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(In)consolation in Contemporary British and Postcolonial Literatures

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## *Drifting* as Consolation in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK

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### Résumés

English Français

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* deals with the exhumation and identification of bones in the context of the civil war in Sri Lanka. Sent by a human rights group to investigate mass burials, Sri Lankan-born and North American-educated Anil Tissera returns to her native island as a forensic anthropologist after 15 years away. Invested as she is in her job, Anil needs time to authorize herself to be affected by what she uncovers. The reconstruction of her relationship with the excruciating history of the island takes unusual narrative shapes in the novel, which has been criticized for meandering along too many digressions and for "drifting [...] away from the book's essential business" (Maslin 11). As I investigate what can be referred to as literary *drifting*, I offer the hypothesis that such *drifting* is the route the novel takes to steer the protagonist and the readers from desolation to consolation. I argue that, far from diverting us from the main forensic purpose of the book, Ondaatje's literary *drifting* contributes to creating a new space and time for the desolate and the inconsolable, as if solace could only be found in the relational engagement with a community.

L'exhumation et l'identification d'ossements dans le contexte de la guerre civile au Sri Lanka est au cœur du roman de Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*. Envoyée par un groupe de défense des droits humains pour enquêter sur des fosses communes, Anil Tissera, née au Sri Lanka mais installée en Amérique du Nord, revient sur son île natale en tant qu'anthropologue médico-légale après 15 ans d'absence. Pleinement engagée dans son travail, ce n'est que peu à peu qu'elle s'autorise à être affectée par l'expérience. La reconstruction de sa relation à l'histoire douloureuse de l'île prend des formes narratives inhabituelles dans le roman, qui a souvent été critiqué pour ses nombreuses « dérives [...] loin de l'intrigue essentielle du livre » (Maslin 11). Je formule l'hypothèse que la digression littéraire est la voie empruntée par le roman pour conduire la protagoniste et les lecteurs et lectrices de la désolation à la consolation. Loin de nous détourner de



l'objectif médico-légal principal du livre, la dérive littéraire d'Ondaatje contribue selon moi à créer un nouvel espace et une nouvelle temporalité pour les désolé.e.s et les inconsolables, comme si le réconfort ne pouvait être trouvé que dans la relation à une communauté.

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## Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés :** Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, Sri Lanka, consolation, médecine légale, digression, dérive

**Keywords:** Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, Sri Lanka, consolation, forensics, drifting, textual kinetics

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## Texte intégral

- 1 In her book review of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Janet Maslin expresses her admiration of Ondaatje's writing for being able to “commingle anguish and seductiveness in fierce, unexpected ways” (11), but she also vents her frustration with the way the novel fuses so many elements that seem foreign to its primary focus on the civil war in Sri Lanka:

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” [...]—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. (11, my emphasis)

- 2 Maslin's frustration with a novel that is multi-layered, scattered, time-jumping, and whose purpose appears at times indistinct, may well have been shared by some readers, even though similar digressing narrative techniques have featured in many earlier works by Ondaatje, namely *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), *Running in the Family* (1983), or *The English Patient* (1993), and readers have learned to appreciate them. Yet, *Anil's Ghost* is somewhat different, even from *Running in the Family* that is also set in Sri Lanka and also digs up bones, albeit figuratively and from a personal perspective. *Anil's Ghost* 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, in what can be defined as a genocide by the Sri Lankan Tamils. In the opening pages, Sri Lankan-born, Sinhala-speaking and North American-educated Anil Tissera comes back to Sri Lanka as a forensic anthropologist, responding to a call from the Centre of Human Rights in Geneva to go and investigate the political killings of the Civil War. In Anil's search for identification in the context of mass killings and mass graves, the bones of the dead are literally unearthed and forensics are used, scientifically and / or metaphorically, to investigate the crime, reveal the truth about their deaths, but also “settle the dead in the world of the dead” (Herrick 40), thus providing the hope of consolation for the bereaved families. Through the literary text, the forensic search makes it possible for the survivors to get back to the world of the living and allows both the quick and the dead to return to the realm of a visible and tangible humanity. But this can only happen once the bodies of their relatives have been found, identified and given a proper ritual.



3 Fifteen years after she left her native island, Anil's journey is not an easy task as over time she had gradually disengaged herself from Sri Lanka, so much so that she may appear in denial of any trauma she may have suffered, of any tears that may yet have to be shed, of any consolation that she may still be in need of. Anil has been described as "[h]aunted by a strong sense of personal and cultural dislocation" (Härting 43). This dislocation may be due to what she calls her "long-distance gaze" (Ondaatje 11), as her life has been made and unmade by her travels on various fact-finding missions for human rights international bodies. From the beginning of the novel, she entertains an ambiguous relationship with her native island and with her past, marked by disavowal and distance, and the unacknowledged desire to remain in control of her trajectory even if solitary. Thus, she does not want to be reminded of her adolescent swimming success (10-11; 17), or of the scholarship she won to go to America (25), and, contrary to the narrator of *Running in the Family*, insists she is "not a prodigal" (10). She says that "[t]he island no longer held her by the past" (11), a sentence that can almost echo for the reader as "held her *by the throat*." This ambivalence between what can be said and what should be hushed, or between what can be heard and given to understand is a structural element in the plot development. Through the plight of others Anil gradually unravels her own formerly suppressed need for consolation. Through the implicit mention of the island that would be holding her by the throat, the reader is given to understand very early in the novel that recognizing the erasure has become a matter of life or death for Anil, even if she is not yet aware of it.

4 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 a text that uses the angle of the epistemological (Ganguly 2016), the historical (Burton 2003), the diasporic (Härting 2003) or the transnational (Cook 2004). The novel has also been analyzed through the Buddhist and Tantric lens (Hewitson 2019), among others. I have argued elsewhere that it contributes to *addressing* historical horrors as well as *redressing* social injustices (Misrahi-Barak 2023). I suggested that, as bones are literally being unearthed, the text grapples with 'thanatic ethics', performing a mourning ritual that could not be accomplished directly for those lost or unidentified bodies; I hypothesized 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, and investigated the possibility that the narrative of the identification of the dead could create a public space to be shared by all (*forum*).

5 As I engage here with the theme of consolation and ponder whether consolation is possible or even desirable in such a context as a civil war, I would like to follow up on and move beyond such previous forensic approaches, re-reading Ondaatje's novel and re-interpreting the rite that is performed in the text through the lens of consolation. I will argue here that the seemingly drifting style Maslin was unhappy with is at the heart of Ondaatje's narrative and ethical project. It is my contention that, by crossing boundaries, be they national, cultural, political, literary or personal, the sophisticated dynamics of the drifting style in *Anil's Ghost* serve the purpose of countering the dehumanization, the killing, and the polarization at work in the story. It enables a reading whose ultimate *raison d'être* is to create a space of identification and recognition, of textual togetherness and kinship. I intend to show that, far from leaving Anil disengaged, the drifting text is precisely the modality that enables her to *re-engage* with the island and with the world, what the psychiatrist Christophe André calls "reconnecting" when he writes about the consolation that social bonds can provide



“remettre en lien,” 131). I will offer the hypothesis that *drifting* gestures towards consolation in the way it takes us—character, author, narrator and reader—to a place we had not anticipated we would go, in a movement that is not dissimilar to what Kamau Brathwaite called *tidialectics* as will be shown further in the demonstration, thus taking us to a place other than pain and suffering. In that respect, I will keep in mind what Michaël Föessel says about consolation in *Le Temps de la consolation* (2015): “To console is to allow the other person to see and perceive differently, not *according to* their pain, which is not the same as healing, i.e. seeing or perceiving *without pain*” (loc 74 of 276, my translation).

- 6 Opting for an inductive organization that may appear to mimic the very topic of the article as I move from one stage to the next, I will first select three forms of *drifting* in the novel to examine eventually how a space for consolation is generated in the text, as the living move out of the limbo zone of trauma and mourning back into the community of the living, making use of the mode of a revisited elegy. As David Kennedy 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” (loc 19 of 156) Ondaatje is interested in this “transformation” and this “afterlife,” morphing what Jean-Michel Ganteau has called the “saturation with the past” into a praxis of responsibility towards the other and of accountability for oneself that is oriented towards the future (33). This is precisely what I locate at the heart of the *drifting* in the novel—the relational dimension of consolation (Julliand 2020). I will then point to the different ways textual *drifting* contributes to having Anil, as well as the reader, move from desolation to consolation.

## Generating a space for consolation

- 7 The first kind of *drifting* that occurs in the novel takes the shape of detours in space and time. Indeed, *Anil's Ghost* opens with an indirect “vigil for the dead” (5), one that will keep us *awake* throughout the whole novel (from the Latin “vigilantia,” “vigilare,” watch, watchfulness, wakefulness, keeping awake). Before we are even aware of the origin of the pain, this vigil, this search for consolation, is the first passageway the reader goes along:

When the team reached the site at five-thirty in the morning, one or two family members would be waiting for them. And they would be present all day while Anil and the others worked, never leaving: they spelled each other so someone always stayed, as if to ensure that the evidence would not be lost again. This vigil for the dead, for these half-revealed forms. (5)

- 8 Instead of taking us to Sri Lanka directly, as one might expect, the incipit guides us backwards to an earlier excavation site Anil went to in Guatemala, searching for the remains of the killed and the ‘disappeared’ while the unconsolated family members, huddled together, wait by the side of the graves, or sometimes step into the graves, hoping to identify one of their lost ones and to reach the consolation such a *revelation* may provide them with.
- 9 A whole page in italics thus opens the book with what the reader only later understands to be an analepsis. Some eight or nine such passages in italics punctuate the novel, complexifying the time scheme, and providing the narrative with a “textual kinetics” of its own, a concept coined by Anna Reckin to refer to a dynamic movement that pushes us towards reimagining modalities of inhabiting the world in the present.

The italicized passages provide references to Anil’s investigations in Guatemala or



China, a terrorist attack in a tunnel, the National Atlas of Sri Lanka, the Buddhist eye-painter Ananda Udugama, Ananda's wife, Sirissa, and Ravina, the wife of Sarath Diyasena, the government-appointed archeologist with whom Anil will work to identify one particular skeleton whom they ironically nickname Sailor, as in the nursery rhyme Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor. Most of the time, the reader is not able to understand immediately why they are taken through those moments, or who these characters are, which could encourage us to read those moments as structured to work as trauma does: it is most often impossible to understand what is happening at the time of the event; understanding is possible only much later, when you go back to it, or when it comes back to you. As trauma scholars have amply and clearly demonstrated, the traumatic event is one that "resist(s) understanding and integration" at the moment when it takes place (Hirsch 12). A constant element that pertains to those pages in italics is that the characters who 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, unbeknownst to the reader at first but to be ultimately reconstructed, knowingly this time, as one reconstructs and revisits a traumatic event, potentially to move away from it by purging what Judith Butler calls its "traumatic residue." (38)

11 For instance, Palipana, the archeologist Anil and Sarath turn to for assistance, is mentioned in passing in the second passage in italics (12)—even though that page is about China, and more precisely about a series of Buddhist cave temples in Shanxi province where the victims are the Bodhisattvas that were discovered by Japanese archeologists in 1918, with no apparent relation to 20th century Sri Lanka. However, we are only introduced to Palipana diegetically in the section "The Grove of Aesthetics" some seventy pages later (79), and we meet him at the same time as Anil (85), after a few more drifting passages that situate him 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 (91-93) but is only introduced when Palipana recommends him to Anil and Sarath as someone who can "rebuild the head" of Sailor (108). The reader meets Ananda diegetically and briefly in the section "A Brother," (120) which is mostly about another character, Sarath's brother Gamini, the young surgeon who operates in the North Central Province on the victims of stabbings and those missing limbs due to land mines, once the triage of victims has been done: "Orthopaedic trauma, punctured lungs, spinal cord injuries" (120). Finally, a whole section is named after him, "Ananda" (161-205), but it is symptomatic that this latter section is placed after the former, as if the restorative reconstruction that Ananda embarks on could only happen after the reader has been acquainted with Gamini and with the selfless work he performs as if he was past consolation. And yet it is the excruciating work he has chosen to do that enables others to keep their loved ones alive, or reach some form of solace when everything has been tried to save their lives.

12 The characterization of Ananda's wife Sirissa and of Ravina follows a similar pattern, but not quite. The former appears for the first time in one of those passages in italics (172-75). One early morning, as she comes close to the bridge she crosses every day to reach the school where she has a cleaning job, she sees heads on stakes. She has to walk past them, and the reader is reminded of the previous lines: "So many things happened during the feathers of night. The frantic running, the terrified, the scared, the pea-brain furious and tired professional men of death punishing another village of dissent" (174). What Sirissa has witnessed is so traumatic that she is not even given a second chance in the narrative. Instead of being properly introduced in one of the following scenes in the diegesis, she can only be alluded to *in absentia* as she disappeared shortly after the scene on the bridge: "Ananda's wife, Sirissa, disappeared at that time... [...]. It's been three years. He still hasn't found her" (185). She is thus turned into a ghost twice, since





she is absent from the diegesis itself and she is not even referred to later on in the text. Ravina is another one of the ghosts who haunt the text. She is the one the young surgeon Gamini “should have loved” (251), but instead she married his brother Sarath. She was brought to the hospital after committing suicide, and Gamini was unable to save her, letting her slide into “the darkness of another tunnel” (252). Just like Sirissa, she never surfaces in the diegesis. When she is mentioned again a few pages later, it is to say that Sarath would “unearth nothing of Ravina” (279).

13 A second form of *drifting* occurs through more straightforward analepses that haunt the narrative and morph it into a nimble object—“textual kinetics” again. Many of these analepses concern 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 does not even mention for fear it would leave a trace in her life (140-45); her youth 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 disease; and her studies in North America and the Fuck Yorick School of Forensics (146-51).

14 The third and last form of *drifting* materializes through the abundance of literary and cultural references that far exceed the boundaries of the tear-shaped island, even though they do include the National Atlas of Sri Lanka. It comprehends—and we should note the Latin etymology cum- ‘together’ + prehendere ‘grasp’—scientific annals and medical publications; a wide range of literary references, from the Greek poet Archilocus to Kipling to Goethe, writers like Agatha Christie, P. G. Wodehouse, Enid Blyton, John Masters, among many others, or specific novels like *Le Grand Meaulnes*, *L’Homme au masque de fer*, *Les Misérables*, or *The Queen’s Gambit*. One could also mention 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 enough in a novel about excavation, a mining song.

15 All those literary and cultural references that emerge through allusion, partial ellipsis, prolepsis, or analepsis, brush shoulders with the characters that exist in the story, as if on the same level, composing an aggregative approach. On the level of the diegesis, the role of many characters is to connect Anil and Sarath to other characters. If we borrow from Vladimir Propp’s character types, many could be seen as helpers, and as in a fairy-tale that one would unexpectedly stumble upon amidst a nightmare, they reflect and speculate, they contribute suggestions, offer protection, join the dots. Scientists help in that the two archeologists Palipana and his brother Nārada connect Anil and Sarath to artists (the eye-painter Ananda Udugama). In the same way, other sciences are called upon in this collaborative approach. Medicine leads to forensics, one medical doctor leads to another one, on either side of the political divide: Dr Perera, the Senior Medical Officer, working for the government; Linus Corea, the doctor kidnapped by the guerilla in 1987 to operate on the wounded insurgents; most importantly, Gamini, Sarath’s brother, who “saved the lives first, then the limbs” (118), categorizing the incoming victims 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. an insect in its inactive immature form between larva and adult) that were found in the bones (70-73; 152).

16 The text highlights how victims 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 that Sarath has *not* betrayed her. Gunesena smuggles out Sailor, ensuring Anil can bring to Geneva the ultimate evidence of the government-ordered murder. In short, the network of helpers grows organically from within, one connection leading to another, just as one literary or cultural reference leads to another, in an amplifying momentum. Now that the three examples of drifting in *Anil's Ghost* have been reviewed, one can ask the corresponding questions that pertain to the ways consolation is performed in the text.

## Performing consolation

- 17 What, then, is the link between the passages in italics and the diegesis? Between the text-time of the analepses and the story-time of the late-1990s Sri Lanka? Between all the diegetic characters and the fictional characters present in the literary and cultural 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? How can the survivors' impossible mourning and the female protagonist's unacknowledged inconsolation be linked, and to what effect? Is there a possibility that those two forms of grieving, if connected, could endow the mourning and / or the grief with a restorative function geared towards a more future-oriented approach (Ganteau)?
- 18 As readers, we never quite know what to expect, nor what to look for, at first, until we realize we must look back to see where we are going. Reading the novel through the lens of "terrorist fiction," Margaret Scanlan convincingly argues that "the distinctive achievement in *Anil's Ghost* is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror" (302). In particular, the novel uses what Ursula Heise calls "chronoschisms," those "abrupt breaks in time [that shatter] the unifying time of the individual mind" (Heise 7, qtd. in Scanlan 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" (303).
- 19 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 back together, to reattach this episode with that one, connect this character to that one, etc. Pursuing what for Scanlan is the novel's "central question," I want to suggest that this *drifting* is a bringing together, a coming into one's own albeit through a *detour*. Ultimately, the connections that take place in the text create a renewed form of agency for the reader and for the protagonist, an agency that does not stem from control but which enables the yet unconsolated individual to re-insert themselves in a community and look towards a possible future.
- 20 While Anil has shed her younger swimmer self and is ready to don a new persona as drifter, the whole novel appears bent on helping its main protagonist transition from swimming to drifting. A useful prism may be Kamau Brathwaite's tidalectics defined as a complex oceanic worldview which explores the entanglement between past and present, water and land, diaspora and home, roots and routes (Gilroy), and in which the world breathes with the rhythms of the sea, far from the Western terrestrial "obsession for fixity, assuredness, and appropriation" (Brathwaite 34). Brathwaite's tidalectics





provides a framework that enables a creative vision of the past as it surfaces again and again in the present, in a different shape from what it used to be. It is a constant back and forth movement that cannot be reduced to a cyclical movement since the tide never comes back to the same point of origin. The concept was shaped by Brathwaite from the image of an old woman sweeping sand in her yard, repeatedly, every morning. To this continual and coastal to and fro Brathwaite attributes the quality of *tidalectics*, instead of the more Western *dialectics*. The woman's movement is similar to that of the ocean she appears to be walking on, instead of sand, as one could have thought. In the digressions she is involved in as a character—let us remember that the verb *digress* comes from the Latin *di* 'aside' + *gredi* 'walk, step', an etymology that we may also find interesting in the context of reaching consolation as a movement that encourages us to step *aside* one's pain—, Anil could be another impersonation of that walking woman, “constantly coming from where she had come from” (33). She reaches out towards an image of the “perhaps creative chaos of the future” (34), even though she did not realise it at first. Anil may have believed she could swim away from her native island and never be back, but she does return even though not quite to the place she had left, following a narrative tempo that is crucial to the “therapeutic value of literary writings” (James 6).

21 Within the frame of the complex time structure of *Anil's Ghost*, *drifting* can be interpreted, then, in three different ways that do not necessarily contradict the experience of terror embedded in the reading. *Drifting* could highlight what can be “accomplished” to counter the experience of terror and provide some form of solace, just as the movement and sound of the ebb and flow of water—the pain is not erased but it is taken further away and mitigated. I now need to return to the three examples that were taken earlier to illustrate the different kinds of *drifting* in the novel. First, addressing the detours in space and time, the passages in italics that are simultaneously analeptic and proleptic, it is the tension between *story* and *text* that is made clear. The freedom and agency that the victims and survivors were deprived of in the *story* (the diegetic elements as they could have happened in real life) are proffered through the *text* (the diegetic elements as they have been reshaped and reordered by the author). *Story* stays within the borders of the island, within the contours of violence, conflict, destruction and “inconsolation,” unable to escape loss and desolation; whereas *text* roams freely beyond borders and boundaries, across emotions and timelines, making all possible connections outside the frame of violence. The malleability of the space and time schemes, the “textual kinetics,” gives the text the freedom the story does not have. *Text*, as a nimble object, cannot be constrained by the shackles of *story*. *Text* goes against *story*.

22 Second, as regards the more straightforward analepses, the reader is implicated in creating invisible connections that are revealed only eventually—as has been shown earlier, we already know Palipana, Ananda, Sirissa, or 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 (of the leaf, the bird, food and drink, the well, the mine, etc.) that echo across the narrative also create a web of connections, thus undermining the disconnection that seems to emerge from the story. As alluded to earlier, the “powerful remedies” that André associates with social bonds are at work there, too (blurb). The reader cannot but engage in an act of active reconstruction, potentially akin to post-traumatic surgery, reconstructive surgery or bone setting. The text relies on care and agency where there was none, as we can see with Sarath's forensic treatment of the bones:



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. (74)

23 Through a “literary practice of care that is also the expression of an ethics of alterity” (Ganteau 34), the text brings together instead of hacking, it sutures instead of wrenching apart. It creates a subterranean bond of affinities between characters, countries, cultures even, a space of identification that is one of recognition and kinship—a *forum* for everyone to participate in while also providing a court of law (*forensis*) where social justice can be delivered symbolically.

24 Third, as far as the literary and cultural references are concerned, some of them are bound to be missed by the reader; others will ring a few bells, albeit in a fuzzy way; others, still, 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. In another context, Debjani Ganguly uses an interesting phrase to describe the emergence of a “humanitarian sensibility” in the eighteenth-century novel. She speaks of “an architectonics of proximity” (Ganguly 30). As I strive to analyse what is at stake in *Anil's Ghost*, I would like to suggest that *drifting* provides such an architectonics of distance and proximity, a paradoxical *chronotope* where the possibility of consolation is opened up in the way space and time are represented in the discourse of the novel. This is the route that now needs to be taken in the last section of this article.

## Drifting from desolation to consolation

25 I delineated three possible responses to Janet Maslin's interrogations about the novel's *drifting* movement-in-stasis. It is the third point about proximity and distance that I want to use at this stage of my argument in order to show how textual *drifting* contributes to having Anil as well as the reader move farther away from *desolation* (from the Latin *de-*, *thoroughly* + *solus*, alone) and closer to *consolation* (*consolari*, *con-* + *sōlārī*, to solace, to soothe), from solitude and aloofness to togetherness and solidarity. The *tidalectic drifting* at work in the novel takes the character away from the place where pain and suffering were expected to keep her, to another place she had not anticipated she could reach. Bearing in mind the earlier reference to Fœssel's *Le Temps de la consolation*, the reader is now better able to grasp the gradual change that the text has performed on Anil's behalf. If consolation was not available at first because the need for it was not acknowledged, it is now available but not immediately (Fœssel 104). It becomes clear, then, that after the pain will come a time that will be different: “To convince us that the time after the loss will not dwell on the past and repeat it, we need to attribute to it *in advance* a density (of joy, of freedom) capable of responding to the distress of the present. Consolation is a step towards making time and meaning compatible” (loc 104 of 276, my translation).

26 Consolation seems absent from the time and space as shaped in the present but it will come, almost as certainly as the ebb and flow removes the pain and brings it back, closer but different because reconfigured, tidalectically.

27 As I have mentioned above, Anil has been described as “[h]aunted by a strong sense of personal and cultural dislocation,” while her character has also been said to “stage diaspora” as the condition of late modernity (Härting 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 dislocated, out of joint. 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).

28 Her professional as well as personal and sexual life has been depicted through the lens of detachment and alienation, but it is difficult to define Anil in any fixed way. I see ambivalence, ambiguity, and fluidity at the heart of who she is, as she refuses to be constrained by anything or anyone. This is visible for instance in her volatile relationship with Cullis. Sexual intimacy is shared whenever they meet, here or there on the planet, 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. Ganguly sees Anil's training as a forensic pathologist as "an extension of her diasporic status—both are ultimately distancing" (201). In the absolute commitment she has toward her profession and the discovery of truth, however, she learns to negotiate how far or how close she should be, how much detachment or empathy she should adopt. In forensic science as in medicine, one needs distance to be able to reach a valid diagnostic and decide on the route to take, without letting oneself be engulfed by emotion. And yet, one cannot empty oneself of affect, one also needs empathy. The journey Anil performs in the novel takes her from an attempt at maintaining an abstract distance to embracing a more "embodied approach" (Herrick), in her scientific work as in the management of her own personal grief, which she will finally authorize herself to feel and come to terms with through her dedication to revealing the truth of the killing fields on behalf of others. Instead of swimming—and one generally swims in a beeline, from point A to point B, to reach a goal—she allows herself to drift. She accepts, and so does the reader, that the effective point of arrival can be different from the anticipated point of arrival.

29 Through and beyond forensics, what the novel highlights is this complex relationship to the world, as if revealing that 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 a beeline is not always the shortest route. Her understanding of her own work—and of her own self—evolves until it reaches what Ganguly highlights as the necessary co-existence of different practices (multiplicity, alterity). Anil encounters those different practices in the course of the novel and must contrast them with her own. At the beginning of the novel, she is said to be able to "cut a cross-section of bone with a fine saw and determine the skeleton's exact age at death that way" (95). She believes in the indubitable traction of forensic science. Sarath, on the other hand, needs the historical and archaeological approach, "truth is just opinion" (102); while Palipana's approach to Sailor needs the haptic physicality of touch.

30 As Anil investigates further to find truth, albeit not necessarily *the* truth, she comes to test her (in-)capacity for empathy, her desire to stay aloof, her ability to control or remove her emotions, and eventually her willingness to acknowledge trauma. She was not in Sri Lanka during the war, so she may have thought she had not been harmed. She thought she could insulate herself from the world, be *an island entire to herself*, as the poet John Donne would have said, remove herself from what and whom she used to be close to. But what is underlined in the progression of the text is the power of exchange, of encounter, of cross-fertilization. She changes through exchange and she is gradually transformed, shedding the belief she did not need to be consoled because she had not been affected in the first place. She finally becomes attuned to the idea that it is not because she was not a direct victim of the war that she has not been affected by the trauma.

31 Anil gradually moves out of her "long-distance gaze" and her self-positioning as the objective, distant forensic scientist able to reveal an individual mystery through a cross-section of bone under a microscope. What she finally lets go of is her denial of any need for consolation, her "fantasy of invulnerability" (Herrick 36), her "fantasy of mastery"



(Butler, qtd. in Herrick, 37). What she eventually acquires, and the reader with her, is the awareness that only through an “embodied sociality” (Herrick 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 consolation—never absolute ones but at a remove from desolation.

32 The community of beings that is gradually woven around the identification of Sailor's bones 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 46). This community of beings is made up of all the people Anil and Sarath encounter on their way to the revelation of truth about the murder of Sailor and the lie about his death since he was first murdered and then placed in a government-protected archeological zone so that the skeleton would be mistaken for a much older skeleton, along all the other ones dating back to the 6th century.

33 As they work towards identifying the unacknowledged bones, Anil and Sarath provide the families of the victims with solace and the possibility of mourning. More importantly, whether their investigations lead to identifying the anonymous dead or not, they contribute to weaving again a social and personal bond broken by the cycle of violence, loss and suffering (Føessel loc 41 of 276). The group of women who appear in the slim, final chapter entitled ‘Distance’, eerily echoes the group of women who were sitting by the graves in Guatemala at the beginning of the novel. Once the stones have gone through the “triage” (301)—the same word that was used to describe what was happening at the hospital before Gamini could operate on the maimed bodies—the women distinguish the stones to reassemble the body of the smashed Buddha: “The distinguishing of the stones took several weeks, and by the time the dry season came most of the limbs had been assembled. There was now one arm, fifty feet long, an ear. The legs still safe in the fields of bees. They began to move the sections towards each other in the cicada grass.” (302)

34 As they help Ananda rebuild the Buddha in the middle of a killing field, their work is to “distinguish” the stones from the bones, to “assemble” the limbs, two action verbs that are repeatedly used in the last few pages (300-307), as if the broken bodies of the victims and the broken body of the Buddha were reassembled in one social body. It is ironical but significant that neither Anil nor Sarath feature among those villagers—Anil has left Sri Lanka, Sarath is dead—, as if the consolation they have brought to others will suffice. The community of the living Anil finally allows herself to move back to is not only founded on the solidarity and ethics of alterity she has performed; it is also made up of, and supported by, the mental, emotional, literary and cultural drifting as I have endeavoured to demonstrate here. The transaction she has been involved in—acknowledging her need for consolation while accepting to go without it as she hands it over to others—authorizes her to requalify her experience and restore meaning.

35 As a conclusion, I would say that through a sophisticated “textual kinetics,” Anil appears to be hovering between distance and closeness, moving away and coming back, swimming away and drifting back in an oceanic movement which can be enlightened through the prism of Kamau Brathwaite's *tidalectics*. The reader understands she has paradoxically moved closer to herself as she became *other* than the one she used to be, she has “cross[ed] a boundary” and “learn[t] about otherness” (Føessel loc 24-25 of 276).<sup>1</sup> The text organizes, processes and embodies the metamorphosis of Anil who finally finds herself in a place she had not anticipated she would be. Even though she was not aware she needed consolation, she finally realizes she has reached some form of consolation at the very moment she acknowledges her loss and her vulnerability to all her losses—her parents' death in an accident is one of the many losses that are dredged up in the novel; there is also the loss of her relationship with her lover Cullis, or the



chronicled loss of her friend Leaf. After having maintained herself at a distance from her island, from her story, from her friends and lovers, she finds solace with that new community of bodies and minds that has been aggregating around her, a co-presence shared in emotion. If swimming is a metaphor for the desire for control—in Anil's case, at least, she was swimming to win championships—*drifting* deflects all attempts to go from point A to point B in any planned way. It catches you unawares, it takes you further away, it wraps everything and everyone around and together. Suddenly, as in the consolation one provides or receives, one finds oneself at many removes from the earlier loss, however long it has taken to fathom and acknowledge. Finally, be it for Anil or for the reader, *drifting* becomes a *praxis*, which renews the modalities of engagement, and reconfigures the modalities of one's presence to oneself, to the other, and to the text. Far from being an image of passivity—drifting is not floating—it breeds agency in the connectivity it generates. In *Anil's Ghost* consolation is indeed a “social act” (Fœssel loc 41 of 276), whose relational dimension is crucial. Swimming may have been the trope of Anil's disengagement; the island may have been the image of her isolation / insulation / desolation, but *drifting* becomes the trope of her re-engagement with the world and with herself. From *swimmer* she has turned *drifter*, and it is an ongoing, free-form, open-ended process, one that does not call for any closure but opens onto the possibility of a horizon.

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## Notes

1 Michaël Fœssel defines one of the aspects of consolation as "un apprentissage de l'altérité" (loc 24 of 276) and a crossing of the "boundary" (loc 25 of 276).

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