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The World Novel, Mediated Wars and Exorbitant Witnessing

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This essay traces the emergence of a new contemporary novel form at the conjunction of global violence in the wake of the Cold War, digital hyperconnectivity, and a mediated infrastructure of sympathy. Since the first Gulf War, and more so, in the rhetoric presaging the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have come to accept that there is very little difference between the technologies used to wage war and those used to view it. This essay argues that the novels of our time are not contiguous with contemporary cinematic or televisual or new media genres in representing the immediacy of violence, but are rather texts that graph the sedimented and recursive history of such mediation. Their alternative way of documenting "witness"—that is, of abstracting the architectonics of testimonial work—urges us to focus not so much on the question of visibility*—and its stock thematics of overexposure and desensitization—as on the* legibility *of this new mode of witnessing. The distinction between visibility and legibility amounts to calibrating differently the* work *of witnessing in novels, their textual and tropological play with multiple modes of spectatorship and engagement, and their distinctively different braiding of the factual and the evidentiary in comparison with genres of the visual.*

Keywords: war, novel, remediation, witness, evidence

This, I Saw

The cover of Susan Sontag's book *Regarding the Pain of Others* features an etching from Francisco Goya's series, *The Disasters of War* (1810–1820). The surface of this aquatint print is vertically divided into two approximately equal halves. On the left we see a victim of war brutalized and hanged; on the right is a fully clothed mustachioed figure leaning back slightly with his left arm supporting his chin and gazing intently at the dead man's bowed visage. Although not captioned as such, this etching captures the force of Goya's statement "This, I saw," a statement recorded in the annals of art history as acknowledging that he witnessed much of the horror of the 1808 Dos de Mayo uprising and the subsequent peninsular war of 1808–1814—the subject of this series of eighty-two prints. Since the nineteenth century, the vocative force of

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Goya's visualized declaration has become emblematic of the transformative power of witnessing extreme violence in a visual medium. As is well-known, the caption, "This, I saw" was given to etching number 44 in the same series in which we see a terrified mother with a baby in her arms pulling the arm of her toddler as she tries to make him look away from the horror of a battle obviously waging close by.

Since the public display of this series in 1863, thirty-five years after Goya's death, the caption of print number 44 has acquired an aesthetic and ethical charge unthinkable in Goya's time because the witnesses of violence have multiplied a million times over in this age of saturated visual connectivity and exposure. Goya's acknowledgement of both the sheer *singularity* of each confronting moment of violence through the decisive act of seeing and not turning one's gaze away and his foregrounding of the *medium* through which such witnessing happens have become foundational to the vast scholarship that has followed in the wake of the magnified scale of war and violence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sontag sees Goya's art as a "turning point in the history of moral feelings and of sorrow," for a "new standard of responsiveness to suffering enters art." Goya's etchings foreground the excesses of war in ways "fashioned as an assault on the sensibility of the viewer… . A voice, presumably the artist's, badgers the viewer: can you bear to look at this?"[1] In Susan Sontag's meditation on the ethics of visualizing war, the charge of Goya's prephotographic era sketches, etchings, and paintings acquires cumulative power as she contemplates how witnessing is now mediated through the photograph and has become the very condition of living in our times. Goya's etchings anticipate the photograph in their capture not of the essence or the wholeness of the violence witnessed—an allegorical gesture common to many conventional prephotographic era scene paintings—but the latter's contingency, its projective and retrospective temporality, a quality that nudges the viewer to imagine worlds of war beyond the immediate frame of reference. Both the prints of the hanged man and his spectator/witness and that of the terrified mother wrenching her child away from the scene of violence contain an iterative power that can be invoked at points in history well removed from Goya's early nineteenth century, prephotographic world. They become part of an extended historical narrative as they urge us to identify two other critical moments in the twentieth century that transformed the relationship between the *agon* of suffering, the ethics of witnessing, and the medium of representation. Surprisingly and significantly, these are not the two world wars, but the Spanish Civil War between 1936–1939 and the Vietnam War. In the Spanish conflict, photographers were embedded in the military lines for the first time in human history, and their images evoked an immediacy and intimacy to the human experience of war that had previously been transmitted only through the written word or theatrical performances. The Vietnam War was waged amid the power of *televisual* intimacy, a medium that came closest to naturalizing the immediacy of what was previously only a trope of the "everyday" experience of distant suffering.

If the impact of war on people who have never been to war had previously been measured in terms of their exposure to literary and journalistic writing, or more generally to the labor of the human hand on canvas, it is now commonplace to

1 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 44–45.

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measure such impact in terms of an exposure to televisual and digital media. Digital image making in particular has had an exponential reach unimaginable even a decade ago. Whether as evidence or as retribution or even as a quest for justice, pictures and images in accelerated motion and across a wider topological spectrum have become ubiquitous in any contemplation of war in our times. The exponential increase in the quantum and velocity of imagistic exposure on a daily basis translates into a saturated, densely interconnected, global experience of endemic war and violence. An excerpt from Ian McEwan's 2006 novel, *Saturday*, captures this experience powerfully. On the eve of the Iraq War, Henry Perowne, the neurosurgeon protagonist of Ian McEwan's novel, we are told is

> feeling the pull, like gravity, of the approaching TV news. It's *the condition of the times, this compulsion to hear how it stands with the world*, and be joined to a generality, to a community of anxiety. The habit's grown stronger these past two years; a different scale of news value has been set by monstrous and spectacular scenes. The possibility of their recurrence is one thread that binds the days.[2]

This spectatorial, world-making sensibility, mediated by electronic images that iconicize terror-inducing devastation as a sign of our times, is what produces the distinctive contemporary literary formation I call the "world novel." As a global literary form, this new kind of novel has emerged at the conjuncture of three critical phenomena: geographies of violence since the end of the Cold War, hyperconnectivity through advances in information technology, and the emergence of a new humanitarian sensibility in a context where suffering has a presence in everyday life through the immediacy of digital images, that is, a sensibility honed by the experience of what I refer to as "exorbitant witnessing" in the title of this essay.

Witnessing and Novelistic Remediation: A Postcolonial Moment

Questions about the transmediality of warfare and its refractions across an array of virtual fields came seriously into the public domain from the 1991 Iraq War. Grafted onto the dizzying pace of technological and communicational advancement since CNN first launched the Iraq War in the virtual medium, such questions have transformed the topology of humanitarian consciousness. The viral nature of the circulation of Jason Russell's video of March 2012 urging the world at large to help capture the Central African warlord Joseph Kony is one significant recent instance of this shift.[3] Within a week of its release on YouTube and Vimeo on March 5, 2012, Russell's *Kony 2012* was viewed by more than seventy million spectators. By the end of the month, the viewers exceeded one hundred million. Thousands of dollars poured in globally on the very first day of its release as people bought the "Catch Kony" kit. Twitter and Facebook experienced severe loads in the first few days of the video's circulation. *Invisible Children Inc.*, the NGO cofounded by Russell that produced the video, issued a year-long action plan to nab the war criminal. Few people before this

2 Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (London: Vintage, 2006), 176, italics added.

3 http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=kony+2012+official+video&oq=Kony&gs_l=youtube.1.1.0l10.50.806.0.

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campaign knew what Joseph Kony looked like even though he continues to top the ICC's list of war criminals. The campaign aimed at making him one of the most recognizable living war criminals of our times. The online production spiraled into the celebrity circuit with leading actors, policy makers, legal experts, and political leaders lending their voices to the campaign. The unprecedented success of this social media campaign reached an apogee of sorts when President Obama sanctioned the deployment of a hundred elite troops to assist Ugandan forces to hunt down Kony. The *New York Times* reported that the commander of US forces in Africa, General Carter F. Ham, has a Kony 2012 poster on his office door. "Let's be honest," one US official noted, "there was some constituent pressure here. Did Kony 2012 have something to do with this? Absolutely."[4]

Jason Russell, the film graduate from the University of Southern California who generated the *Kony 2012* phenomenon, calls his film the "Pixar of Human Rights Stories." His words attempt to distinguish his humanitarian venture from the conventional script of cultural work on human rights: the "boring documentary on Africa" as he calls it.[5] They also inject a generational shift in attitudes to distant suffering. The Pixar reference, evoking as it does the digital virtuoso of Steve Jobs in superanimating the animation film genre, points not just to a possible aesthetic enhancement of the documentary film in Russell's hand, but more significantly to a fundamental shift in the perceptual field within which the genre of the nonfictional film on humanitarian crisis operates in the age of social media. The allusion is to a vastly expanded audience networked daily into a circulatory information economy. This global audience is exposed to a range of storytelling genres where lines of authorship and spectatorship crisscross constantly. The "boring" documentary is not exactly a good fit within such an interactive cultural economy. In its transgeneric mutation into a thirty-minute YouTube video, *Kony 2012* is a melange of visual and narrative forms that belong in a globally recognized field of aesthetic intelligibility: the news story, the documentary, the blog, the advertisement, the sentimental soap, the televised debate with a panel of experts, narrative updates on Facebook. Prominent in its aesthetic mediation is humanitarian affect amplified across the entire globe.

The video begins with an image of our blue and green planet, and quickly identifies its core audience as the multimillion social media users who appear as glowworms on the surface of our planet. "Right now," Russell's voiceover informs us, "there are more people on Facebook than there were people on the planet two hundred years ago." Russell's appeal to this vast mesh of humanity to help nab Kony, the criminal recruiter of child soldiers and underage sex slaves, is effected in several ways. In a series of quick montages, familiar screens and vocabularies from our digital experience flash across the viewing eye along with recent political events attributed to digital connectivity such as the Arab Spring. Various news clips about governmental attempts to contain the damage of widespread humanitarian crises across the world also feature within this montage. The screen within a screen technique is deployed

4 Jeffrey Gettleman, "In Vast Jungle, US Troops aid search for Kony," April 29, 2012, *The New York Times*. Accessed June 25, 2013, at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/30/world/africa/kony-tracked-by-us-forces-in-central-africa.html?ref=josephkony.

5 Quoted in the *New York Times*. Accessed June 25, 2013, at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/09/world/africa/online-joseph-kony-and-a-ugandan-conflict-soar-to-topic-no-1.html?_r=0.

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effectively throughout the film to capture the depth of virtualization of our global entanglements. The idea of humanitarian connectivity is ripe for realization, the video implies in no unsubtle terms, as Victor Hugo's hyperimprovised post-Napoleonic era observation "Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come" flashes across the screen against a red background. Having established its ethical investment in an idea—humanitarianism—whose time has finally come thanks to a radically interconnected world, the video quickly moves into its core narrative. The privileged upbringing of the filmmaker's son in suburban America is juxtaposed with the story of a fugitive child soldier, Jacob Acaye, whom Russell befriended during his sojourn in central Africa. Jacob witnessed his own brother being killed by Kony's Lord's Resistance Army and for years lived in fear of meeting the same fate. In the film we see him at various stages—as the frightened prospective child soldier fleeing Kony, a depressed teenager unable to come to terms with life in a shelter, and finally, a surprisingly evolved young adult, joining Russell and the *Invisible Children Inc.* group in the advocacy against the war criminal. Jacob becomes the singular case around which the passion of this humanitarian war film revolves.

The issue of whether the film realized its ultimate goal of nabbing Kony by the end of 2012 should not, I suggest, be used as a barometer of its true impact[6] because its unprecedented impact was in some senses written into the very script of the video and its choice of the mode of distribution. The fact that it managed to elicit an instant global response in ways that decades of documentation and written works on the depredations of war economies in Central Africa hadn't been able to is for the purposes of my analysis a telling feature of this era of humanitarian wars. *Witnessing publics*, to use Meg McLagan's term for publics hailed into existence by an ever-growing visual repertoire of testimonial genres, were critical to the stupendous circulation of *Kony 2012*.[7] For the purposes of my argument, the Kony episode serves as a point of entry into contemplating the emergent circuits of imagination and the repertoire of cultural forms that have transformed the art of novelization in our war-saturated information age. The viral nature of the response to Russell's film helps bring to the fore the critical distinction that Agamben once posited between the "age of the human rights" and the "age of witnessing."[8] Roughly, these two ages correspond historically to the period right after the Second World War (with the UN Declaration of Human Rights) and the period of the post–Cold War, respectively. One connotes the preeminence of a legalistic imaginary, the other foregrounds an affective orientation that is more singular and, hence, also more transitive, in its empathetic reach. There is, of course, considerable spillage from one to the other depending on the genre and context of culture work. In the former the suffering bodies represent the human as aggregate, as the abstract bearer of rights that urge to be

6 The Kony 2012 media phenomenon, not surprisingly, did not maintain its momentum beyond the year. Stories proliferate about many the controversies with which its maker, Jason Russell, has been dogged, including a traumatic breakdown. See the article in *The Guardian* published on March 3, 2013, for an account of these developments. Accessed June 25, 2012, at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/03/jason-russell-kony-2012-interview.

7 Meg McLagan, "Principles, Publicity and Politics: Notes on Human Rights Media,"*American Anthropologist* 105:3 (2003).

8 See Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), see especially *Preface* and chapter 1, "Witness."

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sanctified and inviolable. In the latter, the human is the singular and melancholic bearer of embodied suffering.

The term *age of witnessing* signals an increasing inflection of the *sensorial and the affective* in the *juridical* and the transformation in the global imaginary of rights from idea to *sensorium*.[9] More demands are made on the *visibility*, *legibility*, and the *transitive affectivity* of human rights in the concrete, everyday, somatic spheres of conflict than ever before. This shift, I suggest, arises from the changed nature of warfare itself since the end of the Cold War where more noncombatants than ever are corporeally and materially affected by war, and it is within this sphere of amplified human casualties and heightened extrajudicial witnessing that novelistic work on the new wars finds its provenance. Let me elaborate on both these points.

Our era is the era of "humanitarian wars" where the unit of conflict is not (or not only) individual nation-states, but various nonstate human groupings that are not recognized as legal combatants. The term *humanitarian war* itself captures the scaled up and vastly different nature of warfare in our times. It manifests at least three features that distinguish it from conventional warfare. In the first instance, it is a composite of state sponsored violence, civil and interethnic conflicts, guerilla warfare, and organized crime. These latter are less interested in unseating governments in other states than in territorial capture within their own nations through large-scale displacement of populations and even genocide of targeted groups. 9/11 demonstrated that in some cases even territorial capture is little motivation. Spreading terror through massive infrastructural and human damage appears to be the prime goal. Second, civilians are the largest casualties in these wars. Refugees and the war maimed through indiscriminate targeting ("collateral damage" in terms of the new vernacular on contemporary wars) have grown alarmingly large in numbers. As Mary Kaldor in her study, *New and Old Wars* (2006) notes, "At the turn of the twentieth century the ratio of military to civilian casualties in wars was 8:1. Today this has been almost exactly reversed; in the wars of the 1990s, the ratio of military to civilian casualties is approximately 1:8."[10] The third significant feature of these new wars is the amplification of the scale of operations of the global humanitarian industry to help cope with the volume of humanitarian casualties. A veritable army of international aid agencies and nongovernmental human rights–based networks including Oxfam, Save the Children, International Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, and *Medecins Sans Frontiers* are ubiquitous fixtures in such wars.

Of particular significance to my analysis is the communication infrastructure of this global humanitarian and human rights industry. Visual documentation via digital technology, in fact, has become the primary means through which human rights

9 In his recent book, *An Archaeology of Sympathy*: *The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema*, James Chandler defines sensorium as a whole apparatus consisting of *sensibility*, that is, "the capacity for fine grained sensory experience," that is, to feel; *mobility* that specifically "registers the relation between motion and emotion, which is our capacity to move and be moved both in body and spirit"; and *virtuality*, which is the "capacity of an embodied sensorium to undergo circulation among a range of imagined locations." (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), xviii. My use of the term *sensorium* in the context of our hypermediated age carries the charge of all three components that make up its architecture.

10 Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 9.

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advocacy functions in our era. Armies of activists trained to use a Sony handycam are as much in the frontline of humanitarian wars as are journalists and official combatants. There are, in fact, now human rights groups whose primary specialization is providing training in visual technology to aspiring human rights activists. One such group is WITNESS, cofounded in 1992 by human rights advocate Peter Gabriel and two other NGOs: Human Rights First and Reebok Human Rights Foundation. The catalyst for its establishment was the Rodney King Jr. incident where one bystander videotaped King's brutal bashing by the Los Angeles police. Beginning with the aim of giving "cameras to human rights activists around the world," its activities have rapidly extended to video advocacy and video training. By their own estimates, in their twenty years of work, WITNESS "has partnered with more than 300 human rights groups in over 80 countries, trained over 3,000 human rights defenders"[11] The group has developed video tool kits specially suited to human rights work and now has a dedicated online platform for human rights media called HUB. The imagistic dependency and technological transformation of the humanitarian industry has made it impossible for any state to engage or intervene in civil or international conflict without the effects being visible globally. In fact, the very preparedness for war or humanitarian intervention on the part of a state has often been provided by the informational infrastructure of news media and human rights groups.

What we see in the video work of these organizations today is a transition from the 1980s and early 1990s' enthusiasm for transparent image-based human rights advocacy (something akin to the Shock and Awe phenomenon heralded by CNN in the first Gulf War) to a more nuanced understanding of the role of the technologies of visual witnessing of conflict.[12] That is, there is a marked shift from a transparent capture of atrocities through story-telling and direct video footage to a complex grasp of the *multiple perpetual and affective fields within which witnessing occurs*, and it is this shift that provides a critical point of entry into the phenomenon of novelization in our wartime. The significance of novelization in this era of humanitarian wars, I submit, lies not just in the increasing use of story-telling and testimonial documentation to generate a diffuse global empathy and outrage at the ever-escalating ravages of war. It lies critically in *offering multiple fields of perception*—points of view as novel theorists might put it—through both the conventional novel and other multimedia forms of literary expressivity. If by novelization we understand the shifting horizons—both formal and ideological—of literary fiction in different technological eras *as well as* the adoption of the generic conventions of the novel by other media forms, then both *Kony 2012* and Gabriel's attempts to inject perspectival and characterological depth to videos on human rights violations can be seen as novelistic in their orientation. But what about the actual novels themselves? How are they situated within the spectrum of televisual and new media representations of humanitarian wars? What new formal configurations do they manifest?

My primary argument here is that the novels of our time are not contiguous with contemporary cinematic or televisual or new media genres in representing the

11 Sam Gregory, "Transnational Story-telling: Human Rights, WITNESS and Advocacy," published under the special forum "Technologies of Witnessing: The Visual Culture of Human Rights" ed. Meg McLagan, *American Anthropologist*, 108:1 (2006): 191–220.

12 See especially, Gregory's, "Transnational Story-Telling" and Ronit Avni's, "Mobilizing Hope: Beyond the Shame-Based Model in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *American Anthropologist*, 108:1 (2006): 206.

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immediacy of violence, but are rather texts that register the sedimented and recursive history of such mediation. Their alternative way of documenting "witness"—that is, of abstracting the architectonics of testimonial work—enables me to focus not so much on the questions of visibility—and its stock thematics of overexposure and desensitization—as on the *legibility* of this new mode of witnessing. The distinction I make here between visibility and legibility amounts to calibrating differently the *work* of witnessing in novels, their textual and tropological play with multiple modes of spectatorship and engagement, and their distinctively different braiding of the factual and the evidentiary in comparison with genres of the visual. My argument here is very different from the classic postcolonial one as seen, for instance, in a recent essay by Robert Eaglestone on fiction in the age of war and terror.[13] Eaglestone's contention is that the novels of our times rhetorically enact their inability to capture the truth about war, terror, and suffering due to an entrenched western sensibility that cannot bridge a cultural chasm—that terror is seen as simply evil in Jonathan Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* or as illness in McEwan's *Saturday* or something stemming from frustrated passion, as in Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*. Although Eaglestone is right about the thematic focus of these novels and the pathologies they graph, such an argument does little to highlight the contemporary conjunctures of postcolonial thought, our information era's spatiotemporal ruptures, and what these mean for scale, distance, and sensibility, both materially and culturally. Turning the cultural chasm argument between western and postcolonial worlds on its head, I contend that the turn to witnessing and (re) mediation in contemporary novels actually works across this chasm in that it is symptomatic of the foreshortening of the distance between the postcolonial world's violent spasms and the various forms of spectatorship that have been generated in the global West, which is really the true site of the media apparatus. In other words, the saturations and reinflections of witnessing violence across multiple media including the novelistic are actually *prime postcolonial moments* and need to be read explicitly as products of postcolonial planetary reconfigurations rather than just the concomitant effects of hypermediation in our information era.

A significant corpus of works by the renowned graphic novelist Art Spiegelman will be my first point of departure, for in them we not only see the most explicit abstraction and remediation of the visual into narrative form and vice versa, but also a working through of the chasm between myriad cultural worlds. My second example is Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*. This novel displays an intimate if tortuous traction with "truth-telling genres." War, violence, and trauma often throw these genres into crisis, a process Michael Rothberg has called "traumatic Realism."[14] *Anil's Ghost* allows me to trace a shift in the epistemological purchase of the contemporary war novel where the legibility of witnessing is tied up with a braiding of two kinds of evidentiary truth: the forensic and the testimonial. Forensic, because zones of war and genocide double up as massive crime scenes and testimonial because "truth" here is also the product of too many eyewitnesses. Excavating it, hence, involves a complex remediation of genres of evidence.

13 Robert Eaglestone, "'The age of reason was over … an age of fury was dawning': Contemporary Fiction and Terror," in *Terror and the Postcolonial*, eds. Elleke Boehmer and Stephen Morton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 361–369.

14 Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

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Framing War: Spiegelman's Comic Grids

Spiegelman's self-described "double-track disposition toward reading and looking"[15] propelled him to create novelistic pictorials, two of which, *Maus* and *In the Shadow of No Towers*, have become classics of our times. Spiegelman's brilliant architectural interplay between the verbal and the pictorial in graphing the horrors of both the Holocaust and 9/11 is, for the purposes of my analysis, a generic *tour de force*. His works iconicize the conceptual kernel of my argument in the way they graphically foreground the act of novelistic witnessing in our era of global wars and informational hyperconnectivity. He has repeatedly described the architecture of his comics as structurally witnessing the demolition of the "world grid"—a translation into aesthetic form of two momentous world historical events of our times: the holocaust and 9/11. His comic grids architecturally *externalize* the complex intertwining of narrative and image in the act of witnessing catastrophic moments in human history.

Spiegelman, in fact, calls his art "novel graphics" rather than "graphic novels" to highlight precisely this feature. Elsewhere, he is explicit in naming the "novel" and not cinema or visual art as a medium that comes closest to his work. Further, in framing his elaborate sketches in ways that deliberately capture the shifting horizons of witnessing from the prephotographic era to our times, Spiegelman's comics bridge the architectonics of witnessing violence from Goya's time to ours. The artist, in fact, recently invoked the power of Goya's sketches in his interview with Hillary Chute in *Metamaus*. When asked about the significance of drawings by holocaust survivors, and especially his use of them in *Maus*, Spiegelman urges us to see them not as expressive modes but as information about what really happened:

> The few collections of survivor's drawings and reproductions of surviving art that I could get my hands on were essential for me. Those drawings were a return to drawing not for its possibilities of imposing the self, as of finding a new role for art and drawing after the invention of the camera—*a kind of commemorating, witnessing, and recording of information—what Goya referred to when he says, "This, I saw." The artists, like the memoirists and diarists of the time, are giving urgent information in the pictures*, information that could be transmitted in no other way, and often at great risk to their lives.[16]

This way of conceiving "information" imparts it with an ethical depth that information theorists of our hyperconnected and mass-mediated digital age are hard put to attribute to the constant flow of news stimulus around us. In his *Critique of Information*, for instance, Scott Lash finds scarce symbolic or iconic value in televisual and digital media content, only indexical signification—something that flashes a signal but does not generate a substantial and sustained ethical response:

> The sports, the news on television, the sending of electronic messages, playing computer games, is signification via signal and may be more or less *indexical* … the sort of signification that is going on is neither predominantly *symbolic* nor *iconic*, but indexical through the signal.[17]

15 Interview with Hillary Chute, *Metamaus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 52.
16 Art Spiegelman and Hillary Chute, *Metamaus*, 49–50. Emphasis added.
17 Scott Lash, *Critique of Information* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 11, emphasis added.

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Lash proposes a new form of sociality that he calls "informationality"—a mode of orientation to the world informed by an economy of signs. Although he resists Baudrillard's simulacrum thesis of the collapse of the real and the hyperreal into one depthless entity, he is skeptical of the capacity of the everyday, ephemeral visual stimuli to generate a field of meaning powerful enough to stir a collective moral response. He would, of course, have had to revise his thesis comprehensively since 9/11 and the 2011 "Arab Sprin" political mobilizations. In both, the visual sign operated far beyond the indexical to take on massive symbolic and iconic value. Communication through digital media was critical to the mass uprisings against dictatorial regimes in the Middle East. The multiple forms of mediation and remediation that enabled the global flow of information of these world-historical events of our century—from the visual to the narrative to the digitally iconic to the conventionally expressive arts of painting and music—give far more credence to Speigelman's powerful formulation of informationality through the pictorial and other media, one that we are ethically compelled to respond to and one that his comic medium is well placed to re-present, that is, make present again.

Excerpts from his comic strips help illustrate the thrust of this argument about visual and graphic *informationality* that records, witnesses, and commemorates traumatic events and that simultaneously appeals to our analytical and affective sides. One recurrent motif in Speigelman's work is the intersection of what he calls "personal history" and "world history." The artist's presence as both survivor and witness is explicit on almost every plate of his graphic novels. Plate number six of *In the Shadow of No Towers* is a particularly powerful example of the formal processes at work here. The skeletal frame of the glowing north tower looms across the left column of the entire page. We see five falling figures across the length of the tower, each of them resembling Spiegelman, and no doubt commemorating one of the most iconically disturbing images of the 9/11 catastrophe. The rapidly distributed global images become the source of his witnessing. A text inserted halfway through the tower reads:

> He is haunted now
> by the images he *didn't* witness . . .
>
> images of people
> tumbling to the
> streets below . . .
>
> especially one man
> (according to a
> neighbor) who exe-
> cuted a graceful
> Olympic dive as his
> last living act.

The "falling" Spiegelman figure symbolizes all at once the history of his personal trauma as a child of holocaust survivors, his own terrifying experience of the attack on the towers as a resident of Lower Manhattan, and his identification with the fateful

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death-leaps of the inhabitants of the twin towers. This vertical telescoping, across the ashen frame of the burnt north tower, of multiple temporalities of trauma, both personal and historical, is then replicated breadthwise in a series of violent palimpsests across eleven other panels more conventionally associated with a comic book. Holocaust history, the history of Arab anti-Semitism, and 9/11 "smash" into one another in these panels. The key encounter here is between Spiegelman and a homeless Russian woman who daily hurls anti-Semitic abuses at him in her native tongue as he walks down the street. On the afternoon of 9/11, she disappears from the street only to reappear as a demonic specter right at the center of the entire plate. The reader is confronted by a flaming rectangular panel featuring her devilish profile, framed by iconography from Nazi-era history, biblical Hell, and the familiar glowing skeletal frames of the twin towers. The boxed caption reads, "Her inner demons had broken loose and take over our shared reality." Interestingly, she is back on the streets after the fatal day, and this time in a series of three panels we see her spouting her anti-Semitic venom in English, not Russian. The panels become charged with her hate-filled invectives. "You Damn Kikes, You Did It!" she screams in one of them. This dangerous coalescing of the histories of Nazi and Arab hatred of the Jews in the figure of this woman shakes Spiegelman out of his stupor. In his preface to the book, memorably entitled, "The Sky is Falling!" he notes his own predilection for conspiracy theories and his realization of their limits during 9/11:

> In those first few days after 9/11 I got lost constructing conspiracy theories about my government's complicity in what happened that would have done a Frenchman proud. (My own susceptibility for conspiracy goes back a long way but had reached its previous peak after the 2000 elections.) Only when I heard paranoid Arab Americans blaming it all on the Jews did I reel myself back in.

We see this position graphically hypostatized in panel nine where the homeless Russian woman is physically thrown back by the force of his retaliation: "Damn it, Lady! If You Don't Stop Blaming Everything on the Jews, People Are Gonna Think You're CRAZY!" Panel ten shows him striding off after his successful knockdown of the specter of conspiracy, except the sequence ends recursively with a throwback to his figuration as the little son in *Maus*, suffering a nightmare and being consoled by his mother, "Hush, You Fell Out of Bed Sweetie." In the space of a single plate with twelve panels in all—*windows* he calls them—Speigelman manages brilliantly to compress multiple histories of personal trauma and political catastrophes.

His panel drawings, Spiegelman is at pains to explain, are not merely expressive but *informational*—a kind of commemorating, witnessing, and recording of information—what Goya referred to when he said, "This, I saw." This emphasis on the "truth-telling" function of art, I argue, has made a phenomenal comeback in the novels of our times. One sees this not merely through a "realism" explosion, but through a shift in the epistemological lexicon of the novel, that is, the emergence of new understandings of the factual and the evidentiary in relation to ideas of witnessing and spectatorship. Significantly, the "factual" in the world novel is an interplay between what I have previously referred to as *forensic* truth on the one hand and *testimonial* truth on the other.

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Forensic Witnessing and the (Non) Evidence of Bones: Anil's Ghost

This generic interplay between forensic truth and testimonial truth is brought to crisis in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*.[18] This novel does not explicitly thematise the exorbitant impact of imagistic witnessing, but it powerfully abstracts the conundrum of truth making in an era of proliferating genres of evidence. The "witness" in Ondaatje's novel is a Sri Lankan forensic scientist and anthropologist, Anil Tissera, commissioned by an international human rights group to find out the truth about a series of extrajudicial massacres from 1988 to 1990 during the long years of civil conflict in her homeland. The skeletal remains of the victims—bones—become evidence in the hands of this scientist, and she soon discovers how dangerous her informed and factual witnessing is in a zone of war, and especially in one that implicates her culturally. *Anil's Ghost* was published barely twelve years after the Sri Lankan massacres of 1988–1989 in which at least two militant groups—the LTTE from the North and JVP from the South—were engaged in repeated bouts of high-intensity civil conflict with the government.[19] The ominous scale of the killings is noted early on in the novel by the archaeologist character, Sarath Diyasena, in his briefing to Anil, the forensic scientist. Significantly, he warns her that in this triangulated warfare culpability is difficult to apportion:

> The bodies turn up weekly now… . Every side was killing and hiding evidence. *Every side*… . The government is not the only one doing the killing… . A couple of years ago people just started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There's no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are. (17, emphasis original)

In a text saturated with such dark, inscrutable, and illegible deaths, the duties of *excavating truth* and *providing witness*—making scorched bones speak, as it were—are herculean tasks. My argument is that it is precisely this conundrum—this necessity *and* impossibility of finding the truth about extreme human violence—that *Anil's Ghost* primarily sets out to confront and it does so with astonishing aesthetic flair. To recast this point in terms of the architectonics of novelistic witnessing (as distinguished from witnessing in visual media), Ondaatje's novel makes *legible* the act of witnessing by drawing into its narrative ambit a range of fact-finding genres—the case, journalistic reports, human rights narrative exposures, forensic evidence—many of which constituted the prehistory of the English novel as it evolved in the eighteenth century.[20] To that extent, it experiments with the novel's epistemological purchase in the history of what counts (and has counted) as "fact" in modernity. Rather than represent a singular "truth" about what happened in Sri Lanka during the years from

18 In recent years, quite a few novels have dealt with the relationship among genocide, war, forensic archaeology, and witnessing. These include Anne Michael's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice-Candy Man* (1991), and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980).

19 LTTE stands for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam and JVP for Janatha Vimukti Peramuna.

20 See Lennard Davis's *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); J. Paul Hunter's *Before Novels* (N.Y. and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990); and Mary Poovey's *The History of the Modern Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

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1988–1990, *Anil's Ghost* journeys through the monumental hurdles that confront anyone who sets out to find such truths. Tropes of the "factual," the "case," "evidence," "light," and "sight" proliferate through the text. The novel, much to the disappointment and even dismay of its many politically informed readers, is not an epic rendering of the many dimensions of Sri Lanka's prolonged civil conflict with the Tamil Tigers.[21] It is not a realist historical novel staking its merit on crafting a literary verisimilitude of the conflict even if Ondaatje's matter-of-fact prefatory note does appear partly to encourage such expectations:

> From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Sri Lanka was in a crisis that involved three essential groups: the government, antigovernment insurgents in the south and separatist guerillas in the north. Both the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government. Eventually, in response, legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents…. *Anil's Ghost* is a fictional work set during this political time and historical moment.

In fact, there is no hint in this note about the novel's epistemic orientation. Why do I then read Ondaatje's novel first and foremost as a powerful statement on the novel's capacity to explore the vagaries of the "factual" in witnessing human experience *in extremis*? There are three reasons why I do so.

First, the novel plunges us right away into the worlds of a forensic scientist and an archaeologist respectively. Both are professional seekers of evidentiary truth and almost every dimension of the conflict is refracted through their gaze. Much of the novel is concerned with the discovery of skeletons at an old archaeological site that are almost certainly not ancient. Second, rather than flesh out the historical and political coordinates of the civil conflict as a background to their quest, *Anil's Ghost* shifts the narrative to an alternative historiographical and archaeological world where the quest for evidence through the dissection of bones continues in a nonscientific register through the agency of Palipana, an old Buddhist monk and a retired and disgraced former teacher of the archaeologist. Much of the novel, in fact, plays out this epistemological battle between true and false evidence. Third, the forensic quest culminates not in a political denouement through a categorical impugning of the truths internationally avowed by the Sri Lankan political establishment. What we are left with instead is an allegorical opening up and prolonging of the perceptual reach of witnessing beyond the immediate site of violence. This happens through the archetypal Buddhist figure of Ananda who, in a sequence reminiscent of the shell-shocked aftermath of the Taliban's exploding of the Bamiyan Buddhas, is shown to be reconstructing a shattered statue of Buddha while leaving all the cracks visible and who had previously helped the forensic scientist to reconstruct the face of a skeleton when her scientific approximations left her defeated. It is, as we shall go on to see, in the figure of Ananda that Ondaatje places the burden of the rift between *forensic* and *testimonial* witnessing.

21 See hostile reviews of *Anil's Ghost* by Sri Lankan scholars Ismail Qadri and Ranjini Mendis. Ismail Qadri, "A Flippant Gesture Towards Sri Lanka: A Review of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*," *Pravada*, 1:9/10 (2000): 24–29. Ranjini Mendis, "Review of *Anil's Ghost,*" *Chimo* (Fall 2000): 7–12.

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Let us briefly attend to each of these three, but with one caveat. The novel does not simply romance the scientism of bones or the archives. The epistemological purchase of "evidence" as a product of modern science is never taken for granted. There is, in fact, almost a pre-Enlightenment reading of empiricism as the evidence of the various senses, not simply that of scientific reasoning. Each of the main characters, Anil, Sarath, Palipana, and Ananda, is representative of distinctly different modalities of getting to the truth of the massacres: Anil believes in the indubitable nature of forensic evidence; Sarath in the "archaeological surround of a fact"; Palipana in tactile exploration reaching back to ancient nontextual practices when the natural and human were not clearly disaggregated; and Ananda in the aesthetics of the visual and the somatic. Each is in the end transformed by the force of the other three. To advance this argument about an expansive notion of empirical truth as evidence of the senses"[22] and one that questions the dominance of scientific reason, I read Anil and Sarath's witnessing under the sign of "Bones," Palipana's under the idea of "Hand," and the Ananda under the term "Eye."

Bones

One of the prevalent visual memories of massacres and genocides in our modern era—Auschwitz, Cambodia, Rwanda, Somalia, Guatemala, Iraq, Syria—is that of bones; either a pile of skeletal faces or shards of charred bones. In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, the Tutsi-led Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) took the astonishing decision to leave the corpses where they lay, between the church pews, beneath the school desks, in the yard outside. In the words of Michael Ignatieff, who witnessed the grim memorialization a year later in the company of the then UN secretary general Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "The survivors turned the church compound at Nyarubuye into the Yad Vashem of African genocide."[23] One also remembers the killing fields of Cambodia with piles of skeletal heads that eventually incriminated the Khmer Rouge. Bones are often the only remnants that have worked as hard scientific evidence to demonstrate crimes against humanity. Not surprisingly, forensic scientists have been at the heart of international human rights investigations of such killings. Scholars in recent years have noted a spike in the publication of histories of forensic science.[24] In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, not just the scholarly world, but also the global popular imaginary has, since the late nineties and at the turn of the millennium, been saturated with the world of forensic crime detection. Television crime dramas like *CSI* and *Bones* have forensic experts as central characters. The history of the production of *Bones* is particularly fascinating in its entanglement of real-life and televisual characters. Its lead character is Dr. Temperance Brennan (called "Bones" in the series), who is loosely based on a real- life forensic anthropologist and

22 I borrow this phrase from Michael McKeon's *Origins of the English Novel: 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), Chapter 2: The Evidence of the Senses: Secularization and Epistemological Crisis.

23 Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1998), 76.

24 See Antoinette Burton, "Archive of Bones: *Anil's Ghost* and the Ends of History," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38 (2003): 39; and Roy Porter, "Body of Evidence," *Guardian Weekly*, 7–13 February (2002): 16.

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author, Kathy Reichs, also the producer of the show. Dr. Brennan is also the name of the detective in Reich's crime novel series even though the TV show is not based on this crime series. Interestingly, however, the TV character Dr. Brennan also writes crime mysteries in her spare time, which features a detective named Kathy Reich! It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine what this late modern obsession with forensic evidence says about the importance of the "factual" in the wake of three decades of postmodern problematization of positivist knowledgemaking. What I can say, in the context of our discussion thus far about Ondaatje's novel, is that the composite figure of Temperance-Kathy—and the gender is not incidental—becomes emblematic of the importance of witnessing objectively, yet compassionately in our era, qualities that Ondaatje's forensic anthropologist, Anil, demonstrates in equal measure. There is also one other critical point to be made in the context of my focus on the novelistic. Forensics works through building *cases* from bodies, corporal fragments, or bones of victims. If one recasts this fact in relation to the importance of the case study in understanding the evolution of the novel form, one can say that central to the act of novelistic witnessing in our violent times is the construction of *cases* that combine the force of the latter's *juridical*, *individuating*, and *sentimental* forms—forms that were seen as distinctly different in earlier eras, and on which scholars such as Foucault, Forrester, Hunter, and Chandler have written extensively. To recapitulate briefly, the earliest secular cases in seventeenth-century England were predominantly "juridical" in that they constituted a set of circumstances around a particular act that could modify or confirm an existing set of rules. With medicine and forensics, the case began to operate with an "individuating" force, foregrounding the specific constitution or body of the patient/victim as the locus of knowledge. Paul Hunter also notes that the individuating register of casuistry gained increasing prominence in an evolving culture of beliefs in the significance of "individual temperament," which he historically dates to the Interregnum in seventeenth-century England "when [England] had to confront what individuation had made of tradition and authority."[25] The "sentimental" case—the third type - follows from this process of individuation, and is, as James Chandler has forcefully argued, the precursor to one of the most critical coordinates of the novel form: the point of view.[26] Chandler dates its emergence to the mid-eighteenth century with the publication of both Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and Laurence Sterne's *The Sentimental Journey* (1768). The sentimental case is a "specific description of a person's experiential situation, as what had befallen that person."[27] It is anticasuistical in that it is less concerned with a set of rules than with enabling what Chandler calls "sentimental mobility"—that is, "a capacity to put oneself in the place of another—a mobility made possible by the sympathetic imagination."[28] Extrapolated on to the novel form, we can see the inflection of the sentimental case in how the very structure of the novel hinges on the reader's ability to move from one point of view to another. The novelist,

25 See J. Paul Hunter's *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1990), 291.

26 James Chandler, "*Lord Jim* and the Sentimental Novel," *Critical Inquiry*, 33:4, Summer (2007): 837–864.

27 Chandler, *Lord Jim*, 841.

28 Chandler, *Lord Jim*, 842.

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in other words, through her rhetorical and narrative strategies, *makes a case* for directing our sympathetic imagination from one character to another, which in turn leads to progression in the plot. In making a case for compassionate witnessing in our era of global civil wars through the forensic realism of Ondaatje's novel, I draw in the following pages on the force of all three readings of casuistry—juridical, individuating, and the sentimental—and demonstrate their limits and possibilities in situations of terror and trauma. The forensic pathologist in the novel not only makes a juridical case to be presented before a tribunal, but also seeks to individuate each case medically through painstaking research on the nature of the victim's death. Further, her sympathetic imagination urges her to seek help from unconventional sources to reconstruct the terror and pathos of the extinguishment of lives in the civil conflict—that is, she goes beyond her scientific training and finds complementary pathways to research and present a "sentimental" case.

We see Anil's passion for "bones" early in the novel. She boasts to her American lover, Cullis, that she knows "the names of several bones in Spanish … *Maxilar … Cubito, Omoplato, Occipital*" (34). As a forensic anthropologist attached to the UN Commission on Human Rights, she is an active seeker of truth about crimes against humanity. When the Sri Lankan government decided to set up a war tribunal with the help of the United Nations to stem the damage to its international reputation on human rights, Anil volunteered to represent the global body in the country of her origins. From the start, she appears single-minded in her mission: to verify on behalf of the international human rights community that the Sri Lankan government was not involved in extrajudicial killings. Her firm commitment to a global juridico-political framework is conjoined with her scientific zeal in "tunnelling towards [the] discovery" of facts (69). Together, they propel her into a forensic quest for "truth" in her ravaged native land that she believes will "set one free" (102). She agrees to meet some forensic students and encounters her first potential case, a man killed since her arrival: a body freshly dead. Despite her long years of training she feels a frisson go through her as she tests the time of death. It coincided, she realizes, with her early evening walk the day before. "She never usually," we are told, "translated the time of a death into personal time" (13). We see her struggle to appear professional and distant as she takes stock of her first case and soon after, her second, this time of a body thrown into the sea from a helicopter. Her partner investigator, the local archaeologist, Dr. Sarath Diyasena, arrives soon after and whisks her off to their "lab" space, the abandoned passenger liner, the *Oronsay*. Apart from bodies wrapped in plastic sheets, the defunct liner, Anil notices, is also used to store Sarath's archaeological findings, mainly rock and bone fragments. As is her wont, she is immediately attracted to the bone fragments. Sarath tells her they are from a sixth-century dig, a graveyard for Buddhist monks. Her sharp forensic eye soon notices a fragment that does not belong to that era, that is, in fact, more recent. When she points this out to the archaeologist, he freezes: "He had stopped what he was doing and was watching her" (21). Did he know about this? Is he part of a government conspiracy to hide bodies of the recently killed in this ancient site? At this stage, we, as readers and Anil, as an outsider, have no way of knowing. This signals the start of her quest. She urges Sarath to make arrangements for them to visit the ancient site. When Sarath and Anil proceed to Bandarawela on the basis of the news that three other skeletons had been found on that ancient site,

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Sarath cautions Anil about jumping to conclusions about their antiquity or lack of it. Interestingly, Sarath's warning has both epistemological and cultural overtones. "I want you to understand," he says, "the *archaeological surround of a fact*." Elsewhere in the book, archaeological practice is compared to the reading of a complex historical novel (151). Forensics, Sarath suggests, is too abstract; it is incapable of working through the layers of deep history in the way archaeology does. Anil's disciplinary training in turn is seen as an extension of her diasporic status—both are ultimately distancing. "You know," Sarath tells her, "I'd believe you more if you lived here. You can't just slip in, make a discovery and leave" (44). He is dismissive of the power of the global humanitarian gaze too: "International investigations don't mean a lot." (45). This thematic interplay between the polarities of an abstract versus a culturally informed pursuit of knowledge both informs and complicates the ethics of witnessing war crimes. For instance, Anil's forensic commitment to get to the bottom of the truth of these extrajudicial killings does not necessarily make her a disinterested, objective, and detached witness in the way Sarath seems to suggest. We see her in turns anxious, angry, outraged, dismayed, and fatalistic about the situation in Sri Lanka. At several moments in the novel, we see also her sympathetic imagination at work as she contemplates the emotional toll of these violent, inexplicable deaths on the family of the victims. They lose language and logic. Fragments of clothing of a loved one often remain their only source of connection with what they have lost:

> They held on to just the coloured and patterned sarong a missing relative last slept in, which in normal times would have become a household rag but now was sacred (56).

In an effort to individuate each of the three discovered skeletons at the Bandarawela site, in order to bring them back into the realm of language and meaning, she starts by giving them names: TINKER, TAILOR, SOLDIER. Ondaatje's play on the popular detective novel genre is evident here. John Le Carré's novel of the same title (with the addition of SPY) is the obvious referent here. This playful rhetorical gesture is a sure sign that Ondaatje while crafting this novel was unmindful of neither the popular cultural impact of forensic crime fiction nor its resonance with the experience of witnessing, through an informational hyperconnectivity, real-world massacres. The invocation of Le Carré in this instance does not take away from the seriousness of Anil's nominalist gesture. She talks repeatedly of the importance of *naming* the skeletons because to her they "become representative of all those lost voices"; the voices of those reported missing in that long inventory of names we saw earlier; voices of those "who were slammed and stained by violence" (55–56). We see the significance of *naming* early on the novel in the very way Anil gets her name. She was not born with it but had to "buy" this masculine sounding name off her brother because she was so unhappy with the name given her by her parents. We never hear what her original name was, but it is clear that it violated her sense of what constituted her essential being. There is no doubt that the thematics of naming in this novel is intricately woven with that of individuation, sympathetic recognition, and testimonial plenitude. Extrapolated on to the deathworlds of post-1989 Sri Lanka, *naming* appears to be the only antidote to annihilation. If death is "vaporization" and "microfragmentation" in Anil's forensic world, life is making the flesh whole and singularly sovereign with the

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power of naming. Anil's discovery of a fourth skeleton—which she names SAILOR—reinforces her conviction that this ancient burial site was used by government officials to bury their more recent killings. There's "[s]omething not prehistoric" about this skeleton, she tells Sarath, as her forensic training affirms that it belongs to a badly burnt body. In defiance of his caution not to rush into conclusive truths, she draws on her training to build a clear case for murder in this instance. She and Sarath are aware that they have reached an impasse in their investigations unless they find a way to reconstruct the skull. Seeking such expertise openly was dangerous in a political context that openly implicated the Sri Lankan government in a murder case. Rather than go back to the murky world of Colombo's bureaucracy—medical and political—they turn to his old teacher, Palipana, an epigraphist and archaeologist, now blind and living an ascetic life amid sixth-century ruins in faraway Anuradhapura. In this turn of the plot, we see the novel opening up to an epistemological world that is distinctly different from forensic science.

Hand

Ondaatje takes great pains to delineate Palipana's protean and unorthodox knowledge world to us. We learn that, despite being feted globally for his rare achievements, he shunned the limelight. A man of spare habits with a manic dedication to his work, he made a formidable teacher and researcher. Students rarely lived up to his exacting standards, but being subjected to them, a few of them in turn, Sarath included, became renowned scholars in their field. Despite feeling alienated from him due to his repeated intellectual brutality, they were compelled to acknowledge that "he was the best archaeological theorist in the country, that he was nearly always right, and that even with his fame and success he continued to live a lifestyle more minimal than any of them" (80–81). Palipana's hands and fingers were critical to his talents as a scholar even before he lost his eyesight. He thrilled at theorizing parallels between the expertise of stonemasons and his own work in translating Pali texts. He needed to *feel* the texture of rocks and ancient inscriptions, and spent more time in *tactile* contact with his sites than with scholarly books. His need to experience these sites as places of everyday dwelling, of continuous human activity, was also a critical aspect of his scholarly orientation. This brought him considerable infamy in later years as he was seen to flout rules of documentation and evidence. A past student exposed his latest project as fictional. What did this formidable master of archaeological theory and epigraphy set out to prove with this last defiant act of worldly scholarly engagement? The limits of the factual and the evidentiary? The lamentable disenfranchisement of a holistic epistemology that ought to incorporate all human faculties, not just reason and visual evidence? The impasse his defiance signals toward is this: "The point was not that he could ever be proved wrong in his theories, but that he could not prove he was right" (83). The motif of the hand in my analysis stands for this aporia of the provable and the demonstrable as much as it stands as a counterpart of scientific knowledge, one that begins where forensic science—the science of bones—reaches its limits. "We use the bones to search for truth," Anil tells him, even as she is forced to admit she does not know where that will lead unless he is willing to help them. She and Sarath have come to him to help them reconstruct SAILOR's skull. Given his extensive connections in the nonscholarly world of artisans and stonemasons—the reconstructionists of his archaeological findings—they are hopeful he will be able to

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direct them discreetly to a nonprofessional reconstruction specialist. By creating the SAILOR's head and face they hope to individuate him, to bring him back to the realm of human belonging. The reconstructed head is also, of course, meant to be presented as a juridical case against the government in the presence of a UN tribunal. Despite his infamy in the world of knowledge, Palipana becomes for them an *indispensable medium through which to channel their forensic witnessing* of the civil war massacres.

Eye

Convinced that he has an able intellectual counterpart in Anil despite their different approaches to the truth, Palipana offers to help them in reconstructing the skull. He directs them to an artist, Ananda, a dissolute soul who stumbles through his work in the gem mines, inebriated and bereft. His wife disappeared one night during the height of the civil war. The trauma made him renounce the world of art. But Palipana had complete faith in his talent. Ananda in his view was not just an accomplished artist; he was the best eye painter of three generations in a family that specialized in the auspicious ritual of eye painting, an ancient practice on the island called *Netra Mangala*. This was the ceremony of the painting of eyes on a sculpted holy figure without looking directly at the face of the god or goddess. The artist could see the face of the holy figure only in a mirror. He had to paint the eyes on it by holding his brush over his shoulder with his back to the statue. The aura attached to this artifice was immense. The statue acquired divine life only after the eyes were painted on it. It incarnated life and illumination as soon as it acquired eyes. The novel from this point on turns to a third modality of engagement with truth for which I use the term *Eye*, not in the sense of direct and demonstrable visible evidence, but as a metaphor for insight into the truth of the abyssal and sublime beyond the horror of the event. It connotes a mode of witnessing that transcends the temporal logic of justice and retribution.

A distinction that Derrida draws between various gradations of meaning in the concept of witnessing is illuminating here. In his essay "A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text: Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," Derrida attends carefully to the Latin etymology of the term *witness* and unearths three equivalents: *testis, terstis*, and *superstes*. The first is "witness" as such. It is, however, coextensive with *terstis*, that is, one is present as a third party to mediate differences arising from an event. *Superstes* is witness as third party *and* "survivor": one who persists beyond the (traumatic) event and holds on to the truth of the event for times to come. To this last he ascribes the power of *poesis*, a power to prolong the temporality of the event by making *present* the *perceptible* dimension of witnessing as something seen, heard, and felt, not merely something that can be proven in a court of law:

> "Bearing witness" is heterogeneous to the administration of a legal proof or the display of an object produced in evidence. "I bear witness" means not "I prove" but "I swear that I have seen, I have heard, I have touched, I have felt, I have been *present*."(188–89)

Ananda in the novel is the *superstes* to Anil's *terstis*. He is the witness as the "survivor" of trauma, one who persists beyond the event and holds on to its truth, one who makes *present* its terror for generations to come through his artistic labor. His young wife, Sirissa, disappeared one morning on her way to her daily job at a local school.

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This was the same morning in 1989 when forty-six school students and staff from the Ratnapura district were rounded off and led away to an unknown destination. Their severed heads were later found strung up on poles near their school.

Ananda's reconstruction of the skeleton's head takes on monumental significance against the backdrop of this horrific train of events. The completed artifact stuns Anil and Sarath. The face they encounter is not an approximation arrived at by a rigorous and abstracted forensic calculation. It is too individuated, too singular, too emblematic of the creator's *agon*. The face Ananda creates is a projection of his unfathomable sense of loss, his melancholia that refuses to let go of the dead, that seeks to bestow on not just the severed heads but also on the unfound body of his young wife, a sense of peace and dignity after death. It is a mode of witnessing that seeks to prolong the temporality of a traumatic event, to "preserve, safeguard or protect the dead by offering them an unsurrenderable, interminable, commemorative lodging within the social, political and psychical imagination of the living."[29] Instinctively, Anil and Sarath recognize in this gesture the defeat of their epistemological and legalistic assumptions about forensic witnessing. Anil, in fact, unable to reconcile the staggering incommensurability between their mode of witnessing and that of Ananda's, breaks down and cries bitterly. She is the Derridean *terstes*: abstractly speculative but with an empathetic imagination that enables her to trade places with the subject of suffering. Her aspiration is to eventually transcend both positions and occupy a third one that is legible in a court of law. She ultimately cannot transcend her spectatorial status, however. Sailor's skeleton remains but a piece of *evidence* for her; without it she has no agency. Ananda is the quintessential *superstes*, the witness as the survivor of trauma who through a melancholic encryption of the dead prolongs the affective temporality of the occurrence beyond that of distributive justice. Through this *impasse* or aporia between two modes of witnessing—the forensic and the testimonial—*Anil's Ghost*, I contend, makes legible the vicissitudes of what counts as "fact" in the history of violence in our times. The novelization process here although not explicitly thematizing the impact of exorbitant media witnessing, nevertheless abstracts from the political surround of our precarious times, the power of such witnessing in our times of endemic war and violence.

In conclusion, we might gather the various strands of my argument about witnessing, visibility, legibility, and mediation. I began with an extrapolation from Goya's *Disasters of War* series to talk about the architectonics of witnessing violence in our photographic, televisual, and digital ages. I then posited an argument about the distinction between visually mediated and novelistic witnessing and suggested that the latter was not contiguous with our everyday experience of televisual and electronic witnessing in our post-1989 world. Rather it was something that could be seen as a legible record and creative transmutation of our very experience of mediated witnessing through history, and also one that conjoined the factual and affective in ways that prolong the temporality of witnessing a traumatic event. We also plumbed the etymological complexity of the term

29 Ian Baucom, "The Imaginary Resentment of the Dead: A Theory of Melancholy Sentiment," in *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital Slavery and the Philosophy of History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 258.

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witness and noted the significance of the figuration of the "third" as a role ascribed not just to giving evidence in a court of law but to an act of *poesis*; one prolonging the temporality and perceptual reach of a traumatic event, an ability to patiently, empathetically transcribe for future generations what really happened. Together, this triangulated argument about visual witnessing, novelistic legibility, and the philologically configured "third" (that folds the *terstes* into the *superstes*) offers a powerful frame within which to read novelistic works in our era of hypermediated wars and humanitarianism.

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