THE HETEROTOPIC SPACES OF POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S ANIL’S GHOST

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Studying in Guy’s Hospital in London where she is training to be a forensic scientist, Anil Tissera, the protagonist of Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, discovers a new word that sounds strangely familiar though she has never heard it before. This word is *amygdala*, the anatomical term for a small knot of fibers made up of nerve cells that is located near the stem of the brain, one of which she has just cut away from surrounding tissue as part of an anatomy class (134). Although amygdala comes from the Greek word for almond, to Anil it “sounds Sri Lankan,” like the name of “some bad god” (135). She asks the professor teaching her what it means. “Nothing,” he replies, “[i]t’s a location. It’s the darkest part of the brain…A place to house fearful memories” (134).

This vignette, which appears toward the center of the narrative, adumbrates the underlying themes of Michael Ondaatje’s complex and profoundly moving novel *Anil’s Ghost*. Metaphorically, and sometimes literally, the amygdala is the living kernel at the center of this text, binding and unbinding the seemingly incommensurable categories of scientific and imaginative “truths” and the histories that they contain. In much the same way, the amygdala also mediates the emotional responses to trauma that are encountered and revisited during the course of the narrative. This scene intimates how location or place can overshadow the meaning of the word, how dark or fearful memories are connected to the physical. What begins for Anil as a fascination with the sound and shape of a word that connects her to her homeland turns into a habituated physical act, an intrinsic part of her investigative methodology as a reader of the intricacies of dead bodies. Yet, simultaneously, the ghosting of the word also provides a continuous re-enactment of memory that underlies an
unconscious search for located, homely affirmation and re-connection. Once trained, Anil always “remembers the almond knot. During autopsies her secret habit of detour is to look for the amygdala, this nerve bundle which houses fear” (135).

The Habit of Detour

Many book reviews and later articles of literary criticism have accused Ondaatje of circumventing the historical realities of the traumas of the Sri Lankan civil war of which he writes in Anil's Ghost. The novel has been dismissed for its “irresponsible” apoliticism (LeClair 31) and attacked for the “exhilarating feeling” of its ending, which obfuscates the terror and pain of lost “lives and culture” ruined by civil war by offering the vision of a “permanent cure” through artistic vision (Ganapathy-Doré par. 15). In an earlier issue of Studies in the Novel, Margaret Scanlan opens an article on Anil's Ghost by questioning whether “[b]y omitting so much of what we expect from a political novel in the way of public events and historical detail, Ondaatje might risk aestheticizing terror, repeating the modernist gesture of turning away from atrocity to timeless form” (emphasis added). However, Scanlan then refutes this rhetorical gambit by arguing that Ondaatje’s “distinctive achievement in Anil's Ghost is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror” (302).

My argument in many ways is also about the achievement of Ondaatje’s narrative form in this novel, but it follows a very different trajectory. With no disrespect to Scanlan’s fine essay—I am merely following my own special interest in trauma readings—rather than replicating, or perhaps as well as replicating the experience of terror, I believe that Ondaatje’s famously fragmentary and ambivalent narrative exposes the way in which the developed world turns away from the experience of trauma that so often blights the existence of many postcolonial subjects in different parts of the developing world. Moreover, and this is the central focus of my essay, this habit of detour is well ingrained in the ethnocentric blindness of trauma theory itself.

The acknowledged method of working through and healing trauma is through words, or the creation of a narrative, whether written or spoken. Much trauma theory grew out of Holocaust studies which sought ways to enable particularized forms of profound historical trauma to be narrativized. Lawrence Langer, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Saul Friedman, and Dominick LaCapra—to name just the most prominent scholars—painfully and evocatively describe this trauma; Kalí Tal and Jonathan Shay do so for the experiences of Vietnam veterans. Yet little has been done to think through the more contemporary and differently situated effects of trauma that have evolved through the legacies of colonialism. Except for scholarship that examines the relationship of trauma to the long-term effects of African American slavery, most notably evolving around the work of Toni Morrison and especially her extraordinary
novel *Beloved*, trauma theory and its motivations remain largely race-blind and Eurocentric. Furthermore, as I argued in *Whiteness and Trauma* (2004), the theorizing of trauma and its effects remains bound up in the privileges of whiteness and is thus blind to the invisible normatives of power that the positioning of whiteness entails.

However, Cathy Caruth, the most prominent trauma theorist engaged in literary criticism today, maintains that in this age of violence and natural and technological catastrophe, trauma itself may “provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as *our ability to listen* through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (“Introduction,” *Trauma* 11; emphasis added). Caruth’s theory of belatedness, central to her work, helps unravel some of the more complex conundrums of the mechanisms of trauma and, indeed, its theory. She claims that “the attempt to understand trauma brings one repeatedly to this peculiar paradox: that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (“Introduction,” *American Imago* 5). While the concept primarily invokes a psychic rupture in the form of a withholding of traumatic memory from consciousness, it has consequences for the structuring of form and style in literary texts that lead to both innovative writing and new possibilities for working through trauma. Caruth maintains that we begin “to hear each other anew in the study of trauma…[by] *listening* through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience” (2, emphasis added). Yet such a statement manifestly ignores power structures. The areas of study to which she refers include the fields of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, sociology, and literature. However, the “we” remains undifferentiated and can be assumed almost exclusively to hold the privileges of whiteness. For this reason, I would like to extend the idea of the temporal disruption of belatedness as a way of beginning to address the notion of postcolonial trauma.

Together with its psychic implications and repercussions, belatedness also entails the idea of disjuncture in historical time, which raises important questions both about the periodization of colonialism and postcolonialism and about the long-term psychic effects of this imagined closure suggested by the prefix “post.” In terms of the colonial/postcolonial binary, the question of who is able to effect closure on historical traumas is bound up with the imagined dismantling of colonialism. There are ongoing traumas for many millions of people whose lives are still disproportionately circumscribed by the often intense suffering created by the changing face of power structures that have metamorphosed into neo-colonialism, cultural imperialism, and now the injustices (racial, gendered, and classed) inherent in the universalistic notion of global capitalism. Only those who can ignore “the belated scar[s]”–both metaphorical and literal–inscribed on the lives of millions *who live the consequences of colonialism* can retreat, in the words of Robert Young, into
the “safety of its politics of the past” (3). Belatedness, then, also concerns the power politics of relation and location, as Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani suggest: “‘Post’ means ‘after in time.’ But what happened during that time—presumably in this instance a time between ‘colonialism,’ or ‘coloniality,’ and now? In what senses are we now situated ‘after’ ‘coloniality’ in the sense of ‘coloniality’ being ‘over and done with?’ What, about ‘the colonial,’ is over and for whom?” (294-95). The politics of location involve both the territorial (the physical location of the body mapped by ownership of land or nation) and the abstract (the psychic mapping of interpellation[s]). Moreover, the whole idea of who will listen is intrinsic not only to trauma theory and the possibility of resolution through testimony, but also to the politics of the postcolonial arena. In postcolonial theory itself, the question was raised by Gayatri Spivak, most notably in the words of the title to her now famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988). However, over time, the focus of her critique shifted, and Spivak answered her own rhetorical question by posing another: “For me, the question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘Who will listen?’” (“Questions” 59).

Amalgamating trauma theory and postcolonialism is not, therefore, just about individual traumatic experiences not being assimilated at the time of the occurrence. The synthesis is complicated by cultural imbalances that are bound by issues of psychic and material domination inherent in ethnocentrism and the invisible power structures of whiteness. These structures of power change in form but still all too often continue on after the supposed demise of colonialism. Although, on the positive side, the radical disruption of time involved in the concept of belatedness unsettles the ostensible notion of historical “progress,” the articulation of postcolonial trauma(s) that can be belatedly narrativized requires not only a voicing of unresolved historical loss and pain but also access to empathetic listeners.

Surviving trauma depends, to a greater or lesser degree, on being heard and empathetically acknowledged on both personal and social levels. In Survival in Auschwitz, Primo Levi recalls a dream in which he attempts to tell his sister and others about his experiences in Auschwitz. They are indifferent and behave as if he is not there. It is a dream, he tells his readers, from which many other concentration camp survivors suffer. Meditating on this psychic enigma, Levi then poses a poignant and ethically significant question that is also relevant to thinking about postcolonial trauma: “Why is the pain of every day translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the unlistened-to story?” (60, emphasis added). Postcolonial traumas are, of course, of a different nature to the horrors of the Holocaust, but the intrinsic point remains the same. To be released from trauma’s encryptions, a narrative (personal and social) has to be constructed and then psychically released through the act of being compassionately listened to and affirmed. However, while trauma studies grew out of a need to expose and deconstruct the long-term pain of deep-seated
personal and cultural trauma, and despite its inter-disciplinary promise, it arguably remains largely neo-colonial in focus and thereby disinterested in the traumas of postcolonial nations. Postcolonial trauma exists, I believe, in a heterotopic relationship to trauma studies.

Michael Ondaatje was largely educated and lives in a developed-world location, yet his personal ties to Sri Lanka—evoked so captivatingly in *Running in the Family*—enable him to see and voice both sides of the story, as it were. Rather than a turning away from a localized postcolonial perspective, of which he is sometimes accused in relation to *Anil’s Ghost*, the politics and narrative poetics of the novel can also be read as a complex exposed of the ingrained habit of detour and blindness to its own deviation that continues to haunt Western interpretations of trauma. It is, I believe, no accident that no one in this novel is healed through the agency of his or her own words; that there are no moments of cultural belatedness represented in its prose; and, finally, that there is an inordinate stress on the need to listen closely and respectfully to the situated knowledges of Sri Lanka and to the ongoing traumas of its citizens.

The Heterotopic Spaces of Trauma

Trauma and postcolonial theories both rely on the interconnection of time and space in real and psychological terms. For this reason, I will use Michel Foucault’s very under-theorized work on heterotopia to fathom a way beyond the power structures of developed-world ethnocentrism, which hinders the democratization of trauma theory. In doing so, I hope to create a new form of connection between trauma theory and postcolonialism. As Kevin Hetherington suggests in his monograph *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering*, the concept of heterotopia has most often been associated with ideas about postmodernity (41). The term is thus long overdue for renegotiation and application to a reading of postcolonial trauma. Indeed, the notion of heterotopia lends itself to postcolonial critiques and analyses because both are quintessentially about otherness and social ordering.

“Heterotopia” is a Latin word that translates literally as a place of otherness: in Foucauldian terms, “Of Other Spaces/Des espaces autres” (22-27). Importantly, then, it is a concept that is always relational—a place can only be “other” to another place. Heterotopias are, for Foucault, “real places” that exist in contradistinction to utopias, sites with “no real place” (24). While they principally concern ideas of space, these heterotopic spaces or sites can be, as Hetherington argues, “textual sites as much as geographical ones” (43). They are also “most often linked to slices in time...[which Foucault terms] heterochronies” (26). What is important is that heterotopias are “sites which rupture the order of things through their different mode of ordering to that which surrounds them” (46). They are sites of contrast that effectively create ambivalence and dis-order. When it comes to adapting the theory of heterotopia, or Foucault’s “heterotopology” (24), to postcolonial exegesis, the intertextual
relationship is only too apparent. If a heterotopic site, or “counter-site,” as Foucault described it (24), is about destabilizing and unsettling the place juxtaposed to it, so too does postcolonial theory move to unsettle, displace, and marginalize lingering colonial ideologies and practices on both temporal and spatial terms.

At the same time, in theorizing about these other spaces Foucault also believed that the “problem of the human site or living space is not simply that of knowing whether there will be enough space for men [sic] in the world—a problem that is certainly quite important—but also that of knowing what relations of propinquity, what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in a given situation in order to achieve a given end” (23, emphasis added). Thus Foucault’s heterotopology (24), or theory of heterotopia, adapts well to a reading of Anil’s Ghost because it offers a new way of thinking both about postcolonial othering in time and space, but also, and perhaps more importantly, a new way of conceptualizing the othering of postcolonial trauma within trauma theory. However, it is the concept of “relations of propinquity” that draws Ondaatje and Foucault together in imaginative synthesis, for the concept of propinquity appears to be close to the heart of Ondaatje’s fictional philosophy. At the center of his previous, highly acclaimed novel The English Patient lies the evocative notion of propinquity: “propinquity in the desert… the propinquity of water, the propinquity of two or three bodies” (150). In this novel, Ondaatje narrativizes propinquity to draw together nearness in place or proximity, nearness of relation or kinship, nearness to or affinity with nature, and nearness in time—only to demonstrate that all these affinities become both precarious and dangerous when aligned with the power structures of war. As Kip, the bomb-disposal Indian subaltern who has worked so assiduously for the British Army suddenly learns to his horror, the Allied Forces would not have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima if Japan had been a white nation (286). This traumatic disordering and disruption of all Kip has believed in for so long occurs near the end of The English Patient. In contrast, from beginning to end in Anil’s Ghost, the relations of propinquity are all connected to the impact of postcolonial trauma, and as “[h]eterotopias take quite varied forms” (Foucault 24), so too do the individual effects of both personal and cultural trauma in this latter novel.

The “colony,” Foucault states, is one of two “extreme types of heterotopia” (27). He believes that both the brothel and the colony can be thought of as veering between a form of “illusion” and a form of “compensation.” Read from the perspective of the colonizers, this can certainly be seen to be the case for the colony. However, there can be no form of illusion or sense of compensation for those who live the harsh reality of the “space of emplacement” (22) that the situated postcolonial ex-colony bespeaks. For Foucault, this space of emplacement signifies the “medieval space,” a space that no longer exists because of the blurring of what were at that time the rigidly separated spaces
of the sacred and the profane into more generally permeable or de-sanctified sites that exist in proximity or propinquity. It was the gradual accumulation of scientific knowledge that began with Galileo that constituted a differently-formed order of hierarchies (23). In *Anil’s Ghost*, scientific knowledge as a form of hierarchical knowing is aligned with the powers of the West, and a power that is epistemologically sanctioned to discount local postcolonial knowledges.

Sri Lanka has been a colony controlled by Portugal, Holland, and Britain, respectively. The island has a complicated history of inter-ethnic tension and violence that both predates colonialism and was exacerbated by colonialism but which for reasons of space cannot be evoked here. However, in reading *Anil’s Ghost*, it is important to know that Sinhalese-Tamil violence in postcolonial Sri Lanka had gained momentum in 1956 when Sri Lanka’s first prime minister passed a government act that made Sinhalese the official language of the country. Civil unrest and ethnic frictions then erupted into greater carnage in 1983 when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (known more colloquially as the Tamil Tigers) retaliated against what they saw as their oppression by the majority Sinhalese with a suicide bomb attack in northern Jaffna, which killed thirteen Sinhalese soldiers. A Sinhalese backlash ensued, and many Tamil homes and livelihoods were destroyed (Ratti 125-26). The mid-1980s to the early 1990s in Sri Lanka was thus a period of sustained, unpredictable inter-ethnic violence, and it is this context of seemingly interminable postcolonial civil war that is the setting of Ondaatje’s novel.

However, Ondaatje makes no binarized assumptions about Tamil or Sinhala sides of the civil war, because his Sri Lankan-born protagonist Anil Tissera is an intriguingly hybridized character. If she can only haltingly speak Sinhalese, the language of her family (9), she can also understand a little Tamil from her close maternal association with her ayah [native child’s nurse], Lalitha (23). Anil fled her home island fifteen years ago when she was eighteen and returns now, at the behest of the United Nations, not as a diasporic subject returning to a familial community, or even to a community of friends, but as a Westernized outsider who can no longer fluently speak her mother tongue. When her Western lover, Cullis, asks her whether “her background” is Sinhalese, Anil tells him, “I live here…in the West” (36). Indeed, her outlook on life is shaped by a Western education, a love of Western literature, and her positivist philosophy, which collectively have, in Manav Ratti’s words, “removed her from the thickness of location” (136). She appears to have only a peripheral emotional attachment to Sri Lanka, its culture, and its people as her fleeting interest in the Sri Lankan-ness of the word “amygdala” implies. Her habits of detour are based on Western epistemologies and ways of being in the world. Trained as a scientist, she thinks in classificatory terms: truth is real and certifiable in bodies, bones, and sediment. She deals with things by acting on methodically worked-through information.
Anil’s attachment to things Western results in an inability to see trauma from a postcolonial perspective. She is attached epistemologically and ontologically to an order of things that disallows her from connecting to the lived traumatic pain of Sri Lanka’s postcolonial others, and, indeed, in many ways she is culturally complicit with the “false empathy and blame” of the West that Ondaatje so decries (44). This is not to represent her as uncaring: Anil’s work as a forensic anthropologist matters to her a great deal. However, years of witnessing the agony of those searching for their disappeared loved ones has also, to some degree, been accompanied by mental numbing, a defense mechanism common to forensic scientists working in the world’s killing fields. This is implied by the way her hand moves constantly in her sleep, “as if brushing earth away” (34), and by the raucous gatherings of her and her co-workers and their utterly concentrated pleasure in the banal physicality of tenpin bowling as a means of psychic release (149-50). Anil is, as we will learn, no stranger to either personal or cultural trauma; but the localized cultural trauma that she “unburies” (28) through her professional capacity has been in Guatemala, the Congo, and other traumatized zones of the developing world: never in Sri Lanka. She is utterly culturally distanced from what Ondaatje loosely terms “Asia” (156) by her obsession with “court[ing] foreignness.” “She felt complete abroad” (54), the text tells us: “she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze” (11).

Postcolonial Heterotopia

All countries “constitute heterotopias,” Foucault writes (24). It is how they are interpreted that matters. Until Foucault published his meditations on heterotopia, the word was a medical term attached to the study of anatomy. In medical science, “heterotopia” refers to the displacement of a bodily organ from its normal position: it denotes “parts of the body that are either out of place, missing, extra” or “other” (Hetherington 42) in terms of corporeal matter, such as the growth of a tumor. However, a medical explanation such as this was presumably not designed for reading the bodily traumas of war, which is perhaps why Anil does not immediately recognize the cause of death of the second corpse she has to investigate after her arrival in Sri Lanka. The first corpse has two broken arms but undamaged fingers, the second “flail fractures on the rib cage” (14). The first man had been killed as his arms were raised in the supplication of prayer; the second had been pushed out of a helicopter at a height of at least five hundred feet and had hit the water below, belly-down, so that the wind had been knocked out of his body, displacing all his organs (14). This second death was death by traumatic heterotopia.

In Foucauldian terms, this heterotopic death is a postcolonial trauma that can create new meaning “as its history unfolds.” “[E]ach heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society,” Foucault writes. However, it is the temporal and spatial shifts in history and the cultural codes such history is read by that are important because any heterotopia can and does change in
function and meaning depending on the particular “synchrony of the culture in which it occurs.” Thus what is constituted as heterotopic is dependent on dominant codes of interpretation. Foucault’s example that most clearly connects with death and trauma is the “strange heterotopia of the cemetery…a space unlike ordinary cultural spaces.” He offers a contextualized reading of the location and re-location of the dead in a European time-frame that moved from honouring corpses by burial within the sanctified space of the church (up to the end of the eighteenth century) to removing cemeteries to the borders, or even outside cities, which began in the nineteenth century. Thereafter, “cemeteries then came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but ‘the other city,’ where each family possesses its dark resting place” (25).

However, while most Western families possess their own dark resting places in Western cemeteries, this is not an option in the postcolonial killing fields of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, sites that are most often situated in the developing world. In the hauntingly beautiful opening of Anil’s Ghost, Ondaatje draws a vivid picture of the devastating trauma that accompanies unlocatable death. The Guatemalan killing field of which Ondaatje writes is a place of “fear, double-edged.” However, the fear of the Guatemalans who gather at the excavation site and wait silently and patiently for the disinterment of unnamed bodies is not related to the possibility of the continuation of the war around them. Their unspeakable fear is that the bodies the Western forensic scientists excavate might be “their son in the pit” (5) or worse, that the body in the pit would not be their son. This would mean that the search for his remains would go on, without touch and without closure. At this heterotopic site of postcolonial burial, Anil and her fellow scientists often encounter one particular woman who has lost both her husband and her brother. One time they find her sitting within the open excavation site which acts as a communal unmarked grave, “her legs under her as if in formal prayer…There are no words Anil knows that can describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face. But the grief of love in that shoulder she will not forget, still remembers” (5-6). With no body to bury, there can be no resting place for the unnamed Guatemalan woman’s trauma. Unable to speak her pain, she mutely carries the physicality of traumatic grief in and on her own body.

It is important both for the narrative structure and the politics of Anil’s Ghost that this witnessing of postcolonial trauma with which the novel opens is not located in Sri Lanka, that this deeply private moment of watching and then reliving another’s trauma is the result of a different form of Western intrusion into the politics and governance of another developing country. Like Sri Lanka, Guatemala was also a colonized country; but in 1954, over a hundred years after the country was granted independence from Spain, the US covertly backed a military coup that toppled the democratically-elected Guatemalan government from power. Three-and-a-half decades of civil war and innumerable human rights atrocities followed, claiming 200,000 lives, many of them in the 626 massacres that occurred in Maya Indian villages (Aizenman) such as the one
represented in this opening of *Anil’s Ghost*. However, aside from the traumatic horror of civil war killings, Guatemala and Sri Lanka have a further form of postcolonial trauma in common. More people have been forcibly disappeared in Guatemala during the past four decades than in any other Latin American country: since 1960, there have been approximately 45,000 disappearances reported in a country with a current population of ten million, most of the victims “disappearing” from peasant villages (Aizenman AO1). After Iraq, Sri Lanka has the second highest number of disappeared people in the world. A UN study published in 2006 stated that more than 55,000 people have disappeared, presumed killed in the past twenty-five years (BBC online “Sri Lanka’s Disappeared Thousands”). “The country existed in a rocking self-burying motion. The disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of bodies from the Hokandara mass grave,” Ondaatje writes (157): “those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection of the self” (55-56).

To overcome trauma and reconnect with the self in terms of both psychic logic and narrative language, there has to be a body to mourn. In *Anil’s Ghost*, the profusion of deaths and atrocious violence are made infinitely harder to bear because of the gaping void left by the the disappearance of loved ones. As prefigured by the Guatemalan prologue that appears in italics, Ondaatje continues to register the ongoing trauma connected to unexplained deaths; deaths that have no story attached to them and instead are encrypted in the interminable silence of not knowing how, when or why these deaths occurred, or even if they have occurred at all. However, Ondaatje interrupts the silence that surrounds these painfully inexplicable deaths with intermittent stories of violence that appear in italics. These vignettes of violence may represent “the wound’s incision” in the Buddhist cave temples where “[h]eads [are] separated from bodies. Hands broken off,” and the spoils are appropriated by “museums in the West” (12); the seemingly random killing of a government official on a speeding train (31-32); or just a simple and poignant list of some of the Sri Lankan dead who have disappeared while conducting small acts of daily living:

*Kumara Wijetunga, 17. 6th November 1989. At about 11.30 p.m. from his house.*

*Prabath Kumara, 16. 17th November 1989. At 3.20 a.m. from the home of a friend....*

*Manelka da Silva, 17. 1st December 1989. While playing cricket....*  
*Weeratunga Samaraweera, 30. 7th January 1990. At 5.00 p.m. while going for a bath at Hulandawa Panamura.* (41, emphases in original)
These sections carry no explications. They exist as unlocated, depersonalized testimony of “the scarring psychosis in the country. Death, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it” (56). However, there is one intensely traumatic and personalized story of disappearance that Ondaatje does “walk” us through with the victim herself.

Again italicized, the story of Sirissa’s vanishing is the only intimate history of deadly loss in the novel, but it is pivotal to the plot development and narrative structure. Like those listed above, the timing of Sirissa’s disappearance is exact—it was “six-thirty a.m. when she reached the bridge” (172)—and she literally attempts to run past the confronting trauma with which she is faced. On this particular day, at either end of the bridge she crosses every day to her work in the little village school, there are four heads on stakes. They belong to a group of local teenagers, young men she greets every day as she walks toward the school. In a moment of stark trauma, she recognizes the faces: “She begins running forward, past their eyes, her own shut dark until she is past them. Up the hill towards the school. She keeps running forward, and then she sees more” (175). We never know what she then sees or how she dies, but this brief history of a traumatic end to a life is prefaced by a three-page sketch of intimate, grounded, lived knowledge that is focalized through Sirissa herself. We know the pattern of her daily existence: the names of the birds she loves; her attachment to walking the empty village streets at night; her daily work in the school; and the love that exists between Sirissa and her husband, Ananda, who will play such an important role in the second half of the novel. This affirmation of love is represented by a drawing Ananda has sketched of Sirissa “on a frail piece of paper [that she unexpectedly finds] tucked into the latter reaches of the book’s plot” she is reading (173). We feel a sense of empathy and connection with Sirissa, and because we know her subaltern history, it is possible to identify with and understand Ananda’s spiraling self-destructive reaction to his wife’s disappearance.

In contrast, because Anil is an outsider in her own country, she does not have any such sense of intimate connection to localized trauma. Anil mediates her understanding of postcolonial trauma through “the darkest Greek tragedies [which, to her, seemed] innocent compared with what was happening here.” At university, Anil had translated lines from the work of the classic Greek soldier-poet Archilochus, noted for his satire; on arrival in Sri Lanka, she compares his representation of Greek warfare to that of the postcolonial civil war she is now investigating: “In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by [Archilochus wrote]. But here there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was” (11). This in part explains Anil’s obsession with identifying and naming the skeleton Sailor, who is the symbol in the novel of the “unhistoric dead” of this entirely contemporary war (56). Sailor’s body “was found within a sacred historical site” (52) where he has been reburied, or emplaced, anachronistically in a
cemetery for the “prehistoric” (50). To Anil, this body and its deathly history is not only “traceable” (52), but it is also “representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name,” she believes, “would name the rest” (56). Her motive is honourable, but her methodology is distanced by her Western training and outlook.

In her endeavour to locate and name Sailor and his lost history, Anil works in a heterotopic space as “strange” as Foucault’s cemetery, and indeed, it is a cemetery of sorts. Once a real colonial cruise ship called the *Oronsay* of the Orient Line—in other words a floating colony—this vessel is now stranded in a disused quay and used as an adjunct storage and work area of the Kynsey Road Hospital. It is chandeliered but dark and full of rats (19), yet Anil, with Sarath’s help, turns it into a site for conducting illegal autopsies. In her naïvete Anil believes that if she solves the mystery of one dead corpse, she can thereby stop the killings, a notion ironically undercut both by the settled decay of the once-colonial ship and its means of access. To enter its inner space, Anil must walk up the gangplank from Reclamation Street (18). As a result of her somewhat overbearing confidence in the superiority of Western science, Anil easily acts, but she rarely listens to the perspectives of those othered by the West.

**Whispered Histories**

Anil’s fixation with the search for a traceable truth means that she does not listen to others, especially the postcolonial subject who is most aware of local situated knowledges. “*Listen,*” she says to Sarath Diyasena, the local archaeologist with whom she is paired during her seven-week investigation, “there are trace elements you can find in bones...that [can] seep in from the surrounding soil...passing into and out of bones...in this skeleton, there are traces of lead all over him. But there is no lead in this cave where we found him, the soil samples show none. Do you see?” (50-51). She is a reader of bodies; he a reader of the earth and human artefacts. Their knowledges are commensurate, yet even when discussing the intricacies of soil, she commands him to listen to *her.* However, despite the power imbalances between the Western-authorized Anil and Sarath’s role as local archaeologist, Sarath acts as Anil’s subaltern foil, and his constant questioning of her motives and methods occasionally destabilizes Anil enough to encourage her to rethink some of her long-held assumptions.

Central to Anil’s cultural relearning is the interlinked concept of whispering and the need to listen. In this novel, whispering variously symbolizes a dangerous way of spreading illegal or secret knowledge about who the enemy might be; a form of intimacy; and, finally, a hesitant way of beginning to work through personal and cultural buried histories and so attempt to narrativize postcolonial traumas through the medium of words and bodies. Frequently, however, the boundaries merge and blur. Sarath was a man “who was efficient in his privacy, who would never unknot himself for anyone” (54). “He was
always whispering. She [Anil] kept saying, What? What? [but after a while] could hardly bother to say it” (60, emphases in original). Despite the fact that Anil understands only too well the connective possibilities of whispering because of the “whispering pact” that had existed between herself and her father (68), she does not learn to listen to the whispery voice of Sarath until it is too late.

In the context of a civil war, whispering is most likely to be a form of verbal protection, a way of keeping the body safe by making sure the voice remains soft and low. As Sarath points out to Anil, “You’re six hours away from Colombo and you’re whispering—think about that” (54, emphases in original). Twice in the text, Ondaatje draws our attention to the extreme dangers of taping a conversation in a country beset by violent civil unrest because then illicit whispers become recorded words. Early in their working relationship, Anil tapes Sarath’s voice as he speaks of archaeological sites in the country through which they are travelling. Suddenly, she interrupts with a question about President Katugala, Sri Lanka’s Silver President, nicknamed thus because of his “shock of white hair.” Sarath becomes silent. “Then his hand reached over and took the tape recorder from her lap, ‘Is your tape recorder off?’” he asks, making sure it is switched off before he answers her question (45). Years later, when Anil is remembering the significance of the amygdala, the “nerve bundle which houses fear,” the first fearful memory that enters her mind is of “[d]riving with Sarath once. He asked, ‘Is your tape recorder off?’” Only then does he dare tell her that “[t]here are at least two unauthorized places of detention in Colombo” where torture and death are the norm. Unassimilated as conscious memory, the traumatic memory intrusively returns: “‘Is your tape recorder off?’ he had said. ‘Yes, it’s off.’ And only then had he talked” (135). At the time of reading this ghostly repetition, we, as readers, are unaware of the cause of this fearful, recurring memory that Anil retains. Only in the final pages of the novel do we come full circle and hear Sarath’s voice urgently whispering to Anil on a tape recorder. By that time he is dead.

Anil never learns to trust Sarath in part because of their divergent understandings of the meaning of truth. For Anil, truth is singular, about proof and clarity: “Truth comes finally into the light” (259), she believes, if you work hard and long enough in seeking its answers. In her forensic examinations of dead bodies, she regards “the permanent truths [as being] the same for Colombo as for Troy” (64). However, Sarath, with his experience of the local context, knows that truth has a particularly complicated and dangerous history in postcolonial Sri Lanka: “Sarath knew that for her the journey was getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into?…[He] had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs” (156). As an archaeologist, “Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for truth if the truth were of any use” (157), a prescient statement that uncannily foretells his death.
Unable to respect his situated truths, Anil mistrusts him: “I don’t know where you stand…I know you feel the purpose of truth is more complicated, that it’s sometimes more dangerous here to tell the truth” (53). When Sarath does not return as planned to the walawwa where they have been examining Sailor’s body away from the dangers of Colombo, Anil calls Dr. Perera, thereby betraying Sarath, whose final act of bravery in seeking after a truth ends in his death. The body of Sailor, now identified and named, has been confiscated by the government so that the truths that Sarath and Anil have unburied will never become public knowledge. However, unbeknownst to Anil, just before his torture and death, Sarath has tracked down Sailor’s body. Delivered back to her heterotopic space in the Oronsay, the body now lies ready for Anil’s final scientific examination. Then she discovers a tape recorder secretly buried in the rib cavity of the body. Anil presses the button that will release the disembodied voice without removing the tape recorder from inside the body. Thus the whispering voice of the dead Sarath speaks uncannily through the dead body of Sailor (284) in a postcolonial version of Caruth’s reading of Tancred’s traumatic encounter with Clorinda as her voice sorrowfully calls out to him through the wound on her dead body (Unclaimed Experience 2). Despite its buried location, Sarath’s “voice…is very clear and focused. He must have held the recorder close to his mouth as he whispered,” Anil thinks as she paces up and down the hold of the ship, “listening to his voice again. Listening to everything again” (284). Sarath’s dead voice, speaking from the cavity of another who had also died a death of trauma, lives on as Anil’s whispering ghost. She now endlessly listens and re-listens to the past in what will become a fearful, traumatic memory housed in her own amygdala.

Yet it is the silent Lakma, the niece of the epigraphist Palipana, Sarath’s mentor, who is able to gesture toward the possibilities of transmuting whispered histories from one person to another in a more healing form: “Lakma watched him [her uncle Palipana] and listened, never speaking, a silent amanuensis for his whispered histories” (105). Suffering from permanent aphasia—her linguistic logic broken and silenced by witnessing her parents’ violent deaths when she was twelve—over time Lakma has come to feel “safe, finally, with him, this man who was her mother’s brother” (105). Lakma carves “one of his phrases into the rock, one of the first things he said to her, which she had held on to like a raft in her years of fear. She had chiselled it where the horizon of water was,” so that what gradually became a “yard-long sentence” would be intermittently visible to the world “depending on the tide and pull of the moon” (107). It is in the Grove of Ascetics where Palipana and Lakma live that Anil learns to hear and see locally; “She imagined he [the blind Palipana] could hear the one bird in the forest distance. She imagined he could hear Sarath’s sandals pacing….She was sure he could hear all that, the light wind, the other fragments of noise that passed by his thin face” (87). However, as we are to learn, Palipana had taught Anil to listen but not to listen closely enough. It is hard to break a habit of detour.
The Affirmation of the Touch

It is not easy to recover from trauma in isolation (Brison 25). The central affective gesture offered as a means of passing beyond trauma in Ondaatje’s novel is the intersubjective empathy of the human touch. Ananda, the only character in the novel who experiences a sense of belated healing from trauma, is both an agent of touch and the recipient of an affirmative touch. After Sirissa’s traumatic disappearance, Ananda deserts his inherited and revered position as an artificer, a craftsman who paints the eyes on the holy figure of the Buddha, and turns to drunkenness as a method of obliterating what he cannot forget. Recommended by Palipana to Anil and Sarath as an artisan who might be able to recreate a living embodiment of the head of Sailor from his decapitated skull in order for him to be identified, Ananda, once again creatively employed, gradually claws his life back from the brink of paralytic despair.

Anil anxiously awaits the reconstructed face that will prove, she believes, that Sailor’s death is indeed a political killing. However, when Ananda finally unveils the newly fashioned head, it does not resemble the specific person that Anil imagined from reading his character from his body make-up and markings. Instead, Ananda presents a more generalized face full of peacefulness and serenity. She is utterly perplexed but astonished by the “serenity in the face she did not see too often these days...[a face without] tension. A face comfortable with itself...[which] was unexpected from such a scattered and unreliable presence as Ananda.” Anil is told by Sarath that this facial recreation is what Ananda “wants from the dead” (184). Only now does Anil learn that Ananda’s scattered and unreliable presence is the result of his traumatized yearning for his wife Sirissa, who disappeared three long years ago. The face he creates “showed a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim” (187).

Sitting in the dark later that evening, dissolved into weeping for Ananda’s loss, for Sarath’s younger brother Gamini and the “mad logic” of trauma in which contemporary Sri Lankans are forced to live (186), Anil unexpectedly feels “the softest touch on her face” (187). Ananda has moved close to her and, as if he were resculpting the face of serenity, “with his thumb [he] creased away the pain around her eye along with the tears’ wetness” (187). They have no spoken language in common, but the physical language of touch both communicates and eases physical and psychic pain. Yet in spite of Anil’s deep immersion in this grounded visible pain of fellow-Sri Lankans, she cannot divest herself of her need to classify and prove. Not long after, she makes the fateful call to Dr. Perera, and circumstances spiral out of her control with the death of Sarath. We never learn what happens to Anil after Sarath’s death: this ending is intentionally ambivalent.

As David Farrier says in the conclusion of his essay about the localized trauma of Anil’s Ghost, “with Anil departed for the West, Ondaatje gestures towards the local as the only tolerable response for individuals caught up in
the violence of civil conflict” (92). In the final section of the novel, entitled “Distance,” Ondaatje closes the narrative with a scene as haunting and memorable as its opening in Guatemala. Both beginning and ending depict intimate representations of private traumas that can so easily occur in the heterotopic spaces of Third World “killing field[s]” (301). Both are located in poor areas of “desperate farming” (299), and both visualize the extraordinary physicality of trauma. Yet the traumatic anguish of the opening scene is ongoing, if not endless, for there is no narrative of psychic relief available to the Guatemalan woman who cannot find the bodies of her husband and brother. Her grief of love and traumatic loss are carried, and will continue to be carried, unacknowledged, inscribed mutely on her face and on her shoulder. In contrast, Ananda has affected some kind of closure on Sirissa’s death through the physical sculpting of her face. Now, in this last section, Ananda also becomes the accidental agent of cultural healing of postcolonial trauma when his nephew, who assists him in the eye painting ceremony, leans over and places “his concerned hand on” Ananda’s. In the beautiful last paragraph, Ananda finally sees the world anew through eyes alive to the beauty of the world and sees his place in it. It is a vision of propinquity:

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him here….The birds…flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared.

He felt the boy’s concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world. (307)

However, the precious propinquity of this final scene is not, as Sarath’s brother Gamini prophesies earlier in the novel, “enough reality for the West” (286). The neocolonial assumptions of trauma theory and the “angle of the world” that comes under the auspices of its gaze continue to other postcolonial trauma as “the hundred small traumas” (287, emphasis added) that Gamini reads on his dead brother’s body. Ananda’s intimate and localized view of the world and his reconstructing of the face of trauma as situated and desperately embodied will only become integrated into trauma theory as it stands if and when the epistemological horizons of the West widen enough to listen to, and then acknowledge, the whispered histories of postcolonial subjects.
WORKS CITED


NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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