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A “Just Hearing”: Reading Shyam Selvadurai’s *The Hungry Ghosts* as Counter to State Practice

ARUN NEDRA RODRIGO

IN *THE HUMAN CONDITION*, HANNAH ARENDT claims that “The chief characteristic of this specifically human life . . . is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it ‘somehow is a kind of praxis’” (97). To have the capacity to narrate one’s life story is to be welcomed into the fold of humanity. Fleeing a space where one’s rights were denied, as many refugees do, does not then reduce one to the status of *zoe*; rather, in possessing the capacity to narrate one’s life story, one enters as *bios* into a larger political context limited to the practices not of one nation but of humanity as a whole. Giorgio Agamben, on returning to the Greek roots of contemporary democratic traditions, argues that to speak of a *zoe politike* would not make sense, and what was in question for Plato and Aristotle was “a qualified life, a particular way of life” (*Homo Sacer* i). Only *bios* were accorded rights and the articulation of principles to the political community. In other words, while *zoe* could designate a mode of life, only *bios* could alter it, because only *bios* could endow that life with meaning through its narration.

The request for a narrative, in the immigration documents that refugees are required to fill out within fifteen days of arriving on Canadian soil, seems on the surface to extend that possibility of an articulation of selfhood. Stepping out of the interrogative mode of answering binding legal questions that comprise the bulk of these forms, whose import refugees might not fully comprehend, they can see themselves emerging instead into the body politic, through recognition of their subjective experiences and political decisions to immigrate, in the request for their own narratives. However, the constraints placed on the form in which refugees can narrate their life experiences, and the compulsion under which they can narrate those experiences, diminish their capacity

to endow their experiences with complex meanings. The generic constraints of immigration forms, and the process of the refugee hearing, borrowing as it does from the Christian practice of the confessional, present modes and conditions of representation that cannot fully allow for an articulation of complex historical, political, and personal events. Instead, they serve the self-endorsing practices of the state in its maintenance of sovereignty both juridically, in the ordering of the narrative process, and culturally, through the reification of the European Christian traditions of the settler cultures of Canada. These intersections of culture and law, where meanings are made and unmade, are important precisely because they reveal the ways in which symbolic forms are tied to relations of power (McClennen and Slaughter 7). It is in these intersections that the refugee is reinstated as a minoritized subject.

In seeking refuge, the refugee also seeks justice, but the compulsion to speak in the mode of another, in the conditions determined by another, can hardly lead one to narrate oneself adequately in the pursuit of justice. This formulation echoes Jacques Derrida's question about how one can distinguish between the force of law and violence deemed unjust, for the very compulsion under which such laws are enacted can lead to aporias in the pursuit of justice ("Force of Law" 6, 23-27). The refugee hearing, in its attempt to order an often confusing and complex network of meanings and relations created by states that fail to uphold the social contract, is mobilized as a discursive practice that indulges in epistemic violence by silencing narratives that do not endorse its own normative framework. The connections between the techniques and forms of power for which they are produced are not analyzed, and the hearing becomes a form of Orientalist discourse (Said, *Covering Islam* 151). Geographically based oppositional categories are thus created in which less privileged nations are depicted as threatening spaces that breed terrorists who intend to harm the inhabitants of privileged nations.

This essay focuses on the narrative demands made via the Personal Information Form (PIF) on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who arrived in Canada between 1983 and 2009, at the height of the civil conflict in Sri Lanka, to draw attention to the ways in which it reinstated the refugee as a minoritized subject. I then turn to Shyam Selvadurai's novel *The Hungry Ghosts* to explore the ways in which it can serve as a critical

intervention in the hearing process, allowing refugees to document and make truth claims in their histories of trauma, giving their experiences more complex meanings. In keeping with Paul Gready's claim that the "unique truth practices and repertoire available to the novel as a genre" allow readers to explore "uncomfortable truths" in matters pertaining to human rights conflicts (156), I would argue that in some instances the novel provides a more "just hearing" for the refugee.

Set in Sri Lanka and Canada between the early 1980s and the mid-1990s, *The Hungry Ghosts* closely parallels much of the period when the PIF was employed for Tamil refugees arriving in Canada. In the PIF, refugees play the role of documentarians of trauma because they have to give meaning to their experiences if they are to be judged "genuine." Refugees have to correspond to the state's version of "truth" while proving that they are "right" in their judgments of the past. However, produced under compulsion and within the constraints of the PIF, the truth claim potential of the refugee narrative is denied because it deconstructs itself in the service of the state and is limited to meanings that endorse state practice. In this context, the genre of the novel can offer both truth claims that critique state practice and forms of meaning that allow for the working through of specific trauma in the pursuit of a "just hearing."

In positioning a reading of *The Hungry Ghosts* in this manner, I do not imply that the novel is irrevocably tied to a particular historical moment, nor do I expect fiction to take the place of legal frameworks. That would be an injustice to the novel as an art form in the first case and fall into a relativism of perspectives that do away with the possibility of redress in the second. However, as an art form that engages with the public imagination, the novel brings forms of meaning into cultural practice and can thereby effect change in the practice and interpretation of justice. In this I concur with McClennen and Slaughter's assertion that, "if literature and culture can be said to 'work,' maybe they work in the long term — that is, much of the imaginative and social work that literature does is done over time and space and is done through the forms of stories that enable forms of thought, forms of commitment, forms of being, and forms of justice" (11). Selvadurai's protagonist, like Selvadurai himself, did not go through a refugee hearing and does not at first see himself as a refugee. However, by the end of the novel, Shivan comes to inhabit ontologically the condition of a refugee, revealing the

extent to which juridical practices seep into the public imagination and shape cultural practice. In *The Hungry Ghosts*, characters straddle worlds both real and ghostly in attempts to endow their pasts, and thereby their presents, with meanings that have thus far been wrested from them by statist violence. It is in these worlds of meaning that they find agency, accountability, and a form of “justice” not bound by the juridical practices of the state. In contrast to the refugee narratives elicited by the state, under constraint and compulsion, the form and content of *The Hungry Ghosts* allow the refugee to enter the body politic as *bios* through a complex engagement with trauma and truth claims that counters the self-endorsing practices of the state.

Self-Endorsing Juridical Practice

To understand why the novel can provide a more just hearing, it is necessary to examine the ways in which the refugee hearing process, in both its written and its oral requirements, fails in its aspiration to provide justice. In 1987, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on the necessity for oral hearings in recognition of the inadequacy of written refugee status claims (*Singh v. Minister*). The defendants were granted the rights to fundamental justice; additionally, they were granted the right to security of the person and the right to a fair oral hearing. In doing so, the Supreme Court gestured to natural law and to human rights, those held outside the bounds of citizenship. However, prior to a hearing, and within a month of initiating a claim, refugee claimants had to fill out a generic PIF that consisted of a number of questions pertaining to their identity and a section entitled “Narrative” to establish their credibility in writing. Although, for the purposes of this essay, and to address the experiences of Tamil refugees arriving in Canada between 1983 and 2009, I engage with the now defunct PIF, it is worth noting that its current replacement, the Basis of Claim, is a longer form that requires extensive details about refugees’ travel routes, ostensibly to expose human traffickers. Thus, the concerns of the refugee have become sidelined in the revised form by the concerns of Stephen Harper’s Conservative government. At a gathering of Conservative supporters at the Deer Creek Golf Club, on 17 August 2010, the prime minister was quoted as saying, “I think Canadians are pretty concerned, when a whole boat of people comes, not through any normal application process, not through any normal arrival channel, and just simply lands.

And obviously this leads to significant security concerns” (“Detention Hearing”). The current focus on human trafficking is reminiscent of the prejudicial practice of the “continuous journey” requirement, which proved to be fatal to so many passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru*, and is worth reflecting on. Reinforcement of the idea of the continuous journey as “normal process” and “normal channel” taints the refugee with criminality and terrorism while eliding the tiered juridical system that it would create. Through such culturally accepted norms, oppositional categories are created¹ wherein developing nations are depicted as spaces that breed terrorists who threaten the security of well-meaning Canadians.

Although the PIF’s interrogative mode puts the claimant on the defensive, suggesting a discursive link between criminality and the condition of being a refugee, the introduction of a narrative space suggests the possibility of empathy by the reader. A marked shift occurs in the narrative space from the legal contractual language that articulates the “rights of the citizen” to an informal language embedded in subjective experience that articulates the “rights of man.” In this space, claimants come to understand refuge as a human right and the narrative as an assertion of that right and a reinsertion of themselves into the political body. They can thus see themselves as *bios*, narrating their lives and possessing the capacity to alter the body politic. It is at this point that the constraints placed on the narrative make its most radical articulations impotent, and the PIF acts as what Derrida terms a “supplement” that “intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of”; it fills “as if one fills a void” (*Grammatology* 145). Contextual information and the subjective interpretation of events, which would constitute a “thick” description, are left out, for the imposition of a legal, rational structure on the narrative requires that the claimant focus on “thin” rather than “thick” description (Walzer). The refugee is thus reinstated as *zoe*, rather than *bios*, insofar as the narratives of refugees are taken out of their hands and they are rendered speechless, though with a voice. The distinction between voice and speech parallels that between *zoe* and *bios*, because *zoe* can express (voice) himself or herself, but meaning (speech) can only be attributed to *bios*. It is of interest to note, with Agamben, that *zoe* cannot be pluralized. One can interpret that to mean that *zoe* is incapable of forming or seeing himself or herself as part of a community and therefore cannot hope to transform a community by engaging with it

meaningfully. Refugees, prompted for facts that correspond with dates and events that can be corroborated, are reduced to the conditions of bare life. They are no longer viewed as having histories drawn from subjective experiences or histories at all, for that matter, for history is more than the mere enumeration of events. The narrative, Donald Galloway claims, is expected to be complete, true, and correct, while the prioritization of “just-the-facts” ensures that the information provided by the claimant cannot be contextualized or interpreted (4-5). Furthermore, the two pages provided for the narrative imply that a clear and objective account can and should be presented within that space, though more pages can be used should the need arise. This might leave claimants wondering if the use of additional space suggests any particular extra-textual readings of the veracity of their accounts: whether they would be interpreted as exaggeration, embroidery, or even inability to function adequately in the language and thereby make potential immigrants undesirable. The current Basis of Claim form must be filled out in a shorter period of time, fifteen days, and like the PIF it provides limited space for the narrative; clearly, changes to the form have not been for the better.

The expectation that victims of persecution can provide succinct causal analyses of the political events relevant to their sufferings, and to distinguish and prioritize the events most relevant from those less relevant, asks much of people who have often been systematically excluded from the political process and might have suffered considerable trauma. To complicate matters further, when claimants attempt to be objective, and create accounts that conform to what they deem to be the criteria of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), their accounts might come into question for seeming to be too detached. The process does not take into account the pressure on a refugee to produce a narrative that corresponds with the self-endorsing expectations of Immigration Canada, nor does it allow for the difficulties inherent in producing a sufficiently personal account under the given constraints. As Galloway suggests, “The underlying message appears to be that a Board Member is entitled to suspect that the claimant was not personally involved if he or she does not try to offer a unique perspective on the occurrences in question. Absence of any reference to subjective experience suggests falsity” (7). Yet, when claimants attempt to reduce their narratives to those that they are led to believe will be relevant to the reader (tallies

of facts), they are almost certain to leave out vital information on and details of their subjective experiences.

The written account thus appears as a paradoxical performance, on the one hand constrained by the framework of legal language, most clearly demarcated by the appendix to the PIF, and subscribing to a paradigm of objectivity, on the other hand requiring that the subjective experience of suffering and persecution still glimmer between the lines. All of this while suspending the writer in uncertainty, requiring that the account be written “cold,” with no sense of whether the reader is willing or able to follow the experience inscribed therein.

During the oral hearing that eventually follows submission of the relevant documents, the refugee claimant is questioned in person about the information given in the PIF, including the narrative. On the surface, it appears that the introduction of “demeanour” as a factor in the decision-making process reaffirms that the written account is deemed inadequate to reflect the claimant’s subjective experience (Galloway 24). However, suspicions about the accuracy of interpreting “demeanour” turn the hearing into an interrogation during which claimants must show their ability to stick to their stories, to demonstrate their consistency and thus their credibility. Not surprisingly, Sean Rehaag’s research on acceptance rates of refugee status points to huge disparities among board members, with several being close to zero in their acceptance rates. This suggests that “demeanour,” primarily interpreted by the judge, is an inaccurate source of information subject to the vagaries of personal bias, cultural practices, and cues with which the judge might be unfamiliar. In addition, research on the capacity of judges to draw accurate conclusions based on “demeanour” indicates that the judges most confident of making accurate determinations tend to be the least accurate (Porter and ten Brinke 60-63). The constraints placed on the written narrative and the burdens of its evidentiary value are made even more problematic by such revelations. Although the format of the hearing, modelled on the procedures of the criminal trial, encourages the view that refugees must defend their claims, we should remember that refugee claimants ought not to be expected to defend themselves. They are not on trial.

Self-Endorsing Cultural Practice

The refugee hearing is shaped by legal definitions and precedents found in both immigration law and criminal law; however, its self-endorsing

character is derived not purely from its juridical practices but also from their religious genealogy via Canada's European "founding cultures." It can thereby be read as a technique of discipline designed to produce cultural "docile bodies" while extending the promise of citizenship as an ultimate recuperation or redemption. Although a discourse of ordering and classifying is applied to the refugee hearing, however unsuccessfully, it is even more troubling to note its parallels to the religious model of the confessional, as examined by Michel Foucault. The secularized displacement of the sacred in the scientific enumerations of the state is rendered paradoxical through the symbolic re-enactments of sacred practice: a reminder of the refugee's condition as *homo sacer*, when juridical power derives its legitimacy from the sacred (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*). There are numerous parallels between the Foucauldian reading of the sexual confession and juridical practices in the refugee hearing. In his analysis of the confession, Foucault identifies the inducement to speak, the postulation of causality, intrinsic latency, methods of interpretation, and the medicalization of effects as ways in which the exhortation of confession came to be constituted in scientific terms (65-73). Examining the hearing in this light, it appears that, in the first instance, the claimant is induced to narrate his or her condition through scribal and verbal documentation. In addition, the claimant's narrative is deployed as a system of decipherable signs and symptoms, with the claimant's memories expected to fit neatly into this system. The claimant is then cross-examined by a refugee hearing officer, who holds what is deemed to be up-to-date data on the political climate of the claimant's country of origin and measures the statements made against those data.² UN declarations notwithstanding, the hearing can be regarded as legitimate only if it is built on the notion that there is universal agreement on what constitutes persecution and that these definitions are sustainable regardless of geographical location.

In the hearing, refugees are induced to tell everything, with the help of an interpreter if necessary, to establish causal links between their own behaviour and the actions of the group or government that has persecuted them, and to help establish causal networks of action and reaction as if to ascertain whether they were in any "real" danger. Ethnicity becomes endowed with an inexhaustible and polymorphous causal power, such that the conflicts in Rwanda and Sri Lanka were interpreted solely as ethnic conflicts, as if questions about resources

or the monopoly of capital were irrelevant. This begs the question of whether ethnicity is considered by the Canadian government to be a valid cause of persecution. The latency expected to be uncovered is a tendency toward violence somehow intrinsic to ethnicity. The question of latency is especially troubling given the current discourse on terror and the association of particular ethnic or religious groups with terrorist tendencies. Consider the incredulity with which “homegrown” terror is treated in the media and pronounced as something expected to grow elsewhere. It is a process that essentializes groups of people from select geographical areas as being hostile and destructive to the West, very similar to processes that Said described as “self-correcting, self-endorsing disciplines that state the normative” (*Covering Islam* 143). The IRB thus reinforces the link between ethnicity and “natural” belonging, which government practices, enabled by the proposed Bill C-51, for instance, serve to entrench further.

According to Foucault’s fourth criterion, truth attains its completion only via the judge/confessor who records and condemns or acquits. The truth resides not in the claimant as subject but in the judge as transcendental Subject, the master of truth. The judge performs a hermeneutic function by deciphering the truth of the confession, in many instances with incomplete and self-endorsing information provided by the persecuting government/forces, by Canadian nationals appointed to diplomatic posts, or by NGOs. To put it simply, the judge declares “what actually happened,” much like priests have “unearthed” sin and psychologists have “unearthed” sexual deviance. Refugee claimants do not possess truth or confess truth as known to them; rather, they enter into subjectivization through a process of psychic self-mutilation that begins with the reformulating, editing, and rationalizing of their histories and experiences. The act of seeking refuge is reduced in this way from a political act committed by *bios* to an act of desperation committed by *zoe*. The refugee, whose life is carved up by violence and narrowly defined legal documents, is reduced to bare life in the discursive process of the refugee hearing, in which “truth” emerges from the process of recounting the written narrative and the cross-examination that follows.

Finally, the hearing is also codified to perform a therapeutic function insofar as it is intended to redeem the refugee from his or her position as *homo sacer* and recuperate him or her into civil society and the role of citizen or *bios*. Thus, the domain of citizenship is normalized, and

the condition of statelessness is pathologized. The significant difference between the confessional and the hearing is that, after a successful hearing, a waiting period, and the catechism of a citizenship test, the successful claimant must pledge allegiance to Canada. The potential for harm when refugees are induced to speak when they are not ready or able to do so is skilfully portrayed in *The Hungry Ghosts*, in which forced disclosures by Shivan have destructive consequences for him and his lovers. At the same time, Selvadurai unveils the fantasy of recuperation after disclosure as being just that, a fantasy. Redemption is offered neither by state nor by family but by the arduous path that he decides to undertake at the end of the novel.

Where my examination of the hearing as disciplinary practice departs from the symbolic and internal repression delineated by Foucault is in the recognition that these practices also possess an institutional materiality (Poulantzas 76-92). State practices possess meaning and value because they are accompanied by a universalized discourse on the legitimacy of the state's monopoly of violence. The state's capacity to produce consent via forms of domination is possible, as Nicos Poulantzas asserts, because "state-monopolized physical violence permanently underlies the techniques of power and mechanisms of consent" (81). The refugee hearing finds its undergirding meaning precisely in the state's capacity to detain refugees in camps or detention centres and in its capacity to deport and denaturalize. Although the lack of available resources is given as the most pragmatic reason for the inability to accommodate every request for citizenship, the current discourse on terror adds an element to the judicial forensics of the refugee hearing. Ontological and epistemological distinctions are set up between the peace-loving and governable North Americans and the potential terrorism of the other, very similar to the Orientalist discourse that Said described (*Orientalism* 2). The refugee immigrant is thereby tainted and, even after receiving citizenship, remains "unsettled." This leads to the formation of ghetto communities with the same attendant stressors, such as the Tamil communities in Scarborough, exemplified by the one close to Bridlewood Mall in *The Hungry Ghosts*. Selvadurai presents the Tamil boys who live close to the mall as being unsettled and unheard, carrying on their shoulders heavy burdens of anxiety.

The parallels between deviance and the condition of the refugee need to be examined for two reasons. The first is the need to critique

the techniques and frameworks employed by the hegemonic discourses of the nation in excess of which the criminal, the non-heteronormative, the insane, and the refugee exist. The second is the revelation regarding those techniques and frameworks by those who see through them or outside them. In the words of Agamben, "If in the system of the nation-state the refugee represents such a disquieting element, it is above all because by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty" ("We Refugees"). The refugee narrative, a narrative of trauma, possesses the potential for intervention, both as historical text and as testimony, when it serves to uncover the violent practices behind the state's claim to sovereignty in its encounter with the state's monopoly of violence. However, given that the refugee narrative produced under the constraints of the state's monopoly of violence serves primarily to endorse state practices, one might consider the possibilities of the novel as a critical intervention in the pursuit of a "just hearing" for the refugee.

The Novel as Truth Claim

Some of the most remarkable contemporary fiction written in North America, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Wayson Choy's *Jade Peony*, and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, dwells on the themes of haunting and possession through the inheritance of trauma of historically marginalized groups. Canada and the United States have been built on the labour, oppression, and erasure of vast numbers of people, and a critique of biopolitics in these states must address their inheritance of trauma. However, a distinction needs to be made between the ahistorical trauma that becomes part of the cultural inheritance of North Americans and the historically specific trauma, with perpetrators held to account, such that the working through of trauma is not delayed or deferred. A failure to make such distinctions prevents critical intervention by the refugee, serving instead the hypostatizing practices of the state in its maintenance of sovereignty and its myth of undivided origins, wherein the refugee suffers from what Dominick LaCapra describes as "a constitutive loss or lack which may as well be a secular variant of original sin" (xiv). If one is born into the "original sin" of non-correspondence with the absolute foundation of national ethnicity and its myths of undivided origins, the refugee serves as a reminder of that trauma, disrupting both

the absolute foundations and the totalizing solutions of the transhistorical nation. In other words, the refugee unveils the obsolescence of the modern nation by breaking up the identity between nativity and nationality.

The Hungry Ghosts falls well into the genre of the *roman à clef*, drawing on the political turmoil in Sri Lanka and Selvadurai's own experiences as an immigrant in Canada. The novel shifts back and forth in time, through the childhood memories and current struggles of its protagonist, Shivan, the child of a marriage between a Sinhala woman and a Tamil man. The death of Shivan's father drives his mother, Hema, back to the household of his authoritarian grandmother, Daya. Having grown up in poverty and subject to the dictates of her extended family, Daya protects herself through her unceasing accumulation of wealth and property, often at the expense of marginalized and vulnerable people. Her husband's death leaves her unfettered to pursue her avarice, and her thug Chandralal aids her in this pursuit. When Daya takes a liking to Shivan and grooms him to be her heir, he finds himself thrust into a world of ethical quandaries from which he cannot extricate himself. Unable to challenge his grandmother's hypocrisy — Daya consistently makes *danas* ("offerings") to the Buddhist temples to appease her guilt — Shivan persuades his mother to emigrate to Canada after the riots of 1983. His intentions are not entirely pure either, driven as much by his hope for acceptance of his sexual orientation as by his need to get away from his grandmother's control. Although he recognizes that he is protected from the ethnic violence by his grandmother's wealth and her Sinhala last name, he cannot fully identify with her ethnic privilege, her unscrupulously acquired wealth, or, for that matter, her plans for his future.

In Shivan, Selvadurai has created a protagonist who is not an embodiment of virtue, and his growth as a character perhaps gains greater depth because of it. As a child, Shivan is petulant and selfish, and as a young adult he pursues his desires at great risk to others, especially Mili, whose association with Shivan leads to his death. Shivan is aware of the patriarchal power that he possesses as his grandmother's heir and his mother's male child. His dreams of emigrating to North America arise not from any concern for his vulnerable mother, or for his unrecognized brilliant sister Renu, but from his belief that he can be his true self there: "Once in America, I told myself, I would become

the person I really knew myself to be" (57). Caught up in his fantasies of finding acceptance as a gay man and being lauded for his wit, he pressures his mother to emigrate to Canada. Since emigration would also liberate them from his grandmother's control, his mother agrees in spite of his sister's protests. Selvadurai is unapologetic in his exploration of the patriarchal power that Shivan possesses but also reveals that this power is contingent on his remaining in the closet, both as a gay man and as a Tamil. His Tamil patronymic marks Shivan, even though he enjoys the privileges afforded by his grandmother's wealth and his mother's decision to have him educated in Sinhala. He witnesses the violence that erupts around him in July 1983, but from within the enclosure of his grandmother's property, protected by her *golayas* ("thugs"):

One day, the Tamil houses on the roads around ours went up in flames. For a few hours in the afternoon we could hear the roar and crackle of fire, the crashing of furniture being destroyed. Once, a woman screamed, a gargled sound so chilling it haunts me to this day. The air was rancid with smoke and we walked around with handkerchiefs pressed to our noses, coughing and gagging when it was at its worst. In the evening, bits of ash floated into my grandmother's garden, settling on her flowers. (65)

Shivan is traumatized by the sound of the woman's scream, which continues to haunt him, but like the rest of his family he chooses not to ask his grandmother's thug Chandralal how and why they remained safe. "Perhaps we didn't want to know," he admits (66). Although Shivan's need to escape this oppressive situation is easily understood, it is also easy to understand that such a narrative, in which violence that cannot be easily reduced to ethnic conflict takes place in a complex network of kinship, capital, and patronage that blurs the demarcations of victim, colluder, and perpetrator, would not fit within the frame of decipherable signs and symptoms of the PIF.

Having come out to his family in Canada and engaged openly in short-term relationships, when Shivan returns to Sri Lanka his naiveté and burgeoning sexual confidence lead him to ignore or dismiss the warnings of his Sri Lankan friends to end his relationship with Mili or to keep it hidden. He pursues Mili with an aggressiveness that forces him out of the closet in a society that views homosexuality as a crime and the gay male as expendable. Mili's death can also be attributed to the broader normalization of violence carried out by the govern-

ment of Sri Lanka. The mundaneness of state-sponsored paramilitary forces, death squads, and disappearances creates the ideal circumstances in which civilian vendettas can be carried out. Mili's murder is easily disguised and his body disposed of by men who are accustomed to brutality. Such complex webs cannot be expressed in the causal framework posited by the PIF, and certainly extrajudiciary killings are often difficult to verify via information exchanged between sovereign states. Mili's death is also a crime that cannot be brought under the umbrella of ethnic violence, since Mili was Sinhalese and murdered by Sinhalese thugs. Although the protection of minority rights ought to be a vital concern in legal discourse, the assumption that the interests of minority groups can be determined solely or primarily along ethnic or racial lines becomes increasingly unsupportable. There is no denying the shared experiences of oppression among historically marginalized groups; however, the assumptions that their interests can be uniformly expressed, and that redress can be uniformly applied, ignore the existence of minorities, whether identified on the basis of caste, class, gender, or sexual orientation, within those minorities and diversity among the oppressed in general. In representing this diversity, the novel points to a constitutive lack in the foundation of the nation, in which the ideal subject must be both undiluted in ethnicity and heterosexual in order to reproduce national identity.

Where the homosexual is deemed to be deviant because the homosexual body cannot be deployed by a heteronormative state, refugees are deemed to be deviant because their identities cannot be deployed by the fundamentalist state in which they were born, and they carry the taint of violence that threatens to disrupt the statist narratives of their adopted land. Selvadurai troubles the idea of national identity in its constructs of categories such as "immigrant" and "refugee" by paralleling instances in which the homosexual and the refugee are marked as deviants. The distinction between the immigrant and the refugee as ontological categories is highlighted when Shivan first makes contact with a gay man in Toronto. The man asks him if he is a refugee, and Shivan replies, "No, I came here with my family. We're immigrants" (97). This seemingly innocuous statement can be read in a number of ways. It demonstrates the class distinctions among the waves of political refugees who arrived in Canada with families and resources, as Selvadurai himself did, and refugees who often arrived alone, with scant resources,

sent abroad by families desperate to protect their lives. Shivan and his family are given visas in Colombo after filling out forms and being interviewed to determine their desirability as immigrants, a test that they appear to pass easily. This is certainly a far cry from the experiences of the refugees who arrived on the MV *Sun Sea*, for instance.³ It is also a far cry from the experiences of the boys who live near Bridlewood Mall: “The young men spoke no English, and some of them had never been outside their village. The boys’ forced hilarity and sliding sheepish eyes suggested the heavy burden on their shoulders” (109).

The term “refugee” categorically distinguishes desirable immigrants, like the English-speaking Shivan, from undesirable immigrants, like the sheepish Tamil-speaking boys. His reluctance to identify with the boys, for whom he clearly feels sympathy, while also feeling superior to them, is a reflection of his class privilege. A more generous interpretation of his rejection of the term “refugee” can also be attributed to a form of survivor’s guilt: a reluctance to claim a term associated with the suffering that Shivan had encountered only indirectly by that point. Although the novel allows for both possibilities, the statement also serves as a marker of a historical moment in Canada. It is a moment when a shift occurs in the framing of refugees, from potentially desirable immigrants to undesirable immigrants tainted with violence and, post 9/11, terrorism. Although Shivan can initially reject such a categorization, he comes to inhabit it ontologically as a man who is both Tamil and homosexual. Even though he first comes to Canada as a privileged “immigrant,” he returns from his visit to Sri Lanka as a “refugee.” The burdens that he senses on the shoulders of the Tamil boys foreshadow his own “heavy load” at the end of the novel. While the Tamil boys have known all along their condition as refugees, no doubt having gone through the refugee claim process, Shivan comes to inhabit that category ontologically through his failed attempts to shed the past and live what he sees as a normal life. What little protection his class privilege offers him from racist state practices is revoked in his experience of racist cultural practices as he makes his first forays into the gay community.

The Hungry Ghosts takes the model of the coming-out narrative and applies it to the refugee, who must come to terms with a category viewed as deviant. Shivan negotiates being “closeted” as a homosexual in Sri Lanka and “closeted” as a Tamil refugee in Canada for fear of the physical and psychic violence that might arise from his admission

of certain truths about himself. In doing so, he learns to disregard his own trauma, until he is reminded of it when he listens to the activist Sriyani speak at an event at a Canadian university (276-277). Shivan has learned to live with his trauma by retreating to a “numb, quiet place” (277) and tolerating the vague references to and codifications of his deviant identity until circumstances compel him to “out” himself. The linguistic codifications that parallel the conditions of the homosexual and the refugee are expressed through elliptical phrases and shorthand that seek to avoid confronting the “unspeakable.” His grandmother, for example, cannot speak of his homosexuality: “‘That Jayasinghe boy, taking my obedient, innocent grandson and changing him into this grotesque . . .’ She made a disgusted sound. ‘I cannot even say the word’” (222). Similarly, both Shivan and Michael cannot speak of the taint of violence that Shivan carries as a refugee: “Terms like ‘your mother’s issues,’ or ‘1983’ became a shorthand between us for that history, and he explored [it] no further. I think he understood, without daring to articulate it to himself, that to press for more information, to look more keenly at my odd family relations, would be to confront the disparities in my story — and that the truth, once revealed, would take us where, in the end, it did” (318). His fear of rejection, were his deviance to be revealed, turns out to be well founded, and his relationship with Michael deteriorates rapidly when Shivan finally reveals the truth. Michael cannot overcome the sense of betrayal that he feels, and he cannot understand the role that trauma has played in Shivan’s secrecy. Even more significantly, he voices an all-too-familiar kind of anxiety: “‘You brought your grandmother and your fucking lover into my life, into my apartment. You’ve soiled it with these people. I don’t even know what they look like, and I’ve been living with them for the past two years’” (341).

Similar refrains resonated throughout the Toronto area in 2009 during the Tamil protests against the slaughter of Tamils in Sri Lanka. News reports were full of bystanders asking why “these people” could not leave their problems back home. The implication was clear that the undivided origins of the nation were being ruptured in this reference to a past marred by violence and forced displacement. Michael cannot reconcile himself to Shivan’s past, in part because Shivan’s relationship with Mili was ended by force. He cannot be certain that Shivan does not still long for Mili or draw comparisons between him and Mili —

comparisons in which he inevitably falls short of the ideal lost love, eternal and unchanging in memory. The parallel with the public notion that one cannot have “true patriot love” for Canada if one brings one’s problems along, easily drawn here, reveals another instance of state practice that seeps into the public imagination. Michael thinks that his life has been “soiled,” an interesting word that connotes the *soil* of a nation being *soiled* by bloodshed, even if that bloodshed happens elsewhere. Shivan has internalized the anxiety of being soiled, or tainted, himself: “My past has tainted Michael, changed him from the man who opened his door, his life, to me two years ago, wearing that ridiculous batik shirt to impress. He has become someone he does not recognize” (370). The decision to return to Sri Lanka and work through his karma/trauma is reached in part by the realization that he and Michael can never return to the idyllic lives that they had lived while he remained closeted as a refugee.

Selvadurai’s novel cannot be read as offering closure, either in its working through of trauma or in its truth claim. Shivan is aware of the discourses around him that do not, and perhaps will not, accept his revelations as “truth.” He fears placing his life before another who will act as transcendental subject, and his fears prove to be justified. His life, open to the interpretation of others, is presented back to him as something twisted and deviant. Far from allowing him any redemptive release, both instances of “coming out” under inducements to speak lead to the loss of a loved one and to suffering that he comes to accept as his karmic burden. Selvadurai’s decision to reject the Christian promise of redemption after confession and penance for the Buddhist practice of expiation is an interesting and apt one when viewed in the light of the refugee hearing. As Selvadurai says in an interview with the *National Post*, “To me, it seems a saner way to live your life than to believe you can go to confession, say five Our Fathers and six Hail Marys, like I did as a Catholic, and then that’s it, you’re free of sin. Well, you’re not. You’re not. You have to take responsibility for it” (“Shyam Selvadurai”).

In paralleling refugees and homosexuals as “deviants,” Selvadurai’s novel also serves to uncover the ways in which sovereign power borrows its legitimacy from the epistemes and symbols of the sacred. Shivan’s choice to accept accountability for his actions and to take on an act of dharma and sacrifice can be read as a rejection of the foundational Christian epistemes of his adopted nation and the narrowly defined

Protestant-Buddhist epistemes of his nation of origin. Although the choice of Buddhism as a spiritual path of healing might appear on the surface to reify the identity of the Sinhala state, by choosing to refer to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as rebels rather than terrorists, Selvadurai ruptures the correspondence of that identity as well as the legitimacy of the state's monopoly of violence. The activist Sriyani presents a critical view of the LTTE in the talk that Shivan attends (207), but the narrative voice of the novel maintains the term "rebel" and thereby moves away from the discourse on terror that has tainted the most vulnerable of refugees. In an interview with *NOW Magazine*, Selvadurai reveals that it was a conscious decision to tell a story different from the one that "the government is trying to shove down our throats" ("Shyam Selvadurai's *The Hungry Ghosts*"). It is a strategy that works as well in challenging the Canadian legal-judicial processes that have turned the refugee hearing into a trial as it does in challenging the fundamentalist narratives of the Sri Lankan government.

Although the idea of justice is never overtly described as such, it permeates the novel through the characters' belief in karma. The novel is interspersed with Buddhist fables that speak to the persistence of the karmic burden. Daya is fond of narrating them, and Shivan holds on to these stories as a means of coming to terms with his own struggles. While Daya attempts to expiate her guilt through monetary offerings to both Buddhist and Hindu temples, unshakable in her conviction of her moral superiority in the face of her family's pain and resentment, her family members bear the brunt of her coldness and cruelty. The idea of offerings as absolution is repeatedly challenged in the novel, for instance when, in a moment of anger, Hema lashes out at her: "I have hated every minute in this house, and so have my children. Never mind your past life, you will pay for this cruelty in your future life. And no amount of bana and danas and donations for bells and ropes at the temple will make up for what you have done" (72). The working out of karma is seen as complex and non-linear and not leading to a form of harmony or clear-cut resolution. In one of his narrations of his grandmother's stories, Shivan discloses that "Denouements are often long in Buddhist stories and are, in fact, the point of the tale: Actions are easy to perform, but working off the karmic effects of those actions takes a long time" (261). It is telling that this disclosure arrives after a story of two wives who pursue and destroy each other's children over several lifetimes

until they learn from the Buddha that vengeance cannot cleanse past wrongs. The concept of justice in *The Hungry Ghosts* is removed from the state-endorsed construct of fundamentalist Buddhism as an oppressive religion with its attendant moral ascendancy, as reflected in the character of Daya, who attempts to order her surroundings through her practice. Justice is reinstated instead in a form of Buddhism that functions as spiritual practice that requires attention to deeds in the present and pursuit of expiation for deeds of the past. Haunted by past wrongs, Daya refuses to relinquish control over her daughter and grandchildren, rewarding and punishing them for what she believes they have done for and to her. Her family members exist as means to her own karmic ends, and as such she cannot recognize that they might have their own desires and sorrows.

In rejecting his grandmother's path, Shivan rejects the narrative of the nation that deploys its subjects as means to its own self-endorsing ends. When he accepts his fate, he feels his mind become light, "as if released from a sharp and overwhelming pain" (371). In choosing his own path, Shivan moves away from a model of absolute resolution and toward a more complex sense of agency, gaining the ability to work through his trauma through service and compassion. In this complex working through of trauma, and the revelations afforded by truth claims that cannot be produced under the constraints and compulsion of state practices, *The Hungry Ghosts* gives the reader a sense of what it means to really hear a refugee voice. However, in more than one instance, it reminds the reader of the multiple layers of truth and meaning not revealed or resolved. Resolution is something to work toward rather than assume. In the final moments of the novel, Shivan refers to the "heavy load" that he bears, and in this way Selvadurai reminds us of the Tamil boys who live near Bridlewood Mall, whose burdens have always been heavy, and whose stories are still unheard.

NOTES

¹ The Harper government's current attempts to introduce Bill C-51, the "Terrorism Bill," are further evidence of such oppositional discourses that would criminalize critiques of the state.

² The current "Revocation of Persuasive Decisions" pertaining to Sri Lanka on the IRB website reveals that the recent changes in Sri Lanka are no longer considered "meaningful and durable." The evidence on which previous decisions were made has ceased to be valid.

This revocation came into effect in the same year (2012) as the Basis of Claim form, which attempts to uncover human trafficking. The implications for refugees shortly after the massacre of Tamils in the northern province of Sri Lanka in 2009 were obvious: at their most vulnerable, they had to contend with the Canadian government's "sound reasoning" that meaningful and durable change had been made in the country from which they were fleeing, and thereby they had no cause to seek refuge.

³ In 2010, the MV *Sun Sea* arrived on the shores of Vancouver carrying 492 people detained by the Canadian authorities under suspicion of terrorist activity. Angus Reid polls at the time showed that large numbers of Canadians wanted them deported even if these suspicions proved to be unfounded, as they did for all but one individual.

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