

“Perceiving [...] in one’s own body” the violence of history, politics and writing: *Anil’s Ghost* and Witness Writing

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The specific task of the literary testimony is [...] to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others – *in one’s own body*, with the power of sight (insight) usually afforded only by one’s own immediate physical involvement.

Shoshana Felman¹

A witness, as critical analyses conclude,² falls under a double bind: on the one hand, the necessity to bear just testimony to an unascertainable event, and the demand to testify in compliance with the current episteme, on the other. The act of witnessing adheres to *the truth of an event* and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*, since integration into a stable frame of reference may result in the loss of the intensity of the recalled event.³ Nevertheless, the crisis of truth and the resistance to textuality do not necessarily lead to historical amnesia, as Cathy Caruth concludes:

The act of refusal [...] is therefore not a denial of knowledge of the past, but rather a way of gaining access to a knowledge that has not yet attained the form of “narrative memory.” In its resistance to the platitudes of knowledge, this refusal opens up the space for a testimony that can speak beyond what is already understood [...] The refusal of understanding is also a fundamentally creative act.⁴

Slipping away from established frames of reference and being uncontainable within conventional linguistic structures, testimony begets a different truth and a processual language. Attempting to access an irretrievable reality, a witness, Shoshana Felman points out, rediscovers the testimonial power of language by passing through its vulnerability and muteness.⁵ Bearing witness, thus, confirms the impossibility of an all-inclusive narrative; according to Marianne Hirsch, it invokes both “the act of holding – caring, protective, and nurturing” and the “historical *withholding* that does not absorb the other”.⁶

Michael Ondaatje's works can be analysed as instances of witness writing on a number of levels. The semi-documentary and metafictional nature of his texts addresses the question of how one can bear witness to reality, history or creativity. Moreover, the mixed-media quality of his books, including or referencing ledgers, maps, plaques, photographs, tapes, reels, letters, drawings and interviews with witnesses, lends the textual artefacts texture whose materiality gestures at historical silences and obliterations. However, this witness writing shies away from becoming yet another redemptive testimonial narrative; instead, Ondaatje's texts relentlessly expose the inaccessibility of experience to transparent forms of representation. Simultaneously with that, Ondaatje's works recurrently testify to the writer's self-conscious bearing witness to his own (witness) writing. Rather than fulfilling the historiographer's duty to "tell the truth" from the secure perspective of an all-seeing and all-knowing subject, Ondaatje repeatedly foregrounds both his limitations as a witness-writer to convey authenticity and his precarious implication in the episteme he critiques.

With *Anil's Ghost*⁷ Michael Ondaatje undertakes a second, albeit fictional, journey to Sri Lanka, this time carried out by the character Anil Tissera.⁸ Similarly to the author, Anil was born and grew up in Sri Lanka, which she left in order to further her education and embark upon a forensic career – first in Britain, then in the United States.⁹ The trajectories of their lives overlap in still another aspect: after a prolonged absence – in Anil's case of fifteen years, in Ondaatje's twenty-five – each undertakes a return journey to the homeland. If the result of Ondaatje's visits is an account which bears witness to lives ignored by History, to the importance of intimacy in history writing and to Ondaatje's own writing as a creative witnessing act, Anil's trip – initially driven by the quest for truth and justice, and subsequently transformed into an intimate act of witnessing – is permeated by profound disappointment with macropolitical structures and a renewed trust in the micropolitical. I will argue that the novel does not reduce its critique to facile essentialist juxtapositions such as West vs. East, Christianity vs. Buddhism, local vs. foreign. *Anil's Ghost* neither envisages a solution

to the crisis in Sri Lanka, nor does it sublimate the crisis into a cathartic artistic creation. On the contrary, Ondaatje's novel carries out an act of witnessing, which maps the violent encounter between the public and the intimate, and which testifies to the irreparable corporeal inscriptions of this encounter, without adjudicating a final verdict or offering a lasting cure. With his sustained interest in the tactile, Ondaatje foregrounds proximity as a non-appropriative approach to the Other that reasserts their opaque unknowability and unsettles the assumed supremacy of ocular centrism. Moreover, the close-up on the corporeal conveys the impossible position of war-torn Sri Lanka, a position that the "long-distance gaze" (p.11) of "visiting journalist[s]" (p.27) cannot discern. Anil's return to Sri Lanka does not merely provide her with cognitive plenitude, now that the proximal aspect of the migrant's "stereoscopic vision" is no longer absent;¹⁰ the renewed proximity to the place of her birth does not arouse in her patriotic fervour or the guilt of a "prodigal" returned (p.10). Instead, it enables her to engage in a reciprocated act of affectionate witnessing: succumbing to the indexical rather than the metaphorical power of her surroundings – human bodies, stone statues, natural habitats – the forensic pathologist comes to bear the imprints of the suffering of those disempowered by macropolitical structures. The reciprocity of such witnessing acts is conducive to the emergence of a micropolitical response to disempowerment: not only are the victims of the violence in Sri Lanka acknowledged as a historical and material presence, but they can also start bearing witness to themselves, to their stories, to others who have gone unwitnessed. Bearing witness to unwitnessed stories and unacknowledged witnesses becomes an interlinear historiographic act, an intimate gesture of micropolitical affect, which sidesteps the exigencies of identitarianism and macropolitical allegiance.

Anil's Ghost is woven around the plot of "witnessing the body" as an epistemological tool for scientific inquiry and successful dissemination of political indoctrination. Discursive formulations of the corporeal alternate between an impenetrable irreducibility that is constantly undergoing mystification and an authentic reflection of internal essence that needs

deconstruction.¹¹ One cannot help discerning in such interpretations the stark delineation between an intangible essence (the true self) and a corporeal shell enveloping it. The latter tends to exist in order to shelter the former, albeit in a static, somewhat passive way; however, it is also there to be injured and pierced. The body, as Elaine Scarry observes, is thus constructed as a weakness and vulnerability, which can be manipulated, exploited and tortured. A conduit of pain, corporeality is perceived as a threat to the self, leading to the loss of language, consciousness and sense of the world. If the heightened sense of physicality alerts one to human mortality and destructibility, it also leads to the sense of agentlessness and betrayal; an uncomfortable reminder of the self's vulnerability, the corporeal becomes the resented member of the Cartesian split.

At the same time, Scarry discerns in the body a possible witness to suffering, as the corporeal is capable of lending tangibility and actuality to an unshareable sentient experience:

If the felt-attributes of pain are [...] lifted into the visible world, *and if the referent for these now objectified attributes is understood to be the human body*, then the sentient fact of the person's suffering will become knowable to a second person.¹²

Here emerges another type of body, an agentic, interactive presence capable of generating memories where they did not exist in the first place and of offering solace when such seemed unattainable. Whilst the experience of pain is essentially unobjectifiable, Scarry argues that through an emphasis on the human body and its affects, through the permeation of “the visible” with “the sentient”, the inexpressible can be shared with others. This type of body sheds macropolitical allegiance and omniscience for the intimate world of the interpersonal. *Anil's Ghost*, thus, attends to “the body witnessing”, an enabling act of presencing those that have been silenced by History makers. The presencing of the body and presencing through the body affectively detour the instrumental use of the corporeal. Bodies engaging with other bodies – human, natural, artistic – transcend their ascribed functionality as cognitive instruments and assume the role of active witnesses of difference; they “touch into words”¹³ what has gone unnoticed and offer the solace of caress where healing is impossible.

Ondaatje's writing, therefore, through its emphasis on the corporeal, the intimate and the interpersonal, bears active witness to the affective powers of the body to presence voices that have been muted by dominant discursive regimes, to enable non-appropriative micropolitical appreciation of opacity, to offer affectionate caress in the irreparable sutures of macropolitical pressures.

Witnessing the body

After a fifteen-year-long absence from Sri Lanka, Anil Tissera returns as the forensic pathologist of an international mission to investigate allegations of human rights violations. She is paired off with a local archaeologist, Sarath Diyasena, to carry out her inquiry on several skeletons discovered in an ancient burial site in a government-controlled area. However, Anil detects that one of the skeletons, whom they provisionally name Sailor (the other three being Tinker, Tailor and Soldier), appears to be the victim of a more recent violent death, which will implicate the authorities. The story, therefore, follows Anil's urge not only to uncover Sailor's identity, but also to incriminate the Sri Lankan government. However, her idealism is shattered when she has to confront the disenchanted "locals" – the archaeologist Sarath, the doctor Gamini, the epigraphist Palipana – whose disappointment with mainstream political movements has turned them into bitter cynics. Whilst politics and its rhetoric provide no solution to the national crisis but instead further instigate animosity and violence, artistic creation offers a site where those disempowered by macropolitical structures can voice their stance. Thus, having hired a local artificer, Ananda, to reconstruct Sailor's face for identificatory purposes, Anil and Sarath eventually realize that the face he has recreated, whilst bearing a general resemblance to the actual victim, also incorporates the features of Ananda's missing wife Sirissa, the traits of the artificer's grief for her, the pain of other tortured civilians and the grief of their relatives. One never gets to know what happens to Anil and her investigation: after the authorities confiscate her notes and Sailor, Sarath (at his own

peril, which ultimately leads to his death) manages to retrieve the skeleton and advise Anil to leave the country. However, whether she manages to do so and what she does with her “recreated” report (p.282) is left unclear. Instead, the book averts its gaze from the “Western” character and focuses on two vignettes: one of Ananda reconstructing a broken statue of the Buddha and another of Ananda painting the eyes of a newly constructed statue of the Buddha – two creative acts carried out in defiance of the surrounding background of violence.

The corporeal assumes a central presence in *Anil’s Ghost*: bodies are injured, mutilated and murdered; caressed, cured and recreated; abducted, disinterred and investigated. A series of disturbing images that recalls Ondaatje’s suggestive representation of the 1971 JVP Insurgency in *Running in the Family* – “the Kelani and Mahaveli rivers moved to the sea, heavy with [the] bodies”¹⁴ of insurgent students – the close-ups on the bodily experience in the later novel draw attention to the appropriation of the body by political and scientific discourses. For in the context of war, as Scarry concludes, the urge to presence the corporeal by inflicting pain informs strategies of absencing: not only is the body’s owner made extremely aware of their physicality, but the corporeal is also constructed as the conduit to the betrayal of one’s self. Anil’s declared objective, as a representative of a human rights organisation, is to reverse this dehumanising process and uncover the truth that “shall set [one] free” (p.102). Adamant in her faith in universal justice and in her abilities to act as a just witness to the atrocities in Sri Lanka, she embarks on an inquest whereby rights and wrongs will be ascertained by the abstract standards of scientific impartiality and universal justice. Approaching the traces of human life she comes across as evidence and emptying the retrieved bodies of the specificity of their “character and nuance and mood” (p.259), Anil uses them for purely representative purposes: “[o]ne village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims” (p.176). Thus, without actively causing suffering, Anil nonetheless participates in the objectification of the corporeal by assuming that the scientific tools at her disposal enable her to access and explain the painful experiences of many others.

Such objectification initiates a quasi-healing process, which is, according to Scarry, “a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain”.¹⁵ Anil’s empirical translation of suffering into detached observations produces impersonal “permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy”:

She began to examine the skeleton again under sulphur light, summarizing the facts of his death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy. One forearm broken. Partial burning. Vertebrae damage in the neck. The possibility of a small bullet wound in the skull. Entrance and exit.

She could read Sailor’s last actions by knowing the wounds on bone. He puts his arms up over his face to protect himself from the blow. He is shot with a rifle, the bullet going through his arm, then into the neck. While he’s on the ground, they come up and kill him. (pp.64–5)

The dismemberment of Sailor’s body into wounds and bones, medical phrases and an incriminating report, contributes to the optical illusion of transparency and universality: an otherwise inscrutable body is laid bare for the observation of the pathologist or for the consumption of the reader. Reduced to a sum of “organs without a body,” Sailor (later identified as the plumbago miner Ruwan Kumara) has become a text for Anil to read, edit and interpret; as Rosi Braidotti concludes: “The bodily surface, and the complex montage of organs that composes it, is thus reduced to pure surface, exteriority without depth, a movable theater of the self”.¹⁶ The interchangeability of body parts mirrors the myths of equivalence that the capitalist economy of exchange disseminates and the myths of identity that the colonial rhetoric of exclusion upholds; thus, the popular “Jaipur Limb” is defined by its price tag of thirty pounds, “cheaper because Asian victims could walk without a shoe” (p.118).¹⁷

The loss of integrity of the human body – with body parts removed, stitched, replaced, valued in monetary terms, purchased and discarded – is mirrored in the impossibility of a unitary and coherent self. This is why Anil’s insistence on preserving her position as an impartial external witness ascertaining the truth of Sri Lanka is untenable; nor can her brand of justice offer a solution to the situation. In contrast, Gamini, Sarath’s brother and doctor by

profession, will not only denounce any humanist givens, but also immerse himself in the comfort of the smell of soap and the tender touch of a hand:

This was when [Gamini] stopped believing in man's rule on earth. He turned away from every person who stood up for a war. Or the principle of one's land, or pride of ownership, or even personal rights. All of those motives ended up somehow in the arms of careless power. One was no worse and no better than the enemy. He believed only in the mothers sleeping against their children, the great sexuality of spirit in them, the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night. (p.119)

Resenting adherence to identitarianism, ownership and individualism, Gamini finds comfort in “the sexuality of care”, which is reminiscent of Kip's longing in *The English Patient* for the caring love of his *ayah* and Anil's recollection of the lost language of tactility between her and her *ayah* Lalitha.¹⁸ The disenchanted doctor's investment in the tactile and the olfactory seems to be “the only reasonable constant” (p.120) as bodies will never stop turning up. Whereas their huge numbers testify to the instrumentalisation of the corporeal into a tool of political warfare, Gamini's yearning for multisensory comfort indicates the potential of corporeality to resist identitarian inscriptions.

In a situation where “[o]ne was no worse and no better than the enemy”, where there is no “information of who the enemy was” (p.11), Anil's trust in scientific empiricism and objectivity is challenged by a truth, which, in Palipana's words, “is just an opinion” (p.102). Once a renowned and meticulous scientist himself, Palipana has lost his reputation and had his name removed from the Sinhala encyclopaedia for allegedly forging the evidence for his translations of the interlinear texts of the Sigiri rock graffiti. These accusations, however, have been based on the absence of Palipana's sources from the legitimate national chronicle, the *Cūlavamsa* (p.81),¹⁹ rather than on proof of intentional forgery. The epigraphist's crime – his non-alignment with the official truth and his breach of scientific methodology – is interpreted as a gesture of “betrayal” (p.82). For the denounced epigraphist, on the other hand, such a gesture is liberating, “not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance” (p.81); the truth that he is after is the one “that could only be guessed at”

(p.83), not the one found in history books or “graven images” (p.96). A clash, thus, emerges between Anil’s belief in logic, distance and objectivity, and the embodied forms of history that Palipana advocates:

For him, now, all history was filled with sunlight, every hollow was filled with rain. Though as he worked he was conscious that the paper itself that held these histories was aging fast. It was insect-bitten, sun-faded, wind-scattered. And there was his old, thin body. Palipana too was now governed by the elements. (p.84)

Reminiscent of the tangible memories and decomposing documents described in *Running in the Family*, the history Palipana approaches is elemental and immanent, rather than monumental or teleological. Exploring “every problem with many hands” (p.82), the epigraphist relies on the skills of local artificers and the stories of *dhobi* women in order to approach the banned “interlinear stuff” (p.193) and the excluded “unprovable truth” (p.83), resurrecting as much as reinventing eras long gone by. Studying “history as if it were a body” (p.193), Palipana sees the historical corpus as a corpus imbued with the specificity of real lives rather than the abstractedness of grand ideas, as a corpus defined by its opacity and resistant to the scopic consumption of mainstream history, as a corpus threatened by silverfish and moths just as the human body is susceptible to disease and mortality.

Similarly to Palipana, his former student Sarath acts as a link between the “mortality of flesh and bone and the immortality of image on rock” (p.279); having renounced the social world, the archaeologist rejoices in his “dark trade with the earth” (p.29). Whilst Palipana is looking for the banned and the untold by official discourse by exploring the destroyed and absenced traces of the interlinear, Sarath is always considerate of intimate histories that have happened in the cracks of a culture of musealisation:

He would hold statues two thousand years old in his arms. Or place his hand against old, warm rock that had been cut against it. This was his pleasure. Not conversation or the education of others or power, but simply to place his hand against a *gal vihara*, a living stone whose temperature was dependent on the hour, whose look of porousness would change depending on rain or a quick twilight. (p.279)

Even though Anil is prepared to dismiss Sarath's microscopic approach to the surroundings of a fact as too "aesthetic" (p.52), for him such an attitude constitutes a more ethical engagement with the plight of those living the consequences of the fleeting administration of justice by ("Western") visitors. Not only are universal justice and absolute truth chimeras conveniently employed by macropolitical formations, but they are extremely dangerous insofar as they ignore the pledged human lives:

Sarath knew that for her the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would then truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake or petrol. 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, as a result of this information, to new vengeance and slaughter. There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use. (pp.156–7)

Just as the human body can be parcelled into usable parts by all the parties in the violent conflict, as well as by the empiricism of historical and medical discourse, so too truth can be packaged into profitable pieces of information that can not only sell papers but also take lives. At the same time, however, Sarath's reliance on partial truths, his attendance to fractures and sutures, differs from the economy of exchangeability that human lives and body parts have been subjected to. In contrast to the truths packaged by external observers, Sarath's insistence on the fragment gestures at the impossibility of seamless justice and at the ignored reality of lives unwittingly trapped in the conflict. If Palipana's old belief was that "the ascendancy of ideas" (p.12) is the only survivor in a world where art and history also partake of perishable physicality, the ease with which these ideas summon lives and mutilate bodies is critiqued via the reference to the criminal dismemberment and economic exploitation of cultural artefacts by museums "in the West" (p.12).

Anil, therefore, will realize that there has been a singular life, a life ruthlessly taken at that, behind Sailor's skeleton. This life does not amount merely to the occupations of a plumbago miner and a toddy tapper – tangential clues to a life that distortions on the bone help her

detect. This is a life whose singularity has been evacuated with the elimination of the body's opacity, a life reduced to material for manipulation, torture and representative statistics by the machinery and rhetoric of macropolitics. This life has also involved the intimate surroundings of a family and fellow villagers, all in the plight of ultimate warfare. Anil's urge for justice cannot account for such intimate experiences; instead, she will need to approximate all the historians, venerators and ministers of the body: Palipana, studying the body of scriptures, Sarath, exploring the body of archaeological environs, Gamini, ministering to the bodies of the all too live or all too dead human beings in his wards, and Ananda, moulding into life the stone bodies of the Buddha. For all her trust in scientific objectivity, Anil eventually becomes aware that she will have to intersperse the time of her samples with personal time, to engage with the "archaeological surround of a fact" (p.44) rather than observe with "the mercy of distance"²⁰ and "the false empathy and blame" (p.44) of political writing:

She used to believe that meaning allowed a person a door to escape grief and fear. But she saw that those who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic. It was the way to abandon emotion, a last protection of the self. They held on to just the coloured and patterned sarong a missing relative last slept in, which in normal times would have become a household rag but now was sacred. (pp.55–6)

Her transparent "reading" of Sailor's wounds cannot act as a healing process for those trapped by the unidentifiable enemies in a situation where "[d]eath, loss, was 'unfinished', so you could not walk through it" (p.56). Unable to carry out the process of "working/walking through" death, torture or pain via narrative integration and rationalisation, people "slammed and stained by violence" hold on to the tangible traces of those that have been forcefully absented. Whereas the discourse of violence that Scarry conceptualizes frames the body as a site of betrayal and abjection threatening the self,²¹ those disempowered by such discursive practices relish the proximity to items indexical of the corporeality of the abducted and the murdered. Acting as constant reminders, these traces preserve their inscrutability to intrusive gazes such as those of scientific forensics and sensational journalism.

The identitarian “truth of their times”

The pornographic glimpses over the zone of conflict are conveyed through Ondaatje’s verbal translation of the maps of Sri Lanka:

The National Atlas of Sri Lanka has seventy-three versions of the island – each template revealing only one aspect, one obsession: rainfall, winds, surface water lakes, rarer bodies of water locked deep within the earth. The old portraits show the produce and former kingdoms of the country; contemporary portraits show levels of wealth, poverty and literacy [...] There are no river names. No depiction of human life. (pp.39–40)

The optical versions of the island visually capture different aspects of its environment: ore and minerals, bird life and climate. An instance of omniscient representations, these maps not only replicate the objectification of Sailor’s body that Anil’s medical report enacts, but also reiterate the colonial reduction of the island to its natural riches and trade potential. The sense of abstraction is reinforced by Ondaatje’s choice not to include a visual rendering of the island, unlike the map in *Running in the Family*. In this way, not only are Sri Lanka and its inhabitants further detached from the reader of such representations, but the conflict, its violence and victims are also transformed into media events and mere rhetoric.

Anil’s Ghost, however, shifts the emphasis from monumental historical events and heroes to the adjacent, the surrounding, the interlinear:

The most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization [...] Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives. A dog in Pompeii. A gardener’s shadow in Hiroshima. (p.55)

This newly discovered belief in fossil-like indices of history critiques the identitarianism informing the macropolitical struggles in the background of the text as well as the facile representations of the conflict. Premised upon binary logic, teleology and genealogy, identitarian thought summons homogenous formations. In contrast, the micropolitical, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, traverses these macropolitical conglomerates by operating in-between and within them, and thus forming heterogeneous multiplicities. Anti-identitarian

and deterritorialising, the micropolitical is processual and creative; should it ossify, it will metamorphose into a minority formation, which does not subvert identitarian thought but rather reverses the binary opposition. Therefore, the micropolitical shares the same continuum with the macropolitical, engaging with existing macropolitical groupings by reinventing them.²² On the one hand, through its emphasis on the intimate and the creative the novel suggests ways of micropolitical reinvention of arborescent forms of representation; on the other hand, however, *Anil's Ghost* also foregrounds the tectonic slippages of truth and history by focusing on the appropriation of the corporeal for identitarian purposes.

The micropolitical aspect of Ondaatje's narrative does not spring from the facile juxtapositions of West *vs.* East, Christianity *vs.* Buddhism, local *vs.* foreign; instead, it traverses these dichotomies and exposes the exigencies of each identitarian side. By engaging intimately with the surrounding context of the rampant necessity to take sides in the civil war situation, *Anil's Ghost* questions not only the impartiality of the "Western" distant gaze and the abstract ideologemes of Sri Lankan macropolitics, but also the subversive potential of narrowly defined identity politics and representation. At the core of this critique is the vacuity of historical and political teleology in a situation of entrapment:

"Anyway, these [are the] guys who are setting off the bombs and who the Western press calls freedom fighters ... And you want to investigate the *government*?"

"There are innocent Tamils in the south being killed too," Sarath said. "Terrible killings. You should read the reports."

"I get the reports [...] We're all fucked, aren't we. We don't know what to do about it. We just throw ourselves into it. Just no more high horses, please. This is a war on foot." (p.133)

As this argument between Sarath and Gamini suggests, ahistorical slogans, such as "freedom" and "the right to life", have lost their meaning in the civil war. Although the conflict in Sri Lanka has been defined as driven by identitarian allegiances – Sinhalese *vs.* Tamil, government *vs.* anti-government socialist insurgents – what the novel critiques is each side's usurpation of the intimate "house [of] fearful memories" (p.134) in the brain, the *amygdala*.²³ Thus, Sarath and Gamini help Anil incriminate the government, whilst acknowledging the

violence of both separatist guerrillas in the North and anti-government insurgents in the South. The questioning of identitarian boundaries is also reflected in the ambiguous treatment of religious iconography in the text: the meaning of the Christian crucifixion has transformed from a symbol of redemption into a punitive procedure for truck drivers, Buddhist *poya* celebrations have become a good opportunity for mass killings, monks like Palipana's brother Nārada are the targets of political murders, statues of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas are the embodiments of a rigid ethnic-religious principle tearing the island apart. Even though "Western" political, religious and discursive practices are implied to be inadequate and damaging, the local, nationalist approach is presented as equally destructive.²⁴

The appropriation of the affective powers of the corporeal by arborescent forms of representation can be discerned in the use in Ondaatje's novel of the Nētra Mangala (eye-painting) ceremony. A ritual of consecration, Nētra Mangala is characterized by ambiguity: praising sight as the site of life and truth, it also questions divine visual omnipotence insofar as it is a mortal artificer that paints in the divine 'eye':

Without the eyes there is not just blindness, there is nothing. There is no existence. The artificer brings to life sight and truth and presence [...] The painter dips a brush into the paint and turns his back to the statue, so it looks as if he is about to be enfolded in the great arms. The paint is wet on the brush. The other man, facing him, holds up the mirror, and the artificer puts the brush over his shoulder and paints in the eyes without looking directly at the face. He uses just the reflection to guide him – so only the mirror receives the direct image of the glance being created. No human eye can meet the Buddha's during the process of creation. (p.99)

The powerful position of the gaze as the site of vitality and divinity is corroborated by the artificer's inability to meet the Buddha's gaze directly, save for the intermediary of a mirror. The emergence into divinity of the Buddha, then, is the result both of the artificer's creative act and of the Buddha's self-creation, as it is his image that guides the artificer's hand. Thus, the Nētra Mangala ritual confers significant power to the intermediary object, the mirror, which, similarly to the artificer's paintbrush, plays a vital role in the creative process: being the surface where their looks meet, it acts as a link between the Buddha and the artificer. The

artificer's mirror also, according to Ananda Coomaraswamy, functions as the "lighting conductor" of the "evil eye" of the Buddha image.²⁵ In this sense, as a physical relic, it not only acts as a necessary complement to the religious doctrine, but also validates the existing power dynamic. Proximity, then, enables intimate witnessing and reinvention of monumental history but also can bolster identitarian thought through its affective impact.

The statue of the Buddha that is blown apart by hungry civilians-turned-thieves towards the end of the novel sums up successfully the incursions of identitarianism on the corporeal:

Still, this was broken stone. It was not a human life. This was for once not a political act or an act perpetrated by one belief against another. The men were trying to find a solution for hunger or a way to get out of their disintegrating lives. And the "neutral" and "innocent" fields around the statue and the rock carvings were perhaps places of torture and burials [...] These were fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century. (p.300)

The abstention from taking sides is impossible; "neutrality" and "innocence" are corrupted with murders, burials and blood on everybody's hands and in everybody's fields. While Palipana's approach engages with the holistic relationship between the contour of paintings and the qualities of the surface underneath, with the civil war such seamless syncretism is no longer possible. The reconstructed Buddha statue, then, will remain with its face "quilted" (p.302) and in sutures.

The body witnessing

Forensic investigations, medical interventions, political rhetoric and religious doctrine in *Anil's Ghost* subject the human body to an economy of exchange, whereby it loses its singularity and integrity. Such discursive practices can be seen as bolstering disciplinarian mechanisms for the production of what Michel Foucault has called "docile bodies": "[bodies] that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved".²⁶ The numerous instances of display of tortured bodies in the novel suggest that the public humiliation of the corporeal serves not only to instil terror but also to affirm control in a moment of major epistemological slippage:

At particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief – that is, when some central idea or ideology or cultural construct has ceased to elicit a population’s belief either because it is manifestly fictitious or because it has for some reason been divested of ordinary forms of substantiation – the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of “realness” and “certainty”.²⁷

Moreover, the display of such violations of the body functions both as an index of the superiority of a certain power mechanism and as an invitation to the intended audience for the validation of the existing power relations. Foucault, thus, concludes:

Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it.²⁸

Such participation guarantees the witnesses’ subscription to and reaffirmation of the discursive practice; it is through the spectators’ witnessing of complicity that the dominant power structure can continue exerting control. Thus, appealing to the “spiritual self”, mechanisms of control not only construct the corporeal as inferior, but they also lead to a disembodied form of witnessing wherein the body is the surface for the inscription of a punishment.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, identitarian discourse, media representations and “Western” intervention become such complicit witnesses of the body; premised on a scopic economy of detached observation, these complicit witnesses adjudicate according to their respective moral or legal frameworks. However, the novel also gestures at another site for witnessing, coming from within the corporeal itself. By renouncing the power of vision and visibility – for instance, two of the main characters, Palipana and Ananda, are blind or with failing eyesight – and reinserting the importance of tactile experience into a hitherto optically informed discourse of witnessing, the body in the act of witnessing, *the witnessing body*, attains the potential to disrupt the hegemonic optical regime. Ondaatje’s text presents a close-up of corporeal witnessing that not only testifies to abducted memories and unacknowledged experiences, but

also empowers the body to act as an affectionate witness to the inscrutability of pain, the inexpressibility of grief, the silence of the witnesses to pain.

The reinvention of Sailor's face by the artificer Ananda empowers the corporeal by ignoring the requirement for semblance to the actual murder victim, who remains unidentified almost till the end of the novel. The artificer kneads into the face the quest for tranquillity of any unwilling participant in the conflict as well as the anxieties of those witnessing the conflict. The artistic act itself is performed as an illicit love affair, which contrasts with Anil's schematic scientific research process: each night Ananda will embrace and caress Sailor's skeleton after he has worked on the skull all day and destroyed it in the evening. The artificer appears to re-enact over and over again the destruction of the civil war and the awareness that any material traces of one's life or death can go missing. For he has missed the encounter with physical pain: his wife, Sirissa, has been abducted and supposedly murdered. There are only conjectures, but there are neither remains, nor witnesses. In Sailor's case, the bodily witnesses to his pain – his half-burned and broken bones – are present but they themselves have had no witness to their witnessing. If Ananda had reconstructed Sailor's skull for purely identificatory purposes, this would not have offered solace for his pain and the suffering of other villagers; neither would diatribes or accusations. Ananda's creative approach of moulding depersonalized pain is deprived of the vociferous tumult of revolutionary discourse; it transcends the binary model of majority vs. minority and enacts instead the micropolitical position of affectionate relationality. Thus, Sailor's beheaded body and body-less head will not resemble the punitive "heads-on-stakes" expeditions of paramilitary forces; they will embody "the peacefulness [Ananda] wanted for any victim" (p.187). Sailor's reinvented face does more than simply help identify the victim of a murder and thus provide evidence to incriminate the government; its kneaded-in placidity becomes a material witness to unacknowledged torture and a personal witness to the grief of the mourners-never-to-be. It also enables Ananda, the one unable to witness the pain of torture and mourn in time, to

become a belated witness to the relief his wife must have wanted in her last hours. Rather than manipulable evidence of the hegemony of a sovereign, the corporeal assumes the role of an agentive witness. It thus helps redefine the act of witnessing as an embodied process of reciprocal exchange of affect. Such acts of witnessing not only revise negative conceptualisations of the body as a treacherous vulnerability, but also enable a form of relationality with pain that will not “work through” suffering into a transparent narrative of sublimated emotion.

The last vignette of *Anil's Ghost* captures another creative act which is neither cathartic nor devotional, and which replays the dialogue between distance and proximity. In addition to the Buddha statue that has been defiled by thieves, Ananda is involved in the consecration ceremony of a new statue. In the eye-painting ritual he performs a multiplicity of gazes will be swapped between the new Buddha and Ananda. Concentrating on the artificer's creative powers through his intimate experience of the divinity, the episode highlights the permeability of artificer and statue through the haptic medley of the visual and the tactile.²⁹

Ananda was very tired. As if all his blood had magically entered into this body. Soon, though, there would be 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 from a great distance [...] It was the figure of the world the statue would see forever, in rainlight and sunlight, a combustible world of weather even without the human element [...] And now with human sight he was seeing all the fibres of natural history around him. He could witness the smallest approach of a bird, every flick of its wing, or a hundred-mile storm coming down off the mountains near Gonagola and skirting to the plains [...] Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him there. The eyes he had cut and focussed with his father's chisel showed him this. (pp.306–7)

Ananda's effort filters into the inanimate statue, thus lending it not only sight but also life. However, before erecting the boundary between divinity and humanity, the new god will caress the artificer, their looks will mingle. What follows is a kind of textu(r)al osmosis between the divine and the human: whether the “human sight” which captures every feel and flicker of the world is Ananda's or the Buddha's, the Buddha's gaze reflected in the mirror as seen by Ananda or Ananda's gaze reflected in the mirror as seen by the Buddha is hard to

determine. Although in this brief moment the artificer gives in to the seduction of optical supremacy, this is a supremacy that his chisel and mirror have generated, the closeness being even greater when the deity will bear witness with the faultiness of “human sight” even without “the human element.” Ananda, thus, manages to mould the act of witnessing into an entity as impersonal as a deity, and yet “so close” as his own creation. By bringing together the cracks of the broken image and the overall image of the new statue Ananda practises a type of art that will bear witness to the world and awake the Buddha to the sweetness of the surroundings. Unlike the “Western” guests who depart from the bloodshed (read Anil and all the visiting journalists and academics), the look that Ananda revitalizes is that of the insider, whose home is in flames and whose body devoured by the encroachments of identitarianism and spectacle-thirsty culture industries. Such an embodied response to History *is* witnessing to and “taking sides” with the absenced and the muted, the entrapped and the immobilized, providing them with the agency to bear witness to an impossible reality on their own opaque terms.

Ondaatje’s witness writing defies the clear-cut prescriptions of arborescent representation by renouncing both unitary self and realist representation. Such witness writing does not and cannot aesthetically represent a recognizable external referential reality; instead, it is conducive to continual reinvention through the caress of tactility, the affect of songs, the timbre of skeletons and statues. Engendering anxiety rather than relief, the intimate scope of *Anil’s Ghost* does not redeem history through art; instead, by unsettling the fundamentals of optical transparency and absolute knowledge, unitary self and universal truth, this act of witness writing exposes historical whitewashings and excisions. It restores intimacy and corporeality as viable approaches to bearing witness to personal and communal histories as ethical ways of preserving the opacity of difference.

¹ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p.108.

² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996; Cathy Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, introduction Cathy Caruth, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; and Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

³ Cathy Caruth, "Recapturing the Past", in *Explorations in Memory*, pp.151–7, p.153.

⁴ "Recapturing the Past", p.155.

⁵ "Education and Crisis", p.53.

⁶ Marianne Hirsch, "Marked by Memory: Feminist Reflections on Trauma and Transmission", in *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, eds. Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002, pp.71–91, p.88.

⁷ Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2001. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given in parentheses with page numbers only.

⁸ His first trip back to Sri Lanka took place in 1978 and 1980 and is recounted in the 1982 fictional memoir *Running in the Family* (Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*, London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 1984).

⁹ For parallels with Ondaatje's life, see Geetha Ganapathy-Dore, "Fathoming Private Woes in a Public Story: A Study of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*", *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 6.3 (2002), retrieved 1 May 2004 at <<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert>>; Marlene Goldman, "Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*", *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal*, 6.3 (2004), retrieved 11 February 2005 at <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb04-3/goldman04.html>>; and Antoinette Burton, "Archive of Bones: *Anil's Ghost* and the Ends of History", *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 38.1 (2004), 39–56.

¹⁰ "a kind of double perspective [...] at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society" (Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991*, London: Granta Books/Penguin, 1991, p.19).

¹¹ Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

¹² *The Body in Pain*, p.13.

¹³ *Family*, p.22.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.85.

¹⁵ *The Body in Pain*, p.9.

¹⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.50.

¹⁷ In his Marxist analysis, Satchi Ponnambalam attributes the ethnic divide between the Sinhalese and the Tamils to the advancement of capitalism on the island. (Satchi Ponnambalam, *Sri Lanka: The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*, London: Zed Books, 1983)

¹⁸ Anil's and Kip's shared longing for their *ayahs* can be seen as an instance of their privileged socio-economic position in Sri Lanka and the Punjab, respectively. See Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, 2nd edition, New York: Vintage, 1996.

¹⁹ A sequel to the Mahāvamsa (6c.a.d.), the Cūlavamsa is a Sinhalese chronicle of Sri Lanka, written in Pali. Both chronicles were compiled by bikkhus (Buddhist monks) and their accounts built continuity between the parinibbāna of the Buddha, the preservation of Buddhism and the settling of Sri Lanka by the Sinhalese. Combining religious bias and racial identitarianism, the Mahāvamsa and the Cūlavamsa have been used as powerful tools of nationalist indoctrination. See K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, London: C. Hurst and Company, 1981; E.F.C. Ludowyk, *The Story of Ceylon*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967; and *The National Question and the Tamil Liberation Struggle*.

²⁰ *Family*, p.179.

²¹ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p.17.

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, foreword Réda Bensmaïa, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986; and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *On the Line*, trans. John Johnston, New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

²³ For critiques of Ondaatje's representation of nationalist thought, see Qadri Ismail, in "A Flippant Gesture towards Sri Lanka: A Review of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*", *Pravada* 6.9 (2000), 24–9; and Pradeep Jeganathan, in "Discovery: Anthropology, Nationalist Thought, Thamotharampillai Shanaathanan, and an Uncertain Descent into the Ordinary", *Lines* (2002), retrieved 18 June 2007 at <<http://www.lines-magazine.org>>.

²⁴ The complicity of Western Christianity in Sri Lankan identity politics is exemplified in the Theosophical Society of Colonel Henry Olcott and Madame Helena Blavatsky, which gave rise to nineteenth-century Protestant Buddhism. See Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka*, foreword Lal Jayawardena, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992; and Kevin Trainor, *Relics, Ritual and Representations in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Satchi Ponnambalam and Richard Gombrich, on the other hand, attribute the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism to the embourgeoisement and urbanisation of the Buddhist faith. See *The National Question and Tamil Liberation Struggle*; and Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988.

²⁵ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, 2nd edition, New York: Pantheon Books, 1956, pp.70–5.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, London: Penguin books, 1991, p.136.

²⁷ *The Body in Pain*, p.14.

²⁸ *Discipline*, p.58.

²⁹ The term "haptic" was introduced by nineteenth-century Austrian art historian Aloïs Riegl. Etymologically related to the Greek word for "grasp, seize", it has been used to describe a different way of seeing: instead of scanning the outline, haptic vision penetrates the surface and rejoices in texture. Thus, an opposition is drawn between the optical and the haptic eye: whereas the former follows linearity and contour, the latter is tactile and its way of seeing can be interpreted as a form of touching. See Aloïs Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, trans., foreword and annotations Rolf Winkes, Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider Editore, 1985; and, Claude Gandelman, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.