communities and networks

¹⁶ This phenomenon has been noted in a variety of scholarly work on modern day conflict. See Harbom and Wallensteen 2005; Wallensteen and Sollenberg 1999; Kaldor 2001; Duffield 2002

has been increasingly felt in conflict processes with the emergence of diaspora groups who ‘frequently support insurgencies in their homelands’ because as Byman et al argue, ‘despite being separated by thousands of miles, homeland struggles are often keenly felt among immigrant communities.’ (Byman et al. 2001: 41) In this sense, conflict seems to have become dispersed and delocalised, with insurgent groups getting support not just from communities within a war ravaged land but also from the diaspora in a landscape of conflict which itself has become deterritorialized and decentralized and where contemporary diasporas are increasingly recognized as significant players in insurgencies and homeland conflict. (Kaldor 2001; Demmers 2002:86; 2007; Duffield 2002; Cheran 2004; Lyons 2007; Zunzer 2004; Østergaard-Nielsen 2006; Orjuela 2008)

Vertovec for example underlines the potential of diasporas to ‘actively be involved in nation-wrecking when there is violence and war in the homeland’, citing examples stretching from ‘places as diverse as Ethiopia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, Kashmir, Israel and Palestine.’ (Vertovec 2005:8) In similar terms, Cochran et al argue that ‘large Diaspora communities have the coercive power to raise funds for weapons, or lobby in support of the political objectives of militant liberation struggles in their countries of origin.’ (Cochran et al: 2009:683) It has also been suggested that ‘diaspora members sending high levels of remittances as well as the channelling of funds through welfare organizations’ with links to insurgent groups should be seen as ‘indicators that diaspora activities tend to be conflict increasing.’ (Zunzer 2004:19; see also Collier 2000, Duffield 2001) These ideas have been granted greater currency since a 2003 World Bank study claimed that ‘if a country which has recently ended a conflict has a large diaspora... its risk that the conflict will resume is sharply increased.’ (Collier et al: 2003: 85-86) Building on such research, Cheran argues that Sri Lanka is ‘among the top 20 developing countries that receive large amounts of remittances from its diaspora’, highlighting an accepted belief that the Tamil diaspora provides ‘substantial resources that sustain both the armed struggle for a separate Tamil state and the Tamil refugee communities that are spread across the war-torn areas in Sri Lanka.’ (Cheran 2004:7) The relevance of such transnational involvement is also a staple insight from an influential ‘new war’ literature. (see Kaldor 2001; Duffield 2001; 2002) In this vein, Duffield argues that transnational dynamics change the nature of war for

‘war as a reflexive and network enterprise does not follow the traditional state based pattern of escalation, stalemate and decline; one cannot assume that exhaustion will occur in transnational wars.’ (Duffield 2002: 158)

Specifically with regards to Sri Lanka, Byman et al echo just such opinion, stating that,

‘The ltte insurgency and its diaspora are intimately tied to one another. So long as the group can use its diaspora to raise funds, its guerrilla and terrorist campaign can be sustained.’ (Byman et al 2001:54)

Scholars define the capabilities of transnationalism as ‘the extent to which individuals and communities identify with the social, economic or political processes in their home countries, which is a prerequisite for them to engage in transnational activities.’ (Al-Ali et al 2001: 581) I will argue that any analysis of such an ‘identification’ requires a greater degree of flexibility and imagination. This will enable us to fully and better appreciate its scope of commitment, its degree of intensity and the meaning and interpretation of its expression on the ground because such transnational feelings and activities ‘can be classified in a variety of ways’ and as put forward by Fuglerud, the ‘nature of exile identity is itself a very complex and controversial matter.’ (Al-Ali et al 2001: 581; Fuglerud 1999:16)

My work will ask questions about the definitions of transnationalism and the dynamics of a transnational diasporic consciousness in a time of war, an engagement with what Rumford has termed ‘the new spatiality of politics’ where ‘society does not have the same boundaries as it had previously, especially so as society and the nation-state do not necessarily inhabit the same space.’ (Rumford 2006:163)

1.4 Long Distance Nationalism as Theory and Conceptual Explanation of Diaspora Motivation and Activism

The key question in this research is why significant elements within the diaspora community are willing to support the insurgent agenda of the LTTE. In the literature on the links between diaspora communities and homeland conflicts, certain explanations are regularly wheeled out. One notable and influential attempt to capture

and theorize the nature of such diaspora sentiment is Anderson's exploration of what he has termed the 'emergence of the long distance nationalist.' (Anderson 1992a: 10) Anderson underlines his belief that such an involvement is 'in effect, a politics without responsibility or accountability.' As if in response to the claim that the diaspora individual continues to be symbolically part of 'the people' and the political struggles back home, Anderson contends that such 'political participation is directed towards an imagined *heimat* in which he does not intend to live, where he pays no taxes, where he cannot be arrested, where he will not be brought before the courts – and where he does not vote.' (Anderson 1992b: 11) Anderson also notes that the long-distance nationalist may be easier prey for political manipulators, since he 'will not have to answer for, or pay the price of, the long-distance politics he undertakes.' (Anderson 1992a: 11)

In similar fashion, Ignatieff also puts forward the argument that 'diaspora nationalism is a dangerous phenomenon because it is easier to hate from a distance: You don't have to live with the consequences -- or the reprisals', a view echoed by Collier who presents diaspora activism as essentially defined by the fact that 'they do not have to suffer any of the awful consequences of renewed conflict because they are not living in the country.' (Ignatieff 2001; Collier 2000: 14) In this sense, it is also frequently argued that 'diasporas tend to be more extreme than the populations they have left behind', developing and engendering a more hard line position. (Collier et al: 2003: 85-86) As argued by Collier, 'they are much richer than the people in their country of origin and so can afford to finance vengeance.' (Collier 2000: 14) Collier and his co-authors also contend that diaspora populations may not have a full picture of the conflict as they are not 'in day-to-day contact and accommodation with the enemy' and such a dynamic makes 'life for those left behind much more dangerous.' (Collier et al 2003: 74; Collier 2000: 6)

My reading of this conceptual presentation of 'long distance nationalism' is that in effect, it is a manifestation of a vicarious and irresponsible mutation of nationalism that is deprived of credibility because of the unaccountable and hence irresponsible nature of its transaction and offer of solidarity. The pastiche nature of nationalism in this conceptualization is defined seemingly based on a particular perception of the nature of the diaspora condition, leading us perhaps to pose the question as voiced by

Brubaker, 'what then is the nature of a diasporic stance'? , or in my case, what then is the nature of the conflict diaspora stance? (Brubaker 2005:13) Anderson himself refers to long distance nationalism as a 'kind of politics with an 'ersatz aura' of 'drama' and 'sacrifice.' (Anderson 1992b: 11) Some attempt at explaining these contentions is provided by Ignatieff, who argues that,

'emigration is accompanied by the guilt of departure. This guilt makes diaspora groups more violent and more extreme than those that live in the country where the oppression is taking place.' (Ignatieff 2001)

Diaspora attitudes and mindsets are thus presented as being informed by an uneasy and stark juxtaposition; that while their fellow former nationals are left in war and poverty, they live safe and relatively wealthy lives in their new place of habitation. In the light of such an extreme dichotomy, many then feel that the least they can do is to contribute with money or political engagement, a viewpoint supported by Byman et al who speak of diaspora feelings of 'genuine sympathy for the domestic struggles of their overseas kin.' (Byman et al. 2001:55) Besides guilt , Ignatieff also claims that it is the trauma of displacement that develops into 'hatreds' that motivate support for violence. (Ignatieff 2001)

Such conceptualisations of the diaspora condition however fail to fully capture and interrogate the relevant depth and complexity of the specific emotional, psychological and existential issues faced by conflict diaspora members and how their lived experiences provide fertile ground for a frame of reference which structures and informs a particular consciousness within individuals who have themselves lived through the ravages of war and have been forced to leave their homeland under duress, however defined. Their ownership and investment in the discourse of what has been termed 'long distance nationalism' therefore needs to be brought to the fore, to enable their present motivations and life-worlds to be put into a more contextual framework.

It is surprising that while usage and acceptance of the term and concept of 'long distance nationalism' has indeed become a norm of sorts in the academic literature¹⁷,

¹⁷ Skrbis 1999; Demmers 2002; Wayland 2004; Cheran 2003; Fair 2005; Biswas 2004; Orjuela 2008

its foundational representational definition as ‘a politics without responsibility or accountability’ and similar ideas flowing from this basic thesis, have not been challenged conceptually or analytically in a more explicit fashion (Anderson 1992b: 11) Such ideas include critical assessments of the diaspora condition masked as basic assertions, which present diaspora sentiment and activism as being ‘hate from a distance’ (Ignatieff 2001), a ‘suburban dream-politics’ (Anderson 1992b:11) waged by ‘distant warriors’ (Orjuela 2008:441) who ‘finance vengeance’ (Collier 2000: 14); a ‘prosthetic nationalism’ (Appadurai 1995: 220), a ‘nationalism by proxy’ (Biswas 2004) infused by a ‘politics by nostalgia’ (Appadurai 1995: 220)¹⁸ in an effort to live out ‘frustrations and fantasies’(Kaldor 2006:8) ‘without accountability.’ (Anderson 1992b: 12)

To my mind, this dominant discourse of transnational expression in a time of conflict, which is basically what the conceptualization of ‘long distance nationalism’ represents, fails to capture the very real bonds of identification, solidarity and passion that emanate from within conflict diaspora communities and hence define both diasporic space and the nature of diaspora identity. It is my belief that rather than just essentializing diaspora opinion and support for bellicose action based on functional ideas of coercion, hate or guilt, in a somewhat instrumental, reductionist and opportunistic sense, it is necessary to interrogate the existence and motivations of such communities within a more subjective, political and historicized context. Our field of analysis should focus on the experiences, commitments and resilience of such communities and the narrative meanings that they attach to their motivations and expressions as a people ‘in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves.’ (Rushdie 1992:124-5) It is only through such an interrogation, that we can hope to understand in a more insightful manner, what Appadurai refers to as the ‘new patriotism’ of those in diaspora. (Appadurai 1995: 220)

In the context of conflict, we need a more contextualized and focused platform to theorize the processes of identity formation within the diaspora condition, how those in diaspora would view and interpret the discourse of war and displacement and their

¹⁸ Appadurai’s comments here are by way of discussion rather than a reflection of his own position but they do represent a review of a more general attitude towards diaspora sentiment.

continuing role in such a landscape of conflict and violence. Most importantly, we need to develop a greater 'imagination' regarding the nature of diasporic spaces – what they are and how they enable diaspora sentiment and feeling to be imagined. As depicted by Rushdie, 'migrants... make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats' and it is these new relationships and the content of the imagination that sustains them, that must be theorized. (Rushdie 1992:125) Members of a conflict diaspora to my mind are forced to engage with a search for a new viability as individuals and as a community and a failure to interrogate this viability of a 'diasporic self' makes any theory of diaspora identity itself unviable.

I will seek to argue that the concept of 'long distance nationalism' as presently understood, has been detrimental to a proper appreciation of diaspora experience, feeling, expression and aspiration. Conceptualised by Anderson in rather negative and derogatory terms, it has come to dominate much of the understanding of transnational diaspora expression in a time of distant war and it is my belief that such an 'act of interpretation', a 'process of naming and definition' can be argued to misrepresent what we see on the ground and hence the way a people and their motivations are conceptualised. By misconstruing the nature of the conflict diaspora condition, one can quite easily 'take the words out of their mouths', marginalizing what such communities actually feel or how they themselves experience their own reality. (Chametzky 1986: 4)

The challenge we face therefore can be seen as a variant of the insightful work of analysts like Chambers regarding the tension between the power of the authoritative voice and the competing claims of other experiences wherein knowledge is gained and expressed, especially by those on the ground. (Chambers 1977)¹⁹ As put forward by Wilmer, 'we need language as a tool of representation in order to think and talk about the social world, but at the same time, semiotic reality ought to bear a meaningful relationship to empirical reality, the world of experience.' (Wilmer 2003:220) In considering 'outside support for insurgency movements', Byman et al

¹⁹ Chambers's work has informed much of my thinking when contrasting the voices of those I encountered in diaspora with the way Tamil 'long distance nationalism' is often presented in what was not only a 'a time of war' in Sri Lanka, but also a period which coincided with the global discourse of the 'war on terror' – a perspective which I address in a later chapter.

acknowledge as mentioned above, that such struggles are ‘ keenly felt’ by those in diaspora. (Byman et al. 2001: 41) My contention is that it is essential to try and understand the roots and content of just such ‘ keenly felt’ emotions and the experiences and life-worlds of those who inhabit what I will define as a necessarily politicized and traumatic space. For Anderson, such individuals live with a constant ‘ mediated imagery of home’ and my work is thus an attempt to give a deeper sense of epistemological meaning to such imagery in a time of war. (Anderson 1992b: 8)

Anderson’s own work does refer in passing to ‘long distance nationalism’ as ‘in effect a politics’ and a form of ‘political participation.’ (Anderson 1992b: 11) I argue that this is actually instead what we should focus on and how we should approach the nature of the motivations that inspire the so called long distance nationalism of conflict diaspora communities. Such a politics should be seen as a form of transnational consciousness and expression, born out of a particular transformative political context and social identity and it requires a greater degree of respect and understanding on our part, in order to understand its profound legitimacy within the Tamil community. It may be a subtle point, but to my mind, it goes to the heart of the issue because it informs the actual content of what has been termed ‘long distance nationalism.’

It has been stated that we are better ‘able to begin to analyze and discuss diasporic identities and long distance nationalism because we have changed the lens through which we perceive the world.’(Glick-Schiller & Wimmer 2003: 596) It is my contention however that along with such a transnational lens, we need a new vocabulary and a more engaged conceptualization of ‘being in diaspora’ because of war, in a time of war. My work therefore is an attempt to study the Tamil diaspora through this new analytical and conceptual lens, underlining a belief that conceptual ideas are at heart, a question of perspective. There is a need to appreciate that rather than just silent victims in our midst or the dogmatic carriers of a single-minded nationalist banner, such communities should be interrogated in more complex terms and recognised as political and politicised entities who speak a different language, alien to the confining orthodoxy of state-centric political discourse.

I am not saying that Tamil diaspora consciousness as I intend to present it, is free from a nationalistic turn but what I will argue is that the pro-LTTE nationalistic hue of much diaspora expression should be seen as symptom, creation and product of a crisis in Sri Lankan politics. The journey to such a state of crisis and its impact on the personal lives of ordinary Tamils must be contextualised and historicized, for as put forward by Chametzky, ‘one’s own vision and voice are shaped by the special history and normative patterns of rhetoric and thought of a region and a landscape.’ (Chametzky 1986: 5) It is essential therefore to try and understand how Tamils see themselves in their incarnation as a diaspora community in a diasporic landscape and how they choose to represent and articulate their feelings about their displacement, their sense of being part of a wider transnational Tamil society and their relationship with a history and a continuing present of conflict in Sri Lanka.

1.5 Forced Migration: Etiology Of A ‘Conflict Diaspora’ Discourse

The growing academic discourse on civil wars has made admirable progress in trying to situate the analysis of the consequences of war, not just on the state and the insurgent groups but also on the civilians caught up in the horrors of war. Scholars like Nordstrom and Green have made us more profoundly alive to the rather mundane fact that civilians ‘exist’, not just as potential rebels but also rather as victims of war, individuals who find themselves exposed to the brutality of conflict. (Nordstrom 1992; Green 1999)

In her study of conflict, Green makes the point that ‘it is commonplace in counterinsurgency warfare’ that ‘unarmed civilians were configured as the enemy and treated as such.’ (Green 1999:9) Nordstrom in turn theorizes the link between war and displacement with her conceptualisation of ‘dirty wars.’ (Nordstrom 1992) Drawing on Nordstrom’s work, Skinner argues that ‘strategies of the dirty war are aimed at destabilising the social institutions that ground society.’ This ‘involves challenges to the sanctity of the family, the torture, death or militarisation of civilians and attacks on the integrity of everyday life, its coherence and reality.’ Most relevantly for my focus, Skinner argues that it is the very ‘displacement of civilians that has been used as a strategy to destabilise social institutions.’ (Skinner 2005:6) It is through such displacement that the right to community, family, and security are all undermined and

so processes of displacement and forced migration can be seen as the ultimate success indicator of the dirty war.

This seems to have been the very experience of conflict for many Tamils in Sri Lanka. In a world of increased mobility however, victims of conflict no longer just inhabit battle-scarred villages or refugee camps in crisis states. Rather, the context of conflict has resulted in the creation of large diaspora communities in cities across the globe, creating another strand in ‘the complex relationship between migration and conflict.’ (Salehyan 2007:128) Wars are normally graded according to battle field deaths or casualty figures, however as many contemporary conflicts show, the displacement and the haemorrhaging of civilians leaving the country is also a variable that speaks volumes about the apparent transformative destruction of a community and a society in a time of war. Conflict diaspora communities are paradoxically both central to conflict and marginalized by it. These people lived for all intents and purposes on the frontline of conflict however their displacement abroad has made their relevance more ambiguous as far as the state and the politics of conflict is concerned. My focus on the Tamil diaspora is to make one such displaced community in Skinner’s words, the ‘focus of enquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the narrative.’ (Skinner 2005:1) Drawing on the work of David Parkin, Turton presents the argument that,

‘the way people experience movement...and the extent to which this is a shocking and disruptive experience, is determined by the conditions under which they move... whether and how much people see themselves as being displaced against their will.’ (Parkin cited in Turton 1979:122)

I focus on a conceptual and analytical space that often gets lost or is under-analyzed in discussions of diaspora and transnationalism. I theorize this analytical space as the ‘context of exit’ and this concerns a central part of my research, the particular etiology of a specific diaspora community in a time of conflict . It is accepted that Tamils constitute a recognized diaspora community. (Fuglerud 1999, McDowell 1999, Wayland 2003, Cheran 2004, Orjuela 2008) As argued by Appadurai and Beckenridge however, ‘diasporas come in many forms. There are diasporas by design and diasporas by accident... diasporas of loyalty and diasporas of exit.’ (Appadurai and Beckenridge 1989:i) The dynamics of the diaspora community interrogated in this

research will highlight the need to contextualize the use of the concept 'diaspora' with an adequate theorization of the term in the context of 'conflict diasporas', underlining a belief that the particular historicity of the Tamil diaspora and the reasons for their dispersion from Sri Lanka should provide an analytical point of reference that must be taken into account at all times when seeking to interrogate and theorize the nature of the Tamil diaspora condition.

In many instances and with valid alternate primary foci, the life of diaspora communities is often presented as beginning upon arrival in their chosen destinations. The reasons for departure from their home countries are often presented only in passing and in the case of conflict diasporas, the issues surrounding home country conflict is often referenced in a somewhat limited fashion. In this sense, much of the analysis of the transnational consciousness of conflict diaspora communities is decontextualised, rendered both ahistorical and apolitical. There are vast disparities in the experiences of various diaspora groups and the narrative meanings that they attach to such experiences and to themselves.

When discussing conflict diasporas, a context of conflict is vital in order to appreciate the narratives of the present. When we seek to define the reasons why diaspora members may engage in activities that support conflict in their former homelands, we need to understand the perceptions and experiences of those we aim to study, a contextual 'migrant's-eye view of the world.' (Rushdie 1992: 394) This work therefore is meant to give a sense of context to one such diasporic place and the individuals who inhabit it, by asking about the experiences and mental processes involved in the journey from citizen to refugee to diaspora member. As put forward by Brah, these journeys into 'a process of becoming' must be 'historicized' and I suggest that the nature, effects and interpretation of this history is key to how those in diaspora understand and internalise a narrative of conflict that informs their sense of self at a very ontological level. (Brah 1996:188) My aim is to link issues of diaspora identity formation more explicitly to the narrative of conflict in Sri Lanka, past, present and future and to interrogate the salience of cause and effect. The consequences of violence and forced migration in all its various hues will thus be analysed as an integral part of diaspora discourse as we seek to interrogate a community and a people defined by war.

A salient finding of my research has been the Janus-like quality of the diaspora condition and the individuals who dwell there, a synthesis of past and future concerns bound up in a present state of being. My argument is that one can only understand diaspora motivation and aspiration if one begins conceptually from the beginning, both spatially, temporally and existentially – not just in the Tamil enclaves of Harrow and Wood Green in London but in villages and towns across Sri Lanka. I take as my starting point an insight from Nordstrom that ‘these people have seen too much war, they have become the war.’ (Nordstrom 1992:40) Nordstrom speaks specifically about those who live in conflict zones however my aim is to seek to expand her analytical gaze to include those who have left because of the oppression and brutality of violence that they have experienced. Writing on the experience of internal displacement, Newman underlines the fact that,

‘refugees who have lived through violent experiences such as war or torture may suffer profound psychological distress ...given that traumatic events are rarely isolated incidents, but rather violent processes which persist in destroying the psyche long after their actual occurrence, even when far distant from danger.’ (Newman 2003: 34)

My intention again is to suggest that those forced into diaspora due to conflict, should also be viewed through the same analytical lens depicted by Newman above. With a similar focus on IDPs, Skinner notes a surprising ‘lack of analytical work dedicated to the experiences, perceptions and actions’ of individuals whom she refers to as the ‘people in-between’, ‘at the centre of the conflict.’ (Skinner 2005: 1) My work I argue concerns another ‘under-analysed’ group of people whom I feel are also, despite their actual geographical location, still at the centre of the conflict. Far from ‘getting away’, Tamils who flee war zone as refugees and ‘transform’ themselves into asylum seekers who eventually form diasporas abroad, have in many instances, taken the trauma and suffering of war with them. For them, war is not just an event ‘back home’, but rather very much part of their own continuing personal biography as significant protagonists in a particular conflict narrative.

My research is premised on a belief that a first response to any interrogation of diaspora attitudes to conflict in a distant homeland, is that rather than posing the

question as a dichotomy and juxtaposition of ‘diaspora abroad’ and ‘conflict at home’, we need to embed both question and answer in the context of violence, conflict and forced migration, underlining a need to ‘face up to the scars and fractures, to the blisters and sores, to the psychic traumas of bodies on the move.’ (Mishra 1995:7) Reflecting on the increased interest in the diaspora by commentators and analysts in 2009, a British Tamil newspaper editorial expresses disdain at the fact that such interest is limited only to a focus on the newsworthiness of the world wide demonstrations:

‘What is striking... is how none of these studies are particularly concerned with how ‘the Tamil Diaspora’ came to exist in the first place! Were this to be considered, the dynamics of... state repression, of execution, torture and rape by the ‘security forces’, and of exploitation by the ethnic supremacy embedded in state and society would be laid clearly open: the survivors of thirty years of Sinhala rule are here, in the West no less, to tell their stories.’ (Tamil Guardian 2009)

My work is thus also presented as an attempt to listen to just such stories and to uncover and theorize the continuum and relationship between diaspora identity, narratives of violence and the consequences of violence that travels across borders of time and space, underlining the fact as put forward by Hall, that ‘identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.’ (Hall 1990:225)

1.6 The Tamil Diaspora in a Time of Conflict: An Introduction to a Discursive Terrain

**‘I have had the sense of having frequently to reconstruct my life.’
(Rushdie 1990:8)**

The nature of diaspora consciousness in a time of war can tell us something about our own political modernity. As we see British soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, how do we make sense of ‘war at a distance, war going on elsewhere, war that we cannot see and do not directly feel but which we are always consciously or unconsciously aware of and responsive to?’ (Simpson 2010:13-4) In the UK, one reminder of such social involvement in conflict has been the repatriation of the dead. The return of fallen soldiers from military duty overseas routinely brings the British

market town of Wootton Bassett to a standstill as local residents pay their respects to the dead who pass through their town in military hearses.

"They come out of the pubs and stand in silence. It is a very patriotic scene. Everybody shows their appreciation of what the soldiers are doing." (cited in Jardine and Savill 2009)

Analysts like Nordstrom, Kaldor and Duffield theorize modern war as a process which tends to blur and even erase the line between soldier and civilian, combatant and non-combatant. (Nordstrom 1992; Kaldor 2001; Duffield 2001) This analysis however is one seen only on the ground in actual contemporary war zones. Looked at from a different perspective, for soldiers who fight wars in distant lands, the society they leave behind can often forget that it is indeed even actually 'at war.' Here, the life-worlds inhabited by soldier and civilian is worlds apart. It is just such an interrogation of the contemporary normality of the 'everyday' in a time of distant war that I wish to address. My focus however is on the Tamil diaspora community living in our midst, civilians who feel themselves caught up in a distant war.

*'we come here because all these boys and girls also, they are our soldiers only.... but they are also our children only. They are fighting for us, dying for us, dying for Eelam.... That is why must show respect..... this is a war for us, it is our war only.'*²⁰

The words above, spoken at the 'Heroes Day' event mentioned above, echoed the views of many Tamils present. Indeed, it is their own reference to British soldiers killed in Afghanistan and the comparisons they drew, which informs my present thoughts. O'Hagan has described Wootton Bassett as 'a place where every day is Remembrance Day' and coming so close after 'Remembrance Sunday', many also drew comparisons between their own efforts to honour 'their' fallen dead and the spirit of national mourning evidenced on 'Remembrance Sunday' throughout the UK. (O'Hagan 2009: 43)

Clifford makes the point that in 'diaspora discourses generally, both loss and survival are prefigurative.' He posits however that what is prefigured is unclear as 'we lack a description' in a concrete sense, of what a diaspora is supposed to be. (Clifford 1994:

²⁰ Interview: November 2008

328) While the etiology of the Tamil diaspora will be a significant part of my thesis, my work will also seek to bring into perspective, the rebirth of a people who have imagined and discovered other ways of surviving and ‘being-in-another-world.’ Being in diaspora is in many ways to have a hybrid identity, if only because geographical location, passports and naturalization papers don’t tell the whole story of who you are.

Gilroy’s seminal work on diaspora identity has argued that academic discourse as a whole ‘has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation’, what he refers to as the ‘routes’ of diaspora. My work I hope will contribute to creating a theoretical framework to help better understand the conflict diaspora condition, paying attention to both the ‘routes’ and ‘roots’ of the diaspora experience as I engage with narratives of both loss and survival. (Gilroy 1993:19) Following Gilroy, I believe the experience of displacement can be the grounds for the creation and production of an identity anchored in diasporic space.

With all its analytical sophistication, Gilroy’s work impresses on many levels. My focus however is differentiated primarily because of the immediacy and contemporary nature of conflict diaspora discourse in terms of the ‘roots’ of their homeland context as well as when considering the ‘routes’ experienced in their journey through a ‘process of becoming’ in diasporic space. I will show that an analysis of both roots and routes are equally important and indeed cannot be separated for both elements are very much part of the on-going biographical experience of diaspora Tamils. Gilroy does reference this discourse of continuity albeit in a more abstract way, arguing that the experiences of historic black communities are evident in the deep psychological linkages between the past and the present in contemporary black cultural history. (Gilroy 1993) In the case of contemporary conflict diasporas however, what I am trying to highlight is that we are at this very moment, at the beginning of just such a journey of ‘cultural’ creation. The significance of diasporic roots and routes for the Tamil diaspora is that it underlines the transformative psychological impact of processes of conflict and displacement on present day lives and present day struggles in diasporic space. It is in the context of oppression, exclusion, violence, dislocation and contestation that conflict diaspora culture and identity encapsulates in a very

particular way, what Rushdie has conceptualized as the ‘experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis ... that is the migrant condition.’ (Rushdie 1992: 394)

Diaspora opinion in general is of course disaggregated when considering the extent and degree of professed support for homeland militant action and as referenced above, the Tamil diaspora does indeed include a range of opinions. Such opinion is influenced and informed by a range of determinants and one could also disaggregate the Tamil diaspora community itself by using a variety of variables such as age, gender, economic and educational class, religion, caste, regional origin within and time of departure from Sri Lanka, not to mention the growing significance of the second generation, those born in the UK.²¹ My work however is focused on individuals who actually live the ‘conflict diaspora’ condition, those dislocated and displaced by violence and oppression in all its forms, who now find themselves inhabiting the place of diaspora. The bulk of my fieldwork has been conducted with Tamils who left Sri Lanka from 1983 onwards, as refugees and asylum seekers, with most of my respondents leaving from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The time frame of my research focus and fieldwork broadly covers the years 2006-2009 and does not substantially involve any study of diaspora sentiment beyond the aftermath of the 2009 battlefield decimation of the LTTE.²² Diaspora activity and sentiment during the months leading up to the demise of Prabhakaran and the LTTE is presented as the culmination of my thesis.

While 2000 was the supposed start of a peace process, marked by the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) in February 2002, this was ‘short lived.’ (UN 2011: 11) The agreement did bring a short ‘respite from hostilities’ but violence and low-level conflict continued almost unabated. (HRW 2006:8) The ‘LTTE unilaterally abrogated the CFA in April 2003’ and with ‘renewed hostilities breaking out in 2006’, it is clear that the ‘CFA largely existed in name only.’ Full scale armed confrontation resumed in August 2006 and by July 2007, after a series of brutal battles; the government took control of the Eastern Province from rebel hands. A full military offensive against the LTTE in all its remaining areas of control then began in January 2008. (UN 2011: 11-3) Throughout the period of my research therefore and bearing in mind the nature of

²¹ For a general discussion of issues faced by the ‘second generation’ see Levitt 2009

²² A review of the diaspora after May 2009 can be found in the ‘Crisis Group’ Report 2010.

the conflict since 1983 and the nature of state –society relations between successive governments and the Tamil community since the 1950s, the diaspora can indeed be classified as a conflict diaspora in a time of oppression, conflict and war. This will be further addressed in later chapters.

My research has led me to awareness and a belief that as referenced above, a significant proportion of the diaspora community does indeed support the LTTE.²³ My work is thus presented as a study of diaspora opinion that does manifest the phenomenon of what has been termed ‘ long distance nationalism’, broadly conceptualised as support for the LTTE and the struggle for Tamil self-determination. My aim is to interrogate the nature of such support and hence the content of what is presently accepted as the foundational basis of long distance nationalism, why it exists and what it means and my point of departure, consolidated throughout my research, is that the broader reasons for such support are not significantly affected by the variables mentioned above as such support seems to transcend all manner of categorical classification. I start my research however mindful of Brubaker’s assertion that,

‘we should not... prejudge the outcome of such struggles by imposing groupness through definitional fiat. We should seek, rather, to bring the struggles themselves into focus.’ (Brubaker 2005:13)

I do not claim that the diaspora is devoid of anti-LTTE opinion nor that it is defined solely by support for the LTTE. Rather my argument is that the Tamil diaspora is defined by the context of war and it is within this context that we should begin our search for a sense of diaspora identity in a time of struggle, bearing in mind the ‘emergence of doubt, questioning or even confusion’ that ‘ facilitates the formation ... of emergent, hybrid forms of cultural identity.’ (Bhabha cited in Tambiah 2000:178) My aim in discussing the ways in which diaspora Tamils negotiate a sense of delocalized conflict and deterritorialised identity, is not to pigeon-hole them within a ‘one size fits-all’ template, but rather to highlight the dynamic nature of such negotiations against a background of their own experiences and perceptions, the ongoing conflict processes in their home country and the interconnectedness of

²³ A ‘Crisis Group’ Report on the diaspora for example refers to ‘pro-Tiger elements, which constitute the vast majority of the diaspora.’ (Crisis Group 2010:5)

different aspects of 'being', as individuals progress from being refugees and asylum seekers into becoming part of a diaspora. My arguments will underline the fact that while there are indeed conceptual elements that suggest that members of a conflict diaspora community might be more likely to support homeland insurgent action, this is something that should be investigated and understood contextually rather than assumed categorically.

Naficy reminds us that 'exile discourse thrives on detail, specificity and locality' because 'displaced people do not experience exile equally or uniformly.' (Naficy in Morley 2000: 55) My belief is that the production of theory itself in this regard, needs to be rooted in the historical, political and social circumstances of those it seeks to describe and when we consider conflict diasporas, what we need is a theoretical framework that prioritises the lived reality of a context of conflict and violence, not in abstract terms but rather as a need to understand the deeper existential effects and needs which flow from just such a state of being. The nature of diaspora consciousness needs to be examined together with the modes and processes of exclusion and violence that have brought such a consciousness into being. Marginalized by dominant representations of what it means to be 'Sri Lankan', Tamils have long been the victims of a particular political narrative of postcolonial state building. Their presence as a diaspora community is a continuation of just such narratives because for the majority of Tamils, they would not be abroad if not for a political history of discrimination, victimization, oppression and conflict, a situation that Bernard Crick as early as 1964 described as one where Tamils were 'being punished for what they cannot be, or for what they are not even allowed to be.' (Crick 1964: 82)

My focus has been on a study of a cross section of 'ordinary' Tamils, individuals not tied in officially to institutional, pro- militant activism or the increasingly 'professional' Tamil diaspora political lobby. My intention has been to try and analyze how such individuals react to the diasporic landscape they find themselves in, how they perceive their own experiences and identities within that landscape and the reasons for their viewpoints regarding the conflict and their support for the LTTE. It is an approach that seeks to understand the ideology of the proverbial 'common man', the ordinary Tamil man or woman in London who finds himself or herself, to

steal a well-worn legal phrase, ‘on the Clapham omnibus.’ It is an attempt to identify and equate ‘public opinion’ with ‘commonplace humanity’ based on the reasonableness of the common man. (Bagehot 2001:30)²⁴ When we expand this analogy to consider diaspora opinion however, ‘commonplace’ becomes quite difficult to ascertain. In all possibility, a member of the Tamil diaspora on a London bus has in his personal history, experiences of violence, loss and suffering that in many ways defines the conflict diaspora condition. Would he still qualify as reasonable in his judgements and perceptions regarding the issues surrounding such events? Nonetheless, it is within this broad mass of the Tamil diaspora that I have sought to find the ‘small actors and bit-part players, whose lives...were inextricably interwoven with broader political realities.’ (Butalia 2000:71) They represent the hundreds and thousands, who regularly attend diaspora demonstrations and events and represent to my mind, what Turton refers to as the ‘ordinary people viewpoint.’(Turton 2003:2)

Diaspora theory in this sense will be presented ‘as a framework for the study of a specific process of community’ creation in a time of crisis, transition and contestation. (Butler 2001: 194) I will argue that such communities are created from a culture of conflict, where the question of ‘nation’, community and identity is posed at the level of trauma and loss endured, survived and transfigured. In their search for meaning and struggle for recognition, such communities can be said to represent a response and a challenge to regimes of political violence, underlining the fact that ‘violent processes of displacement do not strip people of their ability to sustain distinctive political communities and cultures of resistance.’(Clifford 1994: 319) The impetus for my thesis has been a desire to capture just such a consciousness of community and resistance within the Tamil diaspora. It flows from a moment of clarity that was ‘given’ to me by one of my informants, who posed the question: ‘*have you been in war time, do you know (how) to talk about war?*’

²⁴ Bagehot refers to such public opinion as ‘the opinion of the bald-headed man at the back of the omnibus...the opinion of the ordinary mass of ...commonplace mankind.’ The legal fiction of the reasonable person is a characterization of an ordinary individual against whom a defendant's conduct might be judged in a civil action for negligence in English law. See *Hall v. Brooklands Auto-Racing Club* (1933)

He had taken me to a room he was renting in Earls Court and as we had crossed the threshold, he told me that I was entering a ‘place of war.’²⁵ He proceeded to explain to me his thoughts on a ‘*funny war*’ that he was involved in, a conflict whose images haunted his thoughts and yet one that was in actuality being played out thousands of miles away. He explained in very visceral terms, the effects of the conflict on all those in his ‘immediate’ circle of intimacy, fellow diaspora Tamils that I knew but also various individuals presently based in Sri Lanka, India and across Europe and North America. It was an almost unending anthology of stories - whose characters seemed to populate the room for brief moments before the very tangible reality of new characters jostling for space, forced them to give way - stories of loved ones lost, pain and suffering endured, families broken up and families reunited. There was much that was bleak but also a very tangible sense of hope, what he referred to as ‘*stout dreams*.’²⁶ Intertwined with such stories was also a reflection on more abstract and existential ideas concerning questions of suffering, morality, justice, the best way to cook crabs and the nature of identity and belonging in a time of war and displacement.²⁷

In her work on transnational communities, Levitt argues that ‘if a fiction of congregation takes hold, then a diaspora emerges.’ (Levitt 2001: 202) During the course of that single night, it seemed to that I was witnessing one man’s narrative ‘celebration’ of just such a community that he was a part of, its trials and tribulations but more importantly, a celebration of its survival and aspiration as part of a wider transnational community.

My aim is to ask what we can learn about the sentiment of those in diaspora by looking at the lives and experiences of particular individuals. Beyond the macro-causal structural conditions which inform the formation of diasporas in a time of conflict, my aim is to ‘engage with narratives on suffering in their own terms’ and to try and link a macro discourse of diaspora experience with individual responses to

²⁵ He had lost two close friends in the conflict and for him, their loss meant that he would always be in a place of war because the effects of war were always with him and in him. (this is the closest I can get to a rendition of how he felt)

²⁶ This of course was a reference to alcohol but its intended analogy was more in line with the idea of steeling oneself with a stiff drink rather than getting intoxicated, stout as beverage but also as a frame of mind.

²⁷ Interview with ZAC: August 2006

violence and conflict. (Wilson 2003:269) Abu-Lughod argues that ‘focusing on the particular is not about privileging the micro over the macro.’ She posits that a focus on the individual, ‘need not imply disregard for forces and dynamics that are not locally based.’ To my mind, this is all the more relevant when we consider members of a diaspora community, who in their very nature, manifest the ‘effects of extra-local and long-term processes.’ Following Abu-Lughod, I would argue that the personal narratives of those in diaspora can be said to reveal transnational effects that are ‘manifested locally and specifically , produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives, inscribed in their bodies and their words.’ (Abu-Lughod 1991 in Brettell 2003:23-24)

In their seminal work on transnationalism, Basch et al maintain that ‘it is only in contemporary fiction that this state of ‘in-betweenness’ has been fully voiced.’ (Basch et al 1997: 7, 8) Cutting a similar vein of thought, Ashcroft suggests that ‘creative artists often seem to express most forcefully the imaginative vision of a society’ seeking to articulate itself. (Ashcroft 2000: 5) The relevance of such ‘fictional’, imaginative visions is also pointed out by Giddens, who reminds us, that

‘literary style is not irrelevant to the accuracy of social descriptions’ because ‘the social sciences draw upon the same source of description (mutual knowledge) as novelists or others who write fictional accounts of social life.’ (Giddens in Lewis et al 2008:15)

I mention this strain of thought because my own work has been much informed by insights from a variety of such ‘other sources of knowledge.’(Lewis et al 2008:15) It is my belief that in order to understand and to ‘capture more evocatively’ the transformative, imaginative element that is part of the diaspora condition, such alternative modes of thinking are required in order to fully apprehend the existential element inherent in diaspora discourse. (Ashcroft 2000: 5) The author Salman Rushdie underlines the theme of migration in much of his work, arguing that migration,

‘offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age. The very word metaphor, with its roots in the Greek word for “bearing across,” describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants - borne-across-humans- are metaphorical beings in their very essence.’ (Rushdie 1991:278)

Taking seriously diaspora viewpoints enables us to understand the ideas and images that inform the lives of such borne-across-humans as they seek to give meaning to their present lives and to understand what Ashbery has termed the nature of the ‘experiences that they have experienced.’ (Ashbery 1981) This search for a sense of meaning by individuals who in many senses have lost everything, underlines the fact that war and its claims and consequences come ‘in many guises and its effects continue to be felt long after’ the immediacy of violence. (Colson 2007:2)

Levitt makes the point that ‘the national backdrop which the migrant remembers is not the same as non-migrants’ everyday realities... asymmetries result from temporal as well as moral disjunctures.’ (Levitt 2009:1230) The question posed therefore is if such processes mean that you can become a more ‘Tamil Tamil’ in diaspora – something that you were not in the first place and what the reality of such an identity entails. When considering diaspora lives in a time of conflict, we need to take seriously the fact that we need particular theories of perception and intellectual activity, theories of emotional and existential struggle and a theory of a ‘particular epistemological account of ideological structures’ created in diaspora hearts and minds, set against a backdrop of experience and perception and a subjective reading of history. (cf Said 1984: 16) It is this perspective that will enable us to realize that for those in diaspora, an apprehension of time and space and an ‘imagining’ of a sense of being, obligation and morality, all correspond to a different logic and rhythm of meaning. This perspective should not be marginalized, for in silencing such claims, any assessment of the conflict diaspora condition will present such communities as randomly formed and directionless and in this sense, our understanding of the concept of ‘ long distance nationalism’ is also rendered superficial and analytically meaningless as we will fail to correctly grasp the motivations and aspirations that inspire its manifestation.

Chapter 2 : An Analysis of Definitions and Conceptual Ideas

2.1 An Introduction to a Diaspora Community: Prologue to a Definitional Analysis

It was a Sunday morning in April 2009 and I had been invited to attend a First Communion Celebration Mass at St Gabriel's church in Harrow by one of my Tamil informants whose son was participating in the event. At the end of the mass, the various families involved took turns to take pictures in front of the altar; small groups flanking a child dressed in white. When the turn of my informants' son came, at least 20 people crowded into the 'photograph-to-be.' Despite the large number of family members in attendance, I could already see the 'transnational' footprints that would flow from this event; photographs sent by post and email to various destinations around the globe and messages of congratulations and gifts making their way back in return.

After the mass, we walked back to my informant's home where a party to mark the event was to be held. More guests began trickling in, many coming straight from having attended the demonstration that was currently then being held daily in central London. I asked one of the arriving guests why she had attended the demonstration and she said simply,

*'to show them we are here.... and we will not be quiet... no matter how hard they try, they cannot kill us all.'*²⁸

There were two young Italians sitting near me – employees of my friend, who had only recently started working with him in the restaurant that he owned. I had met them before and as soon as the other guest had turned away, they asked me various questions. It was the first time that they had heard of the issues surrounding the conflict and I summarize the questions posed:

²⁸ Conversation with WARN: April 2009

‘Who are the ‘we’ and how are the ‘we’ connected to the ‘us’ and for that matter, who are the ‘they’ and if the ‘they’ are Sri Lankans, are not the ‘we’ and the ‘us’ also Sri Lankans? Are the ‘they’ trying to kill Tamils in the UK?’

As I tried to answer their questions, I remember thinking, ‘are these Italians conscious of where they are – not so much in a suburb of London but in a transnational Tamil diasporic social field, a place in itself.’ This seemed like a contrived thought on my part even then, but just at that moment, we were all invited to view a video screening of a wedding. The wedding being shown was that of a German Tamil man and a Canadian Tamil woman, both of who now lived in London and it had been held a few months back in Chennai. Many of those present were excited to see the event unfold on screen, not least because every once in a while, various individuals would refer enthusiastically to a peripheral individual on screen, who it turned out would be a relative or close friend. This turned out to be a popular part of the afternoon – picking out friends and family whom you recognised while also being ‘introduced’ to other individuals on screen who were in turn related to other people in the watching crowd. The wedding guests themselves seemed to leap off the screen and disappear into the crowd as they were picked out and discussed by friends and family amongst the watching crowd. People even began to call friends and family in Sri Lanka and beyond on their mobiles, sharing the fact that they were watching them on screen.

I spent the rest of the evening at various points, enquiring from people I had not encountered before, the singular question – ‘what is the Tamil diaspora?’ This of course involved some establishing of terms but the dominant response seemed to be one of puzzlement. As one respondent put it,

‘when you leave (the) kitchen and enter (the) sitting room, you don’t forget the kitchen, especially if your wife is still there.... You don’t become another person. Myself here, my parents in Mannar (Sri Lanka), my brother in Paris, we are all the same people.’

*‘Even if (your) wife is not in the kitchen, maybe rice is cooking on the stove’, quipped another. ‘You always need to keep the door open to remind you, if you just forget everything, house can burn down.’*²⁹

²⁹ Group discussion: April 2009

I use the above narrative of a social event to situate an instance of an ‘everyday’ moment in the diaspora experience. As the day progressed, men and women separated, moving to different parts of the house as was normal on such occasions. Conversation amongst the men now turned to talk of the ongoing conflict as well as their experiences of the demonstrations in London, which almost everyone present had participated in at some time or other. This moment of ‘*talking Sri Lanka politics*’ as one individual put it, was an almost mandatory occurrence at such gatherings. Reflecting on my earlier definition of terms, one of the men present told me that for him, a definition for ‘*Tamil diaspora people only*’ lay in the ability of an individual to ‘*feel for Sri Lanka with heart and soul*’, something which in his mind, marked the lives of all present.³⁰

In this chapter, I seek to engage with the theoretical definitions and conceptual issues raised when we interrogate both the nature of diasporas and the idea of a transnational paradigm. The creation of substantial diaspora communities, not least the growing worldwide proliferation of the Tamil diaspora, underlines the fact that an analysis of the concept and phenomenon of diaspora formation should be seen as a ‘discourse that is traveling...in new global conditions.’ Being in diaspora therefore should not be seen as an experience that only follows a ‘definitive model.’ (Clifford 1994: 306)

In engaging with a vast literature on competing conceptual and analytical ideas, my point of departure and constant frame of reference will be the ‘actually existing’ Tamil community that I have engaged with. Often encountering a lack of understanding and sensitivity towards their sense of connection to events a world away, those ‘living in diaspora’ seem to me to be captives of a turn of phrase. The danger here is that the actual identity and aspirations of such individuals thus becomes vague and out of focus, deprived of context and meaning.³¹ In the case of diasporas generally and more specifically conflict diasporas, theoretical discourse therefore should be a map which guides our intellectual and emotional understanding and

³⁰ Conversation with PR: April 2009

³¹ In an article on the demonstrations in Parliament Square, the journalist Will Self (2009) recounts the following: ‘As I walked past the long file of belted and truncheon-dangling officers, I noticed several had small green cylinders attached to their waists. “What’re those?” I asked a sergeant.

“Fire extinguishers,” he replied.

“Are you expecting petrol bombs?”

“No, not that...” “but y’know, these Malaysians an’ that — they set fire to themselves.”

interpretation of a people, a condition and an experience that many seldom encounter and an analytical space which most never enter.

2.2 Diaspora: Definitions and Conceptualisations

An early assessment from Vertovec in 1997 makes the point that ‘diaspora’ is often used to,

‘describe practically any population which... has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe. (Vertovec 1997: 1)

A need for more conceptual rigour is put forward by Brubaker, who argues that ‘the universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora.’ Brubaker argues against what he refers to as the ‘let-a-thousand-diasporas bloom’ approach, where according to him, ‘the category becomes stretched to the point of uselessness.’ (Brubaker 2005:3) We begin our search for definitions however in an earlier time where diaspora was defined simply as ‘that segment of a people living outside the homeland.’ (Conner 1986: 16) In his consideration of diaspora as a ‘new field of study’ Sheffer added another layer of complexity with his view that diasporas are ‘minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their homelands.’ (Sheffer 1986: 3) This was followed by a now much quoted attempt by Safran in 1991 to provide a comprehensive breakdown of the conceptual and analytical characteristics of diasporas. (Safran 1991: 83–4)³²

In similar fashion to Safran, Sheffer and others in the field have proceeded to develop what Walbeck refers to as ‘elaborate typologies’ of diasporas. (Sheffer 1996:39; Cohen 1997) While rich in descriptive and comparative detail, my own feeling, following Walbeck, is that in trying to conceptualise the study of diasporas, ‘far too much discussion has been devoted to whether this or that community really is a genuine diaspora’, based on criteria that seems suspect or at least open to challenge. (Walbeck 2002:231) For example, a key criteria often put forward speaks of a need for some degree of what Brubaker terms ‘homeland orientation.’ (Brubaker 2005:5;

³² See Appendix A for Safran’s full effort

Safran 1991: 83–4; Sheffer 1996:39) Other commentators however argue that diasporas may not always manifest such feelings, or at least not in terms as clearly or as easily recognised. (Clifford 1994:305-6, Falzon 2003) Rather than believing that ‘their ancestral homeland’ is the ‘place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return– when conditions are appropriate’, diaspora members may actually feel that they prefer or are better off in diaspora. (Safran 1991: 83–4) As put forward by Clifford, we should be wary of constructing our working definition of a term like diaspora by recourse to an ‘ideal type’ as even the supposed original, classical ‘pure forms’ of diasporic communities like the often quoted Jewish diaspora ‘are ambivalent, even embattled, over basic features’ as set out in any such strict ‘definitional checklist.’ (Clifford 1994:306, Brubaker 2005)

My own approach to a review of the relevant theoretical and definitional issues concerning diasporas will be largely informed, in the first instance by Vertovec’s more analytical approach that seeks to capture the various complexities inherent in diaspora theory. According to Vertovec, such theory ‘conveys at least three discernible meanings of the concept diaspora’, ‘diaspora as social form, diaspora as type of consciousness, and diaspora as mode of cultural production.’ (Vertovec 1997:2) Many theorists have used Vertovec’s conceptualization as a point of departure and below is a brief summary of the current state of play. At this point, it is helpful to appreciate that much of the analytical categories used by various theorists do seem to overlap, both semantically in some senses as well as conceptually.

Vertovec’s first realm of analysis does follow a familiar line of defining diaspora by reference to a series of attributes, diaspora by checklist as it were. This is presented as ‘diasporas as social form’ and Vertovec himself references the work of authors such as Sheffer and Safran. Vertovec sees this conception of diaspora as being associated with an archetype of ‘forced displacement, victimisation, alienation, loss’ as well as ‘a dream of return.’ The defining nature of diaspora here is as ‘a social form in that the emphasis remains upon an identified group characterised by their relationship-despite-dispersal.’ (Vertovec 1997:2-3) Walbeck presents this version of diaspora as a ‘form of social organization’, as a ‘specific form of transnational community.’ (Wahlbeck 2002:229)

Vertovec's second conceptualization of diaspora, 'as consciousness' is presented as a 'relatively recent, approach' that 'puts greater emphasis on describing a variety of experience, a state of mind and a sense of identity.' (Vertovec 1997:8) Walbeck sees this as an analytical tool that describes the 'geographical displacement and/or deterritorialisation of identities in the contemporary world', a strand of research that 'has occurred across disciplinary boundaries, and has been undertaken by sociologists, anthropologists, literary critics and those working within the traditions of cultural studies.' (Walbeck 2002: 229; see also Adamson & Demetriou 2007:499) Adamson and Demetriou present this consciousness as a social condition, an avenue to use the concept of diaspora 'to theorize and reflect upon the transnational and translocal dimensions of identity formation.' (Adamson & Demetriou 2007:229)

Vertovec's third conceptualization of diaspora is defined as diaspora as a 'mode of cultural production.' Diasporas are perceived to be a subset and a creation of globalisation processes and in this regard,

'globalisation is examined ... as the world-wide flow of cultural objects, images and meanings resulting inback-and-forth transferences, mutual influences, new contestations, negotiations and constant transformations.' (Vertovec 1997:19)

Though not mentioning it by name, Adamson and Demetriou speak of 'another strand of literature on diaspora' which they see as 'exploring how new forms of transnationalism are transforming traditional understandings of national identity' and they distinguish this strain of analysis from 'diaspora as consciousness' by arguing that in this conceptualization, 'the term diaspora refers less to a social condition than to an empirical reality.' One could argue therefore that what they are referring to, also addresses the idea of diaspora as a 'mode of cultural production.'

The validity of Vertovec's typologies as discreet modes of analysis is called into question by Sokefeld, who argues 'that it is difficult conceptually to separate diaspora as social form from diaspora as a type of consciousness.' (Sokefeld 2006: 265) Walbeck also highlights the rather fluid borders of the typology, arguing that 'diaspora as a mode of cultural production' does tend to merge with the earlier analysis of diaspora as consciousness as far as issues like cultural hybridity are concerned. (Walbeck 2002:235) Walbeck also maintains that Vertovec has

overlooked the predominantly American scholars within the disciplines of political science and international relations who ‘have to be regarded as a separate category studying diaspora as politics.’ He emphasizes the ‘political activism of transnational communities and diasporas’, arguing that the political relations between diaspora, homeland and country of settlement often constitute complex interdependent relations among three poles.’ (Walbeck 2002:235) In a similar vein, Adamson and Demetriou draw our attention to a body of literature that emphasizes the role of the diaspora as political actors and hence focuses on their political activities - the impact of migrant interest groups and ethnic lobbies. (Adamson and Demetriou 2007: 299) Sheffer also seeks to address this political element in his later work, arguing that ‘there has been a noticeable lack of in-depth studies... of the political dimension of the diaspora phenomenon’, a ‘gap’ that needs to be addressed. (Sheffer 2003: 5)

A reading of the conceptual and analytical fields outlined above underlines the fact that as far as diaspora theory is concerned, the overlaps are considerable and much of the broader literature does seem to only speak onto itself, drawing up lists of characteristics or conceptual modes of inquiry that seek to highlight the particular focus of the authors involved. The fact seems to be that despite efforts to add clarity, the meaning of diaspora remains rather broad, with various definitions contested and disputed- with varying degrees of nuance, clarity and coherence. Commenting on an edited volume of articles by Vertovec and Cohen (1999), Van Amersfoort for example argues that ‘the reader gets the impression that the term ‘diaspora’ is used to describe a bewildering variety of experiences and situations and is led to wonder whether we are not all, in some sense, diasporic.’(Van Amersfoort 2004: 360)

Sokefeld however does argue that despite this confusion, ‘ there appears to be a fairly common core understanding of what (diaspora) is about.’ He posits that ‘nobody would question that diaspora has to do with dislocation, with having left particular places and living elsewhere, or with simply being out of place.’(Sokefeld 2006:265)

Following Brubaker, I would argue that an interrogation of what a diaspora is, should not be conceptualised ‘as a bounded entity, but rather as an idiom, a stance, a claim.’ As put forward by Brubaker, ‘we should think of diaspora in the first instance as a category of practice’ which is ‘ used to make claims, to articulate projects, to formulate expectations.... it does not so much describe the world as seek to remake

it.’ (Brubaker 2005:12) An analytical stance in itself, Brubaker encourages us to investigate the claims diaspora members make regarding their will to be seen as a distinct community, the stance they engender regarding their ‘worldview’ and aspirations and their subjective feelings towards the politics of their homelands. In the final analysis, as suggested by Brubaker, it is the subjective perceptions, sentiments and actions of individual members of such communities that should be the focus of our study.³³ Such an approach seems more relevant for my own focus as it allows me to engage with the question ‘whether the concept of diaspora can be used to describe and study some specific qualities of the particular community in question.’ (Walbeck: 2002: 231)

Clifford argues that ‘a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaptation, or resistance may be as important’ a criteria as any other, in terms of diaspora theorizing. (Clifford 1994: 306) To my mind, it is essential to situate such communities within the perimeters of an interrogation of what I conceive to be a study of a community-in-progress. This will enable us to try and capture within an analytical framework of meaning, just such communities who find themselves ‘out of place’, but it would also enable us to approach this task in a more contextual manner as we seek to understand the landscape of experience and meaning within which such communities define themselves. In trying to analyse the ‘political importance of diasporas’, Vertovec states that

‘belonging to a diaspora entails a consciousness of, or emotional attachment to, commonly purported origins ... Concerns for homeland developments and the plight of co-diaspora members in other parts of the world flow from this consciousness and emotional attachment.’ (Vertovec 2005: 3)

The issue of a specific diaspora consciousness has been called into question by scholars like Van Amersfoort, who cast doubt on the question of ‘whether diasporas indeed generate a specific type of consciousness.’ (Van Amersfoort 2004: 361) My own feeling and the focus of my thesis is that rather than the somewhat essentialist

³³ I limit my endorsement of Brubaker’s thesis to his argument that it is the subjective nature of diaspora sentiment that we should focus on. I argue that in the context of conflict diasporas, an understanding of the nature of diaspora identity is a function of an inherent way of being, informed by the context of violence and war which has produced such individuals and communities. The experience of conflict in this sense is not an aspect that informs the subjectivity of diaspora attitudes but rather it is the condition of its subjectivity.

and generalized consciousness referred to by Vertovec above and challenged by Van Amersfoort, a study of conflict diaspora consciousness is first and foremost, a study of personal experience and an engagement with a politicised social identity that flows from just such experiences, specifically an engagement with a culture of violence and the politics of conflict within a specific context. As mentioned above, Vertovec does suggest a conceptualisation of diaspora ‘as consciousness’, where what is deemed essential is the ‘emphasis on describing a variety of experience.’(Vertovec 1997:8) It is my belief that this is an analytical line of enquiry that needs to be further developed conceptually, taking into account the very specific nature of conflict diasporas and the context and experience of conflict that defines them.

In my analysis, the ‘specific qualities of the particular community in question’, will be presented as the experience of experiencing the diaspora condition in a time of conflict and war and the consciousness of violence and dislocation that such a condition of being engenders. (Walbeck: 2002: 231) For the many Tamils represented in my work, their significance and relevance as individuals and a community in a ‘place of diaspora’ is framed within a consciousness which puts their own experiences of violence, loss and displacement as well as their perception of the ongoing continuum of conflict processes, suffering and oppression in Sri Lanka, very much at the centre of diaspora discourse, underlining their own involvement as a community of suffering and interpretation. I will argue that conflict diaspora consciousness is a subject worthy of study for what it can tell us about the nature of a community in our very midst, yet one seemingly still on the borderland of a distant conflict.

2.3 Diaspora and Transnationalism

Tölöyan presents a much-quoted definition of diasporas as ‘the exemplary communities of the transnational moment.’ (Tölöyan 1991:5) To address the nature of diaspora is to engage with the phenomenon of transnationalism and following Brettell, ‘we might ask what is the conceptual relationship between diaspora and transnationalism.’(Brettell 2006:329) The need to interrogate this conceptual and analytical linkage is underlined by Brubaker, who poses the question,

‘does ‘diaspora’ along with kindred terms such as transnationalism... name something fundamentally new in the world? Have we passed from the age of the nation-state to the age of diaspora?’ (Brubaker 2005: 8)

Basch et al describe transnationalism as ‘a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries.’ (Basch et al 1997:22) The theoretical foundations of transnationalism have been developed primarily through the work of scholars addressing issues of migration and the nature of migrant communities and its conceptual definition has sought to underline and highlight the fact that migrants,

‘are fully encapsulated neither in the host society nor in their native land but... remain active participants in the social settings of both locations. They construct their identities in relation to both societies.’ (Glick-Schiller and Fouron 1990:330)

Such work in the 1990s heralded what Al-Ali et al describe as the ‘the emergence of transnationalism as a key field of study in international migration.’ (Al-Ali et al 2001:578) In a review of the ‘continuities and discontinuities between immigration and transnationalism’, Smith makes the point that while such continuities do exist, what is being posited is that transnationalism represents

‘something new, requiring a very different theoretical lens than the early focus on ‘migration’, which carried with it an embedded understanding of the world from the nation-state perspective.’ (Smith 2008: 478)

Transnationalism therefore can be seen as a radical theoretical lens, for in terms of defining migrant identity, passion and activity, it ‘challenges the hegemony of the nation-state’ to dictate terms in isolation from all other external influences. (Gilroy in Nagel 2001: 249) The academic literature that has grown up around the issues related to the study of transnational processes is vast and underlines the prophetic argument of Basch et al that ‘the concept of transnationalism is an idea whose time has come.’ (Basch et al 1997:7) The relevance of transnational theory to my work can be encapsulated in Fog-Olwig’s claim that such a theory ‘has contributed to our understanding of migration by pointing to the inadequacy of investigating population movements in terms of one-way movements that result in the gradual integration of migrants into the receiving country.’ (Fog-Olwig 2003:787) By appreciating and

using a transnational lens, we are able to see that migration in whatever form, is actually a complex business and diasporic lives must be studied within the context of ‘multi-layered social fields’, bearing in mind ‘how the different strata of transnational activities mutually interact and transform one another. (Levitt et al 2003:567-8) In an attempt to link the two concepts of transnationalism and diaspora, Levitt in turn also argues that ‘transnational communities are building blocks of potential diasporas that may or may not take shape.’ (Levitt 2001: 202)

The concept of ‘transnationalism’ however, like that of ‘diaspora’ also has its detractors who question its novelty, its conceptual clarity and its efficacy as an analytical tool to varying degrees. (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004, Kivisto 2001, Nagel 2002) Levitt et al point out that,

‘some critics doubt that transnational practices are widespread or very influential... Others contend that migrants’ transnational practices are not new.... Still others charge that the findings from the primarily case study- based research . . . are often exaggerated or skewed.’ (Levitt, et al 2003: 565)

Kivisto’s criticisms for example focus on his belief that,

‘the concept suffers from ambiguity as a result of competing definitions that fail to specify the temporal and spatial parameters of the term and to adequately locate it vis-à-vis other concepts.’ (Kivisto 2001:550)

Even those who advocate the strength of the transnational idea accept that “transnationalism becomes a rather meaningless idea when it is used as a catch-all term for any migration- related matter’ and some question if transnationalism is ‘ a concept, a theory, a field, an approach or a discipline? (Portes et al 1999:219; Martiniello & Lafleur 2008:648) Brubaker’s influential article on the conceptual perimeters of the ‘diaspora’ idea is also relevant here for he gets straight to the crux of the issue, questioning the very relevance of diaspora and transnationalism as tools of analysis as well as ‘the alleged novelty and import of the phenomenon itself.’(Brubaker 2005: 8)

In defence of transnationalism as a conceptual and analytical lens, Vertovec addresses many of the criticisms from what he refers to as the ‘the usual suspects’, drawing

attention to the fact that most of the criticisms have been repeatedly responded to by a variety of scholars and furthermore, scholars of transnationalism have also made ‘considerable conceptual tuning concerning modes, levels, extents and impacts of transnationalism.’ (Vertovec 2004b: 2-5) These include works by many of the main theorists working in the field of migration studies who have formulated and critically interrogated the various issues raised, including the veracity of transnationalism as a new analytical phenomenon and the nature of its conceptual and analytical perimeters. (Vertovec 2003, 2004; Portes et al 1999; Portes 2001; Ostergaard-Nielsen 2003, Martiniello & Lafleur 2008; Glick-Schiller et al 1995; Levitt et al 2003; Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004; Portes 2003; Smith 2008) Such work has also been strengthened by other studies that seek to expand and analyse the utility of the concept as a lens to interrogate different aspects of migrant life. (Al-Ali et al 2001; Glick-Schiller & Wimmer 2003; Levitt & de la Dehesa 2003; Fog-Olwig 2003; Falzon 2003; Viruell-Fuentes 2006)

Trying to inject a measure of circumspection into the debate however, Vertovec presents the idea that while

‘the widening of networks, more activities across distances, and speedier communications reflect important forms of transnationalism in themselves... they do not necessarily lead to long-lasting, structural changes in global or local societies.’

He further argues that ‘migrants have historically maintained long-distance social networks, and the fact that messages or visits take shorter time does not always lead to significant alterations in structure, purpose or practice within the network.’ (Vertovec 2004:972a) While Vertovec does seem to correctly advise ‘analytical caution’, it is alternatively argued that it is a transformed environment that we now live in and hence ‘the ready availability of air transport, long-distance telephone, facsimile communication, and electronic mail provides the technological basis for the emergence of transnationalism on a mass scale’ and it is such ‘necessary conditions’ that have enabled ‘the rise of grass roots transnationalism.’ (Portes et al 1999:223-4, Brettell 2000:104, Portes 2003: 874-5) As Landolt argues, reflecting on just such a growing extensiveness and intensity of transnational forces in the world today, sometimes ‘a quantitative change results in a qualitative difference in the order of things.’(Landolt 2001: 220)

Cutting a different vein of thought, Smith argues that even ‘if transnational life existed in the past but was not seen as such, then the transnational lens does new analytical work by providing a way of seeing what was there that could not be seen before because of the lack of lens to focus on it.’ (Smith 2003:725) What is being suggested therefore by many of the scholars in the field is that transnationalism is an analytical tool that allows us to transform the way we think about both states and societies, providing us with a sharp shift in perspective, allowing us to better appreciate the fact that the transnational relationships in diasporic lifeworlds ‘involve fundamental modes of transformation’ which inform the very character of such communities. (Vertovec 1999; 2004) Such transformations are significant when we seek to understand the nature of transnational diaspora communities, both in the present, mainly because of a changing technological environment but also when we revisit and interrogate the nature of diaspora identities in the past as suggested by Smith above.

Surveying the effects of the transnational idea and its ‘far-reaching consequences’, Stephen Castles has famously stated that ‘transnational affiliations and consciousness will become the predominant form of migrant belonging in the future.’ (2002:1158) While the strength of the idea of transnational space is the revelation that transnational relationships don’t require ‘migrants to move physically within this new space’ in order to feel the impact of transnational influences, activity and consciousness, it does pose questions regarding the content of such a transnational consciousness – what it means in practice and especially what it means contextually and subjectively to those in diaspora. (Martiniello & Lafleur 2008:649)

It is my contention that when considering the case of conflict diasporas, it is this qualitative transformation of our understanding of diaspora consciousness in a transnational field that must be further theorized if we want to fully appreciate the content and meaning of what has been termed ‘long distance nationalism’ and to my mind, a good starting point is the work of Arjun Appadurai. Appadurai takes the issue of diasporic space as a key determinant of a process of political transition, arguing that ‘diasporic public spheres, diverse among themselves, are the crucibles of a post-national political order.’ For Appadurai, what is important about a transnational

diasporic space is that it signals that ‘the era in which we could assume that viable public spheres were typically, exclusively, or necessarily national could be at an end.’ (Appadurai 1996:22) The consciousness of those who inhabit diasporic spheres therefore is deeply implicated in just such transnational processes and for conflict diaspora members, it does suggest that a society in conflict now has new borders of narrative and meaning.

2.4 Appadurai and the Journey into a Theory of Transnational Diaspora : A Transformation of the Reality of State and Community Discourse and the State of Reality of Diaspora Communities

Appadurai argues that to fully appreciate the realm and impact of transnational lives and to ask exactly what such emergent social forms demand of us intellectually, ‘we need to think ourselves beyond the nation.’ For Appadurai, such an intellectual shift will enable us to better recognize ‘post-national social forms.’ (Appadurai 1996:158) His arguments present the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism as analytical platforms to interrogate the nature of the state and hence the way we think about politics, society and community in a globalised world.

In earlier work, Appadurai has presented a critique of how we tend to box-in people and culture in specific geographical localities, arguing that the social sciences have tended to tie people to places through ascriptions of native status: ‘natives are not only persons who are from certain places, and belong to those places, but they are also those who are somehow incarcerated, or confined, in those places.’ (Appadurai 1988:37) Correspondingly, it is argued that the study of cross border processes in the past has tended to be compromised because of what has been referred to as ‘methodological nationalism’, ‘the naturalization of the nation-state by the social sciences’ where ‘countries are the natural units for comparative studies’ and society is equated with the nation-state. (Glick-Schiller and Wimmer: 2003:576) This phenomenon is further theorized in Levitt and Glick-Schiller’s work on transnational social fields where they argue that,

‘researchers often take rootedness and incorporation in the nation-state as the norm and social identities and practices enacted across state boundaries as out of the

ordinary. But if we remove the blinders of methodological nationalism, we see that... social life is not confined by nation-state boundaries.’ (Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004:1007)

For Appadurai, such a phenomenon had been increasingly self-evident and can be seen to also apply specifically to ‘ ethnic groups, sectarian movements and political formations, which increasingly operate in ways that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities.’(Appadurai 1996: 165) In developing his thesis, Appadurai introduces the concept of the ethno-scape, which he describes as ‘the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live’; immigrants, refugees and exiles, who seem to, 'affect the politics of nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.’ (Appadurai 1996: 33) A transnational theory of diaspora identity thus ‘invites us to move into the contested spaces between poles of local and global, to proceed in ways that do not privilege the nation-state and its institutional order over the subnational and the supranational networks of communication.’ (Gilroy in Nagel 2001: 249) Closely tied in to the development of this transnational conceptual terrain is the idea of deterritorialization, which underlines the fact that diasporas do not travel in a cultural, political and historical void. Gupta and Ferguson describe the process of the ‘deterritorialization of identity’ as one where,

‘The rapidly expanding and quickening mobility of people combines with the refusal of cultural products and practices to ‘stay put’ to give an erosion of the cultural distinctiveness of places.’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 9)

Deterritorialization in this sense presents an argument that identity and other ‘cultural products’ can transcend territorial boundaries. As argued by Appadurai, the process of deterritorialization means that ‘the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality.’ (Appadurai 1996:48) In her work with Hutu refugees in Tanzania, Malkki for example explores how the ‘lived experiences of exile shape the construction of national identity and historicity.’(Malkki 1992: 38) Using Appadurai’s early work as a point of departure, Malkki argues that people who are displaced ‘invent homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases.... through memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit.’ (Malkki 1992:24) In this sense again, ‘the ethnos and the territory no longer neatly coincide.’ (Inda & Rosaldo 2002:20-1)

In his work on the development of nationalism, Anderson defines the nation as ‘an imagined political community’, highlighting the role of print capitalism, the development of vernacular languages and the rise of communication infrastructure as significant aspects of a transformative epoch where ‘natives’ began to see themselves as potential citizens of a potential nation-state. (Anderson 2006: 6) This development of a ‘new’ sense of community meant that new institutions had to be engendered to accommodate the imagination and growing nationalist consciousness of hitherto colonized people. This in turn led to a period of contestation and challenge against the writ of the colonial state as this new imagined community sought to inscribe itself onto the discourse of power. The crux of Anderson’s thesis is focused on a process of transition, of how a diverse people who would never ‘know most of their fellow members or meet them, or even hear of them’, managed to ‘imagine’ themselves as belonging to one political community – the nation state. (Anderson 2006: 6)

Anderson’s work was premised on a thesis that his conceptualization of the imagined community was one that was ‘imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.’ (Anderson 2006: 6) When considering transnational communities, Appadurai argues that the development of electronic media has decisively changed the conceptual and analytical terrain, creating the potential for a ‘community of sentiment’ that transcends sovereign borders. (Appadurai 1996:8) As depicted above, this new technological environment is indeed one of the founding arguments for the ‘success’ of the transnational idea and Appadurai seeks to make the point that what we are seeing in this era of globalization and mass migration is another such period of transformation and transition – of contestation and challenge to the idea of the nation state and its stranglehold on processes of identity formation and the logic of belonging. As he argues,

‘the nationalist genie, never perfectly contained in the bottle of the territorial state, is now itself diasporic. unrestrained by ideas of spatial boundary and territorial sovereignty.’ (Appadurai 1996:160)

It was to address such dynamics that Appadurai sought to find a conceptual framework that could explain, sustain and prefigure, just such a contextualised ‘world view’, a discourse that seeks to enable the validity of the claims of transnational theory to shine through. He provides just such an analytical framework for an

interrogation of structures of meaning and feeling within transnational social and political life with his concepts of 'locality' and 'neighbourhood'. Appadurai defines locality as 'primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial' while neighbourhood, defined as 'situated communities characterized by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual' refers 'to the actually existing social forms in which locality as a dimension or value is variably realized.' (Appadurai 1996:178) What is essential is an appreciation that 'locality cannot be separated from the actual settings in and through which social life is reproduced' and as such, in order to 'make the link between locality as a property of social life and neighbourhoods as social forms', we need to be attentive to the 'exposition of the problems of context.' (Appadurai 1996: 182) With this conceptualisation, Appadurai enables us to appreciate that the production of a sense of locality in relation to a distant homeland can very well be engendered in a landscape of diasporic neighbourhoods in a 'deterritorialized' world. (Appadurai 1996:188)

Appadurai's work is 'consciously shaped by a concern with diaspora, deterritorialization, and the irregularity of the ties between nations, ideologies, and social movements' and it presents me with an analytical point of departure to interrogate the nature and production of transnational identities and aspirations within a diaspora community in a time of war. (Appadurai 1996:48) This is not however a question of the disintegration of the nation state and the movement towards a post-national age but rather a question of conceptualising a mode of challenge and contestation. What is being suggested is that transnational diasporas can pose challenging questions about the claims of citizenship, the nature of identity and belonging and about how the transnational imagination of community can potentially impact on a state left behind.

Such a challenge is most apparent when we consider the fact that in the Tamil context, diaspora identity is in its strictest sense, not a national identity but rather one that seeks to function instead as a counter-narrative against the hegemonic and dominant representations of official Sri Lankan state discourse regarding issues of state identity and territorial integrity. Divorced from a geographical association with their homeland, many in the diaspora see their continued loyalty not to the state but rather to a different 'imagined community' and to structures of feeling and narrative which

challenge the legitimacy of the state left behind as presently configured. This underlines the fact that states do not have a monopoly on the loyalties of its inhabitants, either past or present. As put forward by Gupta, it is 'only by examining such non-national spatial configurations that the 'naturalness' of the nation can be radically called into question', challenged by identities 'that transgress the national order of things.' (Gupta 1992:64)

The first point of departure therefore is to appreciate the potential role that diasporas can play as part of an analytical challenge to 'discourses that are contained within the hyphen that links nation to state.' (Appadurai 1986:159) Conflict diaspora communities can be argued to represent the prodigal sons of the family of nations who have left home, have yet to return to the fold and instead seem intent on undermining the integrity and ethos of the fold from afar. As argued by Appadurai, we need to take cognisance of the fact that 'the landscapes of group identity – the ethnoscapings... are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded or historically unselfconscious.' Appadurai presents such a vein of analysis as an anthropology of transnationalism, complete with the 'brute facts about the world of the twentieth century that any ethnography must confront.' (Appadurai 1996:48)

One such brute fact is the reality of conflict and to my mind, a focus on conflict diasporas brings to the fore the politics and the politicization of the socio-cultural landscape of the place of diaspora. The engendering of a combative dialectic relationship between the diaspora and the Sri Lankan state therefore can be conceptualized as one where the state itself is implicated in the production of the place of diaspora and the creation of a politicised diaspora identity and hence linked to the 'cultural politics of deterritorialization and the larger sociology of displacement that it expresses', a dialectic that clearly needs to be more explicitly contextualised and analyzed. (Appadurai 1996: 39) For many diaspora Tamils, the effects of this politicization are manifested in their response to the call and cause of Tamil nationalism. As put forward by Appadurai,

'such nationalisms actually contain transnational, subnational links. ...non-national identities and aspirations. Because they are so often the product of forced as well as voluntary diasporas very few of the new nationalisms can be separated from the

anguish of displacement, the nostalgia of exile, the repatriation of funds, or the brutalities of asylum seeking.’(Appadurai 1996:165)

Appadurai labels such movements ‘trojan nationalisms’ and he cites Tamils in the diaspora as one of ‘the carriers of these new transnational and post-national loyalties’, ‘subversive micronarratives’ that inform and are informed by movements opposed to the state left behind. (Appadurai 1996:8; 165) Many Tamils have indeed invested their loyalty in just such a competing ‘imagined’ narrative – the idea of the attainment of Eelam, ‘a nation imagined and claimed... but not quite realized in a stable state.’ (Jeganathan 1998:522) Appadurai presents the imagination as a ‘collective, social fact’ which informs this new terrain of identity and belonging and his belief is that ‘much of national and group politics in the contemporary world has to do’ with what he calls ‘the work of the imagination’ (Appadurai 1996: 146) Drawing on Anderson’s work, we can also take a timely and necessary reminder that just because communities of belonging are imagined, it does not mean that they are fictitious or unreal and to that end, even transnational ‘imagined communities ...are real because they are imagined as real, because they are taken as real and because they therefore have very real effects on social life.’ (Anderson 2006: 6; Sokefeld 2006:266)

The relevance of Appadurai’s work to the issues surrounding the imagination of an identity in conflict with a state left behind is also underlined in Malkki’s work. By juxtaposing different conceptualizations of identity creation in her work, Malkki theorizes the fact that all such identities are

‘always mobile and processual, partly self-construction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, etcetera.’ (Malkki 1992:37)

While it is true that ‘deterritorialization affects the loyalties of groups’, as Malkki’s work shows, such identities are contingent, dependent on different readings of the narrative and experience of exile and what it means. (Appadurai 1996:49) It is imperative therefore to appreciate that in similar fashion, diaspora communities do not come fully formed as discrete entities presented for study and analysis and as such, the content of diasporic identity is a dynamic entity that must be interrogated within its own specific context.

For Brettell, Appadurai's work heralds an invitation to take on board the 'subjective meanings of displacement -in short, the nature of diasporic cultural consciousness.' (Brettell 2006:329) This then is my point of departure, an attempt to interrogate the contextual aspects of conflict diaspora consciousness, the way such communities make sense of the world around them and the very particular 'structure of feeling', imagined and engendered in a time of conflict. (Appadurai 1996: 182) It is a study of the creation, consciousness of and consequence of such transformative narratives of experience and perception. Building on the insights evident in the work of theorists like Appadurai and Malkki, my argument will be that in order to interrogate and correctly understand the actual content and meaning of long distance nationalism evidenced in a conflict diaspora community, we need a more contextual and subjective understanding of the biography of both the diaspora community in question and the epistemological meaning of the place of diaspora they inhabit.

2.5 The Nature of Diaspora Consciousness

Werbner reminds us that the 'the question of who owns a diaspora and its foundational myths...is a highly contested one.' (Werbner 2005:35) In seeking to understand the basis for Levitt's 'fiction of congregation', which produces a diaspora, I believe that there is a gap in the literature in terms of the conceptualization of conflict diaspora consciousness as both foundation and platform for expression, self-representation and conviction in a time of conflict. (Levitt 2001: 202)

It has been suggested that diaspora identity formation is merely an extension of an essentialist primordial ethnic discourse. (Nuhoglu-Soysal 2000; Anthias 2001) I argue instead that being part of a conflict diaspora is to be involved in a dynamic process of identity creation; diaspora as a study of experience rather than as a description of 'something that from the outset provides continuity and fixed structures for social life, as in primordialist approaches.' (Sokefeld 2006: 267)

An alternate approach in the literature to theorizing diaspora consciousness is based on theories of social mobilization, an approach endorsed by analysts such as Sokefeld and Vertovec. (Sokefeld 2006, Vertovec 2003:652-56) Sokefeld argues that an

analysis of diaspora discourse should focus on how such movements ‘ build organizations, elaborate ideologies, and socialize and mobilize constituencies.’ (Sokefeld 2006: 269-70) Such an approach does have the merit of conceptualising diaspora identity as something to be contextually interrogated and explained, mindful of the political instrumentalization and manipulation of ethnicity by vested elites. For Sokefeld, ‘as identities become politically effective only when they are employed ... we have to ask how these people are mobilized for such an identity.’ (Sokefeld 2006: 266-267). However, while the effectiveness of diaspora communities in the political sphere and the means by which elites and other vested interests seek to use, manipulate or formulate a particular diaspora identity is a worthy field of research, it is my belief that all such studies should begin with an effort in the first instance, to understand the emotional, moral, psychological and existential struggles experienced by those in diaspora.

Sokefeld does speak of a need to understand the emotional terrain of diaspora lives, but only in pursuit of a need to find ideas that will ‘legitimize and mobilize action.’ (Sokefeld 2006: 269-70) Such a focus is dependent on employing master narratives which prioritise a discourse of categorization and mobilization over the actual narratives of experience and subjective feelings and the various analytical threads which seek to contextualize and define the diaspora condition as a study in itself. It runs the risk of seeking to fit the experiences of diaspora individuals into well used categories of ‘victimhood’ and it is worth recognizing the strength of such ‘victimization narratives’ in appealing to a sense of ethnic solidarity where an ethnicized identity is then used as the basis for engendering and mobilizing political support. (Wilmer 2003 224) In her work on theorizing diasporas, Butler warns about the risks associated with such a mode of analysis, arguing that it would inadvertently mean ‘moving towards essentializing ‘diaspora’ as an ethnic label rather than a framework of analysis.’ (Butler 2001: 193)

My own argument is that a focus on the institutional ‘frames’ of mobilization theory, which may include primordial themes and the way they are ‘supplied’ by elites for consumption by the masses, does a disservice to the core of a belief that diaspora consciousness is very much based in the first instance, on the contextual lived experiences and perceptions of ordinary individuals. A focus on strategies and

structures to the exclusion of an engagement with such individual life histories does play a part in silencing and making invisible the actual experiences of diaspora members, undermining the link between frame and actual lived experience. This includes how the consequences and claims of an 'ethnicized' discourse has actually been experienced by those who fall within its analytical perimeters and how such a discourse has structured their social world. Such studies to my mind do manage to 'frame' and find what they are looking for, but they fail to interrogate the reasons for the 'take up' of such a stance. The focus in such cases is on the 'how' rather than the 'why.' This is an oversight which to my mind is repeated in many studies of diasporas³⁴, thus underplaying a significant intellectual focus, that 'he who has a why.... can bear with almost any how.' (Nietzsche in Frankl 1963: 121)

As the central party to the significant relationships that define my research focus, I try and present an argument that the diaspora has 'a real and tangible social existence that validates it as an area of social study', in line with a belief that 'a people's existence is not defined only by their material conditions but also by their ideas and moral views.' (Mkandawire 2010) Mkandawire makes the observation that 'it is difficult to see how we can understand Africa's problems and prospects without knowing the opinions, visions or myths' held by Africans themselves', if only as an 'index of their... aspirations.' His focus is on the theme of African development but the thrust of his argument can be used as a commentary on other fields of research that also marginalize the actual viewpoints of the constituency under analysis in favour of more dominant critical discourses.

That the diaspora has been instrumental in enabling the LTTE to pursue the path of conflict is an accepted position but what has been less clearly studied are the reasons why the diaspora has embraced the legitimacy of militant nationalism as a function of their own aspirations, a question that often seems to have a similar 'spectre of irrelevance' hanging over it. (Mkandawire 2010) A focus on actual diaspora opinion, vision and thinking linger in the footnotes of standard works on the Sri Lankan conflict or are only mentioned in passing in works which focus on diaspora involvement in homeland conflict processes. The latter are often concerned more with

³⁴ Examples to greater or lesser degrees include Adamson 2002; Zunzer 2004; Cheran 2004; Wayland 2004; Fair 2005; Byman et al 2001

ways of transforming such diasporas into agents of peace rather than agents of conflict, an instrumental orientation which seeks to transform rather than to understand. In the post 9/11 world and in conflict assessments in general, certain issues are often conceptualized as either being ‘good’ or ‘bad’ with a prescription that one can either seek to isolate the bad or turn the bad into good. As argued by Demmers, ‘there is too much focus on changing behaviour: as if diasporic positions are merely irrational.’ (Demmers 2007:4) Diasporas in this sense, are often presented as having a causal relationship to conflict processes in their countries of origin or rather they are presented as holding the key to conflict transformation and peace building, diaspora as either ‘nation –builders or nation-wreckers’, a conceptual and analytical continuation on the discourse of mobilization. (Vertovec 2005: 4-5 see also Shain 2002; Zunzer 2004; Orjuela 2008)

Such approaches assume a passive or neutral stance on the part of those in diaspora, prior to their engagement with exogenous processes of mobilization, where the very formation of diaspora consciousness is presented as ‘an issue of social mobilization.’ (Sokefeld 2006: 268) My own focus will seek to interrogate and capture the basis of diaspora consciousness at a point prior to its mobilization and instrumentalization as a political resource, formulated and harnessed for a particular agenda. My argument is that what we require is an approach that forces us to consider and interrogate a more organic process of becoming, ‘an alternative to the essentialization of belonging’ but also a critique of the assumption that diasporas by their very nature, represent a naïve bank of support ready to be mobilized and directed. (Brubaker 2005:12)

Conflict diaspora consciousness to my mind, suggests a new paradigm of analysis, where such communities are potentially seen as both valid in themselves, as well as potentially part of a wider transnational Tamil society because of the feelings and passions represented by a self-professed transnational identity engendered through subjective experience, perception and sentiment. What needs to be made clear is the legitimacy of the terms used to describe such a community and their acceptance of such descriptions, for as put forward by Vertovec, ‘in order to have real meaning, claims and criteria surrounding diasporic boundaries and membership should be self-ascribed’, because anything else would be ‘illegitimate.’ (Vertovec 2005:3) Cutting a

similar vein of thought, when we seek to define diaspora motivations and aspirations, it is essential that we take seriously the subjectivity of diaspora experience and opinion.

‘We lost our homes, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in the world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings.’ (Arendt in Ritivoi 2002 :13)

The loss suffered by virtue of displacement as put forward by Arendt above, speaks volumes about the challenges and changed circumstances of diasporic lives. A study of conflict diaspora consciousness therefore is a study of real lives in transition and crisis. Having endured violence, displacement and forced migration and with continued violence in a distant homeland, a transnational stance for conflict diaspora members can be seen as part of the very language of conflict itself and as with conflict in general, ‘simple answers are simply not available.’ (Demmers 2007:5)

Tamil diaspora attitudes should thus be analysed within a discursive framework that addresses how the politics of conflict and displacement have been experienced emotionally and understood rationally within such communities and how the content and aspirations of identity formation are contextualised, creating a platform where the act of supporting the LTTE and the pursuit of Eelam is given meaning and a high moral and social value. Jeganathan puts forward the idea that,

‘Eelam, which rose to prominence as a popular but clearly rhetorical political idea in the mid 1970s, became a possibility only after 1983- after the massive anti-Tamil riots that punctuated with profound force the national space of Sri Lanka.’

1983 is significant because it ‘marks the beginning of an exodus-movement of Tamils... first to South India and then, in increasing numbers, to the metropolitan spaces of Western Europe, Canada, and Australia.’ (Jeganathan 1998:522-3) The relevance of this exodus for my purposes is that traumatised by violence, conflict and displacement and yet now safe from the immediate violence of the state, diaspora Tamils are now more willing and able to fully consider and imagine what it means to be Tamil in a time of war and in the context of the pursuit of Eelam. Rather than either ‘distant warriors’ or ‘distant peace workers’, members of a diaspora community are first and foremost ordinary human beings whose experiences, stories, perceptions

and feelings need to be listened to and understood. (Orjuela 2008:441) My own feeling is that to begin a journey into diaspora because of conflict is to engage with a 'new encounter' that profoundly changes your consciousness and sense of self. A focus on the phenomenon of 'long distance nationalism' underlines the fact that in the context and consequence of modern civil war, 'natives' have travelled and in the process they force us to reconsider our ideas regarding identity, belonging, citizenship and the meaning of borders. The essential element at issue therefore is to correctly understand the content of such 'long distance nationalism' and what it means.

A dominant focus in the literature to date is that ideas and theories surrounding the transnational paradigm should emanate from and be manifested in tangible and concrete social relations that can be identified and defined. Such relationships are envisaged to be situated within the 'everydayness of material, family, social, and symbolic networks and exchanges that connect' diaspora communities and the homeland left behind.' (Velayutham and Wise 2005:40) Transnational relationships however to my mind, are not just to people but also speak of a way of being, thinking and feeling. To this end, while it may be the development of communication and media technology in a globalised world that produces a more enabling environment, making it possible to 'create an illusion of spatial contiguity (and) a lack of spatial separation', it is essential in the first instance to understand the nature of the conflict diaspora condition and hence the ethnography of the transnational character and idiom that it inspires and produces. (Werbner in Adamson and Demetriou 2007:508) It is again, an argument that focuses on the intellectual, psychological, emotional, moral and existential world of those in diaspora, rather than on the enabling technology or the agents and strategies of ethnic mobilization.

For many diaspora Tamils, the physical, emotive and tangible relationships with friends and family in Sri Lanka which inform their lives, is also underpinned and defined by psychological and existential relationships, obligations and commitments which many have with Sri Lanka as place, experience and narrative. To my informants, Sri Lanka is experienced and represented as a place with a 'biographical' meaning, a significant entity in its own right as tangible reality but also as a realm of ideas, metaphors and aspirations. This connection with a country left behind is presented as a key relationship in the psychosocial inventory of diaspora individuals.

My belief is that most assessments of conflict diaspora communities present them in terms that they themselves do not recognize because it undervalues this sense of ‘commitment’ to a lifeworld situated and bound up with a distant place- past, present and future. The transnational character of diasporic lives underlines the fact that the relationships which define the basis, nature and content of diaspora consciousness can cross borders both in tangible and less tangible terms. A significant aspect of my thesis therefore is the idea that a transnational diaspora community can be defined as such, not only because its members indulge in a high degree of ‘concrete’ transnational affiliations but also because they perceive themselves and imagine themselves as such and through such consciousness, they do indeed act and live out transnational lives as part of a politicised, deterritorialized, transnational ‘community of sentiment.’ (Appadurai 1996:8)

In her interrogation of the nature of the individual, Hayden argues that a person can be conceptualized as existing in and through the relationships that constitute the self.’ (Hayden 2006: 481) For many Tamils, to be in diaspora is to assume a culture all its own, one informed by conflict and by the nature of the relationships that such movement engenders – a relationship with a homeland and a community left behind, a relationship with a contextual and specific narrative of conflict that informs their exit into a life in diaspora, a relationship with existential questions that flow from a legacy of being part of a society at war, a relationship with an experience of being in exile in a time of continuing war and conflict and a relationship with competing ideas of responsibility, truth, moral economy and justice. It is to my mind, a combination of these various relationships that defines a sense of diasporic identity, a form of consciousness based on a transformed idea of community, what Gilroy refers to as a ‘a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion’ which produces ‘an explicitly transnational... perspective.’ (Gilroy 1993: 4; 15)

My argument is that conflict diaspora consciousness is a terrain that cannot be adequately commented on without an in-depth appreciation that much of the relevant conceptual and analytical discussion is linked to the context of conflict, the transformational effects of loss and the production of aspirations which flow from that context. We need to make a special attempt to study the crossing of borders, those who do so, why they do so and how they conceptualise their present reality in a place

of diaspora. The relevance of Appadurai's work to my own focus, is that it captures and illuminates the need to be cognizant of the 'changing social, territorial and cultural reproductions' of identity, which occur when 'groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories' and reconfigure the meaning of their past experiences and future aspirations. (Appadurai 1996:48) The scope of our analysis however should not stop merely with the recognition of an identifiable community but rather we should investigate the 'process of becoming' by which a specific sense of transnational relationship and worldview is imagined, engendered, articulated and thus given credence and coherence in a diasporic landscape in a time of conflict. As put forward by Appadurai,

'these landscapes thus are the building blocks of... imagined worlds.... many persons on the globe live in such imagined worlds and thus are able to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind.'(Appadurai 1996: 33)

It is this viewpoint that challenges the simplistic conceptualization of diaspora consciousness as a paradigm of 'a past invented for the present, and perpetually labored into shapes and meanings consistent with the present.' For commentators like Nuhoglu-Soysal who suggests such a viewpoint, diaspora does not exist

'as a lived reality but as part of a broader scheme to insert continuity and coherence into life stories that are presumably broken under the conditions of migrancy and exile. It is the reification of categorical homelands, traditions, collective memories and formidable longings. It is a category of awareness, in which present-tense practices lack capacity in and of themselves, but attain significance vis-à-vis the inventiveness of the past.' (Nuhoglu-Soysal 2000:2)

For many Tamils however, while there is a significant relationship with the traumatic experiences of the past, it is a dynamic relationship involving past, present and future. What we require is a more accurate conceptualization of diaspora consciousness that underlines the fact that while their engagement with the past is a key determinant of their present lives, it is their present lives that are at issue and rather than their life stories being 'broken' by exile, their reality is very much defined by the condition of being in diaspora in complex and varied ways. Indeed for many, 'only the present exists' but it exists in a very particular way that underlines the existential nature of the conflict diaspora condition, which is defined by its inherent and consuming capacity

to cross boundaries of time and space in search of its relevant epistemological framework. (Crites 1971:301)

Cutting a similar vein of criticism, Brun has argued that in studying the life world of those displaced by conflict, commentators like Mallki focus too much on a ‘social construction of a national past.’ Brun argues instead that,

‘in order to understand crises of displacement, it is not only the imagined place of the past that must be understood. The here and now should also be present when analysing situations of forced migration.’ (Brun 2001:19)

My own view is that this is a misreading of Malkki’s analytical focus. My analysis of Tamil diaspora sentiment, informed by much of Malkki’s work, is rather that the ‘imagined place of the past’ is a vital tool in ensuring that the future idea of Eelam remains in the consciousness of those in diaspora, as they struggle to find a sense of meaning in their present lives. It is an imagination that speaks to the present and looks forward rather than backwards, seeking to create a narrative of a viable self based on an existential need to structure and inform a present state of being. The imagination as Appadurai argues is a dynamic concept that provides ‘fuel for action’ and in this sense, rather than the past devouring the present, the relationship to the past is rather one that can be conceptualised in a positive way, as a creative function that enables the consolidation of a particular way of being, despite its measure of trauma and pain. It is a dialectic engagement between past and present, here and there; where the past matters but only in terms of interpreting the present and charting an argument for a particular future.

This brings me to the ‘conceptual charge’ of diaspora consciousness being merely a condition of ‘reification’, a conceptualisation that seems to figure in one way or other in many contemporary accounts of diaspora consciousness. Drawing on Lukacs, Honneth suggests that the idea of ‘reification’ refers to a

‘habit of mere contemplation and observation, in which one’s natural surroundings, social environment, and personal characteristics come to be apprehended in a merely detached and emotionless manner—in short, as things.’

In this sense, ‘reification constitutes a distorting stance’ which prevents a ‘genuine or proper stance toward the world’, disabling our ‘ability to see and experience the issues or elements in question as qualitatively unique or particular in content.’ (Honneth 2005: 99; 100; 95; 101) I would argue that the very use of such terms runs the risk of de-contextualising and de-politicizing the relationships that constitute the nature of diaspora consciousness. Individuals in diaspora do not conceive of or experience their reality in such a lifeless, static and detached manner, where epistemologically, the past is rendered distant and abstract and hence silenced. They may indeed be in exile but as I will argue, they are neither externalized nor exiled from a range of homeland concerns and relationships, which instead cross borders in complex ways. Such relationships and concerns which define diaspora ‘imaginings’ and attitudes are rather a sign of something much more politically dynamic, emotionally significant, existentially ‘visceral’ and hence worthy of more focused analysis.

I will argue that the key to an understanding of diaspora lives is to map out cause, effect, consequence and response – to engage with the experiences and imagined subjectivities of individuals and to trace the ontological social and political nature of ‘actually existing’ diaspora communities. To that end, I look to Appadurai who argues that,

‘the transformation of everyday subjectivities through... the work of the imagination is not only a cultural fact. It is deeply connected to politics through the new ways in which individual attachments, interests, and aspirations increasingly crosscut those of the nation-state’ (Appadurai 1996: 10).

It is only through a contextual investigation into the subjective production of diaspora consciousness on the ground that we will be able to offer a more revealing and insightful approach to the study of diasporas, for as put forward by Sokefeld, ‘there can be no diaspora community without a consciousness of diaspora.’ (Sokefeld 2006: 267) My argument is that it is a transnational consciousness that has informed and molded the Tamil diaspora, shaping its narrative of itself and how it narrates its sense of place in diaspora and in the dynamics of a ongoing conflict. This is especially relevant when considering the concept of community, drawing on the idea that all migrants ‘are often embedded in multi-layered, multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind.’ (Levitt & Glick-Schiller

2004:1003) A study of conflict diaspora consciousness therefore can be seen as constituting 'other forms of imagining community', enabling us to 'pose new questions about spatial identities and commitments', challenging more orthodox understandings of the limits of society and the idea of community but with a specific focus on what constitutes the borders, boundaries and perimeters of community and society in a time of conflict. (Gupta 1992:73; 74)

I hope to underline a core belief that diasporic space is not only influenced by a transnational consciousness but also becomes for the Tamil community, a specific site for the manifestation and propagation of just such transnational feelings which in turn define the nature of identity and belonging in a time of war. The local is not only influenced by the transnational but it becomes clear that especially for conflict diasporas, lived reality is nothing if not transnational. A transnational consciousness in this sense is not just a mental gaze directed outwards, beyond the borders of a particular state but rather it is a state of being that defines who they are as human beings, illuminating the experiences they have been through and contextualising the reality of the lives they live on the border between here and there.

Chapter Three: Questions of Methodology

3.1 Introduction

**In any case, the ethnographer is, in an important sense, a teller of tales.
(Collins 2003: 247)**

My aim in this chapter is to present the methodology and basis of my research agenda and fieldwork, an interrogation of the route taken as it were as well as the roots of my own conceptual and analytical interest in the transnational consciousness of diaspora Tamils. My work has focused on the experiences, narratives, opinions and life stories of a cross section of the Tamil community in London. Starting with a key contact, A, whom I had known for a number of years, I have gradually increased my circle of engagement to take into account the experiences and viewpoints of a sprawling network of friends and family, all in some way or other linked either directly or indirectly with A.³⁵ These ever expanding networks of extended family, friends and varied acquaintances thus became my 'extended field site', a methodology similar to others who have tried to analyse transnational socio-cultural systems.
(see Fog-Olwig 2003 ; Hage 2005)

In early work on Afghanistan, Edwards makes the point that 'what goes on inside Afghanistan affects what is happening in the camps, just as both of these situations influence (and are influenced by) the lives of Afghans in more distant locales.' Edwards's analytical focus is that 'though distant in space, the different contexts are not isolated from one another' and any attempt to study the conflict in Afghanistan without studying the diaspora or vice-versa would be 'partial, incomplete, and vaguely untruthful.' (Edwards 1994:345-346) My own search for a relevant methodology has led me to a similar conclusion. My study of the Tamil diaspora in London kept leading me back to the conflict that has informed their decision to leave Sri Lanka in the first place. Like Edwards, I too needed a 'mechanism that would reflect more closely the whole story as I understood it, a story that is not confined to any one point in time or space.' (Edwards 1994:345-346) A focus on personal

³⁵ Before the start of my research, my relationship with A had also led me to help out various members of the Tamil community in immigration matters in the UK. The relevance of this to my research will be addressed below.

narratives and life stories provided just such a discourse of relationship – a discourse of continuity between the past and the present, a link between suffering experienced and suffering presently endured, a bond between those who have left and those who remain behind and a discernment of an existential relationship of thought, image and feeling with a distant land, all encompassed in narratives of violence, loss and displacement, of crossing borders yet still being held ‘enthralled’ to the claims of a distant land. The relevance of such narratives as a research tool is emphasized by Eastmond, who argues that,

‘they provide a site to examine the meanings people... ascribe to lived experience [and] placed in their wider socio-political and cultural contexts, stories can provide insights into how forced migrants seek to make sense of displacement and violence, re-establish identity in ruptured life courses and communities, or bear witness to violence and repression.’ (Eastmond 2007: 248)

In my fieldwork, I was constantly struck by the feeling that so much of the narrative focus of my informants seemed to emanate from, involve or gaze towards a distant shore. Even in initial introductions, informal conversations almost always tended to transcend the boundaries of a purely London-centric existence. My own experience suggests that to encounter a diaspora community is to encounter individuals with an alternate sense of orientation. As put forward by Dominguez, such orientations underline

‘bonds of affection... for people or places that feel deeply important to those who share them but also profoundly lost or so far away that one has to stop to ask about the basis of such connectedness, feeling, hope, anger, and despair.’ (Dominguez 2008:371)

Rather than just assuming such links, my work will suggest a conceptual framework that highlights the affective, social, emotional, psychological and existential relationships that develop within diasporas during a time of conflict, a framework that informs the basis of conflict diaspora consciousness. Following Bruner, my methodology will underline a need to know how ‘people experience themselves, their lives and their cultures’ and how they strive to come to terms with the events and experiences that have brought them to this point in their lives. (Bruner 1986:9)

Throughout 2009, the Tamil diaspora dramatically increased their visibility in the mainstream press and in the consciousness of the British public. At various marches and demonstrations, their activism has been ‘documented’, a diaspora community ‘marked present.’ Paradoxically however, a focus on such events actually serves to obscure individual diaspora stories and experiences. What instead is brought to the fore is an awareness in the mainstream, that Tamils seem to manifest a broad vein of support for the LTTE. While this may indeed be true, my own research seeks to interrogate the experiences and feelings that engender such support. As one of my informants put it, *‘you cannot just hear background music , you must listen to what (the) song is saying (the lyrics) . That is (the) real story.’*³⁶ The focus of my methodology therefore has been to listen and to try and give some meaning to just such stories and the feelings that emanate from such songs of experience within the Tamil community.

*‘people are not interested in us, never listen, they talk of Iraq, Afghanistan also but our war is not their war Look at (the) demonstrations you went, people say Tamils are there only. We can be British...my children are all born here but when we go there, we are Tamil only. So I go but I want to be British there also. Why (the) genocide in Sri Lanka is not like Saddam, like Taliban. We are here to say (demonstrating) against killing not coming just for picnic, for counting only...4000 Tamils in Westminster, 40 000 Tamils marching..... We are British people saying something.’*³⁷

3.2 Life Histories and other Personal Narratives

‘Stories, stories, stories! I have never known for sure if I am their prisoner or their jailer.’ (Daniel 1996:4)

In a review of texts on the nature of diaspora feeling, Dominguez questions if we can ‘understand the basis of those feelings of connectedness, their texture, their plasticity, and their legs?’ (Dominguez 2008:389) Informed by such concerns, my methodology following Brettell , has been premised on an idea that in order to understand members of a diaspora community ,one must try to engage with their ‘subjective states of mind.’ (Brettell 2003: 29) To this end, I have focused on participative, qualitative, ethnographic fieldwork within the Tamil community in London over a 3 year period

³⁶Interview with TT: May 2007

³⁷Interview with ARN: May 2009

between June 2006 and June 2009 in an effort to try and get deeper into the lives of the people whose experiences, opinions and feelings I was interested in studying.

It is to discover the extent, reach and influence of such 'legs' of connection and meaning that I have chosen to use the lens of personal narratives and life stories as my primary methodological approach. Taking a cue from Brettell again, I believe that through these individual stories, we can learn how the diasporic experience is 'patterned and subjectively experienced.' (Brettell 2003:43) I am mindful of Daniel's warning regarding the difficulty when writing about people, of attaining the appropriate 'correspondence of one's representation with the represented.' (Daniel 1996:120) My methodology therefore is informed by a similar concern on my part, as revealed in Eastmond's analysis of the 'the epistemological and ethical debates' regarding 'how we can know something about other people's experiences and how we can represent them in ways that do them justice.' (Eastmond 2007:249) How do we capture the salience of the experiences they have lived through and understand the impact of such experience on their consciousness as individuals and as a community?

A search for such a process of discernment is presented by Bruner as an 'anthropology of experience' which he defines as a way to appreciate 'how events are received by consciousness.' (Bruner 1986: 4) For Bruner, following the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, 'reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience.' (Dilthey in Bruner 1986:4) The difficulty of representing another's experience is the crux of the dilemma that Bruner seeks to engage with. As he argues, 'we can only experience our own life, what is received by our own consciousness. We can never know completely another's experiences.' (Bruner 1986: 5) With that as his point of departure, Bruner presents the solution as an effort in 'interpreting expressions', as 'expressions are encapsulations of the experience of others' and enable us to better understand 'peoples' articulations, formulations, and representations of their own experiences' which also include expressions of their 'feelings and expectations.' (Bruner 1986: 9;4)

My focus on life stories and personal narratives thus presents itself as a methodology which enables me to try and see the world as my informants see it, to appreciate the context of their expressions and to gain a sense, however limited, of their 'lived

experience.... as thought and desire, as word and image.’ (Bruner1986: 9; 5) It was a gradual process of understanding on my part and a realization that what was on offer was a way to study an ‘unfolding reflective awareness of being-in-the world’, including a sense of how people make sense of their past. (Ochs and Capps 1996: 21) It is this ‘reworking of the past’ in the present, that makes a qualitative methodology most suitable for my particular research context, for it seeks to capture the subjective emotions and expressions of my informants, emphasizing the fact that ideas and intellectual responses are created through experiences and subjective perceptions of meaning and reality. (Gallinet 2006:344) As Brettell reminds us,

‘while quantitative analysis may provide answers to certain questions, there are qualitative inquiries which numbers cannot satisfy. Subjective states of mind cannot be inferred with confidence from such ‘objective data.’(Brettell 2003:29)

By delving deeper into the lives and perceptions of my informants, my work aims to problematise the diaspora condition in a time of war, highlighting the links between cause and effect , here and there, past and present and the metaphorical journeys which transgress such binary opposites. Jackson reminds us that, ‘stories are not only like journeys because of the effects they have upon us; stories are so commonly and conspicuously about journeys’, a topical observation relevant to my own focus because as argued by Brah, ‘at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey.’(Jackson 2002: 30; Brah 1996:198) What is significant is that more than just a story of physical and spatial movement, diaspora narratives are also about consequences that travel and continue to travel. It has been central to my research to be able to grasp the nature and the effects of these various ‘journeys taken’, which reference not only the destination reached but also the cause of that first footstep, the turmoil involved in physical, affective and existential terms as well as the logic of a vision of an envisaged future destination.

When I first began trying to put into a coherent form the various narratives, stories and opinions culled from my respondents, my first reaction was that much of the material was in a sense ‘too human’, full of what I sometimes judged to be rambling and at times idiosyncratic reflections. This is possibly a common sensation as revealed in Malkki’s reference to the ‘messy’ and ‘unmanageable’ character of the stories she encountered in her own fieldwork. (Malkki in Jackson 2002: 95) Through

the inherent grace, generosity and goodwill of almost all my various informants however, I came to appreciate a statement by Ochs and Capps, that ‘through narrative we come to know what it means to be a human being.’ (Ochs and Capps 1996: 31) I gradually learnt that much of what I was hearing from my informants was actually both an implicit acceptance and invitation; an acceptance of my interest in their lives and opinions and an invitation to ‘draw close’, to listen to personal stories of loss, pain and struggle as well as stories of resilience, determination and hope, which for many of my informants seemed to define their very sense of humanity, their sense of being alive. It was this sense of ‘continuity’, evident in many of the narratives encountered that gave me a structure to better understand what was being offered as well as an awareness that this was the way my informants chose to set out their stories.³⁸ Ochs and Capps make the argument that such narratives provide

‘narrators and listener/readers with an opportunity for fragmented self-understanding. Each telling of a narrative. ...evokes only certain memories, concerns, and expectations.... only fragments of experience.’ (Ochs and Capps 1996:21-22)

I have indeed found that my encounters with my various informants often left me feeling that at different times, the ‘idiom of being’ presented varied as to tone and character. Different streams of narrative or different parts of a life history seemed to produce a different narrative character. The opportunity to revisit particular narratives therefore, in order to clarify events and opinions previously expressed, was crucial in enabling both the informant and myself to appreciate the seemingly ‘inconsistent’ and fragmented nature of certain accounts. The important thing for me over time however was to acknowledge such inconsistencies rather than to always seek to arrive at a ‘coherent’ outcome. In some instances, coherence did come, often at a later date, when the informant himself found it necessary to revisit events and instances previously referred to. Such ‘revisitations’ would deepen and elaborate on episodes

³⁸ I had a feeling that I had an opportunity and a duty to ‘listen’ rather than to try and conduct structured interviews that may perhaps have prioritised my own assumptions. In personal narratives where they were ‘liberated’ in their own minds from having to defend a pro-LTTE stance, many of my informants revealed instead passionately held convictions which seemed to be moulded from their own experiences of suffering and loss. My informants often stressed that although they ‘ended up in the same place’, namely emphasizing support for the struggle waged by the LTTE, they felt that it was important that I realised that such support had a very personal history and a sense of conviction born out of personal experience and a wider sense of the social and political world that they inhabited.

already recounted, emphasizing certain details or seeking to clarify points that the informant had subsequently reflected upon at greater depth.

I did also find that when recounting feelings of loss and sorrow, fixed and finite meanings were seldom available. At such times, it did seem as Jackson states, that it was ‘storytelling over stories – the social process rather than the product of narrative activity’ that was important.’ (Jackson 2002: 18) Ochs and Capps speak of such narratives placing ‘narrators and listener/readers in the paradoxical position of creating coherence out of lived experience, while at the same time reckoning with its impossibility’, a situation ‘particularly salient’ for those who have suffered particular issues such as violence and political repression, a context which resonated with the experiences of many of my own informants. (Ochs and Capps 1996: 29) For many of them, their own stories of loss and displacement were experienced as part of a much larger story of continuing violence.

‘Why you are asking me this things? ... myself also I am always asking same things. That is what I am seeing ... Yes, we suffer very much and here also is hard but still in Sri Lanka many peoples dying. For them (it is) very (much) worse. Why I am here (when) there they are still dying? ... all we do people still dying... government still killing... all the big countries like US not stopping what Sri Lanka government is doing. Is all this talking, talking going to help.....(It is more your story that I am interested in – but all this you are saying is also very important)... my story is only small...big story is in Sri Lanka, not here. There is my story also but sometimes I am feeling ... like something that is in wrong place... Where is my place to talk? My story really (should be) in Sri Lanka only... it is Sri Lanka story... if you want to see, you must come to Sri Lanka...there you will really see..... But in Sri Lanka, hard to talk about this things...’³⁹

The above extract underlines for me a dominant theme evident in many personal reflections and narratives – a sense of a degree of powerlessness and the question of whether their own experiences deserved consideration when compared to the ongoing suffering in Sri Lanka. Many of my informants even suggested that a ‘better’ focus for my study should be an interrogation of the actual conduct of the security forces in the ongoing conflict because as one of my informants put it,

³⁹Interview with NEW: June 2007

'suffering only is our story...but those people (the soldiers and politicians) are the big kings of this story. They only are the big storytellers.' ⁴⁰

It can be argued that my focus on such individual narratives may tend to 'simplify' the chaos and magnitude of war. In his study of the violence in Sri Lanka, Daniel acknowledges an inherent feeling that because, 'Many have died. To say more is to simplify.' All such necessary 'simplifications' however do indeed have a purpose, which Daniel presents as the 'burden' of trying to give an account of death, destruction and suffering. (Daniel 1996:3) It is my belief that those in diaspora also labour under multiple layers of loss and there is a need to also give an account of their suffering in order to understand its effects on their consciousness as individuals and as a community. A key question therefore is the issue of the significance of those in diaspora and the validity of their experiences in the bigger picture of conflict in Sri Lanka.

In line with an initial focus on actual violence and suffering endured which flowed from my own doubts regarding the question above, I did catch myself making distinctions between those who had suffered first hand and those who were 'merely' in the vicinity of suffering, my own version of what Summerfield refers to as an attempt to sub-classify degrees of 'traumatisation' based on 'distance from the provoking events.' (Summerfield 1996: 12) My informants also were often keen that I meet other individuals who had had first hand experiences of actual physical violence, as if such 'evidence' would render their experiences more valid and in turn legitimize their viewpoints regarding the veracity of state oppression and violence. I found myself wondering if all narratives are of equal value when dealing with questions of violence and suffering. Did such passing thoughts on my part regarding the need to grade narratives according to physical violence actually suffered, unconsciously lead me as Kumar says, to

'do violence to forms of violence that may not be empirically concrete or tangible, but may, nevertheless, be inscribed in the bodies and memories of people who have lived through those events?' (Kumar 1999:203)

⁴⁰ Interview with KIR: Dec 2006

As she argues, 'is it only the survivor herself, speaking from personal experience, who can articulate her ordeal? Who constitutes a survivor of violence?' (Kumar 1999:203) For diaspora Tamils, does their very presence here now 'in safety' somehow undermine their relevance in a still continuing conflict? As Appadurai states in his interrogation of anthropological theory, 'it becomes difficult to say who really speaks for whom.' (Appadurai 1988:17) Even for those who have suffered violence, can diaspora narratives truly 'bear witness to a traumatic history through conscious acts of remembering the past?', a past that by its very nature eludes them both in time and space? (Kumar 1999:203) It is such questions that underline for me the complexity of dealing with diaspora narratives but it is just such questions that take us into the heart of the conflict diaspora condition.

3.3 Diaspora Narratives as a Study of Violence and its Effects

'War is not outside us, the war and the violence is inside us.'
(cited in Perera 2007)

As I began to get a greater contextual awareness of the community I was studying, I grew to believe that the growth of an ever increasing diaspora because of conflict is in itself an act of collective violence against the Tamil community and as such, diaspora narratives are by their very essence, stories of violence directed against both individuals and against the community as a whole, both in the diaspora and in Sri Lanka. To this end, a study of diaspora experience quickly becomes a study of the lives of people still on a borderline of conflict, a community of suffering, very much still in crisis, struggling to make sense of the violence embedded in their social world.

Tamil diaspora accounts frequently bring up what they consider to be an objective 'narrative of conflict', legitimised and made flesh as it were, by their own experiences. Such a narrative presents itself as a history of the oppression of the Tamil people, informing the 'logic' of the present conflict and hence providing the background for their own stories of suffering, loss and displacement, seminal moments in their own life stories. In wondering why 'we find so many intricate studies about war and so few about human suffering', Robben and Nordstrom ask the question why the 'chaos of warfare and the incomprehensibility of violence for its

victims' is so 'seldom addressed in scholarly writings.' (Robben and Nordstrom in Colson 2007:3) A similar viewpoint is also expressed by Jackson who urges the need to 'give voice to and work from the lived experiences' of those we study. (Jackson 2002:81)

My own work I believe tries to pursue just such an ethic, for coupled with the violence of displacement, it is images of conflict and loss that inform much of the inner world of my informants. While a study of such violence was not my original focus, my work has been informed by the experiences of my informants and it quickly became evident that violence and its effects in various forms was a meta-narrative of the conflict diaspora condition. Vigh argues that an anthropological focus on 'conflict, violence, suffering and marginalisation' is not just for the 'third world' but one relevant to the 'invisible and marginal lives of the world's besieged' wherever they may be. (Vigh 2008:12). Against the background of continuing conflict in Sri Lanka, my work is thus presented as a study of one such besieged community and this involves taking seriously the transnational character of the diaspora.

While many Tamils are ready to give an opinion on the current state of the civil war, deeper and more complex currents of emotion and sentiment are embedded in conversations and narratives that only surface in very particular circumstances. I have often heard and witnessed my own informants shying away from various topics in their interactions with others and these 'dialogues of evasion' remind me of my own initial engagement, where much was left unsaid. Such silences and the attempts to break such silences represent to me a fundamental aspect of the conflict diaspora condition and the legacy of violence that many such narratives reference.

The idea of a silence, a loss of words caused by pain, torture, rape and other forms of violence is well expressed in the academic literature. As represented by Scarry, the goal of oppression in all its forms is to 'make.... the voice, *absent* by destroying it' and as noted by other scholars, to suffer such a silence, imposed through repression, is to lose a part of one's humanity, to suffer the erosion of one's sense of self and the power to identify and articulate the meaning of experience. (Scarry 1985:49; see also Daniel 1996, Das 1996)

*'Even now when I visit to Sri Lanka, I feel this feeling... same feeling, like got fear, like got some danger...I have Sinhalese friends, I know top people but still when I come to checking (checkpoints), I remember the feeling from last time. Just like that, your life can change. It is hard to forget that feeling. For me, that was worst thing. Always frightened... That thing I really hate.'*⁴¹

The sentiments expressed above underlines what Somasundaram refers to as the 'repressive ecology' that prevailed for many, a climate of fear and insecurity 'based on imminent, pervasive threat, terror and inhibition', what Lawrence refers to as the 'psychological effects of political oppression' where one learns 'not to speak and to know what not to know.' (Somasundaram 2007: 12; Lawrence 1997: 217) For many of my informants, their lives had been one of just such insecurity and silenced despair, where dreams of the possibility of positive change had seemed unrealistic. In his study of Palestinians in the occupied territories, Hage expresses a belief that, 'nothing symbolizes social death like this inability to dream a meaningful life', a state of being that he defines as a 'culture of despair (and) resignation' (Hage 2003:79)

The relevance of such a belief to my own work is that it highlights one element of what diaspora narratives in a time of conflict actually are, something that I myself had not fully appreciated. Having left such a landscape of despair behind, diaspora Tamils now have the opportunity to 'dream' again. My informants are victims of conflict but in diaspora, they have a chance to reflect on the events and experiences which had previously left them voiceless and to begin a journey out of the darkness of silence. On the most physical level, the journey into diaspora signals an end to the threat of violence, heralding a personal journey into a realm of a particular sense of freedom. This reference to '*freedom*' is something I heard repeatedly in the course of my research and it is made all the more poignant when we contrast life in diaspora with the situation in parts of Sri Lanka where many of my informants originally came from, regions of violence and despair where Tamils experience what Skinner has referred to as a process of 'dehumanization.' (Skinner 2005:7) Being in diaspora therefore has given them the opportunity to break the bonds of what Donnan and Simpson have referred to as a 'whispered history' and a 'silenced identity.' (Donnan and Simpson 2007:9, 10)

⁴¹ Interview with KIR: Dec 2006

It is this articulation and expression of experience and the effects of such experiences on present mindsets that gives diaspora narratives particular significance. In her study of the personal narratives of women who suffered violence, Butalia suggests that there is much to be learnt from uncovering the narratives of suffering and lifting them out of the depths of silence, because it is from within that silence that one may liberate ‘the histories that have always hovered at the edges of those that have been told.’ (Butalia 2000:71; 106) For the purposes of my own focus, Butalia’s work is aptly titled⁴² and to my mind, diaspora narratives can be seen as just such an attempt to voice the ‘roar which lies on the other side of silence.’ (Eliot 1964: 191) Breaching and penetrating the legacy and realm of silence however has proved for many to be a painful process in itself. Silences and the stories around such silences thus became a key point of my interaction because as Ghorashi has argued, even for those who have made the journey into exile and who now stand ready to tell their stories, silences still exist. (Ghorashi 2007)

‘To know my story, you must know Sri Lanka part also, my life like the coins, got two sides. One side London story, other side is always (in) Sri Lanka... Here (in UK) I got some peace, other side always scared. This side, I got respect – other side I always (was) scared so no respect.... (Why were you scared?) Still I am scared ... (for) Sri Lanka, always I am scared. But that time, everything I was scared – always worry, what can happen, people die, people disappear. Soldiers come, lot of tension only.. I see my friend one time... Don’t know why, who kill him... That time all confusing only but scared so must keep quiet only... no talking about this thing.... I always see his face now. That time, I (was) thinking maybe I die like that also... maybe army kill, maybe someone else kill... War is confusing – can I say ‘confusing’ like this? War is confusing time....that time, I cannot say what is (the) true thing. That also is scared for me...you say scary no... war is like that only...always scary because always never know... to be safe, just keep quiet only.Maybe now only, I can say what is (the) true thing for me but talking (about these things) also (is) not easy (for me). I think like this only is war’⁴³

The literature is replete with theories on the ‘singularity of suffering’, ‘how people have struggled to find words to describe their experiences’ and how such struggles lock them ‘into a world that they frequently seem unable to communicate to others, and that others seem unable to share.’ (Donnan and Simpson 2007: 5,6)⁴⁴ Green

⁴² The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India

⁴³ Interview with VIJ: Jan 2007

⁴⁴ See also Das et al. 2000:59; Das et al. 2001; Daniel 1996:1142-43 on victims of violence in Sri Lanka; Gallinat 2006 on victims in the former East Germany; Krog 1998 on the victims of violence in Apartheid South Africa

references just such issues when she speaks of the complexity of ‘fixing fear and terror in words’, while Zur speaks of victims of violence who felt the inadequacy of the language they knew to speak of what they had experienced. (Green 1994: 230; Zur 1998: 161) As one of my informants told me,

*‘we are all like this flowers only...where are this from...they grow somewhere else then come here, now they will only die...what is there to say.’*⁴⁵

For RAJ, his life in London is haunted by a memory of witnessing an army unit enter his home and remove his two elder brothers. He had been in his early teens then and had never seen or heard from his brothers again. His family had promptly sent him abroad but it was too late:

‘I think that day, the soldiers took me also, only nobody know (realized)...I also did not know (at) that time.’

In many ways, a part of him had indeed died on that day and it had left him unable to truly revisit and talk about the moment when his life had changed for forever.

*‘you look, the flower is beautiful, the people look, the flower is beautiful but the flower knows, inside he (it) is dying only.’*⁴⁶

RAJ’s state of mind echoes Scarry’s insight that ‘quite literally’, pain and suffering may indeed be the unmaking of one’s world. For Scarry, silence, the destruction of words, may in a sense be an aspect of a death already suffered because of past experiences of violence and suffering. (Scarry 1985:23) While both Scarry and Das (1996) speak of pain and suffering endured directly by the people concerned, various narratives I have analysed seem to also reveal the fact that as Langer has observed, ‘the crucial instants are not those when one explains how one survived, but how a member of one’s family died.’ (Langer 1996: 56)

I have found RAJ’s narrative of this episode in his life almost unbearably unsettling⁴⁷ and I must confess that I had been moved to tears, not so much with the actual content, disturbing as it may be, but rather with the manner of the telling, the effect of

⁴⁵ He worked in a restaurant and was arranging tulips in small vases as we spoke

⁴⁶ Interview with RAJ: Aug 2008

⁴⁷ This was despite the fact that he could not really talk about the episode in any great detail.

the stumbling and disjointed words on the person in front of me. His was a life still fractured by the effects of violence. As with many of my informants, I found myself wondering about the extent and nature of his loss; what part of his selfhood had been irrevocably taken from him and about my own ability to ‘quantify’ such loss?⁴⁸

There were many times in the course of my fieldwork when I struggled to find a way forward in my interactions with many of my informants. At times, I was not even sure that there was a ‘story to get’ at vital times in a longer narrative, because of the difficulty individuals faced when recounting experiences which were infused with instances of violence and suffering. Daniel makes the point that it is just such lives that present researchers with difficulties because often enough ‘the most poignant parts of their voices are their silences.’ (Daniel 1996:120-1) Ghorashi emphasizes the need to ‘discover different layers within the stories and to give the silence a chance.’ It is her reference to the silences within stories, ‘the moments that were not so easy to talk about’ that really resonated with me. (Ghorashi 2007:3; 2) In my own work, it is also these silences which I remember most, silences which in the beginning were uncomfortable but gradually I too realized that it was in these silences that much of the trauma, despair and feelings of loss were really ‘articulated’, what Donnan and Simpson refer to as ‘silent tears still falling’, a wordless expression of grief. (Donnan and Simpson 2007:24)

In listening to diaspora narratives, I have often felt the effects of such trauma and the strength of such deafening silences, pregnant with unsaid meaning. In the midst of speech, I have seen individuals struggle with what Wallace Stevens has referred to as the ‘the hum of thoughts evaded in the mind.’ (Stevens in Rehder 1988:241) In coming to terms with past trauma, individuals need to interrogate the emotional and existential dimensions of their sense of self against a background of a profound sense of loss and confusion. Kübler-Ross has tried to analyze the process of grieving and has suggested a conceptualization of the stages of grief, a process that involves 5 key stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. (Kübler-Ross 1969) I mention this because over the course of my fieldwork, it did occur to me that many of the narratives that I was listening to did represent the emotional journey of individuals

⁴⁸ RAJ left London in late 2008. Unconfirmed rumors abounded that he had gone back to Sri Lanka to join the LTTE

at various stages of the grieving process and an awareness of this process did enable me to put certain issues into context. Following Ochs and Capps, I was also better able to appreciate a belief that ‘when encountering narratives involving trauma, it is essential to realise that individuals may be using such narratives as a means to come to terms with events and personal sentiments that they themselves have yet to reconcile.’ (Ochs and Capps 1996: 30) My key point here is that for many, grief and the process of coping with grief, either explicitly or implicitly, are constant companions and this was something that I had to take on board when dealing with narrative accounts of a brutalised past and its present consequences.

For every major account of atrocity in the public consciousness of the Tamil community⁴⁹, most Tamils also have a list of incidents ‘closer to home’, within their own towns and villages, where they themselves or their friends and relatives were exposed to the everyday violence of war. Even now in diaspora, many relate to accounts of state atrocity with the force of a personally viewed experience. There is a sense that such atrocities do not just happen to those who are killed or to those who lose loved ones, or to those relatives and friends who do the rounds of police stations and detention centers, hoping to hear that missing loved ones are still alive. Such violence and loss are perceived to affect every Tamil, both within Sri Lanka and across the diaspora. As they hear the news reports or listen to accounts from relatives and friends still in Sri Lanka, there is a palpable sense that it is their very own children who also ‘grow in the oppression of a war-torn night.’ (Sivaramani in Knuth 2006:85-6)⁵⁰ More importantly, it underlines for many, the nature of the ‘*evil people and evil government that is in power.*’⁵¹

It is such feelings that also suggest another dimension to the nature and content of diaspora narratives. Being in diaspora is seen in terms of being a survivor, with a survivor’s perceived duty and obligation to break the bonds of silence in order to

⁴⁹ Those in diaspora still talk of events like the 1984 Mannar massacre where about 120 Tamil civilians were killed by the army, the 2006 Vaharai bombing where 47 civilians were killed and over 130 injured when the army bombarded an IDP village and many other incidents in between. (for Mannar massacre see Sri Kantha 2007; for Vaharai bombing see Jeyaraj 2006)

⁵⁰ Such a metaphor is also tangible reality as some diaspora Tamils still have children in Sri Lanka, in the care of spouses, grandparents or other relatives

⁵¹ Interview with RIC: June 2007. He also drew my attention to a poem by the Tamil poet Nuhuman, which he said ‘*told the evil of the government*’. See Appendix B

honour the memory of those who had not survived and to bear witness to the violence and political repression that has transformed their lives and continues to transform the lives of those still in Sri Lanka, a sentiment echoed in Margalit's concept of the 'moral witness.' (Margalit 2002:150) For many, as expressed by my informant above, the other side of life '*is always in Sri Lanka*' and it is a reality that he and many like him, are still coming to terms with, in an effort to find their voice and to know and express '*what is true*' for them. I believe that it is the experience of loss and suffering that qualifies and enables those in diaspora to give voice in place of those who have yet to find a place where their stories may be told and listened to, or indeed on behalf of those whose voices have been forever silenced. In their suffering, they have seen and come closest to being able to understand what Ashbery refers to as 'the look of others through their own eyes.' (Ashbery 1977) It is such a dimension that is fundamental to an understanding of the nature of the diaspora condition in a time of conflict.

Lawrence makes the point that the voices of those who have suffered the violence of war are the 'voices which are hardest to hear outside this cordoned-off region of the island.' (Lawrence 1997: 217) Diaspora voices however can in many instances represent a new source for such testimony, as often enough they are the voices that have managed to escape just such 'cordoned-off' regions. The creation of diasporas due to processes of conflict and forced migration make personal narratives as a research tool all the more relevant due to the fact that such narratives tell us something about experiences to which we have little other access but they also reveal the varied ongoing consequences of conflict and violence. The 'field' of my research therefore is a landscape littered with a discourse that can only be accessed through a methodology that prioritizes the lived experiences of my informants.

Storytelling, whether in the form of life histories or more partial personal narratives enables a richer seam of potential in research concerning those who have suffered because such stories have the potential to transport us into the lifeworlds of our informants in a way that more quantitative data cannot. It may even be the case as O'Brien observes, that 'story –truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth' because only such narratives can convey the experience of what things were like, and in doing so, 'make things present.' (O'Brien 1990 in Jackson 2002:54)

3.4 An Interrogation of Contested Viewpoints

The nature of truth and what is true are issues that cropped up in much of my analysis. A Tamil friend who helped me during some of my fieldwork summed up his own observations with the following comment: *'if anything happens, our Tamils will blame government and government will blame LTTE.'*⁵² While made in a somewhat facetious vein, his comment did highlight the fact that much of the discourse of conflict, especially in the fog of war, did sometimes amount to a 'blame game' of sorts, between factions bitterly opposed to each other. The issue of such contested viewpoints is one that I had to deal with in my own analysis when thinking through the narratives and opinions I was being exposed to. The approach that I have taken does not 'assume objectivity; rather, it privileges positionality and subjectivity'. (Kihler-Riessman 2002:696) I acknowledge that for most of my informants, their stories are also the way they bring meaning to their present lives for as suggested by scholars like Bruner and Jackson, 'stories make meaning.' (Bruner 1986: 140; Jackson 2002: 18) Diaspora narratives therefore cannot be seen as simply reflecting life as lived, but should be seen as 'creative constructions or interpretations of the past, generated in specific contexts of the present.' (Eastmond 2007: 251) It was for me, the way my informants chose to let me understand the journey of their lives to date but also the background that informed their aspirations for the future.

In this sense, many of the narratives I encountered initially raised questions in my mind regarding issues of perception, reliability and relative objectivity. Du Perron highlights the crux of this issue – the validity of the historical accuracy of 'personal narrative' in contrast to the more objective viewpoint of traditional historiography. While acknowledging that the 'voices of the people who lived through a particular episode in history', may be 'illuminating' yet not 'provide an 'objective' viewpoint', she also questions the 'suggestion that traditional historiography is by definition objective', a suggestion she views as 'problematic.' (Du Perron 2002:390) For many of my informants, the 'reality' of the situation presented in official and mainstream accounts of the conflict is often regarded as suspect because, as voiced by Rushdie,

⁵² Conversation with SUMI: July 2007

‘the migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature.’ (Rushdie 1992: 125) In this sense, we need to ‘confront the ‘Rashomon’ aspect of experience – that things look different to different observers, and that one’s very perceptions are shaped by the social and cultural context out of which one operates.’ (Chametzky 1986:3) Indeed, for many of my informants, in a mainstream climate where the LTTE is demonised as a terrorist organization with no coherent claim to legitimacy, their own view seems to be that such viewpoints themselves may be every bit as partisan and prejudiced.⁵³

Williams contends that ‘the narrative approach does not attempt to seek explanation but to draw out truths and meaning from depictions of histories and stories as perceived by the protagonists’ and from an early stage, I did hold that ethic in my mind as my concern was also ‘with the voices of people who aim to capture their own intimate life through their stories about it’. (Williams 2007: 867; Plummer in Williams 2007:867) Daniel argues that for those displaced by conflict, life following the moment of the first involuntary and unwelcome displacement, is almost never a simple narrative that leads to a single truth.’ (Daniel 2006: 63) To that end, I have also learned, following Kihler-Riessman, to appreciate and accept the fact that ‘‘truths’ rather than the truth of personal narrative is the watchword.’(Kihler-Riessman 2002:704) I proceed with a belief that each narrative has elements of the truth as perceived by the informant for as put forward by Young, ‘whatever ‘fictions’ emerge... are not deviations from the ‘truth’ but are part of the truth in any particular version’. (Young in Butalia 2000:11 see also Atkinson 2002:122). I have adopted an approach that ‘everyone has a story’ and such stories are also important for what they can tell us about the storyteller, his wider social world as well as the perceptual environment in which the story is presently being told. (Atkinson 2002:122) Diaspora narratives are thus real in the sense that it is through such stories that people exist and stake a claim to their search for meaning and identity in a place of diaspora.

A particular episode from my fieldwork is instructive. G was a Sinhalese individual who had once served as an army officer in Sri Lanka. Despite his ‘former life’, G was now married to a Tamil woman and had very many friends in the Tamil community.

⁵³ At times, even my own ‘veiled distaste’ for the violence of the LTTE was picked up on and branded as a ‘bias’ by some of my more ‘hardline’ informants.

He had a great deal of sympathy for the suffering of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka, having seen it with his own eyes and he seemed to present an image of an individual who was fair and reasonable when discussing the conflict. In an increasingly polarized climate between Sinhalese and Tamils, G to my mind was an individual who would have been prepared to listen with an open mind to ‘the other side of the story.’ He was on intimate terms with many of my informants but they adamantly refused to share their experiences of suffering with him. Once, when I remarked on this ‘silence’ to one of my informants, I was told:

‘Why to tell? What can he do now? ... He was there, he knows but I have my story, maybe he has his one only (his own version of events) Nirad, this is war, many things happening. Many heroes, many devils. Why to argue this thing with him? I am not fighting all the Sinhala people. This is political problem with government... Even if many Sinhala people are good people, the Government will just kill them also.’⁵⁴

The relevance of this account to me lies not so much in RO’s refusal to share his story with G but rather in his reference to different versions of the ‘story.’ This reference to issues of contested viewpoints reveals to my mind a significant element of what such narratives actually are. As argued by Gallinat, such stories of suffering are ‘not factual but personal and emotional, stories which speak of multiple layers of meaning and significance.’ (Gallinat 2006:353)

It is these layers of meaning that inform the consciousness of many of my informants. Such perceptions are complex and underline the fact that in the context of conflict, a single truth as mentioned above, is often difficult to perceive as polarized opinion tends to result in self-censoring processes of cognitive dissonance. RO’s comment, speaking of G; *‘I have my story, maybe he has his’*, hence takes on another level of meaning. For RO, even those who were actually there, either as combatants or civilians, have their own perception of events and such perceptions may differ. Diaspora narratives therefore speak not just of conflict and violence endured but also of battles and conflict over the very meaning of such events.

In trying to work out why certain narratives and opinions came out in a particular way, I found myself going ‘back to the person.’ I had spent much time getting to

⁵⁴ Conversation and Interview with RO: June 2007

know my informants and my belief is that how they wanted to represent themselves and their experiences should be respected and more importantly, such subjective representations are actually the essence of my research focus in trying to understand the deeper rhythms of meaning which inform diaspora support for militant action, a viewpoint underlined by Johnson who argues that,

‘Interviewers should remember that that it is possible that what they are getting from those they interview is not the whole truth... what they are getting are the stories respondents want to tell. That in itself tells us a good deal about what we really want to know.’ (Johnson 2002:136)

3.5 Participant Observation

It became clear to me that while personal narratives enabled me to understand, analyse and react intellectually to the experiences and perceptions of many of my informants, so much more was also on offer provided I could find the tools to access and capture the various textures of expression that gradually began to reveal themselves. It is my belief that the field of my research was based in the very particular cultural world that my informants inhabited and what was needed was also a methodology that would enable me to fully engage with the social landscape before me. In seeking to immerse myself within the diaspora community over a period of time, my desire was to try and go beyond the limited , ‘short-term, almost mechanical and subtractive engagement’ which to my mind runs the risk of reducing diaspora experience and opinion to a snapshot moment of polemic caricature rather than one of shared intimacy. (Cueullar 2005:172)

My fieldwork thus expanded to include informal conversations and a great degree of participation in and observation of, a range of social, cultural and political activities. Participant observation of individuals enmeshed in such social fields gave me the opportunity to appreciate the transnational social networks that many of my informants operated within, as I struggled to place relationships that transcended time and space and also orthodox familial relationships.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Many of my informants included within their ‘family’ circles, individuals who were not actually related by blood or marriage but who had become ‘*like family*’ because of shared experiences in diaspora and as such, ‘family’ networks expanded as new extended families were then pulled into existing networks. This also worked in reverse with individuals in diaspora being pulled into networks based on family connections established back in Sri Lanka by other family members. The reach of such connections was brought home to me when I once asked two of my informants, how they had met and

Informal ‘interviewing’, naturalistic conversation and group discussions enabled me to flesh out views and narratives on attitudes towards the on-going conflict, an area of discussion that I found almost always led back to aspects of an individual’s own biography, a meeting point between individual lives and the broader contemporary and impersonal forces of Sri Lankan political history. The relevance of such a conceptual overlap was underlined by the numerous occasions where the prevailing emotional mood of the day was influenced not by the local or national climate of current affairs in the UK but rather by events in Sri Lanka. In such instances, the benefits of a thick ethnography did pay dividends as opinions and reactions expressed could clearly again be traced or interpreted with regards to biographical histories I had already been exposed to. In this sense as well, diaspora lives are also routinely re-embedded within a landscape and context of crisis and conflict.

An involvement in social events also provided me with the opportunity to hear group discussions, where thoughts and experiences would be shared. These discussions enabled me to get a sense of where and how certain individuals chose to ‘put out their stall’ in terms of their support for or criticism of the LTTE. Eastmond notes the positive nature of such engagement, stating that ‘listening to the stories people tell one another and observing the various ways in which they engage with their situation...adds important context and depth of understanding to the stories elicited’ by those with a research agenda. (Eastmond 2007: 251) My fieldwork was thus also informed to a great degree by ‘deep hanging out’, marked by the telling and sharing of stories. (Rosaldo in Clifford 1997: 55-6) I follow Eastmond’s belief that ‘stories are part of everyday life and constitute means for actors to express and negotiate experience.’ (Eastmond 2007: 248) The sharing of such stories seemed to become the very currency of intimacy as strangers became more familiar through impromptu discussions brought about by various friends and relatives dropping by venues at

why they had decided to go into business together. Their response was that they actually did not even know each other that well. Their fathers in Sri Lanka had become close friends while both sons were in the UK and when the respective sons had saved enough money to start a business, their fathers had put them in touch, urging them to pool their resources and embark on a joint venture. Since that beginning, one of the individuals, ARU, had also gone on to marry the sister of the other. ARU jokingly referred to it as a ‘*match made in heaven*’, but only if your idea of heaven was his mother’s kitchen in Sri Lanka where the ‘*agreement*’ between the two families had been made. For ARU, long deprived of his mother’s cooking, his mother’s kitchen was in fact his idea of ‘*heaven on earth*.’ (Conversation with ARU and SIV: June 2006)

which I was present. These included places of work, the homes of my various informants as well as restaurants and cafes where individuals from the Tamil community congregated.

Encountering the ‘daily life’ of my informants also included the many festive events that marked the life of the community such as weddings, birthdays as well as the celebration of religious and cultural events such as baptisms, Christmas, ‘Deepavali’ (the Hindu Festival of Lights), ‘Thaipongal’ (Hindu harvest festival) and ‘Puthandu’ (Tamil New Year). This enabled me to add an additional perspective to my research, reminding me that despite the various narratives of pain and loss that I was encountering, my informants were far from being just victims. I believe this informal and spontaneous approach to getting to know individuals in different settings, beyond the exclusive relationship based on researcher and informant enabled many of them to respond to me in a more relaxed and open manner in more formal and specific interactions later on, where to some degree, they were more able to just ‘be themselves.’ Having said that, I did always try and ensure that my identity as a ‘researcher’ was clear with regards to my presence at many of these events, so much so, that it was a standing joke whenever I appeared that everybody else had to be on their best behaviour as they were ‘*being studied*’, something they also sometimes referred to as ‘*picture time*.’⁵⁶

Participant observation also enabled narratives to emerge throughout the course of ‘daily life’, mostly at the instigation of the informants themselves. In her work Malkki underlines the relevance of participant observation as a means of creating a platform where narratives come to the fore in an organic manner. As she explains, narratives,

‘emerged, not only in homes, but also on lorry drives, during walks along forest paths, in the fields while people were working.’

Malkki makes the point that ‘conversations in these diverse settings about everyday topics, personal circumstances, and immediate concerns often led to broader... reflections.’ (Malkki 1995a: 49) In my own work, such ‘informal’ social interactions also gave me an insight into how particular actions or associations could trigger a

⁵⁶ The relevance of ‘picture time’ is addressed below

stream of memories and thoughts, events from the past intruding onto the present, memories that many of my informants possibly initially did not wish to share with me. One such event stands out for me, underlining the fact that for many, the trauma of a past experience is also the trauma that lives in the present.

It was a warm summer day and I was in the back garden of one of my informants, helping her put up a clothesline for the first time. When we had done so, she proceeded to hang up the washing. As we sat in the garden watching bedsheets sway in the wind, she suddenly told me that the last time she had seen her sister, her sister had been hanging up clothes on a clothesline at their home in Sri Lanka. She herself had been on her way out to visit relatives and had waved goodbye to her sister as she left. Her sister must have left the house later on but she was never seen again and the family was never able to find out what had happened to her sister. Such occurrences were not uncommon as many Tamil youth were often taken away and detained by the security forces, who suspected them of involvement in the LTTE. Tears came into her eyes as she recounted the devastation of her family as weeks passed with no word from her sister. Although I had been talking to her over an extended period of time, this was the first time she had ever mentioned having a sister. I had not been expecting it at all and it brought home to me the fact that for her and others like her, shadows from the past are always by their side, despite their efforts to 'move on.' As she herself admitted, the trigger for her sharing this tragic episode with me at this point in time, had indeed been the clothesline but it was obvious that her grief was a constant companion. She signalled the end of the conversation with the words, '*maybe I should get a dryer.*'⁵⁷

3.6 The Importance of Trust-Building

Because of the emotional nature of the subject material raised, my fieldwork was marked by a conscious need to engender stronger bonds of trust and intimacy, developed over a longer time frame. This was partly to gain the confidence of those whose lives I was researching but it was also an effort to situate myself within a context where I would be better able to understand the nature of the material I was

⁵⁷ Conversation with GW: June 2007

being exposed to and what such experiences and the very act of sharing such experiences meant to my informants.

In his work, Cueullar makes the point that ‘short-term engagements seem to circumvent... the problem of trust’, making ‘trust building’ a euphemism. Following Cuellar, I believe that ‘trust is the product of a sustained encounter, of a negotiation of an intimate, intersubjective and even political space.’ (Cueullar 2005:171) It is in the everyday reality diaspora life that such spaces presented themselves and it was important for me to engage as much as possible with my subjects on their own terms in places where they felt comfortable and so much of my fieldwork was marked by long periods of ‘sustained informality’ as referred to above. My aim, as described by Fuglerud, was to engender ‘prolonged relationships’ such that the experiences and stories of my subjects would be offered to me ‘in bits and pieces, freely offered the way it normally is between people who become acquainted.’ (Fuglerud 1999:17)

Such relationships were very relevant for the majority of my target group, ordinary Tamils whose lives had been disrupted by the effects of conflict and displacement and as such, many had left formal schooling in their mid-teens. Like most Tamils, they had a profound respect bordering on reverence for anything academic and the more formal, structured interview format that I initially began with, seemed to spark a need on the part of many of my subjects, to adopt a very formal, respectful and inhibited stance which just did not ring true to life, echoing the words of Cuellar who argues that ‘the interviewing encounter’ often presents an authoritative structure as it is ‘done in a controlled environment where a hierarchy is well established.’ (Cueullar 2005:171) In such settings, I gathered that many of my informants felt like they were on parade and this situation reminded me of dated studio photographs of long dead relatives which are found in many Tamil homes. Given pride of place, such photographs present formally attired men and women who stare unsmilingly out at you. A similar formality of occasion and expression was truly something that I did not want to engender.⁵⁸ In the early stages of my fieldwork, it was often only after an interview session, that informants would ‘come to life’ and tell me what they referred

⁵⁸ This analogy was agreed with by many of my informants who immediately recognised its relevance as a metaphor for our more difficult moments. Interviews and discussions were then sometimes jokingly referred to as ‘*picture time*’

to as the '*the real point*' that they had been alluding to at various stages during the interview.

Speaking of the use of personal narratives as a method of research, Ghorashi puts forward the idea that 'this research method is especially useful with marginalized groups that need more room in order to be able to express themselves.' Ghorashi maintains that the use of personal narratives enables a 'dialogical, interactive situation' to be created, one 'including both the storyteller and the researcher.' The strength of this approach is that it 'makes the well-known hierarchical relationship that forms part of any interview less visible for both parties, sometimes even less present.' (Ghorashi 2007: 120) In basing a significant part of my work on a methodology of personal narratives and life stories as well as on informal discussions and naturalistic conversations where relevant, my aim has been to take full advantage of the relationships of trust that I have worked hard to engender with my target group. It is this climate of trust that I feel is key in ensuring that the narratives which inform my research emphasize the feelings, opinions and perspectives of those I have encountered rather than merely reflecting my own particular interests or agenda, except in the broadest terms. In fact, much of my work has been led by the particular concerns and reflections of my informants themselves, giving me a greater sense of the perspectives that matter to them. This has allowed me to inform my own work with the issues many of them struggle with, questions which have revealed to me the existential struggle for meaning and a sense of self evident in how they interpret their experiences and the 'place of diaspora' they inhabit in a time of war, because of war.

My specific interest in the topic of the Tamil diaspora in London began quite unintentionally when I met A in 1999. He had opened a 'pizzeria' in Earls Court where I lived and occasionally I would go there for a meal. As we got closer as friends, it began to dawn on me that while A did indeed live and work in Earls Court (he lived above the restaurant), most of his emotional life seemed to be still focused on Sri Lanka, a place he had left about 10 years before. He had spent the majority of those years working in restaurants all over London and with his family still resident in Sri Lanka, he seemed to spend what little free time he had, desperately trying to keep up with news from home through weekly telephone calls and through meetings with Tamil refugees who had recently arrived in London. A's main focus however was on

his restaurant business but even this pursuit of profit had a transnational agenda. His plan was to get together enough money such that he could help his brothers and sisters make the journey over to the UK as well.

In those early years of our acquaintance, I never really got the full picture of the exact reason why he himself had left in the first place. In 2006, when I started to investigate his story in a more structured way, I learnt that he had been forced to leave because one of his younger brothers had joined the LTTE in the mid 1980s. Identified as a pro LTTE family because of his brother's action, A's family was now vulnerable, both from the security forces who were cracking down on suspected militant sympathisers but also from the attention of rival militant groups active during that period. Whitaker gives us a sense of what he refers to as a time of 'epistemic murk' when 'each group had its own watchers, its own secret denouncers, and to engage in the wrong performance, the wrong act of representation, for the wrong audience, could mean death.' (Whitaker 1996: 6) The deciding factor for A happened when he was detained for 3 days by the security forces. According to him, he was sure that he would be killed or tortured to reveal the '*comings and goings*' of his brother. In the end, he was only beaten up and eventually released with the understanding that he was to be more '*helpful*' when approached in the future.⁵⁹ Fearing for his safety, A's father decided that he should leave. It was also felt that the situation would only get worse and with this in mind, A's father believed that in the future, A might be able to help the rest of his siblings make the journey overseas if necessary, once he himself was settled abroad.

The fact that my fieldwork proper was initially begun amongst people not totally unfamiliar to me is a point worth noting. Through my relationship with A, I had become involved over the years in helping diaspora Tamils with various immigration matters. This included applications for asylum, for long-term residency and for naturalization.⁶⁰ For my fieldwork, I again chiefly turned to A as my primary contact and guide, basing myself at A's home and restaurant.⁶¹ Gradually, I began to meet

⁵⁹ Interview with A: June/July 2006. Whatever else happened during his time of detention is a subject that A is still unable and unwilling to talk about in great detail.

⁶⁰ I am legally trained but such help was purely in a personal capacity.

⁶¹ I also began helping out at the restaurant to engender familiarity with the Tamil staff and other Tamils who frequented the restaurant.

extended family and friends without A being around and this enabled me to ‘suggest’ and develop independent bonds of friendship and trust. I was treated with much warmth and openness from the very beginning and this ‘head-start’ has enabled me to develop a greater degree of familiarity over a shorter period of time with a wider variety of people. Ever increasing networks of friends and family in turn led to further introductions and my network of contacts and informants gradually increased. My past experience of helping in immigration matters also turned out to have been a good grounding in helping me get a better grasp of the trials and tribulations of members of this particular community as they engaged with a ‘process of becoming’, from refugee to asylum seeker to diaspora member.

In considering my present research perspective and my role as a researcher, I have felt it necessary to state this background as clearly as possible for two reasons. Firstly, because it underlines the fact that I have spent a lot of time with various individuals, shifting through their accounts of persecution in a voluntary and non-official capacity. This I believe has given me an insight into the lives and backgrounds of many individuals, some of whom have been selected as informants for this research project. The accounts of those who do not figure in my research have also been invaluable as a sort of ‘background reading’, an opportunity to expose myself to a broader field of experience and sentiment. The second reason is because my experiences have also given me an insight into an aspect of the ‘process of becoming’ that many have experienced. Speaking of her personal experience as an asylum seeker in the Netherlands, Ghorashi categorizes her own interviews as ‘too fast, too purposive, or much too short’, with applicants being ‘treated like a number or a file.’ (Ghorashi 2007: 2) Her perception of having her ‘passionate story’ translated in an ‘indifferent voice’ and being reduced by officials to ‘one among others, not doing justice to (her) reality’ is sadly one that I became very familiar with, albeit in vicarious fashion within the British immigration system. (Ghorashi 2007:118) Hours spent preparing individuals to give a full account of their experiences of persecution and in some cases even torture, often resulted in a cursory interview, with officials focusing on peripheral details in order to highlight an inconsistency or to suggest deceit.

Even when applications were successful, many of my informants would return with a defeated feeling that they struggled to put into words. A positive verdict was of course

all that was important but in many cases, there remained a lingering feeling of unease. In reviewing these episodes, what became clear to me was that for many Tamils, their interviews were in a sense their moment of testimony, their day in court. Denied such a forum in Sri Lanka, many of them saw the officialness of the immigration process as an opportunity to tell their story and many even felt that such ‘testimonies’ would have some consequence, some impact on attitudes towards the conflict in Sri Lanka. A failure to meet such expectations therefore can be argued to have inadvertently further entrenched the ‘violence of voicelessness’ that many had already suffered in their personal journeys from regions of conflict and violence to an immigration interview room in the UK. (Cueullar 2005:172)

I have also observed the fact that many solicitors who act for Tamils in their asylum claims often offer their clients ‘template narratives’, pushing aside the real testimony offered with the phrase ‘*won't work*’. My own feeling is that for many, this ‘silencing’ and the lack of acknowledgement of their real stories is also something that often eats away at them, a further imposition on their already traumatized sense of self. While this may seem like a rather existential perspective on what is after all, a very pragmatic bureaucratic process, my own belief is that it has a real effect on individuals at a traumatic time of their life and it is a process that has an influence on the ‘final product’, the consciousness of individuals denied the opportunity to express their own sense of injustice and suffering and to have such suffering acknowledged. Daniel and Knudsen highlight the potential damage of such a process, alluding to the fact that in encounters with authorities such as immigration caseworkers, the ‘individualities’ constructed by refugees in ‘oral autobiographies are often deemed irrelevant.’ Such individualities, however, as they explain, are for many, ‘the foundation on which a meaningful world may be rebuilt.’ (Daniel and Knudsen 1995: 5)

Because of my prior engagement with my target community and their negative experiences of ‘having to tell their story’, I was able to be aware of and develop certain positive strengths within my own fieldwork practices. My prior exposure to this bank of common experience did enable me to ‘listen better’ with a different sensitivity, mindful of not making assumptions about what I was hearing. It also gave me a greater sensitivity and a willingness and confidence to take on board the fact that

many in diaspora suffer not just from affective and material deprivation but also from existential struggles brought on by the effects of violence, loss and displacement.

Many of my informants also seemed more willing to accept me as somebody already on the outer realm of their own social field and hence someone who ‘understood’ and could be trusted. This sharing of a certain degree of emotional intimacy and acceptance did have a tangible significance. From quite early on, it became evident to me that while most of my informants were quite willing to discuss their opinions on the war in broad and general terms, many were quite reluctant to discuss their own specific experiences of personal suffering, loss and confusion, especially with strangers or those whom they deemed ‘unsympathetic’, people they referred to as those who ‘cannot hear.’

‘I argue with S⁶² ... she is Tamil also but from Colombo, different type, she also cannot understand what is happening so she is thinking different story.... she thinks we are low-class people, always making trouble only but she must be asking why. It is not just I am Tamil... S also is Tamil only. When S is talking, all is common sense for her...government must be good, Tigers must be bad because Government say Tigers are terrorist. For her, that is complete story.... She can say like this only because she is not knowing what is happen(ing) to us, what Government is doing... We are not mad people... Not only rich people want peace. Poor people also want peace but peace must be real peace for everybody otherwise we only will suffer.’⁶³

A’s account above highlights an issue worth noting. In his work on the politics of storytelling, Jackson asks the question, ‘who can tell a story?’ (Jackson 2002: 35). In my own work, I have actually faced a different issue – that of who can listen to a story. Quoting the words of a Greek Cypriot refugee, Loizos makes the point that for many refugees,

‘those who aren’t refugees do not understand the pain of those who are – it cannot be shared. But the refugee can talk about his suffering to another refugee.... The one understands the suffering of the other, but the non-refugees don’t feel things’ (cited in Loizos 1981:127)

⁶²S is a mutually known individual whose views on the conflict differ significantly from A’s. He explains that in his experience, many of those ‘rich’ Tamils from Colombo like S, just want the conflict to end, without acknowledging that the conflict is being waged by the LTTE on behalf of the Tamil people, for specific aims which in A’s perception are essential for the welfare of the Tamil people especially in the northeast.

⁶³ Interview with A: January 2007

It is worth bearing in mind ‘that shared meaning cannot be assumed between researcher and researched, and that informants may not be able to express their knowledge, even if they want to.’ (Hollway and Jefferson in Williams 2006:867) Many of my informants seemed to hold the view that their personal narratives of suffering could only be related to either those who had also suffered similar experiences or to those whom they felt may show sensitivity or understanding towards their story.⁶⁴ Even in general discussions where their own lived experiences may have ‘won’ a point or proved convincing to a skeptical audience, they often refrained from presenting their own actual experiences, preferring to argue in more abstract terms. This unwillingness to employ a ‘I was there’ stance was something that I witnessed quite often. To many of my informants, S mentioned above, represented such a person, one to whom stories and narratives of personal suffering were often not offered. Referring to S, A had stated, ‘*some people don’t want to know, so they cannot hear.*’

In their study of a culture of silence amongst Protestants in a predominantly Catholic area of Northern Ireland, Hastings and Simpson state that the ‘transition from private memories to public tellings raises issues of ownership.’ (Donna and Simpson 2007:24) Echoing my own experience above, they suggest an explanation for the hesitancy they encountered with their own subjects:

‘Once my story is told to others, it is no longer just *my* story. At best, where it is told to those who are trusted and who share its sentiments or maybe even some of its experiences, it becomes *our* story. But where it is told to those who may not approve or who disbelieve, it risks becoming *your* story, or worse, *their* story, something that may result in a struggle over meaning.’ (Donnan and Simpson 2007:24, italics in original)

Thompson underlines the fact that when considering such stories, we need to appreciate that it is ‘not just a story’ but part of a wider narrative that has become ‘integral to the constitution of many Tamil people’, telling them ‘just who they were’ and affirming ‘many other stories that were embodied in the Tamil sense of the conflict and their place within it.’ (Thompson 2004: 156) It is my belief that in order to truly understand the opinions and mindsets of those in diaspora, their social world

⁶⁴ It was not deemed necessary to fully agree with the viewpoint of the narrator. It seemed more like a need for a sense of respect and a willingness to listen with an open mind.

and their sense of a community to which they belong, it is just such stories which we need to access and to this end, my research has been premised on an effort to know just who these people are, to go beyond the ‘facts’ of their lives and to try and give voice to how such facts have been experienced and internalized, turned into narratives that are then marshalled and sent out to ‘imagine’ and define a particular diaspora identity in a time of war .

3.7 The Idea of Community Reconsidered

**‘Migration is part not only of an individual but also of a collective biography.’
(Brettell 2003:43)**

Simone Weil tells us that ‘to be rooted’, ‘is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.’ In considering such an existentialist need for a sense of belonging, Weil also brings in the issue of community. As she observes, being rooted is very much a social fact before it is anything else and as such, it is inextricably linked to a person’s ‘real, active and natural participation in the life of a community.’ (Weil 1952 in Jackson 2002:12)

To my mind, conflict diaspora narratives are in their essence, a search for a sense of meaning, belonging and community identity in a time of turmoil and dislocation. When studying such communities, I believe we need to engender an awareness that allows us to recognize and capture the significance of such relationships. This in turn requires an appreciation that we need to be able to reinterpret our understanding of what constitutes the ‘real’ and the immediate as far as society and community is concerned. A study of a conflict diaspora community therefore is an attempt to understand varied perceptions of community lost, community gained and a sense of community transfigured, an engendering of a transnational consciousness constructed ‘along a fine line between movement and change, continuity and identification.’ (Fog- Olwig 2003:797) Each narrative that I have encountered has enabled me to better appreciate the effects of conflict and displacement on a ‘personal level’ but it has also given me a profound sense that it is from a sense of community that one is primarily displaced from. As one of my informants put it, *‘I did not live myself alone under the coconut tree’*⁶⁵, underlining the fact that ‘though stories emanate from

⁶⁵ Interview with KIR: Dec 2006

personal experience, it is not the imprimatur of individual identity that gives a story value, but the imprimatur of a community.’ (Jackson 2002:62).

My research is based on an initial assessment that many of the Tamils I have encountered in my work have been emotionally scarred by their experiences of violence and displacement. These traumatic experiences present a variety of complex and lingering effects but it is in the realm of family and community that such effects are most apparent, underlining the fact that ‘emotional processes cannot be understood through a focus on individuals alone, because emotions often occur in social contexts and inter-subjectivity is essential to emotional life.’ (Svasek and Skrbis 2007:371)

Hage criticizes those who study diasporic communities in terms which seem to present them as an ‘imagined community’, yet one with ‘very little community in it and a lot of imagination instead, usually the imagination of the researcher.’ Far from the study of ‘imagined but non-existing communities’, what I aim to show is that for diaspora Tamils, such a sense of community does constitute ‘a point of attachment’ as far as their life worlds are concerned. (Hage 2005:468) Diaspora narratives refocus our attention on the effects of conflict on individuals and families but they also reference a wider engagement with an emotional and ideational lifeworld that references the effects of conflict on the dynamics of the wider community and society. As Jackson reminds us, ‘because violence... occurs in the contested space of intersubjectivity, its most devastating effects are not on individuals per se but on the fields of interrelationships that constitute their lifeworlds.’ (Jackson 2002: 12) In the Tamil context, Somasundaram posits that,

‘in collectivist societies, the individual becomes embedded within the family and community..... The family and community are part of the self, their identity and consciousness.. Tamil families, due to close and strong bonds and cohesiveness in nuclear and extended families, tend to function and respond to external threat or trauma as a unit rather than as individual members.’ (Somasundaram 2007:2)

I quote at length because such a viewpoint underlines the subtext of how many of my informants have articulated their own feelings and emotions and it is a viewpoint that

we need to take seriously in order to appreciate its validity, strength and analytical significance. As argued by Daniel,

‘a person who seeks asylum is above all else a human being.... whether or not s/he is an individual.... There are many ways of being human. Being an individual is just one of them.’ (Daniel 2006: 61)

This sense of being part of a wider community and society defines the Tamil diaspora’s very sense of itself and it is an ethic that flows through my methodology and my thesis. As put forward by Sander, it is a analytical paradigm of conceptualizing community as a constituent part of personal identity. (Sander 1998:150-51) In its most concrete form and key to this dynamic are the very real and tangible affective relationships of the heart and mind that those who inhabit the place of diaspora have with friends and family in Sri Lanka and across the world. These affective relationships form the building blocks of a transnational ethic that enables them to see themselves as a relevant part of a wider social, cultural and political community. As put forward by Appadurai & Breckenridge, ‘even for apparently well settled diasporic groups, the macro-politics of reproduction translates into the micro-politics of memory, among friends, relatives and generations’ (Appadurai & Breckenridge 1989: i-iv) More than just an ‘armchair interest’ in the drama of conflict therefore, diaspora ‘interest’ is fuelled by the fact that for many, the ‘small wars and invisible genocides’ that make up the life of a civil war impact on them through the ties and connections they still maintain with a lifeworld and a community left behind. (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004:19)

‘you ask if I (am) happy. When I first come, always I am thinking of going home because of parents, friends... our town is dangerous place so parents staying with relatives somewhere else. Everywhere not safe, anytime soldiers can come. ...Here I am safe but always I am thinking of home (Sri Lanka) only. Now I have passport (British Nationality) but still Sri Lanka only is for me.....But Sri Lanka is not good home for our people now ...Tamil people dying everyday ...how to be happy...we only must help to make change there. My own children is here, so safe but many Tamil children there (are) not safe. (So you are lucky to be here?) Like that only God takes care but other children also like my children..... I talk to my mother...she will say, Raji has disappeared, or Suthen’s son has died...all people we know like our relatives only. Like this is pain for us but how to say this pain, who to say this pain, who can change this pain? ... It is not like one bomb in Wembley station tomorrow...that will be sad but actually, not really I will know the people killed... even Tamil people. But my

*town in Sri Lanka, all people know each other. ...even if I don't know you, still you will be like somebody son, somebody father...like that I will know them.'*⁶⁶

The essence of this particular strain of analysis is that diaspora as a conceptual category 'includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put.' (Brah 1996: 181) Malkki underlines the relevance of such a perspective and the emotional strains involved by reminding us about the people who stayed put, a perspective often sidelined in conventional analysis. As she argues, are such people left behind not 'connected to the people who fled? It is as if the place left behind were no longer peopled.' (Malkki 1995b: 515) Conflict diaspora members often carry the war inside them but they also carry within them relationships to a lifeworld that they have left behind, primarily because of a community and a sense of community that they still abide by. For many of my informants, the imagery of conflict and violence that has scarred this social landscape cannot be overlooked for as put forward by Fair, 'most have (had) at least one family member (however near or remote) killed, raped, or tortured in the war' and it is such violent events that loom large in their consciousness. (Fair 2005: 139) In a review essay focusing on the lives of Palestinian exiles, Dominguez finds a similar vein of feeling as that represented by the lament of my informant above: '*how to say this pain, who to say this pain, who can change this pain?*' She highlights the fact that the condition of being in exile can be encapsulated in a series of plaintive questions:

'how do I voice such pain?', 'What is loss?..... How does feeling it shape our thoughts, our feelings, and our actions? With whom do we share it?' (Dominguez 2008:375)

It is in order to interrogate such sentiments of pain and the transformative effects of loss within a conflict diaspora community, that it is essential to employ a methodology this is 'sensitive to the fluidity and everyday experience of ... transnational family networks', because in a time of conflict, so much else is also

⁶⁶ The crux of his point was that his life in Sri Lanka was more infused with and embedded in social relationships. In his present life, he used to greet the neighbourhood cats in Earls Court every time he saw them. He had given them all names – based on characters he had known in his home town, neighbours and acquaintances who were a part of the life of the town – the postmaster, the old lady who sat in the sun every morning with her eyes closed, mumbling her prayers, the village drunk who often was found asleep in various places, the barber with his handlebar moustache. It was a way for him to relive '*a walk through* (his) *hometown*', a walk through a consciousness that still reminded him of a community and a way of life left behind but still real and present. Interview with ROB: July 2007

represented in the reality and significance of such networks of feeling, identity and belonging. (Evergeti & Zontini 2006:1032) The relevance of such a transnational consciousness is highlighted when we consider what I perceive to be a founding narrative for the formation of conflict diasporas – the creation of ‘communities of suffering’ which link homeland and diaspora communities. (Gallinat 2006: 362) In recounting her own experiences as a member of a diaspora whose homeland was engulfed by violence, Habib underlines her membership of just such a community of suffering when she states that, ‘the only way I could recreate the invisible link, was through my suffering.’ (Habib 1996:100)

For my informant A, such an ‘invisible link’ to a sense of family and community is encapsulated in his understanding of the word ‘*commitments*.’ It took me a while to fully appreciate its multifold meaning and its almost sacred hold on A’s life . In a discussion about ‘commitments’, A had once turned the question on me. I had started to discuss my lack of a wife and a mortgage as the basis for my ‘uncommitted’ status when he interrupted me rather abruptly: ‘*What about your family, your people , Singapore ? Important no?*’. Despite his British passport , he then made plain his own sense of ‘*commitments*’:

‘ your commitment is (to) your ‘uur’⁶⁷ only....., your home place, (it is) what we all feel inside. I am here because Sri Lanka is not ok right now, not right for our people , but we are not in (the) wrong when we still feel for Sri Lanka...we are (in) wrong place but (we have the) right feeling Sri Lanka only is my story.... after all talking , LTT for me is still right because I know what is happening there .To know LTT is right , you must know Sri Lanka. Otherwise, you cannot see what really they are doing for Tamil people We only want to make (the) place right for our people. We are here now and here only we must do something....we cannot forget our place.’⁶⁸

A’s sense of his ‘*place*’ of loyalty is something echoed in Tamil cultural tradition where as put forward by Somasundaram , ‘a person's identity is defined to a large extent by their village or ‘*uur*’ of origin. The ‘*uur*’ more or less placed the person in a particular socio-cultural matrix’ and this was the ‘defining abode of his personal and cultural sense of commitment, belonging and loyalty.’ (Somasundaram 2007:2) The transnational nature and concerns of the Tamil community I engage with is based on

⁶⁷ At its simplest, the concept of ‘*ur*’ is often taken to refer to an ancestral village

⁶⁸ Interview with A: March 2007

very real relationships that flow from just such a conceptual way of being and of seeing the world . This was evident from the very beginning of my own fieldwork through the very makeup of the affective networks that I encountered. As put forward by Fog Olwig,

‘migrants did not only move as individuals, but just as significantly as members of a family network, and they were therefore not merely moving to various destinations, but also within family networks.’ (Fog Olwig 2003:800)

My field of study therefore represented ‘networks of global routes, defining a field of potential social, emotional and physical mobility for their members.’ (Hage 2005:468) Marriages for example were often arranged through such transnational networks and often enough, this ensured that the prospective bride or groom would often be someone still in Sri Lanka, preferably a distant member of an extended family or a relative of a close friend. Such arrangements were seen as helping another branch of an extended network gain a diasporic foothold. The continuing conflict also meant that many families already settled in the UK often played host to new arrivals – individuals linked to various social networks. For someone like A, this was not confined to just ‘hosting’ his own friends and family members, however broadly familial or friendship ties were defined, but also included individuals from various overlapping circles of relationship , for whom he functioned as a link and entry point into the Tamil diaspora world in London. A was thus a significant node in a wider transnational network, enabling others to leave Sri Lanka by providing financial and logistical support structures and also by acting as a constant source of aid and encouragement, helping people readjust, settle and establish themselves once they arrived in London.

Despite having crossed borders as refugees and now increasingly part of a settled community, Tamils in London do not have the easy luxury of a dichotomy: ‘*that side violence, this side peace.*’ The essence of being part of a conflict diaspora community is the fact that one seems to live in a metaphorical borderland region between war and peace. An appreciation of such a perspective may go some way towards helping us overcome an artificial analytical divide between ‘here and there’, ‘before and after.’ Diaspora Tamils tend not to make such distinctions when they think about their present reality, because as suggested above, often enough for many, ‘here’, the

destination ‘after’ the journey may be their new reality but family and friends and a wider sense of belonging and community are often enough still ‘there’ and therefore ‘there’ is still very much a place of the heart for a variety of affective, psychological, intellectual and existential reasons. The continuing nature of the conflict ensured that the effects and consequences of the war still play a significant part in their daily lives. In a very real sense, in Thompson’s words, ‘here bleeds into there andthe two sides often bleed together.’ (Thompson 2001 179-180)

Amitav Ghosh makes the point ‘that writing about families is one way of *not* writing about the nation.’ It is as he says, ‘a way of *displacing* the nation.’ (Ghosh in Ghosh and Chakrabarty 2002:147) For many in diaspora however, a political narrative of the nation is intimately bound up in versions of the family narrative. One would think that compared to such personal stories of intimate loss and pain, a ‘political’ and hence more abstract version of events would come across in a relatively ‘distanced’ and bloodless manner. The reality however seems to be that for many of my informants, politics is primarily the politics of a struggle for justice and dignity for the Tamil community and in this sense, the war is just a form of politics that kills people, a fatal intertwining of social forces with intimate personal lives. The conflict is thus a politics of the family writ large and hence, it is not something abstract but rather the meta-narrative for all other stories told.

3.8 Confronting The Existential In Diaspora Narratives

‘We have a country of words. Speak speak so we may know the end of this travel.’ (Darwish 2003: 11)

As Jackson suggests, ‘storytelling is usually prompted by some crisis’, and this in essence, is how I approach diaspora narratives, as stories of individuals and a community in crisis. (Jackson 2002: 18) Listening to narratives of pain and suffering has been a difficult part of my fieldwork but it has also been an exercise in humility which has left me with a profound sense of respect for the courage and resilience which many of my informants have displayed in very difficult circumstances. It is this resilience that also informs the content and meaning of a fundamental aspect of what, to my mind, such narratives are really about. Jackson makes the point that,

‘The critical question for the refugee, and for anyone writing about refugee experience, is an existential one: how can this immobilisation, reduction, and nullification of the person be resisted and transfigured, so that self-determination and power is regained.’ (Jackson 2002:105)

For Eastmond, ‘refugees are in the midst of the story they are telling, and uncertainty and liminality, rather than progression and conclusion, are the order of the day.’ (Eastmond 2007: 251) The fact that those in diaspora still grapple with similar existential questions is underlined by Colson, who argues, reflecting on Eastmond’s work that,

‘There is good evidence that the effects of the refugee experience are not transitory. Years later, many are still trying to deal with what happened, as Eastmond found Chilean exiles doing ten years after their settlement in the United States.’ (Colson 2007:330)

In a reference to his own life in exile, Rushdie captures a sense of the existential challenge of a diasporic life when he states: ‘I’m not who I was supposed to be. . . . I stepped out of the world.’ (Rushdie 1990:8) The effects of displacement are described as ‘not only a crisis of social meaning but also, for the individual, a crisis of identity’ in what is quite literally, a new world. (Eastmond in Colson 2007:330) As Schiffrin tells us, ‘we are continually locating and relocating ourselves, defining and re-defining ourselves and our worlds’ and to this end, identities, especially in diaspora in a time of conflict, are often a work in progress and perhaps always remain unfinished. (Schiffrin 1996: 200)⁶⁹ It is through the lens of violence, displacement, loss and the reality of an ongoing conflict and a society in crisis that Tamils face their own existential search for meaning. Personal narrative, as argued by Ochs and Capps, ‘is born out of experience’ and I have realized that it is only through such personal stories and viewpoints that I have been able to get a sense of the vulnerability that defines the lives of many diaspora Tamils as they seek to come to terms with the terms of their new world and what it means. (Ochs and Capps 1996:20)

⁶⁹ Gilroy (1993: xi) also argues that identities in diaspora ‘are always unfinished, always being remade.’

Clifford Geertz makes the point that the ‘only thing that humans cannot seem to live with is the idea that life might be utterly random, meaningless and absurd.’ (Geertz in Scheper-Hughes 2008: 44) Similarly, Summerfield observes that a sense of

‘meaninglessness leaves people feeling helpless and uncertain (because) at stake are the cultural and social forms which for a particular people define the known world and its values.’ (Summerfield 1996: 6)

The freedom, security and relative stability encountered in the ‘place of diaspora’ by many Tamils thus presents itself as an opportunity to reflect on past suffering and present deprivations, an opportunity to find and structure a sense of meaning in a time of crisis and transition. ‘Narrativization’ in this sense can thus also be seen ‘as a mode through which experience is given shape’ and as put forward by Fog-Olwig, diaspora narratives can be seen as a means by which those in diaspora attempt to engage with and articulate their ‘understanding of themselves and the lives they have lived.’ (Das 2003:301; Fog Olwig 2003:797) Taking seriously diaspora viewpoints and narratives therefore represents a process by which we too can seek to understand this search for meaning in a time of violence and trauma, which to my mind, defines the conflict diaspora condition. As presented by Brettell, the use of narratives enables us to ‘get beneath the abstractions of. . .theory’ in an effort to understand the realities of displacement ‘from the insider’s perspective.’ (Gmelch in Brettell 2003:26-27)

For Langer, such ‘life stories’ traumatised by violence, ‘are really death stories, which include the death of the self in ways we still need to interpret’, while Das speaks of victims of violence ‘carrying their own corpses within them wherever they went.’ (Langer 1996: 56; Das 1997: 87) Conceptualising the consciousness of victims of violence in such existential terms does seem to occur quite frequently in the broader literature⁷⁰ and to my mind, this perspective is key to understanding the conflict diaspora condition. For those who carry experiences of violence within them, it is clear that they too also carry an appreciation that surviving violence, is as Langer says, ‘an event to be endured, not a trauma to be healed.’ (Langer 1996:58) In giving voice to their experiences of suffering both past and present, diaspora Tamils have the potential to speak in a voice as Eliot says, ‘tongued with fire beyond the language of the living’ and it is this voice that any study of a conflict diaspora community should

⁷⁰ Green 1994; Zur 1998; Das 2003; Scarry 1985; Daniel 1996; Das 1996; Kumar 1999; Langer 1996

endeavour to capture. (Eliot 2001) Such narratives enable us to appreciate how such past experiences can create a continuum of suffering which crosses borders, 'carried forward and backwards in time.' (Das 2003:302)

In his work on the links between experience and the presentation of narrative, Stephen Crites makes the point that,

'Only the present exists..... a present of things past, a present of things present, a present of things future.... Inseparably joined in the present itself. Only from the standpoint of present experience could one speak of past and future.' (Crites 1971: 301)

I have not tried in any way to present a detailed chronological representation of life stories because that is not how individuals in diaspora seem to function or how they choose to represent themselves. Instead, ghosts from the past seem to wander freely, informing present attitudes, past reflections and aspirations for the future. Chronology is of course present but often ignored but rather than a sense of confusion, I believe that it is the emotional, psychological and existential connections revealed as boundaries of time and space are transgressed that gives voice to the reality of the conflict diaspora condition. In seeking to understand the nature of such lives, it is essential therefore to grasp the fact that the things that matter don't happen at the level of chronology.

Langer gives a particular insight into such existential suffering that lingers on for survivors of violence, arguing that that we need to challenge our normal assumptions that 'survivors.... experience time only chronologically, so that the present appears to follow the past and precede the future.' Instead, he maintains that survivor accounts of trauma and suffering involve 'a mental witness rather than a temporal one', one who is quite literally 'out of time' as he or she tells the story. He explains this by referring to the fact that for many such individuals, 'time is durational as well as chronological, and that durational time is experienced continuously, not sequentially as a memory from which one can be liberated.' (Langer 1996:55) For those who have suffered such traumatic incidents, the experience is 'not part of (their) historical past, but of (the) durational present, and as such is both unforgotten and unforgettable.' (Langer 1996: 58)

Jackson argues that perhaps when considering the lives of the displaced, what is definitive 'is the fact that he or she has suffered more deeply and perhaps irreversibly than most' and to my mind, such suffering, both past and present, is fundamentally an existential issue. (Jackson 2002:81) In much of the literature, it is this acknowledgement of and engagement with an existential state of crisis in the diaspora condition that seems to be missing. As I try to link my focus on the Tamil diaspora with the conflict in Sri Lanka, it becomes clear to me that for many of my informants, the Sri Lanka they have 'left behind', a Sri Lanka that they still nonetheless 'live within', is a place defined by the consequences of oppression, violence and conflict, a conflict that they themselves still feel presently engaged in and hence, it is a conflict that informs their sense of self on various levels.

*'Every-time I call my mother... she always asks what time is it. Its (been) many years now already but still she cannot understand how time difference works. I will call in the early morning UK time before I go to work, for her lunchtime in Sri Lanka and she will ask me if I have had lunch... It is a small thing but for me, that is my life...different time, different place.... Because of everything happening (in Sri Lanka), I am here... where my mother also cannot understand the time because my life now is not real time... not Sri Lanka time, for me now is 'foreign time' and for everybody, this is difficult time ... Once upon a time, (the) clock⁷¹ was normal for our family. Now we have my brother in Canada time, my London time, my mother still Sri Lanka time. Everything has changed for us... For me, maybe one day we can all be 'one time' people again ...same place, same time... and a good time for Sri Lanka also ... but that will be Eelam time...We are fighting not only for our place ... but for our correct time also but also we are remembering all the time we have lost.'*⁷²

Nordstrom observes that 'war is one of those curious phenomena that is inherently defined. People quite simply know what war is.'(Nordstrom 1998:148) The transformative effects and consequence of war and displacement on diaspora consciousness however is something that is often overlooked and under-analysed in diaspora theory and this needs to be reconsidered. For Hage, 'despite its obviousness', the importance of interrogating different conceptualisations of the 'viable self and its analytical consequences is nowhere near emphasized or analytically exploited enough... in migration and diasporic studies.' (Hage 2005:472) My study of the

⁷¹ A detail from the narrative was the fact that despite internal displacement herself, PAU's mother had managed to hold on to an old clock which had always been part of their family life. For PAU, this clock which still informed his mother's life, was also a symbol of the time with her that he had lost because of his departure from Sri Lanka

⁷² Interview with PAU: January 2008

Tamil diaspora is thus an attempt to understand just such narratives and perceptions of the self in a time of crisis and transition. Jackson makes the point that ‘we tell ourselves stories in order to live’ and what I argue following Atkinson, is that we also tell ourselves stories in order to interpret and get a sense of who we are and as a means for ‘discovering how we construct our lives.’ (Didion in Jackson 2002:15; Atkinson 2002:121;123)

The journey into diaspora in a time of conflict is an emotional and existential journey as much as it is a physical one and as such, it is a process that affects individuals and communities at an ontological level as it is a journey whose destination is not simply defined in spatial terms. It is my belief that such individuals often inhabit the discourse of conflict and displacement as ‘metaphors, tropes and symbols but rarely as historically recognised producers of critical discourses themselves.’ (Kaplan 1996:2) This has often been the case as Kaplan argues, for many marginalised groups and my work is an effort to bring an interrogation of the consciousness of one such community, center stage as it were, in the belief that it is the perspective of those on the ground who are best placed to guide us in our analysis of their lives and motivations in *‘foreign time’*.

‘you can never have a holiday from this place (in diaspora)... you are always here, always in the head is that thinking only.... I am Sri Lanka Tamil but not in Sri Lanka...so like that, who I am? even I go back to Sri Lanka now, I know so much has changed ... but really I also have changed.... now I really know the suffering.’⁷³

⁷³ ibid

Chapter Four: Tiger Tiger, Burning Bright: Tamil Diaspora Perceptions of the Narrative of Conflict

4.1 The Tamil Question

**In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
(Blake 2004:20)**

**‘Our lives teach us who we are.’
(Rushdie 1992: 414)**

In a reworking of a now almost universally accepted idea that 'transnational politics has opened spaces for participation of previously marginalized groups', it also seems to me that transnational diasporic spaces have also opened up mental spaces, enabling those same marginalized groups to not just approach politics, but also to see themselves and politics differently. (Itzigsohn 2000: 1146) My argument here is that rather than just knee-jerk partisan support for co-ethnic belligerents in a civil war framed solely along ethnic lines, diaspora support for the LTTE does by its nature, speak of a very particular consciousness and a level of critical engagement with political narratives which seek to engage with a wider criticism of a society left behind.

Gilroy contrasts the nature of what he terms 'kinetic war' (where you kill people and break their stuff) with the complexities of the information war, the need to make sure that your representation of the conflict narrative wins out over that of your opponent. (Gilroy 2010) In diaspora circles, the discourse and narrative of conflict is very much a space in itself. Freed from the immediate oppressive gravity of living in a state of threat, diaspora Tamils care passionately about the 'battleground and contested space' of such narratives because it is a discourse that defines them. As argued by Bhatia, 'the purpose of the discursive conflict is to attain a victory of interpretation and ensure that a particular viewpoint triumphs.' In the Sri Lankan case just as much as in the 'Global War on Terror', the original focus of Bhatia's work, the parties in conflict are indeed 'engaged in a physical war...but also in a dispute over discourse.' (Bhatia 2005:6-7) In a time of war, as the official narrative and discourse of conflict is

engendered and controlled by the state, the role of the diaspora takes on an interpretive role. Linked to networks of knowledge and experience within the war zones, diaspora sentiment and activism has done much to bring attention to the Tamil cause and the plight of those left behind. When seeking to appreciate the various dimensions of this narrative of conflict, the presence of the diaspora can be crucial in making us alive to the ‘alternative discourses of emotivity (that) co-exist in particular socio-historical settings.’ (Svašek and Skrbiš 2007:379)

‘Here we are having safe life but still we care, still we support [LTTE]Of course nobody wants war. Tamil people in Sri Lanka, Tamil people in Europe, Canada... we did not choose war but we have no choice. Did America people choose war with Bin Laden? How come their war is ok? Bin Laden kill America people in 9/11. Government is killing Tamil people everyday for long time. Just like American people, Tamil people also have a war to stop terror...our war (on terror) is to fight government terror. We don't have 9/11, we have 999 everyday. ⁷⁴ For us this is everyday emergency because everyday Tamil people is being killed and this is not accident...why I am here (in London) is also not accident.... this (is) already long-time story and this story only we must tell. ⁷⁵

Malkki argues that the ‘involuntary or forced movements of people are always only one aspect of much larger constellations of socio-political and cultural processes and practices.’ The politics of displacement therefore references a variety of themes and processes such as,

‘nationalism and racism, state practices of violence and war, censorship and silencing, human rights and challenges to state sovereignty... citizenship and cultural or religious identities.’

In the case of conflict diasporas, the central determinant in their displacement is the nature, cause and propagation of conflict within a particular society at a particular point in time. The root causes of conflict therefore represent just such a ‘relevant context of human displacement’ and it is such a litany of root causes manifested as a continuum of causation, effect and consequence that has informed and continues to inform the displacement of many Tamils. (Malkki 1995b: 496) This context is an important part of diaspora narratives primarily because it is this background information that plays a significant part in how they frame their understanding of the

⁷⁴ The telephone number 999 is the British access code for the emergency services

⁷⁵ Interview with VIJ: May 2007

conflict 'left behind' and their own reasons for being in diaspora. It is also clear that such conflict and the narratives around it are never actually 'left behind.'

*Of course for me here, life is better. Life is peaceful. Who wants to kill me here? In Sri Lanka we are not rich people. Now here, everything I can buy... not everything maybe but slowly, slowly. ... If you are working hard, you can be anything you want... But this is not our place...it is good place but not our place. I am happy here but I still have my place and that place (is) always Sri Lanka only.... (You mean your hometown?) Not just my town, I am talking about my Sri Lanka ...that is my place only ... for me, Sri Lanka must have place for Tamil people also but our people must have power also, cannot only be Sri Lanka for Sinhala people only. That is now Sri Lanka story but that is not real Sri Lanka. (What is real Sri Lanka?)... Sri Lanka must be good place for all people, never-mind Tamil, Sinhala... When that can change, that will be real Sri Lanka.'*⁷⁶

*'I was watching news one time.... about all Tamil people, running, running from the fighting. All of them also watching and saying how sad, how sad for this people'⁷⁷ and I am thinking this is not other people, this is me... You see all this Tamil people, no home, no food and yes, very sad. But for me, it is like watching the video camera... (it was like watching a video of myself, of my own experiences) That people on TV... that people is not just my people only... that people, yesterday was me only...my mother, my father...that was my life and still that is my life. (That experience will always be a part of me). But yesterday, today, tomorrow, our Tamil people will suffer.. this story you must know, then you will understand...'*⁷⁸

The voices from the diaspora makes us alive to the fact that just like any other faction involved in conflict, those in diaspora also have their own particular point of view. When discussing issues surrounding the conflict in general, the interpretation of events is one fraught with various levels of meaning. From the birth of independence, to the growing effects of Sinhala ethno nationalism, the corresponding rise of Tamil nationalism, the events of Black July in 1983, the drift into civil war and through the various periods of conflict over the next two decades and more between the LTTE and the state, what is notable is that the nature of fact and truth has become both contingent and absolute amongst many in the diaspora. Contingent because meaning is generally dependent on where you stand on the issue of Tamil self determination and support for the LTTE and absolute because most Tamils are convinced that their point of view is correct, born out of a deeper understanding of 'the way Sri Lanka is' and an expressed consensus amongst many that 'you cannot believe what government

⁷⁶ Interview with GCB: April 2007

⁷⁷ He was talking about watching the news with his non-Tamil work colleagues in a restaurant kitchen.

⁷⁸ Interview with FS: May 2007

says.’⁷⁹ As Fuglerud has also found in his work with the Tamil diaspora in Norway, such a discursive landscape means that,

‘We enter a period in tamil history where any comment becomes controversial to the people who lived through it. There are no ‘facts’... only an ongoing controversy of what really happened and who did what and why.’ (Fuglerud 1999:34)

‘Sri Lanka is very sick...long time is this sickness. So LTTE for us is like medicine. sometimes medicine is bitter and the taste is bad but slowly you get better. That only is my hope. ...slowly with LTT, things will get better but yes, first is bitter (time) ...that only is war. Maybe this is not best medicine but what else we have...cannot always wait for best medicine only. ...don’t take any medicine, sure things will get worse.’⁸⁰

‘LTT is not from the biscuit tin only. If no Sri Lanka (history) like this, then no LTTE like this also. But this is the way for Sri Lanka only so Prabhakaran only is our answer.’⁸¹

‘Everybody will say (that) Prabhakaran is our ‘nayagan.’⁸² Yes, now for us, he is the hero... But why we have LTT? Why we have Prabhakaran? Who only made (created) this ‘nayagan’ for us? All these politicians only I say help to make LTT..... You bring Mandela here, LTT can stop..... But always we have different type of politicians and see what all they are doing, not just to Tamil people, see what all they are doing to Sri Lanka. That is why LTT is there.’⁸³

Considering the points of view put forward above by some of my informants and their conceptualisation of a state of crisis which depicts the LTTE as the answer, we are led directly to ask, ‘what is the question?’. For many, the question posed is an indictment of the postcolonial state and its treatment of the Tamil people.

‘I always say politics is talk only. But in Sri Lanka politics is also like magic. One minute, house is there. Next minute house is gone. One minute got Tamil people, than

⁷⁹ This viewpoint is culled from numerous personal interviews. While many are willing to accept the fact that LTTE propaganda may also be less than accurate, this does not alter their core belief that the government is not to be trusted and as such, any pronouncements from the international community which stem from government sources are also suspect.

⁸⁰ Interview with JEG: May 2007

⁸¹ Conversation with VIJ: May 2007

⁸² ‘Nayagan’ means ‘the hero’ or ‘the leader’. The description was possibly used for my benefit because we were earlier discussing a 1987 Tamil film of the same name. The film depicts the life of Varadarajan Mudaliar, a Bombay underworld figure in the 1980s of Tamil descent who was respected by large sections of the Tamil community in Bombay because he was seen as standing up for the rights of the Tamil minority in the slums and in the main, the dramatization of his life presents him as a sort of ‘Robin Hood’ figure, driven to violence and criminality by discrimination and the corruption of the political and economic system.

⁸³ Interview with NEW: June 2007

*suddenly all Tamil people have to run. Sri Lanka used to be green country, now I think it is red country. Everywhere got blood... Sri Lanka-style magic show. Where got Tamil people, one day like magic, will change... then only Sinhala people will be there... (But all this is because the government is fighting the Tigers right?) That is because Tigers don't like this magic show. All Tamil people don't like this magic show. One day, they (the government) will say Sri Lanka always only Sinhala people. That they will call peace but that day, you will find no Tamil people.... That is why Tigers is fighting to stop this magic.. and Government is doing more magic, this only is their politics. Black magic politics, always killing people only... I am here because of that black magic... Tigers is fighting to stop this magic so more people like me don't disappear... You want to know Sri Lanka, you must learn to see this magic show.'*⁸⁴

The specific 'narrative of conflict' that I will refer to in this chapter is first and foremost a 'literature' made up of the experiences, opinions and perceptions of Tamils, narratives that represent a colloquial, grass roots commentary on the political history of the conflict as experienced and understood by many in the diaspora. It is a record of a community's own lived experience of the crisis and conflict, which worked its way from the official structures of governance, through the major currents which have defined the history of post colonial Sri Lanka, down to the personal lives of individuals on the ground. As suggested by my informant above, such narratives present a perception that echoes Clausewitz's famous dictum that 'war is a continuation of politics by other means' or as my informant would have it, war is politics by '*killing people only.*' (Clauswitz 1997:22) It speaks of a community's own understanding and perception of the politics of the civil war; its etiology, consequences and effects and for many Tamils, it is an indictment of the Sri Lankan state and the reason why there exists a groundswell of diaspora support for the LTTE.

Korf has stated his belief that 'the global discourse on terrorism' after September 11' has 'started to overshadow the Tamil nationalist discourses' within the diaspora. (Korf 2006:287-8) According to my own research however, the fact of the matter seems to be that the question of whether the LTTE is deemed to be a terrorist group by the international community or even the British government, has not really impacted on actual support for the LTTE, rather it may even have strengthened such support. It is a curious thing in civil war scholarship that it often comes across that an understanding of a specific conflict by outside observers is deemed to be the 'correct'

⁸⁴ Interview with ARN: July 2008

interpretation of event and meaning, which then needs to be explained to those most affected by the conflict. Surveying the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, Wilmer notes that, 'war was neither experienced nor understood by people who enacted and survived it.... in the same way it was portrayed in academic and policy discourses.' This leads him to pose the question if, 'the way intellectuals, policy makers, the media... understand war (is) grossly at odds with the lived reality of war?' (Wilmer 2003: 225)

Kleinman et al tell us that, 'how we 'picture' social suffering becomes that experience' and specifically when we study conflict diaspora communities, it is imperative that we begin from their own world view, by situating their understanding of and response to conflict processes within the political history of the conflict that has affected them and within the terrain of their own experiences and perceptions of such conflict. (Kleinman et al 1996: xiii) My research leads me to believe that much of what occurs in conflict and how it is perceived, is mediated by the experience of violence, loss and suffering that many have suffered and continue to suffer, experiences which inform their current evaluative decision making processes with regards to how they view the conflict as a whole. This seems to me as I emerge from my period of fieldwork, to be both an obvious statement and one not often given due consideration within the mainstream academic literature on the nature and meaning of 'long distance nationalism' within a conflict diaspora community.

In this chapter, my focus is on this disjuncture between the views of mainstream commentators and a significant section of the Tamil diaspora regarding the basis of their support for the LTTE. It is a study of how diaspora members perceive and make sense of an ongoing subjective relationship with a particular understanding of the narrative of conflict, a journey into 'the kinds of background information.... that sometimes have been considered.... beyond the scope of study.' (Malkki 1995b: 496) Diaspora support for the LTTE in this regard therefore is a question posed and negotiated rather than a tautological description of the diaspora condition. Taking a cue from Keen's 'nearly said' Shakespearean dictums, one can argue that to be or not to be a supporter of the LTTE is indeed the question faced. (Keen 2008: 72) This would locate diaspora consciousness as a 'response', not only to specific instances of a developing 'continuum of violence', which defined their life experiences in a

homeland left behind but also enable us to see how such experiences inform wider perceptions of more historicized and current political narratives of violence and conflict. (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004:1)

My contention is that far from essentializing the diaspora condition, such a thesis actually invites us to interrogate and appreciate the nature and context of these perceptions and how they may inform both diaspora consciousness and the nature of support for the armed struggle waged by the LTTE. A key focus of my work therefore is the need to capture and represent this ‘insider view’, an emic rather than an etic approach to diaspora perceptions, what Ferraro describes as an approach which seeks to take as its primary focus ‘the categories, concepts, and perceptions of the people being studied.’ As he argues,

‘Because human behaviour stems from the way people perceive and classify the world around themthe only legitimate strategy is the emic, or insider, approach.’ (Ferraro 2006: 17)

In similar terms, as told to me by two of my own informants, it is a question of listening to the ‘*music*’ and ‘*stories*’ that define the diaspora condition.

‘I see all the killing.... Tamil people dying and it is not my people only dying, my home place also is dying. Sinhala people, Tamil people, Sri Lanka...all is dying. That is what I am feeling now.... Once upon a time, Sri Lanka was my whole world only. I was born there, like my father and my grandfather and before also all the same (my ancestors). I did my schooling there, got married there. My first child was born there. Like that only, always I will be for Sri Lanka. Now I am here (UK), here we can go other places, see other places.. I am thinking to go live in Canada, maybe Australia.. but those days, for us, not like this.You born (in) Sri Lanka, you live (in) Sri Lanka, you die (in) Sri Lanka. Only Sri Lanka you will see... Now I am here, this is not my choice...this is government choice only. It is their fault only.... Killing my life but they will say it is our fault also. Tamil people are the trouble people... Like this, how is (it) fair? Like this, they can push me out but still I am Sri Lankan. Still I have Tamil music only, not English music, not baila⁸⁵ music... their music also I don’t want...that music I can put off because I know what is the real music for me. Like that also, all the noise from government is not true ... I know what is the true thing.’⁸⁶

‘Do you know all our stories? This is not just like magazine, not like newspaper. We all have pain stories. (stories of pain) This is not like just reading newspaper only....

⁸⁵ ‘Baila’ is a popular form of music predominantly performed in Sinhala. My informant’s reference to it is to make the point that the music of his heart as it were, is Tamil

⁸⁶ Interview with TT: May 2007

*Our stories (are) not in books. Here, only you must listen. This is like Eelam library for you. ...but no reading, just listen... All our stories, that is reason for Eelam'*⁸⁷

Wars 'do not just happen' (Munck 2008:11) Conflict and violence, as Keen reminds us, never appear out of nowhere. (Keen 2001:2) In her work on the violence of the Soweto riots, Pohlandt- McCormick argues that conceptualising the riots as a 'turning point inadvertently shifted analysis and understanding toward a chronology that began with that day, as if there had not been much to prepare for it.' (Pohlandt-McCormick 2000: 28) The crux of such an argument reminds us that well before the focus of the world and the academic community is aroused by events of violence such as those of June 1976 in South Africa or July 1983 in Sri Lanka, 'violence is already present in the social order.' (Martin-Baro in Manz 2008: 161) The relevance of this point for Sri Lanka is underlined by Kapferer who reminds us that, 'the situation of violence has steadily grown particularly since Independence in 1947.' (Kapferer 2001:33) Kapferer speaks of a society in crisis and a transition from peace to war according to Keen should encourage us to consider what both have in common with each other. (Keen 2001:2) It is often possible to trace a 'continuum of violence' where increasing levels of oppression and exploitation ensure that an institutionalised system of structural violence becomes the norm, even in times of so called peace.

One continuity between war and 'peace' in Sri Lanka has been the gradual political disenfranchisement of the Tamil community. (De Votta 2004, Wilson 2000, Tambiah 1986) In his seminal text, Sen argues that 'the violation of freedom results directly from a denial of political and civil liberties by authoritarian regimes and from imposed restrictions on the freedom to participate in the social, political and economic life of the community.' Sen presents a list of 'major sources of unfreedom', which include 'poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states.' (Sen 2000:4; 3) I draw attention to Sen's work because besides the violence and insecurity caused by conflict, what was also often brought up in interviews was a feeling that to be Tamil, as one of my informants put it, is to live a '*life with too too many full stops and question marks*', limitations which

⁸⁷ Interview with JEG: May 2007

prevented them from living lives of freedom and peaceful dignity and in many instances, such *'full stops'* could also bring *'your life to (a) full stop.'*⁸⁸

For many, it was and still is their frustration at seeing moderate Tamil political leaders unable to command political capital and influence in the centre, resulting in a failure to effectively represent and protect the interests of the Tamil community, that drives them into the mindset of the militants. The institutional decay of political institutions, the marginalization of the rule of law, the effects of ethnic outbidding on ethnic tensions within the political system and the rising levels of anti-Tamil state sponsored violence, all contributed to a situation where conflict became increasingly endemic within society and a culture of violence was brought home to the civilian population, brutalizing and transforming much of the socio-political landscape.⁸⁹ (DeVotta 2004, Wilson 2000, Tambiah 1986, Swamy 2002, Goodhand 2001)

*'Do we wait another 50 years or do we fight and continue to fight. Do you know our history? All this time our boys (Tigers) have been fighting.... but first, for long time, we were just dying quietly.... that is the real story I think. (But do you not think the government has tried over the years to address the grievances of the Tamil people?) How to trust government? They are all crooks ... Chandrika⁹⁰ and now Rajapaksa⁹¹ ... those two are real butchers but every government had its share of crooks and butchers. We, all of our Sri Lankan people in fact have needed a statesman – like your Lee Kuan Yew fellow⁹² ... People used to say Sri Lanka would be like Singapore... that was 30 years ago, I am still waiting. Maybe your Tamil people will start a war also, then we can be like Singapore but for that to happen, you will first need to borrow our good for nothing, bloodthirsty Sinhala politicians... I am old enough to remember all the big Tamil politicians of those days. All of them were given the run around by those Sinhala bastards. That is why the LTT has support... Would we have even got this far without the Tigers?'*⁹³

'What is happening ...this is not terrorist problem. How can people say like this? For government, this is really Tamil problem.... that you must understand, whatever we do, government will say this is 'terrorist' problem We are Sri Lankan people also, so where is law for Tamil people? Where is (the) law in our place when soldiers come? Where is police to protect us... if soldiers can kill our people.... you

⁸⁸ Conversation with JEG: May 2007

⁸⁹ The politics of discrimination, exclusion and oppression against the Tamil community inevitably also gave rise to the sense of an 'existential threat' which I address in Chapter 6

⁹⁰ Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga was the leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the 4th executive president of Sri Lanka, serving from November 1994 to November 2005.

⁹¹ Mahendra Rajapaksa is the current executive president of Sri Lanka, a post he has held since 2005

⁹² Lee Kuan Yew was the first prime minister of independent Singapore, serving from 1959-1990 and credited as being the driving force behind Singapore's economic success

⁹³ Interview with MRP: October 2007

*must be knowing this, the soldiers say everybody is terrorist and like that nobody is safe anymore because everybody is terrorist only. Why not say all Tamil people can be killed? That is what actually they are doing. That is the war they are having.... Not terrorist problem, it is 'Tamil problem' only... Like that, over there now, how to survive? Always got worry, always scared and what is the reason ... because you are Tamil only.'*⁹⁴

The 'Tamil Question' has long been the stumbling block in the nation-building project of postcolonial Sri Lanka and it is imperative that we realise that the 'Tamil Question' has also always been the central question for those in diaspora, for the genesis of the Tamil diaspora is the failure of the state to answer the 'Tamil Question.' A significant aspect of this chapter is a belief stated by Anthony Giddens that 'a person's identity' is significantly informed by 'the capacity to keep a particular narrative going.' (Giddens 1991:54) Living in diaspora is a dynamic experience and for most of my informants, responding intellectually, psychologically and emotionally to events past and present in Sri Lanka is a process that constantly involves a dialogue with their own sense of place in a conflict narrative that both involves and overwhelms them. It is a struggle to make sense of their own biographies, both as individuals and as a community, in an effort to maintain their own subjective version of an abiding⁹⁵ sense of being part of a wider Tamil community affected by violence and conflict. This struggle is a function of both structure and agency for as Giddens says, 'each of us not only 'has', but lives a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information.' (Giddens 1991:14) It is how we interpret that information that defines our sense of being and for conflict diaspora members, it is how they internalise and make sense of the narrative of conflict that is part of that process of becoming.

For many Tamils, being in diaspora is a time and space where they come to terms with what it is to be Tamil, where as Ghorashi so perceptively states in her analysis of life in exile, 'time and space become multidimensional.' (Ghorashi 2003:8) The strength and significance of such narratives is underlined by Vigh who argues that 'it is when people find themselves ruined, uprooted, mutilated and their routines of life upset that they ask themselves why and how this has come about.' (Vigh 2008:16)

⁹⁴ Interview with AGCS: July 2007

⁹⁵ I take this idea from Ismail (2005: xxx), who sees abiding by Sri Lanka as displaying a 'commitment to attending to its concerns, to intervening within its debates', 'to display patience, to stay with it, endure it, work with it.'

4.2 The Narrative of Conflict as an Anti-Colonial Narrative

**‘In Sri Lanka history is never distant or past but present and immediate.’
(Kapferer 1988: 50)**

‘A social movement is never simply about its object but is always about the deepest identities of the participants’ (Breines 1989:18)

The postcolonial period in Sri Lanka’s history has been portrayed as one where a ‘nationalism of liberation turned into a nationalism of domination.’ (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991:46). For many Tamils, postcolonial politics is a narrative of the rise of Sinhala majoritarian ethno-nationalist rule and the subjugation of the Tamil ‘nation’ by an increasingly militarised mode of governance. Much of the argument against the state and in favour of the LTTE is made within a discourse that sees the oppression and violence against the Tamil people as an ongoing attempt at ‘internal colonialism’ by the Sinhala dominated central state. (Hechter 1975) For many diaspora Tamils, the critical history of a struggle for social, economic and political rights is missing from contemporary accounts and analysis of the conflict. In various reports and accounts in the mainstream media, the killings and suicide bombings committed by the militant LTTE often lead the story. While allegations of government atrocities and ill treatment of civilians also do figure from time to time, what is almost always missing is a comprehensive etiology of the conflict. While such a limited presentation of events, focused on the here and now of contemporary blood and gore is part and parcel of the nature of information flows and news reporting from conflict zones, this is a key problem in trying to engender understanding of and support for the Tamil cause. As most of the Tamils I encountered argue, the legitimacy of the Tamil struggle can only be truly appreciated if one conceptualises the political history of Sri Lanka as a record of Tamil marginalization, oppression and victimization by the state, issues which never fail to reveal themselves in diaspora narratives, embedded in personal accounts of cause, effect, consequence and reflection:

‘The problem is not Tigers only...you need (the) right focus, (the) right picture - every time, we are hearing (that the) Tigers, (are) terrorists only. Long time already, if you see the history, the problem is (the) government. It is all politics only. For me, first is

*the political problem, than only Tigers come. Tigers first are not the problem. You cannot ask first about Tigers, ask first about Sri Lanka (n) politics only'*⁹⁶

'I am sure all these boys have been telling you our point of view but take with you one thought from an old man. I have been watching my country for many years now and I am one of those people who remember the change. That is the real suffering.... seeing the change. But here you must want to talk history with me. All this is our history.... do you know the changes? The change from people being friendly to always being scared and suspicious, then security checks and police and army everywhere. That change and what was before and why it changedthat is never part of the story...all it says at the end of these reports is you know that usual bit.... 'Tamil Tiger rebels have been fighting the government for 30 plus years' ... but are our people mad? Do we like to live in the jungles and fight all the time? Ask your English friends why we are fighting.... will they know the history? Have you ever seen a newspaper report mention Chelvanayakam for instance? Do you know Chelvanayakam?'⁹⁷ How many people even remember that Bandaranaike⁹⁸ started all this?'⁹⁹

It has been a significant aspect of my interaction with various members of the Tamil diaspora in London that *'talking history'* has always managed to *'intrude'* into more personal narratives. The discussions I encountered about the political history of Sri Lanka varied in terms of levels of coherence and accuracy but it is worthy of note that almost everybody interviewed had a *'take'* on the historical record, forcing me to appreciate just how relevant such perceptions of history are to a study of diaspora consciousness.

A brief review of the historical foundations of such perceptions therefore is of relevance as it forms a background against which much of the narrative of conflict is understood and internalised. For many Tamils, the *'colonizing'* impulse and logic of the Sinhalese dominated government can be traced back to the ethno-nationalist agenda evident in the election campaign of 1956 and the issues surrounding the eventual implementation of the Official Language Act of 1956, an act which served to *'enhance the majority community's socio-economic possibilities, while imposing relative deprivation on the minorities... a radical change in policy implemented by the Sinhalese for the benefit of the Sinhalese'* (De Votta 2004: 73) As argued by

⁹⁶ Interview with JEG: May 2007

⁹⁷ I was pleased to be able to say that I did indeed know of Mr Chelvanayakam and his role in the forming of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the creation of the Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976, which I discuss below

⁹⁸ Solomon Bandaranaike became prime minister of Sri Lanka in 1956 on a Sinhala nationalist platform.

⁹⁹ Interview with MRW: Oct 2007

Nithiyanandam, 'what was emerging was an exclusive right for the Sinhala–Buddhist in the island and an implied tolerance of others only as subordinate and secondary', a state of affairs which has underlined a sense of vulnerability amongst Tamils.

(Nithiyanandam 2001:38)

The thrust of such legislation was challenged by Tamil political leaders of the time, who labelled such policies as an 'attempt at genocide' and warned that ' a long suffering and indulgent people will..... rise in resistance.' (Ponanbalam cited in De Votta 2004:57) The threat for these early Tamil political leaders was a belief that their distinct culture was in danger of being assimilated into the dominant Sinhala culture and that their rights as full and equal citizens were being undermined by policies that institutionalized Sri Lanka as 'Sihadipa' (the island of the Sinhalese), resulting in economic and social opportunities for Tamils being curtailed by pro-Sinhalese affirmative action policies in higher education, public sector employment and in economic development initiatives. (De Silva & De Silva 1984, De Votta 2004, Wilson 2000, Tambiah 1986) Tamil leaders conceptualised such policies as 're-colonization' and put opposing Tamil sentiments in trenchant and vivid terms:

'Is this...that great freedom that the Tamils...fought for with the Sinhalese to obtain, to wrench, from the British? That from white masters we are to turn to a lot of brown masters, from masters who crossed seas...to an indigenous brand of masters permanently settled in this country? (Ponanbalam cited in De Votta 2004: 76)

Armed conflict in pursuit of Tamil self-determination however did not begin until the very late 1970s. The interim period saw a series of peaceful protests and demonstrations by the Tamil community. Classed as satyagrah¹⁰⁰ movements, these efforts to hold the state to account were often met with violence. Nadarajah & Vimalarajah present Sri Lanka's postcolonial history as,

'punctuated by bouts of annihilatory violence... directed against the Tamils in 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983, in which thousands were massacred, property was destroyed, and hundreds of thousands made refugees.' (Nadarajah & Vimalarajah 2008:14)

¹⁰⁰ Sanskrit term for a philosophy and practice of nonviolent resistance developed by Gandhi as a form of peaceful disobedience during the struggle for Indian Independence

Sangarasivam implicates the state for these acts of violence arguing that ‘the efforts of Tamil political parties to negotiate a parity of status for the Tamil people’ were often met with riots that were in fact organized ‘state-sponsored violence.’ (Sangarasivam 2001:96; see also Sivanandan & Waters 1984) Against this backdrop, an important staging post for the Tamil community is the democratically ratified and accepted Vaddukoddai Resolution, a political document which first states in concrete terms the demand for an independent state of Eelam. It was unanimously adopted at the First National Convention of the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) on 14th May 1976. The TULF was an ‘umbrella’ party formed to unite all the major Tamil political parties of the time. In the 1977 general election, the party’s manifesto declared that should it get a mandate from the Tamil people, it would proceed ‘to claim the right to self-determination... and the expression of the sovereignty of the Tamil nation.’ The TULF won 18 out of the 24 seats it contested, including all 14 seats in the Northern Province, the traditional homeland of the Tamil people. By winning an overwhelming majority of the popular vote among Tamils, the TULF believed that it had secured a mandate from the Tamil people to establish the state of Tamil Eelam. (Wilson 2000:114; see also Swamy 2002: 32-5)

One of the claims made by the resolution underlined the conceptualisation of the Tamil struggle as a struggle against colonialism, presenting the argument that the nature of governance in Sri Lanka had made,

‘the Tamils a slave nation ruled over by the new colonial masters... who are using the power they have wrongly usurped to deprive the Tamil nation of its territory, language, citizenship, economic life opportunities of employment and education thereby destroying all the attributes of nationhood of the Tamil people’ (Vaddukoddai Resolution cited in SATP 2001)

The Vaddukoddai Resolution can be seen as the last opportunity presented to the state by moderate Tamil political leaders to address the grievances felt by the Tamil community along constitutional means. The failure of the state to address such demands can thus be seen as the point where ‘Tamil parliamentary politics ceased and Tamil civilian political parties became irrelevant, giving way to the militants.’

(Wilson 2000:115) Tamils were gradually alienated from constitutional electoral politics and ‘the state.... did little to induce the Tamils back into the political arena.’

As put forward by Yiftachel & Ghanem, ‘from 1978 until 2001, the majority of Tamils boycotted the elections and only rarely participated in other state affairs.’ (Yiftachel & Ghanem 2004: 659) The rise of Tamil militancy, exemplified by the LTTE therefore is often cast in terms of an action of last resort. As early as 1973, in the face of persistent government intransigence, the newly formed TULF had posed the foundations of just such an act of last resort. Though not advocating violent struggle itself, the TULF had posed the question:

‘What is the alternative to a nation that lies helpless as it is being assaulted, looted and killed by hooligans instigated by the ruling race and by the security forces of the state?’ (Ponnambalam 1983:192)

With the idea of self-determination steadily gaining ground, the LTTE and other Tamil militant organisations were able to present armed insurrection as the only plausible way for just such a outcome to be realised in the face of an imperious and oppressive state. The anti-Tamil riots of July 1983 brought the issue of Tamil vulnerability to the fore. (See Chandrakanthan in Wilson 2000: 160-1; Sivanandan & Waters 1984; Piyadasa 1984) Tambiah writes of a situation where Sinhalese rioters were accompanied and directed by police while carrying voter lists which designated the addresses of Tamil owned houses and businesses, ‘a complete breakdown of law and order...caused as much by the active participation or passive encouragement of the ultimate guardians of law and order – the police and the army.’ (Tambiah 1986:24 see also Tambiah 1992:73) The tension between the state and the Tamil community had already been highlighted by a provocative interview just a week before the riots, when speaking about his determination to fight the ‘terrorist’ problem, ‘without any quarter being given’, the then President, J.R. Jayawardene had stated,

‘I am not worried about the opinion of the Jaffna (Tamil) people... now we cannot think of them, not about their lives or their opinion...Really if I starve the Tamils out, the Sinhala people will be happy.’ (Jayawardene 1983)

It was also significant as Tambiah notes, that ‘in the first days after the holocaust, when the Tamil refugees remained in the camps, neither the President, the Cabinet, nor even a single Sinhalese politician visited them to commiserate.... or to promise relief and rehabilitation.’ (Tambiah 1986: 27) The massacre of Tamils and the response or even collusion of the government in the violence raised the level of moral

outrage amongst the Tamil community. Levels of support and emotional engagement within the Tamil community for the pursuit of an independent homeland via armed insurrection increased dramatically, with all the various Tamil rebel groups benefiting greatly from a large influx of recruits. (Swamy 2002:96-7; 104-5) While they were at this time still many Tamil leaders who opposed such trends, they ‘were submerged in the emotional torrents of calls for ‘Tamil Eelam’ and “Aayuthap Porattam” (Armed Struggle). (Jeyaraj 2007) For many Tamils, what they had suffered was clear proof if further evidence was needed, that they were being targeted by blatant state sponsored violence.¹⁰¹ The importance of this understanding lies in how Tamils then began to view the state and their place within or rather outside the protection of the state.

The meta-narrative and essence of the conflict can be seen as the refusal by successive Sinhala dominated governments to acknowledge the rights, claims and status of the Tamil people, an official narrative of the state that questions the historic provenance and legitimacy of the Tamil people ‘ as a co-constituting nation of the post-colonial state.’ (Nadarajah & Vimalarajah 2008:13) The countervailing Tamil narrative is that the North and the East of the country are the traditional homelands of the Tamil people, and that there is ‘a specifically Sri Lankan Tamil identity that has origins in antiquity and therefore valid claims to the Sri Lankan geopolitical space.’ (Hellman-Rajanayagam in Ho and Rambukwella 2006:72) While the history of ‘who came first’ is contentious¹⁰², what is relevant here is that most Tamils believe one version of history while the dominant Sinhala narrative presents another version, one that many Tamils bitterly dispute. (Spencer 1990)¹⁰³

This is a view exemplified by the various pronouncements of Sinhala political elites over the years. Nissan for example quotes a government minister after the events of 1983, stating that,

¹⁰¹ It is of course relevant that acts of violence against the Tamil community had been going on for quite some time with the 1958 Anti-Tamil riots which saw ‘hundreds murdered and thousands displaced’ (De Votta 2004:113-9) and the burning of the Jaffna Library in 1981 by security forces (Knuth 2006:84-6), as particularly significant events in Tamil public consciousness.

¹⁰² Austin’s offering here is instructive, an argument that although ‘ all history is made up’, ‘the history of Sri Lanka is more made up than most, and documents put out by the government and its opponents have plundered the past history of Tamil kings and Buddhist priests in defence of their own interests.’ (Austin 1994: 61–2)

¹⁰³ There is much literature on the history of Sri Lanka and the different versions of this history, its effects and consequences. Some texts which have informed my work include de Silva 2005; DeVotta 2004; Tambiah 1986; Wilson 2000

‘Sri Lanka is inherently.... a Sinhalese state . . . this must be accepted as a fact and not a matter of opinion to be debated. By attempting to challenge this premise, Tamils have brought the wrath of the Sinhalese on their own heads; they have themselves to blame’ (Nissan 1996:176)

Similarly, in 2008, the then head of the army declared in an interview,

‘I strongly believe that this country belongs to the Sinhalese but there are minority communities.... they can live in this country with us. But they must not try to... demand undue things.’ (Fonseka cited in Bell 2008)

It is in the present context of conflict that such arguments are challenged by Tamils who have been exposed to the reality of a ‘narrative of conflict’ that de-legitimizes the claims, policies, strategies and actions of successive governments. The conflict is seen and experienced as one being waged not only in the midst of the Tamil community but specifically against it, notwithstanding the usual claims by the state of the need to win Tamil hearts and minds. Diaspora perceptions often sketch this disparity between the rhetoric of the state and the reality on the ground, underlining the fact that tension between Sinhala and Tamil identities reflects Said’s argument that the production and championing of a particular national or cultural identity is almost always ‘implicated directly or indirectly in the denial, or the suppression of equal identity for other groups.’ (Said 1994a: 356)

Such dynamics were highlighted by the response of the government to rising levels of Tamil militancy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a response which saw the enactment in 1979 of the Prevention of Terrorism Act, a temporary measure made permanent in 1982 which ‘empowered the police and members of the armed forces to arrest and search persons and places, and to impose internment.’ (Samaranayake 2007:182; see also Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah 2005: 91) The consequences of such an attempted policy of containment was the ‘widespread torture and human rights abuse of many young Tamils’. The presence of the military in the north and east also ‘exacerbated the Tamils’ sense of alienation’ as it was seen as an ‘occupation force’, a sign that the Tamil community was viewed as a political problem to be dealt with in military terms. (DeVotta 2000: 63; see also Korf 2006: 285-6; Yiftachel & Ghanem 2004: 659) This was a point of view brought home to me in various interviews which

underlined the fact that violence was gradually seen as the main arbiter of societal negotiation between the state and its Tamil citizens:

*'This government is only good for Sinhala people. For us government is only army. That is why we need Eelam government for Tamil people. If government was fair, no war will be happening.... War is not a happy thing, who wants war you answer me? ... but our Tamil area is for our people but now we have soldiers everywhere ...all Tamil people will say like that.... can everything in Sri Lanka, everywhere in Sri Lanka be for their people (Sinhala) only. Sri Lanka is our place also.... We are not free. Government is thinking Tamil people not really Sri Lankan people, believe me, that is what they are wanting, Sinhala people only... That only is why Tigers are fighting for Eelam... can I say... freedom fighting for our people. That is real story, government story is different thing.'*¹⁰⁴

Added to the secular ethno nationalist politics of successive Sinhala governments and the rising levels of brutality, many Tamils also point to the growth and strength of 'political Buddhism' as a force reigned against them. Spencer states that 'according to this view, the Buddha himself entrusted the island's destiny to the Sinhala people as guardians of his teaching', a view that is now 'insistently proclaimed in the press, in the speeches of politicians, and in schoolbooks and history lessons.' (Spencer 1990:3; see also Tambiah 1986:58; Tambiah 1992) It is this foundational myth that provides a link between race, land, religion and nationalism and this has fuelled popular support for Buddhist nationalism and its manifestation in a doctrinal belief that 'to be a Sinhalese is to be automatically a Buddhistand to be Buddhist is to be able to make a total claim territorially and politically-over Sri Lanka.'(Tambiah 1986: 58) Such a viewpoint is exemplified by the words of Walpola Rahula, leader of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) or National Heritage Party, a political party composed solely of 'bhikkhus' (Buddhist monks), who objecting to Sri Lanka being termed a 'multi-national and multi- religious state', stated that

'Seventy percent of the country consists of Buddhists and Sinhala people.... It is a Buddhist Sinhala State...'(Rahula in DeVotta and Stone 2008:35)

The significance of political Buddhism is the fact that yet another dominant discourse has over the years been institutionalised and used against the Tamil minority. Ideas can be seen as an institutionalist construct and it is such ideas, articulated by elements

¹⁰⁴ Interview with RE: June 2008

within Sinhala political society that have created and legitimated the present ethno-nationalist socio-political landscape. The various historical, social, religious and political tensions evident in the wider literature that seek to explain the roots of a drift into and a continuation of conflict, underline the fact that 'at the heart of the Sri Lankan crisis is a crisis of the state' and as argued by Goodhand, this 'is illustrative of the fact that democratic institutions do not necessarily foster democratic politics.' (Goodhand 2001:30; 8) In this sense, DeVotta refers to Sri Lankan democracy as a 'control democracy' aimed at marginalizing the Tamils and creating a Sinhalese ethnocracy, a democracy he defines as one 'in which the majority group eschews ethnic compromise with a state's minorities.' (DeVotta 2000: 58) This undermining of democracy in all but form is not lost on the Tamil diaspora.

In his study of colonial societies, Fanon speaks of a mode of political communication where the 'violence' of colonial regimes is reciprocated by the 'counter-violence of the colonized.' (Fanon 1963:46) In the Sri Lankan context, what is clear is that the tensions between the Tamil community and the state have been exacerbated by the bitter civil war which has 'brought to the fore the military as a major agent in the Sinhalization of contested space, and the reinforcement of Sinhalese dominance...in politics' as well as in the minds of the Tamil people, a state of affairs that to many Tamils resembles a landscape of colonialism engendered and colonialism to be contested. (Yiftachel & Ghanem 2004: 671) The political, social and economic marginalization of the Tamil minority can thus be framed as an attempt by Sinhalese nationalists to re-imagine the political and cultural landscape of the state, creating a 'cultural imagination entrenched in dichotomies of insider/outsider, indigenous/alien. (Ho and Rambukwella 2006:77) Speaking of the experiences of colonized nations, Ashcroft poses the question,

'what happens to the concept of 'home' when home is colonized, when the very ways of conceiving home, of talking about it..... remembering it, begin to occur through the medium of the colonizer's way of seeing the world?' (Ashcroft 2000: 15)

The narrative of conflict taken on board by many diaspora Tamils conceptualises the challenge of Sinhala ethnonationalism as an ongoing process that threatens to create just such a state of affairs. The political narrative that in many Tamil minds has

created a diaspora community in the first instance, is a narrative where the ‘we’ of post-colonial citizenship became disaggregated and where Tamils were forced to adopt a subaltern identity, one that was necessarily subservient to the dominant Sinhala national project. The consequences of such ‘expectations’ thrust onto and against a once confident community ensures that territory and identity would henceforth always be a contentious issue.

4.3 The LTTE and the Quest for Tamil Eelam: A Discourse of Terrorism

Interrogated and Contested

Andrea: ‘Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero’

**Galileo: ‘No, Andrea: ‘Unhappy is the land that needs a hero’
(Brecht 1952: 468)**

**‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said... ‘it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master.’
(Carroll 1969:66-7)**

Bhatia argues that ‘the struggle over representation is directly a struggle over the legitimacy of violent acts.’ (Bhatia 2005:13) At the discursive level therefore, as evidenced in much of the literature, ‘the legitimacy of the LTTE’s armed struggle—and hence the label of ‘terrorism’—is at the centre of an interpretative contest’ for it voices and defines essential truths regarding ‘who is the victim and who is the perpetrator? Who is in the right, who is in the wrong, and who is to be blamed?’ (Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah 2005:94; Bhatia 2005:14)

In the wake of the ‘war on terror’, the nature of who and what constitutes a terrorist was brought to the fore in global political discourse. Surveying the changing geopolitical situation from a Sri Lankan perspective, Korf warned that, ‘what earlier could be justified as support of Tamil “freedom fighters” now appeared to be seen as a blessing of Tamil “terrorists”.’ (Korf 2006:287-8) Korf’s juxtaposition of freedom fighters and terrorists does underpin a key issue in Tamil diaspora discourse because throughout the conflict, the state has used ‘the language of terrorism’ in an attempt to deny political legitimacy to the LTTE. (Stokke 2006:1022) The issue of legitimacy is just as important in the formation of a conflict agenda as it is in the formation of a

governance regime and to this end, Bhatia reminds us that ‘internally, for a state...referring to their opponents as ‘subversive elements’, ‘terrorists’, ‘extremists’, and ‘bandits’ is an attempt at denying the legality of their opponents.’(Bhatia 2005: 14; see also Keen 2008: 72; Korf 2006)

Diaspora support for the LTTE has also almost always been couched in terms of the legitimacy of the struggle waged, an approach which not only challenges the labelling of the LTTE as a terrorist organization but also questions the very legitimacy of the state to rule over its Tamil citizens as discussed above. In this battle for legitimacy, Shankar Raji, the London-based leader of the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation (EROS)¹⁰⁵ underlines the fundamental role and ongoing support provided by members of the diaspora :

‘Almost all the Tigers' funding came from abroad and British Tamils played a huge role..... Whether peace prevails.... will just as much depend on what happens on the streets of Southall, Tooting and Harrow than within Sri Lanka itself.’(cited in Taylor 2009; see also Goodhand 2001: 28; Chalk 2000; Samaranayake 2007: 175 for pro LTTE diaspora organizations ; Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah 2005: 96 for pro LTTE diaspora media platforms ; Zunzer 2004:14-24 for overview of the Tamil diaspora structure in Europe)

I have often had the opportunity to walk those very streets in Tamil diaspora areas like Harrow and Tooting and it is clear that ideological support for the LTTE has been overwhelming. As one of my informants put it, before sending me out to get a sense of ‘*what people think*’,

*‘if you want to hear our people, just listen..... Yes, many Tamils don’t like some of the things LTT is doing, ... but come and listen only, like or not like is not (the) only thing.... sometimes I also don’t like what LTT is doing also but most of our people give support to Tigers... I can say ninety percent. For us, LTT is not terrorist group. This is not big secret. This is (the) truth only.’*¹⁰⁶

My focus in this section is on how the LTTE and its violent brand of nationalism is internalised and represented on the ground and the effects such a discourse has on the worldview of those in diaspora. The representation of the LTTE in the Tamil popular

¹⁰⁵ EROS was one of the early Tamil militant groups but having been superseded by the LTTE, it has now turned its back on violence and is primarily based abroad

¹⁰⁶ Interview with GUB: June 2007

imagination is vital in understanding the willingness of the Tamil diaspora in large measure to countenance and even passionately support the organization and its aims. As with Carroll's words above, the issue is often presented as a question of who should be master of the truth about the meaning of things, about the nature of the war and how it should be interpreted and understood.

*'Look everywhere here... all Tamil people. We are Tamil nation not terrorist nation. If we are terrorists, we will be hiding in the cave. All this people are coming to hear Prabhakaran. He is our leader. We are walking proud... (Do you think most Tamil people in London feel like this?) Look friend, here you have thousands of Tamils ask them... One by one. Look at all them aunties (older women) with their children, do they look like terrorists to you? So go and ask, why are these aunties here for LTTE, for Eelam, for Prabhakaran?'*¹⁰⁷

The exchange above happened as I, along with hundreds of others, gathered for the annual 'Heroes Day' event in London. I have reviewed the event in an earlier chapter so here, I focus on the issue of labels. As the day of the event approached, with publicity from all the various Tamil media platforms in London encouraging Tamils to attend, the British conservative think-tank, the Center for Social Cohesion, put out its own press release, which had as its heading, 'Banned Terrorist Group Plans Event Honouring Suicide Missions at the London ExCel Centre.'¹⁰⁸ The opinion of the thousands of Tamils who attended the event however exemplifies a competing effort to make sense of the discursive landscape that informs the civil war, the labelling of the LTTE as a terrorist organization and hence the 'place' that diaspora Tamils should inhabit in this landscape of conflict and rhetoric. Trawick attempts to address just such competing perspectives when she seeks to explain her own analytical point of departure:

'The LTTE believe that their struggle is just.... no choice is left to them but to wage war in pursuit of an independent Tamil Eelam. Opponents of the LTTE say that the Tigers ... are crazed suicidal terrorists, heartless criminals.... as a social scientist, such assertions explain nothing.' (Trawick 1997:153)

For many Tamils, the failings of the state represented by the policies of its leaders since independence, overshadows, explains and to many, even justifies, the so called

¹⁰⁷ Interview: Nov 2008

¹⁰⁸ The press statement alluded to the fact that, 'The. ...Tamil Tigers, are a proscribed terrorist organisation...Holding a public Heroes' Day event in the UK is illegal under both the Terrorism Act 2000 (for supporting a proscribed organisation) and the 2006 Act (for glorification of terrorism)'

‘terrorism’ of the LTTE. Over time and over the course of the conflict and the various failed peace attempts, many Tamils have accepted the belief put forward by the LTTE that because of the ‘assaults on their personal safety and security, as well as on their dignity as a community.... their collective salvation lay only in the creation of a sovereign territorial nation-state.’ (Bose 1994: 81; see also Tambiah 1986)

‘If Tamil people go to Colombo, government is very worried... that is what I am saying.¹⁰⁹ All Tamil people are terrorists right? Mannar we are terrorist, Colombo especially we are terrorist. Everywhere police checking, checking Tamil people. Now also I go to Colombo I feel is very dangerous. Like that how to live? Also always like this is big shame for Tamil people... and that is our own country only.... Even come to Heathrow, no checking like this... If they are treating us like that only, that is why Eelam is important thing for us.’¹¹⁰

‘All their talk about peace is rubbish only. From my time already, army is for killing Tamil people only. How is army protecting us? Ask anybody who knows Sri Lanka, with the army on the street, you better watch out if you are Tamil... Colombo is different, Jaffna is different. Yes, many Colombo Tamil people are ok but there also for Tamils is difficult.... not just 83’, now everywhere checkpoints.... anything can happen.... the army is like kings only... anything they can do.... where is law, only army have power.... they are acting like gangsters and Tamil people is the enemy for them. If you see all this, how can you say LTT not necessary?’¹¹¹

DeVotta makes the point that the ‘war reinforces ethnocentrism’, citing the fact that while the current

‘government is quick to compensate Sinhalese civilians killed due to LTTE terrorism... innocent Tamils killed due to military operations are completely disregarded. Likewise, soldiers who have resorted to the rape and murder of Tamil civilians are never taken to task even after some get identified.’ (Devotta 2009:52)¹¹²

To this end, as revealed by the sentiments of my informants above, it can be argued that ‘state terror reinforces the cognitive plausibility and moral justifiability of a radical political orientation.’ (Godwin in Wood 2003: 234) As events on the ground became institutionalised in their minds as a continuing war by the state against the Tamil ‘other’, many embraced the ideology of the LTTE for the first time. This is especially relevant for many of the older generation that I encountered in my

¹⁰⁹ He was referring to recent news that non-resident Tamils in Colombo were being targeted by the authorities who saw them as potential ‘terrorists.’ See Buerk 2007

¹¹⁰ Interview with GUB: June 2007

¹¹¹ Interview with AGCF: August 2007

¹¹² For a discussion of human rights abuses, judicial failure and impunity with regards to the conduct of the Sri Lankan state against Tamil civilians see also Crisis Group 2007:4-16; Hogg & Abrahams 2007

fieldwork. Such transformations could even be described as iconoclastic, considering their previous lives as law-abiding citizens of Sri Lanka, who in many cases had even been employed as civil servants. The relevance of such transformations may seem like a mundane observation but it goes to the heart of the conflict diaspora condition, as exemplified by two of my older informants who had left Sri Lanka in the late 1980s:

*'When I first left, years ago, actually I wanted to get away from all the madmen... not just the Sinhala madmen but also the Tamil madmen.I was a teacher but I could see that my students had other ideas, not my ideas... For myself, I felt that madness was taking over... I wanted to be free from all the hate but something happened over here... I was empty.... I just could not turn my back on everything...its like calling your family... you can put it off but ultimately you have to do it. And when I did 'call', the Tigers answered the phone. For me, they were the ones with a plan. They were not just talking like all the Tamil politicians I remember from my younger days... Yes, there are problems but at least they are challenging the government, fighting for Tamil people. Before the Tigers, we Tamils were just being kicked around. Now at least we can kick back and that is something... I think of it now as acting in self-defence.'*¹¹³

'I don't even feel that all the violence is the real issue... that is war and we are fighting as well... whose hands are clean in war? There are no saints in Sri Lanka... They say it is Buddha's place but I think they have sent Buddha on a long holiday... What I feel is that the violence is just one side of things....the Tigers are doing some very bad things, the government is corrupt and the army is out of control, killing and torturing civilians. But what is the reason for the conflict... Eelam war 1, Eelam war 2... when we reach Eelam war 10, it will all be about war only, you kill my people, I kill your people. ... problem is what the bloody Sinhala government has taken from us. that they have the power and we have nothing.... you know, in my time all the top government post holders, the hospitals, the courts, the police, the army.... all the top post holders were Tamils... Everything now is in the hands of the Sinhala people and all our top people are gone..... Australia, Europe, US.... that is where all our top people are. now our people are fighting in the jungles only. So who has benefited... who has all the jobs, all the power? that is how you should be looking..... What did the Sinhala people expect ... our top people had to go elsewhere.... so now they have to deal with Prabhakaran and his friends ... our top killers. I am not too proud of everything that Prabhakaran and the LTTE have done but why did all these groups come in the first place... In my time.... it was not just the LTTE, there were so many groups, all fighting the government, also fighting each other. That also was bad for our people but again, why did all these groups come in the first place? this is something that I can say..... if you take everything from people, if they have nothing left, then you cannot control them anymore.... You have taken everything and so they have nothing to lose. I think for many of our people, that is the problem. Everything has been taken from them... they are not even afraid of losing their lives now.I have met these people and it is frightening. To me, it is

¹¹³ Interview with MRW: Oct 2007

like their souls are in a different place but I still ask you ... who brought them to this place?’¹¹⁴

The notion of a people having a war foisted on them is a theme that comes up often. Having ‘expressed’ their own act of last resort in leaving, diaspora Tamils have a particular dialectic sympathy with the LTTE. Having lost their own ‘place’ in Sri Lanka and having to live with complex layers of loss and grief, many in the diaspora see the LTTE as representatives of a oppressed community who have themselves been forced into a ‘place of war’ where as the psychiatrist Anila Liyanage says, ‘death and destruction is far better than life in the given circumstances.’ (cited in Joshi 2000) Hage articulates this viewpoint when he references the idea of ‘structural sin’, ‘seeing evil in the conditions rather than in the people.’ (Hage 2003: 89) Commenting on the situation in Palestine and the ‘production’ of suicide bombers, Hage makes the point that,

‘suicide bombings are undoubtedly a form of social evil, but their evil is also the evil of the living conditions from which they emanate... where the possibilities of a meaningful life are shrinking, rather than in the individuals trying to survive in such conditions’ (Hage 2003: 88)

For many of my informants, such was the environment of their own experiences and it informs their feelings about the political landscape in Sri Lanka.

‘Am I am terrorist because I support LTTE? This is something funny for meIf they are only every time calling us terrorist only, that is the problem. You are asking... saying violence is bad...I know that is what you are thinking... but what else can we do... Come and be Tamil in Sri Lanka and then only you will know. Terrorist I don’t like but we are not terrorist... Look what they are doing to our people and our place.’¹¹⁵

‘Why government only can say what is right thing, what is wrong thing. Why when soldiers kill our people that is ok because of war.... when our boys kill, that is terrorism. Why we must accept everything that government say? Who can say Sri Lanka government is a good government? When government like this, who can say LTT is terrorist? I don’t know why British people, European people cannot see this. Can you make peace like this?(But what about the other Tamil groups – Tamil politicians – is it only LTTE that is important?)Always we have (had) our Tamil politicians but nothing good happened for Tamil people...not just now I am

¹¹⁴ Interview with MRG: September 2007

¹¹⁵ Interview with A: January 2007

talking, many, many years, the government has played out our people (our Tamil politicians)but also that time is not real Tamil party, that is Cinnamon Garden¹¹⁶ party only, all rich Colombo Tamil people only, like that only was our Tamil leaders... This is why LTT is coming.... Now also, who you are meaning – Douglas?¹¹⁷ People like Douglas, they are not for Tamil people, Douglas is for Douglas only. Surely better is TNA¹¹⁸, TNA is for LTTE, for Tamil people... this is peaceful political party only but still government is killing them.Like this only is politics in Sri Lanka. That is why still LTT is important.... every time Tamil people try to do politics, we will get killed only...that is Sri Lanka history. All LTT is doing is for Tamil People only. Good, bad, all is happening but still LTT is for us only... for me is only LTT and Eelam. All other people is talk talk only. Can we only listen to this talk talk? Sri Lanka problem is still a bad problem so talk talk only is not enough. Because I am here (in London), I can enjoy but inside (me is) Sri Lanka only and that place is suffering. I can talk alsobut our people are suffering. Talk talk (is) not enough for ending this suffering.’¹¹⁹

The rise of militant Tamil nationalism and especially the coming to prominence of the LTTE did indeed mark the end of the non-violent ‘*talk, talk*’ phase in the Tamil struggle. (See De Silva 1998; Swamy 2002; Wilson 2000) In response to the various abuses inflicted on the Tamil community and the indifference shown to mainstream Tamil political leaders by the government, the LTTE decided from its inception to circumvent the leadership of the traditional Tamil elite who had consistently put their faith in constitutional processes. To this end, the LTTE decided to oppose the efforts of the dominant Tamil political parties of the time by calling for a boycott of the 1983 local government elections. This was significant because it represented the first direct confrontation between the LTTE and the dominant Tamil political party of the time, the TULF, which was committed to contesting the elections. As Swamy explains, underlining the degree of popular support for the LTTE against the hitherto dominant TULF,

¹¹⁶ An exclusive residential enclave in Colombo

¹¹⁷ Kathiravelu Devananda popularly known as Douglas Devananda, is a Tamil politician and Minister in the present government. Originally a Tamil militant, he gave up violence and is currently the leader of the Eelam People's Democratic Party. He has been a vocal critic of the LTTE who in turn see him as a traitor to the Tamil cause and they have tried repeatedly to assassinate him.

¹¹⁸ The Tamil National Alliance is an electoral umbrella alliance of Tamil political parties. It was formed as an amalgamation of the historic Tamil parties such as the TULF and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress as well as a number of former rebel groups such as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization . It has participated in elections since 2001. The alliance supports self-determination in an autonomous state for the Tamil people and accepts the leadership of the LTTE as the sole, legitimate voice of the Tamil people. Three of its sitting Members of the Parliament K. Sivanesan, Joseph Pararajasingham and Nadarajah Raviraj have been assassinated since 2006 with accusations for their killing levelled at government backed entities.

¹¹⁹ Interview with FNE: January 2008

‘The Tamil voters gave a stunning verdict. Almost 90% of the population in the north stayed away from the ballot box... an irreparable damage to a political party which only six years ago was considered the undisputed voice of the Tamils...’ (Swamy 2002: 86-7)

This first confrontation was a clear sign that from the beginning, the ‘Tigers understood the mood in Tamil areas.’ (Swamy 2002: 85) Schalk has argued that the spirit of the text of the Vaddukoddai Resolution mentioned above, ‘is of the utmost importance to understanding the motivations of the... Tamil resistance movement’ and in many quarters, it is the LTTE that has managed to present itself as the natural successors to Chelvanayakam, the principle author of that Resolution. (Schalk 2002:47) Instead of a policy of non-violent political struggle however, the LTTE believe that they have come into (Chelvanayakam’s) heritage in the battlefield’.

(Wilson 2000: 132-33)

‘We represent the militant expression of the collective will of our people who are determined to fight for freedom, dignity and justice. We are the armed vanguard of the struggling masses, the freedom fighters of the oppressed.’ (LTTE Statement 1979 in Nadarajah & Sriskandarajah 2005: 25)

Such ‘mission statements’ have been part of LTTE propaganda since its earliest inception and while such pronouncements may seem grandiose, the reality is that it echoes a sentiment that resonates with a particular reading of political history, where the LTTE has grown legitimately and successfully into its present day stance of claiming to be the sole representatives of the struggle of the Tamil people. For many diaspora Tamils, the LTTE are seen as agents of a political ideology of struggle and empowerment in a realm where orthodox political action has proved unsuccessful. Many of my informants offer the viewpoint that it is a desire to challenge a sense of despair and powerlessness that drives them to support the LTTE. The issue of providing a renewed sense of Tamil self-respect has been a vital part of the success of the LTTE from its very beginnings, exemplified by Prabhakaran’s own words in seeking to highlight the role of the LTTE:

‘The Tamils bowed their heads when repeatedly knocked and lived as slaves with shame. The greatness of getting them to live with self-respect was the work of our liberation movement.’ (Prabhakaran)¹²⁰

¹²⁰ cited @ TamilCanadian Website

In narrating their own journey towards becoming supporters of the LTTE, many of my informants emphasize not the actions or political statements of the LTTE, but rather a list of the discriminatory practises, violence and atrocities committed by the government against the Tamil people. Theirs has not necessarily been a search for a exclusivist ideology but rather for a viable platform to express solidarity and defiance in the search for a sense of justice and dignity in the face of state oppression and violence. This need to situate and analyse the LTTE and its actions on a broader canvas of meaning and consequence is underlined in the words of some of my own informants:

*'The problem is LTT is (a) terrorist group... (At least) that is what (the) world is saying. So, normal, normal, how can we say we are supporting them only? But actually that only is what we are saying... we are not hiding ...Many Tamil people in UK, Canada, Australia, and Germany... (We) say we are helping Sri Lanka Tamil people only but there is big question here.... how to help our people? Where is our place (how do we offer help effectively)? For me, not only me but also many people, only LTT can help our people so our place is to help LTTE. Before already (earlier) I am saying, LTT is not only (about) fighting, also politics is happening but government must come also... politics, ceasefire... but real ceasefire must be two sides, not Tigers only. Government must be serious not always saying this is Sinhala country only. We are fighting because Sri Lanka (is) not Sinhala country only... so how to start peace with all government side saying Sinhala country, Buddha country. We are Sri Lanka people, but we (are) not Sinhala, we (are) not Buddhist. For government, that means we are not Sri Lanka people...like that only they can say Sri Lanka is for Sinhala people. For me, government must say, Tamil people like Sinhala people.... everything equal only, then only can have peace'*¹²¹

*'I talk about Sri Lanka and you think, ...not just you I am saying, everybody thinks I am talking only for Tamil people, our people only. But in UK also, we can see same story... same story but result is different. In UK, we are having many different people but all people is same. You have British passport, then you are same as all people. Still got some problems but no killing, fighting business. That is what I am asking. Why government can kill Tamil people? Because there, only Sinhala people are real citizens.... that is what government is saying. Tamil people are different thing for them. That is the problem. There are not seeing our history, our place... I talk about Sri Lanka, I am talking not just Tamil people but I am talking for justice... human justice not Tamil justice.... when we talk, people are thinking we are Tamil so we care for Tigers only. Last time, like that I was proud.... LTT is hero story no? ... now, I want people to hear more what I am saying...Like European people I can show our case...justice, human rights, genocide ..what government is doing...better if people care for that story, not only LTTE story.'*¹²²

¹²¹ Interview with NEW: May 2008

¹²² Interview with HH: March 2008

The journey of RIC, a Tamil accountant in London, along a similar path towards supporting the LTTE is another example of such sentiments:

*'I told you that my appa (father) was killed in the 83 riots. I was very young at the time. My mother always told me that my father was killed by bad people. She did not see it as Tamil-Sinhala fighting. She was helped by her Sinhala friends. We always had lots of Sinhala friends in Colombo – Muslims, Burgers –all. That is what my mother always said to me. We are all just Sri Lankans. It was a Sinhala 'uncle' only who helped me to do the accountancy course. I never said LTTE good, government bad.... Actually I was Mr 'No Politics Here Please'. I think I just did not want to have to be thinking about my father's death and all that but many things made me start thinkingis the government doing the right thing? If I am not supporting the Tigers, I am supporting the government no? So, I must believe what the government is doing – but so much killing government is doing.I can tell you many examples the killing of those girls in Vallipunam ¹²³, what the church is saying about people killed in Padahuthurai¹²⁴ the aid workers killed¹²⁵, also you know this man Taraki¹²⁶, you must know this man was killed also, who is doing all this, this is the government only...and now who is helping Karuna¹²⁷ to kill? ... LTTE is fighting a war but the government cannot just kill 'whoever' only they want.....if the government is doing bad things, than at least somebody must fight against them. For me, like this, only the LTTE is there..... Who else is fighting for Tamil people? We are wanting (the) international community to make peace but we are not believing in miracles. That is why LTT also is important. Otherwise, everything government wants, government will do...**(But surely LTTE is only doing what LTTE wants – Can other Tamil voices speak? What I mean is, is it peace that is important or LTTE to win)**... I understand what you are saying but what I am saying is that now in war time, everybody cannot be talking... otherwise government only will win. Give us Eelam, then things will change.'*

I had questioned RIC about the various initiatives, both local and international, that sought to bring about peace as well as his views on the Norwegian sponsored peace accord signed in 2002 between the LTTE and the government. His view, echoing

¹²³ This is a massacre known as the Chencholai bombing where on August 14, 2006, about 61 girls aged between 16 and 18 were killed when the Air Force bombed what they represented as an LTTE training camp. See Unicef 2006

¹²⁴ Massacre of about 15 Tamil civilians, including children in ariel bombing. See BBC 2007; The Catholic Bishop of Mannar Diocese, Rt Rev Rayappu Joseph called the attack a 'crime against humanity' (TamilNet 2007)

¹²⁵ Seventeen local employees of the French NGO, Action Contre la Faim(ACF) were found dead in the town of Muttur in August 2006 and it is generally believed that the security forces were involved in their killing. See Huggler 2006

¹²⁶ Taraki is the pen name of the Tamil journalist Sivaram Dharmeratnam. He was allegedly killed by pro-government paramilitaries in April 2005 because of his criticism of the government and his pro LTTE line as editor of TamilNet. See Guardian (UK) 2005; TamilNet 2005; Whitaker 2007

¹²⁷ Vinayagamorthy Muralitharan known as 'Colonel Karuna' had been a very senior member of the LTTE hierarchy and had created a storm in Tamil diaspora circles when he had defected from the LTTE to the government side, taking a large number of LTTE cadres with him in 2004. His faction was now believed to target LTTE sympathizers on behalf of the government in the eastern province. See Ramesh 2006

many of my other informants, was that all such initiatives were merely ‘side issues’ because according to him, the government knew how to ‘handle all those people.’ For RIC and for many others, all that the international community was prepared to do was talk, a state of affairs that many saw as reminiscent of the constitutional political struggle waged in vain by Tamil political leaders of yesteryear.

*‘All these years when the government was terrorizing our people, where were these organizations? Did the UN come and help? Did the British government come and help..... Why so many people are dying... they are interested only in talking. In Sri Lanka, only the LTTE can make things change. **(But is not the LTTE part of the problem? A problem for peace?)** Nirad, many things you know but also many things you don’t know.... the government is always killing people.... Now also this is happening so where is peace? They know how to hide these things....so many disappear like that.... is that a government we can trust?.... you ask about peace, what do such people know about peace? what do they mean by peace? You ask these questions so ask also, what you mean by peace?’¹²⁸*

The idea of attaining ‘peace’ is a perspective that often featured in many of my interviews and it is important to appreciate the obvious fact that for many Tamils, peace is not just the absence of war. Rather than an insight culled from the academic literature, such sentiments occur quite frequently in diaspora narratives, where support for the LTTE is framed as a way to get a ‘good peace for Tamil people’.

*‘Government is saying now is time for peace but what sort of peace? Peace must also be for Tamil people. That is what we want. Good peace for Tamil people. Otherwise, 10 years more also, Tamil people will still be fighting **(But the government wants peace – wants the fighting to stop – is this not right?)** Wanting fighting to over (stop) is different from peace no? Many years already, Tamil people only peaceful.... like Gandhi only...they are brave but like this how can... when government still doing all the killing nonsense that type peace is ‘Tamil people killing’ peace.... that is not real peace.... surely Tamil people must fight? If Tigers control our Tamil places... will government want peace? Will they let our Tamil power stay? Only when government have control, they want peace, for Tigers to stop fighting only.... that is not peace... for me justice for Tamil people only is peace **(Can you get justice without fighting?)** Will government listen if no Tigers fighting? This people.... how to trust them. Tamil people only will suffer... these political people, how to trust?.... I got no trust for Sri Lanka government. Even good thing they say got evil thing hiding underside. We must see this evil thing first otherwise we only will suffer. War we suffer, peace we suffer.... But one day Eelam will come. **(Do you really believe that Eelam is possible? Will that bring real peace?)** Slowly, slowly is possible. What*

¹²⁸ Interview with RIC: February/March 2007

*else is our choice? All Tamil people can come to Europe? That is what Government wants... that is why we need LTT, that is why we need Eelam*¹²⁹

While the opinions offered above seek to defend the militant struggle of the LTTE and the pursuit of Eelam, Tamils have had to face the question if indeed the ‘destruction caused by the war itself is worse than any evil the fighting is meant to correct.’ (Trawick 1997:153)

‘For myself, I am looking for right thing. What is right thing now? To fight in the jungles, to come here, to support LTTE? Always I am thinking. Always I am saying, also LTTE is not always like the hero.... for some people Prabhakaran is like MGR¹³⁰ but Prabhakaran is not always doing the right thing but this is a long story...maybe never finish story but still it is our story only. London also still the story is happening and we must all play this story. For me, because of this long story, that is why we must help LTT.this is a bad time for everybody and if no LTT, things will be more worse... the world will stop talking about Sri Lanka because no more LTT, but our people will still surely, surely suffer.’¹³¹

KB’s comments above underline a tone of relative ambivalence common to many, towards the actual brutality of the violence employed by the LTTE in many instances. In many interviews and discussions, what seemed to be an initial unwillingness to discuss and oppose this brutalism was actually a more considered response, a call to move away from the particulars of each specific suicide attack or assassination, to focus more on the political history of a community under attack. It was a plea to consider the basis of the Tamil struggle as a whole, both its causes and its overall aims, in short to engage with how those in diaspora perceive and interpret the images and narrative of violence employed by the LTTE. This will be further discussed in the section below. As one of my more reflective informants explained, the violence and brutality of the LTTE is always mitigated by the dream of achieving ‘*some sort of Eelam.*’

‘When I was younger, I also used to think Tigers are like heroes. That is why I understand how all the younger boys think. We must realise that for many Tamils, for me as well, the Tigers gave us something to be proud of. What Prabhakaran created

¹²⁹ Interview with BGCB: December 2006

¹³⁰ Maruthur Gopalan Ramachandran, popularly known by his initials M. G. R was a South Indian film actor who was also Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu from 1977 until his death in 1987. In his film career, he often played roles that portrayed him as the saviour of the oppressed. During his period as Chief Minister, he was also often a staunch supporter of Prabhakaran and the LTTE see Swamy 2003

¹³¹ Interview with KB: February 2007

was self-respect... Tamil Tiger. We are all Tamil so we could all be Tigers. Even an old man like me... at work, people ask me about 'my' Tamil Tigers. You know in India, if you talk about Tamilian people, you are talking about bookish, shy, mathematical vegetarians... What Prabhakaran and the Tigers showed us is that we Tamils can also be brave and strong soldiers. A boy's dream. ...I believe that if Prabhakaran gets some sort of Eelam, we Tamils will have achieved a great thing. I know myself what a thug... what a ruffian Prabhakaran can be but deep inside, I have this belief that things will change if Eelam is achieved. Difficult for some to accept but for many people, you can tell Prabhakaran's story like one of those 'Amar Chitra Katha'¹³² heroes, not the Gods, but all those involved in the (Indian) freedom struggle. He is the same ... fighting against injustice you know the type. 'Nowadays' for us is not lying down peacefully on the road like in my day. 'Nowadays' if you are a Tamil nationalist... you can be fighting back... You can be killed but at least you can die for something ...and for us you see, if our people are willing to die, then many of us are willing to support them... because we know what it all means. You need to know what it all means...all war is bad but sometimes you have to fight.'¹³³

It has been stated that diaspora opinion in support of the LTTE is not reflected in popular support for the LTTE amongst Tamils within Sri Lanka. (Rajasingam 2009; Korf 2006:287) Wilson argues however that although it is clear that the LTTE 'have the support of the Tamil people in general', Tamils in Sri Lanka present a façade in public. (Wilson 2000:131) This reflects my own experiences amongst the diaspora in London who argue that despite public pronouncements to the contrary, there is much support for the LTTE and their claim to be the voice of the Tamil people.¹³⁴

*'Where do people think Tigers are coming from, are they from outer space? Tigers are our people, our Sri Lanka people only. They are the ones fighting. We are only doing small thing, trying to help.... because we also know the real story.... but Sri Lanka people are the ones really suffering. That is why Tamil people in Sri Lanka support LTT but they must be careful. What they cannot say, that only we are saying for them. We are all same people ...'*¹³⁵

¹³² India's largest selling comic book series featuring stories from Indian mythology, history, folklore and fable. There is a particular focus on heroes of the Indian Independence struggle.

¹³³ Interview: MRK February 2008

¹³⁴ Such sentiments of course clash with the views of more 'enlightened' Tamil opinion in Sri Lanka. The 'University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) (UTHR (J))', a human rights monitoring body for example sees the LTTE as an organization with the 'capacity to descend to the lowest depths without any qualms in the treatment of its own people.' UTHR (J) 2008; Rajan Hoole, one of the co-founders of the UTHR portrays the LTTE as 'an organization that is against ordinary human aspirations. They want to place the people within a fascist polity, where there can't be any kind of independent thought or dissent.' (Hoole in Rubin 2002)

¹³⁵ Interview: MC April 2008

The price of such support, if made public however, is deemed fatal and as a result, it is evident that a culture of ‘self-censorship’ does exist in Sri Lanka. This echoes Wood’s observations regarding the ‘hidden transcript’ of discontent and resistance, in contrast to the public performance of deference and conformity.’ (Wood 2003:15) The rule of law and the security afforded to all Sri Lankans has been severely undermined over the years and many Tamils live in fear of the ‘disappearances’ and killings which seem to stalk anybody who is deemed to be a supporter of the LTTE or even those critical of the government. (see Crisis Group 2007, HRW 2008)

‘Look, the government is not afraid – who killed Lasantha just now? ¹³⁶..... if the government can kill him, surely they can kill anybody they want. Lasantha knew about human rights and all that, he had big friends... overseas, everywhere, but if the government wants to kill you, you are dead ...did all the overseas people protect him from the bullets?even now, people don’t want to see, don’t want to understand...Sri Lanka is a dangerous place, not because of Tigers but because of the government.’ ¹³⁷

The presence of a pervasive ‘climate of fear’, ‘ a pattern of intimidation routinely expressed’ by agents of the government is not just a threat for disempowered civilians, but also an issue for members of civil society at all levels, ‘ including journalists, academics and NGO workers.’ Such intimidation has had the effect of stifling free and open debate’ in the media let alone within the civilian population. (IBAHRI Report 2009: 72,8)¹³⁸ The introduction of the 6th amendment to the constitution in 1983 also made it a crime for any person or political party to support or promote the establishment of a separate State within the territory of Sri Lanka¹³⁹ and this of course criminalizes any support for the LTTE and its aims. In contrast to being in Sri Lanka therefore, one can argue that the ‘diaspora is related to the nation (left behind) in a negative manner in the sense that it expresses what cannot be spoken about elsewhere.’(Turner 2008:1162)

¹³⁶ Lasantha Wikramatunga was the chief editor of the Sunday Leader newspaper. He was shot by unknown gunmen in January 2009. He was a critical voice of government policy and it is widely believed that he was the target of a government-sanctioned assassination. Lasantha himself had foretold his own death in an editorial published posthumously after his death, laying the blame for his killing on the highest echelons of government. (Wikramatunga 2009)

¹³⁷ Interview with RIC: April 2009

¹³⁸ See also Thakurta 2009 for an account of assassinations targeted at journalists.

¹³⁹ The actual section referred to is CHAPTER XX – GENERAL: ‘Prohibition against violation of territorial integrity of Sri Lanka.’ 157A. (1)

Castigated by mainstream commentators even within the Tamil community, both in Sri Lanka¹⁴⁰ and in the diaspora,¹⁴¹ for its extreme violence and terrorist tactics, fascist ideology, authoritarian command structure, human rights abuses against civilians, use of child soldiers and for its poverty of vision and political intransigence¹⁴², the LTTE nonetheless seems to have struck a chord with a broad segment of the Tamil diaspora, who see it as a home-grown movement born out of suffering, that addresses their own experiences and concerns and brings to life¹⁴³ a sense of hope, for many of their own aspirations. Rather than a terrorist organisation to be defended, the challenge represented by the presence and articulation of the Tamil cause by the LTTE is seen as revolutionary and necessary, an expression of the will of the Tamil people, both in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora. The Sri Lankan based Jesuit priest Harry Miller, echoes and encapsulates the views of many in diaspora, that it is the ‘abuse that ordinary people suffer at the hands of the army’ that is the ‘primary motivating factor to join the Tigers’, a symptom of a status quo where ‘the harsh reality is that a Tamil in Sri Lanka is and will remain a second-class citizen to the Sinhalese.’ (Miller in Joshi 2000)

Gayatri Spivak makes the insight that ‘literature is transactional. The point is not the correct description of a book, but the construction of readerships.’ (Spivak 1989:87) Prabhakaran and the LTTE, to paraphrase Spivak, have changed the book of Tamil nationalism by changing and constructing the expectations and aspirations of its readership. Carr reminds us that ‘the great man is always representative either of existing forces or of forces which he helps to create by way of challenge to existing authority’ and for many diaspora Tamils, despite the brutality of the LTTE, when conceptualising their own understanding of a particular narrative of conflict, Prabhakaran does represent just such an individual, one who has put into action as well as ‘into words the will of his age.’ (Carr 1990:54; Hegel in Carr 1990:54)

¹⁴⁰ For case specific indictments of LTTE violence, see UTHR (J) website in general and 2002; 2008 in particular.

¹⁴¹ Examples in the diaspora include the Canadian based journalist Jeyaraj (2009) and the London based commentator Rajasingam (2009)

¹⁴² For human rights abuses see Hogg & Abrahams 2007; HRW 2008b; for use of child soldiers, see HRW 2004

¹⁴³ Considering the brutality and violence of the LTTE, the irony of this feeling, which is sincerely held by many in diaspora is not lost on me. Jeyaraj (2007) expresses a different viewpoint, arguing that ‘the violence has not brought Tamils anywhere near political emancipation...only debilitated the people and reduced them to despair.’

4.4 Legitimising Violence

**‘The British took away their past, the Sinhalese took away their future. All they have is the present. And that makes them dangerous’
(Sivanandan 2007:334–5)**

**‘*Pulikalin Takam Tamililattayakam*’: ‘The task of the Tigers is (to win) motherland Tamililam’
(Schalk 2002: 50)**

The violence of the LTTE has always presented itself as a study in complexity and it is this complexity that has marked the relationship of the LTTE with the diaspora. In their work on the subjectivity of violence, Das et al note that ‘violence acts as a privileged marker in drawing the boundaries of community, such that an act which is both necessary and just to those inside the boundary may strike the outsider as arbitrary and unjust.’ (Das et al 2000: 120) For many in the Tamil community, the LTTE is seen as the vanguard of a legitimate, defensive nationalist spirit that refuses to lie down and admit defeat.

This in essence is the ideology of the ‘siege mentality’ promoted by the LTTE itself, an ideology that maintains that ‘the moral obligation’ to fight for the idea of Eelam ‘is more important than political reality.’ (Sivaram 2005) Waterson makes the point that ‘in complex ways, war produces social identities’, an aspect of which she refers to as the need to ‘learn thy enemy.’ (Waterson 2008:25) Enemies however don’t often come fully formed, rather they are ‘constructed in conflict.’ (Ferguson 2008: 39) Wars have always served as a means to engender group identity and group awareness and the creation and production of an enemy goes a long way to strengthen the idea of ‘who we are’ in relation to the enemy. The conceptualisation of the enemy and the threat posed is also important in explaining ‘why we do what we do’ and as such, it is also relevant how the representation of the enemy in conflict is integrated and perceived within present realities. An extreme ideology needs to produce a clear picture of the enemy and the LTTE have gone to great lengths to ensure that the ‘enemy’ in their version of contemporary Tamil political cosmology is represented as a clear and present danger that demands a particular form of disciplined resistance. By attacking civilian targets, including Buddhist temples and mosques, the LTTE have

exemplified their opposition to any limits on their discourse of violence. The enemy is anybody who opposes the will of the organization or stands to mount a significant challenge to its claims for sole leadership of the Tamil struggle, reminding us that ‘war confers legitimacy to actions that otherwise would be seen as crimes.’ (Keen 1998: 320)

Many of my informants have internalised just such viewpoints and express the opinion that in the fight for Tamil rights and freedom, the only relevant organisation is the LTTE and as such, if any other constituency is doing or saying things opposed to their agenda, then ‘*sadly*’, they are part of the problem. The crux of the matter for many, is that although there is a willingness to question LTTE actions and to accept that certain actions seem unduly harsh, almost all my respondents were quite comfortable in the final analysis to put their faith in the LTTE and its version of morality. This is not to say that most people agree wholeheartedly with the more brutal acts of the LTTE, but it is clear that to many diaspora Tamils, the actions of the LTTE do represent a necessary and acceptable evil, a narrative that underlines a deeply held conviction that ‘the Tamil people took up arms against state terrorism only after 30 years of suffering.’ (Emmanuel in Dobbyn 2011)

The extent of this necessary evil takes into account the fact that the LTTE has been responsible for the deaths of many Tamils over the decades, ranging from members of rival militant organisations, moderate political leaders and other voices in civil society who have questioned or opposed its aims, criticized its methods or challenged its role as the sole representative of the Tamil people.¹⁴⁴ These include significant Tamil politicians like TULF general secretary A. Amirthalingam, assassinated in 1989, TULF president Neelan Thiruchelvam, assassinated in 1999¹⁴⁵, as well as the killing of the human rights activist, Rajani Thiranaganama in 1989.¹⁴⁶ One explanation for

¹⁴⁴ The UTHR (J) website is a great resource for making us ‘alive’ to the very many ordinary Tamils of all descriptions who have been killed by the LTTE.

¹⁴⁵ Besides being a politician, Thiruchelvam was the Director of the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. As a lawyer, he had helped the government draw up plans for devolving power to Tamil areas in the north and east, which President Kumaratunga hoped would erode support for the LTTE. His collaboration with the government was the possible reason for his assassination by a suicide bomber on 29 July 1999

¹⁴⁶ Thiranaganama was a co-founder of the UTHR (J). Although still disputed in some circles, most educated opinion accepts that the LTTE was responsible for her assassination because of her part in

continued support for the LTTE, despite such assassinations, was actually underlined in an interview with Sithi Thiruchelvam. Talking about the assassination of her husband, she was asked if she blamed the LTTE for his death, to which she replied,

‘a large proportion of the blame in all this is in the successive state governments that we have had. They have failed us – much, much more than – Tigers have taken a people who have been extremely traumatised by the iniquity of governance and made them imagine a better future’¹⁴⁷

Besides the moral issues raised, the reality seems to be that to most of my informants, even key figures in public life like Amirthalingam and Thiruchelvam seemed really quite marginal to them, underlining the perception mentioned above, that when considering the Tamil struggle, only the LTTE seemed relevant after decades of perceived oppression and ineffectual constitutional struggle.¹⁴⁸ In 2009, the relationship between the conflict and the diaspora was brought centre stage by the self-immolation of British Tamil resident, Murugathan Varnakulasingham in front of the United Nations buildings in Geneva, in protest at international inaction amidst the mass killings of Tamil civilians by the military in Sri Lanka. In a ‘suicide letter’ explaining his actions, Varnakulasingham stated:

‘We Tamils, displaced and all over the world, loudly raised our problems and asked for help before [the] international community...for three decades. But nothing happened ... So I decided to sacrifice my life ... The flames over my body will be a torch to guide you through the liberation path’¹⁴⁹

While Varnakulasingham’s act was aimed at the international community, his call for his sacrifice to act as a ‘torch’ towards ‘liberation’ was a clear appeal to his fellow Tamils in Sri Lanka and across the diaspora. His actions actually brought increased attention to another facet of the conflict as far as many of my own respondents were concerned, the fact that to most diaspora Tamils, it is members of the LTTE who are seen as ‘*everyday dying*’, sacrificing their lives on the frontline of the struggle.

documenting and publishing ‘The Broken Palmyra’ (Hoole et al 1990), a document that highlighted human rights abuses in Jaffna by all sides in the conflict.

¹⁴⁷ BBC Today Programme, 2009

¹⁴⁸ Swamy speaks of an event that foreshadows the killing of Amirthalingam. Confronting the then TULF leader when he was addressing a public meeting in Jaffna, an LTTE member asked ‘What have you done for the last 30 years?’ (Swamy 2002: 86)

¹⁴⁹ Joyce and Bell, BBC 2009; see also TamilNet 2009b

*'Always I am saying only, here we are the ones to be strong for Eelam no? Before war, during war, after war ...still got more war comingwe are still here... (In Sri Lanka (the) government can bomb us..... here how to bomb? We are here because why? we are here same reason Tigers are fighting....because government is not good for Tamil people.....so we must be fighting now. (But is being in UK the same as fighting in Sri Lanka? What do you mean fighting?) I mean we are surviving no? (In) Sri Lanka, our boys (LTT) are everyday dying, these people are our heroes..... Many Tamil people dying so here we must live so people will know what government is doing and so people can hear our Tamil people, what we are saying and also what our boys are dying for.'*¹⁵⁰

An expressed and widespread approval of their very own 'heroes' continues the theme of an engagement with a dark side that seems to haunt the diaspora, a dark side that feels little remorse when glorifying as martyrs, those who carry out the violent actions of the LTTE.

*Our people.... actually we are peaceful people only. Not like the Braveheart people...¹⁵¹ But cannot always be peaceful only. When wrong thing is happening, our people will fight also because we must fight for right thing. ...Like that we must give respect to our boys (LTTE)... for us, they are like the Braveheart people because fighting for freedom is right thing.'*¹⁵²

It is this 'against the odds', martyr-like struggle and sacrifice of the individual LTTE cadre, men and women who stoically face death for a supposed greater good, that commands respect, reverence and support. Most importantly, as one of my informants put it, such individuals are seen as being 'just like us', only blessed with more courage and conviction.

'I know what you will be saying but I am not celebrating Sinhala deaths. Death will happen in war, even when we have success, our own boys die also.... I am celebrating our life. Tiger victory is life for our people so that is why I am happy...even when our boys die, they are fighting for what they believe, showing their courage... that sacrifice we must respect. ...like this Prabhakaran also will die one day for Eelam...'
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¹⁵⁰ Interview with MRSWB: April 2009

¹⁵¹ A was an ardent follower of 'action movies' and he especially liked the large scale battle scenes in the 1995 movie 'Braveheart', the dramatisation of the life of the Scottish patriot William Wallace who led the resistance against the English during the Wars of Scottish Independence. In the film, the Highland Scots were portrayed as a fierce and warlike people.

¹⁵² Interview with SU: July 2007

¹⁵³ Interview with PRA: April 2007

In explaining his conceptualisation of ‘necropolitics’, Mbembe argues that ‘the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.’ (Mbembe 2003:11) The actions of the LTTE challenge the sovereignty of the state by entering into a reciprocal ‘dialogue of violence’ where Tamils are not only victims but instead, the structures and agents of Sinhala oppression are also made vulnerable. Diaspora support for the LTTE therefore, as repeatedly voiced by many of my informants, is a vote in favour of this ‘democratisation of violence.’ (Keane 2004: 31)

Weber characterised the state as the ‘community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.’ (Weber 2003:78) By fighting and killing for the cause, the LTTE is seen as presenting a competing claim for legitimacy, a legitimacy celebrated across the diaspora at events like the annual ‘Heroes Day’ commemoration. Hellmann-Rajanayagam reminds us however that ‘heroes in LTTE culture are honoured not for killing the Tigers’ enemies but also for their own deaths.’ (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005: 122) It is this salient fact that re-positions again, the emotive content of a message that resonates within the diaspora, the idea that while on the surface, such memorial events ‘express sentiments of mourning and remembrance of the fallen’, their true impact is that ‘in valorizing the ideas’ that underpin the struggle of the LTTE, ‘they help to construct and maintain community.’ (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005:117)

In a diasporic environment where Tamils seek to create a sense of community and social meaning against the backdrop of conflict and displacement, militant activity presents itself as a perverse form of social capital that defines and enhances both itself and the Tamil community as a whole, by virtue of its role in providing an effective challenge to perceived state violence and oppression. Support for the LTTE presents a narrative where ‘the Tamil nation is reproduced ... as something to believe in and as a unifying storyline’ and the protagonist in such a storyline is the LTTE. (Jeganathan in Korf 2006:287) The sense that both the LTTE and the diaspora are embedded within Tamil society and part of a wider ‘community of suffering’ is a viewpoint often brought up and this is fundamental. For many of my informants, support for the LTTE is not presented in jingoistic or bellicose terms but rather as an act of hope born out of desperation, a desire to express solidarity but also to be recognised themselves, as part

of a wider transnational Tamil community in crisis. Almost everybody I encountered in my fieldwork claimed to know at least one person, however remotely, who was or had been, part of the LTTE. Such connections give the struggle waged by the LTTE an intimate and ‘local’ face, underlining the fact that in a somewhat close knit community made up of sprawling networks of transnational affective relationships, such linkages may also provide an additional insight into the very DNA of the logic of diaspora support.

‘For me, when people talk of Tigers, I am thinking of all the boys from my home-place (town). When they say some boys (LTTE cadres) have been killed, I am always thinking this is like my own children.... Like this, LTTE is like part of my own body. All LTT boys are like my own sons because of all I have suffered myself... that suffering you cannot see, only they are knowing... because they also have mothers... that is why they will die for our suffering.’¹⁵⁴

For those in diaspora, the sacrifices of the LTTE enable them in their own lives to re-imagine the concept of place and community within a particular social world. It is in essence a struggle for recognition – the recognition that Tamil grievances and the quest for Eelam is a legitimate cause worth fighting and dying for. This sense of a ‘social world’ as Bourdieu argues, ‘gives what is rarest – recognition...It is capable of giving meaning to life, and to death itself, by consecrating it as the supreme sacrifice.’ (Bourdieu 2000:240) It is this code of meaning that is deciphered, understood and accepted by many in the diaspora, a need to appreciate both the giver and the nature of the gift. It is a form of community building made sacred in the act of its pursuit and thus worthy of what Wood has referred to as ‘moral commitments and emotional engagements.’ (Wood 2003: 18)

Why is LTTE your answer? The many problems I can see but why support the Tigers?) *if we want to win, than LTTE is the only way. They are the ones knowing how to fight war, not just protect one family, win one fight, but win for all Tamil people, win Eelam for Tamil people. Everything we must think – our Tamil people in Sri Lanka, their suffering, what government is doing, also our Tamil people here, why they are here, how they come here..... cannot only think about our place (our own lives). Sri Lanka war is everybody, everywhere war, where got Tamil people, got Sri Lanka war... I am sitting here now (Earls Court) but I am crying...this crying is ‘Sri Lanka war’ crying only... so here also you can find Sri Lanka war...but LTT is the ones who really know this war. For them this war is not just talk, ... or for study like you, this war is about our life. Not for Sri Lanka, London, Germany, Canada ...but*

¹⁵⁴ Interview with MRSRS: December 2007

for all our Tamil people, for our freedom... this is ugly war but for us is freedom war... for Sri Lanka government, what war is this? ’¹⁵⁵

‘Why Eelam you are asking? Do you believe we are suffering genocide? (Is it important what I believe?) Nirad, c ’mon man – if you believe genocide happening, surely everything LTT is doing is ok right? Surely we must fight to survive right? For us, all the Sinhala presidents are like Hitler only. (Do you really believe that is the case?) Hitler time, many people die, many leave Germany right? Now is same, many Tamils are dying, many also leave ... To live we are leaving our homes but also we are still fighting.... LTT is fighting (against) genocide of our own people... You know so much about Sri Lanka but genocide you cannot see because that you don ’t want to see... That is why our people are dying. Nobody wants to see what is happening... just like Hitler time.’¹⁵⁶

The last extract above may seem somewhat extreme but in considering the viewpoints expressed by many others, it does capture a flavour of the desperation many in the diaspora have felt over many years. Such feelings were brought to the fore in 2010, when reviewing the final days of the war against the LTTE in 2009, Jan Jananayagam, a spokesman for the pressure group, ‘Tamils Against Genocide’, stated that ‘it is time the UN recognized the deliberate genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka, and did something before the Tamil people are wiped off the island.’¹⁵⁷ Her comments were primarily based on UN reports that suggested that the number of Tamil civilians killed in the fighting during the final stages of the conflict was ‘anything between ten and forty thousand people.’ (Buncombe 2010)¹⁵⁸ In similar terms, a diaspora website reflecting Tamil expression in 2009, underlined the sentiment of many :

‘If your family was.... being raped, killed and shelled ...what would you do?.. Could you go to work efficiently thinking about your sisters and mothers being kidnapped and raped? Could you remain silent?’ (Sunthar 2009)

Kleinfeld has argued that ‘the heart of establishing a regime as legitimate is its identity as a moral agent’, based on the ability of political actors and institutions to ‘establish a moral grounding’ for their exercise of political power. (Kleinfeld 2005:291) Charges of discrimination, oppression, human rights abuses and war crimes over many years therefore represent a profound critique of the postcolonial Sri Lankan state, challenging the very legitimacy of political rule. For many diaspora

¹⁵⁵ Interview with THOM: September 2008

¹⁵⁶ Interview with BAL: February 2008

¹⁵⁷ cited in TamilNet 2010

¹⁵⁸ For a full assessment of the final stages of the conflict see UN 2011

Tamils, such an indictment of the state also ‘legitimises’ in a perverse way, both the basis of the struggle waged by the LTTE, as well as its use of extreme violence in the pursuit of self-determination. This is the nature of their truth and the diasporic forum has long presented itself as a platform for telling such ‘truths’ about the ongoing conflict. The issue of conflicting ‘truths’ encapsulates the clash of perceptions around which violence has grown and as put forward by Keen, ‘it is important to look at how truth is constructed, who has the right to speak what counts as truth, and whose interpretations of reality are ignored.’ (Keen 2008:15)

For Foucault, ‘each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth...the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.’ (Foucault in Smart: 1994: 235, see also Foucault 1982:182-5) It has often been the case that diaspora opinion regarding the nature of the conflict seems to present its own version of truth and reality struggling to make itself be heard against the claims of official state discourse and international opinion. In various websites, in demonstrations around the world and in diaspora living rooms and kitchens, what is being contested is the truth of the situation ‘*back home*’, a contest of ‘whose knowledge counts’, whose presentation of reality is valid. The response by the diaspora is seen very much as voices raised as a community, seeking to resist what they perceive as the colonizing discourse of the state which seeks to de-legitimise the basis of the Tamil struggle by seeking to colonise and define the nature of the conflict. The force of words in this sense is relevant because as argued by Bhatia, a ‘territory or people are first colonised by words and names before being physically occupied by soldiers’, a situation very much in evidence in the Tamil areas of Sri Lanka and in the minds of many Tamils. (Bhatia 2005:13-14)

Foucault defines discourse as a system of representation which ‘constructs the topic... It governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about.’ (Foucault in Hall 2001:73) Following on from a conception of Sri Lankan state discourse as a nationalism of domination based on what Emmanuel has termed the ‘state-aided colonisation’ of the Tamil people, we can also make the case that ideologically, such ‘colonialism is an operation of discourse’ which ‘interpellates’ its Tamil citizens ‘by incorporating them in a system of representation.’ (Emmanuel in Dobbyn 2011; Tiffin and Lawson 1994:3) The true effect of such powers of representation is that it seeks to

construct and legitimise over time, an internalisation within the marginalized community itself, of ‘elements of thinking and practise that represent the interests of the dominant centre.’ (Green 1999:11)

Butler however provides us with the tools to better understand what we are seeing on the ground, that such frames of interpellation can be challenged, that we do not have to ‘take for granted the sovereign power of the interpellative utterance to bring into being what it names.’ She uses Foucault’s insight that ‘the time of discourse is not the time of the subject’; a subject does not have to accept the interpellation. (Butler in Butler and Salih 2004: 212-3) Rather than being complicit and passive in an acceptance of a colonizing discourse, many diaspora Tamils have embraced the brutal logic and legitimacy of militant nationalism represented by the LTTE, to challenge the efforts of the state to write off the Tamil struggle as a narrative of mindless violence and ‘terrorism to be defeated’ at any cost.

Discourse, to paraphrase Foucault, can also be conceived as a violence that is done to people and in this sense, the willingness of the diaspora to accept and support the violence of the LTTE is fundamentally informed by the fact that official state discourse is directly a challenge to their own narrative identity as it fails to recognize the basis of their own narratives of loss and suffering, undermining the meaning they themselves give to their experiences of violence and displacement within the broad sweep of political history. ¹⁵⁹ Pohlandt-McCormick reminds us that ‘beyond the experience of actual physical violence lies a form of discursive, rhetorical violence that continues to do harm in the minds of people.’ She argues that such violence ‘moves beyond the harm to individuals and coalesces in collective memories and official histories—which may be in tension with one another.’ She presents her own work on South Africa as an attempt to consider,

‘the damage done.... when those who did the physical violence erased the histories of their victims and contrived to create a history that denied their culpability: when violence and silence acted in collusion with each other.’ (Pohlandt-McCormick 2000: 23-44)

¹⁵⁹ Foucault suggests that we should ‘conceive discourse as a violence which we do to things.’ (1972: 229)

In similar terms, for many diaspora Tamils, the current and historical rhetoric of the state and its conceptualisation of the conflict as simply a war against terrorism and terrorists represents a discourse that evades responsibility and accountability for the discrimination, oppression and state-sponsored violence directed against the Tamil people over decades. It is a violence they have suffered first hand, a violence that continues to be inflicted on the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and a violence that also follows them into the place of diaspora. This has meant as put forward by Emmanuel, that when we consider support for the LTTE outside Sri Lanka, we are not talking solely about ‘members of a banned organisation but normal citizens of these foreign countries marching with certain symbols and flags expressing their ideals’, ideals which they carry within them with a deep sense of conviction informed by their own experiences and understanding of their own place within a particular reading of a narrative of conflict that defines them. (Emmanuel 2009a)

**Chapter Five: The View from the Place of Diaspora. Seeing the State through
Diaspora Eyes: Borders in the Formation of Conflict Diaspora Consciousness**

5.1 The Place of Diaspora

**‘We are only what we remember.’
(Gunsekera 1998:180)**

**‘All the time that I have been here...there was a hollow in me where my country was. There is a pain in me ... pain, of being evacuated from my country, I hadn't come to terms with’
(Sivanandan 2000) ¹⁶⁰**

We had just left the tube station and there it was, in the first shop we passed - fresh ‘curry leaves.’¹⁶¹ This was my first visit to South Harrow high street which as my informant A had told me, was dominated by Tamil owned businesses. During the journey, I had asked him if the easy availability of almost all things Sri Lankan in London these days meant that in some way, rather than missing home, the Tamil community had managed to bring a slice of home with them to London. In an interview the next day, A revisited the question posed:

*‘Actually, it is a complicated issue.... LTT always complicated but food also complicated. Before when just come, bachelor time, all boys living together, we cooked our food, rice and curry, very simple. Nowadays we have everything here but really more time I am spending thinking of Sri Lanka. but also why I am here, how I am here.... I worry for my wife’s family, they are still all in Sri Lanka... I am here, my sister and her family also still in Sri Lanka.. I send money, other things also I help. I am the eldest in my family. I hear a lot of bad stories from my sister, from my cousins, from my wife’s family.... I feel lucky for my children.... all safe here.... but also I feel worried for our people there. ... They suffer and we know this suffering.Now everyday, I am talking Sri Lanka... Everything Sri Lanka only. Tamil people all settled here now but still we cannot let go Sri Lanka... you can say, we live in Sri Lanka also. That is the problem but that is our family no? **(But if all your family was away from Sri Lanka, would Sri Lanka still be important for you)**... why only Tamil people must leave Sri Lanka... is Sri Lanka poison for Tamil people... No, I think my family always (will be) part of Sri Lanka... but what I am wanting to say is Sri Lanka also is my family. Country is like family no? You cannot agree sometimes but you cannot forget and go only...that is why I am saying.... for us food, our own family, this is of course important thing to have (in London) but still always we are*

¹⁶⁰ Ambalavaner Sivanandan, a Tamil from Jaffna is director of the Institute of Race Relations in the UK and editor of its journal, Race & Class.

¹⁶¹ A staple in Tamil dishes, though not used much in North Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi cooking and hence not commonly sold in most other South Asian shops.

still in Sri Lanka only.... Like that only I am saying, I eat all Tamil food here but I will always be hungry for Sri Lanka only..... hungry for Eelam.'¹⁶²

In his writing on the practise of fieldwork, Clifford states that long held structures such as 'notions of community insides and outsides, homes and abroads' are increasingly being contested and challenged by 'post-exotic, decolonising trends.' (Clifford 1997: 53) Clifford's analytical focus highlights for me a significant aspect of my own work, both methodologically and analytically. In studying the Tamil diaspora, it quickly became evident that what I was studying was 'a cultural world of individuals, places, memories, and practices.' (Clifford 1997: 55-6) By immersing myself in the world of informants who '*talk Sri Lanka*' on an almost daily basis, I have been able to appreciate and understand what such conversations represent. As another informant put it, it is a means by which they were '*always almost home.*'¹⁶³ Their words in this sense, speak of a 'conversation' within themselves that defines their very experience of life in diaspora, a life that involves relationships, places, experiences, memories and feelings connected to Sri Lanka which takes them '*almost home*' on a regular basis.¹⁶⁴

It was Nov. 2007 and as part of my fieldwork, I had spent the past year helping out in a Tamil owned restaurant in the Earls Court area of London. It was early evening and one of the chefs arrived with a bunch of flowers – which he described as 'karthigaipoo', the Tamil national flower. 'Can they grow here?', I asked, '*Like me, only in Sri Lanka but we are both here now*' was the response. Having attended a pro-LTTE event earlier in the day, the discussion that followed emphasized his sense of a Tamil identity passionately held – he too was always '*hungry for Sri Lanka.*'¹⁶⁵

In the diaspora community, the 'Karthigaipoo' celebrates a metaphysical link with a distant homeland framed in political terms. Its adoption as the National flower in 2003 was a political act by the LTTE and its use and celebration is conceptualised as a

¹⁶² Interview with A: July 2006

¹⁶³ Conversation with KP: December 2006

¹⁶⁴ During interviews and conversation, many of my informants at various points referred to '*talking to Sri Lankan*', '*talking of Sri Lanka*', '*talking about Sri Lanka*' and, '*talking with Sri Lanka*'. I repeat and discuss A's phrase '*talking Sri Lanka*' because rather than a question of grammar, it defines A and many like him. .

¹⁶⁵ Conversation with RV: November 2007

mark of support for the movement.¹⁶⁶ Discussing the symbolism and ‘feeling’ for a national flower which must be flown across borders to serve its function, is at once to face the fact that symbols of identity do not lose their meaning when they traverse borders, anymore so than the sense of identity and belonging carried by refugees and immigrants who form the basis of diaspora communities. Like the symbolism of the flower in question, support for the militant struggle is also conceptualized as being capable of deterritorialization, nurtured and brought to bloom in ‘the native soil’ not of place, but rather in the hearts and minds of diaspora Tamils. (Olwig and Hastrup 1997: 4)

The presentation of the phenomenon of ‘long distance nationalism’ and its conceptual ability to challenge the supposedly ‘fixed location’ of nationalist sentiment has brought diaspora communities under increased scrutiny. The consequence of the formation and effects of an engaged diaspora have already been noted by scholars in the field of international relations who argue that,

‘diasporic practices and politics are a potential source of changes in the spatio-political configuration of identities... since they take place within the interstitial spaces of the existing structural configurations of international politics.’ (Adamson and Demetriou 2007:496)

The focus of such a thesis seeks to provide a theoretical framework for a study of the geopolitics of diaspora. My contention however is that such a thesis would benefit from a more primary level analysis which seeks to interrogate how the ‘place of diaspora’ is viewed and experienced by the individuals who inhabit such space. Such a focus would help us understand the way diaspora communities imagine and construct the diasporic world, enabling us to situate the foundation and ethic of a transnational consciousness within the experiences and everyday lives of those inhabiting the place of diaspora.

I take as my point of departure, a need for a sort of ‘critical geopolitics’ of diaspora, ‘a kind of everyday-life geopolitics’ (Muñler 2008:329) Such an approach can be seen as an effort to ‘re-imagine’ and reconfigure the way we understand the meaning and relationship between territory and politics. (Ó Tuathail and Dalby 1998; Dodds &

¹⁶⁶ see TamilNet 2004

Sidaway 1994) As argued by Muller, it 'examines the very construction and social effects of geopolitical imaginations and geopolitical identities.' (Muller 2008:323) The relevance of this perspective lies in the area of perception and discourse, an interrogation of the 'socio-cultural resources used by people in the construction of meaning about their world and their activities.' (O'Tuathail & Agnew in Muller 2008:325) This can thus be seen as a way to highlight the fact that for many in diaspora, a transnational consciousness is not a theoretical position but rather a very real and significant part of their identity and sense of self, which in turn defines the way they conceive of diasporic space.

This is especially relevant in the case of conflict diaspora communities for it situates diasporic space within a discourse of political violence, war and forced displacement. I will argue that conflict diaspora communities represent a significantly different 'immigrant population' and as such, even within the discourse of diaspora and transnationalism, 'new conceptualizations and a new analytical framework' of thinking is required in order to correctly 'classify' the meaning of the place of diaspora in a time of war. (Basch et al 1997:4) By broadening and integrating our reading of overlapping analytical and conceptual fields, we can better appreciate how the 'everyday- life' of the diaspora can create and articulate 'alternative knowledges' which 'encompass more radical understandings of the political.' Such an appreciation will enable us to capture a better sense of the diaspora condition and an 'understanding of how place is central to particular terrains of resistance.' (Routledge 1996:510) This in turn will also enable us to actually interrogate the content of what has been termed 'long distance nationalism' and in the case of the Tamil diaspora, what such an appetite and hunger for Eelam represents.

The discipline of conflict studies has in many ways been long absent from the academic debates on the nature and significance of the place of diaspora. In early scholarship on the analysis of conflict, a study of the politics of the nation state and its discontents seemed to provide the sole foundation for much of the discourse regarding the nature of conflict. As conflict studies as a discipline became more sophisticated, with a focus on a raft of different conflict processes, the academic literature has delivered valuable insights regarding the need to study conflict at different levels of analysis. This has included a focus on issues like the political economy of conflict and

the nature of transnational shadow economies that arise and even inform modern day conflict paradigms.¹⁶⁷ Just as we had to take a step back from a focus on the internal politics of the state to appreciate exogenous conflict dynamics that cross borders, we now have to cross borders to appreciate the dynamics of a community formed and informed by conflict.

We need to reconfigure how we see things and indeed what we see, when we speak of conflict diasporas and the place of diaspora. The creation of a conflict diaspora can be seen as a sign that a new discourse has entered the lexicon of conflict as former refugees from conflict now re-enter the realm of conflict in a different guise and in the process, the place of diaspora becomes a new front in an ongoing conflict. Such a perspective in the Sri Lankan context is suggested by the Catholic Bishop of Jaffna, who underlined the role of the diaspora in stoking the fires of conflict, arguing that by their support of the LTTE, 'the Tamil diaspora has created this monster. They are the reason for this on-going war.' (Soundranayagam cited in Mahindapala 2008) A similar viewpoint is captured in a statement by a senior advisor to the President of Sri Lanka, who reflects on the 'well known and well documented' agenda of the 'Tamil Diaspora in sustaining and fuelling 20 years of conflict.' (Dhanapala 2005)

Richards makes an appeal for us to analyse war within its 'social context' and not to view it as a 'thing in itself.' His focus is on making us understand that we have to learn to 'read' war as a 'social project' and hence to focus on the society involved in conflict. (Richards 2005:3) If we accept that 'transnationalism challenges the socio-spatial assumptions of community', then our understanding of the perimeters of a society in conflict and the nature of the place of diaspora in a time of war also have to be re-imagined. (Rouse 1991:12) A transnational paradigm underlines the fact that diaspora communities inform and demand a different reading of the political and social landscape, 'challenging our assumptions regarding the simple analytical distinctions commonly made between what is 'internal' vs 'external' to the state.' (Adamson and Demetriou 2007: 503) An engaged and politicized diaspora community born out of violence and conflict suggests that though inhabiting a new national space, such communities inherently create a space of autonomy in the place

¹⁶⁷ Duffield 2000; Pugh & Cooper (Eds) 2004; Keen 1998; Le Billon 2001; Nordstrom 2000

of diaspora that enables them to be still effectively invested in the society left behind. This single conceptualisation calls into question many assumptions of conflict theory, pointing to several salient features that other literatures miss regarding the extent and nature of the domain under study in a time of conflict.

Building on such insights, a key finding in my research is the need to take seriously the visceral potential of a discourse held by many diaspora Tamils that they are indeed in a state of war, produced by war. My contention is that when considering those who inhabit the 'place of diaspora' because of war and in a time of war, events in the homeland, past, present and future are a key determinant and a constitutive part of the diaspora condition for they define the nature of diasporic space. It sometimes seems however that events in the homeland are generally kept apart from theories of diaspora analysis. As argued by Levy and Weingrod,

'.... the growing literature on homelands and diasporas has primarily been focused on the latter: the field is called "diaspora studies," The literature is replete with statements. ...that there is a continuous interaction between them...and yet little attention has actually been given to this topic.'(Levy and Weingrod 2005:14)

For many Tamils, the place of diaspora straddles a borderline between war and peace, both literally and metaphorically. This view of themselves as occupying a place of 'peace that is no peace' seems to be a blind spot in much academic discourse. (Orwell 1945) Tamil diaspora society in this sense, to borrow and modify a concept from Riggs, can be seen to represent a type of 'prismatic society',¹⁶⁸ a society on a continuum of war and peace, a society which inhabits a hybrid psychological space of not war-not peace. (Riggs 1969) What is needed therefore is a more imaginative conceptualization of the 'place of diaspora' in a time of war and how it informs the nature and content of 'long distance nationalism', a dynamic relationship that also seems to suffer from inadequate analysis. Like most phenomena in the social sciences, 'long distance nationalism' does not exist in a void and it is essential to examine the epistemological domain of its production. As put forward by Elazar,

¹⁶⁸ According to Riggs, a 'prismatic society' is an intermediate society which occurs at various points in the continuum of development, i.e., between tradition and modernity, where aspects of both are evident within society.

‘when we do think of location, we tend to think of it simply as a spatial matter — as a matter of being some place. In fact, location has three critical dimensions: spatial, temporal, and cultural... It is necessary to understand all three facets of location in order to understand how people behave and why they behave as they do.’ (Elazar 1999:876)

The process of constructing an identity for a diasporic space in relationship to the state left behind will be argued to constitute a meta-narrative and meta-logic for conflict diaspora members as it plays a significant role in reconstructing their sense of identity and sense of belonging to a wider definition of community in a period of crisis, emphasizing the fact that such diaspora communities are a distinct part of a society at war, informed by a particular relationship to both time and space. It suggests a need to try and understand the trail of tears left behind and the existential crisis engendered for those who find themselves displaced not only from a particular place but also from a particular time and a particular way of being, in short from a particular sense of self. This is not only relevant as an exercise in trying to understand the experiences of conflict diaspora communities but it also provides us with a context that informs the creation of a particular social, cultural and political landscape in the place of diaspora, conceptualised as a traumatic landscape, where those who have seemingly lost everything, confront a situation where the ‘scraps (and) patches of rags of daily life’ as Bhabha says, must be turned into a coherent way of ‘being-in-the-world.’ (Bhabha 2005:209; Daniel 1996:67-68) In this sense, as put forward by Whitehead, the contemplation of such a traumatic landscape ‘teaches us that what we see is always and necessarily a question of how and from where we see.’ (Whitehead 2004:48) This applies as much to our understanding of the place of diaspora as it does to our own sense of perspective when seeking such an understanding, highlighting a need,

‘To take into account not only what co-exists side by side in a country... but what lies outside the spotlight of comparison, in the life-world left behind or brought from one place to the other.’ (Fuglerud and Engebriksen 2006: 1119)

5.2 Conceptualising Diaspora as a Heterotopic 'Borderland Community'

'the terms border and diaspora bleed into one another.' (Clifford 1994:304)

'the diasporic Hindu was no longer a Hindu happening to live abroad, but one deeply transformed by his diasporic experiences.' (Parekh in Vertovec 1997: 11)

Rodgers has argued that commentators tend to pay 'little attention to social and cultural constructions of the ...places occupied by refugees and other forced migrants.' (Rodgers in Turton 2004:15) While much work has actually been done on just such places like refugee camps,¹⁶⁹ I believe that our understanding of diasporic spaces formed and inhabited by former refugees fleeing conflict, still does suffer from just such a conceptual blind spot. A failure to fully appreciate the relevance of such spaces and the experiences and aspirations of the people who inhabit them, tends to depoliticise and marginalize the significance of such communities within the larger narrative of conflict, a conceptual neglect and disregard of a constituent part of the wider community of suffering caused by conflict and war. Such a disregard can be argued to manifest what Sider has conceptualised as 'a destructive silence... about suffering', a failure to see and a failure to say, a situation where it could be argued that the effects of 'violence escapes its analysis.' (Sider in Green 1999:12; Kapferer 2001:35)

*'Many funerals I have attended in Sri Lanka but most important one is when I left..that was my own funeral... that 'funeral' I still remember. Everybody is crying and you don't know where you are going ... I was thinking will London be for me heaven or hell.'*¹⁷⁰

My contention is that we need to conceptualize conflict diaspora members as a community inhabiting a metaphorical borderland site where 'here and there', 'peace and war', 'past and present' all exist side by side, informing and affecting the very consciousness of those displaced by conflict. Reconceptualised as a borderland community in a time of conflict, the diaspora can be seen as carrying a specific stance of transnational potentiality for the subjective social world that they inhabit as

¹⁶⁹ Malkki's body of work in this respect is exceptional in its insight and influence

¹⁷⁰ Interview with CB: December 2006

‘images from one place begin to dominate pictures of another.’(Appadurai 1988:17)
The significance of diasporic space in my analysis is that it has the potential in its own construction to function as a landscape of meaning where counter-narratives can be propagated, underlining the fact that any analysis of such a space needs to highlight ‘the structures of feeling that bind people to geographical units larger or smaller than nations or that crosscut national boundaries.’ (Gupta, 1992:64) An interrogation of the place of diaspora is thus a study of a landscape where just such feelings are interpreted, made flesh and given voice. Brah argues that ‘it is not possible to address the concept of diaspora without considering its relationship to the idea of borders.’(Brah 1996:198) When we consider conflict diaspora communities, a relationship to the idea of borders is one embedded in the narrative and interpretation of conflict for it is in their former incarnation as refugees from violence that the border looms large in their consciousness. As emphasized by Hadad,

‘The refugee is created at the border, where inside and outside meet. She cannot exist solely inside, nor can she exist solely outside. The border is that which ensures her existence.’ (Haddad 2007:121)

For many Tamils, this transformative journey across borders is fundamental as even years later, it is this first crossing of borders that seems to have defined and consolidated their sense of dispossession and vulnerability. My linking of a study of diaspora consciousness with a border discourse is thus heavily informed by the identity of diaspora Tamils as former refugees from conflict, who still carry within them a sense of both ‘inside and outside’, of being created anew out of a legacy of violence and dispossession. While the word ‘refugee’ itself has negative connotations and is not one often used by diaspora Tamils to describe themselves once they are settled in the UK,¹⁷¹ the fact of having left a home to seek refuge somewhere else is a condition that they readily accept, as it speaks of a history and a claim to ‘another place’ and provides the basis for recognition of an identity that they are at pains to ‘explain’ for it in turn explains who they are. This will be further addressed in the next chapter.

¹⁷¹ Such labels of ‘being’ are seen as markers of chronology, status and stability. To be a refugee is to be a ‘newcomer’, someone who has yet to achieve stability. With the acquisition of ‘permanent leave to remain’, stability and a progression to British citizenship is guaranteed. Refugees are also not legally allowed to work until their asylum claims are reconciled and this too is a liability.

A focus on borders can thus be argued to help shape our very perceptions of the life world of such diaspora communities and the nature of the place of diaspora they now inhabit. This is analytically and conceptually necessary to underline the fact that a diaspora consciousness takes on different layers of meanings when it is integrated within the fabric of the geopolitics of conflict, the trauma of forced migration and the engendering of a transnational identity. As Inglis and Bone remind us,

‘The study of borders and boundaries is crucial for the social sciences, not least as regards the need to be constantly engaged in reflexive self-probing of their own analytic orientations and dispositions, lacunae and blind spots. (Inglis & Bone 2006: 273)

Conceiving of a diasporic space as a borderland site does of course have its conceptual tensions with studies of more orthodox borderlands but it is my belief that such an analysis will deliver analytical dividends. Goodhand argues that to start from a borderland perspective involves ‘reading against the grain.’ (Goodhand 2005: 193) It is just such a reading that will enable us to better understand the way those in diaspora actually engage with the idea of borders and processes of bordering. Gupta and Ferguson note that borders do not ‘indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization.’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:18) As such, ‘borders are not to be conceived only as the edges of territory, zones of connectivity, or even spaces of governance.’ (Rumford 2006:166) While political scientists and scholars of international relations focus on the physical reality of borders, anthropologist and sociologists make us alive to the fact that ‘even physical objects such as territory (and borders), are (re) created in and through the human discourse.’ (Forsberg 2003: 7)

When considering diaspora lives, it becomes clear that the idea of borders is defined by both the tangible and perceptual effects of transnational processes that challenge, transgress and re-conceptualize their boundaries. Diasporas in this sense are seen as being a creative force, imbuing diasporic space with a sense of meaning and purpose. To quote Simmel, ‘the border is not a spatial fact with a sociological impact, but a sociological fact that shapes spatially.’ (Simmel in Williams 2003:28) The relationship

of conflict diaspora communities to states and communities left behind thus redefines the social realities and perimeters of conflict and consequence.

*'20 years I have lived in UK. People say can visit Europe - Spain, Italy, Greece.... I have only see Paris and Hamburg and there also, only for family weddings..... For our Tamil people, holiday is family only. Normal time is family also. Business is family ...everything is family only. War also is family only...you ask how I live here, ...for me, big thing is no family ...people look at us here in London but some things they never can see.. my children have here no grandparents.... that thing people cannot see.... for me, when I first come, many years I did not ever see my parents. That also is war...so people can see me but they cannot see me crying for my parents that time. ...Like that, really they cannot see me.... Because for me, always I am living with my family (parents and siblings in Sri Lanka), never mind my family that time really is not here...'*¹⁷²

*'In Sri Lanka, you go out, your family is at home, waiting for you..... Here (in London) for me, anywhere I go, always family is with me only.... they are not in England but they are always with me still.'*¹⁷³

It is the sentiments and perceptions of just such individuals that reveal to us the personal foundations of a transnational consciousness and the reality of a borderland discourse as a means of emphasizing both a consciousness that transcends borders and the vulnerability of a physical reality that suffers its effects. Another of my informants for example told me that he kept photographs of his family arranged around his mirror and for a few seconds everyday, he had the sense that he was back with them in Sri Lanka, in their midst as it were, as he gazed into the mirror.¹⁷⁴ As much as they are defined by the tangible realities of being in diaspora, it is in this discursive sense – border as metaphor and discourse- that we can best seek to begin to capture and give meaning to a parallel sense of reality that is engendered in the hearts and minds of those who actually imagine and hence live such 'in-between' lives.

The concept of border as diaspora discourse makes us alive to the fact that members of a diaspora are not only socially constructed by others or by circumstance or by the states they have left behind or even necessarily by present location, but rather that they themselves also have the power to produce their own metaphors of being and

¹⁷² Interview with SUR: December 2006

¹⁷³ Interview with PRAB: January 2007

¹⁷⁴ He had even asked a friend to take a photograph of his reflection in the mirror surrounded by the photographs of his family He had then sent the photograph back home to his family with the caption – 'Still, I am always there with you.' Conversation with KK: March 2007

meaning. Faced with the usual paradigms of binary distinctions such as ‘Here–There, Us–Them, Include–Exclude, Self–Other and Inside–Outside’, diaspora Tamils seek to define their own sense of reality as a community of experience and as a community of interpretation. (Rushdie 1991:278) Such a ‘reality’ highlights the fact that ‘people do not just ‘experience’ the social world, they interpret it’ in ways relevant to their own consciousness of themselves as social beings within a particular lifeworld. (Wilmer 2003:220) This act of interpretation defines the nature of diasporic space, underlining in a diasporic context, a challenge similar to Malkki’s analytical efforts to challenge the ‘implicit assumption that in becoming torn loose from their cultures, uprooted from their homes, refugees suffer the loss of all contact to the lifeworlds they fled.’(Malkki 1995b: 515)

A topic that often came up in my interaction with my informants was about the whereabouts of my own parents. Apart from being a customary greeting amongst Tamils, asking after my parents and their welfare also seemed in this context to give us a common bond – we all had parents somewhere.¹⁷⁵ An early interaction with one of my informants revealed the fact that his parents had been in an IDP camp. Although he was speaking of a past event, I found myself visibly overcome, thinking of how I would feel if my own parents, already in their late 70s had been forced to live in such circumstances while I was comfortably placed somewhere else. I expressed a degree of concern but my informant laughed:

‘I also used to worry that time, but actually that time also, they are worrying more for me only. Life there for them was hard but for my mother, Sri Lanka things she says she knows... England thing only for her is frightening. That time she say, always she is praying for me only. That time for my family, leaving Sri Lanka was very frightening thing ... that time no friends here, no family... very difficult. Like going to the moon, like England is not on the map also... What will you eat? , Where will you stay? Do you have rice in England? ... everybody was worried for me only. Our people never really travelled that time. My mother never even been to Colombo also. Now all is very different in London for Tamil people but that time going England, going ‘foreign’, was big thing. ’¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Some of my informants had of course lost parents during the course of the conflict but this did not stop them from asking after the welfare of my parents. As I got to know them better, I would often start a meeting with the statement ‘ Parents, brothers, my cats – all fine’

¹⁷⁶ Interview with PP: November 2007

For many, a mother's tears represent the backdrop and chief 'image' of a journey into diaspora. The visceral and symbolic nature of this particular experience is underlined by Mines when she notes that in colloquial Tamil, 'when a person sets off from home on a journey, he or she is said to 'purappatu' (puram + patu, literally, to "experience the exterior"), a word which also euphemistically refers to death.' (Mines 1997: 176) Seeing a son or daughter leave for an unknown future was a mixed blessing – a feeling that they would be safer abroad but also a worry that unknown dangers awaited along the way and in a foreign land. This journey towards an unforeseen 'exterior' was very much seen as a consequence of a conflict that forced families to make very difficult choices that would change their lives forever. For many of my informants, the place of diaspora is a place where the presence of loved ones is defined by their absence. Responses to questions asked always seemed to bring forth these liminal entities who nonetheless seemed to be always present as their thoughts or opinions were expressed in their absence: 'like this only my brother is always saying', 'my father said to say to you', 'like this my mother is feeling', 'my elder brother can explain this story better than me.'

*'How to live normal life here? My brother in Sri Lanka, my parents in Madras. My cousins are in Canada. My sister is in Paris... This I know is not normal life. Just like Sri Lanka only, London is different but still same like Sri Lanka because there also is not normal life for us at this time.... Here always missing family, there always worrying for family.. Only war is like this no? You must leave with no choice.... Where is the real choice? That is like war only. Fight, don't fight. No real choice like that. Only choice for me nowadays is always to give support our people... I can be far but for my people, I am just there only...that is why we are here also so we can help our people...that only is the choice we can make, to work hard so we help our people... You can say, this restaurant is only existing because of war.'*¹⁷⁷

The crux of my argument here is that diasporic spaces should be theorized as having an ongoing contextual relationship to conflict zones left behind. As my informant above puts it, it is a relationship that situates them in a place that is 'different but still same', a place where empty chairs remind you of absent family but where constant thoughts of such family members seem to populate an empty room with their presence, a presence that constantly reminds you of the threat they still face in their own daily lives and hence a threat that increases your own sense of vulnerability. By

¹⁷⁷ Interview with KG: June 2007. He was talking about a Sri Lankan restaurant he had helped to set up, where the interview was taking place.

the 'placing of boundaries and borderlands at the center of our analytical frameworks, as opposed to relegating them to invisible peripheries', we can situate such diaspora communities back at the heart of a conflict paradigm, giving them back their identity as a community violently dislocated and displaced and yet 'emplaced' by war and its consequences. (Malkki 1992: 24) As alluded to by my informants above, it is a way to see members of a diaspora community as complete human beings, and hence to appreciate both the deprivations which inform their lives but also the way that they create and engender other discourses of being that bind them to communities left behind and place them within the daily realities of such communities.

For many of my informants, there is a need to apportion culpability and blameworthiness, to answer a specific question posed: 'who is to blame for my being here?' Forced to exist in a borderland zone between war and peace, many seek in their own lives to bring meaning to the 'place' they now inhabit, a place created and politicised by the politics of conflict in a distant land. Sangarasivam makes the point that beyond the easy labels of civil war in 'far- away places', most people cannot imagine the 'realities of people who live with war.' (Sangarasivam 2001: 96) For Sangrasivam, her identity as a Tamil was a significant issue in the 'politicised spaces of nationalism and violence in Sri Lanka', where she was viewed 'as the enemy' by soldiers and had to 'survive everyday fears of interrogation, arrest, detention, torture, disappearance, and death.' (Sangarasivam 2001: 95, 96-97)

Thinking about the nature of 'space' as a conceptual category, Clifford has argued that, 'space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced.' (Clifford 1997: 54) Just like Sangarasivam's encounter with 'politicised spaces', my own work suggests that it is the desecration and alienation of 'place' by the politics of ethno-nationalism suffered by many Tamils in Sri Lanka that has resulted in the creation of a politicised diasporic space that comes with a sense of responsibility and a duty to bear witness. Identity formation, both in terms of one's own identity as well as that of 'the enemy' is consolidated within diasporic space, where past and present images meet and as such, it is the role of 'place', of being in diaspora because of war that inscribes itself onto diaspora consciousness, a consciousness that they too not only 'live with war' but that they are defined by war. In the case of conflict diaspora communities reigned in opposition to the state left

behind, it underlines the fact not only that ‘nation and nation-state are not identical’, but also that they are often locked in an ‘intimate’ relationship of violent confrontation. (Clifford 1994: 307) In the Sri Lankan context, it is the violence of the ethno-nationalist state that has brought the place of diaspora into existence and it is from the place of diaspora that such ‘nationalist narratives are being brought under increasing critical scrutiny by those marginalized or excluded from them.’ (Gupta 1992:76) Bastian underlines the consequence of just such a dynamic, observing that,

‘The war forced a large section of the Tamil population to migrate.... this population became a formidable force in support of the separatist struggle.’ (Bastian 2009: 88)

It is a consciousness of being part of a society in conflict and a community at war, that informs the fact that for many who inhabit diasporic space, support for the LTTE represents a form of articulation that they are part of the Tamil struggle. Ironically, Bastian highlights the fact that diaspora activity in trying to challenge and undermine the state has led in no small part to a belief ‘within the majority Sinhala population and mainstream political parties’ that the ‘state was under threat.’ (Bastian 2009: 88) The relevance of Tamils who cross borders and occupy the place of diaspora in this dynamic is underlined by the words of former president J.R. Jayewardene, who reacting to their high levels of advocacy and activism in Western states, referred to them as ‘the world’s most powerful minority.’ (Cited in Wilson 2000:123) As far as many ordinary Sinhalese are concerned, diaspora Tamils represent a threat from abroad but a threat metaphorically camped out just on the borders of the state. The ‘place of diaspora’ is enemy territory and the personification of the Tamil diaspora as the ‘enemy’ is clear as evidenced in various Sinhalese media platforms. The following is just one example of this viewpoint, an excerpt that ‘celebrates’ the death of the LTTE leader Prabhakaran, with a particular focus on those who inhabit the place of diaspora.

‘The mighty Sri Lankan army crushed the LTTE... All you coolies that clean toilets in foreign countries can do is to shout and stink up a place. You coolies jumped up and down for months but did you achieve anything? You coolies will never be able to challenge the Sri Lankan people. It must be tough to live like a second-class citizen with no country to call your own. Just stay away from Sri Lankashout..shout..march..march..beg..beg.. == NOTHING!!’¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ SiberNews 2009

The opinion expressed above, crude and taunting as it may be, ‘situates’ the diaspora within the very discourse of conflict, in just such a borderland region of involvement between war and peace which they themselves recognise and accept. In one of Foucault’s lesser-quoted works, he introduces the concept of heterotopic space, a place of ‘otherness’ where the hegemony of the norm and all grand narratives are contested. As put forward by Foucault, ‘our epoch is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites’ and my contention is that diasporic space in a time of war speaks of just such a significant relationship, embedded in what Foucault refers to as ‘relations of propinquity.’ My conceptualisation of heterotopia as an analytical tool to approximate, interrogate and represent diasporic space is to underline the fact that the idea of borderland space occupied by conflict diasporas should be seen as having the capacity to function as just such a ‘counter site’, bound up in a spatial and visceral relationship with a war zone in a distant land. (Foucault 1986:24)

Instead of keeping our analysis separate when we consider such different sites of engagement, we should instead look for the set of relations that define a site, relationships which cross borders and underline the fact that we do not live in a void but rather that we live ‘inside a set of relations’ that constitute who we are. (Foucault 1986:23) For Foucault, heterotopic space is a site that has the potential ‘to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.’ (Foucault 1986:24) In this sense, when considering the landscape of diaspora lives, it encourages us to reflect on the nature of things elsewhere that we may otherwise overlook or rather not factor into our present consideration of things as they seem to us.

The place of diaspora conceptualized as heterotopic space can give us a deeper sense of this relationship – a space at once real and different but locked into a relationship with another place. While my aim is to make the argument that diasporic spaces are very much connected to and defined by the discourse of conflict in a homeland left behind in complex ways, its conceptualization as a space of heterotopic ‘otherness’ allows us to see this space not as a mere extension of a state left behind but as a space with its own discourse of meaning and representation. (Foucault 1986:24-6) Using heterotopic space as a conceptual lens to think about a discourse of borders and a

borderland community in a time of war allows us to juxtapose diasporic space seen as a heterotopic borderland space, with orthodox ideas regarding the nature of diaspora lives which are ‘externalised’ from homeland processes. This enables us to challenge and unsettle such ideas, to rupture the orthodoxies inherent in the order of things and to ask ourselves what such orthodoxies prevent us from understanding. (cf Malkki 1995b)

Heterotopic space functions as an alternate landscape where identities can be fashioned and refashioned. Free from oppression and subservience to a state left behind, a diasporic borderland space seen as heterotopic space enables those in diaspora to engage with different representations and narratives of identity, place and voice in a ‘non-native’ environment. This underlines the fact that conflict itself can be conceptualised as a ‘theory of rupture’ and it is only out of this process of rupture that a diasporic space is constituted. (cf Appadurai 1996:3) If the national space in Sri Lanka is seen as a ‘space where what is considered marginal can only occupy a position of subservience’, the place of diaspora represents a constituency that seeks to redefine that space. (Ho and Rambukwella 2006:77) My use of the term ‘native’ is a calculated effort to echo and revisit Appadurai’s work on the incarceration of the native and the broader need to challenge the scourge of methodological nationalism in the social sciences. For Appadurai,

‘the critical part of the attribution of nativeness..... is a sense that their incarceration has a moral and intellectual dimension. They are confined by what they know, feel, and believe.... prisoners of their mode of thought.’(Appadurai 1988: 37)

A heterotopic borderland space however can be understood as a space where the ‘deeply metaphysical and moral dimensions’ of subaltern representations can be challenged and contested and where the discourse of identity can be re-imagined subjectively as ‘natives’ escape the realm of their ‘incarceration’ and ‘confinement’ and represent themselves across borders of time and space. (Malkki 1992:29; Appadurai 1988: 37) As put forward by Burrows who links the concept of heterotopia to representations of trauma in postcolonial settings, ‘the notion of heterotopia lends itself to postcolonial critiques and analysis because both are quintessentially about otherness and social ordering.’(Burrows 2008:165) Through this lens, the state left behind is brought center stage as the ‘ the primary conceptual

‘other’ against which diaspora is defined’ in ‘a battle of the imagination, with state and nation seeking to cannibalize one another.’(Brubaker 2005:12; Appadurai 1996:39)

It is worth noting that until Foucault published his meditations on heterotopia, the word was primarily a medical term attached to the study of anatomy and referred to the displacement of a bodily organ from its normal position. (Hetherington in Burrows 2008) In terms of the body of a community torn asunder through violence and displacement, one can argue that a heterotopic ‘diagnosis’ of diasporic space is relevant in quite a literal manner. To be a diaspora Tamil, is to be a person physically emplaced yet emotionally and existentially ‘out of place’ and ‘out of time’, bound up in a heterotopic relationship with a society and community left behind, where to be displaced is never to be fully absent but rather to have one’s absence transfigured.

An engagement with the idea of heterotopic space enables us to interrogate the nature of this ‘absence’ that is an integral part of the conflict diaspora condition. Diaspora Tamils carry with them a sense of the absence that defines them, absence from a homeland, absence from a part of who they are, absence from a trajectory of life that seemed to encompass all that they could envisage. In this sense, the diaspora inscribes itself on the Sri Lankan landscape not by its presence but rather by the presence of its absence, but it is this absence and presence abroad instead, that actually enables them, with their increased freedom to protest, opportunities for mobilization and fund raising and increased relative wealth, to emerge reborn in the Sri Lankan landscape, their links and loyalties to place and society, reconfigured and transformed but still valid and relevant. For many, their consciousness of being part of a wider Tamil society is thus as Foucault would have it, ‘absolutely real.’ (Foucault 1986:24).

‘My life is there, inside Sri Lanka. That is real feeling for me....if you cannot understand this thing, everything you cannot understand Always I am saying...I am living inside Sri Lanka only.’¹⁷⁹

For many diaspora Tamils, the description ‘inside Sri Lanka’ has a peculiar significance. Das juxtaposes an environment of violence and suffering on the one hand with scenes of ordinary lives on the other, presenting them metaphorically as the

¹⁷⁹ Interview with KG: June 2007

two opposite shores of a flowing river. She asks the question if we can ‘see the two shores together within a single frame’, positing the view that even if one is tempted to just ‘cast away these images (of violence) from the shore of everyday experience’, one still has to question what such ‘brutalisation did to the experiences of self, community, and nation.’ (Das 1996:68-9) Das’s metaphor is especially relevant when considering conflict diasporas as it forces us to reconsider just what it means to be part of a transnational community born out of the context of war and forced migration, where the everyday ‘normality’ of ordinary life is both profoundly affected and constituted by past trauma as well as by the continued sense of ongoing suffering as part of a community at war; the claims of violence, past and present knocking at the ‘threshold within which the scenes of ordinary life are lived.’ (Das 1996:68) This sense of a continuing existential crisis will be further developed in the next chapter.

Foucault argues that there are ‘oppositions that we regard as simple givens’, ‘that our institutions and practices have not yet dared to break down.’ (Foucault 1986:23) The orthodox representation of long distance nationalism speaks volumes about the need to try and situate conflict diaspora communities analytically within the realm of actual conflict. Such representations underline the fact that we are still unable to fully appreciate the significance that a legacy of conflict and violence experienced and the visceral claims of a non-state ‘imagined community’ may have for members of a conflict diaspora in a time of war. Diasporic space and those who inhabit it are still theorized as external to the mainframe of conflict analysis and long distance nationalism is thus conceptualised in literal terms, as a long distance relationship that lacks the commitment of authentic concern and involvement and the proximity and understanding of intimate experience. For many Tamils however, such a mode of analysis fails to capture the essence of their own experience of being ‘present’ in diaspora, external spatially to the state left behind and yet fully ‘present’ within the history and continuing atrocity and trauma of its politics.

An understanding of the place of diaspora as a heterotopic borderland space gives us a new vocabulary to conceptualise and understand the pain and commitment that infuses such communities and the relationships that define their sense of being both a community of suffering and interpretation. I draw attention to this because it marks for me, a dimension of the diaspora condition which is often unnoticed, a tension

between the collective pain and passion many of them feel with regards to events, past, present and future in a distant homeland, juxtaposed with the fact that they now live in an environment where those events seem to barely register within the wider public discourse.

An informant once told me about an incident where he was talking with other immigrants – a Pole, a Georgian and an Egyptian, the ‘usual suspects’ in the catering industry in London. He was telling them about the death of his cousin during an attack by the military. His village was ‘*accidentally hit*’ in a battle between the LTTE and the army. His main feeling was that while they were sympathetic, they reacted to his narrative as though it was indeed a truly unfortunate accident and the conversation soon turned to instances where relatives and friends had died in accidents, with the Pole recounting how his brother had died in a car accident. For my informant, what was difficult to accept was the awareness that his own ‘*story*’ and the politics of the struggle in Sri Lanka was a blank slate to many of his listeners, its authenticity and significance not immediately acknowledged and even sometimes doubted. As he said, ‘*it is not (a) story they tell in Poland.*’

*‘they are saying here we are all same only, ‘other place’ people (immigrants) only Mehmet (the Egyptian) is claiming for asylum to stay, better money here he says... and I also was last time (a) refugee (claiming asylum). Like that, we are all ‘same same’... My story (is) just one more story only.’*¹⁸⁰

His use of the word ‘story’ referred to his experience of hearing many ‘refugee stories’, narratives concocted by those seeking a right to live and work in the UK under somewhat dubious pretences. Like many diaspora Tamils, he saw himself in a different category from such individuals because in his mind, this place of diaspora which was locked in an embattled relationship with a homeland in conflict, had special meaning to him. Many of his family members were still in Sri Lanka and for him, the war was a place he still visited in nightmares, a place that he could not ‘escape.’ For conflict diaspora members, the place of diaspora thus ‘has a different meaning ... because they inhabit it differently.’ (Ashcroft 2000:157) Many of my informants struggle with just such a daily reality, that while they may feel themselves to be in a ‘state of war’, the wider public just does not identify with a conflict that is

¹⁸⁰ Interview with RAV: November 2007

often grossly underreported in the mainstream British media, its atrocity ‘unrecognizable’ because of an accepted attitude that such conflicts do happen ‘out there’ in foreign countries.¹⁸¹ When I consider the voices of the diaspora, one of the seminal bylines of postcolonial scholarship comes to mind. The issue may very well be not only ‘can the subaltern speak’ but also the question that if she can speak, who is listening? (Spivak 1988)

While the mainstream British public may be indifferent to the conflict in Sri Lanka, what is important is the fact that for many families within Sri Lanka, the identity of those in the diaspora is clear, for it is a reflection of their very selves, members of their own family who continue to contribute to the well-being of the family and to be involved with the wider society left behind. In this sense, the Tamil diaspora is involved in an ongoing conversation with the Tamil community still in Sri Lanka. Vertovec underlines the importance of such ‘conversations’ which form the basis of a ‘transnational social reality’ by noting ‘the bifocality of many people left behind... whose lives are still transformed by the transnational activities and ideologies among those who actually move.’ (Vertovec 2004a: 976) Reviewing the different stages of the Tamil struggle, the Former Catholic Vicar General of Jaffna makes particular reference to what he calls ‘the ‘peoplisation’ of the struggle ... a whole people – within and without.’ Emmanuel makes the case that in the context of the conflict, it is ‘the Tamils who are suffering in silence’ in Sri Lanka who bend their ears towards the voices of those in diaspora, for they themselves do not have the ‘strength to stand up or speak up for themselves’, emphasizing a belief that ‘the only people who can help.... are the Diaspora.’ (Emmanuel 2009b; 2009a)¹⁸²

In a time of conflict, it is the place of diaspora therefore that can be argued to represent both a refuge and a home for the hopes and aspirations of an embattled community, underlining an important insight from Peter Rose, who in his study of exile, notes that ‘when the sense of home includes those who are in exile, then exile

¹⁸¹ see Langer 1996. It is often said disparagingly of Tamils in diaspora who do not show interest in events in Sri Lanka, that they have become ‘English’

¹⁸² Presently based in exile in Germany, S. J. Emmanuel now functions as the elected President of the ‘Global Tamil Forum’, an umbrella group of world wide diaspora organizations

itself may also be a home.’ (Rose 2005:22)¹⁸³ This sense of a home away from home can be conceptualised as a place of meaning where the diaspora seeks to represent both itself and its experience and perception of conflict in its own voice. Clifford argues that a study of diasporas provides ‘resources for emergent post-colonialisms’ and in the Sri Lankan context, this is indeed relevant for as argued in the previous chapter, much of the conflict can be conceptualised as a failure of the postcolonial nation-building project and the Tamil diaspora are both the victims and products of this failure and in this sense, the civil war is very much a part of who they are and why they are ‘out of place.’ (Clifford 1994:302) It is the effects of conflict that give them their place and voice in diaspora and as noted by other scholars, ‘theorizations of diaspora... should not be divorced from historical and cultural specificity.’ (Brazier & Mannur 2003: 3) Away from the hegemonic gaze of the nation state left behind, a diaspora community can thus be argued to imbue diasporic space with just such epistemological constructions regarding its own history, identity, sense of belonging and sense of purpose in a time of war.

¹⁸³ A Tamil mother recounted to me a story concerning her son who had been left in Sri Lanka with his grandparents because his father has been killed and the mother had decided that she would try and get settled, before bringing her son over to the UK. This period of separation has endured for about 6 years. At age 10, still in Sri Lanka, the boy had got lost one day in his neighbourhood. When asked where his home was, he had replied ‘Earls Court’, the area in London where his mother lived. She had repeatedly told him over the years that this was his home but that in the meantime, he had to stay at his grandparents’ house. For the boy, his mother had remained in a deeper sense, the receptacle of his own ‘sense of home’ – home as the place of a relationship rather than an imaginary place in West London.

5.3 Diaspora Voices, Emplaced and in Action: The Death of Prabhakaran and the Disruption of the Number 12 Bus to Oxford Circus

**‘It's not against a community... I'm talking about terrorists. Anything is fair.’
(G. Rajapaksa¹⁸⁴ quoted in Buerk 2007)**

**‘This is not a war against the LTTE as the Sinhala state professes. This is a war against the Tamils; against the Tamil nation. In short, a genocidal war.’
(Prabhakaran 2008)**

**'territory is without doubt a geographical notion, but it's first of all a juridicopolitical one: the area controlled by a certain kind of power.'
(Foucault 1980: 68)**

On 18 May 2009, as news of the death of LTTE leader Prabhakaran began to filter through from the battlefield in the Vanni region of Sri Lanka, via the internet to the streets of London, hundreds of Tamils began to crowd along the streets of Westminster, blocking off roads and bringing traffic to a standstill around Parliament Square. The flags of the LTTE were very much in evidence¹⁸⁵ and the crowds were chanting, “*Prabhakaran, Our leader*”, “*Tamil Tigers, Freedom Fighters*” and “*We are, Tamil Tigers*”. The Sri Lankan flag was set on fire and hundreds cheered. Under the statue of Churchill in Parliament Square, as part of an ongoing protest demonstration, a mass of banners and placards had been erected, putting forward various ‘demands’ such as “*Stop Bombing Schools, Hospitals & Churches*”, “*Stop Killing Innocent Tamil Kids & Civilians*” and “*Tamil State is The Only Democratic Mandate*”, to name but a few.

By January 2009, government troops had finally captured the town of Killinochi, the stronghold of the LTTE for the past ten years. The LTTE had faced repeated military setbacks and by the early months of 2009, were finally hemmed into a narrow strip of land in the northeast, along with thousands of civilians. The plight of the civilians trapped in the war zone seemed to mobilize the global Tamil diaspora and protests and demonstrations were held in cities across the US, Australia, Canada and across Europe. On 31st Jan 2009, between fifty and one hundred thousand British Tamils staged a march through central London, condemning the slaughter of Tamil civilians

¹⁸⁴ Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary

¹⁸⁵ In earlier demonstrations, the police had acted to remove such flags and Tamils had generally refrained from displaying them.

by the state.¹⁸⁶ Tamils of all ages from all walks of life were present, many sporting mock bloody bandages to highlight the carnage of the conflict. Red and yellow flags, the Tamil national colours were everywhere, symbolising the demand for an independent Tamil state and various banners and homemade signs called for an end to the genocide of the Tamil people. The crowds chanted various slogans including demands for the lifting of the ban on the LTTE in the UK.¹⁸⁷ A second march of more than 100 000 people also went ahead on April 11, 2009.¹⁸⁸ At both these events, through the wearing of t-shirts and scarves, and the carrying of banners and in various chants, the support of the Tamil diaspora for the LTTE was very much in evidence.

From the 6th of April 2009, Tamils in London began a daily protest in the square adjacent to the Palace of Westminster. Two of the protestors, Sivatharsan Sivakumaraval and Prameswaran Subramaniam began a hunger strike to try and force the British government to intervene to stop the conflict and the killing of civilians.¹⁸⁹ This protest vigil continued day after day and became a focal point for diaspora disquiet as hundreds of Tamils gathered there at all hours, carrying banners and chanting slogans. They accused the Sri Lankan government of genocide and urged the international community to act to stop the killing of innocent civilians.¹⁹⁰

As stated in their literature, given out to the public in support of their demonstration, they explained that, “ it is the Tamil Diaspora alone, who is in any position to freely express the political will of their brethren in Sri Lanka...” Significantly, they referred to themselves in all their literature as ‘fellow British citizens.’ In speaking to many of those there, my own impression has been that while their chants and slogans reveal a focus on their identity as Tamils first and foremost, much of their discussion in informal ‘interviews’ drew heavily on their parallel identity as British citizens, emphasizing their identity as a diaspora community, inhabiting diasporic space yet

¹⁸⁶ A report on the march can be found on TamilNet 2009a. My own comments are based on my attendance and observation, field notes and informal interviews.

¹⁸⁷ A petition to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown signed by thousands of Tamils was formally presented to the British Government. See Appendix C for the text of the petition.

¹⁸⁸ see BBC 2009a; also TamilNet 2009c

¹⁸⁹ The two individuals vowed to fast unto death but fortunately neither carried out their threat. Their effort however, while it lasted, staged in a tent in Parliament Square, was the focal point of the demonstration see Daily Mail 2009a

¹⁹⁰ See Appendix D for a list of the ‘charges of genocide’ cited by the demonstrators in their literature.

still 'haunted' by events in Sri Lanka, a mode of feeling similar to many of my own informants.

*'I always feel hunted, haunted.. how you say? (both are good actually. What do you mean?)...I cannot forget... cannot let go, cannot walk away.'*¹⁹¹

Many of those interviewed did indeed feel that the war against the LTTE was a war against the Tamil people as a whole and hence it was also their war. As one man put it,

*'We are all the same Tamil people only, all in Europe, UK, America, Canada, Sri Lanka – we are Tamil only... the government say(s) they are fighting the Tigers only but Tigers and Tamil people are same only...where else (are the) Tigers from, but from our Tamil people only....'*¹⁹²

The show of strength throughout 2009 by diaspora Tamils was the culmination of a process that had a long gestation period.

*'All our people are like Clarke Kent, like Batman. Superheroes. No... of course (we are) not like superheroes. Prabhakaran only is superhero, he is 'Rambo-karan'¹⁹³ (laughing)... But all of us have secret jobs. Most of the time, restaurant job, petrol station job but real job is to help Tamil people in Sri Lanka only.'*¹⁹⁴

The place of diaspora has never been a neutral venue as far as conflict diasporas like the Tamils are concerned. In their own 'cultural world of individuals, places, memories, and practices', the diaspora reveals itself, regardless of our ability to be aware of their presence or the content of their motivations. (Clifford 1997:56) For many, the 'job' of that identity is to support the actions of the LTTE and to challenge the narrative of the state from a position of strength.

In the early years of the Tamil exodus however, Prabhakaran had described the diaspora as the 'lost generation' (*tholaintha santhathi*). It was generally accepted that the LTTE regarded such people who had 'left the homeland' (*pulam peyarnthor*) with

¹⁹¹ I had been invited to attend the demonstration by one of my informants who was involved in providing food on site. Conversation with GU: April 2009.

¹⁹² Interview: April 2009

¹⁹³ An allusion to the film character 'Rambo' as portrayed by Sylvester Stallone. Rambo is presented as a tough and effective warrior, always on the side of good.

¹⁹⁴ Conversation with GU: April 2009

contempt, for in leaving, they had abandoned the struggle at a critical juncture. (Jeyaraj 2009) A Tamil poem, 'Lament of the Diaspora' underlines such sentiments, juxtaposing the contrast between those who lead 'an obscure life abroad' and enjoy 'the relative security of the asylum country' and those who heed 'the siren song of country and cause.' (cited in Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2005: 136-7) Over the years however as diaspora activism, organization and funding for militant activities have gathered pace, such judgements ceased and the place of diaspora has been embraced, celebrated as a powerful asset, a resource to be harnessed and employed in the service of the struggle.

The diaspora has managed to create over a relatively short time, enclaves of habitation that in various ways have begun to emplace a sense of Tamil-ness in London. The physical signs of such emplacement are the most obvious - the grocery shops with a wealth of foodstuffs catering to the Tamil palate, the boutique shops selling the latest in South Indian fashions, the jewellery shops which specialise in gold and other ornaments for weddings as well as the various outlets selling a variety of Tamil magazines and newspapers, alongside an extensive range of the latest DVD movies and audio CDs. All these shops bustle with customers and the sounds of conversational Tamil fill the air, above the almost compulsory sounds of Kollywood¹⁹⁵ music, which seem to follow you from shop to shop, ushering you out of one and beckoning you into another.

This physical manifestation of a need to create familiarity, to embed one's identity in one's environment can be read as a sign of the growing empowerment and confidence of a diaspora community that has begun what Ashcroft refers to as the 'discourse of habitation.' (Ashcroft 2000:172) More than the creation of physical structures, such a discourse speaks of the social production and celebration of a sense of community. For a conflict diaspora community, it is a statement of survival, defiance and resilience. Through inhabiting, appropriating, and negotiating an ethic of 'being in diasporic space', the Tamil community has been able to re-find and re-define itself with regards to a homeland left behind. As put forward by Ashcroft, 'habitation is

¹⁹⁵ Kollywood, as opposed to Mumbai based, Hindi, 'Bollywood' cinema, is the Chennai-based Tamil language filmmaking industry.

more than the occupying of a location, it is itself a way of being.’ (Ashcroft 2000:158-9)

‘In Sri Lanka, government say my number one son is criminal, terrorist. Here, my number two son is professional person but he also is doing help for our people in Sri Lanka. If he is in Sri Lanka, he will be terrorist also. Like that only, for government, all our boys are terrorists only... . They can take you, put you in jail and then suddenly you are terrorist and me, suddenly I am like ‘Osama amma!’ (The mother of a terrorist, a reference to Osama Bin Laden)... This is big power they are having there. Like the Devil they can do this bad things but here, God is with us...’

The extract above, relayed to me in a Tamil household kitchen by a mother, surrounded by other mothers, highlights a particular aspect of the meaning of the place of diaspora – the power to provide a space for empowerment and aspiration. Having embraced a subjective realm of knowledge and awareness, she was able to challenge what she saw as the ability of the state to define the very vocabulary of the conflict. Her point underlines the fact that to her and arguably for much of the Tamil community as a whole, her sons, (even the one supposedly active in the LTTE) are not terrorists. While the label of ‘terrorist’ for ‘*number one son*’ may of course be a subject for debate, it is with regards to ‘*number two son*’ that her point is most forcefully made. To her, the place of diaspora enables her second son to be the person he wants to be, free from the ability of the government to ‘define’ him, imprison him and thus label him as a criminal because of his support for the LTTE.¹⁹⁶

‘You see my St Christopher¹⁹⁷. Always I am wearing because he only brings us all here. That is why this is special place for us. In Sri Lanka, I pray for help and now I am here so like that, we must try and help other people also.’¹⁹⁸

The potential of the place of diaspora to provide the resources for Tamils to challenge official Sri Lankan state discourse is underlined by Ashcroft’s insight that ‘as soon as we make this tropic connections between spatiality and epistemology, between the boundaries of space and those of knowledge, we are drawn inexorably to the issue of

¹⁹⁶ Arendt’s theoretical paradigm of ‘action-as propaganda’ as well as Foucault’s work on ‘governmentality’ could also be employed here to interrogate the power of governments to define what is and is not legal or criminal and how such illegality should be policed or disciplined (Arendt in Keen 2008: 89-90; Foucault 1991:87-104)

¹⁹⁷ She was referring to a medallion that she wore around her neck. In Catholic hagiography, St Christopher is venerated as the patron saint of travel and travellers.

¹⁹⁸ Group Conversation with MRST: April 2008

power.’ For Ashcroft, this is a process whereby individuals ‘inhabit a network of relations which constitutes’ their sense of place and ‘to inhabit place is...to inhabit power.’ He concludes his point with a statement that could be taken as a motto for the emergent potential of a diaspora community: ‘to transform one’s place is to engage the boundaries of power.’ (Ashcroft 2000:172) For diaspora Tamils however, the boundaries of power they seek to challenge lie in Sri Lanka.

‘Do you think we are only here when other people look at us? I have been in London now for 20 years... You said we are all British Asian. But we are also Sri Lankan. We are Tamil. We are British now but first is the war, our war...because of this war only we are now British but because of this war also, we are Tamil... First is what is happening in Sri Lanka. The first thing for us is what ‘our boys’ (the Tigers) are doing. That is who we are... There is a war in Afghanistan... that is not our war. Iraq also... not our war. Do people care about our war? Just here now, every day for us is our war, no need to go Afghanistan.... I remember once after Rajiv¹⁹⁹ was killed, one of my English colleagues asked me why we wanted to break away from India! I have known him for so many years but to him, I am ‘Asian’ so I must be from India only... Sometime I want to shout... Eelam! Eelam... People will think I am mad and then I can explain. Then they will listen and remember... we are Tamils from Sri Lanka. I watch Afghanistan on TV, I read about Afghanistan in the papers but our Sri Lanka war is more real for me because this is our war.... all Tamils here are involved in this war.’²⁰⁰

The development of a strident Tamil diaspora identity challenges the original perceptual framework within which most Tamils in London initially operated when they first arrived as refugees and asylum seekers. Many told me that their early lives in London were marked by a desire to be ‘invisible’ due to their status as refugees, their employment within the black market, their fear of British bureaucracy in various forms as well as their lack of fluency in English and general awkwardness in being in a European country where they did not really understand the norms of behavior. While hoping to achieve this state of invisibility, many Tamil also discovered that a state of invisibility was thrust onto them by virtue of their status as asylum seekers, living on the margins of an already established society.

‘Do you know this invisible man story? That only was my story. When first we are coming, nobody sees me, I also cannot see me.... In Sri Lanka, people know me, I have good job, and people know my family. Here, that time, I look at me also, I don’t

¹⁹⁹ Rajiv Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India was assassinated by an LTTE suicide bomber in India in May 1991.

²⁰⁰ Interview with MRAR: May 2008

*see me (I did not recognize the person I had become) but always inside I know what all I have suffered...that only is my 'tomtom'²⁰¹ for going for Eelam.'*²⁰²

As the community began to grow in number and as more and more were granted British citizenship, the confidence of the diaspora has grown significantly over the past decade. A key insight from much of my engagement with diaspora members is that their interest in participating in a wide range of events which focus on their identity as part of a Tamil diaspora community is often framed in terms of no longer wanting to be invisible, a desire to emphasize their identity as British Tamil Sri Lankans, to be recognized as such by the British public but especially for their identity and their voices to be 'registered' by the Sri Lankan state. Myerhoff makes the point that 'one of the most persistent but elusive ways in which people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves.' (Myerhoff 1986:261) The desire of my informants to articulate their transnational affiliation with the Tamil community in Sri Lanka and with events in Sri Lanka suggests just such an effort. The demonstrations and marches in 2009 in London, in which thousands of Tamils participated was especially 'celebrated' as testimony to the fact that they were no longer politically invisible in the context of the Sri Lankan conflict but instead were vocal emissaries for their community in a time of crisis for all. Their 'pride' in such events is palpable and seemed to counter the 'invisibility and the disturbing psychological and social consequences of being unnoticed' which many felt that they had been laboring under to some degree. (Myerhoff 1986:263) A vibrant and politicised identity in the place of diaspora enabled them, in Myerhoff's words, to create a platform where,

'by denying their invisibility, isolation, and impotence, they made themselves be seen, and in being seen they came into being in their own terms, as authors of themselves.' (Myerhoff 1986:263)

Drawing on ideas from Cohen, Manz makes the point that in conflict situations, 'there is the atrocity triangle, composed of victims, perpetrators, and observers.' (Manz 2008:158) Rather than presenting themselves as either helpless victims or bystanders in a distant land, defined negatively by its 'otherness', the geopolitics of place in the

²⁰¹ The brand name for a GPS automotive navigation device

²⁰² Interview with RR: May 2007

Tamil diaspora consciousness can be seen as a discourse that challenges the externalisation of diaspora communities from the politics and violence of homeland conflict, underlining the fact that the place of diaspora is indeed a ‘habitat of meaning’ which needs to be better understood, forcing us to reconfigure our understanding of the ‘old trinity of state-people-territory’ and hence the nature of diaspora consciousness and the content of long distance nationalism. (Hannerz 1996:22; Arendt: 1966:282)

In an article evaluating the character of aid workers who seem addicted to working in disaster zones, Michela Wrong notes that they are often portrayed as ‘adrenalin junkies.’ She suggests however that the more appropriate term would be ‘significance addicts.’ (Wrong 2010: 14) Voices from the diaspora to my mind represent just such an ‘addiction’, a need to synthesize past, present and future, to give a sense of significance to the geography of their present place of being. As argued by Ashcroft, ‘place is always more than mere location for the subject whose identity is in crisis’ and in this sense, rather than an Andersonian ‘aura of drama’, it is the actuality of a profound commitment to both the past and the future in the present moment that creates the aura of diaspora perception in the place of diaspora. (Anderson 1992:11; Ashcroft 2000:198) As put forward by Said, ‘the geographical sense makes projections’, which in turn makes ‘possible the construction of various kinds of knowledge, all of them in one way or another dependent upon the perceived character and destiny of a particular geography.’ (Said 1994b: 93)

In line with many scholars, Tambiah argues that the nature of diaspora identity is informed by a series of factors, which include ‘places of destination, both short term and long term.’ (Tambiah 2000: 178) When we consider the Tamil diaspora however, we have to take into account that the envisaged long term ‘destination’ for many, presents itself as an ontological framework of meaning as well as both place and aspiration. For diaspora Tamils who support the struggle for self-determination, paradoxically, leaving Sri Lanka has been the start of an existential journey towards Eelam, a destination that in their minds, will herald a time of dignity and freedom for a long suffering people but also the victory of a particular narrative of self and community.

In his 1998 work on the nature of diaspora yearning, Jeganathan presents an analytical and conceptual thesis that the idea of Eelam 'is not a lived-place... rather it is place as 'icon', located only on the 'World Wide Web', a 'space which has a "there" with no there there.' (Jeganathan 1998:526) As I survey the diasporic landscape however, it seems to me that what is key is not so much the fact that there is 'no there there' when we consider Eelam but rather that 'there is a there in exile.' (Naficy in Morley 2000: 55) The place of diaspora may be 'out of place' and 'out of time', a place where space and 'time seems multidimensional' but it is here, 'outside the nation-states space/time zone' that the meaning of Eelam takes on a particular significance that is more powerful than that envisaged by Jeganathan. (Sokefeld 2006:265; Langer 1996:55; Ghorashi 2003:8; Cohen 1997:135–6)

As they honour the sacrifices of the LTTE at events like the 'Heroes Day' commemorations, diaspora Tamils underline the fact that the place of diaspora is a domain where the 'ghostly national imaginings' of 'death and immortality' associated with the pursuit of Eelam are brought to life and celebrated. (Anderson 2006:10; 9) Anderson reminds us that 'communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined.' and to my mind, it is essential to appreciate that it is as a community of suffering and interpretation that diaspora Tamils engage with the place of diaspora, giving it meaning, both as a landscape of trauma but also as a landscape of resilience and hope. (Anderson 2006:6)

*You know, I was never thinking of leaving, coming to Europe like this... Some of my friends join (the LTTE). But me, I think I was scared. Afraid to die I think. Many friends there have different dream, like they want to be like Rambo, kill people, fighting... but actually that is not a real dream.... that is just hard choice for Tamil people... Here only now in UK, slowly, slowly I have dreams... dreams for Sri Lanka. How can Tamil people (in Sri Lanka) get what here I have? Here, you are safe, can make money, no soldiers, no danger...but still we carry the pain so we know... Here you can dream of change for Sri Lanka, for Eelam we can dream. Here, we can help Eelam dreams come true ...that only is my dream.'*²⁰³

The link between such 'Eelam dreams', as put forward by many of my informants and the resulting consciousness engendered can be conceptualised as a space where individuals find the freedom to 'refigure their social lives (and) live out proscribed

²⁰³ Interview with BGCB: December 2006

emotional states and sensations.’(Appadurai 1996:5) Das and Kleinman argue that ‘the social space occupied by scarred populations may enable stories to break through.... a counter discourse that assaults.... the taken-for-granted meaning of things as they are.’(Das and Kleinman 2001:21) In the case of conflict diasporas, this space is the place of diaspora ‘where collective feelings of belonging, representation and politicisation are defined and debated and where perceptions of empowerment, hope and agency may potentially arise.’(Mavroudi 2008: 60) As one informant told me, *‘in Sri Lanka, always the politics was following me, now I am the one who follow(s) the politics.’*²⁰⁴

In his thesis on the rise of nationalism, Anderson posits that the ‘ebbing of religious belief’ did not herald the disappearance of ‘suffering’ and as a result, ‘what then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning’, in short the ‘idea of nation.’ (Anderson 2006:11) One could argue that the place of diaspora is the domain where such a process works in reverse, underlining its particular epistemological ‘aura’ for diaspora communities. Displaced and alienated from the embrace of the imagined community of postcolonial Sri Lanka, it is in the place of diaspora that the idea of the nation already existing is challenged and subverted; substituted instead with the almost ‘religious imaginings’ of the idea of Eelam as both roadmap, destination and destiny. (Anderson 2006:10)

²⁰⁴ Conversation with ARN: July 2008, London

Chapter Six: The Existential Question in the Conflict Diaspora Condition

6.1 Confronting the Existential

**‘There is nothing like a war for the reinvention of lives.’
(Rushdie 1991: 468)**

**‘Words such as displaced, dislocated, fugitive, uprooted, and stateless describe the refugee’s objective situation, but they describe with equal metaphorical force his or her state of mind.’
(Jackson 2002:89)**

‘Why did you leave Sri Lanka’ is a question that has often formed the basis of much of my initial questioning. For many of my informants the response was often an entry point into narratives that chronicled the growing rise in state repression, the rise of Tamil militancy and the start of the conflict that would consume Sri Lanka for the next three decades. Leaving seemed to be an act of last resort, a journey from a zone of violence and conflict to one of peace, from a community and a society at war, to an environment of security and stability.

A number of interrelated issues however flow from such a point of departure, revealing the complexity inherent in the nature and character of the conflict diaspora condition. While I spent much time listening to the circumstances which forced, prompted or convinced them to take the biggest decision of their lives, surprisingly, this was not the most significant part of their narratives. Instead, what marked their narratives was the fact that almost everybody I encountered seemed to experience life in diaspora as a continuation of a narrative of loss and emotional struggle. Superficially all seems ‘normal’ as we encounter a community striving for material success, with a keen interest in the welfare of family, the academic progress of their children and a high level of community spirit but for many, it did indeed seem as articulated by Said, that ‘the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something.’ (Said 2001:173)

As my relationships deepened, it gradually became evident that a particular sense of enduring pain was clearly an emotion that many simply lived with, a sense of pain that spoke of separation from loved ones left behind or the grief of mourning loved

ones lost. But it was also a sense of pain and suffering that spoke of much more in a language not easily defined. This may seem like a prosaic observation considering the upheaval inherent in being to all intents and purposes forcibly displaced but perhaps it is this very obviousness that blinds us to a significant aspect of the conflict diaspora condition; what it means and how it informs the very consciousness of those in diaspora and hence their sentiments and motives.

As argued by Kleinman and Kleinman, 'suffering is one of the existential grounds of human experience' and where it exists, it presents itself as 'a defining quality' which cannot be ignored. (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996:1) I seek to make the argument that it is the existential struggle for meaning, born out of experiences of violence, loss and suffering, that is an inherent part of the conflict diaspora condition, fundamentally informing diaspora consciousness and the means by which they seek to give shape to their own subjective and contextual 'imagination' of identity and purpose. That the Tamil diaspora is vital to the functioning of insurgent activity in terms of funding and advocacy is an accepted truism already discussed. Less developed is an appreciation of the psychological and emotional landscape within which those in diaspora live, a landscape which seems to make the diaspora community a potentially 'captive market' for mobilization in support of insurgent agendas. The conceptual irony is of course that by their very nature as a diaspora community, they are not 'captive' in spatial terms. I will argue that conflict diaspora members also inhabit and navigate an existential landscape that is as much a part of the conflict as the homeland they have left behind and the place of diaspora they now occupy, underlining in my own work, that as suggested by Malkki, 'the widely held commonsense assumptions linking people to place, nation to territory, are not simply territorializing, but deeply metaphysical.' (Malkki 1992: 27)

Our inability at times to capture this existential element inherent in the diaspora condition should not blind us to its significance for such questions often 'exist in their essence even before they are materially realized and named.' (Kundera 1994:15) In my engagement with Tamil diaspora narratives and in my attempt to define that 'something lost' that Said refers to, I have found myself forced to try and understand this existential element in the lifeworld of my informants. Such a line of enquiry I believe is key to an understanding of how those in diaspora seek to bring some form

of understanding to the experiences and sense of loss that seems to define their lives. As put forward by De Zoysa, war

‘causes many types of losses: loss of loved ones, family, relatives, friends...; loss of home.... trust in others and of the feeling of security; through torture, the loss of dignity, integrity and personality; through displacement, the loss of communality.... in short, losses of varying degrees and nature become commonplace.’ (De Zoysa 2001:202)

The study of conflict diasporas therefore is not only a study of conflict and the violence of displacement but also a study of the existential consequences of violence and displacement in all its varied forms, a realm of analysis that seems largely absent from most assessments of the conflict diaspora condition. This oversight represents to my mind, a failure to theorize the way those in diaspora engage with feelings that many have but almost all have trouble naming and as put forward by Kleinman et al, an ‘incapacity to acknowledge that pain’ on the part of academia could betray a ‘blindness in moral sensibility’, a sensibility that is necessary if we are to fully appreciate the nature of diaspora consciousness and the content of long distance nationalism. (Kleinman et al 1996: xiv) The need for such a conceptual engagement with this particular frame of reference is deeply significant for as Colson reminds us, those who have been affected by violence and displaced by conflict, ‘see the world through different eyes.’ (Colson 2007:6) In his study of the effects of violence, Daniel states that,

‘what is at stake, especially for those whose bodies have been spared the destruction of death, is the death of a way of being-in-the-world, the death of that which constitutes their identity, honour, and dignity.’ (Daniel 1996:67-68)

This is all the more significant when we consider a community displaced by violence. With a similar focus on violence, Das asks the critical question which I believe also lies at the heart of the conflict diaspora condition: ‘what is it to lose one’s world?’ (Das 2007:2) For those in diaspora, the starting point for the existential gaze of their current status of ‘being-in-another world’ can be conceptualized as a sense of deprivation; deprivation of a place called home and its associated easy feelings of community, identity and belonging, a ‘perceived collapse of everything secure and strong.’ (Somasundaram 2007: 15) As suggested by Butler, such a sense of loss can

reveal ‘something about who we are.... something that delineates the ties we have to others...ties (that) constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us.’ (Butler 2003: 12) The effects of violence and displacement which result in the unmooring of such symbols of the social self can be further conceptualized as a state of vulnerability, a crisis in a sense of self that persists beneath a façade of normality.

When asked about this apparent disparity between her everyday self and the emotional landscape that seemed to reveal itself in interviews and discussions, one of my informants told me that what was being revealed in such instances, was what she referred to as *‘the Sri Lanka me, the really always me.’*

‘sometimes go wedding or some function (party), we must be happy . Go for work, we must be serious and for our children, always happy only...sometimes strict.. so sometimes I am like this, sometimes I am like that, we must be strong yes? But when we are talking, that is different me... Sri Lanka me, really always me, me for me, not for anybody else... this me is always thinking, crying, feeling, thinking.... because so much has happened for me...some you can see, some you cannot see, some things I also cannot say (understand) ...so always lot of thinking.’

It occurred to me early on that it was this ‘hidden self’ that should be the focus of my work. Langer makes the point that ‘the body can be maimed in many ways, not only through mutilation’ but also because of the ‘inter-twinning of the physical and the metaphysical.’(Langer 1991: 101) Cutting a similar vein of thought in her testimony regarding women who suffered rape during conflict, the psychotherapist Lepa Mladjenovic refers to it as making a woman feel ‘homeless in her own body.’ (Mladjenovic in Copelan 2002: 197) The ability of violence to rob us of our sense of home, physically and existentially, even to make ‘foreign’ our own sense of ourselves, is a key issue in trying to gauge the human and social cost of conflict. It underlines a sentiment that I have often come across with my own informants; how the violence of the conflict and their journey into diasporic lives has affected them on such an ontological level that it has transformed them and in the process, it is now a part of who they are as social beings.

This sense of a loss of home and a sense of home should not be underestimated. As suggested by Ashcroft, ‘the question ‘where is my place?’ is connected to the more difficult question of ‘where do I belong?’ (Ashcroft 2000:198) As those in diaspora

struggle to define their sense of self and the meaning of their experiences, it may indeed be the case as Rushdie argues, that all questions regarding who they are and the meaning of their identity and sense of belonging, are all manifestations of a ‘single, existential question: How are we to live in the world?’ (Rushdie 1992:18)

During the period of the 2009 Tamil demonstrations in London, I chanced to listen in to a radio ‘phone-in’ programme where listeners had been asked to call in with their views on the demonstration. The majority of the callers were quite baffled as to who the demonstrators were. In following the views of various people who called in to express an opinion, it occurred to me that the dominant feelings engendered were expressed in a series of questions which did indeed reference the complexities of the diaspora condition: ‘Who are these demonstrators? Why are we letting foreigners demonstrate in Parliament Square? Are they really British? Why are the demonstrators supporting terrorists? Should we care what these ‘foreigners’ want? Are they really British?’ (This was a popular question, much repeated)²⁰⁵

In his work on the nature of ‘the foreigner’, Derrida brings to life the existential complexity inherent in the nature of just such questioning. For Derrida, questions accompany and reveal the arrival of a foreigner. (Derrida 2000) This is relevant because ‘a diaspora only becomes a diaspora at the moment of relocation’ and hence while displacement may begin a journey into diaspora, it is only as the proverbial ‘foreigner in a foreign land’ that the journey into being part of a diaspora truly begins. (Ali 2003: 474) For Derrida,

‘the question of the foreigner is a question **of** the foreigner, addressed **to** the foreigner. As though the foreigner were first of all **the one who** puts the first question.... As though the foreigner were being-in-question.’ (Derrida 2000:3, emphasis in original)

Diaspora Tamils do indeed find themselves in a contentious position, for at the heart of the diaspora condition is, to paraphrase Derrida, the question of the diaspora condition, addressed to the diaspora by itself in its own search for identity and meaning. The very ‘being’ of those in diaspora is in-question, and what is being

²⁰⁵ My comments here are based on a 2 day period in April 2009, listening to ‘The Mother of All Talk Shows’ hosted by the former MP George Galloway on Talk Sport Radio, which bills itself as the UK’s most popular commercial radio station.

questioned, as put forward by Rushdie in his critical interrogation of exile, is ‘who you are and where do you belong and what that identity and belonging means.’ (Rushdie 1992:18) In similar terms, Gramsci argues that when seeking to interrogate the nature of the individual, ‘the starting point ... is the consciousness of what one really is’ and as such, it is important to decipher and understand the ‘infinity of traces’ that define us. It is as a community seeking to articulate and explain itself that just such a critical study can prove most insightful for what it reveals about the nature of the construction of diaspora consciousness. This is especially relevant when we consider conflict diaspora members because it is the infinite effects and consequences of violence and loss that need to be always kept in view, demanding of any analytical framework, additional layers of conceptual analysis. The need to compile an ‘inventory’ of such ‘traces’ is thus essential. (Gramsci cited in Said 1979:25)

Brettel draws our attention to what she regards as a ‘central tension’ in the study of migration. Quoting Fielding, she refers to his idea that, ‘There is something strange about the way we study immigration...It is one of those events around which an individual’s biography is built.... Migration is a statement of an individual’s worldview...And yet, when we study immigration ...we seem to forget all this.’ (Fielding in Brettel 2003:23)

Brettel’s work urges a greater degree of understanding for the emotional, psychological and what I perceive to be an existential element involved in the processes of migration. For Tamils, the narrative of conflict adds a further element of anguish and complexity to the causes, nature and consequences of migration. This forces us to engage with a culture of conflict that is very much part of the Tamil diaspora condition, where as Farmer says, ‘damage is done even to a sense of where one fits into the world.’ (Farmer 2008:167) It is the reality of a social world where many Tamils see themselves as refugees from and survivors of conflict, a distinct part of a community at war. Soguk reminds us, that ‘examined critically, the word refugee reveals a tortured history’ and it is the politics of this history that is key to the existential struggle for meaning that many in diaspora labor under, as they seek to continue their journey towards a redemptive future. (Soguk 2007:303) We need to appreciate the vulnerability and aspiration inherent in the diaspora condition and to that end, we need to understand what sort of ‘sentiments, narratives, and historical

memories of perceived trauma and woundedness' inform it. (Scheper-Hughes 2008:37)

In this chapter, my aim is to seek to give voice to the existential complexity of being that many Tamils face as they struggle to come to terms with their past experiences in Sri Lanka and their present state of exile. It is a struggle to define a sense of self, informed by the interplay of these constitutive parts, a struggle that often finds articulation in diaspora narratives where past, present and future aspirations overlap, underlining the complexity of the diaspora condition as individuals seek to comprehend the various 'conflicts and tensions' within them as they struggle to define who they are and to reconcile the 'identity related problems' connected to different representations of the self across barriers of time and space. (Cornejo 2008: 334)

6.2 An Existential Interrogation of things 'Past'

**'The past is never dead. It's not even past'
(Faulkner 1951: Act I Scene III)**

**'I don't know if anyone really knows war until it lives inside them'
(cited in Nordstrom 2002:274)**

A concern with the existential in theories of migration is not altogether new. Hage argues that in order to 'mark and define the diasporic condition', it is essential to engage with a theory of 'existential movement.' (Hage 2005:469; 470) My own focus on the Tamil diaspora however is informed by a perspective defined by the context and consequence of conflict. Many of my informants speak of their decision to leave as a response to feelings of being trapped – trapped by feelings of insecurity, fear and the threat of violence as well as the very pressures of being a minority community facing discrimination and victimization. As one informant put it: *'I am Tamil here, because cannot be Tamil there.... Here Tamil people can be many things, everything you can be.... there only got jail or die in the jungle or just suffer... There everybody got suffering only...'*²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶Interview with GU: March 2007

For many, leaving was the answer to a life ‘going nowhere’, framed as either ‘go Europe or go cemetery.’²⁰⁷ The decision to leave one’s home because of conflict is a process rather than an event, a process that occurs along a continuum of crisis, despair and desperation. In the Sri Lankan context, it was a continuum of oppression and violence that pervaded ‘all relationships and activity’, changing the social and political dynamics of society and the way the state treated the Tamil minority. (Somasundaram 2007:12; see also DeVotta 2004) Minorities however as Appadurai states, ‘do not come preformed. They are produced in the specific circumstances of every nation and every nationalism.’ (Appadurai 2001) As one older Tamil man put it, thinking back over his early life in Sri Lanka, the realisation of the ‘creation’ of his own minority status had the quality of a ‘living nightmare.’

‘My father and his father also, so this is going back quite a while.... they always only talked about Sri Lanka and being Sri Lankan. There was no Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim, Burgher everybody was just Sri Lankan. I think I can even say that they were proud to be Sri Lankans... But by my time, it was always.. one got the feeling because that is what Bandaranaike²⁰⁸ and his people started saying..... that we Tamils had got the better of the situation under the British and that we were always thinking only of being Tamil and not Sri Lankans. I can say it is those people who changed things.... and then 83’²⁰⁹ happened. It was as though they forced us into a living nightmare, slowly they were building this nightmare and all of us were involved but we did not see it coming.. One day in 1983, I went to sleep, still Sri Lankan and I got up as a Tamil and then I saw, maybe before I did not want to see.... but that day I saw I was living in this nightmare. But at least I was able to stay alive, and after that, I managed to come here. (London) Many of our Tamil people living this same nightmare, they did not manage to stay alive evenThese nightmares are not just in the mind, they can kill also.... That is the problem with Sri Lanka, our nightmare is real.’²¹⁰

Through experiences of discrimination, victimization and violence because of their identity as Tamils, many of my informants speak of a sense of having been cast adrift even before they left Sri Lanka. As conflict engulfed the state, centred primarily on areas of Tamil occupation in the north and northeast, the growing risk to life also increased as ‘the intimate space of family life (was) intruded upon and shattered by the political.’ Like conflicts the world over, the significance of violence in this regard

²⁰⁷Interview with CB: December 2006

²⁰⁸Solomon Bandaranaike became prime minister of Sri Lanka in 1956 on a Sinhala nationalist platform.

²⁰⁹1983 anti-Tamil riots known as Black July. I have discussed this in Chapter 5

²¹⁰ Interview with MRR: December 2007

is that 'war makes the familiar landscape strange, threatening, dangerous, marked by violence.' (Huttunen 2005:186-7) For Tamils, this was exemplified by the increasing use of checkpoints and security raids where as Whitaker states, 'every bridge, most crossroads, all the entrances and exits of all the villages and towns bristled with the Sri Lankan army.' (Whitaker 1997: 203) For many of my informants, this was a reality that they had lived through:

*Rajapaksa says army is Sri Lanka army, for all Sri Lanka people...why Tamils must pretend Sri Lanka army is our army. From long time already, they are killing our people only... how is that our army? . They are not our boys... how many Tamil people will join Sri Lanka army? From long time already, for the army, Tamil people is other people, second class people, enemy people, not their people... Always when Tamil people are killed. ...army only is there. Long time already like that.'*²¹¹

*'I see my town upset that time... The soldiers are angry and so our people must suffer... that is how the war came to my place. Before always we are hearing stories but this time is real. I was young boy but some older boys went with soldiers (were taken by the soldiers) and never come home. We know them, we know they (are) not Tigers... (the) army know they (are) not Tigers so why they never come back? They are surely killed already. After that only, my father say I have to go Europe otherwise government will do like that to me also.'*²¹²

Another informant drew attention to the fact that prior to the soldiers coming, his own town was not exactly a hotbed of LTTE support. In fact, many of the people under the leadership of the town elders were opposed to the violence and wanted to stay out of the fighting.

*'They only (the soldiers) bring the fighting. For my place, surely that I know... My father say when fighting start, everybody is wrong. That is (the) reason our people did not want any trouble but still the soldiers came. They (the soldiers) say they are looking for Tigers but they only make the trouble,... After that only, many boys join (the LTTE). No army, no Tigers. ... Now I think no choice anymore. Everywhere is fighting...Sri Lanka means war only for everybody... for army, we are all Tigers. Tamil, so Tiger, so terrorist, so trouble...like this, surely, surely army can kill you.'*²¹³

By conflating terrorism with a struggle based on ethnic representation in pursuit of social, economic and political rights, the state had quite significantly managed to produce and institutionalise what Keen has termed a 'a discourse of othering', 'a

²¹¹ Interview with VIJ: June 2007

²¹² Interview with TAM: June 2007

²¹³ Interview with KB: February 2007

redefinition of the enemy from the external to the internal, from an armed group to a particular ethnic group, and from the soldier to the civilian'. (Keen 2008: 71-2)
Tamils were now 'identified as differentiated 'Others' constituting a punishable category of people.' (Lawrence 1997:223)

*'This is what I was seeing those days...I see people die... soldiers come and if you lucky, you see people die . If unlucky, you die yourself. Blood , head open, blood everywhere.... Like Eid²¹⁴ time like that , but this is our people dying.... Always I am thinking .. I have my plans, my dreamsto marry, buy a shop...but always that time, I am thinking, I also can die like this...just like this only....my body on the floor , head open , everybody can step on me like thatThe Father (priest) always say, keep Jesus in your heart. I was thinking that time , if I get killed , then people can step on Jesus also...In Sri Lanka, better keep Jesus in the cupboard at home only. I was young boy and I was thinking like this only...even God cannot help us there.'*²¹⁵

Such sentiments echoed through the words of many of my other informants. It was a feeling that no matter how 'tough' or 'innocent' they were, everybody was now vulnerable and hence life with all its claims for the future seemed very precarious if you were Tamil. This extreme culture of violence which overwhelmed the Tamil community has been noted by other commentators who speak of the 'massacres of non-combatants' where 'Tamil bodies were found in the waters of the Bay of Bengal.... or were burned on roadsides, paddy fields and inside government detention camps.' (Lawrence 1997:218) Similarly, Somasundaram presents a graphic picture of an environment where 'seeing many mutilated or dismembered bodies (and) decaying and bloated remains, have saturated the consciousness with death.' (Somasundaram 2007: 15) This violence, referred to by Whitaker as the 'government's primary tactic' consisted of 'raising the threshold of terror' on the Tamil population 'until the 'sea' in which the LTTE 'fish' swam would be poisoned.' (Whitaker 1997:202)

Whitaker's use of the imagery of a 'poisoned sea' is highly relevant because it underlines the crux of my own findings, that as put forward by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 'violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality— force, assaults, or the infliction of pain—alone.' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004: 1)

²¹⁴ His comment was a reference to the ritual slaughter of lambs and goats which occurred during the Muslim festival of 'Eid al-Adha.' The slaughter area was often covered with blood.

²¹⁵ Interview with DAN: June 2007. For DAN, his faith lay in his heart but his comments left me with an image of bits of brain tissue rotting in the open in the aftermath of a killing; feelings of love, dreams for the future and belief in God all somehow represented in the specks of brain tissue.

When I consider the sense of trauma and loss that seems to me to define the Tamil diaspora condition, I realize that such suffering can only be fully apprehended if we situate our analysis within the discourse of the destruction and denaturing of a particular social world for as put forward by Summerfield, ‘war is a collective experience and perhaps its primary impact on victims is through their witnessing the destruction of a social world embodying their history, identity and living values.’ (Summerfield 1995: 15)

For many of my informants, the legacy of having lived in such a landscape of conflict is a discovery that such experiences of ‘violence and terror can destabilize a person’s sense of self.’ (Thompson 2004: 155) As one of my informants put it, it forced the lives of many Tamils onto a different path, forcing them to wear ‘*different shoes*.’

*‘I don’t remember how I felt that day... Everything was just normal. We had soldiers come through the village looking for certain people... we all knew who is with Tigers and who needs to be careful, who is hiding.... all these things. I was sitting one time waiting for my uncle to come... there was some trees on the road and I used to wait for uncle there. I saw uncle coming and then a van came behind him and stopped and some people got out. They started fighting (with my uncle) and they took my uncle into the van. I just sat and watched everything.I never screamed, I never told anybody that I had seen this... Other people saw him being taken like this and so my family heard what happened but I never said I was there... But I know my uncle saw me that day... he never called to me to help him... he did not want to put me in danger... I was the last member of my family to see him and nobody knows this, till now also... After that for me, I was living different life. Everything looked the same but nothing was the same.... Afterwards, I was still always waiting for my uncle... just to come home again but I think even at that time, I knew this will never happen. My grandmother was always praying for him to come home... **(Do you know who took your uncle?)** I think we will never really know but he was taken by government people because he was a supporter of Tigers...but that time, when they took my uncle, they caught (captured) all our lives as well... they took our lives awaynow what we havewe have this sadder life... different shoes also... after this, everywhere I walk, things never feel comfortable for me ...like my shoes are wrong shoes....not my shoes, other people’s shoes I am wearing.... Maybe that is the problem, all Tamil people nowadays are wearing the wrong shoes...that is why we are all like this, uncomfortable in our lives...Can we go back to how it was before?’²¹⁶*

For many of my informants who have experienced violence in some form or other, violence is indeed ‘first and foremost an ontological reality.’ (Nordstrom 2008:73) It changes everything and that is quite simply the way they relate and relate to, their

²¹⁶ Interview with SUG: June 2007

encounters with violence. A major part of that change was the creation of a culture of silence, an acknowledgement of the unavailability of a space away from the surveillance of those who wield power. As one informant put it, it was *'like always (having) someone stepping on your throat.'*²¹⁷ The growing militarization of society after 1983 gradually meant that violence was understood as the primary means through which the state engendered communication between itself and the Tamil community. It is this meaning of violence as a form of wordless political dialogue, that had to be deciphered and for many of my informants, it is a 'language' that they still remember, for it is 'the social and cultural dimensions of violence' that give it 'power and meaning.' (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004:1) Such dynamics have clearly had an impact on the Tamil community and over the years of crisis and conflict, the population as a whole has 'become polarised into relatively clearly defined ethnic groups.' (Orjuela 2003:202). What seemed to factor equally significantly for many Tamils was the consolidation of a long held perception that they were indeed defined and treated as 'second class' citizens, not given the appropriate 'respect' as a community or protection by the state. Tamil engagement with agents of the state instead represented the arrival into their community of '*piraccinai ndtkal*', what Lawrence has referred to as 'troubled times.' (Lawrence 1997:218)

Said makes the point that when we categorize sections of a population as the 'Other', than 'just beyond the frontier between 'us' and the 'outsiders' is the perilous territory of not-belonging.' (Said 2001:177) Such people are 'displaced' from their sense of belonging and in this state of 'exile' from the dominant political community, those who are deemed 'outsiders' are left vulnerable, their voices effectively silenced. Tamils have been made to embark on just such an enforced 'journey' into an 'exile' of political powerlessness. What is of relevance to me here is the idea that 'going into diaspora' can occur even without leaving one's place, an insight from one of my informants who used my own seeming 'fixation' with 'diaspora' to express his own experience of 'exile' prior to his actual journey into diaspora.

'What is the word you use – 'diaspora'...I am thinking for me, I go diaspora.... can I say like that... I go diaspora after our house was searched by army.... Somebody

²¹⁷ Interview with CB: December 2006

*talked trouble for me and the soldiers came... I remember the shoes, soldier shoes everywhere. Before already we had trouble but always outside ... this was trouble coming inside the house. Trouble come inside, my life then went somewhere else... because after that, my house was different place for me, not like my house anymore... Like that only everything was changed for me. Once upon a time Sri Lanka was good home for us, now all changed.'*²¹⁸

When the *outside* comes *inside*²¹⁹: TAM's statement speaks of a process whereby the everyday and the ordinary takes on a '*changed*' meaning. In listening to such narratives, I have often been made aware as Paul Farmer says, that 'war spoils the meanings of things in complex and enduring ways that we are ill-equipped to measure.' (Farmer 2008:167) For many of my respondents, the trauma of their own experiences forced them to look at things in very different ways as they were forced to confront the intrusion of violence into their everyday lives.

There are borders of inclusion and exclusion in all societies and for many Tamils, the politics of postcolonial Sri Lanka was and is, an unending project by the state to exclude Tamils from the benefits of full and equal citizenship. The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides the etymology of 'diaspora' as deriving from the Greek and its definition as 'to scatter.' Bearing in mind that the most basic responsibility of the modern state is to provide security for its citizens, one can argue that a community, while still within the borders of a state, can be set apart, scattered and pushed into a realm where the state ceases to offer security and protection, leaving members of such communities vulnerable to threat and violence. When we consider issues of conflict therefore, we also need to consider the fact that through exclusion and alienation from the protection of the state, a people may also become 'diasporic' when violence transforms and transfigures the place they know as home. As argued by Said, exile can also be seen as an

'exile from a way of being, rather than exile from a place', a 'condition legislated to deny dignity – to deny an identity to people.' (Said 2001:175)

Ashcroft argues that people actually dwell 'in a place beyond location, an imaginative space deeply imbued with the place-ness of (their) own carefully nurtured sense of

²¹⁸ Interview with TAM: June 2007

²¹⁹ An interesting point for me was TAM's focus on '*soldier shoes*' in his home. In Tamil homes, both in Sri Lanka and in diaspora, shoes are normally left on the threshold, outside the home.

being.’ (Ashcroft 2000:198) A sense of place can be argued to inform a sense of identity and vice-versa, deeper ontological reflections being very much part and parcel of questions which seek to ‘place’ an individual or community within a given cultural or ideational framework. For Tamils, this challenge to their ownership of a sense of identity and belonging in and to Sri Lanka thus involves an existential crisis in their very conception of ‘being’ Sri Lankan, as their ‘place’ in the social and political fabric of the state was cast into crisis.

I have had the experience of listening to a Tamil father ruminate on the fact that his young daughter was told to draw a flag as part of her school homework, a flag to represent her country of origin. He was teaching her to draw the Sri Lankan flag when the obvious contradictions came to his mind. Should he be teaching her to draw the Tamil Eelam flag instead? Surprisingly, he had never thought about his feelings towards the Sri Lankan flag until that very moment:

*‘I was drawing the lion and then only I see the problem. The lion is representing the Sinhala people. This lion is the thing that chased us away from Sri Lanka. For Tamils, there is only small line (strip) at the side of the flag, orange line. That is what they want. ...To keep us there, at the side only. Sinhala people have big place for the lion to run. We have small place only.... For that reason only, lion (is) with the sword, to keep us in the small place...maybe to chase us away also... so our orange part can get smaller and smaller.’*²²⁰

For my informant, his description of the flag represented a narrative of his own victimization, alienation and displacement and as he put it, if he had to say that Sri Lanka was his country, then he would do it *‘feeling shame... because how to feel proud... for a country like this?’* His feelings of ‘shame’ however also speak of something more, not just a comment about the oppression of the Tamil people by the *‘lion with the sword’* but also about how such oppression has made him feel.²²¹ Hage identifies humiliation as,

‘the experience of being psychologically demeaned—treated like less than a human being...without a capacity to redress the situation. ... being shouted at, abused,

²²⁰ His ‘analysis’ of the symbols of the national flag are in the main factually correct. While he was being cynical about the symbolism of the sword, his words do have an ironic twist as the sword does represent the sovereignty of the country, something that the secessionist pursuit of Tamil Eelam by the LTTE does of course challenge.

²²¹ Interview with PETE: Dec 2007

searched, stopped, ordered around, checked, asked to wait, “allowed to pass,” and so forth.’ (Hage 2003:82)

In the Sri Lankan context, the climate of violence, threat and fear also gave rise to just such forms of personal intimidation, especially in the Northeast where rebel activity was at its highest and Tamil specific districts could be bracketed into ‘rigid zones for efficient surveillance.’ (Whitaker 1997: 203) Somasundaram refers to the ‘pervasive check points’ where Tamils, ‘quickly change their behaviour and tone’ assuming ‘a submissive posture (bent head and body, low and almost pleading tone of voice, pleasing manner with a smile)’ In a society where age is venerated, he also notes the damaging effects on a sense of community dignity and self-respect because of ‘the contemptuous way elders and community leaders have been treated by the authorities.’ (Somasundaram 2007:8) Many of my own respondents commented on just such instances in their own experiences and what sticks in my mind is a particular quality of ‘*shame*’ and despair which many of them seemed to have experienced almost as a form of physical violence.

‘What you are saying ...yes, we all coming ‘diaspora’ ... because of soldiers and government only . That is my thinking only because that is what I am seeing.... so many things they are doing to us. Here, I am listening to radio, reading , talking and hearing many people..... So much learning I am doing, like you only, learning all the politics..... but somethings you cannot learn from just the books ... this shame I am talking is like that, always being frightened..... but shame also for being frightened. Many people talk big now but that time, everybody is frightened of soldiers. This is our shame.... Shame for my family and for all our Tamil people. How to tell this shame? Can you understand this shame ? If I can show you ...make you feel how we are feeling, then only you will understand.... then, no need for you to ask all the questions.....then Tigers, Eelam, all will be clear for you....then maybe you also will give support ! ’²²²

‘ big problem is that here (London) you cannot see all what we have see(n) in Sri Lanka . That is why British people cannot understand why we are needing Tigers... here, we can talk but you cannot see, go Sri Lanka you can see but you cannot ask all the questions.... because people cannot talk.’

The effects of such ‘violence’ within my own circle of informants is captured by the extracts above, which had fellow Tamils present nodding in agreement. I have often found such sentiments hard to elicit, as though its very admission and articulation had the force of an additional assault on the speaker. It is only through a gradual

²²² Group discussion with NEW: June 2007

appreciation of the true meaning of what such admissions mean that I have grown to understand what such ‘shame’ represents for those who have experienced and ‘lived’ it – a clawing, visceral sense of pain that stays with them long after the event. It was this sentiment that often seemed to create a divide in my interactions with some of my informants. There was a sense that unless you yourself had experienced such feelings, you would never truly be able to understand the context from which many of them derived their intellectual and emotional point of ‘alienating’ departure. An experience of conflict and violence in all its various hues and textures was also experienced and articulated as an assault on one’s value system. It is not a question of just living with violence but of having been transformed by its daily threats and humiliations and it is evident that such experiences of violence do not always ennoble.

As another informant quaintly informed me, with a great degree of understatement, *‘this was not decent place for us.’*²²³ Margalit has theorized the nature of a decent society as one whose institutions do not humiliate its citizens and in many ways, much of what needs to be written about the existential undercurrents which inform Tamil diaspora sentiment can be conceptualized as reaction and response to the pain and effects of just such institutionalized humiliation. (Margalit 1996) As put forward by Ahmed, feelings engendered in such situations where discrimination and victimization is based on ethnicity ‘often slides into other negative feelings, or to other kinds of social as well as psychic negativity. (sadness, shame, anger, fear, despair, grief, and so on)’ (Ahmed 2005:73 see also Gilligan 1999:103-136)²²⁴ This to my mind, is the subtext of what Summerfield has referred to as a ‘key element of modern political violence... the creation of states of terror which penetrate the entire fabric of economic, socio cultural and political relations.’ (Summerfield 1996: 4)

For many Tamils, apart from the fear of violence actually inflicted, such a state of terror is quite simply the overwhelming feeling of disempowerment of an individual and a community. One of my informants likened his feelings to how an *‘illegitimate person might feel at a family wedding’*²²⁵, a feeling that one was always liable to be picked out, criticized and humiliated and perhaps even worse. It underlines for me a

²²³ Interview with CB: December 2006

²²⁴ Gilligan presents a theory that violence is rooted in efforts to ‘end’ feelings of shame and perhaps one can argue that support for a violent militant agenda can also be conceptualised along such lines.

²²⁵ Conversation with PUN: June 2007

dimension of what such ‘terror’ entails, a feeling where your very legitimacy to exist and go about your daily life with dignity is called into question. Such feelings should not be downplayed and it can be argued that many of the Tamils who live in diaspora, do so because to live in Sri Lanka is to live with the accompanying shame and despair that such a state of terror engenders. This ‘ politics of bad feeling’ however is one that endures and crosses borders and such sentiments of shame and humiliation present themselves time and time again, sometimes explicitly, but often, hidden away in the subtext of narratives of loss, grief, helplessness, despair and anger. (Ahmed 2005)

The existential nature of ‘violence’ has been acknowledged by theorists like Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois who posit that ‘violence includes assaults on the personhood, dignity, sense of worth or value of the victim’ (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois : 2004: 1)Such violence should be seen in a transformative sense – what it does to people - and my own feeling is that it is this change in the constitution and terms of social life that provides the necessary framework required for understanding violence and its impact on those who lived within its gaze, forcing them, as my informant says above, to wear ‘*different shoes*’ ever after. Rather than just a collection of brutal events, tragic as they may be, such instances speak of a psychological and existential landscape of violence which forced individuals to reconfigure the very manner in which they saw themselves. The crux of my argument in this section is that apart from the real and present danger many Tamils faced, it was such assaults that robbed them of their sense of self and sense of ‘home’, sending them into a journey of ‘exile’ while still in Sri Lanka itself.

6.3 An Existential Interrogation of things 'Present'

**‘The real plot of Moby Dick takes place inside Ahab. The rest is a fishing trip.’
(Rushdie 1992: 225)**

**‘You can check out anytime you like, but you can never leave’
(Eagles 1977)**

‘To get the taste I am talking about, you must come to my placeonly in my village you get sweetest coconut water’

'You have our food here (in London). Now everything you can buy but still the taste is different ... all the things you can buy but the real taste you cannot buy. That one, only at home you can get.'

My journey into the realm of Tamil diaspora accounts of loss began with very prosaic and mundane accounts concerning the subject of food; the importance of authentic *'Tamil food'*, *'the way we do things back home'*²²⁶ and the inferiority of the taste of all other crabs when compared to Sri Lankan black crabs. This was a subject that most Tamils have no problem being very passionate about and being of Tamil origin myself, such conversations were often a device that had the power to 'be the axe for the frozen sea inside.' (Kafka 1978:16) I was gradually exposed to conversations which were framed as more explicit narratives of loss, however again, these too related in the first instance, to quite mundane issues such as the diminishment of extended family involvement in various festivities, the absence of grandparents in terms of childcare or the lack of social gatherings. Over time however, it became clear that much was being said between the lines, for as put forward by Summerfield, it is often the case that 'there are no socially-defined ways of mourning a lost way of life.' (Summerfield 1996:6)

My gradual appreciation of the meaning of these shrouded narratives has occurred with a growing awareness on my part of a variant of Eric Wolf's insight that 'transcendental ideological issues appear only in very prosaic guise.' (Wolf 1969: xi) Getting to know my informants was to take part in a ritual of remembrance and reflection, of how things once were, of a life taken away and for many, of suffering endured and loved ones lost or left behind. To many of my informants, the border crossed was a metaphor for irreparable loss made concrete and being in diaspora was to be a people violently displaced not just from a particular place but also from a particular way of life and a particular sense of self. But it was also a time of hope for a better future, where the strains of a redemptive ideology are heard in a language beyond the confining logic of the state left behind.

Building on points raised in Chapter 4, it is significant that within the field of Conflict Studies, the deterritorialisation of the consequences and effects of conflict on the

²²⁶ Group discussion January 2007

identity and psychology of a conflict diaspora population is left surprisingly unexplored, especially when we consider the growing academic interest in the phenomenon of 'long distance nationalism.' It has been noted that the refugee is a figure studied more often than not, away from the sound of battle and in a sense, conflict diaspora communities are similarly and perhaps more concretely, emplaced away from the theatre of conflict and this distance, both conceptually and physically from the frontline seems to have placed the study of such communities on the margins of conflict analysis. It is also relevant that when we speak of diasporas, we are in the main discussing a community whose members are settled and largely accepted in a new host country as citizens. The essential question that arises therefore is if the effects and consequences of conflict processes are still relevant.

My contention is that it is as refugees from violence and conflict that diaspora Tamils define themselves and this is a significant basis of their search for meaning and a sense of identity. It has been noted that many commentators tend to 'downplay the presence of the past in contemporary diasporas.' (McGregor 2009:186) While there is often an acknowledgement of a past in a foreign land, the present is often analysed as a time of normalisation, with the focus being on issues of integration within the host society. My point of departure however is a view that becoming part of a diaspora through war and displacement is a process of traumas rather than an event with an easily defined start and end. Forced migration due to conflict not only dislocates people from their homes, possessions, livelihoods and communities, it also has profound effects on people's ways of thinking, their attitudes and perceptions. As put forward by Somasundaram, the context of war results 'in change at cognitive, emotional and social levels', transforming 'the lives of individuals, their families and their communities in fundamental ways.' (Somasundaram 2007:13,11)

Linking the formation of diaspora communities to homeland conflict, enables us to link the 'existential assaults' mentioned above that forced many Tamils into diaspora, to a continuing existential crisis that marks the conflict diaspora condition. It is an analysis that enables us to locate and appreciate the fact that the varied effects of violence 'do have a tomorrow.' (Nordstrom 2004: 223) When we consider the dynamics and consequences of violence on the creation and cultural production of such diaspora communities, we are forced to address the fact that the sense of loss and

pain that many have suffered can not only be deterritorialized and ‘emplaced’ elsewhere but also added to. I have often asked my informants for their own appraisal of how the Tamil diaspora is viewed by the general public in London:

*‘English people... they are always telling me that LTTE is terrorists. I try to explain what we are seeing but for them, it is like official story already. Sri Lanka they know they say... nice beaches, friendly people. Tigers is the problem, Tigers are terrorists. Tigers are killing many people and government is fighting for peace only. People say they know all this already...Sinhala people are all like monks only... they only want peace.... but this is Sri Lanka... even monks want to kill Tamil people. ... This is how I learn a important thing. I know Sri Lanka story, I know LTT story. Inside all that story is my story. So now is for me only to tell (the) story. For English people, Sri Lanka story is like movie so must have good people and bad only and Tigers are the bad people.....’*²²⁷

*‘British people say this is not British war, not their business so because I am British now, not my business also...But for me, it is my people fighting. ... I am here but still my heart is there also so really war is still my war only.... Like that, I do lot of things for our people there.... if our people are fighting I will help them also because the fighting is for my family also. Otherwise, who will help? **(Is it your family here or your family there you mean?)** Both type got.... all Tamil people have family there, here, Germany, Canada, everywhere got... also I have family in heaven because of government... from heaven also they will be helping us because they know what is happening... **(Any family in the other place, not heaven?)** That God only can say. ...but all only because of government so like that God will understand ... that is why we must fight from here also.... here is ‘maybe place’ for us ..maybe Eelam can happen from here...’*²²⁸

*‘I can tell you something ...I can ask British people to say ‘Sri Lanka’. It is simple thing to say...but there you can see the difference. How our Tamil people say ‘Sri Lanka’ is different because for us ‘Sri Lanka’ is not just the words only...when we say Sri Lanka, we are feeling many things... we are saying many things but these things we are saying with our hearts only, with our prayers also. British people cannot say Sri Lanka like that so they cannot understand.’*²²⁹

The responses expressed above are representative of a deeply held feeling that it is only those of the diaspora who can speak about the diaspora condition in terms relevant to their own experiences of violence and displacement. For those who have made the journey into diaspora, the struggle they now face is a struggle for a ‘stable identity’, what Tabori refers to as ‘an integral part of exile itself’, a struggle against being cast adrift in a world of turmoil and meaninglessness. (Tabori 1972:37) This is

²²⁷ Interview with THOM: December 2006

²²⁸ Interview with AHL: June 2007

²²⁹ Interview with ARN: July 2008

especially relevant in the case of conflict diaspora members whose ‘sense of being’ is already embedded in narratives of exclusion, alienation and existential crisis. The past may indeed be a foreign land but it is a foreign land they carry inside them in the present, a present where even the dead make claims on their sense of moral responsibility.

‘sometimes, I am walking and I see a building or a church and I am back at home only (in Sri Lanka), and I have the fear inside ... inside and everywhere.... I am like a mad person because what I am seeing is not there... other persons cannot see what I see. This is (the) reason, last time I say why I don’t like to go new places. It’s funny thing, new place, that is when there is danger. Here Earls Court, East Ham where I stay – this places all I know – this is England for me, England only.... . But last year, I was working in Dorking and many times, I am seeing Sri Lanka places, Sri Lanka people only.... sometimes dead people also I am seeing... I cannot explain but in Dorking, you turn here, turn there, turn here and you can see Sri Lanka places... like that, sad, angry, frightened, all you can feel, just like that.’²³⁰

The experience of my informant above underlines the fact that for many, while they are mostly able to embrace a normality and a reality that defines the present for them, a past that transfigures the present is always no further away than the ‘distance of a shout.’²³¹ Nordstrom makes a similar point in her work, presenting an argument that if a,

‘post office becomes a site of a massacre,... post offices become attached to the production of violence in ways that last far beyond the conclusion of the war. It is unlikely that anyone who witnesses these atrocities will ever again... enter a post office without re-experiencing the impact of war.’(Nordstrom 2002:280)

As I survey my fieldwork and case studies, I realize that it is this experience of living with and within the shadow of violence that informs the lives of many that I have encountered. This underlines one of my key arguments - that for many Tamils, living in diaspora is just ‘a different kind of war story’ and should be interrogated as such, because for them, it is lived as such. (Nordstrom 1997) In her work, Nordstrom narrates an episode where stranded in a town devastated by war, she is ‘scolded’ by

²³⁰ When he had first arrived in London, 10 years before, such images of his experiences in Sri Lanka had been a more constant and frequent companion. Interview with PERU: May 2007.

²³¹ In his poem so named, Ondaatje talks of an ancient time when distances were measured by the voice and life was lived within close community structures. The voice is thus represented as a symbol of community and it is the effects of violence on the Tamil community, which many of my informants seem to carry within them. (Ondaatje 1998: 6)

locals for being unprepared for the situation she found herself in: 'war they explained is a travelling companion and one has to be prepared for it.' (Nordstrom 1997:xi) For many diaspora Tamils, while they did indeed have the chance to pack for their impending journey abroad, many have realized that they failed to appreciate the fact that the war would also be a travelling companion that they would in fact take with them from their towns and villages, encountering it again, in the streets of London and in their hearts and minds. This underlines the fact that when trying to understand the diaspora condition, we would do well to appreciate the various stories within the story, because diasporas only exist because they are by definition from 'somewhere else' and both that 'somewhere else' and the journey from 'there to here' has a history.

'For me he is gone (dead), long ago already happened like that. My mother, she is always thinking he will come home but I know he is gone. That is why she is still there only (in Sri Lanka), waiting for him to come only. For me, (there is) nothing to say anymore and we are small people so we cannot do anything.... But sometimes here also (in London), I see him but like my old life (in Sri Lanka), I know he is gone only... But also I think, like all our Tamil people in Sri Lanka, he is still there only, forever always there. That is (the) funny thing ...if my brother was alive, one day he will die. But like this, always he will be in Sri Lanka only...and like that, always I will be there also.'

I listen to narratives like this above; one of my informants talking about the disappearance of his brother and it brings home to me the 'unfinished encounter' many diaspora Tamils have with Sri Lanka, an encounter which involves their past, present and future. We are increasingly 'told that our lives are storied' and it has struck me that many of my informants have often used the phrase '*once upon a time*' in their narratives, often to refer to a time before the conflict and violence impacted on their own lives. (Abu-Lughod in Collins 2003: 245) The coming of conflict however, brings with it a twist in the story, a transformative element that defines most Tamil diaspora narratives as violence stains the consciousness with what Perelli has termed 'blood memories', experiences which become 'the standard of evaluation against which every situation - past, present and future – will be judged.' (Perelli 1994: 40)

'What I want is life like before only. Here (I feel like) I am nobody. Who really cares for me here? I have (British) passport but this (is) not home for me. This passport now I can go France, I can go Singapore also.... you can sponsor me... but I cannot go back to my life before..... That time I have all family, friends with me.... now all

different. I am angry (because) ... my Sri Lanka life was take (n) away. This is not my life. People say heart tells your home (home is where the heart is), my heart broken ...my home broken.. Actually for me, sometimes it is like everyday heart is still breaking only, lot of pain I have feeling.... Always I am thinking of what happen (ed) last time, my family there, what is happening now in Sri Lanka.... this things (thoughts, memories, a sense of loss) can travel here to my head without passport, no need visa to come.'²³²

*'Have you been to Spain? In Sri Lanka, I don't know Spain.. Only England yes. Who is this now want to go Spain? Is it I that want to go or someone else? Now, here... I have many new dreams like going Spain, but I also ask...before, before I left only (Sri Lanka)what really was my dream when I was a boy there.... before all the bad things? Now I cannot even say. Sometimes I think I cannot even remember that boy. That is very sad thing for me sometimes I want to look in my bag, the bag I bring from Sri Lanka and see if that boy is still there, inside the bag only. But that bag also is gone..... Maybe that boy is still in Sri Lanka only somewhere. Now is only me hereso sometimes I am asking myself ...who is this fellow here? (who am I?)'*²³³

*'when you marry, then your family is your wife, your children.. If not marry, your family is your mother, your father, your brother, sister, all your relatives. You must be with your family no? 10 years now I am here (London), still I am not married, because still I am on my journey. **(Where are you going? What is your journey?)** My family is still in Sri Lanka. They are trying to come but still hard for us. For me, when my mother is here, then only my journey will stop. But that also I think is not the end of the story. Always I am thinking of all my other relatives, my cousin sisters... When their life will be safe? ... and then also, I am thinking of my cousin brother that die already ... maybe my journey cannot end because always I am thinking of him...maybe for us, Eelam only then our journey can end.'*²³⁴

In the extracts above, my informants question their own attempts to make sense of their present lives against a background of violence and displacement. Caruth puts forward the argument that

'The traumatized.... carry an impossible history within them... they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess. (and thus which possesses them)' (Caruth 1996:5)

Caruth's work suggests that the trauma of loss and suffering is often both overwhelming and under-appreciated at the moment of its infliction and as such, 'the wound of the mind' needs time to find the space and language for its own articulation.

²³²Interview with KP: December 2006

²³³ Interview with RO: June 2007, London

²³⁴ Interview with AFF: June 2006, London

²³⁵ This process seems to function as a form of bereavement that defines the individual in very complex ways. For many diaspora Tamils, the struggle they face seems to be in trying to understand when such trauma and suffering will end. My own focus when faced with such narratives has been to try and understand what Butler has termed the ‘transformative effect of loss’, which for many of my informants has meant that they are on a constant journey, searching for a sense of meaning and hence a destination. (Butler 2003:11)

‘That is me only, crisis state’

Over the period of my research, I have tried to give some of my informants a sense of the context within which I was ‘researching’ their lives. As part of that endeavour, I often took some of them along to public lectures on relevant topics at various venues. One such event was a public lecture on post conflict reconstruction held by the ‘Crisis States Programme’ at the LSE and in later discussions, one of my informants gave me a new line of thinking.

‘Crisis is good word.... when crisis will stop for me? They are talking this ‘post conflict’ but when is the post crisis for me. I am thinking I am here, my people are thinking all is good here but I am always feeling bad. Some nights very bad²³⁶ ...One time at the army checkpoint I was nearly finished (captured). The soldiers said I was LTT but my uncle talked for me. This type of thing is always happen(ing). Still there now is happening... For our Tamil boys especially, very dangerous. For our people, this is bad time in Sri Lanka but I am here and still it is bad time for me also, you cannot just forget everything... like that only people must see us, everyday is for us our crisis, everyday is like war for us also.’²³⁷

With a particular focus on conflict situations, Vigh puts forward the premise that,

‘Crisis is normally conceived of as an isolated period of time in which our lives are shattered. The phenomenon is seen as a temporary disorder, a momentary malformation in the flow of things.’(Vigh 2008:5; see also Butler 2003)

²³⁵ My reading of Caruth benefits from Das’s employment of some of Caruth’s wider concepts and concerns. See Das 2007: 100-6

²³⁶ He had ‘confessed’ that he often woke up at night covered in sweat with a feeling that he had just been savagely beaten.

²³⁷ Interview with VIJ: May 2007

When faced with ‘situations of chronic crisis and uncertainty’ however, Vigh argues that ‘instead of placing crisis in context... we need to see crisis as context – as a terrain of action and meaning.’ The extract above highlights a feeling that many of my informants have revealed in narratives which speak of individuals and a community that seems to find itself ‘caught in prolonged crisis rather than merely moving through it’ (Vigh 2008: 7; 5; 8) As VIJ might have said, this is ‘diaspora as a state of crisis’, diaspora as a way of life. I have been led to a belief that for many of my informants, the pursuit of ‘normal’ is one that they grapple with on a daily basis with limited success, underlining the fact as put forward by Colson that, ‘the effects of violence and displacement are long lasting, pervasive and unexpectedly complex.’ (Colson 2007:2) Displaced by violence, Tamils are not just transformed by conflict and their journey into diaspora but rather they also change the nature of the diaspora condition, imbuing it with a sense of crisis and trauma.

‘I feel sometimes like that present you gave Y (his son). But no box with picture, only the pieces. So my picture cannot complete... People also here see me like that ... full picture is missing. In Sri Lanka I had box, the full picture. Full picture is important otherwise not complete...also if no box, the pieces can get missing also.’

He was talking about a jigsaw puzzle. The idea of an incomplete jigsaw puzzle seemed a very apt metaphor for a feeling that his present life was one of broken pieces and perhaps symbolically or ironically, the puzzle I had given his son, an old one of mine, had a few pieces missing. The complete picture as it were, would never be a reality again, a sentiment echoed by A in his reflections on his own identity, an identity whose completeness depended on a more historical gaze, a willingness to encounter experiences which had their roots someplace else. Even with an awareness of A’s past however, his reflections also pointed to another vein of thought and feeling; that because of his experiences of violence, displacement and loss, his sense of self would henceforth always be not ‘complete.’²³⁸ This feeling informed much of his reflections and explained his reference to himself as being metaphorically like pieces of an ‘unfinishable’ puzzle, a fragmented version of the person he should have been. For A, to live in diaspora is to live without a psychosocial map that tells you and shows you exactly who you are and where you belong. We were talking about

²³⁸ A’s use of the word ‘complete’ was a constant feature of his conversation. He had picked up the word from a former employer who used it to convey an attitude to work. All tasks were never done until all was ‘complete.’

how he saw himself, how he perceived himself at this moment in his life. A's concern was with what he had lost, what he referred to as his '*behind stories*.'

'Many good things come to me in London but this is like going to the moneychanger. I have my car, my restaurant, money, but all my behind stories I have to give for exchange.... I want to make a jigsaw of my 'last-time' place (his home in Sri Lanka), a big one, like table size, where I can show my son everywhere, all my places.... places I (used to) go, piece by piece because every piece like that is my story..... I was very 'havoc' (naughty)... always going here, going there... fishing, climbing trees, going friends' house, playing football.... always playing when study time.'

His house had long disappeared, damaged in the conflict that had engulfed his part of town. The area where his house had been had gradually been depopulated and finally, as he told me, '*now only grass everywhere*.' Ever since he had his first child a few years back, a popular theme for A's reflections was the nature of his own surroundings when he himself was a child. He had grown up surrounded by open fields and in close proximity was a river where one could catch fish. The children of the town used to roam freely and the contrast with his present home in a very urban part of South Harrow made him express a sense of '*pity*' for his own child who would never have that experience of 'running wild'. A's wistfulness when remembering a landscape left behind was however tempered by more insidious contemporary currents, for as he stated, the whole area would possibly be mined now and hence inaccessible. The intrusion of the tools of conflict into his own cherished landscape affected him very deeply.

While A professed to have spent much of his early life roaming the outdoors, his sense of loss was directed not just towards a landscape of fields, rivers and trees but also towards the structures which symbolized for him a community that had been destroyed; the homes of friends and relatives and the intangible structures of relationship and feeling that such homes represented, a reminder of the fact that for him,

'Sri Lanka is not Sri Lanka now for me. ... Sri Lanka is war so difficult but still it is my place ... here if you want to visit someone, you must call and plan. That time, at home, we just go to people's house only, everyday, you can just go. No need to check diary, text, call first... One friend had big verandah, always someone was there... or we can go stand near the shop to meet people. Now everybody is gone ... and I am

here so I am gone also... Last time, if I don't go to shop for 2 days, people will ask about me. Now all lost... Once upon a time that was my life.'²³⁹

For A, the various houses of neighbours and friends had strong emotional meaning because he had been in all of them at some point or other and just as much as the fields outside, these homes and the families within had been the landscape of his childhood. Another informant echoed similar thoughts:

*'There are things I remember from before... my house, my school, my tata's (grandfather's) shop, cousin-brother's house, but now its missing...my family tells me everything is changed now.... but these places are still standing in my mind. How I feel is like I was living and then suddenly my life stopped...I left Sri Lanka for political reasons...I came here and a different life started but what happened to my life.... is my life still waiting there. ...sometime I think, where is that life?.. because here, I have taken a different life ...I am a different person now..... I am old and also I am still young.... like the vampires ... because my age stopped when I left home that time..... When I go to Sri Lanka and see my parents now, I feel like a time traveller because its like I am still 20 years again.... so something is missing, something is lost.... for me, that is my story.... for all our people, i think we are looking for that thing only.... we must know what that story is telling us.'*²⁴⁰

Since the time A had left Sri Lanka, his parents who remained behind had moved about 6 times in search of safety and security. Reflecting on his own departure and the various movements of his parents, A observed that,

'a house nowadays in Sri Lanka is only to lose... so cannot be our house like last time. Not safe. That one I cannot forgive, that my parents have lost their place and they have to wander like beggars only.'

For many diaspora Tamils, the houses and homes they have left behind, empty houses that in some instances are now rubble, are seen as a symbolic representation of the diaspora experience itself, a representation of time, place and a sense of home and self lost.

'For me, for our family, when we left our house, that is when we are coming to London, just that time we did not know where we were going. What is your word? – diaspora people? ...Actually only was one year later I came to London but that time, (that) first time we left our house, we no longer have (our) home.... Later only, after

²³⁹ Interview with A: March 2007

²⁴⁰ Interview with D: Jan 2007

*11 years in London, I save money, buy this house, my family is coming, one by one, from Germany, from Paris. I remember one day, Good Friday. You know we cook vegetables only... All my favourite vegetables that day we had. That day was first time my family was together. This is 13 years later..... That day we have a home again... This is why all this peace story (that the) government is saying is difficult for me.... You can build the houses again but where is the people? All this talk but where is the peace to live like family for Tamil people? Can the government build all our families again? Can they give us our lives back... all (that) we have lost.... they must put like the 'time-machine', I come and tell my story and then they give me back 'that time' ...but first they must say the truth, then only things can change.'*²⁴¹

Haunted by a 'lost past' and more importantly by a past lost in terms which they now claim to better 'understand', many of my informants underlined the fact that such trauma is not just a manifestation of suffering but also a lesson in understanding.

*'that time different, now different now we can see better ...that time, you know what it looks like (war), you know how you feel, you can even know how it smells..... but you don't understand what it all means... why the things are happening.... when you can know all this, then only you will know why. (we support the LTTE)'*²⁴²

I had asked A if he had any photographs of his childhood. I had just gone through stacks of photographs of his life in London; pictures of his new Mercedes, his restaurant and numerous social occasions featuring an assortment of friends and family. He was sending them to his parents in India. I was intrigued by the fact that many Tamils in London seemed to photograph or film for posterity almost every event they encountered, from significant events like weddings to smaller events like birthday parties and even simple gatherings of friends and family. For A, the informal daily life of his childhood and early youth however could not be relived through such a photographic record.

'How to know? Life was always same only, nothing special to photo, always same only.... my family lived there many years, long time (many generations), same house, same church, nothing change. Now everything is changed but that time, why to think that everything can change ...we are not political people so many things we did not understand.... Sometimes I still cannot believe this thing has happened.... Just like that, whole world can change. That is why maybe always our people are taking photos now...taking photos but also always thinking for Eelam.'

²⁴¹ Interview with ELO: February 2007

²⁴² Interview with LOG: June 2007

There had of course been photographs of weddings and other celebrations but most of these had been lost in the course of the various displacements that A and his family had suffered. While the present was recorded ‘ad nauseam’ in various formats, images of the past existed only in his memory.

‘In your house, you have all your photos of Singapore, mummy, daddy, all on your wall. My house in Sri Lanka, now no walls also, everything gone.... Many persons also disappeared, killed.... so photos gone is small thing because many people gone (have died).... But here now I have lot of relatives, lot of London pictures. But that is not full picture, not complete story.... photos from last-time, people from last-time, that is the complete story which people must know.... For me, this is the computer – (he taps his head)- everything is here..... our people will never forget all what we have suffer(ed), all what has happened. That is our story now.... you ask me if I want to go back one day...actually, I want to migrate to ‘last-time’ only... before everything bad is happening.... when my mother was younger time.... that only is the visa I want for me.... otherwise visa for Eelam only.’²⁴³

6.4 An Existential Interrogation of an Unknown Future

**‘Where do you come from?And where are you going?’
(The Red Queen in Carroll 1969:17)**

**‘I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach.’
(Scrooge in Dickens 1990: 103)**

‘What really can we do here? We can send money, we can go marching (demonstrating). We can help our people to leave Sri Lanka..... that is the real things we can do..... I see my mother now... 5 years in Madras, 4 years in Switzerland with my brother, then Paris. She is international traveller now. Now she is here but still always she is thinking of home... There are things she knows from home-time... this she cannot talk but inside for her is very painful and still only Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka she is interested. Go Cornwall holiday... she is not interested, go and sit Parliament Square (The site of demonstrations in 2009), everyday she wants to go ...like that maybe we can make change for Sri Lanka. Important thing my mother says, we must always remember our Tamil people. For my mother, that only is why we are here we must call and listen for Eelam...now for her, Parliament Square is like Eelam already so everyday must go.’²⁴⁴

In seeking to appreciate the agency of those who flee violence, Turton instructs us that such individuals may insist, in their own words, that, ‘to migrate is something we

²⁴³ Interview with A: March 2007

²⁴⁴ Interview with SS: April 2009

do, not something that is done to us.’ (Turton 2003:11) If we accept that ‘ideological and political hegemony in any society depends on the ability to control the material context of personal and social experience’, then such individuals underline their agency to some degree, in their extreme willingness to manoeuvre out of the spaces of oppression they find themselves in and this can be seen as the start of an existential quest for a new discourse of being. (Harvey in Ashcroft 2000:125) The relevance of this is not to downplay the violent conditions that may give rise to such hard decisions but rather as Turton argues,

‘to understand the point of view and experiences of the people making the decision to move..... to emphasise their embeddedness in a particular social, political and historical situation..... to see them as agents, however limited...their room for manoeuvre may be.’ (Turton 2003:12)

Interrogating the nature of conflict diaspora communities therefore is an exercise in appraising different layers of institutional and personal histories. Why do we have the diaspora communities we have? Their presence in our midst suggests an exclusion from their homelands but while it is essential to understand the nature of such exclusion, it is also essential to consider the modes of identity incorporation that enable a diaspora community to reconfigure and recognise itself in exile. Those who flee their countries in a time of war are often presented in the popular media as individuals bereft, wandering the alien streets of a foreign city, disconnected from both a distant homeland and the alien environment they find themselves in. Malkki has similarly expressed her concern that such discursive conventions tend to abstract refugees ‘from specific political, historical, cultural contexts’, effectively silencing them. (Malkki 1996:379) Like Turton, Malkki’s contention is that refugees themselves may see things differently. That rather than being passive victims, they may see their suffering as a ‘condition that helped to produce a particular political subjectivity.’ (Malkki 1996:378-9)

Starting from first principles therefore, we need to always bear in mind ‘ what kind of mobility is foundational in shaping the diasporic condition.’ (Hage 2005:468) The question as put forward by Brah, is not simply about

‘who travels but when, how and under what circumstances? What socio-economic, political and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora?’ (Brah 1996: 188)

‘Many have left.they are searching for new life. That is what (the) government wants...to tell the Tamil people to go...but for us new life, old life, it is one life only. For me, back home is still my life.... You cannot just look for new things when your house is (having) problemYou need to do your homework.... I was born in Sri Lanka but Sri Lanka (was) born in me (as well)... Nowadays to be Tamil is hard work. That is our life...you can come here (London) but you cannot run away really.... I think we are all like the ‘Dracula people’ (vampires) We go and government is happy because they think we are ‘dead’ (gone forever) but still we (are) always coming back (involving ourselves politically), in London also we are always shouting for Eelam, so still problem for government... Government must understand we will forever be Tamil only... born Tamil, refugee time Tamil, now you call diaspora people.... but still always Tamil only...so Eelam only is our place. (where we are going)’²⁴⁵

Throughout my thesis, it is the specific transformational context of violence and conflict that has differentiated my focus from other streams of analysis. To my informant above and many like him, the need to address this ‘homework’ defines their ‘cognitive landscape of emotion’, which in turn informs their current attitudes towards support for the LTTE, the pursuit of the dream of Eelam achieved and what it represents. (Heider 1991:6) Building on the literature above, we need to evaluate the continuing mobility of diaspora consciousness as burdened with a traumatic past, it encounters itself in the present and looks forward into the future. An interest in the nature of diaspora consciousness focuses our attention not just on how we view diaspora communities, but rather on how they view ‘the repercussions of exile on their lives, their life paths and their histories.’ (Cornejo 2008: 336) For many Tamils as depicted above, a life in diaspora is a life in exile from a part of their own sense of self. It is an experience of ‘arriving’, but never actually being able to close the door on the journey made, a journey framed not just in physical and spatial terms but also in existential terms and it is this quality of a transformative journey still ‘unfinished’ that defines the conflict diaspora condition.

In his early study of the Palestinian diaspora, Said makes the point that ‘our truest reality is expressed in the way we cross over from one place to another.’ For many

²⁴⁵ Interview with BAL: December 2007

individuals who leave their homelands because of oppressive processes connected to conflict, despite finding refuge in other countries, ‘exile remains the deepest continuity in their lives.’ (Said 1986:164) It is this mode of feeling and being that challenges the belief that for those in diaspora, acquiring citizenship status in their new land of residency means that their narrative of displacement, suffering and exile is over. Writing about refugees, Daniel makes the point that the ‘field’ of focus, is not necessarily a place, but a movement of people through space that shares a common discourse. (Daniel 2006: 57) Although the place of diaspora is indeed ‘a place’, it is a place whose meaning is vulnerable to the discourse of violence and displacement that underlines the subjective experience of those who live there. Conflict diaspora consciousness is thus infused with just such a discourse of traumatic lived experiences, a state of being that transcends the legal, chronological and conceptual differences between refugees from conflict and members of a settled conflict diaspora community. Soguk puts forward the idea that the meaning of ‘refugee’ is ‘a politics of capturing the human under duress’ and it is imperative that when considering conflict diaspora communities, we maintain this sense that what we are analyzing is a continuation of just such a political and existential journey of duress but also a journey of hope and aspiration. (Soguk 2007:303).

The focus for diaspora Tamils is not to be trapped in their past, but rather to use the past to inform and imagine their present state of being and purpose in order to change the future – to use the experience of being in diaspora to dream new dreams and to embrace a path out of the duress that informs their lives. This existential dialogue within the hearts and minds of those in diaspora regarding who they are, what they have experienced and where they are heading, speaks not just of a personal journey but also of a journey that potentially speaks towards both community and homeland left behind. It is ‘the blurring of once taken-for-granted boundaries’ within a transnational paradigm that should enable us to appreciate more clearly that the creation of a particular diaspora consciousness in a time of war has the potential to produce ‘new sources of cultural meaning, and new forms of social and political agency that flow across national borders.’ (Smith 1994:16)

For many Tamils, their willingness to support the LTTE and as such, a particular version of morality and political aspiration is the result of just such a transnational

political subjectivity, but one that has been upgraded to the level of an all encompassing ‘ideology of being’, which enables them to make sense of the social world they now inhabit, a world produced and infused with the legacy of a culture of violence and conflict. This is fundamental because as put forward by Anderson, any conception of nationalism ‘has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which-as well as against which-it came into being.’ For diaspora Tamils, the overwhelming lived reality of violence, dislocation and loss means that rather than a ‘religious community’ or a ‘dynastic realm’ the ‘relevant’ cultural system in their context is actually a culture and a realm of violence and oppression. (Anderson 2006:12) ‘Armed’ with this sense of a fundamental ‘beginning’, understood on their own terms as a discourse of survival and resistance, a consciousness of being part of a diaspora in a time of war reflects a need to go forward ideologically within a very particular epistemological framework of meaning.

A study of a conflict diaspora community is thus a study of those who survived – ‘living and surviving to tell the tale’ but also living to create new tales and responses while holding in trust the testimonies of those who failed to survive and those who still suffer. Scheper-Hughes underlines the importance of this vein of thought, stressing the need to celebrate ‘forms of everyday resilience’ found ‘searching in the nooks and crannies of oppressed and excluded communities.’ (Scheper-Hughes 2008: 53) Diasporic space in a time of war is just such a nook or cranny of resilience and when we interrogate its inhabitants we need to be constantly aware of this fact and how such a narrative defines their negotiation and imagination of self and purpose, motivation and aspiration. Rather than manifesting a disempowered sense of victimhood, with ‘little or no scope for independent rational decision making’ as in most assessments of forced migration, diaspora Tamils have grown to manifest a consciousness of themselves as a community with a significant and specific contextual transnational potential. (Turton 2003:10) Infused with ‘a social reality saturated with positive emotional bonds’ and an ‘obligation to remember’, they strive to ‘re-imagine’ themselves in the place of diaspora as a valid part of a larger Tamil society. (Margalit 2002: 144)

*'You are always asking about Sri Lanka... Let me ask you something. Which Sri Lanka you want? I was in Sri Lanka, then had to leave Sri Lanka. Now I am here but still there is Sri Lanka and one day, maybe I can go back to stay but that Sri Lanka will be Eelam... Eelam always is calling All is same Sri Lanka but all is different Sri Lanka also. Which Sri Lanka you are asking for? ...because all got different story (meaning)....Sri Lanka story still changing so we also still changing.'*²⁴⁶

For many of my informants, their turn in diaspora has been a transformative experience of encountering themselves anew and this has involved a search for what Sellars has referred to as a viable 'manifest image', a way of being a 'man-in-the-world' based on the way the world appears to them through the 'facts' of their own experiences and perceptions. (Sellars 1962:42) As put forward by Said however, 'facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them.' (Said 1994a : 254) It is from this context of experience, perception and aspiration therefore that diaspora consciousness is imagined and framed in terms of the moral assaults and political violence that has produced it. It is a consciousness that also produces its own sense of moral responsibility and sense of obligation, where to be in diaspora is to have just such a role in supporting a narrative and an agenda for action based on a new found ability to be 'story-tellers and meaning-makers', firstly of themselves but also as a means 'to reframe adverse events in order to make them meaningful.' (Scheper-Hughes 2008: 44) For many, this has involved a degree of radicalization, resulting in a turn towards acceptance and support of the LTTE and its brand of violent militancy. They are radicalized not only by the experiences they have lived through but also by their efforts in trying to understand and confront the meaning of such experiences and why it happened and to answer the existential questions which define their present state of being 'in diaspora.'

In the late 1950s, faced with what he perceived to be an existentialist threat to the Tamil community, Tamil politician A Amirthalingam of the Federal Party warned that the ever-increasing ethno-nationalist policies of the state would ensure that,

'Even if only one Tamil man is left in this Island he will fight to the bitter end.... for equality of status with the Sinhalese people and never accept this stamp of inferiority.' (cited in De Votta 2004:110)

²⁴⁶ Interview with CAN: Dec 2008

A consciousness of being part of a transnational diaspora community brings another dimension to Amirthalingam's words, for even Tamils who have left the island can now be seen to manifest support for this 'fight to the bitter end'. The important point here is that for many, support for the LTTE and the pursuit of Eelam is an ongoing discourse of challenge, contestation and hope, which puts forward a moral challenge for due recognition of the dignity and historic claims of the Tamil community. In a conceptualisation of the moral order of society, the philosopher Charles Taylor argues that,

'The underlying idea of moral order stresses the rights and obligations we have as individuals.... to each other..... Political obligations are seen as an extension or application of these more fundamental moral ties.' (Taylor 2004:4)

For Taylor, what is deemed most important in an analysis of the moral order is how 'people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others.... and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.' He uses the term 'social imaginaries' to refer to this process of how people make sense of the world around them, 'that common understanding that makes possible... a widely shared sense of legitimacy.' (Taylor 2004:23) As depicted throughout my thesis, diaspora identity is embedded and made sense of within broader intellectual, emotional, social and political networks of meaning and belonging and this is fundamental because 'we need to go beyond to the family, group, village, community and social levels if we are to more fully understand what is going on in the individual.' (Somasundaram 2007:12)

The crux of my analysis here is that for many, theirs is a struggle to consolidate an aspiration to a sense of identity that encompasses the broader idea of a transnational Tamil society, a people inside and outside, divided by conflict and forced migration yet united by suffering and a vision of a particular future. Such thinking to my mind underlines Appadurai's call for a more 'careful exposition of the problems of context.' (Appadurai 1996: 182) It is with just such an exposition of context in mind that we are able to appreciate that for many Tamils, their sense of a 'social imaginary' and hence of who they are, is invariably informed by what Vertovec refers to as the realm of relationships within the 'transnational imaginary', bringing us closer to an

understanding of how diaspora Tamils may actually go about the business of negotiating and imagining their sense of self, sense of place, sense of community and sense of purpose in a time of war. (Vertovec 1999:451)

Displaced by violence, Tamils have dragged ‘their imagination for new ways of living along with them’ and in this sense, the imagination can be seen as having the transformative power of a ‘projective sense about it ...a prelude to some sort of expression.’ The imagination in this context, as put forward by Appadurai, is thus ‘a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.’ (Appadurai 1996: 6; 7) By taking seriously, ‘the imagination as a social practice’, we will be better able to appreciate as Malkki says, the ‘meanings that people ascribe to national identity and history, to notions of home and homeland, and to exile as a collectively experienced condition.’ (Appadurai 1996: 31; Malkki 1995a: 2) When I consider the nature of the Tamil diaspora community, I realize that my work is in essence a study of a social and politicised consciousness in a traumatic landscape that seeks to imagine and define itself on its own terms, away from the ‘colonization’ of its identity and the undermining of its motivations in reductionist terms such as those presented in theories of ethnic mobilization or long distance nationalism as presently understood. What then does it mean to cherish the idea of a transnational diasporic identity informed by a relationship to a distant homeland? As opposed to an actual return to an actual state, Said speaking of his identity as a Palestinian in exile, states that:

‘what return does mean to me is return to oneself... a return to history, so that we may understand what exactly happened , why it happened and who we are.’(Said 2004: 429)

It is in similar efforts to understand their own experiences and to define ‘who they are’ and ‘where they are going’, that many of my own informants also articulate their ‘mission’ in diaspora. Because of the violence, suffering, loss and sense of displacement that many carry within them, an engagement with the existential is indistinguishable from the way they conceptualise the political and social landscape they now occupy, both physically in diaspora and metaphorically in Sri Lanka for as highlighted by Kapferer, the legacy of violence and disenfranchisement suffered by Tamils represents an attack on the individual ‘at his or her ontological depth, at the very source of being and existence in the world.’(Kapferer 1988:83) I would argue

that for conflict diaspora communities, such an ontological crisis of being continues and is exacerbated in their 'new world' and it is this existential search and struggle for meaning that needs to be better integrated within the discourse of long distance nationalism.

Building on the work of analysts like Appadurai and Malkki therefore, my argument is that it is an engagement with the existential, evident in the conflict diaspora condition that has enabled the imagination to play a significant part in defining a sense of diaspora consciousness. For many of my informants, the imagination does indeed function to 'disimprison the soul of fact' and by addressing the existential crisis brought on by the 'facts' of their own experiences, such an imagination does 'see into the life of things', offering a way forward. (Coleridge in Willey 1980: 25) In his work on the traumatic psychological effects of the colonial experience, Fanon argues that the colonization of the mind experienced by those dominated by colonial institutions results in 'individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless - a race of angels.' (Fanon 1963: 155) Fanon's lyrical characterization could very well be an apt description of the existential crisis of the conflict diaspora condition in itself but when considering the Tamil diaspora, it is increasingly clear that this diaspora stands in a place where a defined sense of a transnational identity is being forged in a very particular language, an identity which looks towards a specific horizon as an answer to the ongoing internal dialogue that many have with their own existential selves.

*'Never-mind where all we are, surely what is important is where we are from, where we are going ...I want to be from a free country. That is where I want to go... In England, we can see what this freedom is, so surely for our own country that freedom also we want. You want to be proud... for Sri Lanka I am sad but one day, for Eelam, I will be proud. That day, we will all be really free people. Can you imagine like that? Sri Lanka, London, Canada... all Tamil people will be free.'*²⁴⁷

It is the visceral strength and symbolism of Eelam as an idea that addresses and provides answers and meaning to the existential yearning that is a part of the Tamil diaspora condition. The image of the pursuit of Eelam and the legitimacy of the struggle waged by the LTTE is key to diaspora consciousness as it gives them

²⁴⁷ Interview with PETE: Dec 2007

something to believe in, a subjective belief that shapes their own sense of identity, legitimacy as refugees from violence, coherence as a 'nation-in-exile' and reality as part of a wider transnational Tamil community, striving for a sense of recognition, justice and dignity in the face of an oppressive ethno-nationalist state. The idea of Eelam is the idea of a triumphant 'return' to just such a place where their 'dignity and personhood' as Tamil Sri Lankans may be redeemed and recognized in terms they accept. (Wood 2003:233) As put to me by my informant above, it is a pursuit of a narrative of freedom achieved, a narrative that will define the nature of Tamil lives wherever they may be.

The landscapes of the imagination are 'deeply perspectival constructs' and what is important is that when we consider diaspora lives, we try and appreciate the demands of such a landscape – what it means and why it matters. (Appadurai 1996: 33) For many of my informants, their search for a sense of identity and meaning is not an abstraction; rather it is a reality that they live within on an almost daily basis. Violence, displacement, the journey into diaspora and the experience of the diaspora condition ensures that for many, there now already exists the seeds for a 'discursive availability' of a transnational identity that already has social and political legitimacy. (Gupta, 1992:71)

Said theorizes that 'the struggles to win American independence, to unify Germany or Italy, to liberate Algeria were those of national groups separated – exiled – from what was construed to be their rightful way of life.' (Said 2001:176) Even from the place of diaspora, what is important for many Tamils is an acknowledgement and a recognition of their 'rightful' history and identity as a people, for as put forward by Ashcroft, it is 'when place is least spatial', that its ideological significance is most powerful. (Ashcroft 2000:125). As Bourdieu argues, 'there is no worse dispossession... than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition' and in this sense, the 'long distance motivations' of many in the diaspora represent a very particular discourse of being and aspiration, a resilient and at times seemingly anomalous struggle to resist such dispossession and loss, a discourse tied up with the pursuit of Eelam and the idea of self determination for the Tamil people. (Bourdieu 2000: 241) It is a diasporic identity 'held together or re-created through the mind...through a shared imagination' and in this sense, diaspora Tamils see

themselves not only as a people informed and affected by conflict but a people
'imagined in conflict', who still see themselves living in 'provinces in which a war is
raging.' (Cohen 1996:516; Clauswitz 1997:150)

*'When I come (to UK), all change for me. Even my name change but my heart (did)
not change. English people cannot say my name, so like that I suddenly become Jack.
I am Jack but also 'not Jack' because for me, always I will be Jegan.... I come here
today and only Jegan is here – Here is for Tamil people who die for Eelam.
Sometimes I think I also already die.... But here I feel alive still...that only is Eelam
calling.'*²⁴⁸

²⁴⁸ Conversation with JEG: Nov 27 2008, Heroes' Day Celebration

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

**‘I sincerely believe that a subjective experience can be understood by others’
(Fanon 2001:63)**

**‘exile is a metaphysical condition.’
(Brodsky 1990:103)**

In my thesis, I have sought to create a ‘biography’ of the Tamil diaspora community and an epistemology of the place of diaspora, to suggest that any attempt at understanding such communities displaced by conflict, needs to take into account the experiences, perceptions and feelings that inform their consciousness as a community in exile. My work has sought to define such a consciousness, which I see as the ‘essential means by which human beings live, by which they know and shape what their experience is all about’, underlining the fact that ‘consciousness and its products are integral and constitutive elements of ‘reality’, not mere reflections of some other more basic, primary reality.’ (Chametzky 1986:58)

I have argued that the cultural, social and political identity of the Tamil diaspora community, framed as a conflict diaspora in a time of war, is one that is fundamentally informed by various layers of loss, grief, and suffering which are tied to larger narratives of conflict in Sri Lanka. To be a Tamil therefore is for each member of the diaspora, a narrative that is embodied in his or her sense of being Tamil, through the optic of conflict, violence and displacement. It is a narrative of experience set against the backdrop of a particular reading of the political history and context of conflict in Sri Lanka. My contention is that it is the overlaps that occur across such a subjective understanding of Sri Lankan political discourse, the personal experiences of violence, suffering and loss and the emotive, psychological and existential experience of being in a place of diaspora, bearing witness to ongoing conflict and suffering in a distant homeland, that informs, shapes and defines a particular diaspora consciousness which in turn informs the content of long distance nationalism.

I have argued that this sense of consciousness has led to the creation of a powerful discourse within large sections of the Tamil community that presents a turn towards Tamil nationalism as the only legitimate response to the violence of the state.

Anderson states that to understand the transformative and creative phenomenon that is the spirit of nationalism, it is essential to understand the reason why it commands such 'profound emotional legitimacy.' (Anderson 2006: 4) This then has been my aim, to understand and present the terms that predicate the emotional legitimacy of a particular transnational imagined identity amongst a large section of the Tamil diaspora and in the process, to challenge the traditional understanding of the nature and basis of what has been defined as 'long distance nationalism' in relation to the motivations and aspirations of conflict diaspora communities.

The concept of long distance nationalism as presently understood, implicitly references both the profile of a diaspora community as well as the content and nature of transnational sentiment and activity, derived from a particular understanding of what constitutes the basis of a diaspora identity. It is my belief however that it is the conceptual failure of 'long distance nationalism' to explicitly recognise itself as a contingent product of lived experience, perception, culture and history that makes its claims superficial at best and dogmatic at worst, as least with regards to the domain of my study, conflict diaspora communities and specifically the Tamil diaspora. In the process, the idea of long distance nationalism as presented in much of the literature, fails to do justice to either an understanding of diaspora identity or the motivations that inform the transnational content and nature of such an identity.

The transnational activity of the Tamil diaspora has indeed played a part in the Sri Lankan conflict but rather than a study of concrete effects; the product and mechanics of the manifestation of such transnational activity, my work has been focused on trying to understand the basis and nature of such a transnational diaspora identity and hence the starting point for actions and activities that have emanated from a specific way of 'being-in-another-world.' I have argued that the Tamil diaspora is to a great degree best conceptualised as a community of experience, perception and place, defined by the transformative impact of the deterritorialised 'imagining' of relationship, identity, belonging and moral community in the context of conflict. My work isolates the fact that when considering such diaspora communities, we need to

pay special attention to the experience of experiencing the diaspora condition in a time of conflict and the various effects and consequences of violence, loss and forced displacement that are inherent in such a condition of being.

There has been a growing acceptance in the current debates on conflict processes that war and conflict do not emanate from a vacuum but are instead embedded in the particular historical, cultural, social, political and economic biography of the society within which it emerges. (cf Richards 2005:3) A specific conflict can thus be better understood by seeking to better understand the society that has produced it. When considering the nature of conflict diaspora communities however, I have proposed a different vein of analysis. My argument is that rather than just seeing such a displaced community through the prism of a society in conflict in a distant land, we would do better to consider how the context of conflict and displacement has produced such a community; its culture, the nature of its relationship to a society and homeland left behind and the existential questions it faces as it seeks to define a sense of identity and belonging in diaspora. Building on Vertovec's conceptualisation of 'diaspora as consciousness', I have argued that to understand the 'emotional and moral motives' that inform the sentiments and motivations inherent in such a community-in-progress, we need to appreciate that the context of conflict is also the context of diaspora consciousness. (Vertovec 1997:8; Wood 2003: 2)

My work has thus been a presentation of the validity of a conflict diaspora identity as a function of diaspora consciousness formed through lived experience. In its simplest terms, I have argued that we need to take seriously the idea that a conflict diaspora community is a living embodiment of a culture and a society produced by conflict and informed by the effects and consequences of violence and displacement at various levels and as such, we need to interrogate its sinews of being and consciousness through the optic and discourse of conflict, violence and contestation. This is especially relevant when we seek to understand the reasons why diaspora members may support homeland insurgent groups fighting against the state. Rather than a focus on a supply-side discourse of diaspora manipulation, mobilization and exploitation by elites, my argument has been that we need to first address the issue of why those in diaspora are willing to respond to such prompting. We need to go some way to internalise the formation of sentiment and motive rather than look to exogenous areas

of mobilization and appreciate that the logic of long distance nationalism is something that has its impetus not only in distant homelands but also in the hearts, minds and imagination of those in diaspora.

In my work, I have tried to prioritise an investigation of the personal autonomy of diaspora Tamils. It is an attempt to explain the nature of the diaspora condition by highlighting, as put forward by Zur, 'a person's ability to govern him (her) self with a conscientious search for meaning', a definition of 'personal autonomy' which she presents as 'a quiet acting out of inner conviction', based on a struggle to do the right thing within the moral order of a particular social world. (Zur 1998:125; 97-8) A 'knowledge' of the diaspora condition to my mind, is ultimately derived only from those who have experienced its various dimensions and exclusions in their lives. An important part of my work therefore has been an effort to acknowledge and embrace the sentiments and insights of such situated knowledge and to find a theoretical framework and language to 'locate' and articulate the claims of such experience. The question that arises therefore is whether my analytical framework has sufficient epistemological significance. When considering its impact on an interrogation of the conceptual perimeters of diaspora identity and long distance nationalism, does it have the capacity to produce knowledge that may be of use in challenging present norms about how we view the nature and motivations of conflict diaspora communities? To this end, Laclau is instructive and my work has been an attempt to politicise the conflict diaspora condition by constructing

'a new language – and a new language means.... new objects, new problems, new values, and the possibility of discursively constructing new antagonisms and new forms of struggle.' (Laclau 1990: 162)

7.1 The Narrative of Conflict

**‘It's not against a community... I'm talking about terrorists. Anything is fair.’
(G Rajapaksa cited in Buerk 2007)**

**‘If the LTTE were not here, we would all be fucked’
(Sivaram in Whitaker 2007:217)**

A fundamental finding of my research, as one of my informants put it, is that a significant number of the Tamil diaspora have *‘tigers on the mind.’*²⁴⁹ The role of the LTTE in waging war against the Sri Lankan state is of course one of the meta-narratives that informs any question on the Sri Lankan conflict but when considering the politics and the very ‘being’ of being in diaspora, it is also clear that the LTTE has become very much part of the ‘travelling culture’ of the Tamil diaspora. (Cohen 1997:135) I argue that the fact that diaspora discourse is mainly presented in support and in defence of the LTTE is very much a function of diaspora experience, perception and interpretation of its own particular biographical context and history. We are thus forced to confront the issue of violence – a discourse of violence experienced and contested but also a question regarding the legitimacy of supporting violence in turn. To this end, what I have conceptualised as the narrative of conflict is fundamental.

Keen reminds us that ‘the subjectivity of the violent – the way violence was seen by them, their perceptions and emotions as well as their interests - had to be taken seriously’ and cutting a similar vein, I have argued that we need to embrace an analytical framework that takes the professed basis of diaspora support for such violence seriously. (Keen 2002:4) It is to my mind, a stance in line with Keane’s very first ‘rule for democratising violence’ which is to ‘always try to understand the motives and context of the violent’ and by extension, the motives and context of those who support the violent. (Keane 2004: 167) An appreciation of this subjective narrative of violence and conflict brings us into the discursive world occupied by those whose viewpoints and motivations we seek to study as we confront the picture of the world as they see it. It compels us to take on board the fact that being in diaspora because of conflict has the potential to represent a way of being that extends

²⁴⁹ Conversation with GE: Oct 2007

and legitimates a particular conception of a struggle for equality and liberty, where support for violence functions not just in Young's phrase, as 'a kind of psychotherapy of the oppressed' but also as a kind of psychotherapy for those displaced by oppression. (Young 2001:295)

I would argue that such a discourse of legitimisation is also relevant when we consider the wider role of discourse in civil war scholarship, for example when considering the dominant 'greed- grievance'²⁵⁰ paradigm in civil war literature. Much of the discussion and theory around the paradigm of greed and grievance as motivations for conflict, fail to adequately address the question of degrees of legitimacy. While grievance is conceptualised as a relatively 'legitimate' cause for conflict where its veracity is proved, the 'illegitimate' element of greed is presented as the actually existing counter-position. My own argument, culled from and put forward by many in the Tamil diaspora is that the crux of the issue for them is not actually a question of just whether grievance is a more legitimate rationale than greed but rather a plea to actually interrogate the degree of legitimacy of the grievance itself on its own terms and hence the legitimacy of the call to arms and the basis of the support for militant action. The idea put forward is that not all grievances are the same. In this sense, the legitimacy of the LTTE is directly linked to the determination of the Sri Lankan state to pursue an ethno- nationalist regime of internal colonisation and militarised political control from the centre, an objective seen by many in the Tamil diaspora as one that has and continues to bring 'nothing but violence, terror, and destruction' for both the Tamil people and for Sri Lanka. (Jeganathan and Ismail 1995:8)

For many Tamils, their struggle in diaspora is a struggle for an appropriate narrative presence, one that represents their history as a people, their experiences of oppression and violence and their legitimate aspirations for self-determination for the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. It is the pursuit of the idea of Eelam that is most significant, both because it represents the long desired destination of freedom gained from perceived oppression as a people, but also because this narrative of self-determination for the Tamil people is one that is not available within mainstream official state discourse in

²⁵⁰ see Collier et al 2003 ; Berdal 2005

Sri Lanka. It is this ‘unavailability’ of legitimacy that enables the state to class the LTTE as a terrorist organization and to effectively disregard the reasons for its appeal amongst large sections of the Tamil people, both in Sri Lanka but overwhelmingly in the diaspora. It is a rhetoric that seeks to confine and de-legitimize Tamil diaspora discourse within the framework of ‘terrorism’, hence defending and legitimizing the historic governance strategies of successive governments, the present political status quo as well the role of the state in the conflict, in the process, implicitly justifying Tamil suffering and displacement, both past and present, as acceptable collateral damage, a state of affairs apparently taken to an extreme degree in the final stages of the conflict in 2009. (UN 2011) In a war over meaning, diaspora viewpoints present a script of challenge and resistance to this official state discourse, a script that is then conscripted into the service of producing a particular narrative of conflict and hence a particular diaspora identity.

7.2 The Place of Diaspora

**‘ The people that were left and escaped from the sword, found grace in the desert.’
(Jeremiah 31:2)**

**‘meaning must be found and cannot be given.’
(Frankl 1975: 112)**

In seeking to locate the nature of diaspora consciousness, I have inevitably been drawn into the very anatomy of displacement and hence the place of diaspora. I have argued that the accepted norms of ‘ long distance nationalism’ fail to fully appreciate the need to take the epistemological meaning of diasporic space seriously. I have argued that the place of diaspora should be seen as an experiential site where the performance of a diasporic identity has been painfully and gradually negotiated and consolidated through a process of intellectual, emotional and existential struggle by those who inhabit such space and give it meaning, underlining as a point of departure, a belief that ‘the war between belonging and exile is perhaps the most urgent and existential question that we are all obliged to solve in the postcolonial and globalized era.’ (Ganapathy-Dore 2001:89)

It has been my contention that we need a vocabulary to portray the place of diaspora in a way that breaks down the mental barriers that separate it from the ravages of conflict in a distant homeland. I have argued that the place of diaspora cannot be studied in isolation, as it is a place deeply implicated in the context of war that has produced it. More than being defined in spatial terms, the nature and discourse of diasporic space is a cultural, social and existential construction and for those who carry the legacy of conflict within them, the culture and effects of violence and displacement is so embedded into the landscape and fabric of diasporic space that we are in effect studying a traumatized landscape and we need to be mindful of the demands of such a landscape. It is essential therefore to 'emplace' the place of diaspora in its proper context, on a war footing as it were, and interrogate its meaning within political, social and psychological currents linked to the conflict in question. Quite simply, it is an effort to emplace the conflict itself, its consequences and effects, within the place of diaspora.

Despite their new found citizenship in various host countries, diaspora Tamils still feel and imagine themselves to be part of a society at war. It is thus important that we are able to locate such communities within a framework that highlights the lived and felt experiences of individuals who act in ways that manifest a social identity that transcends geographic space. The experience of displacement therefore should be seen as the grounds rather than the barrier for the creation of a lived space of struggle and contestation relevant to and in relationship with, conflict in a distant land. My conceptualization of diaspora space as a heterotopic borderland space is thus presented as a way to bring this viewpoint into its proper perspective, a new vocabulary that enables us to see diasporic space as a product of both lived experience and an imagination that gives the place of diaspora specific meaning. It enables us to dis-embed the place of diaspora from the external and embed it within the domain of conflict itself, a domain where its inhabitants paradoxically already exist.

A discussion of the place of diaspora within a border discourse enables just such a new language to highlight how the idea of borders and processes of bordering are seen and understood by those who inhabit diasporic space. It is a way to theorize their search for a 'sense of place' in the social and political landscape they now find themselves in, relative to where they once were, in roles that define them as engaged

members of a political society in a distant land, whose own personal biographies of involvement in that society are taken seriously. I have argued that we are called to help excavate such diaspora communities from their epistemological confinement in the 'external' where they suffer the violence of being de-contextualized and where their suffering as protagonists in their own right is made distant, both conceptually and analytically because of distance, both in time and space. The diaspora condition in a time of war therefore requires a re-imagining of diasporic space as a landscape of consequence, an acknowledgment that it is a landscape of intimate trauma and complex meaning.

Rumford puts forward the idea that theorizing borders can be seen to involve 'an attempt to understand the nature of the social' and in this sense, 'theorizing borders and the dynamics of bordering and re-bordering have become key components of understanding contemporary social and political change.' (Rumford 2006: 155). I have argued that being a member of a conflict diaspora is in itself, to inhabit a highly politicized social landscape. My conceptualization of the 'political' in this respect is, as Laclau puts it, 'as having the status of an ontology of the social.' (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: xiv) It is simply a reflection of who they are, informed by the experiences that inform the lives they presently live and the aspirations and hopes they hold. As put forward by Clausewitz, war belongs to the 'province of social life' and my argument is that the place of diaspora should be re-conceptualised as part of the socio-political landscape of war, as both product and resource. (Clausewitz 1997:102)

I have argued that diasporic space is not a neutral terrain but rather a space where an embattled and excluded diaspora seeks to challenge the hegemonic discourse of the state left behind. Firstly, by defining through their own experiences, the nature and configuration of power relations evident within the state left behind and secondly by supporting a counter narrative that challenges the political status quo. Conceived in this way, inhabiting a diasporic space because of conflict and displacement constitutes in itself an acknowledgement that the present political order is in crisis and must be reconstituted. The place of diaspora and its inhabitants therefore present themselves as a resource for supporting just such a project of political and social transformation, a legitimate challenge as they see it, to the space of oppression and violence in Sri Lanka, which they blame on the political culture inherent in the workings of the state.

I see this shaping of a particular political subjectivity in the place of diaspora as a way to present a diaspora community, not just as victims and distant observers, but rather as active agents of their own social, cultural and political consciousness. It is a place where such an agency both produces and is produced by a transnational consciousness, a place where the diaspora both recognises itself and demands recognition as a relevant constituency of Sri Lankan Tamil society.

7.3 Confronting the Existential in the Conflict Diaspora Condition

**‘The prisoner who had lost faith in the future -- his future -- was doomed.’
(Frankl 1963:117)**

**‘Once more to journey on a chartered course
To reach which country?
I have no country now but self.’
(Arasanayagam (1991) in Ganapathy-Dore 2001:98)**

To understand the motivations of individuals and communities is an exercise in making projections in an effort to construct various kinds of knowledge about a particular constituency. The construction of the concept of ‘long distance nationalism’ therefore is an exercise in ascertaining and assessing the nature and performance of a particular transnational diasporic identity.

Writing about how terrorists are formed, Keen makes the important point that one should be alive to the ‘need to look at processes of becoming’ that in turn ‘demands a sense of history.’ (Keen 2006:89) When seeking to understand those who live diasporic lives because of conflict, my argument has been that just such a process of becoming is at play but what is also needed is a sense of the anguish, confusion and questioning that defines the experiences of individuals caught up in that particular history. There is an anguish felt not only for those left behind or an anguish that speaks of a knowledge of conflict, violence, loss and suffering experienced and endured. Rather my argument has been focused on the existential anguish of individuals who find themselves displaced from a sense of their very being because of processes of conflict and the violence of displacement. It is an argument that underlines the fact that death is not the only way to lose your life, urging us to pay

more attention to the tragedy of the other in our midst and what that tragedy actually means.

While diaspora Tamils may be freed from the reality of living in detention or refugee camps in a landscape of terror, their existence in a daily 'state of crisis' is still something that we have to take on board, primarily because that is how many of them experience and picture their own lives spent on a 'borderland' between war and peace as members of a 'community at war', searching for a way to interpret their experiences as a means to inhabit a new sense of self. Rather than being attacked by violence, they are now besieged and imprisoned by more existential assaults that question who they are and where they belong and it is the nature of their response that to my mind should define the actual content of what is termed long distance nationalism.

In his seminal work on nationalism, Anderson refers to the decline of imagined religious communities because of the decline of the sacred languages that had mediated a sense of unity in the minds of its followers. In parallel, he chronicles the rising challenge of the idea of the nation, whose growth underlined and consolidated a fundamental change in our understanding of time and hence of ourselves. Anderson contrasts the idea of 'Messianic Time', what he refers to as 'a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present', which marked the life of imagined communities of faith, with Walter Benjamin's concept of 'homogeneous empty time', a mode of apprehending time that differs from 'Messianic Time' because it is marked not by 'prefiguring and fulfilment', but rather by 'clock and calendar.' Rather than the simultaneity of past, present and future as part of a perceived daily reality, Anderson argues that the idea of the nation was built on 'the idea of a sociological organism moving through homogenous empty time', what he refers to as the 'precise analogue of the idea of the nation.' (Anderson 2006: 23-6)

From the nature of diasporic lives existing in a realm where time seems multidimensional (Ghorashi 2003:8; Edwards 1994:345-6; Gilroy 1994:207), to the effects of violence and trauma which challenge our ideas of the temporal nature of suffering (Langer 1996:55, Caruth 1996:5, Butler 2003:11; Das 2003:302; 2007: 100-6; Perelli 1994: 40), the nature and idea of time or rather the idea of being out of place

and 'out of time' has been fundamental to my analysis of the Tamil diaspora condition, a perspective that has revealed itself throughout my research and fieldwork. (Langer 1996:55)

Distanced from an association with a geographical nation, community and homeland because of displacement, denied the 'deep horizontal comradeship' within the realm of postcolonial nation-building because of state policies of Sinhala ethno-nationalism and alienated from the claims of a political state because of oppression, violence and conflict, the lives of diaspora Tamils straddle a world where an existential search for identity, meaning and belonging crosses borders of time and space and transgresses the logic of the nation-state. (Anderson 2006: 7) It is my argument that there is a particular diasporic consciousness at play in the context of conflict and violence, formed out of this forced engagement with the existential. Tamils who are exiled from a distant homeland live in the performance of this consciousness, which in turn furnishes the mind of such diaspora communities, shaping its sense of itself and enabling its imaginative vision to call into being a particular picture of the transnational world they inhabit, a sense of belonging imagined but imagined differently, where the confining logic of citizenship is perceived as just one way of being human. It is a world where past, present and future merge and as such, it is a place where a search for existential meaning is indeed informed by the 'the shadow of the future cast backwards in time.' (Anderson 2006:24) For diaspora Tamils therefore, one can argue that a sense of being part of a wider transnational Tamil society, as well as their motivation for supporting the LTTE and the dream of Eelam, is a pursuit that occurs in Messianic time, 'a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present' because that is the nature of how diaspora lives are experienced, imagined and lived due to a legacy of violence, loss and displacement.

It is a time of vulnerability, where the call of Eelam is heard as much in the rhythm of a 'sacred' language as it is in the vernacular. In his work, Anderson refers to how the survival of the great religious 'attests to their imaginative response to the overwhelming burden of human suffering.' (Anderson 2006:10) For those who exist in diaspora as communities of suffering and interpretation, it is my contention that the call of Eelam represents just such an imaginative response to an existential crisis that all have lived through because of violence and displacement, a call made in the

language of ‘ prefiguring and fulfilment’, rather than of ‘clock and calendar’, a language that gives them hope in the present for a particular vision of the future and a vindication of the sufferings of the past. (Anderson 2006: 23-6) The location of this existential element in the Tamil diaspora condition has been a significant part of my thesis for it is my contention that we cannot fully understand either the perimeters of Tamil diaspora identity or the transnational consciousness of this identity, without such a focus and the ideological structures that flow from such an epistemology. It is this element that comes to the fore in most diaspora narratives, stories and reflections and it is indeed as put forward by Crites, that such stories are ‘dwelling-places. People live in them.’ (Crites 1971: 295) Cohen argues that diasporas while ‘dwelling in a nation state in a physical sense’, also travel ‘in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation-states space/time zone.’ (Cohen 1997:135–6) My work has sought to reference and give voice to the nature of just such travels and in the process to provide a particular hermeneutic vein to a reading of Tamil diaspora nationalism, an analogue perhaps for the idea of the conflict diaspora condition.

In her exploration of violence and grief, Butler reminds us that ‘we cannot understand vulnerability as deprivation. ...unless we understand the need that is thwarted. (Butler 2003: 20) I contend as put forward by Frankl, that the nature of being human is inevitably a condition of ‘being responsible - existentially responsible, responsible for one's own existence.’(Frankl 1975: 26) The relevance of this existential dimension is that it gives a lie to the idea of diaspora motivation manifested in orthodox conceptualizations of long distance nationalism, as existing without a foundation of substance, commitment or a sense of responsibility. By failing to interrogate the existential questioning that is a part of diaspora consciousness, the concept of long distance nationalism fails to provide an effective framework for an investigation of the experiences, vulnerability and hence the deprivation felt by those who live in diaspora because of conflict. It marginalizes the actual human being who is the object of the study, rendering him seen but unseen, making invisible the source and provocations of his motives, the nature of his claim to ownership of the experiences and aspirations that define him and hence marginalizing the particular consciousness of identity and belonging that sustains him.

Taking seriously the legitimacy of such an identity also forces us to confront one of the key aspects of our own modernity, the idea that our identities are defined by the claims of citizenship rather than by the claims of our humanity. As put to me by one of my informants, ‘*passport you can change, heart you cannot change*’²⁵¹; a sentiment that encapsulates to my mind, the heart of the conflict diaspora condition and the content of long distance nationalism – that it is a question of engaging with the hearts and minds of those in diaspora in a time of distant war. It is my belief that we need to draw new frontiers of cause, effect, consequence and meaning and acknowledge the existential challenges that such individuals and communities confront as they seek to understand their experiences and define themselves and their place, both in diaspora and in a distant conflict, outside the orthodox claims and confining logic of citizenship.

7.4 To Conclude

**‘Death, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it.’
(Ondaatje 2011:52)**

**‘It’s all happened before and will happen again
And we the onlookers
But now I’m in it
It’s happened to me
At last history has meaning.’
(Arasanayagam (1984) in Ho & Rabukwella 2006:65)**

When we confront the actual nature and basis of conflict diaspora consciousness, it becomes clear that we indeed face another chapter in what Kalyvas has termed ‘a scholarship of combat.’ (Kalyvas 2006:35) The language of long distance nationalism should thus be deciphered and read in a more contextually relevant vein of analysis. In his seminal work on the nature of war, Clausewitz speaks about the central importance of ‘public opinion in provinces in which a war is raging.’ (Clausewitz 1997: 150) My thesis has sought to argue that in considering diaspora consciousness in a time of war, we need to expand such a focus to include the people of the diaspora, the public opinion of a people not in a country at war but a people who see themselves as the people of a country at war. In this sense, long distance nationalism as a concept for the interrogation of the motivations of conflict diaspora communities, will only

²⁵¹ Conversation with MB: June 2008

fulfil its analytical function when it is significantly informed by the fact that such ‘transnational projects’ do really require us to consider a ‘new perspective.’ (Basch et al 1997:1)

We need to view such communities as an integral part of conflict and a society in conflict and to that end, the study of the hearts and minds of a diaspora community is just as important as other aspects of both conflict analysis and diaspora theory.

Clausewitz states that ‘moral forces are amongst the most important subjects in war’ for they ‘form the spirit which permeates the whole being of war’ and as such, an engagement with such forces makes us alive to that fact that a theory of war should by definition extend ‘its borders over the region of immaterial forces.’ (Clauswitz 1997: 150; 151) To my mind, what Clauswitz refers to here, albeit by his own admission in an ‘incomplete and rhapsodical’ fashion, is a study of the battle within the hearts and minds of those caught up in war. (Clauswitz 1997:152) He underlines the importance of such a perspective with the argument that the actual physical forces of conflict are seen as ‘no more than the wooden handle, whilst the moral are the noble metal, the real bright polished weapon.’ (Clauswitz 1997:151)

To wage war, one must first make the case and win the narrative of ‘why war.’ When we consider the supposed nature of long distance nationalism, we find ourselves asking those in diaspora a similar question – why support conflict? Tamil diaspora support for the LTTE has been very much part of the dialogue of conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government and my work has sought to provide a multi-foundational ontology for such support which reflects to my mind, the complexity of conflict diaspora lives and motivations. Rather than simply a belief in ‘fairy tales of liberation’, for many diaspora Tamils, support for the dream of Eelam is and has been a moral obligation in a ‘battle for truth.’ (Appadurai and Beckenridge 1989:i; Foucault 1980:132) Even in the darkest hours, it is this aura of diaspora perception and aspiration that looks into a possible future and despite the claims of political reality, does indeed bring out of the ‘shadows of imagination, that willing suspension of disbelief’ that calls into concrete existence, a solemn belief in the object of its yearnings. (Coleridge 1834: 1740)

In considering the narrative of conflict held by those in diaspora, the meaning of the place of diaspora they inhabit and the existential questions they face in a time of conflict, I present a framework that focuses on the hearts and minds of diaspora Tamils, a people who believe in the legitimacy of the struggle against the Sri Lankan state, where as Fanon says of the violence of the oppressed in a colonial context, their sense of a particular and subjective ‘morality is very concrete.’ (Fanon 1963: 44) While diaspora support has never been the whole story of the conflict in Sri Lanka, its relevance to the conflict and to the nature of Tamil diaspora consciousness and identity should not be underestimated. In his posthumous editorial, Wikramatunga underlined just such a dynamic in his indictment of the Sri Lankan state and it is a warning that we would do well to consider when seeking an understanding of the actual content of Tamil long distance nationalism:

‘a military occupation of the country's north and east will require the Tamil people of those regions to live eternally as second-class citizens, deprived of all self respect..... The wounds of war will scar them forever, and you will also have an even more bitter and hateful Diaspora to contend with.’ (Wikramatunga 2009)

7.5 Epilogue

‘Living in Jaffna means living in fear’ (Emmanuel in Dobbyn 2011)

Rather than a sense of defeat, the battlefield demise of the LTTE in 2009 seems to have heralded a renewed sense of purpose within the diaspora. Events moved quickly throughout 2009 and following a series of consultations with diaspora communities across the world, diaspora leaders initiated a groundbreaking referendum for Tamils in various diaspora centres to register their support for the creation of an independent Tamil homeland in Sri Lanka.²⁵² The issue presented was a vote in support or otherwise of the statement that, ‘*The Tamil speaking people have confirmed that the Tamils in Sri Lanka have the right to self governance based on the Vaddukoddai Resolution 1976.*’ (Tamil Eelam News Services 2010) The referendum was passed

²⁵² Reports of the referendum held in various European, US, Canadian and Australian cities can be seen at TamilNet 2009d; 2010a

with overwhelming support from diaspora Tamils across the world.²⁵³ Observing members of the British Tamil diaspora community voting in the referendum in the UK, the journalist Stuart Cosgrove called the Tamils ‘the undisputed world champions of diaspora politics.’ (Cosgrove 2010; see also Jones 2010)

The aftermath of the brutal final stages of the war did not spell the end of traumatic times for the many Tamil civilians who had previously been trapped in the war zone. (See UN 2011) As described by Adams, such individuals were then ‘illegally detained in overcrowded, sewage-infested camps, with the government controlling their every movement and with no independent protection mechanisms in place’ leading to ‘reports of enforced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and ill-treatment.’ (Adams 2009) In August 2009, various Tamil diaspora groups from all around the world came together to form the Global Tamil Forum (GTF) in order ‘to unite the Tamil Diaspora throughout the world’ to act with the international community to get the 300,000 Tamil detainees released. A representative of the Forum claimed that diaspora involvement was crucial because those interned in the camps were being ‘subjected to torture, rape, disappearance, extra-judicial killing and numerous other human rights violations while the Tamils outside the camps dare not speak out on behalf of these people for fear of being abducted, tortured and murdered themselves.’ (GTF 2009)

In mid 2009, diaspora leaders also began plans for the formation of a ‘Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam’ (TGTE) based in the diaspora. In a press release in June 2009, barely a month after the battlefield decimation of the LTTE and the death of Prabhakaran, Selvarasa Pathmanathan, the new head of the LTTE, declared that ‘the struggle of the people of Tamil Eelam, for their right to self rule has reached a new stage’ and this would include the setting up of the TGTE. (Pathmanathan in Mushtaq 2009)²⁵⁴ Visvanathan Rudrakumaran, an American citizen based in New York, was given the go-ahead to proceed and he now functions as the

²⁵³ It is worth noting that the diaspora has in fact always been a part of Tamil discourse with significant historical roots. The Vaddukoddai Resolution of 1976 itself specifically refers to the diaspora, stating that, ‘the State of TAMIL EELAM shall... also ensure full and equal rights of citizenshipto Tamils of EELAM origin living in any part of the world who may opt for citizenship of TAMIL EELAM’ (Vaddukoddai Resolution cited in SATP 2001)

²⁵⁴ See also Haviland, BBC 2009a; 2009b

leader of the TGTE.²⁵⁵ The relationship between the diaspora and the LTTE ensured that the proposed transnational government would honour the heritage of the struggle waged by the LTTE, a stance which is set out in its ‘guiding principles’²⁵⁶, despite the fact that the transnational government itself would be committed to achieving its aims ‘through non-military means.’²⁵⁷ The initiative for a transnational government-in-exile was rationalized because of the perceived ‘lack of political space’ for Tamils in Sri Lanka ‘to articulate their political aspirations and realize their right to self-determination’²⁵⁸, underlining a belief amongst many in the diaspora, that Tamil politics is not confined to Sri Lanka but ‘extends into the transnational social space’²⁵⁹

While one may indeed quarrel with various details regarding the legitimacy or relevance of the proposed government-in-exile and question the effectiveness and viability of its actual functioning over the past two years, including its legitimacy to speak on behalf of Tamils in Sri Lanka, what is significant is the fact that such an entity does represent an attempt to bring together representatives from all the various diaspora centres in order to seek to give a degree of democratic credibility, legitimacy and coherence to Tamil diaspora opinion in what has been presented as a ‘milestone in contemporary transnational politics.’²⁶⁰ Its functioning, impact and legacy is surely an area for further research.²⁶¹

²⁵⁵ The development of this initiative and details regarding its progress and activity as a government-in-exile can be found at their website eelaminexile.com

²⁵⁶ The Advisory Committee, Formation of a Provisional Transnational Government of Tamil Eelam Report (2010:19)

²⁵⁷ *ibid*

²⁵⁸ *ibid* (2010:1)

²⁵⁹ *ibid* (2010:4)

²⁶⁰ *ibid*.

²⁶¹ A tentative review of all the diaspora organizations including the TGTE post May 2009 can be found in Crisis Group (2010)

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APPENDIX A:

Safran posited that the concept of diaspora be applied “ to expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics:

- 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions;
- 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements;
- 3) they believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;
- 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate;
- 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
- 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.”

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APPENDIX B :

The Sikalokavada sutra and the Dhammapada referred to in the poem are in the simplest terms Buddhist scripture that contain Buddha's teachings on the way to avoid evil. The poem refers to the burning of the Jaffna Library in 1974 by security forces, a particularly significant event in Tamil public consciousness. (see Wilson 2000: 125; 160; Knuth 2006:84-6)

Buddha was shot dead in my dream
last night
State Police in civilian dress Killed him.
His corpse lay in a pool of blood against the steps of Jaffna library.

In the dark of night the Ministers came
They were angry:
'We had not marked him out
Why then this murder

'No mistakes, Sir
We couldn't get at a fly, even
without shooting him first Hence...

Oh well,
Bury the corpse at once'.
The Ministers left.

The men in civilian dress
dragged the corpse
covered it with 90,000 books
Burnt the Sikalokavada sutra.
Buddha's corpse turned to ashes
So did the Dhammapada.

Nuhuman (no date)
@ http://tamilnation.co/literature/eelam/resistance_literature.htm

APPENDIX C: Petition to British Prime Minister Gordon Brown formally presented to the British Government on 31st Jan 2009 by members of the British Tamil diaspora.

The petition was as follows:

“I express my solidarity with the people of Tamil Eelam in their struggle against Sri Lankan state oppression and I support their efforts to liberate their homeland in the North and East of the island of Sri Lanka and to restore their sovereignty over it. I believe, as they do, that only the establishment of the secure and independent state of Tamil Eelam can ensure the well being of the Tamil people and their right to self-rule. As I am unable to express my feelings and support to the brave men and women who are fighting an armed struggle for a just and legitimate cause, with a full democratic mandate of the Tamil people, for the entire Tamil community in Sri Lanka, I as a law abiding citizen of this country demand HM’s Government de-proscribes the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) immediately.”

APPENDIX D: A section of the literature handed out during the Tamil demonstrations of 2009 in Parliament Square , London

‘Documented acts of Genocide of Tamils over 61 years by Sri Lanka’:

1. Rule of emergency laws for most part of 30 years
2. Disenfranchisement of one million Tamils of Indian origin
3. Periodic state sponsored pogroms against Tamils
4. Military occupation and total control of Tamil civilians
5. Discrimination of Tamils in education and employment
6. Destruction of Tamil cultural institutions
7. Systematic destruction of places of worship
8. Destruction of schools and libraries
9. Permanent encampment of internally displaced people
10. Understating Tamil civilian population
11. Restriction of supply of food and medicine
12. Failure to protect Tamil civilians
13. Extra judiciary killings, arbitrary arrests and disappearances
14. Attacks on hospitals and aid workers
15. Indiscriminate bombings and artillery attacks on civilians
16. Forced sterilization of young women
17. Separation of young men from families
18. Economic embargo for over 25 years