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**THE MARIANNA MCJIMSEY AWARD**

# (In)visible Bodies: Re-Theorizing the Consumption of Bodies Through Divine Possession in Post-War Sri Lanka

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This paper examines the ritual of divine possession in post-war Sri Lanka, specifically looking to how the act of divine possession involves a powerful articulation of women's bodily agency. Drawing from historical sources such as colonial era journals, legislation, chronicles, political speeches, and news coverage, as well as my own field work, I trace how women's bodies are often depicted as sites of the nation and are forcefully consumed, through constructions of gendered norms, forms of labor, and legislation for the continuance of that nation. I posit that divine possession engages in a (re)consumption of women's bodies that works to counter the violence of the nation/state by making community trauma legible on the body itself.

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**Keywords:** Sri Lanka; Divine Possession; Women's Agency; Gendered Religious Practice; Nationalism(s)

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“People's bodies are perhaps the finest  
scale of political space.”

(Alwis and Hyndman 2007, 549).

## Introduction

She stood in front of the main shrine room at the Kataragama temple complex in Southern Sri Lanka, her hair shifting with the rushing wind and the sudden, sharp movements of her body. She cried out in a piercing shriek, her body moving faster, caught in the power of a divine grasp. The crowd from the morning *puja* ceremony circled loosely around her, keeping their distance with watchful eyes. Many of the people I had interviewed were among the bystanders, and while not all believed wholeheartedly in divine possession, all stood with quiet respect, for the oracle had caught their attention just as she was caught by the divine. Words poured from her mouth more quickly than I could hear, and mere minutes later she dropped to the ground, her consciousness returned. After she fell, people instantly rushed forward, helping her rise and bringing her fresh water and fruit left from the *puja* ceremony.

This was but one instance of divine possession I witnessed during my research in December 2015. This work is an attempt to contextualize both this moment and the practice of divine possession in Sri Lanka in a way that recognizes the agency of women engaged in ritual practice, the history of embodied violence carried forward against women by the frameworks of nation and empire, and the countless formations of women's resistance to the hegemonies imposed upon them.

Divine possession involves women calling forth deities into their bodies. The body itself becomes a vessel for divine power and relays truth through oracular revelation. Women who embody the divine typically engage in the practice in a structured ritual process within religious space, although there are women who are “caught” unexpectedly by the divine. Through divine possession, other community members or supplicants can ask questions about their lost ones; truth is revealed about the fates of family members who have been “disappeared,” and to some extent, the god or goddess can provide protection amid the violence of conflict. Because of their status as oracles, or *maniyo*, these women hold power and have increased mobility.

This association with the power of the divine disrupts the set hierarchies of their world, where demons and women are marked by impurity and set far from pristine divinity. Through this practice, the female body becomes the scroll upon which truth and dissent are written, where the reality of these women's lives is encapsulated through the very bodies the nation seeks to control, consume, and make invisible.

The act of ritual divine possession in Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup> has existed as a marginalized religious practice since pre-colonial times, taking place far from the sacred centers in liminal religious spaces under the fluctuating control of nation and empire. Divine possession is similar to other practices that involve lesser deities in the Sinhalese Buddhist or Tamil Hindu pantheons, but is centered among communities and with village practitioners. Until recently the practice was restricted to men. For women, engaging with ritual space is fraught with regulations imposed onto bodies and spaces, as the supposed impurity of women's bodies creates a barrier to interacting with the divine. However, the rise of divine possession and oracular revelation through the bodies of women began during the height of the war between the Sri Lankan state and the separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The dissolution of social services and frameworks of community through the violence destabilized the norms and ideologies barring women from engaging with the divine. Divine possession remains a prevalent practice for women seeking to remake their worlds in the wake of war, and amid the processes of migration, globalization, and the state's attempts at peace building (Bastin 2002, 165). The rapidly changing socio-political spheres of post-colonial Sri Lanka are tied to ritual practice and physical space. Ritual access for women as well as the practice of oracular revelation through divine possession are both impacted by society as well as transformed by society.

I argue that divine possession directly counters the regulatory discourses and ideologies regarding the body that are perpetrated by colonial rulers and nationalist figures, through a radical (re)consumption of the body. This renders visible the experiences, hidden traumas, and expressions of femininity suppressed by hierarchies

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<sup>1</sup> While under colonial rule the island of Sri Lanka was termed "Ceylon," I will be using Sri Lanka regardless of the time period.

of power. To represent the act of divine possession and the space where divine possession occurs, I will be drawing from both ethnographic accounts of divine possession by scholars during the conflict, as well as my field notes from research conducted between September 2015 and December 2015 in Kataragama, Batticaloa, Kandy, and Colombo. To articulate the powerful (re)consumption of bodies that divine possession entails, I will first summarize the myriad forms of regulation and consumption imposed upon women and women's bodies by colonial and nationalist enterprise. Then I will look to how women's agency is produced, conceptualized, and read in the act of divine possession. I aim to emphasize how divine possession involves an active and powerful resistance to the individual consumption of bodies and the violence enacted by state forces against communities in Sri Lanka.

The practice of divine possession, and the complicated nature of women's agency within the sphere of possession, is important to engage because of its potential for expanding conceptions of agency. Analyses of divine possession and even those on demonic possession, which consider the possessed body to be agential, still do not adequately investigate women's continued bodily agency. I will examine previous theorizations on agency and possession, focusing specifically on Mary Keller's concept of instrumental agency as a starting point, to articulate a theory of the possessed body as powerful and agential. This allows a perception of possessed bodies as powerful not solely within ritual spaces, but instead as a site of analysis themselves where the possessed body makes visible state terror and community grief.

The methodology used throughout this work is a post-colonial feminist approach looking to re-contextualize the experience and agency of women while still ensuring and defending the validity of women's religious practices. It is motivated by the need to view women's divine embodiment as implicated in and impacted by histories that play into the present. Using a "rhizomatic approach" drawn from Nira Wickramasinghe's (2006, 107) conceptualization of historical accounts, I aim to center an analysis of power and hierarchy not limited by specific moments. This approach disrupts the linearity of historical accounts, rendering events of the past crucial to understanding ritual processes in the present. While this excerpt focuses

primarily on accounts and instances of divine possession in the present and recent past, this thesis at-large looks to how colonial ideologies coalesce with nationalism, how they create and continue forms of regulation imposed onto bodies and spaces, and how the past is evoked through the constructions of nationalisms and the ever-present vestiges of colonialism. Divine possession in the present exists atop these dynamics, and serves to counter systemic regulation of women's bodies within ritual space.

### **Consumption, Colonialism, and Post-Colonial Nationalism**

The subversive strength found through divine possession is tied to how bodies are consumed through political constructions and the complex ways in which nation and empire utilize (in)visibility of bodies to further their ideologies. The consumption of bodies refers to how bodies are subsumed into the nation or the empire, how bodies become the maps upon which culture is inscribed, how the body is channeled into lines of production for the sake of economic growth or colonial profit, and in a visceral way, how the body is overtaken by an external force during the act of divine possession. The consumption of the body engages with a simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Bodies can be consumed through invisible formations, such as the consumption of laboring bodies erased in discourses on trade, capital, and legislature. However, sometimes this consumption is visible through the production of specific images of femininity that serve to erase all bodies outside of such a framework. In contrast to this, divine possession is a forceful visage to behold; it is undeniably powerful, impossible to ignore, and above all relies on an external power separate from the state. Divine possession consumes the body, rendering visible the terrors inflicted by the state and the pain of enduring the nation and empire, by retaining a bodily agency not present in colonial or nationalist consumption of women's bodies.

Colonial threads of regulation, alongside indigenous patriarchies, resulted in a consumption of the body that continued throughout the colonial era and extended far beyond it. The bodies of Sri Lankans were moved, at times forcibly, toward production of certain commodities and into a brutal system of exploitative labor that

continues to this day.<sup>2</sup> Victorian ideologies, working in conjunction with existing threads of regulation, created certain standards of behavior and dress to which women were forced to conform.<sup>3</sup> This was then codified into law through the production of

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<sup>2</sup> The British delineated identity and shaped post-colonial society through their co-opting of caste boundaries for administrative offices and labor organization. They utilized large numbers of Western-educated Jaffna Tamils to man the majority of low-level administrative positions. Tamil populations in Jaffna had access to missionary education long before other populations in Sri Lanka because of the history of colonial control on the edges of the island and the close proximity to South India, which already held great numbers of British missionaries. The staffing of British administrative positions created hierarchies of labor and production in the empire. Bastin describes how the Tamils who worked in Colombo would change from Western clothes into Tamil ones as their train neared their homes in Jaffna (see Bastin, 1997, "The Authentic Inner Life"). The body, and the performed respectability of the body, becomes a manifestation of colonially imposed identities. The hegemonic control of the British is seen in every essence of this interaction: British missionaries educate Jaffna Tamils, focusing not only on religious instruction but also on creating a workforce needed to continue British rule. Even with instances of resistance and mediation as shown by Tamil workers shedding their colonial garb, there is still a prevalent consumption of bodies that arises from the intense and omnipresent control exerted by the empire.

<sup>3</sup> The patronizing rigidity imposed by British rulers and missionaries differs markedly from the indigenous Sri Lankan norms described by colonial travelers, in contrast to Knox and Percival's accounts of Ceylonese practices (see Knox, *An Account of the Captivity of Capt. Robert Knox: And other Englishmen in the Island of Ceylon; And of the Captain's Miraculous Escape, and Return to England, in September, 1680; After Detention in the Island of Nineteen Years and a Half* and Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon*).

Malathi de Alwis notes that the missionary Reverend Spence Hardy, who lived in Sri Lanka from 1862–1864, believed that "the abasement of the native women by their men and their religion was perceived as being enough qualification to 'initiate a mission against paganism' and once such a mission was initiated, it was soon discovered that 'whatever Christianity may do for the man, for the woman it does more'" (see Alwis, *Maternalist Politics in Sri Lanka*). Indigenous practices and traditions, specifically those regarding women's behavior and women's bodies, became sites where colonial power was transacted. The norms of femininity in pre-colonial society became a justification for colonial involvement, resulting in the consumption of women's bodies to solidify and extend the control of the British Empire. Alwis notes in her work on the creation of specific norms of respectability in Christian education, "these women's morality, we can then surmise, was clearly signposted through a transformation of their minds and their bodies" (Ibid). Alwis articulates how every minute element of the Christian missionary schools was aimed at regulating all aspects of womanhood. She turns to the detailed schedules, the particular uniforms, and even the needlepoint coursework that required rigid postures as part of this enforcement of respectability throughout the colonial encounter. In this way, the body is seen as a site of the "Other," the non-British, and thus the bodies of women are consumed by the British Empire and remade within certain frameworks of respectability and propriety. The British simultaneously used the bodies of women to distinguish themselves from indigenous populations as well as to reinforce this mission of civility.

“personal” law, essentially sacrificing women and women’s voices for the sake of the collective body.<sup>4</sup> Women were (and are) tasked with embodying respectability, thus upholding the traditions and culture of the nation. This embodiment is reliant on an entirety of consumption of the body; there is little space for irregularity or resistance within this paradigm. These systems of regulation did not end with the closure of colonial rule, but extended throughout an era of conflict and nationalism, inspiring the creation of new forms of regulation and norms regarding women’s bodies. These aimed to counter colonial ideologies while still perpetuating singularized conceptions about women’s bodies.

This consumption of women’s bodies through nationalist ideologies occurs foremost through the creation and replication of certain constructions of Sinhalese femininity upon which the nation is built. Women are considered the strongholds of culture by Buddhist reformers like Anagarika Dharmapala, who called upon women to dress in the “traditional” Kandyan sari as an act of domestic and feminized resistance to colonial rule.<sup>5</sup> Nationalist leaders continuously urge women to raise strong sons

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<sup>4</sup> The British utilized law in varying forms to impose their hegemonic rule onto the smallest units of political space. Structures of inheritance place women’s bodies as vessels of transaction for commodities like land and property, rendering the body transparent, invisible, and necessary for the continuation of the family and the nation. Carla Risseuw traces this out when she states, “...the overall land policy of the British entailed alienation of land on a large scale from its original (multiple) owners in order to facilitate the economic exploitation of land in the form of plantations (Waste Land Act, Ordinance no 12: 1840)” (see Risseuw, *The Fish Don’t Talk About the Water*). This ordinance placed the regulation and ownership of land in the hands of the British, forcing indigenous Sri Lankans to formally acquire the rights to land and then pass these land rights down through their family. This shift in transfer of property is important to note because of the resulting implications for women. Before the creation of strict regulations on private property, the existence of communal property facilitated women’s movement within their communities and between relationships because there was no need for intergenerational control of property and wealth. These regulations were overlaid onto indigenous systems, resulting in the creation of General Law (built from overarching Roman-Dutch legislation and British Law) and family laws (Kandyan Law, Thesavalamai Law, and Muslim Law). This resulted in dual forms of regulation on women’s bodies: the overarching commodification of bodies, land, and marriage by the British governing laws, as well as the micro-regulations regarding the body within community law.

<sup>5</sup> See Anagarika Dharmapala. 1965. *Return to Righteousness, a Collection of Speeches, Essays, and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*. Ananda W. P. Guruge (ed.). Colombo: Anagarika Dharmapala Birth Centenary Committee.

to fight wars for “Mother Lanka.”<sup>6</sup> The Sinhala epic *The Mahavamsa* is continuously replicated in textbooks and speeches by politicians, furthering the image of the ideal “moral mother.”<sup>7</sup> These mythologies about the idealized Sinhalese nationalist woman result in the social regulation of women and women’s bodies. They also tie women’s social position and ability to conform directly to the conflict with the LTTE—and to the success or failure of the Sinhalese nation. Women become not only a part of the nation, but crucial to the survival of the nation. In this vision, the state needs the dutiful Sinhalese woman in order to sustain itself; it must thus consume women, specifically women’s bodies, through the perpetration of continued forms of bodily regulation and the mythic association of nationalist women to the existence of the nation.

In contrast to the ideologies perpetrated by colonial rule and nationalist polity, the practice of divine possession, while also involving a consumption of the body,

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<sup>6</sup> Rajapaksa stated in his victory address, “As much as Mother Lanka fought against invaders such as Datiya, Pitiya, Palayamara, Siva and Elara in the past, we have the experience of having fought the Portuguese, Dutch and British who established empires in the world” (see “President Rajapaksa’s Speech to Parliament on the Defeat of the LTTE”). Here, Sinhalese nationalist ideologies are presented in the context of not only the brutal battles fought by Vijaya and Dutugemenu for the sake of Sri Lanka, but are also aligned with the creation of an independent Sri Lanka, a “Motherland.” This constructed mythology of history cannot be contested without standing against the state itself. Rajapaksa’s words place women as the vessel through which the nation is continued, born, and reenacted. He goes on to state, “The immense gratitude of our nation goes out on this occasion to all parents who brought forth the heroic troops who sacrificed their lives, and to their wives who gave them strength to serve the motherland” (Ibid). Troops, like Dutugemenu and his warriors, are crucial to the nation. However, they are also reliant on mothers who raise warrior sons and wives who support their soldier husbands. The motherland is built upon the idea of the nationalist woman, the dutiful wife, the strong Sinhalese mother. It is through this construction that the motherland is continued. Women are consumed for the sake of the nation, folded into these composite parts of duty, respectability, and motherhood, and erased when they do not fit those parts.

<sup>7</sup> The “Moral Mother Syndrome,” as termed by Malathi de Alwis (see Alwis, “The Moral Mother Syndrome”), is the construction of a certain norm of Sinhalese femininity inspired by Vihara Maha Devi, Dutugemenu’s mother. In the construction of the sacred Sinhalese Buddhist nation, Vihara Maha Devi protects the nation by providing guidance during Dutugemenu’s war against the Tamil King Elara and by performing her maternal duty of raising a good Sinhalese nationalist, warrior son. While she is given a place as a military counselor during Dutugemenu’s war, she is mostly credited with raising Dutugemenu, creating a certain vision of the nationalist-driven woman who protects the nation through reproducing and rearing good Sinhalese boys.

extends the threads of women's agency from within the sphere of ritual to create a unique articulation of resistance. This resistance is born through the body itself, for when the body makes visible that which cannot be spoken, hidden traumas and discontents are brought forth without the violent bodily repercussions of speaking out against state terror. While women are continuously erased, subsumed for the sake of the nation, constructed and limited by the discourses perpetrated by those in power, they are also made visible, powerful, and agential through the practice of divine possession.

### **Instrumental Agency and Bodily Resistance**

While there is an abundance of research conducted on demonic possession in Sri Lanka, the recent rise of divine possession there has yielded few analyses of the practice.<sup>8</sup> Patricia Lawrence's ethnographic accounts offer an unparalleled look into the lives of women oracles during the conflict in Batticaloa. However, the other widely referenced work on divine possession in Sri Lanka, Gananath Obeyesekere's (1981, 65) prominent analysis of oracles at Kataragama in South-Central Sri Lanka, only serves to continue interpretations with limited agential scope. His work on women oracles possessed by divine beings views divine possession through a psychoanalytic lens. He asserts in *Medusa's Hair* that divine possession is "a culturally constituted idiom available to women for expressing and managing their personal problems." This statement downplays the validity of possessions and the importance of women's ritual practice; women's "personal problems" vocalized through divine possession deserve to be treated with respect and intentionality. He suggests that women who

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<sup>8</sup> The possessions of women are often first considered as demonic. Women are forced to find male priests to legitimize their experience as divine possession. When women's experiences are understood as demonic possession, the ritual of exorcism from these possessions relies upon a reinstating of social hierarchies instead of a disruption of them. As Bruce Kapferer notes in his extensive work on demon possession in Sri Lanka, women are seen as much more likely to be possessed by demons than men, and because of this perception the association of women with impure elements and mental weakness is strengthened (see Kapferer, *A Celebration of Demons*). While demon possession and exorcism may allow communities, especially those marginalized by the state, to exert control over hierarchies of being, they also reinforce the cosmic hierarchy through the suppression of elements seen as 'impure' and 'demonic'.

engage in divine possession merely shift their alliance from their husbands to the divine being that possesses them, implying an explicitly sexual nature to women's possessions, which is not assumed in the divine possession of men. Obeyesekere (1981, 65) states, "The woman renounces sex with her husband. She then transfers her allegiance to a god. This must be associated with her renunciation of sex with her husband. But she does make a vow of fidelity to another and nobler lord, to a divine being." This framework serves to limit women's agency by assuming they still must be under the domain of a male authority figure. This is also inherently tied to women's sexuality, or in reality their willingness or lack thereof, to submit control of that sexuality to the male authority. His analysis places the agency of women firmly within the confines of sexuality, and their positioning, to male figures—either their husband or male deities. Arguably, Obeyesekere's framework utilizes the same limiting ideologies perpetrated by colonialism and nationalism by relying on regulation of women and their bodies.

Mary Keller's (2002) extensive work on instrumental agency provides an important alternate source of analysis in thinking about possessed bodies. Her work articulates how possession challenges a great number of preexisting frameworks because of the complicated question of agency when the woman may not be conscious or "in control" of her body. She describes possession as "...consciousness is overcome, and the body is used like a hammer or played like a flute or mounted like a horse so that the possessed body is an *instrumental agent* in the possession" (2002, 74). Despite the fact that the body may not retain consciousness and is in the sway of an unknowable power or force, the body, the vessel of power, is still accorded agency. The body is *instrumental* in action, resistance, the transfer or use of power, and as such is rendered agential by the process and presence of divine possession.

As a crucial element of her analysis, Keller takes into consideration the legitimacy of possession and the experiences of possessed bodies. Her work places the existence and consideration of the possessing entity at the forefront of the conversation, and she states "...the possessed body becomes a place for doing business for another, the ancestor, deity, or spirit, who is usually at a distance" (2002, 78). Keller balances both the assertion of agency for the possessed body while still acknowledging the

existence of the possessing entity as a force and a power that must be considered when discussing agency. This facet of her theory is important to consider, for it does more than just acknowledge the legitimacy of a practice in the eyes of the practitioner. By acknowledging and centering the existence of invisible forces in divine possession, Keller expands conceptions of agency through her recognition of how agency is impacted by the power of the possessing entity.

Keller's theorization is possible because of the way that she frames subjectivity in relation to agency. She states, "Agency does not reside in individual subjectivities; it resides in the interrelationships of bodies with systems of power such as economic systems and religious systems, with their regimes of *discipline*" (2002, 73). In this way the body is positioned in its relationship to the community, to the individual, to the power implicated in the existence and enactment of possessed bodies. The agency of possessed bodies is also deeply and directly tied to systems of regulation, such as those perpetrated by colonial rule and nationalist ideologies. The agency of women who embody the divine in modern Sri Lanka must then be considered both within ritual moments as well as embedded in a context of hundreds of years of complicated and layered forms of patriarchy and nationhood, which serve to simultaneously consume, erase, and utilize women's bodies for the sake of nation and empire.

Using Keller's concept of instrumental agency as a starting point and asserting that women who embody the divine are agential in the possession, I posit that not only does the body hold instrumental agency, but this agency extends outward from the space of possession to directly counter the myriad ways in which the state and the empire rely upon the consumption of women's bodies for their existence and sustainment. Because the possessed body has instrumental agency, the body is simultaneously consumed and overtaken, but is still powerful and agential. Through colonial and nationalist regimes, the consumption of the body is often subtle, relying on an intentional invisibility for consumption and continuance of the nation/empire. In divine possession, however, the body is viscerally and visibly consumed, overtaken by a deity. The body becomes a vessel for another force, another power outside the realm of the individual.

## **Forced 'Disappearance' and the Visibility of Violence**

Divine possession involves a powerful (re)consumption of the body through making visible the experiences, traumas, and fates of family members and community members who have disappeared. Patricia Lawrence, in her unparalleled accounts of violence and divine possession along the Eastern coast of Sri Lanka during the height of the conflict, recorded numerous instances where oracles would embody the divine and reveal truths about the disappeared. This particular facet of divine possession began during the war, but continues to this day as many women still seek answers about the fate of the missing. Both throughout the multi-decade civil war and the overlapping JVP insurrection in South-Central Sri Lanka, the state would simply kidnap anyone who could possibly dissent. For the JVP insurrection (which was the violent dissent of a political party comprised of mostly young, unemployed, educated men), the state kidnapped and/or killed thousands of young men in impacted areas. In the areas most affected by the conflict with the LTTE, anyone who could have any connection to the Tigers was taken. They were snatched up for 'questioning' by the police. Even now, decades after their loss, families still refer to their loved ones as "disappeared" and not deceased. This enactment of violence, of "disappearing" a body, is especially horrific. It prolongs grief; it extends the control and tyranny of state power. These disappearances consume bodies in the most literal sense and extinguish them from existence. This is the most visceral representation of state terror as played out upon bodies taken and made invisible in the public sphere.

Divine possession and the truth embedded in oracular revelation about the fate of those disappeared make visible the pain and fates of those who have disappeared through a radical use of the body. By embodying and inhabiting situations of violence, by making the disappeared visible instead of invisible, the existence of state terror is acknowledged and challenged. Malathi de Alwis (2009) writes in her work on the Mother's Fronts that women would often have little or no physical evidence of those they had lost. She writes, "The 'disappeared' who are denied names or identities by the state, who are assumed to 'occupy no space', now 'have a place' upon the bodies that birthed them and mothered them" (2009, 384). The 'having a place' or claiming

of space that she refers to is how women would carry their son's clothes and wear photos of them pinned to their saris. These remnants of someone's life were often the only physical remains from their sons' existence. The state, by "disappearing" bodies continuously throughout the war, created a situation of ambiguity—without the body, communities cannot effectively mourn or move forward but instead become "chronic mourners" (Alwis 2009, 379). Just as women would hold on to the physical remains of their sons' existence, divine possession also involves evidence on the body, creating traces of others where little or no proof exists. In a setting where the state will offer no certainty about the fate of those lost, divine possession and oracular revelation provide certainty written onto the same bodies made victims of state violence. In the wake of years of colonial rule and conflict bolstered by nationalism, divine possession makes visible the lives of those who are shrouded from public perception, countering the state's attempts to erase from the public sphere the bodies of women and the bodies of those who dissent.

Divine possession counters these disappearances by placing the body as a site where the fate of the lost is rendered visible. In times of state terror when grief is seen as a threat to the state, divine possession and specifically the physical bodies of the possessed, provide a space for emotion in the face of extreme violence. Patricia Lawrence's interlocutor Saktirani, an oracle in Batticaloa (1997, 279), exemplifies the power of the body in resisting violent hegemonies. Lawrence describes one instance of Saktirani's oracular revelation where a father came to ask about the fate of his missing son:

In response, the oracle uses both body and voice as an instrument for re-enacting the son's experience of torture, experiencing his pain, calling out incoherently for approximately fifteen minutes, sometimes voicing the word *erivu* ("burning"), then vomiting. She returns his *vettilaipakku* offering, and lapses into an unconscious state lying on the sand. She then stands half bent as though being beaten, and vomits again. She holds her head, arms, neck, back, and legs—saying that she feels pain all over.

Here, Saktirani's body itself is a stand-in for the body of the lost individual—her body crosses the bounds of space and time. By representing the body of a lost community member, her body acts out the processes of torture and death—she cries out in emotion at the feeling of violence. This violence is not solely in the sphere of the ritual, but is considered a mirror of the torture suffered by the disappeared. This visible and evident violence within the space of ritual enacts power differently than the actual violence of torture. Through torture, the body experiencing violence is completely at the mercy of those inflicting terror. Through divine possession, the body is situated within the sacred and communal space of the temple, surrounded not by enemy soldiers but by community members. By taking these violent moments and placing them into a context where people can grieve and gain closure and where bodies themselves hold an instrumental agency, oracles reclaim these moments and break the state's control over knowledge regarding the fate of the disappeared.

Through divine possession, the same bodies consumed by nation and empire are used to stand against the hegemony of state violence. Bodies bearing the marks of histories of violence are overtaken by divine forces far more powerful than the state—and these deities then break the hold of the state by making visible state terror. Lawrence (2007, 107) writes about Saktirani, "At the end of language, her body became the agent, a site where truth is made public." Because the bodies of oracles show on the body itself, the pain suffered by the disappeared, the invisibility of state violence is countered. Because of this visible trauma, the state can no longer justify violence in abstract forms or claim it is for the good of the nation. Through divine possession, oracles allow communities to make sense of the violence in which they are embedded, through the same bodies that the state attempts to dominate and consume. As divine possession conveys the last moments of someone's life or the experiences of the disappeared, families can gain closure about those who are dead and disappeared, or maintain hope about the lost and the living. By conveying these moments of state torture, or violence at the hands of the LTTE, women legitimize these experiences through their embodiment of the divine, bring these moments to the forefront of the community, and resist the exceptionalist violence perpetrated on all sides. The body becomes a site of power and resistance because it actively

challenges imposed hegemony by forcefully making visible the state's violent consumption of communities.

### **Divine Possession as Resistance**

Divine possession thus becomes a way for everyday individuals embedded in a landscape of terror to reclaim some essence of their lives. The state acts to conceal its constant onslaught of torture and terror, portraying the war as necessary for the survival of the state and its citizens.<sup>9</sup> In order for the state to keep up this façade, it must conceal not only the extant threads of torture and terror, but also the expressions of grief by those impacted. Lawrence (2007, 274) notes that along the conflict-affected Eastern coast, "There is an island in this sea of silence: the emotional outpourings at local temples." This emotional outpouring that Lawrence notes is the expression of grief and trauma within the sacred space of the temple, where individuals seek solace through ritual practices in a time where they have no other place to turn. Even now at temples it is not uncommon to see people struck by emotion, grieving for themselves and those they have lost.<sup>10</sup> This forceful and agential visibility counters

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<sup>9</sup> The replication of the Mahāvamsa by nationalist leaders like former President Rajapaksa serve to highlight the Sinhala and Buddhist ethos of the nation. By emphasizing Sri Lanka as the last repository of "true" Buddhism, Rajapaksa places the conflict as a fight over the very future of culture, religion, and identity. Kapferer states, "Through their imaginaries of the past, Sinhala nationalists were instrumental in the reontologization of political space, which in the context of the ontologies of the self and other, created in the modern inventions of the bureaucratic state (no less a dynamic of the constitutive imaginary), became vitally explosive as critical forces fuelling the directions of the ethnic war" (see Kapferer, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Culture of the State*). Kapferer articulates how nationalism is a project involving both the construction of a certain vision of the past as well as the evocation of that past into the present. The very essence of the state is thus imbued with mythic elements. The association of nationalism with mythologies such as the *Mahāvamsa* lends authority and legitimacy to the project of the state. It also associates this nationalist rhetoric with a sense of intense urgency and importance, as the continuation of the state is associated with the safety and security of the only true repository of Sinhalese Buddhism and Sinhalese identity. In this way, the tales of Vijaya and Dutugemunu are central to the creation and sustainment of Sinhalese nationalism and conflict.

<sup>10</sup> The recent protests (Summer 2015, Spring 2017–present) at Nallur Kovil and Kilinochchi are testament to this—as women are continuing to gather and protest against the state for information regarding those they have lost. As the local elections near (February 2018), protests have risen again, as women activists tire of the current government's lack of fulfillment on their promise to release the list of those taken into army camps on the Eastern coast and forcibly 'disappeared'.

regulation; it counters the imposition of the British and of the Sinhalese state, and in doing so creates a powerful mode of women's resistance and an alternative to the violence perpetrated by those in positions of power. This outpouring is reliant on bodies themselves, the same bodies that are mercilessly regulated by nation and empire.

By making visible the violence carried out by the state, the bodies of oracles take state violence out of the control of the state—remaking the body as a powerful entity, not defenseless or anonymous. By embodying the violence suffered by community members, oracles hold agency over terror. Outside of the sphere of ritual, women hold little power against the violence perpetrated by the state. However, within these ritual moments, violence is not only visible but can be controlled, limited, and countered. The body is so often the site where terror, like nationalism and colonialism, is mapped out. The pain of torture and the remnants of conflict exist to this day on the bodies of those impacted. Divine possession simultaneously consumes the body but also reshapes its perception—the body is no longer something solely marked by war, but is an agential power that can channel the divine. Divine possession is visibility, it is agency, and it defies the continuous destruction and regulation perpetrated by colonialism and nationalism.

## **Conclusion**

Divine possession directly counters the disappearance of bodies; it reveals the existence of grief, and centers the enactment of trauma. The body is consumed and overtaken, yet is still radical, revolutionary, and agential. The body is relational, imbued with the grief and trauma of the disappeared and lost, engaging not only in a project of visibility for the individual body but also becoming a site where the hypocrisy and terror of the state is held as evident. Alwis (2009, 90) notes (referencing Judith Butler), “Thus, at the same time as we struggle for autonomy over our bodies, we are also confronted by the fact that we carry the ‘enigmatic traces of others.’” The possessed body is complicated, as the body is not solely autonomous, for there is an external and immeasurable power at play that is written and held on the body itself. The body is a site of community grief; it is a place where the lives of others, those who have been taken and disappeared, are made visible. The body is consumed, it is not

entirely independent, but yet the body is also transformed into a site where women are visible, where women's pain is visible.

Divine possession makes trauma, pain, torture, and disappearance apparent. It does so through the forced visibility and instrumental agency of possessed bodies. This visibility and agency then directly counter how bodies have been co-opted and used by colonial rulers and nationalist regimes. Reading agency across time, amidst the contexts of colonial rule and post-coloniality, and embedded within horrific and destructive violence, is a complicated task. This is made only more complicated by the dynamic of possession itself, where the body is consumed and overtaken by an immeasurable external power. However, by extending concepts of agency to encompass this complexity, divine possession can be seen as an act of incredible resistance, one that is not limited by the bounds of time or ritual space. Instead, it enacts dissent across numerous fields and stands against not only the regulations embedded in the post-colonial nation, but the ongoing remnants of colonial regulation as well.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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