

Richmond B. Williams Traveling Fellowship Award Proposal

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I would like to go to Sri Lanka this summer and visit the public libraries and archives in Jaffna and Colombo. I am interested in researching contemporary novels set during the Sri Lankan civil war, both in order to understand how this particular context (as well as the archival material its authors engage) is distilled into narrative, and to contribute to the wider conversation about how novels as a genre respond to war in a way that refrains from detailing trauma and rather depicts the mundane and everyday.

The novels I am looking at presently include *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* by Nayomi Munaweera, *The Story of a Brief Marriage* and *A Passage North* by Anuk Arudpragasam and *The Seasons of Trouble* by Rohini Mohan. These novels were published between 2000 and 2021, the latter part of the war, and were written by authors based around the world. Some of these works have attained mainstream popularity and literary awards— and this has played a crucial role in highlighting a tragedy in a corner of the world that may otherwise go unheard of (many people I meet haven't heard of Sri Lanka, let alone its 29 year long civil war). These few books thus carry a significant burden in adequately capturing both the major events of the war and the experiences of people struggling through its impacts on the every-day, and I hope to compare and contrast the ways these novels strive to represent this through narrative.

I first became interested in this topic upon hearing my father's account of his imprisonment in a cell in Sri Lanka. At 17, he was tortured for days for information on the whereabouts of the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam, a 'terrorist' or 'savior' militant group in Sri Lanka, depending on where you reside culturally. I am interested in understanding how novels about this war convey how it affected (and still affects) so many people on so many different levels. I want to look at the novels' rendering of the intimately personal and individual, and fundamental human concerns of suffering and displacement. Time is also an important theme in these works- the role of archive and history in informing these novels, how these novels present the immobilizing effects of war on characters as well as its stamp on their futures, and how these novels function to sustain a culture's history. Supplementing this exploration of texts with an exploration of the sources from which these texts were derived, will enable me to better understand how history and narrative inform one another, how archives grow narrative, and how narrative becomes a kind of archive.

One way I hope to better understand how these novels depict the war through the trivial and everyday, is to see how they compare with the sensational and journalistic. The National Library of Sri Lanka has a collection of all of the newspapers published in the country since 1976, whereas copies available to access digitally do not span this entire period. This library also has a unique collection of newspaper clippings of special edition articles and important news items that cannot be accessed anywhere else. By looking at these clippings and papers I can identify what kinds of information are approved for publication and to be spread locally and globally, and can compare this to the domestic concerns, items of torture and other horrifying events that the narratives detail. This library has also collected periodicals, for which I am interested in the type of content included. Unlike newspaper articles which focus on major events, periodicals may betray quotidian, civilian desires, habits, or concerns. Records of these online are even less available. Finally, I have a particular desire to visit its rare book collection, which houses books about literature, as well as rare and old books written by Sri Lankan authors. The former will enable me to learn about the conventions of narrative earlier in Sri Lanka, which may be quite different from the novels I am exploring, largely because of the western influence their

authors carry. An example is explicit references to sex and nudity (often inappropriate things to write about for earlier Sri Lankan audiences), or a fascination with mundane detail while earlier authorship may have valued sweeping narratives, and more that I hope to identify. These contemporary authors tend to have a more global perspective (for example, the majority are writing from western countries because they are second generation immigrants, and the one based in Sri Lanka studied at Columbia University), and they are also all written in English, which allows for certain liberties.

One direction this project could go in would be to look at the specific ways that a narrative that seeks to illuminate a non-English speaking culture is conveyed in the English language. Perhaps writing in English is politically impartial- rather than writing in either Tamil or Sinhalese- since language itself was a major point of contention in the war. And yet, English itself was the language of colonizers which played a role too in the division between the two main groups. Furthermore, the use of the English language is often a simple consequence of the fact that the authors' primary language is English. This too, however, highlights their identity as second generation immigrants, who were displaced from their own countries but have benefited from an education their parents were deprived of due to the war. In my personal experience, my relatives have asked me to write their story because they do not feel like they have the literary capacity to do so, and yet their story is so important that it should not simply disappear after they pass. Thus, these narratives play important roles in reconstruction and maintenance of history and identity. My interest in the novel's role in the preservation of history and identity also compels me to look at instances of deliberate erasure. In my research, I therefore also want to visit the Jaffna Public Library, burned down during the war as an act of intentional erasure of identity, with the project of understanding how these contemporary novels seek to push back such attempts at erasure. The destruction of such an important archive of Tamil heritage and culture makes it all the more important to visit, so that I can see what remains, and push back against the ostensible limits of archives. I say this with Saidiya Hartman's *Venus in Two Acts* in mind, and I hope to have an opportunity to speak with her and understand how her work can inform my own.

The absence of material is at first a primary challenge to my research, but also part of my fundamental research question- I can look at fragmented records such as the remains of a burned library, or even archives that predated the civil war such as the palm leaf manuscripts at The Colombo Museum Library, to see how narrative is constructed from that, or how these remains inform the novels I am looking at. This is also why I need to physically visit these archives in person; unlike the British Library or another well-resourced library, there is only a general description of the types of archival material held in these Sri Lankan libraries but not specific details of what I might find. Since I am exploring contemporary novels by living authors, I also have the opportunity to reach out to authors to see what archives they visited and what research they undertook in the process of writing their novels, which I have already begun to do. I hope to look at the material these authors looked at in order to enhance my understanding of how they transposed archival documents into breathing fiction.

My preliminary examination of Sri Lanka-related archives with a Butler librarian was a helpful starting point, but we discovered how limited the available online resources are, and I would definitely benefit from seeing Sri Lankan archives in person. I still have people to speak with, such as the professors that Professor Murray has helped me to identify and various librarians I have been directed towards by others, and I am sure that my ideas for this project will only continue to grow. I am also considering pursuing a master's in English Literature after graduation (and prior to law school), and believe that the Richmond B. Williams Traveling research fellowship will prepare me for the type of deep investigation I hope to continue in my senior thesis and beyond.

Breakdown of estimated budget:

- Flight to Sri Lanka:
 - Approx. \$2000 round trip (\$1605- \$2250)
- Local transportation: approx \$100 total (includes trains around the island)
- Food: \$840
- Accommodation: \$3000