

THE LANGUAGE OF TOUCH: RE- THINKING SILENCE AND TRAUMA RESTORATION IN *ANIL'S GHOST*

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IN *TRAUMA FICTION*, Anne Whitehead outlines the paradox that typically complicates trauma theory's relationship with its object of study, trauma fiction: "If trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?"¹ Like many first-wave literary trauma theorists, Whitehead begins her inquiry with the assumption that trauma is characterised by unspeakability—the idea that trauma cannot be "spoken" or represented in language.² This starting point inevitably prompts crucial questions about the efficacy of trauma fiction, whose essential task is to represent trauma. For instance, given that fiction constitutes worlds constructed entirely by words, how does trauma fiction attend to an experience that is

1. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.

2. Other first-wave theorists of trauma include Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2002).

thought incapable of representation in language? And if literary trauma theorists were to use language to explain the trauma in these fictional texts, effectively transforming these unrepresented experiences into spoken ones, would they not then be *speaking for*, or even effacing, an experience not theirs to explain?

In order to avoid the unethical implications of writing about trauma, Whitehead and other literary trauma theorists have instead analysed the way in which trauma fiction and its language portray trauma as unspeakable. Naomi Mandel observes this tendency especially in the critical responses to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which have tended to trace the ways the trauma of the novel's protagonist is characterised by its unknowability. *Beloved* is a well-known 1987 novel about the traumatic consequences that arise when Sethe, an African-American slave, murders her baby daughter—an act she commits in an attempt to save her child from being captured into slavery.³ As Mandel notes, many critical readings of the texts have assumed that Sethe's significant trauma is "unspeakable" insofar as it is said to exhaust "the limits of language"—a limit "that trauma imposes."⁴

However, in her analysis of *Beloved*, Mandel concludes that neither silence nor a critical appeal to the many problems associated with speaking about trauma—such as "the paradoxes of language and silence, the unspeakable and speech, narrative and trauma, rememory and forgetting"—is an "acceptable response to a history of atrocity."⁵ In other words, Mandel argues that critics who refer to the *difficulty* of speaking about trauma only maintain "an uneasy equilibrium between two uncomfortable choices"—namely, silence or speaking the unspeakable—while denying "the problematic implications of either."⁶ Contrary to these critics, Mandel points out that the characters in *Beloved* do not have the "privilege" of escaping these difficult choices with clever rhetoric.⁷ Instead, in order to "survive both their past and their future," Sethe "must speak the unspeakable" and

3. Naomi Mandel, "'I Made the Ink': Identity, Complicity, 60 Million, and More," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48, no. 3 (2002): 606–7.

Among others, Mandel cites James Phelan, "Toward a Reader-Response Criticism: The Difficult, the Stubborn, and the Ending of *Beloved*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, nos. 3 and 4 (1993): 709–728; and Mark Ledbetter, *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996).

4. *Ibid.*, 606–608.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

“face the disturbing consequences of their complicit actions.”⁸ In other words, no matter how well literary trauma theorists outline the challenges or complex paradoxes posed by speaking about trauma, they do not answer the fundamental questions about trauma fiction: How does trauma fiction bear witness to what trauma is and give those who have suffered a voice?

Mandel’s alternative approach to *Beloved* is quite unlike those of the trauma theorists she cites, who read *Beloved* as testifying to the sheer impossibility of speaking about the trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery. Instead, Mandel offers a bold interpretation of what it could mean to “speak the unspeakable,” reading the “doubleness” of the title “Beloved” as both a signifier that points to her child and one that also effaces her real name. As Mandel writes, the title bears witness to the way in which Sethe’s trauma complicates her ability to grieve for her child: on the one hand, Sethe desires to evoke the memory of her child; but, on the other, her attempt to do so ensures that her daughter stays buried in silence—precisely because Sethe can only refer to her circuitously.⁹

While there is value in Mandel’s call to think about trauma in new ways—ones that go beyond the paradox of “narrating the unnarratable”—and even though she admirably demonstrates how novels “must speak the unspeakable,” two points in Mandel’s argument are problematic.¹⁰ The first point is one to which she draws attention herself. Mandel acknowledges that, in using language to speak circuitously to her trauma, Sethe becomes complicit with the consequences of speaking: after all, she writes, Sethe “is the one replacing and effacing her murdered daughter with the word on the tombstone.”¹¹ In other words, as Sethe uses language to create signs for the silence, to point to the silence, she risks commemorating these signs instead of her daughter. And by referring to her daughter as “Beloved” (rather than using her

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 589.

10. *Ibid.*, 608.

11. *Ibid.*, 589.

given name), Sethe obscures her daughter's identity, and thereby becomes complicit in hiding a part of her daughter's story.

The second problematic point in Mandel's analysis is her assertion that the characters in *Beloved* "must speak the unspeakable" in order to survive—problematic because Mandel does not consider the context that makes, or would make, it possible for these characters to speak.¹² This omission implies Mandel's assumption that Sethe always had the right conditions in which to vocalise her unspeakable pain, and perhaps that it was simply for a lack of trying—or even by choice—that Sethe does not immediately do so. However, Sethe's eventual ability to cope with the trauma of killing her child is conditioned by certain favourable circumstances. For instance, because Sethe's encounter with the spirit of her dead daughter, Beloved, happens some eighteen years after she kills her child, Sethe has the benefit of distance in time from that initial traumatic event. Moreover, after she kills her child and is imprisoned, Sethe's former slave owner loses interest in her. Hence, upon her release, Sethe is no longer a hunted woman, a situation that affords her the agency she needs to buy the tombstone for her child and mourn her freely. Both of these factors are crucial to the space that Morrison creates for Sethe to grapple with the trauma of killing her child. They indicate that it is a suitable time for her to speak the unspeakable; in the diegesis, they establish an external world that is stable enough for her to bring the tumult of her internal world to the fore safely. But these factors are not present for every trauma survivor. Some may be in situations that make it physically dangerous to vocalise pain, while others may simply not have had the benefit of sufficient distance from the traumatic experience—spatial, temporal or affective—to cope with its impacts. Thus, although Mandel's prescription that all survivors must speak the unspeakable may be useful in theory, it is important to acknowledge that certain conditions have to exist before survivors can be protected from the consequences of speaking

12. *Ibid.*, 608.

their pain. Indeed, to blankly state that survivors *must* speak risks being damaging and counterproductive to their recovery—or, as this essay terms the process, their “restoration.”

Silence Speaks

Although her response to *Beloved* differs from the typical literary responses to the novel, Mandel’s resistance to a rhetoric of silence and her prescription to speak is still very much in line with the conventional trauma model. Without moving beyond the binary in which speaking (here synonymous with healing) is privileged over silence (here synonymous with trauma), Mandel is bound to think of silence/trauma only as the antithesis of speaking/healing. In this model, all silence is effectively reduced to an impenetrable abyss that must be overcome, while the act of speaking, or inscribing one’s trauma into language, is always privileged as something cathartic and sought after. But whether this conceptualisation is theoretically sound is questionable. In *The Language of Silence*, Leslie Kane poetically elucidates some of the many meanings and functions that silence bears:

The dumb silence of apathy, the sober silence of solemnity, the fertile silence of awareness, the active silence of perception, the baffled silence of confusion, the uneasy silence of impasse, the muzzled silence of outrage, the expectant silence of waiting, the reproachful silence of censure, the tacit silence of approval, the vituperative silence of menace, the peaceful silence of communion, and the irrevocable silence of death...¹³

Even though this taxonomy of silence illustrates many instances of experience in which we respond without words, we typically do not conflate them. Instead, each instance of silence is given meaning through an interpretation of the specific context in which it is observed. Likewise, within the discourse of literary trauma theory, the silence of the traumatised being—the immutable silence of trauma—does not unequivocally point to the absence of a voice. Rather, to borrow the words of Harald Knutson

13. Leslie Kane, *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1984), 15.

and Aslaug Kristiansen, silence has the potential to be heard, and even understood “with an adequate level of precision when context is considered, for context is the map on which the phenomenon will be understood.” As they continue,

The manifestation of silence in and of itself is so rich and has so many “voices” that context is crucial to its understanding. By reducing the universe of contexts and focusing on the few probable ones, the level of precision for understanding silence is heightened.¹⁴

Contrary to Mandel’s proposition that the only ethical or palliative response to traumatic silence is to “speak” of it—or to find a way, however circuitously, to wrest speech from a survivor—Knutson and Kristiansen’s taxonomy reminds us that language can first serve a more efficacious function for the observer: namely, to make plain the context surrounding the traumatised’s silence. Characterising silence in more than two ways allows us to interpret and understand silence in a way that might better preserve the singularity of the survivor’s traumatic experience. Indeed, acknowledging that silence may have many meanings is precisely what the conventional conceptualisation of trauma renders unrecognisable; the simplistic binary of “speaking is good/silence is bad” does not account for the fact that not all silence from a traumatised subject is traumatic silence, and, *mutatis mutandis*, not all silence is something detrimental to be overcome. In other words, the conventional reading of silence prevents us from acknowledging that, in specific contexts, some silences may be “speaking silences” necessary for healing and restoration, whereas others may be different to these. Conceptualising silence as something that, in its unique context, can and should “speak for itself” would allow critics of literary trauma to perceive silence in more imaginative and complex ways, and to avoid the act of effacement that comes with turning all silences into static examples of language and narration.

While in Morrison’s *Beloved*, time and space afford Sethe the ability to address her traumatic experiences, in Michael

14. Harald Victor Knutson and Aslaug Kristiansen, “Varieties of Silence: Understanding Different Form and Functions of Silence in a Psychotherapeutic Setting,” *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 51, no. 1 (2015): 4–5.

Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, the characters do not share this same privilege.¹⁵ Instead, they are situated in the thick of the Sri Lankan civil war—a war infamous for the fact that it forced a minority group, the Tamils, into implacable silence. In the context of this conflict, the characters' traumas remain too raw and their external world too volatile for them to talk about their pain safely; indeed, these figures have no choice but to remain in silence to survive. The stark contrast between the world of *Anil's Ghost* and that which Sethe inhabits is marked, highlighting the fact that no two traumatic contexts are the same and underscoring the need for a more nuanced treatment of silence in theories of trauma recovery and restoration that can accommodate these marked differences.

In 1983, the longstanding tension in Sri Lanka between the Sinhalese (predominantly Buddhist) and Tamils (predominantly Hindu) had reached its peak. For decades, the Sinhalese had “resented what they saw as British favouritism to the Tamils under colonial rule,” where colonial policies “privileged a Tamil ‘minority’ at the expense of a Sinhalese ‘majority.’”¹⁶ When Sri Lanka finally attained independence, the Sinhalese-led government adopted a series of policies and imposed several laws that elevated the status of the Buddhists and Sinhalese but oppressed the Tamil minority. As the human rights scholars and art historians Caroline Turner and John Webb note, the Tamils “had long protested against the laws that effectively discriminated against them in respect of entry to higher education and public service.”¹⁷ Their protests ultimately transformed into a violent uprising in 1983 when the armed Tamil national resistance, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), killed thirteen Sri Lankan soldiers.¹⁸ The state responded violently, and reacted with “acts of genocide against ordinary Tamil citizens,” catalysing an “endless cycle of violence and more violence” as both the state and LTTE continued to war and

15. Michael Ondaatje, *Anil's Ghost* (London: Vintage, 2011). All subsequent citations to this novel will be given in the text of this essay in parentheses.

16. Julie McGonegal, *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 83, 89.

17. Caroline Turner and Jenn Webb, *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 83.

18. *Ibid.*

retaliate without restraint.¹⁹ In this conflict, the “vehemence of these two nationalisms” and both factions’ “incompatibility and unwillingness to compromise” ensnared them in a civil war that would claim over 100,000 civilian lives by its end in 2009.²⁰

With this state of violence as its backdrop, *Anil’s Ghost* focuses on the impact of the war on the Sri Lankan civilians. The act of demonstrating “public sorrow” against the war, however, was unthinkable, with fathers fearing that the act of protesting a child’s death would lead to further deaths in his family (52). For “if people you knew disappeared, there was a chance they might stay alive if you did not cause trouble” (52). In this state of civil war, language—typically a means of creating and demonstrating a shared sense of identity and belonging within families—is now the same thing that could destroy the family. This subversion of language and family caused extreme trauma—“a scarring psychosis”—in which the loss of the familiar created deep pockets of silence, spaces now emptied of language and its attendant bonds (52). The violent context of the civil war and the trauma it induces in *Anil’s Ghost’s* characters, make it untenable for them to speak. In order to represent the survivor’s traumatic experience, the novel both thematises and performs the process in which one becomes a witness who listens to silence without dragging it prematurely into the realm of language. The novel allows readers to witness the growth of its primary focaliser, Anil, as she develops acute insights into the importance of context for apprehending and understanding silence. As she becomes more observant of the Sri Lankans, Anil discovers that, far from saying nothing through their silence, these figures’ non-verbal gestures constitute another form of speaking. As she develops a greater appreciation of the context in which these silent characters live, Anil (and the reader) learns how to decode the language of their touch. In this way, Ondaatje’s novel demonstrates fiction’s capacity to do more than merely represent trauma as unspeakable. It also reveals the

19. McGonegal, *Imagining Justice*, 90.

20. *Ibid.*

way in which language may be used to trace the different realities, cultural contexts, and worlds of trauma, thus giving trauma's seemingly insurmountable silences a comprehensible shape.

Tears and Touch: Shaping a Witness Who Sees

Anil is a Sri Lankan woman who has spent most of her adulthood working in the West as a forensic scientist; she carries herself aloofly, proud that when she meets a guarded person who seems closed off, “she could close down too” (28). For Anil, silence is a choice—it is a romanticised form of power and control, and a defence mechanism through which she may protect herself from rejection. However, as Anil returns to Sri Lanka as part of a United Nations' Human Rights Investigation to examine the increasing number of civilian deaths in the civil war, she is thrust into a context in which silence is a consequence of more tragic causes. Here she discovers the silence of survival (Sarath), the silence of a political death (Sailor), and the silence of trauma (Ananda). But for someone who perceives herself to be in control, as well as a person who, as a forensic scientist, unearths the dead's “secrets,” Anil is unprepared for the impenetrable and frustrating silence of those she meets in Sri Lanka—a silence that refuses to yield to her investigations.

Initially, Anil insists on imposing her pre-existing framework of silence onto Sri Lankan culture, an approach that impedes her ability to recognise the precarious context in which the civilians are forced to exist. During an excavation job at her first dig site, Anil and her coworker, a local named Sarath, discover four skeletons. They name them “TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SAILOR” (51). Anil observes that the first three bodies are from the sixth century, but records that the bones of the fourth body, Sailor's, “were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned” (50). Anil immediately deduces that Sailor's death was a recent one. She attempts to persuade

Sarath of her theory by using her geological knowledge:

Listen . . . there are traces of lead all over him. But there is no lead in this cave where we found him, the soil samples show none. . . . This is no ordinary murder or burial. They buried him, then later moved him to an older gravesite (51).

And yet, despite Anil's reasoning, Sarath's responses to the theory are by turns non-committal ("burying a body and then moving it is not necessarily a crime") and evasive ("Do you mean any murder . . . or do you mean political murder?") (51). Anil cannot understand why Sarath is deliberately obtuse and sceptical in the face of clear evidence of the body's relocation. Frustrated, Anil repeats her points "firmly," hoping to elicit Sarath's agreement. "It was buried no more than four to six years ago," she says. "What's it doing here? . . . I have to show you something. . . . *this thing. Listen.*" (52). But Sarath only deflects her questions once more.

Anil's demanding inquiries reveal the way that, as a scientist, she is used to pursuing the truth and drawing factual conclusions, no matter the implications. Indeed, in this context, Anil's detection of the potential injustice of the situation seems only to intensify her determination to discover the truth. However, Anil does not realise the contextual difference between working in the West and working in a country beleaguered by civil war. As such, she cannot understand why Sarath refuses to acknowledge the merit of her logical hypothesis. Instead, Sarath immediately recognises the danger in what they have discovered, and tries to dissuade Anil from drawing conclusions by delaying his answers with subtle digressions, perhaps hoping she will recognise his caution without him having to spell it out. But Anil's repetition of the word "*Listen*" as she tries to persuade Sarath of her theory only highlights her own deafness. It also underlines the fact that *she* is the one not listening to what Sarath is suggesting—not with his words but with his silence and subtle cues. After all, using explicit language to speak to injustice will not work in

the context of this country. Hence, in order to construct stories about the death and pain in this new world, Anil must reconstruct the way she gathers and presents her data. Henceforth, the purpose of Anil's journey will be as much about learning a new language as about discovering the truth of the skeleton's story.

After this episode, Anil's story reaches a turning point, when she is forced to work with a man completely inaccessible to her. As Anil and Sarath endeavour to identify the skeleton's identity, Sarath's former mentor, Palipana, refers them to an artificer who is said to be capable of recreating the unknown figure's face from its skull. Palipana explains that the artificer, Ananda, used to be one of the most renowned professionals in the country, someone who performed the sacred rites of the Nētra Mangala and painted the eyes of several 40-foot-tall Buddha statues. But, much to her disconcertion, Anil discovers that, after "a tragedy in his life," Ananda now "works in the gem pits" and has become such a heavy drinker that "it is not safe to be with him underground" (104). The fact that both Ananda and Anil cannot communicate in the same language adds to her wariness of him. His silence prevents her from using her preferred strategy of communicating—interrogating people about their work methods, as she interrogated Sarath in order to understand what he is trying to accomplish—and leads to her frustration.

Now with two silent mysteries to decode—that of Sailor the skeleton and Ananda—Anil begins to rely on her eyes more than her words to find answers. For the forensic scientist, Sailor proves to be the less complex mystery of the two. She describes her initial examination of the skeleton as "her reading of [his] bones," as though the figure is an "open book" with an easily discernible narrative (173). Her knowledge of the body and its functions gives her a thorough understanding of the causality of damage to the organism: how external activity has clear effects on the body. She recognises that the "agility"

of the skeleton's "pelvis, trunk and legs" indicates a "swivel of a man on a trampoline" (178). And Anil's highly-trained eye is able to both identify how this man's pelvis differs from the norm—it is hypermobile and more agile than usual—and infer the movement that is likely to have shaped his bones in this particular way. As she steps back from her initial, emotion-laden response to the injustice of Sailor's murder and forward into her position as a scientist, Anil establishes the necessary distance to see what Sailor's body, without words, is telling her.

Anil eventually begins to transfer these skills of observation onto the other subject of mystery: Ananda. As she watches the artificer sculpt Sailor's possible face, the narrative style shifts to reflect the scientific and objective manner in which she observes Sailor's bones:

He had marked several pins with red paint to represent the various thickness of the flesh over the bone, and then placed a thin layer of plasticine on the skull, thinning or thickening it according to the marks on the pins. Eventually he would press finer layers of rubber eraser onto the clay to build the face. Collaged this way with various household objects it would look like a five-and-dime monster. . . . When Ananda could go no further with the skull's reconstruction, he took it all apart, breaking up the clay. Strangely. It seemed like a waste of time to her. But early the next morning he would know the precise thickness and texture to return to and could re-create the previous day's work in twenty minutes (163–67).

Using little figurative language, Anil's description reflects the foreignness of Ananda's silent process. She does not compare the partially sculpted face to something human, nor anthropomorphise the face into something it is not. Instead, Anil's only metaphorical gesture is to compare the emerging face to a "five-and-dime monster," which does little to make it more comprehensible (168). Figurative language typically juxtaposes something known with something unknown so that the characteristics of the known provide a lens through which the unknown can be demystified. Yet in this instance, the figurative comparison only succeeds in emphasising the extent to which Ananda's process is unknowable, both to

Anil and the reader. It is far easier to imagine a partially sculpted face with various fragments of plasticine stuck to it than to picture a monster purchased at a bargain store. Thus, this unlikely metaphor suggests Anil's dissociation: in the sculpting process, she witnesses something so foreign that almost nothing in her broader epistemology, her wider frame of reference, can be likened to the scene. And when Anil witnesses this strange, "monstrous" process, she begins to see precisely what it is she does not know.

Anil's first experience of Ananda's silence is the result of the language barrier that divides them. Although their silence is unintentional, then, Anil's mute interaction with Ananda illustrates three key principles for bearing witness to another's traumatic silence in an ethical manner.²¹ First, since Anil and Ananda literally do not speak the same language, Anil must rely on cues rather than words to understand him. It is in this same way that witnesses expand their capacity to "read" a trauma survivor—by paying attention not just to what the survivor says but the manner in which they say it. Non-verbal language is, after all, a critical part of a survivor's narrative, testifying at times to the aspects that he or she struggles to express in words. Second, since Anil has no pre-existing frame of reference with which to conceptualise Ananda's working methods, she must observe his patterns and context carefully to make sense of his actions. The narrative style thus reflects Ananda's resistance to Anil's linguistic organisation of his work—his will that she should not "speak for" his process or impute her meaning into the sculpted head. After all, Anil has no way of knowing what his work is. Although Anil can do no other, her posture of deference to Ananda illustrates the way in which a deferential encounter with the trauma survivor's inner world is a way to meet him on his own terms. Third, without the ability to communicate verbally, Anil cannot urge Ananda to do things according to her schedule—to stop "wasting time," for instance, in

21. See Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (eds.), *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80–92.

making, breaking up and remaking the face. Instead, she must let him go through the process of creation on his own terms and at his own pace. This illustrates the principle in which witnesses should respect the nature of the process and the time a survivor requires to work through their trauma and not uncritically prescribe a recovery method or restoration schedule. As it happens, Anil's inability to take control of Ananda's work is fortunate, as Ananda is trapped in a circuitous bout of traumatic silence. As Debra Jackson succinctly explains, such a silence may reflect a trap in which the temporal discontinuity of past and present must be resolved:

When a traumatic event occurs, the full realisation of its impact is not immediately accessible. Instead, there is a period of latency between the time of the traumatising event and the full emotional impact of the event. This belatedness . . . traps the survivor in a cycle of repetitions and re-enactments that make the traumatic event contemporaneous with the present.²²

Ananda's sculpting—which consists of compulsive, repetitive acts of making and breaking up the face—testifies to the nature of his traumatic silence, which hides in plain sight. Tasked with collaborating with the artificer, Anil adopts the position of the observant witness, and tries to overcome their language barrier that divides her and Ananda. And it is this very turn of events that affords Ananda the potential to transform his traumatic silence into what may be called a “speaking silence.”

Having taken a step back so that she can make thorough, objective observations of Ananda's conduct, Anil then moves “closer” to the situation by asking questions—questions through which she seeks to “fill in” her missing contextual knowledge. When Ananda finally completes his protracted sculpting process, Anil discovers his achievement: he has created a head so well-crafted that it “was not just how someone possibly looked” but a real and recognisable identity—“a specific person” (180). As Anil reflects, “It revealed a distinct personality, as real as the head of Sarath” (180). Anil identifies an aura of peacefulness in the

22. Debra Jackson, “Answering the Call: Crisis Intervention and Rape Survivor Advocacy as Witnessing Trauma,” in *Critical Trauma Studies: Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life*, eds. Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 206–207.

face—“a serenity in the face she did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself” (180). It is evident to Anil that Ananda possesses the skill and potential to deliver what her investigation requires: a lifelike representation of Sailor’s face that can be used to identify his body. But Anil lacks knowledge of Ananda’s background, and this ignorance stops her realising what is immediately apparent to Sarath: that the peacefulness of the face is not commendable or helpful but is precisely “the trouble” with it (180). When Sarath objects to the sculpture, Anil reacts with newfound curiosity and assertiveness. In this context, her willingness to ask Sarath “What do you mean?” (180) marks a change; she is no longer the “[closed] down” woman Sarath met at the start of the novel (28). Rather than being uninterested in what Sarath has to say, Anil is now willing to immerse herself in the difficulties of this new space, and is now committed to understanding the nuances of Sri Lankan culture. Sarath obliges to Anil’s request, explaining to her that, in the last few years, the Sri Lankan civilians had “seen so many heads stuck on poles here” that they had become commonplace; nevertheless, families would care for these heads, often taking them home in their arms, “wrapping them in their shirts or just cradling them” (180). As Anil learns, however, Ananda did not have the “privilege” of retrieving the head of his wife, Sirissa; she had “simply disappeared and there was no sighting or evidence of [her] existence or [her] death” (180). After three years, Sarath explains, Ananda “still hasn’t found her. He was not always like this. The head he has made is therefore peaceful” (180). As it turns out, then, the sculpted head is not a reflection of his artificer’s skills; it is, rather, a work that reflects his heart’s deepest needs.

Anil’s willingness to include Sarath in her investigation draws her closer to the heart of the story and opens her eyes to “see” something that was not previously apparent to her. Even though the sculpted head is not the “truth”

that Anil looks for—the face of the man who could be Sailor—she sees something in it that is significant: it is a face representing the ones who have disappeared. When Anil learns of Ananda’s story, she is affected deeply: she “could no longer look at the face, [and] saw only Ananda’s wife in every aspect of it,” and before long, she “began weeping” (180). The objective gaze of Anil the scientist is replaced here with a different kind of scopic regime, one defined by a kind of imploring blindness. As Jacques Derrida wrote of this kind of vision in his *Memoirs of the Blind*, to see in this way has always been a part of the eye’s destiny:

Deep down, deep down inside, the eye would be destined not to see but to weep. . . . The blindness that reveals the very truth of the eyes would be the gaze veiled by tears. It neither sees nor does not see: it is indifferent to its blurred vision. It implores: first of all in order to know from where these tears stream down and from whose eyes they come to well up.²³

While Anil’s objective gaze allowed her to apprehend her subjects at a distance and remain an outsider, partly indifferent to the ramifications of the civil war, her tears now signify an emotional response: Anil has allowed the story to touch her. Significantly, when Ananda sees Anil’s tears, he responds in a silent but meaningful way, “creas[ing] away the pain around her eye along with her tears’ wetness [and] knead[ing] the skin of that imploded tension of weeping as if hers too was a face being sculpted” (183). If the cold, impervious gaze of the forensic scientist is seen through eyes that, like those of a sculpture, are, as Derrida writes, “always closed,” “walled up,” or “turned inward, more dead than alive, scared stiff, more than the eyes of masks,” then Anil’s tears represent the instant in which these “dead eyes” crack open and bring her into commune with her humanness.²⁴ The intimacy of Ananda’s touch “sculpts” her into life, alerting her to the life—not the death—before her. In seeing the world beyond her own experience and witnessing the pain of another, Anil finally recognises that “it was not a reconstruction of Sailor’s face they were looking at” but a face of Ananda’s grief (180).

23. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins*, tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 126–27.

24. *Ibid.*, 44.

Repetition and Touch: Shaping a Narrative that Speaks

In *Anil's Ghost*, the trope of touch underlines the importance of “seeing” the hidden story not immediately obvious to the gaze. And unlike the gaze, touch requires a certain closeness with the subject. As a forensic scientist, Anil’s discoveries are born of her scopic observations. However, it is not only visual observation that gives Anil new insight into the subjects of her inquiries. When Anil observes Sailor’s heel bones and left leg, which was “broken badly in two places,” she recognises something unforeseen about Sailor, who she had previously considered an active, working man. As she discovers, Sailor’s bone characteristics indicate “an alternate profile completely, a man static and sedentary” (174). Initially, Anil does not have enough contextual knowledge to make sense of this inconsistency—this particular “silence” in Sailor’s story. But, quite by chance, Anil soon notices Ananda squatting while he works. She asks to touch his heel to test her hunch that Sailor may have worked in a similar posture. In response, Ananda tells Sarath that “he got used to squatting in the gem mines” where he worked (175). This is just the piece of information Anil needs, as it allows her to conclude that “under his flesh,” Ananda has the same “strictures on the ankle bones of the skeleton” as Sailor, which in turn indicates that, like Ananda, “Sailor worked in one of the mines” (176). Here, Anil’s precise observations about the effects of crouching on Sailor’s body are guided by the tactile data collected by her hands, unravelling part of the mystery of Sailor. If distant observation allows Anil to identify signifiers with unknown signifieds, then it is the intimacy of touch that narrows the meaning of these signs to only a few logical possibilities. Having thus “filled in the blanks,” Anil tells Sarath “we have a story about him, you see.” He was “a man who was active, an acrobat almost, then he was injured and had to work in a mine” (176). Sailor’s silence

thus “speaks” when Anil’s touch confirms what her eyes have already suspected, allowing her to “hear” an account of his story.

Although Anil decodes Sailor’s silence, when she abandons her own working hypotheses about Ananda’s silence, she shifts the responsibility of listening to him to readers. Thus, the novel deploys a narrative strategy in which it sutures its readers to Anil’s perspective so that we do not see or know anything else but what she allows us to. In this way, readers experience the challenge of piecing together a context from the handful of observations that Anil conveys to us. First, we know that Anil has watched Ananda enough to notice specific repetitions in his behaviour; second, we know that these repetitions have allowed him to produce a beautiful work of art; but third, we know that the very beauty of this artwork has tormented him, leading to his suicide attempt. As discrete narrative points, none of these observations can yield any significant meaning. But as these observations are lined up next to one another, the specific combination of information gives shape to what Ananda cannot say. His silence is no longer an infinite, unexplainable chasm but is sutured together through the links that connect these otherwise disparate observations.

The gathering of information via touch proves to be as crucial for Ananda as for Anil. Unable to comprehend the disappearance of his wife, Ananda remains blinded to the full causality and narrative of his internal chaos. In their research about trauma restoration through clay therapy, Cornelia Elbrecht and Liz R. Antcliff take their cue from psychologists Peter Levine and Maggie Kline, who argue that “it is not the gravity of the event that defines trauma, but the level of experienced helplessness.”²⁵ For Elbrecht and Antcliff, trauma is a situation that renders an individual so helpless that their central nervous system remains in fight-or-flight mode, and is thus “thwarted” from being “switched off.”²⁶ In this context, the traumatised subject’s helplessness is so overwhelming that their body perceives the threat as ongoing. As

25. Cornelia Elbrecht and Liz R. Antcliff, “Being Touched through Touch: Trauma Treatment through Haptic Perception at the Clay Field, A Sensorimotor Art Therapy,” *International Journal of Art Therapy* 19, no. 1 (2014): 21.

26. *Ibid.*

a result, their body locks itself into a perpetual survival mode and experiences “hyper arousal, hyper vigilance, and emotional and somatic numbing”—even more so when triggered by subsequent events that recall this initial helplessness.²⁷ Elbrecht and Antcliff’s research provides a lens through which to analyse Ananda. When tasked with sculpting the face of a murdered man so that his family might be able to identify him—a family that would have endured the same experience of having a loved one disappear—Ananda is triggered to “see” the pain and helplessness of his own loss again. The magnitude of his pain impedes his ability to sculpt objectively, blurring the line between his loss and that of Sailor’s family. Presumably, Ananda too wants the chance to identify her face from a sculpture.

If his commission to sculpt a missing person’s face is a traumatic trigger, the process of sculpting is arguably what brings him closer to his “restoration.” For Elbrecht and Antcliff, trauma restoration is not so much about “remembering what happened” as about enabling the body to find a way to complete the thwarted fight-or-flight impulse.²⁸ As they propose, a successful completion of the fight-or-flight response “resets the structures within the brain,” establishing a process in which “individuals can move from survival to living.”²⁹ Given that, as they write, “hands driven by the innate memory are more concerned with creating and recreating implicit memories rather than the recall of specific trauma events,” Elbrecht and Antcliff conclude that working with clay has the potential to help the traumatised subject “complete unfinished action cycles that were interrupted through dissociation during the traumatic event.”³⁰ Moreover, through actions like sculpting and manipulating clay, traumatised subjects “discover physical impulses and options that they had abandoned for the sake of survival during the trauma.”³¹ In other words, this tactile process allows traumatised subjects to convey what has not been completely expressed during the traumatic

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 22.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

situation, and “what happened [to them] is *told by the hands* through the present moment experience of touch in the Clay Field, rather than through cognitive recall of memories.”³² For Ananda, who is denied even the ability to “cradle” the beheaded skull of his wife (180), the repeated sculpting of a head becomes his way of “speaking” about the insurmountable difficulty of never discovering her whereabouts. The extent of Ananda’s helplessness manifests itself in the sculpture, which reflects the fact that his wife is always just out of his grasp: in shaping her face, he re-enacts the multiple times in which he appears to be close to finding her; in breaking up the face, he re-enacts the time his hopes have been dashed.

If touch is a way for a witness to see, it is also a way for a trauma survivor to speak. Significantly, each of Ananda’s attempts to sculpt is not a pointless repetition that leaves him stuck in the same place from which he started. He could always “recreate the previous day’s work in twenty minutes,” could proceed onwards from the beginning before destroying his work again (163). Ananda does not engage in merely the blind repetition of *acting out* one’s trauma, where one is, as LaCapra notes, “performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop.”³³ Rather, Ananda’s repetitions, each with a difference, constitute a process of *working through* his trauma. The process echoes the Freudian “talking cure,” in which, as Hanna Pickard notes, patients are urged to “re-live the trauma in the presence of the therapist, who actively encourages and helps them to put the experience into words” so as to “promote the elaboration and temporal contextualisation of the trauma memory.”³⁴ In every attempt to tell the story, even minor additions and amendments represent an advancement towards the production of something more complete. By externalising the story, Pickard writes, and by “creating a clear, coherent, and temporally ordered narrative of the traumatic event,” patients are thought

32. *Ibid.*
(Emphasis mine.)

33. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 21.

34. Hanna Pickard, “Stories of Recovery: The Role of Narrative and Hope in Overcoming PTSD and PD,” *The Oxford Handbook of Psychiatric Ethics*, eds. John Z. Sadler, K. W. M. Fulford and Cornelius Werendly van Staden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5.

to better recognise how their memories may be “integrated into [their] life story.”³⁵ Thus, as Ananda’s hands speak for him, they also form a clearer picture of his loss. In sculpting the face in fits and starts, his hands become like those of someone who cannot see; for, as Derrida writes, the hand of the blind man “feels its way, it gropes, it caresses as much as it inscribes, trusting in the memory of signs and supplementing sight.”³⁶ The haptic sensation of a hand caressing clay, beholding what it touches, “speaks” of the wife whose loss Ananda cannot bear, affording him a way to tenderly apprehend her memory. There is a comfort in this manner of speaking, as the time it takes to sculpt a face also allows Ananda to get used to thinking of her, helping him to honour her memory without turning away in guilt or despair.

Although the practice of sculpting finally steadies Ananda’s emotions, allowing him to confront the significance of his loss, it is notable that trauma survivors often resist working through their grief. As LaCapra writes,

In working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. One’s bond with the dead... may invest trauma with value and makes its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound.³⁷

Although Ananda is bound to relive and commemorate the loss of his wife, his achievement of narrative closure, which occurs when he completes what Elbrecht and Antcliff call the “unfinished action cycles” that are “interrupted through dissociation during the traumatic event,” comes at a considerable cost to him.³⁸ Through crystallising his narrative and thus giving shape to a void, Ananda inevitably also acknowledges that his wife is gone for good. Ananda’s completed sculpture, which recreates the three-dimensional presence of his lost wife, constitutes the closest thing to her real presence—and the process of creating the sculpture constitutes the closest thing to bringing her back into his life. Yet, the

35. Ibid.

36. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 3.

37. LaCapra, *Writing History*, 21–22.

38. Elbrecht and Antcliff, “Being Touched Through Touch,” 24.

verisimilitude of this artform, which is *almost* lifelike, only reinforces what it is certainly not: the face and body of his wife. Once complete, Ananda's recognition of the sculpture's difference from his lost wife is crushing; it proves too much for him to handle, and leads him to try and take his own life that very evening (191).

Like the anomalous, tell-tale signs on Sailor's bones, which need the eye of a trained forensic scientist to identify their presence and meaning, both Ananda's silent sculpting and his suicide attempt can only be "heard" in the presence of a witness. Anil finds Ananda "trying with what energy he had left to stab himself in the throat" (191)—a haunting image of traumatic silence struggling to cry out. And Anil's presence as Ananda's witness literally saves his life, as she applies pressure to the wound in his neck. As she does so, Anil notices that "his eyes were wide open" and "seemed to be swallowing everything"; as Ananda was not wearing his spectacles, "he couldn't see" (193). She quickly puts them back on his face, allowing his eyes to focus on her, and "suddenly . . . he seemed to be back with her, among the living" (193). Like the therapist who, on listening to a patient's story multiple times, notices recurring patterns and themes that the patient is unable to see, Anil gives Ananda his sight back when she returns his spectacles to his face.³⁹ Portraying Ananda as a trauma survivor who has seen too much pain, the novel suggests that the touch of a witness is what both keeps a survivor grounded in the present and prevents them from being overwhelmed by the past.

* * *

Anil's Ghost exemplifies the way in which contemporary trauma fiction invents and imagines new ways to think and speak about trauma. But the novel also illustrates how literature can be respectful of the deep struggle that is involved in working through one's trauma. In their excavation work, Anil and

39. Pickard, "Stories of Recovery," 5.

Sarath may have named the dead bodies that they found “TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER, SAILOR” (51)—generic names from a children’s ditty that are “representative of all the lost voices” (56)—and work hard to discover Sailor’s story in an effort to bring justice to the victims of the civil war. However, these characters (and the novel) omit the other names that follow in the ditty. Thus, the absence, but alluded presence, of the names “rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief” signifies the names that have not yet been given to the bodies that have not yet been found—and the stories that are yet to be told. One cannot claim that the novel proposes a manner in which storytelling can restore the traumatised; after all, by leaving some things just out of the reader’s grasp, the novel prevents one from asserting that they have understood its silence perfectly. Nevertheless, the many depictions of touch that are woven into the novel remind us, as Karen Mackendrick writes, that “touch is language without resolution.”⁴⁰ And, as she continues, “the knowledge given to us by touch is always partial, and passes over, and returns. . . . It always leaves more to be desired.”⁴¹ In the same way, a fictive representation of a traumatic event is just that—fictive; it too always leaves us desiring more of the knowledge it gives to us. And yet, trauma fiction does offers us something: a brush with, or glimpse of, an emotional world we will never fully comprehend. As such, it is a world that calls for our continual attention.

40. Karmen Mackendrick, *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 65.

41. *Ibid.*, 52.

