



Mediating Sovereignty in Necropolitics: *Vanni* in the Framework of Intimacy Geopolitics

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Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict (2019), by Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock, is an ethnographic work in the medium of comics and set in conflict-ridden Sri Lanka. It narrates the story of two fishing families, the Ramachandrans and the Chologars, and their gradual displacement from the coast of Vanni, Sri Lanka, due to the tsunami and the civil war. This essay examines the conflict as a necropolitical project based on the sovereign right to kill and examines how necropolitics conditions death and its related performances. In such cases, sovereignty is constantly asserted and contested through the practice of self-regulation, which, in turn, also influences the performance of intimacy. The essay undertakes the proposed examination by studying the three key aspects of intimacy geopolitics: spatial relations in deathscapes and necrosapes, modes of interaction in the performance of intimacy, and associated sets of practices. Sovereignty is expressed and conditioned in the triadic conversation of necropolitics, intimacy, and death. Intimacy geopolitics allows the framing of impersonal necropolitical conditions with a grounded embeddedness. Comics, as popular geopolitical artifacts, provide a medium in sync with the methodology of intimacy geopolitics.



Introduction

Vanni: A Family's Struggle Through the Sri Lankan Conflict (2019) by Benjamin Dix and Lindsay Pollock is a 'non-fiction-fiction' in the medium of comics (2019: 265). It is an ethnographic account of the Sri Lankan civil war based on Dix's experience as a UN official in the country. It narrates the story of two fishing families, the Ramachandrans and the Chologars, and their gradual displacement from the coast of Vanni, Sri Lanka, due to the tsunami and the civil war. It is a documentation of life in an ongoing violent displacement as people flee for safety from military violence (by the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)), rushing across declared no fire zones that are nonetheless bombarded by both sides. It documents the loss of life, families, livelihood, and living with it. The book follows the Ramachandrans and the Chologars across their homes on the beach in Chempiyanpattu, the tsunami relief camps of 2004, multiple IDP camps made for people forced to relocate to state-assigned no fire zones, and the final asylum of the remaining survivors in London. This paper reads the Sri Lankan conflict per Mbembe's logic of necropolitics. It studies the multiple expressions of death and related performances in a necropolitical conflict and examines the dialog between the two within the framework of intimacy geopolitics.

The project of intimacy geopolitics aims at geopolitical groundedness that views intimacy as more than just the recipient of broader historical, social, and political phenomena. It envisions intimacy as embedded and as conditioning these phenomena that are conventionally seen as 'bigger' than the intimate.

Our focus on the intimate, as such, encompasses but also goes beyond interest in the embodied, everyday manifestations of geopolitics to trace and understand more broadly how lived experiences are intrinsically embedded within and productive of wider historical, cultural, socio-economic and geopolitical processes. (Barabantseva, Mhurchú and Peterson 2021: 345)

Envisioning the geopolitics of a conflict without frameworks of intimacy, emotional topographies, and gender is essentially a hierarchical practice.¹ Intimacy is an essential intervention into the nature of fatal violence and its pervasiveness in geopolitical conflicts (Pain and Staeheli 2014; Pain 2015). It is explained through, for

¹ The cultural turn in the discipline of geography post-1980s also meant a significant addition to how we envisioned space and spatial relations in geopolitics. This was reflected in the steady burgeoning fields of alter-geopolitics and the allied fields of emotional-, popular-, intimacy-, and feminist geopolitics. See Massaro and Williams (2013), Pain (2009), and the volume of papers edited by Pain and Staeheli (2014) for an introductory understanding of how these new ways of conceptualizing spatial relations challenged the hierarchies of traditional and mainstream geopolitics.

instance, the potential grievability or non-grievability of bodies that translates into material realities for them.² Death and intimacy are part of a material-perceptual paradigm, and graphic narratives that seek to represent violence in geopolitical conflicts enable an aesthetic-political acknowledgment of death and living by visualizing the necropolitical logic of these places (Orbán 2015; Raina 2022). Mbembé & Meintjes frame the central question of necropolitics as follows: ‘Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)?’ (2003). This essay undertakes an examination along the same lines but streamlines it through intimacy and intimacy geopolitics. It is structured in three sections: first, the texture of necropolitical violence in the primary text; second, the spatialities of death created in the wake of necropolitical violence; and third, mourning and martyrdom as practices in death-worlds. In doing so, it unveils the triadic conversation of intimacy, death, and necropolitics.

On the Texture of Necropolitical Violence

Part III of *Vanni* places the narrative in 2009 and shows the Ramachandrans and the Chologars camping in multiple no fire zones. After arbitrarily forcing people to vacate the first zone, the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE soldiers engage in combat in the second no fire zone. This unannounced attack results in a carnage in which displaced innocent civilians are caught unaware and exposed to indiscriminate shelling. It reveals the necropolitical principle of the conflict that sees populations as fit for elimination and beyond the legal-sovereign domain of accountability. The Ramachandrans are caught in this heavy shelling, and Michael, their youngest child, is killed. The discovery of Michael’s corpse, the family’s grief, the shoddy burial, and the incessant attacks on their camp, visualized in silence, span over three pages and eighteen panels. Diegetically, the sensory overload of the bloodbath has been rendered wordless and soundless. Simultaneously, elsewhere, Nelani Chologar and her child, Bala, have been starving for days, their emaciated looks mimicked in the visages of other worn-out people in their city of tents. They get a meagre handful of cooked rice from a couple, but Bala insists on sharing the food with his mother. Unsatiated, he gets up at night to look for something to eat and ends up eating the leaves of an unknown poisonous plant that kills him. We see him in silent panels, searching for something edible and chomping down on unidentified leaves. Akin to the Ramachandran’s tragedy, Nelani’s

² The notion of grievability and non-grievability of bodies has been intensively theorized in Butler’s *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009). We can also refer to Avril Maddrell’s work on death, mourning, and deathscapes to study how social identities and death converse with each other to produce differential affects and scapes (2010, 2016, 2023, 2023). For a singular analysis of *Vanni* through the lens of Butler’s *Frames of War* and precarity see Joseph, et al., (2023).

discovery of his dead body and its burial is a silent depiction. With tears and inaudible cries, Nelani buries him and digs his grave with her own hands.

There has been work on the political ability of comics to speak via the drawn line as an imprint and a trace (Vignes 2010; Scherr 2016; Nayar 2021). This ability makes comics a politically charged medium for silence as a representative tool and the ethics of communicating violence. The visual detailing in these panels of *Vanni* suffices to create an aesthetic of death, loss, and grief. Dix and Pollock have rendered the violence here purely visual, and this visuality makes for an uncomfortable reading that is, nonetheless, capable of arousing other senses as well. The aesthetic use of silence begins with Antoni's discovery of Michael's lifeless body lying amidst rows of other bloodied, dead bodies swarmed by flies. The visuals create the smell of death and decay. Pollock's illustrations bring forth the pathos and pain of the Ramachandrans. The reader has been with them since the beginning of the text, privy to their happy and peaceful days and the murder of the youngest member of the family. The silence of the panels leaves the reader in an uncomfortable reading bereft of the support of the verbal. Conventional codes of comics making and reading promise the reader a reliance on text to supplement the comic's imagetext.³ But here, in the lack of a verbal track, the characters' faces and the narrative (diegetic and the reality of human loss in conflicts) allow the reader to visualize cries of pain. This aesthetic of silence continues even as bombs rain all over again on the no fire zone. The centrality of intimacy geopolitics and its assertion of groundedness is reinforced when Rajni's cries for the war to stop break the uncanny silencing of the panels: 'Not now! Give me peace! Let me grieve my son!' (185). Meanwhile, the smell of rotting wounds, corpses, burning camps, and a cacophony of grief, massacre, and violence lingers throughout. This creates a synaesthetic engagement between the reader and the narrative based on the visual absence of sound. The comic employs an acoustic stillness⁴ to indicate the infrastructural and visible violence of necropolitics committed to the material destruction of populations. In his essay, Mbembe discusses death-worlds as 'new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead' (2003: 40). Following this principle, the sovereign's decision on death permeates into no fire zones to ensure the continuity of a necropolitical logic even when the said zone is not directly the target of the state.

³ The term "imagetext" is borrowed from WJT. Mitchell's interview with Wiesenthal and Bucknell (2000). While Mitchell uses it with respect to representation and the pictorial turn; here, it reflects the heterogeneity of the visual-verbal sign in *Vanni* and the medium of comics in general.

⁴ For more on the aesthetic employability of silence in graphic narratives based in conflict zones, see Adler and Kohn (2020) and Raina (2024).

Bala's death is a commentary on the proliferated nature of violence and fatality in *Vanni*. It is part of an iconography of multiple deaths, hurried burials, visible graves, and the continued peril of death. Violent conflicts entail more than guns, ammunition, and decibels; armed violence is just one of their facets. Its effects play out in other ways as well, and it is crucial to place Bala's death within the social context of the Sri Lankan situation, i.e., within a necropolitical setup with its objective violence. According to Žižek, subjective violence involves visible acts of harm performed by 'clearly identifiable agents' that are observable against a backdrop of non-violent normalcy (2008). However, he maintains that this normal is a construct that does not visibilize objective violence, which in turn is inherent to the 'normal' state of things- it sustains the normal. Conflicts accentuate the structural and objective violence to which marginalized groups are often exposed. Michael and Bala are boys of the same age, growing up in the same neighborhood and born into families of similar socioeconomic standing. Both went through the same conflict and were affected in similar ways. Ironically, their lives took a different turn in their death. While Michael dies of an explosion, Bala dies of poisoning. Both are violent deaths but manifest in different ways. Mbembe writes that in necropolitical conditions, life becomes death's medium as there is no accountability, acknowledgment, or justice to lives rendered disposable (2019: 38). Even though not linearly connected, these panels depicting Michael and Bala's deaths are present in a network of iconic solidarity, joined in the representation of violence and the trope of death in conflicts. Caught in the Sri Lankan conflict, their lives were reduced to the sheer act of staying alive, and they could be violated or snatched by any violence as long as it recognized their legal-sovereign disposability as bare life. Their lives present a violent intimacy with death conditioned in both life and its cessation. For Michael, it was the subjective violence of an air raid, and for Bala, it was a hypervisibilized objective violence that made food and sustenance inaccessible. In *Vanni*, this osmotic typology of violence is a commentary on the proliferation of death that indicates the intimacy of its characters with necropolitical violence. The primary marker of the necropolitical condition is sovereignty, as the decision on the death of its subjects. The following section uses this essence of necropolitics and allied violence to study the permeated spatialities of death as deathscapes and necrosapes.

Deathscapes and Necrosapes: Intimacy in/of Necropolitical Spatialities

This section compares campsites in *Vanni* that came up in the face of fatal violence: one was established after the massive ecological ferocity of the 2006 Boxing Day tsunami, and the others during and towards the end of the Sri Lankan civil war. The first is the Chempiyanpattu relief camp on the coast of Vanni, and the second is the IDP Camp at

Visuvamadu. Along with the difference in the violence that created these campsites, their varied topography, the make of their tents, and the constitution of what they hold indicate a structural and lived difference between them. This difference is created and conditioned by the cumulative action of intimacy and death as material-perceptual paradigms in *Vanni*.

Tsunami Relief Camp at Chempiyanpattu

After the tsunami of 2004, Chempiyanpattu in Vanni is a relief camp for hundreds of homeless people who have arrived in this 'huge town of tents' (59). For fear of the spread of disease, thousands of unidentified bodies are hurriedly buried in mass graves. Images of tents and mass graves will also repeat themselves once the displacement caused by the warring between the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE commences in 2007. *Vanni* shows the woven textures of natural disasters and civil war in the life of the Chologars. Nandini Chologar lost her husband, Suji, and her elder son, Jagajeet, to the tsunami. Jagajeet was an LTTE soldier who lost his leg in the conflict. Segar, Nelani's second son, is overwhelmed by a sense of loss that this enormous 'city of tents' seems to emanate and constantly seeks to escape its dismal vicinity. He walks away from the site, crosses an adjacent graveyard, and sits on a beach facing the sea; the dead and the living sit face to face. Considering the recent tsunami, he is seated between two spaces that bear marks of a recent and personal carnage- the mass graves of tsunami victims and the sea that claimed their lives.

The central panel shows him and Chira, his sister, facing the sea with the graveyard's crosses in the background. This circumferential death is also evident in Segar questioning Chira about Jaga and Appa's whereabouts, 'Are they back there with the others in the mass grave? Or are they out there at sea?' (63). His family could be anywhere between the sea and the graves. Not only is death present materially in the form of mass graves, but it has also created emotional geographies of loss and fear in the camp that stretch to the sea. The survivors of the Chempiyanpattu relief camp appear to be nestled in a material-emotional spatiality of death. Such spatialities, referred to as deathscapes, are also emotional geographies created in the intersection of socio-spatial structures of death and 'emotion and affect, identity and politics' (Sidaway & Maddrell 2010). It illustrates a familial intimacy between the dead and the living. Segar has lost his father and brother, and he also witnessed the large-scale death caused by the tsunami. This lends to the deathscape a 'sense of place' (Sidaway & Maddrell 2010). On seeing Segar's desolation, Chira asks him to return to the land of the living and find a reason to 'come back to life.' The land of the living becomes a paradoxical reference to Chempiyanpattu as an intimate deathscape, albeit with its

survivors. Later, to get back into the world of the living, Segar joins the LTTE and subsequently dies.

The tsunami relief camp in Chempiyanpattu is visually marked by refugee kits, hygiene packs, white UN volunteers, and 'UN' stamped over neat, sturdy, and identical tents. There are desolate and crying faces in the sprawl of tents, but gradually, the desolation is replaced by their attempt at rebuilding the place till it gains a material sense of structure and proportion. Civilians assert control over the quality of their lives as they attempt to renegotiate a living in the tent city. Although it originated as a deathscape, the living come to assert a sovereign hold on the place, modifying their intimacy with the dead and the deathscape. This sovereignty is formed and shaped in the deathscape mentioned and is, therefore, woven with the material and mental reminders of death. In *Necropolitics*, Mbembe writes

The exercise of reason is tantamount to the exercise of freedom, a key element for individual autonomy. The romance of sovereignty, in this case, rests on the belief that the subject is the master and the controlling author of his or her own meaning. Sovereignty is therefore defined as a twofold process of self-institution and self-limitation (fixing one's own limits for oneself). (2019: 67–68)

In the tsunami relief camp, civilians are in a self-regulatory conversation with death and its spatiality. As months roll on, the camp begins to feel permanent, and this sense of tentative permanence creates a notion of relative safety for them until the eruption of armed violence between the Lankan army and LTTE in 2007 forces them to flee. The war exposes civilians to continuous displacement from one safe zone to another, temporarily stationing them in multiple campsites. One of these is the Internally Displaced Persons Camp (IDP) at Visuvamadu (figure 14), and the other is Manik Farm. In the coming paragraphs, both will be analyzed as intimate spatialities of death operating within a necropolitical logic.

IDP Camp at Visuvamadu

Figure 1 is a full-page representation of the IDP camp at Visuvamadu as another makeshift city of tents in Vanni. The camp is a temporary aggregation of tents and bunkers set up in August 2007 after the war reached the tsunami relief camp at Chempiyanpattu, forcing its occupants to run south and inland for safety. Its visual topography consists of rudimentary tents of wooden logs, pieces of cloth, and tin sheds, accompanied by underground bunkers that the occupants must dig for themselves. It is littered with shoddily done tent arrangements, a goat tied to a tree, random chairs,

utensils, bags, some bikes, and a makeshift bathing area. The banality associated with these things and their placement gives the IDP camp an imagination of chaos, a sense of temporary occupancy, and simultaneous collapsibility. This collapsibility is supported by the presence of bunkers and proven by the attack of the state, which soon declares certain portions of territory as no fire zones, designating others as spaces where the state has the sovereign right to execute its necropolitical logic. The camp's occupants are on the lookout for shelling by the Sri Lankan government and forced recruitment by the LTTE. Self-regulation, while still in conversation with death, faces its limit. The journey of the Ramachandrans and the Chologars after leaving the IDP camp shows the transition from a deathscape to one regulated by a singular political logic: necropolitics.

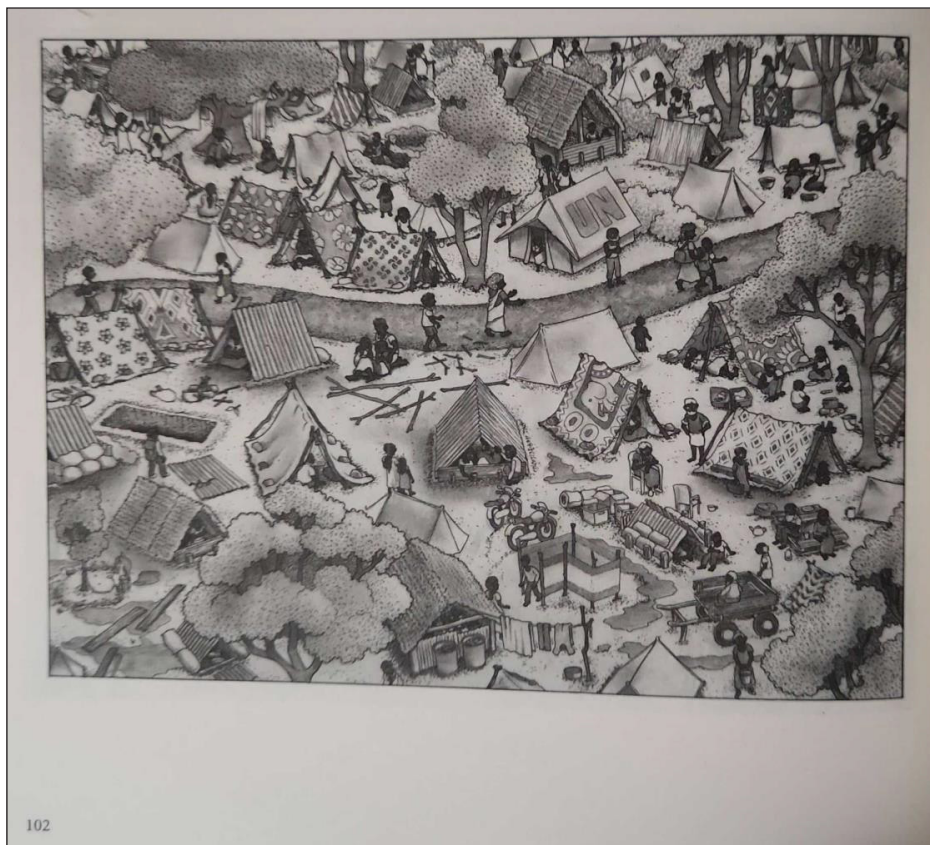


Figure 1: IDP Camp at Visuvamadu; Dix, Benjamin and Pollock, Lindsay. Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict, p. 102. Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2019. © 2019 Penguin Books.

On 21st January, the Sri Lankan government announced a no fire zone that would not be shelled, and the occupants of the IDP camp rushed toward this promised safety. The entirety of **Figure 2** is a singular panel, in itself a deathscape. While **Figure 2** shows the entire site devastated by the bombing, the next page (**Figure 3**) localizes the narrative

on the four remaining members of the Ramachandran family. Necropolitical setups naturalize biophysical elimination as an exercise of the sovereign's right to kill. In such a setup, the sovereign desires to absolutely exclude by the extermination of select life. Naturalization is possible because killing is an impersonal action, made possible through a 'long process of dehumanizing and industrializing death' (18). Drawing the bombings through varying perspectives and placing their subsequent panel breakdown side-to-side, one panel focusing on the site from a bird's eye point of view and the next placing it within the intimate unit of the Ramachandran family, re-personalizes this physical elimination. Antoni, Theepa, Michael, and Rajini are rescued from underneath debris and carried onto a truck for medical aid. **Figure 3** is a polyptych that individualizes the four family members even as the background of a devastated campsite remains the same. While they are unconscious, the family is fragmentedly distributed within the page layout, and the comic page's formal abilities break the site's uniformity into four panels.

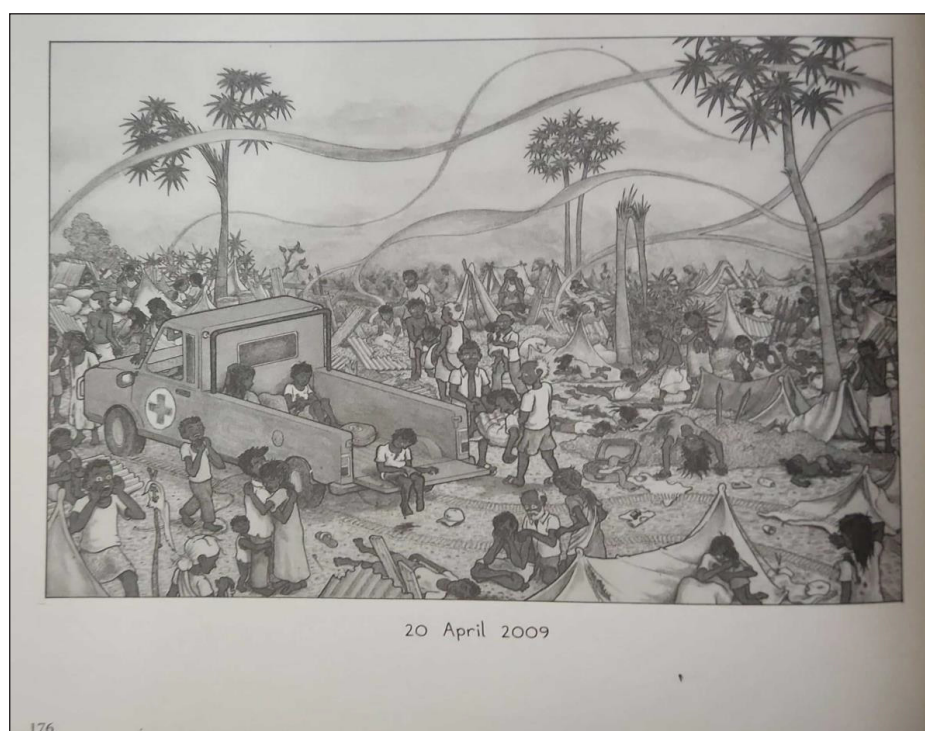


Figure 2: Dix, Benjamin and Pollock, Lindsay. Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict, p. 176. Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2019. © 2019 Penguin Books.

The *mises-en-page* of the two figures create two different socio-spatial representations of the bombing. The polyptych allows two parallel yet co-constituting tracks: the bombing of an entire group of unnamed and unknown human bodies, the death and injury of the Ramachandrans as individual people, and their unified

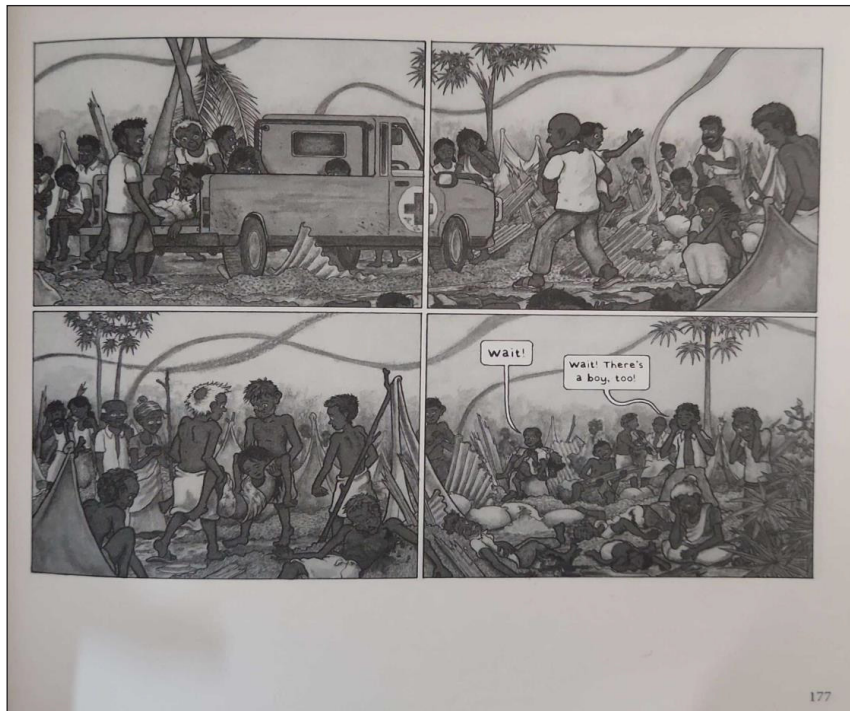


Figure 3: Dix, Benjamin and Pollock, Lindsay. *Vanni: A Family's Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*, p. 177. Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2019. © 2019 Penguin Books.

representation as a familial unit, all within the spatio-topical framework of the comics page. The two pages allow a visualization of intimacy geopolitics at its most direct: asserting the emotional geographies of intimacy and pain against the clinical logic of necropolitics. In this representation, the medium of comics exercises an aesthetic of political spatiality. The arthrological function of comics deconstructs the IDC camp at Visuvamadu to reveal layers and textures of death vis-à-vis intimacy geopolitics and necropolitics.

Manik Farm

Towards the end of the fighting in 2009, the IDC camp at Manik Farm is considered one of the largest camps on the planet (222). **Figure 4** is a full-page representation of the camp that holds 300,000 internally displaced people and follows right after panels containing bird's-eye images of bombed and desecrated sites showing a visible carnage of tents and lived spaces (222). At Manik Farm, Antoni is picked up for interrogation by Sri Lankan soldiers and tortured in custody. The farm has an aesthetic of striation with an eerie proportionality. It has an evenly striated distribution of tents with an official enclosure on the side, possibly for use by the Sri Lankan army. In place of the makeshift tents that people had made in the wake of the Boxing Day tsunami, this place has sturdier-looking stable tents. Wired fences on all sides and one small gateway marked

with well-wrought tire tracks indicate one-sided mobility for the armed state. Mbembe talks about how a heavy check on mobility is crucial for forming ‘death-worlds’ (2003: 40). Manik Farm shows that in such death-worlds, the living are in a necropolitical intimacy with death and its threat. The place exudes an imagination of planning, and the regularity of topography extends to the rain that falls in similar equidistant layers. It creates an aesthetic of contrast between the violence attributed to the creation of Manik Farm and the uncanny order it portrays. While both the tsunami relief camp and the IDP Camp at Visuvamadu held an imagination of chaos, they were marked by a relative self-regulation of the living. However, the order of Manik Farm is the visual manifestation of the state’s necropolitical logic of sovereignty.⁵ The striation here is in the service of a sovereign with the aim of absolute surveillance

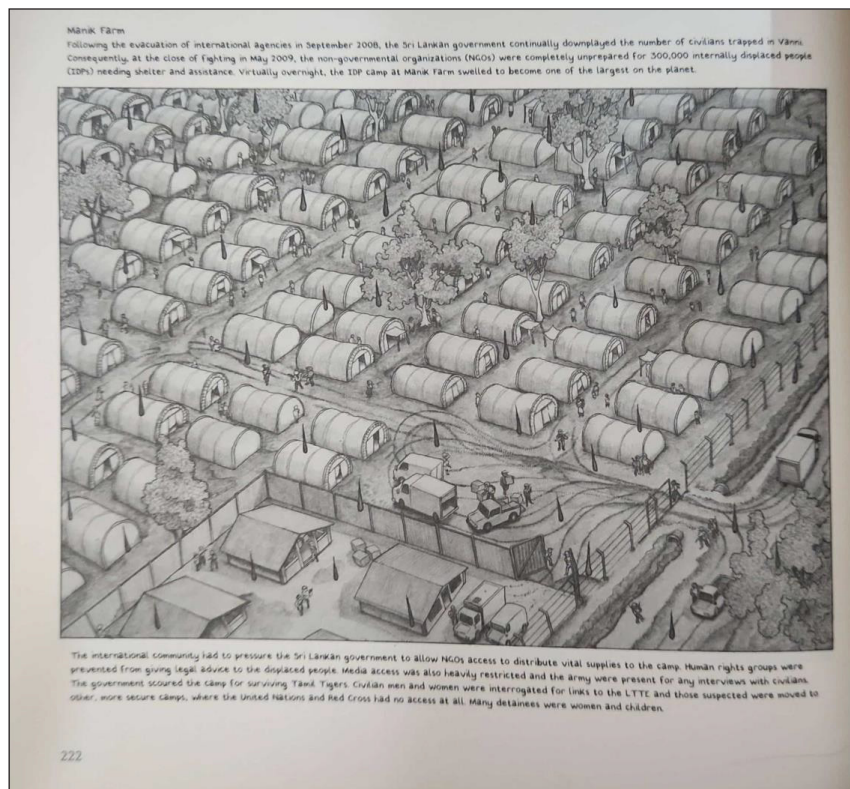


Figure 4: Dix, Benjamin and Pollock, Lindsay. *Vanni: A Family’s Struggle through the Sri Lankan Conflict*, p. 222. Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2019. © 2019 Penguin Books.

⁵ ‘In these more or less mobile and segmentary forms of administration of terror, sovereignty consists in the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death, and doing so under conditions in which death itself increasingly tends to become spectral, thanks both to the way in which it is lived and to the manner in which it is given. This life is a superfluous one, therefore, whose price is so meager that it has no equivalence, whether market or—even less—human; this is a species of life whose value is extra-economic, the only equivalent of which is the sort of death able to be inflicted upon it.’ (Mbembe 2019: 37–38)

The international community had to pressure the Sri Lankan government to allow NGOs access to distribute vital supplies to the camp. Human rights groups were prevented from giving legal advice to the displaced people. Media access was also heavily restricted, and the army were present for any interviews with civilians. The government scoured the camp for surviving Tamil Tigers. Civilian men and women were interrogated for links to the LTTE and those suspected were moved to other, more secure camps, where the United Nations and Red Cross had no access at all. Many detainees were women and children. (Dix and Pollock 2019: 222)

Manik Farm presents terrifying imagery of planning to calculate access in and out of the camp. Unlike the tsunami relief camp and the IDP Camp at Visuvamadu, here, the threat of collapsibility is necropolitical but woven into a structure of sturdy planning. The first two showcased a material collapsibility resisted by the Tamilian's sovereign self-regulation in an imagination of chaos and deliberate action. Manik Farm's necropolitical logic is carried out in the form of death and its threat, which is the sovereign and absolute principle of the place.

The materiality of deathscapes is highly revealing of their sociology. The first relief camp transitioned into inhabitable quarters with some semblance of permanence. The displacement camp is a space of stressed mobility and urgent evacuation. Manik Farm is the physical and spatial manifestation of the vulnerability of its occupants as bare life. The civilian in Manik Farm is the original inclusion by exclusion in the figure of Agamben's *homo sacer* (1998). They can be killed without repercussion since their death is outside the realm of sovereign legality. Manik Farm is a *necroscape*, formed by a relationship between necropolitics and landscape that affects the lives of civilians, ways of living, and their 'threshold between life and death' (Guglielmucci, 2020). The chaos of the first relief camp, as a deathscape, showed the citizen/ refugee sovereign engaged in self-regulation, which Manik Farm, as a necroscape, denied. While the relief camp, with its desolation and the adjacent, visibly conspicuous graveyard, is a deathscape reminiscent of primarily ecological violence, the displacement camp is a proto-necroscape indicative of precise, impersonal, deadly violence, infrastructural warfare, and invisible killings. It reaches absolution in Manik Farm. This transition can be traced in the changing topographical look of the camps with their gradual striation. The sovereign's right to kill finds its complete logic in Manik Farm, where civilians have been kept without access to aid and survival. The state can govern and execute their transition to bare life. *Vanni's* topography and navigation (both *Vanni* as a narrative and the place) are an engagement with death, material and perceptual respectively, with a necropolitical spatialization in Manik Farm.

An analysis of these spaces reveals various death-intimacy conversations. Necropolitics primarily concerns the philosophy of sovereignty and its right to decide on life and death. In such conditions, intimacy cannot help but be woven into the various manifestations and performances centred around death. Intimacy geopolitics advocates a groundedness built in spatial relations, modes of interactions, and a set of practices. The undertaken analysis shows how death figures via the first two aspects. Deathscapes and necroscapes are spatialities where sovereignty and necropolitics engage with each other in performances of intimacy. These performances are explained as self-regulatory modes of interaction. It appears that sovereignty is asserted, contested, and modulated in the triangulated conversation of death, intimacy, and necropolitics. The third aspect connects intimacy geopolitics to a set of practices undertaken in personal and public spaces, as individuals and as a community. It is analyzed in the last section by examining *Vanni's* death-worlds, martyrdom, and commemoration practices. Comics and their media-specific techniques of drawing, silence, and form enable this multi-modal visualization of intimacy geopolitics.

Death-worlds, Mourning, and Martyrdom as Practicing Intimacy

The experience of survival and its daily reiteration happens in the multiple performances and practices required for living after the death of a close one, for example, in the form of Martyrs' Day in *Vanni*. Mourning and remembrance around death have always been mediated culturally and politically by multiple factors, including state, religion, and other dominant actors (Klass & Goss 2003). There are no singular ways of grieving, mourning, or celebrating death. Each process is situated in a matrix of social nodes, creating varied and often contradictory performances. In *Vanni*, the implicit threat of death hangs over everybody who seeks to join the LTTE or is forcibly recruited into it. Eelanila, the grandmother in the Ramachandran family, loses her son Ranjan, an LTTE fighter, to the war. The Chologars lose their children, Jagajeet, Segar, and Chira, who were all young recruits in the LTTE army. However, a specific celebration is also associated with this death on Martyrs' Day. This celebration makes death and its remembrance more powerful in influence and affect. It creates deathscapes of pride, joy, and grief in memorial services, which exist in a paradoxical relationship with the fear experienced by living members in that particular deathscape as an emotional geography. In the case of *Vanni*, practices of mourning, grieving, as well as celebration must take into consideration the necropolitical logic of that death.

These practices are as much public as personal. A politicality associated with death radiates outwards vis-à-vis these nodes into the entire social matrix. Referring to Eelanila, Antoni's widowed mother, having lost her husband in the riots of 1983,

Nelani remarks that 'it is hard to be a widow on a celebration day' (26). The riots, the impending violence of a conflict that could reignite at any point, and the fact that her son Ranjan is an LTTE member complicate the celebration of martyrdom for her. Nelani experiences a similar trepidation in being associated with the LTTE and the commemoration of Martyrs' Day: 'Her eyes ran along the martyrs in the photographs—so many just kids' (22). Her son Jaga is also a Tiger. His uniform's bolder and darker detailing makes him stand out from others in the panels. The panel shifts from Nelani's eyes on Jaga in his uniform, donning his hat, to photographs of martyrs in LTTE uniforms. The photographic celebration of their death creates an emotion of veneration coupled with fear in its vicinity. It creates a sense of trepidation for Nelani that runs parallel to the event's purpose.

Mbembe asserts that the logic of martyrdom is understood as the will to die fused with the will to take the enemy as well. It contests necropolitical logic by asserting its sovereign decision on the death of 'everyone' (2003: 88). Thus, the desire to fight the Sri Lankan government is fuelled by a sovereign desire to decide on death and its possibility. The celebratory practice of Martyrs' Day is a part of this assertive sovereignty. Necropolitics reconfigures the relationship between sacrifice, terror, and resistance. Built on Bataille's notion of death as a luxury of expenditure, sacrifice and martyrdom are positioned as wilful engagement at the level of sovereignty. This has manifestations in how the Tigers and their resistance are lauded in performances of community-based intimacy, like popular songs about Tigers fighting for their Tamil homeland, memorized by small children (21). However, it also denies romanticization since the death-world of the living engages with the logic of martyrdom, creating a site where multiple performances, including intimacy, are expected and evoked. Despite her son losing a leg after stepping on a mine, Nelani finds some assurance in the fact that her son is away from the war and she can keep him safe. Such intimate decisions constantly mediate the logic of martyrdom and necropolitics.

In his book *Governing the Dead*, Stepputat talks about how sovereignty is maintained and mediated around practices related to life and death, primarily through the management of dead bodies (2014). This can function by means of controlling commemoration, burial, or even display for power purposes. Commemoration is a reflection of political memory. The visibility/ invisibility of the dead, dying, and injured plays a vital role in practices of sovereignty and intimacy. While the living celebrate the dead in discourses of popular resistance, this celebration cannot be interpreted or performed similarly by everybody in their private lives. Apart from the physical vulnerability of Tamilians in *Vanni* to impending necropolitical violence, the graphic narrative also shows the complicated nature of necropolitical death-worlds as intimate spatialities of paradoxes and tensions in their social practices.

Conclusion

This paper examines *Vanni*, the Sri Lankan civil war, death, and necropolitics in the framework of intimacy geopolitics. Death elicits different performances in material conversation with the geopolitics of a conflict zone; within a necropolitical setup, it is the governing principle of sovereignty that oversees the transformation of deathscapes into necrosapes. An examination of these ‘scapes’ reveals a practiced modulation of sovereignty that is both channelled and contested through performances of intimacy. The lens of intimacy geopolitics allows us to ground narratives of war and massacres in a horizontal multi-node setup. Fuelled by intimacy, death has a point-counterpoint relationship with necropolitical logic.

This paper makes a case for how comics serve as both text and method in the schools of graphic ethnography, emotional geography, and intimacy geopolitics. *Vanni* is an ethnographic non-fiction-fiction that also echoes with comics journalism. It belongs in the body of popular geopolitics that documents conflicts and creates democratized narratives to function as antidotes to mainstream and often top-down geopolitical discourses, alongside texts like *Maus*, *Palestine*, *Munnu*, to name a few. Its form, arthrology, spatio-topical setup, medium-specific usage of silence, image, and text allow a visualization of intimacy geopolitics and its triadic explorations vis-à-vis spatial relations, modes of interaction, and sets of practices. There is a certain flow in the paper that correlates to these three principal elements. The first and second sections (on texture and spatialities) have a more obvious mirroring with the formal elements of comics, vis-à-vis page breakdown, layout, and the arthrological function of comics. Notably, the texture and spatialization of necropolitical violence find astute aesthetic realization in *Vanni*’s multiframe. The third section is practice-oriented, and it builds on the emotional geopolitics of *Vanni* and the ethnographic capability of *Vanni*.

This research cements comics as part of related popular geopolitics and as one worth scrutiny for its position as a medium with a unique aesthetic imagetext. While geopolitics is in conversation with various performances of intimacy, the necropolitical claim on the right to kill brings in death as another major conversant. The triangulation of death, intimacy, and necropolitics determines and expresses sovereignty and its politics. By extending the ambit of intimacy geopolitics to other social, political, economic, and cultural modes, we gain more insight into the lived experience of conflicts. In such a case, its main contribution is allowing an examination of sovereign assertions and contestations, thereby opening avenues for further explorations of sovereignty and its politics.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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