

# Archivaria

The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

## Documenting Disappearance

Personal Archives, Life Writing, and the Self in Sri Lanka

HENRIA ATON

*Archivaria* 94 (Fall/Winter 2022), pp. 232-257

---

### Cite this article:

Aton, Henria. "Documenting Disappearance: Personal Archives, Life Writing, and the Self in Sri Lanka". *Archivaria* 94 (Fall/Winter 2022): 232-257.

<https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13877>

# Documenting Disappearance

## Personal Archives, Life Writing, and the Self in Sri Lanka

HENRIA ATON

---

**ABSTRACT** On August 12, 2022, Tamil relatives of those forcibly disappeared during the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) marked their 2,000th day of public protest. Since these roadside protests began, elderly women and men searching for their loved ones have passed away and transitional justice promises have failed, but the disappeared have not been found. This article examines *archives of the disappeared*: collections of files, objects, photographs, etc. about missing loved ones. Paradoxically, these archives, as evidence that the disappeared once lived, are at the core of the protests, yet they are still overlooked by the Sri Lankan state. I explore these collections by examining the intersection of critical personal archives, life writing scholarship, and South Asian studies. The emerging field of critical personal archives suits the unique quality of archives of disappearance, their constructed nature, and their underlying intimacy. Life writing scholarship focuses a much-needed critical lens on self-representation, power, and narrative in archives, especially regarding those whose stories are marginalized and/or not deemed archivable. Drawing on semi-structured interviews I carried out with mothers of the disappeared in 2016–2017 and 2022, I analyze these archives using three life writing concepts: relationality, cultural scripts, and autotopography. The result reaffirms the enduring cultural, political, and personal value of archives of the disappeared and calls for reimagining personal archives as politically and emotionally powerful forms of representation that carve space for love and resistance.

---

**RÉSUMÉ** Le 12 août 2022, des familles et proches de Tamouls disparus de force durant la Guerre civile au Sri Lanka (1983–2009) ont marqué leur 2 000<sup>ème</sup> jour de manifestation publique. Depuis que les manifestations en bordure des routes ont débuté, les ainé.e.s à la recherche de leurs proches sont décédé.e.s et les promesses de justice transitionnelle n'ont pas été tenues puisque les personnes disparues n'ont pas été retrouvées. Cet article examine les archives des disparu.e.s : collections de dossiers, objets, photographies, etc. à propos d'êtres chers disparus. D'une manière paradoxale, ces archives, qui servent d'évidence de la vie des personnes disparues et qui sont au cœur des manifestations, sont pourtant encore négligées par l'état du Sri Lanka. J'explore ces collections en examinant les intersections qui relient les archives personnelles critiques, le genre littéraire de récits vécus et les études d'Asie du Sud. Le domaine émergent des archives personnelles critiques convient pour évaluer les caractéristiques des archives de disparu.e.s, leur formation particulière et leur caractère intime. Le genre littéraire des récits vécus met l'emphase, dans une dimension critique nécessaire, sur des questions d'autoreprésentation, de pouvoir, et de récits dans les archives, particulièrement en ce qui concerne celles et ceux dont les récits ont été marginalisés et/ou jugés non archivables. En me basant sur des entrevues semi-structurées réalisées en 2016–2017 et 2022 avec les mères de personnes disparues, j'analyse ces archives en utilisant trois concepts formant le genre littéraire de récits vécus : relationnalité, scripts culturels et autotopographie. Les résultats de la recherche réaffirment les valeurs culturelles, politiques, et personnelles des archives des disparu.e.s et appellent à réimaginer les archives personnelles comme étant des formes de représentations politiques et émotionnelles qui forgent de l'espace pour l'amour et la résistance.

*How long does one wait expecting return? One, five, ten, fifteen years? Does it ever end, the waiting?*

– Malathi de Alwis, “‘Disappearance’ and ‘Displacement’ in Sri Lanka”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

For almost four decades, Tamil women across Sri Lanka’s Northern Province and Eastern Province have tirelessly gathered, produced, and protected materials connected to loved ones who were forcibly disappeared<sup>2</sup> during the Civil War (1983–2009). This article examines the results of this documentation work: archives of the disappeared. Despite the ubiquity of these archives and the transnational visibility of human rights abuses like enforced disappearances in other countries, there has been little scholarly work on the nature of the records themselves and why they exist. Situated at the complex intersection of personal and human rights archives, collections on the disappeared are not easy to see, categorize, or interpret. For the most part, they have eluded the state’s gaze, even when their creators do not. Archives of the disappeared are records of love, care, and courage, just as they are records of necropolitics and the afterlives of violence. They contain stories of everyday life, and its joys and tribulations, alongside those of grief and suffering. It is these qualities, I argue, that help families resist the Sri Lankan state’s attempts to control the collective memory of the war and public consciousness about the disappeared.<sup>3</sup>

1 Malathi de Alwis, “‘Disappearance’ and ‘Displacement’ in Sri Lanka,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no. 3 (2009): 378–91. This article is dedicated to Malathi de Alwis, feminist anthropologist, activist extraordinaire, rigorous critic, and generous committee member. Though Malathi passed away too soon, her influence on several generations of students and scholars of Sri Lanka is visible. She is deeply missed.

2 In Tamil, the preferred term translates to “enforced disappearance.”

3 For an example, from an archival studies perspective, of dehumanization as a state tool, see Mario H. Ramirez, “The Fate of Many, the Brutality of Others: Human Rights Documentation and the Margins of Subjectivity in El Salvador” (PhD diss., UCLA, 2017). The term *necroviolence*, a play on Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, was coined by Jason de León in his ethnography of migrants and migrant deaths in the Sonoran Desert. It means “the complete destruction” of a body. See Jason de León, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 71.

As part of a broader research project on the Tamil archival multiverse, this article is guided by a series of questions: What, if anything, can archival theory tell us about the relationship between intimacy, memory, and politics in these archives? What stories do records of the disappeared tell? How are these told, and by whom? How can we expand and reimagine existing archival knowledge to make room for other ways of storytelling through archives specific to regional, cultural, and political contexts? To address these questions, I propose a theoretical framework that brings together scholarship on personal archives and life writing<sup>4</sup> in South Asia.

For readers who are not well-versed on Sri Lanka, this article begins with an introduction to its history, the war, and enforced disappearances on the island. It moves on to an in-depth description of one archive of the disappeared, followed by an explanation of methods. After providing an overview of 21st-century literature on personal archives, the article introduces life writing as a discipline, focusing on South Asia. Drawing from interviews with families of the disappeared and their archival records, it explores three life writing concepts: *autotopography*, *cultural scripts*, and *relationality*. The article demonstrates the cultural and political value of life writing for those whose stories are marginalized and/or deemed not archivable. It asks us to pay more attention to life writing by being attentive to these dynamics as we seek to reimagine these personal archives as a politically and emotionally powerful form of representation that carves space for love and resistance.

## The Sri Lankan Civil War and Enforced Disappearances in Context

Sri Lanka is a lower-middle-income country in the centre of the Indian Ocean that is home to 21 million people. Roughly 70 percent of the island's population identifies with an ethno-linguistic group called the Sinhala, of whom the vast majority are Buddhist. The island's largest minority identifies as Tamil, a distinct (if segmented) ethnic group. Most Tamil speakers on the island are

4 The term *life writing* is expansive and does not necessarily refer to a written record so much as to a process of writing one's life, which can occur through text, performance, etc. There are many similar terms, including *life stories*, *life histories*, and *life narratives*. See Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, eds., *Speaking of the Self: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 3–4.

Hindu, although there are also large communities of Tamil-speaking Muslims and Christians.

From the beginning of the 16th century, Ceylon – as it was called until 1972 – was successively ruled by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British before it achieved independence in 1948. Colonial rule dramatically transformed the island's modern development. At independence, its social indicators (literacy, per capita income, infant mortality, etc.) made Ceylon considerably better off than many of its regional neighbours. But colonial rule, tied to systems of oppression and inherited inequalities, also resulted in lasting challenges for economic, social, and political life.<sup>5</sup>

Sri Lanka has been battered by wave after wave of instability, violence, and natural disasters. Between 1983 and 2009, a civil war was fought between the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lankan government and a secessionist Tamil militant group known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who sought to create a separate Tamil state on the island.<sup>6</sup> In 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated the eastern and southern coasts of the island, killing tens of thousands of people and destroying entire villages as well as agricultural land and property.<sup>7</sup> In April 2019, a series of bombings, claimed by the militant Islamic State group known in English as ISIS, killed 270 people in three churches and hotels. Like the rest of the world, Sri Lanka shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, despite its economic reliance on tourism. During my latest visit in May 2022, the economic impact of these events, together with decades of political corruption

- 5 For a thorough account and analysis of Sri Lankan history, see K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006); and John Holt, *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 6 For an accessible explanation of the war and how it unfolded, see the introductory chapter of Sharika Thirananaga, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). For information on the history and origins of the conflict, see Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), especially the introduction. More specific analyses of violence in Sri Lanka include Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Rajan Hoole, Daya Somasundaram, K. Sritharan, and Rajani Thirananaga, *The Broken Palmyra: The Tamil Crisis in Sri Lanka: An Inside Account* (Claremont, CA: The Sri Lanka Studies Institute, 1990). The latter was written by four members of the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna).
- 7 Nuanced accounts of livelihoods before and after the tsunami include Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, "Temporality of Disasters: The Politics of Women's Livelihoods 'After' the 2004 Tsunami in Sri Lanka," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 29, no. 3 (2008): 325–40; and Jennifer Hyndman, "Feminism, Conflict and Disasters in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka," *Gender, Technology and Development* 12, no. 1 (2008): 101–21.

and lack of accountability by the Sri Lankan government, had brought the island's economy to a grinding halt and forced the government to default on its loans for the first time in its history.

The civil war was the backdrop of most enforced disappearances in the northern and eastern provinces. There is a broad consensus in Sri Lanka that the civil war was triggered by events in 1983 known as Black July.<sup>8</sup> In reaction to the murder of 13 Sinhala soldiers by the LTTE, Sinhala mobs, abetted by the government and armed with the names and addresses of individuals and businesses owned by Tamils in Colombo, carried out a deadly pogrom against Tamils. Black July catalyzed an almost three-decades-long war between the government and the LTTE, who fought for control of land in the northern and eastern provinces. Civilians in these provinces suffered continuous bombings and displacements, and it is in this context that enforced disappearances occurred. In certain towns, it would be difficult to find anyone who has not been impacted by enforced disappearances. Although the exact number of disappearances is difficult to find, estimates range from 60,000 to 100,000 since the war began.<sup>9</sup>

Disappearances in the Sri Lankan context can be categorized into three types.<sup>10</sup> The first – “white vaning,” a euphemism for kidnapping – was primarily used by the state and its allies, who kidnapped individuals, often in the middle of the night and from their homes. White vans driving through a village or street, by all accounts, resulted in sinking dread and terror. Forcible conscription, by the LTTE, of individuals who never returned home is also considered a type of enforced disappearance. The third type occurred in 2009, when the war ended. After defeating the LTTE, the Sri Lankan army called for Tamil families to surrender any family members who had been part of the militant group, including those who had been forcibly conscripted or had chosen to leave the

8 See Nimanthi Perera-Rajasingham, ed., “July ‘83 and After,” Special issue, *Nēthra* 6, no. 1–2 (2003), published by the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo.

9 These numbers correspond with those published by the International Center for Transitional Justice, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.

10 There is excellent scholarship on archives and disappearances in South Asia that we cannot cover here. For example, see Ather Zia, *Resisting Disappearance: Military Occupation and Women’s Activism in Kashmir* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019); Salman Hussain, “Violence, Law, and the Archive: How Dossiers of Memory Challenge Enforced Disappearances in the War on Terror in Pakistan,” *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 42, no. 1 (2019): 53–67; and Vindhya Buthpitiya, “Absence in Technicolour: Protesting Enforced Disappearances in Northern Sri Lanka,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28, no. 1 (2022): 118–34.

LTTE before the end of the war. The military promised that these individuals would be taken to rehabilitation camps and returned to their families, but to this day, there is no official documentation of who was surrendered, and not one person has returned home.

Post-war, transitional justice initiatives have played an important part in Sri Lankans' understanding of the issue of disappearances. Despite a number of commissions and inquiries since the end of the war, there has been no relief for families whose loved ones are missing and total impunity for soldiers and officers responsible for the disappearances.<sup>11</sup> Even the newly created Office on Missing Persons (OMP) has failed to engage survivors in any meaningful way, including in the process of deciding on the OMP's mandate and its priorities. Now, with the re-election in 2019 of senior members of the Rajapaksa family, all pretense of supporting transitional justice has ended. In 2020, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa announced that individuals who went "missing" during the Sri Lankan Civil War are gone. "I can't bring back the dead," he stated to a United Nations official.<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, this statement meant nothing to my interlocutors in Sri Lanka, who have long known that the Rajapaksa family is responsible for war crimes, including many disappearances.

## Description of Collections

For the purposes of this article, Tamil archives of disappearance in Sri Lanka are the indirect product of enforced disappearances carried out by the Sri Lankan government and Tamil militant groups before, during, and after the island's Civil War. These archives are collections of materials with disparate provenances, creators, and intended functions but a shared subject: the disappeared. Created, shaped, and preserved by relatives of those who are missing, these collections have multifaceted values, including in the private and public spheres. While we cannot assume that all these collections contain the same kinds of records – or that all families have such archives – the description below is representative.

11 Previous iterations include the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC), the Consultation Task Force (CTF), the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR), and the Presidential Commission to Investigate into Complaints Regarding Missing Persons.

12 Maria Abi-Habib and Dharisha Bastians, "I Can't Bring Back the Dead": Sri Lanka Leader Ends Search for War Missing," *New York Times*, January 21, 2020.



K. Amma's<sup>13</sup> 18-year-old son, Gajan, was forcibly recruited by the LTTE in 2006, in the last years of the war, when all families were forced to send at least one person to fight. Gajan never returned, and K. Amma has been searching for him ever since, throughout her own experiences with repeated displacement; inhumane refugee camps; and the last, perilous days of the war. In spite of the challenges her family faces, K. Amma has followed every lead, walked to every local government office (*kachcheri*), and followed up on every reported sighting of her son – at military camps, in prisons, and even walking on the side of the road.

During our first visits with K. Amma in 2016, every record she placed before Rani, my research assistant, and me was accompanied by a story, told by either herself, her husband, or their children, who walked in and out of our conversation as they went about their days. With consent from the family, I took photographs of the items she shared, all listed here:

- two large, laminated headshot-style photographs
- two photographs of her son being made a prefect at his school
- Gajan's national identity card (NIC)
- a photograph of K. Amma with her newborn baby in 2006, when she had narrowly escaped the bombing of the Kilinochchi hospital where she gave birth
- family albums filled with photographs of her disappeared son in his Boy Scout uniform, swimming with his cousins, dressed up, petting his dog
- the family's refugee camp identity cards
- a pair of jeans, shorts, and shoes that her son wore
- an Adventist Development and Relief Agency International folder containing two more laminated photographs, school pictures, and a copy of Gajan's NIC card
- her son's pet parrot, sitting in a cage behind us

13 Interview subjects preferred to remain anonymous and are each identified in the article as *Amma* (Mother) with a unique initial.

K. Amma's archive about her son's life and disappearance is not large in terms of items or space. When the army arrived in Kilinochchi in the last months of the war and the family was displaced, they were only able to carry essentials with them. During this time, K. Amma carried her entire collection – all the records listed here – in a bag. She was also lucky, she said, as not all families were able to preserve their archives as they experienced displacements, the unsanitary environments of camps for internally displaced people, and the final chaos of the war in Mullaitivu. Today, she keeps these records tucked away in an almirah.

## Methods

When I arrived in Jaffna in 2016, roadside protests by families of the disappeared were still relatively new. Through conversations with friends and colleagues, Rani and I were put in touch with L. Amma, who holds a leadership position within the Association for Relatives of the Enforced Disappearances, North and East. L. Amma vetted us and my project.<sup>14</sup> I am a white woman born in France to parents from Brittany and Auvergne, but I identify primarily as a settler Quebecer. Both sides of my family are implicated in global histories of colonialism and imperialism, including in Tamil-speaking South India.<sup>15</sup> I am conscious of the extractive histories that have brought me to this place, from three consecutive colonial governments to post-tsunami aid and post-war development. Rani is a Sri Lankan Tamil woman who lived through the Civil War.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2016, Rani and I have interviewed 15 affected families and individuals in three towns and have spoken to activists across the island. During initial

14 Some questions we were asked were, What is your research going to do for families of the disappeared? How are you going to help? How do we know if you will extract what you need and then leave? In response, I shared three commitments: (1) to the best of my ability, I will prioritize a flexible research design that seeks to answer questions that families of the disappeared wish to have answered; (2) I will translate what I write or speak about into Tamil for stronger community access; and (3) I have a personal and professional commitment to Sri Lanka and families of the disappeared that will not end when my PhD research does. Permission to use any collected data was in the purview of the families themselves, and I have respected different levels of comfort, especially when it came to sharing photographs of archival records.

15 My paternal great-grandmother worked on a rubber plantation in Brazil, and my maternal great-uncle was a Jesuit missionary (and archivist) in South India.

16 Rani (pseudonym) attended all interviews and translated from English to Tamil and Tamil to English whenever needed. We also loosely transcribed and translated the interviews together.

conversations, I invited families to reflect on their interest in the project, how it could be of value to them, and how they believed it should be conducted. Responses to my questions guided my research design and methods. We used semi-structured interviews with families, asking questions centred on the records in order to encourage narration. During these interviews, we often found ourselves surrounded by piles of records covering every nearby surface. With each interview, Rani and I heard stories about births, childhood mischief, performances at school, and loyalty to loving friends and family. The result was a rich collection of data reflecting the physical archives of the disappeared, record-based narratives, and emotional trauma. After each interview, we spent the long bus ride home considering the stories bestowed upon us – stories about a person, a life, and lives changed forever.

## Reading Personal Archives as Life Writing

The undertheorization of personal archives in archival studies is a product of 19th- and early-20th-century archival theorists' claims that personal archives are unreliable.<sup>17</sup> Archivists claimed that personal archives were not natural by-products of actions and were too easy to change and manipulate.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, limited space, resources, and understanding has meant that personal archives are not of interest to government archives unless they belong(ed) to an influential person. In the last two decades, however, critical scholarship that is in line with the archival field's belated turn to postmodernism has shifted how we think about and work with archives of all sorts, including personal ones. Despite the traditional view that archivists must be objective and archives must be the result of particular procedures, research increasingly demonstrates that archives are constructed and collaborative – the products of social, cultural, and political contexts from which they cannot be divorced. Archival theorists and practitioners have expanded and reimagined foundational concepts of archival science such as original order,

17 Terry Eastwood, "A Contested Realm: The Nature of Archives and the Orientation of *Archival Science*," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 2nd ed., ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 12.

18 Eastwood, "A Contested Realm," 12.

creatorship, value, and provenance.<sup>19</sup>

Archival theory around personal archives has followed this larger trend in the discipline, stimulating a much-needed conversation. In 1996, Sue McKemish argued that personal archives do indeed have enduring value, not only for oneself or one's family but as "evidence of us," society, and collective memory.<sup>20</sup> Opposing voices have criticized approaches that seek to legitimize personal archives by using the already established concept of evidence. Arguing that personal archives tend to be created and to operate in ways that are fundamentally distinct from the creation and operation of other types of archives, critics have called for reimagining the appraisal of personal records.<sup>21</sup> Another theory has described personal archives as an "expression of character" of the records creator and has argued that the idiosyncrasy of personal archives is missed when we look only for evidence.<sup>22</sup>

Cautioning against the potential limitations of reading personality or psychology in personal archives, Jennifer Douglas demonstrates that personal archives are made up of "representational strategies" used by the records creator and others who participate in shaping archives, such as family members, archivists, and researchers.<sup>23</sup> Most recently, research has brought emotions to the forefront of personal archives, focusing on the ways that grief, loss, and love shape the record-keeping practices of bereaved parents.<sup>24</sup> New concepts and interdisciplinary

19 For example, Jessica M. Lapp, "'The Only Way We Knew How': Provenancial Fabulation in Archives of Feminist Materials," *Archival Science* (November 9, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-021-09376-x>; Jennifer Douglas, "A Call to Rethink Archival Creation: Exploring Types of Creation in Personal Archives," *Archival Science* 18, no. 1 (2018): 29–49; Michelle Caswell, "Irreparable Damage: Violence, Ownership, and Voice in an Indian Archive," *Libri* 59, no. 1 (2009): 1–13; Joel Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience," *Archival Issues* 29, no. 1 (2005): 65–76; Lori Podolski Nordland, "The Concept of 'Secondary Provenance': Re-interpreting Ac ko mok ki's Map as Evolving Text," *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 147–59; Jennifer Meehan, "Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records," *Archivaria* 70 (Fall 2010): 27–44.

20 Sue McKemish, "Evidence of Me," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (1996): 28–45.

21 Verne Harris, "On the Back of a Tiger: Deconstructive Possibilities in 'Evidence of Me,'" *Archives and Manuscripts* 29, no. 1 (2001): 8–21; Catherine Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 126–35.

22 Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives," 134.

23 Douglas uses terminology inspired by life writing – coaxers and coercers – to describe those who may be involved in someone else's personal archives. See Jennifer Douglas, "The Archiving 'I': A Closer Look in the Archives of Writers," *Archivaria* 79 (Spring 2015): 67.

24 Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas, and Devon Mordell, "'Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists': Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 84–120; Jennifer

frameworks in the area of personal archives centre people, their emotions, and their experiences, inside and outside of official archival institutions.

This article builds on interdisciplinary research in archival studies and life writing. As a form of representation rooted in people, places, experiences, and histories, life writing is person centred and political by nature. Like archives, life writing is neither an objective practice nor one that guarantees truth. Rather, it is a narrative form and strategy that must be analyzed as such.<sup>25</sup> Previous studies have used life writing theory to disrupt and evolve archival concepts and open a space for the politics of self-representation.<sup>26</sup> This article extends this transformational research by focusing first on Sri Lanka and second on archives that do not belong to writers, artists, or other influential figures whose records are deemed to have enduring value for our society.

Archival studies scholarship about South Asia is limited, but life writing practices in the region have long been a tool through which people and communities have told stories and transmitted knowledge beyond the bounds of archives.<sup>27</sup> In South Asia, life writing has been the equal purview of emperors,<sup>28</sup> oppressed caste women, and everyone in between, but telling lives, especially, has been a way of sharing the stories and memories of those who are marginalized, under-

Douglas and Alexandra Alisaukas, "'It Feels Like a Life's Work': Recordkeeping as an Act of Love," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring/Summer 2021): 6–37; Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, "Radical Empathy in the Context of Suspended Grief: An Affective Web of Mutual Loss," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021).

- 25 Stuart Blackburn, "Life Histories as Narrative Strategy: Prophecy, Song, and Truth-Telling in Tamil Tales and Legends," in *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, ed. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 203–26.
- 26 Heather MacNeil, "Understanding the Archival Fonds as Autobiographical Text through Three Discourses," *Journal of Library and Information Studies* 10, no. 3 (2019): 47–58; Douglas, "The Archiving 'I,'" 67; Carolyn Harris, "Paper Memories, Presented Selves: Original Order and the Arrangement of the Donald G. Simpson Fonds at York University," *Archivaria* 74 (Fall 2012): 195–217; Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, "Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives," *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2009): 25–39.
- 27 Arnold and Blackburn, eds., *Telling Lives in India*; and Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, eds., *Speaking of the Self*. Other work on life writing, life stories, and life histories in South Asia that may interest archival scholars include Navaneetha Mokkalil, *Unruly Figures: Queerness, Sex Work, and the Politics of Sexuality in Kerala* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), especially chap. 2, "To Claim the Day: The Sex Worker as Subject in the Time of AIDS," 89–125 (on the autobiography of former sex worker and sex work activist Nalini Jameela); Hephzibah Israel and John Zavos, "Narratives of Transformation: Religious Conversion and Indian Traditions of 'Life Writing,'" *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2018): 352–65 (on life narratives of religious conversion); and Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) (on women's stories of everyday lives after extreme violence).
- 28 See the Mughal Emperor Bābur's *Bāburnāma*, an autobiography of his life.

or unrepresented in archives, or considered untrustworthy narrators due to illiteracy, gender, or social location.<sup>29</sup> Abandoning the belief that life writing is biased or unreliable – or at least more so than records – is necessary if we are to pay attention and listen closely. Truth in life stories, Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley argue, is layered and multifaceted; it requires an understanding of the histories, cultures, and languages of the people representing themselves.<sup>30</sup> In other words, there is enormous value in the ways people choose to share the truths of their own lives.

The following section explores three ways in which families of the disappeared choose to tell the stories of lost lives and of the truths they live through each day as survivors of the Civil War in Sri Lanka. The stories I share here are not direct quotations but come from my extensive notes, written during and right after our conversations with families.

### **Autotopography: What Tells Stories**

The authors of *Archive of Memory: Reflections on 70 Years of Independence* record a statement, from a woman named Rajeswary, that reflects the significance she places on everyday objects used by her disappeared son: “When I die, I want my son’s plate along with his clothes, comb, toothbrush and personal documents placed in his suitcase and buried with me.”<sup>31</sup> Much has been written about the power of objects as aids to memory, as tangible tools for sustaining physical connections with loved ones, and as a method for reading against the silence of the official archive.<sup>32</sup> In life writing, the concept of autotopography offers a framework to think about the process of meaning making through objects of the disappeared. Autotopography is a form of life writing in which a person’s “integral objects”<sup>33</sup> – for example, those items most used or most significant to someone –

29 For example, Bama, *Karukku* (Chennai: Macmillan India Ltd., 2000 [1992]).

30 Anshu Malhotra and Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, “Introduction: Gender, Performance, and Autobiography in South Asia,” in *Speaking of the Self*, 23.

31 Malathi de Alwis and Hasini Haputhanthri, eds., *Archive of Memory: Reflections on 70 Years of Independence* (Colombo: HistoricalDialogue.lk, 2019), 116.

32 Douglas and Alisuskas, “‘It Feels Like a Life’s Work’”; Aarzo Singh, “Recovery after the Rupture: Linking Colonial Histories of Displacement with Affective Objects and Memories,” *disClosure* 28 (2019): 1–12.

33 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 262.

create a “physical map of memory, history, and beliefs” unique to that person.<sup>34</sup> Not all objects are autotopographical; in archives of the disappeared, those that are tend to contain a physical, bodily trace that acts as a “metonymic link with past events or absent persons.”<sup>35</sup> In this context, I describe autotopography as an intimate process in which (mainly) mothers collect, create, and narrate objects that constitute a “locally produced representation of the past.”<sup>36</sup>

This is not to suggest that a personal object is not political. On the contrary, it is a “countersite,” a “*lieu de mémoire*” that resists government narratives about the disappeared and “provides a personal revision of the totalizing narratives of history.”<sup>37</sup> Arguably, the totalizing narrative of history that families of the disappeared face is the state’s messaging about disappearances throughout the last decade: either that the missing are dead and will not be found or that they chose to leave the country and their own families behind during the war. Powerful, integral objects imbued with memory and touch that connect families to their missing loved ones help them refute the latter explanation and see the former as motivation to keep fighting for truth.

One of the first things J. Amma brought out when Rani and I sat down on her veranda was a beautiful, wooden balance that her son, a goldsmith, had used before he was disappeared. As we admired it, opening all of its drawers and feeling the 100-gram weights and other small, precious items, J. Amma shared its story with us:

When Iyathurai needed to get a job, J. Amma sent him to her sister’s home to receive training as a goldsmith (a family occupation). After six months of training, Iyathurai returned and asked his parents to help him open a shop and buy equipment. Despite some disbelief about the brevity of his training, his parents agreed. Iyathurai did very well and was able to spoil his family. He made two thalis for his sisters, as well as bracelets, bangles, and anklets. His sister brought us a pair of earrings Iyathurai had made for her in 2003: small flowers of red gems. J. Amma

34 Jennifer A. González, “Autotopographies,” in *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies*, ed. Gabriel Brahm Jr. and Mark Driscoll (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 134.

35 González, “Autotopographies,” 134.

36 González, “Autotopographies,” 138.

37 González, “Autotopographies,” 139.

will not allow anyone to alter or sell the jewellery, even though the pieces are broken.

No one has used the balance since Iyathurai's disappearance, even though the family has relatives who are also goldsmiths. It was clear from our conversation with his mother and father that it is a deeply significant object that speaks to Iyathurai's innate talent, his confidence, and his loving relationship with his family, offering evidence that he was a good, hardworking person who provided for his family. In fact, when Rani and I first visited, we asked J. Amma about her memory of her son and she waved her hand back toward the house, saying, "Yellam nyabaham" (Everything is memory). Iyathurai, she explained, had bought much of the furniture in their home. His presence seemed to inhabit J. Amma's home just as it inhabited her.

Clothing belonging to missing loved ones is ubiquitous in archives of the disappeared. As we know, there is a deep intimacy in materials that have touched skin and been imbued with the smell and feel of an absent body. A beloved smell or texture is "an extension or a trace of the absent presence," a way to manifest a person that is only possible for those who knew them and loved them so well.<sup>38</sup> After Iyathurai's disappearance, J. Amma kept a lot of his clothing, but she separated his favourite pieces from the pants and shirts he and his brothers wore daily. Though she told us this story, J. Amma did not show us any of the clothing she described but instead protected this intimate comfort – a familiar smell on a familiar piece of clothing – from the interference of prying outsiders.<sup>39</sup>

K. Amma had a different approach. She brought out her son's clothing, placed it on a chair next to us, and shared a laugh while telling us about Gajan's jeans:

When Gajan got a pair of jeans in the early 2000s, denim was very expensive in Sri Lanka, so they were considered dressed up. One day, the girl living next door bought a similar pair of pants. After having it pointed out to him, Gajan immediately stopped wearing them, after only a handful of uses. K. Amma kept them, however, and they are now part of his archive.

38 González, "Autotopographies," 134.

39 This sentiment echoes the desire of bereaved parents to protect their children from anyone who would not "look with love." See Douglas and Alisaukas, "'It Feels Like a Life's Work,'" 36.



K. Amma had teased Gajan about this situation when it happened, and she was equally joking and lighthearted in retelling the story. Her story lets us imagine Gajan as a typical teenager, navigating the vicissitudes of fashion and young adulthood. While most of our conversations focused on Gajan's traumatic disappearance, K. Amma also shared precious moments of levity, demonstrating that even archives of the disappeared hold more than evidence of loss.

The final object I consider is a set of diaries kept by Mahilan, V. Amma's son. Despite being clinically blind in one eye and learning Braille, Mahilan was recruited by the LTTE in 2006 to work in the reporting unit and surrendered in 2009 at the end of the war. Diaries are more rare than other types of records in archives of the disappeared, and these books were deeply personal to Mahilan and his family:

In those days, before his disappearance, Mahilan kept diaries in which he wrote about his life, composed poems and songs for his mother, observed and drew those around him, and doodled images of his favourite sport, cricket. His sister says he was always talented. She remembers a drawing of his favourite Tamil actress, Sneha, which his mother hung up in their home. When he was forcibly conscripted by the LTTE, Mahilan left his diaries behind. When his family was displaced to Matale, they buried the diaries in a town named Visuvamadu, for fear that the army would destroy them. When the family returned to Kilinochchi after the war, they found that Visuvamadu no longer existed as they had known it. The town was completely bare, all its buildings razed to the ground. The lack of landmarks and fear of stepping on mines prevented Mahilan's family from finding the exact place the diaries were buried.

Mahilan's diaries are multimodal, on the line between text and object. Textual records in archives of the disappeared tend to be government files, paper documentation of claims made in person, and articles from newspapers. A diary, though written by hand, is fundamentally different from these types of records; it is a space for self-expression that allows the diarist to narrate their own stories for their personal use or public consumption. Lack of access to the text in the diaries is a loss for Mahilan's family, but the significance of diaries as objects opens new doors for interpretation. Placed alongside other autotopographical

objects, they become one of many “fugitive fragments”<sup>40</sup> that can tell us about aspects of his life – his creative spirit, for instance.

### **Cultural Scripts: How Stories are Told**

Life writing scholarship has much to contribute to personal archives theory, including by modelling how to think and write about archives outside frameworks developed in the Global North. It encourages a grounded, contextualized analysis based on the writer’s positionality, culture, nationality, religion, etc. In this section, I explore the life writing concept of cultural scripts, or the language, forms of knowledge, and modes of narration one can use to represent oneself. Cultural scripts differ from one person to the next, as they are the products of people’s ideas, practices, beliefs, and social locations.<sup>41</sup> This is not to imply that cultural scripts cannot be learned; people and communities have agency in choosing how they code-switch and communicate. However, we should be cautious and avoid assuming that their “claims are anything less than real.”<sup>42</sup>

For almost four decades, families of the disappeared have tapped into the universal language of human rights and development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in order to make their stories more visible outside Sri Lanka. *Human rights* and *development* are powerful words in Sri Lanka, linked to foreign and local researchers, journalists looking for bylines, gender development NGOs, and of course, the United Nations and its media apparatus. Sri Lankan women with knowledge of these institutions and the buzzwords they like to hear understand how they operate. They have become skilled in telling stories and sharing experiences using the correct language, discourse, and interests to connect them with a particular audience and/or funding body.<sup>43</sup> At the time of writing, however, Sri Lanka is 13 years post war but is still ruled by politicians

40 Santanu Das, “Reframing Life/War ‘Writing’: Objects, Letters and Songs of Indian Soldiers, 1914–1918,” *Textual Practice* 29, no. 7 (2015): 1265–87, 1272.

41 For instance, Kirin Narayan has shown that caste, age, literacy levels, and exposure to media all shape the way women in Kangra, India, narrate their own life stories. See Kirin Narayan, “‘Honor Is Honor, After All’: Silence and Speech in the Life Stories of Women in Kangra, North-West India,” in Arnold and Blackburn, eds., *Telling Lives in India*, 227–51.

42 Kate Cronin-Furman and Roxani Krystalli, “The Things They Carry: Victims’ Documentation of Forced Disappearance in Colombia and Sri Lanka,” *European Journal of International Relations* 27, no. 1 (2021): 79–101.

43 Mario Ramirez, “Wither the Human in Human Rights?: On Misrecognition, Ontology, and Archives,” *Archivaria* 90 (Fall 2020): 44–69, 69.

who only feign commitment to transitional justice and truth and reconciliation mechanisms. While Sri Lankan Tamils may know how to engage the discourse of global human rights organizations, they are also aware that these international bodies will not hold the Sri Lankan government and individual politicians accountable for war atrocities like enforced disappearance. Yet many relatives of the disappeared continue to use terms such as *victim*, *survivor*, *transitional justice*, *accountability*, *evidence*, and *testimony* in video clips and interviews, hoping against hope to capture the attention of foreign audiences.

Even families who are angry about having to play along with this discourse continue to speak in human rights settings, unwilling to forgo even the smallest chance of reaching the right person. It was only when my relationship with the mothers I worked with developed further that I began hearing about their feelings vis-à-vis this discourse, which has not done anything for them:

K. Amma, along with her fellow mothers, feels deep frustration when she is asked to speak with journalists, visiting politicians, and researchers for NGOs. On these occasions, it is especially important to “perform” the grief and suffering she carries every day.

More than once, she has been interviewed, photographed, and asked a few questions for the benefit of foreigners whose goals do not align with hers. No one asks what she and other mothers want; the performance says enough.

Thinking transnationally also goes beyond universal modes of speaking about violence and conflict. Many mothers of the disappeared in Sri Lanka feel a connection with women in other countries who have also suffered from enforced disappearances, and they asked Rani and me about what happened to those families, who they know – although they will never meet them – can understand their grief and anger. Mothers of the disappeared all have access to the widely recognized iconography of women protesting with photographs of their loved ones. In this case, the cultural script of these powerful images – though still part of a human rights language – centres the women and their collective grief.

In Sri Lanka, strategic use of such images in public highlights the sacred bond between mothers and their children. Motherhood is conceived as a natural and sacred role for women of the island. In the face of this motherly love, politicians

have struggled to denounce women's protests about the disappeared as disruptions planned by their enemies.<sup>44</sup> There is a history of Sri Lankan women bringing intimate records such as photographs of their children to protests and tapping into the cultural script of motherhood, which depoliticizes identity, as a protective cover.<sup>45</sup>

But searches for the disappeared do not end with public protests. Photographs also illustrate the ways that families of the disappeared have adapted the visual medium to different registers so that multiple copies of one image can circulate in and speak to different audiences. While the iconographic headshots of the disappeared have their place on the global stage, in northern Sri Lanka, the same photographs circulate in ordinary, local networks that are less interesting to international audiences but equally important in the search for truth. V. Amma described these alternative sites of truth seeking to us:

V. Amma carries several versions of the same photograph of her disappeared son. She uses a copied, laminated, and zoomed version for the protest tent – never the original. The fear of losing the original or of someone destroying it means it is always kept safe. In her travel purse, V. Amma carries a smaller, crinkled, and folded version of the same photograph, which travels everywhere with her. Its primary purpose is for use in sacred religious spaces and rituals, or as a tool for astrologers and oracles, from whom she seeks blessings and answers.

Temples, churches, astrologers, and oracles: these sacred spaces and people are part of a larger sociality that produces its own script grounded in everyday belief and encounters with religion and the sacred. Looking to the divine for truth produces an entirely different quality and value for photographs, which has yet to be studied by archival scholars.

44 Malathi de Alwis, "Maternalist Politics in Sri Lanka: A Historical Anthropology of its Conditions of Possibility" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1998).

45 De Alwis wrote on mothers of the disappeared in southern Sri Lanka, where the government brutally fought against a social party known as the People's Liberation Front (JVP). To my knowledge, there have been very few conversations between mothers in the North and those in the South due to a lack of trust and accusations of performativity. De Alwis, "Maternalist Politics in Sri Lanka."

### Relationality: Who Tells Stories

As of May 2022, 178 Tamil parents of disappeared children in Sri Lanka have died.<sup>46</sup> As the number of deaths expand, the need to protest to uncover the truth about what happened to Sri Lanka's forcibly disappeared is very present and urgent. What is less clear is the future and what it will hold for families and their loved ones. Responsibility for seeking the truth will eventually pass from those who experienced the trauma first-hand to their children, some of whom were too young to remember the disappeared, and the Association for Relatives of Enforced Disappearances, North and East, is increasingly concerned about the future. This section examines the promises of intergenerational archiving and its current challenges and seeks to answer the question of whether it can be sustained.

In the course of our interviews, Rani and I met many siblings, children, and grandchildren of the disappeared: the youngest darting around to capture our attention and the eldest – now adults<sup>47</sup> – recounting stories about their missing relatives. A recurring theme in these stories is the impact of disappearance and now activism on surviving family members. Of those whose siblings disappeared, some experience resentment against their mothers for prioritizing a person who is not there. Activities such as travelling to meetings, paying for expensive train tickets, and protesting in very difficult conditions get in the way of ideal motherhood duties such as cooking and caring for the family. Seeing attention diverted elsewhere can be difficult for the surviving children, who paradoxically feel left behind. Some mothers, facing the continued danger of arrest by the Special Task Force (STF) under the notoriously brutal *Prevention of Terrorism Act* (PTA), also face active resistance from their own children. In a heartbreaking moment, V. Amma told us what her youngest son had asked her: “If we disappeared, would that be easier for you? Would you be happy?” His words are eerie – too similar to those of the Criminal Investigation Department officer who came to L. Amma's door and threatened her, asking, “And if you disappear, who will search for you?”

The tension parents feel, between wanting their disappeared children to come back and wanting their other children to live safe and happy lives, sets up a

<sup>46</sup> The Association for Relatives of Enforced Disappearances, North and East Provinces, tracks these numbers and has published two documentary booklets containing a picture and the name, age, and cause of death of each person. The first book is entitled *Erasure of Evidences*, and the other is *Disappeared Tamil Babies of Sri Lanka*.

<sup>47</sup> I refer to adults as “children” when it is necessary to clarify the relationship between the disappeared and the storytellers. No one below the age of 18 was interviewed or asked questions by the researchers.

triangle of relationality in which all parties are dependent on each other. For instance, members of the same families shared with us, on different occasions, their constant worry that other family members would not maintain their relationships with the disappeared, either through the archives or in family histories, and would not continue to protest for justice when their daily lives were already often a struggle:

When K. Amma passes away, the search for her disappeared son will end. This is normal in families where there is no wife or children to continue the search. K. Amma's husband could attend special meetings but would not be able to do the rigorous, everyday work that she does without facing problems with the Criminal Investigation Department. Even now, K. Amma does not allow her sons to participate in the protest, to avoid any trouble.

V. Amma has continuous headaches, swelling, and pain in her arm. Her mind and hopes deteriorate every day. She spends days and nights in the protest tent near her home, regardless of the weather or discomfort, and she is painfully aware of how her behaviour impacts the rest of her family. The strict ascetic rules she follows – such as not consuming television, music, or entertainment and not eating types of foods preferred by her disappeared son – impact the lives of her children. She knows this, though, and told Rani and me that she will not allow the rest of her family to continue the search for her son. She received a visit from an ex-cadre, who told her that her children would face threats if she continued the tent protest. But V. Amma responded that she has only two responsibilities: to search for her disappeared child, and to protect and care for the ones she still has with her. Without the means to escape the country as emigrants or refugees, the family has no choice but to avoid all risks and protect themselves.

Neither of these stories suggests that the existing records will be impacted or that the meaningful memory practices that occur through interaction with the records will cease. They do make clear, however, that even mothers who are active participants in the protests see an end to their quest for truth. With their deaths, these mothers will no longer carry out their responsibility to search for the disappeared and protect survivors. The unanswered question remains: on whose shoulders will this responsibility fall?

Not all families share the sense that death means an end to truth seeking. In families with siblings who are too young to remember much about their disappeared siblings, archives of the disappeared are the sites of strong, intergenerational bonding. While older siblings may have responsibilities to their own families, younger siblings often spend more time with their mothers:

K. Amma's third son was very young when his brother was disappeared. Now he always wants to participate in rituals for his annā (older brother). He regularly accompanies his mother to pujas and joins K. Amma when she undertakes vegetarian diets or carries out other vows. Thambi (little brother) has many fond memories of his brother, shaped by the stories he heard growing up. He knows how well Gajan took care of him.

How members of thambi's generation will act when their parents are no longer able to protest or care for their own records is difficult to predict, in part because the political and economic future of Sri Lanka itself cannot be pinned down. It is also difficult to say how the archives will or will not have evolved and whether they will be able to withstand the tropical climate. However, I am inspired by other intergenerational movements for justice around the world. Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (HIJOS) is a movement led by children of those forcibly disappeared during the Dirty War in Argentina (1976–1983). Their form of protest is *escraches*, rowdy and joyful demonstrations that call out and identify specific perpetrators of disappearances and “work to reappear those who have been erased from history itself.”<sup>48</sup> Despite the cruel passage of time, HIJOS's visual reminder to Argentinians and the state teaches

<sup>48</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 169.

us that there are many ways to protest and keep disappearances in the eye of the public. The organization demonstrates how the bonds between the disappeared and their descendants can continue into new generations and phases of life.

## Reimagining Personal Archives

Many personal archives have a unique ability to capture and hold the beautiful idiosyncrasies of people's lives through the things they choose to keep and the ways they represent themselves. Archives of the disappeared, however, appear to be paradoxical. The root cause of their creation – the violent act of enforced disappearance – is a strategy used to deny the victims' personhood and their very existence. However, I have found that records produced by families act as powerful counterforces. If disappearances seek to erase people from history and memory so that we forget their faces and their names, family archives remake them in the eyes of their loved ones. Collections that include wide-ranging records, from government documents to autotopographical objects, and narration via storytelling serve as defences against erasure and affirm families' claims that their loved ones lived happy lives and "were (and are still) loved and deserving of love."<sup>49</sup>

Personal archives are still considered difficult to theorize, because "individuals create documents, use them, and husband them in idiosyncratic ways that often defy straightforward application of certain traditional archival concepts and principles."<sup>50</sup> Some critical archival scholars have also been justifiably hesitant about transferring theories, processes, and forms created by and for institutions of the Global North to countries with different archival practices. Reading archives through life writing, however, encourages a new perspective that embraces idiosyncrasy and unconventional recordkeeping as positive forces in our field's attempt to expand our knowledge of the archival multiverse. Current research on personal archives is transformative in its attentiveness to grief and love and its commitment to interdisciplinary research. However, the field of personal archives does not yet have a platform from which to critique power, violence, and inherited inequality. Life writing, on the other hand, is a

<sup>49</sup> Douglas and Alisauskas, "'It Feels Like a Life's Work,'" 24.

<sup>50</sup> Eastwood, "A Contested Realm," 19.



centuries-long practice in South Asia that is embedded in the politics of representation.<sup>51</sup> The three concepts examined here are only part of a larger tradition that still needs exploring, but they serve to exemplify how we can work toward reimagining personal archives.

First, life writing offers a new way to think about archival objects in their own right. Reading objects as life writing makes room for more radical and inclusive modes of self-representation, but it can also be challenging. Telling an intimate and affective story about an object that cannot speak requires making sense of what we have in order to build “a narrative of fugitive fragments, the flotsam, jetsam and lagan of life wrecked by war.”<sup>52</sup> Second, the concept of cultural scripts provides an opportunity to reject the idea of text (in its most rigid sense) as the most reliable form of telling and encourages a deeper examination of why certain types of narratives are heard and others are not. This requires critical analyses of language and cultural knowledge. Community, experiences of trauma, and social location are just some of the factors that influence how we tell our own stories, consciously or unconsciously drawing from the different scripts we each have access to. Third, focusing on intergenerational archiving as a relational activity brings the future of archives of the disappeared into focus and explores the relationships family members have with each other, with the disappeared, and with their records.

## Conclusion

More research about the possible contributions of life writing theory to work on personal archives will help construct the scaffolding for an archival theory of personhood. Much can still be written about South Asia and the critical debate over its history: how it is told and who can tell it. In the colonial and orientalist imagination, for instance, South Asians are described as ahistorical and too immature to represent themselves as a region or a people. Dominant-caste Brahmins, who had sacred, written texts, were considered the most reliable

51 See Arnold and Blackburn, eds., *Telling Lives in India*; Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley, eds., *Speaking of the Self*; A.K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

52 Das, “Reframing Life/War ‘Writing,’” 1284.

sources of information on Indian history, culture, and religion.<sup>53</sup> The consequences have been far reaching for all of South Asia – not least because oral history, storytelling, and performance have been missed and dismissed even though they constitute a rich potential archive of those who live at the margins of the official histories written by their dominant caste and colonial oppressors.

Another potential path could be research that explores the ways that archives of the disappeared, though personal, are closely connected to each other. These archives form a constellation of similar records across the North and East of Sri Lanka that is powerful based on its sheer numbers. These archives will never feel complete due to their missing records and the fact that they await the return of someone who may never walk through the gate again. We do not know how archives of the disappeared move through these constellations or how their shapes shift as they do so, yet these questions may be key to future research. While individual personal archives can never tell “the completeness of one life, one story,” with help from life writing theory, it is possible that, taken together as one unit, they can “help us to sense the life of a whole war-ravaged community.”<sup>54</sup>

53 The idea that India did not have a historical consciousness before colonialism has long been criticized. For more on the background and refutation of this idea, see Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Romila Thapar, “Historical Consciousness and Historical Traditions in Early North India,” in *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 61–78.

54 Das, “Reframing Life/War ‘Writing,’” 1284.

---

**BIOGRAPHY** Henria Aton (settler, she/her) is an archivist and PhD candidate in the University of Toronto Faculty of Information, with a specialization at the Centre for South Asian Studies. Henria worked as an archivist in Sri Lanka from 2016 to 2018. She is currently an independent archivist and consultant in Sri Lanka, specializing in personal archives. Recently, her research on contemporary Tamil archives has been supported by a SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarships – Doctoral Program (CGS D) fellowship; the Centre for South Asian Studies at the University of Toronto; and the University of California, Berkeley. She holds an MA in South Asian religions from McGill University.