

“My Body was a Poem:” Jean Arasanayagam’s Poetic Body as Witness and Judge in Sri Lanka’s Ethnic Conflict¹

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Abstract: *Jean Arasanayagam’s poetry has shed light on the trauma enacted in Sri Lanka’s nearly 30-year civil war (most notably in Apocalypse ’83), ending officially in 2009 by the violent defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by the Sri Lankan government. Arasanayagam, however, has continued to produce work that is critical of the island nation’s ethnic conflict, political stances, and development as the state rhetorically moves towards the path of reconciliation. Following Jacques Derrida’s work on language, I suggest that Arasanayagam’s response to violence and identity politics should be understood within the formation of the “poetic body”. The poetic body considers both the body that writes and the body of writing, the poem itself, as each has gathered presence, playing the role of both witness and judge. Through her work, I investigate this body as a poetic space for possible peace building and reconciliation. This paper acknowledges and argues for the interconnections and intra-actions of language and the body as co-creating the other in specific temporal-geographic spaces.*

Keywords: identity politics, poetics, postcolonial theory, reconciliation, Sri Lanka

My Body was a Poem

*My body was a poem someone else created,
but my mind, my imagination were self-made
beginning with the whispered syllables that
reached my ears in the silent ocean of my
mother’s womb, words that drifted from the
universe of her emotions, shooting stars that
leapt into her blood as we began, together, that
star-bound journey into the naked light of day
from that interior darkness (The Almsgiving 26).*

On May 16, 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared a victory over the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), or the Tamil Tigers, officially ending the nearly 30-year ethnic civil war between the Sinhalese and the

Tamils, which left anywhere between 40,000 to 100,000 dead.² Eight years after the official declaration, the country still finds itself in a process of healing and reconciliation. One such voice that has remained a nearly constant silver thread passing through the acts of violence on both sides of these ever-narrowing and contested boundary lines is that of Jean Arasanayagam. Poet, playwright, and short story author, Arasanayagam was born in 1931 as a Dutch Burgher, with both Dutch colonial and Sri Lankan native ancestry. As such, Arasanayagam was born into juxtaposed identities. These two identities, both the colonised and coloniser, do not rest easily in Arasanayagam; they remain wild and untamed, neither to be nailed down and claimed by the other, nor to be at peace with the other. In her poetry, Arasanayagam is always retracing, remapping around her own identity. In addition to her own body as being a contested space, or borderland, Arasanayagam (maiden name Solomon) is married to a Tamil Sri Lankan, Thiagarajah Arasanayagam. The family objections that surrounded their marriage reveal further issues around identity.³ As Alka Nigma has described of Arasanayagam work:

[o]scillating between her past and present, her sensibility is threatened by a deep *sense of alienation*. *A surge, a dread, angst, gewissen, skicksal (sic)* - existentialists give many names to our existence - lurk around her. The past, she feels, cannot be reclaimed and the present she finds hostile. Her present does not spring directly from her past (She belongs to a Dutch Burghar family by birth and embraced Tamil culture after her marriage with Thiagarajah Arasanayagam) and hence an acute sense of rootlessness torments her psyche. When earth erodes and grows shallower in the present, she realizes that she has no roots to support her. The originals of her identity are 'lost, archived,/forgotten locked in thombos, put away ('An Historical Document') (1993, 106-107).

Nigma (1993, 106) further describes that “the poetry of Jean Arasanayagam in ‘mournful melodies’ struggles with both the inner and outer turmoil”, while accentuating Arasanayagam’s own concession that “[t]he crux of her poems is a ‘life time’s search for an identity””. As Nigma suggests, this continual search for a singular identity, to become “whole”, “exposes the underlying existential problems of our time” (106). While the search for identity underlies an existential predicament in the contemporary world, I maintain that Arasanayagam’s own quest for identity is reflective of the identity quest that the greater populations of Sri Lanka have undergone and are currently undergoing, as the “post”-colonial nation state negotiates between its colonial past and present (or presence), and its marriage between the two primary ethnic groups in the country, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. To that effect, Melanie Murray has described Arasanyagam’s oeuvre as one engaging with “issues of identity and territory by exploring her (colonial) past to come to grips with the present” (2009, 55). Further, Robert Siegle has observed that:

Jean Arasaayagam’s analysis of these matters [including the “rapidly evolving topography” of global flows and spaces of a neoliberal financed world and the counter-narratives provided by the Global South], often but not always implicit, instantiates the grain and texture of these macro modes and forces from the global story in Sri Lankan

daily lives of those who have lived through them, namely her own and of those among her countrymen with whom she has the intimate contact of a fellow resident (2015, 40).

Such liminal, at times precarious, socio-political position in Arasanayagam's poetry not only indicates the identity work necessary for post-conflict Sri Lanka, but also reveals the issues surrounding identity for the "post"-colonial condition. In view of the complex historical underpinnings of Arasanayagam's poetry, I suggest that contemporary ethnic violence in South Asia did not necessarily originate from state independence, but from the lessons learned in the nation building processes of Western liberal democracies. The nation state is deemed as the highest mark of progress, but only as it is also built on exclusionary principles, with clearly defined geopolitical borders which separate the language, identity, and culture from one nation state to another. Chantal Mouffe observes that "[i]n the West the meaning of democracy was founded on the differences established between its own system of governance and those of the 'other' that rejected it", and argues that "[t]he political cannot be grasped by liberal rationalism as it shows the limits of any rational consensus, and reveals that any consensus is based on acts of exclusion" (1994, 105-106). This view is further articulated by Sankaran Krishna, who, specifically looking at the relationship between India and Sri Lanka during the years of conflict, investigates the link between nation building and postcolonial violence in South Asia:

the attempt to construct nation-states on the basis of exclusionary narratives of the past and univocal visions for the future has reached an impasse. The fixation with producing a pulverized and uniform sense of national identity (usually along majoritarian lines) has unleashed a spiral of regional, state, and societal violence that appears endless. The disciplines of history and international relations have rendered the narrative of the nation that undergrads the political imaginaire in South Asia as rational, realist, inevitable, and progressive. One finds the contemporary violences, both physical and epistemic, that accompany nation building repeatedly justified by the claim that the history of world politics had demonstrated such violence to be both inescapable, and indeed, necessary (1999, xvii-xviii).⁴

Krishna also describes the postcolonial condition as "a society suspended forever in the space between the 'former colony' and 'not-yet-nation'", producing what he describes as 'cartographic anxiety', which is

[t]his preoccupation with national space and with borders reveals an obsession to approximate a historical original that never existed, except as the telos of the narrative of modernity: a pure, unambiguous community called the home-land. In this sense, postcoloniality may be defined as a condition marked by the perpetual effort of colonized societies to catch up with the putative pasts and presents of colonizing societies who anyway do not accept that they are in a race" (1994, 508, 517).

Therefore, the "post"-colonial state, both in terms of the nation and as a condition, indicates a political liminality, always marked as "almost" in conceptual yardstick of Western liberalism.

Acknowledging Sri Lanka's own emergence under these contested conditions, Elaine Y.L. Ho and Harshana Rambukwella analyse Jean

Arasanayagam's work in terms of national discourse, "[p]laced as she is, at the crossroads of two minority identities – Burgher and Tamil – in the country, her work encapsulates a unique and complex response to the exclusionary nationalist rhetoric of postcolonial Sri Lanka" (2006, 63). Correspondingly, Murray argues that Arasanayagam's writing "locates the rigid boundaries defined by colonialism and also critiques the present divisions of postcolonial Sri Lanka: her ambivalent position is situated uncomfortably between the spaces of colonial/ colonizer" (xiii). And it is for similar reasons that I suggest Arasanayagam's poetic response to the violence of Sri Lanka's civil war provides a productive, and even ethical, methodology to map the cartographies of anxiety present in the postcolonial Sri Lankan individual, as well as to question the possibility of "reconciliation" and "forgiveness". The question of reconciliation remains at large for the nation state, and as Jacques Derrida states, "[t]here is always a strategical or political calculation in the generous gesture of one who offers reconciliation or amnesty", which is one of many reasons that Derrida considers acts of forgiveness to be "mad" (2001, 40, 39). That is, even as we consider the possibility of reconciliation, we must also hold it suspect to what political strategies will be met by its declaration.

In order to investigate Arasanayagam's own role as identity-tracer, I wish to introduce the conceptualisation of the *poetic body* as a specific spatio-temporality that is capable of moving across and in-between multiple locations and times. That is, the poetic body is both Jean Arasanayagam's situated lived reality as negotiated and expressed through language, and it is also the body of the text, the poem itself, that gives index to this body having experienced and witnessed the world. Or one might say instead there is the dialectic of the "body as poem", and the "poem as body", which oscillate and work simultaneously, in this specific case, to give both evidence to the possibility of forgiveness, but also to question this possibility. The poetic body becomes an articulation of the play between both the macro and micro political discourses and as a co-presence of the spaces/places that inform the body of its position in its globally-localised particularities. As such, the body-as-text or text-as-body operates in its own unique spatio-temporality.

Moreover, the awareness of this dialectical, poetic body is seen in Arasanayagam's own understanding of her role as poet. The epigraph cited at the beginning of this paper from Arasanayagam's poem "My Body was a Poem" might, at first reading, invoke the traditional Cartesian division between mind and body. However, I posit a more productive reading of Arasanayagam, that is, the lines are only drawn between mind/body, or even body/language as she is already oscillating between these spaces. She begins stating, "[m]y body was a poem someone else created, / but my mind, my imagination were self-made" (*The Almsgiving* 26). By claiming that her body was already written by someone else she seems to be denying her body's own agency, while implying that it is the mind that is self-made and agentic, as it moves between oceans and

shooting stars. However, when considering the title, the poem is not so much about the mind, as Arasanayagam wishes to highlight the importance of her body, or rather, bodies. “My body”, as she states, initially is presumed to be the physical body, but is actually created in language, not in birth. Instead, it is the mind which begins “with the silent ocean of my / mother’s womb”, and as her imagination moves “into the naked light of day / from that interior darkness” (26). However, to complicate things, this birth of the mind is also connected to language. Arasanayagam expands the picture by portraying the mind as “the whispered syllables that reached my ears in the silent ocean of my / mother’s womb, words that drifted from the universe of emotions” (26). Furthermore, one cannot take that her mind was entirely self-made, as its creation is also dependent on others, or an/other, as she writes, “shooting stars that / leapt into her blood as we began, together, that / star-bound journey into the naked light of day” (26). Thus, this poem not only collapses the distinctions between possible mind/body dualisms, but more importantly, for this essay, the distinction between bodies and language. Arasanayagam subtly dances between the creation of language and the creation of bodies, not only making both bodies and poems as things already constructed, produced within particular circumstances (even emphasizing emotions as productive), but also as elements that are self-created. Posed in this way, she indicates that bodies and identities are (always) already constructed and written, and yet, they still provide space(s) for individual agency. Thus, the poem is more appropriately read as *my body was a poem that was already written, and my body is a poem that I am always rewriting*. Again, to emphasise the importance of the role of the dialectical poetic body, this should also be read as *my poems are bodies already lived, and my poems are bodies I am always reliving*. This is particularly important to understand Arasanayagam’s own position as poet and peace activist, as Sara Hannan quotes Arasanayagam, stating, “I am constantly reviewing my role as a peace activist in the reassessment of my complex saga through life, writing, radical changes in mind-thought and experiences in the milieu I inhabit” (2013, 1). Therefore, one of the many positions, as poetic body, that Arasanayagam inhabits is that of a peace activist. In order to see how this position must be continually reviewed and retraced, I engage how Arasanayagam has approached her role as poet in the turmoil of the civil war and in the current state of peace building and reconciliation.

In what follows, first I engage with Caroline Schwenz’s reading of Arasanayagam’s poetry, as she places Arasanayagam’s work alongside trauma theory, in order to see how the poetic body is not only a witness to war and a judge for the victimised, but, as I would add, how these acts of “seeing” and “claiming” violence become the very acts that can allow for and open a space and a dialogue for forgiveness, and possibly even reconciliation. Second, I move to one of her more recent works, *The Almsgiving* (2014), written after the civil war and in Sri Lanka’s process for reconciliation. I connect both *Apocalypse ’83* and *The Almsgiving* to show how Arasanayagam not only holds others

accountable, but how she holds herself in suspicion by constantly questioning and exploring her own privileged position as poet and writer. Thus, through these two different temporal positions, the body as poem and poem as body, we can also see how this national, or even global, issue becomes a manifestation of one woman's experience: the witness of the poetic body. Through the conception of the poetic body, I argue that it is Jean Arasanayagam's mindful positioning of herself, even amidst violence and trauma, that enables her to reach out towards peace, and whose poetic movements *might* contain the radical potential for a "reconciled" Sri Lanka. Ultimately, I will suggest that the "mad" act of forgiveness or reconciliation cannot be achieved at the level of states, because it remains "in the field of politics" and therefore is only used as a mode of exchange, but such madness may be possible in the practice and continual re-tracing of violent acts (Derrida 2001, 39).

The Poet as Judge for Peace

Caroline Schwenz engages Arasanayagam's *Apocalypse '83* (1984) and *Reddened Water Flows Clear* (1991), two collections that come out of Arasanayagam's experiences of the civil war, and are evidently marked by "trauma and violence", particularly as she and her family were relocated into camps with other Tamils (2013, 317). Schwenz reads these poems through the framework of trauma theory and the concept of "poet as judge" as indicated by Martha C. Nussbaums' work, arguing that Arasaiaayagam's "poetic voice speaks as a 'poetic judge,' and that this authority allows it to comment on the act of ethnically marking and committing acts of violence against individuals" (316). Acting as a judge, Arasanayagam's poetry "verdicts, deciding who is guilty of violence, and in what manner" (317). Within trauma theory, Schwenz is interested in issues of ethnic identity, but as she notes ethnic markers are absent in these two collections of Arasanayagam's work. For example, Schwenz uses Jeffery C. Alexander's cultural trauma framework, which is defined as

[o]ccuring when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, making them forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (Alexander 2004, 1; as quoted by Schwenz 2013, 318).

Central to cultural trauma framework is the process of identification and identifying between victims and violators. But as Schwenz points out, "Arasanayagam does the opposite" (320). Arasanayagam uses identifiers such as "strangers", "men", and "they", but "[n]one of these words identify aggressors in a concrete sense, indicating that Arasanayagam is leading the reader away from its importance" (320). It is not important who committed the acts of violence in terms of ethnic or social markers, but it is important that the acts of violence are acknowledged and accounted for. The guilty verdict is on the act. She does, however, hold the identity of the individual accountable in terms of the acts they commit, including both overt and subversive acts of violence. For Arasanayagam, however, acts of killing are synonymous to acts of silence. For

example, as Schwenz notes, in the poem “Personae”, Arasanyagam asks both “have you ever killed, tell me?” and “Have you ever been silent tell me?” (Schwenz 2013, 320; Arasanyagam *Apocalypse '83*, 27). By holding those that would kill her and those that would silence her as equally complicit, she also suggests that silence is a form of death.

Additionally, in the poem, “Innocent Victim - Trincomalee”, Schwenz emphasises the temporal-space of trauma that the poet experiences, as well as the process of “re-visioning” that Arasanayagam undergoes, which creates multiple temporalities in relation to the experience of trauma. For example, Arasanayagam writes:

When they came strangers,
 Our house went up in flames
 Thrown in like faggots, my parents
 Blazed crackling, they burnt
 Like two lizards in the fire
 My sister too, she, tiny
 Chameleon turned first green, then
 Livid red...

...

... My house went up in flames.
 Together with
 My sister. father. mother.
 And will they come again?
 Strangers? (1984, 30).

This poem reviews a first-person experience of a young girl whose family is forcibly displaced from their home. Arasanayagam may even be drawing from or imagining her own daughters’ view and memory of this violent act. But while the horrific images that the young girl witnesses, both her home and family burning, are bright and vibrant, the “strangers” that have committed these acts remain hidden. They are “strangers” in the truest sense of the word here, they have no ethnic or political markers; they are only defined by the violence they have committed. Schwenz also writes, “[t]his poem tells a traumatic story that is no longer simply a young girl’s experience; it is now a testimony to cultural trauma, altered, revised and reinterpreted to negotiate with multiple representations of conflict. It is a poetic judgement” (320). In addition, I suggest that another temporality exists as a representation of conflict in her re-visioning: a representation of reconciliation. That is, as Arasanayagam performs her role as poet-as-judge, the act of trauma remains both present and past, simultaneously in a spatial-temporal act of occurring and remembering. This spatial-temporality of judgement allows for the possibility of peace. By speaking to both the past and present, it opens a space for both parties to emerge once more, perhaps, as a practice, or at least possibility, of forgiveness. At the same time, the act of re-remembering the trauma is done as a practice of

reconciliation. Remembering resists silence, it resists a second death. We can further understand these multi-shifting temporalities as played out through memory and the act of re-remembering by focusing on Arasanayagam's unique position as the poetic body.

In Arasanayagam's role of poet-as-judge, the legitimacy of her verdicts does not merely come from her poetry, but her lived experience as a body reliving trauma. That is, it is not merely her poems, her writings, that claim the right to speak and give evidence to violence and trauma, but also the complex spatio-temporality of the poetic body. The poetic body is both the body, the lived experience of Arasanayagam and the poem as a presence, gathering on the page as a body. Just as Derrida understands writing and language to gather presence as a supplement that "is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence", I also suggest that we can discuss the presencing in language as gathering bodies (1974, 144). It is the poetic body that is judge. And it is, at the same time, the poetic body/bodies that deliver the verdict(s).

For example, in the poem "Now We are Strangers", the role of the "stranger" changes (1984, 42): the stranger is no longer the individual who committed the acts of violence, but the acts of violence themselves have turned one another into strangers. As Arasanayagam writes:

It's final now the parting
 It's over, this obsessive wandering
 In a landscape rank with foliage
 The earth repels the root, the bitter soil
 Rejects the seed, canopies of leaf
 Lift parting their branches in a snarl
 To bare the mud and slime coiling
 With reek and stench of corpses
 Hacked or raped or burned

...
 Now we are strangers
 Either we stay awake dark nights sleepless
 Throbbing with fugitive dreams
 Locked within a cell
 Wait for the release of death
 Or embark upon a ship
 That takes us rootless
 Without maps
 To fare forth
 On a voyage without end (42-43).

Although the poem opens with a seemingly optimistic end to the violence, "It's final now the parting", it is clear even before the end of the first stanza that the effects of these violent acts, the murder, burning, and raping, have seeped into the landscape. They are in the mud and slime, because even the earth rejects this "bitter soil". However, despite the declaration at the beginning, in the final

stanza an “end” cannot truly come. She claims that “now we are strangers”, and does not distinguish between individuals that have committed acts of violence or those that have had them committed to them. The entire collective “we” are forced into two choices, either to stay locked up and imprisoned by the past, or, to find a possible way “out”. However, neither of these options really indicate an “end” or a “finality” or even the ability to “forget” the acts of violence introduced in the first stanza. The possibilities are only about remembering. Remembering can be suffocating and miserable, or remembering can be an act that releases. However, this “release” or journey is one that does not have a destination. It is a rootless journey without maps or end; its only purpose is in the act itself. Therefore, what we might conceive of as “forgiveness” or “reconciliation” is not in the typical political use. Reconciliation is not a destination or a mark that can be declared, it is an endless journey without direction. This is also the role of the poetic body; it too is a vessel of endless wondering, serving the role of a voyage without end, one that is continually re-embarked every time it is read again.

As guilty verdicts are delegated and sentenced to individuals for the acts they committed, but not sentenced against individuals’ ethnicity, Arasanayagam’s poetry is always already working towards peace and reconciliation even amid acts of violence. She teaches how it is possible to condemn violence without condemning an ethnicity. The temporal space of text is such that it is always in the state of present, always already happening. The acts of violence that Arasanayagam experienced in the intermittent camps are still happening. They cannot be erased. But a call for peace, for love, or for compassion is also always already happening (but always in her own terms). The “re-vision” involves re-visioning these moments as moments of compassion for what could have been, and thus, what could be. The poetic body is evidence of a possible form of reconciliation that was already at work in the exact moment of trauma.

The Struggling Fish as Poetic Body

Such conscious, mindful awareness of the condition in refugee camps is echoed in Katrina M. Powell’s interview with Arasanayagam. Included in Arasanayagam’s 2014 collection of poems, *The Almsgiving*, Powell’s interview discusses the ways in which Arasanayagam’s work “uniquely links identity, documentation and lineage” (1). Powell begins the interview inquiring about Arasanayagam’s play “The Captain has Come” which engages issues and experiences of individuals as they were forced into displacement camps. Arasanayagam states that she was aware of “layers” in the camps, “something I was very conscious of even in the first camps that we were in”, as even in the camps, class status was invoked: middle class, upper middle class, and professionals were “on the top layer and below in the big hall there were those who had come in from the estates and all the Indian labourers, the fringe

people” (2). However, Arasanayagam appears to resist any political move that might have been made to segregate individuals: “[b]ut we were all one when it came to the political similarities. In the sense that we were all alienated displaced, dispossessed, separated from our own kind, made to feel strange, made to feel outsiders” (2). Arasanayagam states that she observed “human qualities in people” and explains that she saw “the frailties, the selfishness, the vanities, the wanting the best places for themselves like the man bringing the mattress for himself and his wife” (2). She tells the story of a newly-married couple, presumably from a lower-economic class, that were forced to sleep on the bare floor. The man goes to find a mattress for he and his wife, which is later taken away from him as others around him “objected vehemently” (2). Arasanayagam’s accounting of the displacement camps is humanizing, creating “a counter history, not of numbers and statistics and identity cards, but rather the human qualities in people during the warehousing of them” (Powell 2014, 153). She does this by not just putting blame on those that worked in the camps, but, as in her example of the husband and wife, by passing judgement against those that would object vehemently to a husband finding comfort for himself and his wife. Any individual is capable of displaying the best and worst of these human qualities, and as poet-as-judge, Arasanayagam holds all accountable.

However, throughout Arasanayagam’s collection, it is not only others that are held accountable for their in/humanity, for she calls her own political and poetic position into question. In his description of Arasanayagam’s work, Robert Siegle discusses her position as “witness” (2015, 46). A term he says is “not innocent”, as “one witnesses a crime – Arasanayagam does this relentlessly – but one also encounters witnesses of faith who step forward to attest to truths however inconvenient, and sometimes at significant risk to themselves” (46). Arasanayagam understands her own risks, which is seen in her use and understanding of language. In her poem “Am I that Poet”, Arasanayagam takes responsibility for what is produced, and never innocently, in language. In the first stanza, Arasanayagam begins by stating that beneath the works of language, “[p]oetry, fiction, epic, saga”, “lie the hidden stanzas, soliloquies, cloak and dagger” (31). Language does not merely hide, it waits, dagger-ready. Since the violence of language is always there, she collapses the distinction of those individuals who have survived the atrocities of the world and those that have been written about: “lifting out words with careful tongs from the great / conflagrations that overcome our worlds, enveloped in / flames, the martyr-victims who kindle and ignite with the fire brands of their bodies the holocaust no one can evade, it’s for the survivor to utter the epitaphs” (31). The more that we enter into the world of language, the violence, the loss of innocence it embodies becomes paramount, “[w]e learn, knowledge grows, we lose our innocence” (31). Language also becomes a form of colonialism, a form of forcing others into subjugation:

as we scabble with dusty fingers
 the charred earth for sustenance, pressing our roots
 and subterranean creatures inhabiting that under-
 world of mazes and tunnels to shift the layers
 of time, find an unbelievable life that exits
 undisturbed until our greed, our lust, our
 desire for preservation insert our hands like
 sharpened weapons to slit their throats and bellies (31).

Focusing on the hands, Arasanayagam makes the violence intimate. In so doing, she not only identifies the violence in the act of language, but she further seems to claim that *she did not witness these acts of trauma, of subjugation, of power, from afar, but she was there, her hands were dirty and lustful as she stuck the dagger in herself. She waited beneath hidden stanzas until she could wait no longer.* The poet's need "to nail down", or to intimately know the subject in front of her is rendered fruitless, ultimately "feed[ing] our starveling appetites in scarred fragmented / patchwork land of sparse denuded forest" (31). And what remains are "stumps of ancient trees or dying mud-holes / where fish choke and squirm in vestigial pools / of murky water and hardening ridges of earth", which what pervades her to ask, "Is that myself, the struggling fish, / Am I that poet?" (31). The poet here at once is a violator, hooded figure, and a violent imperialist, but the poetic body is also this: a struggling fish. What, then, is the point of entering into the violence of language if you are, beneath the cloak, a fish that squirms in mud pools? Or, as Arasanayagam also puts it, why write if nothing changes:

Why write at all then?
 The world will never change,
 conquest, invasions, wars, repressive regimes
 remain the same anywhere, migrations, the exodus of refugees
 from battle zones, the fleeing people finding hazardous routes
 of escape set up their tents in friendly territories
 carrying terror-stricken children in their arms
 subsisting on handouts, enduring nightmares traumas (33).

Writing her experiences of the civil war did not stop other violent acts from taking place. Yet, as she writes, the poetic body must still stand witness, both for the powerful and the powerless, just a struggling fish. But her poetry is also evidence of something else, that of survival. A point that Arasanayagam also struggles with: "[d]oes the poet deserve to survive while others die, speechless, / gagged by death, scalped, burnt, maimed, mutilated" (34). Again, like the title of the poem, the question remains more of a fact. We can follow this line of thought throughout the sentence, where she begins by questioning, but also by describing the acts of brutality done to others. The question fades until it is no longer a question, or questionable; it is simply a statement. A statement that could be read as: *she has survived, when others have not. They have died in so many different ways, and still she lives and still she writes.*

These are also contestations that Arasanayagam is unable to give up, as she revisits them again and again, until she places a question mark to her thoughts in the poem “Poet. Myself?”. She repeats her stanza that begins “Why write at all then? / The world will never change”, up until the line of “refuge-tents in friendly territories”, but this time she finishes the stanza with hope: “Shepherds take refuge in caves and ancient Roman / ruins, children hold out their hands to feel the warmth from blazing logs to withstand winter’s chill, / ... there will be warmth and meat and milk” (60). It is only by re-questioning, by re-imagining the possible outcomes of those that endure violence that she is able to find hope. Although this hope for others does not answer the question of the role of the poet as survivor: “The poet too is then, a survivor, / Bombed out, shelterless, dispossessed, diploid by history, / by powerful regimes, by repressive measures to silence you” (60). The poetic body is now not only the one that hides in silence, but was also silenced. The personal voices of those that would speak violence, others like herself, have been displaced in history. Thus, Arasanayagam asks again: “[d]oes the poet deserve to survive while others die, speechless, gagged by death, scalped, burnt, maimed, mutilated” (60)? The “others” that have died include poets, as both are silenced, and silence is death.

Connecting “Am I that Poet” and “Poet. Myself?” uncovers the importance of questioning in Arasanayagam’s work. Questions are not innate, they are something that must continually be reworked, retraced, and remapped. In this way, Arasanayagam also resists silence. To re-question is to give life once more to the gagged and speechless. This continual re-tracing and re-living is also a part of the archiving of the poetic body. Katrina Powell (2015), in her discussion of Arasanayagam, points out that for Derrida “archive” meant “power, order, and permanence”, but that with Arasanayagam’s “[r]esistant, transgressive, and dangerous practice of archiving to remember, archiving so one does not forget, and archiving as a way of understanding what we do not understand are the types of documentation that counter what we typically know about the refugee or displacement experience” (153). If reconciliation can be achieved, it will not be in forgetting, but in the remembrance as seen by the poetic body. As Arasanayagam’s poetry reveals, there is violence waiting in the dark, in the hidden places of power. These places include language, which is why the poet must ultimately question her own positioning, just as Arasanayagam questions the violence of war and displacement. She ends “Poet. Myself?” again by questioning/stating, “[w]ho picks up the fallen victim, / as the fugitives run behind / prone bodies, as they run, run, run, fleeing into / endless darkness screened off from light, / dawn wrapped in smoke-filled darkness” (62). Because as the bodies run, fleeing into endless darkness, so must the poet. *Who picks up the fallen victim? It is not the poet who writes, but the poet that questions.* The poet who remembers.

The poetic body must always revisit, retrace, remap; only by re-questioning can one begin to build peace, both within the poetic body as an

individual woman, a survivor, but also within the macro contexts that this poetic body works towards.

Conclusions: On Non-Forgiveness Reconciliation

In *Apocalypse 83'* and *The Almsgiving*, Arasanayagam stresses that she is not innocent from acts of violence, as there is discursive power in writing. Additionally, the violent acts that she bore witness to and lived through coincide with a continual questioning of search for identity, while drawing parallels with Sri Lanka's own search for identity as it continues to wrestle with its colonial past and present. The poetic body must continually (re)make this journey of self-discovery of identity and place, which extends to Sri Lanka's own understanding of national identity and as a space that is written over by these voices.

I maintain that Arasanayagam's individual experience, presented here as the poetic body, both acknowledges the knowledge produced from a situated experience and finds value in personal narrative, which serves to validate the individualised experience. She resists reification of individuals into ethnic categories, or other positions of blame that would seek to negate her own humanizing view. Arasanayagam's voice is not only a witness to war, but a witness to the possibility of peace and forgiveness. her work also gives rise to the body; the body as the site where peace is not only spoken of, but where it is practiced. I have acknowledged and argued for the interconnections and intra-actions of language and the body as co-creating the other in specific temporal-geographic spaces. That is, one can map out how the body understands and navigates the world through language, and ultimately how peace building and reconciliation is possible from *one* individual's situated experience.

Writing in 1999, Robert I. Rotberg wrote that "Sri Lanka's civil war is fuelled by competing conceptions of nationalism", and that peace could only be achieved through "brilliant generalship or by consummate diplomacy" (7, 15), that is, by "crushing the Tamil rebels on the battlefield" or by "negotiating a lasting peace with the help of a third party" or own their own, if possible (12). But no matter which strategy proves most effective, the country would still have to focus "on a secure future for minorities within a dangerously destabilised plural society" (12). Writing eight years since the declared victory over the LTTE, I wish to suggest another alternative for possible reconciliation, one that might find value in a de-centered plural society, even in the geopolitical condition of cartographic anxiety, that of the continual re-questioning and remapping of identities, as indicated by the poetic body. This kind of reconciliation, or measure of forgiveness is neither made by nor discussed on national or a nation state's terms, because

each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it notable and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some

therapy or echoing of memory, then the ‘forgiveness’ is not pure — nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality (Derrida 2001, 31-32).

To take Arasanayagam’s poetic body and poet-as-judge methodological lessons is to find reconciliation by what is perhaps better referred to as non-forgiveness. This is a reconciliation process divorced from forgiveness, because it is not ‘pure’ forgiveness as Derrida understands it, but it does, I argue, disrupt ordinary historical temporality. Pure forgiveness is the work of memory, as the acts against those are continually re-traced, re-remembered in the living archive of the poetic body. This does not collapse or place blame across ethnic lines, but it is the acts of violence themselves that are continually remembered, even the acts of violence in the very process of writing and remembering by the poet herself. Powell also finds potential in Arasanayagam’s work to be able to teach us something about reconciliation, as she writes:

What Arasanayagam’s work illustrates for us is that it is in the ordinary, the everydayness of life, that meaningful reconciliation can occur. Often texts like these are dismissed as having no rhetorical ‘power’ because of their interiority. I would argue, however, that the act of narrating a life, creating an alternative archive, resists dominant narratives and creates a different narrative space in which to consider processes and consequences of displacement. Narratives of identity in Sri Lanka, because of their emphasis on interiority, illustrate alternative archives that rhetorically unravel the physical suffering of displacement, do not conform to the heroic displaced person narrative, and consequently challenge what we know about border crossing, shifting identities, and notion of post-war reconciliation (2015, 154).

The poetic body indicates complex and unstable spatio-temporality, which might also provide a language to speak of how memories of bodies are a part of the political present of Sri Lanka’s reconciliation process. Sri Lanka also has a poetic body, a poetic body of conflicting identities and contested marriages, with constructed bodies that have never been stable, but always in transition, already multiple that are now articulated presently between historical particularities and contemporary flows. Sri Lanka is a poem that was already created, and is a poem that is always being created.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented as “Jean Arasanayagam: The Poetic Body in Sri Lanka’s Reconciliation” at the Northeast Modern Language Association (neMLA) conference in Hartford, Connecticut on March 17-20, 2016.

² Examples include, The Associated Press. “Sri Lanka Starts Count of Civil War Dead.” *Aljazeera America*. N.p., 28 Nov. 2013, and Mahr, Krista. “Sri Lanka to Start Tally of Civil-War Dead.” *TIME*. N.p., 28 Nov. 2013.

³ Many of Arasanayagam’s works also explore her husband’s identity and upbringing as a Sri Lankan Tamil (Sjöbohm 1991, 294).

⁴In regards to national identity produced along majoritarian lines, this may additionally reflect why Nira Wickramasinghe frames her own history of Sri Lanka as not “a comprehensive history of the ‘fragments’ of the nation, but rather a history that incorporates the lives of the fragments of society, ethnic groups, small religious communities, caste communities, workers, women’s organisations that represent minority cultures and practices” (2014, xviii).

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