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"Only Sow Words": Cheran's *A Second Sunrise* as Postcolonial Autobiography*

Abstract I: Questo saggio discute l'antologia di poesie *A Second Sunrise* (2012) del poeta tamil in esilio Cheran come autobiografia postcoloniale, quale narrazione della vita del poeta e autobiografia comunitaria rappresentativa della comunità (diasporica) in Sri Lanka. La vita e l'opera di Cheran sono incentrate su un solido legame al luogo di origine e, sebbene fisicamente estraniato da quando è in esilio, egli non ha mai smesso di onorarlo attraverso il suo costante sforzo poetico e l'attivismo politico. Il senso di comunità e il legame con la terra animano *A Second Sunrise* e collegano concettualmente e tematicamente l'intera produzione poetica. Servendosi della teoria della *life writing* questa lettura vuol mostrare che l'antologia, pur sottolineando una necessaria continuità di senso per il sé esiliato, mette in luce le molteplici possibilità di riconfigurazione identitaria in contesti traumatici.

Abstract II: The article discusses the poetry anthology *A Second Sunrise* (2012) by exiled Tamil poet Cheran as a form of postcolonial autobiography. The anthology arguably constitutes a narrative of the poet's own life, reading also as a form of communal autobiography representative of the (diasporic) Lankan Tamil community. Cheran's life and oeuvre are styled around a consistent bond with the place of origin and, although physically estranged since he went on exile, Cheran has never ceased treading it imaginatively in terms of both poetic endeavour and political activism. The sense of community and the connection to the land thus inform *A Second Sunrise* and conceptually and thematically link the whole collection of poems. Using a set of propositions from the broad area of *life writing* theory, this reading intends to demonstrate that the anthology, while emphasizing a necessary sense continuity for the exilic self, throws light on the multiple possibilities of identity reconfigurations in traumatic contexts.

Keywords: postcolonial autobiography, Lankan Tamils, Cheran, poetry and war, poetry as autobiography, life writing.

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Introduction

This article discusses the poetry anthology *A Second Sunrise* (2012) by exiled Tamil poet Cheran as a form of Life Writing, specifically postcolonial autobiography. In reading this poetry anthology through this prism, the connections between the poet and the lives of those who underwent similar historical circumstances are foregrounded: on the one hand, the anthology arguably constitutes a narrative of the poet's own life; on the other, it reads as a form of communal auto/biography representative of the Lankan Tamil community. Further, the paper shows that Cheran's life and oeuvre are styled around a consistent bond with the place of origin and with the land – something which extends to the diasporic Lankan Tamil community. Although physically estranged from his place of birth since he started living in exile, Cheran has never ceased treading it imaginatively in terms of both poetic endeavour and political activism. In conclusion, the paper demonstrates that the sense of community and the connection to the place of origin inform *A Second Sunrise* and link the whole sequence of poems conceptually and thematically – from the earlier ones written at the onset of the civil conflict, to those written during and after the war from diasporic locations. Furthermore, reading the anthology as a form of postcolonial autobiography, while emphasizing a necessary sense continuity for the exilic self, throws light on the multiple possibilities of identity reconfigurations in traumatic contexts.

Terminology and Genre Connections

Smith and Watson define *life writing* as "written forms of the autobiographical" (2001: 4). They see the concept as embedded in the notion of life narratives, which expands to include life representations also through other, non-written media, such as visual or digital. Kadar refers to *life writing* as "a kind of writing about the 'self' or the 'individual' that favours autobiography, but includes letters, diaries, journals, and (even) biography" (2009: 5), which shows that, like other scholars in the area, she does not contemplate poetry as a form of *life writing*. Martínez García, drawing from Shaffer and Smith (2004), uses *life writing* as "an umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and diverse modes of personal storytelling that take experiential history as its starting point" (2019: 254). Green synthesizes that *life writing* "extends the field of literature, covering what used to be thought of as autobiography or biography" (2008: 50). For our concerns here, it seems pertinent to briefly discuss the relationship between *life writing* and autobiography.

Maya Rota considers *life writing* and autobiography as two different genres, drawing a distinction between "the *descriptive* nature of autobiography and the *performative* one of Life Writing" (2009: 52, author's emphasis). This difference can be ascribed to autobiography's perceived origin and traditional association with the historically dominant subjectivity of the white man which originates in the Enlightenment (Whitlock 2015: 3). Following from this historical relationship, many autobiographies have been characterized by "self-absorbed individualism" (Maya Rota 2009: 52). The traditional, modern understanding of subjectivity is allegedly dominated by a sense of unity and stability, hence Maya Rota's (among others') attribution of a merely *descriptive* nature to the genre which characterizes it, namely autobiography. By contrast, *life writing* "can be seen as the best one for the purposes

of postmodern and postcolonial subjectivities to overturn and finally overcome this ideal" (Maya Rota 2009: 52). This perception of subjectivity takes us to understandings of the self as multifarious and contingent, hence the *performative* nature of *life writing*. While this distinction seems attractive, the views of Gusdorf's and other traditional scholars of autobiography that this genre "expresses a concern peculiar to the Western man" (Moore-Gilbert 2009: xii) have been superseded in our days. To more recent critics, autobiography encompasses "the widespread use of self-representation in both pre-literate and non-Western cultures" (Smith & Watson 2001: 84), that is, the exclusivity of autobiography as solely corresponding with stable notions of the Western male subject of European modernity has been abolished. In other words: the postmodern and the postcolonial also claim autobiography as a genre of their own.

The study of postcolonial autobiography emerges in full with our century, although some precursors like MacDermott (1984) already incorporated non-Western places and peoples when scrutinizing the development of a genre, autobiography, which in our days could never be understood without postcolonial contributions like those of Fanon, Gandhi or Mandela. Early on, Hornung and Ruhe (1998) describe the genre of postcolonial autobiography as 'communal autobiography', showing that concern with the community is a crucial element in it. One of its basic characteristics is the interconnection and mutual representativity of author and social group, a concern which applies to other genres in the postcolonial arena: "For postcolonial writers […] the individual is inseparable from the community, or in Salman Rushdie's words, 'to understand just one life you have to swallow the world'" (Bannerji 2019: 9). Gilmore corroborates this integration of the personal and the communal in postcolonial autobiography stating that "although it may present a close examination of one person's life, [postcolonial autobiography] is also a reflection of the larger networks, such as family, region, nation, that shape an individual" (quoted in Lo 2011: 12).

In the long run, the term *life writing* has been more successful than autobiography when it comes to representing the postcolonial. This probably occurs because, as Kadar claims, "'autobiography' is a loaded word, the 'real' accuracy of which cannot be proved and does not equate with 'objective' or 'subjective' truth" (1992: 10). Indeed, the concept of *life writing* seems to accommodate better the huge variety of forms and multiplicity of locations of postcolonial autobiographies, their distance from the allegedly unified and self-contained subjectivity of the Enlightened European subject, and their frequent mediation of "private intentions and social exigence" (Smith & Watson 2001: 18).

In any event, in times where all subjectivities are assumed to be felicitously disjointed and more often than not postcolonial, the terms 'life writing' and 'autobiography' get along on good terms. Gilmore contends that every autobiography is "an assembly of theories of the self and self-representation; of personal identity and one's relation to a family, a region, a nation; and of citizenship and a politics of representativeness (and exclusion)" (quoted in Lo 2011: 12), an assembly which applies to both postcolonial *life writing* and autobiography – as I intend to illustrate here. Before moving on to our case study, however, let us also briefly fix our attention on the idea of assembly put forward by Gilmore, as it is here where autobiography and *life writing* connect with poetry (Gilmore 2000).

According to Kadar, autobiography "is best viewed as a continuum that spreads unevenly and in combined forms" (Kadar 1992: 10), a view which justifies the reading of a poetry collection as an autobiography in syncopated form. MacHale's theory of segmentivity (2009), based on DuPlessis's ideas about forms of continuity and discontinuity in poetry (2006), supports such critical reading. As he claims, "far from being distinct, the two categories actually cut across each other: many poems are narratives, after all, and many narratives are poems" (MacHale 2009: 12). Further, the body of poststructuralist work deconstructing the Cartesian Enlightened subject carried out in the last decades of the past century amply justifies viewing the genre as "unevenly" and formally complex. The intimate character of both poetry and autobiography reinforce the connection between genres: "For a real poet, and moreover for a representative poet, life and poetry become one thing" (Menealou 2017: 5). Poetry and autobiography have thus much in common. Jackson draws parallelisms between the two genres: "Aesthetic proportions, precision, brevity, a simplicity of lines, gaps, leaps, and the revelation of character through the telling detail: the art of [auto]biography is already sounding indistinguishable of poetry" (Jackson 2016: 3). Following from this, the enterprise to read a poetry anthology as a form of postcolonial autobiography should seem sufficiently justified. The benefits of this reading are that emphasis is put on the idea of continuity and on the workings of memory as the backbone of a sense of exilic and/or diasporic identity, while it throws light on the multiple possibilities of identities to reconfigure themselves and of resilience.

A Poet Who Speaks for Many

If Maurice Halbwachs distinguished the self-explanatory concepts of "autobiographical memory" and "historical memory" (Olick *et al.* 2011: 19), in the case of Cheran's poetry these two forms of memory conflate[1]. Cheran's voice is completely original, and certainly his life is unique in many ways, but it is, and this is the case made here, simultaneously representative of that of thousands of political refugees from Lanka. In the last decades of the twentieth century, thousands of Tamils were obliged to take flight from their island of origin, where conditions had grown extremely harsh for them. Those voices were mostly silenced, but Cheran's poetry speaks for them, as his voice is inextricably bound to that of the collectivity. There seems to exist a recurrence of this pattern; Chelva Kanaganayakam explained that, when it comes to Tamil literature from Lanka, "tales of individual heroism are folded into a collective struggle for a Tamil identity" (2007: 197). This conflation of the personal and the communal is surely due to the debasement that Tamils have systematically suffered on an island where they are a numerical minority. In the absence of an institutional structure providing equal status *de facto* to all citizens, any sense of Lankan Tamil identity is bound to be complex. In dire political circumstances, often the writer's look turns to the past to reassert the sense of belonging in the territory, and therefore "it is […] not surprising that some [Tamil writers] resort to originary myths or historical narratives of conquest

[1] Cheran is the author of over fifteen books in Tamil, and he is the most internationally acknowledged Lankan Tamil poet at present. Recipient of several important literary awards, his work has been widely translated into English and other languages.

to reflect and legitimize the present" (Kanaganayakam 2007: 197). Although it is deeply anchored in the present, Cheran's poetry looks to the past in order to both mourn and claim a territory, geographical and emotional, deeply injured. His connection to the Tamil land is as paramount as his connection to the Tamil people. In different ways, Cheran's anthology *A Second Sunrise* (2012) reads as a poetic inscription of both Cheran's individuality and of that of the Lankan Tamil communities worldwide obliged to live in exile.

A Second Sunrise as Postcolonial Autobiography

Showcasing poetry written over more than three decades, *A Second Sunrise* comprises fifty poems translated into English by two outstanding specialists in translation and Tamil literature: Lakshmi Holmström and Sascha Ebeling. In their introduction to the anthology they identify three narrative threads in the poem sequence: the narrative of war, which is closely intertwined with "an almost pastoral perception of the landscape in the early poems, and the devastation of the land seen thirty years later"; the narrative of love, "moving from the lyrical quality of the early poems, even then aware of love's fragility, to the later ones, more complex, at times ironic or self-mocking"; and "the narrative of exile, return, and the diasporic experience" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 124-125). These threads secure the collection's cohesion, as the translators explain: "So wide a range means that each poem has to be seen afresh and in its particularity, but also as part of the poet's entire oeuvre" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 125). A parallel argument is developed in the afterword, written by Sascha Ebeling, which revises momentous aspects of Cheran's life and work.

My discussion does not discard these insightful arrangements. Rather, using them as its basis, it seeks to adjust these topics (war, love and exile), as presented in the poems, to the chronological progression of a lifetime. As suggested earlier, the point can be made that any poet's life-long oeuvre can, as a whole, be read as a form of life narrative. The singularity of this particular author's oeuvre is that it is representative of thousands of subjectivities, like postcolonial autobiographies tend to do, but also, emphatically, that it illuminates crucial events of recent history. As the poet claims, "Someone who reads my entire poetry will have a clear picture of what happened to the Tamils from 1980 up until 2009, it's a kind of snapshot […] It's not like a political statement, because I lived through it […] In a sense I am a poet as a witness, a witness to history" (Ebeling 2012: 132).

Youth Poems: Land and Love, and the Sea

The sense of place (and with it, of displacement) is the point of departure to understand Cheran's poetry. In his youth, Cheran writes poems closely anchored to the territory, a feature which will not disappear later on in spite of distance. Precisely the deep connection to his home place in the north of the island, that he entertains since his early years, will make it possible for him to remain always in close contact with it, even when in exile[2].

In their comment about the translations, Holmström and Ebeling write about Cheran's attention to landscape. They begin by noting that his poetry is loaded with allusions to

[2] In spite of having temporarily moved south to Colombo for some time in his childhood because of his father's position as government officer.

Tamil classical texts, to then remark that "there is also, most importantly, a way of perceiving the landscape, often with the focus on minute detail, an image which is at once real and symbolic" (Hölmstrom & Ebeling 2012: 124). This attention to physical detail is not restricted to his early poems (in the collection represented by ten poems written between 1976 and early 1981), yet at this stage in the writer's life it appears as more pristine, not yet shrouded in the ominous mantle of violence. Thus, for the time being symbolic meanings, while not necessarily absent, are ancillary to a voluptuous yet realistic description of landscape, of a beauty which mesmerized the young poet. As he has explained,

> One of the things that really attracted me to the landscape of Jaffna was the red soil. We get greenery only for a few months in the year when there is rain. Beyond that, it was mostly very dry, but we had all sorts of different massive trees to which I was attached, in the backyard and beyond in the paddy fields. My fascination with the flora and fauna in our area was endless (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 90-91).

These aspects are present in poems like "Coolie women in the rainy season" and "A sea shore song", descriptive of traditional cultural practices such as cultivating rice or marriage. The second title provides the clue to the most important motif of this segment of early poems, and possibly of the whole collection: the sea. A malleable and expressive ocean is the traditional companion of Tamil life, as seen in its recurrent presence in these early titles: "The Sea", "An evening, as the boats are coming in" or "The Seashore: Three notes". In Sascha Ebeling's afterword, perceptively titled "Between love, war and the sea" (which to a great extent inspires this section's title), this foremost specialist in Cheran's poetry writes: "In the beginning, there was the sea" (Ebeling 2012: 138), a sea which he shows as ripe with metaphorical meanings[3]. The sea is paramount in the poet's whole oeuvre, and Cheran himself has conceded: "In the place where I was born, we had no rivers, no mountains, we only had the sea. So what defined my imagination when I became a writer and poet was the sea" (Ebeling 2012: 138).

At this point the forthcoming war is only intuited in some lines, which testify to the uneasy situation of Tamils – "In days to come […] a fire will break out" (Cheran 2012: 22-23)[4]. For the time being, love – together, of course, with the sea – is prominent, with titles like "Tonight, when you cannot be near", or in the romantic memories revised in "A rainy day". Land, love, and the sea will remain recurrent motifs through Cheran's poetry and life, later unfortunately overshadowed by bleaker ones.

The Loss of Innocence: "A Second Sunrise" and Black July

The burning of the Jaffna library on 1 June 1981 was one of the worst episodes of cultural genocide in the world's history (Cheran 2016) and originates the poem which lends its title

[3] Ebeling explains that the first poem ever published by Cheran was titled, precisely, "The Sea". This occurred in 1977, and the medium was the Tamil avant-garde literary magazine *Alai* (Wave) (Ebeling 2012: 138).

[4] All subsequent citations are taken from this edition.

to the anthology. The poem "A Second Sunrise"[5] signifies the poet's fall from a dubious paradise. Historiography has convened in marking the July 1983 pogroms against Tamils on the island, an episode known as Black July, as the beginning of the civil conflict. Yet the catastrophe of the library destruction two years earlier cannot be overestimated. In the poem, while walking by the seashore, the poetic voice sees a light on the horizon, to discover with horror that the cherished library of Jaffna, built through communal effort and which treasured thousands of unique Tamil manuscripts (Knuth 2006: 85)[6], is ablaze. This has been qualified by the poet, a student at the time, as the most traumatic event in his life:

> I went to Jaffna University, and it was when I was there as a student that we heard about the burning of the library a few hours after it was set on fire. We saw that it was burning, and we tried to go there to help, but we couldn't because they started firing at us. It was the next day that was the most hurtful moment in my life. In the morning, we all went to see what had happened. It was totally gone. Right next to the library was the Duraiappah Stadium where the police and army were stationed. As people went to see what had happened to the library, the soldiers were standing there in the stadium mocking us. They would say, ''Aney, it's gone. Now what are you going to do?'' This was the moment when I felt that the only way forward was to wipe these soldiers out. We were angry, but we were helpless because we were just young students, and they were the armed forces (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 94).

The passage shows the impotence felt by those young students, and may serve to explain the steady rise in militancy of Tamil youth: "So this is the beginning of my political writing and my anger. Although it had been building over time, it erupted with the burning of the library", explains the author (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 94). However, instead of taking up arms, Cheran chose to serve through political journalism, an effort added to his poetry, increasingly political too[7].

The episode of the library and the increasingly damaging interventions of the army and state in Tamil land results in a change of tone in the treatment of the territory. "My land" is the poem which follows "A Second Sunrise", and it constitutes a necessary vindication of the place after the cultural genocide meant by the library felony: "Our roots go deep: / one footstep, a thousand years" (32). At this point the sense of community is strategically strengthened in the closing lines: "I stand on a hundred thousand shoulders / and proclaim aloud: This is my land" (33). From here on, the poems written between 1981 and 1983 show

[5] Besides the title of this poem and of the anthology, *A Second Sunrise* is also the title of Cheran's first collection of poetry, published in 1983.

[6] As Knuth explains, "the Jaffna Public Library served as a storehouse of materials that validated [Tamil] identity [in Sri Lanka]" (Knuth 2006: 80).

[7] In the interview he explains the division of the different armed groups which emerged, and his reasons for not joining any of them: "I was hoping that the ideal of liberation would be different. We couldn't simply mirror the image of the oppressing Sri Lankan state. The way they conducted the killing of innocent civilians, the massacres, the torture, we could not do the same thing. If we did, what would be the difference?" (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 97). He wrote about this contradiction in "A poem that should never have been written" (Cheran 2012: 59).

mounting violence, as it effectively occurred in Tamil lives: "But / who can prevent / the looting of Tamil houses?" (34), we read in the piece "When they shot him dead".

Two poems devoted to the looting and massacres of Black July conclude this group, which, after the loss of the youthful candour still breathing in the early poems, reflects the escalation of violence and the poet's growing anger and sadness. Cheran's equanimity regarding the conflict in spite of his position strikes the reader, though. In "Letters from an Army camp" (36), the poetic voice impersonates a Sinhala soldier, barely a child, stationed in the north. The murder of thirteen Sinhala soldiers, which signalled the beginning of the attacks on Tamils island-wide in July 1983 (Yogasundram 2008: 330; Sivanandan 2009; Perera 2015) is thus dramatised from an unexpected perspective. This is a subtle form of reclaiming accountability, while pointing out that ordinary people are sometimes made guilty of crimes they did not commit or were coerced to commit by the powers that be. After some time in the north, the soldier is transferred back home in the south and can reunite with his beloved, as he had yearned. But this does not mean any restoration of peace, rather the opposite: the next poem, "I could forget all this" (42), contains harrowing images, where the massacres of Black July are reflected in their full brutality. There is no way back; from now on, the state is one of war[8].

War-torn Selves and Landscapes, and First Exile

Between 1983 and 1987 Cheran wrote poetry and journalism[9], denouncing brutalities on both sides. His poems of this period speak of loss, such as "What have we lost?", and grief, as in "You didn't weep that day", or "Amma, don't weep". The gulf between the Tamil and Sinhala people has widened, as is sadly expressed in "A letter to a Sinhala friend", published in 1984. The poem is based on an actual collaboration of Cheran as a university student with a group of Sinhalese researchers in the uncovering of an archaeological site, which metaphorically points to a past shared by both communities[10]. Sascha Ebeling's reading celebrates that "what is also uncovered is the fact that both Sinhalas and Tamils are human beings with human emotions" (Ebeling 2012: 149), thus showing that Cheran, as always, intends to give a humane dimension to a conflict which is devastating to both parts. Unfortunately, eventually the poetic persona voices reality as it stands, summarizing the end of the inter-ethnic love relationship which had emerged in such auspicious surroundings with a cutting sentence: "you to the south / and I to the north" (49).

Cheran's writing these years, both journalism and poetry, was uncomfortable to both parts involved in the conflict, and the sense of impeding danger was pervading.

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[8] "Before 1983 there was only a handful of Tamil rebels or Tamil terrorists, depending on your bias, in Sri Lanka. The pogroms of July 1983 and the military and political support according to them by neighbouring India emboldened the rebels dramatically. By the end of 1984 there were thirty-five rebel groups espousing a wide spectrum of political ideologies from nationalism and Marxism to an unholy blend of both", writes Cheran (2000). See Wilson 2000 for a revision of the development of Tamil nationalism.

[9] As he explains in "Salad Days", he joined the *Saturday Review* in 1984, but before that he had regularly contributed journalism pieces to other media.

[10] In the context of literatures of Lankan origin, this trope was later used by Michael Ondaatje in his novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000).

He even survived a helicopter attack (Ebeling 2012: 135), which is reflected in the poem "21 May 1986", with an eloquent ending recounting the daily state of affairs: "the sound of the machine gun / remains in the air / now, as always" (55). In the words of Sascha Ebeling, in those years "death became a ubiquitous and everyday phenomenon"[11], and the scholar remarks on the impossibility of representing such dire conditions with ordinary, descriptive language: "the degree to which living in constant fear of being hurt, abducted or killed and seeing corpses and the terror of mass violence become part of everybody's life is difficult to recreate in the words of the historiographer" (Ebeling 2012: 133). In the face of this impossibility of re-presenting the events in a purely descriptive manner given the extremity of the situation, Cheran's poetry remains an eloquent testimony of the brutalities and, still more emphatically, of the general sense of desolation which had taken over the land and the people: "Among these graves / among these corpses / between the bloodstained clothes / among grief-stricken mothers / wailing for their dead sons / I wander […]" (58).

His fall from grace with the militant Tamil groups because of his refusal to join any of them plus his unsparing criticism of their means was worsened by an army attack on the modest headquarters of the *Saturday Review*, the journal he wrote for, and his subsequent detention by the army[12]. This is his explanation of those days, which seems opportune to reproduce in its length:

> I was forced into exile in 1986, partly by the government and partly by the Tigers. There were others – such as the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO) – who were unhappy with my writing and activism as well. It's an interesting thing because everybody knew that I wasn't affiliated with any militant group; I was just a writer and poet with a big mouth. [...] Here was someone who wasn't against them, but not for them either; instead, I disturbed everything. […] This was a very serious issue for them, and I was asked to leave Jaffna by one of the leaders of the Tigers. […] I still stayed in Jaffna for some time with his permission, while not being too active, but then things became really difficult […] [and after the attack on the *Saturday Review*'s headquarters] my editor, Gamini Navaratne, finally said, ''Putha [son], this is not going to be good for you. You better leave" (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 99).

Cheran left Sri Lanka in 1987, and he would spend two years in the Netherlands. Three poems illustrate this first period away, and as will occur later in his permanent exile, they mix elements from the poet's present ("When I understood the meaning of love", 62) with the war in Sri Lanka ("Rajini", 1989). The third one, "Meeting and Parting" (66), explores precisely the in-between quality of the life of the diasporic person, as it reflects on what unites and separates his persona with a hypothetical addressee-lover, making nature and landscapes (among them oceans) simultaneously frame, testimony and metaphor of the

[11] The sentence ends: "[…] for thousands of Sri Lankans all over the island" (133). In those years, a leftist political insurrection in the south of the island was also brutally quelled by the Sri Lankan government (see Wickramasinghe 2006: 240).

[12] He explains this experience in his creative non-fiction piece "Salad Days" (2000).

lovers' feelings, a treatment of nature which applies to the whole of his love poetry and is drawn from the ancient Tamil Sangam tradition (Ebeling 2012: 136).

After completing an MA in Development Studies, Cheran returned to the island. The arrival of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in 1987 had also contributed to precipitating his departure after he criticized their practices in his journalism. When he returned from exile in 1989 the IPKF troops were still there, and the *Saturday Review* had been closed down. Nothing had improved. He joined a Human Rights group in Colombo, keeping on with his journalism, but he suffered threats and two attempts on his life. Eventually, he obtained a scholarship to pursue doctoral studies in Canada. In 1993 he left for good.

Mature Quarters: On the Responsibility of Distance

Leaving the land does not mean forgetting the people. Rather the opposite: Cheran's activism is reaffirmed by distance, and his sense of responsibility is left untouched. Exile provides him, however, with new perspectives, and leads him to a better understanding of his role in the broader picture:

> Living in exile gave me lots of insight into politics, pain, dislocation and the importance, or the lack of importance, of location. It also changed the structures of my language; it changed the metaphors. How was I to express solidarity while being part of a struggle from a distance? We have heard of the irresponsibility of distance. This is a major issue in diasporic studies. But I've also learned that there is an idea of responsibility of distance, and I think that these are two sides of the same coin. I belong to the school that thinks that for the Tamil diaspora, or for any diaspora, the responsibility of distance will be the key to any sense of solidarity in the future (Cheran & Halpé 2015: 100).

A sense of responsibility towards his community undiminished by distance transpires Cheran's narrative of his own life, and also the poems he will write hereon. For starters, though, the first poem in the anthology published after his definitive exile, "Fire", shows a persona mesmerized by the landscape found abroad. It is easy to assume that those "leaves a thousand tongues of flame / in the countless colours of fire" (67) are recognisable Canadian maple trees and colourful forests. In this new context, nature is set alight "with Time's fire": this poem thus marks a transition in which the past is partially left behind, and where "[…] the future plays / its new music on the falling leaves" (67). The poetic voice, however, faces the void of a life to be remade in a moment of complete incertitude: "But what future for me / during wintry days / on a solitary island / of ice and stone?" (68). Like time, also the weather plays a metaphorical role in this allusion to the Canadian frost in winter. Once again Cheran accompanies and mirrors human existence with landscape: one cannot exist without the other.

After this transitional poem come a series of deeply sorrowful pieces completely focused on the war, with titles like "Epitaph", "War – a very short introduction" or "Sunset". In "The fisherman going hungry" (a title which confirms that the foundational trope of the sea has not been abandoned), the poet passionately reinforces his commitment

with his fellow Tamils back home in the conclusion: "I saw a hungry fisherman. / My face and my voice were his" (73). On its part, the poem "Apocalypse" mourns the need to leave of the poetic persona and of so many thousands, a forced exodus which has left the land empty and desolate: "We have all gone away; / there is no one to tell our story. / Now there is left / only a great land / wounded. / No bird may fly over it / until our return" (74-75). The reason for this massive flight is unequivocal: "In our time we have seen / the apocalypse" (74).

Understandably, in the new context a new *joie de vivre* seems to take over this sense of desolation. "Whirlpool", containing a conversation tinged with philosophical and amorous undertones, inaugurates a batch of poems dominated by a sense of normalcy, poems of love or human relations, like this one or the humorous "Kissing a woman with glasses in the summer", which yet in the context of diaspora are, as warned by Holmström and Ebeling, "framed against a sense of loneliness, uncertainty and loss" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 125). This is a period of discovery of realities beyond those on the island. New landscapes are found abroad, and the vindication of nature dominates also in this part of the anthology, in poems like "Journey to a volcano" and "The great tree in the forest", which dwell on the trope of the natural wonders of the American continent, as we saw it occurred in "Fire".

In this part of the anthology, two pieces instantiate more clearly the diasporic subjectivity. One of them, "Midnight mass", is a long narrative poem divided in three parts, each of them set in a different part of the world (Sri Lanka, Europe and presumably Canada), and which thus account for the shifting sense of location which accompanies the diasporic person and, in this case, reproduce quite literally the poet's life journey. On its part, the poem "The koel's song" also dwells on images of nature: to foreground the image of the koel, a bird which, as is known, lays its eggs in other birds' nests for these to raise its chicks. This species has been repeatedly used in postcolonial and diasporic literature as a metaphor for the sense of disruption between self and location, or self and tradition[13]. Here, the last stanza expresses this correlation with the poet's life (and by extension, as we know, of those in his predicament) with allusion to the silencing of Tamils in Sri Lanka: "Riding the wind a koel, / a koel made voiceless" (85), and then, "It flies across boundaries / to spread the roots of its tree", in a clear allusion to the dispossession of the community in the island of origin and their need to tread the world in a massive diaspora[14].

It is ironic that, since this thrust towards new places and imagery offers the poetic self a respite from the calamities of war, he should find himself immersed in a reality which is by no means always unhostile. The fallacies of Canadian multiculturalism and the latent or explicit racism which pervades Western societies are made patent in the poem "Colour". Here, an old and dishevelled white beggar, not casually donning "a small Canadian flag pinned carelessly / upon his ragged, drooping overcoat" (78), proffers an insulting remark connected to the perception of a certain ethnicity (incidentally mistaken, since the chosen epithet is "Paki"), when the poetic persona refuses to give him the coin he begs for. The old beggar's lack of empathy and his use of the ethnic Other as a scapegoat for his own

[13] See Morgan 1987 and Taylor 1998.

[14] See Burgio 2016.

frustration is symptomatic of a regrettable racism which, unfortunately, finds reverberation across Western societies at large[15].

Haunting Legacies: Trauma and Resilience

Unfortunately the respite of discovery is brief, and in the midst of the necessary reconstruction of life in new quarters, trauma returns in the form of disturbing nightmares. The very quality of trauma is that it appears in uncanny ways, and that it cannot be fully expressed, but takes "the form of a belatedness" (Caruth 1997: 208). As Debra Jackson formulates it, "through involuntary repetitions such as nightmares, flashbacks, and/or hallucinations, the survivor's reexperiencing of the traumatic event generates a voice that is released from the wound, which bears witness to the trauma" (Jackson 2016: 207). This is what occurs in "The trace of a dream". Here the poetic voice awakens from a nightmare remembering fragmentary images where a book is transformed into a coffin, which significantly has "draped over it / a national flag" (91). The coffin oddly moves by itself towards a cremation ground, followed by "faceless / bodiless, / a multitude of legs" – obviously suggesting the strength of the community which supports a common dream in jeopardy. The persona awakens to remember that the coffin "refused to burn / in the hottest furnace" (92), suggesting that the dream of a land free of oppression will not fade easily. The poem ends back in the present ("And so the day began"), with the image of "[…] a giant tree / which had not yet put forth / new leaves". This is a clear hint of hope for the dream of a Tamil nation-state, whose birth has been hampered, yet refuses to die out.

Another haunting memory is reproduced in the next poem, "Chemmani", a troubling description of a place of horrors. As is explained by the translators, Chemmani, a village near Jaffna, was "the site of a crematorium and cemetery used by Sri Lankan soldiers for executions and extrajudicial killings of Tamils. Hundreds of people who had 'disappeared' were later found buried there" (Holmström & Ebeling 2012: 121). The poem emphasizes how places are pregnant with unspoken history, in this case terrible memories which underlie and undermine any possible sense of normalcy in the present, and which can be breathed in the air itself: "The wind returns to the street / teeming with life and death" (93), in a place where "Under the bridge / the skulls and bones of all those / buried beneath the mud and mire / take wing, fill the air / with lies" (94). Those lies are the false promises of the politicians who have destroyed and stolen the territory: "[…] a demon face / […] willing to pour away the country's wealth / to sell the air and the water / and swallow up the land and its yield" (94), and the ontological fallacy of a ground full of bodies now covered "by advertisements for cell-phones" (94).

At this point, after these uncanny surges of troubled memories, the armed conflict takes again central place as the anthology's narrative thread. "On the banks of the river", as its title conveys, speaks of two confronted factions, set against each other across the water, in a poem full of tension, expectation and fear – the physical setting deployed in a forceful mixture of poetic and violent images. The poetic persona is, as always, conciliatory:

[15] See Brancato 2020, 2021.

"People, let us not make a bridge of corpses / to cross the river" (97), we read. Yet these sadly prophetic words will go unheard by those in power.

The Hope and Pain of Return

In 2004, a seasoned poet returned to Sri Lanka. In those years, after the peace process had been brokered in 2002, the situation was one of relative calm. Several poems dated this year seem to account for this situation. In "Three paths", for instance, the war is seen from the future, as something already in the past. It even begins in epic manner: "When the gods and the devils / fought their murderous ethnic war / a drop of blood splashed down […]" (98), with the result that "Three paths branched away / from that very spot". The three branches are then enumerated: those who chose to merge with the Sinhala majority in the south, those who went west in diaspora, and those who went "eastwards into the jungle" and returned "Shouting war cries" (99), that is, the militant dissidents. In turn, these three reactions gave way to "three hundred perspectives" which themselves gave way to "three million faces": This is a form of emphasizing the wide diversity of opinions and political views within the Tamil population, often homogenized according to the viewer's own political sympathies.

The next poem, "Midway", literally speaks of a return to the land of origin. The beautiful landscape which was praised in the early poems is now destroyed, a few resilient palmyra trees reigning lonely and landmines lying everywhere, "forbidding you to tread the earth" (100). In this crying land, the paths cannot be traced anymore, an image which reverberates into a plastic metaphor of defeat which ends the poem: "Even the earth isn't patient / to raise its voice" (101). And the people have certainly not been spared either in the conflict, as we read in "Cousin". This piece is devoted to a relative who has lived through the war, having suffered "six displacements / within nine years" (105). This cousin's words "are not punctuated / by sobs; they are taut / with sorrow", an eloquent image of the depth of her pain, which cannot even be expressed. Surrounding them, holed and felled Palmyra palms, "ripped and fragmented land" (106), ruins, dust, burning heat […] The people and landscape are scarred, and a sense of gloom pervades it all: "We whose hearts were moved with love / not only for humankind / but also for plants and trees and homes / endure in our time / only the scourge of human arrogance" (106).

"The dark sea" is also among the poems written in 2004, a year which, in spite of the relative calm allowed by the peace process, turned out to be fatidic for an unexpected reason: the tsunami, which tinged with further horror Cheran's visit to Sri Lanka. If the poet had survived two attempts on his life in his youth, he would now survive a new hazard. The sea, that inseparable companion of his youth and his people, becomes in this poem, as it did in reality, a dark force of nature eager to take a myriad lives. The poetic voice weeps at the sea's betrayal as if having lost a dearest relative: "A mother lost her magical beauty / the grace of excellence / the strength to support" (109-110). And together with the people, the territory remains, as ever, inveterate victim: "All that was left that day was fear, / the land destroyed / landscape changed / seascape become a vast desert" (110).

Another poem from the same year is "This poem has no end", which also returns to the matter of memory. "All memories refuse to be destroyed" (107), we read, and this does

not only refer to the memory of war, which as we see sadly persists in people and places. Crucially, what remains is also the political vision: "a dream persists / refusing erasure". The dream of a Tamil free land has not been abandoned, although there is a general sense of exhaustion. The poetic voice is detached, both present and necessarily distant, surely as a matter of survival: "Impermanence and ceaseless wandering / cast their own seductive light. / What can I send now / but this poem […]" (107). Poetry is the chosen weapon, the best gift Cheran can offer his people, while he yearns for some impossible distance from the source of his nightmares, or, as he hopelessly begs, "in the hope / of the sweetness of a solitude / untouched by bitterness" (107).

Distance grows real again in "A season of pervading light", already written from his place of exile some years later, in 2007. In 2006 the peace process was definitely broken, and the conflict recommenced. In Canada, surrounded by cedar trees and black squirrels, the poet's heart is heavy with sorrowful memories of his native land, definitely wrecked: "there is no one to return my homeland to me" (108). Out of pain, he feels numbed to feelings when he writes, "Let me close forever / the entrance to my heart's cave / […] / No one will ever come again" (109). Meanwhile, in Sri Lanka, the wheel of violence is turning again at full speed.

A Lifetime to Mourn

The anthology closes with two poems written in 2009, both motivated by one of the most callous episodes of recent history: the end of the Sri Lankan conflict, brought about through the death of thousands of innocent civilians. "First, they burnt the books", says Cheran to Halpé in 2015, "and later in May 2009, they burnt the people!" (94)[16].

"After Apocalypse" picks on the title of an earlier poem, showing that the present plight is not new at all, although certainly the level of barbarism has now reached yet more devastating dimensions. This piece uses the traditional Tamil technique of *kilai kadai*, or "branch stories", which as the anthology editors explain, "are incidental stories or episodes, branching off from the main narrative" (Hölmstrom & Ebeling 2012: 122). The seven *kilai kadai* of this poem compose a fresco of destruction and despair, beginning with 'Warscapes', where a doctor is seen to amputate the arms of a toddler wounded in war without anaesthesia[17], to be followed by 'Homage', which denounces the silencing of the massacre in the world media. Upon this horror, "Someone inscribes empty words / upon the memorial raised by our tears" (111). The poet is not unperturbed by the brutal sense of murder and defeat, but is unwavering in his effort to keep record of it in poetic form. Decapitated corpses and the forgetfulness risked in the exile of whole generations populate the following verses, to eventually return to the land in the fifth branch story: "Here, in this land my story began /

[16] Details of the events of May 2009 and the previous months have been made known in spite of the Sri Lankan government's efforts to wage "a war without witnesses" (Boyle 2009; Harrison 2012; Weiss 2011).

[17] The same heart-wrenching motif appears in the opening pages of Anuk Arudpragasam's novel *The Story of a Brief Marriage* (2016), which dramatises the last days of the war in the so-called No Fire Zones. See Alonso-Breto 2021. First-hand witness of the appalling situation is provided in the documentary *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields* (Macrae 2011), produced by BBC Channel 4.

[…] / A land where even in the height of summer / people strolled about with ease / has become, in a few days, a country / whose language is replaced" (112).

The long war has destroyed everything; notwithstanding, all but hope has been snatched, and "even though the branch stories are muzzled / the narrative will continue, endless" (112). Once again we see that there is faith in the future after all. "After Apocalypse" ends with two of the landmarks of Cheran's poetry, namely sea and language. Or rather, with their metaphorical absence: "The sea has drained away / Tamil has no territory / Kinships have no name" (113). Hope has not disappeared altogether as we saw above, yet at this point the pervasive mood is one of defeat. In the midst of chaos, again, the poet's mission is never forgotten. The very last poem of *A Second Sunrise* concludes with testimonial determination: "Cheran. / Fling away the footprints, the voice. / Sow only words" (117).

Conclusions

Jeffrey Alexander explains that "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2011: 307). In the case of the Tamils from Lanka, there is not one single event, but a crescendo of horrors: decades of systematic discrimination, the burning of the library, Black July, the horrors of war inflicted on them by both warring sides, the final massacre. Alexander claims that often cultural trauma has "not been successfully broadcast to wider audiences" (2011: 310). This may be the case with the deep sorrow felt by this community, but certainly Cheran's poetry diminishes that failure. And though he is certainly the most outspoken Tamil poet in the global sphere, he reminds us that he is not alone in his endeavour:

> Tamil literary voices that have emerged from the ashes steadfastly refuse to be coerced in the official paradigm of closure, reconciliation and economic development. Numerous collections of poetry and several testimonies of survivors published in Tamil attest to this. Poetry now has become a vibrant expression and archive for the Tamil experience of genocide (Cheran 2016: 218).

Since the war ended years ago, poetry has maintained the responsibility of spreading the horrors of what occurred to the community, and bears the burden of carrying the cultural memory of the Lankan Tamil people. Poetry puts collective pain into words and thus contributes to healing, since "working through trauma […] ultimately becomes a narrativizing act, because the act of remembering and recounting structures *through* language what has occurred *beyond* language" (Wicks 2016: 135). Those harsher poems which provide witness of the apocalypse are a form of mourning and of denouncement, but also of personal reconstruction: "apocalyptic trauma must be recalled, reconstructed, and placed within narrative memory in order to help individuals regain a sense of identity and order" (Wicks 2016: 136). The collective and the individual are thus irredeemably entangled. Affecting a whole people in exile, the whole enterprise of Cheran's poetry, *his poetic autobiography*, is loaded with political overtones, and testifies to the fact that autobiographical texts can

indeed act as "potent weapons in political movements" (Jensen & Jolly 2014: 219, quoted in Martínez García 2019: 255).

Cheran's anthology of poems *A Second Sunrise* reads as a form of autobiography reflecting personal and communal history and memory. In the foundational study *Post-colonial Life Writing: Culture, Politics and Self- Representation*, Bart Moore-Gilbert explores postcolonial *life writing* in the light of four modes of being: (de)centered, relational, embodied and located selves. All four can be traced when reading *A Second Rise* as a form of postcolonial autobiography: the syncopated and recomposed sense of the self as expressed in the different poems and periods; the deep connections with the community and the implications of the responsibility of distance; the necessary embodiment in the depiction of war casualties and in the construction of a new sense of being abroad; and the firm sense of locatedness surging once and again in the necessary reconstruction of a sense of home – in spite of difficulties. They can all be traced in a collection of poems which, as a whole, narrates the life of a poet and the trajectory of a community. It does so through a firm anchorage to land and language, poetically accompanied by the sea, and tarnished with a violence which the collection manages, if only partially in view of the brutalities committed on all sides, to exorcise.

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