

Haunting Encounters: The Ethics of Global Reading

by

Joanne Lipson Freed

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Dissertation Committee:

Associate Professor Joshua L. Miller, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Jennifer A. Wenzel, Co-Chair
Professor Michael Awkward
Assistant Professor Amy Sara Carroll

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Dedication

To James, who has shared it all

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

In this dissertation, the term “haunting” describes not just an experience of the supernatural, but a wide range of encounters that are uncanny or unsettling, in which unacknowledged connections and enduring differences come—often urgently—to the fore. Recent U.S. and postcolonial literature is replete with such hauntings, both literal encounters with embodied specters and metaphorical contacts with the ghostly presence of the past or future. In the texts I consider, the depictions of haunting function as compelling literary devices, but the encounters across difference that they describe also provide a model for understanding the ways that they engage their readers, especially readers who approach the works from the position of cultural outsiders. Informed by theories of poststructuralist ethics, I argue that such encounters can give rise to forms of profound mutual implication that are founded on, rather than diminished by, difference and imperfect understanding, and that in doing so, they provide a model for the study of world literature. Despite their locations within distinct national and ethnic canons, the U.S. and postcolonial texts I consider *become* world literature through the reading positions they construct, inviting readers to take responsibility for the stories they tell, but also marking the limits of readers’ imaginative access.

The comparative readings in each chapter of “Haunting Encounters” reveal the similar strategies that U.S. and postcolonial texts employ to engage distant readers and draw them into the fictional worlds they create. Juxtaposing texts drawn from very different cultural and historical contexts, these comparisons also work to dislocate

positions of readerly authority based on insider knowledge or acquired expertise, and provide a model of reading that reflects the emergence of new readers, new contacts, and new routes of circulation in our contemporary global moment. Through this comparative methodology, “Haunting Encounters” offers a definition of world literature based not on the national or cultural location of a given text or its author, but rather on the capaciousness of that text’s address to its readers.

Introduction

This dissertation emerged out of my own curiosity about the surprising number and diversity of texts in both recent U.S. ethnic literature and postcolonial literature that take up haunting as their central theme. The liminal and the supernatural seem at first glance to be surprising subjects for these authors, writing in cultural contexts and literary traditions firmly rooted in the generic conventions of contemporary realism. Many of these texts address topics with concrete, urgent political stakes—racism, anti-imperialism, indigenous land rights, political persecution—that seem to run counter to the experiences of imaginative extension and suspension of disbelief that depictions of haunting require from their rationalistic readers. How, then, do the thematics of haunting serve these authors' political and aesthetic purposes, and what does haunting allow them to accomplish?

In these texts, time and space are rendered out-of-joint in a way that productively undermines certainties about the here-and-now. In *Beloved*, the ghost that haunts Sethe and her family is at once both young and old, and the system of slavery that the ghost represents, although officially a thing of the past, remains very much alive. In Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, the jungles of the Pacific literally come home to the reservation with Native American veterans of World War II, the boundaries between them collapsed by the logic of American imperialism. In writing *Anil's Ghost*, Michael Ondaatje provides international readers with a portrait of Sri Lanka's civil war that is both distinctive and universal, creating a space that is at once everywhere and nowhere.

And in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ayi Kwei Armah depicts his own present moment as the intersection of the past's failed vision and the future's elusive promise. In different ways and different contexts, these texts ask a similar set of questions: What does it mean for conflicting temporalities—for instance, Western modernity and indigenous cultural memory—to overlap with one another? And what possibilities, both exciting and troubling, are opened up when spaces such as the nation, the reservation, the village, or the home become increasingly permeable? These defining questions, equally central to both U.S. ethnic literature and postcolonial literature, distinguish these fields from other contemporary literature and place them in productive conversation with one another.

By using haunting to construct comparisons across these two bodies of literature, I hope to draw out the fundamental and significant similarities between them. Haunting is not only a theme in these works, but also a shared set of formal strategies which allow them to engage their readers in profound and personal ways. Unlike canonical texts addressed to supposedly homogenous audiences and shaped by ostensibly universal standards of value, works of ethnic and postcolonial literature have never been safe in such assumptions. Addressing audiences at the margins, these texts are already engaged in cultural contestations in the effort to claim voice, identity, sovereignty, or equality. And addressing international or cross-cultural audiences, they are subject to the pressures of a majoritarian literary marketplace, which either ignores or fetishizes the “difference” they represent. The logic and language of haunting allows these texts to respond to the problematics of their circulation and reception.

Haunting has the power to make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange, and in the hands of these authors, it provides a means of managing ethical engagement and

imaginative access of diverse global readerships. These works of fiction not only *depict hauntings*, but strive to *haunt their readers* through formal strategies like magical realism, traumatic narrative, and utopian vision that resist readers' efforts to distance themselves from the stories that confront them. By drawing readers in affectively and imaginatively, these works insist that the problems and questions they raise cannot be contained within their fictional frames, in a way that echoes the immediacy and intensity of being “possessed” by a ghost or specter. But they also, simultaneously, mark the limits of the knowledge or insight that can be gained by reading a work of fiction. Like hauntings, which are risky and always temporary, these texts do not allow their readers easy or comfortable access to the worlds they depict. This set of strategies responds to the position that U.S. and postcolonial texts occupy relative to the multiple audiences that read them, audiences made up of both cultural insiders and cultural outsiders, whose acts of reading reflect their distinct contexts and differential positions of power. Although the authors I consider may not conceive of their writing as works of “world literature,” I argue that the mode in which they write is perfectly suited to our contemporary global moment. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, the reading position these texts construct—one which is broadly and deeply responsible, yet alert to and respectful of enduring forms of difference—offers a model for traversing the ever-growing diversity of our contemporary literary landscape.

Theoretical Encounters

In the texts I consider, haunting takes a range of forms, both literal and metaphorical. Both Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) and Mahasweta Devi (“Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha”) imagine embodied ghosts or specters whose impossible appearance

challenges rational definitions of the here-and-now. For Leslie Marmon Silko (*Ceremony*) and Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*), the past itself becomes a haunting presence that disrupts our notions of temporality and influences the production of historical memory in the present. Michael Ondaatje (*Anil's Ghost*) and Costa-Gavras (*Missing*) grapple with the present absence of the “disappeared,” who haunt society and public discourse through their highly visible erasure. And for Ayi Kwei Armah (*The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*) and Don DeLillo (*Falling Man*) it is the possibility of a different and unrecognizable future itself that haunts the dismal present. These hauntings all represent encounters across difference—metaphysical, temporal, and interpersonal—that are profoundly unsettling for those involved and which, perhaps most importantly, carry profound political and ethical stakes.

The intense, imperfect encounters across difference in these texts resonate with the kind of relationship philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes, in which the encounter between the self and the other becomes the constitutive site of ethical responsibility. Levinas’s definition of “difference” is broadly inclusive, encompassing not only the difference that separates any individual from another, but also the radical alterity of God, death, and knowledge. In the context of the specific, situated, and politicized “differences” these novels depict, the capaciousness of Levinas’s definition risks effacing the forms of power that define such inevitably asymmetrical relationships. But the inclusiveness of this definition also offers a valuable counterpoint. By emphasizing difference as the constitutive condition of *any* encounter with another, Levinas theorizes an ethics of the encounter that is powerful and *a priori*, and it is the forcefulness of this ethical claim that I draw on here. Taking Levinas’s model of the ethical encounter as a

challenge, I suggest, can help us imagine how encounters across difference—both within literary texts, and beyond them—might take place on a more equal footing.

For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter with the other gives rise to an ethical responsibility derived not from one’s ability to know or understand the other, but instead from the very difference that makes any other person separate and distinct from oneself and therefore, in his terms, “radically other” (64). This difference requires one to reach out and address the other, and the result is a reciprocal relationship grounded in the moral force of not-knowing. Most importantly, for Levinas, the obligation to address the other and enter into dialogue is *neither enabled by, nor undertaken in service of*, gaining complete or perfect knowledge of the other. Instead, it is the very fact that the other remains fundamentally different from oneself—and therefore unknowable—that is the source of one’s responsibility. This unknowability is a fundamental and defining element of the encounters I define as hauntings, in which the force of the relationship derives in large part from the impossible, ungraspable nature of the specters which characters in these texts confront.

A similar recognition of the limits of our ability to know informs Freud’s notion of the uncanny, or *unheimlich*. Notably, Freud’s exploration begins with a consideration of the uncanny as an aesthetic phenomenon, explicitly connecting it with the effects produced by some kinds of literary fiction. As he describes it, the uncanny is an experience of unexpected and unsettling recognition, the return of something “secretly familiar” which has been repressed (244). To illustrate the phenomenon, Freud offers an anecdote: alone in his train compartment, he is startled by his own reflection in a mirror when a sudden jolt causes the bathroom door to swing open. Briefly, he believes a

stranger has entered his compartment, and after recognizing his mistake, Freud recalls that he “thoroughly disliked” the appearance of the supposed intruder. The uncanny, as exemplified by Freud’s moment of (mis)recognition, points to the way in which we can become strange to ourselves, and by seeing ourselves through another’s eyes, unsettle the boundaries between self and other. Indeed, as the anecdote reveals, the element of the stranger or the other we recognize in ourselves may not cast us in the most flattering light, and may provide an opportunity for reflection and critique.

Jacques Derrida’s remarkable treatise, *Specters of Marx*, draws together both Levinas’s understanding of the ethical encounter and the unsettling recognition of Freud’s uncanny, along with a typically diverse range of other thinkers and theories. Derrida turns to the concept of haunting to make sense not only of the kinds of ethical relationships that are Levinas’s central concern, but also the relationship between past, present, and future. Using the ghost of Hamlet’s father as an example, Derrida underscores the ghost’s power to disrupt and invalidate the practices of looking and knowing that “scholars” embrace: “As theoreticians or witnesses, spectators, observers, and intellectuals, scholars believe that looking is sufficient. Therefore, they are not always in the most competent position to do what is necessary: speak to the specter” (*Specters of Marx* 11). In proposing “hauntology” as a deconstructive alternative to ontology, Derrida imagines a way of being that is productively out-of-joint. Only through the kind of not-knowing that characterizes the relationship between self and other, he suggests, can we make sense of the past, envision the future, or allow for the possibility of justice. He writes:

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the

present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth. (*Specters of Marx* 48)

Thus, for Derrida, the ghost or specter becomes a figure for all that disrupts, interrupts, or deconstructs, and possesses all the productive potential that such interventions promise.

Building on both the post-positivist rejection of truth and knowledge that underlies Derrida's "hauntology" and Freud's notion of the uncanny, sociologist Avery Gordon argues for the value of haunting as a scholarly paradigm. In *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon contends that haunting reveals the silences and omissions that define both the social world we inhabit and the critical frameworks we use to describe and analyze it. As she writes, "[t]he ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us" (8). In this definition, haunting is an act or process of disruption that both reveals and unsettles "the complicated workings of race, class, and gender, the names we give to the ensemble of social relations that create inequalities, situated interpretive codes, particular kinds of subjects, and the possible and impossible themselves" (4). Gordon's formulation emphasizes the productive power of haunting as a manifestation of tension and contradiction: pushed to the edges of our collective social consciousness, but never completely contained, marginal subjects (women or political prisoners) and ugly chapters in history (dictatorship or slavery) continue to make their presence felt in life, literature, and culture. Importantly, she argues for haunting as not merely a figurative trope, but as a foundational practice for the production of knowledge about others in and beyond the study of sociology. Writing during a moment in which the rise of poststructuralism inspired, in her own words, "an optimism in the humanities and social

studies that the older institutional edifices were crumbling, [and] that new knowledge and modes of knowledge production were possible,” Gordon takes seriously the insights that can derive from experiences of silencing, liminality, and aporia (xviii).

Several other recent works addressing haunting as both a literary theme and a critical paradigm form the context for this project, informing my use of the concept, but also diverging from it in important ways. In *Raising the Dead*, Sharon Patricia Holland explores the experiences of liminality that mark African American literature and culture. Thinking in somewhat broader terms, Kathleen Brogan understands the rise of haunting in U.S. ethnic literature in the 1980s and '90s as a “pan-ethnic phenomenon, registering a widespread concern with questions of ethnic identity and cultural transmission” (4). Although Brogan’s analysis reflects the limitations of multiculturalist frameworks, which risk treating ethnic identities as simply “flavors” of a broader minoritarian paradigm, she nevertheless points to a concern with ethnic identity and cultural memory that cuts across racial divides. Finally, Ann Laura Stoler’s introduction to the edited collection *Haunted by Empire* uses haunting to describe how the legacies and consequences of imperialism reemerge in the most unexpected places. Focusing on the frequently unacknowledged ways in which intimate relations are shaped by and reflective of structures of imperial domination, Stoler lays the groundwork for a transnational analysis of imperialism and its aftereffects.

These theoretical formulations all contribute to the definition of literary haunting I draw on in the work that follows. By using the concept of the other, a hallmark of poststructuralist theories, I aim to take advantage of the fluidity and flexibility that defines it. The expansiveness of this concept of otherness allows it to inform the wide

range of encounters and experiences I categorize here as haunting. It also has the potential to unsettle the kinds of directional flows of knowledge and power that categorize cross-cultural contacts. Freud's concept of the uncanny similarly has the potential to challenge hegemonic distinctions between the "knowers"—white, Western intellectuals—and the "known"—the racialized, gendered other of that Western self. Recognizing the other as one's own uncanny double renders such distinctions, on which relationships of power and privilege are constructed, tenuous at best. Finally, following Gordon's model, I endeavor to address the unknown and the unknowable as the object of serious study. Attending to the silences that mark both literary and social texts, the haunting presence of that which we cannot know becomes as foundational as our obligation to address it.

Critical Contexts

My initial observation—that haunting was a recurrent theme in a wide array of U.S. and postcolonial texts—reflects the relevance of a concern with boundaries and definitions within each of these two literary fields. More than ever, both postcolonial studies and American studies are haunted by their own past identities, as well as by their at times uneasy relationship to one another. Postcolonial studies faces the challenges posed by the temporal structure that the "post—" in postcolonial implies: the period that follows the definitive end of European colonization in the Third World. On the one hand, that teleological narrative of progress stakes a crucial claim, rejecting as a thing of the past the political domination, economic exploitation, and institutionalized racism that defined colonial rule. Theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah points to this resistant narrative when he describes the "post-ness" of the postcolonial as a "a space-clearing gesture"

(348). But half a century after the nationalist revolutions that ended formal colonial rule, teleological narratives pose challenges for those still committed to political, economic, and social transformations in the Third World that remain at best only partially realized. Simon Gikandi points to the problems of embracing a culturally defined postcoloniality that purports to transcend narratives of modernity and development, when the material needs and aspirations of many so-called postcolonial subjects remain linked to those very processes. And Jennifer Wenzel insists on recognizing anti-imperialism's powerful challenge to structures of colonial oppression, reminding us that, even if the hopeful promise of decolonization has not yet been realized, the setbacks faced by postcolonial nations have been neither ahistorical nor inevitable. The work of these and other scholars suggests the complex temporalities with which postcolonial studies must now grapple: in order to preserve the political engagements entailed in narratives of revolutionary transformation, while recognizing the ongoing injustices that remain unaddressed even after the end of official colonial rule, the “post-colonial” must be both present and absent, both a contemporary reality and a future promise.

American studies, too, finds itself in a moment of redefinition. The so-called “transnational turn” in American studies has pointed scholars in the field toward investigations of spaces, contacts, and movements beyond the U.S. nation, or at its borders; and toward literatures written in languages other than English, or in other Englishes. As John Carlos Rowe has pointed out, critics differ significantly in their understanding of precisely what a transnational American studies entails.¹ For some, it

¹ In an entry in the Encyclopedia of American Studies, Rowe describes the multiple, intersecting meanings of the field’s so-called “transnational turn.” By his definition, the

has meant an increased attention to America's frontiers and borderlands as vibrant spaces for cultural innovation, where counterhegemonic definitions of national identity are negotiated.² For others, the transnational networks created by trade, travel, and migration are a privileged frame, suggesting the impossibility of considering any national space as isolated and self-contained.³ What these different methodological and theoretical orientations share is a sense of the insufficiency of the nation—at least in its traditional sense—as a critical frame. But transnational American studies has also drawn criticism from those who see it as reproducing an expansionistic intellectual imperialism, in which everyone and everything becomes the Americanist's sovereign terrain.

The study of “global,” “world,” or “planetary” literature lies at the uneasy intersection of these two fields, each of which seeks in some way to reflect and respond to the apparent insufficiency of strictly national frames for understanding cultural, economic, linguistic, and political relations and circulations. While “globalization” may aptly describe the observed phenomena of economic and cultural exchange, it is troubling as a critical frame to the extent that it reproduces schematic understandings of development such as the World-Systems Analysis made famous by Immanuel Wallerstein. In setting forth a model that divides the world between “core” and “periphery,” World-Systems theory effectively takes the global, rather than the national, as its privileged frame, but as many of its detractors have noted, reifies the Eurocentrism

term encompasses scholarship which draws connections to European imperialism and postcolonial studies, that which interrogates the concepts of “nation” and “citizenship,” as well as, in a somewhat different vein, American Studies scholarship that is conducted outside the U.S. academy.

² See, for instance, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border*

³ Paul Gilroy's 1993 book *The Black Atlantic* is a prominent and frequently cited example of such transnational work.

that defined imperial cartographies and imposes a single, undifferentiated system on the world it describes. For some, such as Gayatri Spivak and Wai Chee Dimock, therefore, the planet is a better frame, one which evokes a grander scale that transcends humans' ability to know, possess, or control. Proposing to "overwrite the globe," Spivak contends that the planet "belong[s] to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan" (*Death of a Discipline* 72). In a similar vein, Dimock turns to the planet in search of "alternative geographies" that challenge the assumed primacy of the nation, arguing that "[f]orging such geographies might be one of the most critical tasks now facing the field" of American studies (3).

Scholars such as David Damrosch and Franco Moretti have responded to the call for a renewed and redefined world literature by taking the global circulation and reception of literary texts itself as their object of study. In his influential book *What is World Literature?*, Damrosch defines the field as comprised of "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language," offering a critical model that accounts for the ways in which literary texts are transformed through this process of circulation (4). More controversially, Moretti has advocated a radical transformation of literary practice, arguing that "the sheer enormity of the task [of studying world literature] makes it clear that world literature cannot be literature, bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. . . . The *categories* have to be different" (55). The "distant reading" he proposes, an approach which stands in deliberate contrast to the practices of close reading on which literary study has traditionally been based, allows critics to "focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems" (57).

Although Moretti's model is provocative, few have heeded his call to radically transform the practices of literary analysis. His model of distant reading also differs in important ways from the practice of reading I am proposing here. Moretti's "distance" refers not to the cross-cultural reading of an individual text, but rather to a critical vantage point that is powerfully abstracted; it is not a question of *difference*, but rather of *scale*. Indeed, Moretti makes very few concessions to the challenges of studying a given literary tradition from the position of a cultural outsider, and is unapologetic in his reliance on other experts for more detailed analyses of the national literatures on which he draws. While I recognize Moretti's argument that distance is a "condition of knowledge" that yields qualitatively different and valuable insights into literature, I question his assertion that this is the only or the best way to adequately respond to the breadth and diversity of the texts that the field of world literature must take as its objects of study (57). Indeed, the model he puts forward, which is premised on abstraction, would be entirely ill suited to a consideration of the haunting fictions that are my subject here: where Moretti draws back in an effort to achieve a "global" perspective, these texts invite the opposite motion, drawing readers in and inviting them to take direct and personal responsibility for the stories that they read. And although these texts impose limits on their readers' knowledge and access, those limits are grounded in the responsibility of the direct, one-on-one encounter, rather than the detachment which Moretti's model requires.

In contrast to Damrosch and Moretti, critics such as Vilashini Cooppan put forward a model of world literature that is predicated on less schematic forms of comparison. These critics respond to the problems of scale and relation that world

literature poses by a process of shuttling in and out, using relations mapped out on the level of individual texts to help formulate an understanding of just exactly what the “global” entails. Cooppan undertakes to read world literature “through a sustained and ongoing encounter with its local points and global forms” (11). She suggests that

[s]eeing literature as a system that operates on the principles of movement and exchange means comparing and connecting one text, time, and place with another, and hearing the echoes of one, or indeed many, in the voice of another. This is what I would call reading literature in a worldly way. (11)

Working to “imagine a literary-critical version of [Stuart] Hall’s ‘relational thinking’” as the basis for world literature, it is no coincidence that Cooppan herself turns to the concept of haunting to make sense of these kinds of cross-cultural contacts (13). For Cooppan, the tensions between sameness and difference that emerge in the reading of world literature have echoes of the Freudian uncanny, such that

[t]o read Sumerian and Egyptian poetry, the Sanskrit or Malian epic, the Kenyan or Colombian novel, is to seek out the sheer unassimilable strangeness of difference and to open oneself to the uncanny moment in which difference is refracted, if only fragmentarily, as the familiar. (22)

Cooppan is careful to warn against the kind of “imperializing model” that “aims simply to reveal the other as the self,” a danger of the Great Books approach to world literature that grounds itself in supposedly universal standards of literary value (22). But her own dynamic, dialogic method of world reading resists this model and “invites us . . . to recognize instead a ghostly alienness animating *every* text,” not only those from the marginalized or minority traditions (24).

Cooppan’s framework describes not so much “world literature,” a static body of knowledge, but rather “world reading,” a dynamic and transactional process of contact and exchange, in effect providing a model of world literature that is implicitly or

explicitly reader-centered. Such a reader-centered approach invites us to define world literature not merely *descriptively*, as Moretti does, or even *proscriptively*, as debates over disciplinary formations do, but *aspirationally*, by considering what kinds of relationships and engagements world texts themselves both invite and structure. In arguing for a focus on world literature's invocation and interpellation of its readers, I am not undertaking a sociological study of real readers' documented responses to literary texts.⁴ Instead, my concern is with what narratologists have termed the "textual" or "implied" reader, who is created and structured by the text's address. If, as Damrosch suggests, the concept of world literature is grounded in the circulation of texts beyond their country or culture of origin, it is worth considering how certain texts themselves invite, anticipate, and manage the engagements and responses of diverse readerships. In different ways, the texts I consider provide us with a model for cross-cultural comparative reading by creating a space for readers beyond their immediate national or cultural context. In doing so, they consciously forge connections with distant readers, but also carefully structure those readers' engagements, reminding them of the limits of the access or insight into another's life and world that reading a work of fiction can provide.

Thinking about these texts' engagements with their readers as hauntings foregrounds a crucial element of their operation: the ambiguity that defines a reader's encounter with any work of fiction. As Wolfgang Iser suggests, the very concept of a reader-centered approach to literature is grounded in a recognition of literature as a

⁴ Although readership studies is not my chosen methodology, recent work by Megan Sweeney, who considers incarcerated women's use of literary texts from a variety of genres, and Kenneth Roemer, who uses reader-response criticism to explore the reception of utopian fiction, points to the valuable contributions of such approaches.

transaction enabled by uncertainty and ambiguity: “it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to ‘communicate’ with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to participate both in the production and the comprehension of the work’s intention” (24). Much like a ghost, which gets and keeps our attention through the very fact of its incomprehensible strangeness, a work of literature engages readers who are drawn in by and must respond to its ambiguity. Indeed, in Avery Gordon’s formulation, the effects of a haunting encounter sound a great deal like those of reading a good book: “The ghost . . . pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as recognition. Haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening” (63). Echoing Iser, Gordon imagines a ghost whose strangeness draws us in, but that strangeness in turn gives way to a transformative recognition that initiates us into a “special way of knowing,” the circumscribed, imperfect, projective knowing that reading a work of fiction can produce. Like the haunting encounters depicted by the works of fiction I consider, the texts themselves challenge us to make contact across boundaries of difference and, despite imperfect knowledge or understanding, to become responsible through the act of reading.

Comparative Practice

The comparative readings that comprise each chapter of this dissertation constitute yet another form of haunting, working to destabilize both the national narratives within which they are situated and, as Cooppan suggests, calling into question the hierarchical structures of value and visibility that define their relationship to one another. Each of these comparisons is driven by formal and thematic similarities that connect texts drawn from distinct national, ethnic, and cultural contexts, and makes an

argument for the continuities between them. Like haunting encounters, which challenge us to confront the limits of our knowledge, these comparisons unsettle critical positions grounded in cultural authenticity or acquired expertise, since few readers will find themselves equally familiar with all of the texts under consideration. Like literary ghosts, which traverse temporal and geographic boundaries, comparative readings such as these challenge the illusions of isolation and self-containment that form the boundaries of academic fields and disciplines, providing the basis for meaningful connections across difference while making even the most familiar texts and contexts strange.

Chapter 1, “Encounters with Ghosts: The Ethics and Politics of the Supernatural,” centers on the depictions of the supernatural in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the novella “Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” by the Indian author and activist Mahasweta Devi. Although the apparitions these two authors imagine—the ghost of a murdered child and a prehistoric winged creature—differ in important ways, both test the limits of readers’ willingness to believe. Echoing poststructuralist formulations of the ethical encounter, the characters within these texts confront the ghosts that haunt them across boundaries of insuperable difference, and in those encounters become both singular and responsible. By challenging readers to take their hauntings seriously, these texts also challenge us to take seriously the realities their characters occupy: a world in which the threat of slavery’s dehumanization justifies the taking of a child’s life, or in which relentless drought and famine are not enough to drive one away from the land where one’s ancestors are buried. But by foregrounding the moments of intentional infidelity that mark their own texts as stories not to be passed on, both Morrison and Devi also remind us that our entrance into the world of the text has only been provisional.

Chapter 2, “Haunting Pasts: Telling the Traumas of History,” uses trauma theory to explore how imperial domination lives on in the present. Focusing on the novels *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko, and *The God of Small Things*, by Arundhati Roy, I argue that trauma is not a depoliticizing framework, but can in fact serve to reinforce the connections between the ostensibly “private” sphere of affective experience and the “public” sphere of the political. Because of the paradoxical nature of traumatic memory, the fictional representations of trauma in these two novels raise important questions about the stakes of narrating the past. By inviting identification with its protagonist, *Ceremony* encourages its readers to embrace an alternate narrative of history and share in a healing ceremony that the text itself enacts. *The God of Small Things*, by contrast, expresses a greater suspicion about revisionary narratives, which it suggests may allow one to dodge responsibility for the past. In doing so, it also reminds its readers of their responsibility to the past and cautions them against identifying too easily with its victims.

Chapter 3, “Invisible Victims, Visible Absences: Imagining Disappearance for and International Audience,” places the novel *Anil’s Ghost*, by Michael Ondaatje, alongside the American film *Missing* (1982). These texts center around disappearance, an act of political violence that leaves behind either a body without a name, as in the case of *Anil’s Ghost*, or a name without a body, as in *Missing*. In different ways, both texts rely on the unique properties of fictional narrative to fill the gaps and silences that disappearance produces, making its victims visible and laying the groundwork for real-world intervention. But in doing so, they inevitably reproduce the limitations of their authors’ or their readers’ imaginations. Written at a remove from the conflicts they depict, and reflective of the distant audiences for which they are produced, *Missing* and

Anil's Ghost rely on the conventions of realism to establish their authority and truthfulness. The lives and experiences they cannot imagine, however, haunt them from the margins.

Chapter 4, “Dystopian Presents, Haunting Futures,” considers how representations of the present are haunted by futures that they cannot envision. Comparing Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* with Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man*, this chapter draws on theories of dystopian literature to make sense of the way these two texts invite their readers to imagine a different and better future. Writing in moments of social crisis, these two authors must balance the desire to imagine change and transformation with a recognition of the danger that hopeful visions will merely reproduce the conditions of the present. Inasmuch as the power of their social critique is grounded in the unrelenting pessimism of their outlooks, *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* cannot themselves imagine or depict hopeful futures. But through their cyclical structure and ambiguous, open-ended narrative, these texts allow readers to take up the challenge of imagining the kinds of social transformation that the texts themselves cannot provide.

Ultimately, I argue that it is through comparisons such as these, shaped by the logic of haunting, that we might best approach the practice of reading world literature. These haunting encounters insist on the importance of making contact across difference in our contemporary global moment, when such contacts are both urgent and inevitable. But just as importantly, they also work to unsettle and destabilize the asymmetrical structures of knowledge and power at work within these relationships. The chapters that follow provide an opportunity, in Cooppan’s words, “to witness through the distorted lens

of a partial familiarity, a version of the temporal, linguistic, or cultural difference with which one chooses to live, as with a shadow, because without it there is nothing” (22).

Chapter 1

Encounters with Ghosts: The Ethics and Politics of the Supernatural

In Mahasweta Devi's novella, "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha," a progressive Indian journalist travels to an impoverished tribal village where he comes face-to-face with something impossible: a creature with wings and claws that regards him with a "glance . . . so prehistoric that Puran's brain cells, spreading a hundred antennae, understand nothing of that glance. If tonight he'd seen a stone flying, with its wings spread, would he have been able to speak to it?" (141) Puran's encounter with the pterodactyl is an encounter with incomprehensible difference, that which is absolutely other. But Puran cannot walk away or disregard what he has seen; instead, he knows instantly that the pterodactyl has come to him as a "supplicant" and that he is responsible for protecting it from the prying eyes of the world (142). The appearance of the pterodactyl—not a ghost in the strict sense, but rather an "ancestral spirit"—not only challenges Puran's understanding of the modern world he occupies, but also tests and stretches the credulity of Devi's rationalistic readers. Like the supernatural phenomena that occur throughout the body of fiction described as magical realism, Devi's pterodactyl is definitively not a symbol or a metaphor, but a material fact which readers of her text must accept—at least provisionally—as part of the novella's central premise.

In this chapter, I explore the consequences of Devi's choice to make a supernatural apparition central to a work of fiction that explicitly addresses the immediate, pressing needs of India's oppressed tribal minority communities.

“Pterodactyl,” like Devi’s other fiction and journalistic writing, articulates a scathing critique of India’s government and its Hindu majority, who are responsible for perpetuating the structural inequalities that condemn tribal communities to poverty, illiteracy, and starvation. At first blush, asking readers to accept the possibility that an embodied ghost or specter inhabits this present-day world would seem to detract from the force of such a critique. Examining “Pterodactyl” alongside another equally surprising and provocative depiction of the supernatural, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, helps bring the effects of this strategy into sharper focus.

In both “Pterodactyl” and *Beloved*, fictional characters model the response to the supernatural that readers themselves are invited to adopt. By confronting the ghosts face-to-face, these characters recognize a form of mutuality that connects them with the ghosts across unbridgeable boundaries of difference. The relationships with ghosts these texts depict echo poststructuralist formulations of ethics, which define the encounter with the other as the source of ethical responsibility. As readers, we too are confronted with stories that challenge rationalist assumptions about the nature of reality and test our ability to believe. Like the characters within them, readers of these two texts must learn to connect across boundaries of difference: to recognize their implication in the stories they read, but also to respect the limits that the texts themselves enforce.

Encounters with the Other

In Devi’s “Pterodactyl,” Puran is transformed by his encounter with an impossible, prehistoric creature that appears in an impoverished tribal village in contemporary India. As a journalist for a local newspaper in the city of Patna, Puran travels to the town of Pirtha at the request of an old friend, Harisharan, who is now a

local official, to document the ongoing crisis there. Although the government refuses to acknowledge it, the tribal people living in Pirtha and other neighboring towns are dying from a man-made famine and from pesticide poisoning; by inviting Puran, Harisharan hopes to publicize the humanitarian crisis and obtain relief supplies for his starving constituents. In the town, however, a mysterious creature has been sighted—part reptile, part bird—and a tribal boy named Bikhia has carved its image in stone. When Puran first arrives in Pirtha, the local people are mistrustful of him, and his attempts to win their acceptance only further mark him as an outsider. But everything changes on Puran’s first night in the village, when the pterodactyl appears seeking shelter in the hut where he is sleeping. His obligation to protect and conceal the pterodactyl, which he believes to be an ancestral spirit of the tribal community, allies him with Bikhia, and together they struggle to care for it and protect the secret of its presence. During his stay in Pirtha, Puran witnesses the dignity and integrity of the tribals in the face not only of starvation, but also exploitation by labor contractors and objectification by international aid workers who seek to capture the tribals’ abjection on film. But the pterodactyl’s death brings Puran’s time in Pirtha to an end. Together, he and Bikhia hide its body in a deep cavern, and Puran prepares to return to his own life and his work as a journalist. The article he writes about Pirtha is scathing; it makes no mention of the pterodactyl and focuses exclusively on the government neglect and corruption that is responsible for the tribals’ suffering. At the novella’s close, Puran is hailing a truck on the road leaving Pirtha, to return to his life, his profession, and his family.

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is perhaps the most well-known ghost story in contemporary American literature, and like Devi’s novella, it depicts an encounter with

the supernatural that challenges characters' assumptions about the world they occupy. Morrison's novel is set in the black community on the outskirts of Cincinnati in the period following emancipation. At the center of the novel is an event that occurred years before, when Sethe, an escaped slave, attempted to kill her own children rather than allow them to be recaptured and returned to slavery. At the time the novel begins, Sethe is living in isolation with her surviving daughter, Denver, her two sons having fled the uneasy atmosphere of a house purported to be haunted by the ghost of their dead sister. The arrival of Paul D., a former slave from the same plantation, promises to bring Sethe out of her isolation and back into the world. When the two begin a romantic relationship, Sethe hesitantly ventures beyond the house at 124 Bluestone Road, and the black community which had ostracized her begins to show signs of acceptance. But the arrival of another visitor, a mysterious young woman named Beloved, changes all that. At once a helpless, demanding child and a sinister, knowing presence, Beloved drives Paul D. away, but is embraced by Sethe and Denver, who come to believe that she is the embodied ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter. Despite their efforts to "make up for the handsaw," Beloved's insatiable need for love and attention drains the women dry; on the brink of starvation, Denver ventures into the outside world to seek help from the women of the local community, who drive Beloved off (*Beloved* 263). At the novel's close, Denver has matured into an independent and capable adult, Paul D. begins to reconcile with Sethe, and Beloved's ghost is gradually, but uneasily, forgotten.

In many important ways, relationships with ghosts or specters in these two texts echo the face-to-face encounter with the other that lies at the heart of poststructuralist formulations of ethics. For theorists such as Levinas and Derrida, the one-on-one

encounter between oneself and any other gives rise to a profound, personal obligation that exceeds the subject's volition. The responsibility this relationship engenders is not based on any kind of calculated exchange; it is a "responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed" (Levinas 83). But despite that profound responsibility, the other remains fundamentally different and inherently unknowable. As Levinas reminds us,

The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other's place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery. (43)

What Levinas describes as "a Mystery," and Derrida identifies as "the secret," remains the defining characteristic of the ethical encounter, and this residue of secrecy is, in part, what leads Gayatri Spivak to describe ethics itself as "the experience of the impossible" ("Imaginary Maps" xxv).¹

For these poststructuralist thinkers, the difference of the other is absolute, and not a matter of degree: inasmuch as the other is distinct from the self, every other is entirely other. This assertion of radical alterity allows the relationship between the self and the other to extend beyond the interpersonal and encompass other kinds of otherness, such as the otherness of God, death, futurity, and knowledge. At the same time, however, an element of mutuality lies at the foundation of the ethical obligation that makes one responsible to "the naked face of the first individual to come along" (Levinas 83). The

¹ Spivak, a formidable poststructuralist theorist in her own right, translated and introduced the collection *Imaginary Maps*, which includes "Pterodactyl." Spivak's framing of Devi's fiction, as well as her translation, places it explicitly in the context of poststructuralist ethics, reflecting but also glossing the dynamics at work in the text itself. For explorations of Spivak's role as translator and the implications of her arguably heavy-handed interpretive presence, see Iuliano, Salgado, and Wenzel.

mutuality of such a relationship reflects what Levinas describes, borrowing the terminology of philosopher Martin Buber, as the “I-Thou” relationship: addressing the other as “Thou,” rather than the more formal “You” or the objectified “It,” the subject’s relationship to the other is a dialogue defined by both intimacy and reciprocity. In assuming responsibility for the other, the subject stands alone as singular and irreplaceable. For Derrida, mortality is the source of this singularity, since in the moment of one’s death no one else can be substituted in one’s place. Thus, “[i]t is from the site of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible” (Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 41). It is this stance of “ethical singularity,” which entails a recognition of both difference (“singularity”) and responsibility (“ethical”), that allows one to enter into mutual relationships with others.

Derrida imagines the dialogue between the self and the other as an offer of welcome or hospitality, citing Levinas’s claim that “[t]o approach the Other in discourse is to welcome his expression” (qtd. in *Adieu* 27). However, as Derrida goes on to suggest, this radical openness to the other exposes the subject to the risk of being haunted:

When someone questioned Levinas about the “phantomatic character” of his philosophy, especially when it treats “the face of the other,” Levinas did not directly object. . . . [H]e clearly specified “welcomed,” especially in an “immediate,” urgent way, without waiting, as if “real” qualities, attributes, or properties (everything that makes a living person into something other than a phantom) slowed down, mediatized, or compromised the purity of this welcome. It is necessary to welcome the other in his alterity, without waiting, and thus not to pause to recognize his real predicates. It is thus necessary, beyond all perception, to receive the other while running the risk, a risk that is always troubling, strangely troubling, like the stranger (*unheimlich*), of a hospitality offered to the guest or ghost or *Geist* or *Gast*. There would be no hospitality without the

chance of spectrality. But spectrality is not nothing, it exceeds, and thus deconstructs, all ontological oppositions, being and nothingness, life and death—and it also gives. It can give, give order(s), and give pardon, and it can also not do so . . . (*Adieu* 111-2)

Derrida seems to describe precisely the fate that befalls both Puran and Sethe, who in offering hospitality, end up playing host to the ghostly. The ghosts that haunt them, like the ones that Derrida describes, undermine and transform the oppositions that defined their realities, giving and withholding orders and pardon. These ghosts' deconstructive spectrality is indeed "strangely troubling," and by "troubling" the boundaries of Puran's and Sethe's self-declared isolation, the ghosts make them sensible for the first time of their obligation to others. By offering hospitality to the ghosts that haunt them, Puran and Sethe learn to recognize the limits of their ability to know another, and in doing so, become truly responsible.

Both Puran and Sethe mistakenly believe that they know others, and their inappropriate claims to knowledge only serve isolate them and limit their ability to be truly responsible. Although Puran thinks of himself as progressive, his inability to understand the realities of tribal life leads him to produce reductive representations of tribals that arguably do more harm than good. Moreover, in his personal life, Puran finds himself unable to form meaningful bonds with those he most cares about. Sethe, too, is a victim of her own misplaced certainty about those around her. Years later, she still fails to recognize that it is not only the violence of her actions, but also the claim she exercised over her children and her certainty about their future, that troubles her family and friends. Sure that she will be judged by others for her "rough choice," Sethe never gives them the opportunity, cutting herself off from the kinds of reciprocal relationships that define a sustaining community (*Beloved* 188). In opening themselves to ghosts, however, these

characters are forced to confront a form of radical alterity that frustrates and invalidates their attempts to know, to explain, or to interpret. After the ghosts' departure they are much closer to the kinds of ethical responsibility that Derrida and Levinas describe: they begin to recognize the limits of their ability to know another, and in doing so, become able to enact their responsibility to others and to accept the singularity that makes them answerable for their own actions.

A Dinosaur in Pirtha

At the start of Devi's novella, Puran is portrayed as a man isolated from family and community and adrift in his own life. A middle-aged widower whose wife died in childbirth, Puran has allowed his son to be raised primarily by his own mother, and although he has been in a romantic relationship with his girlfriend Saraswati for years, he is unwilling to commit to marriage. Although Puran prides himself on his efforts to defend and advocate for tribals and other oppressed groups through his journalism, Devi's text makes clear how little Puran understands about the experiences and values of the tribal people he attempts to represent. Reflecting on an article he wrote about a tribal man who attacked another man in a conflict over a water buffalo, Puran remembers later that he "had not grasped the desperation behind his urgent and troubled message" (103). Despite the man's attempt to explain that a water buffalo is invaluable to a successful farmer, Puran fails to understand the desperation that would push this tribal man to murder. Puran intends well, but Devi ironizes the self-congratulatory attitude with which he recalls turning the man's life-and-death story into "a most compassionate small news item" (103). By failing to recognize his own ignorance of the man's experience, Puran

succeeds only in transforming him into an object of compassion for an audience of educated and comparatively privileged newspaper readers.

Puran embarks on his trip to Pirtha with similar assumptions about the poverty he has been sent to document. As he packs his belongings, he seems to pride himself on his own expert and practiced minimalism: “A sarong, a towel, jeans and kurta top . . . , ‘Monkey’ brand tooth powder (he can’t bear a toothbrush), soap, shaving gear, comb, camera, a small tape recorder, a notebook, three ballpoints” (107-8). When he arrives in Pirtha along with a desperately needed shipment of relief supplies, however, the extreme poverty and famine there make a mockery of his carefully prepared travel bag. Confronted with the tribal community’s desperation, Puran is moved to respond, but his initial attempts to do so prove hollow and misguided. Understandably troubled by the idea that he should have better food and accommodations than the members of the community who are his hosts, he insists that he will sleep on the floor of an abandoned hut rather than at the house of a local leader, the Sarpanch, and asks for only simple, minimal food to eat. But this self-denial misses the point: when Puran tries to avoid eating dinner, Shankar, an educated tribal man, frankly informs him that “[y]ou people understand nothing. Will our hunger lessen if you don’t eat?” (136)

After only a few hours in Pirtha, Puran begins to realize how little he understands about the lives of the tribals whose suffering he has come to document, and the futility of gestures such as refusing food or theatrically handing over his camera in an attempt to earn their trust:

He had always thought he was altogether self-reliant since he set out with nothing but a sarong and a toothbrush in his shoulder bag. Now he sees that’s not enough. He feels inadequate. It’s true that he can’t reach Shankar’s people by eating little or sleeping on grass mats. There is a

great gulf fixed between Puran's kind and Shankar's kind. But he does want to get close. (140)

Whereas before Puran believed he could understand and even ally himself with the tribals by approximating the conditions under which they live, he now understands that the difference separating him from them is far more profound than their different lifestyles. With the recognition of this difference, however, comes a new, strengthened desire to connect with the tribals in a more legitimate and respectful way: no longer entirely "self-reliant," Puran now begins to feel the desire to "get close" to the people about whom he previously wrote from a distance, knowing that he will never be able to "reach" them completely.

Puran's relationship to the tribal community is transformed by the arrival of the pterodactyl, which appears to Puran in the abandoned hut where he is sleeping on his first night in Pirtha. The pterodactyl singles Puran out, and as in the confrontation with the naked face of the other that initiates the subject into responsibility, the obligation Puran feels to the creature is immediate and profoundly personal. Spivak, who translated the novella, is certainly inspired by this parallel in her reading of the text, describing the pterodactyl as an "ungraspable other" who calls forth "ethical responsibility-in-singularity" from Puran ("Afterword" 200). The pterodactyl's prehistoric gaze shatters Puran's isolation and ostensible self-sufficiency, for in it he sees a personal appeal and call to responsibility: "It wants refuge with Puran. Puran cannot betray this, for any reason at all" (142). Unlike Puran's vague if justified sense of collective social guilt as a member of the nation's middle class and privileged Hindu majority, his obligation to the pterodactyl singles him out as an individual. His contact with the pterodactyl is intense and one-on-one: in order to protect the creature, Puran must conceal it in the private,

domestic space of the hut where he is staying. He must provide for it from among his own personal possessions and feed it with his own food: when Puran asks for fish the day after the pterodactyl's arrival, Harisharan assumes it is for him to eat, but a careful reader realizes that it is intended to feed the pterodactyl. The intense, personal obligation that Puran feels toward the pterodactyl stands in stark contrast to his earlier compassion for the tribals, and by meeting and returning the pterodactyl's gaze, Puran begins to understand a form of responsibility before another that is far more meaningful than his earlier gestures of altruism.

Despite the profound and personal obligation that Puran feels when faced with the pterodactyl's gaze, however, the creature's thoughts remain inscrutable to him. Puran's first reaction to the pterodactyl is utter incomprehension; it is as if he had seen "a stone flying" (141). Later, as he tries to provide it with food and shelter, he is forced to recognize that he understands nothing of its wants and needs. Consulting a reference book on dinosaurs provides little insight, since the book describes no creature quite like the one that he has witnessed:

Pterodactyl—a flying reptile of the pterosauria class from the Mesozoic era, extinct species . . . Their earlier editions, e.g. the *rhamphorynchus*, still had the long tail of a reptile and innumerable teeth.

[This creature has no teeth. It does not have a long tail, Puran is certain, for he has taken a good look in the half-light.] The *pterodactylus* of the earth's Jurassic age was as big as a sparrow, with a very small tail, and teeth in the front part of the mouth. [This one is larger in size.] (154, brackets in original)

Earlier, Puran prided himself on having "done his homework" by reading about the history and geography of the Madhya Pradesh region and "the characteristics of the Indian *Austric*," but the pterodactyl reveals just how superficial such knowledge can be (108, 114).

The taxonomy in Puran's reference book not only fails to describe the creature he has encountered, but also provides no insights into the reason for its appearance or the message that he believes it carries. Although the text itself is careful not to authorize Puran's assumptions, Puran believes the pterodactyl is an ancestor of the tribal community that has returned to communicate an important message to modern India in general, and himself in particular. "It wants to say something, to give some news, Puran does not understand. *No point of communication*" (158 italics in original). Puran considers many possible messages, including that man-made famine is a crime, that the "collective being" of tribal peoples has been crushed, and that humans, like dinosaurs, are becoming an endangered species (157). Against the backdrop of the crisis in Pirtha that Puran is witnessing, all of these messages are compelling and all of them are urgent, but to each question that Puran poses, "the dusky lidless eyes remain unresponsive" (157). If indeed the pterodactyl has come from the past with a message, its inability to communicate that message only strengthens Puran's sense of obligation to it. In the end, Puran poses to the pterodactyl, and in effect confirms to himself, the explanation that human and dinosaur are bound together by the very difference that separates them: "You have come to me for shelter, and I do not know how to save you, is that why I'll see your death?" (158) In this final interpretation of the pterodactyl's inscrutable gaze, Puran bases the obligation he feels to the pterodactyl—to remain with it and witness its death—on his own inability to understand it. In this moment, Puran seems to see his responsibility to the pterodactyl as being derived from rather than diminished by the unbridgeable difference that makes self-disclosure and understanding between them impossible.

In its supernatural, impossible existence, the pterodactyl frustrates all claims at knowing: Puran cannot learn about it from a book or interpret its gaze, and on the most basic level, he cannot even succeed in finding any plant or animal that the creature will eat. Indeed, Devi's text suggests that attempting to know or represent the pterodactyl can have unsettling or even dangerous consequences. As Harisharan and the Sub-Division Officer assert, echoing one another, to believe in the pterodactyl is nothing less than to "deny reality," for "if we acknowledge the pterodactyl, where will homo-sapiens-mapiens be? Their two worlds are different after all" (113, 159). In an important sense, these men's assessments are correct: the pterodactyl's existence does pose a radical challenge to modern, rationalist definitions of reality. Rather than embracing that challenge, however, both men, as government officials, concern themselves only with "what can be done within the administrative framework" of the modern Indian state (112).

By contrast, the fate of the journalist Surajpratap demonstrates the costs of attempting to reconcile the pterodactyl's existence with the "administrative framework" that Harisharan and the Sub-Division Officer represent. Surajpratap, who arrives in Pirtha shortly after Bikhia's first sighting of the pterodactyl, takes photographs of the carving that Bikhia has created and plans to publish them. Devi's text describes Surajpratap as an idealist and a reformer who made a reputation for himself in the Dalit movement, and who came to Pirtha committed to documenting the injustices suffered by the people there. When he insists on publishing a report on the pterodactyl, however, Harisharan and the Sub-Division Officer confiscate his film and he loses his job at the newspaper he works for, which has indirect ties to the government. In the end,

Surajpratap suffers a nervous breakdown; a man who “had great promise,” he drops off the map and achieves nothing for the people of Pirtha (112).

The “explosion in . . . Surajpratap’s head” when he first sees Bikhia’s carving exemplifies the cost of trying to know the inscrutable pterodactyl (159). Unlike Surajpratap, Puran seems to understand the limitations of his contact with the supernatural creature. Whereas Surajpratap is eager to document the pterodactyl, Puran acknowledges that it is, in its absolute strangeness, beyond representation: “I won’t go near, I won’t touch you, I will not take your picture with the flash bulb of my camera” (155). By recognizing the way that the pterodactyl’s difference places it beyond his reach, Puran protects not only the pterodactyl, but also his own sanity. Rather than attempting to produce knowledge about the pterodactyl, as Surajpratap did, Puran recognizes what he had not before: the profound limitations of his ability to know another. Whereas before he was satisfied with reducing tribals and their life-and-death struggles to “most compassionate small news item[s],” after his encounter with the pterodactyl he respects the integrity of their experience, however different it may be from his own. When Puran first arrived in Pirtha, he refused food in sympathy with the tribal community, failing to recognize how his status as a (well-fed) outsider made this gesture hollow. After coming face-to-face with the pterodactyl, he participates in the tribal community’s mourning rituals, but never forgets his difference and his status as a guest.

Puran’s encounter with the pterodactyl changes him, forcing him to recognize the insuperable difference that makes it impossible to truly know another, but also revealing that difference to be the source of ethical responsibility rather than an impediment to it. The relationship Puran forges with Bikhia, in particular, exemplifies this newfound

understanding of difference, and it stands in stark contrast to the condescending sympathy or empty equalizing gestures that constituted his earlier efforts to connect with the tribals. As the pterodactyl's caretakers, Puran and Bikhia are bound together of necessity in a tacit partnership; nevertheless, Puran often finds the silent Bikhia as inscrutable as the pterodactyl itself. By the time Puran leaves Pirtha, however, he has come to recognize and value the distance that persists between them, despite their partnership. Meeting eyes with Bikhia, Puran takes the following cautionary message from him:

Because you are involved in this incident, therefore you'll have to stay to the end. That does not mean that you will get from me the comradeship of the last few days. You remain you, and I remain me, and after this heavy phase is over each will return to the orbit of his life. (182)

Bikhia's acceptance of Puran's role in the pterodactyl's visit is grudging, but definite, and despite insisting on the boundaries of difference that will continue to separate them, Bikhia also acknowledges their provisional partnership. This relationship is tentative and circumscribed, to be sure, but it nevertheless contrasts sharply with Puran's earlier, failed efforts to understand and participate in tribal life. Puran's compliance with Bikhia's directives—that he participate in the rituals that end the period of mourning and that he leave as soon as they are completed—reflects the relationship of respect and obligation the two men share. As Puran comes to understand, he can honor his responsibility to Bikhia by recognizing the difference that separates them from one another.

Puran's relationship with his longtime girlfriend, Saraswati, is also transformed by his contact with the pterodactyl. He himself is the first to admit that, although he has known Saraswati for fourteen years, "no real relationship has grown" between them (97). Shortly before his departure for Pirtha, Saraswati has issued Puran an ultimatum: still

unmarried at the age of thirty-two, she is ready to give up on him and join an ashram. Puran acknowledges that he is responsible for not allowing “a fleshly, hungry, thirsty, human relationship to grow” between him and Saraswati, but when he leaves for Pirtha he feels unable to do anything about it, and ponders the following “moral question”: “how will a person merely floating in the every-day world, who has not attempted to build a human relationship with mother-son-Saraswati, be able to do justice to a subject as a journalist?” (97) Soon after arriving in Pirtha, however, Puran realizes that the reverse is true: in order to do justice “to himself or Saraswati in the Saraswati affair,” he must find a way to grasp the stories of tribal oppression he is being told by the people there (119). His encounter with the pterodactyl allows him to understand not only his relationship with the tribal community, but also his relationship with Saraswati, in new terms.

Puran’s thoughts repeatedly turn to Saraswati as he struggles to make sense of the pterodactyl’s appearance. Reflecting on the fact that books are unable to explain the pterodactyl’s difference, he recalls Saraswati’s speculation that “[p]erhaps you have not been able to know me after so many years spent close together because there is no book about me” (158). Puran’s connection with Saraswati, like his contact with the pterodactyl is a connection across difference that can never be completely bridged: the difference that, as Derrida suggests, separates any two individuals. By demonstrating the limits of his ability to know another, Puran’s encounter with the pterodactyl prepares him to connect more meaningfully with Saraswati. Whereas before, Saraswati was the object of Puran’s search for knowledge, after his encounter with the pterodactyl, he is able to approach her across difference, rather than attempting to “know” her as he would the

information in a book, and to accept the mutual responsibility that connects them to one another. As Puran's visit to Pirtha draws to a close, Harisharan offers some friendly advice to Puran, who he admits "has changed so in these few days" (173). "*Man!* Go back. Get married. Return to normal life," Harisharan recommends, to which Puran replies with surprising ease, "I'll do that" (185).

Perhaps most importantly, after his time spent in Pirtha, Puran understands that he can only fulfill his responsibility to the people of Pirtha by respecting the difference between their world and his. As he contemplates writing his article, Puran recognizes secrecy, rather than disclosure, as his highest form of responsibility: "Pirtha has taught him that, even if you are a reporter, you must not ask all the questions all the time" (180). On its face, Puran's report about Pirtha may not differ greatly from his earlier compassionate small-news item. Both claim to speak on behalf of tribals who are not themselves heard, and both speak in a language of politics that is familiar and intelligible to mainstream readers. This time, however, Puran is aware of the inevitable silences and omissions of his report. After his encounter with the pterodactyl, he knows all too well that the language of politics and social justice that he relies on in his article hardly reflects the tribal community's experience, which is defined instead by the supernatural and the miraculous. He also recognizes, however, that reporting the appearance of a dinosaur in contemporary India would elicit skepticism and ridicule, and would do little to improve the situation in Pirtha. When he hails a truck returning to the city, a move that Spivak interprets as "step[ping] . . . into action within the post-colonial new nation," he also carries with him the experience of meeting Bikhia—and the pterodactyl—face-to-face (*Thinking Academic Freedom* 31). Although he accepts the limits of his own ability

to know—and to narrate—another’s experience, after his encounter with the pterodactyl he can no longer “remain a distant spectator anywhere in life” (Devi 196).

A Ghost in Cincinnati

Like Devi’s pterodactyl, which transforms Puran’s understanding of himself and the world around him, the appearance of Beloved forever changes the women living at 124 Bluestone Road. Beloved’s ghost is perhaps the most familiar apparition in contemporary U.S. literature, so familiar that her impossible, supernatural presence risks being taken for granted by readers of this thoroughly canonized text. Although *Beloved* is most frequently interpreted as a novel dedicated to addressing and healing the wounds of slavery, Morrison’s commitment to remembering the past is counterbalanced by a deep-seated concern with knowledge as an exercise of power.² Morrison’s novel is filled with characters who claim to know—and judge—those around them. Sethe is made the object of knowledge, first by Schoolteacher, the slave master who listed her “animal” and “human characteristics,” and later by the black community, including Paul D., who accuses her of inhumanity when he learns of her past actions (*Beloved* 202). But Sethe is also brought low by her own assumptions that she can know her children and her neighbors, both black and white, as well as the ghost that takes up residence in her home. Beloved’s ghost reveals the danger of such assumptions, consuming Sethe’s energy and individuality bit by bit, until she remains only a shell of her former self. It is only after

² For an analysis of the politics of knowledge production in *Beloved*, see Ann E. Goldman, “‘I Made the Ink’: (Literary) Production and Reproduction in ‘Dessa Rose’ and ‘Beloved.’ ”

the ghost's departure that Morrison's characters are able to recognize and respect their differences, and begin to form relationships across them.

Like the pterodactyl in Devi's text, the young woman who appears outside the house at 124 Bluestone Road defies all rational explanation. When she first arrives, helpless, confused, and insatiably thirsty, Paul D. and Sethe theorize that Beloved has fled someone or something terrible, but her clean, fine clothes and baby-soft feet seem to rule out an arduous escape on foot. Her continued frailty and dependence stand in contrast to surprising feats of nearly superhuman strength; as Paul D. muses, Beloved "can't walk, but I seen her pick up the rocker with one hand" (*Beloved* 59). Her childlike behavior—babbling, playing games, and throwing tantrums—is at odds with her calculated efforts to both seduce Paul D. and drive him away from Sethe. Most importantly, although both Sethe and Denver become convinced that Beloved is the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter, the two women's certainty is never entirely endorsed by the novel. Although Beloved possesses memories, like Sethe's special song, that only her child could know, she also knows things that exceed Sethe's grasp, such as her description of the "dark place" she was in before, which merges a vision of death with the experiences of slaves on the Middle Passage (*Beloved* 264). After Beloved is driven off, the women who come together to conduct the exorcism remain uncertain about exactly who or what Beloved was. And in retrospect even Denver believes at times that Beloved was "sure 'nough [her] sister," but reflects that "[a]t times I think she was—more" (*Beloved* 281).

From the moment of her arrival, Beloved makes powerful and unsatisfiable demands on the women at 124. "Deep down in her wide black eyes, back behind the

expressionlessness, was a palm held out for a penny that Denver would gladly give her, if only she knew how or knew enough about her" (*Beloved* 124). Similarly, Beloved's unrelenting devotion to Sethe reflects Beloved's singular claim on her. Looking into Beloved's eyes, "[t]he longing that [Sethe] saw there was bottomless. Some plea barely in control" (*Beloved* 62). Beloved's intense but undefinable desire, like the pterodactyl's unknowable message, exemplifies the failures of communication that define an encounter with a ghost. Rather than diminishing the women's obligation to the ghost, these failures of communication only intensify that obligation, moving Denver and Sethe to try to satisfy Beloved in any way they can, with sweets, stories, activities, and attention.

As Morrison's novel makes excruciatingly clear, however, Beloved's claims on the women at 124, although they may be justified, can never be satisfied. Beloved's ghost, as Denver explains, "was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love, which was only natural, considering" (*Beloved* 220). Separated prematurely and violently from her mother, Beloved is desperate not only for "the best of everything" in the house, but also for the attention and mother-love such small privileges reflect (*Beloved* 253). Both materially and emotionally, however, Beloved is insatiable: "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (*Beloved* 253). Whereas Puran does not know how to care for the pterodactyl and fails to find food for it, no amount of nurturance is enough for Beloved, who eats and eats yet is always hungry for more. And the intensifying fights between Beloved and Sethe reveal that no amount of explanation will satisfy Beloved either. Sethe compulsively narrates and re-narrates her past to Beloved, trying to make her daughter understand her impossible choice. Despite Sethe's desperate efforts to explain herself, however, Beloved remains

“[u]ncomprehending,” and rather than forgiving Sethe, Beloved’s demands and tantrums only intensify (*Beloved* 264).

Sethe’s determination to make Beloved see her side is a process to which, as Denver recognizes, “there would never be an end” (*Beloved* 263). Sethe cannot understand Beloved’s description of her suffering in the “dark, dark place,” or the devastation of the infant’s loss of her mother’s face (*Beloved* 264). And Beloved, in turn, will not be consoled by Sethe’s explanations. Indeed, the justifications Sethe offers for killing her child, like the act itself, reflect a claim over her daughter that denies the fundamental difference between them: “The best thing she was, was her children. Whites may dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (*Beloved* 264). As Sethe struggles to “make [Beloved] understand,” she refuses to relinquish the logic that led her to murder—the conviction that she *is* her daughter and her daughter *is* a part of her, and although she asks for forgiveness, she refuses to acknowledge the ethical singularity that would allow her to take true responsibility for her actions. The longer Beloved and Sethe struggle, the more the boundaries between the two women blur. In response to the ghost’s demands, Sethe gives herself over to Beloved, dressing Beloved in her clothes and, like Puran, feeding Beloved with her measure of food. As a result, “Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur” (*Beloved* 263). Only Denver’s decision to seek help, and the community’s intervention, save Sethe from annihilation.

Sethe’s brush with self-loss, like Surajpratap’s nervous breakdown, reveals the danger of claiming to know another. Ultimately, it is Denver’s willingness to enter into

dialogue with others across boundaries of difference that saves the family at 124. In her courageous ventures out into the world beyond 124, Denver learns to offer information and gratitude, and receives food and acceptance in exchange. The plates of food given by neighbors, each distinguished by an individual woman's identifiable dish or covering and accompanied by a single name or mark, are given in return for Denver's willingness to provide a version of her story and a personal thank-you. Unlike Sethe, who refuses to explain herself for fear of being misunderstood, Denver realizes that “[n]obody was going to help her unless she told it—all of it” (*Beloved* 266). But even then, Denver cannot provide a full account, and “explained the girl in her house who plagued her mother as a cousin come to visit, who got sick too and bothered them both” (*Beloved* 267). In exchange for her self-revelation, albeit partial and imperfect, Denver receives the help she desperately needs. The community's response, in turn, demonstrates the kind of responsibility that thrives across the differences between individuals. Although there is much debate, and even skepticism among the women who hear Denver's story, many of them come together to protect Sethe and her family from Beloved's sinister “invasion” (*Beloved* 270).

After Beloved's exorcism, the reconciliation between Sethe, Denver, and Paul D. reflects how each has been changed by his or her contact with Beloved. Denver has fully entered the world her mother so feared, working, building relationships, and preparing to perhaps attend college. When she tells this to Paul D., he resists warning her that “[n]othing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher,” as he might have before (*Beloved* 280). Instead, he acknowledges that Denver's experience might differ from his own, and when she raises the question of his relationship with Beloved, he

recognizes her right to form her own opinion. Although Sethe has been brought low by Beloved's haunting, her questioning response to Paul D.'s insistence that “[y]ou your best thing” holds the possibility that she, too, may come to recognize and value the difference that separates her from her children. These relationships reveal how Morrison's characters have been changed by their contact with the ghost, brought into a recognition of difference that allows them to be both singular and responsible in their encounters with one another.

Reimagining the Real

As Avery Gordon describes it, “[b]eing haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (8). Clearly, this account could quite easily describe the experiences of both Sethe and Puran, for whom the encounter with the ghostly is undoubtedly a captivating and transformative recognition of a new reality. But Gordon's description could also describe the experience of reading fiction: we are drawn in emotionally, mysteriously and perhaps unwillingly, by the novelist's art; rather than gleaning “cold knowledge,” we experience another reality; and we are transformed, rather than merely informed, as a result. The vision of a transformative rather than acquisitive practice of knowing that is central to Gordon's project resonates with the poststructuralist model of the encounter with the other outlined earlier in this chapter. The condition of haunting that she describes, as a model for the act of reading a work of fiction, suggests that encountering a text like *Beloved* or “Pterodactyl,” like encountering a ghost, might have profound ethical and political implications. Indeed, if we consider the reader's encounter with a work of fiction to be

another instance of haunting, the haunting relationships that are mapped out in these texts can also inform our own practice of reading them.

Like encounters with ghosts, encounters with fictions elicit intense engagement and require us to acknowledge a particular form of responsibility to another—in this case, responsibility to the text itself. Drawing on Levinas, Adam Newton theorizes the relationship between reader and text as a face-to-face encounter like that between the self and the other: “Like persons, texts present and expose themselves,” and the “claim” they make on us is rooted in the readerly engagement they demand (22). Our obligation to a fictional text is, at least in part, to suspend our disbelief and enter into the world that the text invites us to imagine; in Newton’s words, such fictions “call for mimetic, performative acts from readers, in spite of the ontological and epistemic borders between fiction and reality” (22). Although Newton goes on to distinguish between several more specific forms and mechanisms of readerly interpellation, his statement captures an essential quality of all fictional texts: the imaginative engagement that a work of fiction requires from its readers. Much as, in the encounter with the other, one’s responsibility requires meeting and returning the other’s gaze, the reader’s encounter with a work of fiction requires a similar willingness to make contact.

In addition to this willingness to engage, however, both “Pterodactyl” and *Beloved* demand something more. Not only must we suspend our disbelief in imagining the novel’s characters and events to be real, we must also rise to the challenge of accepting, at least provisionally, the existence of ghosts. The presence of the supernatural in these texts brings with it the problem of what Morrison describes as “accommodation”: in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” Morrison notes that the women

and children in her novel are able to accommodate the uncontrollable and incomprehensible presence of Beloved's ghost ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 32). This is precisely what *Beloved* asks of us, as well. Readers of Morrison's novel must imaginatively accommodate a possibility that, in the world beyond the text, many would likely reject: the return of an embodied baby ghost carrying with it the legacies of slavery. Devi's text, which locates a living dinosaur in contemporary India, requires a similar leap. And, like Morrison's women and children, Puran models the acceptance of the supernatural that we as readers must also provisionally assume. Like the appearance of a ghost in one's house, being confronted with a ghost in the pages of an otherwise realist fiction can and should be shocking. And much as Puran and Sethe are challenged to reimagine their relationship to the world around them, so too are readers who endeavor to take seriously the depictions of the supernatural in these two texts.

Theories of magical realism as a genre can provide a helpful framework for thinking about the ways in which these texts insert supernatural elements into their otherwise realist narratives, as well as how they invite their readers to respond to elements that defy rational explanation.³ As Wendy Faris describes it, the first defining element of a magical realist text is what she calls the "irreducible element" of the supernatural, something which cannot be explained by or confined within rational understandings of reality (7). Her interesting choice of terminology itself points to the very strangeness of such supernatural elements and their absolute incompatibility with

³ For many, the term "magical realism" evokes the particular aesthetic (and political context) of the novels of the Latin American literary "boom" of the 1960s and '70s. In tracing the evolution of what she argues has become a genuinely global form, Faris emphasizes magical realism's unique ability to draw readers in as central to its broader appeal (37).

rationalistic frames of knowing. In magical realist fiction, although supernatural elements may challenge readers' expectations, they "are well assimilated into the realistic textual environment, rarely causing any comment by narrators or characters, who model such an acceptance for their readers" (8). Through its juxtaposition of the natural and the supernatural, magical realism seems to cultivate the experience of the uncanny, presenting a world "in which the natural appears strange, and the supernatural pedestrian" (Camayd-Freixas, qtd. in Faris 11). Indeed, Faris points to the ghostly quality of the extended or enhanced vision that magical realism offers:

The magical realist vision . . . exists at the intersection of two worlds, at an imaginary point inside a double-sided mirror that reflects in both directions. Ghosts and texts, or people and worlds that seem ghostly, inhabit these two-sided mirrors, many times situated between the two worlds of life and death; they enlarge that space of intersection where a number of magically real fictions exist. (21-22)

Following Faris, then, not only do ghosts haunt the characters *within* texts like "Pterodactyl" and *Beloved*, but, much as Gordon suggests, haunting also describes the relationships these texts establish with their readers, by challenging them accept the supernatural and embrace an expanded definition of the real.

As Faris argues, magical realist fiction challenges the normative assumptions of Western rationalism in ways that allow voices from the margins to emerge and flourish, and both Devi and Morrison explicitly strive to give voice to the silenced through the medium of their fiction. In her essay "The Site of Memory," Morrison situates her fiction in relation to the autobiographical tradition of the slave narrative, whose authors were of necessity "silent about many things, and . . . 'forgot' many other things" ("The Site of Memory" 191). Her task as a fiction writer, as she defines it, is thus "to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it" ("The Site of Memory" 193).

Like Morrison, Devi also conceives of her fiction writing in relation to the silences of official records. In the interview with Gayatri Spivak that begins *Imaginary Maps*, Devi recounts her response to the inquiry of a tribal girl, who wonders why tribals are absent from the official, written account of Indian history:

“When we go to school, we read about Mahatma Gandhi. Did we have no heroes? Did we always suffer like this?” That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal heroes. (xi)

Reflecting their authors’ stated objectives, both *Beloved* and “Pterodactyl” invite readers to imagine the stories of those who are silenced in official narratives of nation and history. Like Puran and Sethe, whose encounters with ghosts shatter their isolation, “Pterodactyl” and *Beloved*, as their authors frame them, might force their readers to acknowledge those whose voices they had been unable to or had chosen not to hear.⁴

Such efforts to expose readers to the unheard voices of tribals or former slaves, however, raise yet another set of problems surrounding the power to know and interpret. By exposing their readers to unheard or unrecognized voices, these texts challenge their readers to enter into a relationship across difference, and in doing so, require that we perceive and recognize the limits of our ability to know. Writing about *Beloved*, Yung-Hsing Wu reminds us that Sethe’s incomprehensible actions, as well as Beloved’s supernatural return, require an act of “accommodation” from Morrison’s readers. Resisting arguments that impose a single, static interpretation on the novel’s moral

⁴ In making this claim, I am cautious of the assumption it would seem to imply: that the readers of these texts are privileged white Westerners who receive Devi’s and Morrison’s fictions as giving voice to the racial and national other. It is not my intention to reproduce the selective vision that such an assumption entails. But strictly speaking, it is safe to assume that the audiences for these works include neither former slaves nor illiterate tribals. From this perspective, any contemporary reader of either Morrison’s or Devi’s text approaches it, to at least some extent, from a distance.

complexity, Wu insists that Sethe's choice is a *problem* in the novel to which readers and critics will never be able to pose a definitive answer.⁵ In a similar vein, Jennifer Wenzel points to the ways in which "Pterodactyl" and the other stories in Devi's collection *Imaginary Maps* foreground the challenges and dangers of misinterpreting the many different representational claims that circulate within them. As she suggests, "the reader of 'Pterodactyl' as the unabridged account of Puran's extraordinary experience feels herself in possession of a terrible secret, with some awareness of the awesome responsibility of that privilege" ("Going Global" 240). In different contexts, both Wu and Wenzel emphasize the risk that readers, who are themselves coming into contact with these works of fiction across boundaries of difference, might overstep the texts' invitations.

By inviting their readers to accommodate alternate realities, both in the form of the supernatural and in the form of experiences other than our own, these texts expose themselves to the risk of being misappropriated through interested readings. Indeed, as Wenzel suggests, such interested readings might be inevitable.⁶ But texts like "Pterodactyl" and *Beloved* also face another risk: that readers will distance themselves and fail to acknowledge the transformative power of their encounters with the stories they

⁵ In this, Wu echoes James Phelan's contention that it would be "ethically irresponsible" to resolve the problem Morrison's novel poses "by reaching for a clear and fixed judgment of Sethe's actions" (311-12).

⁶ As Wenzel frames it, reading Devi's stories requires a reader to take "the necessary risk of bringing her own needs and desires to those of Spivak, Mahasweta, the characters, and their "real life" models, all already competing in the book" ("Going Global" 247). Wenzel is correct to argue that readers must recognize the interestedness of their encounters, and I would suggest that the haunting encounters depicted in "Pterodactyl," like those in *Beloved*, offer us models for reconciling our situated readings with the forms of responsibility we assume.

contain. This is a challenge that Dipesh Chakrabarty grapples with in a slightly different context, questioning how historians might best account for nonrational ways of thinking that run counter to their own. Complicating models of historiography that anthropologize nonrational beliefs, Chakrabarty challenges his readers to ask themselves the question, “is this way of being [a belief in gods or spirits] a possibility for our own lives and for what we define as our present?” (108) Genuinely considering this question makes it impossible to hold another’s experience at arm’s length. Crucially, however, Chakrabarty does not assume that historians who ask themselves this question will abandon the rationalism that serves as the foundation for their politically informed practice of telling stories from the margins. Rather, he suggests that they coexist, and that “taken together, the two gestures put us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present” (108). Chakrabarty argues that, although the historian may turn to a rationalistic approach in service of promoting “social justice and democracy,” accepting the supernatural as a “present possibility,” and recognizing the fundamental human similarity that connects the historian to his or her subjects, is a prerequisite to that distancing move.

The model of Chakrabarty’s approach to subaltern history offers readers an alternative to the anthropologizing perspective they might otherwise adopt toward the black community of Morrison’s nineteenth-century Cincinnati or the tribal villages of rural India. By challenging us to take their hauntings seriously, these works of fiction also challenge us to take seriously the realities these characters occupy: a world in which the threat of slavery’s dehumanization justifies the taking of a child’s life, or in which relentless drought and famine are not enough to drive one away from the land where

one's ancestors are buried and the culture that sustained them. But like Puran, who knows he must leave Pirtha and protect the secret of the pterodactyl, or like the women of Sethe's community, who recognize Beloved's return to the material world of the present as an intolerable "invasion," Chakrabarty's model also recognizes the necessity of maintaining a more distanced, analytical approach. Indeed, although both Devi and Morrison create fictions that draw us in, fostering a sense of intimacy and interpretive responsibility, both authors also invite us to step away from the fictional worlds they have created and consider them from a more thoughtful distance.

In a note at the end of "Pterodactyl," Devi undermines the representative authority that her text had seemed to claim by explicitly identifying her own imaginative interventions:

In this piece no name—such as Madhya Pradesh or Nagesia—has been used literally. Madhya Pradesh is here India, Nagesia village the entire tribal society. I have deliberately conflated the ways, rules, and customs of different Austric tribes and groups, and the idea of the ancestral soul is my own. I have merely tried to express my estimation, born of experience, of Indian tribal society, through the myth of the pterodactyl. (196)

Like Puran, who had "done his homework" on tribal India, Devi's text has given the impression, up to this point, of providing a complete and transparent depiction of the realities of tribal life. Her note, which declares her depiction of tribal India to be an imaginative, fictionalized composite, shatters this illusion, reminding readers of the limits of their access to the world Devi's story seemed to transparently and accurately depict.

Devi's remarks in the interview included in *Imaginary Maps* reflect a similar tension between knowledge and secrecy. In one striking move, framing her translated fiction for a Western audience, Devi compares Indian tribals to Native Americans: "Why should American readers want to know from me about Indian tribals, when they have

present-day America? . . . I say to my American readers, see what has been done to them [the Native Americans], and you will understand what has been done to the Indian tribals" (xi). This comparison gives with one hand, but takes away with the other. By claiming that the tribal experience is equivalent to the Native American experience, she suggests that American readers already know all there is to know about Indian tribals. At the same time, however, this comment is a gesture of refusal, since it allows Devi to avoid providing readers with any information about the lives, experiences, and beliefs of tribal communities. Like Puran, whose exposé on the suffering in Pirtha both exposes and conceals, Devi suggests that her fiction might operate in a similar fashion. By inviting Western readers to recognize their connection to the experiences she depicts, but also cultivating a more distanced, analytical stance, Devi lays the groundwork for readers to be haunted by her fiction—to recognize an enduring form of responsibility that is grounded in a recognition of difference.

Like "Pterodactyl," *Beloved* also insists on stepping back from the immediacy of the haunting past and allowing some stories not to be told. In her novel's well-known conclusion, Morrison implies that if Beloved's stay at 124 eventually fades from the community's memory, such forgetting is protective and productive, for Beloved's is "not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 290). Of course, as readers we cannot fail to note the irony that Beloved's story *is* passed on through the writing of Morrison's novel, up to and including the moment in which she instructs her readers about its secrecy. But by reminding us that Beloved exists only through the medium of a story that can be either told or untold, Morrison directs her readers to consider the ethical and political stakes of narrating that story. As Dean Franco points out, criticism on *Beloved* often makes an

implicit shift from the register of fictional representation to that of material reality. Indeed, he argues that the work of reparation for which *Beloved* calls can only take place at a remove from the novel itself: “A national discussion on the efficacy and limits of apology, forgiveness, compensation, and broadly conceived social redress begins when readers turn from the private encounter with the novel to the public history the text produces” (431). This shift, I argue, is facilitated by Morrison’s conclusion, which reminds us that her story, like all acts of representation, is inherently compromised, and that our entrance into the world of the text has only been provisional. Like Denver, who steps off the porch and into the world, knowing that she cannot foresee or prevent life’s many perils, we are invited to move beyond the haunted world of *Beloved*, and to recognize that, although we may have been touched by that world, we are not of it.

The Power of Ghost Stories

In arguing that magical realism is a genre particularly suited to postcolonial critique, Faris points to the fact that it “has participated in transculturation processes that have resulted from encounters between different cultures throughout the world” (134). One reason for this, she suggests, is that the coexistence of two distinct literary modes within it—realism and fantasy—echoes and reflects the process of cross-cultural contact and creates what she describes as “a particularly intense dynamics of alterity” (134). Following Faris, there is something about the mode in which texts like “Pterodactyl” and *Beloved* imagine otherness that is particularly disposed to crossing boundaries. Comparing these two texts allows us to recognize the common ground of similarity underlying the specific, situated political and historical projects that Morrison and Devi undertake. For both Devi and Morrison, turning to the supernatural allows for productive

political engagements while also calling into question the very cultural foundations upon which those engagements are built. In “Pterodactyl,” Devi’s work of fiction accomplishes everything that Puran’s article accomplishes, detailing the unjust laws and economic policies that cause tribal people to suffer. But it also simultaneously makes a more personal kind of contact with its readers, urging us to recognize the common bonds across difference that connect Puran with the pterodactyl and bring him to understand that, despite their difference, they share a common fate. In a similar way, *Beloved* is certainly a historical novel about slavery and its aftermath, which attempts to imagine the subjectivities of people whom history has rendered voiceless. But like *Beloved*, who was “more” than just Denver’s sister, Morrison’s novel is also more, challenging readers to test themselves against the impossible moral questions Sethe faces.

Placing these two texts side by side, and recognizing their similarity, also offers a model of reading world literature that challenges the kinds of hierarchies and structures of power that make *Beloved* far more familiar than “Pterodactyl” to many readers of this chapter. For these readers, such a comparison has the uncanny ability to make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. For readers who have become comfortable with the central conceit of Morrison’s novel, comparing it with “Pterodactyl” reminds us that *Beloved* is a ghost story, and as a literary figure, Beloved’s ghost is just as strange and unsettling as Devi’s dinosaur. Moreover, for those deeply engaged with the kinds of debates about American history and African American identity within which *Beloved* is most frequently situated, a comparison with “Pterodactyl” foregrounds the fact that Morrison is similarly concerned with questions of knowledge and representation. Conversely, comparing “Pterodactyl” to *Beloved* reinforces Devi’s efforts both to bring

her stories home to Western readers and to prevent the kinds of tokenizing claims that Spivak, as Devi's translator, is so concerned with. Comparing "Pterodactyl" to *Beloved*, like comparing tribals to Native Americans, suggests that struggles for justice in tribal India carry all the complexity that readers likely recognize in political contests that occur closer to home. Informed by the logic of haunting, a reading of *Beloved* and "Pterodactyl" together demonstrates the comparability of two such different texts and, in their asymmetry, the valences of difference that make the comparison between them meaningful.

Chapter 2

Haunting Pasts: Telling the Traumas of History

In Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, Tayo's intrusive memories transport him from his quiet life at an isolated sheep camp to the jungles of the Pacific where he fought as a soldier in World War II, and back further to his lonely childhood as an orphan raised in his aunt's family. For Estha, one of the twin protagonists of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the inky octopus that blots out his memories of the past can never erase one unforgettable image from his childhood, the broken body of his friend Velutha, who was beaten to death by the police. For these characters, the past is indeed a haunting presence, one that intrudes into and dramatically alters their lives in the present. Despite its power over them, however, that past is also elusive, in a sense spectral. They cannot name, understand, or control the past that haunts them, and although it dominates their consciousnesses, they cannot integrate it into their senses of themselves. This chapter will explore the consequences of this particular form of literary haunting—a haunting by one's own past.

The intrusive memories of the past that Tayo and Estha experience have all the hallmarks of psychological trauma, the uncontrollable return of a past experience so troubling that it could not be fully grasped or understood at the time that it occurred. These recurring memories are incredibly vivid and accurate, such that the trauma sufferer often must relive the past again and again in the present. Despite the power of the traumatic events to intrude into and control the life of the trauma sufferer, however, these

events remain beyond the reach of his or her understanding, unable to be fitted into a comprehensible narrative of the past. It is therefore no surprise that the effects of trauma are frequently likened in both clinical and theoretical contexts to a form of haunting or possession by the past.¹ Like the ghosts we encountered in the previous chapter, the presence of the traumatic past is insistent, troubling, and disruptive, challenging the boundaries between then and now, here and there, real and unreal. But for all its immediacy, the traumatic past, like a ghost, remains opaque and inscrutable; indeed, it is precisely the incomprehensibility of these past events that motivates their uncontrollable return. If, as Cathy Caruth suggests, “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event,” trauma throws the claims that the past can make on us into dramatic relief (“Trauma” 4-5).

In both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things*, depictions of trauma reveal the damaging effects of imperialism in the realm of the personal. Comparing the representations of imperial trauma in these two novels, however, requires us to traverse the geographically and historically distinct histories of imperialism that inform them. Silko’s text reflects forms of imperial violence—both physical and epistemological—that are rooted in uniquely American logics of civilization, modernity, and manifest destiny. It is shaped not only by the particular history of white racism against indigenous peoples, but also by the resulting concern with cultural preservation within Native communities, one which frequently takes the form of racial purity and social conservatism, as scholars

¹ These references are so common as to seem almost obligatory in descriptions of trauma; see, for example, Caruth, “Trauma” 4, LaCapra 14, Laub 63, Cvetkovich 6.

such as Scott Richard Lyons and Sean Kicummah Teuton have noted.² In *The God of Small Things*, the legacies of British colonialism in India are inseparably intertwined with the competing and at times contradictory logics of caste and class privilege, as well as the specific regional identity of Kerala, a space marked by both religious and linguistic difference within the Indian nation. In Roy's novel, culture becomes the site of contestation in a politically independent India, where the wealthy speak English and aspire to study abroad, and the worldviews of children like Estha and Rahel are shaped by "World Hit[s]" like *The Sound of Music* (54). My argument here is not that the imperial contexts that define these two texts are equivalent or interchangeable. Instead, I would like to suggest that the very fact that both Silko and Roy respond to them through the use of traumatic narrative, which they employ both in similar ways and to similar ends, is itself the basis for considering their novels together. The connections these texts seek to forge with their readers, as well as the narrative and ethical challenges they face in doing so, reflect the similar locations they occupy within contemporary circuits of global literary exchange, and point toward a new way of thinking about them, together, through the framework of world literature.

In these novels, therefore, trauma serves a twofold purpose. In both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things*, fictional representations of trauma reveal the unacknowledged and unaccounted-for effects of imperial domination. Rather than diverting attention from the political, trauma lends added force to political critiques by

² In *X-Marks*, Lyons is critical of "culture cops" whose engagements with Native culture reflect a binary between traditionalism and acculturation (xii). In a similar vein, Teuton resists rigid formulations of Native American identity, drawing instead on a flexible and dynamic understanding of experience and identity to ground and evaluate claims to knowledge.

demonstrating the profoundly personal impact of structural inequality and state violence. In the context of novels which circulate globally among diverse audiences, moreover, trauma not only highlights the individual suffering that results from the exercise of imperial power, but also elicits forms of engagement from readers for whom the novels' events might otherwise seem distant or abstract. Both Silko and Roy not only depict trauma, but also reproduce it in their narratives, allowing readers to share the dislocation and distress experienced by their protagonists. While both rely on traumatic narrative to make their readers responsible, however, the two authors define that responsibility in distinctly different ways. By identifying with Tayo and sharing his process of healing, readers of *Ceremony* are entrusted with the alternate history that the novel espouses. Readers of *The God of Small Things*, by contrast, are moved by the suffering of Roy's characters but cautioned against identifying with them too closely, and are instead held responsible for constructing an accurate and critical narrative of the past.

The Politics of Affective Experience

Because of its focus on personal experience and the inner workings of the individual mind, trauma might at first seem to be either an apolitical or even depoliticizing framework for considering the forms of systematic and often institutionalized violence that novels like *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* depict. Recent scholarly work on affect and intimacy, however, has called into question any simple distinctions between "private" realms of sensory and emotional experience and the "public" world of the political. Although the distinction between private and public has long been the subject of critique, it endures, as Lauren Berlant has pointed out, in the

constructed dichotomies that support a wide range of social and political exclusions.³ These exclusions, such as the entrenched racism faced by the Native American veterans in *Ceremony* or the legally codified gender and caste oppression in *The God of Small Things*, are at the heart of the trauma that the two novels depict, and demonstrate how, in Berlant's words, "so many institutions not usually associated with feeling can be read as institutions of intimacy" (3). By identifying the qualities of affect, intimacy, sexuality, and bodily experience as fundamental to the workings of public projects such as nation- and empire-building, in the way that both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* invite us to do, we can begin to challenge the ideological structures that are the foundation of the violent exclusions they depict.

Rather than displacing a critique of the political forces, ideologies, and operations of power that might cause individual suffering, trauma makes those forces visible and opens them to interrogation. As Ann Cvetkovich suggests, inasmuch as many forms of so-called "personal" trauma reflect or mobilize social power relations that are overdetermined by race, class, gender, or imperialism, these traumas are no less political than the archetypal experiences of soldiers or political prisoners.⁴ Indeed, an examination

³ As Berlant suggests, the appeal of the public/private divide extends beyond the Victorian fantasy of a more ordered world from which it derives. In contemporary society, it underlies a range of exclusionary distinctions codified in law and culture, such as the divisions between "male and female, work and family, colonizer and colonized, friend and lover, hetero and homo, 'unmarked' personhood versus racial-, ethnic-, and class-marked identities" (3).

⁴ In *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich insists on the important connections between trauma's affective and political dimensions and challenges any simple distinction between the implicitly masculinized "political" trauma of war and the feminized "personal" trauma of rape and incest. Although her central concern is with the way that sexual trauma, in particular, gives rise to forms of lesbian public culture, her arguments

of trauma that recognizes its underlying political significance, Cvetkovich argues, has the potential to challenge entrenched national narratives that efface troubling histories of oppression and imperial domination:

[C]onstructing the history of the United States from the vantage point of trauma produces a critical American studies, one that revises a celebratory account of the nation and instead illuminates its emergence from a history that includes capitalism and economic exploitation, war, colonialism and the genocide of native peoples, and slavery, diaspora, and migration. This version of American studies converges with transnational approaches to the United States, making it possible to explore the tenuous borders (both literal and ideological) of the United States as a nation along with the violences that sustain, defend, and/or expand its borders. (36)

In suggesting that the affective experience of trauma might illuminate the workings of imperialism in the United States, Cvetkovich echoes a body of scholarship that has compellingly elaborated the ways in which affect and intimacy are both shaped by and reflective of the operation of empire.⁵ Indeed, the consonances between the representations of trauma in *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* suggest the interconnections between temporally and geographically distinct imperial projects that

about the political significance of so-called personal traumas speak to the question of trauma's value as an analytical framework.

⁵ Scholars going back to Frantz Fanon have demonstrated the convergence of imperialism's political and economic power and its impact on the psyche of the colonized. More recently, Anne McClintock has pointed out that the disciplinary separation between psychoanalysis and history, which occurs in concert with the emergence of colonial modernity, draws an artificial distinction between "the family, sexuality, and fantasy (the traditional realm of psychoanalysis) and the categories of labor, money, and market (the traditional realm of political and economic history)" (8). Despite their seeming separation from the political structures of empire, she argues, these "private" experiences and relations are in fact an essential part of Western imperial projects and the epistemologies that support them. In a similar vein, Amy Kaplan's pivotal article "Manifest Domesticity" reveals the ways that discourses of territorial expansion and domesticity in the United States were both interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Ann Laura Stoler has described.⁶ Placing affect at the center of an analysis of imperialism thus reveals not only the unacknowledged personal dimension of colonial violence but also the similar ways in which distinct imperial projects have sought to discipline the personal and the intimate.

A more thorough consideration of affect is thus important not only because it fills a gap in our understanding of national or colonial history, but also because it reveals previously unrecognized sites and frameworks for subversion and resistance. Berlant's explorations of affect are often in service of an interrogation of various forms of national belonging or exclusion. Cvetkovich, who seeks to distance the experience of trauma from a medicalized discourse of disease, argues that the affective experience of trauma can also give rise to vibrant, nurturing, and politically significant public cultures. For Stoler, a focus on the intimacies of colonial rule makes visible not only the operation of imperial power but also the forms and strategies of resistance it generates: the “‘uncanny’ intimacies” she documents “may leave room for relations that promise something else, that activate desires and imaginaries less easily named” (14). As these authors suggest, focusing our attention on the often disregarded terrain of affective experience may strengthen existing political critiques and provide new possibilities for imagining resistance. Trauma, in particular, serves this purpose in both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things*: it functions, as Cvetkovitch describes, as a “hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and oppression and the felt experience of them” (12). In both

⁶ Drawing on Indonesia’s colonial history, Stoler demonstrates that proper management of intimate relations was an essential component of imperial rule. As she suggests, “[t]he incommensurabilities between North American empire and European colonial history diminish when the intimacies of empire are at center stage” (“Tense and Tender Ties” 58).

novels, trauma highlights the operation of imperial power by revealing the personal suffering it causes, and in doing so it becomes the means through which that power can be challenged and counteracted.

Trauma in *Ceremony*

Ceremony presents a moving portrait of Tayo, a Native American veteran of the Second World War, who has been left shattered by his combat experiences. Although the United States' involvement in World War II is rarely thought of through the framework of colonialism, Silko's treatment of the war emphasizes the connections between Tayo's status as a Native American and the particular traumas of his military service. As Alan Wald has argued, Silko's depiction of Tayo's trauma suggests not only that "similar mechanisms of racism and economic exploitation are involved in *all* wars waged by the United States," but also that "American imperialism's crimes against people of color are not simply aberrations" (26). Indeed, Tayo's experiences of trauma—both the "political" trauma of shell-shock and the "personal" trauma of growing up an orphan—combine to reveal the pernicious and pervasive effects of Native Americans' status as an internally colonized minority. By placing the personal, embodied effects of Tayo's trauma, such as his nightmares, nausea, and uncontrollable crying, at the center of her text, Silko emphasizes the devastating consequences of Native Americans' oppression and marginalization by white America and suggests the urgency with which these injustices must be addressed.

At the start of Silko's novel, Tayo is wracked by nightmares and incapacitated by nausea, left alone to care for his family's isolated sheep camp on the Laguna reservation. Through the novel's fragmentary narration, we gradually learn of Tayo's past as his mind

moves freely between his present life on the reservation and his memories of childhood and the war. The illegitimate child of an anonymous father whose ethnicity remains unknown, Tayo is given to his aunt to raise, and remembers very little about his mother, who dies while he is still young. His cousin, Rocky, whom his aunt clearly favors, is a star football player who aspires to lead the assimilated life that is valorized at school. The two young men enlist together, and when Rocky is killed in combat, Tayo feels responsible for his death, as well as for that of his beloved uncle Josiah, who dies while they are away at war. Back home again at Laguna, Tayo struggles with alcohol abuse, like many of the other veterans, but after he seeks help from the Native healer Betonie, his perspective changes. As Betonie explains, the evils of the modern age, including the arrival of whites in America and the invention of the atom bomb, are the result of Native witchery, which it is Tayo's mission to resist. Following Betonie's advice, Tayo searches for and recovers Josiah's stolen cattle, and during his search he meets and begins a romantic relationship with Ts'eh, an embodiment of a sacred figure in Laguna mythology, who joins him at the sheep camp and teaches him about traditional forms of healing.⁷ Tayo is forced to hide from the authorities when his longtime adversary Emo spreads rumors that he is crazy, and by choosing not to retaliate when Emo tortures and kills his friend Harley, Tayo frustrates the destroyers' bloodthirsty purpose. At the close of the novel, Tayo no longer suffers from survivor's guilt and traumatic flashbacks, and he is beginning the process of becoming a Native healer.

⁷ Although Ts'eh's identity remains ambiguous, she has strong connections to both Thought-Woman, who appears at the novel's opening, and the mythic figure of Yellow Woman. For a thorough account of Yellow Woman's significance in Silko's fiction, including *Ceremony*, see Elizabeth Hoffman Nelson and Malcolm A. Nelson, "Shifting Patterns, Changing Stories: Leslie Marmon Silko's Yellow Women."

Tayo's intrusive memories, which encompass both bittersweet memories of childhood and violent echoes of combat, seem to reflect two distinct sources of trauma: growing up as an orphan, and serving in World War II. For Tayo, however, “[h]ome life, and the battles waged there, are indistinguishable from the battle he has fought as a combatant overseas,” and the trauma of his personal experiences of marginalization and loss reflects the political structures of U.S. militarism and imperialism (Rand 24). As a member of an internally colonized minority, Tayo identifies with the Japanese soldiers he is fighting, who are also framed by U.S. wartime discourse as nationally and ethnically other. The connection that Tayo sees between himself and the Japanese—a connection structured by the operation of U.S. imperialism—expresses itself in a profoundly personal way when he becomes convinced that his beloved uncle Josiah is one of the men before his firing squad:

Tayo stood there, stiff with nausea, while they fired at the soldiers, and he watched his uncle fall, and he *knew* it was Josiah; and even after Rocky started shaking him by the shoulders and telling him to stop crying, it was *still* Josiah lying there. (8)

Importantly, although Tayo's fellow soldiers dismiss his vision of Josiah as “hallucinations” brought on by “battle fatigue,” the Native healer Betonie validates the personal connection Tayo feels with the Japanese soldiers (8). “It isn't surprising you saw him with them. You saw who they were. Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers” (124). In a similar moment, at the train depot after Tayo's release from the veterans hospital, his traumatic memory transforms a young Japanese-American boy in an army hat into his cousin Rocky. The image of the boy blurs the distinctions between Japanese soldiers, Japanese-American civilians, and Tayo's own Native American family, and sends Tayo into a fit of terrified crying and vomiting. As the novel suggests,

there is a germ of truth in Tayo's traumatic visions of Josiah and Rocky, which reveal the similar forms of marginalization and state-sponsored violence inflicted on those, such as the Japanese-Americans and Native Americans, who are defined as outsiders. In Tayo's mind, military service makes him responsible for the deaths of both his uncle and his cousin, and the guilt he feels about these deaths suggests his profound ambivalence, as a Native American, about his role in the U.S. military.

Tayo's mixed-race identity is also a source of trauma that is shaped by and reflective of imperial power. As the child of a Laguna mother and an unknown father, Tayo's "half-breed" identity is a constant reminder to his family and community of his mother's shameful past. Tayo is consciously excluded by his aunt, who raises him, and carefully distanced from her own son, Rocky, in a tacit arrangement that only the three of them acknowledge. As Silko makes clear, the shame that Tayo feels about his mother's past, which is shared by Auntie and by the community at large, reflects the alienating effects of an intrusive white culture. Unlike "the oldest times, when the people had shared a single clan name" and "had known, with the simple certainty of the world they saw, how everything should be," Tayo and his family live in a world where everything has become "entangled with European names" (68). Tayo's mother, Laura, is a victim of this cultural double bind, ashamed of both her own culture and her transgressions of its norms, and the community is defeated by their sorrow and confusion at "losing her" and also "losing part of themselves" (68). For Tayo, the loss of his mother and the isolation he feels in his aunt's family give rise to a profoundly personal trauma that reflects Native Americans' status as an internally colonized minority and white America's devaluation of Native culture.

Silko's narration weaves this account of Tayo's childhood and his mother's past together with two other important events—Tayo's and Rocky's enlistment, and a bar fight in which Tayo almost kills Emo—which situate Tayo's childhood trauma in a broader political context. At Rocky's suggestion, Tayo and Rocky enlist together as brothers; as a soldier, Tayo gains a brother only to lose him. Tayo's status as an unwanted and unwelcome member of the family only heightens his survivor's guilt, which makes him feel as though Rocky, the favored child, should still be alive and “[i]t was him, Tayo, who had died, but somehow there had been a mistake with the corpses, and somehow his was still unburied” (28). Tayo's relationship with Rocky and his own mixed-race identity are also at the heart of his conflict with Emo. At the time the fight begins, Emo is bragging about torturing Japanese soldiers and toying with a bag of human teeth. As his anger at Emo mounts, Tayo recalls the image of the Japanese-American boy at the depot, in which the Japanese soldier's face and Rocky's childhood face are merged. For Tayo, who sees through the logic of war that authorizes violence against “enemies,” Emo's pride is little more than murderous bloodlust. When he accuses Emo of being a killer, Emo's retort, “[y]ou love Japs the way your mother loved to screw white men,” finally pushes Tayo to violence (63). Emo's remark equates Laura's cultural and sexual betrayal with Tayo's betrayal of his country at war: both mother and son are accused of loving the enemy, an accusation which maps the violence of war onto the terrain of intimate relations.

Emo, like many of the other veterans, acts out the political trauma of his status as a second-class citizen in his sexual relationships. In uniform, the Native American veterans experienced a temporary reprieve from the racism of mainstream American

society, and for the first time enjoyed the sexual attentions of white women. After the war, the veterans' stories about dancing with blondes and going to bed with redheads feature prominently in their drunken reminiscences, and sex with white women stands in for all of the forms of privilege they experienced during the war. Emo makes this equation between white privilege and white women explicit: "They took our land, they took everything! So let's get our hands on white women!" (55) The Native American women the veterans sleep with, like the young Towac woman Helen Jean, are treated as little more than poor substitutes for the white women the veterans remember. One man comes on to Helen Jean by telling her about a blond prostitute he slept with in California, and when she does not leave the bar with him, he makes her perceived inferiority clear: "You bitch! You think you're better than a white woman?" (165) Having failed to get work as a secretary, Helen Jean is too ashamed of herself to write home, and although she survives as a de facto prostitute, she clings to the last vestiges of respectability that set her apart from the other Indian women she sees in Gallup: the curled hair and penciled eyebrows that reflect internalized standards of white beauty. Helen Jean's inability to escape the life she is living, as well as the veterans' disdain for her, reflect the racism of white society; like Tayo's guilt and shame, they reveal the trauma of empire at work in the realm of the personal and the intimate.

Trauma in *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things, although set in a very different context than Silko's novel, also relies on trauma to emphasize the profound effects of national and imperial power on the personal and intimate lives of its characters. For some critics, most notably Aijaz Ahmad, the novel's concern with the intimate appears to marginalize the political

as a lens through which the novel's events can be contextualized and interpreted.⁸ As Ahmad suggests, the novel's emphasis on the erotic, in particular, "dismisses the actually constituted field of politics as either irrelevant or a zone of bad faith" (104). Ahmad is right to note that intimacy and the erotic feature prominently in Roy's depictions of a variety of political projects, including resistance to the legacies of British colonialism and struggles for legal and social equality. He fails to recognize, however, that by focusing her novel on the personal, Roy actually raises the stakes of these projects by demonstrating their profound personal, as well as political, significance. By suggesting that her characters' problems stem from the breaking of "the Love Laws"—a phrase which itself represents the intersection of the intimate and the juridical—Roy points to the personal as a stage on which politicized forms of violence can be both carried out and, perhaps, resisted (33).

The God of Small Things is narrated cyclically, alternating between an account of the events that unfold for the novel's protagonists, the twins Estha and Rahel, in December 1969, and their consequences, more than twenty years later, when brother and sister are reunited as adults. The 1969 storyline begins with the arrival of the twins' cousin Sophie Mol, the daughter of their uncle Chacko and his estranged British wife Margaret Kochamma. During Margaret Kochamma's and Sophie Mol's visit, the twins' mother, Ammu, begins an affair with Velutha, an Untouchable carpenter, that sets off a

⁸ Ahmad's review of *The God of Small Things* in the weekly Indian newsmagazine *Frontline* is frequently cited and rebutted by subsequent critics of Roy's novel, in part, I suspect, because his overt and strongly worded critique stands out among many other more positive responses. Although I disagree with him on many points, in particular the fairness and "realism" of Roy's representation of communism, Ahmad offers a thorough and engaging analysis of the novel and raises a number of valid questions about Roy's treatment of sexuality and intimacy.

chain reaction of tragic events. In the chaos that follows the discovery of the affair, the three children decide to run away, and Sophie Mol drowns when their canoe capsizes. Unknowingly, Velutha and the twins take refuge in the same abandoned house, and the twins witness Velutha's brutal beating at the hands of the police who come to arrest him on trumped-up kidnapping charges. When it becomes clear that Velutha is fatally injured, the twins' great-aunt, Baby Kochamma, who filed the initial false report, coerces the twins into identifying Velutha as their kidnapper. In the aftermath of these events, Estha is "Returned" to his father; Ammu, forced to leave her family's home, is separated from both her children, becomes impoverished and ill, and eventually dies. Estha and Rahel are forever changed, haunted by their own complicity in Sophie Mol's death and Velutha's murder, and grieving the loss of their mother and each other. As adults, the twins lead hollow lives, and Estha's muteness, like Rahel's vacant eyes, serves as a continuing testimony to the personal damage that can be done by the social and political forces of "an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it" (293).

Throughout the novel, Roy relies on her characters' personal, affective experience to frame political currents and historical events and imbue them with significance. Set in the fictional town of Ayemenem, in the Indian state of Kerala, the novel's events are informed by the region's long history of Syrian Christianity, as well as by the more recent flourishing of communist politics there, and throughout the novel Roy reminds readers of the personal implications of this political movement. Three characters represent the face of Communism in Ayemenem: Chacko, who avows his commitment to revolution while underpaying his own workers; Velutha, the Untouchable carpenter and card-carrying Party member; and Comrade Pillai, the ambitious local Party functionary. For these

characters, Roy makes clear, being a Communist often has as much to do with the domestic and sexual dimensions of their daily lives as with their abstract political ideals. For Chacko, “play[ing] *Comrade! Comrade!*!” provides a pretense for showering attentions on the most attractive of the female factory workers and a means of satisfying his “Men’s Needs” (63, 160). Although Velutha’s political commitments are certainly more genuine than Chacko’s, the novel consistently directs our attention to the personal significance of his political activism, as well: his playful insistence to Rahel that it was his imaginary “Long-lost Twin brother” Urumban whom she saw in the Communist rally, and his rejection of the “smug, ordered world” that is, as Brinda Bose points out, part of the sexual and emotional connection he shares with Ammu (Roy 169, 167; Bose 63-4).⁹

Comrade Pillai, Ayemenem’s most prominent Communist, is a politically savvy man eyeing a potential seat in the Legislative Assembly and a “professional omeletteer” who is not afraid of breaking a few eggs (224). Despite his role in local public life, however, Comrade Pillai is most frequently depicted within the confines of his own domestic space. The scene in which Chacko and Comrade Pillai first discuss Velutha’s involvement with Party politics is filled with detailed descriptions of the size, condition, and contents of Pillai’s house, which he instinctively understands give him a political advantage:

Comrade Pillai knew that his straitened circumstances (his small, hot house, his grunting mother, his obvious proximity to the toiling masses) gave him a power over Chacko that in those revolutionary times no

⁹ I agree with Bose that Ahmad’s treatment of the relationship between Ammu and Velutha is inappropriately dismissive; although Ahmad rightly points out that their relationship is primarily sexual in nature, his assertion that this fact “reduces the human complexity of the characters that [Roy] herself has created” is an overstatement (105).

amount of Oxford education could match. He held his poverty like a gun to Chacko's head. (261)

As this description makes clear, the condition of Pillai's home is an essential element of his political power. Rather than existing outside the realm of politics, Pillai's and Chacko's private, domestic spaces become the basis on which political claims can be advanced.

Indeed, one of central and emblematic metaphors in Roy's novel, the History House, emphasizes the way in which the legacies of British colonialism are experienced within the realm of the domestic. The History House exemplifies the novel's representation of history as, in the words of Anuradha Dingwaney Needham, "a dominating, oppressive force that saturates virtually all social and cultural space, including familial, intimate, and affective relationships" (372). The phrase is coined by Chacko, who explains to the twins that their family's entrenched Anglophilic leaves them "[p]ointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside of their own history" like people viewing a house from the outside (51). As Chacko describes it, history is like "an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside" (51). The notion of the History House is emblematic of the novel's approach to history, which it renders concrete and meaningful—much as Chacko's metaphor does—through the familiar details of the domestic and the personal. For the twins, this explanation hits home immediately. They know a house like the one Chacko describes, the abandoned estate of Kari Saipu, an Englishman "gone native," located across the river from their home (51). Kari Saipu's house, the twins' History House, has a sordid past: it was left vacant after its owner committed suicide when the young Indian boy who was his lover was taken away from him and sent to school. The novel's brief description of Kari

Saipu's underage lover raises the specter of a sexual trauma that is shaped by and reflective of the operation of imperial power. By connecting the House of Chacko's metaphor—the structures of colonialism that alienate the colonized from their own past—with Kari Saipu's estate, the novel exposes the currents of sexual desire that colonialism shaped.

The Anglophilia that Chacko describes in his account of the History House, a manifestation of India's colonial past, is essential to and inseparable from the family's often fraught personal relationships. Pappachi, the twins' cruel and abusive grandfather, is, in Ammu's words, "an incurable British CCP," or "shit-wiper" (50). Deceased prior to the main events of the novel, Pappachi is remembered through a Western-style portrait, in which he is nattily dressed in an equestrian outfit, wearing an expression of barely concealed cruelty, and holding the ivory-handled riding crop that he used to beat the adolescent Ammu. Although they are never explicitly linked, Pappachi's position in the imperial bureaucracy as an Imperial Entomologist and his role as a domestic tyrant consistently go hand in hand in Roy's descriptions.

The intimate lives of both of Pappachi's children, Ammu and Chacko, are similarly marked by the legacies of British colonialism. Ammu's marriage to her abusive, alcoholic husband disintegrates after he proposes that she become the concubine of his British supervisor, and when she returns home, Pappachi rejects her story because he refuses to believe that "an Englishman, *any* Englishman, would covet another man's wife" (42). Chacko, a Rhodes scholar who takes great pride in his time spent at Oxford, is attracted to his white, British ex-wife's freckles and continues to adore her after their divorce in part because he sees himself as so unworthy of her. And the twins, yearning

for a father figure after Ammu's divorce, measure themselves heartbreakingly against the “clean white children” in the film *The Sound of Music* (100). Staging an imaginary dialogue with Baron von Trapp, the twins find that, unlike their British cousin, they repeatedly fail to meet the Baron's requirements. The twins' sense of rejection, like Ammu's “Unsafe Edge” and Chacko's heartbreak, are forms of trauma that reflect the powerful effects of imperial legacies within the realm of the personal (44).

Velutha's beating is perhaps the most striking instance of a shockingly personal form of violence that highlights the embodied, human cost of abstractions such as “human history” and “power's fear of powerlessness” (Roy 292-3). Having discovered Velutha sleeping in the History House, the policemen beat him systematically and with detachment:

Unlike the tradition of rampaging religious mobs or conquering armies running riot, that morning in the Heart of Darkness the posse of Touchable policemen acted with economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria. They didn't tear out his hair or burn him alive. They didn't hack off his genitals and stuff them in his mouth. They didn't rape him. Or behead him.

After all, they were not battling an epidemic. They were merely inoculating a community against an outbreak. (293)

Throughout Velutha's beating, the policemen's actions are described as impersonal and almost mechanistic, motivated not by personal hatred, but by an abstract sense of obligation to protect a certain circumscribed community from a perceived threat. They are ready to take him away when the discovery of Velutha's fingernails, which he had allowed the twins to paint days before, shatters the policemen's façade of detachment:

One of them held them up and waved the fingers coquettishly at the others. They laughed. “What's this?” in a high falsetto. “AC-DC?” One of them flicked at his penis with a stick. “Come on, show us your special secret. Show us how big it gets when you blow it up.” (294)

After these taunts, one of the policemen crushes Velutha's penis with his boot. This act of sexual violence belies the impersonal detachment that the novel earlier attributed to the policemen's violence. Unlike the other crimes of which Velutha is already presumed guilty—including rape and kidnapping—the specter of homosexuality raised by Velutha's painted nails seems a personal affront to the policemen, whose hypermasculinity Roy darkly parodies by describing them as mincing “[h]airy fairies with lethal wands” (290). The policemen's single act of sexual violence, the culmination of an otherwise “wholly impersonal” affair, invalidates the claim that personal and political forms of violence can be separated from one another (292). For all their supposed detachment, the policemen's cruelty is an inherently personal violation, and the gratuitousness of their final assault on a fatally wounded man reveals the shocking personal cost of preserving the novel's social order.

In Velutha's beating, which is the novel's climax, all of the political currents and personal motives that Roy has traced throughout the novel converge. Mammachi's ingrained prejudice against Untouchables raises the stakes of Velutha's transgression, and her tolerance of Chacko's dalliances fuels her disgust at Ammu for “defil[ing] generations of breeding” (244). A recent Communist march stokes Baby Kochamma's anger, fear, and humiliation, which she projects onto Velutha in her false police report charging him with rape and kidnapping. The death of Sophie Mol, a “clean, white” British child, makes the alleged kidnapping all the more shocking to the authorities, who react accordingly. Velutha is brutally beaten in the History House, the place where he and Ammu conducted their affair, and where the twins stashed food and toys, preparing a home-away-from-home. Acting as “history's henchmen,” the police beat Velutha with

brutal efficiency, and his ruined body is the product of “an era imprinting itself on those who lived in it” (292, 293). Finally, as Velutha lies dying in the police station, Baby Kochamma uses the twins’ love for their mother and each other to coerce the false identification that corroborates her report and justifies “the Death in Custody of a technically innocent man” (298). This event, in which the personal—intimacy, domesticity, sexuality—converges with the political—class, caste, gender, empire—lies at the heart of the novel’s trauma.

In both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things*, trauma reveals the individual, human cost of political structures like racism, gender and caste oppression, and imperialism. But, in much the same way that Stoler and others suggest, by revealing the personal dimensions of political oppression, these novels also allow their readers to recognize the personal as a site of resistance. Significantly, in both texts, sexual encounters become central acts of defiance. Tayo’s relationship with Ts’eh is essential to his process of healing, and the affection and intimacy they share stands in sharp contradistinction to the other sexual relationships we see in the novel, especially those of the other veterans. As Tayo combats the witchery in the novel’s climactic scene, he draws strength and insight from his relationship with Ts’eh, who teaches him how to reconnect with traditional ways of life and practices of worship. In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu’s affair with Velutha represents the consummate transgression of gender and caste restrictions, and their sexual attraction to one another is credited with the power to leave history “wrong-footed” (167). Likewise, the incestuous sex between Estha and Rahel, although described as a moment of shared sadness, reunites the twins and counteracts, to a degree, the trauma that has left them alone in life and alienated from one

another. In both novels, but especially in *The God of Small Things*, the power of such intimate relationships to challenge forms of imperial violence is certainly circumscribed; nevertheless, these relationships exemplify the forms of resistance that can be imagined only when the personal dimensions of political power are recognized.

The Global Circulation of Traumatic Narrative

Both Silko and Roy rely on depictions of trauma to bring home the personal dimensions of state and imperial violence to their readers, but placing trauma at the center of their fictions serves another purpose as well. More than simply describing trauma, *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* reproduce it through formal strategies such as fragmentation and repetition that create a reading experience not unlike the experience of traumatic memory. Like witnesses to a survivor's traumatic account, we as readers become responsible for constructing a linear narrative of the past from the disjointed one with which we are confronted. This strategy for eliciting readerly engagement is particularly powerful for authors like Silko and Roy, whose fictions are written at least in part with "outside" audiences in mind—non-indigenous readers in Silko's case, and international readers in Roy's. Indeed, both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* can fairly be considered within the framework of world literature, understood along the lines that David Damrosch suggests, as a body of "literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin" (4). Damrosch rightly qualifies this definition, emphasizing that such texts must not only reach but also be taken up by other readerships in order to be considered global in any meaningful sense. Reflecting this concern with the reactions of "actual readers," both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* elicit powerful forms of engagement and obligation from their readers by placing

them in the position of the witness. Readers who might distance themselves from the places, events, and communities that these novels describe are drawn in to them, and as a result they experience the consequences of imperial violence with a newfound immediacy. Significantly, although *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* both rely on the language of trauma to interpellate their readers, they employ the sense of connection they elicit to very different ends. Whereas *Ceremony* invites its readers to identify with Tayo and share in the healing ceremony that the novel itself performs, *The God of Small Things* cautions us against embracing comforting narratives and makes us responsible for preserving an accurate record the past we have just witnessed.

The nature of trauma, which places narrative at the center of the process of healing, suggests consonances between the work of the witness or therapist and the work of the reader of fiction.¹⁰ Indeed, the reconstructive work involved in creating an account of the traumatic past can lend such accounts a distinctly *literary* quality. Through a certain lens, the primary difference between narratives that reproduce trauma and narratives that heal it can be seen as a difference in form: the language of trauma is disjointed, interruptive, and repetitive, whereas a healing narrative is linear and integral; the intrusions of trauma are experienced in the present tense, whereas a healing narrative

¹⁰ This comparison requires a degree of caution. I want to make clear that I am suspicious of any easy equation between real experiences of suffering and the psychic wounds they leave, on the one hand, and the literary strategies used to convey the pain of fictional characters and elicit emotional responses from readers, on the other. Nevertheless, I recognize the power of trauma as a framework for understanding the events and effects of literary works like the ones I consider in this chapter. Inasmuch as authors like Silko and Roy foreground the experience of trauma in their fictional texts, it is important to consider the stakes and consequences of narrating the past in the terms that trauma provides.

confines those events to the past.¹¹ Extending these comparisons further, it is possible to see novels like *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* as analogs for the narratives of trauma survivors: both are fragmented narratives, and both require the reconstructive, often imaginative work of a reader or listener to assemble a complete, linear account of key events.

Likening literary texts to the narratives of trauma survivors in this way raises important questions about the listener's or witness's identification with the survivor, which his or her narrative of the past might invite or enable. In clinical settings, the presence of a witness is central to the process of reconstructing a healing narrative of traumatic events, for the witness's willingness to listen is what allows the victim to reconstruct a story of his or her experience. Although the attentive listening of a witness may allow the trauma sufferer to narrate traumatic events and begin to integrate them into his or her life story, it also risks blurring the boundaries between survivor and witness. Speaking from the perspective of a therapist, Judith Herman asserts: "Trauma is contagious. In the role of witness to disaster or atrocity, the therapist at times is emotionally overwhelmed. She experiences, to a lesser degree, the same terror, rage, and despair as the patient" (140). Herman goes on to offer several examples in which the survivor's traumatic narrative seems to take possession of the therapist, who begins to experience the same intrusive images or feelings of powerlessness suffered by the patient. In a literary rather than a clinical context, the idea that a traumatic narrative has the

¹¹ Echoing this comparison between healing narratives and artistic representations of the past, Judith Herman offers an evocative description of the traumatic narrative as "a series of still snapshots or a silent movie; the role of therapy is to provide the music and the words" (175).

power to interpellate and impose itself on a witness is both compelling and potentially troubling.

For example, the ongoing controversy surrounding Silko's use of Native American cultural forms and messages typifies the problems that can arise from drawing readers too completely or indiscriminately into the world of the text's traumatic narrative. For some, such as Paula Gunn Allen, the myths and stories Silko draws on carry sacred content, and Silko's willingness to share those stories indiscriminately with non-Native audiences marks her as a cultural outsider. Allen is critical of Silko's choice to include a "clan story" in her novel, remarking that "she must have been told what I was, that we don't tell these things outside" (88). For others, like James Ruppert, the "mediational" quality of Silko's narrative, which combines Native and non-Native ideologies, is the source of the novel's power to "restructure how each audience [Native and non-Native] values truth, reality, and knowledge" (176, 178). The particular power that Ruppert identifies in *Ceremony*—to engage and transform its readers—is a quality frequently attributed to Native American writing as a genre. This special mode of address, which Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez has termed "conversive," places the reader in an "active role that transcends the more bounded role of the textual reader" in a process that "transforms all involved" (13). What such a theory of Native textuality does not explicitly address, however, are the means by which readers—especially readers unfamiliar with Native cultural forms and traditions—are brought into conversation with these potentially transformative texts, and made to take up the "responsibilities" that come along with their reading position (Brill de Ramírez 13).

The question of *Ceremony*'s address to and interpellation of non-Native readers is an important one, since as Allan Chavkin points out, more than half a million copies of the novel have been sold since 1977, and by the early 2000s it had become "one of the most frequently taught contemporary novels in higher education" (4). For white American readers, who might be tempted to see the traumas that Silko describes, such as the self-destructive alcoholism of Native American veterans, as abstract social ills, distant from and irrelevant to themselves, the language of trauma lays the groundwork for a meaningful engagement with the novel. Indeed, *Ceremony* not only invites the engagement of its white readers, but also allows them to occupy a comfortable place in relation to the story of trauma and recovery it narrates. By allowing its readers to align themselves with Tayo as fellow victims of the pernicious effects of witchery, *Ceremony* shatters the perceived distance of its white readers and effectively interpellates them into the Native epistemology it espouses.

Throughout much of *Ceremony*, the novel's narrative style reproduces the repetitions and disjunctions of traumatic memory. Scenes from Tayo's present, at the sheep camp, alternate with vivid depictions of the Pacific jungles where he saw combat, childhood memories of time spent with Rocky and Josiah, and accounts of Tayo's experiences in the veterans hospital and at home with Auntie after his return from the war. These scenes interrupt the narration of present events as completely and as forcefully as the memories themselves intrude on Tayo's consciousness; just as Tayo is incapacitated by these involuntary flashbacks, it takes almost fifty pages for Silko to narrate Tayo's journey from the sheep camp to the bar, so densely are these pages filled with detailed depictions of scenes from his past. Information that is essential to

understanding Tayo's story, such as Rocky's death or his mother's past, emerges slowly, and readers are often presented with key phrases or images before their significance is revealed. This fragmented, non-linear narration places the reader in a position analogous to the witness of a trauma survivor's account, who struggles to construct a narrative from the survivor's disjointed, uncomprehended memories.

This traumatic style of narration, which is particularly prevalent towards the beginning of the novel, gradually becomes more linear and grounded in the present as the novel progresses and Tayo begins to heal. After Tayo's visit to Betonie, the quest to recover Josiah's stolen cattle and defeat the witchery provides structure, sequence, and meaning to his previously shattered life, and the novel's narration reflects this shift, progressing in a more linear way as Tayo travels to the mountain, returns with the cattle, and evades capture by Emo and government officials. In this latter section of the novel, Tayo's memories inform rather than interrupt his decisions and actions in the present, as when, during his search for the cattle, he remembers the lessons learned from childhood hunting trips with Rocky and Josiah. For the reader, too, this section provides a sense of calm and relief. After the struggle of reconstructing Tayo's story in the novel's early pages, we are now able to follow a clear and purposeful sequence of events—indeed, the familiar plot of a quest or adventure—to its clear and logical conclusion. If, in the novel's earlier sections, we experienced vicariously the intrusions of the traumatic past, by its end we share the relief of finally incorporating those memories into a comprehensible narrative. Like Tayo, we see “the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told” (246). Reflecting Native American understandings of healing as a communal

process rather than an individual one, the conclusion of Silko's narrative artfully draws readers into the community that is being healed by her story and requires them to leave behind the notion of the individualistic Western hero plot.

This idea—that readers, through their identification with Tayo, share in the healing that he undergoes—gives rise to one of the most pervasive and contentious claims about *Ceremony*. According to this line of reasoning, Silko's novel does not merely describe the ceremony that Tayo carries out, but rather *enacts* a ceremony *in which we as readers participate*. Carol Mitchell's account of the novel as ceremony is exemplary:

While one novel alone cannot revive or replace the traditions and ceremonies of a people, Silko's novel is itself a curing ceremony. It weaves the old stories and traditions into the contemporary story of Tayo in a way that helps to make the old ways understandable and relevant to the contemporary situation. Not only is Tayo cured by the old stories and changing ceremonies, but the form of the novel may bring a new storytelling tradition into the Indian tradition that will help to cure some of the hopelessness and despair of the contemporary Indian who is caught between two ways of life. (28)

Mitchell's assertion—that *Ceremony*'s healing power extends beyond the world of the novel's fictional narrative to include those among its readers who might be suffering as Tayo is—echoes comments made by Silko herself. Reflecting on the process of writing the novel, Silko describes experiencing the same journey of healing and recovery that her protagonist does. “[W]hen I started *Ceremony*, I was as sick as Tayo was. I was having nausea and all kinds of weird symptoms and stuff and then as he starts to get better, of course, I was starting, so there is this parallel.” She explains, “[t]hat is why it is called *Ceremony*, because I know that I could not have made it if I had not been writing *Ceremony* for those two years” (qtd. in Cohen 258).

Not only does Silko herself identify with Tayo and share his healing journey, but the structure of the novel suggests and invites a similar identification from its readers. Even those critical of Silko's approach, such as Jana Sequoya-Magdaleno, agree that she intends to interpellate her readers in this way.¹² In the prologue, which frames the novel, the figure of Ts'its'tsi'nako, or Thought-Woman, introduces a direct relationship between thought and reality, since "whatever she thinks about / appears" (1). When the narrator, speaking in the first person, declares "I'm telling you the story / she is thinking," Ts'its'tsi'nako's power to make stories into reality is attributed to the entire novel. As Robert Bell, among others, has suggested, the story of Ts'its'tsi'nako can be seen as part of a curative ritual with the power to affect the world through its very repetition (24). Thus, by incorporating Tayo's story (the story which the first-person narrator is telling us) into the ritual telling of Ts'its'tsi'nako's story, the prologue suggests that Silko's novel might also possess the power to heal those who read it.

By encouraging its readers to identify with Tayo, *Ceremony* also encourages us to embrace the concept of witchery's pervasive and pernicious influence on the modern world, since it is by accepting Betonie's alternate history that Tayo is able to begin the process of healing. According to Betonie, the violence and cruelty of the modern world, including the arrival of whites in America, the genocide of Native Americans, and the carnage of modern war, can be attributed to the work of Native witches, the destroyers. He reassures Tayo that although whites might seem to be the cause of Indians' suffering,

¹² Sequoya-Magdaleno's critique of *Ceremony*, which accords with those made by Paula Gunn Allen and others, centers on the way that the hybrid nature of the novel's prologue invites its readers to take part in both Laguna and Western reading practices, which she argues are mutually exclusive. The very fact of Sequoya-Magdaleno's concern with this question, however, points to the power of *Ceremony*'s interpellation of its readers.

“white people are only tools that the witchery manipulates; and I tell you, we can deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs. We can because we invented white people; it was Indian witchery that made white people in the first place” (132). For readers of the novel, Betonie’s account of history is tantalizing, for it reframes the history of European colonization, and Native communities’ consequent displacement and disenfranchisement, in terms that make Native Americans agents rather than victims. If Native witches are the cause of the destruction that Tayo and Betonie witness in the world around them, then they and others like them also have the power to stop that destruction and frustrate the witchery’s plans.

The logic of Betonie’s alternate history is not only compelling, it is central to understanding the novel’s climax, the contest between Tayo and Emo. This scene in particular reveals the process by which, as Teuton has argued, “Silko carefully inserts tribal experience so that mainstream readers must rely on these supernatural experiences to understand the text and to value their universal appeal to overturn destructive worldviews” (141). Given both the means and the motive to confront and kill Emo, Tayo remains hidden and watches passively while Emo tortures and kills his friend Harley. In the terms of the conventional Western hero plot, Tayo’s choice would be seen as cowardly, for he has failed to show loyalty by protecting his friend. In the context of Silko’s novel, however, this scene is read as a triumph, because by resisting the trap set for him by Emo and refusing to meet violence with violence, Tayo ruins the destroyers’ evil ritual. Thus, in order to read this scene as the climax of the plot and the culmination of Tayo’s personal development, we must accept the alternate history of the witchery that justifies Tayo’s actions as heroic rather than cowardly. In order for the novel to conclude

in the way we have been prepared to expect, with the satisfying experience of Tayo’s success, we must accept the notion of the witchery and embrace the struggle to defeat it as the novel’s central dynamic.

By locating Betonie’s alternative history of European colonization at the center of *Ceremony*, Silko seems to echo Cathy Caruth’s notion of trauma as the source of “a history that is no longer transparently representational” (*Unclaimed Experience* 11). In seeking to understand and narrate his trauma, Tayo creates an account of the past that, while it may not meet strict standards for empirical documentation, has an enormous power to heal. Moreover, by suggesting that the ills and injuries of witchery in Silko’s novel are global in scope and afflict all people in this post-atomic age, the novel frames both Native and non-Native readers as in need of the healing ceremony it carries out. By identifying with Tayo and accepting the version of history that guides him from illness to healing, we also accept, at least implicitly, the epistemology that the novel espouses, one in which time is continuous and the world is both unified and profoundly interdependent. As James Ruppert suggests, in the absence of more overt “activist discourse” in *Ceremony*, this epistemological claim, which he describes as “subversive in the best sense,” is the source of the novel’s politics (177). Through the language of trauma, *Ceremony* challenges all of its readers, both Native and non-Native, to embrace a narrative of history, that, while not “factual” in the empirical sense, contains another form of truth.

Like *Ceremony*, *The God of Small Things* relies on the language of trauma to engage its readers, especially those who could be considered cultural “outsiders.” As an Indian novel written in English, *The God of Small Things* targets a very particular

audience, which includes both international Anglophone readers and upper-class Indian readers, who would have received an English-medium education.¹³ As one indication of its appeal to an international readership, Roy's novel sparked bidding wars among publishers competing for distribution rights in a wide range of Western countries (Swami 100). Like Silko, Roy uses the language of trauma to convey the immediacy and urgency of her twin protagonists' experience to socially and geographically distant readers. By filtering the novel's key events through the childlike perspective of Estha and Rahel, Roy ensures that her readers share the children's horror at events that, in the broader context of world affairs, might seem insignificant. But like the therapist who risks adopting the survivor's sense of powerlessness, readers of *The God of Small Things* are cautioned against aligning themselves too thoroughly with the novel's victims. Rather than including the reader in the process of healing, *The God of Small Things* enforces a critical distance and makes its readers responsible for reconstructing the factual, linear narrative of the past that the novel itself cannot provide.

Just as a trauma sufferer cannot grasp the significance of the events which intrude into his or her consciousness, the disjointed, repetitive quality of traumatic narratives reproduced in *The God of Small Things* presents its readers with descriptions that, although central to the novel's purpose, cannot at first be comprehended or placed. Phrases like "the sourmetal smell" of steel bus rails or the scent of "old roses on a

¹³ The complicated questions surrounding the role of the English language in Indian literature and education are beyond the scope of this project. Priya Joshi offers a compelling account of the relationship between the British novels imported to India in service of a broader colonial project, and the English-language novels written subsequently by Indian authors, for whom nationalism and social reform were dominant concerns.

breeze” appear and recur many times before readers are able to recognize them as the twins’ sensory impressions of Velutha’s brutal beating (31, 8). Key events, too, are narrated out of sequence: in the first chapter, we witness Sophie Mol’s funeral without knowing the cause of her death, and we learn of Estha being “Returned” before learning of the events which lead him to be separated from his mother and sister (12). As in *Ceremony*, the reader of *The God of Small Things* becomes, in effect, a witness to the novel’s traumatic narrative. Crucially, however, *The God of Small Things* cautions us to resist the kind of readerly identification that *Ceremony* invites. Instead, by maintaining its fragmented, non-linear style until its close, Roy’s novel makes its readers wholly responsible for reconstructing the unified narrative of the past that its traumatized protagonists can never entirely achieve. Unlike *Ceremony*, whose readers are invited to participate in the novel’s revision of history, *The God of Small Things* holds its readers accountable for constructing an accurate account of the past from the fragmentary evidence that the novel provides.

At several points, Roy’s novel seems to caution its readers about the kind of “participatory or emulative relation” to the past that historian Dominick LaCapra warns may inhibit our ability to think critically about history (187). As adults, Estha and Rahel continue to suffer from the trauma they experienced as children: Estha has chosen to stop speaking, and Rahel, whose distant, vacant eyes offend her husband during their lovemaking, is left empty from all that she has lost. Despite their evident pain, however, the novel denies them the opportunity to “purchase, for a fee, some cheap brand of exorcism from a counselor with a fancy degree, who would sit them down and say, in one of many ways, ‘You’re not the Sinners. You’re the Sinned Against. You were only

children. You had no control. You are the *victims*, not the perpetrators" (182). As the novel's narrator makes clear,

[i]t would have helped if they could have made that crossing. If only they could have worn, even temporarily, the tragic hood of victimhood. Then they would have been able to put a face on it, and conjure up fury at what had happened. Or seek redress. And eventually, perhaps, exorcise the memories that haunted them.

But this anger wasn't available to them . . . Esthappen and Rahel both knew that there were several perpetrators (besides themselves) that day. But only one victim. (182)

This passage is an explicit rejection of the sort of revisionary narratives that allow trauma sufferers to "exorcise the memories that haun[t] them." Although such narratives might provide comfort, the novel reminds us, they also risk effacing one's responsibility for the events of the past. Estha and Rahel cannot accept an account of the past in which they are merely innocent victims, for they know that such a narrative belies their complicity in Velutha's death. Indeed, through the twins' resistance to claiming a victimhood which, to their minds, they have not deserved, Roy challenges our own desire as readers to identify with the suffering of her characters. Although we may be moved by the novel's many traumas, Roy's text reminds us that we must nevertheless be scrupulous in our accounting of the events of the past and attribute victimhood only where it is merited.

The novel's depiction of the History House, Kari Saipu's abandoned estate, provides an even more scathing critique of revisionary narratives of the past. The site of the novel's traumas, the location where all of the personal and political interests in the novel converge in Velutha's fatal beating, is transformed years later into "Heritage," a tourist resort. At Heritage, the resort owners create "[t]oy Histories for rich tourists to play in" by relocating the ancestral homes of local families and positioning them around Kari Saipu's home "in attitudes of deference" that reflect an idealized colonial past (120).

The truncated kathakali performances which take place there, timed to cater to the “imported attention spans” of the tourists, make a mockery of the epic stories of India’s past that the full dances narrate (220). The resort owners, like readers of Roy’s novel, weave together a narrative of history from different fragments in ways that suit their needs. As Roy makes blisteringly clear, however, these accounts of history are appealing precisely because they efface the tourists’ complicity in colonialism and class and caste oppression, much as the hotel itself seeks to conceal the poverty that surrounds it and the dangerous pollution of the river that borders it, unappealing facts for which its patrons share some responsibility. By overlaying the present-day activities of the resort with traces of the events that took place there years before, like Rahel’s abandoned wristwatch, the novel once again makes its readers responsible for filling the gaps in history and cautions us against constructing self-serving and inaccurate accounts of the past.

Taken together, *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* offer important insights into the nature and consequences of fictional representation of the traumatic past. Silko’s approach to trauma privileges revision as the source of transformation and the basis for connections across difference. By inviting us to identify with its protagonist and embrace the healing narrative that he adopts, *Ceremony* opens the past for revision in the present. Rather than being the victims of European colonization, displacement, and racism, the traumatic effects of which are well documented in the novel, Native Americans like Tayo and Betonie become agents in their own history, and Native epistemology becomes the basis for bringing Native and non-Native readers together in the novel’s healing ceremony. By contrast, Roy’s novel encourages suspicion of revisionary narratives, and

the structure of *The God of Small Things* demands an accurate rather than imaginative reconstruction of the novel's events. Our responsibility, as readers of the novel, is to construct a record of history and its victims without falling prey to the temptation to identify with them. It is only by maintaining this uncompromising record, the novel suggests, that we can fulfill our obligation to those who suffer from history's traumas. Crucially, for both Silko and Roy, trauma gives rise to responsibility and obligation on the part of the witness; we see this play out within the narrative frame of each text, but we also see it enacted in the relation each author structures between text and reader. As readers of *Ceremony*, we are entrusted with the task of changing the way we see the world. As readers of *God of Small Things*, we are made responsible for reconstructing the story of history's victims, who have been prevented from telling it themselves.

Responsible Reading and the Traumatic Past

Both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* make their readers responsible for constructing an account of the past, but whereas *Ceremony* invites its readers to share in the process of revising and reimagining the past, *The God of Small Things* entrusts us with the obligation to preserve an accurate record of it. Especially when the past in question is one of imperial domination, this distinction has real ethical and political stakes. Reading these two novels together forces us to ask: Is it empowering to revise a history marked by violence and oppression, or does doing so blunt forms of political engagement based on an accurate accounting of past wrongs? For some trauma theorists, such as Cathy Caruth, the power of trauma lies in the opportunities for revision that it creates. Echoing *Ceremony*'s emphasis on identification and connection, Caruth sees trauma as a means of interrogating the boundaries that separate the known from the

unknown and bringing people together across difference. For others, such as Dominick LaCapra, trauma's silences and omissions call instead for a scrupulously factual record of the past. Like *The God of Small Things*, which cautions its readers against identifying too easily with its victims, LaCapra asserts that it is essential for those who have not been traumatized to maintain their critical distance and account for the events of the past in ways that survivors themselves might be unable to do. The debate between these two theorists, which hinges on the question of how to narrate the traumatic past in an ethically responsible way, suggests what might be at stake in the different ways that *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* engage their readers.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma challenges us to embrace the revisionary quality of survivors' narratives and to reevaluate the definition of truthfulness that we apply to such accounts of the past. As she has argued, the act of listening to a survivor's narrative "calls for different ways of thinking about what it means to understand and what kinds of truth we are looking for" ("Preface" viii). Caruth focuses her analysis on what she considers to be trauma's central and most compelling paradox: that the memory that returns to haunt the trauma sufferer is, by definition, one that he or she cannot know or understand. In Caruth's terms, then, "trauma opens up and challenges us to a new kind of listening, the witnessing, precisely, of *impossibility*" ("Trauma" 10). Caruth's insistence on the "impossibility" of traumatic memory does not simply acknowledge that the narratives of trauma sufferers may diverge from historical fact. It goes further, claiming that traumatic narratives, by their very nature, cannot offer knowledge about the past, but exist instead in a different register of truthfulness, in which the truth of a survivor's

testimony lies in its “departure” from, rather than its fidelity to, the original event (“Trauma” 10).

Caruth’s understanding of traumatic memory, which emphasizes the unknowability of the traumatic event or experience, has important implications for the relationship between survivor and witness. By emphasizing the impossibility of traumatic narrative, Caruth seems to suggest that it is not only *uncomprehended* by the trauma sufferer, but also more fundamentally *incomprehensible*, in its unrevised form, by both victim and witness alike. Thus, the witness must be willing to receive the survivor’s testimony even if he or she is, at first, unable to know or understand the content of what will be transmitted through that testimony. For Caruth, this inability to know or understand calls into question both the volition and the autonomy of the witness. “[O]ne challenge of this listening is that it may no longer be simply a choice: to be able to listen to the impossible, that is, is also to have been *chosen* by it, *before* the possibility of mastering it with knowledge. This is its danger—the danger, as some have put it, of trauma’s ‘contagion’ ” (“Trauma” 10). Caruth is describing the same “contagious” quality of trauma that Herman identifies, but rather than framing it, like Herman, as a risk faced by therapists and other witnesses, Caruth sees it as the source of “trauma’s address beyond itself,” to which she attributes the power to counteract both individual and cultural isolation (“Trauma” 11). Much like *Ceremony*, which relies on the notion of a shared trauma to create connections between Native and non-Native characters and readers, Caruth suggests that trauma has the potential to bridge barriers of cultural difference. As she argues, all people can potentially be drawn together by the common experience of confronting the unknown within themselves. Indeed, she suggests that

“[i]n a catastrophic age, . . . trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (“Trauma” 11).

If for Caruth the unknowability of trauma provides an opportunity to interrogate assumptions about the transparent referentiality of historical narratives, for Dominick LaCapra the devastating effects of trauma on survivors only emphasize the necessity of creating and preserving a faithful record of the past. Unlike Caruth, who sees identification as the source of trauma’s transformative power, LaCapra stresses the danger of blurring the lines between survivor and witness. Although he affirms a view of historical inquiry “wherein knowledge involves not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value,” LaCapra nevertheless forcefully distinguishes the “empathic unsettlement” one might experience when studying the traumatic past from the “appropriation of [survivors’] experience” (35, 41). Unlike survivors, for whom the act of daily survival—and the creation a narrative of the past that facilitates it—might be an admirable accomplishment, those who did not directly experience atrocities have a different obligation to the past. On this question LaCapra is emphatic:

If we who have not been severely traumatized by experiences involving massive losses go to the extreme of identifying (however spectrally or theoretically) with the victim and survivor, our horizon may unjustifiably become that of the survivor, if not the victim, at least as we imagine her or him to be. . . . But something different may be required of someone who has not lived through extreme events and been severely traumatized, however much we may insist on the significance, value, and effects of empathy with the victim and survivor or the notion that certain “unclaimed” experiences cannot be possessed. Indeed, working through problems for one born later is itself distinctive and closely linked to

ethical, social, and political demands and responsibilities that relative good fortune (of course, markedly different for those in different life situations and subject positions) should call forth and enable one to recognize and to take up. (211-12)

For LaCapra, the distinction between survivor and witness is essential and self-evident, and his claims about history are addressed primarily to the latter, who he argues cannot rightly claim, as Roy would put it, “to wear the tragic hood of victimhood” (182). As he makes clear, an inappropriate identification with survivors of trauma risks absolving witnesses of their obligation to account for the events of the past, an obligation to which he attaches both ethical and political stakes.

As works of fiction, *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* amplify the debate that Caruth and LaCapra stage, for as I have suggested, they not only *allow for* the possibility of identification, as a trauma survivor’s testimony might, but they *invite* it by reproducing the experience of trauma in their narration. Read individually, each novel seems to expose itself to critique. *Ceremony* does indeed efface the responsibility that some of its readers might share for the dispossession of Native Americans. By suggesting that Native Americans themselves are the authors of the ills that beset them, the novel creates a reading position for its non-Native readers—particularly the white readers who remain overrepresented in the many university classrooms where *Ceremony* is read—that seems a bit too comfortable and convenient. No longer responsible for the individual and structural violences that have harmed Native communities, white readers who identify with Tayo join the ranks of the aggrieved and become entitled to the healing that the novel envisions. By contrast, *The God of Small Things* is almost too concerned with distinguishing victim from perpetrator. For readers who have been invited to see the world through Estha’s and Rahel’s eyes, their continued suffering seems a high price to

pay, even granting their complicity in Velutha's death. And the certainty with which the novel separates "sinned against" from "sinning" belies the complexity of the world it describes, in which various forms of privilege and oppression cross-cut one another.

Read together, however, *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* suggest an approach to narrating the traumatic past that balances identification and accountability in the context of a global readership. The traumatic narration of *Ceremony* makes Tayo's suffering our own, drawing us into a story that might otherwise seem distant to many of its readers. Like a ghost, whose appearance reminds us that what is strange can also be uncannily familiar, *Ceremony* refuses to be read through the framework of multiculturalism as "a story about somebody else." The power of Silko's novel is precisely that it makes Tayo's story our story, and in doing so makes us, its readers, responsible for the past we share with its protagonist. *The God of Small Things'* more guarded approach, however, stands as a necessary corrective to the sweeping inclusiveness of *Ceremony*'s address to its readers. Although, to an extent, Roy's novel also draws its readers in, having done so it cautions them repeatedly against the dangers of embracing strategic, selective accounts of history. Like the tourists—presumably both Indian and international—who visit the reinvented History House for pleasure and entertainment, we risk dodging our responsibility for both the past and the present when we create revised narratives of history through our engagement with a work of fiction. But a warning like the one Roy offers is meaningless if readers have not first come to see themselves as connected to and implicated in the trauma she narrates. Without the experience of identification and recognition that a text like *Ceremony* offers its readers, Roy's insistence on a rigorous accounting of the past risks falling on deaf ears. Together,

however, *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* suggest a model of reading that, by balancing connection and distance, challenges us to assume responsibility for the traumatic past.

When read together, these two novels elicit complementary forms of engagement and obligation from their readers, and in doing so, begin to envision a practice of global reading that both recognizes the interconnections that define world literature and remains mindful of the structures of power that mark its production and circulation. If, individually, *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* make visible the hidden or unacknowledged operations of empire, their consonances reveal the interrelationships between temporally and geographically distinct imperial projects. Despite the very different contexts from which these two novels are drawn, one cannot help but be struck, at times, by their uncanny similarity to one another. It seems more than coincidental that both novels center around poignant depictions of orphaned children, evoking a common sense of loss that lies at the root of the traumatic experiences they describe. That both Silko and Roy turn to traumatic narrative to engage their readers suggests similarities, too, in the ways that both authors' work is circulated and consumed by a global audience. Both *Ceremony* and *The God of Small Things* consciously work to position readers who are cultural outsiders, offering them both connections and cautions. Reading these novels together, however, transforms us all into outsiders, for a reader who feels at home in one text will almost certainly feel distant from the other. If we practice the model of reading that these two novels provide, we become personally connected to characters and events, however distant from our own experiences they may be, in the way that *Ceremony* encourages us to do. But we also proceed with caution, as *The God of Small Things*

advocates, being careful not to indulge in comforting narratives that blunt our ethical and political obligations to the past and its victims. As the texts themselves reveal, by reading in this way we can begin to fulfill our obligation to the traumatic past.

Chapter 3

Invisible Victims, Visible Absences: Imagining Disappearance for an International Audience

Disappearance is a form of political violence that attempts to erase an individual from the social and political worlds he or she inhabited, leaving behind a ghostly remainder that stubbornly eludes representation. Nevertheless, as human rights advocates are at pains to point out, the disappeared are not specters but real individuals, and the victims of disappearance have not “simply vanished,” despite the effectiveness of their official erasure (Amnesty International 84). Like the genres of nonfiction writing that are mobilized in support of humanitarian causes, fictional accounts of disappearance are faced with the imperative of making victims visible and recognizable, in order to both intercede on their behalf and bring the perpetrators of systematic violence to account. But precisely because it is not expected or required to be strictly “factual,” fiction plays a special role in representing and transmitting the stories of the disappeared. The disappeared themselves rarely reappear to inform the world of the atrocities they suffered, but fictional representations allow the disappeared to be brought to life as recognizable, empathetic individuals. And because the imaginative work of the writer of fiction readily spans geographic distance, fictional narratives that depict and advocate for the disappeared can be both created and circulated abroad, beyond the reach of official censorship. These fictions, which reflect both the circumstances of their frequently distant production and the desires and investments of the international audiences for

whom they are produced, challenge the silencing and uncertainty that disappearance creates. But they are also marked by their own limitations: the forms of privilege they fail to recognize and the victims who elude their representational frames.

The two texts I consider in this chapter, the 1982 film *Missing* and Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost*, are representations of the disappeared that are profoundly shaped by these conditions of production and circulation. Both were created at a remove from the violent conflicts they depict: *Missing* was produced in the United States under the auspices of Hollywood, directed by the noted international filmmaker Costa-Gavras, and released almost a decade after the 1973 Chilean coup during which it is set. Ondaatje, a quintessentially diasporic writer living in Canada, visited his native Sri Lanka to research *Anil's Ghost*, but wrote, published, and circulated his novel at a remove from that country's protracted civil war. Spanning geographical and cultural distance, these two texts rely on the conventions of realism to render their depictions of the disappeared both compelling and authoritative to their readers. Although these texts are able in some ways to counter the silencing and erasure that disappearance imposes, recreating the disappeared as empathetic, three-dimensional characters, their failures to do so are ultimately more illuminating than their successes. Despite their strategic acts of imagination, both *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* are marked by silences, the haunting presence of victims who cannot be recovered by distant authors or produced as characters for international readers. Ultimately, these texts—and the ghostly figures that lurk at their margins—challenge us to acknowledge and confront disappearance's unrecoverable losses.

The Epistemic Violence of Disappearance

For several reasons, disappearance is unique in the grim repertoire of human rights abuses that, due to a growing culture and discourse of human rights activism, has become increasingly visible in recent decades. The human rights organization Amnesty International defines the disappeared as “people who have been taken into custody by agents of the state, yet whose whereabouts and fate are concealed, and whose custody is denied” (84). Victims of disappearance are often arrested without notice and detained in secret facilities; if they are killed, their deaths are concealed, and their remains are often disposed of anonymously. The fate of the disappeared is, in this way, fundamentally different from that of recognized combatants or accused criminals who are officially detained and placed on trial; although their treatment at the hands of the state may also be unjust, those victims receive a form of official and public recognition. The disappeared, by contrast, simply become invisible, unacknowledged by the government and inaccessible to their families and the public.

Although the term “disappearance” evocatively describes the effects of secret, extrajudicial detention, it is also somewhat misleading, for it implies that victims have simply ceased to exist, effacing the agency of perpetrators and reifying the erasure they attempt to impose. As Alice Nelson explains, speaking about Chile in particular, “[f]rom the moment of their disappearance, missing people were relegated to a perverse limbo in which the state not only denied their *deaths*, but also attempted to negate their *lives* by claiming that the disappeared never existed” (A. A. Nelson 50, italics in original). Human rights groups such as Amnesty International are careful to make this point clear:

Amnesty International puts the term [disappearance] in quotation marks to emphasize that the victim has in reality not simply vanished. The victim’s

whereabouts and fate, concealed from the outside world, are known by someone. Someone decided what would happen to the victim; someone decided to conceal it. Someone is responsible. (84)

The authors of this report sound an important note of caution: that the term “disappearance” risks euphemizing the real suffering of a particular person in custody, as well as the agency of those responsible for detaining that person. It is notable, however, that despite challenging the erasure of disappearance, this statement focuses primarily on the *perpetrators*, rather than on the *victim*. Although the culpability of the perpetrators is reasserted, the agency and affective experience of the disappeared person remains stubbornly absent, even in an intervention as pointed as this one. This omission points to the particular challenge posed by disappearance: it not only makes it difficult to locate and protect victims, but also threatens to place them beyond the reach of representation.

The silencing of the disappeared themselves is often almost total; held in secret prisons, the disappeared are rarely able to communicate with the outside world, and many never “reappear” to tell their story. Moreover, the systematic regimes of torture that frequently accompany disappearance make it extremely difficult for those who do survive to speak publicly about their experiences. Although a consideration of the extensive body of scholarship concerning the phenomenology of pain is beyond the scope of this project, the seminal insights of Elaine Scarry point to the congruent and complementary effects of erasure and dehumanization that disappearance and torture together produce.¹

¹ As Scarry suggests, physical pain both undermines the linguistic powers of the person experiencing it and creates uncertainty in the person to whom it is reported (4). Thus, the disappeared person who becomes a victim of torture is subject to a double erasure: removed from public view and denied recognition as a bearer of rights through the act of extrajudicial detention, and removed again, by the experience of inexpressible pain, from participation in the public discourse.

To the extent that the disappeared are unable to represent themselves as victims, it falls to others to reclaim their identities and reinscribe them in the public discourse. As Nelson explains, “Even without a body to serve as physical proof of their existence, . . . missing people did continue to exist through the ways in which other people reconstructed them discursively, by telling stories that bore witness to those individuals’ lives within a community” (50). Needless to say, however, the state that perpetrates disappearances also endeavors to disrupt and suppress these powerful and resistant acts of representation. “In order to disappear a person completely, then, the State’s task involved an extended battle to silence such community-based narratives” (A. A. Nelson 50). Thus, in addition to secret detention, torture, and extrajudicial killing, disappearance also involves a broader process of silencing intended to prevent the family and community of the disappeared from reclaiming them discursively.

Paradoxically, public display is often central to the coercive power of disappearance and the silencing it imposes on the broader population. Rather than concealing the fact that people are being disappeared, perpetrators make abductions highly visible as a threat to discipline onlookers and render them complicit.² Thus, despite the fact that disappearance is often a matter of common knowledge, the climate of fear it produces prevents it from being acknowledged or condemned, giving rise to an enforced, collective blindness that Diana Taylor has termed “percepticide” (10). Although her subject is Argentina’s so-called “Dirty War,” which differed in important ways from both the Chilean and Sri Lankan conflicts considered here, Taylor’s insights

² Indeed, as James Dawes points out, the fact that onlookers are present may motivate and shape, rather than restrain, acts of violence, which take on the quality of public performances (169).

into the representational strategies involved in disappearance are illuminating. As she points out, “[t]he military violence could have been relatively invisible, as the term *disappearance* suggests. The fact that it wasn’t indicates that the population as a whole was the intended target, positioned by means of the spectacle. People had to deny what they saw and, by turning away, collude with the violence around them” (123). In a climate like the one Taylor describes, representing the disappeared becomes difficult, if not impossible, in the public sphere. This coerced, public silencing contributes to the spectral quality that victims of disappearance assume: although they exist, their bodies (living or dead) are inaccessible, and although their loss is grieved by their family and community, it cannot be acknowledged or narrated.

This dynamic of silencing and erasure is exemplified by a scene recounted in Ondaatje’s novel, in which a man is abducted by rebel fighters in full view of the public and carried away by his captors on a bicycle. Sarath, who witnessed the scene, remembers it in vivid detail:

“. . . It would have been easier if they had all walked. But this felt in an odd way ceremonial. Perhaps a bike was a form of status for them and they wanted to use it. Why transport a blindfolded victim on a bicycle? It made all life seem precarious. . . . They cycled off at the far end of the street, beyond the market buildings, they turned and disappeared. Of course the reason they did it that way was so none of us would forget it.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.” (154-5)

As Sarath’s account suggests, the highly visible, memorable way in which this unknown man was disappeared goes hand-in-hand with Sarath’s inaction and the guilt he feels as a result of it. He feels uncomfortably included in the “us” for whom the scene was staged, and his retelling echoes and almost reifies the logic of the man’s captors: “I don’t know

what he had done. Maybe he had betrayed them, maybe he had killed someone, or disobeyed an order, or not agreed quickly enough. In those days the justice of death came in at any level" (154). Distanced from the man being abducted, Sarath concedes that any of the offenses the man might have committed would be punishable by death. Although Sarath certainly does not condone the man's disappearance, he accepts it as normal in the context of the war and is forced to acknowledge the position of complicity into which his act of passive witnessing has placed him.

Because of its simultaneous reliance on erasure and public display, disappearance takes on a spectral quality that distinguishes it from other forms of violence. Indeed, as Avery Gordon suggests, haunting may be the only framework through which we can adequately comprehend disappearance. She explains: "[a] disappearance is real only when it is apparitional because the ghost or the apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us" (63). Gordon's description certainly evokes the condition of living in a society where disappearance is occurring, in which it is both an unacknowledged reality and a constant threat. But it also points, more broadly, to the problems of representation that disappearance engenders, both within and beyond the zone of conflict. On the one hand, those who attempt to represent the disappeared see it as an ethical imperative, for as Nelson reminds us, "those narratives explicitly reaffirmed the existence of the absent person and resisted the social fragmentation that the regime sought to impose" (50). But however urgent such narratives are, they are profoundly constrained by the forms of imposed silencing that they attempt to counteract. There are limits to what can be known, or even imagined, about the disappeared, and there are also limits to the contexts

in which narratives of disappearance can be produced and circulated. Gordon's account of disappearance *as haunting* points to this central paradox: representing the disappeared becomes essential and urgent precisely to the degree that it also becomes impossible.

Fiction and Disappearance

Under a regime of terror, simply narrating the lives and experiences of the disappeared constitutes an urgent and dangerous form of resistance. Those within the zone of conflict often go to heroic lengths to represent the disappeared, using methods and media that range from graffiti to unauthorized theater performances to the photographs of their missing children displayed by the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina. But given the risk of producing resistant representations at home, narratives of disappearance are often created abroad, intended to circulate among an international, rather than domestic, audience. Located beyond the reach of official censorship and coerced silence, authors writing at a distance from a conflict have much more freedom in representing it. And by distributing their narratives broadly, these authors hope to make disappearance visible to people who have not directly experienced it and who, free from the fear that controls those in the conflict zone, might be better able to respond and intervene.

Although he certainly recognizes their limitations, James Dawes argues for the importance of the forms of storytelling that communicate human rights abuses to international audiences. “One of the most important premises of contemporary human rights work is that effective dissemination of information can change the world. . . . Individuals can be inspired to donate time and money; governments, particularly those dependent on foreign aid, can be pressured into altering their behavior” (9). To the extent

that such narratives are effective, in Dawes's terms, they are often strategic, consciously or unconsciously informed by the circuits they will travel. As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith remind us, narratives of human rights abuses are inherently shaped by the contexts of their production, circulation, and reception, and the representations of disappearance in *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* are no exception.³ Schaffer and Smith invite us to consider how "modes of circulation impact upon the expectations of the teller, the structure of the story, and the mode of address to different kinds of audiences," as well as the ways in which "contexts of reception direct and contain the ethical call of stories and their appeals for redress" (6). Although there are important differences in the patterns of production, circulation, and consumption that define *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost*, both were created at a remove from the conflicts they depict, and with international—and arguably Western—audiences in mind. Shaped by these similar conditions, these two texts rely on parallel strategies to traverse the distance between their creators, their readers, and the conflicts they depict.

Released in 1982, *Missing* tells the story of Charles Horman, an American expatriate who disappeared during the early days of Chile's 1973 coup. The film is fictional but "based on a true story," conforming closely with a nonfictional account written by Thomas Hauser, which was not widely read at the time of its initial publication in 1978. Although Costa-Gavras, a Greek director based in France, was well known for his previous independently produced political films, *Missing* was produced in Hollywood by Universal Pictures for a popular audience, with prominent American actors Jack

³ Although Schaffer and Smith focus on autobiographical narrative, the questions they pose are equally thought-provoking in the context of other forms of representation, both nonfictional and fictional.

Lemmon and Sissy Spacek in starring roles. Although it depicts the events of 1973, *Missing* also reflects its own context, including the conflicts taking place elsewhere in Latin America at the time of the film's release. As Costa-Gavras explained,

Universal would have liked to put at the beginning of the film, "Chile, September 1973." By saying that, though, it becomes a local problem, and it also becomes a historical thing—far away, ten years ago, who remembers that? But I think these things are still happening. It could be Argentina, it could be El Salvador. People are disappearing all over the world. (qtd. in Crowdus and Rubenstein 32)

Costa-Gavras's statement reflects a particular conception about the interests and concerns of the film's potential viewers, one which certainly informed its distribution and promotion in the U.S.

Anil's Ghost is Michael Ondaatje's third novel, and its circulation and consumption reflect both Ondaatje's reputation as an author and the context of his previous work. Ondaatje was born to Dutch parents in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), but received his secondary education in England and eventually settled in Canada, where he established himself as a well-respected poet and writer of fiction. The visibility and success of Ondaatje's previous novel, *The English Patient*, which won the Booker Prize and was adapted into a popular Hollywood film, ensured a broad, international interest in and circulation of *Anil's Ghost*. If the war-torn setting and fragmentary, imagistic narration of *The English Patient* formed part of the context of reception for *Anil's Ghost*, so too did the ongoing war in Sri Lanka and an evolving discourse of international human rights. Published in 2000, in the wake of the so-called "decade of human rights," *Anil's Ghost* explicitly positions itself in relation to a popular narrative of disappearance that traces its genealogy from the Latin American revolutions of the 1970s and '80s to more

recent conflicts in Africa and Southeast Asia (Schaffer and Smith 1).⁴ Well received by readers in England, Canada, and the U.S., the novel is frequently read as human rights fiction, an established and recognized genre by the time of its publication.

In comparing a work of literary fiction with a Hollywood feature film, it is essential to recognize the differences in medium and form that distinguish their approaches to constructing narratives of disappearance. Reflecting on scholarly responses to film adaptations, Brian McFarlane cautions literary scholars in particular, whose training “equips us to read complexity and subtlety in novels,” to be attentive to the comparable but formally distinct ways in which films make meaning (5). McFarlane argues that for a critic to be ignorant of “the ways in which the three large classes of film narration—mise-en-scène, editing, and soundtrack, in their various subcategories—put before us the narrative events” of the film “is to be ignorant of how a film creates meaning in those large areas which pervade a text vertically, as distinct from the horizontal causally linked chain of events” that make up a film’s plot (7). Recognizing the distinct *means* through which novels and films undertake the process of narration, however, we can nevertheless identify similar narrative *modes* that traverse these two media. Both *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* are forms of human rights fiction that tell stories about the disappeared, and both strive to be both realistic and emotionally engaging to their audiences, although they use different formal mechanisms to do so.

⁴ *Anil’s Ghost* begins with a brief scene depicting Anil at work excavating a clandestine burial site in Guatemala. Not directly related to the novel’s main plot, this scene serves in part, as Qadri Ismail has suggested, to situate Anil’s forensic work in the context of a broader narrative of disappearance as a global phenomenon (28).

Despite their distinct contexts and media, *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* both rely on the strategies of fictional narrative in general, and literary realism, in particular, to reach their intended audiences. Because the aim of disappearance is to deny the very existence of its victims, fictional narrative is particularly effective at overcoming this attempted erasure. In fact, this is fiction's strong suit: whereas nonfictional representations such as human rights reports are constrained by limited access to information about the disappeared, fictional narratives are free to fill the gaps and silences of disappearance through the imaginative work of their creators. Unlike nonfictional accounts, which cultivate a "rational, objective, non-emotive voice," in order to establish their "authority to speak," fictional narratives are able to engage the empathy of their audiences through rich, detailed, three-dimensional characterizations of the disappeared that bring them to life for readers and viewers (Dudai 251). While fictional narrative may be able to imaginatively overcome a lack of factual evidence, however, it is hardly exempt from the expectation of truthfulness—some sense that although the particular lives and experiences it represents are imagined, they are nevertheless accurate reflections of a broader truth. This is particularly the case for human rights fiction, which seeks to promote awareness of and intervention in real, ongoing conflicts, and which must therefore depict those conflicts without the perception of exaggeration or bias. Both *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* rely on the conventions of literary realism in this way to establish the accuracy and reliability of their representations.

As a narrative device, realism responds to the paradoxical situation in which those seeking to represent disappearance frequently find themselves: the imperative to create a fictionalized account that audiences will nevertheless receive as accurate, authentic, and

truthful. As Ian Watt has notably characterized it, literary realism is concerned with “the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals” (27). In providing such an account, realism places primary importance on depictions of interiority, creating characters who are recognizable to readers as distinct and three-dimensional individuals.⁵ Thus, it is through the seeming truthfulness of their characters—the extent to which the depiction of those characters’ interiorities is recognizable and thus credible to their audiences—that works of fiction like *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* establish their authoritativeness in representing the disappeared. Literary realism is certainly not the only means of narrating disappearance; indeed, a significant number of fictional accounts address disappearance through abstraction, fragmentation, or metaphor, and do so to great effect.⁶ But the realist style embraced by works like *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* reflects a canny appraisal, whether conscious or unconscious, of the desires and preferences of their viewers and readers.

As works that present accounts of human rights abuses in the Third World to an international audience, *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* enter into contexts already marked by multiple regimes of political, cultural, and economic power. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the cultural prestige and economic buying power of Western literary markets, which privileges the position of Western, metropolitan readers among these texts’

⁵ Formal strategies such as linear plots, reliable narration, and Hollywood continuity editing all contribute to this effect of a character-centered realism. For the purposes of this argument, I am more concerned with the consequences of this realism than the particular strategies used to achieve it.

⁶ Avery Gordon’s reading of Luisa Valenzuela’s novel *Como en la guerra / He Who Searches*, a novel Gordon describes as “allegorical, fragmented, narratively incoherent, and difficult to comprehend in any straightforward way that would easily answer the questions all readers ask,” is exemplary (67).

“international” audiences. Thus, although *Anil’s Ghost* was published and circulated broadly, its primary market was in the West. *Missing*’s international circulation, though different from that of Ondaatje’s novel, reflects the economic power of the American film industry. As a Hollywood film, *Missing*’s primary audience was American moviegoers, but it has been screened in more than ten countries and garnered several international awards. The predominance of Western, metropolitan readers and viewers among the international audiences to which *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* address themselves is typical, especially for human rights literature, and therefore profoundly influences the ways in which these texts choose to represent disappearance.

While it is always problematic to generalize about readers and their preconceptions, it is nevertheless important to recognize that the creators of works of fiction inevitably make their own assumptions about their readers, especially when they seek to inspire real-world political, legal, or humanitarian action. It is therefore worth considering several of the dominant frameworks through which the global circulation of human rights fiction can be understood. In *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan offers a convincing if pessimistic account of the fetishizing imperialist frameworks through which Third World literature is consumed in the West. As his title suggests, Huggan argues that, under the conditions of postcoloniality, Third World literatures and cultures circulate in a global marketplace that values them as “exotic.” Exoticness, he reminds us, is not an inherent quality of a particular cultural object, but rather the result of the way that object is consumed, “a particular mode of aesthetic perception—one which renders people, objects[,] and places strange even as it domesticates them” (Huggan 13). Certainly, we see evidence of this familiar optic in the ways that *Missing*

and *Anil's Ghost* represent the people, culture, and landscape of Chile and Sri Lanka, respectively. But the fetishizing gaze that Huggan describes also informs, more specifically, the treatment of disappearance in these texts.

For the Western readers Huggan describes, hungry for the exotic, disappearance becomes otherness writ large, since official silencing intensifies the inscrutability usually attributed to Third World nations and their inhabitants, and in an attempt to capture the attention and concern of distant readers, the literary realism of texts like *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* frequently traffics in the very fetishisms that Huggan critiques. On the one hand, these representations of disappearance cater to readers' desire to *know*, to possess the masterful gaze of the colonial observer, by providing the aesthetic effect of omniscient, mimetic access to characters' interiorities. These texts not only recover the missing through credible, empathetic characterizations, but also probe the depths of their inner lives, providing unfettered access to the "reality" of disappearance. At the same time, however, they also seem to obey the traditional limits of fiction: their stories of the disappeared, though realistic, are consumed and appreciated as something apart from the world their readers occupy. Thus, texts like *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* expose their audiences to disappearance as something that happens elsewhere, that Westerners should be concerned about but will never need to fear. By indulging the imperialist gaze, these representations of the disappeared succeed in achieving visibility in the eyes of the West, but also, to varying degrees, transform the disappeared into the traditionally passive objects of that gaze: looked upon, but unable to look back.

Certainly, there is some truth to this appraisal of how literary realism functions in texts like *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost*. But it is also possible to understand these texts as

engaging in a more dialogic, if nevertheless strategic exchange with their Western audiences. For although realism can serve, on the one hand, to reify the imperialist gaze of its most powerful audiences, it can also serve, on the other, as the terrain on which claims to status and rights are themselves negotiated. As Joseph Slaughter argues, the novel, and in particular the coming-of-age story or bildungsroman, is closely allied with the project of international human rights. Emphasizing the parallels between a literary genre and a legal regime both predicated on what the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights terms “the free and full development of the human personality,” Slaughter points to the postcolonial bildungsroman as a privileged site where the conferral of personhood, and its attendant rights, can be imagined (qtd. in Slaughter 4). The novel, like human rights law itself, is therefore a site where human rights are not merely depicted or defended, but actively produced. Thus, while Western readers’ desire to consume otherness in the familiar form of the bildungsroman privileges that form “to the likely exclusion of alternative generic forms and constructions of human rights,” the bildungsroman in turn extends the reach of international human rights law “by projecting the social and cultural conditions out of which human rights might be recognized as commonsensical” (Slaughter 33, 29).

Although the subtleties of Slaughter’s analysis of the bildungsroman form in particular lie beyond the scope of this analysis, his framing of human rights law and human rights literature as “mutually enabling fictions” points toward a more reciprocal relationship between those engaged in contests over human rights and the Western readers for whom their stories are narrated (4). Following Slaughter’s model, representing the disappeared as people and bearers of rights contributes to the realization

of a broader international order in which those rights can be recognized, and the strategies of realism deployed by texts like *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* are ideally suited to that task. Much like stories of self-realization from the Third World that arrive in “the familiar national dress” of the bildungsroman, literary realism is a genre with which Western readers are familiar and comfortable (Slaughter 33). Realism’s central concern with individual experience, and with relaying the stories of “particular people in particular circumstances,” predisposes it to the task of establishing the personhood of the disappeared (Watt 15). And the privileged concern with interiority that characterizes literary realism helps create the bonds of empathy that are so often the basis or the inspiration for real-world action and intervention.⁷

Both Huggan’s critique of the West’s voracious consumption of the postcolonial exotic, and Slaughter’s vision of literary personhood as inseparably if not unproblematically linked with the logic of international human rights, inform an understanding of how representations of disappearance such as *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* are produced, circulated, and received. Together, the arguments put forward by both Huggan and Slaughter reflect the work and the negotiations these texts undertake through their use of realism. By bringing the disappeared to life in a direct, seemingly unmediated way for their readers, these texts bridge the gaps—both geographic and ideological—that might otherwise leave international audiences unaware of and

⁷ A great deal has been written, in both theoretical and practical contexts, regarding the relationship between empathy and humanitarianism (see, for instance, Nussbaum and Rorty). While it is important to acknowledge the critiques leveled against empathy as, at best, a flawed mechanism for attaining political and social justice, it is also appropriate to recognize its ongoing centrality to the consciousness-raising work that much human rights fiction undertakes.

unconcerned about the anonymous, impersonal victims of oppressive regimes. Moreover, by representing the disappeared as *people*—recognizably rights-bearing individuals—these fictions may begin to contribute to their legal recognition and protection. But by doing so through the frameworks most available and legible to their creators and their readers, texts like *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* reproduce a particular set of values and blind spots. By relying on realism to reconstruct the stories of the disappeared, these texts challenge certain erasures but inevitably create others.

Realist Narrative: Bringing the Disappeared to Life

Both *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* use the conventions of realism effectively to elicit the engagement of the distant, predominantly Western audiences for whom they are written. Both texts center around the creation of empathetic, three-dimensional characters whose inner experiences become the means by which the conflict itself is depicted and interpreted. The credibility of these characterizations therefore becomes the basis for broader claims of legitimacy and truthfulness in representing the conflicts themselves. This strategy is surprisingly effective at circumventing the climate of silence and denial that surrounds disappearance, for it shifts the burden of proof away from the forms of factual information that can be suppressed through censorship and coercion, and toward the kinds of fictionalized interiority that novelists and filmmakers are experts at constructing.

Produced as a Hollywood film targeting a broad American audience, *Missing* faced the challenge of humanizing the victims of a regime that had received both covert

support and overt recognition from the U.S. government.⁸ Set against the backdrop of a violent military takeover in which thousands of lives were lost, the film focuses intently and exclusively on just one victim, Charlie Horman, an American writer and journalist who was disappeared by the Chilean military. On its surface, the film traces the efforts of Charlie's widow, Beth, and his father, Ed, to construct an account of Charlie's disappearance, find proof of his death, and grieve his loss. Throughout, however, the film's central concern is not Charlie's whereabouts but his character, the question of what kind of man Charlie was. So too, the events of Ed's and Beth's search, which drive the film's plot, are ultimately less important than their struggle to make sense of Charlie's loss. Thus, although *Missing* depicts people, places, and events that are based on fact, its moral weight derives from the fictionalized characters it creates within the framework of that factual narrative.

The film's very first scene, which plays during the opening credits, perfectly illustrates its perspective, framing its depiction of the Chilean coup through a focus on the character of Charlie. As the title fades, we see a man, Charlie, through the partially open window of a car. He is intently watching the scene in front of him, which is visible to the audience as a distant, distorted reflection in the glass of the car window. As Charlie and the audience watch, a group of children plays soccer in an open plaza or square. The tense, ominous music that plays during this scene at first seems incongruous,

⁸ The United States' involvement in the 1973 coup, which overthrew Chile's democratically elected Socialist president Salvador Allende and installed a military junta led by General Augusto Pinochet, was still hotly debated at the time of *Missing*'s release. Subsequently, the nature and degree of that involvement, which included a range of covert actions to destabilize the Allende government and provide resources to its opponents, has become a matter of scholarly consensus corroborated by the ongoing release of formerly classified documents.

overwhelming the diegetic sounds of the children's game and foreshadowing the arrival of a truck full of heavily armed soldiers. Our focus shifts momentarily, first to the smiling face of Charlie's friend Terry, who is also watching the game, then briefly to the children themselves, as we see the military truck approach. But as the soldiers climb down from the truck and the children disperse, we once again watch the scene unfold through the reflection in the car window, literally projected onto Charlie in the position of the observer. More than simply an inventive shot, the perspective in this scene is emblematic of that which the film will employ: our focus is closely trained on Charlie, whom we are invited to read through his reaction to the scene unfolding in front of him. It is only as a consequence of our concern with Charlie and his character that we witness the events of the coup itself.

In contrast to nonfictional representations, in which the disappeared are often reduced to shadowy, anonymous figures or empty statistics, Charlie is highly visible—almost hyper-visible—in the film's early scenes. These scenes, which take place before Charlie's disappearance, play a crucial role in establishing him as an empathetic character and an admirable man: we watch him worry about and then lovingly comfort his wife, carefully and courageously navigate an encounter with the police, and idealistically attempt to intervene on behalf of a stranger who is seized by security forces. The film's ability to represent Charlie with the authority of the present tense is unique to fiction, since nonfictional representations of the disappeared are inevitably retrospective. And although the character of "Charlie" is built on the imaginative work of the film's screenwriters and the actor who plays the role, the mimetic conventions of Hollywood film dovetail with audience expectations to lend these scenes immediacy and apparent

truthfulness. As viewers, we feel that we know Charlie personally and, based on that knowledge, can recognize and resist his attempted erasure. In contrast to the ambiguity and uncertainty that disappearance usually produces, viewers of *Missing* are placed in the empowering position of knowing the “truth” about Charlie in the face of the competing narratives that will be put forward in the wake of his disappearance.

Indeed, although *Missing* might be expected to ground its authority on its basis in fact, the film’s own self-framing highlights its status as fiction. The film’s prologue exemplifies this framing: rather than stating solely that it “is based on a true story,” *Missing*’s prologue gives equal emphasis to its fictionalization: “[s]ome of the names have been changed to protect the innocent and also to protect the film.” From a practical standpoint, this emphasis on the film’s status as fiction did serve to “protect” it, as the prologue suggests: Costa-Gavras and Universal Pictures successfully defended themselves against several libel suits filed by the consular officials whom the film portrayed in a negative light.⁹ But beyond these legal battles, *Missing*’s status as fiction also allowed it to defend itself effectively in the court of public opinion during the controversy that surrounded its release. The film’s suggestion that the U.S. government was complicit in Horman’s death elicited significant criticism, including an official statement from the U.S. State Department contesting the film’s claims.¹⁰ But even when the facts on which it is based are disputed, the emotional appeal contained in the film

⁹ For a comprehensive account of the libel suits that followed the film’s release, see John J. Michalczyk, “Costa-Gavras’ *Missing*: A Legal and Political Battlefield.”

¹⁰ In the published statement, the State Department explains that it “regrets the sad death of Charles Horman as well as the efforts by some to read into it possible involvement by the United States Government and its officials, which the record indicates is wholly unwarranted” (qtd. in Crowdus and Rubenstein 38).

remains effective, as even Flora Lewis, one of its harshest critics, was forced to acknowledge. That *Missing* is, in Lewis's words, “cinematically convincing” allowed it to generate a degree of public interest and debate about the Chilean coup that neither the Hormans’ complaint nor Hauser’s book were able to elicit (1).

Like *Missing*, *Anil’s Ghost* also relies on representations of interiority to both engage its readers and establish its truthfulness. Set during the late 1980s or early 1990s, during one of the most intensely violent periods in Sri Lanka’s protracted civil war, Michael Ondaatje’s novel revolves around efforts to identify a particular victim of that conflict.¹¹ Initially, the novel presents its readers with a mystery: Anil, a Sri Lanka-born forensic pathologist representing an international human rights organization, and Sarath, the government archaeologist with whom she is paired, discover a contemporary skeleton in an ancient burial site. Knowing that the skeleton’s location in a controlled archaeological site strongly implicates the government, they undertake to identify the victim, whom they nickname “Sailor,” and to document his disappearance. As the novel progresses, however, its focus shifts from Anil’s efforts to identify Sailor through forensic science to the individuals that surround her, each of whom has found a way to cope with the forms of loss that define their experience of war. By the end of the novel, Anil’s effort to find truth in “bones and sediment” has faded to the background, and the

¹¹ The complex, bloody conflict in Sri Lanka pitted the country’s majority Sinhala government against both Tamil separatists in the north and armed militants in the south. During an intense period of fighting between 1987 and 1990, Amnesty International estimates that tens of thousands of people were victims of disappearance or extrajudicial killing (28). In 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the Tamil separatists, but as of this writing, wartime emergency laws remain in place and the political situation in the country continues to be uncertain in the wake of contested presidential elections.

novel's shifting temporality and roving, omniscient narration present readers instead with a collage of what Sarath describes as "character and nuance and mood" (259).

Anil, enamored with both the methods of forensic science and its underlying empiricism, focalizes the first section of Ondaatje's novel, which elaborates her background and traces her efforts to discover the identity of the skeleton she has found. To identify an anonymous victim like Sailor, Anil seeks to uncover "the permanent truths" documented in his remains, "same for Colombo as for Troy" (64). Indeed, she successfully identifies Sailor based on the "markers of occupation" on his bones, which reveal his past labor as both a toddy tapper and a miner, and which in turn allow her and Sarath to discover his village, his name—Ruwan Kumara—and the circumstances of his disappearance (177). Despite her commitment to forensics, however, even Anil doubts the effectiveness of using documentary evidence to combat disappearance and political violence. In an episode that foreshadows events later in the novel, Anil recalls her organization's prior expulsion from the Congo, their evidence confiscated by the government whom their findings offended. As she investigates Sailor's disappearance, Anil remains acutely aware of the limits of such work: "in all the turbulent history of the island's recent civil wars, in all the token police investigations, not one murder charge had been made during the troubles" (176).

Sailor's identification resolves the mystery around which *Anil's Ghost* initially centered and marks an important shift in both the novel's focus and its narrative frame. As Sailor recedes from view, the novel directs our attention to a cast of characters that Ondaatje has introduced in the preceding pages: Sarath and his brother Gamini, a physician; Palipana, the aging scholar; and Ananda, a local artisan whom Anil and Sarath

hire to create a facial reconstruction of Sailor. Amid the chaos of war, these characters take refuge within themselves, and Ondaatje narrates their inner lives and past experiences to the reader in engaging and lyrical detail. Moving away from the logic of empiricism and the framework of international law on which it initially seems to center, the novel privileges the inner life of the individual over the public terrain of science and law as the site where survival, justice, and healing are enacted. And even more than *Missing, Anil's Ghost* valorizes the ways of reading in which the text itself invites us to participate. Ondaatje's characters—readers, artists, or historians—embrace the figurative and the interpretive to make sense of the violence around them. These characters seek truth in the aesthetic, rather than the factual, modeling the very practices of reading and knowing that the novel makes available to its readers: practices that circumvent the forms of silencing that disappearance imposes.

In *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje relies on the strategies of fiction to render the disappeared familiar and empathetic, rather than distant and abstract. For although the novel begins with Anil's efforts to identify an anonymous victim, Sailor, it ends with the identification of a much more familiar victim: Sarath. In a surprising twist at the novel's close, Sarath is tortured and killed for helping Anil escape the country with evidence of Sailor's murder, and his body is discovered by his brother, Gamini, among the anonymous corpses of political prisoners whose injuries he reviews and documents. Unlike those dead prisoners, however, Sarath has been constructed as a three-dimensional character; by the time of his death, readers know a great deal about his values, principles, and motivations, as well as the formative events and relationships in his personal life. And unlike the majority of the disappeared, his body is quickly identified by his own

brother, whose medical insights remove much of the uncertainty about Sarath's final hours of life. Not only does disappearance fail to remove Sarath from the realm of representation, it renders him even more intimately knowable both to Ghamini and to readers.

Even with his brother's face concealed, Ghamini immediately recognizes Sarath in his weekly stack of photographs. After locating his brother's body in the morgue, Ghamini carefully dresses its wounds, as if by treating Sarath as he would a living patient, he can bring him back to life. For Ghamini, this final act begins "a permanent conversation with Sarath," acknowledging the resentments that distanced the two brothers and narrating both their past differences and their present reconciliation (288). In contrast to the many anonymous victims whose wounds Ghamini reviews, the "innocent" marks of Sarath's childhood injuries make him instantly legible as an individual and recall vivid memories of their shared past: "[t]he 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" (287). Rather than posing a series of unanswerable questions, Sarath's body provides proof of his essential nature, as confirmed by his torturer's cruel instincts. "It was the face they went for in some cases. They could in their hideous skills sniff out vanity. But they had not touched Sarath's face" (290). As a member of the disappeared, Sarath is not rendered invisible, but rather becomes even more legible in death than he was in life.

The conventions of realist fiction allow Ondaatje to represent the disappeared more legibly than real life usually allows, but throughout the novel, he also argues for fiction as the best—and at times the only—means of survival and resistance in a conflict

zone. The character of Palipana, Sarath's disgraced and reclusive mentor, epitomizes the practices of nonliteral interpretation that the novel advocates. Palipana was trained as an archaeologist, but his preferred description of himself as an “epigraphist” suggests a more oblique, less literal relationship between the ancient writings he studies and the meaning he finds in them (78). Although Palipana’s object of study is the ancient past, Ondaatje clearly relates the “political tides and royal eddies of the island in the sixth century” to the political violence in contemporary Sri Lanka (81). As Palipana’s own eyesight fades, the “illegal story” he finds recorded in interlinear inscriptions is, like representations of the disappeared, “how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie” (105). Ondaatje suggests that, despite Palipana’s disgrace within the academic community, which rejects his interpretations as fabricated, his definition of truth and practice of reading are the right ones for the times. His traumatized, orphaned niece, who rightly distrusts the pretense of safety and veneer of normalcy at the government orphanage where she is initially taken, comes into her own under Palipana’s care and tutelage. Much like the shifting, elusive truth that Palipana seeks, the phrase she chisels into the rock at the edge of a lake to commemorate him after his death “appears and disappears” with the light and the level of the water (107). A privileged, almost sacred figure in the novel, Palipana is emblematic of the imaginative, aesthetic work of recovering the truth of a life from the silence of official history.

Ananda also responds to disappearance through creative acts of representation rather than factual reconstruction. Ananda’s wife, Sirissa, is, like Sailor, a victim of the war, and her disappearance prompts him to abandon his work as a ceremonial painter of Buddhist statues and take up grueling and dangerous work in the gem mines. Anil and

Sarath hire him to reconstruct a likeness of Sailor's face that they can use to identify him, and for Ananda, the project becomes a way of challenging the uncertainty and erasure that disappearance produces. Like other fictional representations of the disappeared, and like the novel itself, Ananda's reconstruction dispels the uncertainty of the hypothetical, "how someone possibly looked," and relies on imagination to recreate an unknown victim as "a specific person" (184). The face Ananda creates is not, however, a likeness of Sailor, but rather a representation of "what he wants of the dead" that displays "a calm Ananda had known in his wife, [and] a peacefulness he wanted for any victim" (184, 187). Through his sculpture, Ananda embraces fiction as a way of providing himself, and other survivors, with solace and certainty in the wake of disappearance.

The healing power of fictional representation is fully on display in the novel's final scene, which depicts Ananda at work on the restoration of a destroyed statue of the Buddha—rather than Anil's return to the West with her forensic evidence, which remainsunnarrated. Ananda's work as a ceremonial eye-painter, like his reconstruction of Sailor, brings the dead to life, for painting eyes on the statue transforms it from an inert object into a sacred one. But this work also takes place, of necessity, in the absence of complete knowledge: although the artificer "brings to life sight and truth and presence" by painting the eyes, "he must never look at the eyes directly. He can only see the gaze in the mirror" (99). This indirect, refracted vision is also emblematic of the work of aesthetic representation in a conflict zone. Ananda's work to repair the broken statue is clearly an act of healing on several levels. Not only does the destroyed figure, sutured together by the work of the artist, stand in for an equally ravaged national culture, but the process of repairing it provides an opportunity for Ananda to acknowledge and remember the

disappeared: at one point, Ananda, wearing a shirt given to him by Sarath, and standing atop the statue during the act of painting the eyes, sees soaring birds, with their hearts “beating exhausted and fast,” that remind him of “the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance” (307). By choosing Ananda’s imaginative act of representation to end the novel, Ondaatje argues for the power of fiction to create meaning and provide comfort in the wake of violence and loss.

Invisibilities and Selective Vision

Both *Anil's Ghost* and *Missing* use the techniques of fictional narrative to great effect in countering the silencing effects of disappearance: rather than relying solely on the limited factual information that is available to them, these texts imaginatively fill the gaps and silences in narratives of disappearance in ways that make them engaging and authoritative for an international readership. The very nature of this strategy, however, requires these narratives to reproduce both the perspectives and the blind spots of their creators and viewers. When gaps in factual accounts are filled by the imaginative work of authors who are distanced, often by necessity, from the conflicts they depict, the resulting narrative is constrained not by the conditions of disappearance, but by the limits of its author’s own imagination. Thus, Ondaatje represents the Sri Lankan conflict through the eyes of characters who, like him, are readers and interpreters of the world around them, and who share his concern with elusive, abstract questions of beauty and truth. But if fictional narratives inevitably reproduce, to some degree, the perspectives of their creators, they also reflect the expectations and interpretive frameworks their readers bring to them. To the extent that *Missing* consciously tries to represent the disappeared in ways that will be recognizable and familiar to its U.S. audiences, the film reproduces the

limits of its viewers' imaginations by focusing almost exclusively on U.S. victims of Chile's coup. Thus, as a direct consequence of their success in creating narratives of disappearance that can circulate among broad, international audiences, texts like *Anil's Ghost* and *Missing* reproduce a form of differential vision that renders only certain kinds of victims visible.

Throughout *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje consistently privileges aesthetic questions over questions of material survival or political power. Notably, none of Ondaatje's central characters take sides in Sri Lanka's divisive civil war, nor do the forms of healing he envisions—creating a sculpture or a story, “study[ing] history as if it were a body”—respond to the material or political conditions at the root of the conflict (193). This apolitical approach to the conflict has drawn criticism from various reviewers and critics. In his review for *The Nation*, Tom LeClair accuses Ondaatje of “turn[ing] away from politics to personal lives,” and Qadri Ismail dismisses the novel as “not much more than the typically flippant gesture towards Sri Lanka often produced by the West” (LeClair 32; Ismail 28). Ondaatje’s turn toward interiority and away from politics, however, can be seen, somewhat more charitably, as a strategy for engaging with his predominantly Western readership. As Manav Ratti points out, Ondaatje’s privileging of the private and the personal forges connections between the novel’s Sri Lankan characters and its Western readers by demonstrating that “‘they’ are just like ‘us’ ” (138). Nevertheless, the interiorities that the novel imagines for its characters share marked similarities that point to the formative effect of Ondaatje’s own experience and perspective.

For example, although *Anil's Ghost* imagines characters from a variety of professions and backgrounds, all of them seem to see the world through the eyes of an

artist, philosopher, or writer. Sarath, the archaeologist, can “read a bucket of soil as if it were a complex historical novel,” and would “give his life” for the efficiency of line in a cave painting he once discovered (151, 157). Despite his manual labor in the mines, Ananda is, at heart, an “artificer” who comes to recognize his true calling by the novel’s close (304). Palipana, who has “reconstructed eras simply by looking at runes,” passes on to his niece the lesson that carvings in “stone and rock could hold one person’s loss and another’s beauty forever” (104). And Gamini remembers his formative experience as a young doctor at a remote base hospital through the lens of the novels that were read in the doctors’ lounge. Even Anil, the consummate empiricist, at times demonstrates an incongruous love of literature and figurative language that seems a reflection of Ondaatje’s own inescapable perspective. In a particularly striking moment, Anil turns to the comfort of quotations from her favorite books to make sense of her experiences of the war. The books she turns to, however, are classics of European fiction, *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *Les Misérables*. Uncharacteristically for someone whose search for truth is guided by quotations like “the bone of choice would be the femur,” Anil praises one of these novels as “so thick with human nature she wished it to accompany her into the afterlife” (140, 54). This short scene, I would argue, represents a break in Anil’s character that points to the limits of Ondaatje’s ability to imagine a character whose experiences and values are, in this respect, so different from his own.

To the extent that the inner lives of characters such as Sarath and Anil are shaped and colored by Ondaatje’s own interests and predispositions, the character who seems most central to the novel’s work of recovery, Ruwan Kumara, is rendered entirely inscrutable within the novel’s privileged frame. Anil’s forensic work provides the few

biographical details about Ruwan Kumara that allow his body to be identified: his death was recent, and he was not killed in the cave where his body was found, but elsewhere. He was buried temporarily in a swampy area, somewhere where there were fireflies. He did vigorous, physical labor before breaking his leg, and afterward took up work in the plumbago mines. When Anil and Sarath finally discover his identity by going from village to village, they learn the date and a few sparse details of Ruwan Kumara's abduction, when he was singled out by a masked informant. But we know nothing of Ruwan Kumara's thoughts or experiences. Unlike almost all the other characters, both major and minor, the novel provides no insight into Ruwan Kumara as an individual. Indeed, after all her efforts, Anil is forced to acknowledge that "they still knew nothing about the world Sailor had come from" (176). When he shifts our attention from Ruwan Kumara to Sarath in the novel's final pages, Ondaatje effectively forwards one of the novel's central aims: rendering the victims of the Sri Lankan conflict visible and empathetic for an international audience. But in doing so, he also reproduces the limitations of his own and his readers' imaginative frameworks, which place Ruwan Kumara, an uneducated peasant, beyond the reach of representation.

Moreover, despite the novel's commitment to the aesthetic and the imaginative, Ondaatje's highly visible practices of research and citation throughout the novel explicitly acknowledge the limitations of his own perspective. Although he was born in Sri Lanka, the majority of Ondaatje's adult life has been spent in the West, and, like Anil, he must certainly have encountered a very different country on his return than the one he remembers from his childhood. In his acknowledgments, Ondaatje documents the extensive factual research he conducted while writing the novel, listing interviews as well

as a wide range of print sources including reference books, atlases, scholarly articles, memoirs, and Amnesty International reports. In several cases, quotations from these texts are integrated directly into the novel itself. Thus, despite its overt privileging of imaginative, interpretive, fictionalizing forms of representation, *Anil's Ghost* simultaneously foregrounds its own reliance on precisely the kinds of factual information it claims to transcend.

Indeed, at several points, *Anil's Ghost* offers an explicit critique of the very position that the novel itself occupies. When Sarath points out to Anil, in the novel's early pages, “[y]ou know, I'd believe your arguments more if you lived here,” the same could be said of an expatriate author like Ondaatje. Sarath urges Anil to “understand the archaeological surround of a fact. Or you'll be like one of those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel. That false empathy and blame” (44). The accusation of false empathy is particularly cutting in the context of a novel such as Ondaatje's, the success of which hinges on its ability to elicit readers' empathy. So is another, similar comment later in the novel, where Gamini reflects sarcastically on the West's view of his country:

“American movies, English books—remember how they all end?” Gamini asked that night. “The American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That's it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He's going home. So the war, to all purposes, is over. That's enough reality for the West. It's probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.” (285-6)

Gamini's critique of this familiar, distanced viewing position rings true, and Ondaatje's own prominence on the Western literary “circuit” cannot help but inflect it with a self-referential quality. By raising questions about authority and responsibility of authors

writing at a distance, Ondaatje foregrounds the limitations of his own perspective even as he relies on it to respond to the conflict he depicts and to overcome the silencing to which he would otherwise be subjected.

In much the same way, *Missing*'s concern with rendering victims of the Chilean coup legible to primarily U.S. audiences reproduces—and at times foregrounds—its own form of selective vision. Charlie's identity as a U.S. citizen is central to the film's representation of him, as well as to its concern with him as a victim. Certainly, the film's choice to focus on an American is a reflection of its intended U.S. audience and their presumed sympathies. But it also places Charlie Horman's identity as an American at the center of the film's project of reconstruction: Charlie becomes an individual who can be differentiated from the anonymous mass of "radicals" and "subversives" imprisoned by the regime to the extent that he can be represented as a good, upstanding, and therefore implicitly rights-bearing U.S. citizen.

Much of *Missing* functions as an extended debate over Charlie Horman's character, and by extension his legibility as a victim. At the start of the film, Ed voices a series of negative opinions about Charlie that would limit our sympathy and concern for him: according to his father, Charlie is irresponsible and lazy, a dissolute liberal who has done something stupid and gotten himself in trouble in a foreign country. Ed's recriminations echo the veiled accusations of the senator whom Ed visits on Charlie's behalf, as well as the other government officials depicted in the film, who suggest that Charlie was a radical and an agitator who deserved his fate. It is up to Beth to provide a counter-narrative of Charlie as an idealist, a childlike dreamer, and a man of principle. Defending their decision to move to Chile, Beth describes herself and her husband as

“two normal, slightly confused people trying to be connected to the whole damn rotten enchilada.” By presenting herself and her husband as idealistic, sincere young people seeking meaning in their lives, Beth refutes the suggestion that their behavior was somehow “un-American,” recasting them as engaged in a quintessentially American search for self-realization. Although Beth’s impassioned defense of Charlie’s lifestyle and values helps frame him as a sympathetic character, it leaves unchallenged the conceit that radicals, whether of U.S. or of Chilean citizenship, might not qualify as victims.

This implicit distinction between “good” American citizens and leftist political agitators is reinforced by the film’s treatment of another disappeared expatriate, Frank Teruggi. The character of Teruggi, like many others in the film, is based on a real individual of the same name, although some aspects of Teruggi’s character, including his close relationship with Charlie, are fictionalized. In the film, Teruggi represents the committed leftist, a staunch supporter of Chile’s socialist experiment, who stands in contrast to Charlie, who is described at several points in the film as a “political neophyte.” Teruggi’s disappearance is one of the other “cases” that the consulate is pursuing, but the film suggests that the American officials are even less concerned with his fate than they are with Charlie’s. Indeed, these officials’ own statements unintentionally reveal their tacit belief that leftist “radicals” like Teruggi are not true Americans entitled to the intervention and protection of the consulate.¹² Sketching an outlandish scenario in which Charlie staged his own kidnapping, they suggest he might

¹² Although the American consulate is certainly not presented in a flattering light in *Missing*, the possibility that it was openly hostile to certain groups of émigrés is only gestured toward in the film, but is more fully and convincingly elaborated in Hauser’s book.

have done so to tarnish the reputation of the regime by “mak[ing] it look like they’re arresting Americans.” Beth is quick to point out their oversight: “They *are* arresting Americans, or don’t David Holloway and Frank Teruggi count!” Certainly, the film intends to suggest that Americans like Teruggi *do* count, but its overwhelming investment in representing Charlie as a legitimate and sympathetic victim undermines that intention. By emphasizing both Charlie’s and Ed’s political disengagement and naïveté, the film itself reproduces the exclusionary logic it attributes to the Consul, which excludes leftists and radical Americans from the category of true citizens.

Thus, by rendering Charlie hyper-visible as a victim, *Missing* in effect produces a kind of differential vision which over-writes the more complex and ambiguous contestations over citizenship, rights, and national identity with a more straightforward rubric: Charlie or not-Charlie. The film is structured around the search for the truth about Charlie, and it invites its viewers to align themselves with Ed and Beth, average people caught in an unimaginable circumstance. But the film also offers us another viewing position at a slight remove from Ed and Beth, one which throws the selective nature of their concern into sharp relief. Repeatedly, the camera follows the Hormans, often with a tight focus on their faces, as they scan countless anonymous victims in search of Charlie. They wander through rows of beds containing nameless patients in a basement hospital ward. Then, upping the visual and representational ante, they walk through a morgue, in which room after room is filled with piles of identified, and later, unidentified bodies. By this point in the film, the Hormans’ optimism has faded; there is little likelihood that they will find Charlie, and these scenes of searching seem almost overdetermined.

The scenes where Ed and Beth search for Charlie represent the film's most sustained engagement with the widespread violence that followed in the wake of the coup, and they are one of the few instances where Chilean victims are visible onscreen. But in room after room of bodies, the only victim that can be humanized and rendered visible by the film is Charlie. Even when Beth discovers and identifies Frank Teruggi's body in the morgue, the film's particular selective vision is only temporarily disrupted. After a brief close-up of Teruggi's body, which is marked by bullet wounds, the camera returns to the multitude of anonymous, unidentifiable bodies that surround them, then pans upwards to show the silhouettes of still more bodies, limbs askew, visible on the other side of a translucent glass roof. All these bodies must be viewed, the shot suggests, before the Hormans will be convinced that Charlie's body, the one that matters, is not among them. This is the perspective made available through a viewing position identified with Ed and Beth, and one which the film arguably privileges. But these scenes also reveal another disappearance: the invisibility of the many Chilean victims of the coup that the film's tight focus on Charlie reduces to the status of scenery. There are notably few Chilean characters in *Missing*, and even fewer civilians. The one Chilean radical to whom we are introduced early in the film is revealed to have been in hiding and returns safely—in reality a highly unlikely scenario. Just as Charlie's status as an individual and a victim, at least as it is produced by the film, cannot quite include Frank Teruggi, it even more definitively cannot be extended to individual Chileans who were disappeared.

The film's selective vision is most poignantly revealed in the scene in which Ed and Beth Horman finally get permission to search for Charlie in the National Stadium, an

improvised prison camp where the military regime detained, tortured, and murdered hundreds and perhaps thousands of Chilean civilians in the early days of the coup. In the years that have followed, the National Stadium has become an iconic representation of the atrocities perpetrated by the Pinochet regime. Thus, for viewers who have even the barest knowledge of the historical events on which the film is based, or for those attentive to the ominous references to the stadium throughout the preceding portion of the film, the stadium is a site already marked by violence. When Ed and Beth emerge from a dark tunnel onto the sunny playing field, the image revealed to viewers is shocking: as the camera pans across the stands, we see they are full of people, all prisoners, whose ragged appearance and improvised shelters suggest they have been in captivity for some time. Over the loudspeaker, Beth and Ed identify themselves and address Charlie by name. Standing on the playing field, they search futilely for him among the crowds in the stands. As in previous scenes, Ed's and Beth's evident despair makes an emotional impact on viewers. But even as we sympathize with them, the scene impresses on us a sense of disproportion which its visual frame reinforces: Ed and Beth occupy the foreground, and their out-sized grief dominates the center of the frame, while the suffering of the prisoners behind them is depicted in the aggregate and in miniature. Amid thousands of prisoners, only Ed, Beth, and the absent Charlie are legible as individuals.

The disproportion that marks this scene does not go unacknowledged by the film itself. The privileged status that Ed and Beth enjoy in the stadium is emphasized by the Chilean colonel's introduction of them, which is notably the only Spanish dialogue in the film that is subtitled. The colonel orders the prisoners to pay attention, then explains,

“We’re going to permit this American who is looking for his son to speak here. Keep quiet [and pay attention].”¹³ As this introduction emphasizes, Ed Hormann’s ability to speak in the stadium is entirely contingent on his status as a U.S. citizen, a fact which is not lost on at least one of the prisoners. In response to Ed’s appeal, a man who appears to be about Charlie’s age, and with a similar hairstyle, rushes forward, and Ed initially mistakes this prisoner for his son. Leaning on the chain-link fence that separates the stands from the field, this man addresses the Hormans sarcastically in accented English. “My father cannot come here. But how about some ice cream with my dinner, Coronel Espinoza?” The prisoner’s statement highlights the exceptional nature of Ed Hormann’s position relative to the many Chilean families desperate for knowledge of loved ones detained in the stadium and elsewhere. And by usurping the discursive space reserved for Charlie to make his own impossible demands, this man also highlights the Hormans’—and the film’s—selective vision. In order to become visible as an individual and legible as a victim, this man must claim the position of privilege reserved for Charlie, but in doing so he once again becomes invisible, for the optic of the film quickly reduces him to Charlie’s uncanny double. Moreover, by this point in the film, viewers recognize that this man’s attempt to make himself visible will likely cost him his life.

In this scene, *Missing* foregrounds the limitations of its own perspective, reminding viewers of the injustice of a differential vision in which Charlie, always the

¹³ The final words of this address to the prisoners are not subtitled, and the translation is mine. The fact that subtitles are used so sparingly throughout the film, and that the prison guard’s announcement is only partially translated, suggests to me the significance of what otherwise might seem to be simple exposition. In particular, foregrounding the Hormans’ status as Americans through the subtitles contributes to the film’s self-awareness in this moment, and its brief recognition of its own selective view.

object of our search, renders others invisible. The prisoner's outburst in the stadium is hardly necessary to the film's plot; indeed, as the Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman has pointed out, "the scene is touching but implausible" given the disciplinary power of the detention center (796). Its inclusion points to an unwillingness on the part of the film to leave its viewers' privileged perspective unquestioned. It challenges us to ask, as Dorfman does, "What about him? What about the son whose father could not go to the stadium to search for him?" (796) Within the framework of the film, which is carefully crafted to appeal to its primarily U.S. audiences, a viewing position identified with Ed and Beth may indeed marshal empathetic engagement from viewers that may translate into action or activism. But that engagement becomes all the more powerful when it can be extended beyond Charlie onto the many other victims at the film's margins, whose recovery, even through fiction, is far more tenuous.

The Power of Haunting Presences

At first glance, the silences that mark both *Anil's Ghost* and *Missing* might seem to detract from the work of recovery and consciousness-raising that these two texts, and others like them, set out to do. But to take these silences at face value, as simple omissions, is to underestimate the productive power of haunting as a response to the paradoxical demands of disappearance. As Avery Gordon argues, "in order to understand and to transform state power, to fight even the most coercive, threatening, militarized, and violent state, the story must be told in the mode of haunting. . . . Why must the story be told this way? Because the story, which is very much alive, is happening in and through haunting" (131). Inasmuch as haunting is the mechanism of disappearance, Gordon suggests, it is also the best means of fighting it. Indeed, through the ghostly

figures that haunt them—Ruwan Kumara and the irreverent prisoner—*Anil's Ghost* and *Missing* envision forms of resistance that move beyond the powerful but limited frame of the realism they employ. These figures trade the familiarity of legible, empathetic characterizations for a relationship with readers that is less certain, but also potentially transformative. By occupying the ambiguous space of haunting—neither present nor absent, neither known nor unknowable—the ghosts of the disappeared ensure that we remain accountable to them.

Like ghosts, who refuse to be contained or forgotten, the disappeared pose an immediate, present, and ongoing challenge to oppressive regimes. Argentina's *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* are one group who have recognized the power of that challenge, resisting official efforts to declare their children dead and rallying around the call of “*aparición con vida*” [bring them back alive].¹⁴ As several of the mothers themselves acknowledge, they hold little hope that their children are alive, years after their disappearance, but accepting their death or claiming their remains would seem to close the matter of their disappearance, which for the mothers is far from resolved (Taylor 189). Through their demands for *aparición con vida*, the mothers continue to challenge the government for information and accountability, and to demand justice and public reckoning in the present. The mothers' strategy points to the very uncertainty of disappearance as a powerful source of resistance: as long as victims' fates remain

¹⁴ The *Madres* are certainly not the only group that has used public protest and consciousness-raising to resist disappearance, but they are certainly among the most visible, and their call for “*aparición con vida*” exemplifies the resistant power to which the contradictory condition of disappearance can give rise.

unknown, they demand a reckoning that has not yet taken place, leaving open the possibility that justice might be carried out at some point in the future.

The haunting quality of disappearance not only resists efforts to confine it to the past, but also defies the geographic and political boundaries that make disappearance something that happens elsewhere. After the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. in 2001, the coup which took place on that same date in 1973 has begun to be referred to as “Chile’s 9/11.” On its surface, this comparison simply points to these two events as similarly tragic and formative moments in their respective national histories. But it also evokes a more profound comparison between the U.S. and Chile that haunts a film like *Missing*, which insists so repeatedly and so forcefully on their differences. Before the coup, many Chileans thought of themselves with pride as members of a stable and long-standing democracy; after the coup, official discourse framed the suspension of democratic rights and freedoms as a necessary defense against internal agitators and external enemies. This history casts a long shadow over recent U.S. policy in defense of the “homeland,” including so-called “aggressive interrogation techniques,” and the detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay without the right of *habeas corpus* or other protections of the U.S. civilian legal system. Haunted by the victims disappearance, the logic that would distinguish U.S. human rights abuses from those that have taken place elsewhere becomes tenuous indeed.

Finally, by challenging the boundaries and conceits of the realist texts that contain them, the haunting figures at the center of *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* also resist practices of reading that would confine them safely away from the worlds of their audiences. *Missing* places us, as viewers, in the position of Ed and Beth in the stadium, where the

irreverent prisoner literally calls us to account. His outburst foregrounds the privileged viewing position occupied by the film's viewers, especially its U.S. audience. The inscrutable Ruwan Kumara presents a more subtle challenge to the vantage point of Ondaatje's readers, who have come to expect the seemingly unmediated access that omniscient narration provides, and the tidy closure that novels, in particular mysteries, rely on. The spectral quality of these characters destabilizes the authority of the author's or filmmaker's gaze by revealing the limitations of the work of recovery that fiction can carry out. It also challenges, moreover, the complacency with which readers distant from zones of conflict might consume representations of the disappeared, exposing the forms of privilege that allow some people to read about what others must live. Although works of fiction like *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* set out to render the disappeared visible, it is through their depictions of what remains *invisible* that they have the potential to form the most meaningful and productive connections with their readers.

Chapter 4

Dystopian Presents, Haunting Futures

Neither Ayi Kwei Armah's 1968 novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, a depiction of life in newly independent Ghana, nor Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, set in post-9/11 New York City and published in 2007, offer particularly appealing visions of the social worlds their authors occupy. In Armah's Ghana, the social life of the nation has become dominated by an ethos of unchecked consumption, financed by graft and corruption, that prevents the emergence of a more hopeful and productive vision for the nation's future. In DeLillo's novel, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 signal the end of America's role as an economic and cultural superpower, but in doing so reveal the emptiness and meaninglessness of the late capitalist society whose decline they inaugurate. Not surprisingly, these novels' grim visions of the present and the future have elicited strong negative reactions from many of their readers. It is a mistake, however, to believe that *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* are entirely nihilistic or defeatist, as readers and critics have often assumed. By interpreting these two novels through the framework of dystopian literature, we are able to appreciate the extent to which their bleak outlooks function as a form of social critique. Relying on the conventions of the dystopian form, their extremely negative visions create critical distance for readers and expose the flawed nature of the social realities they depict. Indeed, the more extreme and alienating that vision, the more effectively it forms the ground for critique—and ultimately for change.

Thinking of *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* as dystopian texts recasts our understanding of the nature of these novels' productive political and social engagements, shifting critical attention away from the content of their depictions and toward their narrative form and structure. Both Armah and DeLillo reveal the oppressive nature of societies grounded in capitalist consumption and commodity fetishism, which transform meaningful labor and sustaining family ties into empty market relations. For both authors, however, this commitment to laying bare the oppressive mechanisms of their present social realities is at cross-purposes to the work of imagining genuine alternatives to those realities. Writing during historical moments in which imagining otherwise seems both urgently necessary and impossibly compromised, both Armah and DeLillo create texts that transfer that responsibility onto their future readers through their cyclical structure and ambiguous, open-ended narrative. By resisting simplistic forms of optimism, these texts refuse to take up the flawed rhetorics that are available to them and remain committed to carrying out clear-eyed social critique. But by leaving their representations of societies in crisis open to reinterpretation and rereading, the novels allow for the possibility that the future might offer hopeful visions that are impossible in the present. These texts—and our readings of them—are haunted by the futures that they themselves cannot presage; as readers, we are invited to step into the ghostly reading positions they map out, and to question whether we can generate the kinds of genuinely different vision they call for. By eliciting such ongoing forms of engagement, these texts embrace haunting as a practice of reading for the future.

The Unpleasant Present

Armah's representation of postindependence Ghana in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* is unrelentingly bleak. The novel's protagonist, referred to throughout simply as "the man," has abandoned the intellectual ambitions of his youth and resigned himself to a job at the Railroad Administration, which he finds thankless and stultifyingly dull. Barely able to support his family on his government paycheck, the man is surrounded by flagrant and unabashed corruption, which he rejects on principle despite his desire to provide a better life for his wife and children. The man's refusal to participate in dishonest dealings isolates him from society, which he perceives as having embraced corruption wholeheartedly in pursuit of "the gleam" of modern amenities and European imports. Although the man rejects the dishonest practices required to attain the gleam, he grudgingly acknowledges its appeal, especially in contrast to the poverty that is its alternative. The novel begins during "Passion Week," the week before payday, when the man and all those around him have barely enough money for necessities like food and bus fare (1). "How much hard work," the man skeptically wonders, "before a month's pay would last till the end of the month?" (95)

In a world where corruption, rather than hard work, is the only route to success, others see the man's honesty not as integrity, but as foolishness or cowardice. His wife, Oyo, is particularly dismayed by the man's refusal to participate in what he describes as "the national game," and ridicules him for lacking the courage to provide her with the lifestyle she desires (55). As Oyo explains, "[e]verybody is swimming towards what he wants. Who wants to remain on the beach asking the wind 'How . . . How . . . How?'" (44). The example of Joe Koomson, the man's former classmate, only sharpens Oyo's

disappointment in her husband. Now a government minister, Koomson is living the life of the “gleam,” enjoying privileges formerly reserved for the class of exploitative white colonizers. Koomson’s life is filled with luxuries that can only be obtained through corruption and public theft: a chauffeured car; a spacious house in the exclusive, largely white Upper Residential Area; imported goods like liquor, perfume, a German radio set, a wig for his wife, and beautiful clothes and toys for his daughter. Although Oyo knows that the Koomsons’ lifestyle is financed by dishonesty, she is unapologetic in her desire for it: “It is nice. It is clean, the life Estella [Koomson] is getting” (44). And although the man insists that “some of that kind of cleanliness has more rottenness in it than the slime at the bottom of a garbage dump,” he admits to himself that he wishes he could provide his own family with the advantages that Koomson’s family enjoys (44).

For the children. Supposing Deede also could have beautiful clothes with their beauty crossing the seas from thousands of miles away, and supposing Adoley could have a machine to ride around on, to occupy her attention while she was growing up, what would they know about ways that were rotten in the days of disappeared parents? What would they care? What, indeed, would anybody care? (145)

Unwilling to compromise his integrity but forced to recognize its cost to him and his loved ones, the man is constantly beset by guilt, doubt, and loneliness.

The unrelenting pessimism of *Beautiful Ones* manifests itself in the novel’s pervasive imagery of filth and decay, applied equally to the supposedly “clean” lifestyle of the gleam and to the daily struggles of the masses.¹ As the novel’s first chapters trace the man’s daily routine, everything he sees or touches is unclean and contaminated, from

¹ In a convincing reading of Armah’s novel, John Lutz uses the framework of Marxist commodity fetishism to illuminate “the implicit connection between the ‘clean life’ lived within the gleam and the miserable, abject one lived among mountains of waste and excrement,” both of which are the products of “a monolithic system of commodity production and exchange” (103-4).

the “rotten . . . stench” of paper money, to the waste receptacle “covered over thickly with the juice of every imaginable kind of waste matter,” to the grime and stench of public showers and latrines. Even the seemingly innocent banister in the Railroad Administration building—its wood decaying beneath layers of polish, and contaminated by the traffic of many hands—elicits his revulsion and despair. The man is no less revolted by his own domestic space than by these public ones: the family’s shared latrine, the shower thickly coated with mysterious slime, and the red floor polish, “tired and menstrual,” which does nothing to rejuvenate the worn surfaces to which it is applied (118). The imagery of filth, rot, and waste in *Beautiful Ones* is certainly not symbolically or ideologically neutral; indeed, in Armah’s text, “shit has a political vocation” (Esty 32). On the most fundamental level, these depictions contribute to our sense of the utter degradation of the man’s environment and the daily assaults to which his values—including cleanliness and purity—are subjected.

Falling Man offers a similarly grim view of both the present and the future in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City. DeLillo’s novel steers clear of depicting the acts of heroism and solidarity that 9/11 inspired, focusing instead on the ordinary, banal, and even unsavory reactions of flawed and fallible characters. The novel’s protagonist, Keith Neudecker, escapes the Twin Towers, where several of his friends perish, but contrary to our expectations, Keith is more antihero than hero. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, Keith is estranged from his wife, Lianne, and their young son, Justin, and although the couple reunites after Keith’s escape, their family life remains strained and distant throughout the novel. Indeed, none of DeLillo’s characters rise to the challenge articulated by the character of Martin, a cosmopolitan art dealer and the

longtime lover of Lianne's mother, Nina Bartos. In the days immediately following the attacks, Martin urges Lianne to respond rationally and productively: "[t]here's the event, there's the individual. Measure it. Let it teach you something. See it. Make yourself equal to it" (42).

Despite Martin's advice, neither Lianne nor her mother reacts in the way Martin suggests. Indeed, Nina's unwillingness to see the events of 9/11 through the political and economic frameworks that Martin puts forward introduces conflict into their long and loving relationship, and eventually leads to their separation. Lianne's initial response to 9/11, like Nina's, is dominated by anger and incomprehension. Watching the news footage of the planes, Lianne remains unable to make sense of what she sees. In the weeks and months following 9/11, she isolates herself from her friends, and even incites a physical confrontation with a neighbor who plays Middle Eastern music that is audible in the halls. By the end of the novel, Lianne has turned even further inward. Her volunteer work with a support group for Alzheimer's patients concludes and is replaced only by a private, neurotic concern with her own mental state, and although she begins attending church regularly, her religious experience is a profoundly solitary one.

Keith and Lianne reunite after 9/11, but their recommitment to one another takes the form of a dazed surrender rather than a conscious change. Although they agree that in "[t]imes like these, the family is necessary," the family they are able to construct together is little more than "people sharing the air" (214). Even as he recommits to his family, Keith begins an affair with a fellow survivor, Florence Givens, whose briefcase he unknowingly carried with him as he fled the towers. Although their relationship, with "its point of origin in smoke and fire," seems initially to offer the possibility of healing

and catharsis, it quickly assumes the banal form of an ordinary infidelity (161). “[S]he would say what someone always says. ‘Do you have to leave?’ He would stand naked by the bed. ‘I’ll always have to leave’ ” (137). Keith eventually ends his relationship with Florence but remains an unreliable presence at home, traveling for days at a time to attend poker tournaments, where he plays semiprofessionally. In stark contrast to his former regular game with a gathering of friends, the tournaments are held in generic, anonymous casinos and offer Keith a world devoid of emotional significance, where his choices are pared down to the simplest principles of cause and effect. Keith’s alienation and purposelessness characterize the novel’s worldview: rather than presenting us with characters who are made stronger and more self-aware by the harrowing events of 9/11, or a community that draws together under duress, *Falling Man* depicts bare human survival and responses to tragedy that are anything but heroic.

The Politics of Pessimism

The grim visions that characterize both *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* have elicited forceful negative reactions from many of their readers. Leonard Kibera, for instance, disparages Armah’s novel for literary shortcomings such as its one-dimensional characters and lack of “development and significant plot,” but is even more troubled by what he sees as Armah’s “contempt for Africa” (71). Although Kibera maintains that he does not expect “moral reassurance as we grovel in the muck, nor an indication of hope contrived in desperation,” he is nevertheless dissatisfied with the novel’s lack of a

hopeful vision (71).² Disappointed readers of DeLillo's novel offered similar critiques. The seeming prescience of much of DeLillo's previous fiction, which was both ambitious in scope and marked by cutting social critique, led to his embrace by many as a privileged interpreter of the events of 9/11, capable of addressing such a momentous subject without aestheticizing or romanticizing it. On the release of *Falling Man*, however, DeLillo was widely criticized for failing to provide his readers with an account of the events that offered solace, enlightenment, or transcendence. To Maureen Corrigan, reviewing the novel for National Public Radio, *Falling Man* is nothing more than "a series of gestures, some contorted, some striking, but all of them infuriatingly empty." And prominent New York Times reviewer Michiko Kakutani was disappointed by DeLillo's choice not to center his novel on a more admirable and selfless survivor, instead of Keith, whom she dismisses as "a self-absorbed man, who came through the fire and ash of that day and decided to spend his foreseeable future playing stupid card games in the Nevada desert" (2).

Critical accounts of the novels such as these are, in essence, factually correct: Armah is contemptuous of the Ghanaian society that surrounds him, and DeLillo does choose to focus on the banality and emptiness of 9/11, rather than on the acts of heroism it inspired. But in an important sense, such critiques reveal more about the expectations of the novels' readers than about the texts themselves. These novels elicit a surprising degree of emotion from readers like Kibera, Corrigan, and Kakutani, who are not merely disappointed by the novels' formal or aesthetic shortcomings, but seem emotionally and

² Fellow Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo has been another prominent critic of *Beautiful Ones*, and her own short story collection, *No Sweetness Here*, published in 1970, can be read as a response to it.

even morally affronted by their pessimism. Underlying these reactions, I would suggest, is an implicit sense that authors like Armah and DeLillo, who take moments of acute social crisis as their subjects and settings, assume a certain political and social responsibility in their representations. Corrigan's complaint about DeLillo's "failure to deepen our understanding of September 11th" is particularly revealing: for many readers, it is not enough to merely *represent* 9/11; rather, it must be framed in a way that allows us to make the events themselves meaningful within a larger social narrative. And Kibera's dismay at Armah's "disaffection with the men and women of Ghana" seems to reflect his own frustrated search for a more hopeful vision of decolonization in Armah's text (70). The fact that authors like Armah and DeLillo, writing in and about moments of crisis, do not provide redeeming narratives of transcendence or visions of social transformation is interpreted by many readers as a betrayal of some greater social responsibility.

Rather than dismissing the pessimism of *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* as reactionary or defeatist, considering these novels through the lens of dystopian literature allows us to understand their political and social engagements in slightly different terms. Although they differ in important ways from the most familiar literary dystopias, which are set in distant lands or imagined futures and frequently rely on the conventions of science fiction, both *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* "offer a detailed and pessimistic presentation of the very worst of social alternatives," which Tom Moylan describes as the defining attribute of dystopian fiction (147). In the context of dystopian literature, a genre dedicated to exposing the flaws of a given set of social conditions, the extremely negative visions in *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* enable, rather than detract from, a

political critique. Indeed, the very bleakness and pessimism that readers such as Kibera, Corrigan, and Kakutani find so objectionable becomes the means through which these texts historicize oppressive conditions that might otherwise be taken for granted, thus prompting critical evaluations and opening the way for social change.

As M. Keith Booker has argued, “[t]he principal technique of dystopian fiction is defamiliarization: by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might be otherwise taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (19). Significantly, both *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* are not set in imagined worlds, but rather depict the present or recently past social realities occupied by their authors. DeLillo, himself a resident of New York City, began his novel shortly after the 9/11 attacks and published it in 2007, while memories of those events remained fresh in many minds. And although several decades have now passed since the 1966 coup which forms the backdrop for Armah’s novel and the context for its writing, the structural challenges and social ills it depicts—powermongering, political instability, concentration of wealth, and “underdevelopment”—persist in Ghana and elsewhere.³ Instead of creating an alternate reality, however, Armah and DeLillo lay the groundwork for a meaningful critique by cultivating detachment and even disgust with the present. Thus the alienation

³ As Neil Lazarus reminds us, “[i]ndependence seems to have brought neither peace nor prosperity to Africa. Instead, it has paradoxically borne witness to stagnation, elitism, and class domination, and to the intensifying structural dependence—economic, political, cultural, and ideological—of Africa upon the imperial Western powers” (3). The failed promise of postindependence social transformation in Africa provides the context for Armah’s novel and others of the period, as well as for our reading of these texts today.

that many readers experience when confronted with these novels is in fact instrumental to their functioning as social critiques.

For Armah, pervasive and graphic scatological imagery becomes a powerful mechanism for defamiliarizing quotidian realities and pervasive ideologies. Many critics have attended to the symbolic import of Armah's depictions of shit and the many other bodily "juices" that are central to the novel's figurative vocabulary (Armah 40). On a symbolic level, Armah's scatological imagery evokes both the moral corruption that defines postindependence Ghanaian society, and the material processes of "[i]rresponsible consumerism and embezzlement [that] lead directly to undisposed-of filth and waste" (Wright 30). Moreover, as Joshua Esty points out, in *Beautiful Ones*, "Armah uses excremental language to perform an extended Freudian unmasking or desublimation: he re-odorizes money, converting it into shit and forcing readers to see wealth as polished waste" (33). Although Esty regards Armah's novel through the generic lens of satire, the disillusionment conveyed through Armah's "excremental vision" also lends itself to the purposes of dystopian literature (35). Through the effect of abjection, Armah's vivid descriptions of waste and filth cause his readers instinctively to draw back from the object, individual, or ideology with which it is associated. For instance, in describing the wigs of human hair, much desired by aspiring, upwardly mobile women like Oyo, as "scraped from [a] decayed white woman's corpse," the novel carries out an act of defamiliarization that opens the familiar commodity, and its reification of colonial values, to critique (89). This strategy is crucial for Armah's novel, since it reveals how the man's comparatively comfortable, middle-class life, which might seem enviable at first glance, is contaminated by the internalized racism and avaricious

consumerism of the society that surrounds him.⁴

The distancing effects of DeLillo's narrative are much more subtle, but no less significant. *Falling Man* invites us to see New York City in the wake of 9/11 through the eyes of a survivor, for whom familiar landscapes are radically transformed and detached from any sense of their former significance. The novel's first pages describe ground zero as, "not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (3). In light of the towers' collapse, the ordinary scenery of the city, formerly unremarkable, seems strange and nonsensical: a "Breakfast Specials" sign is impossibly incongruous, and joggers are stopped in their tracks, their activity rendered wildly inappropriate by the gravity of the scene they witness (3). Reminiscent of the stunted reactions of trauma survivors, this sense that the familiar world has suddenly become incomprehensible is a hallmark of 9/11 discourse, especially in the weeks and months that followed the attacks. But in DeLillo's novel, this experience of dislocation is pervasive. The detachment of the 9/11 survivors is echoed, for example, by the Alzheimer's patients with whom Lianne conducts her "storyline sessions" (125). For these men and women, nothing about the world around them can be taken for granted, as "things fall away, streets, names, all sense of direction and location, every fixed grid of memory" (156). This sense of dislocation is also a hallmark of DeLillo's own prose, which posits the emptiness of his characters and their actions as the defining condition of an American modernity in which "individuality

⁴ Esty's reading of the role of excrement in *Beautiful Ones* foregrounds the self-reproach that scatological imagery encodes, pointing to the complicity of intellectuals such as the novel's protagonist—and its author—in the flawed social system they critique.

is rubbed out, willpower attenuated, and language barely functional” (Versluyts 20).⁵ For DeLillo, as for Armah, defamiliarization creates an effect similar to that of the alternate realities that are characteristic of dystopian texts, and both authors, by distancing their readers from the social realities that surround them, achieve the “cognitive estrangement” that gives rise to both reflection and critique (Suvin 255).⁶

The Possibilities of “Utopian Pessimism”

Despite their bleakness, dystopian texts are not necessarily fatalistic in their outlook, and scholars of the genre are careful to distinguish the varying degrees to which particular texts either open up or close down possibilities for imagining alternatives to the oppressive social conditions they depict. The responses that dystopian texts elicit from their readers are central to determining their ideological orientation. (Indeed, a concern with the kinds of imaginative practices these texts inspire in their readers is implicit in the genre, which is defined by the critical evaluation of alternative realities it invites.)

Discussing the varying degrees of optimism generated by utopian and dystopian texts quickly creates a terminological morass, but I will conform here with the relatively intuitive terms on which Tom Moylan ultimately settles. As he suggests, the bleakness of the imagined world in dystopian texts makes them, by definition, pessimistic. But in depicting a flawed society, dystopian texts may also envision the possibility that oppressive social conditions might be transformed or transcended. For Moylan, the

⁵ For a more inclusive treatment of DeLillo’s engagement with contemporary American culture and society, see Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo’s Dialogue with Culture*.

⁶ Darko Suvin’s foundational definition of science fiction also describes the effect sought by dystopian literature written in other genres, which “estranges the author’s and reader’s own empirical environment” in service of an alternative vision (255).

viability of the challenge that a dystopian novel imagines, to a great extent, determines the political significance of its pessimism. Thus, dystopias which prompt critical reflection on the depicted social conditions and inspire hope for a different and better alternative display “utopian pessimism” (Moylan 154). By contrast, to describe those dystopias which offer no alternative to the bleak reality they depict, Moylan coins the term “anti-utopian pessimism” (154).

On the level of plot, neither *Beautiful Ones* nor *Falling Man* imagines the possibility of a successful challenge to the current, flawed reality; indeed, both texts actively cast doubt on such a possibility. In *Beautiful Ones*, the coup which deposes the corrupt former revolutionary leader Kwame Nkrumah, and which structures the novel’s climax, holds little promise of real or meaningful change. The man stays at his desk when his coworkers go out, opportunistically, to join demonstrations in support of the new government, and he notes that, although the words of the crowd’s songs about Nkrumah have changed from praise to condemnation, the songs themselves remain the same. Nevertheless, the coup does cause one small but important change: Koomson, formerly the embodiment of everything the man had failed to achieve, is forced to flee fearing for his life. No longer a representative of the gleam, Koomson is abjected by his fear, which produces noxious bodily odors, and he must escape from the man’s house, where he has taken refuge, by squeezing through the narrow opening of the latrine. The man helps Koomson escape to safety, and Oyo, terrified and revolted by the spectacle of Koomson’s fall, expresses for the first time her gratitude that her husband “never became like him” (165). Although he recognizes that the world has changed completely for individuals like Koomson, the man foresees no real change for Ghana or for himself: “for

the nation itself there would only be a change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted” (162). And reflecting on the family and the daily life to which he will always return, the man is filled not with optimism but with “the never-ending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all that the remainder of his own life could offer him” (183).

DeLillo, too, offers very little in the way of optimism, depicting the Neudecker family, years after the attacks, as locked into a pattern of gradual and inevitable decline. Keith and Lianne “sink into [their] little lives,” much as Keith had predicted. By the novel’s close, they have become defined by the actions they compulsively repeat—counting by threes or going to church, playing cards or doing rehabilitative wrist exercises—actions which seem to grow more and more meaningless with every repetition. Keith’s compulsion to correct misspellings of his last name on incoming mail, crossing out the “new” in “Neudecker,” is emblematic of the novel’s vision of the future, marked by empty habits that foreclose the possibility of genuine change. Nina’s estrangement from Martin and her eventual death also cast doubt on the possibility of the kind of personal, ideological transformation that Martin advocated in the novel’s early pages. When Martin and Lianne meet for the last time, after Nina’s memorial service, he has abandoned his earlier hope that Americans might rise to the challenge of seeing themselves and their place in the world differently after 9/11.

On the level of plot, then, neither *Beautiful Ones* nor *Falling Man* offers much opportunity to imagine otherwise, but to dismiss these texts as anti-utopian is to underestimate the significance of the ideological work they inspire beyond the frame of their fictional narratives. As Moylan suggests, it is frequently the formal and structural

openness of a dystopian text, rather than its plot, which allows for hopeful and utopian possibilities. Thus, in contrast to conservative, anti-utopian texts, which “[tend] to favor a linear plot” in which all rebellions are crushed, those which offer “a possibility for change or identif[y] a site for an alternative position” allow readers to step outside of the dystopian world, critique its flaws, and imagine other, resistant possibilities (Moylan 156-7). Moreover, as Moylan acknowledges, even those texts which most stubbornly foreclose alternative visions and enforce an anti-utopian pessimism can inspire oppositional reading positions that give rise to utopian possibilities outside the frame of the texts itself. Confronted with such closed, unrelentingly anti-utopian texts, “readers or audiences may well respond with a resistant and utopian attitude—perhaps finding in the very closure of a certain text a chilling view of the present that counterfactually produces hope rather than the capitulation the text itself invites” (Moylan 158).⁷ Thus, by shifting our critical focus from the pessimistic visions provided by works of fiction to the forms of resistance and critique they elicit in their readers, the scholarship of dystopia suggests a different way of thinking about the bleakness of the imagined worlds in *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man*.

Echoing Moylan’s concern with the ideological implications of dystopian texts’ structure and form, Fredric Jameson’s recent work on utopia directs our attention to the inevitable silences and imaginative failures of utopian literature. Jameson notes the

⁷ Moylan’s claim that even the most closed and conservative of dystopian fictions can inspire a resistant hopefulness in their readers is both appealing and problematic: while it allows critics to account for a wide range of readerly reactions and identify forms of resistant reading, it also threatens to undermine the formal analysis of dystopian fiction that Moylan has just offered by suggesting that the politics encoded in the text’s form may be entirely superseded by readers’ ideological orientation.

problematic nature of focusing on the *content* of utopian visions: inasmuch as utopian possibilities are genuinely new and different, they risk becoming “not merely unrealizable, but what is worse, unimaginable” to readers whose imaginations are shaped by their present political and social context (xv). By corollary, dystopian literature faces the opposite challenge. Profoundly invested in critiquing the political and social conditions in evidence around them, dystopian texts may be unable to transcend the context of that critique to convincingly evoke or depict a different and hopeful alternative. Jameson, in response to this paradox, advocates a shift in critical focus from content to representation, a practice he calls “utopian formalism”:

It is not only the social and historical raw materials of the Utopian construct which are of interest from this perspective; but also the representational relations established between them—such as closure, narrative[,] and exclusion or inversion. Here as elsewhere in narrative analysis what is most revealing is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus. (xiii)

The inevitable shortcomings of the utopian imagination form the basis of the politically informed critical practice which Jameson ultimately advocates. If, as he suggests, in characteristically Marxist terms, “[o]n the social level, our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production,” then “at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment,” and “therefore the best Utopias are those that fail most comprehensively” (xiii). Although utopian texts may fail to envision any genuinely different alternative to present social conditions, by making those oppressive conditions visible and allowing them to be historicized, these texts lay the groundwork for visions of the future that they themselves, by definition, may be unable to provide. Thus, as Jameson suggests, “the most reliable political test [of a utopian text] lies not in any judgment on the individual work in

question so much as in its capacity to generate new ones, Utopian visions that include those of the past and modify or correct them” (xv).

Applying Jameson’s framework to both *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* points us to a consideration of their form and structure as works of literature, rather than solely the content of the worlds they depict, as the source of their potential political engagement. Although the novels themselves fail to provide hopeful visions of the future, they might invite or inspire readers to generate their own utopian visions, as Jameson suggests. This understanding calls to mind the unrealized future promise of the “beautiful ones” in Armah’s novel. Near the novel’s close, Armah’s protagonist reflects that

[s]omeday in the long future a new life would maybe flower in the country, but when it came, it would not choose as its instruments the same people who had made a habit of killing new flowers. The future goodness may come eventually, but before then where were the things in the present that would prepare the way for it? (159-160)

The imagery of flowers in this passage clearly connects it with the inscription on the bus in the final scene, from which the novel takes its title: the image of a single flower surrounded by the words “THE BEAUTYFUL ONES ARE NOT YET BORN” (183). Much as Jameson suggests, the man recognizes that “really new things” cannot emerge in the present, and turns instead to searching for “the things . . . that would prepare the way” for that as-yet unimaginable change. Applying this model to a reading of the novels, we can imagine the possibility of “beautiful” future readers, who like Armah’s “Beautiful Ones,” might take these novels’ formal openness as the basis for utopian visions that exceed the novels’ present grasp—and perhaps ours as well. Such readings would evaluate these novels and their utopian potential based on their capacity to generate hopeful visions of the future in the hands of these “beautiful” readers.

Approaching Armah and DeLillo in this way, we would look not for vibrantly imagined alternatives to the social realities the novels depict, but rather for the terrain on which readers might begin to imagine those alternatives beyond the frame of the texts themselves. In both novels, the conditions of market capitalism—and the hollow personal relationships that the capitalist system produces—are a defining aspect of the oppressive social realities they depict. While Armah and DeLillo do not themselves offer alternatives to these dysfunctional systems, their failure to do so can be read as an invitation, especially in light of the iterative structure that defines their narrative arcs. Both *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* deliver their readers, at the novel's end, to a location very similar to their opening. At the end of Armah's novel, the man finds himself retracing, in reverse, the journey of his morning commute, and witnessing for the second time the casual corruption of a bus driver. The repetition at the conclusion of *Falling Man* is even more pronounced, as Keith's escape from the towers, which began the novel, is re-narrated. By effectively beginning again, these novels carry out a repetition with a difference. Not only do their final scenes differ in subtle but important ways from their earlier versions, but as readers, we approach these scenes having ourselves been transformed by the act of reading. This circular structure offers an alternative to the hopelessness and stasis that has defined the novels, suggesting that change is possible and providing readers with the seeds of an alternate vision that extends forward from novel's end.

A Reading of *Beautiful Ones*

In *Beautiful Ones*, Armah's critique of Ghana's ethos of consumption is unambiguous and unrelenting, but while there is little change in the flawed society the

novel depicts, its cyclical narrative offers the possibility that the man himself has changed in a subtle but important way. For much of the novel, the man tries to hold himself aloof from the corruption and materialism he denounces. In the Railroad Administration, he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the not-so-subtle suggestions of the timber contractor who attempts to bribe him, and he avoids the contaminating contact with the banister as he ascends and descends the stairs. At home and in public, the man also goes out of his way to distance himself from Oyo's social posturing, complaining to the Koomsons about the high price of even unpretentious local beer, and bringing his wife abruptly down to earth during a rare taxi ride, when she flaunts "the few rich things that had ever happened to her" for the taxi driver's approval (144). Even as he struggles to separate himself from the corrupt world around him, the man recognizes the futility of such efforts, recalling a friend, Rama Krishna, a Ghanaian man who took that name in his search for spiritual purity. Like our protagonist, Rama Krishna seeks to flee the world around him, which seems entirely contaminated by rot and decay, but his efforts to isolate himself prove pathetic and ineffectual. "Near the end he had discovered the one way: he would not corrupt himself by touching any woman, but saved his semen to rejuvenate his brain by standing on his head a certain number of minutes every night and every dawn" (48). Despite his ascetic quest to keep his body and mind pure, Rama Krishna dies of consumption, his body having "undergone far more decay than any living body, however old and near death, can expect to see" (48-9).

The story of Rama Krishna points to the sexual, as well as financial, dimensions of the idealized purity that the man and others around him seek. Throughout Armah's novel, the normative gender roles that cast men as providers and women as consumers

forge a powerful link between the economic and sexual failings of men like the novel's protagonist. Indeed, it comes as little surprise that the man, who has no appetite for the national game of corruption and social climbing, has also lost his sexual appetite for his wife, and has no money to pay for the services of the prostitute who propositions him during Passion Week. In his attempt to resist the prevailing social forces, the man feels burdened by Oyo's hopes and aspirations, and yearns for the solitary life of a man like Teacher, who has "escaped the call of the loved ones" and is, in the man's words, "the freest person I know" (55). Teacher's dark response, however, makes any vision of a happy life, either alone or with others, seem impossible:

I know I am nothing and will never be anything without them, and when I most wish to stop being nothing, then the desire to run back to those I have fled comes back with unbearable strength. Until I see again those loving arms outstretched, bringing me their gift of death. Then I stop and turn around and come back here, living my half-life of loneliness. (56)

For Teacher, as for the man, the expectations and desires of women—mothers, wives, and lovers—weigh most heavily.⁸ Despite his love for the woman Maanan, in her presence Teacher feels "accused by a silence that belonged to millions and ages of women all bearing the face and the form of Maanan, and needing no voice at all to tell me I had failed them" (72). Unwilling or unable to live up to the expectations of their loved ones, both the man and Teacher find themselves trapped between the loneliness of a solitary life and the reproach of women whose desires they will inevitably fail to satisfy.

⁸ In his provocative article, "Homoeroticism and the Failure of African Nationalism in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones*," Glen Retief identifies the powerful homoerotic undercurrents that are also at work in this scene. Although Teacher succeeds in "mentor[ing] the man back to conventional, familial heterosexuality," the scene nevertheless contains "a veritable plethora of signs pointing away from married, domestic heterosexuality in the direction of the homoerotic" (67).

To justify his solitude and withdrawal from public life, Teacher cites the allegory of Plato's cave: people imprisoned in the dark, who have never seen the sun, refuse to believe the account of one man among them who has escaped the cave and witnessed the brightness of daylight. For Teacher, the parable captures the futility of struggling for change in postindependence Ghana, whose citizens are so seduced by the false values of consumer capitalism that they reject other visions for the nation's future out-of-hand. In his despair, Teacher concludes that "men were all free to do what they chose to do, and would laugh at the bringer of unwanted light if they knew what they needed was the dark" (79). At the time this story is recounted, the man is saddened, but convinced by it. But Teacher's interpretation of the allegory marginalizes one of its defining features: the conditions of imprisonment that cause the prisoners in Plato's cave to reject the escapee's visionary claim. This is the aspect of the allegory that John Lutz emphasizes in his reading of the novel, which recasts Armah's pessimism through an explicitly Marxist framework. If, as Lutz suggests, "those imprisoned in the cave are understood primarily as prisoners of social desire who have been miseducated in a way that makes them incapable of recognizing what is in their own best interests," the parable directs our attention to the fundamental changes that would need to occur before the prisoners could, literally, see the light. Both the allegory, and Teacher's deployment of it, neglect the question on which the man ultimately comes to focus: the conditions in the present that will prepare the way for future change.

The conclusion of *Beautiful Ones* is ambivalent at best. As the novel makes clear, conditions are no different in the Ghana to which the man returns after his adventure with Koomson: desperate children still steal chips of stone from grave markers,

and officials still casually demand bribes. But unlike Teacher, who is determined to hold himself aloof from that world, the man has chosen to engage with it. He has risked his life to help Koomson, compromising his own principles to help the party man bribe his way to safety. When the man encounters Maanan on the beach, he calls her by name in a gesture of recognition and hospitality, unlike Teacher, who cannot bring himself to speak to Maanan and acknowledge his failings and her suffering. Although he dreads returning to “Oyo, [and] the eyes of the children after six o’clock,” the man nevertheless sets off toward home at the novel’s close (183). After bribing the soldiers at a roadblock while the man looks on, the driver of the green bus with its hopeful inscription waves and smiles to the man as he drives off, hailing him much as the man hailed Maanan. The man’s response to the driver’s gesture is ambiguous, and critics such as Robert Spencer have suggested that this interaction, in which the man is once again a distant watcher of the corruption around him, only confirms his aloofness and isolation. But read alongside the earlier account of a bus journey with which the novel begins, this scene suggests an important shift in the man’s attitude and outlook.

In the earlier scene, the man is asleep as the bus driver counts his day’s take, and his refusal to partake in the driver’s offered reciprocity makes the man the target of the driver’s vitriol. Although the man’s response is not narrated in the later scene, the bus driver’s friendly reaction suggests an important difference in how he has been perceived in his act of watching. As Neil Lazarus suggests, “the bus-driver sees the watching ‘man’ not as a stern figure of conscience, calling him to account, nor—of course—as a partner in crime, but as one who understands” (78). The subtle, indefinable change that the man has undergone over the course of the novel is not explicitly described in the text, but is

thus revealed through the cyclical narrative, which allows us to see this earlier scene repeated with a difference. Armah's text does not imagine any viable alternatives to the man's bleak existence, and attempts by critics to name and identify alternatives often seem more definitive than the novel's ending warrants. But it does hold out the promise of a future that might differ from the present we have witnessed, a possibility embodied by the green bus. The fact that the man is open to this promise is itself a form of hope in the context of a dystopian world in which "all that can be expected from the present is that it will not foreclose every single one of the future's progressive options" (Lazarus 73).

A Reading of *Falling Man*

Throughout *Falling Man*, DeLillo grapples with the fact that the "American way of life" under attack on 9/11 was defined by the oppressive conditions of late capitalism, conditions which he has frequently and thoroughly critiqued in his earlier fiction. Much as the coup in Armah's novel yields simply "a change in embezzlers," 9/11 only superficially alters life for the Neudecker family, who remain isolated and adrift in the modern world they occupy. Although Keith survives and the family is reunited, the novel suggests that the "normal" lives they try to recreate are defined by an empty, alienating consumer capitalism. Keith's transformation from financier to professional poker player simply substitutes one form of empty, fetishistic financial dealing for another. And throughout *Falling Man*, even the most basic activities are mechanized and dehumanized. To do laundry, Lianne must first "make selections on the control panel, set the dial on the other side of the panel and close the lid" in a laundry room with a "metallic chill that she felt in her teeth" (150). At the bakery, she must "take a number from the dispenser on the

counter"; as she waits, she realizes that "[s]he hated this regimen of assigned numbers, strictly enforced, in a confined space, with nothing at the end of the process but a small white bow-tied box of pastry" (36). In scenes such as these, DeLillo emphasizes the alienating effects of American late capitalism, social conditions that are revealed, but not meaningfully altered by the events of 9/11.

The tense, distant relationships in DeLillo's novel are also profoundly marked by the effects of capitalist alienation. One of the most intimate moments that readers witness in the brief affair between Keith and Florence takes place at Macy's, where Florence has come to purchase a mattress. In this scene, the private space of the bedroom is transformed into the commercial space of the mattress department, and DeLillo fetishistically repeats brand names like "Beautyrest" and "Posturepedic" that evoke a corporatized and consumption-based domesticity. As Florence tests her mattress, Keith surveys the room to see many other shoppers doing the same, including a couple, "middle-aged and purposeful, trying to determine whether one person's tossing would disturb the other's sleep" (132). "[B]ouncing and rolling," the men and women in the mattress department perform their sleep in public, eroding the significance of this private, intimate act (132). In a similar moment, during the early stages of their reconciliation, Keith and Lianne make out in the back of a taxi, and Lianne thinks to herself, "*it's a movie, it's a movie,*" their real-life intimacy somehow stranger and less familiar than images on a screen (104). Later, when Keith travels to poker tournaments, their intimate relations become even more mediated and mechanical: he and Lianne have phone sex, separated by several time zones, and she imagines him having "automated teller sex" with a call girl (233).

Through these representations of meaningless actions and hollow relationships, *Falling Man* calls into question any celebratory notion of the “American way of life” that Islamic fundamentalism has placed under attack. Within the novel, it is Martin who gives voice to this critique, suggesting that America is defined by little more than its role as a global economic superpower. If the September 11 attacks mark the end of that era of dominance, Martin contends, they only reveal the emptiness underlying America’s national identity. “Soon the day is coming when nobody has to think about America except for the danger it brings. It is losing the center. It becomes the center of its own shit” (191). Although Nina’s former colleagues, whom Martin is addressing, take umbrage at his statements, they do not contest his central claim that America has been defined by its role as an economic superpower. “Ask yourself,” they challenge him, “[w]hat comes after America?” (192). Martin’s response that “[t]here is an empty space where America used to be,” eerily echoes the logic of the terrorists DeLillo depicts (193). The character Hammad, the ingenuous young jihadi, asks a similar question of “Amir,” DeLillo’s representation of so-called “9/11 mastermind” Mohamed Atta: “What of the others, those who will die?” Amir responds that “there are no others. The others exist only to the degree that they fill the role we have designed for them,” an assertion which is uncomfortably similar to the logic that pervades DeLillo’s novel (176). Hammad comes to accept this explanation, musing that “[t]hese people, what they hold so precious we see as empty space” (177). Although they reflect profoundly different ideologies and motives, Martin’s and Hammad’s statements both suggest that, in an America so pervasively marked by late capitalism, there is nothing of value to either preserve or destroy.

This nihilistic outlook is reflected in the first account of Keith's escape from the Twin Towers, with which the novel begins. Keith is alone as he emerges onto the street, surrounded by the swirling, meaningless debris of the corporate world: "the paper massed in the air, contracts, resumés blowing by, intact snatches of business, quick in the wind" (4). Amid this debris, the image of a falling shirt stands out; in this scene, the shirt is empty, "lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river" (4). The falling shirt takes on added significance in light of the many victims who fell or jumped from the towers' higher floors, a fact which the novel's title brings powerfully to mind. In this first scene, however, the "falling man" is revealed to be little more than *an empty shirt*. This scene seems to suggest that much of what was destroyed on 9/11—contracts and resumés, white shirts, and perhaps even Keith himself—was already empty long before the towers fell.

By narrating Keith's escape a second time, however, the novel creates an opportunity for readers to understand it in new terms. As Keith and Lianne watch the news footage of the attacks, they model a similar transformation for the novel's readers: "It still looks like an accident, the first one," Keith reflects, watching the impact of the first plane. "But only the first. . . . The second plane, by the time the second plane appears, . . . we're all a little older and wiser" (135). Like Keith and Lianne, we are a little older and wiser by the time we arrive at the second account of Keith's survival, which concludes the novel. The two accounts are factually consistent, but the second version is longer and more complete, beginning with Keith inside his office, where he witnesses the death of his friend Rumsey, and then describing his long, slow descent of the stairs with the other survivors. By this time, we have gleaned additional details from

the novel's preceding pages that help us understand Keith's experience differently, allowing us to construct a more hopeful interpretation of 9/11 than the novel itself explicitly provides.

Through Keith's fragmentary memories, we have come to know Rumsey, a nebbishy, balding man who is ruled by compulsions, about which he is unflinchingly honest with Keith. "The persistence of the man's needs had a kind of crippled appeal. It opened Keith to dimmer things, at odder angles, to something crouched and uncorrectable in people but also capable of stirring a warm feeling in him, a rare tinge of affinity" (123). In the novel's brief descriptions, the closeness of the friendship between Rumsey and Keith is powerfully evoked, though never explicitly stated, and this insight profoundly informs our reading of the second account of Keith's escape. In the second account, Rumsey is everywhere. As others in his office move toward the exits, Keith seeks out Rumsey, who has already been gravely injured by falling debris. As he attempts to lift Rumsey and carry him to safety, Keith sees "something outside, going past the window," the image of a "man falling sideways, arm out and up" (242, 244). Rumsey dies moments later, a fact which Keith only partially apprehends as he begins the journey down alone. As he descends the stairs, in flashbacks, the falling man he saw becomes Rumsey: "for an instant he saw it again, going past the window, and this time he thought it was Rumsey" (244). Later, when he sees firefighters heading up the stairs, he again thinks of Rumsey. "Rumsey was the one in the chair. He understood that now. He had set him back down in the chair and they would find him and bring him down, and others" (245). This scene makes clear that, for Keith, the fact of his own survival is powerfully informed by that of Rumsey's death.

In contrast to the emotionlessness and anonymity of the first account of Keith's escape, the personal, human significance of loss and survival are central to the second account. The earlier images of meaningless debris are transformed into deeply personal objects: Rumsey's shattered coffee cup, still held in his hand, a child's tricycle carried by a woman descending the stairs, and a briefcase that we recognize as Florence's, though it is never named as such. During his descent, Keith stops on the stairs, and despite encouragement from those around him, cannot be persuaded to continue. But when given a briefcase dropped by its owner and passed down after her, he takes it and continues to safety. At the time, Keith does not know Florence, but through the device of the novel's repetition, readers recognize the briefcase in this account from the narratives of that day that Keith and Florence have shared with one another. The significance of this moment goes unmarked in the text, but we as readers realize that Florence's briefcase has just saved Keith's life, a moment of recognition made possible by the knowledge that we bring with us to this final scene.

By narrating Keith's escape a second time, DeLillo allows readers to reevaluate what they took to be Keith's isolation and emotional distance in earlier scenes. His poker playing, in particular, takes on new meaning in light of his grief over Rumsey's death. Juxtaposing Keith's fragmentary memories of Rumsey with his desire for the "crucial anonymity" of the Las Vegas tournaments, his poker playing becomes not an empty, alienating act, but rather a desperate attempt to keep the painful memory of his lost friend at bay (204). "I heard he went out a window, Rumsey," recalls Terry Cheng, a mutual acquaintance and fellow poker player, whose comment, like Keith's seemingly withdrawn response, takes on new meaning in light of the novel's final scene (205).

Staring into the casino's artificial waterfall, Keith is not so much embracing the artificiality of his environment as managing his powerful emotions; he stares at the waterfall because "if he closed his eyes, he'd see something" (205). The intensity of Keith's grief in this scene attests to the powerful bond he shared with Rumsey, who is far more than the mere "buddy" that the novel initially describes (22). Their caring relationship offers an alternative to the detached, unfeeling masculinity that the novel attributes to Keith, a man who is never able to grow into the role of safe, domestic provider and "husbandman" that his wife imagines for him (70).

The account of Florence's briefcase, too, allows us to reevaluate their relationship, which at first seemed pathetically empty and predictable. Initially, Florence's confession that Keith "saved her life" by returning her briefcase appears sadly hollow and hyperbolic against the backdrop of their failing romance. But the knowledge that Keith, too, was indirectly saved because of Florence suggests a more reciprocal connection. In place of the oppressive gender roles their relationship seemed to reproduce—the needy, passive woman and the decisive, detached man—we are able to reimagine a more meaningful and sustaining connection that transcends their socially scripted roles as participants in a failed extramarital affair.

Ultimately, *Falling Man*'s cyclical structure provides the starting point for a reevaluation of the entire novel, one in which isolation and emotional distance are replaced by intimacy, reciprocity, and profound grief. The novel's final image, the falling shirt, returns us to the opening scene, but its symbolism is entirely transformed. The previously empty shirt is now personified, its "arms waving like nothing in this life," suggesting the human significance of the destruction that took place on 9/11. In effect,

this scene allows us as readers to begin the novel again with a changed understanding. Although it does not invalidate the novel's earlier critique, it allows readers the opportunity to imagine an alternative to the emptiness that most of the novel depicts. The World Trade Center towers become, in addition to "fantasies of wealth and power that would one day become fantasies of destruction," the locus for meaningful, defining human relationships which resist the alienating effects of the late capitalist society around them. Objects, like a shirt or a briefcase, have incalculable value in their human dimension. And Keith is no longer the kind of man who would "break up a table and burn it so he could take out his dick and piss on the flames," defined by a masculine identity that precludes meaningful, intimate bonds with women and men alike (104). The depth and intimacy of Keith's relationship with Rumsey offers an alternative to the socially normative forms of masculine identity that the novel depicts, and his bond with Florence transcends its sexual dimension, standing as a counterpoint to the one-way, "automated teller sex" in which men like Keith are expected to engage. These interpretations are not explicit in DeLillo's text, but are enabled by a rereading or reconsideration of the novel in light of its final scene. Through its cyclical structure, *Falling Man* rejects the nihilism of Martin and the terrorists and instead lays the groundwork for an alternative to the bleak, alienated social landscape it depicts—an alternative which can serve as the basis for a different vision of post-9/11 America.

"Anti-anti-Utopianism," the Best Working Strategy

By analyzing the ways in which *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* open themselves to rereading and reinterpretation, I hope to highlight a dimension of these works' political and social engagement that is marginalized by a focus on the content of

the bleak realities they depict. Although neither of these texts explicitly envisions viable alternatives, their use of structural repetition invites readers to pick up where the texts themselves leave off. This strategy reflects and responds to a profound ambivalence on the part of Armah and DeLillo about utopianism itself, one that Jameson captures in his treatment of the subject:

[F]or those only too wary of the motives of its critics, yet no less conscious of Utopia's structural ambiguities, those mindful of the very real political function of the idea and the program of Utopia in our time, the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy (xvi).

As a strategy for thinking about the future, Jameson's "anti-anti-utopianism" seeks to balance the urgency of imagining new and better alternatives to oppressive social conditions with a recognition of the perils of thinking in utopian terms, not least among them the risk that so-called "utopias" may only reprise the flawed social reality they seek to transcend.

The deployment of dystopian form in *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* echoes Jameson's formulation and reflects a justifiable suspicion of the language of utopian vision. At the time they wrote their novels, both Armah and DeLillo stood at a slight remove from the moments of radical rupture and potential transformation they depict, and they are able to reflect critically on the way events have since unfolded. Armah's novel can be situated in relation to two significant moments of potential change: Ghanaian independence, in 1957, and the ouster of Nkrumah, the nation's first prime minister and president, in 1966. At the time of his election, Nkrumah was widely respected as an anti-colonial figure whose political vision for Ghana promised genuine independence, equality, and prosperity. By the time of the coup that deposed him, however, Nkrumah's plans for the nation's economic development had proved largely unsuccessful, while his

rule had become increasingly authoritarian. Although he is infrequently named in *Beautiful Ones*, Nkrumah is clearly the subject of Teacher's lengthy reminiscences about an inspirational leader "grown rotten with such obscene haste," a transformation which provides the novel's defining context (88). A more immediate reference point, the 1966 coup, is another moment that would seem to hold the promise of change, but informed by the example of Nkrumah's ignominious political career, it instead inspires a profound skepticism in Armah, and makes the continuation of present conditions seem inevitable.

As a moment of potential transformation, the 9/11 attacks differ significantly from the landmark events of Ghana's independence: while the latter inaugurated the freedom and self-determination of a population, the former was defined by massive loss of life. Despite the vastly different significance attached to these two events, they both hold the promise of inspiring a fundamental transformation in the life of a nation. Like Armah's text, however, DeLillo's novel reflects hope for change, but also the recognition that such change has, to date, proved elusive. Between 2001 and 2007, when *Falling Man* was published, the initial impulse that 9/11 represented a turning point in American history and a radical break with the past gave way to the emergence of an all-too-familiar international agenda. Rather than calling America to conscience as a "power that interferes, that occupies," mainstream discourse used the events of 9/11 to justify new interferences and occupations, once again entangled with the profit-seeking motives of American corporations (46). Thus, in the contexts in which both Armah and DeLillo write, the very language of change and transformation has proven vulnerable to exploitation and is readily converted to serve conservative rather than transformative

ends. Indeed, from the vantage points they occupy, the recent past makes the failure of utopian vision seem inevitable.

This kind of overdetermined relationship to the past is one that Jennifer Wenzel addresses in her analysis of anti-imperialism in the Congo. In “Remembering the Past’s Future,” Wenzel criticizes accounts of neocolonialism that describe a process of inevitable and uninterrupted exploitation by the West, as if anti-colonial movements had not offered the possibility of an alternative. As she argues,

commentators tend to frame contemporary conflicts in the Congo not in terms of challenges since the international derailment of decolonization at mid-century but rather in terms of a kind of postcolonial mimicry of the spectacular despoliation of land and people under King Leopold II, as if [revolutionary leader Patrice] Lumumba had never existed to pose an alternative (“Remembering the Past’s Future” 5).

To assume that the present circumstances in Congo were inevitable, she reminds us, is to deny the historical possibility of anti-imperialism, as well as the enduring consequences of its articulation. Taken in a somewhat different context, Wenzel’s argument can productively inform our understanding of the dynamics at work in both *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man*. In the moments in which these two authors are writing, not only have utopian visions of change and transformation failed to be realized, but what is more, viewing them in retrospect, it seems as though their failure was inevitable. Through their cyclical narratives, however, these novels provide readers with a position from which to resist this kind of bleak determinism, allowing us to return to the moment in which the promise of a different future was not simply the prelude to its failure or foreclosure, but rather a vibrant possibility.

Thus, these novels carry out a process of historicization analogous to that which Jameson calls for, contextualizing the bleak reality each text depicts as one among a

range of viable historical alternatives. In doing so, they allow for the possibility of other outcomes, and perhaps more importantly, for different visions of the future that can be built on the foundation of such visions of the past. This openness is essential to the novels' ability to inspire hopeful visions of the future through their grim depictions of the present: through their cyclical structure, they remain open to the new narratives that future readers might construct. As Jameson suggests, therefore, the utopian promise of texts like *Beautiful Ones* and *Falling Man* lies not in their immediate vision of the future, but in the subsequent visions they have the potential to inspire. Indeed, through their structural open-endedness, these texts invite their future readers to take responsibility for imagining the alternative futures that elude their authors' present grasp. While we cannot reasonably assume that all readers will respond to these bleak visions in this way, the negative reactions that both texts frequently elicit suggest the likelihood of this kind of engagement. For readers who react to these novels with frustration, disgust, or even a sense of betrayal, the dystopian presents depicted in these novels provide the impetus to imagine differently and search for alternatives. Indeed, strategies like Armah's use of the grotesque and DeLillo's alienation encourage precisely such a reaction.

To the extent that the moments of crisis to which these novels respond call the framework of the nation into question, they are haunted by the ghost of an emerging but uncertain transnationalism. Armah's novel reflects a rejection of literary and political nationalism, if not the nation as a unit of analysis. As critic Kwame Anthony Appiah and others have pointed out, Armah belongs to a second generation of postindependence African writers whose novels, "far from being a celebration of the nation, . . . are novels of delegitimation: they reject not only the western *imperium* but also the nationalist

project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie" (353). In *Beautiful Ones*, we see both the rejection of triumphalist national narratives and also an awareness that international economic relations, like the culture markets they produce, are a central and inescapable element of the challenges facing an independent Ghana. In *Falling Man*, 9/11 is framed as a quintessentially *international* moment for Americans and American identity. In a nation that is no longer protected by inviolable borders, the World Trade Center is transformed into a site of international contestation. This framing of 9/11 as an international American moment is underscored by DeLillo's inclusion of characters such as Martin and Hammad, who are given equal prominence as interpreters of that day's events.

The new global reality that haunts these texts is uncertain. But it is certainly not the Three Worlds system that contextualizes Armah's writing, in which emerging Third World nations, like Ghana, were forced to choose sides in the political battles of the Cold War that neither reflected nor served their interests. It is also not the transnational late capitalism that defines the America of DeLillo's text as a cultural and economic juggernaut. While seeking to imagine different and better futures, both Armah and DeLillo leave open the question of how readers will define, understand, and interpret the new eras that their texts augur. Ultimately, by directing our attention forward into an unknown future, these texts invite us, and the readers who will succeed us, to consider the insights that our own historical vantage might provide.

Conclusion

Ama Ata Aidoo's play, "Dilemma of A Ghost," is a meditation on displacement. In the play, a young African man who has gone to America for his education returns home with his new wife, an African American woman from Harlem. The play's central metaphor is a song about a ghost at a road crossing who cannot decide which direction to turn. In different ways, each of the play's major characters finds him- or herself facing a version of the ghost's dilemma: Ato, the young man, must negotiate between respecting the cultural expectations of his family and pursuing the westernized life he has chosen for himself. His wife, Eulalie, is a woman without family ties of her own, who comes to Africa with conflicting expectations, seeking both the excitement of an exotic land and the comforting embrace of a second family. And Ato's mother, Esi Kom, is torn in her allegiance, first denouncing first Eulalie as bad wife, then Ato as a thoughtless husband.

In the end, Aidoo's characters themselves are revealed to be the "ghost" referred to in the play's title, interpellated by competing narratives of race, gender, nation, and modernity, but never quite at home in any of them. This sense of dislocation leads to misunderstanding and conflict, but it is also the source of the responsibility to one another that these individuals ultimately embrace. Eulalie's own experience as an African American woman, the educated child of working-class parents, informs her complex understanding of what it means to be "African," one which, flawed though it may be, allows her to identify and connect with Ato. Likewise, Esi Kom's culture shock, when she learns of Ato's decision to delay childrearing, allows her to empathize with

Eulalie's own uneasiness as a cultural outsider. Ato's own conflicted choices between two competing value systems give him the ability—and the responsibility—to bridge between them, a responsibility which the play suggests he has neglected.

Aidoo's play captures several of the ideas that have been central to this dissertation, especially the concept of cross-cultural reading as a “dilemma.” In each of the literary comparisons that I have carried out, the act of reading itself becomes a problem, challenging us to consider questions no less significant than those with which Aidoo's characters grapple: What can we believe is real? Who can narrate the past? How is personhood established? What shape will the future take? The juxtaposition of works drawn from very different national and cultural contexts makes the difficulty of providing definitive, convincing answers to questions like these particularly evident. Like the characters in Aidoo's play, the critical location I have attempted to construct through these comparisons is one of dislocation, for readers who are “at home” in some of these texts will almost certainly feel uncomfortably out-of-place in others.

In the context of our contemporary global moment, cultivating a dislocated, uneasy critical stance might seem to be, at best, a gratuitously contrarian gesture, or at worst, a not-so-innocent strategy for placing the privileged “metropolitan” reader once again at the center of our analytical frame. My intention, however, is quite the opposite. Through the readings in this dissertation, I hope to have shown how haunting can productively unsettle the boundaries of difference that define our cultural, political, and literary landscapes. As it is for the characters in Aidoo's play, being haunted is the condition of our time, for a globalizing world that is at once expanding and contracting challenges us all to recognize that of ourselves in the other, and that of the other in

ourselves. But as each of these readings suggests, recognizing the limits of our ability to know can be the precursor for relationships of profound mutual responsibility that flourish across boundaries of difference.

It is not surprising that one of the central issues in “Dilemma of a Ghost” is childbearing; although haunting often involves a troubled relationship with the past, the unknown and uncertain shape of the future is ultimately what is at stake. To the extent that this dissertation engages questions of historical memory, tracing the ongoing effects of violence, erasure, oppression, and conquest, it is with a mind to the kinds of future possibilities that such engagements with the past enable. Written in 1964, Aidoo’s play represents the beginning of the time frame under consideration here. The fact that haunting has remained a prominent theme from the middle of the previous century to our present postmillennial moment attests to the continuing significance of the kinds of questions these authors pose. The transformations and evolutions of its deployment, in turn, reflect the defining political changes that distinguish the colonial from the postcolonial, or the cultural nationalism of the sixties and seventies from the multiculturalism of the eighties and nineties and the putative “post-racialism” of the United States today.

Responding to the many complex forms of contact and interconnection that define the world in which they write, the authors I have considered here, and many others like them, turn to haunting to imagine relationships across difference that are both urgent and imperfect, both powerful and conditional. In doing so, they model the ways in which a genuinely global literature might most productively be read. These texts do not *begin* as world literature, in that they are the products of the specific and particular national and

cultural contexts that give them their defining shape. But they *become* world literature through the dynamic, dialogic relationships they construct with a wide range of possible readers. By inviting us to be haunted by the stories they tell, and to experience both recognition and alienation simultaneously, these texts invite us to see our own acts of reading as a problem, a dilemma, or an act of negotiation, and prepare us to step into the uncanny world of the future.

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