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Amygdala, or Coming through Trauma

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ABSTRACT:

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) charts Anil Tissera's return to her homeland after 15 years in the West, reprises a trope prominent in the literature and cinema of diasporic experience: the return "home" of the estranged or alienated diasporic South Asian. Contextualizing Anil's story by framing it against Sri Lanka's traumatic triangulated war between government forces and two competing rebel factions, Ondaatje brings together the problematics of "trauma" and "nation" to frame the arc of Anil's self-discovery and simultaneously to explore the potential for a specific—ans psychoanalytically inflected--*postcolonial aesthetic* response to the trauma of the nation, both collectively and individually. This essay then is a case study that studies a fictional representation of real political events to argue for the continued relevance of the subdiscipline of postcolonial studies, against rumors of its obsolescence.

Keywords: *trauma, politics, aesthetics, postcolonial studies, psychoanalysis*

Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) charts Anil Tissera's return to her homeland after 15 years in the West. Anil's story reprises a trope prominent in the literature and cinema of diasporic experience: the return of the estranged or alienated diasporic South Asian. Ondaatje himself acknowledges that this theme was the germ of the book.[1] Yet Ondaatje's novel does a turn on the trope, complicating attendant notions of return-home, of "belonging," by contextualizing and framing the story against Sri Lanka's traumatic triangulated war between Sinhala government forces (ideologically supported by the nation's Buddhist community) and two competing rebel factions, the Muslims in the Eastern province and the Liberation Tigers for Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (Uyangoda 67; Raheem 1). This is by no means the universally accepted framing of the Civil War: Sri Lankan social anthropologist S.J. Tambiah represents the conflict as largely a *two-sided* civil war, between Sinhala and Tamil factions, bringing to head tensions fomented by the experience of colonialism (Tambiah 7,11, 14). What is indisputable is that British colonial policy between 1920 and 1931 split Tamil identity into three regional identities. The Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in the post-1948 (postcolonial) period through the 1970s sought to reunite these fragmented identities and others, including Tamil-speaking Muslims, while Sinhala nationalism perpetuated colonial divide-and-rule policies, interpreting to its own advantage the political implications of the island's name-change from Ceylon to Sri Lanka in 1972. It was not *just* a matter of competing "interpretations" of new political realities. The new constitution of 1972, at least according to one perspective, severely circumscribed Tamilclaims to citizenship and meaningful belonging, which were concretized in the Vadukkodai Resolution of 1976 (Ismail, "Constituting Nation" 239). The figure of the anticipated Tamil Eelam (state) was produced by the Tamil subject's abjection by and within the dominant postcolonial nation-state.

In the novel the categories "trauma" and "nation" come together as the historicizing context for Anil's self-discovery and for the potential aesthetic healing of the traumatized nation. The novel was published before a compromise was negotiated among the main opposing parties and before the Sri Lankan army defeated the LTTE in 2009. Nonetheless it ought to be contextualized against the present actuality of the Sinhala-dominated nation as well as the proleptic or prosthetic figure of the anticipated Tamil nation. This essay argues for the continued relevance of contemporary postcolonial studies, refuting the rumors of the purported death of postcolonialism as a discipline. It considersthis novel as a case study of a postcolonial society at a politically traumatic moment, yet argues that novels are less political tracts than explorations of the psychic (including traumatic) experience of individual subjects. While the essay highlights the postcolonial context of the narrative, it also focalizes other categories of cultural study: gender, ethnicity, and national identity. My approach is also psychoanalytically inflected, especially in its account of trauma as that which resists aesthetic representation. The postcolonial analysis I argue for is thus intersectional, framing the overarching question: What is an appropriate and effective response to trauma, not only at the level of society (ethicopolitically), but also at the level of the individual subject (psychically)? What does it mean to "come through" trauma?

TRAUMA AND THE NATION

Trauma theory has been an important focus of contemporary cultural studies. But "nation" too has been a shibboleth of postcolonial studies and this category underscores the need for sensitivity to collective *political* trauma. *Anil's Ghost* must be contextualized within the complex trajectory of the nation's postcolonial history. But as I will argue below, the focus of the

narrative is on the experience of its individual characters. The novel may not promise an enduring political resolution. What it does demonstrate is the necessity of an aesthetic response; and, as I argue in what follows, this aesthetic response has an ethicopolitical dimension. It is not that a social or political resolution to the conflict was impossible to imagine or that this novel's failure to present such a resolution is a flaw. Rather, what warrants attention is Ondaatje's suggestion that an aesthetic and ethicopolitical response to trauma, whether political or personal, has a special urgency and spectral currency, perhaps even healing power.

An aesthetic and ethicopolitical response to the Sri Lankan political trauma can be most effectively framed within a specifically *postcolonial perspective*, capable of representing postcolonial Sri Lankan experience in the light of contemporary theoretical developments, providing fresh insights into—or productively complicating—critical issues of representation. If there has been much talk recently about the waning of postcolonial studies, this essay suggests that contemporary theoretical paradigms such as trauma theory and psychoanalytically informed ethicopolitical discourse — brought to bear on aesthetic representations such as novels — can offer new and more adequate understandings of the complicated social and political history of postcolonial societies such as Sri Lanka.

To highlight "aesthetic representation" is not to emphasize the cultivation of taste for its own sake, the refinement of perception or a fetishization of aesthetic qualities (color, form, taste, and mass) or the conditions of production of artworks. Rather the emphasis is on restoring the capacity for feeling, literally *aesthesis,* what Theodor Adorno might have projected as the social and cultural function of art within a late high modern conceptualization – a progressive response to the depredations of the modern world. Artworks separate themselves from "empirical reality (Adorno 7)." They call attention to their own construction, their "makability" (39). They offer

alternative pathways of imagining wholeness (45); they are not beholden to a utilitarian calculus of functionality (89). They resist ideological or propagandistic deployment (335-337).

Ondaatje undertakes an aesthetic challenge Adorno could have endorsed: representing traumatized selves, imagining their return to wholeness through the offices of the work of art. Literary representation becomes *writing cure*, coextensive with the "talking cure" of psychoanalysis, approximating through literary figuration what trauma forecloses, "capturing" trauma and in this act of capitation "decapitating" the monstrous Thing, or traumatic kernel (das *Ding*). It is apposite to recall Walter Benjamin's analogous argument that while the aestheticization of politics is a recipe for fascism, the regeneration of the aesthetic sensibility preserves one's humanity in the face of political or other trauma (Buck-Moss 124). This is not a denial of the political, but a repair of experience cauterized by traumatizing political events. Radhika Coomaraswamy is thus right to defend the novel against Ismail's critique, insisting on the difference between Buddhist humanism and Buddhist chauvinism. Coomaraswamy observes that Ondaatje's hope is for a "Buddhist humanism that in some ways radically challenges the very dominant forms represented in Ismail's critique." (29)

Postcolonial nationalist rhetoric often, and sometimes despite its programmatic ambitions, produces a threnody of "failure." Ironically, this motif is traceable even in governmental or bureaucratic narratives in South Asia, a case in point being Jawaharlal Nehru's "tryst with destiny" speech, delivered on August 14, 1947, as India was on the cusp of independence from Britain. Nehru spoke of this as a rare moment of the emergence of the nation's "soul," subtending the end of an era and the beginning of a new South Asian age; yet the official narrative has had to concede that fifty years since, that destiny is haunted by the specter

of failure, contradicting the promise tendered by Nehru. Other admissions of such "failure" include the Sri Lankan Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga's address to her nation on its fiftieth Independence anniversary; as she acknowledged, "We have failed to realize the dreams of our freedom fighters to build a strong and united nation" (qtd. in Krishna vii)[2]. That political failure converges with the traumatic convulsion of civil war in Sri Lanka, mirroring recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Rwanda, Kashmir, not to mention Africa and in the Middle East.[3] These too are admitted failures of nations or other political collectivities to cohere, failures to overcome or heal fissile political trauma.

What novels can do is dramatize how such convergent trauma is recapitulated at the level of the individual; and it is precisely in the context of the neocolonial and neoliberal (and newly militarized) discourse and practices in contemporary Sri Lanka that postcolonial studies can offer unaccustomed, or *suppressed*, perspectives, including the perspective of the losers: the victims, the vanquished. This is essentially an anti-imperialist agenda, and Ondaatje's novel highlights the anti-communalist, anti-hierarchical and resistant possibilities, attentive both to the psychic life of those who suffer and the ethical dilemmas confronting those who seek to represent and bring justice to them. Thus the novel, I suggest, highlights the lineaments of an *emancipatory and ethicopolitical aesthetics*, a way (to adapt the title of another work by Ondaatje) of "coming through slaughter."

TRAUMA AND THE POLITICAL

The novel's major characters, including the protagonist Anil, her colleague Sarath, his brother Gamini, Ananda, and Palipana, are in large measure defined by political trauma, presented in this novel as an unfolding catastrophe, and they are proxies for a collective

experience. Yet fiction's primary domain is the *individual* psyche. Kai Erikson notes that it is the individual's reaction to traumatic events, and not what he or she *is* that gives events "whatever traumatic quality they can be said to have" (184) Trauma may be inscribed on the body—and it may manifest as affective response, cathexis. These embodied effects help to define who or what the subject *is* in their historical context or social milieu. Trauma, then, has a paradoxical, duplex nature. As Erikson acknowledges, "trauma damages the texture of community," (190) yet functions as a community-unifying trait: shared trauma retrospectively constituted as cause.

This is not to say the traumatized subject is exhaustively determined by the retrospectively constituted "cause" of trauma: of course trauma can never be the total measure of the person. Yet ironically, it is the collective (national) trauma—a seemingly interminable state of emergency or exception—that facilitates Anil's accession to a sense of belonging.[4] Though born in Sri Lanka, Anil had left as a scholarship student to study in the U.K. and then the United States, ultimately becoming a forensic pathologist. She is sent back to Sri Lanka in that capacity by the United Nations as part of a human rights team investigating the violence in the civil war in the 1980s. She is assigned a collaborator, the anthropologist Sarath Diyasena, who she suspects is also her government minder (28-29). Together they discover and work to identify the remains of a victim of a suspected political assassination. They provisionally name him "Sailor" and hope also to name the killers and bring them to justice under international law. *Naming*, in these and in other respects, emerges as a diacritic of the narrative.

Ondaatje draws criticism from Qadri Ismail for failing to name which side he supports – the government, the southern insurgents, or the northern guerrillas.[5] *Anil's Ghost* arguably repeats what Achille Mbembe (writing of Africa) diagnoses as an Euro-American gesture of

depriving the non-West of a proper name, rendering it "radically other, as all that the West is not"; in a "grotesque dramatization," the non-West is represented as discomposed—as "a great, soft, fantastic body . . . powerless, engaged in rampant self-destruction," "stupid and mad," always irrational, its political imagination "incomprehensible, pathological, and abnormal. War is seen as all-pervasive" (Mbembe, 11, 8). Critiquing this fantasy of a black "deathworld" suffused by *das Ding*, Mbembe's own very different project is to pose an ethical counterpoint – to give Africa back its name, its identity outside of the deathworld imposed on it by imperial depredation. In the context of Indian subaltern studies, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan undertakes a similar project of renaming or redescription, reframing death itself as a demand to be named, acknowledged, as the contingency of "disclosure rather than as attribute in and for subalternity" (qtd. in Chakravorty 554). As I show below, Anil's name and the identity of "Anil's ghost" are even more central to the story.

In Ismail's view, Ondaatje fails to imagine an ethical counterpoint to the neo-orientalizing of the non-West as an irrational zone of death and trauma. Ismail also criticizes the "absence of minorities" in the novel: although the protagonist is female, there is a palpable underrepresentation of women's voices—so that it is almost possible to read Anil's masculine name contrapuntally as an ironic commentary on the category of the feminine (Ismail, "Flippant Gesture" 26). There are no Muslims, no Burghers in the novel; among the "cardinal actants," all of whom are Sinhala, there is only "one proletarian" who receives significant attention (24). Ismail objects that if we combine Ondaatje's concern exclusively with or for *Sinhala* places and people, Sri Lanka "begins to seem" very much like the nation-state imagined by Sinhala nationalism (Ibid 24). The novel devalues Sri Lankan *Tamil* grievances against the dominant Buddhist Sinhala. It "takes the side" of the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP), a "Sinhala racist

party" against the LTTE on "inconsistent" grounds (Ibid 27).[6] Admittedly, Ondaatje does fail to trace this unrest back to the 1950s and to a series of Sinhala government pogroms to suppress Tamil aspirations (Ismail, "Constituting" 220).

Yet a politically correct representation of Tamils would hardly certify the novel's excellence. *Pace* Ismail, my argument then is that even when a novel or film explicitly takes a stand in representing political trauma as its subject, its success or failure cannot be measured by the yardstick of its politics alone. What is important is the quality of attention to ideas, themes and characters, and my own discussion of Ondaatje emphasizes these ideational and aesthetic dimensions. We must ask not just whose side Ondaatje is on, but also *how* he presents ideas, human actions, *habitus*, and ethical dilemmas.

In Ondaatje's novel, ethicopolitical questions are structurally and thematically pivotal. Mrinalini Chakravorty writes that by foregrounding violent death as a staple of the postcolony, novels such as *Anil's Ghost* implicate us as readers in a host of assumptions entailed in seeing the postcolony as an archive of death. Chakravorty conceptualizes politically motivated killings of civilians such as Sailor as collective postcolonial crypts: the "presence of [such] collective crypts reforms the ethics of trauma so that it is no longer an experience limited to the singular human subject privileged by human rights discourses in the West. Instead, the figure of the dead subaltern . . . stands at the crossroads of life understood in terms of an imperfect balance between singular and collective experiences of trauma in the postcolony" (543).

But such reckoning, I argue, must be articulated with other dimensions, particularly ethicopolitical framings of trauma. Sarath and Anil, in particular, cannot be assimilated into collectivized subalternity, even if, like a latterday tragic figure, Sailor "stands" at the crossroads of postcolonial history. Anil is a liminal figure: this is her handicap but also an index of her

ambivalent or ambiguous status as postcolonial subject. While she is clearly conscientious, her investigation is susceptible to being compromised by "universalist" internationalism, tainted by Eurocentrism.[7] She is aware her final report "would be . . . filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it." Yet she is idealistic enough to believe "that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear" for she understood "that those . . . slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic" (55). Her appeal as a protagonist owes something to the self-reflexivity with which she assumes the moral responsibility to redress injustice. Anil's own ethicopolitical agency is inflected by her openness to the other, to extimacy. As the novel progresses we see that she learns that while distancing herself from the trauma in order to comment on it is valuable, the act of bearing witness requires learning to reduce distance, be alive to the trauma, gradually drawing closer in spirit to those who must live in—and attempt to "come through"—trauma, and so re-construct their identities in the au-delà, the imagined beyond of trauma.

Anil is conscious that in her role as a UN forensic anthropologist the ethicopolitical task of representing and reporting *seems* bloodless, abstract "reconstruction" and imagination. In fact, for sufferers as well as for those who seek to "represent" them or attend to them, political trauma is often cathected onto the body and insinuates itself into the psyche. Traumatized, tortured, disfigured, rendered liminal or emergent, the body becomes the locus for the (re-)presentation or cathexis of the trauma. The physician Gamini's body, for instance, seems to be cathected with individual but also shared trauma, even as he cares for patients. The first time Anil sees him, he appears totally sleep-deprived, less a doctor than a patient himself: if Gamini had "a few free hours he avoided the doctors' dormitory and [lay] on one of the empty [hospital] beds, so that even if he could not sleep he was surrounded by something he would find nowhere

else in the country" (119). Living among the damaged and the dying, Gamini is almost a zombie, becoming psychically indistinguishable from them. His traumatized symptomatology testifies to a breakdown of the symbolic universe, so that the "real" breaks through. This Lacanian formulation resonates with Georges Bataille's account of the "moment when the ordered and reserved . . . lose themselves for ends that cannot be subordinated to anything one can account for"--the moment when "life starts" (Bataille 28). Yet this is what makes Gamini "sympathetic." Paradoxically it is in the Emergency Room, among the wounded and dying, that Gamini's "life starts": he discovers ethical purpose, emerges as an ethical subject in putting others before himself, for which he will pay the ultimate price. For him it is not political ideology, ethnicity or country that anchors identification. Trauma becomes for him the "efficient cause" of an authentic existence, just as it will for Sarath and Anil.

The very surfeit of violence Anil finds in reports and folders that listed "disappearances and killings" is traumatizing: "The last thing she wished to return to every day was this. And every day she returned to it." The traumatic effect is compounded by the fact that perpetrators and victims, causes and effects, are surreally confused in "the shadows of war and politics" where political enemies cut business deals (42-43). Ondaatje's novel is replete with accounts of the ubiquitous slaughter (accounts drawn largely from a 1992 Amnesty International report) (McClennan and Slaughter 1-19):

> There had been continual emergency from 1983 onwards, racial attacks and political killings. The terrorism of the separatist guerrilla groups, who were fighting for a homeland in the north. The insurrection of the insurgents in the south, against the government. The counterterrorism of the special forces against both of them. The

> disposal of bodies by fire. The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea. The hiding and then reburial of corpses" (42-43).

Bodies are dropped out of helicopters into the sea. Sirissa, a young woman who had enjoyed her innocent sexual power over a group of teenage boys one morning encounters their heads mounted on stakes along a bridge on the way to their school (174-175). Daily Anil learns of racially motivated assault, killings or disappearances, "fragments of collected information revealing the last sighting of a son, a younger brother, a father . . . of hour, location, apparel, the activity. . . . Going for a bath. Talking to a friend . . . ." (41-42). Ananda Udugama expresses his trauma by trying to cut his own throat (195-196).

Neither public institutions nor the private space of the home offer respite or protection against trauma in this extended state of emergency. A possible exception is the hospital: "In these times of crisis junior staff members did the work of orthopaedic surgeons. . . .all versions of trauma, all versions of burns, surrounded the trainees" (126). Ondaatje's emphasis on the chaos and the psychic *effects* of this traumatic situation belies Ismail's accusation that Ondaatje fudges the question of which side he actually favours. For the force of the novel's narrative lies in its dramatization of ethicopolitical aesthetics, situated in a postcolonial context and framed *as a problem of psychic experience*. Confronted with pervasive trauma, Anil "remembers the almond knot," the amygdala, which "governs everything": "How we behave and make decisions, how we seek out safe marriages, how we build houses that we make secure" (135). Politically motivated violence is everywhere: it is the way the trauma is *registered* in social and psychic life that engages Ondaatje. Yet trauma is not operative solely at the conscious level of external reality.

Limning the different levels of a stratified self of modern subjectivity, William Connolly defines the "modern theory" of the subject's constitution, with its levels of "unconscious, preconscious, conscious and self-conscious activity, and its convoluted relays among passions, interests, wishes, responsibility and guilt, locates within the self conflicts which Hobbes and Rousseau distributed across regimes (Connolly 57-58)." Connolly might find in *Anil's Ghost* such a modern (specifically postcolonial) "siting" of conflict within the psyche. It is not only or even primarily Anil in whom political trauma is refracted. Witness the "shock of the [political] murder of [Lakma's] parents," a trauma that "had touched everything within her, driving both her verbal and her motor ability into infancy. . . . She wanted nothing more to invade her" (103). The question is whether she, and by extension the nation, can move through melancholia to a state of mourning, no longer disavowing the loss of the loved object. As Chakravorty puts it, the "generative relation between collective melancholia and linguistic expression that anchors *Anil's Ghost* may be understood by considering the formation of psychic crypts" (548) discussed by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok. The melancholic subject maintains a "secret tomb" within, nurturing but not properly mourning the lost object buried, as though disavowing its death; equally, as Abraham suggests, the agent of the encrypting is haunted by the phantom that "returns to haunt" as a "witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other" (546-47) — in Anil's case within Sailor.[8]

Ondaatje's narrator emphasizes that "the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit" (11); political ideology or genre is of less concern than trauma's effects. The interesting problem is not whether trauma conforms to its original association chez Freud with fantasy (which constructs a mental image), nor even to the prototype of a sudden, unbearable experience (which

frustrates any attempt to make a mental image), but rather whether the novel can present a compelling fictionalized—aesthetic—"re-presentation" or testimonial of the impact of some epochal, horizon-altering set of actual events in which a culture's history is articulated with the collective *and* individual unconscious. Such a question motivates E. Ann Kaplan's exploration of melodrama's generic relation to collective trauma: "in what senses can one speak of 'cultural trauma'? What analogies might be possible between forms of individual and of cultural trauma?" (202) She suggests that "trauma can be approached (if not known) only through its figuration by either its victim, by those witnessing it, or by artists undertaking its telling" (204). That figuration is the aesthetic problematic driving Ondaatje's novel.

In the case specifically of the Indian Subcontinent, a postcolonial studies approach remains valuable, given the Subcontinent's colonial history. Indeed many other novelists of South Asian descent (both Subcontinental and diasporic), have sought to "figure" political trauma, particularly the Partition: Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, and Shashi Tharoor. Yet aesthetic representation of trauma renders these novelists vulnerable to the charge of aestheticizing an "essentially" unsymbolizable experience. What can figuration really do in the aftermath of trauma? Is the subject-effect produced through narrativization inauthentic? Ondaatje has been reproached for aestheticizing Buddhism, officially sanctioned by the majority Sinhala government. His is a burgher perspective, critics allege. However, if Ondaatje's perspective is less political than *aesthetic* and *humanistic*, perhaps figuration may furnish opportunities for therapeutic or analytic reflection upon trauma's forms and psychic effects, rather than to discount, displace or "master" trauma.

This relinquishment of the fantasy of mastery is encoded in the story of archaeologist Palipana's self-excommunication from his scientific community. Palipana had apparently

"choreographed the arc of his career in order to attempt this one trick on the world. Though perhaps it was more than a trick . . . ; perhaps for him it was not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance," when "the unprovable truth emerged" (81, 83). Trauma's defining unrepresentability makes the artwork a privileged site of its belated re-*presentation*, its recuperation in a different, retrospective form. "Trauma" in the medical profession denotes primarily bodily trauma; psychic trauma is relegated often to the margin—witness the woefully inadequate coverage offered for PTSD among war veterans. Some commentators nominate the Jewish Holocaust as the Ur-site of trauma in the twentieth century; yet I would argue for a broader interpretation for trauma studies in postcolonial literary and cultural studies, mindful of the category's often unprincipled proliferation.[9]

The analytic value of "trauma" has in recent years been reduced from overuse and overgeneralization. Kai Erikson recommends the term should not be interpreted as an all-purpose cause (e.g., a body blow) but as specific effect—a determinate injury, reaction, or particular response to a cause (183-85). By definition, trauma resists symbolization, especially when extreme; it can be apprehended only retrospectively. The trajectory of any understanding is always inverse, from effect to cause (that is, the cause is reconstructed after the effect is analyzed). Erikson's recommendation thus accords well with the Freudian and Lacanian understanding that trauma can only be cognitively grasped retroactively (*Nachträglichkeit*). Though trauma resists solicitation into the order of meaning (representation), its ramifications and aftermath can be explored in the *après-coup*: literature and other art forms can memorialize trauma, provide a testimonial to it, or, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest, bear witness to it (Felman and Laub 4, 85, 109). This entails the recognition, Cathy Caruth observes, that "there is no single approach to listening to the many different traumatic experiences and histories

we encounter, and . . . the irreducible specificity of traumatic stories requires in its turn the varied responses—responses of knowing and of acting—of literature, film, psychiatry, neurobiology, sociology, and political and social activism" (Caruth, *Trauma*, ix). As for history, Caruth says, "[t]he traumatized . . . carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, *Trauma*, 5).

Such a psychoanalytically informed interpretation of trauma enriches an understanding of the psychic dimensions of Ondaatje's novel, beyond its aesthetic, "structural," discursive, ethicopolitical, and ideological facets. What the art work records is the "*structure of [trauma's] experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, *Trauma*, 4). Thus literature is a non-representational representation of the traumatic experience, though admittedly it can also become trauma's crypt, marking the spot or stain of the trauma without opening it up to analysis or apprehension, thus seeming to foreclose or disavow it. Can this psychoanalytic framing counter the charge of exploiting or commodifying "trauma" while presenting it as the frame for presenting a story, even if that story is about ethicopolitical justice--is Ondaatje capitalizing on the "drama" of trauma—sensationalizing and aestheticizing it--to make his narrative more intriguing? (Radstone 191). Ismail criticizes Ondaatje for not being scrupulously accurate about the facts—for dehistoricizing the political conflict; is he guilty of obfuscating his political commitments and being biased towards Western "universalist" humanist and bourgeois liberal doctrines of human rights? I would defend Ondaatje's novel on both counts because he foregrounds the *psychic* effects of political trauma to bring them to consciousness, and simultaneously fictionalizes (aestheticizes) Sri Lanka's political history to explore—and *illustrate*—how the postcolonial Sri Lankan subject can "come through" trauma via *the*

aesthetic, attentive to the demands of psychic life and alive to ethicopolitical imperatives, and thus regenerate the "beloved" *postcolonial* community of those denied larger communion with society. To judge the novel exclusively on grounds of ideological commitment, therefore, is to reduce it to manifesto. Sailor's death is a "non-representative" representation of the death of many others such as the parents of twelve-year-old Lakma, who was so traumatized by witnessing the political murder of her parents that she falls mute. Identity here is negative belonging, referring to a sameness (*idem*, "identity") constituted by difference. My premise is that a work that turns on individual or collective traumatic experience qualifies as minor literature, as Deleuze describes it: *Anil's Ghost* is a "minor" *postcolonial* text, and is therefore not apolitical. But it also represents trauma as the crucible of an emergent postcolonial identity. It, in other words, is a case study for the continued relevance of postcolonial studies.

Ondaatje presents everyday life in postcolonial Sri Lanka as suffused with a "casual sense of massacre" (283). The nation of Sri Lanka must "come through" this political trauma. In one of her most impassioned conversations with Sarath, Anil scolds him: "some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people. . . . You as an archaeologist should believe in the truth of history. . . . 'One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims.' Remember? I thought you represented more than you do" (275). This is a succinct account of how Anil sees her own mission—to be the agent of a rewriting, a recounting of "history" that would allow the healing, making whole, of the nation through such re-presentation of "one village," "one victim" (275).

The author is more interested in his main characters as individuals, but the collective simultaneously impinges on every monadic individual too. The characters mentioned are all

solitaries whose isolation points to the absence of a nurturing community. Traumatized postcolonial national identity is constituted differently from universal (abstract) citizenship precisely in so far as it is anchored in a community contingent upon particular, politically caused suffering. A novelist writing about the Sri Lankan situation cannot evade the responsibility to reference the Tamils' political aspiration to emerge from abject/object status to subject status, or to use another register, from subject to agent, to emerge fully from mere "national" into postcolonial citizen/ subject. *Anil's Ghost* remains suggestive in pointing to the abstract not-yet: a micro-community of the nation's subalterns which remains only potential, a utopian negation of exclusion as such the isolation (a kind of negative state) and atomization of the individual characters Anil, Sarath, Gamini, Ananda, Sirissa, Lakma and Palipana. To put it generally: such works of aesthetic representation are to be appreciated precisely for what I would call a specific *postcolonial potentiality*. This potentiality is in a crucial respect what defines the *post*colonial project as a minoritarian discourse: the utopian telos is by definition an unachieved "post."

For some, however, this political framing for the novel is too facile or convenient, gratuitously adding drama to a psychological narrative; the author's access to a political framing might even seem to be scaffolding for a shaky ideology of bourgeois individualism. For others, it is something more than a mere reactionary apologia for the official government story about the trauma, not exactly a "counter-history."[10] Ondaatje's staging of the link between trauma at the level of the community and trauma at the level of the individual can be appreciated as an attempt to render some of the affective dimensions—some of the pain of living in a traumatized time and place—which are "traditionally excise[d] and exorcise[d]" from history (Kumar 202). Ondaatje's novel can also be read as an attempt to reticulate the public and the private spheres.

While Anil is fixated on deploying a human rights discourse to indict the government, the middle-class brothers Gamini and Sarath, speak "of how much they loved their country [despite their great suffering in the political crossfire]. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place" (285). While Anil can only imagine constructing a "juridically and scientifically coherent" narrative as indictment, anchored to the case of a single "representative" individual (Sailor), Palipana understands that the truth is "unprovable" and will need to be routed via "an illegal story," an "eccentric" (dissident) accession to what is foreclosed by the trauma of multiple, countless, victims, including not only Sailor but also Lakma and her parents, Sirissa, Sarath, and others (Chakravorty 546). Palipana "began to see as truth things that could only be guessed at. In no way did this feel to him like forgery or falsification" (83). Perhaps this is also the meaning of his Tiresias-like blindness. What he sees is not amenable to vision. It is one man's truth but it goes beyond one man, vision beyond vision—always "past the last post," just as the postcolonial is in one sense always *au-delà*, beyond.

Anil is no faceless bureaucrat; she is emotionally sensitive to the trauma to which she is in a sense being asked to testify. Ondaatje thus poses to the reader the special circumstances of personal and political trauma in reading the already fraught narrative of the protagonist. Anil must grapple with questions such as whether belonging to a national polity (citizenship) is a political and ethical prerequisite for the license to criticize its human rights record, whether she can be unbiased as a U.N. human rights investigator in her erstwhile "home" country, and whether her cosmopolitan perspective (and by extension Ondaatje's) constitutes a specifically *postcolonial* alienation.

She also faces more general ethicopolitical doubts about her loyalties, her emotional/affective commitments, about what she might be willing to sacrifice. These

complicate her interactions with the people who live in the "field" she is investigating. When pressed about her "background," the best she can manage is to say (with unwitting irony) is: "I live here . . . [i]n the West" (36). She insists, "This isn't just 'another job'! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back" (200), but it is clear that when she finishes her job she will leave Sri Lanka. The novel identifies no "home" for Anil to return to, no one waiting for her. Anil's parents were killed in a car crash, after she left Sri Lanka, and she had not wanted to return after that. "Anil was glad to be alone. There was a scattering of relatives in Colombo, but she had not contacted them to let them know she was returning. . . . After she had left Sri Lanka at eighteen, her only real connection was the new sarong her parents sent her every Christmas (which she dutifully wore), and news clippings of swim meets." (10). As a U.N. employee she is also "non-governmental," unattached to any nation. She is a *post-colonial cosmopolitan*, in every sense of the term, including the negative sense of being deracinated, beyond the borders of the nation.

Political trauma here must be read symptomatically, as an epochal and transformative social or political event re-constructed in the *après-coup*, and read retrospectively (as "past" or as already having commenced, if continuing) in the discursive present as a symptom, often cathected in a subject's body or as a performative subject-effect. Anil too takes on, in her body, the pain of a past she has tried, both consciously and unconsciously, to forget. Yet it is a past to which she returns, to reimagine her "home country" as a nation where human rights might take root, and then to re-inhabit this reimagined nation as a nationless citizen-- paradoxically postcolonial Sri Lankan *and* cosmopolitan.

Accordingly, two premises undergird my argument. First, Ondaatje adopts a tentative nominalism: while being sensitive to *collective* trauma, and acknowledging grand liberal humanist or universalist abstractions about human rights, privileges concrete *individual*

experience. Second, aesthetic and ethical concerns are as important as political commitments in evaluating modes of representation in postcolonial self-fashioning.[11] No literary work is merely a mirror of the trauma it seeks to re-present. Thus the novel is a case study in the continued value of postcolonial studies as an approach to aesthetic, historical, ethical, and sociopolitical questions for contemporary culture, particularly in the Subcontinent.

AESTHETICS AND TRAUMA

The political or class biases of an author or filmmaker are relevant, yet they cannot be the only or most important criteria for aesthetic assessment. Ondaatje's novel is an aesthetic or cultural artifact and not a political tract. He is interested primarily in exploring the ethical and aesthetic challenges of representation; local, social problems and cultural life; key problematics of liberal humanism, and political trauma in postcolonial society. He deserves to be read on these terms. Far from being isolated from Sri Lankan politics, Ondaatje explores the premise that a lasting alternative to the internecine conflicts between dominant Sinhala and Tamils will never be discovered through "taking sides" but through an aesthetic and ethical regeneration of the subject—through the emergence from the anaesthesia of trauma into a re-astheticizing of the everyday. Coming through political trauma and its consequent anaesthesia of everyday experience require an aesthetic transcendence—re-aesthesis.

Ondaatje's novel propagates a *particular* aesthesis, an ethicopolitical approach that is not hermetic, ahistoricized. The political "real world" and its ethicopolitical quandaries are not evacuated from the novel's world; for instance, Sarath makes the difficult choice of dedicating his life to the truth Anil wants to ascertain and report: he arranges for Anil to retrieve her evidence and escape from what has become an impossible situation for her, at the cost of his own

life. This act is as authentically ethical as any political manifesto. I cannot agree with Ismail's assessment that Sarath is "the least sympathetic actant" ("Flippant" 28) of the book. Sarath's sacrifice underscores the vicissitudes of perspectival justice in a situation of political and social trauma—or at least Anil's difficulty with sorting these out. Anil may not have been able to decipher until the very end "whose side" Sarath is on. This is her problem rather than his.

Anil's Ghost is not a "war novel" any more than *The English Patient* is a war novel. Ondaatje's interest is in the imprint of political trauma on the subject, on the social "climate of uncertainty," the "scarring psychosis"; in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje writes, "Death, loss, was 'unfinished,' so you could not walk through it" (56). As in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, however, the socio-political agony is less the focus of the author's attention than its consequences for sociality and subjectivity. In both Rushdie and Ondaatje the emphasis on the challenges the subject faces as agent and citizen constitutes a profound engagement with socially responsive sociability. It is a mark of the maturity of a literature, whether minor or major, that it is informed by a social or political vision. Ondaatje's interest in the aesthetic dimension, then, is appropriate and responsible.

THE NAME: AESTHESIS AND AUTOPOEISIS

Anil has embarked on a journey to reclaim her identity as a South Asian—but also as a woman. This is in part a reclamation of a desire that she can call her own. In psychoanalytic terms, it is a requirement for access to subjectivity. It is significant that Ondaatje has elected to make his protagonist female and then confect a subplot that rationalizes and even heroizes, as a kind of feminist "conscientization," her fierce refusal to relinquish the masculine name

(misnomer?) "Anil" to her brother.[12] Anil's misappropriation of a gender-inappropriate name causes an upheaval in her family (67-68). It is the unused middle name of her brother, for which she "pays" him a hundred rupees and a pen set along with a tin of cigarettes and "a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse" (67-68). But the deal does not obscure the "category" (epistemic) violence encoded in her act of catachrestical auto-nomination. At sixteen, she was so angry and tense that she was taken by her parents to consult an astrologer who in his wisdom (though ignorant of the provenance of the name through a history of "involved commerce") came up with the suggestion that if her name could be feminized by the addition of an e, to spell a more demure "Anile," her attitude of fury would be ameliorated. But she holds fast to her masculine name. Her act of self-naming is a symbolic negation of sexual difference, a symbolic refiguring of a phantasmatic negation of sexual difference, and prelude to her auto-nomination. This microhistory of Anil's self-naming is paralleled by other significant problematizations of identity-conferral: the naming of Anil's "ghost," the identification of "Sailor," the conferral of whole identity to a Buddha statue, Palipana's deliberate obfuscation of the truth are all thematic indices of Ondaatje's preoccupation with the epistemological question of naming and of identification.

The task of aesthetic representation of trauma entails a deictic function: the challenge of "*deiktus*" highlights the problematic of naming in cases where the traumatic or monstrous thing can only be pointed to by the name, but not assimilated: this is what confers ghostliness or monstrosity, Derrida suggests.[13] Anil comments that her ex-husband did not adequately separate ("name") the private and the public: this breakdown of inside and outside is "the central quality of a monster" (143). The challenge of naming applies also to her own identitarian struggles in a context where "naming" (naming Sailor, characterizing the trauma of Sri Lanka) defines her

mission. Anil's *inability to name* thus reveals an epistemic preoccupation: when a being enters into be-ing, it lacks a name—it is in a moment of emergence or aletheia--and reminds us of the dynamics of "monstrance" and monstrosity. As such it is beyond the pale, monstrous, *Unheimlich* roughly translated as, ghostly. Anil's ghost is both Sailor (in need of a name) and her own shadow self, somewhere between diaspora and returnee (also in need of a name, an anchor of being); but she is also Sailor's ghost, his representative. Anil also discovers or constructs a mirroring professional task in Sri Lanka: she *assumes* an ethical duty to name the dead man she discovers. "To give him a name would name the rest" (56). And until the body gets a proper name he has the name Sailor, result of an elaborate in-joke, which is nevertheless not an arbitrary and insensitive reaction to the larger social trauma to which the dead body is a witness.[14]

Anil shares with many postcolonial subjects this need for autopoesis: in postcolonial societies and in the novel it is a key issue. After all one of the depredations of the Subcontinental colonial experience (and of the neocolonial reconstitution of hegemony) in places such as Sri Lanka, was the undermining of the colonized or ethnically marginalized body and psyche. Naming thus becomes an "ethical" act in both senses--of identity construction and moral citizenship. It is in this connection that it is most productive to raise the question provoked by the book's title: Who is "Anil's Ghost"? There are several possible answers to this eponymic puzzle. Sailor is the most obvious candidate for "Anil's ghost"--a subaltern subject metonymically representing (standing in for, *darstellen*, in Gayatri Spivak's formulation) victims of political conflict; Anil wants to agitate for the political representation (*vertreten)* of such victims: she is also Sailor's ghostly mirror-image (Spivak, *Other Asias* 78).

Thus the novel elevates *naming* into an ethical micro-project in the novel. Anil's self-reinvention (invention is also discovery, in the classical rhetorical sense of *inventio*) of her own name can be read as a staging of Anil's emergence from alienation and her attempt to achieve a coherent subjectivity. Her struggle to remake herself is echoed by the subnational struggles for group identity: the LTTE bid for a homeland in the north, the separatists' struggles in the south, and the Sinhala government's bid to maintain the status quo. The novel is replete with the agony of internal splitting of national identity just as it explores an abyssal of subjectivity, not only in Anil's case but also variously for Palipana, Dr. Corea, Ananda, and Gamini. They all confront questions of proper names, about property in one's name as symptoms of political trauma: Who is Sri Lankan? To whom does Sri Lanka belong?

Gamini, in particular, embodies in microcosm the nation's convulsive suffering, even as he is a kind of shamanic healer of traumas, collapsing literal and "mythological" roles as doctor. Witnessing and administering to the trauma of others, reduced to a near-apathetic stupor, Gamini exemplifies Caruth's point that "survival itself . . . can be a crisis" (Caruth 9) Witnessing is for Gamini an ethical duty in a conflict where every party is simultaneously perpetrator and victim. Like Anil, Gamini is a solitary in the sense that Felman speaks about, citing Paul Celan's remark that "[t]o bear witness is to *bear the solitude* of a responsibility, and to *bear the responsibility*, precisely, of that solitude" (qtd. in Felman 3). Gamini "witnesses" by *attending to* the victims of the civil war—in both the medical sense and in the sense of witnessing. He manages his own painful solitude (or reinscribes it more deeply as anomie, exclusion from society, social namelessness) by anaesthetizing himself with drugs, fast food from a stall in the open-air market, and dreamless slumber in a hospital bed. He is homeless and loveless, like Anil, if in a more banal, literal sense (215). Gamini apparently has sublimated any libidinal energies to work

(227), like Anil who "fell in love with working at night, and sometimes couldn't bear to leave the lab" (145) and like Sarath too, who "hid his life in his work" (278). Anil is left with only her laboratory, Sarath only the "warm rock" of statues "cut into a human shape" that he would embrace (279), and Gamini only his hospital.

Sarath too is a solitary, who "since the death of his wife . . . had never found the old road back into the world" (277). Mirroring Anil's ethicopolitical liminality, he functions as Anil's foil. Yet she is as suspicious of him as the government, which assigns him as her minder, is of Anil. By contrast with Anil's avowedly humanitarian work, Sarath's is presumptively a comprador stance. But it also represents a principled check against a facile universalist, modernist discourse of human rights, propagated by the U.N. For Sarath, Anil's expatriate-cosmopolitan perspective makes it doubtful that she can maintain a proper parallax between universal principles of justice and local complexities and culturally specific norms; while it constitutes appropriate critical distance for her role as human rights investigator, it also produces grounds for its deconstruction. Indeed, he calls her out on her presumptive bias: "You know, I'd believe your arguments more if you lived here," Sarath tells Anil, advising against "false empathy and blame" (45). Anil risks performing another Western neocolonialist repetition, for "Sarath had seen truth broken into suitable pieces and used by the foreign press alongside irrelevant photographs. A flippant gesture towards Asia that might lead . . . to new vengeance and slaughter. . . As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. . . he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use" (156-7).

THE STATUS OF THE PAST

What then is the value of the past for Anil, and for her others, her ghosts and her "host" nation that is also her home nation? History is trans-substantiated for Ondaatje's main characters. It is a pre-text for staging the emergence of the self as a historicized ("modern") product of a fantasmatic response to trauma. Ondaatje's narrative procedure is an enchainment of the present to the past. But the past is at once forgotten actively, in Nietzsche's sense, and re-*membered*, not so much given present meaning but cathected in present bodies.

Anil attempts actively to forget her individual past: but it is always already inscribed and re-membered in the fact of her diasporic and professional alienation. It is her insertion into the traumatic present of Sri Lanka, exemplarily a moment of "danger" in which—to recall Benjamin's memorable locution--the past "flashes up," (Benjamin 225) that calls into question her credibility as human rights mediator. Anil's return to Sri Lanka is not just the return of a prodigal expatriate, in a pattern familiar to the point of cliché in the discourse of diaspora: it is an adventure in ethicopolitical self-recovery and self-rediscovery: a reimagining in situ of an ethical project to reform Sri Lanka as more hospitable to the rule of moral and human rights law.

Anil emerges only gradually from her alienated perspective into imaginative communion/ community, with the traumatized Sri Lankans. She earns a difficult friendship with Sarath and especially Ananda, whose grief reduces her to sympathetic tears. "She was *with* Sarath and Ananda, *citizened* by their friendship—the two of them in the car, the two of them in the hospital while a stranger attempted to save Ananda" (200; emphases added). The problematic of this overdetermined *citizenship* appears most vividly when, for the first time, Anil provides a report on her findings to the government, although she is denied access to her skeleton, her intended primary exhibit. She expresses hope that the State will be compelled by some universal moral scruple to heed her testimony about the body of Sailor, whose spoor she has been following. Her

testimony is premised on a theory of justice through representation. Although no mindless optimist, Anil seems to want to will Sri Lanka into moral probity and procedural justice. Her appeal, based on an ethical faith in humanist ideals, projects the quixotic hope that the State will become just. But what is important is that Anil herself is transformed into an ethical subject:

> She was supposed to give her report with no real evidence. It had been a way to discredit her whole investigation. . . . Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her quiet explanations, her surefootedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be emotional or angry. It was a lawyer's argument and, more important, a citizen's evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, "I think you murdered hundreds of us. *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*. [271-72; emphases original]

Anil here intuits what Caruth suggests are key lessons of trauma: that "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another," and that "trauma may lead . . . to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8). Even though Anil becomes flustered enough to resort to the reflex that she represents not the Sri Lankan government but an "international organization"—a mistake that smacks of the universalist pretensions underlying many unwelcome penetrations of sovereign Third World nations--Sarath recognizes that her motives are now no longer *alienated* in the debilitative sense. He sacrifices himself to her enterprise, moved by her identification with the traumatized community to which she has finally committed herself though it can no longer be her home. How much this affective pivot does for her political (com-)mission remains uncertain, but ethically it is indeed a

momentous pivot, perhaps — as far as Anil herself is concerned − even the novel's ethicopolitical center of gravity.

Physically returning to the "homeland," Anil finds that she can no longer "own" it. It never was hers except as ethnic matrix: ethnic background can never be totally determinative of identity, only one among much identification. It is this performative dimension that Amartya Sen captures in *Reason before Identity*, arguing for plural "identities." Yet "identity" may be the wrong category, may lead us down false ontological defiles. Reason indeed must come before identity; cleaving to a voluntaristic notion of "invention" of identities, Sen renounces a transcendental faith in identities as ontic ground of subjectivity. Because they are inventions, "identifications" are fungible. Anil learns to identify as "us"—forging a community with her others, even her "ghosts," making their past her own, without "owning" it.

It is certainly Anil's ethical *duty to leave*, to bear witness from afar (in both senses of "witness"), to tell Sailor's story through distanciated narration precisely because it cannot be told and received in country: there is too much trauma, too much noise for the fragile narrative of human dignity to register. Sailor occupies the place from which "the plea from the other to be heard" is voiced, precisely by virtue of Sailor's actual voice having been extinguished. The novel thus promulgates a cosmopolitan ethics counterposed to Bruce Robbins' notion of cosmopolitan compassion as—ironically—accessible even through the bombsight (Robbins 2, 11). It suggests the need for humility among South Asian cosmopolitans who presume to comment on the territorial politics of the countries of their "origin." If cosmopolitan compassion is an ideal within one construction of universalist modernity, postmodernity and postcoloniality trouble such grand narratives.

CONCLUSION: AESTHESIS AS NON-REPRESENTATIVE REPRESENTATION

As a specifically postcolonial narrative, *Anil's Ghost* presents an interestingly ironic conclusion. It brings to fruition the promise that out of horrific political trauma will emerge healing—etymologically, returning to wholeness. In Anil's case healing entails being restored to her human connection with others without "identity' with them, not being alienated from them while managing to attain a necessary distanciation as a U.N. human rights investigator. This underscores Ondaatje's cosmopolitan (feminist?) humanism. Anil's ethicopolitical struggle stages the emergence of a postcolonial South Asian subject bearing within herself the spectral other as constitutive of her own identity. For in this struggle inheres the simultaneous intimacy and otherness—intersubjectivity, extimacy—of Anil's "ghosts."

Anil's self-regeneration cannot be a solipsistic aesthesis; rather it is a kind of attending to the other—this is the rediscovered truth of civil society presented here. Speaking of the novel, Ondaatje remarked that "[t]here are various versions of the truth. . . . Truth, at the wrong time, can be dangerous. That's a conflict for Anil, who's used to the more Western sense of holding truth above anything else" (Weich n.p.). According to Buddhism, it is through suffering that we must come to salvation, be restored to wholeness (Loy 12). Trauma is a particular exceptional instance of the *dukkha* that Buddhism sees as the universal and enduring condition of being human. The Buddhist conception of authentic selfhood adds a profound resonance to the perspective I am advancing, that trauma is ironically the matrix of the emergence of the subject. Lakma, arguably, approximates such a Buddhist aesthetic in coming to terms with her melancholia, when upon Palipana's death she carves into a rock at the water's edge "one of the first things he had said to her, which she had held on to like a raft in her years of fear" (107). The "yard-long" sentence remains "encrypted" within the novel, never revealed to the reader.

Ondaatje understands the labor of aesthetic representation as a protection against the encroachment of monstrosity, and of the self's *embêtement*. It is the act of giving significance to the world, even its pain. This of course is also the credo of the novelist himself, as artificer of the fiction that gives power and meaning to blind political trauma

Ultimately it is Ananda and not Anil whose story encapsulates Ondaatje's sense of what it might mean to *come through trauma*. For Ananda, healing entails coming to wholeness through the religio-aesthetic ceremony of the "netramangala." Earlier, Ananda had been commissioned to sculpt Sailor's face: what he reconstructs is not the "actual" face of the dead man. It is however, a "real" representation of what he "wanted to be true," an "invention" (303). In sculpting the face, he wanted to represent an aspect of his dead wife, Sirissa: "a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim" (187)—what he was representing was not a real person at all but a nonrepresentative re-presentation, a Sirissa no longer traumatized, and therefore most serene (the name Sirissa, denoting the *vakai* tree, is almost a truncated version of "serenissima," which would be a name for someone in possession of wholeness and health, unlike the actual Sirissa). If non-representative representation is framed as ethical act, we might construe Ananda's *mis*-representation as an act of compassionate love *and distanciation*. If he lends an idealized form, a face, to Sailor's skull, Ananda's *aesthesis* is more than an adjunct to Anil's efforts: it offers an analog. Admittedly, there is a sentimental, even selfish quotient in this willful (mis- or non-)re-presentation. But all re-presentations of this kind are bound to be misrepresentations, because the real person's animating spirit, his or her life, can never be faithfully captured—call it anima or soul. The truth is not mimetically representable any more than the real trauma is representable. The truth Ananda wants to capture is not of the order of mimesis, but of an ethical/ aesthetic/ erotic order, a different way of being

intersubjectively tied to another and of discovering or inventing (*inventio*) identity through sameness and difference. It is an insight that makes the invisible or no-longer-to-be-seen, visible again: artistic insight recoded and refracted as willed blindness.

In a sense Ananda almost approaches the status of the homo sacer delineated by Giorgio Agamben: "the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban [who] preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted" (83). The emphasis of the novel is on preserving memory through aesthesis, a championing of aesthetic affect as a defense against the corrosive and deadening effects of politics—but without quite being ignorant or inattentive to the political. Ultimately the aesthetic and the political cannot be separated. Ananda's implicit demand is that Anil and Sarath see in this deliberate misrepresentation the truth of ethical recognition of the other (or the other's pain, loss, or damage) as love: seeing not with the eyes but from the heart, turning the trauma of death into what Derrida might call the gift of death, "received from the other, from the one who, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible" (Derrida, Gift of Death 41).

Importantly, this gift is simultaneously an access to responsibility in being seen without seeing the source of the gaze, being submitted to a visual regime. Sarath at one point speculates that, given that "[p]atterns of death always surrounded him," in his work "he felt he was somehow the link between the mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of an image on rock, or even, more strangely, its immortality as a result of faith or an idea" and that seeing was an important element in the apprehension of death, for it was as if "parting or death or disappearance were simply the elimination of sight in the onlooker" (278). It is not irrelevant then that *Anil's Ghost* dramatizes a profound doubleness in Ananda—simultaneously a "re-

membering" (*anamnesis*) or reconstruction of the actuality (the present) and a *forgetting* of the presentness-of-the-past, of trauma, so as to enable healing. Ananda's story in particular demonstrates how the traumatized *can* move beyond trauma through aestheticized re-presentation (*aesthesis*). While my title makes an oblique reference to an earlier book by Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *Anil's Ghost* explores what it might mean not only to survive, to come through trauma, but also to regenerate the postcolonial self through an ethically-oriented aesthesis, repairing the psyche not only by the current civil war but by the long depredations that condition contemporary postcolonial subjectivity in the Subcontinent.

Ananda's importance to this narrative is indicated by the fact that it is given to him to perform an overdetermined aesthetic/ritualistic act that closes the novel: in a kind of ecstasy (*ek-stasis*, standing beside/ outside of oneself), Ananda, true to his name, which suggests another meaning of "ecstasy," paints the eyes of a Buddha statue to "finish" it as a religio-aesthetic object, conferring upon the sightless statue the power of superhuman vision. Ananda's task as artificer charged with painting Buddha's eyes is to capture the "real" divine power of those eyes even as it registers the belief that "no human eye can meet the Buddha's during the process of creation" (99). The task would be accomplished at the "evolving moment when the eyes, reflected in the mirror, would see him, fall into him. The first and last look given to someone so close. After this hour the statue would be able to witness figures only from a great distance" (306).

Ondaatje presents here an iconic image of giving life, of regeneration that is the only hope of coming through trauma. The ceremony is explained by Sarath's erstwhile mentor Palipana, the discredited sage-like epigraphist and historian, who can "reconstruct[ ] eras simply by looking at runes" and "re-create scenes from just paint fragments":

> Netra means 'eye.' It [the mangala] is a ritual of the eyes. A special artist is needed to paint eyes on a holy figure [such as a Buddha statue]. It is always the last thing done. It is what gives the image life. Like a fuse. The eyes are a fuse. It has to happen before a statue or a painting in a vihara can become a holy thing. (96-97)

This netramangala may seem an odd conclusion to a story about trauma. What insight is coded into this ritual of blindness emerging into powerful sight?

To answer this question we might recall Benjamin's idea that trauma entails the degradation of affect and of everyday experience itself; Ondaatje's novel provides stark if imagined testimonial to this deadening of affect and of daily life. For Benjamin, the only way beyond trauma is a reconditioning of the consciousness, "innervation"—a reinvigoration of the aesthetic sensibility. The aesthetic is the answer to the anaesthesia precipitated by trauma.

The novel comes to rest (rather than resolution) with the labors of the prototypical aesthetic artificer in the novel, Ananda. This conclusion is the only possible one for Ondaatje because history and politics have offered nothing better. It is not just a fortuitous coincidence perhaps that Benjamin too saw in Buddhist ascesis—meditation, prayer, yoga—a fount for the regeneration of the human (Benjamin, "One-Way Street", 444-488). This is what Benjamin meant in stressing "innervation" not in the Freudian sense of "efferent" flows along the neural passages but in the "two-way street" that Miriam Hansen has developed (Hansen 315, 319).

When the Buddha's eyes were finished, Ananda "looked at the eyes that had once belonged to a god. . . . As an artificer now he did not celebrate the greatness of a faith. But he knew if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do

with demons, specters of retaliation" (304). His job done, Ananda turns away, and so turns from trauma (a kind of ascesis): this becomes a cryptic figure for the regeneration of the South Asian subject—an aesthetic figure for an ideal that at the time of the novel's writing seemed unavailable in Sri Lanka. This is another turn on the trope of the insight that comes through a blinding revelation and because it is so enigmatic it may not even be within our grasp. Thus once again like the trauma itself it may be just beyond representation even in fiction but not therefore less appealing as an aspirational ideal, a potential or emergent way of being in the world. Ondaatje's novel offers an aesthetic exploration of trauma, its effects, and possible responses. In so doing it highlights the need for a specifically South Asianist postcolonial framing of attendant historical, representational, narratological and political issues: as such it furnishes a case study for the ongoing relevance of postcolonial studies.

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NOTES

[1] In an interview with David Weich, Ondaatje said that the "the image of someone returning to a country they'd once been a part of, now finding themselves a stranger in that place. That's Anil's path. She grows up in Sri Lanka, goes and gets educated abroad, and through fate or chance gets brought back by the human rights Commission to investigate war crimes. That story of the returning stranger seems very central to our time. That was the starting point."

[2] There was of course also success. Contemporary historians such as Atul Kohli are sometimes criticized for not acknowledging that India has been experiencing a "growing crisis of governability" (see Gordon 157). Yet Kohli has edited a collection of essays on the very premise that there is a case to be made for the formal success of procedural democracy in India. My argument is that this success does not necessarily guarantee that ordinary citizens have recourse to social goods and institutions. See Kohli 2001.

[3] Krishna writes that what might be called the political trauma of LTTE secessionism in Sri Lanka is "proof . . . that majoritarian [Sinhala] overcentralization produces both irredentist violence and precisely what it fears most—namely, partition or secession. The desire for Eelam emerges as a direct consequence of the very imagination that animates most nationalists in South Asia" (242).

[4] If, as Gyan Pandey writes, the trauma narratives of Partition constitute a "secondary" narrative, shadowing the primary narrative of the Independence struggle (30), then the fictional narrative of *Anil's Ghost* is a tertiary narrative, founded on the premise that the phenomenon of trauma at the heart of the struggle for political sovereignty cannot be comprehended without an understanding of the psychic dimension of those who suffer under it. As Chakrabarty argues, the standard Enlightenment account of the subject-citizen [see Mahmood Mamdani and Uday Singh Mehta], as developed in Adam Smith or Hume, "did not provide for individual subjectivities. Human nature for them was as universal as the biological human body" (129).

[5]Qadri Ismail, "A Flippant Gesture." I am grateful to Robert Cruz and Neloufer de Mel for conversation about this question of Ondaatje's political perspective.

[6] There are competing characterizations of the JVP. For instance the party of rebels has been described as an "ultra-left organization dominated by educated youths, unemployed or disadvantageously employed" (Tambiah 14).

[7] See Qadri Ismail, *Abiding by Sri Lanka* for a Sri Lankan perspective on Human rights discourse that makes universalist and Eurocentric "pronouncements" about the country, esp. 41-3.

[8] See Abraham and Torok 89; and Jacques Derrida's Foreword to Abraham and Torok, xiii, xiv, xxxvi.

[9] It is in contemporary cultural studies that we see clearest evidence of what Andreas Huyssen terms "the globalization paradox" in relation to the presumed singularity of the Holocaust as emblematic trauma (24).

[10]Kumar 202.

[11] For an example of this less evident representational mode, one could turn to Romesh Gunesekera's novel, *Reef*.

[12] Many have remarked Ondaatje's play on gender. Kevin Patrick Mahoney, writes that "[h]ere Ondaatje seems to be dealing with the ancient binary opposition of the West as rational and the East as irrational, with Anil embodying the values of the West, and Sarath embodying those of the East. Yet there's also a binary opposition which has the West as powerful male and the East as cowering female. Ondaatje seems to have swapped the genders here, since Anil is most assuredly female (she claims she longs for the privacy of the West, but delights bathing in open air showers)."

[13] See Derrida, Interview with Giovanna Borradori. N.p.

[14] Levity as a response to trauma is of course something Anil at least has long experience with, ever since she was a student of Forensics, part of the Fuck Yorick School of Forensics, her cohort of archaeologists, who "snuffed out death with music and craziness" and formed a community precisely around trauma, since they "couldn't miss death, it was in every texture and cell around them" (147). Ondaatje elaborates the way in which Anil and Gamini find release only in ecstatic escape from the quotidian: she while dancing and doing backflips by herself (181), and he in his operating theater called "Emergency" (223).