

Journal of Visual and Performing Arts

ISSN 2651-0286

Volume 4 | Issue 1 | 2025

UVPA 20th Anniversary Edition 2025



Published by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka

Journal of Visual & Performing Arts Sri Lanka (JOVPA-SL)

UVPA 20th Anniversary Edition
July 2025

Volume 4 | Issue 1 | 2025

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Published by: University of the Visual and
Performing Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka

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The Journal of Visual and Performing Arts, Sri Lanka (JOVPA-SL) is a biannual research publication issued by the University of the Visual and Performing Arts, Colombo. The journal seeks to capture a broad spectrum of scholarly work in the fields of visual and performing arts, while also promoting multidisciplinary approaches within the humanities and social sciences. JOVPA-SL welcomes contributions from both academics and practitioner-researchers engaged in arts-based research, fostering critical dialogue and innovative perspectives on creative practice and inquiry. It serves as a platform for critical engagement, experimental methodologies, and creative pedagogy, addressing themes that are either discipline-specific such as dance, drama, performance studies, music, or visual arts or situated at the intersection of multiple disciplines. The journal invites original, rigorous, and meaningful research in creative arts and performance studies, both within and across academic boundaries. It encourages critical debate and cross-disciplinary exchange through diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to: theatre studies, performance studies, dance studies, ethnomusicology, music education, popular culture, dance and movement analysis, art history, art theory, visual and cultural studies, crafts, digital arts and design, film studies, and fine arts.

Cover Photo: Final Year Dance Production, 'Oracle' performed in 2018 at Panibharatha Theatre. Dept. of Theatre, and Oriental Ballet and Modern Dance.

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Printed and Bound in

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Cover Design and Page Layout:

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UVPA Colombo

ISSN 2651-0286

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Fugitive Sites: Tamil Memorialization in Post-War Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

This paper examines performance as a fugitive site of memorialization in post-war Sri Lanka, focusing on the discussions that followed Strangers in the Night, a devised trilingual performance staged in Tamil-majority regions. Set against the backdrop of Maaveerar Naal (Remembrance Day), the performances generated politically charged audience discussions, emerging as dialogic spaces of remembrance and resistance in a context where Tamil mourning is heavily policed. Engaging Diana Taylor's work on the archive and the repertoire and disappearances, the article shows how testimonies, gestures, and interruptions function as "vital acts of transfer" through which memory persists without stabilization (Taylor, 2003). These exchanges operate as repertoire: ephemeral and embodied. José Esteban Muñoz's concept of "ephemera as evidence" further illuminates how affective traces, silences, tears, faltering speech, constitute forms of political testimony that resist dominant regimes of visibility and documentation (Muñoz, 1996). The article also attends to the gendered nature of post-war trauma, foregrounding how women often assume the role of custodians of memory under conditions that seek to silence their grief. Situating Strangers in the Night within a broader lineage of Sri Lankan theatre, the article demonstrates how performance operates as a fugitive practice: temporary, covert and produced under conditions of surveillance and risk.

KEYWORDS:

Acts of Transfer, Fugitive Sites, Tamil Memorialization, Embodiment, Post-War Sri Lanka.

“He left home on his bicycle. Later, we found his slippers and part of his shirt by the roadside.”

At a performance in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, a woman shared this account of her brother’s disappearance during the final stages of the Sri Lankan civil war. What was being spoken within the performance space carried risks beyond the room. A local facilitator, who was translating this account into English from Tamil, faltered midway. Overcome, she could no longer continue, and one of the Tamil cast members stepped in to translate in her place. I was sitting among the cast, a marginal witness. And since positionality is already on the table, it is useful to know that I belong to the Sinhala majority - an identity that does not enter a place like Tamil-majority Jaffna neutrally in the aftermath of the civil war. It was only afterward that I learned why the translator had broken down: The woman’s testimony had triggered memories of the translator’s own brother, who had disappeared twenty-six years earlier. In that moment, however, what registered in me was the knowledge the interruption carried rather than the explanation. The room held the pause, and the performance slipped, almost imperceptibly, into something else.

This unfolded on November 30, 2022, at Chunnaham Library Hall in Jaffna, during a performance of *Strangers in the Night*, a devised piece directed by Tracy Holsinger and produced by Mind Adventures Theatre Company and Semmugam Performing Group. The performance was trilingual (English, Tamil, and Sinhala) and brought together actors from Colombo, Jaffna, Bogowantalawa, and Kandy. *Strangers in the Night* was based on Mike Masilamani’s poem of the same title, set in Colombo in 2005, at a time when daily life was shaped by war, suicide bombings, checkpoints, disappearances, and state violence against minority communities. These lived experiences of the multi-ethnic cast and crew were shared unevenly across languages and regions and carried into the rehearsal room¹. The piece employed a thrust stage to blur the boundary between performers and spectators, generating an intimate atmosphere. The performances in the war-affected North and East of the island took place later and required a series of adjustments to the work as it had first been devised in Colombo.

¹ *Strangers in the Night* was first devised in Colombo in October 2022, over the course of twenty-four continuous hours. We met at 8 p.m.; the performance premiered the following evening at 8 p.m. Within that compressed duration, the cast, hailing from across the island, collectively generated the music, choreography, and scenes that would structure the work.

Having stepped back to sketch the context, I now return to the unfolding moment where I was no longer fully inside the performance and not yet outside it either. The performance had ‘ended,’ and the discussion had ‘begun.’ However, in Peggy Phelan’s terms, this was one of performance’s many ends: where endings become beginnings (Phelan and Lane, 1998). Disappearances, especially in the context of post-war North and East, persist as ongoing presences. Then something happened. Following the woman’s account, other audience members began to speak, some recounting personal losses. The exchanges moved from testimony to reflection, from recollection to how the disappeared might continue to be spoken for without being spoken over.

It was much later that I wanted to return to this moment. Phelan explains this belatedness. Drawing on Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (afterwardness), Phelan posits that the event exceeds our capacity to grasp it as it happens; it becomes legible only later, in the repeated acts of talking, remembering, and trying to understand what has already disappeared (Phelan and Lane, 1998). This notion of afterwardness also echoes the temporal condition of Tamil memorialization, where loss is repeatedly articulated, sometimes decades after, in fragments, through gestures or testimonies in gatherings. Such forms emerge because the conditions for public mourning are policed or deferred. I structure this account through shifts between scene and retrospect, as part of the repeated returns through which the event becomes legible. I also borrow another sense of the ‘ends’ from Phelan, where ends are futures, marking consequences the event sets in motion (Phelan and Lane, 1998). From one such future, I re(-)turn to the conversations that followed the ‘staged’ piece.

When relating this incident, once again belatedly, to a close friend and human rights activist, Ambika Satkunanathan, I used the words “remarkable” and “moving.” I hesitate to do so now. Ambika, drawing on her extensive work with communities across the North and East, noted that such moments of collective sharing occur in activist and trusted spaces during and after the war. Ambika’s reflection made me think of Sharika Thiranagama’s idea of “war as mundane existence,” developed in dialogue with Lubkemann’s concept of the “social condition of war.” (Thiranagama, 2011, pp. 5-8). Ambika’s

observation re-marked the event and moved me to contemplate the testimonies. How the intimate stage configuration of the performance reconfigured the conditions of speech, redistributed, though not eliminated, the risks of speaking. The performances of *Strangers in the Night* in the Night in Jaffna took place on November 30 and in Kilinochchi on December 1. These dates carry significance and risks. November 27, for example, is a day of political and emotional significance for Tamil communities in Sri Lanka and the diaspora because of Maaveerar Naal (Great Heroes' Day), or Remembrance Day commemorations. The performance, which occurred days after, thus situates itself within a heightened commemorative atmosphere due to its proximity to Maaveerar Naal. The dialogic acts of collective remembrance that took place within the performance space marked resistance in a landscape where Tamil public memorialization remained heavily policed.



Figure 1: Posters of *Strangers in the Night* performances. Image source: Mind Adventures Theatre Company.

Since the end of the civil war in 2009, police and military forces have routinely harassed commemorative gatherings in the North and East. Tamil memorials were destroyed, and organizers and participants at remembrance events faced arrests and intimidation. Writing about commemorations in Jaffna and Kilinochchi three years after the war, Ruki Fernando notes that participants mourned “for the lack of space to even cry and remember without fear” (Fernando, 2012). Centring the discussions of *Strangers in the Night* as commemorative acts, I argue that in Sri Lanka, where the state’s historical narrative seeks to erase or obscure the trauma of Tamil communities, performance spaces become fugitive sites of resistance and memorialization². In this paper, ‘performance’ refers to both *Strangers in the Night* and the testimonies that followed the ‘staged’ piece. I use the term fugitive to describe spaces that are temporary, covert, and produced under conditions of surveillance and political risk, in ways that recall what Ulrich Beck theorizes as the socially mediated nature of risk. Beck argues that in late modernity, risks are “systematically produced” alongside social processes shaping the conditions under which subjects can act or speak (Beck, 1992). Performance emerges as a fugitive site not outside risk but within it. Fugitive sites offer alternative modes of engaging with the past, in contrast to the hegemonic narratives upheld by the Sinhala-Buddhist state. As Sasanka Perera posits, “memory is not a simple matter of accidental or idiosyncratic recall,” but is shaped by social and political contexts (Perera, 2015). The discussions offer a plurality of voices that reclaim muffled histories. The work of Diana Taylor, particularly her formulation of the archive and the repertoire alongside her earlier work on disappearance, is helpful to unpack the discussions of *Strangers in the Night*. Taylor draws a distinction between what she calls the archive, which consists of texts, documents, and recordings, and the repertoire, which includes embodied practices like gesture, ritual, and performance. As Taylor notes, histories have often been understood to have “disappeared” when they lack written documentation (Taylor, 2003, p. 16), reinforcing the authority of literate and institutional forms of knowledge. Against this, the repertoire offers an alternative system of circulation. The collective witnessing and memorialization in *Strangers in the Night* belong to what Diana Tay-

² In Black studies, fugitivity or ‘fugitive planning’ has been theorized as a durational practice of minoritarian social life, refusal, and living otherwise within and against institutional structures (Moten and Harney 2013; Camp 2017). Uri McMillan (2015) conceptualizes fugitive acts as “prosthetic performances,” where public disguise and the body are strategically deployed as survival mechanisms. My reading of the term refers to the temporary emergence of precarious collective expression within a specific setting.

lor describes as the repertoire. Taylor stresses that performance “also functions as an epistemology... embodied practice... offers a way of knowing” (2003, p. 3). In *Disappearing Acts*, Taylor emphasizes that disappearance exceeds the loss of individual bodies, extending to the erosion of public life itself: “just as human beings disappeared, so did civil society” (1997, p. x). Under such conditions, visibility is at stake. As Ana María Fernández, cited in Taylor, notes, “the invisible is not what is hidden but what is denied” (1997, p. 135). What is denied in the Sri Lankan state archive is not only ‘historical records’ but the legitimacy of Tamil grief and remembrance. What lingers in the body. What José Estaban Muñoz calls ephemera as evidence: traces carried in gesture, voice, and affect rather than in documentation (Muñoz, 1996). Ephemera refers to what remains after performance, enabling minoritarian histories to circulate through residual affect and collective memory (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10). The testimonies of *Strangers in the Night* resist the hegemonic, monologic history propagated by the Sinhala-Buddhist Nationalist (SBN) state and reclaim Tamil memory through embodied remembrance in performance spaces. I also attend to the gendered nature of trauma in post-conflict Sri Lanka, where women’s experiences of war take on a distinct form. The testimonies reveal how women are often tasked with sustaining the memory of the disappeared while negotiating the proscription of their expressions of grief. Sri Lankan theatre carries a counter-hegemonic legacy. This paper will also look at this lineage in Sinhala and Tamil performance, tracing how it creates fugitive sites for memorialization.

As a cast member myself, now reflecting as a scholar artist, my own positionality is complex and, at times, tenuous. My role extended beyond performance into documentation as I created an audiovisual archive of *Strangers in the Night* and the discussions it generated. This process was informed by my background in journalism in handling sources and sensitive materials. The documentation of the discussions will remain private. While this paper is a ‘written record,’ its function is to document the traces, honouring the fleeting, emotionally charged exchanges without rendering them fully visible or betraying their subversive power. When dealing with narratives of trauma, there is always a risk of re-traumatization or of spectators

feeling exploited or objectified. In this context, one ethical challenge was to ensure that *Strangers in the Night* did not reduce the complex experiences of the Tamil community to a ‘spectacle.’ In responding to questions, the director and the cast explained how the performance did not have a didactic purpose. Instead, one of the primary motivations for bringing the performance to the North and the East was rooted in the desire to present the work in the hometowns of the cast members. The cast served as a powerful anchor for the production. In particular, cast members from the North, who had endured the war’s devastation, could relate to the testimonies that were shared. For those from the South, while they too had also grown up in a country marred by war, the performance became a space for dialogic exchange. Through listening to and witnessing the testimonies, and through performance, they came to embody and better understand the costs of war.

POLICING MEMORY

*How were we done for in this war?
What did we lose?
What did we gain?
On the walls lining our streets,
we must set down
the history of these heinous men.*

From ‘Done for by War’ by Paamathi (Scroll.in, 2019)

The war can be counted but not contained by counting. The Sri Lankan civil war lasted for 26 years. The government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) left a devastating toll on the country’s population and economy. Estimates suggest that between 80,000 and 100,000 people were killed during the conflict, although the actual number remains unknown. In its final stages, particularly from January to May 2009, the fighting intensified dramatically, leading to widespread allegations of human rights violations. The United Nations estimates that 40,000–70,000 people may have been killed during this period alone, with mounting evidence that government forces deliberately targeted civilian areas, while the LTTE forcibly

prevented civilians from escaping by using them as human shields (United Nations, 2012, p. 14). One of the most troubling episodes occurred between 17 and 19 May 2009, when approximately 500 individuals reportedly disappeared after being taken into custody by the Sri Lankan Army and government authorities (Ball and Harrison, 2018, p. 7). Beyond the human cost, the war also had a massive economic impact, with the direct financial loss over the three decades of conflict estimated at around US\$200 billion (Keerawella, 2013, p. 2). Yet the impact of the conflict cannot be understood solely through statistics or economic loss. As Thiranagama articulates, “the battlefields of the war were not only the frontlines where soldiers died, but also the internal lives of communities and families” (Thiranagama, 2011, p. 10). The war thus reshaped everyday social relations, leaving enduring psychological and communal scars. This lived reality is reflected in personal testimonies, as one audience member recalls: “We know the terror of war. I remember as a child hearing a shell being fired. I ran as fast as I could, but crashed into a barbed wire fence, injuring myself and breaking a tooth. Then the shell hit.” (*Strangers in the Night performance*, 2022, Chunnaham).

The military defeat of the LTTE reshaped the country’s internal power dynamics. The ruling government capitalized on its battlefield success, gaining significant political leverage. The military triumph has been repeatedly commemorated through annual Victory Day events. They reinforced the state’s ethnonationalist identity, leading to a postwar political environment in which the state apparatus became increasingly centralized and militarized under the guise of national unity and security. The post-war reconstruction in the Northern Province has also been shaped by pervasive militarization, which has intensified Tamil alienation (International Crisis Group, 2012b). The SBN state has consistently suppressed Tamil events that remember LTTE combatants or Tamil civilian victims. In particular, Mullivaikkal Remembrance Day on May 18 and Maaveerar Naal on November 27: the former marks the end of the war and the deaths and killings of civilians in Mullivaikkal, and the latter honours fallen LTTE cadres. Each year in Mullivaikkal, North East of the island, mourners gather to light flames, lay flowers, and play defiant songs invoking Tamil Eelam (Arulthas, 2023).



Figure 2: The Mullivaikkal war memorial at Jaffna University prior to demolition. Image source: Tamil Youth Org, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The Sri Lankan state, however, views these commemorations through a security lens, equating them with the glorification of terrorism, and has often responded with surveillance, intimidation, arrests, and destruction of memorials (International Crisis Group, 2012a, p. 14). On 27 November 2011, military and police forces reportedly attempted to block any Maaveerar Naal commemorations across the north and east. Just weeks later, a peaceful demonstration for International Human Rights Day on 10 December was disrupted - activists from Colombo were barred from attending, participants were photographed by authorities, and two organizers were abducted in Jaffna the night before the event (International Crisis Group, 2012a, p. 15). Fernando notes how memorial gatherings took place under surveillance, with army and intelligence officers photograph-

ing participants and questioning priests about services planned to remember those killed (Fernando, 2012). In some instances, the clergy were warned not to conduct prayers for those who died during the final phase of the war. In 2013, alongside official state celebrations of the military's victory, the Rajapaksa government intensified its suppression of LTTE-related commemorations. Citing concerns that such events could mobilize Tamil communities politically, the government formally banned activities associated with LTTE remembrance. The military declared that any observance of Heroes' Day on 27 November 2013 would be considered unlawful (McDowell and Braniff, 2014, p. 96). In January 2021, authorities bulldozed the Mullivaikkal Memorial at the University of Jaffna, a monument dedicated to Tamil civilians killed during the war's final stages (BBC News, 2021; Koneshachandra, 2021; The Contested Histories Initiative, 2021). Later the same year, the courts in Mullaitivu banned public Maaveerar Naal commemorations following requests from the Sri Lankan police, who targeted key Tamil activists and political figures to prevent memorial events (Tamil Guardian, 2021). Such bans and restrictions were issued under the pretext of maintaining public order. In November 2023, authorities arrested at least 10 Tamil civilians under the Prevention of Terrorism Act between November 25 and 27 in Batticaloa and confiscated decorations and loudspeakers from a commemoration vigil (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Satkunanathan, 2023). Among those who were arrested was a bakery employee for selling a cake and an 18-year-old schoolboy (Tamil Guardian, 2023). However, when faced with proscription and erasure, memory endures in different forms.

Performing Tamil memory

We've lived through such difficult times, now we're returning to our homes with heavy hearts. Back then, if we had spoken out, we could have disappeared too. But today, we must speak. We need to talk about it now.

(Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham).

Not all memory can be held in one place. Sasanka Perera describes

Sri Lankan visual art as a “repository of violent memory” (Perera, 2015), preserving experiences of war, disappearance, and trauma. Perera examines paintings, installations, and exhibitions produced particularly during the 1990s, to show that visual art operates as an alternative, counter-archive of violence³. His analysis privileges visual forms that endure beyond the moment of their production and can circulate as relatively stable carriers of memory within the cultural field. More broadly, theatre and live performance, despite their long-standing role in Sri Lanka as vehicles for political critique and social reflection, fall outside of the scope of the chapter and the volume’s wider engagement with memory, erasure and artistic responses to political violence. Perera includes performance art under the category of visual arts. However, his analysis primarily focuses on paintings, installations, and exhibitions whose material persistence allows them to function as repositories of memory. My focus in this paper shifts from repository to fugitivity. I explore how, under conditions of surveillance and repression, memorialization may emerge through the ephemeral, affective acts.

Theatre has always been recognized as a conduit for affective responses, both in spectators and performers alike. This perception is deeply rooted in the Aristotelian conception of Katharsis, as the purging of strong repressed emotions. Throughout history, instances such as the *Astor Place Riot*⁴ in 1849 New York and the controversial premiere of *The Rite of Spring*⁵ in 1913 Paris illustrate how theatre has incited intense reactions, sometimes erupting into riots. Antoine Artaud writes, “A real stage play disturbs our peace of mind, releases our repressed subconscious, drives us to a kind of potential rebellion” (Artaud, 2013, pp. 18–19). Artaud delineates theatre as plague, referring to its capacity to indiscriminately infect large congregations and its potent, almost virulent impact on the collective consciousness. Sinhala theatre, from traditional forms like *Kōlam*, which integrated the critique of public institutions and individuals into everyday life, to Gamini Haththotuwegama’s street performances in the 1970s, leveraged public spaces for anti-establishment, socio-political critique. Theatre anthropologist Ranjini Obeyesekere proposes that theatre is a key form of “critical political discourse” that drew “sustenance from the very traumas of the political situa-

³ In his chapter “Visual Artists Remember; Visual Artists Narrate,” Perera looks at artists who transform personal and collective experiences of political violence into visual forms that challenge dominant state histories and keep suppressed memories in circulation. Among the artists he discusses are Jagath Weerasinghe, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, and Pradeep Chandrasiri, whose works confront themes of disappearance, militarization, and social trauma. He also examines collective initiatives such as the Aham Puram exhibition.

tion” (Obeyesekere, 1992, p. 129). Obeyesekere refers to the 1980s, which saw the emergence of the LTTE, the beginning of the civil war, and a violent youth socialist insurrection.

Tamil performance history registers a similar political charge, but under different conditions of publicness. Tamil theatre goes beyond a representational form: “modern Sri Lankan Tamil theatre is an amalgamation of social, political and cultural activism with an oppressed consciousness” often giving voice to “mental illness, trauma and pain of the Tamil communities” produced by decades of conflict (Sharma and Thavachchelvi, 2021, p. 115). Sharma and Thavachchelvi draw on wartime theatre, propagandist street performances, and plays such as *Maathoru Paagam* (1984), M. Shamugalingam’s *Man Sumantha Meniyar* (1988), and *Annai Itta Thee* (1998), to argue that Tamil theatre became a crucial space for representing collective trauma, displacement, and sexual violence (Sharma and Thavachchelvi, 2021). In addition to its antagonistic relationship to state power, first under an ethnonationalist Sri Lankan government and then under the governance of the LTTE, Tamil theatre also contended with the Sinhala-centric culture of the island. As Sengupta notes, Tamil theatre was “subsumed in the equation of ‘Sinhala’ theatre with ‘Sri Lankan’ theatre” (Sengupta, 2014, p. 47). S. Maunaguru observes that, following the 1983 Black July riots, Tamil cultural activity in Colombo declined and “drama disappeared,” and when practitioners moved to Jaffna, they were restricted by the LTTE’s “heavy-handed[ness]” (Muttulingam, 2012). Jim Sykes states that Jaffna was “largely closed off from the world for nearly three decades because of war,” with postwar relations to Colombo remaining “tenuous” (Sykes, 2018, p. 99). Kanchuka Dharmasiri adds that “for security reasons, it became impossible to hold performances in theatre buildings,” and dramatists “moved out of the officially sanctioned theatre spaces” toward “more communal and creative ways of expression” (Dharmasiri, 2014, p. 220). As cited in Dharmasiri (2014, p. 220), Sivathamby similarly argues that the earlier “mainstream theatre withered away,” and that “alternate theatre rose to fill the void.” M. Shanmugalingam agrees. He declares that “This theatre [Tamil Theatre] did not confine itself to the proscenium stage alone. It went to meet the people in their streets, junctions, markets,

⁴ The Astor Place Riot occurred on 10 May 1849 outside the Astor Place Opera House in New York during rival performances of *Macbeth* by British actor William Charles Macready and American actor Edwin Forrest. The event escalated into violent clashes between supporters of the two actors and state militia, resulting in the deaths of more than twenty people. See Hewett, I., 2013. Did The Rite of Spring really spark a riot? BBC News Magazine, 29 May.

⁵ Igor Stravinsky’s ballet *The Rite of Spring*, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky and premiered by the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on 29 May 1913, provoked a famously hostile audience reaction. See Leadon, F., 2024. The Astor Place Riot: Blood on the Cobblestones. Gotham Center for New York City History, 24 May.

fields and palmyra and coconut groves” (Shanmugalingam, 2012). Ranganathan and Queentus show that in the Tamil North, theatre traditions such as isai nadagam and koothu provided a crucial social space in the prewar period to transfeminine performers who played female roles: “as women did not consistently perform in these productions,” making stage performance “a crucial space for transfeminine life in Jaffna” (Ranganathan and Queentus, 2025, p. 540). Under LTTE rule, however, “the LTTE banned all cultural production except plays produced by them,” and while some performers adapted via sanctioned LTTE plays, others “subvert[ed] this prohibition by organizing secret dance events” (pp. 540-543). Against a backdrop of political turmoil, state violence, and curtailed freedoms of expression, both Sinhala and Tamil theatre functioned as a medium for critical socio-cultural reflection. *Strangers in the Night* can be situated within this lineage of Sri Lankan theatre.

As previously recounted, the story of the disappeared brother took place in the *Strangers in the Night* performance in Jaffna, just three days after Maaveerar Naal or Remembrance Day. The performance took place within a politically charged atmosphere where memorial events in the North and the East were disrupted by the State armed forces and police (Tamil Guardian, 2022). Under these conditions, the performances of *Strangers in the Night* in the North and East took on heightened significance. The story of the disappeared brother created a shift in what could be said. One account made others possible. And as Thambinathan et al. state, such acts of public memorialization are “integral to justice, truth-telling, reparation, and coming to terms with the nation’s history” (Thambinathan et al., 2025, p. 732).

Charles W. Mills, through a critical race perspective, examines how memory functions in maintaining white ignorance and racial epistemic injustice⁶. Mills’ conception of collective amnesia in his essay, “White Ignorance,” refers to the systematic forgetting through which collective memory is structured (Mills, 2007, pp. 28–29). Mills is specifically writing within a U.S. racial context, yet his framework is adaptable to postwar Sri Lanka, where Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist identity and historiography similarly depend on a managed amnesia of Tamil suffering. In Sri Lanka, official narratives marginalize Tamil memory by distorting histories and violently

⁶ Mills describes a “management of memory” that operates through socially orchestrated forgetting, particularly of the experiences and perspectives of Black communities and other marginalized groups (2007, p. 28). He writes, “there is an intimate relationship between white identity, white memory, and white amnesia,” showing how dominant historical narratives erase Black counter-testimonies and render them epistemically invalid (2007, p. 29).

suppressing commemorative practices. The education system too, is implicated in this process. As a site of ideological conditioning, formal education perpetuated Tamil inferiority. An elderly audience member remarked: “In Sinhala history books, it’s written in many places that Tamils are second-class citizens” (*Strangers in the Night* performance, 2022, Chunnaham). There were similar reflections from elderly audience members at the Jaffna and Kilinochchi performances, whose lives were shaped by the civil war and who belong to what Sharika Thiranagama terms the “generation of militancy” (Thiranagama, 2011).⁷

⁷By “generation of militancy,” Thiranagama refers to groups of Tamil youth, especially born in the 1960s, who experienced militancy as a broad social and personal transformation, not only as membership in one organization.



Figure 3: *Strangers in the Night* discussions during the Jaffna and Kilinochchi performances. Image source: Marlon Ariyasinghe.

The woman who shared the disappearance of her brother expressed the emotional burden of revisiting this painful history. The translator, once recovered, responded with a deeply personal reflection and a gentle counter:

I got into NGO work for financial reasons, but I’ve lost people in my own family. My brother disappeared 26 years ago. Since then, I’ve been working with institutions to trace the disappeared, supporting 1,200 families

going through the same pain. I bought new clothes for my mother when I got married, but my mother did not wear them. She wore an old saree. Even 26 years later, she carries the pain within her. We think people will forget and move on, but even on our deathbed, it will remain. Like we learnt to live with COVID. Only if we learn to live with our pain and sorrow can we move to the next stage. I feel sad, but I accept that this happened. I know I became emotional when you shared your story. I ask that you take this story to others. (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham).

The translator's statement "even on our deathbed it will remain" signals that memory, particularly traumatic memory, is not linear. It lingers, commemorated across time and inherited across generations. Another audience member reflected: "It's difficult to find a solution to all of this through a play. But the performance reminded us of our responsibility to address these issues" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham). Another participant expressed appreciation for the forum created by the performance: "I am thankful for this forum/this drama, I know we got emotional, but we need to move forward with the memories, and I ask you to show this drama elsewhere" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Chunnaham). Here, memory is framed as a shared process, something that should not remain contained.

Art historian TJ Demos extends the Foucauldian notion of counter-memory into the cultural and artistic domain, emphasizing its role in documentary practices, activist art, and social movements.⁸ For Demos, counter-memory is "a practice of memory formation that is social and political, one that runs counter to the official histories of governments, mainstream mass media, and the society of the spectacle" (Demos, 2012). Demos identifies counter-memory as a driving force in movements like the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring, where the act of collective remembering becomes integral to political mobilization, creating what he calls "experimental collective memory" (Demos, 2012). While Demos locates these practices within large-scale movements, his insistence on the transformative

⁸ For Foucault, memory is a discourse, shaped by institutions, systems of knowledge, and historical forces. Counter-memory, or *contre-mémoire*, opposes what he calls the "regimes of truth" - a key concept introduced in 1975, modelled on power and knowledge and later modified by incorporating subjectivity (Lorenzini, 2015, pp. 2-3). Regimes of truth underpin official histories produced by the state and dominant narratives. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault famously writes: "Where there is power, there is resistance" (1990, p. 95), emphasizing that resistance is not external to power but embedded within its operations. Counter-memory thus becomes a tactical intervention within history itself.

political potential of art offers a valuable lens for understanding the reception of *Strangers in the Night*. During the discussion, one audience member reflected on this dual potential: “It’s difficult to find a solution to all of this through a play. But the performance reminded us of our responsibility to address these issues” (*Strangers in the Night* performance, 2022, Chunnaham). This response can be understood through Taylor’s formulation of performance as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” (Taylor, 2003, p. 2). It also acknowledges the limits of artistic intervention - art alone cannot resolve political trauma. What the performance does, in line with Demos’s claim, is to move spectators toward responsibility and collective reflection. Another participant expressed appreciation for the forum created by the performance: “I am thankful for this forum/this drama, I know we got emotional, but we need to move forward with the memories, and I ask you to show this drama elsewhere” (*Strangers in the Night* performance, 2022, Chunnaham). Here, memory is framed as a shared process, something that should not remain contained.

The discussions were at times confrontational. The audience fired back with questions like “What are you doing here?” “Why are you digging up the past?” and “You need to show this in the South, not in the North. We know what happened. The South needs to see this.” These responses reflect the deep-rooted distrust and pain that persist within the Tamil communities in the North and East. During the performance at Thanthai Selva Auditorium, Jaffna, one participant connected the play’s themes with collective Tamil experiences: “We have similar stories - we have confronted so many issues: culture, land, the disappeared. We have been suppressed by the ruling people” (*Strangers in the Night* performance, 2022, Thanthai Selva). This statement placed the performance in a broader political context, positioning it as part of a continuum of Tamil resistance and trauma. Another man questioned the performance’s intent directly, asking: “Why do you do this?” while yet another criticized its structure and reach: “When it’s shown like this - here - how much of this message will go to Sinhala-speaking people? Also, there is no beginning or end, so how will people understand this? We fought for our rights... that is not mentioned anywhere” (*Strangers in the*

⁹ There were earlier movements such as the Mothers' Front in Sri Lanka, active in the late 1980s and 1990s, which also mobilized around enforced disappearances primarily in the South. For more on this, see Neloufer de Mel's chapter "Mother Politics and Women's Politics: Notes on the Contemporary Sri Lankan Women's Movement," in *Women and the Nation's Narrative* (2001).

¹⁰ Taylor argues that motherhood itself operates as a performative and politicized role, one that can be consciously mobilized in contexts of repression (1997, p. 194). By bringing mourning into public space, these women shift what is often confined to the private sphere into a visible, collective act. As Taylor observes, "only by being visible could they be politically effective" (1997, p. 187).

Night performance, 2022, Thanthai Selva). His concern reflects both a desire for clearer narrative framing and frustration over the invisibility of Tamil political struggle within broader public discourse. At the Kilinochchi performance, an audience member echoed these sentiments, speaking about the need for the South to confront its role in the war: "The young people from the South came to the North saying they needed to free the country. But what they did - we feel that. We feel the blood. They don't know what they did. Especially, this needs to be shown in the southern part. They came to kill" (Strangers in the Night performance, 2022, Kilinochchi). His testimony highlights the emotional intensity and the call for national reckoning, particularly among younger Sinhalese who may have participated in the war without understanding its consequences.

The testimonies return, repeatedly, to women. Sisters, daughters, and mothers. Those who remain. This is the gendered nature of trauma in post-conflict Sri Lanka. In these contexts, women's experiences of the war – typically centred around the loss of loved ones, disappearances, and violence – frequently take on a distinct form. As R. Thavachchelvi and Priyanka Sharma observe, women's participation in performance is particularly significant, as their engagement with theatre "represents the resistance as well as the culture of creating a counter culture" (2021, p. 116). The testimonies highlight how women are often left to carry the burden of mourning, tasked with preserving the memory of the disappeared while simultaneously navigating a society that seeks to silence their grief. Diana Taylor notes, in her analysis of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, how state violence frequently targets women "as mothers, in [their] motherhood" (Taylor, 1997, p. 187). Taylor emphasizes that the "performative nature of their demonstrations gave the women a way of dealing with it," that is, the loss and grief produced by disappearance (1997, p. 194). Sri Lanka's protests of the Mothers of the Disappeared, ongoing for over eight years, follow the same example. It is the country's longest-running protest.⁹ These mothers, many of whom are Tamil women, have persistently gathered in public spaces, demanding justice and accountability for their loved ones who disappeared during the civil war, particularly in its final stages.¹⁰ Their sustained presence reflects both the per-

sonal and collective resilience of women who refuse to let the state erase the memories of the disappeared. These protests, much like the discussions, are a response to the state's attempts to suppress Tamil mourning and memory. They also challenge the patriarchal norms that often marginalize women's voices in public discourse.



Figure 4: Scene from the *Strangers in the Night* performance. Image source: Kavindu Sivaraj, Bhanu Ekanayaka and Kannan Arunasalam.

PERFORMANCE AS FUGITIVE SITES

*You came
In the dead of nite
You made me stand under the street light,
Now you're saying
I am a tamil in the wrong town
A stranger in the nite?
From Strangers in the Night*

Live performance offers fugitive sites for memorialization. I now return, as a methodological gesture, one final time to the moment with which this paper began: a testimony interrupted, a translator overcome, a pause held collectively in the room. In that slippage, the performance became something else. Performance transmits knowledge that is unavailable through historically acceptable and endlessly reproducible forms of “evidence.” Similarly, the notion of “ephemera as evidence,” articulated by Jose Esteban Muñoz, suggests that minor, affective gestures - tears, silences, trembling - constitute a form of political testimony, resisting dominant archival logic through presence and emotion (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10). As Diana Taylor argues, disappearance exceeds the loss of bodies to the erosion of public life. The testimonies shared in *Strangers in the Night* render memory perceptible.

The burden of remembrance is not even. As the testimonies reveal, women: mothers, sisters and daughters, often remain as custodians of loss. For them, speaking carried real risks. Memorialization is a crime, and visibility is precarious.¹¹ Yet one after another, the audience spoke. As they spoke, they remembered. The more they remembered, the more the disappeared marked their presence. Not just at Chunnaham Library Hall, but at Thanthai Selva Auditorium, then at Thanthai Selva Peace Gallery, in Kilinochchi. What emerged in these discussions was not an alternative archive in any stable sense, but what Diana Taylor would call a repertoire of embodied memory (Taylor, 2003). In contexts where the archive is hostile to minoritized experiences, the repertoire of live performance becomes a radical, fugitive site of remembrance.

At the same time, these fugitive sites do not transcend the conditions that necessitate them. The discussions were fraught with scepticism, anger, and unresolved pain. Questions like “Why are you digging up the past?” and “Why show this only here, not in the South?” speak to the ongoing fractures within the national consciousness. These tensions must be acknowledged as part of the process of Tamil memorialization: disruptive, uncomfortable and incomplete. This incompleteness is precisely the point. *Strangers in the Night* did not offer resolution, nor did it convert trauma into a finished narrative. What it offered, instead, was an ephemeral, fugitive space in which

¹¹ “Visibility is a trap,” warns Peggy Phelan (1993, p. 6), suggesting that liveness can avoid the dangers of surveillance and co-optation. Taylor, however, contends that visibility is both “a refuge and a trap” (Taylor, 1997, p. 186): a necessary condition for making Tamil grief perceptible, yet one that simultaneously exposes mourners to surveillance. These theorizations, often held apart, are both potent to observe postwar Sri Lanka, where Tamil memorialization is criminalized.

memory can be spoken, heard, and held, however briefly. In that fleeting interval, in the testimony that calls forth another, the disappeared persist, as presences who refuse to be forgotten.



Figure 4: Scene from the *Strangers in the Night* performance alluding to the disappeared

Acknowledgements

Like the memories it traces, this paper took shape through shared conversations and the generosity of others. An earlier version was presented at the 53rd Annual Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in 2024. That was also the last time I met my friend and mentor, Harshana Rambukwella, who, with characteristic kindness, offered thoughtful feedback. I carry that with me. Many others have engaged with this work in its various iterations, including Shannon Constantine, elimelgar, Dejan Vasic, Inosha Alwis, and Shashika Bandara. My thanks to Prof. Saumya Liyanage and the editorial team at JOVPA-SL.

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