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On the Edge of a Common Space: Geography and Exclusion

I begin this essay with an anecdote that has almost nothing to do with my subject but one that will, I hope, put my whole essay and mood in context.

One evening a few weeks ago a man fell down at my feet and died. I was one of three judges at the Gratiaen Prize which is Sri Lanka's equivalent of the Booker Prize. The gentleman, Mr. Shanmugalingam was one of five finalists. As his name was called out, he wobbled his way through the aisle onto the stage. I remember thinking that I did not expect an old man to have written the book, and as he began to read I noticed that he had an air of great joy that radiated from him. He had written an extremely brave novel, criticizing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and hostile towards all parties that perpetuate the state of war. It was a bold and courageous book that told its story from the perspective of a minority people that have endured brutal terror at the hands of almost everyone who was involved in the ethnic conflict that has torn our island nation apart. As he was reading excerpts from the novel, trembling from a combination of what I would like to think as age and happiness, he collapsed and died.

His death shattered me. Later that night as I wept in bed for a man I barely knew except through his novel, I did not quite understand what I was mourning for. The next day I switched off my mobile phone, I visited friends and did not speak of the tragic event. I bought a pair of red linen trousers, and sat quietly with my mother in law who had had a mild stroke a week ago. I called my parents in

New Zealand and lent my SUV to someone who wanted to transport a large bathroom sink. I arranged my cupboard and kept aside a pile of hardly worn clothes to be given away. I bought Sinhala and Tamil New Year gifts for my household staff. I looked out of my bedroom window and watched the sunset over the tops of palm trees and mango trees. The red roofs turned a rose pink and seemed to glow with pleasure. And then I realized that what I was mourning was what I had in common with that man; and that I too one day would die. That each and everyone in this world would experience that event we call death. And then? What?

Given? the frame of mind that I am in right now, I feel that I would not be able to write about anything else but death. For suddenly, death for me has become the very purpose of life. It has taken a new importance; it forced itself into my mundane existence and reminded me that I am not here for very long. It took Mr. Shanmugalingam, who I have learnt has no immediate family and who had been living with a niece by marriage far from his home town of Jaffna, to bring the immediacy of my transitory existence home to me. I wonder if it is the thought of death that makes us live our life the way we do.

It is the custom of modern times to avoid the topic of death. It is perhaps seen as a failure of life. But luckily here in Sri Lanka, death is still an event. Funerals are crammed with so much ritual and tradition that even if you are a Muslim and you buried with immediate simplicity you can circumvent it by having forty continuous days of prayer, food and

togetherness or if you are a Buddhist who is accompanied to the cremation ground with drummers and flutists or perhaps a Hindu who is set ablaze in an open pyre by his first born son, your death ironically can still reflect a certain *joie de vivre!*

As the world begins to be peopled by a majority who have perfected consumerism to a fine art, I see a kind of death all around me. It could be a realization of our own mortality as a people, in that we have lived with a policy of instant gratification. If we look down through the ages, never before have there lived a people who have been as selfish as we are. We live as if there is nothing to leave behind, we live as if there is no-one to leave it for.

I reside in a country that is considered poor by most of the world. Sometimes, we do not have the basic necessities of life. Our GDP is 842 dollars. Our children at times live on the streets, we do not always have electricity and if the monsoons fail we are scared witless. And yet, my philosophy of life-- which is shared by my countrymen-- is that of continuity, a sense of having been before and a sense of being again. It is the philosophy of rebirth and karma and a sense of justice and order. But sometimes it is tested.

A long time ago I came to this island in the gene of an Arab sailor who traded in spices and gem stones. I was then blended and liquidized first through indigenous, Sinhala and Tamil and then later Dutch and Portuguese strains and educated as a brown Englishwoman. My mother tongue is English, I have tea at four o'clock in the evening and drive on the left side of the road. I have lived on three continents, over seventeen years, traveled in lands spanning five continents and three years ago I returned to my motherland hopefully never to leave for long periods again. It appears that all First World countries have the same concept as I do – *it is, the stay where you are - remain in the land of your birth -*

don't trespass if you are brown or black - don't visit us, we will visit you attitude. A concept that is reinforced over and over again whenever a Sri Lankan attempts to apply for a visa to visit a country in the First World. Sri Lankans can only visit Singapore and the Maldives without a stamped visa. For any other country on earth, a Sri Lankan citizen must apply for a visa. It is not an easy process.

As I stood for three consecutive days on the street in front of the Italian Embassy with no shelter from rain or sun for a total of 6 hours at a time, with no conveniences, and I mean *no* conveniences, at hand I had plenty of time to mull on The Commons, especially common space and geography. I discussed this with my fellow visa applicants. Some of them had been there for the third or fourth time. They brought little stools and straw mats to sit on. They picnicked and shared personal stories. They littered the area around them with biscuit wrappings and other remnants of sustenance. And they assured me that if they didn't get the visa it would not be a problem. They shrugged with seeming indifference and yet I knew that like me they were anxious and nervous. They likened the experience to that of taking an examination. Pass or fail. Good or bad. Visa or no visa. Now, with no Schengen visa as yet stamped in my passport, as I write this paper I am still unsure if I can come to Greece, be with my fellow colleagues and discuss what we have in common. Right now, I think we have very little.

When I read the briefing note that was sent to us where Peter Barnes had glowingly written of our common assets – the sky, water, public lands, culture, science, customs and laws, rituals and rites, the airwaves, seedbeds of creativity etc etc. I realized that while we share these common assets the greatest asset that is common to all of us, is denied to most of us. It is that of the world. Earth. The Globe. Our Planet. Call it what you will. With the emergence of nation states and travel documents like the passport, with travel

restrictions, visas and borders the world ceased to be common property to be accessed by all its inhabitants on an equal footing.

Prior to the Second World War, people travelled the world to trade, to explore, to proselytize and to conquer. Many of them carried letters of introduction and guarantees of safe passage. The earliest known mention of a passport is found in 450 BC when an official of ancient Persia, Nehemiah received a letter from King Artaxerxes addressed to the “governors of the province beyond the river,” requesting him safe passage as he travelled through their lands on his way to Judah. .

Yet the modern concept of a multi-destination, multi-journey document issued only from the holder’s country of nationality arose only from the middle of the twentieth century. Before this, passports were issued by any country to any individual and were valid for a short period of time, acting much the way visas do today. It was only after the First World War that the wide-spread legal requirement to use a passport to travel between countries arose. I grew up on stories of a grand-uncle who piled his Land Rover jeep with gifts, bundled his wife and two year old child and drove pell-mell to England through Afghanistan and Iran. I hero-worshipped my uncle who hitch-hiked from Oxford to Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known). He slept on park benches and worked in the kitchens of roadside boutiques. These are experiences I can only dream about, that I know I can never have, for now I am from the wrong side of the world.

Today, there is a new kind of apartheid, especially for citizens of Third World countries. It is the apartheid of the passport. The passport has become an obsession. It is the difference between good and evil. My parents gave up their Sri Lankan passports when they were both in their seventies in order to travel the world with ease. These days they live seven months in warm Sri

Lanka applying for a resident permit in the land of their birth, two months in New Zealand, their country of citizenship, during the summer and travel for a total of three months of the year to other countries. In Sri Lanka, a foreign passport is unimaginable wealth, it is a dowry or bargaining tool in marriage so valuable that marriage advertisements carry them like assets. A passport with a valid US or Australian, UK, or Schengen visa is priceless. You can even be killed for it. Sri Lankan expatriates holding passports from Australia, the US and England or Canada flood the country twice a year, during the summer holidays and during Christmas. They buy luxury high rise apartments, have forgotten to speak their mother tongue, and make it a point to be identified as being from somewhere else. It gives them status.

Some years ago I made a conscious decision to remain a Sri Lankan citizen and to thus be party to all the trials and tribulations that are incurred by being one. In Rome, five minutes after I landed, I was asked by security police at the airport if I had enough spending money and how could they be sure that I was a genuine tourist. In Amsterdam, while still in the air passage that connects the airport to the plane, heavy-booted policemen check the passports of Asians to verify they possess a legitimate visa. In Hong Kong, brown- and black-skinned passengers were asked to surrender their passports to the Cathay Pacific crew which would be returned when they arrived in the United States. Occasionally I get tired of my citizenship. Sometimes I just want to be able to travel and enjoy my planet as if I have the right to it.

Today, Third World citizens will travel illegally in fragile and overloaded boats in order to reach the shores of any country in the First World; be they Mexicans on their way to the US, Sri Lankans to Italy, or Vietnamese to Australia. Economically, they become the backbone of their host country.

They do the work that birth citizens do not want to do, they live underground lives, their existence barely acknowledged, and for all this they are grateful. There have been times I have mulled on this phenomenon. Why do people voluntarily fall into a state of debt to travel with risk and fear, to leave all that they know and love, to enter countries that are most often cold and inhospitable, to live alongside human beings who regard them with contempt, to make a life that they will eventually consider successful?

When the Tsunami of December 2004 occurred in South and South East Asia, the magnitude of aid and personnel that arrived to assist its victims was overwhelming. It was colloquially and humorously termed a Tsunami of aid workers. We were touched by the kindness and generosity of the world. And yet, a rebellious corner of my mind wonders whether if any Sri Lankan doctors or other aid workers had volunteered their services when Hurricane Katrina arrived with all its fury upon New Orleans, would they have been given American visas? I doubt it. It is yet another perpetuation of the way traffic of power or aid should flow.

Thus while it is laudable to think of all these other definitions of what we have in common, I want us to think of the right for all human beings to be treated as human. The right to have access to Justice, and a reasonable degree of power and control over our lives. Why is it that the majority of the world's resources are used by the First World even if they are to be found in the Third? Why is it that it is always the First World who will speak about what we have in common, never the Third? And finally when I asked a few Sri Lankans what do we have in common with the world, their replies reflected a morbid and mordant view of the world that worried me – *death, nothing* and *conflict* were some of the replies.

Taken in perspective, it is only for a short time in the earth's history that we have held

this attitude of difference. If we take ancient tales of how the earth was birthed or the ancient edicts on how we are to live, we will find a multitude of beliefs held in common. Even religions as diverse as Judaism, Hinduism and Zoroastrianism combined elements of earlier religious and philosophical traditions to emerge as organized religions, with priesthoods, texts, practices and followers. Take for instance the ancient Maori tale of creation and compare it with the Apache story of creation. They both begin with nothingness or darkness and move into light, and they both talk about the separation of the earth and the sky. The Scandinavian, Welsh and Lithuanian stories of a flood which includes survival of living creatures in a boat, talk about a great calamity that befell the world and after it passed saw an opportunity to start afresh. During these times the different peoples held all the resources precious, and most precious of all was life. It may be interpreted that because it was so valuable, the sacrifice of human life came to mean the ultimate sacrifice or gift one could give a higher being, from the Incas to Abraham to Jesus Christ.

However, from the time where the individual has become? supreme we have taken to polluting our commons, of wasting or throwing them, or being greedy for them and inconsiderate about them. When I was young I was told a story of the American government throwing an excess of wheat into the Atlantic ocean rather than export it as charity to Asia or Africa because it would bring the global price of wheat down. I do not know if it was a true story but it has stayed with me even though I could not have been older than nine years and even then I was horrified. How could they? I raged, living as I was in a 1970s Sri Lanka when consumer protectionism was [ubiquitous?] and we recycled almost everything - clothes, bottles, iron, paper and cans. Green gram or other snacks were wrapped in cones of newspaper, old exam papers lined shelves and wrapping

paper continued to wrap gifts as if in a perpetual life cycle without any hope of nirvana. Bottles were evaluated and retained to house other goods: jam bottles became spice bottles, arrack bottles became kitul treacle bottles marmite bottles became ayurvedic oil bottles. Clothes were identified and lusted after while still draped on [their first] owners. They were coveted and treasured and eventually passed down through generations. Iron that held up houses travelled throughout the island, and cans were used as units of measurement or ashtrays or flattened to hold a fan of coir for a broom.

But today I see that even in my Third World island nation where we still live simple and uncomplicated lives, what we hold common has changed. We have become like anywhere else. We are beginning to think like the others. It is a common frame of mind that is disastrous.

Still, all is not lost; with my Schengen visa almost 80 percent approved (thanks to influence, of course) I would like to end this paper on a slightly more positive note. A month ago my American friend had her baby in Sri Lanka. A single mother, she discovered she could not afford to have her child in America. Surrounded by her adopted family of friends she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. The child was named Medin after the full moon day she was born on. Though this example still holds to the true-to-form flow of First World visitors being able to travel to the Third World easily, I would like to think that this is the new common – a half-American, half-Indian child born in Sri Lanka, who has the possibility of living anywhere and being a true child of the world.

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