Writing with the Ghost:
Specters of Narration in *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje

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Abstract

This paper proposes an analysis of *Anil's Ghost* (2000) by Michael Ondaatje in the attempt to overcome a marginalisation of Sri Lankan literary production, both in the canon of the contemporary South Asian novel, and postcolonial criticism. The novel is set in a Sri Lanka ravaged by the civil war between Sinhalese and Tamils that plagued the country for about a quarter of a century. The war represents a pivotal historical and political circumstance that has attracted the attention of many Sri Lankan literary authors for the last 30 years. Such scrutiny sometimes put in the foreground the active influence that past events still exert in the present, an influence that is often invisible, hidden or neglected.

This is also true for Ondaatje. The author chooses to focus on the investigations of a forensic anthropologist who has returned from the United States to her native Sri Lanka in order to recover the identity of a skeleton abandoned in a zone protected by the government. In her surveys to solve the mystery behind the identity of the nameless victim, and uncover the truth about the mass killings plaguing the region, not only does Anil's quest represent a new generation's attempt to give voice to the voiceless victims of wars and national conflicts but also provides her author with a narrative space made of voids, gaps and blind spots. Attention to such narrative breaks provides space for truths that prove essential to making visible those unaccountable processes through which social authorities and symbolic formations interacted during those warring years. Following Jacques Derrida (2016) and Homi Bhabha (1990), the aim of my paper consists in showing that Ondaatje's novel belongs to a wave of literary fiction concerned with (and even haunted by) the 'ghosts' produced by the violence of the recently ended war. In Ondaatje's literary effort the Civil War works as a moment of temporal negotiation, whose dreadful events are used to highlight the need to recover history in the clash between historical happenings, subjective experience and the distortions of memory.

Key-words: ghost, gothic fiction, memory, time, uncanny.

> ... the future belongs to ghosts.
>
> Jacques Derrida, XXX

> ... the origin of the nation's visual presence is the
> effect of a narrative struggle.
>
> Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*

1. Introduction: the importance of memory in Sri Lankan fiction

This article intends to discuss Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) against the backdrop of the wider context of Sri Lankan and, more generally, postcolonial literary production in English. As Ruvani Ranasinha (2016) notes, the Sri Lankan anglophone novel still occupies a minor position in the landscape of contemporary South Asian fiction, if compared to the critical attention that Indian and Pakistani literary endeavours have usually attracted. This is mainly due to the smaller number of novels written by Sri Lankan authors, as well as the fact that Sri Lankan publishing networks, and consequently Sri Lankan readership, are still relatively new.

Anil's Ghost deals with the Sri Lankan Civil war that plagued the country from 1983 to 2009. One of the causes of the war was the violence that the Buddhist Sinhalese (with the support of the government led by a Sinhala majority) and the Hindu Tamils with their nationalistic claims (put forward especially by the ruthless political movement known as LTTE)[1] perpetrated against each other (Das 2008). The war lasted 26 years and cost somewhere between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand lives to the country. It represents an indelible event in the history of Sri Lanka, with which it proceeded in parallel as the nation was making its transition from the old millennium into the new.

It is important to note that the war came after decades of slow political transformation and 'adjustment' to the legacy effects of colonial rule, first by the Portuguese and Dutch, and later (starting from 1802) under Britain. British rule in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) ended after more than a century, in 1948 but, in the meantime, it had been osmotically incorporated in the transforming social configuration of the island, as the 'new' Sri-Lankan nation was

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[1] Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

simultaneously trying to painfully make it out of the long history of violence between Tamils and Sinhalese that had been plaguing the region for about two millennia.

While as of today motives, reasons and developments of the war remain scarcely investigated outside Sri Lanka, the conflict is the most closely observed event in the literature produced in the last 30 years by Sri Lankan authors, whether living locally or migrants. It has allowed authors to extract topics of more local and global interest, as well as to better survey questions of nationality, citizenship, gender discrimination, and ethno-religious affiliation or violence. If one tried to find a common denominator between some of the most interesting novels by Sri Lankan authors, it might consist of the tendency to see the Civil War as a moment of temporal negotiation between past and present first and foremost. More specifically, Sri Lankan writers have put in the foreground the necessity to confront the past not as a distant source of events linked in a causal relationship to a dreadful present, but as an active and direct, albeit often invisible, influence in the present. In the words of Ranasinha: "Recent Sri Lankan anglophone fiction appears haunted by the 'ghosts' of its warring past. A considerable part of this body of fiction is informed by the recuperation of history as a method of fictionalizing experience subject to the inevitable distortions of memory" (2016: 78). From the survey of Sri Lankan literature of the last decades, there emerges an awareness to address the issue of memory as a way to overcome the idea of 'limit' or frontier understood as a temporal barrier or threshold. This tendency seems to answer Salman Rushdie's (2002) famous invitation to move back and forth the visible and invisible lines dividing people all over the world not just geographically or spatially, but culturally and temporally as well[2]. One may rapidly refer here to Carl Muller's *The Jam Fruit Tree* (1993), Ambalavaner Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies* (1997), Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1995) and *Cinnamon's Gardens* (1998), Pradeep Jeganathan's collection *At the Water's Edge* (2004), Manuka Wijesinghe's *Monsoon and Potholes* (2006) as different examples of novels

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[2] "This is the dance of history in our age: slow, slow, quick, quick, slow, back and forth and from side to side, we step across these fixed and shifting lines" (Rushdie 2002: 90).

delving into Sri Lanka's past to reveal the tension between fiction and history, truth and make-believe.

2. A reading of the 'ghostly' in many of the literatures of ex-colonised countries

From this perspective, the concept of the 'ghost' theorised by French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994) may prove particularly enlightening in reading this trend. According to Derrida, the development of human affairs is inevitably haunted by 'ghosts'. He uses the spectral reference with a double meaning. On the one hand, with the term, Derrida alludes in particular to the casualties of power, the victims of social conflicts and inequalities. Ghostly are the victims of abuse and suppression since their stories are left hovering incomplete in history as 'unfinished business'. They are the broken dreams, the unrealised plans, the latent desires, the questions still waiting for an answer. It is in this sense that Derrida considers the haunting of phantasms or spectral presences as something inherently embedded in every hegemonic structure of power understood as areas of convergence of social tensions, which is especially the case in nations that had to fight their way out of colonial oppression. On the other, weighing on the present are also the promises of future generations, the expectations of those who are not yet born but are destined to be. It should be apparent that, for Derrida, both connotations of the ghost have to do with matters of justice and responsibility. The two concepts interweave and are strictly dependent on one another: the ghost demands the living give justice to those who have been wronged or suffered violence, while simultaneously feeling the burden of responsibility to the unborn, to people to come and new social configurations.

Derrida's reading of the ghost provides a strong case to understand why the presence of the 'ghostly' in literature has been felt more strongly by artists and writers, particularly by those whose works may be retrospectively grouped within the rich vein of the so-called postcolonial gothic. This is a fertile literary subgenre which has provided many evocative metaphors for the ways the collective unconscious interiorises and negotiates the experience of suppression, illegitimacy and discrimination so frequent in contested soils that have endured the experience of colonisation in general

and not just in the British ex-colonies in Asia. Sugars and Turcotte (2009) have argued that the reason for this can be summarised as follows:

... it [postcolonial gothic] takes a variety of possible tacks: fears of territorial illegitimacy, anxiety about forgotten or occluded histories, resentment towards flawed or complicit ancestors, [...] explorations of hybrid cultural forms, and interrogations of national belonging and citizenship. (ix)

It appears that this is mainly because the gothic is able to intercept and efficaciously express the feeling of 'uncanniness' of living in formerly colonial environments. To simplify the Freudian (1919) interpretation of the uncanny in a way functional to the present dissertation, the uncanny is a paradoxical condition of feeling at home and, simultaneously, out of place or 'unhomely'. The uncanny is elicited by a situation of extreme familiarity, yet experienced in conditions which make it unfamiliar, unexpected and ultimately unknown. Uncanniness is thus the unsettling experience of having what is extremely familiar to you feel estranged, uncomfortable or out of place. As has been variously discussed and further developed by subsequent critical and theoretical academic debate, the uncanny is closely connected with the feelings of inauthenticity and territorial dispossession so common in conflictual territories like ex-colonies.

As a matter of fact, for Derrida, the artistic endeavour concerned with justice and responsibility towards both past and future simultaneously is an attempt at speaking to and 'with' the ghost. A writing 'with' spectres is concerned with "certain others who are not present" (Derrida 1994: xviii) especially when, as is in the case of Ondaatje's novel, it deals with the topic of:

... justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer [...] It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born. No justice [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence,

nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. Without this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living, what sense would there be to ask the question 'where?' 'where tomorrow?' 'whither?' (*Ibidem*: xviii)

Paravisini-Gebert (2002) points out that gothic literature was inspired, since its beginning, by the irrational fears fuelled by colonial environments and people. These were frequently contexts for forbidding and frightening embodiments. In turn, fiction produced in ex-colonised countries has often employed gothic elements to represent the horrifying experiences of torture, persecution and slavery suffered at the hand of the coloniser. If on the one hand, gothic elements in Western literature substantiated in fear of anthropophagy practised by semi-beastly or demonic populations, hidden in their sylvan or other naturalistic environments, postcolonial literature was concerned with the way colonisers progressively erased native people's identity through obscure hierarchies of power, and oppressive systems of subjugation which were as invisible as they were brutal. Often, postcolonial gothic has had recourse to aesthetic solutions that mingle the haunting spectres (remaining as a legacy of colonial abuse) with contexts of unpredictable, extreme violence in the present. Such violence has been powerful not so much because of its repressive outcomes, that is by way of getting rid of specific opponents to power, but because of its persuasiveness in discouraging others from following in the victims' wake. Episodes of indiscriminate violence and unpunished murders have contributed to the creation of an imaginary in which nationalism has been haunted by phantasms. Those who are killed become often protagonists of ghost stories about tortured or kidnapped people, suppressed or made to disappear at the mercy of invisible powers that transform lived space into an uncanny place of bewilderment, where unforeseeable dangers make one feel estranged on one's own land. The development of a nation in time becomes thus haunted by ghosts, whose unsolved deaths demand justice but also, at the same time, by what then Derrida

calls 'spirits', the likewise spectral interference of the mysterious hands carrying out violence, spirits still free to act for the realization of their own ends. Both kinds of phantasms contribute to a scenario of fear made up of stories of killings and disappearances spreading unchecked among people in the guise of rumours, official reports and mediatic exposure. It is in this sense that Derrida talks about spirits as necessarily in the plural: "There is then some spirit. Spirits. And one must reckon with them. One cannot not have to, one must not not be able to reckon with them, which are more than one: the more than one/no more one [Ie plus d'un]" (1994: xx). They raise questions that need addressing, pointing to unrecognised, terrifying qualities of savagery, primitivism and violence hidden behind the façade of progress and civility which nations exhibit to promote and cement themselves in their citizens. Both of them are ultimately necessary constitutive elements in the developments of a nation. The imaginary space of 'nationhood' requires those stories as an integral part of its own imaginary, both comforting and menacing.

Dealing with scenarios dominated by projected fears, the 'ghostly' has been a powerful tool in the hands of those artists engaged in probing the process of incorporation of inherited structures of violence and abuse from ex-colonial powers into new post-colonial nations, as well as in finding appropriate literary and linguistic devices not just to represent them, but to cope with them. The necessity to take into account the ghostly depends on the sense of responsibility towards who is no longer present, and the ones who will be, the generations of the future. For Derrida, a writing that takes into account the ghostly, that talks 'with' the ghost is a writing that unhinges the present. From an artistic or literary point of view, the main question is then the following: how does one unhinge the present?

One must at all times keep in mind the implications of the dualistic ambivalence that characterises the ghost for Derrida: namely, the fact the ghost does not belong to a specific moment in time, in that the latter is conceived as a chronological sequence of events ordinately developing one after the other. The ghost is 'always already' (see Althusser 1971) in the development of human affairs, a presence/absence that interferes with the present both from the past 'and' the future.

3. Ondaatje's writing 'with' the ghost

Coherently, the gothic element in Ondaatje's novel emerges as an interrogation of representational practices in the construction of national identity and cultural belonging. I contend that the novel successfully attempts a 'ghostly' writing in the sense Derrida intends when "talk with or about some ghost" is a necessary way to confront these questions. More specifically, following Derrida, the novel deals with the ghost as an entity which "exceed[s] any presence as presence to itself" (1994: 19). It disjoins linearity, variously disrupting the flow of narration. "A spectral moment, [...]", Derrida points out, "no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: 'now,' future present)" (p. 19). For the philosopher, the spectral intervention is not confined to an immediately recognisable point in time but can be felt untimely, sometimes appearing furtively or in absence as a trace (or a trace of a trace).

In offering a gothic rendition of the ethnic conflict ravaging Sri-Lanka, Ondaatje's novel carefully explores tropes of savagery, torture and murder in the postcolonial state. Narration is concerned with the psychological condition of haunted minds in a haunted territory. The author plays with the dualistic ambivalence of the word ghost already starting with the title of the novel and does so at all times during narration. The bones of the corpse recovered at the beginning of the novel possess a double connotation: Anil's ghost represents the resurfacing of the suppressed stories still demanding an answer, while at the same time alluding to her feeling the responsibility to find phantasmatic presences responsible for his death.

If one accepts the critical point of view which sees it as a literary effort trying to make visible how the past and the future operate in the present, *Anil's Ghost* may represent a particularly significant moment in the literary production of and about Sri Lanka of the last 40 years. By merging the surprising and the horrific, Ondaatje's playing with time has perhaps anticipated some of the aesthetic and theoretical trends of postcolonial and post-millennial gothic. If post-colonial gothic previously tended to cope with imperialism as a legacy of an often revenant past, more recent literary efforts tackle it as a bodily, physical and psychological status, situation or predicament (Lazarus 2011). Through a narration that continually

shifts from horror to a sense of haunting and vice versa, *Anil's Ghost* makes the reader confront a past which does not resurface from the grave, but uncannily never perished in the first place (Stoler 2013); the past as a legacy of the unresolved tensions that colonialism had brought about or exploited to its advantage to divide and weaken conquered populations. Such legacy is perceived as an invisible horror, a relentless force that, operating unseen to the eye to bring death and brutality, makes characters uncannily feel foreign in their own lands. The gothic here becomes an effective way to signal the inherent ambiguity of discourses of nationality and belonging. Much postcolonial gothic concentrated on traumas that referred not just to physical harm, but feelings of psychological abuse or uncertainty above all. Political or religious tensions set social groups one against the other, nurturing the fear of death that could strike unpredictably at any time: fear of being killed in a pogrom occurring instantly in the streets and barely leaving any chance for escape, fear of being accidentally hit by a stray bullet, of being blown up in a kamikaze explosion, of being crushed by parts of decaying buildings, of being kidnapped, tortured, sexually abused and then having one's own body thrown somewhere and forgotten, as is the case in Ondaatje's novel. The unpredictability of the menace coming from nowhere, which makes vain every precaution for one's safety, and above all the protection of loved ones, is often present in postcolonial novels and variably represented with gothic elements in many postcolonial authors such as Salman Rushdie, al-Tayeb Salih, J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Arundhati Roy and Jean Rhys.

Anil's Ghost is strongly concerned with the recuperation and management of memory, especially those memories referring to matters still pending, to unanswered questions or unresolved feelings and emotions hovering uncomfortably amid the experience of ethnic conflict for political supremacy and the inheritance of colonial rule. Firstly, as is more immediately apparent, at a narrative level. Set in Sri Lanka, in the late years of the twentieth century plagued by the Civil War, it is a story about solving a mystery. Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist born in Sri Lanka but educated in the West, is asked to find out the identity of a skeleton whose bones are found to be too recent to belong to the archaeological site in which they are originally discovered. At the beginning of the novel, Anil is working in Guatemala and is later sent to her native country

by the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva to work with the local archaeologist Sarath Diaysena to identify the corpse of the dead person, to whom they give the name Sailor. It is suspected that the body may belong to someone killed by the government. Since July 1983, Sri Lanka had been plagued by a crisis which counterposed the government, on the one hand, and anti-government insurgents in the south together with separatist guerrillas in the northern part of the region on the other. The government relies on squads (frequently illegally formed) to root out members of both opposing groups. It is a time in which people are assassinated and erased, together with their stories and the truths they held. We are then told that: "[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" (Ondaatje 2000: 157). Later in the novel, it will be revealed that the corpse belongs to a miner killed and made to disappear for political reasons due to the clash between the Sinhala majority and insurgents.

Thus, Ondaatje's novel focuses on the civil war as an event that requires the new generation of Sri Lankans to foreground those stories of violence and abuse which political authorities wanted to hide from view. Those stories had to be there, to 'exist' simply to influence political action and manipulate the population's perception, but only on the condition that they remained officially invisible. From this perspective, Anil's quest represents an investigation to redeem the victims of a general violence that is pervasive across the country.

Yet, while historical, the haunting of ghosts "is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar. Untimely, it does not come to, it does not happen to, it does not befall, one day, at a certain moment of its history, to let itself be inhabited in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest" (Derrida 1994: 3). Coherently, a novel focused on solving a mystery relies structurally on a sort of temporal deferral or postponement due to the process of finding out the truth about a secret event in the past, but the way such belatedness works in Ondaatje's novel is especially relevant. Indeed, it gives literary expression to the anxieties of youths such as Anil, a generation bound to cope with the difficulties of the civil war and

the necessity to scavenge for past remains in the present. A task to which the new generation of Sri Lankans is called, authors included.

For example, Anil admits that, even though she is not accustomed to, she has had to learn to look back at the time of her own life in order to synchronise it with the time of the dead. As in the following passage, when she is asked to examine the corpses of two students:

... she was still working out what hour it was in London, in San Diego. Five and a half hours. Thirteen and a half hours. 'Is this your first corpse, then?' one of them asked. She shook her head. 'The bones in both arms are broken.' Here it was, in front of her already. She looked up at the young men. These were students who had not yet graduated, young enough to be appalled. It was the freshness of the body. It was still someone. Usually the victims of a political killing were found much later. She dipped each of the fingers in a beaker of blue solution so she could check for cuts and abrasions. 'About twenty years old. Dead twelve hours. Do you agree?' (Ondaatje 2000: 19)

The temporal synchronisation between her living and others dying represents a narrative intensification that somehow manages to make visible, or at least perceived, what Homi Bhabha terms "the historical surmounting of the 'ghostly' or the 'double'" (Bhabha 1990: 295). Such an operation uncannily relies on an archaeological process of doubling and splitting of self and time which is especially effective to describe "some psychic ambivalence or intellectual uncertainty" (*Ibidem*).

The two protagonists of the novel are engaged in digging into Sri Lanka's past to reveal the truth behind the victims of political violence. The archaeological approach to the national past as a way to reveal social injustices and redeem the present resonates at multiple levels in the novel: not just narrative, but also symbolic, diegetic, metaphorical and linguistic. The preface of the novel is an effective example of the symbolic plane. It is a song sung by Sri Lankan miners wishing to come back alive from the dark pits of the earth which they had to enter for work. The song is followed by a brief reference describing the unearthing of a grave in Guatemala where, as previously mentioned, Anil is found at the beginning of the novel. Both references herald the centrality of archaeology as a way to recover or uncover the past surviving in the present. On the one hand, the song describes a miner's hopes of resurfacing safely

from the pits of an excavation site into which he is descending. An experience of survival that miners have to endure every day of their lives (Hillger 2006), and which is reminiscent of poet Juan Francisco Manzano's recounting of his experience as a slave in the mines, a psychological trauma that is compared to the experience of being entombed alive. However, as is later found out, this very song could also have been sung by the ghost, Sailor, the name of the assassinated man whose identity Anil is engaged to discover. Sailor had worked as a miner and was killed due to his involvement in Sri Lankan social conflicts. The song recites:

> *In search of a job I came to Bogala*
> *I went down the pits seventy-two fathoms deep*
> *Invisible as a fly, not seen from the pit head*
> *Only when I return to the surface Is my life safe...*
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> *Blessed be the scaffolding deep down in the shaft*
> *Blessed be the life wheel on the mine's pit head*
> *Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel.*
> – *Miner's folk song, Sri Lanka* (Ondaatje 2000: 19.
> Emphasis in the original)

When the truth is eventually revealed, the reader can't help but feel the disquieting sensation of a sort of suspended or deferred ventriloquism: namely, that those words, previously read maybe as a denunciation of miners' difficult working conditions, had made him or her somehow a living spectral double of the now-deceased Sailor. Also, as Hillger points out, the reference to the "life wheel" highlights "the novel's central concern with digging through the country's traumata" (2006: 202) which still affects the living.

The question of mastering time to recover silenced stories and memories operates also at a linguistic level. In an interview between Ondaatje and the Spanish and Catalan translators of his novel, it emerged that one of the main problems for them while translating the novel concerned meaning, the broad openness to interpretation of dialogues and situational descriptions, as well as the overwhelming subjectivity of narration. As noted by Isabel Ferrer, the Spanish translator, the main problem for her was the fact that the novel generally avoids stating plain facts. For his part, Melcion Mateu (the Catalan translator) pointed out that he had to cope with what he

defined "a problem with reference, a kind of vagueness"[3]. Ondaatje himself has admitted that his writing style in the novel is one of suggestion. It is not just Anil engaged in establishing the truth, but the readers (and consequently the translators as well) are actively involved in a process of discovery which demands the temporary suspension of judgement, to set aside the presumption of immediate comprehension. This is to adopt a way of reading that is prudent, cautious, inquisitive; which delays or puts back understanding or awareness to a later time.

'The important thing is to say out loud what your first impressions are. Then rethink them. Admit you can make mistakes.' (Should she be lecturing them?) 'If you are wrong the first time, redraw the picture. Maybe you can catch what was overlooked … How did they break the arms without damaging the fingers? It's strange. Your hands go up to protect yourself. Usually the fingers get damaged.' (Ondaatje 2000: 20)

More often than not, meaning is left floating, suspended all around the reader in a state of uncertainty even in common situations. The scattering of information and meaning is similar to the work of combing carried out by Anil herself: "One morning Anil found a naked footprint in the mud. Another day a petal" (Ivi: 11). This is also an invitation to avoid direct translation, to abstain from the immediate extraction of meaning, and consequently knowledge, from one language to another. As the translators note, you have to understand "how things work first"[4], rejecting any superficial approach. Ondaatje himself asks his translators if the attitude of waiting to understand how things work may not be considered a way of reading as a "habit of style"[5]. From this perspective, what is interesting is the use of what Ondaatje terms 'half metaphors', that is metaphors that are "half there" or that need "to be filled in"[6] through an abundance of oblique references, hints, and quick glances.

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[3] The interview can be read following this link: http://www.barcelonareview. com/25/e_int_mo.htm. Last accessed on 22/01/2020.
[4] *Ibidem.*
[5] *Ibidem.*
[6] *Ibidem.*

This leads us to another of Ondaatje's preoccupations, his attention to the rhythm or pacing of narration through a careful work of 'spacing'. He admitted that he has learnt to manage spacing during his experience in a small press:

'I think spacing and therefore pacing is very important in the making of a book. I was involved in a small press and I learnt how they typeset. The Canadian visual poet Barrie Nichol, in helping me to write *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid,* showed me how to use white space. I gave him a copy of *Billy the Kid*. I said that where the poem 'I'll send you a picture of Billy the Kid made with a perry shutter' was that I was going to include the one photograph of him. But Barrie Nichol told me: 'Why don't you take the picture out and just leave a sort of a rectangle in blank and we can imagine it?' And I said okay, let's erase it, not say anything. So at the press I kind of learnt how to use space, especially in *Billy*. So I think that by the time I get to *these* books, what's interesting to me is how space is another element of the narrative.'[7]

A consequence of this technique is Ondaatje's reluctance to provide physical descriptions. When a picture of Anil is referred to, Ondaatje does not provide her physical features, even though we learn that the picture is seen by all her relatives from overseas. The picture is there, yet, somehow it is an empty frame that the reader cannot completely fill, at least not without having recourse to his or her imagination. For example, only at an advanced stage do we learn that Anil has dark skin, and in a very oblique reference too:

She left him eventually in the Una Palma motel room in Borrego Springs. Left nothing of herself for him to hold on to. Just the blood as black as her hair, the room as shadowed as her skin. (Ondaatje 2000: 270)

Ondaatje states that he wrote the characters "from the inside out"[8]. He admits that vagueness of narration notwithstanding, he does not provide the reader with an abundance of details about her because, if he did, he felt that would be limiting instead of enriching. He wants the reader to participate in the process of literary creation. Also, because by the time he knows about certain characteristics,

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[7] *Ibidem.* Emphasis in the original.

[8] *Ibidem.*

it is 'too late' to recount. To him, it is important to suggest without saying. This is because for Ondaatje the novel was itself a process: he acknowledges that he does not know everything from the beginning, just like the main characters:

I knew absolutely nothing. I came to work with no knowledge about what the story was going to be about. And with Kip in *The English Patient* I didn't know he was going to be there until he just turned up in that scene, and I had to deal with the fact that he would be staying or leaving. And in this book, Gamini was the surprise[9].

Temporal deferral also works on a metaphorical level. This becomes apparent when Anil 'reads' the remains of Sailor's body to gain fragments of the past, of what really happened. Later in the novel, Sarath too is killed by those who did not wish the truth about the murder of Sailor to be passed on, and the markings on his dead body are read as well. By his brother Gamini, not by Anil. This was part of his job when dead bodies were brought to the hospital where he worked. The sight of the scars, of the wounds inflicted on his brother's body triggers memories of when he was alive. Biographies are written on the bodies of Sailor and Sarath, and their remains are turned into texts.

He was leaning over the body, beginning to dress its wounds, and the horizontal afternoon light held the two of them in a wide spoke. [...]
He opened his brother's shirt so the chest was revealed. [...] Gamini placed the warmth of his hand against the still face. He had never worried about the fate of his one brother, had always thought he himself would be the fatal one. [...] There had never been a tunnel of light between them. Instead they had searched out and found their own dominions. Sarath in sundrenched fields looking for astrological stones, Gamini in his medieval world of Emergency Services. Each of them most at ease, most free, when not conscious of the other. [...] Sarath's chest said everything. It was what Gamini had fought against. But now this body lay on the bed undefended. (Ondaatje 2000: 296)

Another example is the description of the reconstruction of the face of a statue of the Buddha by Ananda, an artist who had previously

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[9] *Ibidem.*

assisted Anil and Sarath in reconstructing Sailor's identity. He wants the texture of the scars to remain. The regained unity must not pass for the original, but bear instead the traces of the work of gathering and recollection done to get there. Originally, he wanted to make the repaired statue look just like it was once, but he eventually changes his mind and chooses to 'quilt' together fragments and pieces as the visible reminder of its wounds and of the work done to remake it whole again:

During the months of assembly, Ananda had spent most of his time on the head. He and two others used a system of fusing rock. Up close the face looked quilted. They had planned to homogenize the stone, blend the face into a unit, but when he saw it this way Ananda decided to leave it as it was. He worked instead on the composure and the qualities of the face. [...]
He stood over what they had been able to re-create of the face. It was a long time since he had believed in the originality of artists. [...] Invention was a sliver. Still, all the work he had done in organizing the rebuilding of the statue was for this. The face. Its one hundred chips and splinters of stone brought together, merged, with the shadow of bamboo lying across its cheek. (Ondaatje 2000: 296)

Significantly, the novel ends with a description of how an artist pieces together the fragments of a broken sculpture. Ananda's activities comment on the novel's concept of art and the artist. From this perspective, he functions as a mirror or fictional counterpart of Ondaatje, since they seem to share the same preoccupations and methods: "gathering [...] the past in a ritual of revival" (Bhabha 1994: 255), recollecting memories and situations, images and traces stitched together in creative and imaginative ways as they are uncannily lived retroactively after being scattered 'in multiple times and different places' (Bhabha 1994).

4. Conclusion

Hopefully, this paper has shown how Ondaatje, aware of the contradictions produced by the conflictual consolidation of national time[10], structures a kind of 'spectral' storytelling where voids and

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[10] As it tries to fill the void produced in "the chronotope of the local" by the uprooting of communities and kins (Bhabha 1990: 295).

overlappings, jumblings and gatherings, delays and leaps intermingle past and present at all levels of narration. Skillfully blending fear and incredulity in the way facts and supposedly objective truths are discovered or learned through narration, the author makes readers experience what Bhabha (1990), drawing on Michail Bakhtin (1986), defined the terrifying, unaccountable truths about the fratricidal politics of the government, which in the novel "are consistently 'surmounted' by the structural aspects of the visualization of time" (Bhabha 1990: 295). In a way similar to *Running in the Family* (1993), another of Ondaatje's novels, *Anil's Ghost* is a hybrid text where symbolic, metaphoric, and linguistic literary devices question the conflictual rhetoric and forms of expression of national and ethnic affiliations, as they are surreptitiously naturalised or made visible through personal time. In the novel, the ghostly is employed to undermine generic divisions between personal and collective experience, contributing to the ongoing debate on the truth-value of fiction and history. The perceived boundary which separates facts and narrative(s) is creatively confounded and, thus, ultimately challenged.

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