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on Statelessness

Oral Histories of Statelessness

Interview with Niro Kandasamy

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Interviewed by Jordana Silverstein

Q: I'm Jordana Silverstein and I'm here with Niro Kandasamy on the 22nd of September 2023. Niro, thanks so much for speaking with me today. Can we start with - can I ask where and when were you born?

A: Sure. Thank you for having me, Jordy. I was born in Paruthithurai which is in the northern most tip of the island that we call Sri Lanka now.

Q: And when?

A: Yeah, I was born on the 14th of November 1988.

Q: And tell me about your family.

A: Sure. My immediate family is made up of five people. I've got a mum, a dad and two older brothers.

Q: They're older? When were they born?

A: I don't know. Older.

Q: They're older, yeah. [shared laughter] And tell me about what life was like when you were growing up?

A: Turbulent. I was born into a war zone and it was – I guess the first years of my life were quite chaotic. I moved to Australia when I was – just before my fourth birthday, in 1992. I do have memories of that period. A lot of my childhood was I guess figuring out how to live in a new land. And I guess that wasn't particularly unique because I was surrounded by people who were also similarly not from here.

Q: Yeah, as in your family or the broader community.

A: Yeah, my family but also the broader community. I grew up in Auburn, which is two suburbs away from here and it was a very ethnically mixed community. There were a lot of like other Tamils. There were also a lot of Lebanese and Vietnamese communities. It was very mixed. I think a lot of us were just trying to figure our way in this new place.

Q: Yeah. What did that figuring out involve for you?

A: Everything from language to even just material things, like my parents finding work. There was a period of time where my dad didn't have a job. It was I guess, financially pretty difficult for us. My mum didn't have the English language skills at the time to be able to also find work. She was also trying to get skills, not only in language but also just other skills, to be able to put herself out there and also raise three kids. So that was, that was challenging. And yeah, I'm just trying to think what else. But also just finding community, because we were – I mean the others who had fled with us were quite dispersed. There were a couple of

families in Auburn and we became friends with them pretty quickly. But there were also quite a few communities who lived around this area here.

A lot of our weekends were spent around here in some ways. Like I went to primary school in Homebush and high school like I said, a couple of streets from here. So, yeah, it was just trying to build new relationships and figure out where things were. I remember having like one spice shop when we first came here so my mum could cook traditional foods so we would always go to that spice shop. So just trying to find our feet and find things that were familiar to us took a bit of time. And then also just keeping on top of what was happening back home because of course we still had a lot of relatives who were still there, the war was still ongoing, and so there was a lot of -

So like I remember as a child sitting down on a Thursday night tuning into SBS Radio because there was a slot where they had Tamil News playing, and we would sit down and listen to what was happening in the war and where the fighting was happening. And then just calling people to find out if they were still alive or where they were. And that was still in the days of writing aerograms as well, so there would always be a delay. Before we had phones - because there was a period of time where we didn't have contact via phone and so we would write letters, so there was always a delay. My mum would write letters and we wouldn't hear back for a couple of weeks or months, and then once we did eventually have contact through phone, we would call to find out where people were and what was happening.

Q: Do you remember that feeling of that delay and the waiting?

A: Not really because there was so much happening here as well. And I guess because of the radio we kinda knew the broader lay of the land and what was happening. Yeah, I guess as a child I wasn't really thinking about - because my immediate family were here. So I guess I wasn't really thinking too much about letters.

Q: And all five of you would sit together to listen to the radio every day.

A: No, it was just on. It was just on. We lived in an apartment which was quite small, it was probably around the same size as this. When the radio was on, that was the noise that was travelling through the house, so you would just hear it.

Q: Yeah. And so did you share a bedroom with your brothers?

A: Yeah. Our first apartment here we all were in the same bedroom; a single bed and a bunk bed, and then we moved, in Auburn but on the other side, and then I had my own little room. But that was maybe like seven or eight years later.

Q: Do you remember what it felt like to get your own room?

A: Amazing. It was just that feeling of having something that was your own space which I just didn't have for such a long time. I had gotten quite used to it but when I did eventually have it, I was like, wow, this is really weird and nice. This is quite exciting. It wasn't a big space, it was tiny, literally tiny. There was just enough space for a single bed and like a little study desk. I didn't - I don't think I had - and oh yeah, I had a bookshelf where I would keep

some of my clothes there and some of my books and other random crap and that was it. And there was a little space for you to walk. And I thought wow, this is better than anything I've had [laughs].

Q: Yeah. Do you remember what you would do while you were in the bedroom, what sort of stuff?

A: I'd listen to the radio a lot. I'd read. I mean, to be honest because it was a house I would also be just out in the backyard or whatever. My mum grew vegetables and we always – I don't know just changing things up and planting new things and mowing the lawn, we just spent a lot of time outside. It was space that we didn't have for such a long time so when we did have it, there was a lot of us just being outside and doing lots of things.

Q: And do you remember arriving in Australia?

A: I remember being given a colouring book on the plane and I remember sitting next to my mum on the plane, and that's pretty much about it.

Q: Yep. Do you remember who gave you the colouring book?

A: No. But my mum told me a couple of weeks ago actually that the air hostess had given the colouring book but it was hours after I was crying nonstop. And she was like, "Oh well you should have given this like a few hours ago." [laughter] But yeah, I guess it was just being in a different environment and the disruption of everything probably caused the distress.

Q: Yeah. And would that have been your first time on a plane?

A: Yep. Yep. And first time leaving the area, like the north.

Q: Yeah. Why were you and your mum talking about this a few weeks ago?

A: Because she's always talking about that or like just life in the homeland. Because the life here was so tied up with life there not only because of the war but just because – yeah, I don't know what it was but there was a real sense of being tied to the village, in the homeland. I don't know, for whatever reason we've just always remained connected in some way to that place. And I think it's partly also because compared to other villages in the north and east, there weren't that many people who left. I guess we still knew quite a few people who were there.

Q: How come not many people left?

A: Yeah, it's a good question. I think a few different reasons. And I can't confirm this, but I suspect a vast proportion of those from my village were working class folks who just weren't able to afford or had connections overseas to be able to move. A lot of folks also had children who signed up to the war effort, so they probably just didn't go. Yeah, I don't know but I think compared to some of the other villages, to me it feels like there were still quite a few people who just stayed there and didn't – I mean they moved around to other parts, but they didn't leave the country.

Q: Yeah. And why did your family leave?

A: I guess the desire at the time was like not desire, you had to leave, there just wasn't a choice. At the time, my dad was already working overseas in Saudi Arabia, as were a lot of people his age at the time. So he was already trying to leave and not return. He had managed to come here and then he sponsored us. But we also because we had been displaced a few times as well, I think it just became quite unbearable. And because he was already overseas, it just kind of made – yeah, it just worked. But also, because we had my mum's brother who had died in, I think it was '89, shortly after I was born, and that was the final thing that pushed my mum to be like, "I can't do this anymore, I need to leave."

Q: Yeah. And do you know why Australia?

A: I've actually got no idea. I think my dad had applied for a few different places and I think this was – I think at the time because he didn't come as a refugee, he came as an economic migrant because that was the visa that was available. And then he came here and then sought political asylum and said he couldn't go back. I think at the time that was just the visa that was available that gave him the easiest route out and that's why. Like there was no – we knew no one here, there were no family connections, but it was literally just -

Q: Where can I get out.

A: - where can I get out and that was – that's how we ended up here.

Q: Yeah. But he was here for long enough before you guys came that he could sponsor -

A: Yeah, he would have come here a couple of years before us.

Q: Yeah, right. So you didn't see him for a couple of years?

A: Yeah, he wasn't around when I was born. I've got no memory of my dad during my first couple of years of life because he wasn't in the country. I've just got no memory of him. My earliest memories of him are being here, like after I came here.

Q: Yeah, sure. And coming over, your mum with three kids, and she's been sort of a single mum or I guess there's community around, that's very different.

A: Yeah, you don't feel it. Like I've got - because yeah, I mean it's – you're not raised by your immediate family there, you're raised by your neighbours and whoever else is around. Like everybody knows everyone. The front door is always open; people just walk in and I don't know, it's just a different kind of life. I don't even recall; I mean I guess I was really little but I don't recall anything missing.

Q: Yeah, that makes sense. And did you say before that you came here with other families, like there was -

A: When we came here there were a few other families that we knew that my dad had already made contact with and they – a few of them lived in Auburn or just around here. They were

like our family friends. And that helped just in terms of general socialising and figuring things out.

Q: Yeah. And when you came, what languages did you speak?

A: I spoke Tamil but I picked up English really quick. I was pretty surprised and I don't know why; it must have been because I was watching TV. Because we didn't speak English at home but the TV – like I remember watching Sesame Street and picking up English watching just cartoons.

Q: You remember learning English?

A: Yeah, watching TV.

Q: Watching TV yeah. How did it – do you remember how it felt learning or navigating learning this other language?

A: I really enjoyed reading little books, like just little kids' books, but I found it pretty okay because for whatever reason, I don't know I just felt like I could do both. I don't remember ever feeling uncomfortable about learning English and Tamil. I mean I was still learning Tamil but I don't recall ever feeling uncomfortable about having both in my life. The only time that became a dilemma for me was when I was in primary school and my mum had just gotten a job in housing. And at her workplace she was doing I think at the time - yeah, she was just doing like admin work or something and they just had to – she had to do a lot of reading and writing as part of the job, I can't remember what it was. And I remember her coming home one day from work and saying, "This is really hard and I don't know what to do. I can't pick up the English skills that I need to do this job."

And I was, as a seven-year-old like, "What can we do about this?" And I was like, "Oh" – and she'd gone to English classes. I was like, "I can't figure out what to do to help this, to help her with the situation," so I said, "You know what, I'm going to start speaking to you in English so that you can speak back to me in English and then you'll – like you might pick that up, pick up the language a little bit more." And so I did and that was the first time that I realised that I had to give up the Tamil with her so that I could help her with her English skills. And I didn't stop doing that until very recently.

Q: You'd speak in English with her.

A: I do both, yeah, but it's only probably been until very recently that I stopped, I've used English less and less.

Q: What caused you to - the reason to change to use it less?

A: Well, Dinesh speaks in Tamil a lot because he didn't move here until he was 15.

Q: Yeah, right. Dinesh is your partner.

A: Yeah. Because he didn't move here until he was 15, I think he's just always maintained the language. The first two years of his school life, he went to the English language learning

school here. We only had two years of high school or a year of high – yeah, two years of high school here and then uni. So he’s always maintained the language. And ever since I’ve been with him, I’ve just naturally fallen back into speaking the language more. And then as part of studying about, like all these things, I’ve just gone, why the fuck am I trying to speak in English? I’ve given up so much and for what? Yeah, I just decided that I would speak to him more in Tamil.

Q: Yeah, because you studied -

A: Yeah, so I studied the history of my community basically and did an oral history project. I interviewed a bunch of people who came at around the same time as me and it was really insightful just to see how people’s life trajectories have been so different because of different things, and how they’ve remained connected to the homeland or not remained connected to the homeland and why.

Q: Yep. Yeah, what made you want to study that?

A: Because the community is so fractured. Growing up, the older I got, the more I realised just how fractured the community is, was and remains.

Q: Fractured in what ways?

A: Class, caste. You really feel differences between people who are from different parts of the island, from different villages. And I also quickly realised that when we did come here, there were already a group of Tamils who lived here who were completely different. They were - their parents were professionals. They were quite well-off. The kids who were around the same age as me were quite just different. They were just a lot more westernised but also quite cultured in that very kind of - in the proper way. They were great singers, great dancers, but also really good at school; they just had it all. And I think for me it was just quite eye-opening to see differences. So there was that.

And then there were kids who were from poor suburbs and just families fractured because of the war and because at the time, like more and more people kept coming and you started to see the impacts of the war more and more, because the war lasted for what, 27 years. I could just see the differences. And as the war picked up and especially towards the end, I just thought, my God, why can’t we as a community – why can’t we mobilise? Why are we so fractured? And that came to me particularly during the final stages, in 2009. And then that’s when I realised that people just had different political opinions, just had different visions for what they wanted and different expectations.

Q: That fracturing, sounds like it feels painful?

A: Yeah, it was. I think it was confusing and painful. Confusing because I just, I didn’t know why and what was happening. Even just stuff, like I remember protesting here on the streets and on one of the days. This must have been in the weeks before the war ended, people were holding up the Tigers flag and it turned into this whole thing and people were like, “Well, I’m not coming if you’re going to hold up the flag.” I mean I’d always known that not everybody supported the Tigers, that was something that I knew quite clearly. But I think when - it hit at

such a critical moment and I thought wow, even in this moment, in this horrific horrific moment, how do we still have the capacity to separate ourselves? Like what? Like why is it that we can't come together at this moment that we still need to find excuses to throw up differences, and to make them known in such an obvious way when there is so much pain happening and being felt?

Q: Yeah. So connection and community is really important to you?

A: I think so, I mean, what else do you have?

Q: Yeah.

A: Right? What else is there? I mean sure, not everyone's going to want that, but I think it's really important, because I don't know – yeah. I think moving here, a lot of that experience was defined by the community and the connections built through the community. I think my resettlement would have been very very different if I didn't have that. Because weekends were completely full with community events, completely full. Like Saturday school, evening programs, fundraisers, birthdays, dinners, the whole lot, temples, all of it. We were just – my mum and I were just talking last night, she would regularly make food, like offerings at the temple on a Friday night or whatever special occasion was happening. She's got a whole heap of big pots to keep the food and all of those things. We bought those things for the very purpose of this.

It's just I guess life adjusted and respond – we had to adjust because of those things and I think that made our lives much more enriching and yeah it just also gave us something to look forward to right? Especially because everything was so broken back home.

Q: Yeah. Would you do all those kinds of things, particularly like the temple and stuff, back home when you were growing up?

A: Yeah, it's really interesting because apparently people weren't that religious back home, or well not where I'm from anyway. So you probably wouldn't have because there were so many temples. There's a temple at every other corner, so you wouldn't need, like you wouldn't be making big tubs of things. But here it was different because there's one temple in the local area, so everybody would congregate there. Yeah, so probably not but there's always other occasions and other opportunities to meet up with people.

Q: Yeah. So these things I guess become the way of being Tamil when you're here.

A: Yeah. And food is like central to that.

Q: What sort of food would it be?

A: Everything from – well if it's temple then it's vegetarian food. Kadala which is chickpeas sautéed in mustard seeds, onions, fennel seeds and curry leaves. Sorry, I'm giving you a whole recipe, and chilli flakes. And then everything from like savoury rice dishes mixed with yoghurt. Kesari which is one of my favourites which is like a sweet, and it's made out of semolina and sugar and ghee. What else? Vada, which is like a savoury donut. Yeah, like a

whole heap of vegetarian dishes, it's something you always look forward to and it's what everybody talks about.

Q: Yeah, is the food.

A: The food, yeah, every event, not just simple like weddings and parties. Everything, it's always about the food. And that's why things like the spice shop was so important because that's where you could buy those ingredients. And so when we first moved like in Auburn, I think there was one spice shop and then later there was two. And so I remember as a child always going to those two spice shops, which is very different to now where you're spoilt for choice. There's just so many, but back then that wasn't the case.

Q: Do you still have the couple that you will regularly go to or you just go wherever now?

A: Oh we just go wherever. And I actually think – oh, one of those spice shops closed down which was a bit sad. I think the other one's still there, in Auburn. Yeah, I think it's still there. But I don't go there anymore, I just go wherever.

Q: Yeah, because that's not where you live and not where your family lives anymore.

A: No, so then we moved to Wentworthville. There are a lot of Tamils there, lots of spice shops, lots of takeouts and eatery options. In some ways when you go towards that side of Sydney, you feel, you feel like you're – not like you're back home but you do get a sense that you're somewhere familiar.

Q: In what way?

A: Well my parents street for example, I think there must be like six or seven Tamil families that live on the street. And it's the same with the other streets as well in the area. Wentworthville, Pendle Hill, Toongabbie, Seven Hills, even Blacktown, are just full of lots of Tamils.

Q: Yeah. And that feels comforting, it feels homely?

A: Yeah. I think you drive through the streets and you're like, "Yeah, I know people here." It feels familiar, it feels, yeah. It doesn't feel as intimidating or as scary as it used to, but that's maybe also because of being here a long time.

Q: Yeah. As in Sydney doesn't feel very scary or that part of Sydney?

A: That part of it. Like I've literally only lived in Western Sydney. This is the closest I've lived to the city.

Q: Yeah right. So yeah - at the moment you don't live in that area. What provoked that decision to I guess have that bit of separation? Or what was it about living around here?

A: When we were looking for places to move to I wanted a place that was close-ish to work and I wanted a little bit of distance, because I think I've also reached a point in my life where I felt like returning from Melbourne anyway where I wasn't near anyone, that I just needed –

I kind of enjoyed having a little bit of space, because I had grown up in the area and, I just needed a bit of distance. But I didn't want to be too far away like I wanted to be able to go there when I needed to, and which the funny thing is, I'm literally there every weekend because something's on. Like I've got a party or I'm visiting or something's happening, whatever's happening is always happening in the area. So I'm there all the time.

But I just felt in my day to day that I just need - and the thing with Strathfield as well, because I catch public transport a lot, it's a bit of a hub, so it's easy for me to get to places as well. Like if I do need to go to the west or the city, it's really quick, it's like ten minutes either side.

Q: Yeah. So there's something in that, like a little bit of distance but not too much.

A: But not too much, yeah because we did think about Glebe. And we were like, "Maybe we could just recreate the Melbourne life." I feel like Glebe is the equivalent of North Melbourne right, kind of, and then I thought I just can't do that thing back here because there's just too much happening in the west that I would feel really weird to not be completely disconnected from it and I just didn't want that. Like I'm not coming back to - I'm not moving into a new state, I'm coming back home in some ways and I just didn't - I needed to be able to negotiate that in a way that was comfortable for me.

Q: Yeah, so you lived in Melbourne for a few years, were you involved in Tamil community stuff in Melbourne?

A: I was involved with the [Tamil] Refugee Council. We mostly did protests. That was the extent of my connection to the community there. Every now and then we would go to Dandenong for something but I didn't really have connections to the community beyond TRC.

Q: And was that a conscious choice?

A: Not really. We didn't have a car. We didn't know anyone. I also just didn't have the time for it. I was just completely consumed –

Q: With studying the PhD.

A: With study, and whatever else time I did have, I was doing TRC work, or when I mean work, I mean turning up to things and there was always something happening in relation to that so I felt like my life was completely consumed and I just didn't have the energy to build new connections with the community there. But also, I was coming back to Sydney quite a lot. I'd come back for everyone's wedding and parties, like I'd spend my summers here. I didn't feel the need to build new communities. But yeah, sure, I mean we still went to things. I know Dinesh had a couple of friends who lived in the Dandenong area, so we have been to things but I don't think I had – I don't think I had developed any proper relationships with people there.

Q: Yeah. Did you have your spice shops in Melbourne?

A: Yeah, it was a bit tricky hey. There was - yeah it was really funny because I think a lot of our shopping was done at Queen Vic Market. We would go there every weekend or Dinesh would go there every weekend, and he would come back with a whole bunch of stuff, like everything, and then we would inevitably go to the spice shop that was on – we used to go to two, there was one, where was it? In the city, on, what's that street? I forgot the name, you know where DFO is.

Q: Yeah, down Spencer Street.

A: Yeah, on Spencer Street, there was a spice shop and there was another spice shop adjacent to the Queen Vic Market, we would go to those two. But we also discovered that we loved cooking Korean food, and Japanese food. So we'd go to the shops opposite the market a lot.

Q: Yeah cool. So what food do you cook now?

A: Everything. We do still eat a lot of Korean, and we live in Strathfield, which is full of Korean barbeque places, so we eat a lot of Korean. We do eat a lot of Tamil food, probably also because like at events and things like that, we're bound to eat it. And now that we're back with our parents as well, they're always cooking it but everything like just the usual stuff, I guess.

Q: Have you learned recipes from your parents?

A: Yeah, my mum brought me a whole recipe book when I was in Melbourne thinking that I was going to make stuff [laughs]. And I have made a few things but I haven't, I haven't really, I haven't really looked at it properly. I mean, I usually just call her up if I get stuck or if something hasn't turned out right. But truthfully Dinesh does most of the cooking.

Q: Yeah, that's just the way – he enjoys it?

A: He loves it like that's his thing.

Q: Yeah, handy.

A: Yeah, I guess so. It just means I've just got to – like I'm not fussy anyway but if he says we're having a curry with puttlu, and fried egg, I'm like, "Yeah, sure, that's great." Even though I've had a massive lunch and I just want something light like toast, I'm like, "Yeah, sure." [laughs]

Q: That's great. How did you and Dinesh meet?

A: We went to UNSW together. I met him for the first time at uni. He's in the grade above me, and yeah so we met at uni and then we reconnected a couple of years later on Facebook, I think. He sort of disappeared and then we reconnected and then we met up just to catch up, and then we were like, "Yeah, let's give this a go." [laughs]

Q: Yeah. How long ago was that?

A: Oh yonks. Um, ten years I think, yeah, yeah.

Q: And just going back a little bit to your family, and tell me about your grandparents.

A: Yeah, my grandparents stayed, back home, until about 2008. So they were there throughout most of the war. They'd come over for three months at a time because that was all my mum was able to do with the visa situation. She had quite a lot of trouble trying to sponsor them here. They would come over for three months at a time and then they didn't permanently move until 2008. They lived, they continued to stay there, and my great grandma also lived with them. She didn't pass away until I think a couple of years after we moved here.

Q: Oh wow. Do you remember her?

A: It's funny because I kind of do like I've got these weird little memories of – I don't know if they're stories or my memories, or – but I definitely have a vision of her in my head. And I can picture her sitting on the corner outside. She's a little lady, probably my height, in her sari, smoking suruttu. Anyway, all the old people used to smoke, so she'd be sitting outside on the floor smoking that and banging something in the mortar and pestle.

Q: Like some sort of food type thing? Yeah right. That's amazing, that's great. [shared laughter]

A: I've got the memories. Yeah, so I've got memories of her sitting on the floor.

Q: Yeah, like at your house?

A: At the house, yeah.

Q: Did you live in an intergenerational house?

A: Yeah, everyone, so her, my grandparents, and my family. It was a tiny house, probably the size of this place here. And there were no windows. There were two rooms but no windows. It's half inside, half outside. You know those kind of houses? And the well on the corner, kitchen and then -

Q: Yeah. And this is with your mum's parents?

A: Yep

Q: Did you have interaction with your dad's parents?

A: I've got no memories of them and to be honest, no, I had zero interactions with them.

Q: Yep. And did any other family members come out to Australia after you guys? No. Did people want to or it just wasn't -

A: From – yeah, I don't know if they wanted to but nobody else did. We were the only ones who were here. And my mum, after her brother died, she was the only child, there was no one on my mum's side anyway. And then on my dad's side, his siblings basically did what he did and they all just went to random countries, so they're all just everywhere.

Q: Yeah. Do you have any interaction with them at all?

A: Yeah. When I was in London a couple of months ago, I stayed with my dad's, one of his brother's daughters, who I'm really close to.

Q: Yeah, was that nice?

A: It's lovely, she's great. Yeah, she's like a cooler version of me [shared laughter]. She's a hipper, cooler, more switched-on version of me, is how I would describe her. She's about ten years younger, she's really cool, she's really cool. I stayed with her and we had a great time.

Q: That's great, that's lovely. And your uncle, he was involved in the war or it was just -

A: No, he actually wasn't. He was – I think the story is that he – a lot happened at the time that he died. He died in '89, the Indian Army were in the north and east. They came as part of the peace process between the Indian Government and the Sri Lankan Government and they were supposed to bring peace. They were Indian Army Peace Keeping Forces. They basically came and killed a whole bunch of Tamils at the time, particularly targeting young men. And that was what the Sri Lankan Government was doing at the time as well. And my uncle was a young man at the time. He's one of like hundreds of young men who died during the late eighties period, just during that time. But he wasn't in the Tigers, he was at a bicycle shop or he was on the way to a bicycle shop and he – let me just get this story straight.

Yeah, I think the Indian Army came and at the time there were also people who for money were pointing other people out, to the army. And the story goes that somebody pointed my uncle out to the army and said that he was part of the Tigers or something along those lines and they came and shot him.

Q: Jesus.

A: Yep. And it was a very common occurrence at the time.

Q: Yeah, that's awful.

A: Yep.

Q: Yeah. Have you been back since you left?

A: We went back in 2004 during the peace process. And that was our first time since moving here. By that point I was a teenager, I was like okay, let's go back to this mysterious place. And yeah, I mean look, it was fine. I mean because we had been in contact with people there, I knew a few key people or at least heard their names and had by that point known a lot of stories. It was fine, yeah, I guess it was just very different to life here right? I remember being there and not closing the front door because people would just keep coming in, because they hadn't seen my parents since they left. And so we would be visiting people and it was just a lot of people, because you knew everyone. That was my first time going back.

And then I went back during my PHD in 2017 with Dinesh and that was a very different experience because I didn't – I went to the archives and then I did go up to the north, to

Jaffna Library but I didn't go to my village. I ran out of time. It was just a really tight schedule and we also went with Dinesh's aunty and her three kids. And the thought of having to travel another hour from Jaffna was just not going to happen during that trip but I haven't been back since and I don't think I can.

Q: You don't think you can?

A: I just don't think it would be safe.

Q: Because of your political activity?

A: Yeah.

Q: How does that feel?

A: Pretty shit, like, I mean – like I've seen it happen and I've seen other people in similar situations and they just - like nobody gives a shit. And the amount of trauma that they would have experienced, you will just never hear about it. And that person has to live with that and not just them but their whole family. So I'm not going to do it.

Q: Yeah, and like you're an Australian citizen now, that doesn't feel like that offers any protection?

A: Nope. Nope. I mean so have all the others, right?

Q: Yeah, yeah. Do you remember becoming an Australian citizen?

A: Yeah, I do actually. I remember taking my plush owl toy to the ceremony.

Q: Your what toy?

A: My plush owl, I don't know why, but it came with me.

Q: Yeah. Was it a comfort toy thing?

A: I think so. I was thinking about it, maybe it was my comfort toy. I took my owl with me and I remember my mum wore a green blazer, I think. I don't know where she got it from, but it was the ones with the big shoulder pads. And I remember some big white guy being like "Congratulations," and I was like, "eh thanks." But I don't remember much else about the ceremony.

Q: Do you remember what you wore?

A: No, I don't, I just remember the owl. Yeah I don't.

Q: Do you remember what your "Eh thanks," was about, like what was going on in the -

A: I knew we were getting – I knew it was a ceremony for the citizenship, and I think the guy just said, "Congratulations for becoming citizens," but I was so – I had this fear of white people. Because I was also really really little but I also just feared as well white people, and I

think I had kind of – I'd always close up a little bit I think like I'm trying - I guess feel safe. Yeah, I don't know.

Q: Yeah. What was the fear about?

A: Just authority maybe, yeah.

Q: Like people who would try to control you.

A: They were always – I mean, the white people were the police officers, the teachers. They were just – you switch on the TV and you would see white people, especially in the nineties, right? I think for me in my head I was like, these are the people with power. Whenever I did come across them, I would just curl up a little bit inside.

Q: And for most of your daily life you didn't have to interact with white people?

A: Not really because I went to – my primary school was really mixed. There were a couple of white kids but the vast majority were not, and high school was the same, like super super mixed. I think I can count like four or five white kids.

Q: And they weren't really your friends?

A: No. No.

Q: Do you feel Australian?

A: [pause] No. I don't actually know what that means because I now associate it to Barnaby Joyce, do you know what I mean? And I just can't – I'm sorry but I can't connect to that, yeah. So no.

Q: I mean I don't know what it means either.

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah. When you were born, am I right, you had Sri Lankan citizenship, did you?

A: I think so, yeah.

Q: And did you travel on a Sri Lankan passport to come to Australia?

A: Yeah, I guess so.

Q: Do you still have Sri Lankan citizenship?

A: No.

Q: And you chose to give that up or you had to give that up?

A: I think we had to give that up, yeah. I think we only got a passport when we had to leave. Up until that point we didn't have passports. Yeah, I don't think my mum had a passport until she had to leave.

Q: Yeah, she had also never left?

A: No. Actually, no she did because before I was born, they were displaced in India. She did. Or but maybe they went by boat or no, they did fly. Yeah, she did have a passport.

Q: They'd been in India and they returned.

A: Yeah yeah yeah. They were in India for a couple of months, just after my second brother was born. That would have been '86, '85/'86. And a lot of people, we had to because the situation was so bad, nobody was actually in our village at that point. People had either displaced to other parts of the north and east or went somewhere else.

Q: Yeah. And were you displaced during your life while you were in -?

A: Yeah. My mum always tells the story of – in our culture after you're born between your birth and turning, or actually no, just in the first couple of years of your life there are lots of little things that you do. When you get your first tooth, there's this little ceremony. Just before you start school there's a little ceremony to make sure that you do well in your studies, that thing. There're just a few little things. When you take solids for the first time, there's a little ceremony for that. On your 31st day we've got the cradle ceremony. I skipped a few of those things but on one of those occasions we were displaced, living in a school and it was – it fell at the time of when we were supposed to do the –

So you basically go to the priest, the temple, and you do this thing where you grab the child's hand and it's supposed to write the first letter of the Tamil alphabet. And because we were displaced, I couldn't do that. But then my mum somehow found a priest I guess who was also displaced and we did the ceremony, yeah so we did the ceremony, while we were displaced. And I think she'd somehow found, because you wear a new outfit usually on those occasions, and I guess she must have packed a dress or something. I've got to confirm that, but she was like, "Yeah, and then we just pulled out this new dress on you and we just got the priest and we did it at the school." And I was like, "Okay." Yeah, I think a few of my things were done while we were displaced. I've got no photos of me for like the first three years of my life.

Q: Yeah, right. You would lose things or just was never - you were on the move and just never -?

A: I was born – yeah, it was just never -

Q: Yeah, displacement is really a key part, like it's part of your -

A: Yeah, because we'd go and then come back and then go and come back -

Q: But yeah, could always keep coming back to -?

A: Yeah, because once the fighting receded people would start coming back. And then you would ramp up and then you would leave again because our village was also very close to one of the army camps.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah

Q: You had this Sri Lankan citizenship but did you ever feel Sri Lankan?

A: No. Could never, didn't have any –I mean, I didn't have any Sinhalese friends. Or actually I knew one girl in preschool here in Australia but I guess I was too little to figure that one out. But no.

Q: When you're now filling out bureaucratic forms and you have to say where you were born and stuff like that, what do you write down?

A: It depends. If I've got the option like in the census form now there is an option to tick Tamil, so I'll just tick that. Where there is no option which is usually the case then I'll just put Sri Lanka.

Q: How does that feel?

A: Pretty shit. But I'm also realising that it's impossible, it's exhausting, and I think [pause] I don't know that I've got the energy to fight every little battle. Sometimes if it means I just have to say, use the term 'Sri Lanka,' then I will.

Q: Yeah. What's the – you said it's impossible and it's exhausting, what's the 'its'?

A: Even just things like explaining why it's uncomfortable for me to use the term 'Sri Lanka,' I can't do that to every – I can't do that every time I meet someone, right? So I'll just say "Yeah, I'm from Sri Lanka." And it is uncomfortable but put simply, I don't really have the energy to explain to every single person the history and the reason why I don't associate myself to the country and the name.

Q: Yeah. Would you ever say that you're from Tamil Eelam, is that a -

A: Yeah. I find it much easier to do in community contexts. I've gotten to a point where I don't really give a shit and I'll just say what I want but that's taken a lot of work. It's taken a lot of me being around people who think similarly and who make me feel comfortable about saying that because for a long time that was not the case.

Q: Why? You mean in community or just in -

A: Yeah, even in community. It's taken a long time for me to find people who have been asking the same questions as me and who were negotiating the same kinds of complexities.

Q: Yeah, it's hard from an edge of a community as well.

A: Yeah. So I do a bit of both and sometimes I mix things up and sometimes it's a whole, it's a bit of a mess but yeah, I think I've just come to embrace it.

Q: Yeah, is the mess also in you give – or I wonder if you give these answers and then it can sometimes carry more meaning than you intend it to in a moment –

A: mmm, yeah.

Q: And then a person hears it and thinks that that's how you would always identify but actually it's just a snapshot in that moment, that's how you wanted to describe –

A: But most recently when – did you hear of *Jungle and the Sea*, the jungle – play.

Q: The play? Yeah. You wrote a review of it for *The Conversation*?

A: Yeah, I wrote a review of it for *The Conversation*. It was a very basic review and I was like, "Yeah, look someone's done some stuff," whatever. I should have been a lot more critical of that play because it was pretty horrible for how it depicted some key things. And people – I mean in the moment I was like, "You know what, someone's done something, there are some things that I feel really uncomfortable about, but I don't think this is what the mainstream community needs to hear." That was my view of things. In hindsight I should have just listened to my gut and just been more critical of the play. So that's a lesson that I take with me. But following that review I had people criticising me for not criticising the play. It turned into a whole thing.

I got invited to a community meeting with the director of the play and it was just a learning moment for me to realise that everything that we do needs to be more considerate of the people who are at the centre of the stories that we tell, because that's not what he did and it caused a lot of pain for people. And me writing that view in that way didn't help the situation. I mean I don't know that they all read it, but they all attended the play. And these are people who were former Tigers who were like, "This is not what happened, so why are you representing us in this way."

Q: Yeah. I get it's about our responsibilities and our obligations to our community and our place within our communities and wanting that at the centre of the work.

A: Yeah. It can be tricky because you know it's – I mean there's the individual and sure you can't separate the individual from the collective. I don't know, it's just really tricky I think, because I guess for me it was like if we shut this one down there might not be any other opportunities, right, for anyone who does want to write different kinds of stories. And then since then, like I've spoken to people and came to the conclusion that you know what it doesn't matter, just write what you want and people will find their way. Like we don't need to settle.

Q: Yeah, that notion of settling I think but also that I guess for community, like when you're dealing with war and conflict, it's not surprising that the conflict will come out in all sorts of ways I guess.

A: Yeah, like it was really telling for me. I was invited to the opening night and I think I counted three other brown people. The entire play was about the war. The entire play was about war and trauma, and he had invited all these white, I don't know what, like reviewers from all these other places.

Q: Yeah, who is the work for?

A: Who is the work for? And then I found out that he's – I didn't go to his first play but his first play was very similar to this one and I was like, "Oh God." And I did hear that he consulted with people, so I don't know, I don't know what happened.

Q: Who was your PhD for?

A: [pause] In some ways it was for me. It was for me to understand why and how. But I think it was also, I think it was also for I guess kids like me, the ones that didn't have the parents who were already established and professionals and lived around here. Yeah, just normal ordinary kids like me who were just on the edges of the community circle who will just always get overlooked or ignored.

Q: Yeah. So class is a big part of your life.

A: Yeah, yep, yep. And caste.

Q: Yeah, can you say more about both those two things?

A: Yeah, so we're from a lower caste. We're from the karai [which translates to the coast, so people who live in that area. Usually, they would be fisher people, although no one from my immediate family were fisher people. A lot of our relatives are fisher people. My village as I said, it's like the northern most point of the island. Yeah, our house is literally ten minutes from the water. And when we came here, we realised that a lot of people here were not from the same caste, they were from – a lot of people here were Vellalar, that's a higher cast and they're from Jaffna, like Jaffna town. Yeah, just very different people, different approaches to life, different, just different, and sometimes they would make it very obvious.

Q: Right, as in they'll look down on you?

A: Oh yeah. I remember as a child, we'd sometimes go to events – and I remember this one time my mum was telling me how this guy was in a really sly way or we were going somewhere as a group of people and he was like, "Oh, it would be really nice if it was just us here." And what he meant by that was like people from our caste.

Q: Yeah,

A: yeah

Q: it's awful.

A: Yeah, and incidentally, I guess it kinda made sense because they were also the ones that were able to – like the parents would finish school and they would go to university. When

they did leave, they were leaving on actual work visas because they had professional jobs to go to. A lot of them came here and they were engineers. A lot of the folks that live in the suburb, yeah, they would have all come I reckon like in the seventies and eighties before the war.

Q: Yeah, and they came in the like economic -

A: Yeah, so they would have been students, like university students, professionals, which is very different to my lot. Like my parents didn't finish high school. My mum, and I don't think my dad went to school past year 8, and my mum didn't go to school past year 10, yeah.

Q: Did your brothers go to university?

A: Yep, yep.

Q: Was that a thing, a big thing for them to go?

A: Yeah, for my mum it was because she just didn't. I think for her it was like, oh - she didn't care what we were going to do. I think for her it was just like, "I just need you guys to get an education." Yeah, she wasn't pushy or anything like that but she definitely wanted us to finish school and go to uni, which was the case for Tamils I guess but I guess for her it meant something a bit different.

Q: Yeah. And how do they feel about you getting a PhD?

A: I actually don't - I mean, I think she was obviously super excited but I think by that point she was just like, "You do what you want," sort of. Yeah, she often says, "Oh not in my - like I never would have dreamt that you would have gone on to do a PhD," and I was like "Yes, me neither mother, that makes two of us." [shared laughter] Yeah, she's really happy of course but I don't think she's - like she doesn't have my certificate framed on the wall or anything like that. But she's also not a very - she's not a show off I guess, she's quite humble about things.

Q: Are you close with her?

A: Yep, very.

Q: Yeah, what does that look like, that closeness?

A: I hang out with her like all the time, like even in Melbourne, I'd call her every day and we'd speak for like an hour. And even now, I spend my evenings with her. Yeah, so we're close.

Q: Yeah, that's cool. And thinking about, to change track a little bit, you've had citizenship somewhere but not a citizenship that you've really maybe ever felt connected to? I mean where feels like home to you?

A: I think about this question a lot and I actually don't know. Because I don't feel rooted. Like I feel like I'm constantly in this - I'm kind of hovering, right? Like I'm hovering. I

don't actually have – I can't think of a – I don't actually know what home is, to be honest, which is why I think I've come to the conclusion that it's really just about the connections.

Q: Connections?

A: with people.

Q: with people. So people are home maybe? Or a form of home?

A: I think so, yeah. Building connections with people who I feel comfortable with who I can open up to.

Q: Do you find it easy to make connections with people?

A: Yeah, I don't – I'm not a difficult person I don't think [laughs]. I'm really easy going and I love like if someone invites to me to dinner, I'm like, "Yeah, sure." I'm quite sociable in that sense. I love going to things but there are very few people who I feel deeply connected to, do you know what I mean? In that sense I really have a small – like my circle is quite small.

Q: But it's tight?

A: It's tight, yep. So for example like Maria, who you've met, I talk to her every day she's like one – after dinners with my mum, it's probably like – yeah, my circle was very tight and small. But there are quite a few others who I would – yeah, like I have good relationships with them and I feel comfortable but I'd also be fine if they left, do you know what I mean? Whereas if Maria said she was going to go back to Zim, I'd be like heartbroken [laughs]. Like it was quite upsetting when I had to move back here but it's fine. One way I was able to deal with it was to say well I'll be talking to her on the phone every day, which I do.

Q: But yeah, there's no geographical place that feels like home.

A: No. Western Sydney, because I've been there for such a long time but it's also quite – I've moved around within it but if I was to pinpoint a geography, it would be Western Sydney.

Q: Yeah. What does, your village back where you were born, what does that feel like?

A: An imaginary place that is I don't know, like I'm connected to it obviously, it's where I'm from and a lot of – like even though I've grown up here, it remains such an important part of my life. But because I haven't lived there for long enough, I'm also equally disconnected from it.

Q: Do you remember the two times you've been back; do you remember how your body felt? Did it feel different there as compared to being over here?

A: Quite sad. I remember driving from Colombo to Jaffna and it's just awful seeing the statues of government soldiers, like massive statues of the government, the army, this celebration of the end of the war and the defeat of the Tigers. And the government's

commemoration of the war just dotted along the A9 highway up to the north. I remember driving past and thinking what is this, and this is not my home, this is not where my roots are.

Q: Do you feel stateless? Is that a useful word for you?

A: I think because I've never felt attached to Sri Lanka or Australia, the concept doesn't really – the concept has less importance than the term home for me because I've never been able to connect to either state. I never think about the state as a place that I desire to be a part of because it's never included me in anything. And when I say me, I mean people like me. But I think the term home is something that I can – that has always been a part of my thinking. And home as in like feeling included or excluded or being rooted or uprooted. And I think when I think of the term 'stateless,' I also think about the struggle for statehood because of the Tamil Liberation Movement. There's a notion of longing for something that never materialised and there's a sense of loss because I've never – because it never happened. I mean sure there was the de facto state but I have no, like I've never lived or I've got no living memory of being a part of that. Sure, I've heard stories and seen pictures and things like that but for the most part it's not something that I've really resonated with.

Q: Yeah. Do you have a longing for statehood?

A: [pause] I don't know, like I'm genuinely confused because I know how important it was for us to have independence. And I know it came at such a huge – that loss and not being able to achieve that came at such a huge toll with such unimaginable loss. So I don't know, like I'm genuinely confused. My sense is that if we did gain independence then we would have had a separate state. If we did have a separate state in the north and east, yeah, I don't know, I'm speculating here right, I don't know. At what cost is the question that comes to mind maybe. Would things be different? Yeah, probably. I'd say so. But yeah, like I said, it never materialised so I don't know, like I don't know if it would have changed things. My sense is that there would have been less heartbreak than there is and continues to be now.

Q: What's the heartbreak?

A: Just the ongoing shit fuckery of the Sri Lankan state continuing to colonise Tamil land in the north and east. They dug up mass graves. They dug up graves of people who had died in the war, like literally just two days ago and they continue to dig up graves. And we're never going to know who those – that's not going to get investigated, no one gives a shit. People are still searching for their loved ones who died, disappeared, disappeared. Yeah, it's just whatever happened pre-war, leading up to the war, the way I see it is it continuing to happen now. Even just the right to remember, like two days ago I saw a video of Sinhalese mobs literally attacking a memorial of Thileepan who was one of the guys who fasted and died in '87 against the Indian Army occupation in plain view of the police who were there. Like how was that any different to what was going on in the eighties? So what's changed?

Yeah, when I put all of that together and everything else going on, it does make me wonder that a separate state and a separate something is the only solution to this.

Q: Yeah. You said a couple of times that we've been talking about I guess this sense of maybe feeling abandoned or that people don't care or that that -

A: Yeah, I don't think there's enough momentum for that to happen and partly it's understandable especially for those who have lost a lot right. Like why would they want to continue to pursue something that has caused so much pain and trauma? But a part of me is like, what else do you do? I don't know what the solution is. I don't know what the future is. Is this just how it is, like is this what – is this just going to be normalised, like I don't know.

Q: What would you like the future to be?

A: A group of people who can self-determine what they want. They should be able to elect their own representatives and have their own say about how they want to live. Just basic self-determination.

Q: Do you think you've had self-determination in the way you've lived your life?

A: Not always. Being a brown girl. Not always. Yeah. Yeah. I think it probably wasn't until I was much older that I have felt like I could do things on my own terms. I think growing up and thinking back, I think my parents were just afraid, like constantly afraid, always afraid that something was going to happen. Curfews were not a thing because you just weren't allowed to go anywhere, right. Yeah, so.

Q: Have you experienced racism in Australia?

A: I'm sure I have and I probably just blocked it off, yeah. I know my brothers have, at school. I think – I mean when you're already excluded and you're already on the margins, the racism just becomes another thing, because you already arrive here knowing that you've been racially excluded from the homeland. It's not a separate thing, that is just your framework, that is just the world in which you – that's just your world. You've already arrived here because you've been racially excluded. Like we knew what it was like before the term even – before we knew the term.

Q: And I guess there are so many ways to respond to that exclusion but one of them could be just to desire to be included. Have you desired inclusion?

A: I don't know into what, I haven't quite figured out into what I would like to be included into. Because the older I got like I said, I don't think I want to be included into Australian society, whatever that is. So I don't know what – and the really shitty thing is like growing up where I did, I didn't have any Indigenous friends, so I wasn't around, I wasn't around the community. I had a lot of - I went to a very ethnically mixed school like I said and so my connections were with those other kids but I never know what I want to be a part of. But I do like being connected to other people, like just others.

Q: Yeah, like other ethnics, migrants?

A: Just people on the edges.

Q: Yeah? Yeah. Class wise as well?

A: Yep.

Q: Yeah,

A: Yep.

Q: Yeah does class difference still remain a factor for you?

A: I can't technically claim to be working class so I'm not sure that stands. [shared laughter] Definitely not, but it's shaped so much of who I am that I can't also shake it off. I know I'm not working class but I can't shake it off, I can't shake that thinking away from me. I can't change my caste, like I'm stuck with that. And regardless of how people say, "Oh well you know, there's no" – people are going to say, "Well there's no caste here in Australia," but you can feel it.

Q: You can still feel it?

A: I can feel it.

Q: Like at community events and stuff?

A: Oh yeah, yep. So I find myself gravitating towards just people who are on the margins, in whatever way.

Q: And is now colonisation here is something you think about?

A: Yeah. And I also see the connections between what's happening at home, back there and what's happening here. I've got dreams of writing a paper, connecting the two but –

Q: Yeah. Are things like solidarity a big thing for you?

A: Yeah, absolutely, yeah. I think it's really really important and it's – I don't think it should be a last resort thing either. Sometimes I feel like what's left to do but builds solidarity but I don't think it needs to be that way, I think it should be something that we do even if we didn't have to be on the street protesting. Like it doesn't need to be part of political movements. I think it should also be part of how we socialise and engage culturally, how we practice joy and happiness. I don't think it needs to be something that we do because we're angry and frustrated.

Q: And what does happiness look like for you?

A: Just chatting [laughs]. I love just having long chats and yeah just having great conversations with people. I don't know, just having a yarn about various things, because that's what we do right? Like I don't come from a line of people who write. Everything is done orally through stories and conversations. So yeah, I guess just having those social interactions is really important and I really enjoy them. Yeah, like I go to so much random stuff.

Q: Like what?

A: Well with work, lunches, dinners. I go to trivia, which I love, like I absolutely love, I don't know why but I just really like it. I usually never get anything right but I just – Yeah, I love getting coffees with people.

Q: Do you talk about questions around citizenship and belonging and home with family and friends?

A: Um, yeah. Not citizenship and stuff like that but like with M I talk a lot about that kind of stuff and with my mum as well and sometimes with D as well.

Q: And those conversations, they're helpful or?

A: I think it's helpful for just thinking through things because we might see something on TV or hear something on the radio and then straightaway, we just turn to each other and we're like, "What the fuck was that?" It's almost like a release mechanism as well. But I guess I feel the most joy when I'm having those conversations because then I feel connected.

Q: Yeah. And your friends from when you were a kid, are you still friends with people from when you were a kid?

A: Yeah. We get invited to all their parties and now all their kid's parties. And I've got some friends from my older workplace as well that I'm still in contact with, so that's nice and I like that I'm being, that I get to see them more now that I'm back.

Q: what sort of relationship would you want them [your potential kids] to have to be Tamil? Is it something you think about?

A: Yeah, it is actually. I think there's so much – there's a lot of – yeah, I feel sorry for them because of the pressure to know things and the need to know things, because I see a lot of little kids nowadays who just don't know. Like they've been born in the last ten years after the war and they just have no idea. Like born here and they just don't realise that there's all this history and all these circumstances and things that have happened that have led to them being born here. And I don't know where they're going to learn that history from, because it's not part of the Saturday School curriculum for instance. So if their parents aren't telling them, how will they know? Because the mainstream school sure as hell isn't going to teach them anything. And that does worry me, because there is now an entirely new generation of Tamil kids growing up being born here and growing up here potentially not – knowing even less than what my generation has known growing up.

Q: And the Saturday School is like a Tamil Saturday -

A: Just language school.

Q: Just languages, language, and culture stuff?

A: Yeah, a little bit of culture but mostly just language and they still teach them the same stuff that they were teaching us.

Q: Yeah right

A: Yeah [sigh]

Q: Yeah, but none of the history?

A: None of the history.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: I actually don't know and I think it comes back to the divide within the community about folks, some folks who just maybe don't see it as an important thing to be able to teach. This is part of the language which I find really strange, because the language was like the first forms of discrimination that we faced. So it strikes me as really odd and frustrating that that history is not integrated more into the curriculum.

Q: Yeah. Do you think it's a difficulty facing trauma and violence or is it a forgetting for some other reason?

A: I think it's an act of forgetting. I think it's being knowingly done.

Q: But you don't know why?

A: They just don't want to deal with it, because to deal with it would mean whose version? Which histories do you tell? Which version of the past do you tell? Whose side do you take? And I know that there are people in the language school space for example who have attended government things.

Q: As in Australian Government or Sri Lankan. Both.

A: Both. Like very pro that kind of multiculturalism.

Q: What do you mean by 'that kind of multiculturalism'?

A: You know, pro the kind of multiculturalism that celebrates culture without really getting to the root of that celebration and why it's important. It's a very surface level celebration of difference and it's usually done within the space of I don't know, Harmony Day or some shit.

Q: It's really palatable.

A: Yeah, and there's usually government ministers there. It's a very show and tell situation.

Q: Earlier when we were talking about you know being stateless and would homeless be a word that you would – that feels like the right word?

A: Yeah, yep, yep. because I think when I think of home, I think of not just a physical place but human interactions and cultures and being severed from that. And rebuilding that in different ways is a feeling of homelessness, in a metaphorical sense of course.

Q: Do you feel like a migrant? Would you describe yourself as a migrant?

A: I guess now I would, like I don't know – yeah, I've grappled with this a lot because sure we fled because of the war, I don't know how long the refugee label lasts, that's something else that I obviously struggle to come to terms with.

Q: So at a certain time, you would have called yourself a refugee?

A: Well, I'm also just thinking about – I don't know that I would be the refugee, the refugee figure that comes to mind.

Q: In whose mind?

A: The world's mind. Yeah.

Q: Why not?

A: Because I think there's so much stereotyping that happens around who constitutes a refugee and what they look like, as someone who just came recently, someone who is struggling financially, someone who doesn't have the right language skills, whatever whatever. I don't know if I fit that figure of a refugee, and I don't. Right, I don't. But I think the sense of, and that's where the migrant thing comes in or the immigrant thing, but I think I have continued to experience that sense of loss. And that has manifested in so many different ways across my life including even like the PhD for example, or the activist work. For me that is my connection to the refugee label. I guess I'm kind of between categories.

Q: And does the in-betweenness and I guess all these kinds of in-betweenness around the states and citizenships, do you feel like it just points to how these categories just don't really work?

A: They don't work.

Q: Or they do, they work in it, to do other things, I guess.

A: Yeah. I think to describe my social, cultural, and political experiences, they're just not particularly useful because they change. And my connections to them change as well. There are some moments when I feel more strongly – there are some periods when I feel that loss more than at other times. Like when I saw the mass graves the other day, it's heartbreaking because it's just such a visceral depiction of something that is gone, but is still there and will be there forever, because you also know that that is not the only gravesite, there are other grave sites that they're going to find and probably do nothing about but it more broadly just symbolises the entire north and east, as a place of just huge loss.

Q: Yeah. What labels do feel useful to you to think of yourself, or descriptors?

A: I actually don't mind using, saying that I'm Tamil. Because I can, I can claim to describe myself within that label however I want, and I feel like I have the freedom to do that. Like nobody can take that away from me, so I'm probably most comfortable being labelled as that. I feel like I have power and the ability to – if I want to be on the fringes within my community, I can and I will and I'm comfortable with that but if I want to insert myself into

some mainstream activity that's happening, then I will and I'm happy to do that. I feel like I have a lot more flexibility within that label.

Q: So there's kind of power and beauty in being on the margins? You like being on the margins?

A: I do. I think, it's taken me such a long time to realise that that's where I belong, that's where I've been all this time and I've just never seen it. And for whatever reason I've not been able to imagine myself in that space as a – to see that space as a welcoming space and as a space where I can just be me, and say whatever the fuck I want and do what I want and make mistakes but also just learn from them and keep moving.

Q: Yeah, that's really powerful. What shifted to help you see this?

A: Being around people like you [shared laughter]. I don't know, I think being in Melbourne was great for that, just being exposed to more people in the left generally. Learning about other people's struggles, meeting new folks who are going through some – who are just experiencing similar things. And I realise that there are lots of people who are just like me, and I found that really – and I was very late to realise that but I think, I think this is it, I can't see myself ever wanting to go back and try and fit into anything.

Q: Yeah, the contortions that are required to fit in? You're still pretty young, how old are you now?

A: Turning 35.

Q: 35, it's young.

A: Thanks.

Q: What do you think justice for statelessness would look like?

A: I'm going to go back to self-determination because I think for my community the only thing standing in the way of justice is being able to self-determine their futures and they're unable to do that, and they have been unable to do that since the British passed over power to the Sinhalese to rule the country. If that was given to them, for me that could be justice for what they've been experiencing.

Q: What would ending statelessness look like?

A: [pause] Just freedom to be able to move where you wanted to, to not have, to not be governed, to not be controlled. To just be able to freely move around, to be able to live on your land and not feel like someone's going to come and take it away. Yeah, like so many of the people I interviewed had lost their physical homes. They would talk about returning eventually and seeing broken homes because the shells had damaged it or it had been used by the militants, it was completely just in ruins. I think just even having access to your land, right.

Q: What's happened to the home that you were in when you were young?

A: Oh it's still there. It's still there. And it's still in the family, I guess. Yeah. Nothing – we did - there was a shell that I think ruined the roof at some point, but there was no serious damage to the house as far as I can tell, so it's still there.

Q: Do you – I mean it's so hard to ask this one question around what you've learned from your life experiences without – like not to say there's growth and learning from going through shit and genocide, but do you feel you've learned things from this, from your set of life experiences?

A: I don't know that I've learned anything because I feel like that was just life. I don't know if it's taught me anything, maybe just that everything is just always going to be chaotic and that's just life. Like there's never going to be any stability, you just better get used to it. Like everything is always going to be changing, there's always going to be constant movement. I remember as a child just hearing there's been fighting here and bombs dropped here and every other week the course of the war would change, so you would hear about it. There was just always something changing, moving, and happening and same goes for life here right. Like my dad would be out of a job and then my mum would get a job and then something else would happen and then we would move and then there was just always constant movement and change and I think in some ways that has come to –

I think those things have helped me come to realise that, and this is going to sound really cliché but, there's always change in life. But I don't know that I've learned anything. And I don't see those things as lessons, like I don't know how to explain it but I don't -

Q: Yeah, they just are.

A: They just are, right. It's just the way of life. It's not like it was a one, there was one incident or one big incident that happened and that was it, and oh yeah, that was so traumatic, that thing that occurred between July and August. It wasn't like that. The pain and the suffering were so constant that I just – because there was no end point, there is no end point, that – there are no lessons because that was just it.

Q: Yeah. Pain just feels like a thing.

A: It's just normal, it's just a thing like. It's just a thing that you get used to having in your life. Maybe that's the lesson. It's not really a lesson, no.

Q: Does it then sometimes feel weird, the idea that people might not have that.

A: Yeah it does.

Q: Do those people feel weird?

A: Yeah! Because it's like how – yeah, I don't know, maybe they just have better ways of dealing with things. Or do you mean like other people who are not -

Q: I mean I guess there's like – not everyone comes from families that have been through genocides.

A: Oh yeah yeah yeah. Oh yeah yeah, yes, of course.

Q: Yeah, is there anything you think we've missed, anything else you would want to say?

A: Um, not really. I mean, in terms of statelessness?

Q: Yeah, or your life or anything you think.

A: You know I think it's interesting for my community because statelessness is something that applied to both the diaspora and people in the homeland, so it's something that crossed borders.

Q: Can you say more about that?

A: People in the homeland obviously felt they were being violently discriminated against, being forced out of their homes, displaced, not being part of the Sri Lankan state. And not only that, but actually the state wanting them eliminated. And then for those of us who managed to somehow escape, and we very nearly didn't, very nearly didn't, but for those of us who managed to escape and then to come to lands like these, you then also felt like you weren't really a part of – you sort of had to perform in a way if you wanted to appeal to the mainstream. And the Australian state here basically just dismissed you anyway. So I think the sense of being stateless was a common thread that connected the community. And I think that's probably one of the things that helped keep people close, and connected.

Q: Across wherever they lived, across borders?

A: Wherever they lived, yeah.

Q: This shared feeling of statelessness, yeah.

A: And then the aspiration for a separate state because that was all happening at the same time. We were still remembering the war dead and fundraising.

Q: Fundraising for back home?

A: Yeah, for the Tigers.

Q: Tigers, yeah.

A: There was this weird cross border feeling of statelessness and then aspiration to have a state. Which is also a form of community building.

Q: And so homeland is how you refer to where you came from?

A: Yep

Q: That's the term that you'd always use in conversation, homeland?

A: Yeah, or back home.

Q: Back home, yeah. Or you talk about north and east as well.

A: Yeah, I try and say – it's really tricky, but I try and say things like the north and east of the island.

Q: The island, yeah. All the linguistic ways to get around.

A: Yeah, trying to get around. And I really hope one day that I can just openly say what I want but I'm not there yet.

Q: Openly say what you want to say. What would it take you to get you there?

A: I think just a little bit more confidence in how people in the community feel, but also how I feel to represent them. Because the thing that sticks, is a sticking point is not everybody associates with the north and east that way. Like a lot of people in my community are fine to say they're from Sri Lanka and I don't want to be, like I'm in this really awkward position, I'm representing them, but I also have my own views. I'm con – yeah -

Q: Who you're representing them to? Or in what context? Like in public, and like non-Tamil community?

A: Yeah, yeah. Although I'm increasingly just like I said being like "Fuck it, I'll just say what I want." But yeah, I do think it's important to separate out my personal views and the views of the people that I've been interviewing for example, because I also don't want to misrepresent how they see themselves. So it's a tension.

Q: Yeah. Something else I just thought of is in terms of the clothes you wear, do you wear sari and wear Tamil clothes?

A: Yeah, all the time, and I love it like I absolutely love it. One of the great things about being back is because I'm going to events more, I get to take out all my stuff and I love it. I've always enjoyed wearing cultural clothes. I don't think I've ever been – I don't think I've ever shied away from wearing that kind of stuff outside.

Q: Yeah. And you wear it for occasions and then the rest of the time you wear western -

A: Yeah, Western clothes although in recent years I've also started to wear cultural clothes when I go to some public events as well, which is nice and it's all just a part of me growing up and being like, "I don't give a fuck anymore, I'm just going to wear what I want," and that's nice. And that's something I would not have done ten years ago.

Q: Yeah, it's a fun bit about getting older and more comfortable.

A: Yeah, I think it's great and I think it's important. They're really simple things right, but I think the clothes are beautiful and they should be worn.

Q: Yeah. Do you also, in your jewellery and makeup and stuff, is that also -

A: Yep, it's a big part of – yeah, one of the things I'm looking forward to about moving is having space for a bigger wardrobe because I currently don't have that much wardrobe space and I realise that I literally do have two wardrobes, like two sets of clothes right. I probably have just as many cultural clothes as I have Western clothes. I just think, I just need space.

Q: Space yeah. Is there anything else you wanted to –

A: No. Thank you.

Q: Thank you so much, I've learned so much and I think people listening and reading your words are going to learn so much from you and be really inspired. And thank you, your story is really important. Thank you for sharing.

A: Thank you, I hope I answered properly. I was a bit rambling there.

Q: Yeah, you answered beautifully.

A: Thank you.

Q: I'll stop it now.