Memory and Place in Michael Ondaatje’s
Anil’s Ghost

Linda Hutcheon is certainly right when she claims that Ondaatje takes one step further in challenging to postmodern boundaries “its fragmented collection of boundaries, research, poems, and photographic works to reconstruct a more immediate and personal history – the writer’s own familial past in what was then called Ceylon” (Hutcheon, 82). Writing his own history, Ondaatje gives form to disparate facts, puts pieces of memory and places together, fictionalizes them in Anil’s Ghost (2000), a novel set in our time. The place is Sri Lanka (former Ceylon), a country forced into the late twentieth century by the ravages of civil war and the consequences of a country divided against itself. Anil Tissera, born in Sri Lanka, educated in the West, a forensic anthropologist sent by an international human-rights group to work with local officials, appears as a ghost to discover the source of the organized campaigns of murder engulfing the island. Bodies and skeletons are discovered, and one is nicknamed “Sailor”. What follows is a novel of memories moved by specific places, a story about love, about family, about unknown enemies and the quest to awaken all hidden past memories – all propelled by a riveting history.

In this novel Ondaatje continues with putting history’s link to fictional narrative as the main focus of attention. Ondaatje’s self-aware knowledge of the textual nature of the past (the past as we can know it today, as it comes through books, archives, records, even memories), like in the novel Running in the Family, also places Anil’s Ghost in the critical poststructuralist and the literary postmodernist context. The author in this book applies similar procedures, already described by Linda Huncheon. In Anil’s Ghost he seeks to represent a reality outside literature, with a narrator as one of the major connections between life and art. And he does this by situating the most self-reflexive of its performance within history. This time, contemporary history overlapped with personal histories, and we not only watch the historiographic and fictionalizing impulses at work, but in a way participate in them. In Anil’s Ghost, Ondaatje chooses what Hutcheon describes as “middle ground of reference” (86), creating a “historiographic” reference.
(the one created in and by the text’s writing). It is doubled because it becomes a part of two “realities” (personal, others). Here the processes of recording and narrating history are the part of the text itself. They create a network of references which includes intertexts of all kinds (songs, graffiti, memories), both literal and historical. This is just Ondaatje’s way to put order among the chaos of historical facts, and memories of the characters of the novel – to create an organized history. Whether this book will remain “an incomplete history” (Ondaatje, 88) the way Hutcheon defines Running in the Family remains to be seen. Whether here the past (memories, places) also escape articulation and proves to be the ultimate intertext whose significance is both intensely desired and constantly deferred are the questions waiting to be answered in this paper.

This book certainly continues Ondaatje’s previous explorations of the boundaries between fact and fiction, life and art, history, identity. But this time the author also adds one new dimension: a confrontation between the conventions of the realist novel (the so-called objective history-writing) and the self-reflexivity of postmodern fiction. One of the two epigraphs in Anil’s Ghost has a metafictive orientation. The language of the story is also to be “gathered” like In the Skin of the Lion; “he picks up and brings together various corners of the story” (Hutcheon, 93).

Readers are introduced into Anil’s Ghost by the author’s announcement that he is going to challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction, building a sort of fictional bridge between two poles of reality (fact). At the very beginning of the novel, in the Author’s Note, Ondaatje first presents the facts:

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 guerillas 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 (Ondaatje, vii).

But soon he warns the readers that this book is also fiction not just facts. Ondaatje continues:

Anil’s Ghost is a fictional work set during this political time and historical moment. And while there existed organizations similar to
those in the story, and similar events took place, the characters and
incidents in the novel are invented. Today the war in Sri Lanka
continues in a different form (Ondaatje, vii).

History as a subject and writing about it involve interpretation, “for the facts
must be given meaning in a particular context”, says the author (Ondaatje,
87). It is subject to the individual and collective fictionalizing memory,
Ondaatje reminds, and introduces a Miners’ folk song from Sri Lanka to
determine the direction of memories and places they come from. Moving
from outwards toward downwards (from the surface of the earth towards its
womb), and vice versa, both memories and places are problematized at the
very beginning of the novel. This song, the second fragment from his
intertextual network, asks the basic question concerning the place where
one can be safe (Ondaatje, 3). Is this place deep in the threatening womb of
the earth, or on the earth, that is the Hamlet’s question:

In a search for a job I came to Bogola / I went down the pits seventy-
two fanthoms deep-invisible as a fly, not seen from the pit head only
when I return to the surface / Is my life safe […] Blessed be
the scaffolding deep down in the shaft / Blessed be the life on the
mine’s pit head / Blessed be the chain attached to the life wheel […]
(Ondaatje, 3).

The third Ondaatje’s introduction in Anil’s Ghost is a narrative fragment in
which the author uses and abuses, exploits and subverts the conventions of
realist fiction, in which the narrator who takes the third-person point of view
introduces the story of ghost-Anil’s memories and places. The frame tale of
this novel situates the narrative as being told through Anil’s memories
combined with Sri Lanka’s war. This is also a story to be “gathered”, until
readers compose a whole made of vertical and horizontal time and space
frame dimensions. Global pains, double-edged fears, are constants (fixed),
something Anil still remembers.

The first full narrative opens also in the mode of realist fiction. Anil arrives
at Katanayake airport to do her task. Memories of her past (after 15 years of
absence) are revived with a place she came to (a photograph of her walking
out of the surf that January morning – which The Observer had used with
the head-line “Anil Wins It!” and which her father kept in his office had
been studied by every distant member of the family, those in Australia,
Malaysia and England, as personal time, well as those on the island)
Place and Memory in Canada: Global Perspectives
Lieu et Mémoire au Canada: Perspectives Globales

(Ondaatje, 10). Ghosts, skeletons, memories of the place, bring back a sentence she translated a long time ago from Archilochus – *In the hospitality of war, we left them their dead to remember us by*. The country of mysteries she came back to is, as she says, “a more complicated world morally” (Ondaatje, 11). With this global comparison, Anil introduces Homi Bhabha’s global genealogies on whose traces we will follow Anil’s narrative. As narrative unwinds at a lot of other global spots, together with mostly Anil’s memories, some more places are introduced: Guatemala, Miami, Pompeii, Hiroshima, Vesuvius, Laetoli; also motifs: love affair, history, childhood, bones, body, the geological map, mines of Sri Lanka. The moment she faces the first body she has to do forensic work on, she surprises herself by doing something she usually does not do: “She never usually translated the time of death into personal time, but was still working out what hour it was in London, in San Diego. Five and a half hours. Thirteen and a half hours” (Ondaatje, 13); “Your dress is Western, I see” (Ondaatje, 27).

Penetrating more deeply into the area, Colombo, she immerses into herself with the revival of long-ago dug memories (the first party, rain); her personal history is a history of some people from the place she comes from. When she meets her relatives after 15 years of absence, they recognize her by the memory of her picture in *The Observer*. A visual sign is a collective memory sign of recognition, though it is a sign which lost its semantic meaning in the meantime. Yes, it is Anil, but not Anil-the swimmer any longer. The power of memory equals the power place. The repeated light motif “Honey, I’m Home, crouching beside a corpse to ascertain the hour of death” makes Anil see how he or she, a warm body becomes it, it’s-the earth’s-the global, the moment it loses the body heat (Ondaatje, 19).

The archeological space is claustrophobic for Anil, as well the history of skeletons, the ceremonies of nature: “Years after a body was buried, there would be a small shift on the surface of the earth. Then a falling of that stone into the space left by decayed flesh, as if signaling thedeparture of a spirit” (Ondaatje, 20). This makes her bury once again a childhood memory when she faces a dead creature for the first time – “sand in his eyes.” The fragments of place do not only make her remember. It’s the words challenging the limits of language. Their physicality is a recurrent motif in this Ondaatje’s novel as well. One of her cousins simply says: “One of my cousins wants me to take a picture of the two of you. To remember that you came here” (Ondaatje, 23).
The people also developed their own set of myths – both national and familial, and in this narrative the political dimension is also tied to the aesthetic: “Forensic work during a political crisis was notorious, she knew, for its three-dimensional chess moves and back-room deals and muted statements for the ‘good of the nation’ […] As if a city from the past had been reburied” (Ondaatje, 29). The disposal of bodies, the hiding and reburial of corpses, a Hundred years’ War with modern weaponry in Sri Lanka, backers on sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun – and drug-runners, political enemies secretly joined in financial arms, the unification of war global spaces, make Anil conclude, “The reason for war was war”. Like in his previous novels “social commentary challenges aestheticism of art that denies history and human pain – but, in a typically postmodern paradox, we learn this through art, that is, through Ondaatje’s novels” (Hutcheon, 98).

The duality of the oral gossip and tales to be transformed into written history and personal histories are also a part of this narrative. A few personal histories are narrated (Anil’s Ghost, Sarath, brothers, Ananda) to be concluded with global mythological tale about time-memory and space distance. In between are central stories told about skeletons, labeled (Frederick Jameson’s supermarket) TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SAILOR – Ihab Hassan’s Renaissance types-Everyone-that is the global one and the same. Spaces and memories are meant for the people to be feared: “Everyone’s scared, Anil. It’s a national disease” (Ondaatje, 53). Memories are ghosts, especially in an encounter with certain spaces, and: “Some people let their ghosts die, some don’t” (Ondaatje, 53). Anil used to believe that meaning allowed people to escape from grief and fear. But here she found out that those “who were slammed and stained by violence lost the power of language and logic” (Ondaatje, 55-56).

*Everyone* here means that we are a part of a larger process of nature, that we all belong to the globe – the earth, and that we are just what we are warned by this novel, i.e. “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” (Ondaatje, 54). By this warning, Anil turns bodies into representatives of race, and age, and place. Still, the same inner space of the earth treats her with the tenderness of all discoveries – the discovery, “some years earlier, of the tracks at Laetoli-almost four-million-year-old-footsteps of a pig, a hyena, a rhinoceros and a bird, this strange ensemble identified by a twentieth-century tracker” (Ondaatje, 55). But one body, whose identity
is a mystery for Anil, is more than just a representative, a type, Everyone. It is not the places (pits, caves) which leave him nameless but also history which is silent of everything that does not fit. The war quits memories, but not mythology, its names, and narrative. It will take a few more chapters before Anil discovers who the skeleton is.

Like in Ondaatje’s previous novels, the theme of naming is central in relation to the position of place and memory in Anil’s Ghost. Anil returns to Sri Lanka to face with her own re-naming, her own choice she had to pay a high price for. She had considered herself nameless until she bought her brother’s name, built a bridge from one gender to another, and thus followed the trace of contemporary theorists for whom the desire for presence is a desire to escape from language as pure exteriority, and a way to identify an inner meaning, to reach beyond the signifier to the signified, or to find the container or a contained meaning (writing is the condition of all language or a prison house from which no escape is possible). This placed the author into the same ambiguous metafictive position he was put in The Skin of a Lion: “the male who will be recorded in history” (Hutcheon, 95).

How high a price did Anil have to pay, exactly? After a lot of negotiations: “She gave her brother one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favor he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse” (Ondaatje, 68). The name of Anil is, in fact, Anil’s ghost, which haunts her throughout her journeys into herself, global histories and geography, memories and places. Later it found its shelter in theory in a special place-location: cave-pit, named, Amygdala, “some bad god” she heard in a London hospital from her professor, “the place where she housed her fearful memories, something created and made by us, by our own histories” (Ondaatje, 134).

Anil has the power of self-naming, but the power of asking herself as well:

But who was this skeleton? In this room, among these four, she was hiding the unhistorical dead. To fetch a dead body: what a curious task! To cut down the corpse of an unknown hanged man and then bear the body of the animal on one’s back […] something dead, something buried, something already rotting away? Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest (Ondaatje, 56).
These narrative procedures are not the only way in which Ondaatje’s text is self-reflexively postmodern. The two epigraphs of the book point to two other major metafictional obsessions: writing and language. (The physicality of the language is a recurrent motif in the text). Like in his previous books, the ancient graffiti poems are subsequently made into images in his own poem, implying that all writing potentially forms this kind of connection between art and life. Thus, Anil reads in three languages (Latin, Sinhala, English) the ironic sign while passing by the chief medical officer’s door on the way to her lab. Let conversations cease. / let laughter flee. / This is the place where Death / Delights to help the living. (Ondaatje, 67); this intertext only serves to direct her to another intertext-the place and memories of her schooling days: It was the Good Ship Venus – By Christ, you should have seen us. / The figured was a whore in bed / Astride a rampant penis (Ondaatje, 69). As the narrative unwinds, songs as intertexts will also be used to support the personal memories of Anil’s (her marriage, separation, and lover). A special kind of intertexts are used for the reading of collective memories: images carved into or painted on rock, the fragmented intertexts leading into the truth, whose discovering can be dangerous at present political circumstances, the truth broken into pieces, deconstructed and misused, for “the country existed in a rocking, self-burying motion. The disappearance of schoolboys, the death of lawyers by torture, the abduction of bodies from the Hokandara mass grave” (Ondaatje, 157). Two graffiti: MAKAMKRUKA (a person who sees things more truly by turning everything upside down, almost a devil) and MADANARAGA (sexual arousal) are also meant for reading collective memories; their wider intertext is “Snow White and Seven Dwarfs” (Ondaatje, 167).

Further in the text, Ondaatje derives global genealogies by introducing a new character-the epigraphist, Palipana (Sarath’s prof. of archeology), who, like Anil, re-named himself, making his name by “translating Pali scripts and recording and translating the rock graffiti Sigiriya” (Ondaatje, 79). A hidden intertext is introduced, Palipana’s history which he wrote lucidly, confirming Edward Said’s global encounter of the West and the East in his Orientalism: “While the West saw history as a faint horizon where Europe joined the East, Palipana saw his country in fathoms and color, and Europe simply as a landmass on the end of the peninsula of Asia” (Ondaatje, 79). Whose memories are older? The struggle for power in language is resolved by one of the conferences where it was finally confirmed, thanks to Palipana, that European culture was old but Asian was older. The global postmodern interplay continues in Anil’s asking for help from Ananda (who chose the
room of the artist to work in with the two words *makamkruka I madanaraga* written on the walls) to resolve the chief mystery of the novel: the identity of the Sailor.

Anil’s Ghost, during its encounter with/of the East and West, supported by other ghosts of memories, reveals many stories. Not only the mystery of the Sailor, but the mysteries of time, memories, space, and globalization as well. It just shows how their revealing through their consigning events to the past and recontextualising them, how the increased speed of the cycle is a type of time compression. This quickening cycle of Anil’s narration and renarration also shows how it is not only history which has been compressed but geography as well (Currie, 104). We are encouraged to think of the planet as a simultaneous unity, thanks to the temporal gap between the places. One version of the dichotomy between space and time is the oscillation between geography and history, space and memory, which cannot be settled as the conquest of one pole by the other. On the other hand, it is also difficult to agree with Currie, who believes that a historical epoch could never be understood adequately except as a site of contestation or a discursive war (Currie, 106).

While trying to come to a conclusion of the interpretation of *Anil’s Ghost* from these postmodern narrative theory perspectives, it is not difficult to agree with those theorists who see the postmodern world as a dialogue between an old (narrative based in the origins of place) and a new process of identification (identity as a unfixed commodity affiliation), for *Anil’s Ghost* is having this dialogue all the time. It also shows some Mark Currie’s noticed theoretical paradoxes: on one hand, it seems as if *Anil’s Ghost* shows how Roman Jacobson’s structuralist dream of a global science of literature has yielded to an uncontrolled fracturing of narratological method, but, on the other, it shows how the particularity of this text or readers “only becomes recognizable through a shared descriptive vocabulary which in itself constantly threatens to homogenize the heterogeneity it advances” (Currie, 14). It is, in fact, this model of change which makes *Anil’s Ghost* still possible to be read as a global or a transatlantic novel, if only provisionally, as if it were a unified entity.
Memory and Place in Michael Ondaatje’s 
Anil’s Ghost

Works Cited
