



HAL
open science

Unburials and Skeletal Reconstructions: Narrative as Forensics in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

Judith Misrahi-Barak

► **To cite this version:**

Judith Misrahi-Barak. Unburials and Skeletal Reconstructions: Narrative as Forensics in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 2023, pp.1-18. 10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190913 . hal-04061579

HAL Id: hal-04061579

<https://hal.science/hal-04061579>

Submitted on 26 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Unburials and Skeletal Reconstructions: Narrative as Forensics in Michael Ondaatje'S *Anil's Ghost*

Judith Misrahi-Barak

To cite this article: Judith Misrahi-Barak (30 Mar 2023): Unburials and Skeletal Reconstructions: Narrative as Forensics in Michael Ondaatje'S *Anil's Ghost*, Interventions, DOI: [10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190913](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190913)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2023.2190913>



Published online: 30 Mar 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 94



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

UNBURIALS AND SKELETAL RECONSTRUCTIONS: NARRATIVE AS FORENSICS IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST*

Judith Misrahi-Barak

Department of English, EMMA, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, Montpellier, France

.....
Anil's Ghost
bones
forensics
forum
Michael Ondaatje
unritual
.....
*Social scientists know how crucial it is to identify the bodies of the men, women and children who have died at sea or on land, or have been buried in mass burial grounds, and how consequential it is to engage (or not) in some form of ritual, of memorialization. If some scholars have focused on locating and numbering those victims, others have used forensic science to identify the bodies so that the families can get them back, engage in mourning and continue to live. Others, still, interrogate the lost objects of the death-bound migration. This essay will focus on a novel that deals with the exhumation and identification of bones in a civil war context. In Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Sri Lankan-born and North American-educated Anil Tissera goes back to Sri Lanka as a forensic anthropologist. She is sent by a human rights group to investigate mass burials during the Civil War and genocide of the Sri Lankan Tamils, thus returning from her diasporic abode after 15 years. In *Anil's* forensic search for identification, with bones being literally unearthed, what does the literary text perform for those lost or unidentified bodies that could not be accomplished*

otherwise? What kind of engagement does it offer? Using the angle of forensics and its Latin etymology, this essay will formulate the hypothesis that the literary text enables justice to be delivered in an open court of law (forensis). Moving beyond the stigmatization of the unritual, it will probe the fraught relationship between literature and forensics, investigating the possibility that the narrative, its staging of the unidentified body of the dead, and our relationship to it, could create a public space to be shared by all (forum).

Introduction

Social scientists know how crucial it is to identify the bodies of the men, women and children who have died at sea or on land, or have been buried in mass burial grounds, and how consequential it is to engage (or not) in some form of ritual, of identification and memorialization. While some scholars have focused on locating and numbering those victims (Heller and Pécoud 2017), or on the objects of migration that were lost or discarded (De León 2015; Goldhahn and Ricciardo 2021), others have used forensic science to identify the bodies so that the families can get them back, engage in mourning and continue to live (Cattaneo 2019). The question I would like to raise here is that of the literary text, whether there is such a thing as what could be called literary forensics,¹ and to what purpose and to what effect.

This essay will focus on Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* ([2000] 2001), a novel that deals with the exhumation and identification of bones during the Civil War in Sri Lanka that tore the country to shreds between 1983 and 2009 and ended up in what can be claimed as a genocide by the Sri Lankan Tamils. Ondaatje offers a context in the epigraph, suggesting that he will not take sides.² Even if it is not the primary object of this essay, it should be said that this seemingly neutral standpoint is brought down if not put to shame by other elements in the novel that indirectly point to a perspective that is far from neutral. The Buddhist presence, for instance, can be seen as one of the elements that only give more prominence to the Sinhala Buddhist majority versus the Tamil Hindu minority, the latter being generally restricted in the novel to the “terrorist” category.

Sri Lankan-born, Sinhala-speaking and North American-educated Anil Tissera goes back to Sri Lanka as a forensic anthropologist, 15 years after having left her native island. She responded to a call that had gone out from the Centre of Human Rights in Geneva for a forensic anthropologist to go to Sri Lanka and investigate the political killings of the Civil War. In Anil’s search for identification, the bones of the dead are literally unearthed, forensics are resorted to, scientifically and/or metaphorically, to investigate

1 As I was working on this essay, I became acquainted with the work of Mita Banerjee. Her use of the phrase “literary forensics” in the online webinar “Migration, Life Writing, and the Spectacle of the Migrant Body in Distress” on the series “Thanatic Ethics” (4 March 2022) coincided with the articulation of some of the ideas developed here. <https://www.thanaticethics.com/copy-of-2020-21>.

2 “From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups:

the government, the anti-government insurgents in the south and the separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government.

Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents.” As an aside, and even if atrocities were performed on both sides, the Liberation Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) was founded in 1976 after some 20 years of oppression of the Tamil Hindu minority by the Sinhala Buddhist majority. Considered a terrorist organization by some 30 countries, LTTE was involved in guerilla warfare to try and obtain a separate Tamil state in the northeastern part of the island. The short article by Nithyani Anandakugan (2020) offers a clear and useful revisiting of the complex Sri Lankan history.

³ This is out of the scope of this essay

the crime, reveal the truth about their deaths, but also to “settle the dead in the world of the dead” (Herrick 2016, 40). Through the literary text, the forensic search makes it possible for the living to return to the world of the living and allows both the dead and the living to return to the realm of a visible and tangible humanity.

In this essay I am not so concerned with how the literary text represents, or rather, presents the trauma of civil war and terrorist violence. Abundant critical literature has been produced on *Anil's Ghost*, analyzing the novel from different perspectives, as detective fiction; as a political novel whose gesturing at *not* taking sides can be seen as highly problematic; as a novel of mourning; as a descent into the underworld or *katabasis* (Herrick 2016); as a terrorist narrative (Kubiak 2004; Scanlan 2004); as one that uses the angle of the epistemological (Ganguly 2016), the historical (Burton 2003), the diasporic (Härting 2003) or the transnational (Cook 2004), or the Buddhist and Tantric lens (Hewitson 2019), among others. I am interested here in how the literary text contributes to *addressing* historical horrors as well as *redressing* the social injustices that still wreck our present. With bones being literally unearthed in the *story*, what does the *text* perform in its literariness, for those lost or unidentified bodies, that could not be accomplished directly? What kind of engagement does it offer and how is it offered? In a text-based approach and using the angle of forensics and thanatic ethics as an ethics that cares *for* the dead and ultimately endeavours to repair the living, this essay formulates the hypothesis that literary forensics *enables* a certain justice to be delivered to the living, in a symbolic court of law (forensis), allowing for a return to the world of the living. Moving beyond the stigmatization of the “unritual” (Loichot 2020), it probes the fraught relationship between literature and forensic pathology, investigating the possibility that the narrative of the identification of the dead could create a public space to be shared by all (forum) even if it means, ultimately, acknowledging vulnerability. After stepping onto the scene of archeology and/or forensic pathology, the process of the identification of one individual skeleton will come centre stage, as well as the question of the performativity of the text in the way it (un) folds and is (de)structured to authorize the caring for the dead and the living.³

Archeology or forensic pathology: what bodies, whose bodies?

but in-depth work would be needed on the ways elegy performs mourning in *Anil's Ghost*. As David Kennedy

It seems one cannot step directly into the exhumation fields. A detour is needed. Before the first section of the novel, the reader is offered the first of the many passages in italics that are scattered across the 300 pages of the book, seemingly taking us away from the expected scene of action but in fact providing us with elements that will be crucial to understanding

(2007) reminds us, “[e]legies cannot just describe loss: they have to refigure it as a species of transformation and provide an early glimpse of an afterlife for their subject” (location 19/156). It is this “transformation” and this “afterlife” Ondaatje is interested in.

what is at stake in the unravelling of the mystery. *Anil’s Ghost* opens with an indirect “vigil for the dead” (Ondaatje [2000] 2001, 5), one that will keep us *awake* throughout the whole novel (see Latin *vigilantia*, *vigilare*, watch, watchfulness, wakefulness; to keep awake) – a couple of pages go back analeptically to an earlier excavation site Anil had gone to in Guatemala, searching for the remains of the killed and the “disappeared” while the family members waited on the side of the graves, or sometimes stepped into the graves, expecting to identify one of their loved ones. Ondaatje takes us to what Herrick calls a “liminal space, inhabited, precariously, by both the dead and the living” (2016, 40).

The introductory pages clarify Anil Tissera’s personal and professional situation, as she is shown returning from her diasporic abode. Immediately after this incipit, a second page in italics follows suit, mentioning an excavation field in China. This time, surprisingly, the crime scene is one that requires history and archeology more than forensic pathology: it is a series of Buddhist cave temples in Shanxi province where the victims are the Bodhisattvas that were discovered by Japanese archeologists in 1918. The description of their destruction is not only reminiscent of the Buddhas of Bamiyan destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan in March 2001 (one year after the publication of Ondaatje’s novel), but also one that suggests the dismemberment of a human body:

This was the place of a complete crime. Heads separated from bodies. Hands broken off. None of the bodies remained – all the statuary had been removed in the few years following its discovery by Japanese archeologists in 1918, the Bodhisattvas quickly bought up by museums in the West. Three torsos in a museum in California. A head lost in a river south of the Sindh desert, adjacent to the pilgrim routes. (Ondaatje [2000] 2001, 12)

Even if the reader does not quite understand yet how Guatemala or China are connected to Sri Lanka, how colonial archeology is associated to the Civil War in Sri Lanka, or how the destroyed statues of the Buddhas are connected to the mass burial sites, what is made clear from the start is that the novel’s larger context is one of post-1989 crimes against humanity and, in Michael Rothberg’s words, we need to “bring histories into contact” (2009, 135) in a “comparative” rather than a “competitive” way (5). We also become acutely aware that archeology and forensic pathology cannot be separated. Human bodies, dead or alive, are connected in the humanity they incarnate. So are the broken bodies and the smashed statues.

This is the novelistic backdrop against which Anil meets Sarath Diyasena, the Colombo government-appointed archeologist who gives his perspective to Anil at the start of the seven-week project:

The bodies turn up weekly now. The height of the terror was ‘eighty-eight and ‘eighty-nine, but of course it was going on long before that. Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it’s secret gangs and squads. Not like Central America. The government was not the only one doing the killing. You had, and still have, three camps of enemies – one in the north, two in the south – using weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship. (Ondaatje [2000] 2001, 17)

He thinks this collaboration with the Geneva-appointed forensic pathologist is an “odd pairing” (17), to say the least. Yet, much further in the novel, when Anil and Sarath are on more familiar terms, he tells her how he chose archeology as his profession, because of the “intimacy”, the “secret”, because of the moment when “[t]ruth comes finally into the light” and how it is “in the bones and sediments” (259). Sarath mentions another dig in China, where he went for his studies, suggesting again the co-presence of archeology and forensic pathology, and the myriad modalities of the emergence of truth. A slight change in the pattern of the landscape (earth of a different colour, for instance) gets teams of archeologists to dig. After finding stone slabs and huge timbers that had been cut and stripped as if to form the floor of a hall, they realize it was in fact a ceiling under which a water tomb was discovered:

Three giant pools. Floating there was a lacquered coffin of an ancient ruler. Also in the water were coffins with the bodies of twenty female musicians along with their instruments. They were to accompany him, you see. With zithers, flutes, pan-pipes, drums, iron bells. They were delivering him to his ancestors. When they removed the skeletons from the coffins and laid them out there was no damage to any of the bones to reveal how the musicians had been killed, not one fractured bone. (Ondaatje [2000] 2001, 260)

The musicians may have been strangled, or poisoned, or suffocated. Even though the bones do not show any mark, they still speak, as any bones in any skeleton, and sometimes beyond the very absence of markings. This is what Ondaatje wants us to understand indirectly, proleptically. Bones will speak.

In all three cases mentioned above, in Guatemala, and in sixth- and fifth-century China, it is sometimes difficult in the description to decide if we find ourselves in an archeological site or in a mass burial site where forensics will be required besides archeology. All the sites, including the ones in Sri Lanka, point to the closeness of the dead body underground and the living body above ground. Sometimes one doesn’t know which is which, as is suggested in another passage in italics where Anil dreams of the shape of

her body being drawn on the floor with a felt marker, just as it is done for a body in a crime scene (61–2). Through the many mentions of exhumation sites, Ondaatje points to this – dig one must, in either case. Excavate one must, in either case, for the sake of both the dead and the living. The bodies of the dead decompose under our feet, or in the oceans we swim in, whether they go back centuries, generations, or are freshly murdered in the killing fields of our times, blurring the boundaries between who is dead and who is alive. What bodies? Whose bodies?

From the many to the one only and vice versa

In *Haunting Encounters: The Ethics of Reading Across Boundaries of Difference* (2017) Joanne Lipson Freed argues that Ondaatje’s novel is ultimately flawed because, even if its work of haunting may open possibilities for the reader to turn to action, it further marginalizes the marginalized as it fails to give distinctive characteristics to the disappeared and favours instead its more metropolitan characters (Lipson Freed 2017, ch. 3). It is true that the novel does not focus on giving back specific characteristics to the bodies of those who died in terrorist attacks and civil warfare or were buried in mass graves. One even has the impression at first that Anil is more obsessed with the bones than with the identification of the people, as in that scene in Guatemala when she playfully boasts to her lover Cullis that she knows the names of several bones in Spanish: “*Cúbito. Omóplato. Occipital*” (35).

Yet, against the backdrop of several exhumation sites in different countries (Sri Lanka but also Guatemala, China, or the Congo), Ondaatje’s novel rapidly zooms in on one particular skeleton that is discovered in a government-protected archeological site in the Bandarawala region, where prehistoric remains were discovered in 1911. Among the skeletons the site still yields, one attracts Anil’s attention, “in the far reaches of a cave [...] a fourth skeleton, whose bones were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned. Something not prehistoric” (50). It is the interaction between the bones and the environment they were placed in that reveals it is a recent “murder victim” (51):

[T]here are trace elements you can find in bones – mercury, lead, arsenic, even gold – that don’t belong to them, they seep in from the surrounding soil. Or they can move from the bones into the adjacent soil. These elements are always passing into and out of bones, whether they are in coffins or not. Well, 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? He must have been buried somewhere else before. Someone took precautions to make sure the skeleton was

not discovered. This is no ordinary murder or burial. They buried him, then later moved him to an older gravesite. (Ondaatje [2000] 2001, 51)

Anil also sees the “twist in the bone” that happens to bones that get burned when they are “green”, that is “flesh-covered” – one more proof of murder. The archeological site is now also a crime scene.

Anil and Sarath label the skeletons TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER and SAILOR. Sailor, the recent one, the murdered one, is at the heart of the criminal and political mystery to be solved. Yet, in no way does Ondaatje forget the thousands of unidentified bones and skeletons, nor the thousands of families yearning for identification and responses: “Who was he? This representative of all those who lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest” (56). In fact, from that discovery onwards, Ondaatje focuses not only on that single skeleton but also on the dialogue that his two main protagonists engage in with the skeleton, thus showing Ondaatje’s focus is on the living as much as on the dead, on what can be accomplished through this dialogue with the unidentified bones of the dead, as we will see in the last part of this essay.

For the moment, let us linger a little longer on Anil’s and Sarath’s investigation of Sailor’s death and on their struggle against his invisibility and anonymity. As Anil says to Sarath: “There are so many bodies in the ground now, that’s what you said ... murdered, anonymous. I mean, people don’t even know if they are two hundred years old or two weeks old, they’ve all been through fire. Some people let their ghosts die. Some don’t” (53). It is a highly sensitive political investigation that is led in a country that is still what Sarath calls “a fearful nation”, where “[d]eath, loss, was ‘unfinished,’ so you could not walk through it” (56). Identifying the skeleton will enable the survivors, the investigators and, by proxy, the readers, to walk through death and loss.

In their investigation, Anil and Sarath must look for support and clues, but first they *listen* to what Sailor himself tells them and they decipher the signs his bones offer: “One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of a small bullet wound in the skull. Entrance and exit. [Anil] could *read* Sailor’s last actions by knowing the wounds on bone” (65, my emphasis). Coming to understand what his last moments were will help understand the cause of death and determine responsibilities. Before reaching that stage, it is the physical gestures of forensics that are performed first and Sarath treats the skeletons in his lab with all the care he could give to a living body:

He [...] began cleaning the bones of the [...] skeleton, drilling free the fragments of dirt. Then he turned on a slim hose and let it hover over each bone, air nestling into the evidence of the trauma as if it were blowing cool breath from a pursed mouth

onto a child's burn. He dipped the camel-hair brush into the dish and began painting a layer of protective plastic over the bones, moving down the spine and ribs. (Ondaatje [2000] 2001, 74)

There is tenderness, and absolute care, in the sweep of Sarath's hand and in the brush of his fingers, as if Ondaatje was exposing the continuity of bones and the kinship of bodies, in opposition to the scorching they have gone through. The aim is to reveal responsibilities in the open light of day, even if this is not the only stake in the process, as we will see.

Revelation is indeed, in all the photosensitive meaning of the term, at the heart of the fastidious labour of forensics that is deployed in and by the narrative. The light and darkness motif is overwhelmingly present in the text: torches are turned on in the middle of the night; matches are struck to dispel darkness; sulphur lamps are lit in the hold of the passenger liner *The Oronsay* that was transformed into a base for Anil's and Sarath's forensic analyzes; alligator-clip lamps or tungsten bulbs are used in the labs; light is "porous" or "twitching" (19), unless it is "burning" or "flickering" (156–7); Sarath always carries a sixty-watt bulb whenever he goes out of Colombo, so "rotten" the light is (61); electricity can "betray" you (187); photography is used to reveal images nobody else has seen before; secondary characters who turn out to be important in the novel work underground, in mines, wells and tunnels; one loses "one's moorings in the darkness" of the forest or of the mine but one also emerges into "pools of light" (244); fireflies are among the elements that help Anil and Sarath in their identification of the bones (153); but Anil and Sarath are also aware that sight can be blinding and sightlessness can be "potent" (97), as is the case for Palipana, the rogue archeologist turned blind, whose assistance they will need. In their quest of light and revelation, Anil and Sarath need helpers, as in a fairy tale even though it is a horror tale – they will take us to the forum that was mentioned earlier.

Keeping safe, reaching out

I would like to suggest that the interventions of, and between, the numerous helpers in *Anil's Ghost* counteract symbolically the violence that imbues most of the places and moments in the novel. A whole network of characters is gradually sketched around Anil and Sarath, reflecting, speculating, contributing suggestions, offering protection too in the paradoxical movement of reaching out to keep safe. Different circles are drawn up, close to them or further away. The scientists who provide assistance constitute the first of those circles: Palipana and his brother Nārada, two archeologists, were

Sarath's teachers and mentors. Palipana, the epigraphist whose power of sight has turned inward, had "made his name translating Pali scripts and recording and translating the rock graffiti of Sigiriya" (79). While reading the stone remnants of the buried cities as so many "limitless subjects to record and interpret", he became an expert at keeping history "ever-present around him" (80). Anil and Sarath turn to him when they need to find someone to read and interpret Sailor's skull. From the depths of the dark green forest groves where he retreated with his books and writing tablets in his old-age solitude, Palipana reads the skull as he would have done ancient rock inscriptions: "his fingers, beautiful and thin, moving over the outlines of the skull Sarath had given him, his long fingernails at the supra-orbital ridge, within the orbital cavities [...], testing the jaw's angle, the blunt ridge of its teeth" (87). The sense of touch is just as powerful as the sense of sight.

Other sciences than archeology are called upon in this collaborative, aggregative approach: medicine and forensics appear to be two sides of the same science, even if only because Anil "should have been a doctor, but [...] swerved off into forensics" (47) after her parents' death. Several medical doctors are protagonists in the novel, on either side of the political divide: Dr Perera, the Senior Medical Officer, working for the government; Linus Corea, the doctor kidnapped by the guerillas in 1987 to operate on wounded insurgents; most importantly, Gamini, Sarath's brother, who works at the North Central Province hospital throughout the war as a surgeon, one of the doctors who "saved the lives first, then the limbs" (118) and organized "the funnel of the triage" (125), categorizing the incoming victims of "intentional violence" (118) and assessing the trauma. Palynology and forensic geology also help identify the traces of soil, pollen grains and spores that "fused to the bones" (52). Chitra Abeysekera, the entomologist, plays a part in identifying the first burial site of Sailor thanks to what she says about the insects and pupae (i.e. insects in their inactive immature form between larva and adult) that were found in the bones (70–3, 152).

The network of helpers also grows organically from within, one connection leading to another. Within the restricted scope of this essay, I will limit myself to two examples among the many that could be taken. First, victims of violence often become helpers, as in the case of Gunesena, the young man who was pulled out of his truck and nailed on the tarmac, as in a modern crucifixion: given proper medical care first by Anil on the road, then by Gamini at the hospital, he is eventually the one who pushes the trolley with the skeletons in the semi-darkness of the corridors of the Armoury Auditorium at the end of the novel, when Anil is heard, in the judicial meaning of the term, by the anti-terrorist unit and is not aware yet Sarath has *not* betrayed her. Gunesena smuggles out Sailor, ensuring Anil can bring to Geneva the ultimate evidence of the government-ordered murder.

Second, when Anil explains to Palipana that Sailor may have been “buried twice” (89) and that the second burial happened in a government-restricted area, she seeks the epigraphist’s help to discover if it can be a murder committed by the government. His response includes telling them about the tradition of Nētra Mangala, that is, the ritual of the eyes, when a special artist, an artificer, is needed to paint the eyes on the Buddha image at five in the morning and animate it with life at the precise hour when the Buddha attained enlightenment (97–9, 106). Palipana refers them to Ananda Urugama, whose tragic story from light to darkness (91–2) will be revealed gradually. The artist, who was the best Nētra Mangala eye-painter craftsman but turned gem-pit worker after his wife Sirissa was killed by insurgents, will reconstruct what Sailor may have looked like, thus contributing to solving the mystery of the murder.

In their contact with one another, each character reveals not only another facet of themselves but also another facet of their being to the character they interact with. None of them is fixed once and for all in what they believed they were; they move and evolve in a fluid fashion so that identities and allegiances are revisited and reconfigured. These multiple relationships in the novel constantly create new affiliations and perspectives onto the self and the other. Identities are “provisional and shifting”, “flexible and permeable” in Ondaatje’s writing, as Victoria Cook (2004) demonstrates in her problematization of naming in the novel, in relation to the construction of an individual identity as one of “transgression, process and fluidity”.⁴

In these combined networks of sciences and reconfigured webs of characters that are woven around Anil and Sarath, two apparently contradictory movements unfold: one that is vertical, another that is horizontal. The vertical drive consists in digging under the surface of the ground, mining the earth, excavating the burial sites, unearthing the bones to force the truth to rise to the surface. The horizontal drive consists in resorting to all the assistance possible, as we have just seen: reaching out to many characters, turning them into helpers, connecting people in a rhizomatic way, putting out lateral shoots, thus going against the very separation, antagonism and extreme violence that is described in the novel.

Such a horizontal, all-encompassing energy that brings people together is also performed at another, deeper level: the text sweeps across past, present and future moments, in a progress that is less linear than *haptic*, an approach that would combine the sense of touch, of kinaesthesia, and proprioception, that is, the body’s appreciation of its own movement (Garrington 2010, 810). Places and cultural references are also embraced in a similar sweeping motion. It has been described as “drifting” and I now want to speculate some more about the possible meaning and implications of such drifting – in French, I would have used the word *vagabondage*.

4 On the dynamics linked to naming in the novel, see also Geetha Ganapathy-Dore (2002), Debjani Ganguly (2016) and Victoria Burrows (2008).

Drifting, drifting ...

In her book review of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, "Unearthing the Tragedies of Civil War in Sri Lanka", Janet Maslin expresses her admiration of Ondaatje for being able to "commingle anguish and seductiveness in fierce, unexpected ways" ([2000] 2001, 11), but also her frustration with the way the novel brings in its midst so many elements that seem foreign to the primary focus on the warfare between government, anti-government insurgents, and separatist guerilla forces:

The book *drifts* in flashback, for instance, from Guatemala to the Miami bedroom where Anil has a tryst with her married lover, Cullis, who is as much on her mind as Sailor the skeleton. She speaks about the Spanish names for bones; he says he has written something about Norwegian snakes. While Cullis sleeps, in the kind of effortlessly bewitching gesture Mr. Ondaatje creates so gracefully, she photographs him, then buries the film inside his suitcase as a souvenir. But as to how such moments – or those in which Anil writes a letter to John Boorman about his film "Point Blank" or ponders lyrics to a song set in New York State by the McGarrigle sisters – connect with the book's essential business in Sri Lanka, that remains *indistinct*. *Frustratingly* so since the *scattered* aspects of this voyage of discovery are *separately* so powerful. (Maslin 2000, 11, my emphasis)

As a response to my introductory question about what the literary text performs for those lost or unidentified bodies that could not be accomplished directly, I would like to suggest that this seemingly drifting style is at the heart of what Ondaatje achieves in *Anil's Ghost* in a wonderfully sophisticated way. The dynamics of drifting in the novel serves the precise purpose of enabling a reading whose ultimate *raison d'être* is to create a space of identification and recognition, of togetherness and kinship in the text, crossing boundaries and countering the dehumanization, the killing and the polarization at work in the story. This is by no means contradictory with the construction of identities in the novel as a fluid process that was suggested earlier. In such a perspective, *text* as a non-linear process goes against the clear-cut rigidity of *story*. The text drifts in several ways, and I propose to see this drifting as part of the literary *counter-forensics* that is at stake here, in a movement born out of the necessity to identify the bones of the murdered but which expands far beyond the mass burial site. Not only does it enable a certain justice to be delivered in an open court of law (forensics), but also it goes beyond forensics and authorizes the creation of a public space to share. I will select here three forms of drifting to examine how such a forum is generated in the text, as the living move out of the limbo zone of trauma, elegy and mourning, back into the community of the living.

First, as was mentioned earlier, the incipit is a double-entry one: a whole page in italics opens the book with what the reader will read eventually as an analepsis. Some seven or eight such passages in italics punctuate the novel, endowed as they are with a complex role to play in the time scheme of the narrative. References to Anil's investigations in Guatemala or China, to a terrorist attack in a tunnel, to the National Atlas of Sri Lanka, to the eye-painter Ananda Urugama, to Ananda's wife, Sirissa or to Sarath's wife, Ravina, both dead in the diegesis, constitute the pith and marrow, if I may say so in the context of bones, of those passages in italics. Most of the time, the reader is not able to understand immediately why they are taken through those moments, which makes me suggest those moments are structured to work as trauma – one is not able to understand what is happening at the time of the event but only much later, when you go back to them, or when they come back to you. A constant element that pertains to those pages in italics is that the characters that appear in them will be introduced formally only later in the diegesis, making those passages *proleptic* as well as *analeptic*, creating connections across the narrative. A couple of instances will show my point. Palipana is mentioned in passing in the second passage in italics (12) but we're only introduced to him diegetically in the section "The Grove of Aesthetics" (79) and actually meet him at the same time as Anil (85), after a few more drifting passages that situate Palipana in his professional and personal history as well as in the forest grove he has retired to. Ananda Urugama, the eye-painter, is the object of the fifth passage in italics (91–3), but we have to wait until Palipana refers Anil and Sarath to him to "rebuild the head" of Sailor (108). We only meet him diegetically but briefly in the section "A Brother", which is mostly about Sarath's brother, Gamini. Finally, a whole section will be named after him, "Ananda" (161–205). The same braiding could be done for Sirissa and Ravina, the wives of Ananda and Sarath, respectively, among other characters.

A second form of drifting occurs through the other, more straightforward, analepses that haunt the narrative and morph it into a nimble object. Many analepses take us to Anil's personal life and memories: her love affair with the married man, Cullis, with whom she entertains an ambivalent relationship; her memories of her marriage with a medical student, whose name she doesn't even mention for fear it would leave a trace in her life (140–5); her youthful memories of the monsoon (15), of the time when she was a swimmer (11, 69), or of the shallow graves she would walk on by accident and fall into (20); her reminiscing of her American girlfriend, Leaf, whose memory is being erased by Alzheimer's, fast; her studies in North America and the Fuck Yorick School of Forensics (146–51).

The third and last form of drifting to be underlined here is the one that materializes through the abundance of literary and cultural references that far exceed the boundaries of the tear-shaped island. It includes scientific

annals and medical publications; a wide range of literary references, from the Greek poet Archilochus to Kipling or Goethe. It mentions writers like Agatha Christie, P. G. Wodehouse, Enid Blyton, John Masters, among many others; specific novels like *Le Grand Meaulnes*, *L'Homme au masque de fer*, *Les Misérables*, or *The Queen's Gambit*. There are also films and actors like *In Search of Gandhi* or Ava Gardner; singers like Frank Sinatra, and specific songs like “The Good Ship Venus”, “Coming in from the Cold”, “Don't Know Much about Entomology”, or Tom Waits' “Heigh Ho”, which is, significantly, a mining song.

So, what is the link between all those mentions and references? Why such sweeping gestures across continents and cultural references in a novel about the Civil War in Sri Lanka and the unidentified bones of the murdered? What is the impact of a time scheme that is bound to confuse the reader? We never quite know what to expect, nor what to look for, at first, and then we realize we must look back to see where we are going. Reading the novel through the lens of “terrorist fiction”, Margaret Scanlan argues that “the distinctive achievement in *Anil's Ghost* is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror” (2004, 302). She uses, in particular, what Ursula Heise calls “chronoschisms”, those “abrupt breaks in time” that shatter “the unifying time of the individual mind” (Heise, qtd in Scanlan 2004, 303):

The chronoschisms create a sense of time experienced through terror, by people living in fear they can be blown away in an instant, to whom historical perspective is an alien luxury. What human beings of good will and intelligence [...] might accomplish in such a time, becomes the novel's central question. (Scanlan 2004, 303)

Whether we speak about the structured-like-trauma narrative, or about text time that shatters story time, it is up to the reader to put the pieces together, reattach this episode with that one, connect this character with that one, and so on. Pursuing what is for Scanlan the novel's “central question”, I want to suggest that this drifting, within the frame of a complex time structure, can be interpreted in three other ways that would not necessarily be in contradiction with holding the experience of terror at the heart of reading but would highlight what is there to “accomplish” to counter the experience of terror.

First, the freedom that was expelled from the *story* climbs back in through the *text*. Story stays within the borders of the island, within the contours of violence, conflict and destruction, whereas text roams freely beyond borders and boundaries, across emotions and timelines. The malleability of the space and time schemes gives the text the freedom the story doesn't have. Text, as a nimble object, cannot be constrained by the shackles of story.

Second, it implicates the reader in creating invisible connections that are revealed only eventually – as has been shown earlier, we already know

Palipana, Ananda, Sirissa and Ravina when we meet them later in the chapters. We recognize them more than we discover them, as if we have always already known them. Recurring motifs that echo across the narrative also create a web of connections, thus undermining what is described in the story (see the motifs of the leaf, the bird, food and drink, the well, the mine, etc.). The reader cannot but engage in an act of active, *writerly*, reconstruction, potentially akin to reconstructive surgery or bone setting. The text brings together instead of hacking and wrenching apart. It relies on care and agency where there was none, as we have seen with Sarath's forensic treatment of the bones. It creates a subterranean bond of affinities between characters, countries and cultures, a forum for everyone to participate in, a space of identification that is one of recognition and kinship, while also providing a court of law where social justice can be delivered symbolically.

Third, some references will be missed by the reader, but others, like the characters whom we are made to recognize eventually, will breed familiarity, and place us, readers, in a tantalizing proximity to the characters – to Anil, particularly. Shooting off from a phrase Ganguly uses to describe the emergence of a “humanitarian sensibility” in the eighteenth-century novel, one could say the *drifting* produces an “architectonics of proximity” and, I would add, distance (Ganguly 2016, 30), a paradoxical space and time where possibilities are opened by creating distance and proximity all at once. One could almost compare this paradoxical space and time with the hovering or the evenly suspended attention that is at work in psychoanalysis – a direction-less attention that does not hold preconceived suppositions or interpretations, a space which brings you closer to what truly matters while maintaining distance – a “floating attention”, if a Gallicism can be allowed here (*attention flottante*). We now need to have another look at Anil's transnational situation, defined as it is by a complex, haptic, relationship to proximity and distance, stasis and movement.

From afar, from up close

Anil has been described as “[h]aunted by a strong sense of personal and cultural dislocation”, embodying “an ethical critique of the failure of global justice” while her character also “stages diaspora” as the condition of late modernity (Härting 2003, 43). Whether she is referred to as a “diasporan” or as an “expatriate” (Ganguly), a “nomad” or a “cosmopolitan” (Härting), Anil's whole being seems to be (dis)located within the prism of what she calls her “long-distance gaze” (11), as her life is both made and unmade by her travels on different fact-finding missions for human rights international bodies. In Härting's words, “Anil's experience of cultural and social

displacement presents a cultural impediment that keeps her suspended in a state of perpetual foreignness and transition rather than allowing her to inhabit multiple cultural and historical spaces at once” (51). From the beginning of the novel, she entertains an ambiguous relationship with her country of origin and her past, marked by disavowal and distance. After having spent 15 years abroad for her studies and her work, Anil’s return to Sri Lanka on her human rights mission is rather “low key” (Ganguly 2016, 198) and definitely not a return *home*. She does not want to be reminded she won a scholarship to go to America (25), or swimming championships when she was young (10–1, 17). She insists she is “not a prodigal” (10); she says that “[t]he island no longer held her by the past” (11), and of course the reader hears, *by the throat*. And yet, she does come back for her mission.

All the aspects of Anil’s professional as well as her personal and sexual life seem painted in what has been labelled as detachment and alienation, but most critics have a hard time putting her into any one given box. I see ambivalence, ambiguity and fluidity at the heart of who she is, not to be constrained by anything or anyone. This is visible for instance in her volatile relationship with Cullis. Sexual intimacy is there whenever they meet, here or there, but it can only be a “long-distance” relationship. Her friendship with Leaf is also identified as a “long-distance” relationship, yet it is intimate and close.

Is there any link between her transnational status and her profession? Ganguly sees Anil’s training as a forensic pathologist as “an extension of her diasporic status – both are ultimately distancing” (2016, 201). In the absolute commitment she has toward her profession and the discovery of truth, however, she will learn to negotiate how far or how close she should be, how much objective distance or empathy she should adopt. In forensic science as in medicine, one needs distance to be able to reach a valid conclusion and not let oneself be engulfed by emotion. And yet, one also needs empathy. This would need longer developments that are beyond the scope of this essay, but it is not haphazard if photography is at the heart of the novel, too, symbolic as it is of one way of accessing, producing and interpreting knowledge, among others. The journey Anil performs in the novel is one that takes her from an attempt at maintaining an abstract distance to embracing a more embodied approach (see Herrick), in her work as in the management of her own grief, which she will finally authorize herself to feel.

What the novel highlights is this complex relationship to the world that takes shape through and beyond forensics, thanks to forensics almost, as if revealing the mystery of the bones was also reconnecting Anil to herself and to the world. She gradually learns that there are many ways to reach truth and her understanding of her own work – and her own self – evolves until it reaches what Ganguly highlights as the necessary coexistence of different practices:

Each of the main characters – Anil, Sarath, Palipana, and Ananda – allegorizes a distinctly different modality of getting to the truth of the massacres: Anil believes in the indubitable nature of forensic science; Sarath in the “archeological surround of a fact”; Palipana in textile exploration reaching back to ancient nontextual practices when the natural and the human were not clearly disaggregated; and Ananda in the aesthetics of vision. (Ganguly 2016, 195)

In all three cases, the body of the dead is, in Ganguly’s words, “the locus of knowledge” (2016, 197), but the modes of approach and understanding vary. When he introduced Anil to Palipana, Sarath said she could “cut a cross-section of bone with a fine saw and determine the skeleton’s exact age at death that way” (95). Palipana listened to her when she explained how she can “use the bone” to search for the truth, believing it will “set her free”. If Sarath needs the historical and archeological approach, “truth is just opinion” (102) for Palipana and his approach to Sailor is one that needs the physicality of touch. A whole other episteme opens up.

What is underlined is the power of cross-fertilization: “[e]ach is transformed in the end by the force of the other three” (195). Empathy and “sympathetic imagination” (Ganguly 2016, 201) help Anil to complete what Herrick (2016) calls her “descent into the underworld”, or *katabasis*. Making it possible for Sailor’s bones to tell his story also enables something in her own self. Identifying Sailor and handing his history back to him and to the ones who knew him, not only settles *him* in the world of the dead but also empowers *her* to come back to the world of the living. Sailor’s bones are Anil’s marrow.

Anil gradually moves out of her “long-distance gaze” and her self-positioning as the objective, distant scientist, able to reveal an individual mystery through a cross-section of bone under a microscope. What she finally lets go of is her “fantasy of invulnerability” (Herrick 2016, 36), her “fantasy of mastery” (Judith Butler, qtd in Herrick 2016, 37). What she finally acquires, and the reader with her, is the awareness that only through an “embodied sociality” (Herrick 2016, 46, referring to Merleau-Ponty) is one able to emerge out of extreme grief and extreme violence, reaching some form of truth and some form of justice – not absolute ones. The community of beings that is woven around the identification of Sailor’s bones through the drifting text fulfills the purpose of one such “embodied sociality”, one in which we can accept to be exposed to “the reality of our shared human vulnerability, our shared corporeal precarity” (Herrick 2016, 46).

As a conclusion, most of the energy of *Anil’s Ghost* emerges from the forensic search into the bones of the dead. Yet, Ondaatje focuses on what a forensic quest on the bones of the dead does to the living. He ultimately translates the forensic search that flows through the narrative into an embodied energy that serves the living. The mystery at the heart of the novel is, in

fact, the mystery of the living, as is demonstrated by Sarath himself. In a text “saturated with illegible deaths” (Ganguly 2016, 193), the reader is left to deal with a truth that can only be delivered through a community of feelings, a community of bodies, a co-presence shared in emotion, an aesthetic vision.

The final pages of the novel resonate with the incipit, that scene in Guatemala where the dead and the living were sharing the same liminal space of grief. The last scene shows Ananda involved in the reconstruction of the Buddha that was shattered to pieces, with the community of villagers but very close to a mass burial site. The reconstruction and the artwork that implicates one’s own body, and all the bodies of the community, portend of a possible life ahead, beyond the radical losses that were encountered and in the heightened awareness of one’s own vulnerability. In Herrick’s words, “it is this very corporeal vulnerability and exposure to others that makes it possible to return to the world of the living after suffering such catastrophic losses” (2016, 46). Ondaatje’s novel does just that – even if it can be criticized for a problematic rendering of the Tamil minority and what they went through, it uses forensics to create a forum so that we can hope to enjoy, once again, being alive. In a haptic manner, the novel invites us to embrace, once again, “the sweet touch from the world” (307).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Anandakugan, Nithyani. 2020. “The Sri Lankan Civil War and its History, Revisited in 2020.” *Harvard International Review*, August 31. <https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war>.
- Banerjee, Mita. 2022. “Migration, Life Writing, and the Spectacle of the Migrant Body in Distress.” *Thanatic Ethics Winter Webinar Series 2021–2022* (March 4). <https://www.thanaticethics.com/copy-of-2020-21>.
- Burrows, Victoria. 2008. “The Heterotopic Spaces of Postcolonial Trauma in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*.” *Studies in the Novel* 40 (1): 161–177. doi:10.1353/sdn.0.0007
- Burton, Antoinette. 2003. “Archives of Bones: *Anil’s Ghost* and the End of History.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38 (1): 39–56. doi:10.1177/0021989404381005
- Cattaneo, Cristina. 2019. *Naufragés sans visage*. Translated from Italian by Pauline Colonna d’Istria. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Cook, Victoria. 2004. “Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*.” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 6 (3). doi:10.7771/1481-4374.1234.
- De León, Jason. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Ganapathy-Dore, Geetha. 2002. “Fathoming Private Woes in a Public Story: A Study of Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil Ghost*.” *Jouvert* 6 (3). <https://legacy.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v613/anil.htm>.
- Ganguly, Debjani. 2016. *This Thing Called the World*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Garrington, Abbie. 2010. "Touching Texts: The Haptic Sense in Modernist Literature." *Literature Compass* 7 (9): 810–823. doi:10.1111/j.1741-4113.2010.00740.x.
- Goldhahn, Almut, and Massimo Ricciardo. 2021. "Objects of Migration: Photo-Objects of Art History: Encounters in an Archive." *Visual Anthropology* 34 (4): 339–367. doi:10.1080/08949468.2021.1944773.
- Härting, Heike. 2003. "Diasporic Cross-Currents in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 28 (1): 43–70.
- Heller, Charles, and Antoine Pécoud. 2017. "Compter les morts aux frontières: des contre-statistiques de la société civile à la récupération (inter-)gouvernementale." *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 33 (2/3): 63–90. doi:10.4000/remi.8732
- Herrick, Margaret C. S. 2016. "Katabasis and the Politics of Grief in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51 (1): 35–48. doi:10.1177/0021989414553242.
- Hewitson, Justin M. 2019. "Mediating Suffering: Buddhist Detachment and Tantric Responsibility in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21 (5), doi:10.7771/1481-4374.3196.
- Kennedy, David. 2007. *Elegy. The New Critical Idiom*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kubiak, A. 2004. "Spelling it Out: Narrative Typologies of Terror." *Studies in the Novel* 36 (3): 294–301.
- Lipson Freed, Joanne. 2017. *Haunting Encounters: The Ethics of Reading Across Boundaries of Difference*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Loichot, Valérie. 2020. *Water Graves: The Art of the Unritual in the Greater Caribbean*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Maslin, Janet. 2000. "Unearthing the Tragedies of Civil War in Sri Lanka." *The New York Times*, May 11, Column 3.
- Ondaatje, Michael. [2000] 2001. *Anil's Ghost*. London: Macmillan.
- Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Scanlan, Margaret. 2004. "Anil's Ghosts and Terrorism's Time." *Studies in the Novel* 36 (3): 302–317.