

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

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Abstract: This article compares the representations of disappearance in Costa-Gavras' 1982 film *Missing* and Michael Ondaatje's 2000 novel *Anil's Ghost*. Written at distinct historical moments, the two texts reflect the evolving discourses of internationalism that inform their production and reception. Although each succeeds, to an extent, in bringing the disappeared to life through fictional representation, the essay argues that they are more meaningfully marked by their failures than their successes: the constitutive silences that make certain victims legible while relegating others to invisibility.

The violence of disappearance is both physical and epistemic. 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” (*Disappearances and Political Killings* 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. Many of the disappeared never “reappear” to tell their story; thus, it falls to others to reclaim their identities and re-inscribe them in the public discourse. Fictional works such as Costa-Gavras' 1982 film *Missing* and Michael Ondaatje's 2000 novel *Anil's Ghost* rely on the strategies of realist narrative to bring the disappeared to life for distant audiences and to fill the gaps and silences that disappearance imposes. Narratives such as these respond to the impulse to make victims visible and recognizable, both in order to intercede on their behalf and to bring the perpetrators of systematic violence to account. But these texts are also

marked by their own limitations: the forms of privilege they fail to recognize and the victims who elude their representational frames.

Alice Nelson explains that “[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” (50; emphasis in original). Despite the absence of documentable evidence, however, victims of disappearance “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). Circulated abroad, beyond the reach of official censorship, depictions of the disappeared hold the promise of not only counteracting the erasure that disappearance attempts to carry out, but marshalling international support for the victims of violent conflicts and inspiring political or legal action on their behalf.¹ These narratives are thus works of recovery, which attempt to reconstruct the disappeared from fragmentary records as emotionally real, three-dimensional individuals, and strategic works of invention, which strive to make the disappeared legible as victims to international audiences. 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; they 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). Taken together, Costa-Gavras’ *Missing* and Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* provide a snapshot of the changing political and cultural contexts within which representations of disappearance have circulated.

Released in 1982, *Missing* tells the story of Charles Horman, an American expatriate who disappeared during the early days of Chile’s 1973 coup.² Both Costa-Gavras’ depiction of the coup and the historical event itself are powerful reflections of the Cold War context that shaped them. The United States government’s fear of the rise of Communism in Latin America fueled its covert support for the coup as well as its subsequent recognition of General Augusto Pinochet’s oppres-

sive regime. Although the events in Chile are the subject of the film, it is remarkably U.S.-centric in its treatment of them. Indeed, despite direction by Costa-Gavras, a noted international director recognized for his political films, *Missing* was nevertheless produced within the context of the mainstream American movie industry. It was released by Universal Pictures for a mainstream audience and featured prominent American actors Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek in starring roles. All of the film's major characters are American, and its central ideological debate is not over the justness of the Pinochet regime or its violent rise to power, but rather the American values of freedom, independence, and democracy, as embodied in culture and enacted in law. In order to recover Charlie as a victim within the terms that it lays out, the film must construct him as a true, red-blooded American young man, drawing on formulas of political ideology, class, and gender to do so.

Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* is the product of a later moment, coming on the heels of what Schaffer and Smith describe as the "decade of human rights" during the 1990s (1). *Anil's Ghost* is set in Sri Lanka, sometime during the period "from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s" according to the author's note (n. pag.), at the height of that nation's brutal and seemingly intractable civil war. The novel tells the story of a Western-educated forensic pathologist, Anil, who returns to her native Sri Lanka to document human rights abuses in an uneasy collaboration with a Sri Lankan archaeologist, Sarath, her officially appointed partner in the investigation. Unlike *Missing*, which frames disappearance in explicitly nationalistic terms through the defining logic of the Cold War, *Anil's Ghost* reflects a more globalized (or, as some have argued, post-national) moment in which people, commodities, and cultures travel freely and broadly along transnational routes of exchange. In this context, as Pheng Cheah argues, human rights and cosmopolitan fellow-feeling are frequently embraced as a means of transcending the limitations of the nation-state, "which is seen as particularistic, oppressive, and even totalitarian" (3). Unlike the specific, nationally-constituted U.S. audience that *Missing* targets, *Anil's Ghost* addresses a more broadly defined Western readership that is presumably concerned about but not directly implicated in the events occurring in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje,

himself a Sri Lankan expatriate living in Canada, frames the conflict as abstracted, decontextualized “violence,” and turns to an equally abstract and universalistic understanding of the aesthetic as a means of overcoming it. Thus, *Anil’s Ghost* humanizes the disappeared by transforming them into objects of artistic representation, interpellating them into a putatively apolitical appreciation of beauty that transcends the particularities of nation, culture, and politics. In comparison with one another, *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* embody different understandings of the transnational space within which narratives of disappearance circulate, but the representational strategies they employ to reach and move their chosen audiences testify to the inherent limits of different models of internationalism.

I. “It’s quite common down here”: Exceptionalism in *Missing*

In depicting the events of the Chilean coup, *Missing* faces the challenge of giving a human face to the victims of a regime that received both covert support and overt recognition from the U.S. government.³ Although thousands of people were killed in the coup, the film focuses intensely and exclusively on just one victim, Charlie Horman, an American writer and journalist who was disappeared by the Chilean military. The film’s first scene, which plays during the opening credits, perfectly illustrates the perspective it adopts throughout. As the title fades, we see 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. The tense, ominous music that plays during the scene initially contrasts with the innocuous image of children playing soccer. 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, before we witness the arrival of a truck full of heavily armed soldiers. As the soldiers climb down from the truck and the children disperse, we again see the scene as a reflection in the car window, literally projected onto Charlie in the position of the observer. More than just creative cinematography, this inventive shot establishes a perspective emblematic of that which the film employs: 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 that we witness the events of the coup.

Like this scene, in which the threat of violence serves primarily as an opportunity to shed light on Charlie's character through his reactions to the events he witnesses, the film as a whole functions as an extended debate over his identity and, by extension, his legitimacy as a victim. At the start of the film, Charlie's conservative and old-fashioned father, Ed, sees his son as irresponsible and lazy, a dissolute liberal who has carelessly gotten himself into trouble in a foreign country. Ed's doubts about his son are echoed by the numerous U.S. government officials depicted in the film, who suggest both implicitly and explicitly that Charlie is a radical and an agitator who deserves his fate. Indeed, at the start of the film, Ed voices many of the same beliefs that a mainstream American audience might hold about a liberal expatriate such as Charlie. It is up to Beth, Charlie's wife, to provide Ed with a counter-narrative of him as an idealist, a childlike dreamer, and a man of principle. Beth defends the couple's decision to move to Chile and describes them 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," and recasts them as engaged in a quintessentially American search for self-actualization.

In addition to defending Charlie's politics—or indeed, his redeeming lack thereof—the film also draws on familiar class and gender formulas to solidify his standing as an upright American citizen. The film repeatedly emphasizes that, despite their different ways of seeing the world, Charlie and Ed are more alike than different. Ed is depicted as a sober, formal, hat-wearing New York businessman who believes in the value of hard work and personal responsibility. He is disappointed and embarrassed by his son's choice to "be a writer" rather than pursue a more traditional career and dismayed by what he sees as Charlie's dissolute and idle lifestyle. Ed's expectations are colored by conservative formulations of upper-class masculinity, but rather than challenge such norms, the film draws on them to defend Charlie's character. Like his father, Charlie knows the meaning of hard work; he puts in eighteen-hour days

translating for and editing a small, independent news magazine, a fact which surprises and impresses Ed. Charlie is also a family man who has “paid . . . attention to the basics” and made a life and a home for himself and his wife in Santiago that Beth remembers as “one of the happiest homes I’ve ever had.” And although he may not share Ed’s faith in “God, Country, and Wall Street,” Charlie is just as courageous and idealistic as his father. When Ed impulsively attempts to intervene in and stop a violent incident, we are reminded that his son did “the same damn dumb thing” only weeks earlier. By revealing Charlie’s embodiment of the masculine norms his father values, the film emphasizes the filial bond between them and reaffirms Charlie’s status as a citizen and a patriot.

Missing addresses a primarily American audience and places Charlie’s identity as an American at the center of the film’s project of reconstruction. Although it denounces the crimes committed by the Pinochet regime and critiques U.S. involvement in the coup, the film relies heavily on the logic of American exceptionalism to elicit shock and outrage at Charlie’s murder. Characters in the film repeatedly emphasize that Charlie’s status as an American citizen should have protected him from the regime’s violent crackdown. Charlie’s words of reassurance to Terry that he is safe because he is an American—which he pronounces “Amurikan,” with a comically exaggerated Texas accent—is the film’s central argument: Charlie *is* an American, despite his non-conformity and left-leaning sympathies, and should have been protected, rather than victimized, by the long arm of his government’s presence overseas. The film suggests that disappearance is a uniquely Third World problem. When the American consul informs Ed that Charlie’s body has been discovered buried inside a wall, he explains matter-of-factly that “they do that, it’s quite common down here.” And despite the U.S. government’s complicity in his son’s death, Ed’s faith in the justice and integrity of the American legal system remains unshaken. As he boards a plane back to the U.S., Ed defiantly declares to the consul, “I’m gonna sue you, Phil. And Tower and the Ambassador and everybody who let that boy die. We’re gonna make it so hot for you you’ll wish you were stationed in the Antarctic!” To the consul’s dismissive acknowledgement that it is his privilege to do so, Ed emphatically responds, “No, that’s my right!”

Missing successfully constructs Charlie as a victim to the extent that he can be represented as a good man and an upstanding—and therefore implicitly rights-bearing—U.S. citizen. But this logic, which allows Charlie to be humanized and reclaimed, necessarily excludes both American radicals and all Chileans from the compass of its recuperative effort. The scenes in which Ed and Beth search for Charlie in hospitals, morgues, and detention centers represent the film's most sustained engagement with the widespread violence that follows in the wake of the coup and are among the few instances where other victims are visible onscreen. In room after room of bodies, however, Charlie is the only victim who can be brought into focus as an individual. At one point, Beth finds and identifies the body of Frank Teruggi, an American expatriate who was a committed socialist.⁴ Although Beth's discovery, together with the account of Teruggi's arrest by the military, makes the Chilean government's responsibility for his death all but certain, Teruggi cannot be the film's primary victim. After a brief close-up of Teruggi's body, which is marked by bullet wounds, our focus returns to Ed and Beth, who insist they will not leave the morgue until they have looked at all the bodies. The camera pans away from them and reveals the magnitude of their task. In addition to the piles of anonymous bodies on the floor around them, the silhouettes of many more, limbs askew, are visible on the other side of a translucent glass roof above them. All of the 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.

The scene also makes clear that Teruggi is not the only victim who cannot enter into representation in the film; for if Teruggi's death serves only to advance the plot, the anonymous Chilean victims who populate the morgue in the scene are reduced to mere scenery. There are notably few Chilean characters in *Missing*, and even fewer civilians. The one Chilean radical we meet turns out to have gone into hiding and is later safely reunited with his pregnant wife—in reality a highly unlikely scenario. The film's selective vision is most poignantly revealed in the scene in which Ed and Beth finally receive permission to search for Charlie in the National Stadium, an improvised prison camp where the mili-

tary regime detained, tortured, and murdered hundreds and perhaps thousands of Chilean civilians in the early days of the coup. When Ed and Beth emerge from a dark tunnel onto the sunny playing field, they are met with a shocking image. As the camera pans across the stands, viewers see they are full of 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; Ed, lost in his own grief, recalls a cross-country road trip that he and his son took together. Standing on the playing field, they search futilely for Charlie among the crowds in the stands. Ed and Beth occupy the foreground of the scene, and their out-sized grief dominates the frame, while the prisoners' suffering is depicted in the background, in aggregate and in miniature. Amid the thousands of prisoners, only Ed, Beth, and the absent Charlie are legible as individuals.

The privileged status that Ed and Beth enjoy is emphasized by a Chilean colonel's introduction of them as "American," a reminder that their ability to speak in the stadium is entirely contingent on their status as U.S. citizens. The reality of this privilege is underscored by the reaction of 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, the 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's position in relation to the many Chilean families desperate for knowledge of loved ones detained in the stadium and elsewhere.

By usurping the discursive space reserved for Charlie in order to make his own impossible demands, the Chilean prisoner also highlights the Hormans'—and the film's—selective vision. In order to become visible as an individual and legible as a victim, the man must claim the position of privilege reserved for Charlie, yet in doing so he once again becomes invisible, for the optic of the film quickly reduces him to Charlie's uncanny double. This man, too, is a victim of the regime, and has a father

who is concerned about his wellbeing, but once it becomes clear that he is not Charles Horman, his personal story is of little concern to Ed and Beth and has no place in the film. The scene thus foregrounds the limitations of *Missing*'s perspective and reminds viewers of the injustice of a differential vision in which Charlie, always the 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 notes, "the scene is touching but implausible" given the disciplinary power of the detention center (796). Its inclusion 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). By making Charlie's identity as an upstanding American citizen central to its project of recovery, *Missing* may succeed in making him legible as a victim to its U.S. audiences, but as a consequence the film cannot confer the same visibility on Chileans.

The interpretive frame that renders Charlie hyper-visible at the expense of the coup's other victims reflects the film's broader stance toward America's role as an international power. Ultimately, *Missing* documents and condemns the U.S. government's betrayal of the American values of truth, freedom, and democracy in its foreign involvements; Chile is its setting, but not the primary object of its concern or critique. Indeed, like so many other texts before it, the film's foreign setting provides a backdrop for exploring fundamentally domestic concerns—in this case the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of U.S. citizenship.⁵ For Costa-Gavras, who views the events in Chile as a representative instance of the broader phenomenon of U.S. interventions in Latin America, *Missing* offers a commentary on U.S. foreign policy:

Universal [Pictures] 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 Crowds and Rubenstein 32)

For Costa-Gavras, the Chilean coup exemplifies the larger phenomenon of political violence in Latin America, a phenomenon inseparable, in the Cold War climate of the 1970s and 1980s, from the U.S. policy of military intervention to prevent the spread of Communism. Thus, although *Missing* condemns U.S. military intervention as a betrayal of American values, the exceptionalism through which it articulates that critique remains the basis of the broader vision of global politics it envisions and circumscribes the forms of international solidarity it is able to invoke.

II. “The reason for war was war”: The Universalism of *Anil’s Ghost*

If the internationalism of *Missing* is predicated on exceptionalist understandings of American national identity, the internationalism envisioned by *Anil’s Ghost* is grounded in a notion of supra-national aesthetic value. Set in the late 1980s or early 1990s, during one of the most intensely violent periods in Sri Lanka’s civil war, Ondaatje’s novel, like *Missing*, revolves around efforts to identify a single, individual victim.⁶ Initially, the novel presents its readers with a mystery: Anil, a 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 effort to identify Sailor through forensic science to the lives of the individuals that surround her, each of whom has found a way to cope with the conflict that rages around them. By the end of the novel, Anil’s search for truth in “bones and sediment” has faded to the background, and the novel’s shifting temporality and roving, omniscient narration instead present readers with a collage of what Sarath describes as “character and nuance and mood” (Ondaatje 259).

Anil, enamored with both the methods of forensic science and its underlying empiricism, is initially the focus of the novel, which elaborates her personal background and traces her efforts to discover the identity of the skeleton she has found. In order to identify an anonymous victim

like Sailor, Anil seeks to uncover “the permanent truths” documented in his remains. Ultimately, 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). Even as Anil and Sarath move closer to identifying Sailor’s remains, however, the novel’s focus shifts away from the evidence-based process of forensic analysis and toward the inner lives of a diverse cast of characters that Ondaatje introduces in the preceding pages: Sarath and his brother Gamini, a physician; Palipana, an 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 distance themselves from the facts of the violence that surrounds them, and instead seek truth and transcendence in the realm of the aesthetic.

If *Anil’s Ghost* offers two models of recovering the identity and humanity of the disappeared—the empirical methods of Anil, and the aesthetic practices of the novel’s other characters—it is clear by the end of the novel which model it privileges. Outside of the context of the Sri Lankan conflict, Anil’s myopic focus on the details of forensic science in popular Westerns reveals a harmless ignorance of the films’ broader narratives and imaginative stakes. Within the conflict zone, this empiricism not only prevents her from recognizing the bigger picture, but in doing so exposes her and those around her to danger. Despite allowing her to document the “details of [Sailor’s] age and posture” and providing her with the information to match the details with a name and a rudimentary biography, Anil’s forensic work tells her “nothing about the world Sailor had come from” (176). What is more, in the context of official repression, the factual evidence in which Anil places so much faith is profoundly vulnerable to suppression or distortion. As she is aware, “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). Indeed, when the government eventually confiscates Sailor’s skeleton and Anil’s research notes, she is left without recourse, and Sarath must sacrifice his life to allow Anil to escape the country with enough evidence to document Sailor’s murder.

In contrast to Anil, Ananda is one of several characters in the novel who 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. When Anil and Sarath hire him to reconstruct a likeness of Sailor's face, 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 challenges the uncertainty of sparse facts; it relies on imagination to construct 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 recovers the disappeared on an imaginative rather than factual level and reveals an emotional truth that Ondaatje suggests exceeds and transcends the aims of documentary reconstruction.

The healing power of fictional representation is on full 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 remains unnarrated. Ananda's work as a ceremonial eye-painter, like his reconstruction of Sailor, brings the dead to life; painting eyes on the statue transforms it from an inert object into a sacred one. 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 repairing the broken statue is an act of healing on several levels. Not only does the destroyed figure, sutured together by the artist, stand in for a ravaged national culture, but the process of repairing it provides an opportunity for Ananda to acknowledge and remember the disappeared. Ananda stands atop the statue while painting the eyes, wearing a shirt given to him by his dead

friend Sarath. The soaring birds he sees, with their hearts “beating exhausted and fast,” remind him of “the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance”; this imagined story, like the reconstructed statue, provides a coherent narrative that makes sense of seemingly senseless destruction (307). By choosing Ananda’s imaginative act of representation to end the novel, Ondaatje argues for the power of art to create meaning and provide comfort in the wake of violence and loss.

The vision of Sri Lanka that Ondaatje’s novel provides—one in which violence can be transcended through aesthetic appreciation—is especially appealing for readers whose primary engagement with the conflict comes in the form of reading works of fiction. By the same token, numerous critics have denounced the novel for its depoliticized depiction of the Sri Lankan civil war. In his review for *The Nation*, Tom LeClair accuses Ondaatje of “turn[ing] away from politics to personal lives” (32), and Qadri Ismail dismisses the novel as “not much more than the typically flippant gesture towards Sri Lanka often produced by the West” (“A Flippant Gesture” 28). Ondaatje’s failure to provide readers with an analysis of the political interests and motives underlying the conflict exemplifies a phenomenon that Ismail identifies elsewhere: the emergence in the post–Cold War era of “violence” as an analytical category. Ismail argues, drawing on the analysis of anthropologist Pradeep Jeganathan, that the “violence” attributed to the Sri Lankan conflict is distinguished by its fundamental incomprehensibility, or what he calls, with intentional echoes of Joseph Conrad’s colonialism, its “horror” (*Abiding by Sri Lanka* 16). Unlike other historical conflicts, which scholars could account for using the political frameworks of “U.S. imperialism, communist adventurism, national liberation, [or] Marxist revolution,” the contemporary eruption of violence in Sri Lanka, like that in Bosnia and Rwanda, cannot be assimilated into narratives of the nation’s political modernity (17). Unable to provide a political explanation for acts of seemingly inhuman cruelty and destruction taking place in “strange non-Western places,” scholars define them as “violence,” an irreducible cultural phenomenon which is not subjected to further analysis (*Abiding by Sri Lanka* 17). Significantly, Ismail points out that the production of

violence as “a global phenomenon” allows for a logic of analogy, which makes sense of the Sri Lankan conflict “not by attending to its concerns, its debates, its singularity,” but rather “by comparing it to other violent, horrible, and incomprehensible places” (*Abiding by Sri Lanka* 17–18).

The treatment of Anil’s forensic work in Ondaatje’s novel reflects an understanding of violence as a global phenomenon that is symptomatic of a broader post-national reality. Anil’s skills, the novel suggests, are universal and portable, applicable and necessary anywhere that there are victims of violence. The novel’s first scene depicts Anil at work excavating a mass grave in Guatemala, where the grief-stricken family members of the victims respectfully look after her and her team; the novel also makes reference to her work in the Congo. For a time, Anil works at forensic laboratories in Oklahoma and Arizona with the remains of the missing and the murdered; though not the victims of political unrest, these individuals too met violent ends, the truth of which can be uncovered by Anil’s forensic analysis. As the novel suggests, Anil’s forensic skills and their explanatory power, like the acts of violence that require them, are universal and unchanging, the “same for Colombo as for Troy” (Ondaatje 64).

The aesthetic truths that Palipana, Sarath, and Ananda embrace are also framed as universal. In one striking example, Sarath recalls how, in the midst of the conflict, he and his mentor Palipana were awed to discover ancient carvings on the wall of a cave. In the scene, “the affection or grief” depicted in the carved image of a mother and her child holds just as much ethical force for Sarath as information about the disappearances happening around him; both are forms of truth for which he would be willing to give his life, “if the truth were of any use” (157). Like Anil’s forensics, Sarath’s aesthetic appreciation generalizes violence, posits an equivalency between the grief of a mother from another century and that of contemporary survivors, and suggests that both are equally beyond his reach to address or prevent.

The work of recovery that the novel imagines, whether in the form of forensics or of art, is as deterritorialized and global as the problem of “violence” that it seeks to address. Anil, a human rights specialist, is an expatriate and a world traveler with a U.N. passport, “at ease whether

on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe” (54). Ondaatje himself is also an expatriate, who was educated in England and resides, teaches, and writes in Canada. A winner of the Booker Prize, Ondaatje writes for an international literary audience for whom the universal principles of truth and beauty that the novel espouses are likely more resonant than the particularities of the Sri Lankan conflict that provides an occasion to explore them. By turning to the interpretive work of forensics and aesthetics to overcome the silencing of disappearance, *Anil's Ghost* engages readers in the work of making meaningless deaths meaningful. The meaning they are able to provide through these universalistic frames, however, cannot be situated, made specific, or individualized. To make the disappeared legible and accessible to a global audience, the novel must first construct them in universalistic terms as victims of violence. Not surprisingly, then, neither Anil's forensics nor Ananda's facial reconstruction provides insight into Ruwan Kumara's life or death. It is “Sailor,” the victim, rather than Ruwan Kumara, the individual, with whom the novel is centrally concerned; evidence taken from Sailor's remains to present to international authorities is what Anil carries with her when she leaves the country, and it is the principle of truth that Sailor represents for which Sarath gives his life.

This universalizing strategy, which packages the products of Sri Lanka for export, is not without its costs, as the novel makes clear. At one point, Palipana guides a group of archaeology students through a looted cave temple, where Bodhisattva statues had been cut away from the walls into which they were carved and sold to Western museums. Palipana's mournful conviction that only “the ascendancy of the idea” survives the ravages of history is belied by the enduring loss of the missing statues, which appear like wounds in the cave walls (12). The fact that the statues were coveted by Western museums attests to the universality of their value and appeal as works of art, and “the ascendancy of the idea” could easily have been used as a justification for their theft in this colonial context. But as the scene demonstrates, the statues themselves, as well as the cave site, are profoundly and irrevocably diminished by their removal. Not only were pieces of the works destroyed (“a head lost forever in a river south of the Sind desert”), but a dimension of their meaning was

lost when they were removed from their original context (12). Arguably, the many documentary references that Ondaatje excerpts throughout the novel suffer a similar fate. For example, a list of the names of the disappeared that Ondaatje reproduces, although drawn from an actual human rights report, “cannot have the urgency of an Amnesty action appeal in the enduring medium of a cloth-bound novel” (McClennen and Slaughter 10). As Sophia McClennen and Joseph Slaughter correctly indicate, this text within the novel exists uncertainly between the realms of advocacy and art; while something may be gained from its reappropriation, something is surely lost as well (10).

Indeed, what is frequently lost in the novel’s response to the problem of “violence” is any sense of agency or remediability. It is a mistake to interpret the narrative of disappearance in *Anil’s Ghost* as simply an instance of unsuccessful activism, as McClennen and Slaughter make clear; nevertheless, it is significant that Ondaatje’s framing of the Sri Lankan conflict, by focusing on the interpretive work of forensics and aesthetics, effaces the agency of those who perpetrate violence, as well as those who combat it. The universality that the novel attributes to the violence it depicts may make that violence legible and significant to cosmopolitan Western readers at a remove from the Sri Lankan conflict, but it also suggests that that violence is ahistorical, inevitable, and irremediable. Throughout the novel, ancient remains are confused with contemporary ones, and as Anil frequently reminds readers, the methods of studying both are the same. Crucially, however, the stakes of doing so are different. Unlike the victims of Pompeii, to whom Anil compares them, the victims of the Sri Lankan conflict were subjected to deliberate and calculated cruelty; as Amnesty International states, “Someone decided what would happen to the victim; someone decided to conceal it. Someone is responsible” (*Disappearances and Political Killings* 84). And unlike the ancient carving that so moves Sarath, the man whose arrest he witnesses is not beyond the reach of help or intervention. By framing such forms of suffering and loss as universal, the novel reifies a powerful dimension of disappearance’s epistemic violence, displaces blame from those who commit crimes, and underscores the belief that society at large is powerless to prevent them.

III. Visible Absences and Strategic Narratives

To the extent that disappearance is a form of epistemic as well as physical violence, the acts of representational recovery that take place in and through works of fiction can present a powerful challenge to disappearance's disciplinary power. But as the readings above reveal, the results of narrative reconstruction can be powerful, but also profoundly ambivalent. Unlike non-fiction representations such as human rights reports, which are constrained by their limited access to information about the disappeared, fictional narratives are free to fill the gaps and silences in accounts of disappearance through the imaginative work of their creators and consumers. Moreover, rather than depicting disappearance in abstract or metaphorical terms, both *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* draw on the strategies of realism to provide "what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experiences of individuals" (Watt 27). As works of realist fiction, *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* offer, first and foremost, a representational plenitude that contrasts sharply with the elliptical, fragmentary narratives that emerge from zones of conflict and bear the marks of political repression.⁷ In addition to providing an engaging and compelling narrative to readers and viewers, this plenitude serves an important political function: in the context of ongoing conflicts, such narratives have "explicitly reaffirmed the existence of the absent person and resisted the social fragmentation that the regime sought to impose" (Nelson 50).

While it is important to recognize the symbolic power of realist representations that appear to bring the disappeared to life, it is also necessary to reflect critically on the narrative conventions that enable this form of imaginative recovery. As McClennen and Slaughter caution, "the apparent urgency of the human rights text should not avert our critical eye from the vehicles in which themes travel, the forms through which texts speak" (12). As both *Missing* and *Anil's Ghost* demonstrate, the representational frames that allow the disappeared to become legible as victims to international audiences are predicated on constitutive silences and exclusions. Rather than attend only to the complete, compelling narratives of disappearance these works purport to provide, we should instead recognize the silences that allow them to speak, silences that reflect

the particular location(s) of their creators and their audiences. These silences are what Slaughter calls “vanishing points,” narrative limits that are “the product and determinant of perspective” (217). Recognizing the formative effects of perspective, which shapes the way in which realist narratives represent the world, reinscribes the agency and responsibility of these texts’ international audiences as political actors and cultural consumers.

Ultimately, the silences that haunt the margins of *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* call into question the distinct forms of internationalism on which each text is premised. The framework of American exceptionalism in *Missing* may serve to render Charlie legible as a victim and to condemn the U.S. government’s involvement in the Chilean coup, but this exceptionalist logic denies the very possibility that the U.S., like Chile, could be a place where rights are violated and injustices are perpetrated in the name of national security. Yet the practice of referring to the coup, which took place on September 11, 1973, as “Chile’s 9/11” allows that chapter of Chilean history to cast a long shadow over recent U.S. policy in defense of the “homeland,” including so-called “aggressive interrogation techniques” and the detention of prisoners without the right of *habeas corpus*. *Anil’s Ghost*, in turn, appeals to universalistic values of beauty and truth to condemn the violence of Sri Lanka’s civil war and elevate the aesthetic as a source of transcendence. What this universalism conceals, however, are the forms of power and inequality that endure in both the cosmopolitan notion of shared human values and the infrastructure of international human rights law to which the novel makes recourse. For indeed, as Cheah notes, the very concept of humanity on which both cosmopolitanism and human rights are premised is inevitably contaminated by the “inhuman” technologies of power at work in global capitalism (11). As representations of the disappeared, both *Missing* and *Anil’s Ghost* are marked by constitutive silences that underwrite the distinct forms of internationalism each text embraces. For members of the international audiences these texts address, to attend to these silences is to acknowledge complicity in their representational choices, and to recognize the limits of the internationalisms they instantiate.

Notes

- 1 As Dawes argues, the belief that producing and disseminating narratives of suffering can give rise to meaningful action is “[o]ne of the most important premises of contemporary human rights work” (9). As a consequence of such narratives, “[i]ndividuals can be inspired to donate time and money; [and] governments, particularly those dependent on foreign aid, can be pressured into altering their behavior” (9).
- 2 The film is fictional but “based on a true story.” It conforms closely with a non-fictional account written by Hauser, which was not widely read at the time of its initial publication in 1978.
- 3 U.S. 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.
- 4 Teruggi, like many other characters in the film, is based on a real individual of the same name, although some aspects of his character—including his close relationship with Charlie—are fictionalized.
- 5 Said’s concept of Orientalism remains one of the most powerful and compelling articulations of this dynamic, in which the West reads itself into and through other cultures.
- 6 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 (*Disappearances and Political Killings* 28). In 2009, the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the Tamil separatists, and emergency laws were lifted in 2010. As of this writing, however, the political situation in the country remains uncertain, and the practices of disappearance, torture, and extrajudicial killing persist (Amnesty International, *Sri Lanka’s Shameful Record*).
- 7 For a compelling analysis of abstraction, fragmentation, and metaphor in literary representations of disappearance, see Gordon’s probing reading of Valenzuela’s novel *Como en la guerra / He Who Searches*, a text she describes as “allegorical, fragmented, narratively incoherent, and difficult to comprehend in any straightforward way that would easily answer the questions all readers ask” (67).

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