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FIELD NOTES

Of Truths and Snakes

The Percussive Effects of Asylum Seeking in Australia

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Abstract

Australia's border hardened stance has created a culture of asylum prevention, providing a rationale for the use of defence and security as the core argument to prevent asylum seeker protection. Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken with Tamil asylum seekers and refugees from Sri Lanka in Australia, this Field Note showcases the percussive impacts of border policy on lived experiences. I do this by elevating the subjective lens, narrating an encounter with one of my interlocutors to provide insights into the process of meaning-making and explore how everyday life is negotiated amid ongoing upheaval and protracted insecurity. This piece illuminates some of the structural and symbolic barriers preventing safety, stability and a sense of belonging for asylum seekers in Australia along with highlighting the intimate, mundane and practical ways that daily life is performed, despite these restrictions.

Keywords

Asylum seekers, Refugees, Migration, Border policy, Australia.

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I was very young when I realised that truth had many faces—some faces that were gnarled and twisted and others painted with bright, luminescent colours that made you squint because of their brilliance. Perhaps it was the evocative stories of her life that *Amamma* (my maternal grandmother) told me each night, delivered with such care that they felt like they were cloaked in silks and smattered with saffron; warm and whispered. Or my parents' stories of their carefree childhoods in Sri Lanka, with hand-made cane furniture, sun-warmed *amba* (mango) and rambutan and ten-rupee bus rides that took them on heart-filling adventures. These stories, representing different faces of truth, transported me to places that were concurrently grounding and evoked a certain mystery. Places I visited as a child and as an adolescent that became intertwined with my own sense of self as an adult and, then, part of my own life story.

These narratives encapsulated a facet of truth, unveiling not just the conveyed content but also the storyteller's perspectives, experiences, and beliefs. This realisation infused many life experiences as I navigated various dimensions of my personal and professional life. It is perhaps because of this that I have always been interested in hearing stories. In listening to someone's life story, you are invited to see their particular representation of truth, revealing elements of their own world view. They offer a space to develop a greater understanding and discover insights about the storyteller and, importantly, other dimensions of truth.

As a child of Sri Lankan migrants growing up in Melbourne, I was part of a strong and extensive Sri Lankan diaspora community. My family's weekends often consisted of socialising at and participating in community events. For much of my life the conflict in Sri Lanka was active. Yet, my understanding of the conflict was essentially intellectual, and cleansed by the privilege of distance. My perception of the war in Sri Lanka intertwined with various narratives, including those propagated by media representations, shaping my interpretation and constructing a distinctly detached kind of war history.

My family had no lived experience of war. We did not come to Australia as asylum seekers or refugees. Our experience was relatively privileged. We came to Australia from the United Arab Emirates, where I was born and where my father had been posted for work for the previous seven years. There were never any significant migration hurdles: both my parents were recognised and welcomed for their ability to add value to Australian society as skilled migrants. They were highly educated, English-speaking and easily integrated into a version of multiculturalism that welcomed the kind of difference that was exotic, interesting, commodifiable and compliant, but not the kind that was unfamiliar or too demanding. Ours was the kind of family that Australia was keen to attract in the hedonistic, big-haired, beer-guzzling Prime Minister Hawke era of the 1980s. We were the ideal migrants.

In 2010 I started a role with an international non-governmental organisation, based in Melbourne. I had responsibility for projects in a number of countries, including in the post-conflict and post-tsunami areas in the North and East of Sri Lanka. I was required to travel to these areas of Sri Lanka a few times a year to monitor the housing reconstruction, psychosocial and livelihood programmes that the organisation was funding and nurture relationships with the in-country organisations that were implementing the programmes. Despite feeling a sense of connection to Sri Lanka, because of my own family history, it was through this role that I had access to areas of the North and East of the country for the first time in my life. However, I did not recognise the Sri Lanka I knew. It was more than the fact that my Sinhalese language skills were not particularly useful in these areas—it was the sense of remoteness, the sense of loss and the visible signs of the war that struck me. It was here that I met families who had a lived experience of the destruction of war. Here, I saw how the embodied aspects of war intersected with culture and society and the ways in which this impacted mental health. I met families who still lived in bullet-riddled homes, were still looking for lost loved ones and who displayed both the physical and emotional scars of conflict. At the time, considering my work commitments, I was undertaking my PhD part-time. Given the psychosocial impacts of conflict that I observed in my work, my initial intention, with my PhD project, was to consider the 26-year civil conflict in Sri Lanka and investigate the mental health burden in these communities as a consequence of their situated cultural, political and social experiences. Then COVID-19 happened. From May 2020, I found myself home schooling my children, working from home through Melbourne's serial lockdowns, while concurrently trying to fit in doctoral study and considering what travel restrictions meant for the viability of my research project.

It was at this point that I reframed and localised my research topic. I recognised that despite having my own migration story, I had limited understanding of stories of asylum seekers and refugees. It prompted me to consider expanding my research focus beyond the immediate impacts of structural or systematic violence on mental distress to also consider other percussive impacts of these forms of violence on the multifaceted social matrix of my interlocutors. I wanted to ultimately have a more nuanced understanding of how structural restrictions may enter into my interlocutors' conceptualisations of their own social-cultural worlds and the kind of meaning-making that occurs in this context of emotional and physical loss—a loss of home, family, familiarity, routine and basic rights. These losses are significant, particularly when looked at through the lens of medical anthropology, as they are all elements of embodied and emotional dimensions of health which, in turn, contribute to a sense of belonging (Chen and Schweitzer 2019; Baumeister and Leary 1995).

* * *

It was a very hot day when I arrived to conduct an interview with Divya at a restaurant in a trendy, inner city suburb, a little north of Melbourne's centre.[1] I remember the heat because I had parked my car up the road and was cursing myself for having worn thick pants. I could feel the warmth insulating around my legs and the beads of sweat on my forehead multiplying as I approached the restaurant. I had arrived a little early and, walking towards the restaurant, I could see that the glass sliding doors were closed. The restaurant had not yet opened for lunch. My eyes immediately were drawn to a young woman, approximately 20 years old, sitting by the large, street-facing window, looking at her phone. As I came closer, she looked up and we smiled at each other. I waved. She put her phone down quickly, walked to the glass door and turned a set of keys that were already hinged in the door. The keyring was so thick that I could hear the keys jangling against each other through the glass. As she opened the door, she looked at me, smiled warmly and said, with a gentle, Australian-tinged accent, 'It's hot today, isn't it? Do you want some water?'

I gratefully accepted, and then asked, 'Divya?'

She laughed. 'Oh yes . . . sorry . . . I am Divya'.

I introduced myself properly and we exchanged greetings. I asked her whether she had been waiting long.

'Not really. I always come early with my dad. He works here as the cook . . . well . . . chef. That's him there.' I looked towards where she was pointing and met the gaze of a sturdy, 40-something year old man dressed in a chef's uniform. His faced eased into an impossibly white, straight-toothed, ear-to-ear smile, contrasting against his smooth dark skin. His smile unconsciously prompted a similarly broad smile from me. We nodded in acknowledgement of each other.

'So what do you do when you are here?' I asked.

Divya proceeded to tell me that she was a student in a biomedical sciences programme, and she uses whatever time she has to study. 'My dad has three jobs and I do one of those with him.' She then explained to me their typical routine:

> My dad and I wake up at around 4:00 a.m. We do this about three times a week. We clean the Woolworths shop.[2] After cleaning, we come to the restaurant. While my dad cooks, I study. He finishes here only after the lunch people go, sometimes 3:00, sometimes 4:00, then he drops me home and he

1 Names and identifying personal details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved in this research.

2 Woolworths is an Australian supermarket chain.

> goes onto another cleaning job. He sometimes doesn't get home until after 10:00 at night.

Her recollection illuminates their everyday struggles, the impacts of their situation on what they experience as the mundane and the ordinary (Hou et al 2020; Hynie 2018; Losoncz 2018). 'That sounds very challenging . . . and tiring,' I said.

She looked at me and stated, quite matter-of-factly, 'Yes, but we have no choice. I can't study without paying. This is because of my [residence] status. Otherwise, it's not allowed. I want to be a doctor, you know.' Then she paused and said, 'Honestly, I think it is unfair. I am not an international student; I am a refugee. We don't have money. We came here with nothing . . . We can't go back.' Divya's comment about her lack of choice and her residence status revealed a deliberately shadowed face of truth, concealed in the protracted bureaucracy of the asylum seeker and refugee system by which she waits to be assessed. While awaiting her refugee assessment, Divya faces limited access to financial or educational support, despite her vulnerable status and uncertain future. Her waiting, she tells me, feels never-ending—it would after ten years. This story, her story, challenges the 'truth' about the fairness of border control policies and refugee processing queues that we consume en masse in Australia, unaware of the dispersed, percussive impacts on so many asylum seeker and refugee lives.

Divya's story is not unusual. She came to Australia as a minor at nine years old, smuggled onto a leaky boat 'with a jacket over my head, in the dark, not knowing where I was going', by extended family who could see her potential. 'I was always good at studying', she said, 'even when I was young.' Her father was a fisherman, in a small, then Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)-controlled, coastal town. She recalls a relatively idyllic childhood, despite having no other memory of Sri Lanka except as a country in the midst of war. As such, sun-sodden memories of carefree running and playing games on the sandy ground with friends and having her hair brushed and plaited by her mother and grandmother were contrasted by other recollections of the war infusing everyday life.

'The LTTE were good. They helped us and spoke for us. But you had to do what they said otherwise it was difficult. There was . . . uh . . . trouble, I guess.' She remembers that her father was the finance officer for the village cooperative, responsible for monitoring and managing the money. These funds would go to help families in the cooperative that may have been struggling. 'Some of the money went to the LTTE too. To help our village. To look after us because we were not safe in Sri Lanka.'

Divya's narrative reminded me about the scope, scale and dimensions of truth. It did, after all, seem to starkly contrast with my own truth of the stories of war in Sri

Lanka. I certainly could not recall any ‘good’ LTTE characters that I had heard about growing up. My truth was that they were unpredictable, unstable and mercilessly violent in their fight to establish a separate Tamil State—a Tamil *Eelam* (homeland). I suspect that both truths co-existed, alongside many others. I couldn’t readily recall any narratives that elevated the everyday Tamil person in the communities in the North and East; narratives that articulated their lived experiences that drove their yearning for *Eelam*. However, it was their everyday reality that left Divya’s father, the man I could see in the kitchen so delicately preparing pakoras, needing to find a way to escape. Divya explained,

> The Army came to look for him many times. He was helping the LTTE by looking after the cooperative money, you see? They saw that as supporting bad people . . . terrorists, I guess. I mean, they [the LTTE] were against the Army and the Sri Lankan Government so they [Army and Sri Lankan Government] had no other thinking about that. They were all just considered bad. No other thoughts. Nothing about the community, the people . . . you know . . . their lives . . . So, he realised he had to go. He went to India. He used to come and go from India and then, I never really understood why.

Divya elaborated that later she came to know that, over the space of many months, her father negotiated with people smugglers to bring the family to India—herself, along with her mother, sister and brother. In India the family lived in a refugee camp. After approximately two years, Divya’s aunties smuggled her onto a boat. She told me that she was scared. She was by herself and did not know where the boat was going. It was not until a few days on the boat that she realised her father was there too.

‘When I got to Australia, I did not know where I was. I couldn’t understand what language people were speaking.’ Divya detailed that after her and her father were granted a temporary protection visa followed by a bridging visa, she went to a local primary and then high school. Divya spoke of her school years as ‘sometimes tough. I did not know English, I mean, I was still learning it, but I was expected to be, and do things, like everyone else.’ She did finish school and was able to get a place at university, despite the challenges of her learning journey, particularly the many educational gaps that she experienced (see McBrien 2005). However, her residence status limited her ability to access any form of income support programs, including a subsidised Commonwealth-supported place at university. So, the only way she could access university studies was to pay for matriculation fees as an international student.

Her degree costs over $30,000 Australian dollars a year, an overwhelming financial burden on her and her father. ‘I don’t know why I can’t be seen like . . . from here . . . like Australian students . . . I work hard. I pay taxes!’ she

exclaimed. She told me that she hardly sees her father because he works so much. She also elaborated that she carries many burdens and immense guilt. Her father has limited English language ability, so she manages all his email correspondence, organises for their bills to be paid, and answers his telephone calls. Any immigration issues are also dealt with by Divya (for more scholarship on language brokerage in linguistic minority communities, see Nash (2017) Tomasi and Narchal (2020) and Tse (1996)).

Divya observed, 'It doesn't seem fair, no? We work, we do the right thing. I want to study, to have an education. I want a future. Without studies, what is future for me? I worry about paying for my studies all the time. I never forget this problem.' Divya's story illustrates aspects of the structural violence experienced by migrants which have been explored by multiple scholars. Hartley et al. (2018, 7) asserts that the Australian structural barriers that deny access to education 'further disadvantages this already vulnerable population [asylum seekers]'. Divya's ongoing distress is one of the percussive impacts relating to the barriers associated with accessing higher education. Vasefi (2022) explains that 'under the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, refugees and asylum seekers are not included as an equity group . . . [and] universities consider admission based on equity criteria . . . focus[sing] on student deficiencies and fail to recognise the value of a refugee's prior qualifications, skills and experiences'.

Divya perceives her pursuit of higher education as pivotal to her future. The significance of her university learning journey is profound, especially as she navigates her experiences of structural and physical violence, displacement, and her search for belonging. Her education is not only what she conceptualises and invests effort in as part of a fulfilling future, but also what those in her family expect of her and are working towards. 'I am going to be a doctor,' she emphasised.

> My life will be better when I finish my studies. I don't know what else I can do but study to have a better life. I am getting married soon and his [Divya's fiancé's] family are supportive of me too. They all want me to be a doctor too . . . he helps to pay for my studies . . . he lives with us . . . he lives with my father and me. We all don't pay so much for rent with three people too so that is part of it . . . more money to pay for living and my studies.[3]

Divya's notion of a better life is propelled by a particular kind of future that she believes will bring her a sense of purpose and wellbeing. This concept of wellbeing is also reflected in Ownsworth and Nash's (2015) statement that 'existential well-being can be enhanced by sense making, or exploring how the event fits with one's

3 Divya got married three weeks after our interview. At the time of the interview her fiancé was also on a bridging visa, working in a supermarket warehouse. During the interview, Divya invited me to her wedding. I tried to contact her multiple times following our conversation to obtain further details about the ceremony, but I was not able to connect with her again.

worldviews, and meaning making or determining the significance of the event for one's life.' For Divya, making sense of a life in limbo is anchored in her aspiration for a particular kind of future. This future is achievable only through higher education.

I asked Divya what becoming a doctor would mean to her. She paused thoughtfully, considering the question, and then said with a sad smile, 'It will give me respect . . . some respect . . . and I get to choose things. Right now this system does not want people like me . . . I am not free to choose . . . I have no choice.' Throughout our conversation it became evident that Divya's everyday existence is coloured by her desire, along with that of her family, to improve her life (and the life of those around her) through higher education. She sees this as life-enhancing, with her everyday existence driven by a clearly articulated core purpose—becoming qualified as a doctor. She attaches meaning to this outcome. To her, this outcome represents a form of power—power to choose, power to experience a form of dignity, power to live a life of meaning and purpose, power to feel valued and valuable. This is her truth.

In what seemed like a tangent, Divya told me about her connection to snakes (*nagas*):

> Do you know, I was supposed to have been born a snake? My mother says I was supposed to have been a snake . . . but I came out a human. I used to see snakes everywhere when I was [in the refugee camp] in India. I could feel them. I knew they were there. I saved my cousins many times from being bitten by cobras. Like, I remember walking to the toilet with my mother and my cousin and I said to them, 'Stop! There is a snake right near the bush [where the toilet area was].' And it was there! To me I am not scared. They are kind of part of me. They have helped me.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, I wondered whether Divya was evoking Hindu Naga symbolism of transformation, power and perception. 'What about now, Divya? In Melbourne? Do you see them?' I asked.

Another pause, and she slowly replied,

> No, I don't see any snakes anywhere now. I don't know where they are. I want to know, but I don't know. It's kind of like I don't know any more what will happen . . . I just keep working, studying so . . . studying and also hoping that things will change.

Authorship statement

Nadeeka Arambewela-Colley is responsible for the initial conceptualisation of this essay and writing the initial draft. She conducted the primary data collection and performed the subsequent analysis as part of a doctoral thesis. Professor Andrea Whittaker, in her role as thesis supervisor, provided guidance regarding the design and objectives of the study.

Ethics statement

The research conducted in the PhD study that contributed to the design and authorship of this article adhered to the ethical standards of Monash University and was approved by the Monash University Ethics Committee.

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About the author

Nadeeka Arambewela-Colley is completing an interdisciplinary PhD reaching across the disciplines of medical anthropology, human geography and public health at Monash University while concurrently working as Manager, International at Deakin University's Faculty of Health. She has practical programme, partnerships, and policy experience, with over 15 years' local (Australian) and international experience in the higher education, government and NGO sectors, with a strong focus on social vulnerability and health. She has a keen interest in decolonisation narratives and storytelling and has published and collaborated in diverse research areas including peace and conflict studies, brokerage, access and equity in student mobility and virtual learning modalities.

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