

A Journey to “Partial Cosmopolitanism” in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*

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MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) can be read as a complex, open-ended narrative about cosmopolitanism and its viability as a moral choice and way of life. The novel’s protagonist, thirty-three-year-old Anil Tissera, is a Sri Lankan-born and Western-trained forensic pathologist, a transnational nomad who accepts work assignments from internationally recognized non-governmental organizations. The story begins to unfold as, after an absence of fifteen years, she returns to her native country on a fact-finding mission authorized by the United Nations. Her task is to investigate human rights violations — particularly ones committed by the state’s government — during the Sri Lankan civil war, a complicated and horrifyingly violent “unofficial war” (*Ghost* 17) that was still raging when the novel was published.¹

An embodiment of an itinerant identity position, Anil has evoked conflicting critical responses. While Victoria Burrows cautiously acknowledges that Ondaatje does “not . . . represent [Anil] as uncaring” (168), several others interpret the protagonist much more negatively, seeing her as an incarnation of privileged Western mobility, a detached observer whose life remains unburdened by any emotional closeness to what she unearths, dissects, and examines (that is, human bodies and fates). Heike Härting, for example, using *diaspora* as the key term in her analysis, argues that the novel “envisions diaspora in largely ahistorical terms as a condition of Anil’s nomadic identity, cultural relativism, and political failure” (44). In Härting’s reading, “the narrative frequently suggests that Anil’s experience of cultural and social displacement presents a cultural impediment that keeps her suspended in a state of perpetual foreignness and transition” (51). However, David Farrier (84-85), focusing on the binary of intimacy and distance in the novel, explicitly takes issue with Härting and highlights the novel’s representations of Anil’s involvement with the local: “[Anil] does engage in the unburial of intimate testimony” (85). Most pivotally, Farrier argues that

“Anil’s nomadism is not the impediment to engaging with the local” but instead “represents a potential freedom from geographical as well as historical consternation” (85).

While my understanding of Anil resonates with Farrier’s position, my contribution to this conversation is to place Ondaatje’s characterization of his protagonist in dialogue with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s vision of cosmopolitanism, as defined in his 2006 monograph, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. (Because Anil is a voluntary migrant, interpreting her in light of the concept of diaspora — as Härting does — would, in my view, necessitate a considerably longer discussion than is possible here about the complex conceptual relationship between the classical victim/forced diasporas and other types of diasporic conditions.)² What emerges from my reading of *Anil’s Ghost* is a portrait of a protagonist who starts out as a cosmopolitan estranged from her country of origin, but who, in the course of the novel, becomes what Appiah terms a “partial cosmopolitan,”³ namely, a cosmopolitan who has a special sense of affiliation with (or is partial to) her “kith and kind” (*Cosmopolitanism* xv). That is, Ondaatje portrays a Sri Lankan returnee working her way from the “long-distance gaze” (11) of a semi-alienated expatriate to the engaged and passionate “citizen’s evidence” (272) that she — by the novel’s end, a partial cosmopolitan — eventually gives in Colombo. While previously Sandeep Sanghera has offered a reading focusing on the notion of citizenship in *Anil’s Ghost*, and Victoria Cook has written about transnational identities in the novel, my use of “partial cosmopolitanism” as an interpretive prism has the advantage of *both* addressing citizenship as a mode of belonging *and* giving a name and definition to one specific type of transnational identity.

Härting, too, briefly refers to Anil as a “cosmopolitan traveller” (46, 51), evoking the well-known trope of the aloof, disenchanted, and culturally elitist border-crosser who cherishes critical distance and cultivates emotional detachment; this view of cosmopolitanism is familiar, for example, from literary-historical discussions of Anglo-American high modernism.⁴ Appiah, however — a philosopher who, in his 2006 book, primarily focuses on ethics — approaches and envisions cosmopolitanism differently. He starts with a personal memory that invokes an anti-colonial struggle and thus points to intense engagement rather than to indifferent detachment: “In the final message my father left for me and my sisters, he wrote, ‘Remember you are citizens of the world.’ But as a

leader of the independence movement in what was then the Gold Coast, he never saw a conflict between local partialities and a universal morality — between being part of the place you were and a part of a broader human community” (*Cosmopolitanism* xviii). Appiah’s stance — representing what Eric Brown, in his discussion of Stoic cosmopolitanisms, terms “moderate cosmopolitanism” (which, in the Stoic context, allowed for “special consideration for compatriots” [555]) — navigates the terrain between two extreme positions: “strict cosmopolitanism” (Brown 555),⁵ on the one hand, and anti-cosmopolitanism, on the other. Strict cosmopolitanism sets the moral bar extremely high by arguing that one’s moral responsibilities to any member of the human community are the same. This model does not accept the claim that one’s moral responsibilities to members of one’s nation/state, locality, or community should take priority over one’s responsibilities to strangers. According to the strictest version of cosmopolitanism, there is no difference between the needs of an alien living overseas and the needs of one’s neighbour, in terms of one’s moral obligation to respond to those needs. By contrast, anti-cosmopolitanism, according to Richard Shapcott’s definition, involves highlighting “contextual origins of community and ethics,” denouncing “cosmopolitan universalism,” and arguing “that actual particularistic community, such as nationality, overrides any abstract or imagined bonds between members of the human species” (50-51).⁶ Appiah, in turn — accepting neither the strict version nor anti-cosmopolitanism — promotes the kind of cosmopolitanism that *both* recognizes the existence of a global human community that creates universal moral obligations *and* acknowledges that we have special responsibilities to those closest to us; hence his term “partial cosmopolitanism” (*Cosmopolitanism* xv). Appiah admits that these two principles at times clash and that cosmopolitanism therefore is, in a sense, “the name not of the solution but of the challenge” (xv). Nevertheless, he advocates “partial cosmopolitanism” as the ideal that we should strive for:

A citizen of the world: how far can we take that idea? Are you really supposed to abjure all local allegiances and partialities in the name of this vast abstraction, humanity? . . . Fortunately, we need take sides neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hard-core cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality. The position worth defending might be called (in both senses) a partial cosmopolitanism. (xv-xvii)

Appiah's "partial cosmopolitanism" offers a fitting interpretive key to *Anil's Ghost*. Katherine Stanton argues in *Cosmopolitan Fictions* that "opening with her arrival to Colombo on a human rights investigation, [*Anil's Ghost*] foregrounds Anil Tissera's realization that she does not have any attachments to the place of her birth. And this does not change — or rather, does not change in the way that her investigative partner, Sarath Diyasena, wants it to" (5). I read the novel differently — namely, as a text that not only acknowledges the expatriate cosmopolitan's alienation from her home island, but also emphasizes the formation of an emotionally and morally significant reconnection, which, in turn, facilitates the emergence of her partial cosmopolitanism in the sense proposed by Appiah.

From this perspective, the storyline of *Anil's Ghost* reads as follows:⁷ early on in the novel, native suspicion of the motivation, commitment, and cultural competence of the returning expatriate is articulated, in no uncertain terms, by the local archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, who is assigned by the Sri Lankan government to be Anil's work partner (and whom Anil initially suspects of being a government spy): "I'd believe your arguments more if you lived here," he said. "You can't just slip in, make a discovery and leave" (44). Anil's application had, indeed, "originally been halfhearted," mainly because it had "seemed somewhat unlikely that human rights specialists would be allowed in at all" (15, 16). However, both Anil's emotional connection with her native country and her sense of moral obligation to it deepen quickly once she is physically back in Sri Lanka. This process soon becomes apparent to Sarath, who gradually realizes that Anil is no naïve returnee: instead of being some well-intentioned but immature enthusiast, Anil is a competent and dedicated professional, as well as an emotionally nuanced person with a significant capacity for quiet, perceptive empathy. When Anil saves local artificer Ananda Udegama's life after his suicide attempt, an impressed Sarath exclaims: "You should live here. Not be here just for another job" (200). The response of Anil, who feels "citizenized" (200) by Sarath's and Ananda's friendship, is intense and passionate: "This isn't just 'another job'! I decided to come back. I wanted to come back" (200). Finally, in the scene in which the reader for the last time sees Anil and Sarath together in the same room, "the Armoury Auditorium that was a part of the anti-terrorist unit building in Gregory's Road [in Colombo]" (271), she — in reporting her findings in front of a hos-

tile, government-sympathizing audience — not only fearlessly argues that “some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people” (275), but also unequivocally identifies with the locals: “I think you murdered hundreds of us” (272). Sarath recognizes, without difficulty, the significance of the Sri Lankan self-identification embedded in Anil’s testimony: “*Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*” (272). Yet, the narrative offers no indication that Anil’s newly re-discovered identity as a Sri Lankan national causes her to renounce her cosmopolitan “citizenship”; instead, at the end of the story, Anil, a partial cosmopolitan, embraces both allegiances. To further demonstrate that partial cosmopolitanism is an apt description of her identity position at the novel’s end, I will next, by way of background, elaborate on the process that Anil undergoes as a returnee.

From a Cosmopolitan Expatriate to a Returnee

For Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan expatriate living in Canada, Sri Lanka’s postcolonial multiculturalism represents a potential for harmonious co-existence and creative connectivity (Ondaatje with Jaggi 7), whereas the long and violent civil war, “a Hundred Years’ War with modern weaponry” (*Ghost* 43), signifies the worst imaginable division and separation. Like Ondaatje himself, his cosmopolitan protagonist embodies both separation and connection, or both distance and intimacy (to allude to Farrier’s preferred conceptual pair), in her relation to Sri Lanka. On the one hand, Anil is disconnected from her country of origin, having lived in the West — England and the United States — her entire adult life. On the other hand, she does have an emotional relationship, albeit a dormant one, with her native island, having resided there until she was eighteen. The narrative implies that the death of her parents in a car accident after her emigration (a detail rarely mentioned by critics) has complicated Anil’s relationship with Sri Lanka during her adulthood. Although Ondaatje refrains from dramatizing this trauma, the sudden departure — or disappearance — of Anil’s parents from her life is an important factor in the novel’s psychological texture: the abrupt loss connects some of Anil’s emotional life-world to the experiences of those Sri Lankans whose family members have disappeared, or are known to have been killed, during the war. Anil’s parents did not die because of ethnic strife or political violence; nevertheless, the narrative implicitly links her personal loss to her capacity for empathy. Indeed, even though

Anil's line of work requires her to maintain a professional distance from suffering, her emotional intelligence includes the ability to empathize, as the novel's Guatemalan prologue, with its focus on the dynamics between Anil's forensic team and the local families of the missing/dead, demonstrates: a small detail of a grieving Guatemalan woman's body language (5-6) leaves an indelible impression on Anil's psyche, emotionally connecting her forensic work at excavation sites with the experiences of the victimized families (6). This disclosure, at the novel's opening, of Anil's intuitive understanding of the emotional depths of mourning helps the reader to bond with her, despite her seemingly detached identity position as a nomadic pathologist⁸ — a perpetual transient who deals with dead bodies, an itinerant cosmopolitan without permanent attachments to living persons in any locality.

During her expatriate years, Anil has not only "courted foreignness" and "felt completed abroad" (54), but has also become a well-trained scientist. However, she knows that her professional background does not make her an expert in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. She recognizes, on arrival, that the Sri Lanka of wartime is a complex terrain that she does not know intimately — a moral and political landscape that she has observed, but has not been able to truly penetrate, with her expatriate's gaze (11). In discussing his own wartime visits to his country of origin, Ondaatje, an émigré since the early 1950s, noted to Maya Jaggi that he "didn't want to go there and make assured judgements about what should be done" and that he had, instead, felt a deep need to be a listener ("Michael Ondaatje in Conversation" 6, 7). Although his protagonist, a scientist to the core, searches for facts, truths, and evidence with much more specifically defined objectives than a fiction writer might, she, too, returns to her home island with questions rather than with answers. In this sense, Ondaatje's and Anil's inquisitive epistemological dispositions, though not identical, resonate with each other.

Even though Anil does not return to Sri Lanka with a preconceived "truth" or with an agenda that she wishes to *impose* on the locals, the identity of a forensic pathologist, whose task is to *unearth* scientific information/truths by studying dead bodies, skeletons, and bones, is vitally important for her. The epistemological orientation of a scientist is a significant component of the Western dimension of her self-understanding. In the West, Anil "had come to expect clearly marked roads to the source of most mysteries" (54). In Sri Lanka, by contrast, she

finds herself attempting to discover truths about politically motivated killings under circumstances in which the politics of the ongoing war make any roads to the sources of enigmas seemingly inaccessible. Anil knows, upon starting her seven-week assignment in war-torn Sri Lanka, that “[n]obody at the Centre for Human Rights was very hopeful about it” (16). However, her expectations soon change, mainly because she and Sarath find the focus of their work almost immediately. Anil, subtly prompted by Sarath, unearths an allegedly ancient skeleton that the two name Sailor (after the nursery rhyme “Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor,” he being the fourth skeleton that they find) — in actuality, the remains of a rather recently deceased individual. Anil realizes that Sailor must have been the victim of a killing by government forces because she has found this contemporary skeleton on a protected archaeological site that no one could have accessed without governmental permission. Fully aware of the implications of her discovery, Anil is consumed by her desire to identify Sailor; this task becomes the core of her and Sarath’s project.

For Anil, Sailor comes to represent all victims of political killings by the government, “all those lost voices” (56). Her conviction that “[t]o give him [Sailor] a name would name the rest” (56) may, at first sight, seem to suggest that she has an overly rigid and immature faith in the capabilities of Western scientific epistemology and forensic science. However, such a reading, which basically faults Anil for both epistemological and political naïveté (see, for example, Burrows 172), fails to notice that, at this point of her life, Anil’s ethics as a cosmopolitan, on the one hand, and as a Sri Lankan, on the other, have begun to converge in a way that had not occurred while she was living in the West.

To elaborate, Anil’s intense response to her discovery of the remains of a victim of political murder has both ethical and affective dimensions. First of all, the narrative’s focus on her obsession with identifying a single victim highlights a core principle of cosmopolitan ethics: “At its simplest, cosmopolitanism embodies the idea that individual human beings are the primary concern of morality. Individuals should be the measure of all accounts of rights, justice and ethics. Cosmopolitanism is ultimately a claim that individuals, no matter where they are or who they are, deserve equal moral respect” (Shapcott 20). Anil’s desire to “name” Sailor — that is, to acknowledge his human individuality, even if posthumously — reflects such moral respect. Second, Anil indeed becomes *obsessed* with Sailor and his identity; hers is a passionate, rather

than a scientifically “cool,” reaction. This emotional intensity arises from her sense of responsibility, which is even keener than usual during this particular assignment that has taken her back to her country of origin. When Ondaatje sought to articulate to Jaggi his own sense of responsibility as a Sri Lankan-born novelist writing a work of fiction set in the civil war, he — always fond of fables — referenced “an Indian myth, *The King and the Corpse*,” which he described as a “strange, nightmarish tale about a king who ends up with a body round his neck that he has to be responsible for” (“Michael Ondaatje in Conversation” 6). The king, said Ondaatje, “has to save the country, and he keeps burying the body, but he wakes up next morning and it’s round his neck again” (6). Ondaatje called his own attitude to his subject matter the “same kind of obsession Anil has with the skeleton — not letting go of it” (6). Despite her moments of doubt and despair (176), Anil does not abandon her project, because she is committed to a morality that emphasizes the inherent importance and dignity of each individual as a member of the human community — that is, to cosmopolitan ethics, as defined above by Shapcott.

Another important factor shedding light on Anil’s “obsession” is that she, though capable of admirable self-discipline, is herself a traumatized person, or at least one who has been repeatedly exposed to traumatizing circumstances — not only because of the untimely loss of her parents, but also because she has witnessed horrifying humanitarian crises in places such as Guatemala and “the Congo” (28). Even though Anil is a forensic pathologist, rather than a real-time eyewitness, her work requires her to incessantly ponder human violence and its ramifications. Also, in “the Congo,” she personally experienced what, during major political crises, often turns out to be the frustrating helplessness of even the most established humanitarian and human rights organizations — a helplessness that, as the narrative makes clear, is in itself a professionally and personally traumatizing experience: “If and when you were asked by a government to leave, you left. You took nothing with you. . . . At the airport, while they searched her clothing, she’d sat almost naked on a stool” (29). Anil does not want her Sri Lankan assignment to end in the same way. In other words, her obsession with *Sailor* should not only be interpreted in light of her scientific perspective, but should also be read against the backdrop of a cosmopolitan’s serious struggle to figure out her moral responsibilities and allegiances during a time of war in her

country of origin. The complex moral and psychological process that accompanies Anil's transformation from an expatriate into a returnee eventually results in her becoming a "partial cosmopolitan" in the sense suggested by Appiah — an individual who recognizes her moral obligations both to the global human community and to her "kith and kind."

Cosmopolitanism, Cultural and Epistemological Pluralism, and the Importance of the Local

Cosmopolitanism is not without its critics. For example, philosopher Hilary Putnam — in his response to "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," Martha Nussbaum's now-canonical 1994 *Boston Review* essay on cosmopolitanism — states that "it would never occur to [him] to say that [he is] 'a citizen of the world'" (95). In his view, Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism (a "stricter" version than the one promoted by Appiah, although not the strictest imaginable variety) is based on a flawed interpretation of universal reason that makes reason "independent of all traditions" (95; "tradition" here refers to the particular, contextual, and local). More generally, critics of cosmopolitanism argue — according to Garrett Wallace Brown's summary, which synthesizes critiques of (particularly Kantian) cosmopolitanism by "cultural relativists," "pluralists generally," and postcolonialist scholars (126, 127) — that humans "have various competing conceptions of the good, that this diversity cannot/should not be forced into a hegemonic universal ethic, and that . . . cosmopolitans are in fact attempting to create an imperialistic utopia" (127). As these criticisms indicate, any articulation of cosmopolitanism must be clear about its attitude to the *local*. Ondaatje is, in my view, a writer with both a postcolonial⁹ and a cosmopolitan awareness who embraces cultural pluralism — in other words, a cosmopolitan who profoundly respects the local and particular. Because *Anil's Ghost* is a novel rather than a philosophical treatise, it does not offer a theoretical formulation for the mutual inclusivity of cosmopolitanism, postcolonialism, and cultural pluralism. Yet it reflects, throughout, Ondaatje's deep respect for the local (here, for Sri Lankan culture and society) — a disposition that can be seen as an extension of cosmopolitanism's above-discussed respect for the innate human worth of each *individual* as a member of the human community. At the same time, the novel poses critical questions for both Sri Lanka and the West.

Ondaatje's narrative highlights the pluralism that is an inherent part of his cosmopolitanism by pondering different epistemologies, Western and Sri Lankan. In Ondaatje's eyes, Sri Lanka's complex ancient and colonial history has made the country profoundly multicultural ("Michael Ondaatje in Conversation" 7). The Sri Lanka that he portrays in *Anil's Ghost* is therefore a mixture of multiple epistemologies — both Eastern, epitomized by Buddhism and the local epigraphist Palipana's vast knowledge of Sinhala history,¹⁰ and Western, embodied by the novel's Sri Lankan experts on Western emergency medicine. *Anil's Ghost*, on the one hand, places a powerful emphasis "on the need to listen closely and respectfully to the situated knowledges of Sri Lanka," as accurately noted by Burrows (165). That is, Ondaatje profoundly appreciates local, subjugated knowledges, as his sensitive and nuanced representations of Buddhist mysticism and Palipana's reconstructions of local history demonstrate. On the other hand, his narrative recognizes that — in nationwide terms — there is no virginal native cultural condition/epistemology, completely unaffected by Western cultures/modes of thought, for Sri Lankans to return to. Nor is there a single or unified indigenous culture either (as the civil war has, of course, made painfully obvious), due to the country's multiple Eastern ethnic, cultural, and spiritual heritages.

Because of Ondaatje's postcolonial awareness, many critics have been tempted to label anything and everything that seems "Western" in *Anil's Ghost* as ultimately representing something negative. However, the novel's worldview is, in my reading, far too complicated and hybrid to lend itself to such a simplified categorization. Ondaatje's list of the medical texts always at hand "in the operating rooms of the base hospitals in the North Central Province" (117), where Gamini Diyasena (an emergency room doctor and Sarath's younger brother) worked before moving on to a job in Colombo, highlights the Western origin of the medicine that the novel's ER doctors practice. Ondaatje's profound admiration¹¹ for Sri Lankan ER specialists' work renders overly categorical the suggestion made by Burrows, among others, that, in *Anil's Ghost*, scientific knowledge *always* represents a negative or destructive force, "a power that is epistemologically sanctioned to discount local postcolonial knowledges" (Burrows 167). Of course, Ondaatje is far from naïve: his above-mentioned list includes two medical texts that are, historically, based on data gathered in US military hospitals during the Korean

and Vietnam wars (see *Ghost* 117), that is, data collected by a Western superpower during its military campaigns in East and Southeast Asia; what Palipana elsewhere in the novel calls “the irony of history” (12) is palpable here, due to these medical sources’ nakedly obvious connection with Western neo-imperialism. Nevertheless, whatever the genealogy of the medical knowledge that the novel’s local physicians use, they utilize their expertise to help anyone and everyone brought to their emergency rooms.¹² Gamini, moreover, not only embodies proficiency in Western emergency medicine, but, along with his brother, also epitomizes a profound love of the local (see, for example, 285). The scene, set in the hallway of a hospital, in which Gamini “reached out and touched the small Buddha in the niche of the wall as he passed it” (119-20) subtly calls attention to the harmonious co-existence of Western medical knowledge and a local worldview/spirituality in the novel’s otherwise often chaotic and conflicted world.

This said, Anil’s conversations with Palipana and Sarath do reveal genuine differences between Eastern and Western epistemologies, between a forensic pathologist’s, an epigraphist’s, and an archaeologist’s professional approaches to truth and knowing, and between the three characters’ personal epistemological stances. As befits the novel’s epistemological interest, the quest for “truth” occupies a pivotal position in the narrative. Ondaatje’s characters approach the concept from various angles, Eastern and Western; attempt to figure out its contextual meaning during the ongoing conflict; ponder its usefulness; and wonder whether and how to live with the painful political and private truths of wartime, and whether and how to act on them. Palipana’s presence in *Anil’s Ghost* calls attention, in heightened fashion, to the very complexity and opaqueness of “truth” in the text. For decades, Palipana — an eccentric introvert completely dedicated to his research, detached from the world even before his full and final withdrawal from it — dazzled academia with his scholarly rigor and originality. However, he lost his credibility when it was discovered that he had, towards the end of his career, placed himself above the rules of academic truth-seeking by offering “over-interpretations” (Gamini’s diplomatic term; 193) of ancient Sinhala history that were, in all likelihood, based on fabricated primary sources (81). The narrative offers two competing views of Palipana’s academic dishonesty: a stern judgment by his fellow scholars and a more empathetic suggestion (which considers the effect

of aging on the elderly man's perception of reality) that perhaps his invention of non-existent sources had been "less of a falsehood in his own mind; perhaps for him it was not a false step but the step to another reality, the last stage of a long, truthful dance" (81). Ironically or fittingly (depending on the reader's viewpoint), in conversations with Anil, the discredited scholar firmly defends the principle of the inaccessibility and relativity of truth, reminding her that truth was an extremely complicated concept even for the ancients (102).

In response, Anil quotes the New Testament to Palipana for the secular purpose of underscoring the vital importance of a relentless quest for truth in science: "'The truth shall set you free.' I believe that" (102). Although Anil here resorts to the authoritative voice of a Western-trained scientist,¹³ hers is, at the same time, the voice of a morally committed but emotionally fatigued cosmopolitan who seeks under pressure to "keep the faith" by actively convincing herself of the meaningfulness of her work in the context of a complex war that does not seem to follow any rules or make any sense. The approach of the elderly epigraphist — for whom, in his sightlessness and in the twilight of his life, "all history" is now "filled with sunlight" (84) — is much more relativistic: "Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion" (102). At the meta-level of the narrative, the text's cosmopolitan tolerance and plurality (as distinct from Anil's, in this case) appears as a disposition that gives room both to Palipana's transcendent relativism and to Anil's epistemological determination.

While the tension between the two characters' approaches to "truth" remains unresolved, Anil's repressed anxiety during the debate demonstrates that the prolonged Sri Lankan civil war has blurred any conceptual boundaries that Western philosophy traditionally sees as separating questions that address knowing (epistemology) from those that address being (ontological and existential issues) and those that address moral decision-making and acting (ethics). Brian McHale argues that while "the dominant of modernist fiction is *epistemological*" (9), "the dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*" (10). However, the epistemological and the ontological cannot always be neatly separated in fiction, in philosophy, or in life; moreover, appropriate social and political action calls for ethical theorizing and moral decision-making as well. As Walter Mignolo notes, addressing epistemology, ethics, and ontology, "The maintenance of life is an expression of *knowledge*, a manifestation of

adequate behavior in the domain of *existence*" (19; emphases added). The context for any interactions among Ondaatje's main characters in the novel's present is the war, a condition in which all epistemologies, Western and local, appear inadequate, in that they repeatedly fail to "maintain life" (to refer back to Mignolo) in the face of the overwhelming violence and terror. Mercifully for the reader, however, the depicted epistemologies and their applications at times offer frail but important signs of hope and healing, as with the successful surgeries in the novel's various emergency rooms, or with the peaceful moments that the characters enjoy among the ruins of ancient Buddhist sacred sites, or with the narrative's cautiously hopeful ending that depicts the grief-stricken and self-destructive Ananda resuming the work through which he best serves his community.

While Anil's epistemological disposition represents empirical science and analytic thinking ("I need to break things apart to know where someone came from" [259]), Sarath, questioning whether "clarity is necessarily truth," argues that clarity is "simplicity" in a negative, unhelpful sense (259). Anil may study bodies as if they were history, but Palipana and his former student Sarath "study history as if it were a body" (193): they sense in history an intimacy with the local — a deep physical and spiritual connection with the soil, the place, the culture. Sarath, like Palipana, can see the past in his mind's eye. A seer and storyteller rather than an analyst, Sarath, who is in love with the past, "can read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel" (151). His deepest desire is "to write a book someday about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed" by letting the story of the city "emerge out of this dark trade with the earth, his knowledge of the region in chronicles" (29). Sarath combines his professional passion with his moral sensibility, as he, in addressing the present, tells Anil rather sternly: "I want you to understand the archaeological surround of a fact. Or you'll be like one of those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel. That false empathy and blame" (44). For Sarath, cosmopolitanism that demonstrates moral integrity must include a comprehensive understanding of, and a hands-on engagement with, the local and the particular.

While sympathetic to Anil's project, Sarath is powerfully aware of the risks that it involves. As he ponders them, he remembers how he and Palipana once illuminated a dark cave by setting branches of a

rhododendron on fire in order to see any ancient images that might still be visible on the cave's walls: "Half the world, it felt, was being buried [as a result of the war], the truth hidden by fear, while the past revealed itself in the light of a burning rhododendron bush" (156). In the eyes of Sarath, a lover of history with very few meaningful connections to the contemporary world, *this* relationship between the past and the present — the past as something that he can see and illuminate, and the present as something that remains opaque and impenetrable to him — represents an "old and accepted balance" (156). It is not that Sarath is insensitive to the importance of truth: "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" (157). However, having long witnessed a vicious cycle of violence that has proved extremely difficult to break, he fears the consequences of Anil's mission: "There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you" (157).

This passage, of course, serves as a foreshadowing. Even though both Sarath and Anil do their best to act morally in an impossible situation, a state of war in which any inadvertent misstep may cost one or more lives, Anil eventually takes such a misstep: at a moment of confusion, she temporarily doubts Sarath and leans on Dr. Perera, a government-linked senior medical officer in Colombo. As a result, events spin out of both Anil's and Sarath's control. Anil's newly discovered partial cosmopolitanism, which includes her reawakened Sri Lankan identity and allegiance, does not prevent her project from ending tragically: we, the readers, never find out whether Anil and Sarath's work ever changes anything for the better, but we do learn that Anil's testimony in Colombo results, without delay, in the brutal torture and murder of Sarath, who ends up dying for the truth that she so ardently pursues. Unlike Anil, a transnational border crosser under the protection of a major human rights organization, Sarath, a Sri Lankan local, had not voluntarily signed up for the investigative task but had been assigned to it by the government. Yet it is he, rather than Anil, who becomes this secular novel's most obvious Christ-like vicarious sufferer, with the narrative's crucifixion imagery culminating in the scene that depicts Gamini's embrace of Sarath's dead body in "a *pietà* between brothers" (288). Sarath sacrifices his own life so that Anil can leave the country with Sailor, the skeleton of the now-identified toddy tapper and mine worker Ruwan Kumara — the only concrete evidence that Anil has of

a political killing for which the government is clearly responsible. The reader is left to wonder whether Sarath's sacrifice will be "of any use" (157) in the context in which "even crucifixion isn't a major assault nowadays" (130), as Gamini once noted sarcastically, when Sarath and Anil brought to his emergency room a man whom they had found crucified to the tarmac. The narrative does not answer this question. After subtly suggesting various meanings for the novel's enigmatic title, the ending eventually identifies Sarath as Anil's "ghost" (305), and we are invited to infer that any harrowing questions haunting Anil after Sarath's sacrificial death will be part of his "ghostly" presence in her life. For Anil in the West (if she in fact returns there),¹⁴ the memory of Sri Lanka will be an expatriate's phantom pain, and the memory of Sarath will occupy a special position within that pain — a position that Anil, in all likelihood, will spend a great deal of time conceptualizing and coping with.

Yet, in order to properly appreciate Ondaatje's profoundly humanistic cosmopolitan vision, which embraces both the global and the local, we should note that the memory of Sarath does not only, or even primarily, represent blame or accusation at the novel's end (despite Ondaatje's terror-evoking word "ghost," apt in the context of the war and its simultaneously physical and spectral presence in the lives of the novel's Sri Lankans). Instead, the final scene of *Anil's Ghost* includes a subtle but moving recognition of the transformative and redemptive qualities of human communion — local as well as global. In this scene, Ananda, wearing Sarath's old shirt, paints the eyes on a giant statue of the Buddha according to the tradition of Nētra Mangala. It is in this context that the Buddhist eye-painter (who has indeed resumed his vocation, which he temporarily abandoned after his wife's tragic disappearance) quietly states to himself that "he and the woman Anil would always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena" (305). Ananda's act of privately memorializing Sarath while performing a public and sacred task reflects his sense that something personally significant — something worth the intimate memento of Sarath's shirt — took place during the time that he, Anil, and Sarath spent together working on a shared task. John Marx, focusing on Ondaatje's depiction of "worldly experts engag[ing] in a group assignment" (94), argues that *Anil's Ghost* "offers no glimpses of shared humanity" (94) because the novel "thoroughly professionalizes the personal" (94, n4). However, placing Ondaatje's

narrative within the framework of cosmopolitan ethics — which, as we have seen, makes Anil humanly and humanistically obsessed with a single victim — renders the categorical binary of professional versus personal/human unnecessary and misleading. During Anil, Sarath, and Ananda's brief work-based acquaintance, Sailor fulfilled a similar psychological function for them as did Almásy's burnt body for his housemates in *The English Patient*: Sailor's identity and history presented a mystery to be solved, and, in the meantime, what was left of him served as a site for the three characters' emotional and existential self-projections. Even though each of them mostly went through his or her existential-cum-psychological process privately, they nonetheless learned important lessons about tragedy, mourning, hope, and human communion from each other.

However, rather than offering a simplistically happy ending, the novel's final section is permeated by images of mental and physical brokenness — not only Ananda's ongoing and often self-destructive struggle with his grief, but also a statue of the Buddha so severely damaged that the locals decide both to reconstruct it and to erect a new one. Eventually, the work on the two statues “ended days apart, so there seemed suddenly to be two figures — one of scarred grey rock, one of white plaster — standing now in the open valley a half-mile away from each other” (304-305). The statues represent the scars left by the war on myriad bodies and minds, as well as the hope that the wounded community may find a way towards healing and recovery. While *Anil's Ghost*, as a whole, interweaves the lives of local characters with the experience of the cosmopolitan returnee, the novel's final section is firmly dedicated to the local: it gently salutes the will of Sri Lankans to remember their dead, survive, rebuild, and live.

Conclusion

In this article, my use of Appiah's concept of “partial cosmopolitanism” as an interpretive tool has resulted in a reading of *Anil's Ghost* that not only recognizes the protagonist's alienation from her country of origin during her expatriate years (an aspect of the novel heavily emphasized by several critics, including Stanton), but also underscores the formation of an emotionally and morally significant reconnection, which leads to the emergence of her partial cosmopolitanism in the sense espoused by Appiah. As noted, criticism of cosmopolitanism (as here described, rath-

er than endorsed, by Bruce Robbins) typically focuses on the cosmopolitan's allegedly "privileged and irresponsible detachment . . . from true feeling, hence from the responsibility that engages a whole person" and "from responsibility, hence from the constituency to which one would be responsible" (Robbins 4). This critique holds that "the cosmopolitan is . . . incapable of participating in the making of history, doomed to the mere aesthetic spectatorship that he or she is also held secretly to prefer" (4). Such a caricatural understanding of cosmopolitanism fails, as this article has demonstrated, to do justice to the complexity of Ondaatje's transnational protagonist. Ondaatje's Anil is deeply committed both to the scientific and the human rights aspects of her work, and, in the course of the novel, she also becomes a "partial cosmopolitan" — partial to her suffering compatriots.

However, despite Anil's profoundly felt sense of responsibility and commitment, Sarath's brutal death raises a difficult question for the reader: should Anil have returned to Sri Lanka at all, or would it have been better for everyone if she had, indeed, been indifferent and stayed away? *Anil's Ghost* does not answer this question by offering any final, clarifying manifesto. Ondaatje neither casually condemns nor simplistically glorifies the identity position of the cosmopolitan returnee, but instead looks at it from various angles, portraying it kaleidoscopically. It is clear, however, that *Anil's* actions are not the ultimate target of Ondaatje's social criticism; rather, he targets a frustratingly complex, opaque, and dangerous predicament — that is, the *war* — in which it is extremely difficult for peace-seeking Sri Lankans, be they local or expatriate, to know what morally responsible action might mean under the tragically twisted circumstances of political violence. During complex emergencies, real-life humanitarian actors routinely have to deal with challenging ethical conundrums in situations in which life and death are at stake, and in which decisions often have to be made quickly — and, not infrequently, without access to all necessary information and other vital resources.¹⁵ In Sri Lanka, Anil finds herself in such a situation, and her assignment ends in a terrible tragedy. This does not mean, however, that Ondaatje casts Anil as a naïve do-gooder or her cosmopolitan ethics as utopian nonsense. It is the war — and any ideologies, networks, and forms of greed supporting the warfare — that the narrative firmly condemns. What Ondaatje offers as an alternative to indifference is a belief in the moral significance of both local and

cosmopolitan ethics, as well as in the importance of a continued pursuit of just local and global politics.

NOTES

¹ Ondaatje does not provide a detailed account of the genealogy or politics of the conflict. His narrative turns inward, focusing on each character's psychological interior and existential quest. Yet, it would be inaccurate to say that Ondaatje's war writing is completely apolitical. Douglas Barbour commented on this issue in the wake of the publication of *The English Patient*, set during World War II: "Ondaatje has tended to resist overt politicalization of his texts. . . . Yet, because of his choice of subjects, they also refuse to become truly apolitical. . . . [H]e does not ignore the political in his work; rather he seeks to place it in a human, fallible context, complicated by the force of powerful and contradictory emotions" (211). This statement precedes *Anil's Ghost* but applies to it as well.

Because Ondaatje is from Sri Lanka, debates about how political or apolitical *Anil's Ghost* is or "should" be, and whether it is political in a "correct" way, have been much fiercer than any similar discussions about *The English Patient*. For summaries of these debates on *Anil's Ghost*, see, for example, Burrows (162), Derrickson (131), and, in particular, Spinks (229-32). As Spinks notes, some scholars have reacted negatively to "the almost complete absence of Tamils from the text" and have criticized "the privilege the novel accords to the Sinhala Buddhist point-of-view" (229; Spinks here particularly paraphrases views presented by Quadri Ismail in "A Flippant Gesture Towards Sri Lanka: Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*," *Pravada* 6.9 [2000]: 24-29). It is true that all of the novel's main characters have a Sinhala Buddhist background. It is equally true, however, that Anil's work focuses on investigating human rights violations committed by the Sinhala government. Part of Ondaatje's ethnic heritage is Tamil, and Tamil suffering is powerfully present in the novel's segments that depict the kidnappings, by Tamil insurgents, of the physicians Linus Corea, a neurosurgeon (*Ghost* 120-25), and Gamini Diyasena (218-20). During their captivity, both physicians work on injured Tamil patients, witnessing Tamil pain and need first hand. The narrative also portrays, in an understated yet moving manner, Anil's reunion with a Tamil woman who used to be her nanny (22-24). Most importantly, the main characters discuss the war several times, but, rather than taking firm sides, they always end up emphasizing the complexity of the situation in which the war seems to have become its own *raison d'être* (see, for example, 43).

² Härtling (45), to her credit, mentions this complexity.

³ In "Cosmopolitan Patriots" (22), Appiah used the term "rooted" cosmopolitanism when referring to the same moral and political position that he in his 2006 book calls "partial cosmopolitanism."

⁴ Anderson, however, usefully complicates any simplistic understanding of the Victorian and high modernist ideal of detachment by addressing Victorian intellectuals' "ambivalence and uncertainty" about this ideal (3).

⁵ Naseem and Hyslop-Margison (52) use the term "robust" cosmopolitanism when they refer to what Eric Brown calls "strict" cosmopolitanism.

⁶ Shapcott's benevolent definition of anti-cosmopolitanism presumes that both "cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans sit within a common horizon and tradition of thinking that is anchored in the twin pillars of liberty and equality" (ix). However, many others use "anti-cosmopolitanism" to denote philosophical and political positions that do not build on either liberty or equality; see, for example, Beck (111). When Shapcott juxtaposes

cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans, he focuses on a much narrower debate or political phenomenon than Beck does.

⁷ Roberts (971-72) highlights several of the same key moments of *Anil's Ghost* as I do, but the conceptual lens through which she examines the novel is "hospitality" rather than cosmopolitanism.

⁸ For Ondaatje's commentary on the novel's opening, see "Adventures."

⁹ Despite his initial identity position as a beneficiary of settler colonialism (his paternal family owned a tea plantation in Kegalle), Ondaatje is, by no means, ignorant or naïve either about colonialism's long-lasting impact on his native island or about its divisive after-effects. He remarked to Jaggi that "what one is as a child, or where one comes from, doesn't necessarily mean you are going to be locked into that forever" ("Michael Ondaatje in Conversation" 9), and spoke explicitly of "having a postcolonial take on the world" (9).

¹⁰ For a reading that connects Palipana with the real-life Sri Lankan epigraphist Senerat Paranavitana, see Goldman 32-33.

¹¹ See Ondaatje, "Patient Canadian." Gamini embodies the disposition that Ondaatje admires: in private, Gamini may argue with Sarath about who is to blame for the war (*Ghost* 133), but at work, he consistently refuses to take interest in any patient's race, ethnicity, profession, or politics (see, for example, *Ghost* 125-26). For a longer discussion of Gamini, see Scanlan 310-11.

¹² For a discussion of the principle of impartiality in humanitarian aid, see Shapcott 128-29.

¹³ Despite this moment in the narrative, I find Burrows's comment that Anil "does not listen to others" (172) too categorical and generalized. Moreover, Anil's need to be assertive is not only based on a Westernized individual's single-minded pursuit of dissectible truths. Power relations based on gender and age also need to be considered, as in Sri Lanka Anil mostly finds herself working in a man's world, with men who are older than she is. Overall, Anil's cosmopolitanism, sociocultural hybridity, gender, age, family history, relationship history, and ongoing existential process mean that she inhabits multiple identity categories, rather than just representing the West that sees itself as authoritative.

¹⁴ The oft-addressed (see, for example, Derrickson 136-37; Marinkova 1-2; Scanlan 305) two-page chapter in *Anil's Ghost* (285-86) that contains Gamini's criticism of Western books' and films' focus on the "tired [Western] hero . . . going home" (286) contains little-discussed metafiction suggesting, first, that Gamini's critique comes to the reader filtered through *Anil's* consciousness and remembrance and, second, that the chapter conveys Anil's thoughts at a time when she has already learned about Sarath's death but is still in Sri Lanka: "If she were to step into another life now, back to the adopted country of her choice, how much would Gamini and the memory of Sarath be a part of her life?" (286). This chapter, in other words, not only emphasizes Gamini's and the late Sarath's rootedness in the local, but also alludes to Anil's psychological process after Sarath's passing.

¹⁵ See, for example, Shapcott, chapter 5.

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