

RETURN TO THE SCENE OF THE CRIME: THE RETURNEE DETECTIVE

AND POSTCOLONIAL CRIME FICTION

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NCKKAM003

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*'Galip had once told Rüya that the only detective book he'd ever want to read would be one in which not even the author knew the murderer's identity. Instead of decorating the story with clues and red herrings, the author would be forced to come to grips with his characters and his subject, and his characters would have a chance to become people in a book instead of just figments of their author's imagination' – Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book*.*

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the ways in which the crime novel genre has been taken up and adapted in order to depict and grapple with ideas of justice in selected postcolonial contexts. It approaches this investigation through the figure of the ‘returnee detective’ in these texts and determines how this recurring figure is used to mediate the reader’s understanding of civil conflict in the postcolonial world.

What makes this trope so noteworthy, and merits investigation, is the way in which guilt and innocence (and their attendant associations of self and other) are forced into realignment by the end of colonial rule and the rise of civil conflict. In the context of civil war, crime becomes more insidious and intimate than the traditional mystery motif will allow. The returnee detective furthers this breakdown by performing the role of hybrid mediator within the text. The returnee figure is at once strange and familiar, lacking both the staunch sense of identity that is necessary in order to maintain the mystery of the ‘other’ and the objectivity to comfortably apportion blame to one side. Postcolonial fictions of crime set in the context of civil conflict thus emerge as belonging to a distinct category requiring a distinct critical approach.

The primary texts are *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Anil’s Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje, *The Long Night of White Chickens* by Francisco Goldman, *Red Dust* by Gillian Slovo and *Crossbones* by Nuruddin Farah. My theoretical framework combines genre theory and postcolonial theory. By combining two critical strands I demonstrate that the intimacy of civil war and the returnees’ ambivalent attitudes to home and away unsettle crime genre conventions, producing a new form that challenges notions of morality, legitimacy and culpability.

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	6
A Case of Arrested Development: Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>When We Were Orphans</i>	25
Investigating the Pathologist: Michael Ondaatje's <i>Anil's Ghost</i>	57
Death of an Idea: Francisco Goldman's <i>The Long Night of White Chickens</i>	92
Another Country: Gillian Slovo's <i>Red Dust</i>	128
Hijacked Narrative: Nuruddin Farah's <i>Crossbones</i>	165
Conclusion.....	193
Works Cited.....	218

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will investigate the ways in which the crime novel genre has been taken up and adapted in order to depict and grapple with ideas of justice in selected postcolonial contexts. I will approach this investigation through a discussion of the ‘returnee detective’, determining how this recurring figure is used to mediate the reader’s understanding of civil conflict in the postcolonial world. In my examination of five novels, I will explore the different ways in which they subvert crime genre conventions in order to challenge and disrupt popular notions of legitimacy, culpability and belonging.

The crime genre has always had a paradoxical appeal. The canon is replete with lurid descriptions of violence, retribution and death, yet it has historically been perceived as a source of light reading. The stacks of paperback crime novels found in most airport bookshops tend to suggest them as diverting and disposable entertainment, appropriate for a beach holiday or long haul flight. Broadly speaking, these novels are known for their relaxing properties rather than for their tendency to provoke serious thought. In ‘The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on Detective Stories, by an Addict’, WH Auden depicts his ‘addiction’ to detective stories as a markedly unserious vice, or guilty pleasure. He writes,

For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol. The symptoms of this are: Firstly, the intensity of the craving — if I have any work to do, I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story for, once I begin one, I cannot work or sleep till I have finished it. Secondly, its specificity — the story must conform to certain formulas (I find it very difficult, for example, to read one that is not set in rural England). And, thirdly, its immediacy. I forget the story as soon as I have finished it, and have no wish to read it again. If, as sometimes happens, I start reading one and find after a few pages that I have read it before, I cannot go on. (1)

Indeed, the idea of the crime novel as light, forgettable entertainment owes, in part, to the genre's reputation for formulaic storytelling, which Auden describes here as 'specificity'. No matter what horrors the texts evoke, the reader can very often be assured that a satisfactory conclusion is in store. In the majority of cases, these conclusions deliver a kind of justice: if not to the fictional perpetrator, then to the reader herself. The mystery motif evokes questions and the expectation of their solution, and the 'solved case' lays these questions to rest, honouring a generic contract between writer and readership.

However, the mere honouring of expectations does not sufficiently explain the genre's allure. Gill Plain writes, 'crime fiction in general, and detective fiction in particular, is about confronting and taming the monstrous. It is a literature of containment, a narrative that "makes safe"' (3). With this formulation in mind, crime fiction can be said to offer the best of both worlds: it offers the reader a thrilling close encounter with the monstrous, but the evil portrayed is curbed and corralled by the strict rules of narrative. Even in cases where the literary criminal evades the reach of the law, they are seldom permitted to slip the bonds of narrative authority. The formula is predicated on an ethos of isolation and naming: the perpetrator is identified amid a group of other characters and clearly marked as the guilty party. This act of separation 'makes safe', as Plain would have it, by suggesting evil as something anomalous, which may be extracted and labelled as beyond the bounds of social acceptability. In the meantime, there is the pleasurable fear that comes from watching it at work.

Auden describes the mystery story as 'the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil' [1]). The double-ness of the struggle Auden describes is a staple of

early crime fiction, but even the more anarchic later forms tend to maintain the 'eristic' triumph implicit in identifying a criminal. This may be true even in cases where the meting out of ethical punishment proves to be beyond the investigator's power. Where the justice system itself is portrayed as being too flawed and inadequate to deal with aberrant individuals, the texts still frequently hew to the principles of the 'whodunit' by naming their perpetrators as such. These later forms include the spy novel, the hardboiled crime novel, the psycho-thriller, the legal thriller, the police procedural, and many more variations on the original mystery format.

Many of these later forms, particular those which employ the thriller aesthetic, tend to evoke suspense through the depiction of a potentially deadly investigation and the uncertainty of justice, rather than solely holding out the promise of a solution to the initial crime. Eyal Segal writes,

Although the hard-boiled mode preserves the basic overarching structure of investigation, it shifts the emphasis from curiosity to suspense as the dominant form of narrative interest, mostly because the events that take place in the narrative present become less subordinate to the goal of solving the past crime mystery. The interest that these events generate by their own internal dynamics, based on the detective's 'adventures', acquires a more autonomous status. (187)

However, even if the novel's chief interest lies elsewhere, the catalytic crime is almost always 'solved' for the reader. Segal goes on to assert that, 'an exemplary motif, in this context, is the detective's unmasking of the woman with whom he has fallen in love as a murderess' (188). Even though such 'unmaskings' may imbue the novel's ending with a sense of ethical and emotional anxiety, other forms of certainty are maintained by the detective's ability to name names. The perpetrator is ultimately

‘pinned down’ by the narrative and made guilty in the eyes of the readership, even if she evades arrest, and even if the primary interest lies in the detective’s response to her crime. While the criminal’s eventual fate may be less than morally satisfying, the ‘monstrous’ is nonetheless tamed by the novel’s formal qualities, which insist on revelation and unmasking. Thus, latter day crime novels usually deliver wish-fulfillment through the provision of narrative cohesion and certainty, although the ethical battle at the heart of the novel may not always be resolved in a similarly conclusive manner.

The very familiarity of crime genre conventions means that crime fiction formulae are ripe for subversion. In his discussion of genre, Tvetzan Todorov writes ‘for there to be a transgression, the norm must be apparent [...] Genres are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature’ (8). In order to portray something untamable, inexplicable, or un-provable, a writer may present a mystery in the time-honoured way, but then decline to meet readers’ expectations of resolution and explanation, emphasizing the limitations of the form. Segal writes,

Familiarity with a generic plot convention may influence the reader’s expectations with regard to future story developments as much as explicit proleptic commentary by the narrator, whereas the breaking of such a convention may produce a surprise as powerful as that stemming from the abrupt revelation of a gap in the mimetic sequence of previously narrated events. (161)

By evoking, and then transgressing from the well-known norms of the crime genre – a genre commonly thought of as formulaic and simplistic – a writer may emphasize the challenging complexity of the subject matter they present. The ‘power’ of these

representations is aided by the use of contrast, which evokes surprise by throwing any deviations into stark relief.

The history of the genre also means it is uniquely suited to political interventions. Auden's formulation of 'the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil' (1) suggests a universal theme, but this apparently timeless struggle is inevitably woven through with the cultural mores and prejudices of its particular era. Early examples of crime fiction often seamlessly and explicitly align good and evil with Orientalist binaries, and the containment of crime with exclusionary nationalist imperatives.

Emerging in the period of the British empire, English mystery stories from the early 20th century (hereafter described as 'Golden Age crime fiction') frequently use the binary of good versus evil as an essentialist catch-all for citizen/ foreigner, West/East and white/black oppositions. For example, Agatha Christie's *The Lost Mine* is set in a London Opium den, and the British villain is depicted as having been corrupted by drug-dealing Chinese immigrants. Although the expression of these themes has become somewhat subtler with the maturation of the crime genre, formulations of good and evil are inevitably infused with contemporary ideas of legitimacy, deviance and social threat. Of the thriller genre, for example, Philip Simpson writes

The thriller plot typically proceeds in linear fashion, from one danger to the next, until the ultimate defining confrontation between good and evil. However, the conflict usually addresses at some subliminal level a contemporary anxiety (or more than one) facing the thriller's audience: the fear of a foreign enemy, the fear of inner-city crime, the fear of the disenfranchised drifter and so forth. (188)

In this thesis I will demonstrate that, in addition to informing the crime genre, the idea of the binary conflict ‘between good and evil’ (Auden 1) underlies both colonial ideologies and essentialist resistances to those ideologies (i.e., those which, in Anthony Appiah’s words, preserve the ‘imaginary identities’ [150] assigned by colonial discourse while calling for an end to colonial rule). Therefore, a genre underpinned by insider/outsider oppositions, and traditionally ending in denunciation and isolation, can be effectively reworked to show the complexity and frustrations of societies in which notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are no longer so clearly delineated, and there is no clear ‘other’ to be vanquished or tamed. Abdul JanMohamed describes colonial ideology as ‘a Manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object’ (4). I argue that by breaking down these oppositions through the resistance of generic fulfilment, authors are able to render the complexity of a world where concepts of friendship and enmity are far more nuanced and unsettling.

The most salient example of this is the context of postcolonial civil conflict. The end of colonialism makes it ever more difficult to impose a ‘Manichean’ distinction between self and other. Moreover, the intimacy of civil war means that perpetrators are neither anomalies nor outsiders: they may know their victims well, and their behaviour is part of a society-wide breakdown rather than a personal or rogue aberration. There is no hope here of extracting the ‘other’ and returning to the status quo – in part, because the very social fabric has been ruptured, and in part because civil atrocities may involve more intimate betrayals than those perpetrated in

the context of foreign invasion, which at least allows the hope that the invaders may eventually withdraw or be driven out.

Heightening the complexity of these conflicts is the fact that the arbiters of the law may themselves be engaged in brutality, complicating the very idea of criminality. In *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Nancy Schepper-Hughes asserts that when violence is endorsed by the state, murder becomes a ‘cruel but usual’ (44) expectation for targeted groups. Because one form of violence is centralized and legitimized, social mores are forced into mutation, changing what is meant by appropriate, moral or justified behaviour. In this atmosphere of collaboration and ambivalence, innocence and guilt may become fruitless designations, and at the very least lose their association with notions of legality and deviance.

The five novels I have chosen to explore are *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro (2000), *Anil’s Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje (2000), *The Long Night of White Chickens* by Francisco Goldman (1992), *Red Dust* by Gillian Slovo (2009) and *Crossbones* by Nuruddin Farah (2011). The novels are set in China, Sri Lanka, Guatemala, South Africa and Somalia, respectively. Each is an English-language novel set in a postcolonial nation during a period of civil war or violent transition, and each features a protagonist who has returned from abroad in order to assume the role of detective. A ‘detective’ is broadly defined herein as a moral observer who is intent upon clearing up a mystery, although some of the returnees do operate in their professional capacity as lawyers, journalists or forensic pathologists. Each text has a different geographical and temporal setting, but engages with a similar historical moment, i.e. the eruption of civil violence in the years following decolonization.

In *The Foreign in International Crime Fiction*, Anderson et al state that

The exotic and the foreign are the quintessence of mystery. The ‘Other’ – and the ‘Unknown’ – arouse feelings of curiosity and fear. They demand to be encountered, investigated, decoded and, possibly, rejected. It comes as no surprise then, that foreign characters and foreign settings have had a privileged space in crime fiction since its origins. (13)

This thesis will demonstrate that, in the context of civil war, the above oppositions are broken down, and ‘crime’ becomes more insidious and intimate than the traditional mystery motif will allow. As Addison and Murshed argue, civil wars are ‘rooted in a partial or complete breakdown of the social contract’ (1). I will argue that the returnee detective furthers the breakdown of conventional categories by performing the role of hybrid mediator within the text. The returnee figure is at once strange and familiar, lacking both the staunch sense of identity that is necessary in order to maintain the mystery of the ‘other’ and the objectivity to comfortably apportion blame to either side. Postcolonial crime fiction set in the context of civil conflict therefore emerges as a distinct category requiring a distinct critical approach.

The research will undertake three main strands of inquiry. The first will focus on the kinds of pressures the socio-political settings of these novels exert on the formal qualities of the texts. I will explore the ways in which the rendering of the complex dynamics of postcolonial civil war impacts upon characterization, resolution and narrative cohesion. A foundational part of the project will therefore be an engagement with theories of genre, and the detective fiction genre and its mutations in particular.

Michael Holquist’s article ‘The Metaphysical Detective Story’ will be a major point of departure here. The thesis will build upon Holquist’s formulation, in which he argues that the metaphysical detective story subverts crime fiction conventions in order to provoke existential and cognitive disquiet through defamiliarization.

However, I will argue that these postcolonial crime stories present a challenge that is more politically invested than that which he describes. Of metaphysical detective stories, Holquist writes: ‘Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack [...] That is the lesson of the metaphysical detective story in our own time. It sees the potential for *real* violence – violence to our flabby habits of perception –in the *phoney* violence of the detective story. (155-156)

The primary texts selected for analysis in this thesis certainly depart from the idea of the tidily solved crime. A background of civil unrest lends an insidious and intimate cast to the question of culpability, as does the figure of the returnee detective, who in addition to seeking to solve the crime must also face survivor’s guilt, and her past incarnations as villain, victim, collaborator and witness. However, I will argue that although the narratives are often open-ended, the ‘metaphysical detective’ label does not adequately describe them. The novels’ ‘jumbled’ quality reflects the limited scope for closure in the contexts they are depicting: thus, the innovations in form can be seen as providing a commentary on the difficulties of reconciliation after civil war and of identifying a single villain in a hopelessly entangled postcolonial world. By contrast, Holquist’s description of the metaphysical detective story is of a philosophical puzzle. Even when the puzzle becomes existential it is seldom socio-political: the violence is ‘phoney’, part of an exercise in defamiliarization rather than a deep engagement with the idea of crime and its implications.

Patricia Merrivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney expand on Holquist’s formulation in their book *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*. Although this collection is more modern, and thus engages with more recent scholarship, it maintains the terms of Holquist’s study by discussing

stories that ‘self-consciously question the very notion of reality’ (4) rather than those whose jumbled form reflects the confusion and turmoil of conditions of social breakdown and the complexity of transnational identity.

This thesis will take up some of Holquist’s theories on structure, particularly his contention that the open-ended form of metaphysical detective story functions to ‘disturb’ the reader. The thesis will argue the same about the postcolonial genre, but contend that this disturbance often has what Edward Said’s *Reflections on Exile* would call ‘worldlier’ implications (Said 2). At times, the texts’ lack of closure does speak to a kind of hopelessness, but in each case it is a feeling that is closely tied to historical context rather than existential ennui. I will therefore make use of Holquist’s theories on structural breakdown, as well as periodically referring to Merrivale and Sweeney, but will suggest a political dimension to what has largely been a philosophical contention.

The second strand of the research will consider what it is that the crime genre offers to writers who choose to depict postcolonial civil war, and what kind of ideologies emerge from the subversion of the genre’s conventions. In discussing the historic relationship between crime fiction norms and political – and particularly, colonial – ideology, I will refer to many of the points argued in Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee’s book, *Crime and Empire: The Colony in Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Crime*. Mukherjee’s work focuses on early crime fiction, and the way in which many of its conventions grew out of the beliefs and anxieties attending the growth of the British Empire. It therefore provides invaluable commentary on the underlying political ideologies of many of the generic formulae from which my primary texts depart. I will also refer to Mukherjee’s discussion of the prevalence of criminal terms

(‘order, deviance and punishment’ [1]) in rhetorical justifications of international intervention, and discuss how my chosen texts abandon or complicate these ideas of social aberrance. To this end, I will also refer to Stephen Knight’s *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, which stresses the relationship between belief systems and the formal qualities of the crime genre.

The third part of the research will explore the returnee detective figures, both as contextual mediators for the reader (i.e. as literary devices) and as players within the worlds of the novels. I will argue that the returnee figures provide a way of ‘framing’ (i.e. representing, but also necessarily delimiting) postcolonial conflict for foreign readers. Part of the focus will be on representation, i.e. how the returnees are depicted in comparison to their local counterparts, and the way in which they are used to translate and filter the local context. The research will ask whether the use of an intermediary figure makes each of the settings more relatable to foreign readers, or whether the use of middleclass, Anglophone emigrants as protagonists creates distance between the detective figures and the other characters in the texts. A key source here will be Judith Butler’s *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* The focus of the inquiry will be on objective and subjective depictions of pain, and the difference between violence that evokes empathy and the sensationalization of violence for scopical enjoyment. It will ask whether (and why) some deaths are depicted as being more ‘grievable’ than others, and how ‘personhood’ comes to be attributed to or withheld from certain characters in the texts.

In discussing the characterization of the returnee detectives (i.e., their role within the worlds of the novels), the project will draw on a range of theory. I will refer to Edward Said’s *Reflections on Exile* and his formulation of ‘contrapuntal

thinking' (88) as an antidote to the rigid binary opposition of home and away. As a comparison to this formulation, I will discuss Adorno's idea of morality becoming detached from sectarian and nationalistic thought ('not being at home in one's own home')(112). This will be instrumental in determining what the symbolically homeless detective figures bring to the investigations they undertake, and the ways in which they balance universal and local conceptions of truth and morality. I will further explore the figure in the light of Nancy K Miller and Marianne Hirsch's assertion that, 'to some extent, the desire for return always arises from a need to redress an injustice, one often inflicted upon an entire group of people caused by displacement or dispossession, the loss of home or of family autonomy, the conditions of expulsion, colonization and migration' (7). In doing so, I will examine the relationship between redress and return in the personal and professional journeys the detectives undertake.

Chapter Overview

The thesis will comprise five chapters. Each will discuss a different primary text, but will have a unique focus, rather than providing variations on a single theme. The intention is to note the commonalities between the countries portrayed (and correspondingly, the texts as a whole) without flattening the unique pressures that each postcolonial context exerts on the generic conventions of crime fiction. I argue that the contexts in which the novels are set are comparable in that they all depict the violent legacies of colonialism. Achille Mbembe writes, 'the colony is primarily a place where an experience of violence is lived, where violence is built into structures

and institutions' (174), and it is this lingering 'cultural praxis' (174) of violence that unites the novels I will explore. However, I am also mindful that, as Ania Loomba, writes, 'because they produced comparable (and sometimes uncannily similar) relations of inequity and domination the world over, it is sometimes overlooked that colonial methods and images varied hugely over time and place' (36). To avoid generalization, then, I devote a chapter to each novel and discussion of its socio-political setting and history, while devoting the conclusion of the thesis to discussion of the primary texts' commonalities and divergences.

In some cases the focus of an individual chapter will be directed by the subgenre of crime fiction upon which each author has decided to build. For example, Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* subverts the formula of the Golden Age mystery¹, thereby facilitating a discussion of nostalgia, restoration and empire. Contrastingly, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* imitates the thriller genre in its depiction of extreme violence, and is therefore more productively read in terms of the detective figure's move from the forensic to the affective gaze. In grouping several subgenres under the label of crime fiction, my intention is not to elide the unique elements of each generic mode. For the purposes of this thesis, the common focus uniting these subgenres is their emphasis on crime and investigation, and their tendency towards revelation. However I freely acknowledge that there are variations

¹I define 'Golden Age' novels primarily as those written in interwar England, which are known for presenting the detective as successfully exerting rationality against the threat of chaos and providing with watertight solutions to the mysteries that they present. However, I follow Julian Symons in including Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories among them, even though the term is more commonly applied to texts from the 20s and 30s. Holmes's last cases were published in 1927, meaning that his narrative life overlapped with, but also far exceeded this period. Stories that feature Holmes are included here because he is in many ways the proto-detective upon which many Golden Age sleuths were modelled. Where a distinction is required between the pre-WWI Sherlock Holmes stories and interwar fiction, I will refer to the early Golden Age and the late Golden Age respectively.

in the way these features are presented and weighted in different types of crime fiction. This relative weighting is important, and will be clearly discussed in relation to the generic expectations my chosen texts evoke. For example, when discussing the thriller subgenre in relation to *Anil's Ghost*, I will focus on the original form's unique reputation for provoking disquiet and fear, rather than tying my reading too closely to my earlier discussion of the Golden Age genre.

At other times, the focus of a chapter will be directed by historical context – for example, the subject of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission exerts unique pressures on the crime fiction genre, as the proceedings intended to separate culpability from retribution. In novels such as Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust*, the result is an unstable and ambivalent narrative arc that does not tend towards closure.

In discussing the texts' departure from historic forms of crime fiction, I focus strongly on generic expectation. In his discussion of genre theory, Daniel Chandler states,

Assigning a text to a genre sets up initial expectations. Some of these may be challenged within individual texts (e.g. a detective film in which the murderer is revealed at the outset). Competent readers of a genre are not generally confused when some of their initial expectations are not met – the framework of the genre can be seen as offering 'default' expectations which act as a starting point for interpretation rather than a straitjacket. However, challenging too many conventional expectations for the genre could threaten the integrity of the text. Familiarity with a genre enables readers to generate feasible predictions about events in a narrative. Drawing on their knowledge of other texts within the same genre helps readers to sort salient from nonsalient narrative information in an individual text. (8)

For the most part, I evaluate these novels in terms of their relationship to the 'default expectations' Chandler describes. In other words, I refer to the genre in terms of norms and assumptions, rather than to the canon in all its multiplicity, except when the primary texts evoke a specific comparison themselves. Although there have, of

course, been many departures from ‘type’ in crime fiction history, I focus on the broader expectation each text evokes and then departs from. This is not to erase the many individual departures from type in the history of the genre, but to explore a particular kind of subversion of generic expectation, which hinges on evoking the best-known elements of a genre rather than its outliers.

Rather than employing an in-depth comparison between specific, more conventional examples and their postcolonial counterparts, then, I will focus on the formal qualities of the postcolonial novels, and the way in which they both rely on and depart from the ‘reputational’ norm. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the formal qualities of the crime novel – for example, suspense, characterization, and narrative closure – have strong ideological implications and can in many cases constitute the affirmation of a particular worldview. Thus, an author’s departure from these norms may not simply ‘threaten the integrity of the text’, but also represent a resistance to the ideology these qualities affirm. In the conclusion, I will discuss the greater and lesser degrees to which my chosen texts depart from the norm, and thus evaluate the extent to which they challenge dominant ideology in their projection of a worldview.

The first chapter will use Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel to set the terms of the thesis and outline its psychological investments. The novel differs from the other primary sources in several ways: for one thing, the other novels have more contemporary settings, whereas *When We Were Orphans* is primarily set in the period between the two World Wars. For another, it engages with the neocolonial exploitation of China and the resultant war between China and Japan rather than depicting civil war. However, the novel engages with many of the issues that are raised by civil war

scenarios by depicting violence within the International Settlement in Shanghai, and the outbreak of an East/East conflict during the last years of the British Empire.

I have chosen *When We Were Orphans* because it provides the most salient and self-conscious subversion of the mystery format. Ishiguro's novel plays with the form of the Golden Age novel, and by changing its structure he showcases the many limitations of the worldview it presents (Döring 60). Nostalgia and restoration will be key themes in my first chapter, and I will explore the ways in which the increasingly disturbed protagonist adopts the expectations of the Golden Age genre in the course of his quest for emotional and temporal restitution.

While Chapter One will focus on innovations in form, the second chapter will pay closer attention to style and characterization. It will argue that the narrative arc in *Anil's Ghost* follows the title character's journey through re-citizenship, as she locates herself as part of Sri Lanka rather than an impartial bystander. A core part of the inquiry will be an inventory of Anil's influences during the investigation. The protagonist undergoes an evolution during the novel, which leads up to a public denunciation of the Sri Lankan government. However, Anil's evolution is not overtly political. This chapter will investigate the influences that inform Anil's transformation, and Ondaatje's decision to locate it outside a socio-political framework. This will be particularly important in introducing the question of how the returnees' complex identities are depicted as influencing their ethical and deductive processes.

Anil's Ghost has been the object of much critical contention. Critics such as R. Wijesinha have decried it as an 'orientalist' (1) text that exploits the Sri Lankan civil war for the sake of sensationalism. Although my focus will be led by Anil's role as

returnee detective, I will engage with these debates as they relate to the character's re-citizenship. I will discuss whether the novel's refusal to 'citize' Anil through ethnic or linguistic initiations represents a humanist resistance to the divisive sectarian discourses that have riven the country apart, or whether it represents an exotic oversimplification in the service of a suspenseful narrative. In doing so, I will examine the balance Ondaatje strikes between the particular and the universal in his portrayal of Sri Lanka, and the way his use of each is influenced by thriller conventions.

Chapter Three will explore the idea of the crime story as a social or national allegory, and discuss whether this extends the genre or limits it in a different way. Like the other writers considered in this study, Francisco Goldman shows the difficulty of assigning blame in the context of civil conflict – in this case, the Guatemalan Civil War, which is fuelled and abetted by the USA's neo-colonial interventions. Guatemala is represented by the figure of Flor de Mayo, whose murder catalyses the narrative. Although the narrative initially appears to be building towards the identification of Flor's murderer, it ultimately reneges on this promise. Chapter Three will discuss the book's treatment of Guatemala as a never-ending palimpsest, and the impact of Flor's corresponding unknowability on characterization and plausibility.

This chapter will raise questions around agency and gender when the female body is used as metaphor for conquest and colonialism, particularly in a context where femicide and gendered violence has been rife. It will go on to build on the questions raised in Chapter Two, by asking what happens when transnational identity is made analogous to an unsolvable investigation.

Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust* is set during the TRC hearings in South Africa, and as such it focuses on the complexities and trauma that apartheid has left in its wake. Chapter Four will investigate the ways in which Slovo uses the thriller form to suggest the limitations of various different types of justice. I will examine the ways in which the novel's protagonist, who works as a prosecutor in New York, is used to suggest the disparities between the restorative and retributive approach, and the novel's juxtaposition of social spectacle and intimate trauma. The chapter will further explore the ways in which the depiction of the state-sanctioned violence of Apartheid pressurizes a generic form that is traditionally predicated on the idea of crime as an aberration. Because Slovo's novel juxtaposes South Africa and New York without immersing the reader in the latter milieu, the chapter will conclude by discussing the implications of Slovo's rendering of South Africa in relation to the USA.

The fifth text under discussion will be Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones*, which operates both as a stand-alone novel and as the conclusion to the author's *Past Imperfect* trilogy. The novel is set in 2006, in the midst of the civil war that began after the 1991 collapse of the national government in Somalia and focuses on Al-Shabaab activity and piracy in the country. The pirates in the text refer to themselves as 'privateers' and 'coastguards', and much of the narrative is devoted to exploring why the label of 'piracy' has been applied, and what constitutes criminal activity in a country wracked by years of dictatorship and civil war.

This chapter will explore the way in which Farah sets up generic expectations by establishing the disappearance of a runaway boy as its central mystery, but then deliberately withholds a cohesive reconstruction of Taxlil's experiences in the country. I will discuss Farah's decision to render post-collapse Somalia through a

narrative that withholds answers rather than establishing a firm narrative line, exploring the idea of this technique as a resistance to the dogmatic and stereotypical discourses that have been generated in relation to the region.

In a concluding chapter, I will compare the ways in which each author embarks on portraying their respective protagonists' journeys of return. The section will go on to examine the different ways in which the writers render their particular postcolonial contexts, and the varying effectiveness with which they use and subvert the conventions of crime fiction in order to project these worlds.

CHAPTER ONE

A Case of Arrested Development: Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

First published in 2000, Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* spans twenty-eight years, and veers between the settings of London and Shanghai. Although the protagonist is a detective by profession, his mission is an unusually personal one: he wishes to solve the case of his parents, who disappeared during his childhood in China. As he searches for the truth, Christopher Banks realizes that what he has perceived as a personal tragedy is, in fact, inextricably entangled with the legacy of British colonialism. In the course of his investigation, he is not only witness to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, but is forced to confront the atrocities of the opium trade, and his own family's role in its propagation.

On first glance, *When We Were Orphans* reads as a heavily stylized tribute to the Golden Age genre. It is only gradually that the book's global and political themes become apparent, and the formulaic narrative arc is broken down. To date, there has not been a comprehensive term to describe this kind of deliberate subversion of the mystery format. The closest is perhaps Michael Holquist's formulation of the 'metaphysical detective story'. Holquist describes this term as follows:

[T]he metaphysical detective story does not have the narcotizing effect of its progenitor; instead of familiarity, it gives strangeness, a strangeness which more often than not is the result of jumbling the well known patterns of classical detective stories. Instead of reassuring, they disturb. They are not an escape, but an attack... That is the lesson of the metaphysical detective story in our own time. It sees the potential for *real* violence – violence to our flabby habits of perception – in the *phoney* violence of the detective story. (153-156)

When We Were Orphans does subvert the idea of the detective story as an ‘escape’ by disrupting or ‘jumbling’ the expected progress of the narrative. However, Ishiguro’s structural innovations are not simply in the service of defamiliarization. Rather, by engaging with the genre and adapting its traditional formula, Ishiguro showcases the many limitations of the worldview it presents (Döring 60). *When We Were Orphans* reveals much of what the traditional form suppresses: that is, ambiguity, marginalized peoples and the difficulty of assigning guilt and innocence in an interconnected, postcolonial world. The text is therefore better interpreted in the light of what Edward Said calls ‘worldliness’, that is, ‘a knowing and unafraid attitude towards exploring the world we live in’ (Said 89). Holquist’s definition suggests a highly intellectual, abstract game, but the violence depicted in novels like *When We Were Orphans* is lent gravitas by its engagement with world history. As such, the challenge it offers is not merely aesthetic, but deeply political as well.

Although the novel demolishes Golden Age conventions (and it is a thorough demolition: Ishiguro breaks almost every imperative listed in S.S Van Dine’s famous *Rules for Writing Detective Stories*), it nonetheless demonstrates the emotional appeal of the genre. The protagonist initially finds refuge and solace within its bifurcated, parochial worldview. Through his eyes, we begin to understand the unlikely idea of the murder mystery as a vehicle for comfort and escapism. In her 2013 article ‘Who Killed the Golden Age of Crime?’ P.D James explains this apparently contradictory appeal. She writes,

The detective stories of the interwar years were paradoxical. They might deal with violent death, sometimes in its most horrible manifestation, but essentially they were and remain novels of escape...Reading these novels today they produce the same comfort as they did when they were written. We enter a world of recognised morality, where evil is sanitised and we can settle

down in a familiar English world where all problems will be solved and peace and normality restored in that imaginary postlapsarian Eden. [sic] (1)

Ishiguro initially places the reader in the ‘familiar English world’ to which James alludes, but gradually widens the lens to expose this ‘Eden’ as facile and altogether unsustainable. The protagonist’s belief in the rules of genre stem from a reluctance to admit that the world’s evil cannot so easily be uprooted or ‘sanitised’, and that the trappings of his profession do nothing to guarantee his own innocence. The first part of this chapter will focus on the Golden Age structure, and the manner in which *When We Were Orphans* first imitates and then abandons this familiar model. The latter parts of the chapter will discuss the novel’s subversion of Eurocentric discourses, and the text’s treatment of the idea of the individual as a powerful force in society.

Genre and Delusion

When We Were Orphans is initially presented as belonging to the Golden Age canon. Helene Machinal states, ‘Economically and effectively, Ishiguro establishes this recognizable terrain by setting up the generic expectation that our rational and dispassionate detective will solve whatever mystery is laid before him’ (Machinal 57). Indeed, Ishiguro evokes Sherlock Holmes on the novel’s very first page, when Banks, the protagonist, states: ‘I decided my future lay in the capital and took up a small flat at Number 14b Bedford Gardens in Kensington’ (Machinal 57).² The ‘generic expectation’ established here is soon undermined, however. It becomes clear that Banks is projecting the conventions of the Golden Age genre onto his own, altogether

² Banks’s description of the apartment evokes Holmes’s lodgings on Baker Street.

more complex, life. We are first made aware of this through a derisive remark made by one of Banks's schoolmates, who sneers: 'But surely he's rather too short to be a Sherlock' (8). The inclusion of this comment lets us know that Banks's role is self-consciously mimetic, i.e. that the imitation of Holmes is his own undertaking, rather than one Ishiguro has imposed from outside the world of the book. When Banks describes his life in Holmesian terms he is not speaking from within the genre, but as a reader himself.

Even though the novel is set in the interwar period (i.e. is contemporaneous with the late Golden Age), we are made aware early on that Banks is somehow out of step with his society. Counterpoints to his perspective are embedded in the apparently 'casual' remarks of his peers, and his interactions with others periodically hint that the world is not quite as he sees it. In Chapter One, an acquaintance off-handedly refers to him as having been 'an odd bird' (3) at school, a charge Banks denies so assiduously that we can only suspect that he protests too much. Here, he gives the reader several examples of his 'bold spirit' and social achievements at boarding school, but his argument is unconvincing, the more so because he rounds off the litany by saying 'I do not wish to imply that this remark of his, about my being "an odd bird", preoccupied me for more than a few moments' (9).

Soon afterwards, an older man he meets at a society party offers another counterpoint to Christopher's perspective, albeit in a more tactful way. In the following exchange, the man questions Christopher's hopes of becoming a detective:

'Not interested in museums, by any chance? Chap over there, known him for years. Museums. Skulls, relics, that kind of thing. Not interested? Didn't think so.' He went on gazing around the room, sometimes craning his neck to see someone. 'Of course,' he said eventually, 'a lot of young men dream of becoming detectives. I dare say I did once, in my more fanciful moments. One

feels so idealistic at your age. Longs to be the great detective of the day. To root out single-handedly all the evil in the world. Commendable. But really, my boy, it's just as well to have, let us say a few other strings to your bow. Because a year or two from now – I don't mean to be offensive – but pretty soon you'll feel quite differently about things.' (14)

Tobias Döring interprets this exchange as evidence that Christopher's choice of career is 'little more than a Museum piece, a "relic" of the times gone by, henceforth an object of historical study like the old "skulls" that promise a more adequate career' (68). Although Döring's article is excellent in many respects, this is a fundamental mischaracterization of what drives Christopher's ambition. Banks's interest is not in history, but in fantasy. He is not, after all, charged with being old-fashioned. Instead, he is termed 'young' and 'idealistic'. The speaker's mention of his own youth indicates that such idealism is a function of personal immaturity, rather than of a particular era. In effect, Christopher wishes to apprentice himself to a tradition that has never existed. His icon is the improbable literary detective, who is able to act, as P.D James would have it, 'rather like an avenging deity' (1). This does not strike his contemporaries as being anachronistic, but rather as 'fanciful' and unrealistic. Banks is perceived as eccentric because he persists in taking detective literature seriously well into adulthood, rather than because Holmes's reign as a cultural icon has ended.

It is evident that one driving force behind Banks's ambitions is his pursuit of the power to set things right, or to 'root out single-handedly all the evil in the world' (14). However, his choice of Holmes as a particular idol is equally significant. In comparing Banks's narration to Watson's chronicling of Holmes, Helene Machinal writes:

This shift from a narrator who can never quite grasp the reasoning process of the great detective, to a detective-narrator whose subjectivity, whose emotion,

often overwhelms the scientific and rational aspects of the detective function reveals at the level of the form itself a tension at the heart of this novel. (58)

As Machinal states, Ishiguro's introduction of such an emotionally burdened detective suggests that the usual form is too facile to provide the reader with more than an affectless '*deus ex machina*' (Van Dine 1) for a protagonist. Banks's humanity and fallibility are used to highlight the implausibility of a genre that characterizes the detective as a supreme rational authority. However, while Ishiguro's characterization exposes the artificiality of the traditional thinly drawn sleuth, it also reveals a lot about Banks's motives.

Ishiguro adds depth to Banks's delusions by acknowledging that the appeal of the Holmes character lies, not just in his prowess, but in his many deficiencies as well. Of Holmes, Christopher Clausen writes: 'He is [...] the sort of isolated intellectual who today would be called alienated: introverted, frighteningly analytical, and often cynical' (Clausen 105). Indeed, Watson himself states that Sherlock 'loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul' (Doyle 1). Nevertheless, Holmes remains admirable because his deficits (his brusqueness, his drug use and his relative friendlessness) are also his virtues, enabling him to perform his astonishing social function.

As Helene Machinal notes, Watson's position as narrator means that we have no choice but to take Holmes at his word. The form of the Holmes stories does not facilitate any soul-searching on Holmes's part: his 'melancholia' (Auden 2) is sketched for the reader, but we are never asked to inhabit it. His intermittent cocaine binges allow his consciousness to go temporarily dark between mysteries (Holquist 142). This makes him the perfect role model for someone who, like Banks, wishes to

excuse his monomania and social awkwardness. For example, when Banks is awkwardly trying to negotiate his way at a fashionable party, he consoles himself with the thought that detectives ‘tend to be earnest, often reclusive individuals who are dedicated to their work and have little inclination to mingle with one another, let alone with society at large’ (10). In this way he subsumes his own insecurities into the detective role, presenting his inadequacies as evidence that his mind is fixed on loftier things. In the same way, he is able to explain away his bizarre leaps of logic by casting himself as an eccentric genius, and hinting at specialist knowledge that he never actually reveals.

Banks’s determination to ‘solve the case’ has evolved from a childhood coping mechanism. Following the disappearance of his expatriate parents in Shanghai, the young Christopher is sent ‘home’ to England, where he is encouraged to ‘look forward’ (9) and not to mope, advice he understandably finds difficult to follow. Instead, he acts out his parents’ rescue again and again. The first hint we are given of this behaviour comes in Chapter One, in which Banks states: ‘I certainly realised quickly enough that it would not do for me to indulge openly – as I had been doing routinely in Shanghai – my ideas on crime and its detection’ (5). His ‘ideas on crime’ are really just fantasies of turning back the clock. Christopher is unable to contemplate the idea that his parents may be beyond his help, and dismisses any evidence that suggests this. If, as Döring argues, the frequent references to museums are indeed symbolic, it is more probable that they symbolize Christopher’s curatorial attitude to his own past. His commitment to the ‘investigation’ is hampered by his desire to keep both hope and history safely behind glass. Indeed, it takes him decades to return to Shanghai, suggesting that he is afraid of reality intruding upon his fantasy

of reclamation.

The idea of the past as a single, harmonious picture is one that informs both Golden Age fiction and the myths that often attend emigration and exile. In her paper, 'Nostalgia and its Discontents', Svetlana Boym states:

Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface. (1)

The second half of the novel depicts Christopher's return to China, where he finally begins to investigate his parents' disappearance. On arriving in Shanghai, he struggles to reconcile what he finds with the 'long-distance' image he has cherished for so long. The blurring of the two cities lends a frantic, hallucinatory quality to the text. This is compounded by the violence to which Christopher is witness: he arrives at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict to find that his old home in the International Settlement has become a war-zone.

The Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, and was to continue for the duration of World War Two. Prior to this, China had been a 'semi-colonized victim of global imperialism' (Mitter 279), with the United States, Britain and France all claiming extra-territorial rights within the country. Christopher's childhood in the International Settlement, in which he is surrounded by 'Chinese, French, Germans, [and] Americans' (77) reflects this period, but Banks returns just as the imperial order is being thrown into disarray, threatening to take his worldview with it.

Zuzana Foniokovor applies a Surrealist analysis to Banks's return to the city, stating that

One can interpret Banks's story in Shanghai as a dream that amounts to a fulfilment of his childhood wish. The character dreams about putting into practice the impotent daydreams of a child. As the dream merges with reality into 'Surreality', the Shanghai story is not presented as something unreal, but as a part of Banks's life, connected to both his past and his future. (119)

While Shanghai does bend to reflect Christopher's mental state, it is arguably in a more complex way than Foniokovor suggests. Her citation of Surrealist theory is astute and valid; however, the Freudian approach is rather too equivocal to describe what occurs in Shanghai. Reality is still visible, if dimly, and the logic is more volatile than the idea of wish-fulfilment implies. By this stage, as Döring notes (79), most people Banks encounters do seem to buy into his bizarre beliefs. Even as gunfire thunders outside, one of the international set exclaims: 'I tell you, Mr Banks, when news of your impending arrival reached us, that was the first good news we'd had here in months' (167). But the threat of a contradictory revelation is present as well, even when Banks does semantic backflips to avoid it. For example, the Japanese soldier he meets is always on the verge of asserting the truth, i.e. the fact that he is a stranger, and not the childhood friend Banks so desperately wishes him to be:

He nodded. "I fight here, many weeks. Here, I know just like" – he suddenly grinned – "like my home village." I smiled too, but the remark had puzzled me. "Which home village is this?" I asked.
"Home village. Where I born."
"You mean the Settlement?" Akira was quiet for a moment, then said: "Okay. Yes. Settlement. International Settlement. My home village."
"Yes," I said. "I suppose it's my home village too." (272)

In this sense, the Shanghai scenes conform more closely to Jung's subjective theory of dreaming, in which each player represents an aspect of the dreamer himself

(Jung 509). Although Christopher himself professes the same beliefs and intentions as before, other characters, notably 'Akira', begin to voice his unspoken doubts on his behalf. The further he ventures into the war zone, the more this unwelcome polyphony intrudes. As Banks shuns these alternative voices it becomes clear that he needs to shut out the truth if he is to maintain his fantasy of rescue. Banks's attempts to limit his world to that which can be solved leads him further and further into a wilful refusal to listen. By portraying his detective's literal inability to process what is being said to him, Ishiguro suggests that the rules of the genre can only stand if certain complexities and voices are silenced and excluded.

Banks has promised himself (and, by extension, the reader) an unequivocal solution to the mystery. The narrative arc has been tending towards this 'single image', but breaks under pressure. He experiences an emotional and mental breakdown as he tries to fit everything into the 'frame' of his fantasy (Boym 1). In attempting to subsume everything into his generic outlook, he at once minimizes the scale of what is occurring and exaggerates his own powers and failings. The Sino-Japanese war is 'my fault' (260); a couple killed in the crossfire might be his parents; the anonymous Japanese soldier can only be the friend he lost long ago.

Describing the war-zone, Banks states: 'I often had the impression we were moving through not a slum district, but some vast, ruined mansion with endless rooms' (256). The reference to the ruined mansion can be read as symbolizing the collapse of the Golden Age ideal. In 'The Golden Age', Stephen Knight states, 'The archetypal setting of the English novels [...] was a more or less secluded country house' (70). When Banks is confronted with real violence, poverty and political

upheaval, it proves too much for his narrow worldview, and the parochial idyll comes tumbling down.

Finally, he collapses into delirium, and wakes up in state of grim acceptance. When a soldier remarks to him that childhood is a 'foreign land', he replies: 'Well, Colonel, it's hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it's where I've continued to live all my life. It's only now I've started to make my journey from it' (295). Part of this 'journey' will involve acknowledging the less savoury aspects of his childhood, and it is these long suppressed memories, rather than any further 'investigation', which will lead him to the truth. This is another way in which Ishiguro departs from Golden Age conventions: Stephen Knight notes that in the Golden Age novel, 'the reader is challenged to match the detective's process of identifying the murderer and there should therefore be "fair play": the reader should be informed of every clue the detective sees' (Knight 7). However, Banks frequently hides clues both from the reader and from himself. Indeed, just before his mother's disappearance he is lured from the house by a supposed family friend and left in a crowded part of town. He describes his refusal to process what has happened in active terms, saying: 'for the next few moments I remained standing there in the crowd, trying not to pursue the logic of what had just occurred' (127). Banks avoids interpreting this incident until the very end of the novel, but it proves to be of critical importance.

To date, the narrators of many of Ishiguro's novels have been somewhat 'unreliable' (Machinal 56), but their unreliability is nearly always rooted in self-deception. Because their evasions are attempts to ignore uncomfortable truths rather than to conceal them from others, these narrators lead one to question the very idea of memory as a reliable source. *When We Were Orphans* takes this subversion further by

suggesting that even the most rational of inquiries is by nature subjective, because the deductive gaze is always under the direction of a fallible human being. Banks's 'clues' end up being the very memories he has banished from his mind. He avoids pursuing them until after his hopes of restoration have vanished, sensing that they may well add up to an unrecoverable loss.

The Golden Age story generally ends with a firm denouement that resolves what Auden describes as 'the ethical and eristic conflict between good and evil' (Auden 1). Of *When We Were Orphans*, Machinal states: 'Our anticipation of, in Auden's terms, the restoration of the state of grace has been frustrated because the conditions that allow for such fine predictability and neat closure have altogether unravelled' (68). However, Banks does discover the truth about his family, and although the 'state of grace' is withheld, the conclusion of the novel provides something richer and more complex. Brian Finney takes note of 'the tone of muted contentment in the final chapter that supersedes the angst that drove Banks to outperform himself in his chosen profession all his adult life' (13). Indeed, Banks abandons his hopes of restoration, but gains something else in the process. His awakening can be read as a move from one form of nostalgia to another.

Svetlana Boym states:

Two kinds of nostalgia are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. (61)

Boym's definition of reflective nostalgia involves accepting the fallibility of one's own memories, rather than regarding one's image of the past as the absolute truth.

When Banks first returns to Shanghai, he embodies restorative nostalgia to the extent that he literally wishes to ‘rebuild the lost home’: he visits his childhood house, now occupied by another family, and announces his intention to move back in once he has found his parents. By the end of the book, however, he has accepted that he can revisit his past only through ‘longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance’ (61). The novel’s ‘imperfect’ ending speaks to this kind of ambivalence. Banks describes finding his mother in a care home in Hong Kong. She is suffering from dementia, and does not recognize him. Years later, he says: ‘After she died, I thought about having her reburied here [England]. But there again, when I thought it over, I decided against it. She’d lived all her life in the East. I think she’d prefer to rest out there’ (322).

Here, Banks accepts the cumulative facts of his mother’s life, rather than trying to cling to the image of her he has salvaged from childhood. He no longer believes in the absolute temporal and emotional restitution that is offered by the Golden Age genre, but his return to Shanghai has not been in vain. The final chapters suggest that his character has developed through the dissolution of his expectations, rather than the achievement of an absolute ‘solution’.

In this sense, *When We Were Orphans* conforms to a new motif that sets the postcolonial crime genre apart from its progenitors, i.e. that of the detective who must grapple with their exilic identity in order to gain more nuanced powers of observation. That Banks is prepared to let his mother ‘rest’ in her complexities shows a new disregard for rigid ideas of home and abroad, as well as for established social rituals. Edward Said describes this kind of perception as ‘contrapuntal thinking’, which he characterizes as one of the advantages of the ‘unhealable rift’ of displacement. Said writes,

We take home and language for granted; they become nature, and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy. The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (3690)

This resonates strongly with the change Christopher Banks undergoes in the course of the narrative. It is no coincidence that Banks becomes a reliable narrator only once he has abandoned his myopic obsession with 'Englishness'. At the close of the novel he is able to see the nuances and contradictions implicit in his mother's life. He accepts that repatriating her body would be an empty ritual, a mere concession to the established 'dogma' and 'orthodoxy' of nationality. For himself, it is cosmopolitan London, rather than an image of England, which Banks claims as having 'become my home' (334). Here, 'home' does not suggest something preordained, but something 'provisional' and ambivalent, won by experience rather than heritage.

Banks is also able to arrive at a less literal interpretation of family instead of rigidly defining it by what he has lost. The last line in the book is given to an aging Banks, who lists his various pastimes and concludes with: 'Nevertheless, there are those times when a sort of emptiness fills my hours, and I shall continue to give Jennifer's invitation serious thought' (334). Jennifer is Banks's adopted daughter, who has suggested that he one day move to the countryside to be closer to her. This is the first time that we see Banks planning for a future that is not just a reconstituted version of his past. Moreover, it is the first time that Banks describes Jennifer in any emotional detail. Her centrality to this concluding scene suggests that Banks's adult life in England, along with the family he has created, has belatedly become as real to him as the childhood he lost in Shanghai.

Identity and Empire

While subverting its narrative conventions, *When We Were Orphans* also challenges the Golden Age genre's Eurocentricism and its connotations of British exceptionalism. On his return to Shanghai, Banks is gradually awakened to the complexity of the opium trade in China. Initially, he is in pursuit of a textbook villain, but finds that all the adult figures from his childhood are culpable to a greater or lesser extent. What has befallen the country, and swept away Banks's childhood, is the result of years of collusion and colonial exploitation. His father worked for a company that imported Indian opium into China, bringing 'untold misery and degradation to a whole nation' (60). Banks's mother, whom he remembers as an ardent anti-opium campaigner, has been forced to abandon her beliefs in order to provide for him. In yet another bitter twist, the police inspector he idolized and relied upon as a child is revealed to have succumbed to opium addiction. In *Opium: A History*, Martin Booth writes that as early as 1893 'opium controlled not only its millions of addicts, but it also orchestrated British expansion into China, other nations quickly following the vanguard' (Booth 140). *When We Were Orphans* emphasizes the far-reaching effects of Britain's weaponization of the drug, and the co-dependent international relationships that ensued.

Given the collaborative nature of the opium trade, it becomes impossible for Banks to assign guilt and innocence in the matter of his parents' disappearance. There can be no victory for the detective in such a situation because, as William. O. Walker III states, 'Opium politics, in the first half of the twentieth century, proved to be a game that nobody won' (Walker 200). Boundaries are further blurred and complicated

by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. As an 'East/East' conflict, it throws power relations into realignment, with Japan's aggressive invasion and attempted colonization of China coinciding with Europe's decline as an imperial power. As an adult, Banks's position as an Englishman in Shanghai is uncertain and mutable: when he is apprehended by Japanese soldiers, both parties are uncertain as to whether he is a 'prisoner or a guest' (292).

However, at the beginning of the novel Banks sees himself as an unequivocal protagonist, and unquestioningly conforms to the Golden Age genre's often facile and essentialist view of morality. The narrative entails a progressive breakdown of this view. Brian Finney states:

In Ishiguro's fiction to be orphaned, to be deprived of parental security, becomes a trope for transnational identity, for doing without a fatherland or motherland. The protagonist comes to realize that the feared other is actually located within the self that has discursively created that other out of its own fears. Like the protagonist, the privileged few have peopled the world beyond their safe borders with monsters of their own imagination. In the course of the novel Ishiguro forces the reader to recognize that the representatives of colonialism, while attempting to foist onto the colonized the stigma of eternal childishness, are in fact themselves childlike, having evaded maturation by projecting the unacceptable within themselves onto the subjects of their colonial discourse. (Finney 2)

Here, Finney does not allow for the fluidity of Ishiguro's metaphors: the idea of orphanhood is absolutely linked to transnational identity, but this is by no means the only manner in which orphanhood is used within the text. For example, Tobias Döring discusses the motif as one of Ishiguro's many allusions to *Great Expectations* (84). In many of Dickens's novels, orphanhood heralds the beginning of a journey in which the protagonist's strength and resourcefulness is tested. The question of whether one can turn out to be the 'hero of one's own life' (Dickens 3) is one that

pervades Ishiguro's text as well. In addition to symbolizing displacement and rootlessness, the motif of orphanhood is used to challenge the idea of the individual's potential for self-determination in society (a theme which will be discussed in a later part of this chapter). However, much of Finney's analysis is pertinent, particularly his identification of the self/other opposition which bolsters Banks's beliefs, and the idea of Banks's essential puerility as mirroring the narrowness of the imperial worldview.

Christopher's upbringing in the International Settlement in Shanghai reinforces the idea of the centre under siege. In his remembrances, the International Settlement is depicted as an outpost of 'home' surrounded by the otherness of 'abroad'. He states:

I for one was absolutely forbidden to enter the Chinese areas of the city, and as far as I knew, Akira's parents were no less strict on the matter. Out there, we were told, lay all manner of ghastly diseases, filth and evil men. The closest I had come to going out of the Settlement was once when a carriage carrying my mother and me took an unexpected route along that part of the Soochow creek bordering the Chapei district; I could see the huddled low rooftops across the canal, and had held my breath for as long as I could for fear the pestilence would come airborne across the narrow strip of water. (54)

The reference to the conspiratorially 'huddled' rooftops shows young Christopher's mental personification of the district: it is not merely depicted as a venue for unsavoury doings, but takes on a sinister character all of its own. Even in Banks's adult perception, Chapei retains its almost mythical significance as the unknown 'out there' beyond British control. When Banks returns to Shanghai, he panics when he realizes where his driver has taken him, even though there is no discernable difference between the two areas:

"Fighting very near. Not safe here."
"What do you mean, the fighting's near?" Then an idea dawned on me. "Are we anywhere near Chapei?"

“Sir. We in Chapei. We in Chapei some time.”
“What? You mean we’ve left the Settlement?”
“We in Chapei now.”
“But ... Good God! We’re actually outside the Settlement? In Chapei? Look here, you’re a fool, you know that? A fool! You told me the house was very near. Now we’re lost. We’re possibly dangerously close to the war zone. *And we’ve left the Settlement!*” (240)

That Banks does not immediately notice the change in districts emphasizes the fact that the line they have crossed is metaphorical rather than actual. Banks’s absolute faith in the Settlement as a secure bastion is an integral part of his delusion. As Brian Finney states: ‘Banks’ memories of his childhood and the International Settlement cloud his perception of the actuality when he returns, undermining his principal adult skill of detecting the truth from what visual evidence is available’ (17).

Banks’s reaction to leaving the Settlement is exaggerated and borderline histrionic, but it has its basis in the attitudes he absorbed as a child. These attitudes, in turn, have a basis in historical fact. During the Sino-Japanese war, the International Settlement of Shanghai would prove to be of major symbolic and strategic importance. Rana Mitter writes:

Shanghai’s status as an enclave of foreign privilege rested on its connection to a growing and prosperous China outside the Settlement borders, whether a weak imperial China or a Nationalist China growing in strength. But the ‘moonscape’ of the battered Chinese city, the refugee flight that destroyed the region’s marketing and transport networks, and the collapsing Nationalist government spelled doom for the huge financial – and emotional – investment that Westerners had made in Shanghai. (186)

In 1943, the Settlement would be returned to Chinese control as part of a diplomatic treaty. However, this occurred only after the influx of thousands of refugees into the Settlement had dramatically heralded the loss of imperial control (Mitter 303). Within the novel, the ‘doomed’ island of extraterritoriality is used to represent Banks’s

perception of himself as a protagonist fending off external forces. At the same time, it foreshadows the impending worldwide breakdown of colonial complacency that accompanied WWII. As Machinal states: ‘The obsolescence of the myth of Britain as an imperialist power is exposed not only in the light of the historical emergence of the new colonial powers such as Japan, but – still more tellingly – through the collapse of the confident organization of [Banks’s] world’ (63). The image of the Settlement as an emotionally loaded, false bastion of security is one of the strongest ways in which Ishiguro links Banks’s personal curatorship (or the ‘confident organization of his world’ [63]) to the exclusions and denials necessary to maintain the imperial myth.

The fear of ‘out there’ resides at the very heart of the Golden Age Genre. The idea of crime as deviant and peripheral presupposes a moral (and sometimes national) core upon which outside influences must not be allowed to encroach. When Christopher, describing Chapei, says, ‘ [I] held my breath for as long as I could for fear the pestilence would come airborne across the narrow strip of water’ (54), his anxiety is both historical (as demonstrated by Mitter’s assertion above) and generic. In “‘Out-of-the-Way Asiatic Disease’: Contagion, Malingering, and Sherlock’s England’ Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee states, ‘In the fiction of Conan Doyle and other late-Victorian authors, [the] pathology of imperial intimacy was often expressed in the drastically altered physiology of English men and women returning from their imperial outposts’ (79). Evil is thus shown to be an ‘alien contagion’ spreading inwards from the Empire and threatening British identity (Cannon-Harris 447).

In *The Speckled Band*, for example, Watson describes the sinister Dr. Roylott as follows: ‘A large face, seared with a thousand wrinkles, burned yellow with the sun, and marked with every evil passion, was turned from one to the other of us, while

his deep-set, bile-shot eyes, and his high, thin, fleshless nose gave him somewhat the resemblance to a fierce old bird of prey' (110). We learn that Roylott has been 'burned yellow' after a long stay in 'the tropics' (109), and that the climate has also ignited his hereditary predisposition to 'violence of temper approaching to mania' (109).

The opium trade adds another dimension to the idea of contagion by suggesting addiction as a gateway to deracination. In Agatha Christie's *The Lost Mine*, a short story of the late Golden Age, the criminal is revealed to be a businessman named Mr Pearson, who has had a Chinese man killed in order to seize documents that reveal the location of a profitable mine in Burma. Although his crime is eventually revealed, Christie mitigates his responsibility by depicting him as having been morally degraded by his visits to a Chinese-run opium den in London. Even as he is proving Pearson guilty of abduction and theft, the detective says,

I fancy Mr. Pearson smoked the opium fairly often down there and had some peculiar friends in consequence. I do not think he meant murder. His idea was that one of the Chinamen should impersonate Wu Ling and receive the money for the sale of the document. So far, so good! But, to the Oriental mind, it was infinitely simpler to kill Wu Ling and throw his body into the river, and Pearson's Chinese accomplices followed their own methods without consulting him. (149)

As in the case of Doyle's depiction of Dr. Roylott, this story suggests the 'pathology of imperial intimacy' (Mukherjee 79), with opium specifically marked as a gateway to becoming the 'other'. Mr Pearson's contact with the drug has brought him into close contact with 'Orientals', but Christie implies that these 'Chinamen' are more prone to expedient violence than Pearson could have hoped to understand, and his own character is ruined.

Early on in *When We Were Orphans*, we hear Banks's mother denounce the opium trade in essentialist terms, calling it 'un-Christian and un-British' (62), a judgement which positions British Christianity as an essentialist moral centre. This was an argument commonly put forward by anti-opium campaigners of the time.

Martin Booth writes

A missionary, Revd James Johnstone, although accepting the opium trade had a beneficial side, admitted: 'I shall have to present such an array of dark facts on the other side that you shall pronounce the whole trade to be a foul blot on the fair name of England, as well as a curse to India, and a deadly wound in the heart of China. (152)

Rather than being rooted in a universalistic humanitarianism, then, the protests were based in the very nationalistic oppositions that had precipitated the trade in the first place. They relied on the fear that opium could destroy British exceptionalism by 'lowering' its traders to the level of their colonized subjects, sullyng 'the fair name of England'. As in Christie's short story, this implies an essential English character that was at risk of being tarnished. At the end of Ishiguro's novel, the anti-opium campaigners are revealed as having been 'very naïve' (306) in their failure to recognize the opium trade as a foundational element of Britain's colonial strategy rather than a rogue deviation from British greatness. In underlining this shift in thought, Ishiguro breaks down the Golden Age association between evil and the other, a breakdown that is furthered by the revelation of what really happened to Banks's parents.

The job of the classic literary detective is to ensure that the centre continues to hold: Banks himself compares his role to that of the twine binding together the slats of a blind (142). He is so accustomed to perceiving evil as a kind of mutation or foreign 'pestilence' (54) that he misses the clues in plain sight. For example, it takes him until

the end of his trip to Shanghai to realize that the person he should be looking for is his ‘Uncle’ Philip, an Englishman and a regular fixture of his childhood home in the Settlement. Philip, it emerges, has been complicit in selling Christopher’s mother (his ‘fellow-Christian’ [307]) to the warlord Wang Ku. He has been implicated in some of Banks’s flashbacks, but for a long time Banks prefers to pursue an imaginary band of kidnappers, stating early on that ‘it may be a foolish way to think, but it has always been my feeling that Uncle Philip will remain a less tangible entity while he exists only in my memory’ (64). This diffidence implies that the grotesque caricatures that dog Sherlock Holmes frighten Banks less than the treachery of a close family friend.

Philip is a disturbing character precisely because of his complexity: his motive is revealed to have been an unsettling combination of greed, lust and thwarted idealism. By contrast, the warlord Wang Ku is scarcely depicted at all, and remains remote. His role in the deception underlines the collaborative nature of the opium trade, which allowed Britain to run China ‘virtually like a colony, but with none of the usual obligations’ (Ishiguro 307). However, Wang Ku is never brought into sharp focus, perhaps because Ishiguro trusts that we have already encountered this villain too many times before. His role in the book is important, however: by stressing the complicity between various nations and organizations, Ishiguro is able to dismantle Orientalist binaries rather than simply reversing them. Instead of polarizing East and West, he underlines the collaborative mechanics of both colonialism and the opium epidemic, undermining the idea of national character.

This is reflected in one of the early Shanghai scenes, in which a young Christopher asks whether he might ‘copy’ Philip’s behaviour in order to become a more convincing Englishman. Their conversation foreshadows Banks’s later attempts

to construct his adult identity. After Christopher expresses his concerns about not being English enough, he and Philip have the following exchange:

‘Well, it's true, out here, you're growing up with a lot of different sorts around you. Chinese, French, Germans, Americans, what have you. It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel.’ He gave a short laugh. Then he went on: ‘But that's no bad thing. You know what I think, Puffin? I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you all grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. Oh yes. Perhaps one day, all these conflicts will end, and it won't be because of great statesmen or churches or organisations like this one. It'll be because people have changed. They'll be like you, Puffin. More a mixture. So why not become a mongrel? It's healthy.’
‘But if I did, everything might...’ I stopped.
‘Everything might what, Puffin?’
‘Like that blind there’ – I pointed – ‘if the twine broke. Everything might scatter.’ (Ishiguro 77-78)

The image of the blind is a recurring one in the novel. It originates with the young Akira, who informs Christopher that ‘it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together. If we did not do our part, the slats would fall and scatter over the floor’ (Ishiguro 75). This is the origin of some of Christopher’s grandiosity, as well as his preoccupation with embodying Englishness: as a child, he accepts Akira’s assertion that he needs to be ‘enough Englishman’ (74) if he is to maintain the peace between his parents. Even when he is exposed to the wider adult world, he persists in trying to ‘bind’ it together, this time using the adhesive twine to symbolize the role of the detective, or ‘those of us whose duty it is to combat evil’ (142).

Helene Machinal comments on the performative aspects of Banks’s identity, stating:

Indeed, it becomes clear that Banks's role as a detective is, precisely, a performance, the adoption of an identity derived from a fictional source. Just as in his description of his lodgings he commented on the potential approval of a visitor, attention to the form of his narrative reveals a consistent preoccupation with how he is being perceived, a preoccupation that borders on

a requirement that he is perceived – that he become a celebrity, a figure on the public stage. (60)

Banks's performative identity is not limited to his aspirations as a private detective, however. His 'Englishness' is also a somewhat stilted act. By twinning Christopher's ambitions towards Englishness with his longing to be a detective, Ishiguro suggests that both roles are 'derived from a fictional source' (Machinal 60). This is made evident when Uncle Philip, Christopher's proto-Englishman, is unmasked as the 'Yellow Snake', a communist informer. Unlike Dr. Royslott, he is not depicted as a deracinated traitor, his face 'burned yellow' and 'marked by every evil passion' (Doyle 3176). In fact, despite his sinister title, Philip remains his bumbling, unnervingly avuncular self. Far from being addled by opium addiction, he has been lauded by European missionaries as 'that admirable beacon of rectitude' (64) in recognition of his campaigns against the drug.

Through the breakdown of Christopher's generic assumptions, Ishiguro ultimately suggests 'Englishness' as a construct rather than an essence. Rather than being a distinct identity, it is inseparable from, and reliant on, the very others it professes to reject. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said states:

The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience (9-10).

When We Were Orphans supports this idea. The perversely dependent relationship between China and Britain is underlined by the eventual revelation that it is Wang Ku,

and not Christopher's anodyne 'aunt in Shropshire' (4), who has been funding his life in England. Tobias Döring writes:

His ultimate devastation... comes with the destruction of what Uncle Philip calls his 'enchanted world', the painful realization that he owes his rise in English society to the fortune and benevolence of a Chinese warlord, i.e. the kind of person his professional duty would have been to fight. Thus, Christopher Banks comes into his true inheritance by losing all his cultural capital and former functions: the knowledge that is here restored to him robs him of his rationale [sic]. (80)

Indeed, the revelation of Wang Ku's role in Christopher's life casts a new light on everything that has been narrated thus far. Banks realizes he is not his mother's saviour, but a direct beneficiary of her sexual slavery. At the same time, his identity as an Englishman is shattered. All Banks's ambition has thus far been in the service of appearing more English: on the very first pages, he recounts buying 'a Queen Anne tea service, several packets of fine teas, and a large tin of biscuits' (1-2) in order to impress his first visitor. Like the tea, that supposed arbiter of Englishness, Banks's lifestyle is nominally English, but actually has its origins elsewhere. His dinners at the Dorchester, and his London house, which overlooks a 'moderately prestigious' square (133), take on the weight of colonial abuse and obligation, which is epitomized by, but not limited to, his debt to Wang Ku. Like Britain itself, Christopher's comfortable existence is revealed as having been built on distant atrocities.

World War II

When We Were Orphans grapples with the question of personal power by taking on the idea of the detective as a solitary arbiter of law and order. In *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Martin Priestman states:

The traditional interest in the charismatic detective has tended to focus attention on the (British) eccentric amateur and (American) embittered private eye, to the near-exclusion of the many fictional police detective whose strength lies in teamwork rather than solitary brilliance. (7)

Banks initially styles himself as one of these solitary heroes, but as Ishiguro widens the historical lens the individual's significance declines to the point of absurdity. Ishiguro suggests WWII as a catalyst of a profound change in global ideas of power and responsibility. Ishiguro's novels tend to focus on the moments before and after cataclysmic events: in *A Pale View of Hills*, we witness the quiet devastation following the Nagasaki bombing, and *The Remains of the Day* focuses primarily on the build-up to World War II. *When We Were Orphans* can also be considered as occupying this kind of space: although Banks is only witness to the outbreak of fighting in Shanghai, Ishiguro depicts the Sino-Japanese war as an early spark in a global conflict. Christopher, for whom Shanghai has always meant the International Settlement, initially perceives it as an isolated incident of violence. Eventually, however, he comes to understand the national and international ramifications of what he has seen. This is reflected in the words of one of the Japanese captor/hosts who apprehend Banks and escort him out of the war-zone:

Suddenly he let out a strange laugh, which made me start. 'Mr Banks,' he said, do you realise, do you have any idea, of the unpleasantness yet to come?'

‘If you continue to invade China, I am sure ...’
‘Excuse me, sir’ – he was now quite animated – ‘I am not talking merely of China. *The entire globe*, Mr Banks, the entire globe will before long be engaged in war. What you just saw in Chapei, it is but a small speck of dust compared to what the world must soon witness!’ He said this in a triumphant tone, but then he shook his head sadly. ‘It will be terrible,’ he said quietly. ‘Terrible. You have no idea, sir.’ (295)

The trope of the individual out of his depth in historical tides is a common one in Ishiguro’s work (Machinal 56). Frequently, his narrators overestimate their importance in the greater scheme of things. In *An Artist of the Floating World* Masuji Ono is wracked with guilt and paranoia over Japan’s involvement in World War Two, believing himself to be nationally reviled. In the end, he is revealed to have been a minor and little remembered player in the conflict. As one of his compatriots says, ‘It was simply our misfortune to have been ordinary men during such times’ (193). Similarly, Stevens of *The Remains of the Day* lives vicariously through the supposed ‘greatness’ of his master, Lord Darlington, at a terrible cost to his own life (258). In *When We Were Orphans*, the looming presence of the conflict adds a historical dimension to the breakdown of the narrative’s initial premise. Banks’s Golden Age delusion is gradually stripped away, but the threat of war suggests that he is not the only one who is due an awakening. In Banks’s mind, ‘solving the case’ becomes synonymous with saving the world. In this sense he is deluded, but his aspirations are not so far from the self-belief expressed by some of the other characters.

Christopher’s love interest, Sarah Hemmings, is initially determined to marry a ‘distinguished man’ who will contribute to ‘a better world’ (47), a project she pursues so single-mindedly that Banks describes her as a ‘zealot’ (47). She eventually settles on Sir Cecil Medhurst, who has helped to establish the League of Nations, and

who complacently dismisses the idea of another World War as an impossibility. When they meet in London, Sir Cecil affirms his belief in personal power, suggesting that he and Banks are both instrumental in 'hold[ing] the line' against those who are 'conspiring to put civilisation to the torch' (42).

However, by the time the Sino-Japanese conflict begins, Cecil is depicted as a hopeless, abusive alcoholic who is taking out his powerlessness on his new wife. Shocked by his sudden loss of colonial privilege, he describes Shanghai as 'too deep for me, my boy. Too deep by far' (179). Even though diplomacy initially seems like a more feasible avenue for maintaining peace than 'detection', both Cecil and Banks are effectively trying to stem centuries of historical resentment with a singlehanded coup, and both are nearly destroyed in the process. In *Crime and Empire: The Colony in Nineteenth Century Fictions of Crime*, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee discusses Britain's colonization of India, stating that 'the East India company tried to invest its colonialist regime with the moral justification of bringing law to what was shown to be an essentially anarchic and criminal country' (vi). In the light of its resemblance to this 'moral justification' of colonialism, Banks's resolution to take on 'the growing turmoil all over world' (153) is revealed as somewhat less egregious than it initially appears.

Sarah is given her own sad awakening. Initially, Banks and Sarah engage in the same kind of games as Holmes and Irene Adler in *A Scandal in Bohemia* (Doyle 17), taking turns to sabotage each other's attempts at social climbing. As they enact their antagonistic attraction, we are led to believe that Sarah is Banks's 'match', the only woman 'clever', 'fascinating' and 'complicated' enough to outwit him (17). However, the consequences of their relationship end up being much graver than their

first encounters suggest. Once she is in Shanghai, Sarah realizes that, far from empowering her, her long-awaited marriage has turned her into a victim. She has even less power than the diminished Sir Cecil, who at least retains his patriarchal hold over her.

The flaw in her romance with Banks is the fact that she comes to terms with her lack of power before Banks has been able to fully comprehend his own. Of Shanghai, she says, 'I can't stay here anymore. I tried my best, and I'm so tired now. I'm going away' (223). Banks is offered the chance to escape to Macao with Sarah, but finds that he cannot yet give up on 'solving the case' in Shanghai. At the last minute, he changes his mind and sets out to find the house where he believes his parents are being held. By the time he comes to his senses, he realizes that Sarah will now be long gone. In turning his back on her, Banks sacrifices the possibility of future happiness in order to chase the shadow of his past. Sarah has suggested sending for Banks's adopted daughter so that they can be 'a little family' (226), but Banks prefers to try and retrieve the frozen familial ideal he has been clinging to all his life.

Sarah leaves Shanghai alone, and eventually ends up in an internment camp, an ordeal that will permanently destroy her health. This underscores the relative triviality of everything that has gone before: Sarah is originally presented as a fixture of fashionable London, on her way up the social ladder. Her social aspirations (which Banks shares) become meaningless as Ishiguro transplants her and assigns her a serious, protracted fate elsewhere. Like Cecil's drunken attempts at roulette, the idea of gaming the system and emerging victorious is made ridiculous. However, Banks doesn't realize this until he is confronted by the great leveller of WWII.

All the major players in *When We Were Orphans* are similarly revealed to be much less powerful than they first appear. Much of the power that is discussed in the parts of the book that showcase fashionable London is shown to be illusory. Icons of strength are used to instil a false sense of security, much as Christopher's early fantasies of rescue relied on the figure of Inspector Kung, the officer in charge of his father's case. Indeed, Kung himself makes an appearance during Banks's second stint in Shanghai. He is now destitute and opium-addicted, but he is neither the hero of Banks's imaginings, nor the 'worthless ragamuffin' (209) of local rumour. Instead, the old man foreshadows Christopher's eventual incarnation as a retired investigator himself. He admits that Shanghai has 'defeated' him, but can still look back on his investigative triumphs with some pride (217). In spite of his expulsion from polite society, and his fondness for 'the pipe', Kung is a kind, quietly dignified old man who has managed to do a modest amount of good. These are qualities that Christopher will eventually come to value, and even adopt, but he has to give up his childish understanding of personal power before he can do so.

The theme of individual powerlessness is at odds with the Golden Age's depiction of authority. The Golden Age detective's strongest feature is the ability to restore harmony in the aftermath of a crime. The detective subdues his antagonists through the power of articulation, or by 'naming names'. As Ronald R. Thomas points out, protagonists like the prototypical Holmes use identification and coerced confessions to 'author' others, and their narrative authority often becomes a means of stereotyping and pacifying foreign bodies (659). Although characters like Sherlock are seldom noted for their physical prowess, they perform a disarming function by co-opting the voice of the 'criminal' who is being apprehended.

Banks's powers of articulation become more and more degraded during the novel, as he clutches for any explanation that will allow him to claim the status of hero. He is so unreliable that the reader is increasingly unable to trust his version of events. By the time he encounters Philip, even Banks no longer trusts himself. He says: 'I was until recently under the impression both my parents were being held captive in Chapei. So you see, I have not been so clever' (306). His side of the interview consists mainly of blunt questions and shocked silences.

His attempts at labelling his story's players also prove futile: when he first meets the false 'Akira', Banks tries to assert his own version of history: "'Now look," I stood up and cried at the crowd. "You've made a mistake. This is a good man. My friend. Friend'" (266). Here, he blithely relies on his detective persona and his word as an Englishman to lend him an authority he does not possess. When he waves a revolver at a group of Chinese civilians, he credits his own 'strident tone' (267) and 'demeanour' (268) with causing them to scatter, rather than the fact that he is brandishing a loaded gun. Childishly, Banks believes that his own determinations of 'friend' and 'foe' are enough to supersede the enmities that have riven Shanghai apart.

Conclusion

In this novel, the Golden Age structure is subjected to the stresses of worldly engagement, resulting in the breakdown of both narrative and protagonist. By thwarting all of Banks's attempts to explain and demarcate the world, Kazuo Ishiguro questions the founding myths upon which colonialism, detective fiction, and narrative

are based. As Banks loses his bearings in the midst of a conflict with multiple players, the reader is invited to look beyond the binaries of East and West; friend or foe. As such, *When We Were Orphans* provides a vantage point on the complexities of the decline of empire in the 20th Century. Paradoxically, the book's power lies in its renunciation of narrative authority, its many loose ends suggesting the value of acknowledging history as a story that is complex, subjective and always incomplete.

CHAPTER TWO

Anil's Ghost: Investigating the Pathologist

Anil's Ghost is set in the 1990s, at the height of the Sri Lankan civil war. Unlike the protagonist of *When We Were Orphans*, the main character is not a traditional detective, but a forensic pathologist who is tasked with investigating human rights violations that have occurred during the conflict.

The novel contains many of the tropes seen in Ondaatje's earlier work – for example, the conflict setting, the use of vignettes, and the limited cast of characters. However, in other ways it can be regarded as a distinct departure from type. For one thing, it contains many elements of the thriller genre: the main character, Anil, engages in a risky investigation that sets the narrative's suspenseful pace. The novel also represents a departure in the sense that it is Ondaatje's first novelistic foray into Sri Lanka, the country of his birth.³ This act of return is mirrored by that of the book's protagonist, who travels back to Sri Lanka as a representative of an international human rights organization.

Much of the novel is preoccupied with Anil Tissera's struggle to reclaim a Sri Lankan identity and to reconcile her own prolonged absence with her mandate as a moral observer. Accompanied by Sarath, a local archaeologist, Anil sets about reconstructing and identifying a skeleton found in an area that can only be accessed by government officials. Anil is the instigator of the investigation, which she justifies as follows: 'Some people let their ghosts die, some don't. Sarath, we can do something' (49). In Anil's world, 'doing something' entails reconstructing the circumstances around a death, giving weight to a crime by removing the anonymity of

³³ Ondaatje explores Sri Lanka in his poetry and in his memoir, *Running in the Family*

both victim and perpetrators. In the process of identifying the skeleton, she hopes to shine a light on ‘a certain kind of crime’ (272) that has become an open secret in Sri Lanka – in other words, the government’s killing of its own citizens. She says of the skeleton that: ‘To give him a name would name the rest’ (52). From the outset, the reader is aware of the victim’s likely cause of death. Thus, the suspense of the narrative does not rely so much on the identification of a perpetrator, but on whether Anil can gather conclusive evidence, and what will happen if she does. The potential consequences loom increasingly large as the narrative progresses and more characters find themselves drawn into the investigation.

While it conforms to many of the conventions of the forensic thriller, the novel ultimately critiques the idea that mass trauma can be explained or quantified by scientific means. Anil gradually realizes that ‘there could never be any logic to the human violence without the distance of time. For now it would be reported, filed in Geneva, but no one could ever give meaning to it’ (51). The narrative resists all logical attempts to decode the Sri Lankan war from above, and the forensic discovery ultimately rings hollow and anticlimactic. Instead, the novel asserts the need for empathy and receptivity on the part of those attempting to understand the conflict. In the novel, Anil’s gradual loss of objectivity is depicted as a positive and more rewarding form of social engagement, even as it clouds her scientific judgement.

Anil’s personal journey often overshadows the official inquiry and the climax of the narrative is not the revelation of Sailor’s identity, but Anil’s moment of self-identification as a Sri Lankan:

Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her quiet explanations, her surefootedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be emotional. It was a lawyer’s argument and, more important, a citizen’s evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, ‘I think you murdered

hundreds of us.' Hundreds of *us*. Sarath thought to himself. *Fifteen years away and she is finally us*. (269)

Although the narrative takes place from multiple points of view, Anil's reconciliation of her 'citizenship' with her role as 'a foreign authority' emerges as a major theme. Her move away from impartiality is exemplified by Ondaatje's use of setting: while Anil and Sarath are in Colombo, their 'laboratory' is located on board the *Oronsay*, a now-docked passenger liner. The ship, which 'had once travelled between Asia and England' (14) is being used as extension of the local hospital, which is overflowing with war casualties. On one level, the 'gutted' hulk of the luxury liner works as a fairly obvious symbol of the state of the nation, i.e. sectarian violence in Sri Lanka as part of the wreckage of empire. Writing in 1994, John D. Rogers states:

Before British rule, identities were often constructed and reconstructed, both by power holders and aspirants to power. Despite many exclusivist and some essentialist identities, there was no fully developed essentialist sociology. After British rule was established, identities continued to be constructed and reconstructed, but this process took place within a more rigid intellectual framework. It was within this framework that the twentieth-century centralization of state power and extension of the franchise led to the rise of ethnonationalism and the Sinhalese-Ceylon Tamil polarization that now dominates Sri Lankan politics. (19-20)

While the image of the ship hints at this history, the theme of colonial damage is not clearly surfaced in the rest of the novel. Although the text refers periodically to Sri Lanka's colonial era, particularly with relation to the theft of Sri Lankan artefacts and the archaeologist Palipana's attempts to '[wrestle] archaeological authority in Sri Lanka away from the Europeans' (75), it does not explicitly address the idea of the colonial system of 'divide and rule' as a catalyst for the current conflict. For this reason, the image of the ship has a stronger resonance with Anil's (and perhaps Ondaatje's) individual project of return.

The *Oronsay* also appears in *The Cat's Table*, Ondaatje's fictionalized account of his childhood immigration to England, where it is described, in all its former glory, as '[a] castle that was to cross the sea' (1). From a scientific point of view, the ship is a poor place for Anil to work: the lighting is bad, and the space below deck is bristling with rats, 'scurrying perhaps over the instruments when she and Sarath were not there' (33). However, the ship's association with motion and migration means that the idea of separation and return is constantly evoked, even as Anil pieces together Sailor's forensic history. Thus, the two inquiries (rational and emotional) become interdependent and interlinked. Anil's investment in the case becomes 'contaminated' by emotion and identification as she seeks to reconstruct her own identity alongside that of the skeleton.

The duality of the investigation, in which Anil's project of return often eclipses the story of Sailor's life and death, is one reason for some of the criticism the text has drawn. It can be argued that Ondaatje uses a real civil war to catalyse his protagonist's emotional epiphany, and that her experience as an expatriate is privileged above local experience within the novel. Several critics have suggested just that. In a brief, dismissive review, R. Wijesinha states that 'despite some merits, *Anil's Ghost* is basically a highly wrought orientalist account of experiences that deserve much more thorough analysis and exposition than Michael was able to supply' (1). He also suggests that the shortcomings of the book owe to the fact that Ondaatje 'is not Sri Lankan, and has not been Sri Lankan for years' (1).

'Analysis and exposition' are glaringly absent from the novel as a whole: Ondaatje does not explicate on the conflict itself, except in a brief editorial note. In this note, he writes:

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents. (x)

The bald references to insurgents and separatists continue throughout the novel, but there is little explanation of the militant Marxism or Tamil nationalism underlying each group's respective declarations of war. Rather than passing judgement on the sectarian resentments fuelling the violence, the novel frames the conflict in the broadest of terms and most apolitical of terms, affirming that 'the reason for war was war' (39).

Anil's emotional evolution is similarly devoid of political content. She may assert her Sri Lankan-ness, but her journey towards identifying as such is powered by a diversity of influences and blind spots, all of which are highly personal. The citizenship Anil assembles for herself lies outside the social strictures of ethnicity and religion that have been magnified into violent nationalisms by the Tamil/Sinhala conflict. Anil never invokes a Sinhalese identity, except as a reference to the 'lost language' (18) of her childhood. Instead, her version of citizenship is an eccentric pastiche of the things that have awakened kinship in her during her return: namely, her relationship with her colleagues ('she was with Sarath and Ananda, citizenized by their friendship,' [196]), an affinity for nature, and her induction into the 'national disease' of fear (49).

This chapter will focus on the way in which Anil's status as a returnee affects and complicates her role as a detective figure, and informs her approach to the investigation. It will argue that Ondaatje undermines the generic motifs of forensic truth-seeking and objective investigation by portraying Anil's immersion into her

surroundings, enacting her re-citizenship through tactile and spiritual engagement. However, it will also demonstrate that the thriller aesthetic that accompanies Anil's journey towards engagement creates multiple elisions and silences, paradoxically undermining the reader's ability to engage with the specifics of the conflict.

Empathy and Tactility

Anil's reassembly of citizenship should not be too sweepingly defined as a return to roots, or as a unilateral repudiation of 'Westernness'. In her article, 'Investigating Truth, History and Human Rights in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*', Emily S. Davis states

Early in the novel, Sarath warns Anil that, as an outsider, she cannot understand the complex truths of the Sri Lankan civil war. His challenge to Anil as a Western detective is not just postmodern but postcolonial as well, because he questions the idea that a Western detective using Western methods can reveal the truth about Sailor. (12)

However, it is too simplistic to describe Anil (as Davis does throughout her article) as a representative of 'Western detection', or even a Western character per se. Davis invokes crime literature tropes by describing Anil as the 'stereotypical hard-boiled loner' (10), but does not note that Anil's solitude also speaks to her background as an emigrant, and her failure to assimilate in either the West or Sri Lanka. As Sandeep Sanghera notes, the young Anil's rejection of Sri Lanka is a calculated move that allows her profession to supersede nationality as her primary mode of identification. Sanghera writes, 'Citizenship is consciously let go. Anil then turns "fully to the place she [finds] herself in" [145]. And that place is the field, the classroom, and the lab where bodies are exhumed for and examined. She settles into her studies, drawing her books close to her' (Sanghera 3).

Anil self-identifies first and foremost as a scientist, but to interpret this nationalistically is to accept an Orientalist framing of Western rationality vs. Eastern intuition that is not upheld by the narrative. Speaking of ancient Sri Lanka, Gamini, a local surgeon says:

This was a civilized country. We had ‘halls for the sick’ four centuries before Christ [...] The names of doctors appear on some rock inscriptions. There were villages for the blind. There are recorded details of brain operations in the ancient texts. Ayurvedic hospitals were set up that still exist [...] We were always good with illness and death. We could howl with the best. Now we carry the wounded with no anaesthetic up the stairs because the elevators don't work. (188)

As is evident from this statement, science and medicine are not portrayed as imported disciplines. In fact, the difficulty Anil must grapple with is not so much the fallibility of her ‘Western methods’ but the difficulty of maintaining her distance as a professional observer in her own country. Anil’s character arc can therefore be more profitably read as a constant negotiation between involvement and distance (Farrier 84), rather than as a hard lesson about ‘the inadequacy of Western detection’ (Davis 12).

Initially Anil, as a rootless loner, uses scientific objectivity as a justification for maintaining her emotional reserve. On an abstract level, Anil’s detachment from sectarian allegiances often makes her appear more moral than many of her local counterparts. She is initially the only character prepared to pursue the truth about Sailor’s murder, upholding Theodor Adorno’s assertion that ‘the highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one’s own home’ (112). In other words, she holds a universalist view of morality, one which she will not allow the particularities of the Sri Lankan conflict to touch. Upon arrival, Anil has no qualms about implicating the government in her investigation, and she plans to do so through impartial scientific

evidence, 'same for Colombo as for Troy' (60). However, Sarath argues that her fixation on universal truth over consequences betrays a lack of moral investment. He says: 'You can't just slip in, make a discovery, and leave' (40). Sarath fears what the truth can do in the hands of a protected observer with an escape route. In the context of the Sri Lankan war, as Wendy Knepper argues, 'the need to assert truth can be a violent impulse and have criminal consequences' (54).

Anil's move from untethered universalism (we are told that 'she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze' [7]) to involved citizenship entails immersing herself in the particular dangers of the conflict. This is in line with Edward Said's formulation of contrapuntal thinking, which differs from Adorno's concept of ethical rootlessness in that 'both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together', and thus contrapuntal thinking represents a kind of independence that is achieved by '*working through* attachments, not by rejecting them' (3703). It is therefore far more subjective and equivocal than Adorno's uncompromising insistence on moral objectivity.

In an early passage describing a colleague from Guatemala, Anil says:

And Manuel. He is part of that community, so he has less protection than the others like us. He told me once, *When I've been digging and I'm tired and don't want to do any more, I think how it could be me in the grave I'm working on. I wouldn't want someone to stop digging for me ...* (30) (Italics in original)

Anil begins to identify with Sailor in precisely the way in which Manuel describes. Here, 'it could be me in the grave' is not simply an expression of humanism, but carries a more literal meaning. Anil has been away from Sri Lanka for years, but had she stayed she may well have been a casualty of war. Just as Manuel is differentiated from 'the others like us' (pathologists) when he is in Guatemala, so Anil finds that professional distance is harder to maintain when she could be the next casualty. In

Frames of War: When is Life Grievable? Judith Butler writes that ‘in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition. Its very persistence depends upon social conditions and institutions, which means that in order to "be," in the sense of "persist," it must rely on what is outside itself’ (Butler 33). Anil’s move to a Sri Lankan ‘us’ is powered by physical vulnerability: she can no longer hold herself apart from the context she is investigating, because in this case the country’s ‘social conditions and institutions’ are enacting the same threats upon her body as they do on the rest of the country’s citizens. Her reclaimed identity is therefore situational (i.e. predicated on her return) rather than essential.

As David Farrier states, ‘To be in some way attached means to be vulnerable, because it implies a greater degree of intimacy [...] Anil must move from the cocooned “us” of Guatemala to a more intimate, and dangerous, *us*, altogether’ (90). In Guatemala, Anil’s group of pathologists had international protection, and visible outsider status to prevent them from being subsumed in the civil war. However, Anil’s ties to Sri Lanka put her at far greater risk. This dangerous solidarity is reflected in an early dream sequence. Here, Anil finds she is not dissecting Sailor, but lying alongside him:

He was using the felt marker to trace her shape. You will have to put your arms down for a moment. She could feel the pen move around her hands and alongside her waist, then down her legs, both sides, so he linked the blue lines at the base of her heels. She rose out of the outline, turned back and saw he had drawn outlines of the four skeletons as well. (58) (Italics in original)

When the dream examiner (presumably Sarath) orders Anil to put her arms down, it is implied that Anil’s affinity with Sailor renders her ‘disarmed’ or emotionally prone. Anil’s dream of being a specimen is both reflective of a literal fear

of death and part of a greater anxiety about being seen and categorized from without. On her arrival in Sri Lanka she is jarred and irritated by the number of people who remember her childhood fame as a swimmer. She brushes off their recognition with flippant remarks ('a lot of blood under the bridge since then' [12]), but her defensiveness suggests a fear of being observed and recognized, even for such a benign achievement. Such recognition precludes the potential for 'privacy', which Anil cites as a treasured part of her life abroad (68).

However, by the end of the novel, Anil freely identifies herself as 'the swimmer' (267) during a phone-call to Colombo, aligning herself with a communal 'us' by accepting the moniker the community has ascribed to her. Sandeep Sanghera writes, 'That early (watery) celebrity citizens Anil to Sri Lanka. Although she has long been gone, her name lives on and that – her name remembered – matters poignantly for it is remembered in a place where names routinely, tragically go missing' (3). The incorporation of this past incarnation (or 'name remembered') into her present identity signifies the type of intimacy and vulnerability that Farrier describes. Anil is no longer simply compiling a report on the war: she is herself part of the narrative, a position that makes both objectivity and security impossible. Indeed, it is that same phone-call to Colombo that brings the wrath of the government down upon her. Anil abandons detachment and caution and gambles on emotion, appealing to an old friend of her father's for help. She says, 'You knew my father. You worked with him. I need someone I can trust' (267).

Anil is not the only character in the novel who struggles to reconcile self-preservation with ethical involvement. Gamini, the trauma surgeon, has sacrificed much of his personal life. He lives in the hospital, snatching sleep in empty patient beds when he can. His marriage has ended ('she didn't love the smell of scrub lotion

on my arms' [189]) and he fuels himself with amphetamines. The first time Anil encounters him he is wearing a black jacket and is 'covered in blood' (182). Like Anil, Gamini is a practitioner of science, but his jacket (the opposite of the imposing, authoritative white coat) and his dishevelled state make Anil mistake him for the victim of an attempted murder. Later, watching him work, Anil once again notes the literal lack of boundaries between Gamini and his patients: 'She noticed he wasn't wearing gloves, not even a lab coat. It looked as if he had just come from an interrupted card game' (126).

Vivian Halloran Nun states that 'Gamini performs his solidarity with the victims instead of interacting through a dynamic of subject-Other such as the one affected by Western(ized) physicians with international affiliations, like Dr. Anil Tissera' (15). However, it is important to note that the 'subject-Other' dynamic is broken down over the course of the novel, at least for Anil. Her personal journey entails an emotional ungluing, a willingness to be touched by the conflict and to be an actor rather than an observer of it. Milena Marinkova states that 'Anil's insistence on preserving her position as an impartial external witness ascertaining the truth of Sri Lanka is untenable; nor can her brand of justice offer a solution to the situation. In contrast, Gamini [...] will not only denounce any humanist givens [...] but also immerse himself in the comfort of the smell of soap and the tender touch of a hand' (82). Anil moves closer to Gamini's mode of engagement as she begins to embrace tactility rather than sterile distance.

In discussing Anil's early career, Ondaatje refers to the 'principle of necessary levity' common among forensic pathologists. We are given a snapshot of Anil's former lab mates in Oklahoma, whose work is accompanied by mordant humour and deafening rock 'n roll. They are insulated from the grieving relatives by

their 'airtight' room, in which they freely refer to the bodies by irreverent, ghoulish monikers such as 'the Lady in the Lake' (143). We are given to understand that this is a form of self-protective bravado, rather than genuine insensitivity:

They snuffed out death with music and craziness. The warnings of *carpe diem* were on gurneys in the hall. They heard the rhetoric of death over the intercom; 'vaporization' or 'microfragmentation' meant the customer in question had been blown to bits. They couldn't miss death, it was in every texture and cell around them. No one changed the radio dial in a morgue without a glove on. (143)

At the beginning of the novel Anil retains this sardonic approach to her work: we learn that she habitually greets the bodies in her lab with an ironic: 'Honey, I'm home!' (15). Although this is sometimes said in a 'tender' tone, the facetiousness of the greeting enforces distance between herself and the objects of her investigation. However, when Anil works with Sailor, she finds herself sincerely moved to cradle the skeleton in her arms:

There had been hours when, locked in her investigations and too focused by hours of intricacy, she too would need to reach forward and lift Sailor into her arms, to remind herself that he was like her. Not just evidence, but someone with charms and flaws, part of a family, a member of a village who in the sudden lightning of politics raised his hands at the last minute, so they were broken. (166)

By holding the skeleton aloft from the examination table, she implicitly draws a comparison between Sailor's body and her own, measuring his frame against hers in order to 'remind herself' of their essential similarity. This is precisely the type of connection she eschewed in Oklahoma, where she was able to 'snuff out death' by refusing to see her own humanity reflected in her specimens. Her conception of Sailor as someone who once lived entails a frightening recognition of her own mortality. Her connection with the skeleton also creates a rapport between herself and the third member of the investigative team, the artificer Ananda. They do not share a language,

and Anil initially dismisses him as ‘a drunk’ (157). However, when she sees him carrying Sailor around the courtyard, she realizes they share a way of communing with the dead. At this moment she ‘wished she could trade information with him... She would have told him what Sailor’s bone measurements meant in terms of posture and size. And he – God knows what insights he had’ (166).

Eventually, Anil is able to gain the insights she craves. By touching Ananda’s calves, she is able to identify the strictures she has found in Sailor’s bones. This leads to the revelation that Sailor, like Ananda, must once have worked in a mine. However, the touch conveys more than forensic information: their initial dislike for each other is overcome as Ananda utters ‘a dry laugh’ (175). Later, when Anil dissolves into tears, Ananda comforts her without using speech: ‘Now Ananda had touched her in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her, except, perhaps, Lalitha. Or perhaps her mother, somewhere further back in her lost childhood’ (183-184). In “Touching the Language of Citizenship in Anil’s Ghost”, Sandeep Sanghera refers to this moment, stating, ‘It is not just a touch that takes Anil into the past, it also roots simultaneously her in the present. It citizens Anil clearly to the Sri Lanka she stands in now’ (8).

Throughout the text, physical contact is granted more weight and meaning than verbal speech: Sarath and Anil have long, philosophical conversations while working in the field, but she observes his guardedness by the fact that he ‘had hardly touched her’ (183). By contrast, Gamini, made unwary by drugs and exhaustion, falls asleep with his head in her lap the first time they are introduced. Similarly, when Anil goes to visit her old Tamil *ayah*, Lalitha, their embraces prove more eloquent than anything their translator can offer. Ondaatje’s insistence on the superior power of tactility means that Anil can be ‘re-citizenized’ without having to recall her ‘lost

language' (18). Again, there is a certain democracy in the claiming of kinship: whereas Anil's use of English only enables her to communicate with middleclass Sri Lankans like Sarath and his brother, her physical proximity to Ananda enables him to 'citizen' her through touch. David Farrier states that 'touch and perception are important in the novel as facilities that allow a connection with the local' (89). However, it is important to note that, even as she establishes human connections, Anil's bodily approach enables her to avoid many of the barriers that characterize 'local' life in Sri Lanka. The universality of tactility is used to transcend barriers of class and culture – the very barriers that fuel the leftist insurgency and the Tamil/Sinhala conflict, respectively. Tactile communication also elides the elements that mark Anil out as noticeably foreign, i.e. her halting Sinhala and 'Western' dress (22).

Through the use of tactility, Anil's journey from detachment to moral proximity is enacted upon the reader as well. Anil, cosmopolitan and broadly relatable, is used to lead international readers to Sarath and Gamini, part of a local family torn apart by war. Anil imagines herself 'in some way like a sister between them, keeping them from mauling each other's worlds' (282). In the same way, Anil performs as a multicultural mediator within the text, beginning with a forensic ('long-distance' [7]) gaze but gradually establishing contact with the human element of the conflict.

The irony is that Anil must re-incorporate Sri Lanka into her self-perception in order to re-establish her citizenship, but in order to bring international readers with her she must also remain as universal as possible, avoiding any 'ideological grid' or 'historical discourse' (Siddiqi 70). Her citizenship is not informed by the cultural

specifics that underpin nationalism, but by shared geography and a common experience of mortality and physicality with which most readers can identify.

Marina Marinkova, author of *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing*, asserts that Ondaatje's 'haptic' prose (i.e. prose which is reliant on 'the bodily, the sensual, the material') is able to '[forge] an intimately embodied and ethically responsible relationship among audience, author and text, as it renounces the Cartesian split between mind and body, the dialectical subsumption of the object into the subject, and the dehistoricization of a phenomenological subject' (4). However, Marinkova's argument (that Ondaatje replaces the dialectical subject/object gaze with the universal language of affective empathy) is rather sweeping, and does not take into account Ondaatje's use of genre. As already stated, Anil's connection to Sri Lanka through physicality and tactility is enacted upon the reader, and lends an immediacy to the historical conflict. However, the 'haptic aesthetic' is unevenly applied, and the book veers between offering the reader 'felt' bodily experience and gruesome external spectatorship.

In portraying the death of Sarath, Ondaatje comes closest to fulfilling the haptic ideal Marinkova describes. Sarath's murder effectively depicts the aftermath of the 'successful' investigation into Sailor's death, as he suffers the consequences of Anil's indiscretion. Like Sailor, Sarath is outlived by his own story. Sailor's story, however, is comparatively sparse: we learn that in life he was Ruwan Kumara. Kumara was a toddy tapper turned graphite miner who was 'disappeared' from his village, accused of being a rebel sympathizer. This, however, is as much as we ever know about him. Instead, it is 'the ghost of Sarath Diyasena' (305) that is left to haunt the reader. Of the forensic crime novel, Katharine and Lee Horsley state, 'by providing readers with not only a body of experts but an expert on the body the

novelist allows them to listen to the voices of the dead' (3). In *Anil's Ghost*, however, the voice of Sailor remains elusive, and summoning it remains beyond Anil's skill.

Through Sarath's death, Ondaatje illustrates the line Sarath took in life: he tells Anil that he wants her to understand 'the archaeological surround of a fact' (40). In the end Sailor's body is a fact (Ruwan Kumara: graphite miner) and Sarath's is a narrative. Instead of humanizing the conflict by resurrecting Kumara, Ondaatje presents us with the dead body of a character we already know well. This intimacy is heightened by the fact that the scene takes place through the eyes of Gamini, his brother, who sees in the body the history of their relationship. Sarath's injuries (burns, broken bones) are common to many of the torture victims portrayed in the text, but our acquaintance with him lends them a horrible specificity. As Marinkova states in her formulation, this portrayal 'renounces the Cartesian split between mind and body' (4) by refracting the image of Sarath's body both through our experience of his character and through his brother's grief: Sarath's chest is described as 'gentle' and 'generous' (285), and he thus retains the humanity that Anil's forensic reconstruction has been unable to restore to Kumara.

The images of Sarath's body are the most personal images of violence that appear in the text. In part, this underlines the difference between the 'unhistorical dead' (52) and the dead with whom one shares a past. Gamini is first made aware of his brother's death through a mortuary photograph. Sarath's face is concealed, granting him Sailor-like impersonality to anyone who did not know him in life. The image is brought in by a civil rights organization that keeps track of torture victims (i.e., by another set of investigators). Even without seeing his face, Gamini recognizes his brother and finds him in the hospital morgue:

Gamini didn't know how long he stood there. There were seven bodies in the room. There were things he could do. He didn't know. There were things he could do perhaps. He could see the acid burns, the twisted leg. He unlocked the cupboard that held bandages, splints, disinfectant. He began washing the body's dark-brown markings with scrub lotion. He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into his life. (284)

Ondaatje makes the reader a witness to the 'pietà' (285) between Gamini and his brother's body, changing the way that tragedy is framed: instead of an autopsy, this is an interactive lamentation, one which is the more affecting because in life we have previously seen 'no touching between [them], not a handshake' (125). When Gamini speaks in the mortuary, he abandons clinical language and his inventory of Sarath's injuries takes the form of a eulogy to their history together:

The gash of scar on the side of your elbow you got crashing a bike on the Kandy Hill. This scar I gave you hitting you with a cricket stump. As brothers we ended up never turning our backs on each other. You were always too much of an older brother, Sarath. (284-285)

Yumna Siddiqi states that: 'Anil repudiates an instrumental view of bodies that have been subjected to violence and asserts instead their affective moment. When Gamini cradles Sarath's battered body, he too reads the body in the language of shared memory and affect [...] By privileging these moments, the novel describes the bodily victims of political violence not in relation to an ideological grid or historical discourse, but rather in terms of the power they have to move' (Siddiqi 70). However, the novel's use of affect is selective, deliberately so, in a way which insists on the collaborative nature of truth. Ondaatje supplies an underdeveloped, fairly affectless sketch of Sailor's life to show the limitations of scientific truth. The second kind of testimony – 'intimate testimony' (Farrier 85), such as Gamini's – can only happen when the bereaved are left alone with their dead. Thus, we are given to understand that the intimate facts of Sailor's life can only be divulged once Anil and Sarath have

carried the news to his village. The mystery of his death has been ‘solved’, but the story of his life becomes a ghost text: it does not appear in the main narrative, but is implicitly being memorialized somewhere just out of earshot.

Of the forensic thriller, Linda Mizejewski writes, ‘in these novels, medical forensics guarantees the authority of the main character [...] Readers are offered meticulous accounts of autopsies, descriptions of police procedures with homicide victims, and the process of profiling criminals through physical evidence’ (55). In portraying this second, highly emotive reconstruction of the dead, Ondaatje reverses generic conventions by undermining Anil’s authority, showing the limitations of her investigative methods. In doing so, he argues for an approach to truth that addresses the effects of emotional and social trauma and ‘the presence of truth beyond the evidential’ (Farrier 89). In Sri Lanka, the text suggests, tragedy is not only diffuse, but fathomless, and it is the death of Sarath that ultimately reveals the comparative shallowness of dispassionate truth.

Bodily Harm

Gamini’s tribute to his brother is a quiet place in an extremely violent story. Part of the reason for critiques such as Wijesinha’s is that the initial onslaught of anonymous brown bodies does nothing to unsettle Orientalist stereotypes about the ‘third world’ as an arena for senseless violence. In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe writes, ‘the theoretical and practical recognition of the body and flesh of “the stranger” as flesh and body just like mine, the *idea of a common human nature, a humanity shared with others*, long posed, and still poses, a problem for Western consciousness’ (103) (italics in original). Eventually, the conflict is fully humanized and made ‘grievable’

through the familiar figure of Sarath, with whose ‘flesh and body’ the reader can identify. However, one could argue that the gruesome images preceding this (most notably the bridge lined with heads on stakes on page 171) provide a gratuitously roundabout route there.

Marinkova’s description of the ‘haptic aesthetic’ does not take into account the fact that the very word ‘body’ has different connotations in the context of the crime genre. *Anil’s Ghost* does make use of ‘the bodily, the sensual, the material’ (4) to connect with its readers: however, in many cases the reader is kept at one remove by the fact that the ‘body’ in question is already dead. In many of these cases, the imagery fits seamlessly within the thriller aesthetic, and serves quite a different function to the one Marinkova describes. The rising background violence foreshadowing Sarath’s murder can be interpreted as a method of creating a sense of threat rather than encouraging empathic identification.

In her article, ‘Anil’s Ghost and Terrorism’s Time’, Margaret Scanlan argues that the book’s ‘distinctive achievement [...] is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror’ (1), in which the loss and salvaging of life alternate in relentless waves. However, ‘replicate’ is perhaps too strong a word: a replicated experience of war would surely be unbearable, whereas reading a novel must be at least partly pleasurable in order to engage the reader. This is especially true of the thriller, a ‘guilty pleasure’ genre, which is known for its ‘direct impact upon the nervous systems of [its] readers’ (Glover 129).

In his discussion of the genre, David Glover writes:

[T]he thriller was and still is to a large extent marked by the way in which it persistently seeks to raise the stakes of the narrative, heightening or exaggerating the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence or shock. The world that the thriller attempts to realize is one that is radically uncertain in at least two major senses. On the one hand,

the *scale* of the threat may appear to be vast, its ramifications immeasurable and boundless [...] On the other, the thriller unsettles the reader less by the magnitude of the terrors it imagines than by the *intensity* of the experience it delivers: assaults upon the fictional body, a constant awareness of the physicality of danger, sado-masochistic scenarios of torture or persecution, a descent into pathological extremes of consciousness, the inner world of the psychopath or monster. (130-131)

Anil's Ghost is marked by a 'rising curve' of violence and brutality: the heads of students are impaled on stakes; a man is crucified to a tarmac road; unnamed citizens are stabbed or shot dead. The narrative gradually picks up speed, until Sarath's final message to Anil imposes the traditional race against time ('Be ready to leave at five tomorrow morning...Do not leave the lab or call me' [Ondaatje 281]). As Judith Butler writes in 'Precarious Life, Grievable Life', 'specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living' (5). The vignette form of the novel means that multiple characters only appear to us during or after their deaths. In some cases these victims are reduced to their parts: 'Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a pit in Matale' (7). Others feature in short inserts in which we witness only their murders or the discovery of their bodies. Most of these characters remain anonymous, and the narrative does not resurrect them.

The use of such inserts is a common feature of the thriller genre: unlike the Golden Age mystery, in which the detective and the reader must have access to precisely the same clues (Van Dine 1) the thriller novel frequently takes the form of a cat and mouse game in which the reader is allowed glimpses into the killer's mind, or to relive 'cold cases' in the present tense. Often, the reader knows that the detective is walking into a trap before she understands it herself. On one level, Ondaatje's use of this convention provides a comment on the nature of civil war. The first vignette features the assassination of a government official through the eyes of his killer. The man is garrotted and thrown from a moving train. An excerpt reads: '*He jerked the*

official off the ground and pushed him through the opening. The buffet of wind outside flung the head and shoulders backwards. He pushed him farther and then let go and the man disappeared into the noise of the tunnel' (27) (italics in original).

The reader is led to assume that this incident is related to the central mystery, until more vignettes of carnage follow. Their very ubiquity points to the impossibility of 'solving' the situation in Sri Lanka, and the ease with which a life can '[disappear] in the noise of the tunnel'. In the sense that they depict violence as a way of life rather than a solvable anomaly, the use of vignettes represents a subversion of genre. However, this is not the only effect of the many deaths portrayed in the text. Ondaatje goes against the grain of the traditional thriller by distracting the reader from the central mystery, but he also uses these apparently senseless acts of violence to heighten the novel's capacity to 'discompose' the reader. Katharine and Lee Horsley note that the bodies depicted in forensic crime fiction evoke a combination of 'repulsion and fascination' (6), and many of the gruesome vignettes in *Anil's Ghost* precisely elicit this effect.

Ondaatje further conforms to genre by exaggerating the scale of the threat, making it appear 'immeasurable and boundless' (Glover 130). One may argue that the brutality of the Sri Lankan government during this period can hardly be exaggerated. However, Ondaatje's embellishment is performed through the elision of individual agency rather than the exaggeration of the government's actual crimes. When he depicts the climactic assembly, for example, he does so without distinguishing any individuals other than Sarath and Anil. Theirs are the only voices we hear directly, a device that effectively monsterizes the rest of the auditorium. Even though the scene

is ostensibly shown from the point of view of Sarath, who knows all or some of the people present, none of the officials is identified by name or appearance:

But now they were in danger. He sensed the hostility in the room. Only he was not against her. Now he had to somehow protect himself. Between Anil and the skeleton, discreetly out of sight, was her tape recorder, imprinting every word and opinion and question from officials, which she, till now, responded to courteously and unforgivingly. But he could see what Anil couldn't – the half-glances around the hot room (they must have turned off the air-conditioning thirty minutes into the evidence, an old device to distract thought); there were conversations beginning around him. He shrugged himself off the wall and moved forward. (269)

Here, the government is shown as a faceless, hostile 'they', more terrible than the sum of those who work for it. Rather than depicting a more realistic vision of bureaucratic collusion in institutional violence (itself a terrifying phenomenon), Ondaatje suggests a seamless conspiracy in order to heighten the impression of threat. There is no indication of how or why individuals allow themselves to become part of a homicidal authority, and this lack of explanation effectively dehumanizes the officials in question.

It is assumed, for example, that each petty officer Anil encounters while leaving the building will be aware of her transgression, and punish her accordingly: 'Sarath knew they would halt her at each corridor level, check her papers again and again to irritate and humiliate her. He knew she would be searched, vials and slides removed from her briefcase or pockets, made to undress and dress again' (274). Indeed, on leaving the building Anil implies that she has experienced sexual assault. There is no suggestion that any of the officials may have different motives or sympathies, or may simply be unaware of what has occurred in the auditorium. After her outburst, Ondaatje immediately frames Anil as an individual in a standoff with the might of a murderous state, heightening suspense by stacking the odds against her survival.

Because the novel focuses so much on Anil's reassembly of citizenship the characters who do not feature in her personal narrative risk being reduced to ominous background noise. This dehumanization occurs in the depiction of both victims and perpetrators, who tend to appear in one dimension. While Anil is able to overcome her foreignness through affective proximity, this means that the place characters occupy in the text is directly proportionate to the space they have claimed in Anil's heart. The many others who inhabit the novel risk being reduced to illustrations of the possible fates that await her and a handful of her friends. Ondaatje embeds a disclaimer of sorts in the text, in which he has Gamini complain about the tendency for fictions depicting 'third world' conflicts to end with the escape of the Western hero (282). Margaret Scanlan observes that, 'reversing the film cliché, Ondaatje drops [Anil] from the narrative as soon as she heads for the airport' (5). While this is generally accurate (we do not actually see her leave, but it is implied that she does), Anil's escape occurs so late in the book that the majority of its characters retain only the significance she has given them, or are characterized by the lessons they have imparted to her. Even Sarath, who emerges as one of the title characters, can be interpreted as the device through which Anil understands that she, like every other Sri Lankan embroiled in the war, has 'blood on [her] clothes' (44).

The final chapter, 'Distance', focuses on Ananda, and is meditative rather than thrilling. The change of pace (Ananda, looking down on the land as he paints, reflects on the time that has gone by) means that the novel neatly sidesteps Gamini's criticism: the chapter successfully demonstrates that the conflict has a scope that far exceeds Anil's stay in the country. However, the chapter is relatively short, and has the quality of an afterword to the main story. The 'camera' (282) of narrative does not leave Sri Lanka, and this final view helps to locate the main text in greater temporal

context, but the novel's suspenseful, ominous quality – the quality that has been used to hold the reader's attention thus far – appears to have taken flight with Anil.

Buddhism and Geospirituality

Anil and Sarath spend much of the novel 'working in the field': they leave Colombo in order to get closer to the villages where Sailor might have lived, and stay in a *walawwa*, or country estate. Here, the courtyard becomes Anil's makeshift laboratory. The isolation gives them some protection from government interference, but also prevents interaction between Anil and other citizens of Sri Lanka. Most of the time, she has contact only with Sarath, Ananda and Sailor. This isolation impacts Anil's evolution in two different ways: first, it intensifies the intimacy between Anil and her colleagues. Ondaatje has used this technique before: the chief drama in *The English Patient* comes from the claustrophobic setting of the villa in which the characters take refuge after WWII. Deprived of other company, they sink deeper and deeper into mutual revelation. The other dimension is a spiritual one. Anil and Sarath find sanctuary in the prehistoric, 'humanless' (186) world outside the cities. As an archaeologist, Sarath specializes in ancient Buddhist iconography, and these images have a strong presence within the text.

In discussing the role of religion in the Sri Lankan Civil War, Neil De Votta writes, 'With no meaningful checks to muzzle the influential *sangha* [Buddhist clergy] and Sinhalese nationalists, Buddhism was provided a special status and state patronage in the 1972 constitution. With Buddhism and Sinhala both afforded superior status, Sri Lanka was now nearer to being an ethnocracy than a full-fledged secular democracy' (De Votta 6). In a violent protest against this perceived

marginalization, the LTTE would drive a tank full of explosives through the iconic Temple of the Tooth in Kandy in 1998 (De Votta, 1). *Anil's Ghost* is set only a handful of years before this attack, and yet its portrayal of Buddhism gives little hint of the faith's role in the conflict: instead, Ondaatje uses Buddhist iconography to symbolize nature, prehistory and a respite from violence. This toothless rendering of Buddhism provides another of the catalysts in Anil's transformation.

Buddhism is introduced to the narrative when Sarath takes Anil to the 'Grove of Ascetics' to meet his mentor, Palipana. Palipana is a former archaeologist, now blind, who lives in seclusion among the ruins of an ancient temple. In the Grove, the narrative undergoes a dramatic slowing of pace:

It felt to Anil as if her pulse had fallen asleep, that she was moving like the slowest animal in the world through grass. She was picking up intricacies of what was around them. Palipana's mind was probably crowded with such things, in his potent sightlessness. I will not want to leave this place, she thought, remembering that Sarath had said the same thing to her. (92-93)

The reference to 'potent sightlessness' is significant. Previously, Anil has been a strong advocate of rational inquiry, but here she subtly acknowledges that there are important ways of witnessing that do not depend on the empirical. During their stay in the grove, she also (albeit uncertainly) agrees to Palipana's recommendation that they allow Ananda the artificer to attempt the reconstruction of Sailor's head. Palipana takes on a parental role for Anil, as he does for Sarath (Sarath says, 'We need parents when we're old too' [42]), imparting stories and wisdom that have little to do with science. In this way, he is of more help than the doctors she has consulted at the hospital in Colombo. Within the text, he occupies the position of a sage: his advice goes unchallenged by Sarath and Anil, both of whom are usually assertive and vocal about their respective points of view. The atmosphere in the grove is described as 'the

spell of the old man and his forest site' (105), and the narrative itself falls under the same enchantment. This becomes problematic when one considers the version of Buddhism that Palipana puts forward.

In 'Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*', Marlene Goldman discusses the lessons which Palipana imparts. She writes:

In Ondaatje's novel, Palipana warns Sarath and his co-investigator, Anil, that monks in Sri Lanka have never been able to transcend politics. Citing a story from the ancient Pali chronicles, Palipana relates how a group of monks fled the court to escape the wrath of the ruler, but the king 'followed them and cut their heads off' (87). At bottom, this story and the novel as a whole emphasize what a number of contemporary critics have observed, namely, that 'Buddhism has never stood outside the dynamics of power' in Sri Lankan society (Kapferer 108). In keeping with this realization, rather than offer a sanitized, apolitical and ahistorical account that ignores Buddhism's enmeshment in nationalist politics, Ondaatje addresses in his novel the complex relationship between religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka. (4)

Here, Goldman does not distinguish between political 'enmeshment' and culpability. In Palipana's story, after all, it is the king who 'violate[s] a sanctuary' with a violent and vengeful act (83), rather than the monks themselves. Palipana cautions against the belief that a total retreat from society is possible, but he does not allude to the *sangha* as an active force in the conflict. He says, 'Even if you are a monk, like my brother, passion or slaughter will meet you someday. For you cannot survive as a monk if society does not exist. You renounce society, but to do so you must first be a part of it, learn your decision from it. This is the paradox of retreat' (99). Contrary to Goldman's interpretation, this does not directly address the issue of Buddhist militancy: there is, after all, implicit passivity in the idea of being 'met' by 'passion or slaughter', rather than instigating it. Palipana's use of the story as a parable therefore erases the agency of the monks involved in the modern conflict.

The narrative voice upholds Palipana's sanitized view of Buddhism: at the end of the novel, Ananda is working on the reconstruction of a smashed Buddhist

statue. The area has become known as a site where the bodies of the disappeared are brought to be razed and disposed of, and we are told that ‘these were fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century’ (296). This not only positions Buddhism’s ‘values’ in opposition to ‘harshness’, but also locates it as standing outside of politics altogether. The existence of both of them in the fields is depicted as a bitterly ironic coincidence, intended to be jarring rather than representative.

The manner in which Buddhism is spoken of within the novel enacts a second form of erasure: when characters such as Palipana refer to ‘monks’ and ‘temples’, they most often use the words to invoke Buddhism without identifying it explicitly. It therefore appears as the default religion within the novel. Even though Ondaatje is careful not to explicitly address the rights and wrongs of the ethnic conflict, his easy conflation of Buddhism with Sri Lankan prehistory becomes indistinguishable from the Sinhalese origin story.

In *In Defense of Anil’s Ghost*, Chelva Kanaganayakam summarizes Qadri Ismael’s eviscerating critique of the novel’s portrayal of Buddhist artefacts as follows:

Ondaatje’s bias in the novel, according to Ismail, is clearly in favour of a monolithic Sri Lanka in which the minority groups are irrelevant: ‘Sri Lankan history, to this text, is Sinhala and Buddhist history. A more humane history than we are used to hearing, yes; but not a multi-ethnic history, either. We now know whose side this novel is on’ (27). [13]

It is facile, of course, to argue that Ondaatje’s portrayal of Buddhism makes the novel a piece of pro-Sinhalese propaganda. While the depiction sails perilously close to Sinhalese nationalist rhetoric, Ondaatje (as Kanaganayakam notes) also portrays the atrocious violence of the pro-Sinhalese government. Rather than indicating that

Ondaatje has chosen a 'side' in the conflict, the portrayal of Buddhism can be read as an appeal to an international readership with limited local knowledge.

In *The Foreign in International Crime Fiction: Transcultural Representations* Ellen Carter and Deborah Walker-Morrison state, '[one] way in which postcolonial authors attract global audiences of cultural outsiders is by constructing "glocal" settings that play on the contrast between the particularly exotic and the universal, and the related continuum between strangeness and familiarity' (13). Carter and Walker-Morrison go on to refer to Graham Huggan's argument that the inclusion of exotic elements favours 'a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery' (13). Ondaatje 'foreignizes' Sri Lanka by taking us away from Colombo and into the Grove of Ascetics, where Anil and Sarath find Palipana living in the ruins of an ancient temple. However, the message they take away is very much a 'domesticated' one.

Anil does not 'become a Buddhist' (or revert to Buddhism) in any doctrinal or culturally specific sense. Rather, she associates the broadest and best-known principles of the philosophy – in particular, denial of the self – with her journey of return. Any references that are not explicitly signposted (for example, Palipana's explanation of the Nētra Mangala ceremony, in which an artificer must blindly paint eyes on a statue of the Buddha) are easily understood using only the pop-cultural common knowledge colloquially known as 'Dharma-lite' (Willis 10).

Ondaatje's universalization of Buddhism is problematic in that it reinforces the shorthand definition of Buddhism as a philosophy of peace, despite the violent Sri Lankan context. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah refers to 'a certain standard perception of

Buddhism as a philosophy and “religion” dedicated to nonviolence and liberation from suffering’ (3), and Ondaatje’s depiction does nothing to correct or complicate this belief. However, it is less a propagandist tactic than another attempt to make Anil’s transformation as broadly understandable as possible. When Palipana refers to the paradox of retreat, for example, his words elide the complexity of the national situation, but can be comfortably understood as a life lesson for rootless, professionally obsessed Anil. His parable can therefore be interpreted as a general plea for social engagement over individualistic detachment.

Mark Siderits writes,

Buddhism teaches that there is no self, and that the person is not ultimately real. Buddhists also hold that the highest good for humans, nirvana, is a state that is attained through abandoning belief in a self. And it is claimed as well that those who enter this state will naturally devote themselves to helping others overcome suffering. (283)

Ondaatje does not explore the metaphysical implications of this belief, but provides a practical illustration of self-renunciation in the figure of Gamini. Gamini’s way of life exemplifies the paradox of retreat. He has renounced his marriage, his class status and even his house. He describes the self-effacing delirium of working in the emergency ward as a ‘state of grace’ (219), and pauses to touch a small statue of the Buddha as he makes his way through the hospital. He refuses to pass political judgements on the conflict, but immerses himself in alleviating the suffering it causes, reflecting that ‘You were without self in those times, lost among the screaming’ (115).

Anil, by contrast, is intent upon observing society rather than participating in it. Her initial attempts to understand Sri Lankan society are futile because she refuses to acknowledge that she is part of it. The job of the conventional literary detective is to exert power over her surroundings and restore them to order, but *Anil’s Ghost*

insists that its protagonist must become one with those surroundings before she can claim any kind of authority. In part, the text's advancement of a 'Buddhist' philosophy of engaged selflessness suggests the egoism implicit in established forms of international intervention. As Teresa Derrickson states, in Anil's Ghost, international human rights investigations are portrayed as 'broadcast[ing] an arrogance that is culturally belittling [...] they provide us, according to Ondaatje's novel, with ample reason to rethink methods of adjudicating human rights violations (1). Ondaatje's invocation of Buddhism can therefore be interpreted as a call for humility and cultural receptivity, rather than the superimposition of narratives and solutions from above.

While Gamini finds a spiritual aspect amidst the wounded in the hospital, Anil's own spiritual awakening is enacted through environmental rather than social immersion. Her interest in Buddhism is inseparable from her appreciation for nature: often, her relationship with her natural surroundings is described in religious terms, and she enacts the principle of self-transcendence by merging with her environment. For Anil, grace is a geospiritual experience, another kind of citizenship that does not require language or other social calling cards.

Initially, her feeling of belonging in Sri Lanka is brought about by sense memories from her early years. Her first awareness that she is glad to have returned is brought on by the sound of rain and the 'duck-like horns' hooting in the traffic: 'Suddenly Anil was glad to be back, the buried senses from childhood alive in her' (11). Upon her arrival in the Grove of Ascetics, she bathes at the well, and we are told that: 'She understood how wells could become sacred. They combined sparse necessity and luxury. She would give away every earring she owned for an hour by a

well. She repeated the mantra of gestures again and again' (86). Anil's actions are not part of any established ritual, but Ondaatje uses religious terminology ('mantra') to describe them. Mantras are traditionally comprised of repeated words, but again Anil replaces language with gestures, composing her own rite. Later in the novel, Ondaatje elevates Anil's appreciation of the natural landscape into a form of trance. One morning outside the *walawwa*, she enacts her own form of ritual to music:

It is wondrous music to dance alongside- she has danced to it with others on occasions of joy and gregariousness, carousing through a party with, it seemed, all her energy on her skin, but this now is not a dance, does not contain even a remnant of the courtesy or sharing that is part of a dance. She is waking every muscle in herself, blindfolding every rule she lives by, giving every mental skill she has to the movement of her body. Only this will lift her backward into the air and pivot her hip to send her feet over her.

A scarf tied tight around her head holds the earphones to her. She needs music to push her into extremities and grace. She wants grace, and it happens here only on these mornings or after a late-afternoon downpour- when the air is light and cool, when there is also the danger of skidding on the wet leaves. It feels as if she could eject herself out of her body like an arrow.

Sarath sees her from the dining room window. He watches a person he has never seen. A girl insane, a druid in moonlight, a thief in oil. This is not the Anil he knows. (177-178)

Although she is listening to a pop-song on a Walkman, Anil is described here as a devotee in the throes of religious bliss. Appropriately, the song is *Coming in From the Cold*, and she uses the familiar song as an initiation into the landscape, melding the local and the cosmopolitan. Of the dance sequence, Sandeep Sanghera writes, 'Anil, for the first time, echoes the place that she is in' (7). Nature is depicted as an active participant in Anil's ritual: 'She stops when she is exhausted and can hardly move. She will crouch and lean there, lie on the stone. A leaf will come down. Its click of applause' (178). The scene represents an effacement of the rationality that usually

constrains her ('blindfolding every rule she lives by'), but it is a hybrid, self-created rite, requiring no specialist knowledge on the part of the reader. Within the story, the scene is used to demonstrate a different side of Anil to Sarath, who is accustomed to her scientific precision and uneasy social demeanour.

Anil's rhythmic initiation into the landscape stands in marked contrast to her initial reaction to return. When she first travels with Sarath, she lapses into a tropical fever, finding herself 'delirious, nearly in tears' (56), unable to tolerate the heat. In the course of her journey she is able to move from fragmented delirium to the fluid grace of the dance sequence. Her return is partly enacted through a literal process of acclimatization as she moves from physical resistance of her surroundings towards an equally physical celebration of her environment.

The reliance on nature to provide a sense of belonging can be interpreted as an evasion of sorts: one can argue that Ondaatje uses it as an alternative to giving Anil the difficult work of exploring and interpreting Sri Lanka's social structure, and finding her place within it. The long descriptions of the landscape accompanied by scenes of horrific violence certainly do little to unsettle the Orientalist idea of South Asia as a kind of lush, verdant hell-scape, redeemed only by its natural beauty. This impression is reinforced by Ondaatje's use of genre. In *The Poetics of Prose*, Tzvetan Todorov notes 'the thriller's tendency toward the marvelous and exotic, which brings it closer on the one hand to the travel narrative, and on the other to contemporary science fiction' (48). *Anil's Ghost* is just such a narrative, and the tropical, unpredictable patterns of the island become inseparable from Ondaatje's depiction of the civil war, and from Anil's journey towards re-citizenship. Discussing the anarchic quality she perceives in herself and other Sri Lankans, Anil describes it in terms of

weather, asking, ‘What is that quality in us? Do you think? That makes us cause our own rain or smoke?’ (303). Indeed, Ondaatje focuses on extremities of climate as much as he does extremes of morality, and the two types of excess echo and address each other.

The thriller genre relies on the constant evocation of anxiety. Because so much of *Anil’s Ghost* takes place outdoors or in rural areas, this threatening aspect is often communicated through pathetic fallacy. The conventions of the genre, in which ‘prospection takes the place of retrospection’ (Todorov 47) means that the reader experiences a swift and full immersion into the ‘marvelous and exotic’ setting (48), but the immediacy of the narrative also means that there is no countering (‘retrospective’) image of what the country might have looked like in peacetime. Anil’s childhood is so lightly sketched that the reader does not see her everyday relationship with the milieu, but only her return, which is enacted through murders and marvels rather than utility and routine. This means that the island appears imbued with a sinister quality of its own.

At times this is suggested through sonic devices. Anil, learning about the amygdala, where the human brain contains primal fears, says, ‘the name, it sounds Sri Lankan’ (130). In another excerpt, Ondaatje describes, with chilling lyricism, ‘murders in the Muthurajawela marsh’ (154). Elsewhere in the novel, in a description purporting to be from a national atlas, the wetland is described as the ‘Muthurajawela swamp’ (35). This suggests that the alliteration in the first instance may be a calculated device to produce an ominous murmur, a technique that effectively implicates the very site of the murders in the horror of what has occurred there. Thus

the anxiety the novel produces is not only established through details of the war, but is written into culture and place, suggesting it as ahistorical and innate.

In order to balance the environment's generic evocativeness with Anil's acclimatization, Ondaatje ensures that Anil adjusts to her surroundings without ever establishing a sense of normalcy. Instead, Anil alters her tempo to imitate her environment, pushing herself into 'extremities and grace' (178), herself becoming strange by 'blindfolding every rule she lives by' (74). The landscape resonates with her, but it is always a resonance that suggests a numinous connection rather than an everyday one. Her dance in the courtyard is wild and risky: there is 'the danger of skidding on the wet leaves' (177), she cuts her foot and begins to weep as she dances. By emphasizing Anil's sense of wonder, suggests a primal melding rather than a considered assimilation. In doing so, he portrays an atmosphere of extremes, alive with both violent and spiritual possibilities. Thus, while Ondaatje departs from the crime genre by chipping away at Anil's authority, he nonetheless maintains the kind of exotic and evocative backdrop commonly used to build atmosphere in the thriller, eschewing worldly explanation in order to heighten scopic sensation.

Conclusion

In depicting his protagonist's journey towards citizenship, Ondaatje both subverts and reinforces the generic conventions of the crime genres. The narrative is directed away from forensic revelation in order to suggest the need for intimate engagement, but this agenda sits uneasily with the instances in which genre is uncritically evoked. The need to connect with the local is suggested through non-specific imagery, as Ondaatje adopts techniques that appeal to 'the nervous systems of [...] readers' (Glover 129)

rather than promoting a rational understanding of the social and political dynamics underlying the Sri Lankan Civil War.

At times, the novel's very universalism means that a real conflict risks being reduced to a sensational backdrop, or to a learning experience in the protagonist's personal journey towards self-actualization. Specificity falls by the wayside, allowing for a more general story of the value of belonging and engagement, a story that, ironically, struggles to apply these values to its socio-political setting. Anil's return is enacted through an embrace of the tactile and the numinous, but these features are seldom given the 'archaeological surround' (40) that Sarath insists must attend local knowledge. These elisions effectively produce swiftness and suspense, bolstering the novel's appeal as a thriller, but gloss over details that could benefit from further magnification and decoding.

CHAPTER THREE

The Long Night of White Chickens: Death of an Idea

The Long Night of White Chickens, by Francisco Goldman, is set during the period of Guatemala's civil war, and much of the novel is set contemporaneously with the action in *Anil's Ghost*. However, Goldman's novel takes the form of a family history, and the non-linear narrative moves between the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and between Guatemala and the USA.

The plot ostensibly revolves around the murder of Flor de Mayo Puac, the head of Los Quetzalitos orphanage in Guatemala City. Instead of conforming to a process of elimination, however, the novel increases in scope as it progresses, accumulating possible motives and perpetrators rather than ruling them out. This chapter will argue that the narrative sacrifices closure and solution in order to emphasize certain elements of life in civil war Guatemala. Michael Holquist refers to the metaphysical detective story as 'drama[tizing] the void' through its lack of closure (155). In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, the 'void' in question is both existential and political.

The novel is lengthy and intimately detailed, but Flor's murderer is never conclusively revealed. This chapter will discuss the text's absence of a perpetrator from three different points of view. It will begin by discussing Flor's narrative function as a national allegory, arguing that the irresolution of her death represents a comment on the collaborative nature of Guatemala's civil war. Flor, a Guatemalan orphan, grew up as an indentured domestic worker in an American household, an ambiguous position that had a lasting impact on her life. While sifting through the complexities of her history, the detective figures begin to see her death as the outcome

of personal, transnational and familial complicity, rather than as the consequence of a single criminal act. Attempts at uncovering a ‘true’ version of the living Flor prove equally difficult. Her elusive and unstable characterization emphasizes the difficulty of understanding a small country caught in the violent crosscurrents of global politics and neo-colonialism.

The next section will discuss the respective motives of the detective figures, arguing that their different positions in Guatemala inform their modes of investigation, and the way they cope with irresolution. Roger is the son of Flor’s Boston employers, while Moya is a young dissident journalist from Guatemala City, and a former lover of Flor’s. This section will argue that Roger’s attempts to solve the case are part of a sustained attempt at return, in which he struggles to locate himself in relation to Guatemala. Like Francisco Goldman himself, Roger is the son of an upper class Guatemalan woman and a working class Jewish man from Boston. His return to Guatemala, which is enacted in the immediate aftermath of Flor’s death, throws his identity issues into sharp relief. Roger’s attempts to solve Flor’s (increasingly baffling) murder therefore mirror his attempts to grapple with the riddle of his own identity. The section will go on to compare Roger’s motives with those of his co-investigator, the journalist Luis Moya Martinez (‘Moya’), arguing that Moya deliberately undertakes a futile investigation in order to throw light on the desperation of life under totalitarianism. Here it will be shown that Moya’s motives mirror the world-making project undertaken by the novel itself.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the novel’s treatment of truth, arguing that Goldman reneges on generic expectations in order to show the complexity of accusation and exoneration in the context of civil conflict. In examining the form of the novel, the chapter as a whole will demonstrate that

Goldman's eschewal of a linear narrative highlights the destabilizing impact of civil war on ideas of identity, plausibility and culpability.

Who Killed Flor de Mayo?

Laura Marcus writes that detective fiction typically contains '[a] complex double narrative in which an absent story, that of a crime, is gradually reconstructed in the second story (the investigation)' (Marcus 238). In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, there is some dispute as to what this crime actually is: the events of Flor's death are so inextricably bound up with her own troubled history, and that of Guatemala, that it becomes impossible to discern the moment at which things fell apart. Flor operates as a very obvious allegory within the text. Her relationship with Roger mirrors the relationship between Guatemala and the USA, and the allusions to her many lovers (all possible suspects in her killing) can be read as a commentary on the international collaboration that brought about Guatemala's civil war. The fact that the murder is never solved conforms to the novel's peculiar logic: just as it is impossible to say who 'killed' Guatemala, so guilt (and correspondingly, innocence) cannot be established in the matter of Flor's murder.

The weightiness of Flor's characterization (the nation as murder victim) sometimes threatens to overwhelm the narrative: the novel initially seems to promise a solution, but the more metaphorical value Flor accrues, the more the events of her actual death are allowed to recede. Of the novel, Jonathan Coe writes

If it just fails, in the end, to pack the emotional punch which it constantly seems to be promising, this is because Flor – although ostensibly the main focus of attention – is never allowed to become more than the sum of the

questions which her (male) investigators ask of her. It looks as though there is going to be a strong female presence at the centre of the novel, but what we actually get is a knot of enigmas, contradictions and unsolved riddles: in this respect the task Goldman wants her to perform – functioning largely as a metaphor for Guatemala itself, maddening but at the same time irresistible – seems finally too reductive, too objectifying. (1)

Coe's assertion that Flor 'is never allowed to become more than the sum of the questions which her (male) investigators ask of her' (1) is largely accurate. Although Flor's voice comes alive in places (notably, in the letters she writes), we seldom see her without the mediation of the male gaze. Her lack of dimension is compounded by the lover's-eye view of the narrative: the investigation is conducted by two men, both of whom view Flor through a lens of sexual longing and loss. Much of the prose has the quality of a love poem, and the novel opens with a romantic lament by Rubén Darío ('...and beneath the window of my Sleeping Beauty,/ the continuous sobbing of the running fountain/ and the neck of the great white swan that questions me' [1]).

The reader is introduced to Flor after her death, as Roger and his father are called to identify her body at the morgue in Guatemala City. Despite the grimness of the scene, Flor's physicality is evoked in tender and even erotic terms, which set the tone for the way she will be described throughout the book. As Mary Evans notes, the body of a young and beautiful woman is a recurring motif in the crime genre. In *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World*, Evans writes:

The gender distribution of the dead in crime fiction has not yet been quantified but what is noticeable is that young and attractive women (across cultures and throughout the twentieth century) are often the victims of murderers. In this context, crime fiction identifies one of the schisms of western culture: its veneration for female beauty but the ancient fear of its disruptive possibilities. (72)

Evans argues that the presence of a beautiful female victim evokes anxieties about transgression (for example, the possibility of sexual predation), while also justifying

the investigation through an aesthetic appeal to both the reader and the investigator. Beauty, she argues, can ‘inspire men to exceptional actions’ (72). Here, Evans codes the investigator (or even, potentially, the murderer) as a male self whose agency is ‘inspired’ by a female other. This dynamic is very evident in *The Long Night of White Chickens*. In the morgue scene, we are introduced to Flor as the catalyst of the investigation, and indeed of the narrative itself. However, the focus is on Roger’s yearning rather than on Flor’s recent suffering and the pathos of the scene is evoked through scopic appeal as opposed to haptic identification.

The sparseness of Flor’s injuries (there is a single, neat slash to her throat) stands out in a text marked by far more lurid violence. In the same room, Roger encounters the brutalized bodies of two unnamed tortured victims. Goldman describes the two men’s injuries in merciless detail, which is noticeably absent from his description of Flor:

Stretched out on slabs, skinny but pigeon chested, their open eyes, like Flor’s, full of the empty, astounded, fed up stare of the dead or maybe that stare only belongs to the just murdered dead. Both of them had horribly battered faces but one hadn’t been washed off yet, his face was a mask of not yet completely congealed blood, he was still bleeding a little I think– and his lower lip looked just torn off. And the other had a cleaned-out gunshot wound in his temple and a clean-looking slice where his penis had been. Both of them were speckled with what I now realize must have been cigarette burns. I’d barely glanced, but even in my dizziness, spaciness, the nausea of the heaviest rage...I took it in. That carnage was in contrast to the clean, nearly pristine, unbearable visage of Flor’s nakedness, the slash in her throat clean and nearly stitched– so cleanly, precisely, delicately stitched that it smacked of her own fastidiousness, as if she’d sewn up her own mortal wound in defiance of the many forced indecencies of death (I mean here we were, looking at her)’. (39)

The first images elicit a visceral reaction from the reader. Their brutal physicality is unsparing, and forces the reader to imagine the ‘tearing’, ‘slicing’ and ‘battering’ that has taken place. It both humanizes the victims by appealing to the universality of bodily pain, and depersonalizes them by removing or ‘mask[ing]’ (39) their

identifying characteristics through battering and castration. By contrast, Flor might be the ‘Sleeping Beauty’ of the Darío poem. The image of the dead Flor is consistent with the one we will be given of her in life: she retains her markers of individuality (her ‘sweetness of expression’ [39]) and her femininity (‘plush lips no lipstick long lashes traces of eye makeup wide-open eyes’ [39]). We are not encouraged to identify with her bodily suffering, but with Roger, who gazes down at her from above, and who states ‘I looked and looked and looked’ (39). In death, she remains an icon of male desire: naked, beautiful and forever out of reach.

The contrast between Flor’s body and those of her male counterparts is significant. In *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, Elisabeth Bronfen writes:

To represent *over her dead body* signals that the represented feminine body also stands in for concepts other than death, femininity and body – most notably the masculine artist and the community of the survivors. These find an allegorical articulation even though they are not the literal meaning of the image. In other words, what is plainly visible – the beautiful feminine corpse – also stands in for something else. In so doing it fades from our sight and what we see, whenever an aesthetic representation asks us to read tropically, is what is in fact not visibly there. As we focus on the hidden, the figurative meaning, what is plainly seen may not be seen at all. (xi)

Indeed, the image of Flor as an almost perfectly preserved beauty moves the reader away from speculation about her last moments and towards a reading of her as a lost love object freighted with symbolic meaning. Looking at her hands, Roger notes: ‘her tawny palms, which always astonished palm readers, professionals as well as amateurs, because one palm was nearly smooth and the other so filled with crisscrossed wrinkles as to be indecipherable, as if clutching there as loosely as a handful of fine sand the layered, lacy palimpsests of all her lived lives: one palm told no story at all and the other held the record of three lives for every century going back

to the beginning of time and who could find the future in that muddle?’ (39). In her very doubleness (on the one hand she is young, on the other, ancient), Flor invites two contradictory forms of mourning: for the brevity of her literal life, and for ‘centuries’ of Guatemalan suffering. However, as Bronfen writes, one form inevitably eclipses the other, and what is ‘plainly seen’ (a woman who has been slashed to death during the civil war) is eclipsed by the image’s allegorical implications.

From a historical point of view, Flor’s death is conducive to a chilling trend of violence against women in Guatemala. In ‘Guatemala as a National Crime Scene: Femicide and Impunity in Contemporary U.S. Detective Novels’ Susanna S Martinez writes:

Regrettably, the fate of the disappeared and murdered women in [these novels] reflect [sic] the shocking trend of contemporary cases of femicide in Guatemala. There are several disturbing aspects that unite these works of fiction to actual cases of gendered violence and femicide in Guatemala, namely: the cases are not investigated in a timely manner by local authorities; the sexual lives of the victims are openly questioned – with victims often being blamed for their deaths; and the crimes remain unpunished. (14-15)

Goldman’s depiction of Flor touches upon the issue of femicide in Guatemala, but then frames it as a metaphor for the country’s own death, divesting it of its immediacy and specificity.

As Ania Loomba writes, ‘from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolise the conquered land’ (154). Correspondingly, the language of national loss, through invasion or colonialism, has often been couched in terms of violence against women: the country is said to have been ‘prostituted’ or ‘raped’. In ‘The Mother Africa Trope’, Florence Stratton discusses the tendency towards gendered national allegories in African literature.⁴ Here, Stratton identifies

⁴ Stratton moves beyond Jameson’s formulation by focusing on gender in conjunction with coloniality, identifying a gendered split in the literary self-representation of colonized communities.

two ways in which women are commonly used as national allegories: the 'pot of culture strand', in which the woman character is used to symbolize a pre-colonial or pastoral utopia, and the 'sweep of history strand', in which she functions as an 'index' of the ever-changing fortunes of the nation (41). Often, in the latter strand, colonialism is depicted through the female character's victimization through rape or prostitution. Stratton writes: 'the national subject is designated as male. A feminized Africa thus becomes the object of the male gaze [...] He is the active subject/citizen, She is the passive object-nation. She symbolizes his honour and glory or his degradation as a citizen' (51). Flor's characterization contains elements of both of the 'strands' that Stratton describes, although there are variations reflecting the different geopolitical contexts.

When Roger identifies Flor at the morgue, he remembers a 'famous nineteenth-century explorer's description of a young and beautiful Indian girl's funeral' (40). In the same passage, he refers to Flor's 'haughty Maya Princess' features, and 'brown skin' (40). It is significant that civil war era Guatemala is pictured not only as a beautiful woman, but as a slain 'Maya princess'. During this period, the government massacred entire indigenous villages, and the American coup was largely enacted in order to prevent land being returned to these communities as a form of reparation for years of feudal labour practices that dated back to 1871.

In the novel, it is made apparent that wealthy families such as Roger's prefer to ignore the indigenous aspect of the Guatemalan origin story, despite the fact they have '*mestizo* bloodlines going back to the conquest' (189). Flor, too, is of mixed origin. The novel is vague about her heritage: she is uncertain of who her mother was, and where she came from, but Roger says 'It is likely that Flor [had] an

unquantifiable share of both Indian and even African blood along with Spanish-Moorish and who knows what else, *vos?* (160).⁵ However, the text repeatedly invokes the indigenous elements of her background, thereby stressing ‘Indian blood’ as the historical foundation of Guatemalan identity and foregrounding indigenous Guatemalans as victims of political murder. At times, these two emphases are at odds. In keeping with the ‘sweep of history’ strand, Flor undergoes an evolution that mirrors Guatemalan history. However, the fact that she moves away from her childhood home in the desert to become an urban, American-educated *mestiza* woman tends to relegate indigenous women to the past tense.

The pre-conquest ideal is suggested by Flor’s first ‘incarnation’ (158). Her early life was spent with her (probably Mayan) father in rural Chiquimula. When Flor returns to visit the region, she finds that the villagers have believed her to be dead for years. Her father, who was murdered, is said to walk the night, and his ghost is known as ‘*El Sed*’, or ‘The Thirst’ (163). After his death, the ghost of the child Flor was also said to cry at night, ‘from several places in the desert all at once’ (163) – evidence, the villagers believed, that she had been hacked to death, and scattered in different places. Flor’s violent exile from the *pueblo* (symbolizing colonization and urbanization) is implied as a figurative death, or another kind of scattering. Describing her return to Chiquimula, she writes: ‘idea for a short story: the possibility that all my life I have been a ghost’ (157).

The novel is similarly haunted by the image of the child Flor. The narrative shifts between Roger’s first-person point of view, Flor’s letters and a third-person narrative that shadows Moya, but all three strands are preoccupied with this figure.

⁵ Intimate form of ‘you’

Moya glimpses ‘a little Indian girl in a snowsuit, one of the orphans, he *swears* from Flor’s orphanage, playing with some other children in a snowy yard’ (107). In his mind, the girl becomes a stand-in for Flor herself: ‘soon, wherever Moya went in Boston, he felt as if his actual shadow was snagging on Flor’s shadow...the actual and innocent shadow of her past’ (107). Indigeneity and the ‘innocent’ past are thus presented as being interlinked.

The idea that Flor has lived her life in successive incarnations (or has different ‘layers of skin’ [158]) serves to both sexualize and dehistoricize indigenous identity. Roger recounts his memories of the teenaged Flor changing out of her school uniform, describing: ‘the sudden baring of smooth, cinnamon brown skin, black hair tumbling down around gracefully bladed shoulders...for those few seconds when she was almost naked, I always thought Flor looked just like Pocahontas’ (171). The description suggests Flor’s schoolgirl persona as a recent and impermanent acquisition. It is only when she shrugs off the uniform of her new life that Flor reveals herself in her original incarnation – that is, as ‘Pocahontas’. The image carries a dual burden of naivety and sexuality: in ‘The Pocahontas Perplex’, Rayna Green discusses the ‘the exotic and sexual, yet maternal and contradictorily virginal image of the Indian Princess’ (709-710) as a gendered personification of the ‘earthly, frightening, and beautiful paradise’ (701) encountered by explorers of the New World. Flor is depicted as being most ‘Indian’ in the years of her early childhood, in her natural state of nakedness and when she is laid out after her murder. All this tends to depict Mayan women as nostalgic and exotic icons of loss.

Flor’s death can be read as a lament about colonialism and ethnic genocide, but as an urban *mestiza* woman she is not a victim of that genocide. She is used to

represent something that is not her experience, while her literal experiences are ventriloquized and allegorized by narrators who do not have access to her thoughts. Her lack of interiority makes the national allegory less stable and more self-reflexive: the narrators do not claim to understand Flor, and the project of defining the nation is subject to their confessed unreliability. However, despite being speculative rather than definitive, this refracted rendering of Flor reinforces the gender stereotypes that commonly underlie nationalism by denying her a private voice.

In discussing gender and nationalism, Anne McClintock writes:

the temporal anomaly within nationalism— veering between nostalgia for the past, and the impatient, progressive sloughing off of the past — is typically resolved by figuring the contradiction as a ‘natural’ division of *gender*. Women are represented as the atavistic and authentic ‘body’ of national tradition (inert, backward-looking and natural), embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity. Men, by contrast, represent the progressive agent of national modernity (forward-thrusting, potent and historic), embodying nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary principle of discontinuity. Nationalism’s anomalous relation to *time* is thus managed as a natural relation to *gender*. (66)

In keeping with McClintock’s formulation of nationalism, the crime fiction format has an ‘anomalous relationship to time’. The ‘complex double narrative’ (Marcus 231) means that the story of the inquiry can only progress through a process of retrospection. The detectives are the ‘agents’ of this progress, while the murder victim is inevitably consigned to history. Flor represents an ideal of Guatemala, but she is largely without agency, even though she is the ostensible driving force of the narrative. In death, she forges a bond between Roger and Moya (the ‘community of the survivors’ [Bronfen xi]) but she is excluded from being part of the group herself: she is not one of the ‘active subjectcitizen[s]’ (Stratton 51), but only the common ground that makes them compatriots.

As Coe suggests, the novel loses some 'emotional punch' (1) by rendering Flor so unknowable: she effectively suggests the 'riddle' of Guatemala, but the pathos of her own demise is somewhat lost in its suggestive import. However, the use of allegory is more successful in another part of the world-making project the novel undertakes: namely, in conveying the clash between the intimacy implicit in neo-colonialism and civil war, and the idea of 'crime' itself. Goldman uses the motif of familial abuse, love and betrayal to highlight the difficulty of extracting a culprit from these tangled bonds, and to represent the nebulous boundaries between humanitarianism and exploitation.

In the world of the novel, help and harm are often indistinguishable from one another. The Graetzes have 'helped' Flor, just as Flor has 'saved' numerous orphans, but none of them emerges from the narrative in a heroic light. Roger becomes consumed with the idea that he and his family are somehow responsible for Flor's death. Regretting his support of her decision to return to Guatemala, he finds himself reacting 'like it was my fault' (226). Flor herself occupies an ambiguous space between victim and perpetrator: after her death, she becomes the centre of a media storm. Reporters allege that she has been running a 'fattening house', where orphans are cared for until they are presentable enough to sell in illegal adoptions. At times, therefore, the detectives' work seems to be motivated by the hope of exonerating Flor rather than finding out who killed her.

One of the suspects in Flor's death is a displaced child named Lucas Caycam Quix. Flor is said to have adopted out Lucas's sister, despite the fact that this meant the children would be separated. Lucas is therefore both a suspect in the murder inquiry and a potential witness and victim of Flor's involvement in child trafficking.

When Roger imagines confronting him, he places more emphasis on what Lucas will be able to tell him about Flor's possible crimes than on extracting a confession. He says:

I wanted to tell him that we had *both* been cruelly wronged, and wanted to at least try to make amends with fate. I wanted to hear what he had to say for himself and look into his eyes and decide then what to feel about him once and for all. (463)

Roger's desire to 'hear what he had to say for himself' (i.e., Lucas's possible motive for killing Flor) is actually an attempt to 'decide what to feel' about Flor, whom he hopes to absolve of the rumours that have surrounded her in death. As he combs his memories of her for clues, he becomes increasingly focused on proving that she was, after all, the person he had known and loved all his life. The text therefore includes a far wider scope of recollections and emotions than those relating to the murder itself, expanding into a family history. The novel's existential inquiry, which questions what it means to be Guatemalan in the time of neo-colonialism, is largely mediated through the lens of this family drama.

In *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America and the Cold War*, Greg Grandin refers to the 'intimacy' of Guatemalan politics, noting that 'the plantation culture that arose within the close quarters of its borders was forged from familiar, often bodily attachments [...] Plantation life rested as much on rape and sex as it did on forced labour' (32). Grandin continues:

Given the closeness of this society, it is not surprising that local explanations of national events are often expressed in terms of physical intimacy and sexual power. Behind every official history lies another not so hidden story – *secretos a voces* – of faithlessness, of furtive passions, of filial grudges. Arbenz's 1953 Agrarian Reform, the most serious challenge to this system of political intimacy, elicits from Guatemalans a creative kind of historical hearsay, one

that translates social histories of migration, gender, class and race into family fables, sordidly accessible histories from below. (33)

The Long Night of the White Chickens follows this tradition of transmuting politics into ‘family fables’. In one of her letters, Flor writes: ‘in a way, I have come to realize, you don’t live *in* a small country so much as *with it*, in a way comparable to how you might find yourself sharing your life with a not necessarily complex but completely involving and painfully demanding person’ (175). In the context of the novel, Flor is this person: as previously discussed, she functions as a national allegory, and her death symbolizes the tragedy of the country itself. The intimacy and ambivalence of Flor and Roger’s relationship can be read as an extension of this metaphor. Roger and Flor have grown up together, but the dynamic between them is nebulous and difficult to define: it is at once a bond of feudal obligation (in that she has spent years working for his family), a sibling-like connection, and a quasi-incestuous, unspoken love affair. This dynamic echoes the historical relationship between the USA and Guatemala.

In 1954, the CIA engineered a coup to unseat the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz, who had begun instituting agrarian reform in the country, a project that threatened the interests of the United Fruit Company, an American enterprise that was deeply entrenched in the country. In *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*, Greg Grandin asserts that ‘there is debate today as to whether it was anticommunism or the economic interests of the United Fruit Company that compelled the Eisenhower administration to act against Arbenz. The question is moot: the culture of anticommunism cannot be separated from the political economy of the Cold War’ (3680).

Formally speaking, the USA had no 'active role' in the coup: it trained a force of Guatemalans, led by Castillo Armas, to undertake the overthrow of the Guatemalan president. Roger, the last of an upper class Guatemalan family, refers to his own grandmother 'lighting charcoal in a pit in her patio' (221) to guide the air force towards the National Palace that night. It is this atmosphere of collaboration that informs the novel as a whole. Roger characterizes the hole left in Abuelita's patio as the portal through which civil war entered Guatemala, but he has to concede that what the USA perpetrated was an act of collaboration rather than straightforward invasion. He says: 'Hardly anyone entered Guatemala through the hole in Abuelita's patio. Tools were passed through it, that's true, such as killing tools for vile apes, all the tools they needed' (213).

Flor is Roger's sister/servant and would-be lover, but like the USA/Guatemala connection, there is no official term to describe their complex relationship. After her death, Roger says: 'I didn't know what I was trying to heal. Had I lost a relative, a sister as it were? A best friend? A myth? A metaphysical lover? A lie? My own history?' (228). His confusion is compounded by the tacit conflicts within his family: his American father Ira treated Flor like a daughter, but never officially adopted her. Roger's mother Mirabel viewed Flor's 'allowance' as her pay packet, and resented the role she came to occupy in the household. Flor, for her part, never stopped addressing Mirabel as '*usted*' rather than switching to the familiar '*tu*' (86). These two different parental attitudes suggest that even supposedly benevolent paternalism inevitably has a darker obverse side, and that the language of rescue can be used to mask exploitation and abuse.

In 1978, the US Congress cut off funds to Guatemala because of its growing reputation for appalling human rights abuses, a change of policy Susanne Jones describes as a symptom of ‘Vietnam syndrome’ (148). The USA, Jonas argues, turned the Guatemalan army into a ‘killing machine’ (147), and then ostentatiously turned its back in order to preserve its own image. Both actions were framed as attempts to ‘save’ Guatemala, first from the spectre of ‘Communism’, and then from a self-destructive civil war. In *Human Rights, Inc.*, Joseph Slaughter writes:

The banalization of human rights means that violations are often committed in the Orwellian name of human rights themselves, cloaked in the palliative rhetoric of humanitarian intervention, the chivalric defense [sic] of women and children, the liberalization of free markets, the capitalist promise of equal consumerist opportunity, the emancipatory causes of freedom and democracy, etc. (2)

Roger becomes obsessed with the idea that his family may have similarly condemned Flor with their patronage, exploiting her even as they were ‘saving her from a suburban maid’s life and God knows what after’ (50). Even ‘innocent’ memories retrospectively take on a sinister cast. Roger describes games played during his childhood, in which he would design mock-murderous contraptions while Flor looked after him during the day. He recalls: ‘They were all theoretically designed to execute Flor, and she was my willing accomplice, holding the stepladder for me if I needed to climb up to some hard-to-reach place and so on’ (192). The childhood story provides a powerful reflection of the collaborative mechanics of the 1954 coup d’état, and much of the violence that followed.

In the novel, neo-colonialism is intimate and indivisible, and resists crime fiction categories that separate victims and perpetrators. In *The Novel of Human Rights*, James Dawes argues that, in *The Long Night of White Chickens*, ‘[the] desire to “find out” is finally characterized as morally suspect’ (144). Dawes contends that

this immorality comes from the drive to ‘individual[ize] narrative answers to complex social problems’ (144). As will be discussed in the third section of this chapter, Dawes’s formulation delineates the private and public spheres in a way that the novel does not uphold: Goldman’s text is concerned with the confluence of the public and the private in the context of civil war, rather than with privileging one above the other. Dawes is correct in stating that Roger’s mission becomes ‘morally suspect’, but this is because Roger is attempting to pass judgement on a situation in which he has played a critical, and possibly destructive, role. Flor, the person he loves most, arrived in his life thanks to the one-way child traffic between Guatemala and the USA, and he has been the direct beneficiary of that traffic.

Looking at a photo of Flor and the orphans at Guatemala City Zoo, Roger notices that ‘a giant Marlboro Man stands up against the sky’ (74). Just as the USA is still economically entrenched in Guatemala, so the shadow of his own family looms large over Flor’s story, making objectivity impossible. As the narrative progresses, he realizes he cannot separate his family’s ‘crimes’ against Flor from everything that has followed, even if they were committed far away in the apparent safety of the family home. As with foreign policy, actions undertaken lightly in the USA have caused violent and terrible reverberations abroad.

Motive and the Detectives: ‘yo persigo una forma’

Throughout *The Long Night of White Chickens*, Goldman associates Flor’s unsolved murder case with two further forms of irresolution, each one tied to the detective figures’ respective positions in Guatemala. As Moya says, ‘We may be in separate labyrinths, Rogerio, but we are hunting the same minotaur, vos’ (117). The image of

the labyrinth is a recurring one, and is reproduced by the structure of the narrative, which is circuitous and punctuated by dead-ends.

Even though much of his family hails from Guatemala, Roger openly identifies Flor as his strongest tie to the country. When she returns there to run the orphanage, he begins collecting books about Guatemala even though he is living in Brooklyn, claiming that ‘a separate part of me went on living in Guatemala with Flor and the ghosts of centuries’ (187). After she dies, he gives up his reading (‘all those Guatemala books turned instantly to hateful junk’ [187]), as though her absence has forever debarred him from understanding one part of his culture. The investigation gives him the opportunity to return to decoding the ‘knot of enigmas’ (Coe: 1) that is Guatemala, but both inquiries prove inconclusive. At times, the text takes on the quality of a travelogue. Roger recounts his experiences as he journeys through the cantinas and brothels of Guatemala City, sets himself up in his family’s ancestral home, and takes a bus journey through the highlands. The novel ends just as he is temporarily leaving the country for Mexico. Despite the smallness of Guatemala, his travels through it have yielded few true conclusions about who Flor really was, or precisely what it is he has lost.

Flor’s death and the subsequent investigation mirrors the imperfection and irresolution of the act of return: in *Rites of Return*, Nancy K Miller and Marianne Hirsch assert that, ‘to some extent, the desire for return always arises from a need to redress an injustice, one often inflicted upon an entire group of people caused by displacement or dispossession, the loss of home or of family autonomy, the conditions of expulsion, colonization and migration’ (7). In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, the need for redress is writ large in the form of the unsolved murder case, but Roger’s

decision to delve through the 'layers' of Flor's life is also driven by a need for self-actualization. In his article 'The Novel of Human Rights', James Dawes states: 'Roger's investigation into [Flor's] murder was always, at its heart, a form of self-investigation, a struggle to come to terms with the fractures of his own identity' (149).

Roger's 'fractured' identity is a result of his mixed heritage: his father, Ira, is a Jewish American with Eastern European ancestry. Ira has working class Boston roots, while Roger's mother Mirabel is from an upper class Guatemalan family. Roger says: 'even during happy times, nevermind the cataclysmic, origins such as mine— Catholic, Jewish, Guatemala, USA— can't always exist comfortably inside just one person... you've been born into a kind of labyrinth, you have to pick and choose your way through it and there's no getting back to the beginning because there isn't any one true point of origin' (185). Roger attempts to navigate his way by becoming more acquainted with his Guatemalan side, but— as Flor's ever-changing 'layer[s] of skin' (158) attest— even the word 'Guatemalan' can signpost a labyrinth. Moya asserts that the country's history of colonialism means that all Guatemalans are 'at least tricultural... or at least there is this opportunity. Spanish, Indian, the synthesis' (242).

Roger's position in the USA is equally ambiguous. For much of his early childhood he lived in Guatemala because of the temporary breakup of his parents' marriage. His arrival in the 'strange new place' (46) that was the USA coincided with Flor's, and she nursed him through his recovery from tuberculosis. Of this, he says 'It was an ideal and lyrical beginning — the other kind or kinds of love came later but were often hard to distinguish from the first. After all, our lives, mine and yours, needed a shape that we could express. A yearlong quarantine is an eternity at that age' (46). The quarantine period suggests Roger's ambiguous position in the USA: he is in

the country, but not entirely of it. Of the months he spent confined to the house, he says 'I hardly had any idea of where we lived... So the world that I still live in begins for me then and there, with you stepping in from the breezeway so that we could be infiltrated into it together' (46-47). The adult Roger, too, turns to Flor in order to give his life 'a shape' (46), struggling to keep her in place as his 'point of origin' (185). Flor's essential unknowability makes this more and more difficult. In this way, Roger's futile process of investigation becomes reflective of the drama of multicultural identity and transnational return, suggesting that, at best, it can end in an acceptance of contradictions, rather than settling upon a 'solution' to one's own ambiguity.

Roger's return to Guatemala is enacted over and over again, but he never locates the centre of Flor's story, or his own. In the final pages he has left the country for a period of time in order to drop below the government's radar, but it is plain from the novel's irresolution that his performance of return could be repeated indefinitely without any prospect of cohesion or consolation. The novel opens with the title line from a Rubén Darío poem, '*yo persigo una forma*⁶'. In the course of the narrative it becomes increasingly clear that the 'form' that Roger pursues through Flor's history is not, after all, a shadowy killer, but an elusive image of self.

Roger's hopes of revelation wane with each new obstacle in his path, but Moya – despite being the instigator of the investigation – appears bitterly disillusioned from the start. As a political columnist, he lives under constant threat, and has no faith in Guatemala's corrupt legal system. When Roger half-heartedly suggests they go public with some of the information they have found, Moya launches

⁶ 'I pursue a form'.

into a caustic tirade: ‘What he was more or less saying was Oh yeah, great idea man, just great that they stomp on us, machine-gun us, break our faces, dump a thousand tons of shit on us, fuck us up the ass, *vos*, and I don’t know what else, *vos!*’ (228). Roger’s suggestion, which might be reasonable in another cultural context, is outlandishly ludicrous in 1980s Guatemala. If Moya strikes Roger as being jaded, Roger in turn comes across as suicidally naïve. Here, the well-worn path towards revelation (the generic trajectory of crime fiction) does not lead towards justice, but only towards more violence and death.

Committed as Moya is to the investigation, it is plain that this commitment does not come with any expectation of any resolution, or of just punishment for the perpetrators. However, the very act of investigating, and of writing, proves to be an end in itself. The act of investigation is significant for Moya (but not necessarily for Roger) because Moya has become habituated to the oppressive silence necessitated by life under the Guatemalan regime. In Moya’s life, ‘secrecy is a church’ (241), and possibly his only chance for refuge and salvation. This is a fundamental aspect of his character: the sections detailing his thoughts and feelings appear intimate, but towards the end of the novel are revealed to be a glaringly incomplete version of his life. After hundreds of pages of denials, it emerges that persistent rumours about Moya’s involvement with guerrilla organizations are true. This is something Moya has never once articulated in the many chapters that gloss his thoughts. That the information goes unremarked for so long suggests that so much in Guatemala is not only unspeakable, but unthinkable as well.

In the light of this, Moya’s commitment to a potentially unsolvable investigation becomes more understandable: in his world, merely posing a question

can constitute an act of rebellion. Asking questions can shed a little light on the 'bottomless grief' (177) in which his country is mired, even if there is little hope of their being conclusively answered. Of the investigation, he reflects: 'True, he had always known that it *might* not go anywhere, and that this alone would not mean that it was not worth chronicling' (287). At times, Roger interprets this 'chronicling' as a cynical attempt to prove a point: 'Come and investigate a murder in Guatemala. It won't go anywhere! See? See what it's like here America?' (277) To Roger this attitude seems exploitative ('Could Moya really use Flor like that?' [277]), but in Moya's world even an unfinished chronicle can perform important work.

In many ways, Moya's project mirrors that of *The Long Night of White Chickens* itself. The novel's failure to fulfil the crime genre's generic expectation of solution dramatically demonstrates the inadequacy of traditional ideas of justice in the world it evokes, i.e. civil war Guatemala. In 'Detection and Literary Fiction', Laura Marcus describes 'post-modern detective fiction' as representing a departure from the process of elimination and the epistemological quest for answers. She writes: 'Postmodernist literature, and postmodernist detective or "anti-detective" fiction in particular, are...placed on the side of a 'negative hermeneutics' (in which the quest for knowledge is doomed to failure) and/or the realms of "ontology", in which the focus is not on the problematics of knowledge (as in the epistemological field) but on world-making' (239). Goldman's novel makes precisely this kind of departure, but the 'world-making' in question is weighted with a political gravitas best described using Edward Said's formulation of worldliness – that is, 'a knowing, unafraid attitude to the world in which we live' (89). The 'quest for knowledge is doomed to failure' here because of the inaccessibility of justice in the socio-political context, and the

multiplication of possibilities illustrates a world too tangled and interdependent to be effectively rendered by a narrative that narrows towards a single truth.

The novel also conforms to Marcus's formulation in its focus on 'ontology', although once again this carries specific political significance. The novel repeatedly revisits the question of what it means to be Guatemalan. This is suggested through the very thwarting of the epistemological inquiry: to be Guatemalan during this period means to be without answers. As Jonathan Coe writes, the novel suggests an analogy 'between [the] convolution and apparent purposelessness of the narrative, and the endless frustration, gridlock and unreality of life in Guatemala itself' (1). Both the novel and Moya's metatext are preoccupied with world-making, and their very shapelessness represents a comment on life under dictatorship. This is best illustrated by comparing the form of *The Long Night of White Chickens* with that of Francisco Goldman's investigative journalism.

Francisco Goldman's investigative piece, *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed Bishop Gerardi?* is a compelling, lucid account of a post-war extrajudicial killing in Guatemala. The book charts the progress of one of the first post-war trials to result in the conviction of army and government officials on human rights charges. There is a background atmosphere of terror throughout: witnesses go missing, and prosecutors and judges are forced to flee for their lives. However, the trial continues, and the (slow) progress of the justice system gives the volume its form. Goldman divides the book into sections entitled: 'The Murder', 'The Trial: witnesses', 'The Third Stage: purgatory' and 'Deciphering the Truth: victory and death'. In its apparent formlessness, *The Long Night of White Chickens* seeks to project a society in which there is not, yet, any such judicial procedure. Roger says: 'Moya insists that any such phrase as *rule of law* is just not in play here and debate over whether or not

that is “really as true as it seems” is off the table’ (278).

In the absence of rule of law, the mystery of Flor’s death cannot be ‘broken through’, but can only be retraced and relived from many different perspectives. In their analysis of the metaphysical detective story, Patricia Merrivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney assert that ‘in metaphysical detective fiction [...] the mystery is a maze without an exit’ (9). The formal subversion here is similar, and Goldman himself repeatedly invokes the image of the labyrinth, but its political investment means that the novel requires a different kind of reading. In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, the circuitous narrative is not an example of ‘playful self-reflexiveness’ (Merrivale 2), but suggests the experience of living under constant terror without even the guiding form of judicial process. Moya says: ‘Trials are much more than a symbol. They are our only hope for becoming civilized’ (274). In the same conversation he refers to ‘the cleansing and inaugural rite of justice’ (273), stating: ‘if my side doesn’t win this one... we may never win anything else, with or without elections. To me, this is the only so-called ideological battle that matters’ (274). Without these trials, grappling with issues of human rights is depicted as a futile process of ‘blasting away at that black-and-white, obsidian-and-diamond-hard riddle of social injustice, of just a handful of rich and everyone else poor, thus so much and so many kinds of murder’ (Goldman 95).

Since Moya’s disillusionment precludes the hope of ‘winning’ justice, his task becomes one of representation. Throughout the novel, Moya’s running catchphrase is ‘*Guatemala no existe*’, a motto which gestures both towards the absurdity and unpredictability of life in the country, and to its invisibility on the world stage. As Jonathon Coe notes, Goldman’s writing follows the tradition of Márquez in its

‘profusion of horrors and miracles’ (1). In Gabriel García Márquez’s 1982 Nobel acceptance speech, the writer referred to the difficulty of conveying the dramatically brutal reality of life in Cold War Latin America:

I dare to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters. A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude. (1)

Moya’s intention is not to tame the ‘unbridled reality’ of Guatemala by solving a murder mystery, but to ‘render it believable’ in all its complexity and horror. His favoured metaphor of non-existence carries the idea of solitude to its melancholic conclusion: Guatemala is so lonely and isolated that it may as well have dropped from the face of the earth. In envisioning a chronicle that will be read elsewhere, Moya hopes to place Guatemala firmly in the global consciousness – to make it exist – even if Flor herself goes un-avenged. By producing a narrative that is in many ways the opposite of a procedural crime story, he hopes to highlight the desperation of a place where meaningful judicial procedure is absent.

The Nature of Truth

While the novel declines to provide a solution to the crime at its heart, it also avoids ruling out possibilities so that one emerges as more likely than other. Within the text, ‘fact’ and ‘hearsay’ are seldom distinguished from one another. Gill Plain writes:

‘crime fiction in general, and detective fiction in particular, is about confronting and taming the monstrous. It is a literature of containment, a narrative that “makes safe”’ (3). The genre’s capacity to ‘contain’ is subverted in this case by the text’s refusal to eliminate or demarcate. Even in its textual makeup, *The Long Night of White Chickens* eschews the idea of containment, insisting that monstrosity, like criminality, is a fluid and elusive designation.

At the beginning of the novel, Flor’s murder has already been ‘solved’ in a lurid trial by media. It is commonly accepted as fact that Flor’s orphanage was a ‘fattening house’ in which local children were sold into adoption, or even dismembered for use in the organ trade. In the media’s rendering, Flor is a *gringa*⁷ who has been assisting the CIA with child abductions, and her death (supposedly at the hands of a fellow trafficker) is popularly considered to be an example of justice rather than a crime in itself. When Roger and his father first arrive to view Flor’s body, we are given a snapshot of the gulf between two cultures. Ira Graetz is informed of the baby-selling rumours surrounding Flor, and protests her innocence in the face of all the evidence presented to him:

“Call it a gut hunch if you want,” said my father. “But I did some police work myself once, long ago, back when I was in the service. And two of my brothers have been district attorneys in Boston, and one is now a judge. And I will tell you this, no one who knows about police work will disregard a hunch just like that, no matter what the evidence to the contrary looks like. In a courtroom you learn that the truth does ring true.” (63)

The rest of the novel works against this premise: we are given to understand that, in Guatemala, the truth very often rings false, and vice versa. Ira’s conception of truth is too narrow to allow for what Márquez terms ‘unbridled reality’ (1). The absurdities of

⁷American woman

life under a dictatorship (the government orders the traffic to run backwards one day, causing massive casualties) mean that even established ‘facts’ can no longer be relied upon.

Goldman’s prose style, too, is inherently inconclusive: the text is awash with parentheses and run-on sentences, a technique that once again evokes Márquez. In the space of a single pair of brackets, Goldman offers the following description of Ira and Roger’s conversation with an American reporter, shortly after they have identified Flor’s body:

Well yes, you know it’s like that in there almost every day and the press here, you know, they’re not exactly antiestablishment and even if they are, there’s all that fear... .. And I said, My old friend Moya was one of them, and she said, Luis Moya, you know him then? And I said, Yeah, he was there, sort of too angrily and defiantly and she started to say something but just nodded, you could see her thoughts working, a kind of tiredness with the failure of her enterprise – particular or general, I don’t know, but she was realizing we had nothing newsworthy to tell her about Flor and she was tired of bothering us, tired of our innocence too perhaps...(58-59)

Paradoxically, the lengthiness of the transcription prevents the true nature of the exchange from being pinned down. Peppered as it is with qualifiers such as ‘perhaps’ ‘kind of’ and ‘I don’t know’, the sentence confesses its own fallibility at every turn. The ellipses at the end suggest a derailed train of thought with the potential to rush in any direction. The novel’s textual structure, which is often rambling and filled with syntactic self-doubt, means that competing truths can exist at the same time, as possible explanations are juggled without ever being conclusively set down.

In ‘The Novel of Human Rights’, James Dawes discusses the progress of the narrative, and the different theories that emerge regarding Flor’s murder. He writes:

Roger’s final hypothesis about Flor’s murder synthesizes the competing moral

and narrative pressures of the individual/ social binary. Flor was involved in a love affair with a political figure that went terribly wrong; in her distraction after the breakup, she arranged for a young girl to be sent to France for adoption. Years later, it becomes clear that the girl had a surviving older brother because Flor (purposefully and illegally? Negligently in her depression over the breakup?) conducted the adoption as if he didn't exist. (144)

However, it is misleading to suggest any of Roger's hypotheses as being 'final', unless it is in a strictly temporal sense: the story ends because the two detective figures are forced to leave the country, rather than because their questions have been laid to rest. Dawes's reading suggests a confluence between termination and closure which Goldman's novel does not uphold. In 'Closure and Detective Fiction', Eyal Segal distinguishes between 'closure' and 'ending' as follows:

What do we mean by saying that a narrative (text) has 'ended'? It may be simply that the tale has reached its termination point, in which case we are referring to an inevitable (and hence 'obvious') phenomenon, since every narrative text has to end somewhere. On the other hand, we might be referring to the sense of an ending (Kermode 1967), that is, not to the textual termination point itself but rather to a certain effect, or perceptual quality, produced by the text. (155)

In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, the novel appears to conclude only because it 'has to end somewhere'. There is no 'sense of an ending', and thus it allows for the possibility of infinite new theories and guesses about Flor's death.

Dawes goes on to align two of Roger's competing theories with the private and the public sphere, respectively. He writes:

Roger considers the possibility that Flor was murdered to clean up the politician's love affair, but then comes to believe that the orphaned brother came back to murder Flor in revenge. Here, the scope of social concern in the narrative is expanding at the same time that narrative focus is contracting. Flor's murder is the result of social breakdown so chaotic and severe that siblings can be orphaned and then separated as a matter of course... to focus

on the turbulent romance, by contrast, is to focus on the individual. The romance plot is effectively depoliticizing, turning our attention away from patterns of public life toward the satisfactions of peeping into the private. (144-45)

While Dawes is correct in stating that the ‘scope of social concern’ expands throughout the novel, the narrative focus cannot really be said to ‘contract’. Rather than hewing to a process of elimination, the text is concerned with the multiplication of ideas and possibilities. The individual and the political are so intertwined that it becomes impossible to separate the two, and it is this blurring of spheres that makes the notion of ‘guilt’ appear so fluid.

Flor’s orphanage is literally in the business of constructing families. Even if the orphan crisis is the result of ‘social breakdown’, we are invited to remember that it comprises thousands of individual tragedies. This is emphasized in the photo of Flor and the orphans on their outing to the zoo. Roger says: ‘For a while Flor liked to put a single plaited braid into her hair along the side, though you can’t see it in the picture. But if you look closely you can see that the girls – rounded Indian faces and Kewpie doll eyes, straight black hair – and even brunette Belinda have put braids into their hair in imitation of Flor’ (74). Something of Flor is replicated again and again in her young charges. The drama of her displaced childhood is simultaneously striking and banal – the children are both a ‘pattern of public life’ (Dawes 145) and a reflection of her own formative trauma.

In *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed Bishop Gerardi?* Francisco Goldman describes this confluence of the public and the private with a remark he attributes to Joseph Brodsky: ‘small countries have big politics’ (2098). In a 2015 interview, Goldman elaborates on this, stating:

There’s a certain advantage to living in a small country like Guatemala, I think. You don’t feel so distant from political reality there. When things

happen, they almost seem to happen on a Shakespearian stage with the audience so close they can become actors too. This is partly what Joseph Brodsky meant when he wrote that small countries have big politics. Sometimes booming politics!’ (Peña 1)

In the novel, the dramatic convergence of the public and private spheres is perhaps best exemplified by Moya’s farcical encounter with an American political analyst. The influential analyst, Sylvia McCourt, has power over Guatemalan life and death – Moya imagines her as a ‘Delphic oracle, a potential unleasher of war, plague and famine’ (274). However, she suffers a ‘crisis’ when Moya cheerfully remarks that their hotel room is probably bugged, and commands him to comfort her, in a bizarre reversal of power dynamics. They spend the night in each other’s arms, discussing love and foreign policy while the state listens in. The novel as a whole maintains these absurd juxtapositions, rather than ‘narrowing the focus’ to privilege one or the other. Dawes argues that ‘Goldman desires both that we study the deep histories of his primary characters as a way of understanding their individualized rights-narratives, and that we resist the insistent pull of the individual’ (145). However, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the Guatemalan characters in the novel do not have the luxury of a private or ‘individual’ life at all: they are all ‘actors’ in the war, forced to inhabit a zone of moral ambiguity.

The narrative never fully implicates Lucas as the murderer, and nor does it affirm or disprove the charges against Flor. Rather, it uses the rumours about her as a way of depicting the dangerous overlap between exploitation and humanitarianism. Flor’s adoption business can be viewed as both an act of cultural confiscation (in which children are abruptly removed from their place of origin), and as an attempt to secure them a safer and better life. Around the time of Flor’s murder, the government is engaged in appalling atrocities, fuelling the influx of orphans into Los Quetzalitos.

Because wealthy local families are turning a blind eye to the massacres, the orphans can only be resettled abroad. Flor says, bitterly: 'So they'll adopt a baby parrot, a macaw, a monkey, a curlew, but an Indian orphan, *olvidate*, forget about it. Not one Guatemalan has ever tried to adopt a kid from my orphanage. Not one' (149). Despite the lack of better options, Flor suffers anxieties about what she is doing. During her relationship with Moya, she expresses her ambivalence and self-accusation:

There was a *mistica* to it. These were whole and often very complicatedly begun little lives she was signing over. It was important to have a sense of how the future would guide the past, you know what I mean? The power she had was incredibly intimidating; she said she needed nerves of steel sometimes, when faced with such a decision. It was just that she trusted herself to get it right more than whoever else might try to. No one knew, she told Moya, during those five brief and turbulent weeks when they were actually lovers, how often she had silently called herself a monster, how bitterly she'd derided her own conceits and prejudices— (305)

The anxiety and '*mistica*' accompanying the process are compounded by the fact that there are no clear legal lines governing transnational adoption. The ambassador who meets with Roger says: 'This so-called illegal adoption business, at least by Guatemalan legal standards, often turns out to be more a matter of ethically disturbing activities, say, than an actual violation of the laws here, because those laws just *aren't* very clear' (58). Indeed, as recently as 2000, Guatemala was reported to have 'the weakest adoption laws in Central America', allowing for 'lucrative business deals' between private agencies and (predominately American) adoptive parents (Siegal 90). In Flor's case, the lack of legal definition means that judgement of her actions is left entirely to the ethical imagination: it cannot be called 'criminal', but the laws do not have sufficient moral content to mean that her adherence to them automatically exonerates her from wrongdoing.

While there is no evidence that she has been selling the orphans for parts, a

different kind of ‘transplant’ is taking place. As David Samper writes in ‘Cannibalizing Kids: Rumour and Resistance in Latin America’, anxieties about ‘outside adoption’ have sparked recurrent legends about child-snatchers throughout Latin America. The whispers that swirl around Flor have their basis in this historical panic: there were several incidents in which American tourists and aid workers were brutally attacked because they were suspected of being kidnappers. Samper writes:

What led to these violent and sometimes fatal attacks in Guatemala, and to many similar incidents throughout Central America? What could have motivated such violent fervor [sic]? It was a rumor [sic]. The people of San Cristobal Verapaz believed that their children were being kidnapped, killed, and their organs harvested for transplantation into wealthy North American children. (2)

In Samper’s rendering, the proliferation of this rumour communicates a particular truth, albeit a figurative one, about the USA’s conduct in Latin America during and after the Cold War. After installing its own preferred leader in Guatemala, the USA was free to entrench itself economically. The country’s natural reserves were ‘gutted’ for export by American corporations (e.g., the United Fruit Company), hence the fear of foreigners feeding upon the country’s most precious resources. Samper writes: ‘though untrue, the rumor [sic] is not a figment of the media's imagination or a political fabrication. Instead, it is rooted in the everyday lives of Latin American people, expressing real concerns and heightening real fears’ (11). However, Samper qualifies this by acknowledging that the rumours have been used to further certain political agendas, including that of conservative anti-adoption campaigners.

The novel is less concerned with the idea of rumours as a form of grassroots resistance, and more with the idea of such legends being harnessed in order to direct anger outwards. In *Speaking With Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*,

Luisa White states that widespread rumours of vampiric Europeans in colonial Africa ‘report[ed] the aggressive carelessness of colonial extractions and ascribe potent and intimate meanings to them’ (3). In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, Goldman takes care to note that the rumours about Flor are deliberately focused on neo-colonial ‘extractions’ in order to erase local complicity in various atrocities. It emerges that the family members of a prominent general have bribed journalists to report on Flor’s supposed human rights abuses in order to divert attention from their own: ‘So here was a chance to put an end to embarrassing rumours about the sister and sister-in-law of Lopez Nub and focus all hatred of baby sellers on Flor as well. Which excited the *faferos*,⁸ because here was their chance to make great patriotic rhetoric against baby sellers and make it sound like they were blaming the hypocritical *gringo* slanderers of Guatemala all in one murder, simply by accepting everything that the police said as true’ (132).

When Flor is accused of ‘vampirism’ on the basis of her supposed ‘American-ness’, the claims are considered attempts to whitewash local complicity through scapegoating. The myth of the *patria* can only be sustained if all blame is shifted towards an outside source (in this case, the USA). However, even knowing the source and the function of the rumour does not remove its content from the realm of possibility.

The Long Night of White Chickens subverts the idea that monstrosity can be defined in the Guatemalan context: like criminality, it proves to be a fluid designation. Roger wants to liberate Flor from being perceived as ‘the moral monster of the Western World’ (38), but Flor is self-aware enough to see this monstrosity in herself

⁸ Corrupt journalists

as she is deciding the orphans' fates. Similarly, when Moya refers to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as 'the best book about Guatemala ever written' (187), this initially seems to be a comment on government atrocities. As a student, he stars in a university production of *Dracula*, in which the terrorized Transylvanian villagers appear dressed in Guatemalan peasant *traje*, as a reference to the government's campaign of genocide in the highlands. Years later, though, Roger accuses Moya himself of 'vampirism', or of using people for his own journalistic purposes. He says: 'So Moya was a little bit like Dracula after all' (277).

It is worth noting that Stoker's novel is not just about a single monster, but about monstrosity as a form of contagion. A large part of the plot features the transformation of a virtuous young woman into a child-stealing vampire. The change is gradual. Lucy Westenra's health and soul gradually ebb away, until at last we read that: 'she seemed like a nightmare of Lucy as she lay there, the pointed teeth, the blood stained, voluptuous mouth, which made one shudder to see, the whole carnal and unspirited appearance, seeming like a devilish mockery of Lucy's sweet purity' (Stoker 201). The characters in *The Long Night of White Chickens* are similarly faced with the possibility that the civil war will make monsters of them all. Goldman writes:

The last thirty years of violent repression – not to mention the centuries before – had perhaps bred a new kind of human being, as if in a poisoned petri dish. Resolutely silent, suspicious, dishonest, full of denial, quick to believe the worst of anyone, guilty when guiltless, guiltless when guilty. Noisy in the cantinas, but, even then, the desperate noise of the stifled. And such a capacity for delusion. Even the religious landscape had for many become one of confusion and delirium, because how to speak to the soul without addressing the terror so many felt there, and how to name the devil without increasing the terror? (296)

In the world of the novel, rumours can be both true and untrue, and humanity and monstrosity can live side by side in the same people. Roger and Moya are both deeply

implicated in Flor's murder, even if their 'crimes' seem trivial from an outside perspective: Moya makes an offhand comment about his affair with Flor, and Roger gives her bad advice about where she should live. In the context of an extremely violent society, this is all it takes to become a killer. The intimacy of civil war means that everyone, including Flor, is 'guilty when guiltless, guiltless when guilty' (296).

Conclusion

The Long Night of White Chickens synthesizes a number of literary forms and techniques into a single story. It is at once a crime novel, a family fable, a travelogue and a story of national breakdown and loss. The incompleteness of the synthesis reflects the difficulty and complexity of the subject matter: English and Spanish sit side by side, and real and imagined versions of events accumulate and remain indistinguishable, while lines of inquiry are abandoned for apparently irrelevant detours. This makes for a challenging read, but the challenge is not merely stylistic, operating as a type of politically charged defamiliarization. Jonathon Coe describes the novel's 'intent' as 'the hacking away of whole indecipherable jungles of irony in order to uncover the raw, disturbed heart at the centre (1). He further notes that 'one awkward side-effect, certainly in the early stages of the book, is that Goldman has been so scrupulous at rendering this indecipherability that he is himself occasionally indecipherable' (1). However, it is perhaps more accurate to state that Goldman's rendering of the 'raw, disturbed heart' of the country *encompasses* absurdity, mystery and irony rather than being obscured by it.

By using the form of the unsolved murder story, Goldman suggests Guatemalan identity as an unsolvable riddle, while simultaneously projecting an

image of a society trapped in the violent 'gridlock' (Coe 1) of dictatorship. At the same time, he suggests multicultural identities such as Roger's as irreducibly complex, defying solution at every turn. Sometimes readability and suspense are sacrificed, as the story unspools into repetition and futility, but the text's very difficulty highlights the intractability of its subject matter. While the murderer's trail is allowed to go cold, Goldman's chaotic projection of a world forces one to conclude that reports of Guatemala's non-existence are greatly exaggerated.

CHAPTER FOUR

Red Dust: Another Country

Like *Anil's Ghost* and much of *The Long Night of White Chickens*, Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust* takes place during a period of political turmoil in the early 1990s. In this case, the setting is South Africa, and the novel focuses on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was convened in 1996, and was one of the conditions agreed upon in the negotiations leading up to the dismantling of Apartheid. The TRC differed from earlier examples of the truth commission model. Rather than offering 'blanket amnesty' to perpetrators, it assessed each case on its own merits. Chief among the qualifying criteria for a perpetrator to receive amnesty was proof of political motivation. In other words, perpetrators needed to demonstrate that their actions were part of systemic violence rather than individual or rogue acts. Full disclosure was mandatory, but remorse was not a condition of amnesty. The hearings also differed from previous truth commissions (for example, those held in Chile from 1990-1991) in that they were held publically and broadcast on national television, in an effort to further the redress of the historical record through transparency (Bhargava 1307).

Sarah Barcant, the novel's protagonist, works as a prosecutor in New York. At the request of her mentor, a left-wing lawyer named Ben Hoffman, she travels back to her hometown of Smitsrivier, where she will represent Alex Mpondo at the amnesty hearing of Dirk Hendricks. Alex agrees to participate, not on his own account, but at the behest of the Sizela family. The Sizelas believe that Hendricks may have information about their missing son Steve, who was detained at the same time as Alex, and tortured by Dirk's colleague Pieter Muller. Because Muller himself has not

applied for amnesty, it initially falls on Alex and Sarah to try and extract this information.

The novel opens with a scene from Sarah's life in New York:

Sarah glanced down, watching as her black suede ankle boots clipped up the subway stairs. She was smiling. No matter how often she sat in her prosecutor's seat waiting for a jury to deliver its verdict she would always find herself gripped by tension. Now the case was over, she felt almost light-hearted with relief... Not only had her victory buoyed her up, but on days like this she would experience anew the joy of being in New York. (1)

As an example of reparative, rather than punitive justice, the TRC proceedings will withhold precisely those features that Sarah has come to enjoy as a prosecutor. Here, there will be no sense of 'victory', or of the case being 'over'. As one character reflects: '[Sarah had] forgotten what this place was like. She'd forgotten that a story with a beginning, a middle and its own neat ending...was something New York might offer, but not South Africa' (336). Thus, the novel's opening lines— which appear to promise a courtroom procedural— prove to be misleading, and the form of the narrative unravels into a more layered and equivocal meditation on the after-effects of violence.

The author of the novel, Gillian Slovo, draws on her own experience of the TRC. Her mother, Ruth First, was an anti-Apartheid activist who was assassinated by letter bomb in 1982, while working in Mozambique. The men who orchestrated her killing applied for, and were granted amnesty in 1998. *Red Dust* highlights the flaws of the reconciliation model of transitional justice, and, unsurprisingly, emphasizes the cost the process exacts from the victims and their families, who are forced to relive their trauma in public proceedings.

Slovo is best known as a crime novelist, and the novel's use of suspense and scope align it with the thriller genre. The action builds towards a violent

confrontation, and the course of the investigation is marked by frustration and distrust of a flawed system. The crescendo of rough justice near the novel's end suggests the volatility of the past, and the TRC's shortcomings in helping the country to process it. The text alludes to the criminal justice model, the reconciliation model, and to violent retribution, but ultimately all three approaches are found wanting. In 'Novel Truths: Literature and Truth Commissions', Paul Gready writes,

Cultural production has challenged the silences of apartheid and the TRC alike, and harbored its own silences. It has reflected upon ambiguity and complexity, interrogating gray areas of experience (for example, people may have been both victims and perpetrators). In the process it has redrawn the contours of South African culture and reconfigured the locus of truth telling. In part this potential is rooted in the fact that art and culture operate in different generic terrain, often asking questions rather than seeking answers. (164)

In keeping with Gready's formulation, *Red Dust* 'ask[s] questions rather than seeking answers'. The novel questions the value of each approach to justice, but ultimately does not settle on a single approach. Instead, it uses the thriller mode to emphasize the difficulty and danger implicit in redressing national trauma. In his discussion of the thriller genre, David Glover writes that the form is 'concerned with creating obstacles, proliferating setbacks, traps, inconveniences, dead-ends and discomposure' (131). In *Red Dust*, many of these 'setbacks' result from the flaws implicit in existing models of redress, most notably the TRC.

This chapter will comprise four sections, with the first three discussing the three major criticisms the novel makes of the TRC. Section one will focus on the text's portrayal of the insidious intimacy of Apartheid, and the TRC's failure to deal with small tragedies as well as systemic atrocity. It will argue that the setting of Smitsrivier does not merely represent a microcosm of South Africa as a whole, but shows the endemic, intimate traumas that have permeate every sphere of life. The

second section will discuss the role of motive in the granting of amnesty, and the text's portrayal of the TRC's division of personal political motivation. The third section will focus on truth and performance at the TRC and *Red Dust's* focus on the emotional cost of public testimony for the victims. The final part of the chapter will focus on the narrative arc of Sarah's return to South Africa, and her role as a cultural mediator for an international readership. While much previous scholarship has focused on Sarah as a symbol of guilty white femininity, this chapter will read her narrative arc as an evocation (and dismantling) of crime fiction's generic expectations.

Little Tyrannies

In its portrayal of Smitsrivier, *Red Dust* treads a fine line between realism and the use of microcosm to suggest a broader national reality. On the one hand, it represents a national crisis through a limited cast of characters, as the issue of reconciliation between races is dramatized through figures such as Dirk, Pieter, Alex and James. As Dorothy Driver writes: 'Slovo uses a classically Freudian model of family or pseudofamily relations in order to reflect on power relations in the social community' (108). However, the emphasis on family dynamics is not only a device to reflect the country at large, but also suggests that the trauma of Apartheid has infiltrated every corner of domestic and family life. In 'Novel Truths: Literature and Truth Commissions', Paul Gready characterizes *Red Dust* as 'one of 'a number of recent South African novels that examine violence that is folded into intimate, interpersonal, everyday relationships' (170). Indeed, the novel suggests that the betrayal and

violations of Apartheid were not only inter-communal, but also threatened to tear families and communities apart from within.

In the course of the novel, the characters uncover a series of revelations about Apartheid-era murders and torture, but these seldom come to light through official channels. Significantly, almost none of the action-changing revelations are made in front of the TRC committee. Shameem Black writes: ‘the omniscient form of the thriller, and its refusal of ambiguous knowledge about what happened in the past, allows for a form of knowability denied to the TRC. In this sense, Slovo’s fiction asserts itself as the competitor of the truth commission’ (55). Indeed, *Red Dust*’s challenge to the TRC is not one that insists on the unknowability or non-existence of truth: the novel provides an explanation for the reader, but it is not one that is made available to the complete cast of characters, or to the public records established by the TRC.

Instead, the revelations occur elsewhere in and around Smitsrivier: Alex Mpondo finds evidence that Steve withstood torture by finding a dead letter box by the river, still untouched by police. Pieter’s amnesty application characterizes Steve’s death as a suicide, but he later confesses in his own home, unmediated by officials and in earshot of his housebound wife. Steve’s body is not identified through any legal or forensic procedure: we know it is him because his mother recognizes ‘a watch’ and ‘a pair of sneakers’ that have been buried with him, and ‘[begins] to wail’ (264). That the real work of discovery is undertaken in and around the town underlines the inextricability of Apartheid from bonds of friendship, family and marriage. By contrast, the action in the town hall tends to have a formal, staged quality, removed as it is from the patterns of everyday life.

Smitsrivier is a rundown town – ‘the kind of *dorpie*⁹ the world had passed by’ (239) – but we are aware from the start that terrible violence has occurred there. The town’s history is bloody, as is evident from the gross human rights violations that are brought before the TRC. The TRC report defines gross human rights violations as ‘the violation of human rights through – (a) the killing, abduction, torture or severe ill treatment of any person; or (b) any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit an act referred to in paragraph (a)’ (TRC 63:42). In the novel, the most notable of these offences is the killing of Steve Sizela, but Slovo also depicts a slew of other violations that do not fall under the TRC’s mandate. Often these relate to the tacit reinforcement of the many injustices implicit in the Apartheid social structure. The TRC’s final report notes its failure to address these as a shortcoming of its model, stating:

This focus on the outrageous has drawn the nation’s attention away from the more commonplace violations. The result is that ordinary South Africans do not see themselves as represented by those the Commission defines as perpetrators, failing to recognise the ‘little perpetrator’ in each one of us. (1)

In the novel, the TRC’s emphasis on ‘the outrageous’ (TRC 1) also enables whole communities to disassociate themselves from their histories of collusion. When the proceedings begin, the white community abruptly disassociates itself from people like Dirk Hendricks and Pieter Muller. Sarah’s old schoolmate, a white barman named Andre, says: ‘Muller’s nothing. He’s on his own now’ (161). This is despite the fact that Pieter has always been looked upon as a ‘pillar of the community’ (334). Andre himself is depicted as a violent racist, who takes to the streets with a gun when protests spread out from the township, claiming that Smitsrivier’s black population is ‘running amok’ (161). His attitudes are indistinguishable from Pieter Muller’s, with

⁹ Little town

the only difference being the degree of ascendancy each man has achieved in relation to the Apartheid state. The community has created both men in its own image, but Pieter was granted a greater degree of power, hence his appearance before the TRC. Andre escapes perpetrator status because he is a barman and not a policeman, rather than because he is, in any sense, a better man.

Mahmoud Mamdani argues that the TRC's focus on individual perpetrators paradoxically enabled group absolution for those who were not deemed to be involved in gross human rights violations. Mamdani states: 'the TRC extended impunity to most perpetrators of apartheid [...] the amnesty intended to be *individual* turned into a *group* amnesty. For any perpetrator who was not so identified was a perpetrator who enjoyed impunity' (35). Slovo's novel upholds this idea by demonstrating Dirk and Pieter as products of their social group, portraying them as 'pillar[s] of the community' (334) who are recast as scapegoats despite the popular support they have always enjoyed.

The TRC of the novel is focused on the actions of the two white men, but Slovo's emphasis on everyday cruelties in Smitsrivier extends transcends racial and gender divides. In the course of the novel, the town proves to be rife with little perpetrators. One notable example is Pieter's wife, Marie Muller. Throughout their marriage she has avoided the subject of his work, becoming a collaborator through omission and silence. After Pieter goads James into killing him, Alex interprets Marie's failure to speak as a form of domination and control. He reflects that 'she'd stood by and watched, without interrupting, as James had twisted in the agony of what Pieter had told him and then she had taken up the gun, and stopped James from being James, from telling the truth. She had kept James as her sort had always tried to keep him: securely in his place' (313). Marie insists that her cover-up is an attempt to

preserve Pieter's memory, but the act also robs James of his agency and identity. Following the shooting, James retires as headmaster of the local school, convinced that he is now too morally tainted to offer his students a role model: 'he could no longer foster those principles of probity, morality, integrity that were essential for the proper development of any individual. Not after what he had done' (307).

Marie Muller's social status troubles the boundaries between strength and weakness: she is so physically frail she is housebound, but at the end of the novel she realizes that she has been complicit in Apartheid by investing in the idea of a separate domestic realm, taking refuge in traditional gender roles to avoid seeing the truth. Of Marie, Slovo writes:

She'd never eavesdropped on her husband, had never even thought of doing so. Pieter was a private man who guarded his secrets well. She had always respected that in him: throughout the many years they'd shared, she had never pried. Just as her mother had ruled over the household, leaving her husband free to negotiate the world, so Marie had done. She had liked it that way; she and Pieter had both liked it. (297)

In overhearing the confrontation between her husband and James, Marie realizes the 'stupid[ity]' (299) of attempting to legislate between the 'household' and the 'world'. She denounces herself as 'culpable' (299), but long before this scene there is evidence that the walls of the Muller home have never been enough to keep politics at bay. In one scene, Marie darns Pieter's suit following his summons to court, acknowledging that he has been subpoenaed without directly broaching the subject with him: 'This was not part of their communication. Never once in all the years of their marriage had she ever asked him about his work' (112). The illusion of separateness is finally demolished by the police officer who attends to Pieter's death. He says: 'their domestic worker is already busy washing away the blood' (306). This domestic

worker, Bessy, has been a largely silent presence in the household, while nursing Marie through an unspecified chronic illness. She is deeply involved in the Muller's home life, but for the most part is treated as an obedient shadow, and lives in a small quarters outside the main house. The policeman's words emphasize the irony of Marie Muller's claim to have lived a life removed from politics, demonstrating as it does the presence of Apartheid in her own home.

James Sizela, too, is a supposedly 'apolitical' character who is nonetheless haunted by what he has done. When asked if James supported Apartheid, Alex says:

Not supported, no. But tolerated. James takes his Bible literally: he believes in rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Upholding the law and obeying authority is his *sine qua non*. He tried to drum this into all his pupils, me included, and so when Steve joined the comrades, James had no way of understanding the move. (244)

Although he has been comparatively powerless in relation to the Apartheid state, James has been unyielding and harsh in his roles as father and teacher. When Sarah interrupts James in his classroom, she finds the older man in the middle of reciting from Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Sarah listens to 'a voice that was not his but the tyrant king's on the eve of Bosworth field, ringing out into that desolate space, an unaccustomed cry of shame for what he'd done, a man about to meet his fate (177).

The passage from which he quotes runs:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree. (344)

In reading the classroom scene, it is tempting to associate the words 'tyrant king' with Pieter Muller, who killed James's son, but it soon becomes apparent that the reference to Richard's crisis of conscience foreshadows something else entirely. The 'cry of

shame' one might expect to be uttered by a perpetrator at the TRC will come not from Pieter, but ultimately from James himself.

When the two men meet away from the proceedings, Pieter openly confesses to killing Steve, but threatens to expose James at the TRC. The testimony that James cannot bear to be publically told does not relate to any crime, but to the way he brought up his son. The most damning testimony, for James, is Pieter's assertion that Steve felt his father had let him down, and wept about it under torture. Pieter accuses him of being an 'unforgiving father' (301) who 'turned his back on [Steve]' (301), claiming: 'he kept on saying that if only you'd listened to him, if only you'd talked to him, he would never have got into this mess' (301).

James is forced to face the fact that he has been a tyrant in his own home, with his acid correctness and emphasis on respectability politics. Pieter reminds him of a time when, outraged by Steve's decision to attend a political meeting rather than church, James refused to speak to him for two weeks. Again, the offence is a negative one, a domestic sin of omission. James has betrayed Steve by refusing to talk and refusing to listen. For this kind of cruelty, there is no amnesty to be had.

David Glover writes that part of the thriller genre's intensity derives from its depiction of heightened states, including 'a descent into pathological extremes of consciousness, the inner world of the psychopath or monster' (131). However, in *Red Dust*, Slovo often sacrifices intensity in order to depict the daily lives of the inhabitants of Smitsrivier. Even the perpetrators appear remarkable only in their very ordinariness. This refusal to pathologize or sensationalize human rights abuses will be discussed in the next section, which examines Slovo's depiction of the banality of evil.

Defining Motive

From very start of the novel, the reader is aware of Steve Sizela's likely fate. We are told that 'Although they had no concrete proof of this, most people in town— certainly most black people – believed that Steve was dead and that Muller was responsible' (16-17). Therefore, the mystery at the centre of the novel is not what happened to Steve, but why he was killed, and where he was buried. In his discussion of the thriller genre, David Glover writes: 'Often the thriller is preoccupied with the enormity of what is known and cannot be proved and this leads to an urgent desire for rough justice, an impatience with official procedures,' (131). In the novel, the TRC process frustrates the search for answers, chiefly because the amnesty hearings reward claims of political intention. On the stand, Dirk's emphasis is on police procedure, rather than the competitive machismo that existed between him and Muller, and thus his unofficial role in Steve's killing never comes to light.

In her portrayal of the TRC proceedings, Slovo suggests a tendency for perpetrators to aggrandize their motives, attributing political depth to casual acts of cruelty. The TRC aimed to distinguish between 'politically motivated' behaviour and isolated acts of violence, with amnesty being offered only for the former type of violation. Anurima Bhargava argues that the reward offered for proof of political motivation— amnesty – ultimately incentivized the distortion and over-simplification of motives by perpetrators. Bhargava writes: 'An emphasis on orders underplays the motives of perpetrators and clouds the inquiry into why these crimes were committed. [...] An accurate picture cannot be established when perpetrators have incentives to align their motives with the programmatic objectives to which they claim affiliation' (1331). By and large, Slovo's novel upholds this view.

In her article on *Red Dust*, Dorothy Driver writes: ‘for the TRC, listening to “motives and perspectives” as part of what it chose to call “personal or narrative truth” was a crucial addition to any discovery of forensic truth’ (113). The novel places a different value on each type of truth that the commission pursues. The ‘forensic truths’ that emerge from the process prove to be valuable, while the ‘motives and perspectives’ on display are either misleading or impossible to discern. As Driver writes, ‘in the novel [...] motives and perspectives play a devious or self-deceiving role in the conversion of truths to lies and vice versa’ (114). The fallibility of subjective testimony is not only due to malicious deception: at the end of the novel, Sarah ‘lies’ to Alex about the timing of Steve’s death in an attempt to release him from guilt. She does not realize her claim is true, and that Dirk’s claim that Alex sent Steve to his death is the lie. This episode shows the unstable relationship between truth and belief that attends the non-forensic, ‘narrative truth’.

In *Red Dust*, the most critical piece of forensic truth centres around the whereabouts of Steve’s body. Prior to the revelation, his family had endured years of limbo, in which they waited for Steve to come home, ‘hoping against hope’ (45) that he had simply disappeared into exile abroad. The exhumation is the first confirmation of his death, and allows his family to begin to mourn him. However, the question of *why* Alex and Steve were tortured – central to Dirk’s attempt to win amnesty – is much less easily answered. The answer, when it arrives – not through any official channel, but through the reader’s glimpse into Dirk’s thoughts– proves to be chilling in its pettiness.

In her non-fiction article ‘Revealing is Healing’, in which she discusses her own experience of the TRC, Gillian Slovo writes:

How did the TRC hearing in which I participated affect me? Personally, if anything, it increased my feelings of hatred. Beforehand, I felt what happened to my mother was purely political. But after observing Ruth's killers' amnesty application I came to see that it was also personal: that they were murderers and that they were motivated by personal hatred as all murderers are. (1)

The novel's complex treatment of motive also resists the idea that motives can ever be 'purely political'. The torture of Steve and Alex can be read as politically motivated in the sense that the two men were ANC operatives, detained for their political activities. It was their politics that initially placed them at the mercy of Dirk Hendricks and Pieter Muller, and a prevailing culture of violence that allowed the brutality against them to go unpunished. However, Slovo does not allow that Dirk and Pieter were only acting to further the interests of the state. Instead, she gradually reveals Dirk's antipathy for Alex as his cross-examination progresses, and the reader is given glimpses of his thoughts that suggest he has been driven by 'personal hatred' and a taste for brutality.

While trying to talk Sarah round to the benefits of the TRC, Ben Hoffman claims that 'Alex and Dirk Hendricks have something very basic in common. They are both, in their own way, patriots... As is Pieter Muller' (150). On the stand, Dirk invokes the defence of patriotism, claiming: 'I was a loyal policeman. We were taught that the enemy was all around, that we must fight communism and its terrorists with all our might. This is what I did [...] I did it for the good of South Africa' (131). However, in the final analysis, the killing of Steve Sizela is revealed, not as an act of due obedience, but as an unforeseen end to a violent game. It emerges that Steve's death was the outcome of a bet, in which Dirk and Pieter competed to see which of them could 'break' their prisoner first. Pieter went too far, and Steve died under torture. When he is taunting James Sizela, Muller says: 'Steve's death was an

oversight...I did it by mistake. It was my hand that knocked his head against the wall, that knocked his brains out' (301). This piece of information is corroborated by Dirk Hendricks, and reveals the two policemen, not only as 'loyal' agents of a violent regime, but as cavalier sadists in their own right. Characterizing their actions as 'politically motivated' does not capture the lightness with which the lives of resistance fighters, and black lives in general, were treated.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, in which she details the 1961 trial of the infamous Nazi, Hannah Arendt writes: 'When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III "to prove a villain"' (287). The characters evoked by Arendt – Richard III, Macbeth and Iago – are self-aware in their motives. Eichmann, she argues, was not. She writes: 'It was sheer thoughtlessness – something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period' (134). The perpetrators in *Red Dust*, too, enact their brutality in the spirit of 'thoughtlessness', rather than considered intention. Even by the period of the TRC, Dirk persists in viewing the incident in the light of a workplace grudge. He reflects, 'And anyway. It was Pieter's fault. If Pieter had taken the trouble to dispose of his own bloody problems, all this would have turned out different. How could Pieter have let it happen in the first place? Why had he, usually so meticulous, suddenly been so careless? Foolish Pieter: killing a suspect by mistake' (333).

In Slovo's text, this 'thoughtlessness' is inextricably tied to a double form of dehumanization: because he is black and has been deemed a terrorist, Steve's death is seen as a 'bloody problem' rather than the extinguishing of a human life. As

previously discussed, it is James who replicates Richard III's 'unaccustomed cry of shame for what he'd done' (177) in the climactic scene, while Muller— by far the worse villain— looks on unmoved. James suffers agonies over Steve's death because he is able to fully apprehend the loss of his son. As Judith Butler writes in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*: 'specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living' (5). Pieter, we learn, attended a church meeting soon after killing Steve, with no apparent sense of the irony of his actions, suggesting that he did not consider his actions murder, if indeed he considered them at all.

In Smitsrivier, the victims and the bereaved seek answers commensurate with the scale of their loss, but often the motive proves to be trivial from the perpetrator's perspective. As far as Dirk and Pieter are concerned, Steve's death was simply the outcome of a drunken wager. In introducing the idea of the bet, Slovo implies that the endpoint of dehumanization is violence so nonchalant that it is essentially meaningless. Even as Dirk tries to frame himself as an innocent dupe of the Apartheid system, his memories of being a torturer reveal the violence he enacted as being inextricable from his own motives. He recalls how Alex's eyelashes used to 'irritate him', to the point that he once considered 'cutting them off' (197).

In her memoir, *Every Secret Thing*, Slovo suggests the startling incongruity between the victims' experience of the impact of violence and that of the perpetrators. Of interviewing Craig Williamson, one of the men responsible for her mother's murder by letter bomb, she writes: 'It was all too clinical for me, this tale of passing hands. I interrupted to ask whether they celebrated when they saw the package. "It must sound terrible and strange..." Craig Williamson told me, "...it was almost casual... it wasn't as though somebody was responsible for this kind of thing...we

had a particularly good technical guy... it was almost luck of the draw” (4328). In *Red Dust*, Steve’s death is the result of a similar terrible lottery. Even Dirk’s decision to implicate Pieter in Steve’s killing turns out to be an impulse towards petty vengeance rather than an act of conscience. It emerges that, annoyed by being made to bury Steve’s body, Dirk planted evidence that confirmed that Pieter had been his torturer.

Slovo’s eschewal of sensationalism in her depiction of evil can be considered a departure from genre. The reader follows Alex’s failed attempt to assemble a chain of political cause and effect, but Slovo does not provide a fascinating portrait of pathology to compensate for the lack of political intrigue— an avenue that traditionally attends the depiction of motiveless violence in the thriller genre. The beginning of *Red Dust* promises a compelling villain in the form of Pieter Muller. Dirk’s prison van is diverted from the road on a dark night, and he is momentarily released from the back, only to come face to face with his old colleague. The image given of Muller is ominous. We are told that: ‘Any other man would have come up to Dirk and shaken his hand or clapped him on the back. But Pieter was not any man. Always controlled, always in charge, he merely walked a little closer before stopping to say: “Dirk”’ (25). However, Slovo dismantles this image rather than building upon it.

In ‘Noir and the Psycho Thriller’, Philip Simpson writes,

The ‘psycho thriller’ is a subgenre of the versatile thriller genre in which crime is represented as an outward manifestation of the internal workings of the pathological individual psyche...[...] The lead character in a psycho thriller is often engaged in a death struggle with the destructive, violent impulses of his or her own mind, or entangled in a contest of wits with a more-or-less equally matched opponent. (1)

Neither Dirk nor Pieter ‘struggles’ against their ‘violent impulses’: their discomfort comes solely from their change in social circumstances. Similarly, although there are

several scenes in which Sarah faces Dirk across a table, trying to manipulate him into revelation, their dynamic never develops into a true ‘contest of wits’, much less a meeting of minds. In *Red Dust*, meaningful confrontation is always elusive, because the perpetrators cannot truly conceive of what they have done and the damage they have caused. The TRC fails to bridge the two points of view, and a full verbal disclosure is never made, either during or outside the hearings.

In ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture’ Hannah Arendt describes Richard III’s crisis of conscience– the very scene from which James Sizela recites – as ‘an encounter of the self with the self’ (143). The TRC proceedings represent an orchestrated encounter with conscience, in the sense that they force perpetrators to confront their victims and the consequences of their actions. However, Slovo implies that the apprehension of another’s humanity, which is an act of imagining as much as seeing, cannot be enforced from without. It is therefore shown that confession does not apply the assumption of responsibility in cases where perpetrators cannot appreciate the humanity of those they have violated.

Truth and Performance

In ‘Performance, Transitional Justice, and the Law: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission’, Catherine M. Cole writes: ‘not only were the [TRC] hearings performed before spectators, they also transpired on stages – the raised platforms and churches throughout the country where the TRC toured like a travelling road show’ (7).

Even though the Smitsrivier town hall is lacking in grandeur, Slovo, like Cole, reaches for theatrical terms in her portrayal of the TRC proceedings. Before he is

called to testify, Dirk Hendricks silently says: ‘showtime’ (79). Sarah, preparing to appear as counsel, notes ‘that tingle at her fingertips, the performance about to begin’ (71). Within the text, the TRC is described in terms of both spectacle and novelty: it is said to be ‘heading into town’ (6), and is referred to by its local detractors as a ‘circus’ (83), a term identical to that used by former Prime Minister PW Botha to describe the real life proceedings (Cole 176).

On the first day of the hearings, Sarah observes the manner in which the setup in the town hall mimics the promises of the new dispensation:

That dusty, dead-end Smitsrivier should be witness to the likes of this! This dance of the past, this baroque blending of court ceremonial, street party and revivalist meeting. That a white policeman should have to come and explain his actions was astonishing enough, yet what felt really incredible was that the faces out there in that sea of an audience were mostly black: here in this town hall where blacks had only ever been allowed to sweep up after the white audience had long gone home. Every rule by which all Smitsrivier had once lived out its life seemed to have been vanquished. (82)

The ‘baroque’ demonstration of a new social order makes a dramatic statement, but it soon becomes clear that the old rules are far from being ‘vanquished’. When Alex breaks down in the hearing, we are told: ‘He pushed through the curtains and into the wings. Backstage was a dismal, crowded place. He scrabbled past old props and broken furniture’ (202). Although the hall has presumably been used for community meetings in the past, the reader’s attention is drawn instead to the forgotten relics of some kind of play. The disparity between ‘on stage’ and ‘backstage’ is significant: like the ‘old props’, it is clear that certain inconveniences have been moved just out of sight. Upon leaving the stage, Alex bolts from the hall and locks himself in a toilet stall. It is only afterwards that he realizes that ‘despite the abolition of segregated facilities he had made his way unerringly to this remnant of the past, to this, he smiled

as he named it as of old, this *kaffir*¹⁰ toilet' (202). This episode illustrates that segregation is still alive and well behind the scenes, and in the psyches of Smitsrivier's inhabitants, despite the ostentatious changes out front.

In the novel, the suggestion of performance is not only a feature of the venue, but is woven into in the proceedings themselves. In Slovo's rendering, the structure of the hearings enables perpetrators to distort and weaponize the truth. Because the amnesty hearings allowed for far more narrative detail than would be considered relevant in a courtroom, perpetrators were given more opportunity to discuss their lives. Having already claimed responsibility for their actions in writing, they were literally tasked with explaining themselves on the stand. In doing this, Dirk has ample time to paint a picture of himself for the commission, even claiming post-traumatic stress disorder in a bid to appear more sympathetic.

Dirk's behaviour on the stand is based on the real testimony of police captain Jeffrey Benzien, who applied for amnesty at the TRC (Driver 108). Antjie Krog identifies Benzien's hearing as an historic moment, stating: 'the amnesty hearing of police captain Jeffrey Benzien seizes the heart of truth and reconciliation – the victim face to face with the perpetrator – and tears it out into the light' (374). Dirk's external manner and the answers he gives the commission follow Benzien's very closely, but Slovo's rendering imagines much of what the actual hearing suppresses.

In footage of the Benzien hearing, Tony Yengeni, one of Benzien's torture victims, says: 'I want to understand really why, what happened? I am not talking about now the politics or your family, I am talking about the man behind the wet bag'¹¹. When you do those things, what happens to you as a human being? What goes

¹⁰ Derogatory term for an African person.

¹¹ Benzien's signature method of torture

through your head, your mind?’ (TRC Tapes). Slovo’s novel takes on the project of imagining ‘the man behind the wet bag’. As Shameem Black writes, the ‘omniscient form’ (55) of the novel allows Slovo to contrast a perpetrator’s bland answers with a revealing interior monologue, thereby suggesting an unspoken dimension to his testimony. The novel ‘asserts itself as the competitor of the truth commission’ (Black 55) by showing the multitude of resentments and complexities that can be contained behind an outward mask of compliance.

Dirk’s unspoken thoughts reveal him as a spiteful and sadistic man, but this side of him is seldom revealed on the stand. For the most part, he comes across as bland and not particularly bright, as he dutifully delivers the lines that will allow him to walk free. When asked whether he has pared down the truth in his amnesty application, Dirk responds as follows:

‘I was in jail when I filled out the form,’ this tamed, unfamiliar Dirk Hendricks insisted. ‘Nobody told me how to do it. I was trained as a policeman only to write down the basic points and that’s what I did here. I wrote what I thought was needed. If it wasn’t enough, I’m sorry.’ Repeating it, that meaningless utterance, ‘I’m sorry,’ this time accompanying it by the briefest of smiles and a renewed lowering of the head, a continuation of his courtroom artifice, a construction for the purpose of getting amnesty which his satisfied lawyer punctuated by reaching across and clicking off the microphone. (184)

The scene takes place from Alex’s point of view, and he characterizes Dirk’s body language – his ‘brief’ smile and the ‘lowering of the head’ – as a deceptive and expedient charade. As we learn more about Dirk’s thought processes, we realize that Alex is correct in this.

In *Performing South Africa’s Truth Commission: Transitional Stages*, Catherine M. Cole writes:

Significantly, the commission did not require perpetrators to express contrition or remorse. Rather the priority of the TRC was truth [...] there was no

incentive or encouragement for those who appeared before the amnesty committee to ‘perform’ in the sense of projecting any particular demeanor [sic], emotion or attitude. (14)

However, as previously discussed, *Red Dust* is highly critical of the Commission’s incentivizing of political affiliation. Dirk’s amnesty is not directly contingent upon a convincing performance of remorse, but it does demand that he show himself as the ‘right’ kind of perpetrator. For this reason, he masks his personal resentment and antipathy, portraying himself as a drone of a violent state rather than a violent individual in himself. When he claims ignorance of how to fill in the amnesty forms, he projects an image of a humble, under-educated policeman with little initiative of his own.

In *A Human Being Died that Night: Forgiving Apartheid’s Chief Killer*, Pumla Goboda-Madikizela argues that the reconciliation model has the capacity to bring about catharsis through verbal apology. She writes,

Beneath the surface of the TRC hearings, beneath the level of mere verbal exchange, something else was going on that constituted a powerful transfer of inner realities between killer and victims’ relatives. In these situations, the killer’s words are, in a sense, performative utterances, almost palpably potent instruments that accomplish the reorganization of the survivor’s inner reality even as they come out, regardless of how flat, shifty or uninspired they may sound. It is not the mannerisms the killer might use in speaking them that makes his words so powerful; it is the very fact that he is saying them at all. The words are what the victim wants to hear, to touch. *The words* themselves. (2265)

In *Red Dust*, however, the concept of falsehood encompasses far more than what is connoted by ‘the words themselves’. Here, the idea of ‘performative utterances’ is redolent of duplicity, even when characters are technically speaking truthfully. As Dorothy Driver writes, *Red Dust* ‘address[es], inter alia, the showy performance of contrition on the part of an amnesty-seeking perpetrator that tears out the heart of the notion of sincerity, to say nothing of truth’ (108). Because Alex has an intimate

understanding of his torturer, he cannot accept the persona that Dirk presents in the hearing, which – as Goboda-Madikizela might have it – is a ‘flat, shifty [and] uninspired’ one (2265). Listening to Dirk’s answers, Alex becomes outraged by his studied lack of inflection: ‘the man Alex had known, the real Dirk Hendricks, had never spoken with such unrelenting monotony’ (183). Dirk’s ‘courtroom artifice’ (184) is aimed at getting amnesty, but in Alex’s mind his ‘showy performance’ (Driver 108) of humility undermines his claims of responsibility.

Slovo juxtaposes Dirk’s ‘courtroom artifice’ with moments of genuine revelation. However, it falls to the victim to use his ‘intimate’ (150) knowledge of his torturer in order to evoke them. Whenever he manages to show the room the ‘real’ Dirk Hendricks, Alex is the one who suffers for it. Initially, he successfully draws ‘flashes’ of authenticity from Dirk by forcing him to discuss the details of his torture:

Dirk Hendricks’s tongue licked out, a snake’s lick, before it hurriedly withdrew, a lustful, greedy, anticipating move. Watching, Sarah saw another man breaking free of the prisoner’s chrysalis. She saw the narrowing of his eyes and the draining away of their colour. His lips tightened: no longer the Cupid’s bow. His head lifted, his back straightened: he looked somehow more substantial and also much more dangerous. The shift was extraordinary. This was no longer the man who’d sat compliant on the stage ever since the onset of the hearing... That one was gone– replaced by some other being that Alex had conjured up – a dangerous being. (190-191)

This ‘shift’ echoes a turning point in the Benzien hearing, during which Tony Yengeni instructed Benzien to demonstrate his preferred method of torture before the commission. Footage of the hearing shows a chilling change in Benzien’s demeanour. Up until this point, his imposing size has been effaced by his position behind a table and by the suit he is wearing. During questioning, the bland, formal tone of his answers belies their content, preventing the viewer from forming a mental image of the incidents he is recounting. Throughout his testimony, he addresses his victims as

‘sir’, in studied deference to the change in the country’s power dynamics. When Ashley Forbes, another of his victims, says, ‘Can I also ask that when I was arrested, do you remember saying to me that you are able to treat me like an animal or like a human being and that how you treated me, depended on whether I cooperated or not?’ Benzien replies with formal detachment, saying: ‘I can't remember it correctly Sir, but I will concede, I may have said it’ (Dept of Justice 1).

Yengeni’s request momentarily forces Benzien to shed this placid persona. Like Dirk, Benzien is suddenly revealed as ‘more substantial and also much more dangerous’ (190) than he has previously appeared. In the torture re-enactment, he crouches over an inert black man and demonstrates suffocating him with a wet bag, restraining the man with the weight of his own body. Antjie Krog writes, ‘the sight of this bluntly built white man squatting on the back of a black victim, who lies face down on the floor, and pulling a blue bag over his head will remain one of the most loaded and disturbing images in the life of the Truth Commission’ (374). Indeed, the image is shocking, not only in its brutality, but in its stark contrast to Benzien’s earlier self-presentation. As in *Red Dust*, the victim has ‘summon[ed] up his torturer’ (193) for the Commission to see. However, the very evocativeness of the image is a double-edged sword. At this point in the recording, Tony Yengeni begins to stumble over his words, losing his composure as he is faced with the image of what has been done to him.

Red Dust dwells on this element of the Truth Commission, suggesting that in order for the truth to be aired, victims were forced to relive their own fear and humiliation. In ‘The Enchantment of a False Freedom,’ Ato Quayson writes,

Red Dust is particularly poignant for suggesting that, for the former victim to accuse his torturer properly and bring him to admit, a terrifying re-enactment of the scene of the torture is called for, in which the former victim, now

apparently free, has to undergo the trauma of recall in order to invoke his torturer in his particularity as torturer. (335-6)

Indeed, leading Dirk through an explanation of his torture by asphyxiation, Alex experiences a flashback. Slovo writes,

Now that Alex had called up the bag there was no escaping it. He felt the tug of it, its heavy fabric closing in, filling his mouth, his nostrils, smothering him. He shivered. Dark. Too dark. He lowered his head. He could feel the silence, building up around him, bringing with it dread. He looked round wildly. (190)

Alex may understand Dirk well enough to ‘summon’ up his other side, but Dirk, equally, is able to expose this lesser-known, terrified version of Alex. When Alex enters the town hall, Dirk notes ‘how different he looked. So different, in fact, that if Dirk hadn’t known he would be there, he wouldn’t have recognized him...What else had he expected? Mpondo was no longer a prisoner. He was an MP. No wonder he looked different’ (78). As Alex leads Dirk through questioning, he loses his assurance and Dirk begins to direct the conversation, chipping away at Alex’s public demeanour. The proceedings recast Alex in a role he thought he had left behind – one which was created for him by Dirk. When he eventually turns his back on the proceedings, Alex frames it as a repudiation of this role, stating: ‘I won’t be his victim again’ (316).

The price Alex pays is not only a product of having to remember the trauma he has undergone, but also of Dirk’s weaponization of the truth. During cross-examination, Dirk reveals that Alex broke down under questioning and told him the location of an ANC arms cache. In doing so, he deliberately exposes Alex to the threat of censure from his community. Indeed, the effect of this revelation is immediately palpable within the town hall. We are told that, ‘the collective was united: like a wounded animal it gave up a soft burrowing hum that hovered above the hall until very gradually it died away. Nothing now– only silence – as the crowd let

sink in what Alex, their hero, had done' (192). By focusing on Dirk's fresh victimization of Alex, *Red Dust* suggests the unfairness of proceedings which essentially punished victims for their participation by laying bare their own histories for public scrutiny.

Red Dust characterizes Dirk's exposure of Alex's response to torture as a deliberate act of malice, a charge that has also been levelled against Benzien. Antjie Krog suggests that, following the wet bag demonstration, Benzien deliberately engaged in retaliatory shaming as he revealed, unasked, the fact that Yengeni had identified his comrades after being tortured. Krog writes, 'Back at the table, Benzien quietly turns on him and with one accurate blow shatters Yengeni's political profile right across the country. "Do you remember, Mr Yengeni, that within thirty minutes you betrayed Jennifer Schreiner? Do you remember pointing out Bongani Jonas to us on the highway?"' (374). Krog further describes Benzien's loaded reminiscences about his 'friendship' with activist Ashley Forbes, in which he claimed that 'I think that the two of us, after weeks of confinement, really became quite close' (374). In the novel, Dirk resorts to both of these tactics, subtly threatening his questioner with mutual destruction under the guise of good faith.

Again, much of Dirk's testimony is literally 'true', but contextually misleading. In the footage of the Benzien hearing, Benzien reminds Ashley Forbes of a trip they took to the countryside, recalling Forbes eating Kentucky Fried Chicken and playing in the snow next to the road while a married couple snapped pictures of him. However, he is vague about the details of torture and assault. When activist Gary Kruser takes his turn to question him, he challenges Benzien's professed failure of recall, saying: 'You seem to remember very flimsy things, like the Kentucky and whatnot' (SABC). In a harrowing follow-up interview Forbes fills in the details that

Benzién has ‘forgotten’ or omitted, i.e. the fact that their day trips were part of a process of psychological torture, which included severe violence, ‘to the point where [...] after three months I tried to commit suicide’ (SABC Special Report). Forbes continues:

And then he takes you for a drive and he’s all dressed nicelyyou go for something to eat and you go to a shop and have something, I don’t know, he says Kentucky or steak or something and he says, ‘No you’ve done well and everything’s okay,’ and then maybe at two or I don’t know what time in the morning he’ll take you back to the cell again. And the next day at about five, six, he’ll come again. (SABC Special Report)

Here, it becomes apparent that the trips Benzién has put forward as evidence of his own kindness were not a respite from cruelty, but part of his attempts to break his suspects. However, by invoking the memory, Benzién at once suggests Forbes’s collusion with his captors, and casts himself in a comparatively benevolent role. Dirk uses the same approach, referencing a trip to the country in which Alex ran around ‘like a child’ (193), and reminding Alex of a joke they had shared. In doing so, he reinforces their old power dynamics, taunting Alex by reminding him of a time when he ‘would have done anything for Dirk Hendricks’ (192). Slovo characterizes Dirk’s tone as ‘gleeful’, which casts the entire story of the day trip as an attempt to humiliate Alex by suggesting him as a servile collaborator, and reminding him that there are far more damning revelations to come.

The TRC report notes the dangers attending public disclosure, but discusses them only in relation to perpetrators. The report asserts that amnesty was not synonymous with impunity, in part because it forced applicants to claim culpability in a public forum, leaving them open to social consequences. The report reads:

Apart from the most exceptional circumstances, the application is dealt with in a public hearing. The applicant must therefore make his admissions in the full glare of publicity [...] Often this is the first time that an applicant’s family and

community learn that an apparently decent man was, for instance, a callous torturer or a member of a ruthless death squad that assassinated many opponents of the previous regime. There is, therefore, a price to be paid. Public disclosure results in public shaming, and sometimes a marriage may be a sad casualty as well.' (Volume #1: 7-8:35)

In *Red Dust*, victims such as Alex must relive the past in the same 'glare of publicity', and are therefore vulnerable to identical 'public shaming' when their response to torture emerges. In implicating Dirk, Alex has to 'unleash his own disgrace' (192), losing his status as a 'hero' (192) in the eyes of the community. He knows that if the questioning of Dirk Hendricks proceeds, his own betrayal of Steve will eventually come to light. In the end, the 'price to be paid' proves to be too high for him to continue with the process, and he decides to break his association with Hendricks by declining to question him further. He says: 'I can't risk Dirk Hendricks's narrative, his version of history, becoming mine. And he's bound to get his amnesty, so why should I put myself through this? I can't sleep. I can't eat. I can't go on. I'm sorry' (228).

When Sarah protests at the idea of Dirk being able to walk free, Ben replies: 'No, he won't. He has lost his wife and his children: to lose the hope of such intimacy is a far greater punishment than any jail sentence' (319). However, the idea of the TRC process as both trial and punishment again suggests consequences for all involved. James kills Pieter partly because he cannot bear to lose the dignity of his position in the community or for his wife to find out how deeply he had hurt their son. In fact, it is the threat to his marriage that finally spurs James to shoot him. Pieter's last words are: 'I'm going to tell the truth to the Truth Commission [...] I'll describe your son and the pain he underwent. I'll tell them what he told me about you as well. I'll make you listen, not only you, but his mother as well' (302). This demonstrates that the TRC's assertion – that 'sometimes a marriage may be a sad casualty as well'

(Volume #1: 7-8:35) – may apply to victims as well as perpetrators. James has already lost his son, and he fears that if he pursues the process, he will lose his wife as well. Like Alex, he has the opportunity to bring to light behaviour far more abhorrent than his own, but ultimately cannot bear to submit his shame to public scrutiny.

In ‘Cracked Vases and Untidy Seams: Narrative Structure and Closure in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and South African Fiction’, Meg Samuelson discusses fictional narratives depicting the TRC, stating: ‘their endings along with the very texture of the narratives reveal how they position themselves in relation to the TRC process and its desired end-result of reconciliation and nation-building’ (66). *Red Dust* ends on an ambivalent note and the question of whether the victims’ ordeal at the commission has been worthwhile extends far beyond the scope of the novel. This ambivalence is partly a feature of genre.

In the thriller genre, a villain is often corralled and punished, but unlike in Golden Age crime writing, the reader is continually made aware that the guilty party is part of a pervasive pattern of social violence. Thus, along with the relief that comes with apprehending the criminal, the texts also tend to leave readers with a lingering sense of disquiet. The context of social transition adds an additional layer to this ambivalence. In this case, it stems from the fact that the effects of the proceedings are intended to produce long-term, systemic change.

Sarah finds it difficult to accept that the hearings have been valuable when she sees the damage they have wrought in Smitsrivier. When she raises this protest, Ben Hoffman says, ‘You’ve got it all wrong [...] The reconciliation the Commission talks about is not between individuals’ (318). This implies that the TRC has value as a national ritual. In Ben’s view, the very public-ness of the proceedings will help to bring about national catharsis, even as it exerts terrible pressure on the individuals

involved. In *Revealing is Healing*, Slovo herself expresses this hope, even as she criticizes many other elements of the proceedings. Of the public broadcasts, she writes,

There were those who told me of driving with the radio on, and of being so affected by what they heard that they had to stop their cars and vomit. But there were also those who turned off their radios, and their televisions, and spoke of other things. And yet even for them, I do not doubt that the drip, drip of the TRC was powerful: the fact that Apartheid's thin veneer of civilisation was gradually being peeled away, could not be completely ignored. (1)

At the period in which the novel is set, it is still impossible to decide what good the TRC has achieved, but even though Dirk will walk free there is a sense that not all is lost. The Commission is intended as a beginning, rather than as an ending, and the form of the narrative imitates this in its resistance of a firm conclusion.

Homecoming

The narrative takes place from several different perspectives, but it begins and ends from Sarah's point of view. In the course of the novel, she is made to confront her own childhood in Smitsrivier, and to weigh her decision to leave. From the start, she suspects that Ben has an ulterior motive when he asks her to return for the TRC, but resolves not to be drawn in:

She would not allow herself to be dragged into a contemplation of her past. Leaving small-town Smitsrivier had been her childhood goal and she had managed it as completely as she could ever have wished. She was here to do a job of work because Ben had asked her to come and because she owed him too much to contemplate refusal. That's all. (12)

It emerges that this attitude of detachment is precisely what Ben, himself a lawyer, is hoping to challenge in Sarah. Despite her technical brilliance at practicing the law, he

suspects her of lacking humanity. After her initial interview of Alex Mpondo, in which she challenges his version of events to prepare him for questioning, Ben accuses her of being a ‘hunter’ (67) and an ‘unfeeling monster’ (68). Sarah protests: ‘Isn’t this why you brought me all the way from New York: because you needed my objective eye?’ (67). In fact, Ben wants to test Sarah’s capacity for compassion, rather than objectivity. He says: ‘Let’s see now if you’re still capable of crossing the divide from prosecutor into people’s champion’ (43).

Sarah is an excellent lawyer, and her failings and missteps in Smitsrivier do not owe to any lapse in technical brilliance, but are implied as a failure of the judicial model itself. Sarah objects to the TRC on the grounds that it is not enough to satisfy the ‘perfectly understandable human desire’ for justice (39). Ben says: ‘Can’t you see how your emphasis on the law is a prosecutor’s obsession that would lead to the most terrible injustice?’ (42). The narrative does not reward Ben’s strong belief in the value of the TRC process, but nor does it champion Sarah’s initial ‘emphasis on the law’, which aims to isolate and extract criminality rather than addressing the legacy of a violent system. This is highlighted at the end of the novel, when Ben, Alex and Sarah all collude in allowing James to walk free after his murder of Pieter Muller. Because of the tangled and violent history that the two men share, Sarah is forced to agree that conventional ideas of crime and punishment should not apply. She further demonstrates how far she has strayed from her ‘prosecutor’s obsession’ (42) by reflecting that ‘perhaps James would come out of this better’ (329). While the novel does not advocate a specific method of long-term redress, it makes it clear that context and history will have to be taken into account.

Sarah’s transformation over the course of the narrative is largely enacted through her relationship with Alex. In the beginning, her judicial outlook insists on a

binary relationship between truth and falsehood that does not factor in the ways in which trauma is processed and remembered. This is evident in her first interview with Alex, in which he apparently misremembers the last time he saw Steve. His version of events is impossible, according to the floor plan of the police station that Sarah produces from her handbag. She confronts him with the disparity, and when he doesn't respond, she says: 'Answer me, Alex. What did you really see?' (64). Her demand suggests that Alex is lying, but the reality is more complex. The fragment of memory is accurate, but has been stored out of context because Alex was not aware that, as a prisoner, he had been drugged and moved to a second location outside the main town. It is only through flashbacks and sense memories that he comes to recall the experience of being transported in the boot of Dirk Hendricks's car with Steve at his side.

At the end of the novel, it is Sarah who resorts to a lie. She says: 'Hendricks told me...he told me that Steve was dead long before you ever named him' (331). Alex's intimate knowledge of Dirk means that he cannot be so easily fooled: 'the fact that she'd assumed Alex would believe what she'd told him, showed just how long she'd been away' (336). Their exchange proves that Sarah still lacks Alex's local knowledge of Smitsrivier, but also that she has come to value compassion more highly than the universal application of truth. In their final scene together she is more intent on consoling him than with establishing a record of what has occurred: 'She thought that this reassuring of Alex was much more important than the truth could ever be' (331). In the same scene, she acknowledges that her feelings for Alex have changed from 'suspicion and attraction' to 'tenderness' (328). She embraces him after they have been talking about his period in detention, transcending the attorney-client divide, the colour bar, and the life-work boundary in one convenient plot twist.

Sarah's return is so metaphorically loaded that it makes the book an unwieldy read. Her original incarnation is best understood as an evocation of a particular genre: the Sarah we meet at the beginning of the novel is single, childless, hard-drinking and expensively shod, as we learn in the few pages that sketch her life abroad. Her New York success story suggests the triumph of the individual: there, she embodies a kind of empowerment often characteristic of the female investigator in a certain kind of popular culture. In *Hardboiled and Highheeled, The Woman Detective in Popular Culture*, Linda Mizejewski writes:

So is this the feminist heroine for the turn of the twenty-first century? The refusal of wife/mother roles certainly aligns them with the non-traditional women's stories. But other aspects of these characters could as well align them with conventional and even right-wing thinking. The successful loner, the gritty nonconformist, the stubborn individualist who's licensed to carry a gun— these are figures more likely to be found in the NRA than in NOW... The [Sue] Grafton and [Patricia] Cornwell series in some ways exemplify the 1970s toughchic school of feminism, in which women succeed on male turf without changing the rules of the game. (36)

Our first glimpse of Sarah suggests her as one of these 'toughchic' heroines. Ben's wife Anna says: 'She has so much going for her. She's beautiful, she's intelligent, she has friends, a good standard of living, she's a good lawyer' (118). The unmaking of this figure does not represent a criticism of the hardboiled crime genre, or even of the American justice system per se, but rather suggests the individualist litigator as being out of place in the context of the TRC, with its emphasis on community engagement and the value of subjective testimony. When Sarah first appears she is 'buoyed' up by 'black suede ankle boots' and 'victory' (1), but the text does not dwell on the fact that both of these have presumably been earned through the business of conviction and incarceration. Instead – like Sarah's designer shoes, which are 'ruined' (35) by the red dust of Smitsrivier – Sarah's beliefs are shown to be suitable for New York, but are

rendered 'completely inappropriate' (36) by her sudden 'continental shift' (8). In South Africa her 'toughness' manifests as insensitivity, and her 'individualism' as arrogance.

The unravelling of the toughchic persona is not limited to Sarah's views on truth and justice, but is a disassembling of the entire identikit sketched in the first few pages. This includes Sarah's 'refusal of wife/mother roles' (Mizejewski 36), and her estrangement from both family and community. At the beginning of the book, Sarah treasures her upscale apartment precisely because she shares it with nobody else: 'She loved its solitude and its uncluttered elegance...this was home' (2). However, once Sarah arrives in Smitsrivier she becomes sensitive to what she perceives as Ben's disapproval of her single lifestyle. She starts when he names a Coltrane ballad out of context ('You don't know what love is' [120]), and she interprets another of his comments as possibly 'making a judgement about her and her lack of either husband or children' (319).

Ben's criticisms about her 'heartless' litigation methods are part of a greater judgement about her incapacity for, or avoidance of intimacy. He says: 'I failed her. I encouraged her to go and I didn't make sure that she came back. And now she no longer belongs here. Or anywhere perhaps' (118). Ben surmises that Sarah's tendency to be ruthless in her work is part of her fundamental inability to connect with other people on a human level. The narrative upholds this idea: Sarah's change in attitude leads her, not only nearer to Alex's way of thinking, but into his arms as well. Similarly, although she intends to return to New York, Sarah prolongs her stay in Smitsrivier in order to spend time with Ben before he dies, assuming a daughterly role by his side.

Slovo's characterization of Sarah is problematic at times. As a character, she lacks psychological depth, yet her experience of return is linked with much graver variations on the theme. This is best exemplified by the title of the novel. As previously discussed, the dust of Smitsrivier ruins Sarah's shoes, suggesting her past and undermining her attempts at self-reinvention. However, the tenacity of the dirt is used in other places to suggest the violent stains of South African history. Dirk observes that, after burying Steve 'the dirt had got everywhere, in his skin and in his clothes; he remembered how much Katie had complained about the way the red dust had clogged up the washing machine' (334). In Dirk's case, the image of the red stains can be read as one of the text's many references to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and suggests the impossibility of washing away the violence of the past. This meaning sits oddly with Sarah's attempts to forget her old self, just as the conundrum of restorative justice makes an awkward companion to the question of whether Sarah will ever 'know what love is' (120).

When Sarah, receiving Ben's initial phone call, thinks 'there is no going back. Not after all this time' (3) it is unclear what is at stake in her return. Her family has emigrated from South Africa, and Ben is the only person in town with whom she has kept in touch. The memories the town brings back for her are ones of awkwardness and discomfort rather than trauma: as Ben's misfit protégée, she received a far more progressive education than most white children in Smitsrivier, and thus grew up as something of an outsider.

Georgina Horrell writes: 'The parallels between "Sarah" and Gillian – character and novelist – are implicit [...] Slovo deftly sets up a picture of a woman who had left the agonies, contradictions and conflicts of South African white womanhood behind, in order to immerse herself in a metropolitan environment

apparently less fraught' (770). However, Horrell's analysis falsely conflates self-imposed exile with political exile, and she does not account for her use of 'agonies' to describe Sarah's experience.

At most, the examples Horrell offers – for one, Sarah's feeling of anxiety and guilt when black men avert their eyes from her in the street – suggest awkwardness. There is nothing in Sarah's background to align her with those who, like Slovo, were raised in families committed to a liberation struggle, a position which, in many cases, may properly be described as agonizing. One suggests the trauma of formative enmeshment in politics, the other a vague feeling of survivor's guilt for having avoided becoming thus enmeshed. We learn that, as a teenager, Sarah was arrested for breaking segregation laws by drinking at an illegal shebeen,¹² but she acknowledges this as 'a stupid risk [taken] merely for rebellion's sake' (34), rather than a committed act of resistance. Furthermore, Ben Hoffman secured her release 'within minutes' (34) of his arrival at the police station, meaning the consequences of her stand proved negligible.

Metaphorically, the significance of Sarah's return is sound: her symbolic homelessness exists as a warning about the dangers of leaving behind the past without so much as a backward glance. However, nothing in the novel really accounts for the idea that Sarah does not belong anywhere, and her journey 'home' symbolizes more than it entails. In the main, she exists as a kind of conduit, whose musings on the subject of the past open the door for the theme to be discussed from a broader and more political point of view. Driver writes:

The novel's deployment of a white woman from New York as its central character is aligned with the book trade dictum that American audiences can

¹²Tavern or bar

be involved in an action only through American eyes. With its major focaliser being at least part American, the book [...] threatens to be less foreign. (106)

This is a fair (if rather cynical) interpretation of Sarah's role in the novel: she operates as both a symbol of return and a cultural mediator within the text, her insider/outsider position enabling her to both supply local knowledge and to demand it on the reader's behalf. However, Sarah's sense of dislocation in Smitsrivier is not merely indicative of the novel's 'aspirant bestseller status' (Driver 107). The 'foreignness' that Sarah interprets for readers is not only the disparity between New York and Smitsrivier, but the disparity between the TRC and existing models of justice. In setting up Sarah's characterization, Slovo uses crime fiction shorthand to suggest conventional modes of justice, and then subjects Sarah and her beliefs to the pressures of a different milieu. Apartheid, the novel implies, is not a case to be solved by a tenacious loner, but requires a different kind of protagonist altogether.

Conclusion

In the course of the novel, three different responses to Apartheid are played out, but no single approach emerges as a clear way forward. The TRC proves, in many ways, inadequate but so do the clear legal principles that Sarah initially seeks to import. James's violent revenge eliminates Pieter from society, but his own relief is mingled with agony and regret. However, if the novel does not end with reconciliation, its denouement suggests, at the very least, forward motion.

When Alex first appears in the novel, he keeps lifting his foot 'further off the accelerator' (29) as he drives towards Smitsrivier, deferring his arrival. At the end of the book he 'pressed down on the accelerator and the landscape accelerated, its muted colours joining into one vast sage blur, passing him by. He let it go. Keeping his foot

on the gas, he thought of nothing in particular: he just drove' (337). As he drives away, Alex reflects, 'He had looked Dirk Hendricks in the eye. That was a start' (338).

Here, it is implied that South Africa may be able to achieve what Alex calls 'a general moving on' (336), although it is unclear whether this will occur because of the Truth Commission, or in spite of it. Without rewarding a specific form of engagement, the novel nonetheless upholds the idea that the past must be 'looked in the eye' before any progress can take place. Sarah's return and her journey from detachment to compassion is used to illustrate the need for an engaged and empathic model of redress, although once again a comprehensive vision of what might have been is not realized in the narrative. In this way, the very structure of the text is allowed to echo the complexity of the subject matter, eschewing easy answers and emphasizing the complex issues that attend the project of healing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Crossbones: Hijacked Narrative

Nuruddin Farah's *Crossbones* is set in Somalia, and was published in 2011. It operates both as a stand-alone novel and as the conclusion to Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy. The books in the trilogy have several characters in common, but are set in different political eras. The trilogy traces the aftermath of military dictator General Siad Barre's regime (*Links*), the rise of power amongst local warlords or 'strongmen' (*Knots*) and the emergence of piracy and militant Islam in the form of Al-Shabaab (*Crossbones*). Each of the texts details a different protagonist's return to Somalia, but *Crossbones* stands out for its subversive use of genre. It is also unique in terms of structure: *Crossbones* is a denser and more fragmented work than its predecessors in the trilogy. The novel engages with the media image that Somalia has recently garnered, countering it with a chaotic, unresolved narrative that supplies many more questions than answers.

The novel initially appears to conform to the narrative techniques of crime fiction, but ultimately shatters them by renegeing on the promises of its opening chapters. While crime fiction typically builds towards revelatory catharsis, Farah's novel is structurally and thematically preoccupied with dissolution, rather than resolution. In order to emphasize the elusiveness and complexity of life in a collapsed state, Farah begins the novel with a clear line of inquiry: we learn that the novel's two 'detective' figures, Malik and Ahl, have returned to Somalia to solve the 'riddle' (41) of a teenaged boy's disappearance. However, once Malik and Ahl actually arrive in the country, every attempt they make to impose narrative on their surroundings seems to result in greater frustration and uncertainty. The promise of closure is broken down,

as are the detective figures themselves: the two protagonists undergo a process of physical and mental disintegration as they attempt to piece together a version of the truth.

Although justice and catharsis are depicted as emotionally necessary and desirable, Farah always places them out of reach, emphasizing their virtual impossibility in the Somali context. At the start of the novel *Jeebleh* notes, sadly, that

the great tragedy about civil wars, famines and other disasters in the world's poor regions... is that the rubble seldom divulges the secret sorrows it contains. The technology, the forensics to determine what is what, scientifically, is not available; the dead are rarely identified or exhumed. Often no one knows how many have perished in the mudslide or the tsunami. One never gets to hear the last words that passed their lips, or what, in the end, caused their death: a falling beam, a failing heart, a spear of bullet-shattered glass? Or sheer exhaustion with living in such horrid circumstances day in and day out? (26)

Similarly, Malik, reflecting on a friend's murder, says: 'I often think how, in fiction, death serves a purpose. I wish I knew the objective of such a real-life death' (285). In *Crossbones*, death is both senseless and commonplace: it does not provide a catalyst for action, nor does it further the character development of those left behind. Rather, it is simply the humdrum, inevitable result of the 'horrid circumstances' (26) the civil war has imposed upon Somalia's inhabitants.

The apparent randomness of the violence in Somalia is amplified by the fact that it is largely enacted remotely. Cambara (the protagonist of *Knots*, who also appears in *Crossbones*) states that 'For me [...] there is no difference between the imam remote-controlling the suicide bomber and the guy orchestrating the Tomahawk launch from the safety of his Colorado base' (355). In modern warfare, perpetrators and their motives are so far removed from their acts of deadly force that the violence itself often appears both pointless and anonymous. During the Ethiopian invasion,

Malik is having drinks with friends when an explosion sounds outside: ‘Just then a single rocket falls close by. The house trembles slightly, the windowpanes shaking in their frames, the bulbs of the chandelier lightly knocking against one another with a tinkling sound that, to Malik, distantly recalls one of his daughter’s wind-up toys’ (285). The reference to the wind-up toy suggests a moral weightlessness: the very mechanisms of the pre-programmed rockets and drones put perpetrators at one remove from the consequences of their actions, creating the illusion of toy warfare, while those in the firing line die unexamined deaths.

This chapter will demonstrate that the form of the narrative in *Crossbones* – that is, fragmented, ‘unofficial’ and progressively breaking down – is a deliberate attempt to reflect the scope and complexity of the Somali situation, in which cause, motive and effect are often difficult to discern. Rather than containing his subject matter within a recognizable form of narrative, Farah pushes the crime genre to its limits by reneging upon every generic expectation the form evokes, thereby suggesting the inability of historically Western forms of narrative to capture the reality of postcolonial, post-collapse Somalia. Not only have villain/victim categorizations been broken down by years of intimate conflict in the civil war, but enterprises such as ‘Somali piracy’ are in fact part of a vast, tangled web of international financial interests. This chapter will argue that Farah does not seek to redress every popular misconception with a countering ‘truth’, but that the chaotic, apparently incomplete structure of the novel is itself a call for fresh terms of engagement. By writing a ‘crime novel’ that evokes more questions than answers, Farah suggests the facility of all forms of narrative that claim to unilaterally ‘capture’ the Somali reality.

Rumour and Revelation

Crossbones is set in 2006, and depicts the final days of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) and Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia. The novel begins with two characters' attempts to construct their own metanarratives about the region. Malik, a foreign correspondent, has come to Mogadishu to write about the 'homeland' he has never seen. He also intends to help his brother Ahl, who is searching for his underage stepson, Taxliil. Taxliil has been recruited by Al-Shabaab operatives in Minneapolis, and has run away to join their ranks in Somalia. His disappearance is presented as the novel's central mystery:

The next time misfortune called, Taxliil was ready to follow. She took him back to Somalia, his route an enigma, the source of the funds that paid for his air ticket a mystery, his handlers a puzzle, the talent spotters who recruited him a riddle. When Ahl decided that he would go to Somalia, [Ahl's wife] Yusur asked him why he would risk his own life in pursuit of the hopeless case of a young boy who had disappeared to God knows where. Ahl replied that he wished to reduce the number of unknown factors. (41)

To return to the statement by Todorov cited at the start of this study, 'for there to be a transgression, the norm must be apparent [...] Genres are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature' (8). Farah's framing of Taxliil's disappearance as 'a mystery', 'a puzzle', 'a riddle' – all things that demand solving – signals the major tenets of the crime genre, evoking generic expectations in the reader. Having set up Taxliil as the narrative's ostensible quarry, Farah then transgresses from the norm by allowing Taxliil's story to recede and remain largely unknown. The narrative therefore moves further and further away from cohesion, not only in the case of Taxliil but also through Malik's repeated failed attempts to capture the region through reportage.

Farah repeatedly undermines the traditional function of the literary detective by thwarting his two protagonists in their quest to pin down Somalia in terms of a single narrative. In ‘The Fingerprint of the Foreigner: Colonizing the Criminal Body in 1890s Detective Fiction and Criminal Anthropology’ Ronald R. Thomas states: ‘The work the literary detective performs is an act of narrative usurpation in which he converts stories told by subjects about themselves into alibis proffered by suspects’ (Thomas 656). Although Thomas explicitly refers to Golden Age crime, his formulation holds true for the majority of detective stories in which the narrative tends towards revelation. Even lacking the traditional confrontation between ‘criminal’ and detective, the detective’s eventual summation becomes the official explanation for all that has gone before. The detective ultimately restores order through the ‘act of narrative usurpation’ (656): he exerts authority by superimposing a single version of events over the many versions of truth that his suspects proffer.

Farah’s repudiation of narrative authority carries meaning beyond the context of genre: it is also used to critique the behaviour of the international media. By making one of his literary detectives a journalist, Farah implicitly suggests ‘narrative usurpation’ as a facet of modern journalism. Malik’s job is to collect information (‘clues’), and to distil many stories into a cogent article. However, Malik struggles to filter the information that bombards him from every side. He also finds it difficult to reconcile what he has read about Somalia with what he experiences in the country itself. In *Getting Somalia Wrong?* Mary Harper discusses the country’s reputation abroad, which is one of undiluted horror:

Media reports talk of a country surrounded by ‘pirate-infested waters’ and of the capital, Mogadishu, as ‘the most dangerous place in the world’. The word ‘Mogadishu’ has entered some people’s vocabulary as a way of describing a place or situation that is truly terrible. Mogadishu was the title of a British play which

premiered in 2011; it was not about Somalia, but a troubled inner city secondary school in England. While covering the riots that hit some parts of England in August 2011, a BBC reporter described the Tottenham district of London as looking like Mogadishu.

(1)

Farah repeatedly addresses such treatments within the novel: early on, one of *Crossbones*' supporting characters, Jeebleh, remembers his foreign wife's 'refrain about Somalia, "That unfortunate country, cursed with those dreadful clanspeople, forever killing one another and everyone around them"' (11). Malik also frequently contrasts the intelligence he garners from local sources with what he has read about in *The Guardian*, or heard on Al-Jazeera and the BBC (366). On his arrival in Somalia, he finds the work of the reporters there inadequate, which he blames on local journalists being intrepid but undertrained. However, Malik and Ahl barely have more success in decoding their surroundings. In *Crossbones*, the truth proves to be complex, subjective and volatile, as is reflected in the nickname which Farah gives one of the Shabaab operatives: he is known as 'Al-Xaqq – "the Truth"', and is 'an explosives genius' (Farah 5).

In *Crossbones*, unofficial narratives are given the same weight (or perhaps weightlessness) as those that issue from recognized authorities. In 'The Short Story From Poe to Chesterton', Martin A. Kayman remarks on the historical relationship between crime fiction and journalism, stating: 'the insistence that the story is dealing with facts [...] constitutes in a narratological sense, the fundamental structure of the more classic puzzle-solving "detective" genre' (1394). Indeed, Farah's decision to provide an array of competing truths makes *Crossbones* appear structurally incomplete: because of the many loose ends, it reads like a cross-section of a far vaster network of stories, rather than a cohesive tale in itself. In the mystery genre, it is axiomatic that the reader must be exposed to each clue that informs the eventual

revelation (Van Dine 1). This is a narrative technique that has remained popular well beyond the Golden Age Mystery because it allows the reader to theorize a solution in tandem with the literary detective. However, in *Crossbones*, Farah sets up Taxliil's disappearance as a clue-puzzle ('a riddle' [41]) and then reneges on the literary 'contract' this implies. Despite Ahl's early promise to 'reduce the number of unknown factors' (41), the reader remains almost completely unaware of the machinations involved in Taxliil's recruitment and eventual escape from Shabaab. Even Malik and Ahl, the detective figures, appear to be hazy on the details. Ahl deems news about Taxliil a 'miracle' (280), and for all the reader is told, his abrupt return might well be a case of divine intervention.

In a 2012 interview with *The Guardian Online*, Farah asserts that Somalia is 'full of stories. We say, "one sick person; a hundred doctors" Somalia is a sick country and everyone has an opinion. Mine is one version; in a civil war, there are millions' (Jaggi 1). *Crossbones* implies this kind of polyphony by suggesting that a multitude of unheard conversations informs the brothers' investigation. In the opening pages, we are given Jeebleh's view of intelligence gathering in Somalia:

In the absence of verifiable reports in Somalia, given its statelessness, all one has to do is to circulate a *kutiri-kuteen* hearsay not traceable to any particular person, and you can be sure that once the word hits the street it will grow its own legs and will, in its wanderings, recruit more and more hearers, with each new hearer adding their bit to the roaming tale until it gains more speed and runs faster than truth. (14)

As David Samper writes in *Cannibalizing Kids: Rumor and Resistance in Latin America*, societies often have recourse to rumour in 'ambiguous situations' (5), i.e. when there is no longer a central authority to dispatch news, reliable or otherwise. Often the rumour is 'true' in spirit, but false in its literal expression. Ahl has great success in using rumour and hearsay to locate Taxliil: arriving in Puntland, he is

besieged by offers of help from locals who believe him to be a journalist. His main ally appears to be Fidno, a negotiator for a group of pirates. Fidno instigates a chain of whispers in order to locate Ahl's stepson, but in return he wants the opportunity to amplify his version of Somalia to the world. Malik's access to the world stage becomes valuable currency, as sources offer their help in exchange for interviews. That Malik's interview skills are so in demand emphasizes the idea of Somalia's many silenced narratives. Farah does not represent them all, but by leaving the main narrative of *Crossbones* gapingly unresolved, he implicitly locates it as only one of the many that are clamouring to be heard.

When Taxliil finally appears his version of events proves to be as unreliable as any rumour. He vacillates between stories, even though his re-entry into the USA depends on his producing a convincing counter-narrative to the allegation that he is a terrorist. His re-emergence is so abrupt that there can be no narrative catharsis. Even Ahl, finally reunited with him, finds his behaviour bizarre and anti-climactic: 'Taxliil has a way of throwing another wrench into the works every time Ahl manages to wrest one free. He finds all this exhausting, and he feels himself in danger of cracking up, never mind his stepson' (341). Indeed, Taxliil appears so conflicted that at the end of the novel Jeebleh, a Dante scholar, implies that the boy's period of 'purgatory' in Djibouti will be beneficial, allowing him to process and come to terms with what has happened to him (380). That this process can only take place in foreign custody, outside of the 'inferno' of Somalia, suggests that Taxliil's own narrative can only be compiled in a third space, removed from the pressures of each of the countries from which he has come.

Degeneration and the Detectives

Farah further undermines the idea of narrative authority by depicting the progressive fragmentation of the 'detectives' themselves. As the texts' investigator figures, Ahl and Malik are used to explore the disparity between the region's reputation and its realities. Their father is Somali, their mother Malaysian-Chinese, and they have grown up in Yemen. F. Fiona Moolla argues that Malik and Ahl's mixed origins are part of Farah's efforts to explore the condition of the 'self-made man' who is no longer bound by Somali clan affiliation. She writes:

Mixed origins and tenuous paternal authority constitute Malik and Ahl as ideal protagonists unchained from filiation, in terms of which non-modern identity was determined; and from those forms of affiliation, in terms of which modern national identity is determined. They are thus, using Joe [sic] Slaughter's terms [...] "tautologically and teleologically" free to construct their own identity. (179)

Moolla somewhat overstates the 'freedom' of these characters who, despite their mixed heritage, are always mindful that their journey to Somalia carries the weight of an ancestral return – on arrival, Malik says, 'It feels bizarre that I am back in a place to which I have never been before' (72). The brothers' multicultural background can therefore be more productively read as part of their role as microcosms of the national situation. The very word 'Somali', Farah demonstrates, is far more complex than it seems.

Farah describes Somalia as 'a region more varied in hyphenated identities than even the United States' (57). Indeed, as Mary Harper writes, 'it is one of the great Somali contradictions that, in diametric opposition to the dream of a "Greater Somalia", are clan and other divisions that have led to extreme fragmentation within the country itself' (34). In addition to this internal 'fragmentation', Farah depicts the

country as being influenced by innumerable political crosscurrents. During the ‘Scramble for Africa’, foreign powers were attracted by Somalia’s strategic position on the coast (Harper 46), and Farah makes it plain that the attraction endures to this day. Towards the end of his stay, Malik wearily asks a source whether it is true that ‘every single Somali politician has a different paymaster outside this country from whom he receives instructions, and whose interests he serves’ (244). Ahl and Malik are used to embody ‘modern national identity’ (Moolla 179) to the extent that their fates become inextricably bound to that of the country. However, rather than being free to ‘construct their own identity’ (Moolla 179), the brothers gradually lose all semblance of self-image and control, and collapse in imitation of the state. By the end of the novel, both are located in ‘limbo’ (Moolla 183): Ahl has begun a long detainment with Taxliil in Djibouti, the outcome of which is uncertain, and Malik lies in a Kenyan hospital, his life hanging in the balance.

The use of overt national allegory is evident in Farah’s body of work. In his 1970 novel *From A Crooked Rib*, it may be argued that Farah uses the protagonist, Ebla, to compare the plight of Somali women to the repeated colonization of the country itself. In *Crossbones*, the brothers’ characterization degenerates over the course of the narrative, as both characters undergo a gradual loss of identity. Ahl and Malik undergo a process of dissolution, paradoxically illustrating the futility of trying to ‘characterize’ a collapsed state in a hopelessly entangled globalized world. Towards the end of the novel, Ahl thinks to himself: “‘I am everything that is around me’”...Who was the poet, Wallace Stevens or Robert Frost? What is around him but the misery of a nation down in the dumps?’ (274).

The idea of ‘national character’ underpins many of the media stereotypes that abound in relation to Somalia. Lyndon C. Way refers to the tendency for

‘homogenization’ in press reporting on piracy (29), and this tendency to generalization and essentialism is present in reports on the country as a whole. In *The World’s Most Dangerous Place: Inside the Outlaw State of Somalia*, British journalist James Fergusson repeatedly uses explanations such as ‘classic Somali behaviour’ (301) to describe things he has observed in the region, or even in the Somali diaspora. Of a less than forthcoming source, he writes:

There was no sense of logic to the way he bent the truth. I was reminded of Richard Burton’s frustrated observation that ‘these people seem to lie involuntarily: the habit of untruth with them becomes a second nature. They deceive without object for deceit, and the only way of obtaining from them correct information is to inquire, receive the answer, and determine it to be diametrically opposed to fact’. (171)

Fergusson’s uncritical (and un-ironic) quoting of a colonial explorer is far from the only instance of Orientalism in his book. References to ‘Somali souls’ (222), ‘the nomad psyche’ (270) and even ‘bad Somali teeth’ (313) abound. Nuruddin Farah himself makes an appearance in the pages: Fergusson meets him for dinner in Minneapolis, during which Fergusson offers the opinion that ‘the Somalis’ capacity for violence [is] innate’ (366). Although Fergusson merely records Farah as being ‘impatient’ (366) with this suggestion, *Crossbones* refutes the idea assiduously and repeatedly.

The use of two protagonists rather than one further emphasizes the idea of ‘national character’ as a flawed and elusive concept. The fact that Ahl is stationed in Puntland, and Malik in Mogadishu, underlines the disunity of what is popularly perceived to be a single, homogenous country. Mary Harper states:

By viewing the whole country through the lens of the capital, Mogadishu, many descriptions of Somalia project an image of a nation in a permanent state of war with itself. However, large areas are quite peaceful, with their own administrations, legal systems and economies... [an]area of relative stability is the neighbouring

north-eastern region of Puntland, which has set up its own semi-autonomous administration, although it was for some time a major pirate stronghold. (9)

Puntland is depicted as a 'pirate stronghold' within the novel, but Farah disassembles these connotations by portraying a place of relative order and peace. It is perhaps for this reason that Ahl, lulled into a sense of security, sends Malik into a dangerous situation in Mogadishu, misreading (potentially fatally) the mood of the city. By placing the two regions in terms of a sometimes-contentious sibling relationship, Farah is further able to deconstruct the homogenous reputation that Somalia has garnered abroad.

In many ways, Malik's investigation proves more difficult than Ahl's. Ahl, after all, seeks only Taxliil, while Malik is attempting to construct a narrative of Somalia itself. Rather than imposing order on his violent surroundings, Malik finds his journalistic abilities compromised: despite many hours in his 'work room' (a phrase which, unlike 'office' or 'study', suggests writing as a process of conscious construction) he is unable to piece together a satisfying narrative. On a fragment of paper, he writes '*Somalis are a people in a fix; a nation with a trapped nerve; a country in a terrible mess. The entire nation is caught up in a spiralling degeneracy that a near stranger like me cannot make full sense of. It is all a fib, that is what it is, just a fib*' (297).

On first arrival, Malik, a seasoned reporter 'appears certain he needs no telling what he must or mustn't do' (*Crossbones* 14). However, this confidence and composure begins to unravel as soon as he arrives in his lodgings in Mogadishu. Immediately, he is beset by nightmares and mysterious itching. This is far from his first foray into a danger zone: he has worked in 'the Congo, Afghanistan [and] Iraq,'

among other 'hot spots' (14), but something about Somalia renders him undone:

Jeebleh feels the sense of stress spreading, with Malik biting his lower lip, too angry to speak. Jeebleh thinks how stresses produce inexplicable results and he wonders how the stresses they are all under, the strain that is bound to invade them – Malik, Ahl and himself – will affect them. What will they be like when they crack up? What will Malik be like when the nervous tension makes him go to pieces? He watches with worry as Malik steps away and stands before the mirror on the wall in the living room and takes a good look at his reflection. Jeebleh senses that even to himself Malik must look older in a matter of moments, rugged and more wrinkled, his face careworn. (32)

The fear of 'cracking up' or 'going to pieces' is not depicted as a general reaction to the stresses of a war-zone, but is particular to the brothers' return to Somalia. At this point, nothing more dramatic has happened than the confiscation of Malik's computer by the UIC, a minor inconvenience at best, but something corrosive is plainly at work. In the USA, Ahl works as the director of an institute 'tasked with researching matters Somali' (33), but he too finds himself unprepared for what he finds in the country itself. As Farah says in his interview with Maya Jaggi, 'how can you reconstruct a country that's self-destructing continuously?' (1).

The more their assumptions about Somalia are challenged, the more the 'detectives' personal identities erode. Malik, ordinarily a cautious man, finds himself driving to town in order to taunt a dangerous militant known as 'BigBeard'. Ahl, confronting the 'television technician' who repeatedly searches his hotel room, feels that 'the din is making him lose touch with his senses, or worse, his reason' (98). Malik's process of disintegration is completed when Ahl sends him to interview Fidno, and Malik is grievously wounded by a roadside bomb, or 'fragmentation grenade' (333).

Ahl's decline also manifests physically: however, it is less dramatic than his brother's, which is, perhaps, a reflection of the situation in Puntland versus the

explosive violence of Mogadishu. Over the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that he is in the grip of a degenerative disease, and is gradually losing control of his ‘out of kilter’ (34) body. It is implied that his illness began to manifest at the time of Taxliil’s disappearance:

Ahlulkhair, known to family and close friends as Ahl, older brother to Malik and the director of a Minneapolis-based centre tasked with researching matters Somali, calls in sick, the first time he has done so in his long career as an educator. The truth is, the growing trend among Somali youths to join the self-declared religionist radical fringe, Shabaab, has thrown him off balance. (33)

Malik and Ahl’s physical and emotional dissolution represents their inability to exert mastery over their surroundings: there can be no narrative closure because, in Somalia, there are no easy solutions to be had. In Thomas’s formulation, the strength of the literary detective lies in his ability to impose names on others, and to articulate his version of the truth (Thomas 656). By the end of the novel, Malik, although alive, ‘is still in no state to speak, much less comprehend what is going on’ (379). Ahl attempts to impose a false name on his stepson in order to take him back home, but Taxliil refuses even to open his new passport, and gives them away in Djibouti. That neither of the brothers appears in the final scenes underlines the extravagant failure of authority and articulation.

Tyranny and Narrative

Farah further separates the idea of narrative usurpation and genuine justice by portraying the text’s ‘detectives’ as being forced to operate outside the law. By the time Taxliil arrives in Somalia the legal system has already failed him. Both the FBI and the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) have their own interest in his case, but their motives are separate from Ahl and Malik’s moral imperative to rescue him. Thomas

writes, ‘In detective fiction [...] the property rights to someone’s story are transferred to the official or unofficial agent of society who is empowered to see and identify the body of the criminal, speaking for the whole society in assigning a story to that figure’ (660). In *Crossbones*, instead of the narrative tending towards this kind of unmasking and the apportioning of blame, it is implied that this ‘transfer’ has already occurred, with devastating consequences. Taxliil has been branded an outlaw, just as Somalia has acquired the reputation of being an outlaw state.

The fact that the novel is set post-revelation shows the manifold complications and inaccuracies that arise when a single version of events takes precedence over nuance. Instead of ‘unmasking’ him as a criminal, Malik and Ahl intend to liberate Taxliil from the identity in which he has been imprisoned. Ironically, this identity was originally suggested to Taxliil during an FBI interrogation. We learn that Taxliil was made a suspect after his Kurdish-American schoolmate returned to Iraq as a suicide bomber. Farah describes the family’s interrogation, the morning after the news of Samir’s death breaks:

Taxliil was made to endure longer hours of interrogation with repeated threats [...]The officer asked [Taxliil’s mother] Y usur if Ahl was likely to recruit Taxliil as a suicide bomber. They suggested she get it off her chest; they were friends, and they meant her well. Who were *his* friends? Whom did he contact, and how did he do it?... Eventually, all three were released by the FBI. Even so, they were told to inform the agency of any suspicious activities. If they failed to do so, they would be reclassified. (41)

The language Farah uses here resonates with a greater theme in the novel as a whole: the threat of ‘reclassification’ is not just intelligence jargon for being placed under suspicion, but also represents a form of narrative confiscation. When the FBI casts Taxliil as a terrorist, they inadvertently move him to solidarity with Al-Shabaab. Their recasting also works retrospectively, changing his image of Samir. Taxliil and Samir are described by Farah as best friends, in the most wholesome of terms: ‘They

played sports and computer games together; swapped clothes; swam and took long walks on weekends. They spurred each other to achieve their ambitions. Neither admitted to knowing what the word *impossible* meant. Doing well wasn't good enough; they did better than anyone else' (40). Taxliil's interrogation puts an end to this youthful iteration of the American Dream, and recasts Samir as a brother in arms. Embracing Islam becomes a way for Taxliil to reject the USA and claim fellowship with the friend he has lost.

On one level, Farah's emphasis on the FBI's role in Taxliil's radicalization can be read as a reflection of the relationship between Somalia and the USA. Mary Harper argues that the USA's initial characterization of Somalia as an international terrorist threat 'inadvertently advertised the country as a promising new battle front for jihadists from across the world' (4), thereby nurturing the region's capacity for recruitment. On another level, the suggestion of self-fulfilling prophecy speaks to the unique experience of those recruited from the diaspora, for whom joining Shabaab is an attempt at self-actualization as much as a political statement. Taxliil pursues the life of a jihadi as an antidote to his uncomfortably hyphenated, Somali-American identity in the hopes of distilling his sense of self. However, once he submits to the will of Shabaab he once again finds himself in over his head. His minders conflate 'Somali-ness' with blind obedience to radical Islam, and his new identity thus becomes a double-bind.

The novel engages extensively with the idea of radical Islam as a strategic superimposition rather than an entrenched part of national identity in Somalia. At the period at which the protagonists arrive in the country, the Union of Islamic Courts is still in a position of power, and enforces its own form of social control, despite the collapsed state. Mary Harper writes

The most significant contribution of the courts was the way in which they ensured basic law and order, including the enforcement of contracts, which made it possible to have commercial and civil life. One of the functions of Islam is that it provides an off-the-shelf, culturally validated code for many aspects of social, economic and political life, which allows for a form of public order and administration in the absence of a state. (82)

The expression ‘off-the-shelf’ suggests a pre-existing code for ethical conduct, one that is seamlessly understandable and accepted in the local culture. In *Crossbones*, Farah disputes this idea. Within the novel it is suggested that the UIC is manipulating ideas of Somali culture in order to bolster its own interpretation of Islam, and thereby lend authority to its own laws. Much of the novel is preoccupied with the idea of staged authenticity in the ranks of the UIC and Al-Shabaab. One of Taxliil’s minders (aptly nicknamed History), is used to reflect this:

“Our instructor had a northern accent, and yelled at us a lot, and wouldn’t tolerate any back talk; he was quite a taskmaster.” Then half-laughing and half-serious he tries to imitate his instructor. “We are not part of history. We are *making* history, *living* history! We are not liberators, fellows,” he would chant. “We are martyrs, through the expression of our fury, through our ambition in action, to lead this nation away from self-ruin.” Then he’d resume his chorus. “We are not part of history. We are *making* history, *living* history!” (346)

Taxliil’s instructor superbly embodies the idea of tyrannical narrative: in the world of the novel, nothing is more dangerous than a version of history that will not tolerate any ‘back talk’ (346).

The form of Islam the Union of Islamic Courts and Al-Shabaab extol is shown by Farah as, at best, an imported tradition, and at worst an invented one. Invented tradition, as described by Eric Hobsbawn, is defined as

a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (1)

In *Crossbones*, Nuruddin Farah emphasizes the ritual and symbolism with which

Somalia's 'Islamic revival' is invested, but implies that the 'suitable historic past' that is being evoked has been strategically curated as a way of consolidating power. By terming their laws 'the Islamic code of conduct' (*Crossbones* 347), the UIC ensures that any dissent from its laws is de facto blasphemy, and that anyone voicing dissent may be termed 'a traitor to Islam' (*Crossbones* 323). Bile, another character who, like Jeebleh, has experienced Somalia's former political incarnations, says: 'I am displeased [...] when someone spouts the obsequious fallacy that all Somalis are Muslim, especially if this is meant to offer legitimacy to a clique of religionists determined to impose their will on this nation' (120). The idea of Somalia as, first and foremost, 'a Muslim country' is used to justify all manner of decisions, including the instigation of war with Ethiopia. The UIC announces that they 'will defeat the invaders the moment they set foot on our soil, a Muslim soil' (*Crossbones* 154), claiming an identity which situates the conflict as a form of holy war, and thereby enforcing its support.

The disparity between old and new is most evident in the subplot featuring Young Thing, an adolescent recruit of Shabaab who is on a mission to 'consecrate' a safe house for his handlers. His story demonstrates both the brutality of the organization and the uneasy place its practices occupy in relation to Somali tradition. Young Thing goes to the wrong residence and encounters an elderly man named Dhoorre, whom he will eventually be forced to shoot to death. When his handlers catch up with him, Young Thing allows Dhoorre to hide from them in the bathroom. Farah contrasts Dhoorre's devotion to Islam with that of the group that has stormed his home by showing the old man in a private moment of devotion:

Dhoorre, who is in the bathroom with the door bolted, eavesdrops on their conversation. When he hears all three men leave the house, he takes a hurried birdbath by letting the water drip into his cupped hands in the manner of

somebody performing an ablution in an arid zone where water is scarce. In Islam, it is incumbent on a Muslim performing ablution to use even the sand if there is no water. Allah will look favourably on one if one is ‘clean’ at the moment of death. He looks at his face in the mirror and confirms that he badly needs a shave – it’s a pity that the blade is dull and he has no replacements.

Just then there is a sudden escalation of noise as TruthTeller returns, grumbling about the weight of the machine-gun and bazooka parts. (62)

Here, Farah emphasizes the jarring incongruity between Dhoorre’s enactment of a solitary, desert-culture practice, and the modern weaponry wielded by the Islamic militants just outside the door. The scene marks Dhoorre out as a devout Muslim to whom Shabaab’s actions appear alien. When the old man entreats them not to punish Young Thing for his mistake, Dhoorre says ‘Islam is peace, the promise of justice’ (66), but the militants’ professed loyalty to a curated past does not extend to the living history in front of them.

Farah suggests that while militant Islam does continue a tradition in the region, it is in fact a political tradition rather than a religious one. In *Crossbones*, Islam is depicted as the latest face of terror, rather than its core cause in the region. Farah achieves this through frequent references to Somalia’s earlier political incarnations, intimating that there is little to choose between the different forms of dictatorship that Somalia has faced. In the following excerpt, claims of narrative authority are used as a connecting thread between General Barre’s regime and the imposition of Islamic law:

Jeebleh thinks that there is undeniable similarity between Caloosha [his childhood tormentor] and Big Beard’s methods, which both claim are in service to higher causes; the late Caloosha asserted his socialist ideals in the same way that BigBeard takes the sanctity of Islam as his mantra, asserts it is the beacon lighting his way to divine authority. (108)

Caloosha, who appears in *Links*, is defined by his incapacity for genuine loyalty. He is suspected of killing his stepfather, is instrumental in having his half-brother imprisoned by General Barre, and is guilty of the rape and abduction of the

under-aged girl he takes as a 'wife'. Caloosha adopts different belief systems with opportunistic haste, adapting to the clan-based warlord system immediately after General's Barre's fall, despite years of lip service to Barre's dogma of Scientific Socialism. Jeebleh says, disgustedly: 'Your loyalties are peripatetic' (*Links* 103). Similarly, when the Union of Islamic Courts is dismantled, the tyrannical BigBeard immediately shaves off his defining facial hair, and begins to wear a suit (247). Despite his changed appearance, his demeanour is exactly the same, and he is unabashed by his seamless change in allegiance.

By painting both 'bullies' with same brush, Farah suggests that their core motivations are the same, despite the apparent difference in the dogmas they expound. Although he represents the relatively new Union of Islamic Courts, BigBeard is depicted with contemptuous familiarity. Like Caloosha (who is described in monstrous terms, even as a child), BigBeard is portrayed as an abhorrent human being, but this has to do with his hunger for power, his repression of women and children and his fondness for violence. The Past Imperfect trilogy is densely populated with child soldiers: it is only their uniforms that change with each new revolution of 'the carousel of politics' (243).

By identifying Islamic fundamentalism with all forms of tyranny, Farah at once denounces the sincerity of its supporters, and undermines essentialist interpretations of its emergence. In *Crossbones*, Farah writes: 'At present, entire regions are considered "terrorist territories"; entire nations are said to 'host terrorism'. Western commentators clued in on recent events add Islam to the equation, work it into the quandary, as if the idea to terrorize is in the Muslim's genetic make-up, forgetting that more Muslims than non-Muslims die at the hands of terrorism' (55). The 'commentators' Farah describes make Islam inseparable from terror, and

dehistoricize the violence in the Horn of Africa by attributing it solely to ‘Islamic Fundamentalism’. While such narratives rely on an essentialist subtext, Farah interprets the use of Islamic identity as a force for tyranny as a piece of sophisticated political opportunism – less a sincere affiliation than a convenient and frighteningly effective rallying cry.

While Farah is convincing in his location of Islam in Somali history, he does not adequately account for it as a revived, globalized form of militarism. However, by separating symbols of broad, global affiliation from local political motivations, he succeeds in complicating the discourse surrounding Somali Islam, if only by showing its apparent simplicity as a carefully curated phenomenon. Power is cemented by the stifling of polyphony and difference, and the cultivation of affiliation relies on the propagation of a single party line. This narrative suppression surfaces most clearly in the scene in which Malik and his fellow journalists are the victim of a targeted roadside bombing: ‘Everyone, including the driver, also now dead, put in his word until the fragmentation grenade insinuated itself into the clamour and terminated their lively debate in instant darkness’ (333). The darkness referenced here is both a literal comment on Malik’s sudden unconsciousness, and an illustration of the explosion as a deliberate attempt to snuff out the light of diversity and dissent.

Piracy

As the title indicates, one of the novel’s chief preoccupations is with media depictions of piracy in Somali waters. Farah depicts Somali ‘piracy’ as blurring the line between legality and criminality, terrorism and resistance, but emphasizes that the very word ‘pirate’ carries an insoluble stigma. The word ‘crossbones’, as F. Fiona Moolla notes,

references the ‘jolly roger’ flag that was once flown by pirate vessels. Peter T. Leeson writes,

The specific images on Jolly Rogers varied. But the purpose was the same in each case. As one witness described it in the pages of the *White-hall Evening Post*, the black Flag with a Death’s Head in it . . . is their Signal to intimate, that they will neither give nor take Quarter (*White-hall Evening Post* October 18-October 21, 1718). By communicating ‘pirate’ to merchantmen, the Jolly Roger helped merchantmen understand they were under attack by piratical belligerents who could and would devastate them if they resisted, as opposed to ‘legitimate’ belligerents who were likely to be more restrained in how they responded to resistance. (11)

Just as ancient pirates displayed the flags to signify their own ‘outlaw’ status, so the word ‘piracy’ has been applied to the Somali phenomenon to imply its unequivocal criminality. The word also conjures up the idea of a fight between enlightened modernity and benighted savagery, while the repeated emphasis on the phenomenon as an exclusively Somali one both imposes distance and absolves other parties involved in the trade. Farah’s novel deconstructs this image of piracy and demonstrates the perils of representing a complex political phenomenon with a single, ominous signifier.

In his paper, ‘Orientalism in Online News: BBC Stories of Somali Piracy’, Lyndon C.S. Way refers to ‘homogenization’ as a core component of media depictions of piracy, stating:

It seems questionable to apply such personal and social traits [drug use, alcoholism, age and motivation] to all those involved in Somali piracy considering the various back grounds, tribal affiliations and expertise involved in pirate operations. Such homogenization, however, does draw upon discourses of Orientalism that represent the ‘other’ negatively, justifying the need for military intervention. (Way 29)

Rather than reversing media binaries to form a solid counter-narrative, Farah critiques piracy in more ambivalent terms. By insisting on the diversity that media reports elide, he avoids both condemnation and romanticization of the phenomenon, placing

the pirates in an ambiguous third space between ‘villainy’ and ‘victimhood’. As Nigel Cawthorne states, Somali ‘pirates’ themselves have always framed their behaviour as a legitimate defensive manoeuvre, if not an act of outright heroism. In discussing the hijacking of the Ukrainian *MV Faina* in 2008, Cawthorne writes: ‘the Somali hijackers did not consider themselves pirates or sea bandits. “We consider sea bandits those who illegally fish in our seas and dump waste in our seas and carry weapons in our seas,” he said. ‘We are simply patrolling our seas. Think of us like a coastguard’ (564). Fidno, the pirate negotiator in the novel, describes the pirates as ‘conscientious avengers fighting to save our waters from total plunder’ (211).

Farah does not entirely embrace the idea of piracy as an idealistic act of defence. Throughout the novel, multiple characters endorse the idea of piracy as a direct response to Western theft of African resources. The presence of the foreign vessels is interpreted as a kind of neo-colonialism, and piracy as an act of resistance. However, although Farah uses this explanation to contextualize the phenomenon in historical terms, he makes little attempt to argue for the morality of the enterprise. Rather, he emphasizes the impossibility of hewing to legality in the context of a collapsed state, and emphasizes that accusations of ‘piracy’ are less about intrinsically criminal behaviour than they are about the lack of a recognized flag under which to patrol the seas. His interrogation of the term ‘pirate’ emphasizes the complex relationship between legality, morality and legitimacy in Somalia.

The first time Ahl hears the term ‘privateer’, he is ‘uncertain’ of how well it captures the Somali phenomenon:

He understands privateers as vessels armed and licensed to attack the ships of enemy nations and confiscate their property. Historically, many European sovereigns issued such licences and they left it up to the licensed captains to determine the nature of the punishment to be meted out to the vessels they

apprehended. A percentage of their catch went to the captain and crew, and the remainder to the licence-issuing sovereign. (211)

Here, Ahl does not suggest behaviour as a means of assessing whether or not something qualifies as piracy. Rather, the distinction is founded entirely on whether or not the vessels have state affiliation: legitimacy is conferred by ‘the licence-issuing sovereign’, rather than by their conduct at sea. As denizens of a collapsed state, it becomes impossible to have this kind of legitimacy conferred. By default, Somali pirates are ‘outlaws’, even though they ‘operate for the most part in their own seas’ (214).

Farah also avoids making a unilateral moral judgement by stressing that piracy has evolved into a sophisticated and stratified system, with motives that vary widely from tier to tier. Furthermore, he identifies exploitation and inequality without the pirate hierarchy itself. This is in contrast to certain media depictions, which sweepingly describe Somali pirates as being ‘very, very rich’ (Gettleman 1). In a 2008 article for *The New York Times*, Jeffrey Gettleman paints a lavish picture of piracy and its rewards:

In Somalia, it seems, crime does pay. Actually, it is one of the few industries that does.

‘All you need is three guys and a little boat, and the next day you’re millionaires,’ said Abdullahi Omar Qawden, a former captain in Somalia’s long-defunct navy.

People in Garoowe, a town south of Boosaaso, describe a certain high-rolling pirate swagger. Flush with cash, the pirates drive the biggest cars, run many of the town’s businesses — like hotels — and throw the best parties, residents say. Fatuma Abdul Kadir said she went to a pirate wedding in July that lasted two days, with nonstop dancing and goat meat, and a band flown in from neighboring Djibouti.

“It was wonderful,” said Ms. Fatuma, 21. “I’m now dating a pirate.” (1)

In *Crossbones*, Farah suggests that while some may be ‘making a killing’, others in the trade are far from being millionaires. Malik, learning that Bile’s nephew is a pirate but still struggles financially, says: ‘You mean there are no lavish weddings being

staged, no formidable mansions being built in Eyle, Hobbyo and Xarardheere? The entire region is not flush with funds and full of luxury goods?' (73). Furthermore, Farah quashes the broad, glamorous notion of 'high-rolling pirate swagger' (Gettleman1) by presenting a starkly different visual image of those involved in the lower tiers of the trade. Our first glimpse of active piracy comes from a set of photographs. Farah describes

Young men – in boats, in ships, manning guns, holding men, faces covered with balaclavas. Young men eating, sleeping, fooling around with one another, speaking on their mobile phones, some of them dressed in the jackets of which they dispossessed their hostages, of whom there are also photos... The haul is big. But the young men wielding the AK-47s, the collapsible machine guns, are skinny, hungry-looking, many appearing as ill prepared for what life may throw at them as Paris Hilton might be going into the ring with Mike Tyson. Are these youths pirates? And if they are not pirates, then who are they, what are they? (102)

Fidno, the pirates' negotiator, could not be more different from the young men pictured here. While he laments the loss of ransom money to foreign parties, he is very evidently motivated by profit rather than survival. Fidno has a touch of the 'high-rolling pirate swagger' suggested by *New York Times* the article: Malik observes that 'he looks like a character out of a crime novel: deviously handsome in a Humphrey Bogart way, with a smile so captivating you have to fight to get your heart back; eyes alive with promise – a promise that will leave you cursing the day you met him' (361). However, his motives cannot be compared to the 'skinny, hungry' youths who undertake the most dangerous part of the work. Fidno has previously worked as a medical doctor in Berlin and Abu Dhabi, but in both cases was reported for malpractice. Following this, a wealthy uncle set him up as a financier in Mogadishu.

Ultimately, Taxliil is shown to have more in common with the pirate youths than Fidno does. At the end of the novel, he describes his time with Shabaab in utterly

childish terms, saying: 'Life was harsh. No TV. No fun. No games' (348). In these final scenes, he is very much an overwhelmed child, rather than the 'terrorist' he has been labelled. That his unpreparedness mirrors that which Ahl perceives in the photograph of the pirates suggests that they, too, may simply be impressionable youngsters in thrall to exploitative recruiters.

Fidno is not cast as an idealist, then, but as someone involved in a sophisticated business enterprise. Although Farah refers ironically to the clichéd 'crossbones' in his title, the text in itself goes to great lengths to undermine the linguistic time-warp in which Somali piracy has been placed. In the novel, Fidno states,

As Somali 'privateers' – we are not pirates, we insist – we avail ourselves of a network of informers of different nationalities and disparate professions: ship brokers, security officials with access to information about ship movements, bankers, accountants; a run of the entire gamut to do with shipping. We communicate with London on secure satellite phones; receive info from someone at the Suez Canal with the schedules of the ships, the nature of the cargo, the name of the owners and their final destination. Dubai. London. Sana'a. The world is at our fingertips. (364)

Here, piracy is depicted as a merely another branch of global, postcolonial capitalism. Farah once again emphasizes Somalia's interconnectedness by referencing London, Dubai and Sana'a. In doing so, he implicitly complicates the notion of 'Somali piracy' by referencing the international network behind it. It is implied that those who make the most money in the trade are the foreign backers rather than local 'financiers', but the entire hierarchy is riddled with inequality and preys on the desperation of Somalia's poorest citizens. Negotiators such as Fidno have access to sophisticated technology, even if their underlings are so poor that 'jackets' and 'mobile phones' (102) seem like worthwhile plunder.

The 'high-seas' promise of the title is ultimately left unfulfilled. The young

men in the photographs never appear in person, and we are never precisely assured of ‘who’ and ‘what’ they are. In narrative terms, the effect is anticlimactic, but the pirates’ very invisibility effectively demolishes the stereotypes by which they are known. By declining to portray the pirates, Farah suggests them as figments made up of the projections and fears of others. It is implied that no text can adequately encompass the broad group of people involved in piracy as long as they are categorized by affiliation alone. This erosion of caricature contributes to an open-ended, ‘unfinished’ narrative, which privileges nuance over cohesion. In its treatment of piracy, *Crossbones* eschews broad strokes, while emphasizing that humanity is in the details.

Conclusion

At 385 pages, *Crossbones* is a sprawling work, which seeks to explore many aspects of life in post-collapse Somalia and the complications implicit in returning to one’s ancestral home. In casting such a wide net Farah sacrifices many elements of the traditionally structured novel, and of the crime novel in particular. The pace of the narrative is choppy and unpredictable, and apparently significant happenings are frequently permitted to sink out of sight. However, the very lack of narrative cohesion provides a strong sense of conditions on the ground, rather than echoing the superimposed, ‘view from above’ for which Farah criticizes the international media. Its form encompasses unfathomable tragedy, but leaves room for hope as well: though its characters are left in a state of purgatory, the novel’s very lack of resolution also allows for the possibility that all is not yet lost. This is reflected in the final lines, which Cambara speaks in a phone call from the Kenyan hospital: ““Goodbye for

now,” she says. “Malik is waking” (382).

CONCLUSION

If traditional crime fiction is ‘a literature of containment’ (Plain 3), ‘restoration’ (James 1) and ‘triumph’ (Auden 1), then the subgenre explored in this thesis can best be described as a literature of elusiveness, ambivalence and loss. Each of the detective figures sets out in the pursuit of wholeness, aiming to piece together the puzzle of the investigation and the riddles of their own identity. As they journey ‘home’, the detectives must contend with the lack of a strong justice system, the dearth of information in the context of social breakdown, the elusiveness of belonging and the limits of various forms of testimony.

Genre, Expectation and Structural Breakdown

While the novels have much in common, they differ in illuminating ways. Each of the five books discussed in this thesis demonstrates the inadequacy of crime fiction conventions in the context of the worlds they project, but employs markedly different techniques. Referring to Merrivale and Sweeney’s definition of the metaphysical detective story, Joe Scaggs writes, ‘the intention of the metaphysical detective story is to overload generic expectations in order to undermine them’ (152). ‘Overload’ is an apt description of Kazuo Ishiguro’s narrative technique in *When We Were Orphans*. The unreliable narrator is unable to discard his generic delusions until the full force of the Sino-Japanese war overpowers them. In the Shanghai of the novel, there are too many villains, too many victims, and too many global links – in fact, too much world altogether – to fit within the narrow bounds of Banks’s generic dream. Banks’s increasingly bizarre attempts to frame the outbreak of the Second World War in generic terms illustrate the narrowness and frailty of Golden Age conventions.

Nuruddin Farah, too, overloads his text with a multitude of partial villains and victims in order to show the futility of dialectical notions of guilt and innocence in post-collapse Somalia. However, unlike Ishiguro, Farah also deliberately *underwrites* parts of his novel. By keeping both his detectives and his readers in the dark about much that has occurred, Farah suggests that contemporary Somalia defies comprehensive or linear explanation. In withholding so many answers, the text performs a kind of emotional mimesis. The detective figure Malik, reflects on another character's death by saying, 'I often think how, in fiction, death serves a purpose. I wish I knew the objective of such a death' (285). The text's refusal to assign meaning or purpose to much of what it depicts provides the reader with a faint echo of this frustration. Thus, part of Farah's world-making project is enacted through the withholding of information, leaving the reader in a state of bafflement that mirrors the anxiety and disorientation of life in an active war zone. There is no reassuring commentary from 'above' about what has befallen the characters. Rather, the narrative is imperfectly patched together from speculation and rumours, a number of which are never confirmed, or even referred to a second time.

In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, Francisco Goldman produces a comparable mimetic effect, but unlike Farah he achieves this through a process of narrative multiplication rather than dissolution. In *Crossbones*, many things go unexplained, while in *The Long Night of White Chickens* every event has several explanations, each as likely and as un-provable as the last. The style of Goldman's prose imitates this process of multiplication and uncertainty. Unlike *Crossbones*, in which gaping gaps are left in Taxliil's (subjective and suspect) account of his time with Al-Shabaab, Flor's murder remains unsolved because the detectives uncover too many motives, too many murderers and too many secret sides to Flor's life. Again,

‘overload’ describes the technique, but the outcome is quite different to that which we see in *When We Were Orphans*.

In Ishiguro’s novel, the central mystery does have a ‘solution’, albeit one that is too ambivalent and complex to be revealed until the text’s generic premise has entirely broken down. In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, there is no ‘sense of an ending’ (Kermode 1), but merely of an investigation deferred. The labyrinthine form of the narrative is such that Roger’s homecoming could theoretically be repeated ad infinitum without ever leading to a breakthrough. This suggests that Guatemala’s repressive regime renders the ‘riddle of social injustice’ (95) impenetrable, and the multiplication of suspects as the only possibility in a country with ‘so much and so many kinds of murder’ (95).

In *Anil’s Ghost* the narrative is redirected rather than overloaded. As Sailor’s identity is gradually filled in, Anil recognizes the inadequacy of forensic terminology in describing what has been lost. However, the novel is comparable with *When We Were Orphans* in the sense that its ostensible subject shifts towards the end of the novel. Ishiguro’s novel purports to be about a very specific set of disappearances, but is gradually revealed as a story about colonialism, the opium trade and the causes of World War II. *Anil’s Ghost* is initially framed in terms of the search for Sailor’s identity, but towards the end of the novel the focus (and the meaning of the title) suddenly alters to reflect Sarath. The revelation of Sailor’s name becomes hollow and with Gamini’s eulogy over his brother’s body we are given the type of history that forensic information is incapable of rendering. Ondaatje’s novel can also be compared to *Crossbones* in the sense that it produces certain silences, but implies that these stories are being enacted outside the scope of the novel. Through Sarath’s murder, we realize that Ruwan Kumara’s life and death must have been every bit as

deeply felt by his community, but we are not given any picture of this because we share the limited view of the investigative team. Like the human rights organization that photographs victims of political murders, displaying their injuries but ‘covering the faces’ (209), Anil’s reconstruction of Sailor renders him somewhat anonymous. Thus Ondaatje demonstrates the incompleteness of Anil’s conception of truth, and the implausibility of the idea that traditional investigation can provide a comprehensive account of the war. The violence enacted in the civil war is both too diffuse (as the use of vignettes of carnage shows) and too deeply, individually traumatic to be alleviated by the blithe maxims (‘the truth shall set you free’) that Anil brings to the scene of the crime.

Gillian Slovo’s novel also emphasizes the elusiveness of truth, and the questionable morality of certain types of revelation: indeed, the slogan of the TRC is ‘the truth will set you free’, an affirmation that is questioned by many of the characters. As in *Anil’s Ghost*, the social context means that revelation and justice are not synonymous. In *Red Dust*, there is a further break between individual retributive justice and mass restorative justice, meaning that the pursuit of one may impede the progress of the other. The complexity of these distinctions means that no firm resolution is possible. Even if individual characters appear to get their just deserts, there remains the chance that this will sow national discord down the line. The conclusion can therefore only be an ambivalent and open-ended one, as the characters wonder whether or not their pain has been in the cause of the greater good.

In all five cases, the form of the novel widens rather than narrowing, meaning that the significance of the individual recedes, a technique that underlines the complexity of systemic violence. Because revelation is not synonymous with justice

in these contexts, the novels' conclusions tend to omit either or both, meaning that each narrative evokes disquiet rather than reassurance.

This disquiet often translates to a difficult reading experience. Jonathan Coe's generally positive review of Goldman's novel nonetheless notes that the book is occasionally 'indecipherable', and 'awkward' (1). Hirsh Sawhney, reviewing *Crossbones* for *The New York Times* writes, 'the real problems in this novel are inconsistent plotting, repetitiveness and a verbose third-person narration that results in muddled psychological portraits' (1). Michiko Kakutani describes *When We Were Orphans* as 'a messy hybrid of a book' (1), one that is 'ragged, if occasionally brilliant'. These novels lack clean lines: they are 'messy', 'muddled', 'ragged' and 'awkward' to varying degrees.

However, as in the original crime genre, there is a strong overlap between reading experience and ideology. In *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Stephen Knight writes,

The content of the text, its omissions and selections, is important. Plot itself is a way of ordering events; its outcome distributes triumph and defeat, praise and blame to the characters in a way that accords with the audience's belief in dominant cultural values— which themselves interlock with the social structure. So texts create and justify what has come to be called hegemony, the inseparable bundle of political, cultural and economic sanctions which maintain a particular social system to the advantage of certain members of the whole community. (4)

In offering discord rather than accord, these novels offer a challenge to established systems of meaning. By declining to distribute 'triumph and defeat, praise and blame' in a way that rewards dominant ways of thinking, they implicitly offer resistance through their supposedly unrewarding techniques. The banishing of wish-fulfillment or comfort from the reading experience also represents an insistence on a more complex and disturbing worldview. The most 'muddled' of the texts explored in this

thesis are also those that successfully project a world of global entanglements and anxieties, framing their postcolonial settings in greater spatial and historical context.

Interestingly, the novels with comparatively smooth transitions and endings (*Anil's Ghost* and *Red Dust*) are those which avoid highlighting certain global connections, suggesting that palatability and worldliness may sometimes be mutually exclusive. As I elaborate in the following section, Ondaatje and Slovo project worlds in which crime cannot be contained, but these worlds are postcolonial countries that appear as anarchic pockets in an otherwise stable world. Thus, like the conventional crime novel they '[make] safe' (Plain 3), if only by curtailing their scope. Here, we see the dangers and seductions of the narrowing of form – the novels that focus on the postcolony without casting a critical eye on the role of the West are the ones that are the most compact and accessible, while the others become unwieldy in their very complexity and detail.

Intimacy, Civil War and World-making

As this thesis demonstrates, the novels begin with an apparent line of inquiry but soon segue into narratives that are more preoccupied with world-making than they are with building a particular case. Often, the narrative scope broadens rather than narrowing, showing the limitations of perceiving crime as an anomaly in a context where violence is ubiquitous. By suggesting the central crime as one of many, the writers effectively highlight the relentless emotional cost of life in an extremely violent society. In *On the Postcolony*, Achille Mbembe writes,

The colony is primarily a place where an experience of violence is lived, where violence is built into structures and institutions [...] The violence insinuates itself into the economy, domestic life, language, consciousness. It

does more than penetrate every space: it pursues the colonized even in sleep and dream. It produces a culture; it is a cultural praxis. (174)

The milieus depicted in the novels are deeply affected by this lingering ‘cultural praxis’. By departing from the idea of crime as an aberration, each text suggests its setting as a place where violence is deeply and, perhaps even indelibly, inscribed. Although each author differs in the extent to which they signpost the colonial past, the legacy of colonialism manifests in all of the novels, in the form of racial discrimination, sectarian violence, economic exploitation and indigenous disenfranchisement. Often, these injustices are enshrined in law, or tacitly condoned by the ruling administration, making the notion of crime ever more difficult to define.

In *Crossbones*, Farah suggests violence as an endemic part of life by depicting a slew of deaths that offer no apparent contribution to the plot. Farah’s descriptors mean that these deaths are not sensationalized, and their very un-remarkability suggests Somalia as a place where ‘life [...] is built on quicksand. Alive one minute, dead the next, and buried in the blink of an eye, no post-mortem, not even an entry in a ledger’ (247). Other writers strike a different balance between the thrilling and mundane, but in each case it is made evident that the central ‘crime’ is part of a systemic pattern rather than a rogue transgression from the norm.

The novels further work to shatter villain/victim oppositions by emphasizing the impossibility of neutral observation or arbitration. Auden writes, ‘The interest in the study of a murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one. The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt’ (1). In these novels, the dialectic is broken down to reflect the dynamics of civil discord and transitional unrest. This means that the ‘innocent many’ cease to exist, but

also that the detective himself is unable to observe the guilty from a neutral perspective.

By the end of the novel, many of the returnees carry a sense of culpability. Instead of bringing salvation or justice, they have themselves become part of a morally ambiguous situation. In *Anil's Ghost*, Anil remembers a line from Dumas's *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' (50). The quotation comes to her before she has endangered her colleagues, immediately after she and Sarath have found Sailor's bones. This suggests that her very knowledge implicates her, rather than placing her in the observational position traditionally occupied by the literary investigator. In contexts where there is no recourse to justice and revelation is dangerous, the truth can weigh heavily rather than providing a path to the restoration of order. Because both revelation and suppression carry moral and physical risks, the detective may become one in a long line of accessories to a crime rather than an agent of justice.

None of the novels identifies a single perpetrator, suggesting that the violence in each geopolitical context is collaborative and complex. In *Anil's Ghost*, Sailor is revealed to have been killed by the government, but this only occurred because 'a *billa* – someone from the community with a gunnysack over his head, slits cut out for his eyes' (265) identified him as a rebel sympathiser: 'A *billa* was a monster, a ghost, to scare away children in games, and it had picked out Ruwan Kumara and he had been taken away' (265). Here the anonymous traitor is, once again, a neighbour or a friend rather than a stranger or a member of an invading army. Monstrosity does not stalk 'the community' (265) from without, but can be slipped on as easily as a gunnysack by any one of its members. The idea of intimate and collaborative violence

is further emphasized by a story Sarath tells Anil. Recalling his experience of seeing a man being ‘disappeared’ and transported away on a bicycle, he says, ‘When they took off, the blindfolded man had to somehow hang on. One hand on the handlebars, but the other he had to put around the neck of his captor. It was this necessary intimacy that was disturbing... the blindfolded man had to balance his body in tune with his possible killer’ (150).

In many of the novels, the intimacy of civil war is invoked through the motif of romantic and familial betrayal, indicating that the fabric of the private sphere has been destroyed by the ‘complete breakdown of the social contract’ (Addison 1). Goldman’s depiction of Flor’s lovers, all of whom may be implicated in her death, emphasizes this. Similarly, Gamini of *Anil’s Ghost* has been in love with his brother’s wife, and both men are shattered by guilt and regret after she commits suicide. This suggests that the crimes of civil war contain an emotional complexity that defies notions of friendship and enmity. This is perhaps most evident in Gillian Slovo’s depiction of Smitsrivier, in which the town’s small size emphasizes the inescapability of politics. It becomes clear that James has been a collaborator of sorts by teaching his students to conform to the status quo, and by punishing his own son for becoming involved in political resistance. Similarly, Marie Muller discovers that she has been ‘culpable’ (299) in Apartheid brutality, despite the fact that for years she has been largely confined to her house.

At times, the texts’ world-making project becomes problematic. As in the case of *Anil’s Ghost*, the authors’ decision to contrast the detective’s point of departure with the otherness of their place of origin may become overtly sensationalist when combined with features of genre. In depicting Sri Lanka as a place of inherent violence and sinister beauty, Ondaatje reinforces certain Orientalist stereotypes rather

than unsettling them, and avoids implicating the West in what has befallen its former colony. Although he raises important questions about the ethics of international intervention through the figure of Anil, Ondaatje also avoids examining the mechanics of a violent state by using thriller conventions (making the threat to the protagonist appear ‘immeasurable and boundless’ [Glover 130]) to depict the government as a single terrible entity. Combined with his decision to set much of the action in ‘humanless’ (186) parts of the countryside, this means that the question of what makes individuals turn to violence is never addressed.

Even when it is executed in a way that eschews sensationalism (Farah, for example, reneges on so many of the crime genre’s expectations that even suspense is often sacrificed), the very device of the returnee suggests a particular readership. Each of the novelists writes in English, and no longer lives in the context they are depicting, although their reasons for the latter range from childhood emigration to political exile.¹³ Thus, their novels represent international interventions in themselves, and can be regarded as being primarily pitched towards readers who are unfamiliar with the local context. It is not only the rules of genre that are established and departed from, but also the Western contexts the protagonists leave behind. The protagonists’ relatively stable, middleclass lives in the West are often sketched only briefly, while their return is always rendered in great detail, establishing their place of origin as the lesser known ‘other’. In part, this owes to the crime genre as a form that emerged under imperial conditions, but framing the step out of genre as an international journey also firmly establishes the culture of departure as the unremarkable norm. *Red Dust*’s Smitsrivier is described as ‘New York’s polar

¹³ Ishiguro is of Japanese origin, but his father grew up in Shanghai during the interwar period. (Hunnewell 1).

opposite' (7). The publisher's foreword to the Random House edition of Ondaatje's novel reads, tellingly, '*Anil's Ghost* transports us to Sri Lanka', assuming that its readers ('us') are not already living there. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, the Somalia Farah 'builds' for his readers is not made from whole cloth, but is constructed in direct opposition to media stereotypes that have been proliferated abroad, which it conscientiously demolishes one by one.

Thus, this particular kind of crime fiction illustrates the intimacy, frustrations and confusion of civil war, but by framing the stories as double departures, it does so within a comparative frame, assuming a baseline of generic and geographical knowledge in its readership. The texts represent a form of defamiliarization by removing features of the crime novel that are so well established as to be taken for granted, such as the value of truth, the availability of justice, and the justness of legal retribution. In the absence of these, the detectives, who in many cases are regarded as experts in their fields, find themselves experiencing the anxieties of life in a society that has become formless and unpredictable.

However, in some cases the trope of the twin departure – from place and from genre – suggests a false equivalence between the staples of crime fiction and actual Western judicial systems. As discussed in Chapter Four, *Red Dust* uses New York to symbolize a certain type of hardboiled justice, but does not comment on the USA's support of Apartheid, or the racial biases of its own justice system. We are told that the protagonist had 'forgotten that the story with a beginning, a middle and its own neat ending [...] was something New York might offer, but not South Africa' (336). The use of place to sketch a particular generic milieu is an economical device, but can result in an uncritical comparison between countries, relying as it does on literary stereotypes. South Africa is depicted with a certain moral and political complexity,

but Sarah's other home remains depoliticised because it is frozen in genre, making the worldliness of the text one-sided.

In terms of world making, the most successful texts are those which enable their protagonists to investigate their places of departure as well as the point of return. These novels come closer to fulfilling Edward Said's conception of worldliness by emphasizing global interconnectedness. In *What is a World*, Pheng Cheah writes, 'For Said, a literary work's worldliness is its geographical infrastructure, its spacial situated-ness, the "historical affiliation" that connects cultural works from the imperial center to the colonial peripheries and the interdependencies that follow from these connections' (219). In *When We Were Orphans* and *The Long Night of White Chickens*, the returnees' travels away force them to take a second look at the homes they have established elsewhere, emphasizing 'interdependencies' and 'connections' which have previously been unseen to them.

In both novels, a second look reveals the insidious nature of neo-colonialism, which leaves scars with its extractions, but provides wealth and stability for the colonizing country. At the end of *When We Were Orphans*, Banks, who strives to be the stereotypical Englishman, finds that he is economically complicit in terrible crimes abroad. The profits of violence and exploitation have been lurking under the civilized veneer of his 'inheritance' and his place in society all along. Similarly, when Roger sets about trying to solve Flor's murder, he must reach far further back than her return to Guatemala. Although the explicit violence occurred there, it soon becomes evident that the damage began in a quiet family home in Namoset, USA.

By suggesting the unreliability of their protagonists' initial perceptions, both Ishiguro and Goldman establish the difference between the 'real' countries the detectives inhabit and the myths that paint them as just and peaceful societies. In

Crossbones, the link between the USA and Somalia is made evident as well, albeit in a more sporadic way. The two countries are narratively linked by the FBI's investigation of Taxliil, and his Kurdish school friend's attempt to avenge the loss of his family in Iraq by becoming a suicide bomber. The USA is also present in the form of the drones that fly over Mogadishu. At all times, the reader is made aware of Somalia's place in the global order, as Farah emphasizes both its political and 'spatial situated-ness' (219).

Each of these three texts emphasizes the postcolonial (and neo-colonial) aspects of their settings rather than focusing only on civil conflict, suggesting global as well as local complicity. Contrastingly, in *Anil's Ghost*, Sri Lanka's colonial history is lightly suggested, but never as a contributing factor to the civil war, meaning that Ondaatje's depiction of Sri Lanka is untethered by global historical context. This suggests Sri Lanka as an isolated pocket of violence, whereas the dedicated portrayal of both sides of the colonial coin furthers the breakdown of the 'guilty and innocent' dialectic. The more thorough demolition of this dialectic (as portrayed by Ishiguro, Goldman and Farah) ensures that the idea of 'the innocent many' (Auden 1) is erased, not only in relation to those embroiled civil war but also with regard to those who invisibly benefit from other countries' instability.

Contrapuntal Thinking, Constellational Thinking and the Role of the Returnee

In examining these five novels, we witness two different kinds of awakening on the part of the protagonists. One type of character evolution is emotional: in the course of the narratives, almost all of the detectives move towards a more nuanced understanding of their own identity and the meaning of home. As previously

demonstrated, this kind of understanding is well described by Edward Said's formulation of contrapuntal thinking. However, a cognitive shift is also evident in each protagonist's character evolution. In the course of their inquiries, the detectives are forced into a Socratic realization of their own ignorance. In order to achieve wisdom, and to function as useful investigators, they must admit to the glaring limitations of their own knowledge.

Rather than a portraying a journey towards certainty, the returnees' narrative arcs tend towards the renunciation of their earliest convictions, and a willingness to claim ignorance of much of the 'outsized reality' (Marquez 1) that surrounds them. In the process, they become more receptive to other ways of thinking, and to accepting local contributions to their inquiries. In 'The Virtue of Socratic Ignorance', Alan R. Drengson writes, 'Our preoccupation with knowledge in both the abstract and the concrete often prevents us from realizing ignorance close at hand, and this failure prevents us from being aware of the open and unsettled character of much of human life' (237). Often, the mysteries at the heart of these novels remain 'open and unsettled', but the detective paradoxically emerges wiser for having acknowledged his or her own limitations.

In realizing that they may be out of their depth, the investigators must often decide to limit the use of their personal power, rather than wielding it to its full extent. As demonstrated in this thesis, the returnee detective occupies the uneasy position of social arbiter of a society from which they are partially estranged. This partial estrangement is an effective literary device, enabling the characters to decode their surroundings for an international readership without ever claiming complete authority. However, within the world of the novels the combination of non-belonging and social arbitration often becomes problematic, savouring as it does of neo-

colonialism. In discussing the idea of the USA as a new imperial power, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee writes, ‘the common rhetorical and representative strategies employed, at least in the West, to document the birth pangs of this new form of globalized power have been precisely those of order, deviance and punishment’ (1). Often, the West’s history of global policing and international intervention emerges as a conscious theme in these novels. Whether or not this comparison is clearly surfaced, each of the detectives faces questions about their fitness for the role they are undertaking, implicitly problematizing both the role of the detective and the ethics of international intervention.

In his article ‘The White Savior Industrial Complex’, Teju Cole discusses the figure of the Western rescuer in international media narratives about the developing world. In order to demonstrate the appeal of this archetype, Cole compares the scant media coverage of peaceful anti-corruption marches in Nigeria in 2012 with the kind of traction achieved by media campaigns such as ‘Kony 2012’. Cole argues that the latter campaign, in which US charity Invisible Children raised millions of dollars towards the capture of Ugandan guerrilla leader Joseph Kony, succeeded in raising attention because of its simplistic narrative and its glorification of Western humanitarianism. Of the under-reported Nigerian story, Cole writes, ‘After all, there is no simple demand to be made and – since corruption is endemic – no single villain to topple. There is certainly no "bridge character," [Nicholas] Kristof's euphemism for white saviors [sic] in Third World narratives who make the story more palatable to American viewers’ (7).¹⁴

¹⁴ Cole refers to Nicholas Kristof’s journalistic portrayals of Africa, in which Kristof often focuses on foreign aid workers. Defending this choice, Kristof writes, ‘One way of getting people to read at least a few grafs in is to have some kind of a foreign protagonist, some American who they can identify with

Cole argues that the idea of ‘rescuing’ developing countries betrays an inability to think ‘constellational[ly]’ (5) about power structures and systems of governance. He writes: ‘there is much more to doing good work than "making a difference." There is the principle of first do no harm. There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them’ (7). In invoking ‘the principle of first do no harm’, Cole suggests that such campaigns have the potential to cause damage even as they purport to offer aid. This is an anxiety that is clearly surfaced in many of the novels discussed in this thesis. In these texts, we are made aware that, as Joseph Slaughter would have it, ‘the banalization of human rights means that violations are often committed in the Orwellian name of human rights themselves, cloaked in the palliative rhetoric of humanitarian intervention’ (2). The terms of Teju Cole’s critique are useful in framing the role of the returnee in these five novels. Each novel both employs and resists the idea of the ‘bridge character’ as saviour by undermining the protagonist’s attempts to unilaterally effect change. In each text, the protagonist must also renounce her own certainties and embrace the idea of constellational thinking.

Anil’s Ghost is a useful case study in evaluating the ethically ambiguous role of the bridge character in these novels. As a literary device, Anil operates as a cultural mediator, one whose role is to make the story more ‘palatable’ (Cole 7) to an uninitiated readership, and ease them into local stories. This is suggested by the very title of the novel, which initially appears to foreground Anil’s work with Sailor, but is finally revealed as a reference to Sarath. However, Ondaatje also embeds criticisms of the Western saviour ideal into the text itself, thus acknowledging it as a problematic

as a bridge character. And so if this is a way I can get people to care about foreign countries, to read about them, ideally, to get a little bit more involved, then I plead guilty’ (1)

trope. Sarath of *Anil's Ghost* says to Anil, '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' (40). Anil's fixation on a single fact ultimately sends Sarath to his death, while his understanding of Sri Lankan society saves her life. As demonstrated in Chapter Two of this thesis, Ondaatje's portrayal of Anil is problematic in many respects, but the narrative undoubtedly rewards the idea of a constellational approach to social arbitration.

Similarly, in each of the other novels, local characters attempt to promote constellational thinking, reproving the detectives for their highhanded behaviour and lack of community engagement. Ben Hoffman of *Red Dust* says, 'But you must see [...] that nothing is as simple as you would have it. We are all interconnected here. You cannot pay attention only to the one side as if it stands separate from the other' (151). Qasiir of *Crossbones* unsuccessfully attempts to talk sense into Malik when he goes to confront the militant BigBeard, invoking his ancestral knowledge of the local community. He says, 'There is no benefit in provoking BigBeard unnecessarily [...] Grandpa, who knew him all his life, always advised me to give him a wide berth' (245). In *When We Were Orphans*, the Japanese colonel Banks meets attempts to correct his myopic understanding of the Sino-Japanese war, saying: 'The entire globe, Mr Banks, the entire globe will before long be engaged in war. What you just saw in Chapei, it is but a small speck of dust compared to what the world must soon witness (295).

The embrace of constellational thinking sometimes results in the deliberate abandonment of the investigation. Of the example set by early detective fiction, specifically Edgar Allen Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Stephen Knight

writes, ‘The crime and the resolution are without history, without recurring roots. This powerful and frighteningly delusive notion is still with us, that desocialised, unhistorical understanding can, by deciphering isolated problems, resolve them’ (Knight, *Form and Ideology* 44). The novels explored in this thesis support the idea that this notion is a ‘delusive’ one. To solve an individual case is often to remove the symptom but not the ‘root’ cause, risking ‘recurring’ violence.

In *Red Dust*, for example, Sarah Barcant’s character evolution is not complete until she accepts that Alex has decided to withdraw from the TRC hearing without questioning Dirk any further. This is professionally counterintuitive, but indicates that Sarah has realized that some cases should not be pursued at any cost. The ‘rational truth’ (320) is that Alex is blameless in the matter of Steve’s killing, but he is unable to emotionally extricate himself from the role he may have played by breaking down under torture, and he cannot risk his relationship with his community, which will endure long after the truth commission and Sarah herself have moved on.

Sometimes the protagonist’s constellational awakening comes too late. The death of Sarath of *Anil’s Ghost* is perhaps the most dramatic example of harm done through returnees’ misreading of the local situation, but each returnee finds herself violating ‘the principle of first do no harm’ (Cole 7) in the course of the investigation. Because they are operating in extremely violent societies, the detectives must face the fact that they risk triggering more violence with both their personal and their professional behaviour. Ahl of *Crossbones* is indirectly responsible for the death of Malik’s stringer Qasiir, and Malik’s own injury in a roadside bombing, for which he is ‘choked’ by his ‘sense of guilt’ (368). After his return to Guatemala, Roger describes his ‘heartless’ treatment of Zamara, his impoverished sex worker girlfriend, as ‘my own crime’ (409). Sarah Barcant inadvertently re-traumatizes her client by

subjecting him to conventional pre-courtroom questioning, unable to see that his reticence goes much deeper than simple uncooperativeness. Ben Hoffman, berating her, describes the interview as ‘a crucifixion’ (65).

The liminal identities of the protagonists have benefits as well as limitations, however. In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said writes,

We take home and language for granted; they become nature, and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy... Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience. (3690)

The returnee detective precisely performs this role, opening up new possibilities that their local counterparts are not in a position to consider. The returnees’ complex relationships with their countries of origin give them unique insight and impetus, even if they sometimes walk the line between boldness and arrogance. As an international journalist Malik is uniquely placed to bargain for information about Taxliil, because he can offer his sources access to the world stage. At the same time, he has a local’s proficiency in Somali, opening the doors of communication and granting him partial insider status.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, the inquiry is catalysed by Anil’s refusal to accept the unwritten rules of the conflict zone. The investigation into Sailor’s death is only able to take place because her argument for holding the government to account is persuasive enough to convince Sarath. Even after her reckless revelation condemns him, he makes sure that when she escapes it is with their findings on Sailor, tacitly affirming their value. Anil’s devotion to truth is never portrayed in a wholly negative light. She may be unversed in Sri Lanka’s particular dangers and nuances, but she is also un-blinkered by its conventions and prejudices, including the acceptance of

closed doors and open secrets. Her attitude inspires Sarath to attempt the reconstruction, even though he understands the risks and limitations of the endeavour far better than Anil does herself.

Sarah Barcant, too, is unbound by many social conventions, and lacks the racial prejudices common to the white community of Smitsrivier. Because of this, she is able to simply walk through many of the invisible barriers left over from Apartheid. Her cosmopolitanism also makes her chafe against the town's gender segregation. When she goes for a drink, she avoids the empty 'ladies bar', which is described as 'a small windowless space' (102) and instead seats herself in the main room, where she is free to observe the townspeople at her leisure. In doing so she establishes herself in opposition to characters such as Marie Muller, who seek to avoid political involvement by keeping strictly to the female-coded domestic realm. It is in the bar that Sarah has her first encounter with Alex outside of a professional setting, and where their relationship begins its evolution from 'suspicion and attraction' to 'tenderness' (328). However, it is only her disregard for the prevailing social mores that makes this evolution possible, and eventually enables her to establish a bond of trust with him. As we see in these examples, the liminality of the returnee figures enables them to transcend social codes, giving them a unique vantage point, even as their lack of local knowledge sometimes lets them down. They therefore approach their inquiries with relative freshness and freedom.

In turn, the investigation has beneficial effects for the protagonist. As well as moving towards a constellational view of their surroundings, they also renounce certainty in their conceptions of home and away, moving towards an outlook that Edward Said terms 'contrapuntal thinking'. In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said writes, 'Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home;

exiles are aware of at least two, and thus plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal* (3708).¹⁵ The returnees achieve this ‘plurality of vision’ by reincorporating their places of origin into their identities without renouncing the aspects of self they have acquired abroad.

For the most part, the returnees begin their narrative lives as somewhat damaged individuals.¹⁶ Of the experience of exile, Said continues:

There is the sheer fact of isolation and displacement, which produces the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation and community. At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as to querulous lovelessness. (3677)

The detectives’ lifestyles resemble Said’s description of the alienation of exile. Their pre-return existences are variously described as ‘sparse’ (Ondaatje 63), ‘miserable’ (Ishiguro 193), ‘hardened’ (Slovo 118) and ‘deadbeat’ (Goldman 221). As discussed in Chapter Four, the idea of the damaged investigator is partly a feature of genre: the lone detective is a recurring figure in the canon, as is the dysfunctional, Holmesian genius, in part because their lack of external investments allows a monomaniacal approach that raises the stakes of the investigation. In *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Stephen Knight describes ‘alienation’ as a recurring characteristic of the classic literary detective (159). However, in these texts the returnee’s damage is also inextricably linked to their status as emigrants.

Most of the texts (with the exception of *Crossbones*, in which the return is to

¹⁵ Although few of the returnees qualify for Said’s definition of political exiles, a formulation which specifies banishment from the place of origin, their lifestyles contain strong similarities to the condition Said describes.

¹⁶ In *Crossbones*, the damage caused by rootlessness is depicted through the figure of Taxliil, who attempts to subsume his contradictions in the dogma of Al-Shabaab.

an ancestral home) characterize the detectives as having initially left their ‘home’ countries without critically examining their reasons for doing so. Either these characters have been relocated as children (Banks, Roger), or their emigration is portrayed as part of the rebellion of young adulthood (Sarah and Anil). The returnees’ evolution in character implies that the damage of displacement can only be eased by coming to terms with the old milieu, enacting what Palipana of *Anil’s Ghost* calls ‘the paradox of retreat’ (303). He says, ‘You renounce society, but to do so you must first be a part of it, learn your decision from it’ (303). Each of the protagonists must come to terms with the scene of their childhood – not as an idealized memory, but as a troubling and complex reality – before they can achieve a sense of wholeness in their personal lives. In attaining a nuanced and constellational understanding of what they have left behind, the protagonists are able to further their own evolution from distance to empathic engagement.

The motif of orphanhood is one that is common to almost all of the novels, with the lack of a welcoming older generation emphasizing the rupture in continuity. In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said writes, ‘No matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics who feel their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood’ (3647). Like orphanhood, displacement proves to be an irreversible process for these characters: even though they are physically able to return, the protagonists are unable to pick up their former lives where they left off. Indeed, the absurdity of this idea is emphasized by Banks’s fixation on reclaiming (and repopulating) the household of his childhood. Instead, the returnees are forced to forge new relationships in an imperfect simulation of repair. Often these bonds are couched in familial terms, emphasizing the idea of the provisional, self-defined home through the motif of the non-biological family.

Roger, for example, sets about repairing an old wrong when he joins forces with Moya. As schoolchildren, the two boys vowed to be ‘like brothers’ (23), a covenant they were supposed to seal by scaling a fence and confronting a vicious dog. In the event, Roger betrayed Moya by allowing him to leap into danger on his own. Besides echoing the USA’s public denunciation of Guatemala, this incident plays a formative role in Roger’s self-perception. When he agrees to work with Moya, their investigation becomes a second attempt at establishing brotherhood, and a way for Roger to prove that he is not the ‘*gringo de mierda*’ (25) who abandoned Moya all those years ago. In the end he makes amends by rescuing Moya from the surveillance van that is tailing them, cementing their bond. While he acquires a second would-be sibling, the relationship cannot assuage the grief of Flor de Mayo’s death. Despite this, Roger’s latter-day relationship with Moya has a value of its own.

Anil initially eschews most emotional connection, but eventually identifies herself as being ‘like a sister’ (282) to Sarath and Gamini. In the forest grove, she defers to Palipana as a father figure (of Palipana, Sarath says, ‘we need parents when we’re old too [42]). The idea of the imperfect and approximate reconstruction of family life is evident in *Red Dust* as well. At the beginning of the novel, Ben Hoffman says that Sarah is ‘no longer the person I knew or the lawyer I trained’ (67). However, at the end of the novel they are reconciled, and Sarah commits herself to being with him during his illness, if not as his literal daughter then as his protégée and his intellectual heir. As discussed in Chapter One, it takes Banks until the end of *When We Were Orphans* to accept that he has had a family all along. While his adopted daughter does not compensate for his lost origins, she provides him with the hope of a future. In every case, the returnee gains something without replacing what they have lost, but the latter relationships are valuable because they are so hard won. Separation

is therefore portrayed as an injury for which one can find solace, but not necessarily an antidote, and the bittersweet complexity of the texts' final chapters reflects this.

Afterword

All of these novels avoid offering solutions to the problems they present. In withholding easy answers, they offer the reader a more complex and critical view of the circumstances that they depict. In these settings, the act of 'narrowing down' suspects and possibilities can have disastrous consequences. The detectives must embrace an ambivalent vantage point – one that is both contrapuntal and constellational – in order to establish an ethical relationship with their surroundings. This implies that true understanding – of violence, of the postcolony, and of the idea of home – is a process of complication rather than simplification.

In each narrative, simplification proves to be a dangerous method – it leads Banks to cling to false hope, it leads Anil to pursue the truth at any cost, it denies the role of the international community in Guatemala's tragedy, it negates the role of trauma in memory and it allows figures such as the 'Somali pirate' to gain international infamy while history and context go unaddressed. However, each writer also acknowledges the appeal of a simplified world as well as its dangers. The comforting expectations of genre are first evoked and then abandoned in order to underline the difficulty and complexity of the constellational approach and the emotional toll it exacts. The reader is inaugurated into a world of ambiguity, broken promises and loss. In projecting these worlds, the novelists insist on the communal elements of violence and exploitation, sacrificing depictions of anomalous monstrosity in order to highlight the kind of atrocities that hide in plain sight.

The discomfort of the reading experience lies partly in the writers' eschewal of shorthand and suspense. Instead of providing ease of narrative flow, they disrupt and make difficult, raising more questions than answers. The realities these novels project resist capture, either by legal or narrative authority. In this way, they avoid one of the qualities that Auden attributes to detective fiction. In 'The Guilty Vicarage', he writes, 'I forget the story as soon as I have finished it, and have no wish to read it again' (1). Interestingly, Auden lists this 'immediacy' (1) as one of the genre's attributes rather than one of its deficits. Forgettability is the result of the traditional crime novel's agenda of wish fulfillment: because the answers have all been delivered, there is nothing left to puzzle over.

By contrast, the novels described in this thesis often demand a second look, withholding wish-fulfillment to the point that many of them have been criticised for their unreadability. However, in their very difficulty, these novels offer a challenge to popular ideas of truth and justice by allowing the reader to glimpse the devastation of certainty that attends social collapse and intimate conflict.

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