

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Anthropology Faculty Publications and
Presentations

Anthropology

2014

**Book Review of, Dhana Hughes. *Violence, Torture and Memory in Sri Lanka: Life after Terror*, and
Gordon Weiss. *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers***

Michele Ruth Gamburd
Portland State University, b5mg@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anth_fac



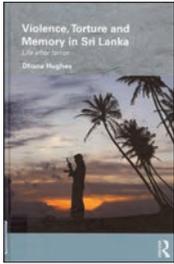
Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

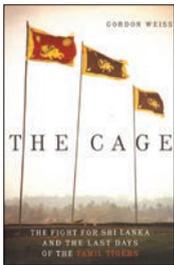
Gamburd, M. (2014). Review of: Dhana Hughes. *Violence, Torture and Memory in Sri Lanka: Life after Terror*, and Gordon Weiss. *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers* [352–356] Vol 73:1-2.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.



Dhana Hughes, *Violence, Torture and Memory in Sri Lanka: Life after Terror*

Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2013. 194 pages. Hardback, £80.00. ISBN 978-0-415-53210-5.



Gordon Weiss, *The Cage: The Fight for Sri Lanka and the Last Days of the Tamil Tigers*

New York: Bellevue Literary Press, 2012. 376 pages. Paperback, \$19.95; ebook, \$19.95. ISBN 9781934137543 (paperback); 9781934137574 (ebook).

TWO NEW BOOKS deal with political violence in South Asia. In *Violence, Torture and Memory in Sri Lanka*, Dhana Hughes grapples with “The Terror,” Sri Lanka’s youth-led Nationalist/Marxist insurrections of 1971 and 1987–1991. In *The Cage*, Gordon Weiss deals with the better-known armed conflict between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (1983–2009), particularly the culminating months of “Eelam War IV.” Both books raise thorny factual questions and moral dilemmas. They explore issues of knowledge, silence, and silencing; they analyze master narratives and subaltern perspectives; and they ask what participants, activists, governments, and members of the international community should do when faced with alleged human rights violations and war crimes.

Dhana Hughes: Life after Terror

In *Life after Terror*, Hughes addresses the insurrections of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP; People’s Liberation Front). She generated her ethnographic data in interviews done in 2007 (primarily with former insurgents but also with former members of the security forces). She presents the social, political, and economic context (for example, marginalization, cronyism, lack of economic opportunities and political influence, unmet aspirations) from which grew both the JVP insurgency in Sri Lanka’s southwest and the Tamil insurrection in the north and east.

During *The Terror*, both insurgents and the members of armed forces came from the same communities within Sri Lanka's majority Sinhala Buddhist population. Betraying bonds of ethnic solidarity, "our boys" became anti-government subversives. Chaos and suffering ensued, with strikes, curfews, death threats, disappearances, torture, and murder leading to suspicion, paranoia, and rage. *Goni billa* (masked local informants) identified JVP participants for the state. Blurring the lines between personal and political, people denounced others not only for involvement in the insurrection, but also for jealousy or revenge. Hughes examines the effect of such violence on kinship and community networks. Chapter 3 deals with the impossibility of intimacy when terror atomizes relationships and "insiders" do bad things. Uncertainty, anxiety, and fear of betrayal undermine relationships. Conversely, chapter 6 examines narratives of family and community solidarity in the face of "external" threats; Hughes's interlocutors found these narratives easier to tell.

Life after Terror's main contribution comes in its nuanced analysis of narrative. In chapters 4 and 5, Hughes examines how former insurgents and military personnel positioned themselves in their stories and justified their actions, especially when extraordinary circumstances required despicable means to reach laudable ends. The narratives she collected often included stock characters: victims, perpetrators, and heroes. No one positioned himself as a perpetrator of violence. Instead, former insurgents told of being tortured and former military officials related their fear for themselves, their families, and their nation in the face of a foe they perceived as strong and frightening. This narrative pattern obscured any clear distinction between "perpetrator" and "victim," although people obviously assumed such roles for particular acts of violence. Hughes's interlocutors emphasized stories that made them feel good about themselves and avoided telling stories that put them in the wrong. Incoherence, inconsistency, and ambiguity revealed moments of cognitive dissonance during which people found it difficult to frame their own actions in ways they wanted to share with the ethnographer. Achieving the "right" (least stigmatizing) sort of story often required silencing of both self and others.

Throughout the book, Hughes argues that people give meaning to violence. In chapter 2, Hughes shows how local understandings of "youth" enable people to set JVP involvement in the past. Sinhala concepts endow the young with favorable characteristics: idealism, energy, and a yen for social justice. But youth are also considered gullible, overly emotional, easily led, and heedless of long-term consequences. People can thus condone or excuse their or others' JVP involvement as a youthful misadventure; because such youngsters mature into adults with a set of less volatile traits, they can be welcomed back into society.

Hughes examines Buddhist philosophy and the doctrine of karma in chapter 8. She identifies two sometimes contradictory dynamics. On the one hand, her interviewees discussed individual responsibility for choices. Bad deeds will have bad karmic effects in this life or future rebirths. Victims of violence can rest assured that perpetrators will face consequences, even if they are never officially held accountable for their actions. On the other hand, interlocutors discussed a doctrine of intent: if one acts with pure thoughts (for example, to save the nation), one can

escape bad karmic consequences for unsavory deeds. Participants on both sides of The Terror used their current interest in Buddhism to establish themselves as respectable community members.

Life after Terror shows the power of rich ethnographic data to refine anthropological theory. Specifically, Hughes challenges scholarly suppositions that people and communities can “heal from” or “get over” violence (25). Instead, she makes clear the painstaking ongoing negotiations that participants (perpetrators and victims of violence, as well as bystanders) engage in on a daily basis. How can individuals and communities move forward when those who wronged each other live side by side? Hughes suggests that silence and social “amnesia” (140) allow people to “get[] on with the business of living” (125) even when they have not forgiven and cannot forget. Such silence, however, leaves underlying grievances unaddressed.

Hughes’s readable book is a revision of her PhD dissertation. Of Sri Lanka origin, Hughes received her graduate education in the UK. She writes with a strong, sensitive, and sympathetic authorial voice. She provides a nuanced understanding of positionality and a thoughtful discussion of research ethics and methods. While respectfully bearing witness to the “truths” that her informants chose to reveal, Hughes also gently reminds the reader of the bad things that these people may have done. Despite the heavy material, it is not a depressing read. Appropriate amounts of background information and theoretical literature appear near the relevant data. The first several chapters are better organized than the final ones. *Life after Terror* will appeal to anthropologists, South Asianists, and Sri Lankanists. In a classroom, one could use the book to discuss state violence, particularly the micro-processes and lived experience of insurgency and counter-insurgency situations.

Gordon Weiss: The Cage

Two themes from Hughes’s *Life after Terror* provide useful insights for considering Weiss’s book *The Cage*. First, silence and silencing pragmatically allow people to coexist despite past unforgiven wrongs. Second, selective memory helps ward off morally and politically uncomfortable thoughts and creates polarized discourses about good insiders and evil outsiders. Weiss’s work raises a third theme: the question of how witnesses should respond to alleged war crimes, human rights violations, and the breakdown of the rule of law.

Gordon Weiss, an experienced former United Nations staff member, served in Sri Lanka toward the end of the civil war. In *The Cage*, he presents a sweeping discussion of events leading up to the defeat of the LTTE in May 2009, with a focus on what happened to Tamil civilians caught between the Sri Lankan army and the Tigers during the last months of the war. Weiss deftly sketches the main issues for a general audience while also providing a solid bibliography and detailed endnotes. The book will appeal to readers interested in Sri Lanka, South Asia, political science, military history, and international relations.

The Cage first delves into Sri Lanka’s colonial history and the era following Independence. Weiss examines governance documents (constitutions and practices surrounding representational democracy). He also sketches the roots of Sinhala Buddhism and majoritarian politics. He probes the economic and political origins of the JVP rebellions and Tamil separatism and outlines the history of the LTTE.

The middle of the book focuses on the plight of Tamil civilians in northern Sri Lanka during the winter and spring of 2009. Weiss's UN experience provided insights that were unavailable to journalists and other international observers due to the strict state control of battlefield access and the well-documented suppression of investigative reporting in Sri Lanka. Relying on published sources and interviews and carefully upholding his International Civil Service Oath (not to reveal information garnered through his UN employment), Weiss takes issue with key points in the government's narrative about a bloodless hostage rescue (xvii, 184). In particular, *The Cage* provides detailed evidence of the use of heavy weaponry and the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants, including those in a No Fire Zone and near a hospital where staff from the International Committee of the Red Cross were working. One chapter focuses on Convoy II, a UN humanitarian aid mission that found itself in the midst of a battle between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE. Other chapters examine "The Cage," an ever-shrinking area shared by Tiger cadres and Tamil non-combatants in which untold numbers perished in the final days of battle. Some civilians were killed by the Tigers to prevent others from fleeing; others died in the government's artillery and aerial bombardment. Weiss presents evidence showing that top commanders on both sides of the conflict had clear and current knowledge of the risks posed to Tamil civilians but pursued dangerous war strategies nonetheless.

The final section of the book deals with the wider implications of the end of Sri Lanka's civil war. One large topic involves media freedom and the lack of independently verified information about the conflict. A battle over narrative paralleled the war over territory. The government of Sri Lanka propagated information that many participants and observers disbelieved. During the same period the Associated Press, Reuters, and the BBC withdrew their staff because of safety issues, and other international journalists were denied visas (136–37). Sri Lankan officials accused international governance and humanitarian organizations that critiqued the situation of supporting the Tigers and "undermining the war effort" (138). A second key theme addresses international law and the war on terror, sovereignty and democracy, and nationalism and majoritarian politics. Juxtaposed with democratic ideals and humanitarian standards, Weiss includes a pragmatic analysis of global geopolitics. He reveals the complex international power dynamics involving the UN Security Council, regional superpowers India and China, countries selling arms, and countries with long histories of sending development aid to Sri Lanka, and shows why the UN and other international organizations did not or could not intervene during the final weeks of the conflict despite evidence of war crimes (123–28).

In sum, these books show that all players in Sri Lanka's various conflicts (the government, the JVP, and the LTTE) have passionately advocated for their positions using both words and physical force. There is no shortage of good causes or bad deeds. All of the parties have sought to avoid stigma by silencing or discrediting other narratives and broadcasting their own version of events. Hughes and Weiss provide detailed analysis of the selective deployment of powerful and provocative facts, fictions, and images. Moderates find no welcome in this polarized debate. As master narratives battle subaltern perspectives, space for genuine discussion shrinks. Meanwhile, individuals, communities, and nations pragmati-

cally get on with living, and conflicts continue over resources, benefits, information, and decision making.

What should readers do as moral witnesses to the violence that Hughes and Weiss describe? Sri Lanka's youth will inherit a brutal template for handling conflict, as well as economic and political structures that advantage some and disadvantage others. Similar patterns of impunity and inequality appear throughout the world as states engage in majoritarian politics and the war on terror. Given this complex history, how can a country build toward a more equitable and peaceful future?

Michele Ruth Gamburd
Portland State University