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(Photo Journal, 2025)

“Traces of Silence: A Woman’s Fieldwork in Sri Lanka”

Autoethnographic fragments from a multi-sited inquiry into
Tamil memory, exile, and post-war peace.

[A journey through digital archives, diasporic memory, fieldwork, and authorship.]

Abstract: This photo journal presents my autoethnographic exploration of Tamil memory, exile, and post-war peace in Sri Lanka. Through a series of evocative images, I chronicled my multi-sited fieldwork journey, beginning in Małogoszcz, Poland, where digital archives and personal artifacts serve as entry points into the Tamil diaspora's narratives. In Amsterdam and Den Hague, I captured the silent assemblies of the diaspora, embodying collective memory and resistance. My lens then moves to Colombo, where I documented the erasure of wartime memories through painted-over murals and the omnipresence of state surveillance. The journal culminates with my introspective field notes penned under the Sri Lankan sun, reflecting on the complexities of ethnographic research, personal doubt, and solidarity. My work intertwines visual storytelling with scholarly inquiry, offering a nuanced perspective on the interplay between memory, identity, and the politics of silence in post-conflict societies.

Photo 1: “Digital Echoes of a Lost Homeland”

📍 Online space / Tamil Eelam digital archive [Małogoszcz, Poland]
📅 2009–2010

Caption: *Stacks of books, notebooks, laptop - my instrument to enter the field. The aftermath of fieldwork lives here: in objects, marginalia, and post-its with Tamil quotes. A domestic scene of analysis, and this is the ethnographer's real desk—the homeland that existed more powerfully in dreams and code than in sovereign space. Here, my research began—not with a passport, but a hyperlink.*

Interpretation: In the quietude of my home in Małogoszcz, my journey into the Tamil diaspora's narratives began. This domestic space, far from the physical landscapes of Sri Lanka, became the initial field site of my research. Engaging with digital archives such as the Tamil Genocide Memorial and the Tamil Eelam Library, I delved into a wealth of documents, photographs, and testimonies that chronicled the Tamil people's struggles and resilience. These platforms, curated by the diaspora, served as vital repositories preserving histories often marginalized or erased in mainstream narratives. They offered a virtual homeland, constructed through collective memory and digital preservation, where the Tamil identity continued to thrive despite displacement and conflict. The act of sifting through these digital artifacts was not merely academic; it was deeply personal and evocative. Each document, each image, resonated with stories of loss, resistance, and hope. The marginalia in books, the post-it notes with Tamil quotes, and the bookmarked web pages became extensions of the field, blurring the lines between researcher and participant, observer and storyteller. This phase of research underscored the transformative power of digital spaces in ethnographic work. It highlighted how, in the absence of physical access, virtual platforms could facilitate profound connections with communities and their histories. As an author and researcher, this experience reaffirmed the importance of embracing unconventional methodologies to capture the multifaceted realities of diasporic life. This photograph encapsulates the genesis of my fieldwork—a testament to how, in the digital age, a hyperlink can serve as a bridge to distant homelands, and a modest desk in Poland can become a gateway to understanding the enduring spirit of the Tamil diaspora.

Role: Author, Researcher



Photo 2: “Circle of Witnesses”

Den Hague, Netherlands
2013

Caption: *In a loose circle, bodies gathered, amongst me taking photos of the community of witnesses. Not quite a protest, not quite a vigil—something in between. This was how diaspora performs itself: through presence, pauses, and public silence. This image remains a haunting reminder of our urgency and youth.*

Interpretation: A moment that resists rigid categorization. The gathering is described not as a formal protest, nor as a solemn vigil, but something in-between—a fluid, affective form of presence. The phrase “*performance of presence*” suggests that the diaspora (in this case, likely Spanish youth in the Netherlands) is enacting its existence politically and symbolically by simply *being there*, occupying space together. The “public silence” speaks to a quiet, perhaps even contemplative resistance—an intentional refusal to disappear.

Role: Chronicler, Participant-Observer



Photo 3: “The Wall That Speaks Silence”

Colombo
2016

Caption: *A painted-over mural. The war has no museum—only these blank surfaces where memory used to live. As a woman researcher, I listened to what wasn’t said.*

Interpretation: I captured a painted-over mural in Colombo, symbolizing the deliberate erasure of Tamil memory and history in post-war Sri Lanka. The absence of a dedicated war museum and the suppression of public memorials, such as the demolition of the Mullivaikkal memorial at the University of Jaffna, reflect a broader state agenda to silence narratives that challenge the dominant Sinhalese-Buddhist perspective. As a woman researcher, the act of observing this blank wall becomes an exercise in listening to what remains unsaid. It underscores the challenges faced by those who seek to document and understand the suppressed histories of marginalized communities. The image serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing struggle for memory and recognition in a landscape where silence is both a consequence and a tool of systemic erasure.

Role: Data Collector, Observer, Field-walker



Photo 4. “Traces of Power”

Colombo, Sri Lanka
2016

Caption: *The body of the state: visible, armored, still. I took this image under watchful eyes, as a woman-researcher navigating a city that still breathed the residue of surveillance. The war had ended—but the performance of peace was choreographed in camo.*

Interpretation: This image is saturated with post-war paradox. The soldier—armored and still—is not just a person, but a symbol: the embodied presence of the state. His posture, his weapon, and his uniform make visible the infrastructure of control. He stands not in battle, but in the performance of order—peace staged through the continued aesthetics of war. The phrase “under watchful eyes” points to a lingering sense of surveillance, not only political but epistemological: as a woman-researcher, your presence is both permitted and policed. The city watches you back, reminding you that to witness is to risk being seen. “The war had ended—but the performance of peace was choreographed in camo.”

Role: Field-walker, Ghost



Photo 5: “Fieldnotes in the Sun”

Colombo, Sri Lanka
2016

Caption: *My notebook rests on a woven mat. Notes blur in the midday heat. I write not only what I observe, but what I carry inside: doubt, discomfort, solidarity.*

Interpretation: This scene encapsulates the dual nature of ethnographic fieldwork—capturing both the external observations and the internal emotional landscape of the researcher. The act of writing fieldnotes in such conditions underscores the immediacy and rawness of the research process. Fieldnotes are not merely objective recordings; they are deeply personal narratives that reflect the researcher's interpretations, emotions, and evolving understanding of the cultural context. As Emerson et al. (2011) note, fieldnotes “filter members' experiences and concerns through the person and perspectives of the ethnographer,” highlighting the inherently subjective nature of ethnographic documentation. The blurred notes symbolize the challenges of capturing fleeting moments and the ephemeral nature of memory. They also represent the emotional complexities that researchers navigate—doubt about interpretations, discomfort in unfamiliar settings, and solidarity with the communities they study. This aligns with the principles of autoethnography, where the researcher's personal experience becomes a lens through which cultural phenomena are examined. I embody a transient presence, moving through spaces and experiences, constantly negotiating my position and understanding. This transient state reflects the fluidity of identity and the ongoing process of self-reflection inherent in ethnographic work. This photograph serves as a poignant reminder of the interplay between the external environment and the internal psyche in field research. It emphasizes that ethnography is not just about observing others but also about introspection and the continuous evolution of the researcher's perspective.

Role: Wayfarer, Transitor

