

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Rebecca Walker, *Enduring Violence: Everyday Life and Conflict in Eastern Sri Lanka*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-7190-8877-3 (cloth)

Rebecca Walker's *Enduring Violence* is an important book for anyone working on Sri Lanka's protracted civil conflict and its social, cultural, and political legacies. Likewise, it is an important read for those contemplating ethnographic research in field-spaces far removed from the comfortable confines of the Euro-American university.

The book is a fine-grained and rich ethnography detailing how Tamil people in the east-coast town of Batticaloa have come to live with and through the extraordinary levels of violence that characterized Sri Lanka's civil war. Based on two years of ethnographic research conducted between 2005 and 2007, the book focuses on the continuity and contours of everyday life for people whose lives and kinship networks have been caught in the midst of the unfathomable cruelty perpetrated by the various militant factions involved in Sri Lanka's armed conflict in and around Batticaloa (Government of Sri Lanka troops, the Tamil Tigers, the Indian Peace Keeping Force, and breakaway Tamil militants loyal to Colonel Karuna). However, the book was also researched during the two-year period just after the Indian Ocean tsunami that devastated Sri Lanka's east coast. In the Batticaloa district alone some 3,177 people died as a result of the tsunami and close to 56,000 people were displaced (p.9). *Enduring Violence* is concerned with exploring the disturbingly fuzzy boundary between ordinary life and extraordinary violence and loss for people living in a context where everyday life must continue in the face of the routinization of murder, torture, rape, and disappearance; the normalization of cultures of impunity and fear; and the legacy of an unprecedented natural disaster. In such circumstances, the book asks, how do people continue with their everyday lives? Further, what role does everyday life play in the struggle to live in such contexts? As its title indicates,

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endurance is central to the book's answer. Indeed, as Walker suggests, it is forms of endurance knitted from the habitual practices, everyday activities, strategies of coping and resisting, and hopes and desires of which her respondents spoke, that help to carve social lives from states of violent disorder (p.87).

Underpinning the research from which *Enduring Violence* emerges is Walker's involvement with a small human rights group, Valkai, formed amongst the mainly Tamil-speaking people of Batticaloa. As the book shows, Valkai's work to facilitate the production of spaces and ceremonies for remembering, grieving, and sharing in vulnerability, loss, and the enforced yet knowing silences that political violence precipitates, has become a key tool for building people's capacities to endure violence. Though at times the engagement with Valkai's work seems somewhat detached from the book's main ethnographic narratives, it becomes clear that it is through this group's work that Walker is able to begin to build her theory of endurance.

The book's structure across its seven main chapters is logical enough, although its compelling and moving preface conveying the entwinement of emotional and academic labour that has gone into its making might well have been more effectively integrated into the more descriptive introductory chapter. Here, Walker offers snapshots of the themes that percolate through the book, as well as providing some useful contextualization of Sri Lanka's conflict and its historical trajectory on Sri Lanka's east coast. Chapter 2 takes space as its main organizing rubric and begins by mapping out the east, providing contextual and historical information on the various ethnic groups that comprise Batticaloa's geography. It then hones in more concertedly on the ways that two events, the LTTE's split¹ and the Indian Ocean tsunami both in 2004, have produced proscribed and militarized spatialities in Batticaloa where everyday life has become contained in particular kinds of ways. As the chapter

¹ One of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's military commanders, Colonel Karuna, defected in 2004 to form a breakaway faction.

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discusses, it is in the context of these proscriptions that Valkai's work as a human rights group becomes so important. Chapter 3 focuses more specifically on the ethnographic methodologies upon which the book relies, the full significance of which, in terms of the dilemmas of researching and writing about violence, become clearer later on in the book (see below). This is followed by a briefer fourth chapter that develops the book's theoretical resources. With the help of range of social theorists and anthropologists, including Michel de Certeau, Michael Jackson, and Veena Das, this chapter spells out the importance of practice, lifeworld, language, and narrative for the forms of endurance that chapters 5 and 6 explore in more depth. Chapter 5, entitled 'Meena's Story', is by far the book's longest chapter. Using extensive excerpts from interviews conducted with one participant only, Meena (her real name has been changed), this chapter connects the grand narratives of conflict and disaster to the personal scale as Meena describes her life in detail. In chapter 6, the book focuses more explicitly on the role of the ordinary for enduring violence. It does so by engaging two further narratives, those of Rani, a woman whose son was killed after he joined the LTTE and whose husband was imprisoned, and Sivam, a fisherman whose livelihood was devastated by the 2004 tsunami. In both cases, as the chapter argues, it is the return to routine, habit, and ordinary life that provide a resource central to the capacity to endure. The final chapter attempts to bring the book's themes together, but analytically it also draws out the importance of processes of, and spaces for, mourning in contexts of extreme violence. It is here again that the value of the Valkai group's work re-emerges, for in the context of the state's abrogation of its responsibility to provide such processes and spaces in a post-conflict situation, Valkai's quiet and unassuming work provides a key emotional resource for communities touched by violence in and around Batticaloa.

Ultimately, this book's strength is the space it makes for the ethnographic narratives it brings into representation. As I have stressed, chapters 5 and 6 focus on three narratives in particular that Walker spends time developing, Meena's, Rani's

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and Sivam's. These firsthand testimonies of loss, physical and emotional pain, and everyday coping mechanisms in the face of war and wave are at turns powerful, harrowing, and humbling. The chapters are marked by a proliferation of stories of torture, abduction, incarceration, and fear, but also creativity, resilience, and the negotiation of these occurrences in and through the patinas of everyday life. To stress that parts of the book are difficult to read is to point to how effectively Walker brings her intended readership face to face with the fleshly, emotional, and traumatic realities of lives lived in circumstances irreconcilably different from most of theirs. This is a book that bears witness to the experiences of communities who too often have too few constituencies to whom they have been able to make themselves visible safely, effectively, and on their own terms.

But it is not only the testimony of Walker's respondents that the book brings into representation. *Enduring Violence* also affords readers glimpses of the risks that accompanied Walker's own fieldwork, including allusions to her exposure to the gendered and misogynistic whims of armed military personnel, and feelings of fear and endangerment in the midst of shelling in and around Batticaloa. We also hear about the ways that Walker's respondents taught her, through the course of her fieldwork, just how to negotiate everyday life amidst these omnipresent realities. And Walker's involvement in the Valkai group offers insights into the importance of practices – what the book refers to as forms of 'active living' – for people to carry on amidst extraordinary violence. The production of new spaces for being together, for grieving, even for being silent amidst those who have lost so profoundly, are facilitated, we learn, by events such as Valkai's mothers' meetings or tree planting ceremonies.

Enduring Violence is not a book that aims to make its point through the logic of number. It does not jolt the reader by stressing the sheer amount of people affected by the conflict and tsunami in eastern Sri Lanka. It could do. Instead, despite a broader base of ethnographic work, this is a book whose effect unfolds through the

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thick description of only three or four people's experiences, including the author's. This is by no means a weakness. On the contrary, it gives substance to the ethnography, lending it both credibility and the capacity to move. It is also this forensic attention to the particular that draws out the importance of a key dilemma that Walker deals with throughout the book: that of silence.

As a disposition to *not* speak about certain forms of fear, terror, and persecution, silence remains key to the ability for individuals to endure violence in the Batticoloa district. In other words, in a context where violence is both routine and political, learning what not to say, what forms of suffering and violation to not express, can be a matter of survival. This, as *Enduring Violence* reveals, presents a dilemma for the ethnographer. On the one hand, it means the researcher must read and interpret the gaps, silences, and allusions in respondents' narratives, for as the book stresses, this "focus on fear, terror, silence, and suffering can actually illuminate the methods by which people cope and survive" (p.22). But on the other, this attentiveness to the *not said* must be balanced against what the ethnographer can say without endangering his or her research participants. This brings forth the ethnographer's own responsibility regarding how and what to describe, or how to write about violence, in the knowledge that, in most cases, he or she has the enviable privilege of being able to leave field-spaces where the stakes of not being silent at the right times are high. *Enduring Violence* is well aware of this, and it is precisely in the aporia that this tension creates where Walker inserts her own presence to good effect. Walker's use of her own encounters, her fears, her exposure to gendered and militarized violence, and her processes of learning how to endure these in the field, effectively plug some of the gaps revealed by these kinds of strategic silence. As such, this is a book about place as much as it is about lives.

Enduring Violence is a book that carefully makes space to bring testimonies of enduring violence into representation. In doing so, it effectively straddles the dilemmas of how to deal with the silences that out of both necessity and fear trail in

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the wake of extreme violence. As a consequence, the book shows both the responsibility and value of ethnography in geographical contexts marked by levels of violence, risk, and fear that can be difficult to imagine from within the comfortable spaces of the Euro-American academy.

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