The Dead That Haunt *Anil's Ghost*: Subaltern Difference and Postcolonial Melancholia

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After all, Taormina, Ceylon, Africa, America—as far as we *go, they are only the negation of all that we ourselves stand for and are. . . . Ceylon is an experience—but heavens, not a permanence.*

—D. H. Lawrence, 3 April 1922

The problem here is not the Tamil problem, it's the human problem.

—Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost*

THE "HUMAN PROBLEM" IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *ANIL'S GHOST* concerns the tidal waves of wounded affected by the political violence in Sri Lanka.[1] The novel's account of the disinterred, disappeared, assassinated, and injured reflects an archive of death. "We seem to have too many bodies around," laments Sarath, one of the main figures in the book (274).[2] The sheer magnitude of human loss signals the impossibility of properly recognizing the full humanity of all the actors in this conflict, much less grieving their loss. The usual ways of memorializing individual deaths that denote a singular, subjective life—through details such as place of belonging, linguistic and familial ties, ethnicity, name, age, and occupation—become insufficient for explaining the losses that are incurred. Human rights, and human wrongs, the novel implies, can no longer be adduced on grounds that value the sentience and security of the individual, historically legible subject.[3] Rather, *Anil's Ghost* presents us with a "human problem" of a different order, one that parlays collective death in generalizable terms and, by extension, our common vulnerability to violence into a new subjective experience.

When anchored to the postcolony, a vision of humanity haunted by collective anxiety about its existence cements a problematic ste-

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reotype. Indeed, *Anil's Ghost* is not unique in furthering a vision of pervasive violence stoked through representations of calculated or accidental death, as well as of societal decline. A cursory survey of contemporary South Asian novels yields quite a list: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*, Omair Ahmad's *Jimmy the Terrorist*, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Khaled Hosseini's *Kite Runner*, Mohammed Hanif's *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, and Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography*, to name a few. Such novels invoke discrete historical contexts—the partition of the subcontinent, political assassinations, war and Western intrusions, caste and gender violence—to animate the idea that life in the postcolony is risk-prone and violent.

This essay examines representations of violence in *Anil's Ghost* to probe paradoxes that arise in postcolonial fictions dealing with specters of death moored to a particular place and real events. Preoccupations with violence in postcolonial literatures, especially when linked to real historical events, seem to shore up dubious stereotypes about insurmountable civilizational differences that structure our globe. The risk is that Ondaatje's Sri Lanka, like D. H. Lawrence's Ceylon, will remain only a foil for the West's self-assurance and self-complacency, a vision of impermanence against which to measure Western stability. After all, Ondaatje's odes to Sri Lanka—*Running in the Family*, *Handwriting*, *Anil's Ghost*—are written from Canada. In *Anil's Ghost*, Sailor's murder in the midst of a tumultuous civil war and the murkiness of seeking its redress suggest that the novel endorses a stereotype of civilizational difference in which the generic fictionalization of mass deaths leads readers to affirm the meaninglessness of individual life in the postcolony. Yet this essay takes an alternate tack. How, I ask, does our entering into the scene of Sailor's death as readers realign our fidelities? I suggest 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.

The prism of death in *Anil's Ghost* makes a critical demand on readers of this text to relinquish settled notions of how we as humans understand our finitude, understand our entanglements with the deaths of others, and ascribe meaning to death itself. Rather than static signs for the real, fictions of death and violence provide volatile aesthetic scripts that conjoin historical circumstance with phantasmatic expressions to raise important questions about mourning, collective agency, and the subalternity of postcolonial societies. The figural reproducibility of violence in the novel's formal experiments, affective signatures, and deliberate transnational gestures reforms commonplace ideas about the worldwide deployment of human rights projects. Postcolonial fictions of human injury compel us to reenvision human subjectivity on the basis of a politics of collective human sentience that goes beyond the individuated forms of human sovereignty allowed by legal, juridical orders.

The stakes of contemplating this alternative humanity become apparent in the novel's evocation of political deaths in the form of what I call postcolonial crypts. The presence of collective crypts reforms the ethics of trauma so that it is no longer an experience limited to the singular individual human subject privileged by human rights discourses in the West. Instead, the figure of the dead subaltern, in this novel but also in the larger global literary imaginary, stands at the crossroads of life understood in terms of an imperfect balance between singular and collective experiences of trauma in the postcolony. This essay concludes by examining the role of postcolonial literature in figuring the postcolony's exceptional

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tie to subalternity as the basis of global difference. If subalternity is understood as the boundless demand for recognition made on behalf of a radical other, its larger affective signification in the context of globalized violence pits one vision of collective human sentience against the hegemonic concern for individual human subjects furthered by human rights discourses. As *Anil's Ghost* shows, fictions about subaltern difference depend on joining fictional inventiveness to psychic and social terrains in unforeseen ways. Ultimately they encourage us to assess our deepest assumptions about the way social life is lived and should be approached in the global South.

Approaching the Unhistorical Dead: The Sentience of Form

Anil's Ghost adopts a volatile aesthetics by pitting the novel's narrative structure against story and theme, a formal strategy that unsettles how the novel's stereotypic allusions to Sri Lanka as the place of undifferentiated, mass deaths may be understood. The novel advances the idea that no wounded or dead person can again be accorded whatever socially coherent subjective self he or she may have previously inhabited. The narrative shadows the arrival of the forensic expert Anil Tissera, a Sri Lankan native who, after a fifteen-year absence, returns to the country in the early 1990s as an advocate for a human rights center in Geneva. Soon Anil, along with Sarath, a local archaeologist assigned by the government to work with her, unearths the remains of a recent killing in a government-protected burial site in Bandarawela. Their discovery of the skeleton, whom they name Sailor, drives the motor of the story. Anil's quest to identify Sailor to make an evidentiary case against the abuse of governmental power is underscored by her initial confidence in her arguments with the doubt-prone Sarath: "But we can prove this, don't you see? This is an opportunity, it's traceable. We found him in a place that only a government official could get into" (52). However, by making Anil's findings initially suspect, and ultimately inconsequential, *Anil's Ghost* unsettles the edifice of crime and punishment and hence the entire apparatus of judiciary and legal redress for political deaths.[4]

If, as Ondaatje writes, "[i]n her work, Anil turned bodies into representatives of race, and age, and place," the certainty and usefulness of such a subject-reproducing task is cast in doubt by the form and arc of the narrative more suggestively than the novel's plot or theme (55). Aside from Anil's realization that for now her findings "would be reported, filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it" (55), the novel repeatedly evacuates the importance of her report on Sailor through fragmentary interruptions that detail an overabundance of such deaths in the forms of episodic vignettes, reportage, or simple lists. An episode of politically motivated murder is related in a jarring segment that describes a government officer being yanked from his seat and pushed out of a fast train shuttling through a tunnel; the incident is left unanchored from the rest of the narrative (31–32). Ondaatje also inserts lists of the disappeared with names, dates, times of disappearance, and snippets of details ("The colour of a shirt. The sarong's pattern"):

> Kumara Wijetunga, 17. 6th November 1989. At about 11:30 p.m. from his house.
> Prabath Kumara, 16. 17th November 1989. At 3:20 a.m. from the home of a friend.
> Kumara Arachchi, 16. 17th November 1989. At about midnight from his house.
> Manelka da Silva, 17. 1st December 1989. While playing Cricket, Embilipitiya Central College playground (41)

The list, as Sophia A. McClennan and Joseph R. Slaughter note, reproduces a 1992 Amnesty International report on unresolved disappearances during the Sri Lankan civil war that was brought, to little effect, before the United

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Nations Commission of Human Rights in 2005.[5] Ondaatje's list names ten missing persons and marks the surfeit of the "unhistorical dead" as always in excess of Anil's attempts to historicize Sailor (55). The names of the disappeared appear across from an enigmatic description of the *National Atlas of Sri Lanka*, whose indexes of geologic life, flora, fauna, and weather of the island are markedly empty of human presence—"No depiction of human life," Ondaatje writes, before filling in this blank with the serialized names of those vanished by war (40). Anil's discovery of Sailor's identity, abruptly revealed later in the text ("He was Ruwan Kumara and he was a toddy tapper" [269]), floats as a similarly hollow echo of yet another of the uncountable dead the novel has already listed.

The human problem at the crux of this novel is, hence, as Yumna Siddiqi notes, about the failure of a "historical" analytic for redressing the dehumanization of civil war (207). Anil's persistent question about Sailor ("Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices?" [56]), followed by her urgent conviction that "[t]o give him a name would name the rest," is undone by the multitudes of others like him. "He was a victim among thousands," Anil realizes, and asks, "What would this [finding his name] change?" (176). The doubts that plague Anil's belief in the restorative capacity of her mission imply that the individuation of death remains indeterminate in this text: neither the affixing of an identity nor its metonymic referentiality attests to the atrocities of violence. Rather, the undifferentiated dead become unruly and imperfect metonymic ciphers useful for marking death in terms of substitution, and the violence that attends it, as perpetual.[6] Sailor's death cannot rationally point to all others who have died or are dying and is in this sense rendered meaningless.

Stripping historical meaning from this one death, however, unleashes the figurative as well as affective replacements this novel produces as its vision of proximal yet universal death in Sri Lanka. Sailor's death, in its emptiness, is endlessly capacious—alluding to every other named and unnamed dead person, as well as to the risk his skeleton poses to all the main characters. Anil barely staves off her own political killing; her aide, Ananda, attempts suicide; Ananda's missing wife, Sirissa, appears posthumously in a surreal moment as Sailor's reconstructed face; and Sarath is murdered. Confronting Sailor, *Anil's Ghost* suggests, is a confrontation with death writ large—as a proximate and shared condition that works through an illogic of substitution. Death here is not an exceptional, irreplaceable, and unsharable ontological experience unique to the individual. It is best understood as an endlessly reproducible event that enfolds all who come within its purview. Reading *Anil's Ghost* is hence like entering an open crypt where the book itself serves as a repository for death's relational and recursive form.

The Postcolonial Crypt: Narrating Collective Cultural Melancholia

In *Anil's Ghost* death is reflected by formal arrangements that allow alternative affective significations of its presence to emerge in the midst of Sri Lanka's political turmoil. The novel intercepts the historical scene of conflict, with its global inflections, to shift the anglophone reader's perception of the war's collective societal impact. Insofar as the novel figures death as an omnipresence that signifies collective trauma, rather than a peculiarly individual one, the novel comes to represent a postcolonial crypt. The story of Lakma, who, at the age of twelve, witnesses the massacre of her parents, illustrates how the novel sutures the terms of collective melancholia to formal, linguistic expression. The event of her parents' killing, we're told, leaves Lakma irremediably scarred—mute, prone to nightmares, regressing into "infancy" in her

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verbal and motor skills, and "scared of the evidence of anything human" (103–04). In this state she accompanies her sole surviving relative, the glaucoma-stricken and disgraced archaeologist Palipana, into the Grove of Ascetics, their forested retreat away from the world. It is Palipana, Sarath's mentor, who aids in Anil's search for Sailor's identity by introducing Sarath and Anil to Ananda, one of the few remaining artists who can reconstruct a face for the skeleton. Yet we are told that Palipana's professional fall from grace comes from having "step[ped] into another reality," where the archaeologist "began to see as truth things that only could be guessed at" (81, 83). Within the novel, Palipana's skepticism toward "truth," his conviction that "in our world, truth is just opinion," stands counter to the certainty of Anil's claim that "[t]he truth shall set you free!" (102).

Palipana's presence serves as a counterincentive to the human rights narrative Anil seeks to valorize. Palipana's attempts to tell "an illegal story" so that the "unprovable truth emerged" is attuned to the cryptic "secret" in which the deaths of Sailor, Lakma's parents, Sarath, Sirissa, and the many other war dead are shrouded (105, 83, 82). Unlike Anil, who wants to tell a juridically and scientifically coherent story about these deaths, Palipana engages the "interlinear texts" that "contain the darker proofs" of phantasm in which each death resonates with the next (105). Such a reckoning with multiple deaths frames the violence of war as a collective experience of melancholia. As a crucible for collective melancholia, the postcolony as an open crypt becomes the site where the case for human rights violations given in Anil's mantra—"One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims"—is alternatively nuanced (176). The prospect of attaining closure through juridical redress that follows the disclosure of violent acts is replaced by the compulsion to continually and collectively acknowledge the losses signified by the dead. The former, which is Anil's way, reconciles loss with proper mourning where in a Freudian sense the lost object is recognized as dead so that the ego can find an ethical reason to move beyond it. The latter, represented by Lakma and Palipana, makes dwelling in loss, signaled by the melancholic's refusal to move past the traumatic event, the ethical impulse of narrative.

The generative relation between collective melancholia and linguistic expression that anchors *Anil's Ghost* may be understood by considering the formation of psychic crypts. In their work on mourning, melancholia, and the transmission of trauma, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok usefully theorize the workings of the intrapsychic crypt and the idea of the phantom. The "inexpressible mourning" of the melancholic, exhibited by Lakma and others in the novel, unfolds, they argue, as the result of "a secret tomb inside the subject" that keeps the lost object "buried alive in the crypt" as a form of psychic incorporation (*Shell* 130).[7] It is only when "[f]aced with the danger of seeing the crypt crumble . . . [that] the ego begins the public display of the interminable process of mourning," which is melancholia (136). In these subjects, the crypt conceals the source of a trauma or loss by deliberately confusing any attempt to articulate the loss. The presence of a crypt depends on a linguistic subversion that purposefully leaves the traumatic experience of loss unintelligible, deferred to other inaccessible forms of signification. The crypt marks a precarious psychic threshold that may inadvertently, through narrative or linguistic slip, at any moment reveal a trauma it must keep hidden. Even as the crypt forestalls melancholia, the secret preserved within it marks a psychic threshold that can collapse momentarily into expressions of melancholic grief whose intelligibility is contingent on how the story being told is made sensible.[8]

Although for Abraham and Torok the crypt describes psychic processes of indi-

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vidual grief, Abraham's idea of the phantom extends beyond personal loss to describe the workings of collective trauma. The phantom illuminates the way in which postcolonial crypts function in my analysis on a narrative level and as a generalized symptom of a cultural condition. Unlike the crypt that entombs the loss of an object of love within the individual, the transmission of transgenerational, interpersonal, and cultural trauma depends not on what is lost to ourselves but on how we are affected by what is lost to others. Rather than the unfinished personal mourning of an individual subject, the phantom signifies "a diverse species of ghosts" that comprise the wounds buried or encrypted in others that nonetheless also affect those near them (172). Describing the phantom effect of crypts, Abraham writes, "What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others" (172). The phantasmatic transmission of trauma allows that loss enclosed in singular crypts is transferable and has a ripple effect. By this analysis individual melancholia, motivated by a particular wound, can produce a collective cultural sense of being melancholic. The phantom in Abraham's account, passing as it does from one unconscious to another (e.g., parent's to child's), ventriloquizes the loss felt by another and "stages" its presence in "words" (176).[9] This narrative dimension in which "phantomogenic words" hint at the presence of the "gaps left within us by the secrets of others" notably "place[s] the effects of the phantom in the social realm (176, 171, 176).

When Palipana dies, Lakma sculpts an epitaph on a rock wall at the edge of a lake. With this gesture, the novel situates Palipana's death in relation to the trauma of Lakma's personal loss, as well as to the web of losses the reader is compelled to interpret in engaging the various crypts and phantoms that haunt *Anil's Ghost*. The novel reveals:

> [Lakma] had already cut one of [Palipana's] phrases into the rock, one of the first things he had said to her, which she had held on to like a raft in her years of fear. She had chiseled it where the horizon of water was, so that, depending on tide and pull of the moon, the words in the rock would submerge or hang above their reflection or be revealed in both elements. (107)

The sentence that Lakma carves remains secret in the novel, a double encryption of the trauma (her parents' deaths) that brought Lakma into Palipana's care and his subsequent death that removes him from hers. Its very secrecy imbues the sentence with a phantasmatic quality. Encapsulating as it does Lakma's fears, Palipana's consolation, and his legacy, it is deliberately rendered on the "horizon." Partially obscured and partially legible (now "submerge[d]," now "revealed"), the sentence possesses the capacity to transmit its etched trauma as a form of consuming melancholic expression. For the silent Lakma "the great generous noise of her work" as she carves the rock is voice-giving, "as if she were speaking out aloud" (107).[10]

The novel suggests that the partial disclosure of the origins of trauma inscribed in this manner endures as a palliative gesture because it lingers on loss. Hence, in the last days of Palipana's life, Lakma focuses on "[j]ust the sentence. Not his name or the years of his living, just a gentle sentence once clutched by her, the imprint of it now carried by water around the lake" (107). Like other partial disclosures—Sailor's identity, Sirissa's disappearance, Sarath's political allegiances, Palipana's gesture that discredits his academic reputation, Anil's tenuous ties to her American friend Leaf and her rift with her lover Cullis—this sentence, despite its inscrutability, compels the reader to interpret it as part of the general landscape of loss evoked by the island. "The yard-long sentence still appears and disappears," Ondaatje writes; "It has already become an old legend" (107). As a sign of the crumbling postcolonial crypt, the

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sentence becomes part of the phantomogenic aspect of *Anil's Ghost*, making one person's death material to how we read other deaths in the novel. Instead of foreclosing melancholia through the juridical accounting of individual death, *Anil's Ghost* amplifies how the loss of any subject circulates indiscriminately in communion with other deaths in a collective melancholia. In other words, instead of circumventing or curing melancholia, as human rights discourse aims to, the novel compels us to experience collective loss in a way that affirms the value of collective loss. The permanence ascribed to the secret epitaph in the narrative ensures that the circuits of loss it returns us to stay embedded in the novel's larger engagement with death as a culture-wide expression of melancholia.

Novels such as *Anil's Ghost* serve as postcolonial crypts by invoking the relational aspects of death that indicate the presence of collective cultural trauma. Unlike intrapsychic crypts that enclose loss to curtail melancholia, these texts function as phantom crypts that ventriloquize the loss of others. Encrypted stories of loss circulate recursively within the narrative to include those for whom this loss may not be primary. If, as Abraham notes, "[t]he phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other," the text of *Anil's Ghost* is a phantomogenic script that bears witness to a transmission of trauma perpetuated by the many dead who are part of a generic cultural circumstance (175). Whereas the solitary crypt hints at a melancholia as yet undisclosed, the presence of the phantasmatic postcolonial crypt reveals the pervasiveness of a cultural melancholia conditioned by myriad crypts that are everywhere collapsing and whose traumatic secrets are revealed, whether partially or wholly, in the stories the novel tells. Such stories encapsulate the characters whose losses are encrypted in them but are also transferred to readers involved in deciphering them.

Articulating Discourses: Human Rights and Subalternity

Anil's Ghost is among few exemplary works that refuse any easy narrative closures where escape from one stereotype—death—is figured through recourse to other stereotypes of romantic love, migration to a pristine West, prelapsarian fantasies of the past, or the emergence of a liberal model of economic, social, or political development. Instead, *Anil's Ghost* forces us to reckon anew with the terms of death as a culture-defining stereotype. To do so requires us to consider that there is no singular story of love or survival or progress here and to ask, What do we make of a book in which an entire society is shown locked in the grip of death? What does it matter that such death, instead of being cast as a solitary ontological experience, evokes a collective cultural one?

If cultural stereotypes gain fictional currency by repeatedly ascribing an attribute to a particular culture or place or people in generalized and static terms, Ondaatje's novel participates in such a flattening. Its preoccupation with death, however, provokes questions about the values and liabilities that adhere to the stereotype in the first place. Sri Lanka's appearance as a subaltern place entangled in "brutal human violence" is, for example, intimately tied to Anil's itinerary there as a human rights advocate (55).[11] The novel evinces a deep skepticism about Anil's fact-finding mission, describing her as an outsider, as someone who "had courted foreignness" and "felt completed abroad" (54).[12] Anil regards the victims of violence she encounters in a way that advances assumptions about their capacity to be human within a narrow framework of liberal rights discourse that privileges language and reason as the predominant aspects of humanity under threat. Her conviction—"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

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of the self" (55–56)—is the basis of the case she intends to make for Sailor. "Who was he," she wonders, "[t]his representative of all those lost voices?" (56). Yet Anil's inability to restore Sailor's voice draws attention to the limited conception of self or the restrictive "ethics of subject formation" through which concerns about human rights violations are routinely funneled (Ong 237). That such ideas about selfhood are culturally alien and fall short of addressing the troubles at hand is echoed by Sarath's blunt appraisal of Anil's work: "You know, I'd believe your arguments more if you lived here. . . . You can't just slip in here, make a discovery and leave" (44).

In the novel this outsider perspective—aligned as it is in Anil's case with a belief in the human subject constituted through the unity of logic, language, and law—is shown as predisposed to stereotypes about the postcolony as a place of stasis and danger. Aside from a far-flung transnational network of other human rights pressure points (Guatemala, Congo, the United States–Mexico border), the turmoil Anil witnesses in Sri Lanka is subtended in her imagination to stupendous moments of human destruction, both natural and political, that are frozen in time. Pompeii, Laetoli, Hiroshima, and Vesuvius are named as predecessors to the violence in Sri Lanka such that, for Anil, "[t]ectonic slips and brutal human violence" seem coeval in "provid[ing] random time-capsules of unhistorical lives" (55). Lacking reference to particular histories of conflict (colonial, ethnic, religious, linguistic) in Sri Lanka, Anil's view of the internecine war in Sri Lanka remains atavistic, recalling prior horrors but lacking contextual compass.[13]

The notion of a generic, radarless violence is what propels Anil's conviction that fear may be the only binding feature of humanity on the island. Traveling undercover to a remote location in search of Sailor's past, Anil suddenly recalls the "[a]mygdala," the "nerve bundle which houses fear" that long ago in London had "sounded Sri Lankan" to her when she first heard it (134–35). Confronted with her inability to make logical sense of the war, Anil is newly convinced that fear pervades the most ordinary aspects of life in Sri Lanka: "She remembers the almond knot. . . . [I]t governs everything. How we behave and make decisions, how we seek out safe marriages, how we build houses that we make secure" (135). The novel omnisciently reinforces Anil's meditations with a line from Anne Carson's *Plainwater*: "I wanted to find one law to cover all of living. I found fear . . ." (135). Notable here is that a universal law is discovered in lieu of a human rights narrative that would restore voice and, by extension, selfhood and dignity under the law to a single unidentifiable corpse. It seems that the arbitrary civilizational norms that govern Anil's attempts to humanize Sailor can only be tested by other equally risky postulates about the primal nature of existence in Sri Lanka—fear, archaic forms of violence, death—that tenuously unites the postcolony to a larger human community. The manner in which stereotypes of death and violence in the postcolony are evoked as the condition for making and unmaking the abridged form of humanity admitted under rights discourses sanctioned by the West remains, as the novel implies, largely tautological.[14]

If there is value to such a stereotype then it is this: the stereotype marks dying as a collective, far-reaching, and global experience, rather than a single event internal to individuals. The story sediments the postcolony as a place of subaltern dispossession while impelling us toward a different paradigm for how we relate to loss. Ondaatje uses the word "pietà" to describe Gamini's transformed relationship to his brother Sarath on finding him murdered for his involvement in Anil's mission:

> There are pietàs of every kind. [Gamini] recalls the sexual pietà he saw once. . . . There were other pietàs. The story of Savitra, who

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> wrestled her husband away from Death. . . . But this was a pietà between brothers. And all Gamini knew in his slowed, scrambled state was that this would be the end or it could be the beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath. . . . So he was too, at this moment, within the contract of a pietà. (288)

A pietà in this case not only involves an intimacy with the dead formed through piety and pity, as the etymology of the word suggests, but also cements into permanence a contract with the dead. For Gamini this entails "a permanent conversation" with the dead Sarath, despite their previous alienation from each other. Gamini's life, which goes on despite his brother's death, signals the extent to which violent loss in the novel is a part of diurnal life. As the opening of another of the novel's postcolonial crypts, this moment highlights the need to dwell in loss, or to be melancholic, as the new ethical obligation in reconciling ourselves to the deaths of others.

Anil's Ghost formally animates such an ethics by withholding a singular explanation that resolves the mystery of Sailor's death. Instead, the reader, like Anil, is left to choose between several moments that punctuate the story, each confounding conclusions proffered by others about the novel's investment in recounting the crisis in Sri Lanka. Both readers and characters, as Margaret Scanlan notes, are forced to engage in "imperfect" "acts of reconstruction," catching only fragmented and fleeting scenes of life in a world perpetually disrupted by violent deaths (302–03). If the reader initially identifies with the main premise of Anil's work as a human rights advocate—"The central truism in her work was that you could not find a suspect until you found a victim" (176)—the various end points of the novel muddle the clarity of such logic. The irrationality of violence, the unpredictability of its intrusions, effects both affective and material transformations in this work. Anil's work as a disinterested "reader of the intricacies of dead bodies" is compromised by her increasing involvement in the affective dimension of social violence (Burrows 161). A dispassionate reader implicated within Anil's "positivist philosophy" thus has to contend with the illogical progression of her investigation (167). Anil's embrace of the skeleton, her inability to distinguish Sailor from Sirissa, and the lack of evidence with which she brings her report on Sailor before the government commission are moments when the narrative of human rights she wishes to tell comes to a halt. Each of these is also a moment when Sailor's story ends:

> There had been hours when, locked in her investigations . . . , she too would need to reach forward and lift Sailor into her arms, to remind herself he was like her. Not just evidence, but someone with charms, and flaws. (170)

> The firelight set the face in movement. But what affected her—who felt she knew every physical aspect about Sailor, had been alongside him now in his posthumous life . . . —was that this head was not just how someone possibly looked, it was a specific person. . . . There was a serenity in the face she did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself. . . . She could no longer look at the face, saw only Ananda's wife in every aspect of it. (184–85)

> What I wish to report is that some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people. . . . The skeleton I had was evidence of a certain kind of crime. That is what is important here. *"One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims."* (275)

If this novel is about Anil's conversion from visitor, voyeur, and witness of violence to intimate participant, or, as Sarath says, her becoming "finally [one] of us," it is also about excesses of violence that cannot be represented through the sentience of an individual subject. Nor can violence be represented by the instrumental logic of individuated crime

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and punishment, by the corpse counting and juridical accounting insisted on by human rights discourses and institutions (272). In this respect, Sailor is and is not Sirissa, and his story, precisely because finding evidence for it remains untenable, only stands in for the stereotype of collective death in the postcolony.

The "gift of death," Derrida writes, is the essence of responsibility driven by our ability "to interpret death, to give oneself a representation of it, a figure, a signification or destination for it" (10). As a narrative that circulates around death, making it the condition of subalternity for the postcolony, *Anil's Ghost* serves as an interpretive destination that measures how we are implicated in the violence done to others. That is, it offers a frame of signification for evaluating our responsibility toward others by seeing ourselves entangled in each violent trespass. At a moment of despair Anil recalls her favorite lines from *The Man in the Iron Mask*: "We are often criminals in the eyes of the earth, not only for having committed crimes, but because we know that crimes have been committed" (54). Struggling to piece together the uncertain narrative of Sailor's death, the reader along with Anil journeys through a surplus of other scenes of annihilation and moments of knowledge. The text presents each death as an invitation to interpret our complicity in that violation, as a means of claiming responsibility for knowledge of crimes already committed against humanity.

Maps of Global Injury: A Subaltern Aesthetics

Despite its critique of human rights interventions, *Anil's Ghost*'s account of Sri Lanka as the place for an endless devaluation of life adheres to an age-old stereotype—the island as a scene of barbarous horror where the reality of life remains indistinguishable from carnage; where all recognition (distinguishing perpetrators from victims, for example) fails. How are we to make sense of the seemingly insurmountable civilizational rupture that the novel's depiction of violence leaves intact? After all, besides Anil, who may be unduly swayed by the influence of a liberal West, there are others who attest to the many crypts strewn over the country. The answer lies in how the novel's absorption with death alters our ethical relation to subaltern death and to a violence that seemingly occurs elsewhere. If, as Sarath speculates in a section entitled "The Life Wheel," "parting or death or disappearance were simply the elimination of sight in the onlooker" (278), *Anil's Ghost* continually returns us as readers of global fiction to the thresholds of death elsewhere to alter our perception of it.

To understand how, it is helpful to return to the questions with which we began: What does it mean that the location of all manner of human injury and annihilation in the novel is aligned with Sri Lanka in particular and the postcolony in general? Does envisioning entire swaths of the globe as crypts, organized around dying bodies, repeat Conradian stereotypes of the postcolony as primeval and fatalistic—stereotypes that cast the global South as the eternal unconscious of the mature, developed world? Or are such stereotypes ambivalently reinvented here to suggest a contestable global model of subalternity? If so, is this model of what Kwame Appiah calls postcolonial pessimism useful as a critique of transnationalization (155)? What are its pitfalls?[15] "In many ways," Ondaatje says in response to a question about his portrait of Sri Lanka, "the book isn't just about Sri Lanka; it could be Guatemala or Bosnia or Ireland. Such stories are familiar in other parts of the world" (Interview 253). To the extent that *Anil's Ghost* is a story about subjectivities formed anew, in and through lives lived in what Achille Mbembe has so tragically termed "deathworlds" ("Life" 1), this is Ondaatje's invitation to expand the terrain of

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such biocultural zones to multiple locations across the globe.[16]

The novel's far-flung global scope seems to dilute the possibility that assigning culpability or criminality for Sri Lanka's violence along specific ethnic or linguistic, religious, or national categories (e.g., Tamil or Sinhala, Hindu or Buddhist, citizen or foreigner) can be intelligibly made. Instead, Sri Lanka remains an abstract location where dying, because "the reason for war is war," is tautologically grounded (Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* 43). Unable to make a forensic and scientifically sound case against the government for human rights violations, Anil flees Sri Lanka for the West with the certitude that she is leaving behind a place of massacre: "She knew she wouldn't be staying here much longer. There was no wish in her to be here anymore. There was blood everywhere. A casual sense of massacre" (283). So just as Ondaatje dismantles, through Anil's failure, the programmatic human rights discourses of selfhood that for the West focalize civil war, ethnic strife, and genocide as a problem of the East or others, he returns us once more to a world-dividing difference.

This difference between secure and insecure lives is world-dividing insofar as the novel separates the metropolitan West from subaltern locations. The geographic distinctiveness of the novel's setting on the island and the larger global circuits of its references also makes this distinction transparent.[17] Although Anil's expert training in medicine occurs in London and the United States, her excavation of human remains—her confrontations with fields of unidentifiable human bodies—takes place in Colombo, northern Sri Lanka, Guatemala, and the borderlands of the American Southwest. The novel begins with a vignette of Anil's time in Guatemala, where forensic work at gravesites is motivated by a collective "vigil for the dead, for these half-revealed forms" that locals keep (7). In juxtaposing the various burial locations that conjoin the discovery of death with localized gestures of care and grief, and a more disinterested forensic effort to rationalize its causes, *Anil's Ghost* reflects generic postcolonial crypts.[18] These crypts, as Sarath reminds us, are strewn all over and infirmly closed: "The country existed in a rocking, self-burying motion. The disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of bodies from the Hokandara mass grave. Murders in the Muthurajawela marsh" (157).

The idea that collective death in the postcolony can be conveyed only as a universal stereotype is vital to the novel's critique of liberal, rights-based assumptions about global violence, even as the stereotype takes on a life of its own. All narrative threads within the text converge on scenes of collective or shared death that essentially flatten the social terrain of the postcolonial nation. Hence, in another culminating moment, President Katugala's death literally disappears into the death of the subaltern, his assassin:

> The cutting action of the explosion shredded Katugala into pieces. The central question after the bombing concerned whether the President had been spirited away. Because the President could not be found.
>
> *Where was the President?*
>
> . . . There was blood on the unbroken windows. . . .
>
> Some flesh, probably from the bomber, was found on the wall across the street. The right arm of Katugala rested by itself on the stomach of one of the dead policemen. . . .
>
> . . . The body, what remained of it, was not found for a long time. (294–95)

The destruction of the president's body, along with the body of the suicide bomber, eradicates political distinctions between them, those divides of "degree" and "motive" that Talal Asad argues differentiate the modern state's perpetration of violence from acts of terrorism.[19] The president, we must remem-

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ber, is one who "claimed no knowledge of organized campaigns on the island" and who, "to placate trading partners in the West," gave in to international pressure to allow Anil's humanitarian mission (16). The subaltern assassin meanwhile remains anonymous, figured only as "flesh" without gender, ethnicity, age, or any other sign of social being.

The critical discourse on subalternity is relevant here to the constructions of such a global map of injury for two reasons. First, in postcolonial studies the figure of the subaltern stands in exceptional difference from sites of privilege, rights, and access typically authorized by the modern nation. And, second, subaltern claims for recognition appear discursively as a zero-sum game over life-and-death struggles. If *Anil's Ghost* represents Sri Lanka as a deathworld, it also casts the entire postcolony as a place of subalternity. Promises of life and security, the hallmarks of modern sovereignty, come unmoored in such deathly renderings of the postcolony. In this particular literary cast Sri Lanka emerges as part of a worldwide traumatic terrain that instances what, after Gayatri Spivak, may be termed the place of a "subaltern effect."[20]

The subaltern effect of the postcolony in *Anil's Ghost* resides in its depictions of the precariousness of life in Sri Lanka. The exemplary associations of subalternity with death signal how the postcolonial literary text serves as a mode of disclosure that demands a different way of apprehending and responding to how deathly violence is globally allocated and experienced. Such novels transpose violence against particular subalterns who are excised from history onto a more general reflection of violence incurred in postcolonial societies. Ondaatje's ancestral memoir, *Running in the Family*, which describes the decadence and decline of his extended Burgher clan in colonial Ceylon, for instance, begins by casting the continent of his birth with a foreboding sense of demise: "*Asia*. The name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be widespread, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada" (22). In the throes of a death rattle, the continental space of Asia becomes a flattened crypt juxtaposing the ruins of the colonial Ondaatje family with that of the colony. *Running*, by recounting Ondaatje's return to Sri Lanka as a journey into "jungles and gravestones," presages the nation's birth as a moment that conjoins the false grandeur of old to an infirm subaltern present (69).[21] The risk of seeing Sri Lanka's emergence from colonialism as devolution into a repressed subaltern state is manifold. It promotes an unexamined nostalgia for a colonial past. It also lends itself to the immense flattening of the heterogeneity of postcolonial space as a space of failure.

Nonetheless it is worth considering why death is often theorized as the necessary precondition of the subaltern's entry into textual worlds and how this affects the ethical impulses of postcolonial writing. In postcolonial studies the death of the subaltern has been critical in framing the absence-presence of subalternity within a text. Spivak's well-known assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" is made in the aftermath of her analysis of colonized women's deaths by sati and the suicide of the young anticolonial nationalist Bhuvaneswari Bhadhuri ("Can the Subaltern" 308). Similarly, Spivak's fruitless search for the rani of Sirmur, who is nowhere to be found in nineteenth-century colonial archives while officers of the raj plot to annex her kingdom, dissolves into unconfirmed suspicions that the rani became a royal sati ("Rani" 270–71). The subaltern's death as demand for recognition is likewise made by the deaths of Mary Oraon, Douloti, Dopdi, and Jashoda, among others who figure as the women subalterns in Mahasweta Devi's prolific stories about the indigenous tribes of West Bengal (e.g., *Breast Stories* and *Imagining Maps*). As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes,

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"Subaltern death, or the dead subaltern, poses questions about the manner of death but also about the meaning of death . . . in a postmortem communication that traverses the boundary between the living and the dead (117).[22] Even if the subaltern cannot speak while alive, subaltern death appears as the trace of a muted speech to provoke a labor of affect that responds to and seeks to mediate the impossibility of subalterns as subjects within texts that attempt their representation.

Ranajit Guha's "Chandra's Death" explicitly makes this effort on behalf of Chandra, a lower-caste Bengali widow whose death from a coerced abortion was tried in nineteenth-century colonial courts. Guha's essay is seminal among the numerous studies by the Subaltern Collective because of its overtly feminist focus, but also because it struggles to reconstruct Chandra's story from a fragmented and dismembered legal archive. Partial testimonies—by Chandra's sister, Brinda, who helped perform the fatal abortion; by her mother; and by Magaram, the brother-in-law who impregnated her and ordered the termination—offer no inkling of Chandra's own position. What the essay evinces instead is the historian's attempt to respond to subaltern death by arguing for an ethical reading of Chandra's plight as a retrospectively construed moment of female solidarity, defiance, and tragedy. As Sunder Rajan notes, in this case and others that relate subaltern deaths, "death functions as disclosure rather than as attribute in and for subalternity" (131).

So, if death remains "the necessary condition for [the] disclosure of subaltern identity" (131), what kind of subalternity does Ondaatje's representation of Sri Lanka as a killing field disclose? We may conclude that Ondaatje's emphasis on serial, unspeaking deaths clears space for thinking about Sri Lanka as the latest edge of subalternity, one that is aligned with the whole of the postcolony. The trouble with such characterization is that it does away with distinctive ways of being human subjects in this arena. If all human beings in the postcolony are material because of their common vulnerability to violence, the subaltern effect Ondaatje produces for Sri Lanka effaces particularities of gender, race, aboriginality, and class that identify specific social differences as the basis for the subaltern's exclusion from society. Spivak warns that "[s]imply by being postcolonial or the member of an ethnic minority, we are not 'subaltern.' That word is reserved for the sheer heterogeneity of decolonized space" (*Critique* 310). This attention to specific historical circumstance is exactly what *Anil's Ghost* sidesteps.

When *Anil's Ghost* and other such novels delineate entire nations of the global South as death scapes, they deploy a questionable stereotype that functions only through the homogenization of social actors and cultural spaces. As a consequence, the decolonial space stands apart and compressed for the explicit burden of violence it bears, becoming allied with other such spaces across the globe.[23] Most importantly, subaltern spaces so imagined reflect human struggles of the most elemental order—over life and death—as the dominant metaphor of global dispossession. As a postcolonial crypt that serves as a repository for representing deathworlds elsewhere, *Anil's Ghost* suggests that a transnational reading public may approach such crypts and respond to subaltern demands for recognition only in the most generalized terms.

The Afterlife of Stereotypes

Constituting the postcolony in stereotypes of death and violence is inherently paradoxical, and this is its unresolved problem. As the stereotype proliferates, it leads to new interrogations about the bases of its assumptions while renewing old biases. Ondaatje's Sri Lanka is a stereotype that makes several demands. It moves us toward a new affective understanding of death as a relational human experience,

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a need to rethink the protocols of global human rights work, and a different paradigm for processing collective cultural trauma.[24] However, it also stabilizes the idea of the postcolony as absolute subaltern terrain, a place of danger and deficit, one in which no one is protected and nothing but brute violence remains a constant.

To acknowledge this problem is to recognize that stereotypes of violence in postcolonial contexts are volatile and stalling. As readers we may, as Anil does, escape the violent borders of Sri Lanka that Ondaatje enlivens with relief, leaving behind specters of unlawful death that seem hazardous and overwhelming even in fiction. Or we may, again like Anil, be haunted by our encounters with those who inhabit this other world, carrying forth a baggage that includes Sailor's illegally smuggled skeleton, Sarath's voice on a tape recorder, and memories of Ananda, the artificer who sculpts Sailor and Sirissa back to life. We may, on the basis of reading *Anil's Ghost*, reform our ideas about death as a phenomenal as well as ontological experience, taking stock once more of how we relate to the deaths of others near and far. And we may contemplate a reform of our own interventions into hot spots of violence that seem far away but remain proximal.

Anil's Ghost takes us toward fathoming the problem of collective death as an ethical bind that moves beyond our conception of ourselves as individuated, nation-bound subjects governed exclusively by reason. As readers implicated in the novel's depiction of collective loss and mourning, we cannot fully separate ourselves (even if we live in the West) from deaths in the postcolony. Such a separation would accept the notion that the postcolony has no historical or current relation to the West, with its own crypt of brutalities committed all around the global South in the name of reason and juridical accounting. Insofar as the reader is implicated, the place of the postcolony is not simply bounded by the geographic borders insisted on by Western ideas of nation-statehood. *Anil's Ghost* tests the sovereignty of the Western self adopted by human rights discourse and rooted in the false notion of the sovereignty of the nation-state's borders by implying that humanity is saliently interconnected on the basis of mutual attachments and responsibility. When asked about the "sense of responsibility" he felt to "make [Sri Lanka's] plight better known," Ondaatje recounts an old myth: "I remember reading the Indian myth, 'The King and the Corpse.' It's a strange, nightmarish tale about a king who ends up with a body round his neck that he has to be responsible for. . . . The king keeps burying the body, but he wakes up the next morning and it's round his neck again" (Interview 251).

This is the burden of responsibility faced by contemporary novels that render the postcolony's exceptional ties to violence. Representing the postcolony as a crypt risks the propagation of unfounded fears in hopes of shoring up unforeseen attachments. The affective dimensions of living through death that postcolonial crypts in *Anil's Ghost* evoke, those moments of waking up with another's corpse around our necks, make our perceptions of reality, as of ourselves, contingent on our imaginative capacity to be in the place of others even in the extreme moment of their death. In some measure, this is a unique attribute of fiction but also particularly in this case of the contemporary postcolonial novel. To the extent that the novel implicates us in its governing stereotype, it offers us an aesthetic script, however unsettling, for measuring our response to and indeed our share in death in other worlds.

Notes

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1. Tambiah; Horowitz; Hoole; Bandarage; and Daniel write of excess war deaths in Sri Lanka. Chamberlain, reporting for the *Guardian*, put the unconfirmed death toll at twenty thousand; Pallister and Chamberlain estimated that fourteen thousand were wounded in the May 2009 conflict.

2. Tambiah discusses "mass violence" in Sri Lanka in 1958, 1977, 1981, and 1983 (13–15). Other examples are the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrections against Tamil Eelam in the late 1980s and in 2009.

3. Spivak observes that Western-influenced "human rights culture" binds members of elite classes across the global North and South ("Righting Wrongs" 527).

4. Stanton unconvincingly argues that *Anil's Ghost* compels need for international criminal justice systems; others persuasively assert that it undoes the juridical expectations of colonial intrigue fictions (Siddiqi 197) to provoke ethical reflections on affect (Staels).

5. McClennan and Slaughter highlight literature's capacity to address human rights concerns (10–12).

6. See Chakravorty and Neti's argument about raced and gendered itinerant human bodies as death-prone and recyclable.

7. Secrecy over trauma defers melancholia, rendering crypts secure. Secrets are deflected onto afflictions such as eating disorders, unkemptness, filth, and coprolalia (Abraham and Torok, *Shell* 132). See also Freud's theory of the death drive (*Ego* 37–62; *Civilization* 75–82).

8. Encrypted secrets, obscured by misleading language, forestall melancholia. Crypts crumble when secrets buried in language are deciphered, and the dissolution of crypts exposes "the open wound" of the melancholic (Freud, "Mourning" 212).

9. Transgenerational phantoms exceed Freud's formulation of repression where the repressed returns as a response to social prohibitions ("Repression").

10. For Burrows, "Lakma's aphasia" signals empathy, key to the novel's depictions of trauma (174).

11. For Ratti, human rights, signification, and the law are interlinked in the novel. Mutua indicts culturally discriminatory metaphors of human rights law.

12. The novel endorses Anil's alliance with the West. "I live here," she affirms, "[i]n the West" (36).

13. Critiquing *Anil's Ghost*'s ahistoricity, LeClair derides its "irresponsible" apoliticism; Ganapathy-Doré excoriates the novel's turn to art as "permanent cure"; Derrickson (131), Goldman, Kanaganayakam (53n), Ismail ("Flippant Gesture" and *Abiding*), and Abeysekara find it inadequately attuned to ethnic rifts.

14. Anil's human rights inquiry derives from weapons deals the Sri Lankan government forges with unnamed Western powers. This implicates her scientific rationalization of violence as emanating from the West. Anil's example shows how culpability—hers, ours, the West's—depends on global geopolitics.

15. Appiah links pessimism in postcolonial African novels to a "transnational rather than a national solidarity" publicizing the "suffering of victims" (155).

16. Biopower is key to Foucault's formulation of modernity's tolerance for "life" (*History*, pt. 5, 133–60; *"Society"* 239–64). Agamben argues that the rule of "bare life" that sanctions the deaths of neglected populations is the corollary to modern security regimes. Mbembe defines modern subjectivity as contingent on death, not life ("Life").

17. JanMohammed and Patterson discuss the deficit and excess of subjectivity that the threat of death confers in slavery.

18. On psychic crypts, see Abraham and Torok, *Shell* and *Wolf Man's Magic Word*.

19. Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* is a counterexample.

20. Spivak's term "subaltern subject-effect" illustrates the conundrum of historians seeking to "recover" subaltern consciousness, will, and presence from colonial archives premised on the eradication of subalterns ("Subaltern Studies" 204–05).

21. *Running* reconstructs family history from ledgers, photos, and memories to reveal the debauchery of the Ondaatjes. The idyll of colonial frolic is transformed after decolonization: family ties fray as societal violence rises.

22. Sunder Rajan finds that subaltern death disappears in archives, a double elision: "The vanishing of their death is, of course, also their death" (134).

23. Necropolitics concerns globalized violence (evidenced in plantation slavery, apartheid and neocolonial settlements, oil wars, and sectarianism) that shows death as intimate to modern sovereignty (Mbembe, "Necropolitics").

24. In *Precarious Life* and *Frames of War*, Butler describes the ethical stakes of refusing to participate in the deaths of others.

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