Postcolonial Trauma and the Ethical Tactility of Reading

by

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Abstract

*Postcolonial Trauma and the Ethical Tactility of Reading* interrogates the practice of reading literary trauma, examining literature of the apartheid in South Africa and the partition in South Asia. The representation of trauma forms a crucial component of postcolonial literature, which is often written in response to events of collective violence on a national scale. However, trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra have focused almost exclusively on the experience of western subjects, ignoring how postcolonial subjects differ in the relationship they develop between the experience of trauma and the process of moving through physical time. This omission tacitly rests on a conception of reading as an isolated cognitive experience, with the reader as a conscious subject categorizing a story’s traumatic events, which are self-identical and historical objects discontinuous from the subject’s own time of reading. Through a study of literary space, trauma theory, and the philosophy of touch, my work reconfigures the practice of reading postcolonial trauma as essentially vexed contact, a continually difficult “touch” between reader and postcolonial trauma text. Within the specific historical and cultural contexts of partition and apartheid, I discuss a cluster of representative novels that use apparently straightforward narrative forms to offer
deceptively complex, tactile encounters with trauma. The project concludes by taking us beyond surface-depth paradigms of postcolonial trauma, in order to present an alternative framework for reading that acknowledges, in the postcolonial context, the possibility of narrative surface as depth.
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Introduction

To write in the space marked by the postcolonial is, in a sense, already to narrate a traumatic experience, not only because postcolonial experience is frequently traumatic, but also because the very word itself suggests a troubled division, a feeling that what came before is fundamentally different from what will follow. We can describe postcolonial literature as written “back” to the former colonizing countries — literature that has come into being relatively recently in order to discuss the lived experience of the colonized or recently decolonized. The term is, of course, quite problematic. We wonder about whether formal independence is enough to convey the postcolonial in certain instances. We question, too, whether forms of neocolonial hegemony delegitimize the very term “postcolonial”; perhaps certain nations are not as postcolonial as we might think.

Why discuss postcolonial literature instead of world literature? The question of how to analyze the relationship between postcolonialism and the world finds expression in how critics have sought to redefine world literature to accommodate the changing realities of literature as an element of global production. David Damrosch has characterized world literature in terms of how works circulate and are received globally, identifying classics, masterpieces, and “windows on the world” as three distinct types of world literature (qtd. in Young 213). The first category, the classic, resonates with Goethe’s nineteenth-century definition of a work of literature from a non-European part of the world, one that possesses undeniable and lasting aesthetic value. However, Damrosch differs from Goethe in that the classic does not necessarily have to be read in the “original” language. The second category, the masterpiece, retains aesthetics as the key criterion, but is always a contemporary work, in contrast to the classic. Lastly, the window on the world, the third category, uses social and cultural criteria to assess the value of literature: a work provides a quasi-anthropological account of another culture, acting as a cultural “translation” for an implicitly western reader.

Damrosch’s categories establish a tacit aesthetic hierarchy: the window on the world, seemingly, is only useful insofar as it tells us something about a culture. Apparently, a
work of literature cannot perform that function and contain aesthetic resonance at the same time. Postcolonial literature, in its very morphology, challenges this hierarchy, forcing us to acknowledge the political and cultural framework within which all world literature moves. However, discussing the colonial or postcolonial condition of a work does not automatically exclude the aesthetic. Unlike Damrosch, I do not believe that a work of literature must always choose between being informative and generating an aesthetic response; it is not an either-or proposition. Moreover, I reject the establishment of these kinds of literary categories (classic, masterpiece, window on the world), which reduce contemporary postcolonial literature to nothing but quasi-anthropological accounts of non-western experience, accounts that have no purpose except to inform western readers. Unless we establish a viable connection to the contemporary postcolonial moment, we run the risk of creating a museum of Orientalist knowledge, a collection of supposedly timeless classics that reinforces and recirculates harmful colonial patterns of thinking and acting.

So we return, uneasily, to the postcolonial, to the split within both the word and the world. This internal contradiction, a recurring pulse, dramatizes the difficulty of the term: vexed, provoked, interrogated, challenged, looping back on itself, never at rest. I use the term “postcolonial literature” consistently throughout this project. I do so for clarity of expression and ease of reading, not in order to homogenize experience within a rubric whose authenticity we no longer question. The term has been and will continue to be contested, necessarily so. We say “postcolonial” hesitantly, doubling back on ourselves in the very act of saying, wondering if we have left something important unsaid. This continual tension might seem exhausting; I suggest instead that it crystallizes the exhilaration of critical inquiry. Furthermore, the self-reflexivity of postcolonial studies makes it highly suitable as a critical framework for studying trauma, which demands the same methodological and ethical rigour. What constitutes trauma? Do we speak of physical wounds, psychic injury, both, or neither? What is the relationship between the trauma of the individual and what we could conceivably call the collective trauma of the individual’s community? How does trauma take shape within specific historical and cultural contexts? And what is the role of literature in representing trauma, alongside other genres such as witness testimony and journalism?
This is a project committed to the thoughtful study of postcolonial trauma as it acquires representation in literature. It juxtaposes the collective trauma of two different regions, South Asia and South Africa, pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable comparative work in the field of literary studies. This comparative framework may appear to be something of a solecism within the field of postcolonial literary studies. Obeying received wisdom, an unwavering attention to local specificity would stop us from looking for commonalities in representation across different regions, time frames, and instances of collective trauma. Aspiring to breadth elides specificity and reinforces existing structures of power, leading us into the trap of substituting one master narrative for another. Indeed, one of the basic arguments against cross-regional comparative work is the danger of reducing the specific historical and cultural experiences of a given region to accommodate a master theory. In certain respects, Homi K. Bhabha’s conceptions of hybridity and mimicry exemplify this tendency, as Ania Loomba notes:

…despite the accent on hybridity and liminality, Bhabha generalizes and universalizes the colonial encounter. Thus, ironically, the split, ambivalent, hybrid colonial subject projected in his work is in fact curiously universal and homogeneous — that is to say he could exist anywhere in the colonial world. Hybridity seems to be a characteristic of his inner life (and I use the male pronoun purposely) but not of his positioning. He is internally split and agonistic, but undifferentiated by class, gender, or location. (149-50)

As Loomba and other critics\(^1\) see it, the development of “sophisticated vocabularies of subjectivity” comes at the expense of any sustained engagement with “class, gender, and context,” making it all the more important for us to “peg” the “psychic splits” of colonialism to “specific histories and locations” (150). Loomba uses location in the first instance, and context in the second, both occupying the same position in the clause (the third and final element); the slippage is suggestive. Location, then, is context in Loomba’s formulation, which implies that cross-regional analysis will lead us back to

\(^{1}\) Timothy Brennan is skeptical of the transformative power of cosmopolitanism (or transnationalist approaches): “To speak of cosmopolitanism’s locality is to suggest its exportability” (qtd. in Goebel and Schabio 4).
Enlightenment notions of universal experience, flattening out cultural specificity and impoverishing our understanding of forms of experience in each postcolonial region.

For Arif Dirlik, this flattening out occurs as postcolonial thought becomes interwoven with late capitalism, in a similar fashion to postmodernism. In other words, both postmodernism and postcolonial thought are the children of the late-capitalist era, offering the pretence of critiquing Western universalism but actually reifying that universalism:

[P]ostcolonialism, which appears to critique the universalist pretensions of Western knowledge systems, and “starts off with a repudiation of the universalistic pretensions of Marxist language, ends up not with its dispersal into local vernaculars but with a return to another First World language with universalist epistemological pretensions…” (qtd. in Loomba 206)

Dirlik sees the attempt to move beyond Western universalism as almost a doomed endeavour, returning us to a different kind of universalism that homogenizes experience across regions, locales, and vernaculars, leaving us with nothing but “epistemological pretensions.” Dirlik reads the “dispersal into local vernaculars” self-evidently: such a dispersal tacitly announces cultural authenticity, in contrast to the universalism of Marxism. As with Loomba, the local almost acquires the status of a fetish object, to be venerated in and of itself, the endpoint of critical inquiry.

To this line of argumentation, I respond with the conviction that the task of the postcolonial literary critic is, of necessity, bound up in analyzing both the specificity of the local and the broader canvas of the global. Confining a novel to its “parent” postcolonial region tacitly reaffirms the ghettoization of postcolonial literature, in which ethnic and cultural identities harden into rigid moulds based on arbitrary borders (themselves frequently colonial in origin and neocolonial in their continued existence) and making the inclusion of postcolonial texts in departments of literature a matter of checking off countries and continents on a list. Studying a given country or region also puts us at risk of reducing that country’s literature to the expression of a historical framework that is sealed off from other decolonized regions, a “narrowly cognitive”
methodology “that involves only a process of information” (LaCapra 41). The dialectic between the former colonizer and the postcolonial nation acquires an undue importance, eclipsing the ways in which forms of social, political, and cultural experience cut across national borders in the postcolonial domain. Moreover, focusing only on a given region exoticizes the postcolonial; constraining critical inquiry to a single or small group of cultures that we can “know” by accessing a small selection of literary texts.

My first chapter lays out the critical framework for studying representations of postcolonial trauma, discussing the problem of the reader’s response to literary trauma as it pertains to related fields such as trauma theory, affect theory, and phenomenology. This chapter establishes the project’s conception of reading postcolonial trauma as essentially vexed contact, a continually difficult “touch” between reader and postcolonial trauma text. My second chapter details the specific historical and cultural contexts of the partition of India and the late apartheid in South Africa; I then discuss two representative novels (Jyotirmoyee Devi’s The River Churning and J.M. Coetzee’s Age of Iron) that offer tactile encounters with literary trauma using unassuming but highly complex layers of narrative structure. The third chapter frames the issue of vexed contact as one of reader seduction, in which the apparently candid child narrators of two novels (Mark Behr’s The Smell of Apples and Bapsi Sidhwa’s Cracking India) offer the reader a problematically euphoric experience of reading trauma. The fourth and final chapter takes us beyond surface-depth paradigms of postcolonial trauma, in order to present an alternative framework for reading that acknowledges, in the postcolonial context, the possibility of narrative surface as depth.

Fixating on every concrete detail of the local, we risk reducing postcolonial experience to a digestible account of “other” cultures. In this latter scenario, the postcolonial writer becomes what Gayatri Spivak calls the “native informant,” whose job is to make the postcolonial other intelligible to the west — different but not too different, in an uncomfortable echo of Damsroch’s “window on the world.”

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2 Robert Young has a somewhat caustic view of Damsroch’s “window” category. A window on the world, he notes, “may just work so long as the other culture is not represented as too different, which may account for a common preference for the use of diasporic writers who may write in English or other European...
because the local culture, in this model, can only be informative to the west. Such a possibility, to my mind, does not function effectively as a counter-hegemonic strategy. Postcolonial literature is not and should not be purely the corollary of political and cultural formation. In examining the historical and cultural frameworks that shape postcolonial literature, we must do more than recirculate the discourses of protest and complaint. My project aims to infuse the study of postcolonial trauma with an attentiveness to metaphor, embodiment, and the relationship between narrative structure and the aesthetics of representation. In this aim, I hope to offer an account of postcolonial literature that honours the ambivalence of traumatic experience, creating the discursive space within which traumatic experience can find expression — in all its poignant complexity.

languages, rather than local ones who write in their own indigenous languages and do not write for western audiences” (214).
1 Touching Postcolonial Trauma

In the opening pages of *Corpus*, Jean-Luc Nancy reflects on the construction of the body in Western thought, and how this tradition limits the ability to speak about the body and tactility in writing. For Nancy, the western conception of the body is “overworked”, the construct of the “Occident.” When we say “This is my body,” we establish a conception of the body in relation to everything else: this body is mine because it is not another’s, because it exists in a world of other bodies and objects. We exhaust the body as a frame of reference; we write about the body as if it were possible for us to get “outside” the body. We speak of touching the body as if touching were an act we could accomplish in complete control of ourselves, as self-willed, rational, and sovereign subjects. Nancy argues that conventional forms of writing, which seek only to speak about bodies, are inadequate. These forms, he intimates, must give way to writing that dramatizes the very difficulty in describing the act of touching bodies:

> Touching doesn’t exactly happen in writing, if writing even has an inside. But at the border or limit, in the extremity of writing, *nothing takes place except touching*. Thus writing resides in the limit. If anything happens to writing, it is the act of touching. More precisely: the act of touching the body (or rather, specific, singular bodies) by way of the *incorporeal* quality of sense. And by consequence, making the incorporeal touch, making of it touching, making a sense of touch out of sense. (13, translation mine)

Nancy calls on us to think about a way of writing that accommodates the distance between bodies, that makes visible the “exposed” quality of all bodies in the world, at the same time as he compacts the plurality of many bodies into a single “exposed body.”

How does a body come to be perceived as a body, an object available for perception? How does a body exist, in space, as a body, and how do we formulate the space around a body as permeable, the environment in which bounded bodies exist and come into contact? Without the bounded body, we have nothing available to grasp, no sense of individuated objects available for our perception. This dependence on the spacing of bodies into discrete entities speaks to the fundamental condition of writing, taking us to
the present moment, in which it “is time, in effect, to write about and think the body in terms of the infinite distance which makes it ours, which makes it come to us from farther away than all our thoughts: the exposed body of the world’s population” (Nancy 14, translation mine).

Nancy sees this new way of writing as composed of tangents, lines, striations, and vectors: lacking a type of formal unity, the written body is *ex-scribed*, moved beyond or out of the text. Moreover, the media proliferation of bodies makes the task of writing the body an “urgency” for him. Bodies of all types come to us “from the greatest distance,” signalling an experience “on edge, at an extreme limit,” for which we need a “resolutely modern” solution in writing (Nancy 9). His vision is particularly bounded, his theoretical canvas confined to the western, Christian body that comes to exist as a body always falling, in specific reference to the biblical expulsion from paradise. Against the falling western body, Nancy notes the presence of “[s]trange [étranges] foreign bodies, endowed with Yin and Yang,” who themselves regard the western body as “stranger than anything foreign” (7).

The word *étranges* recurs here, indicating both the translated meaning (the strangeness of bodies) and a second valence (to be *à l’étranger* is to be abroad, not in one’s own land). As Nancy finds these non-western bodies strange, so too may we find the cryptic quality of this passage. Nancy wants to deconstruct the western body, but ends by locking the west into an ineluctable binary opposition with the east. The two are incommensurable for him; they cannot speak to each other. Viewing bodies on television, the example that Nancy uses, we confront the comparative scarcity of western bodies — a chosen few, in sickness (hospitals), exhaustion (toiling in factories), or else dead (cemeteries) — when set against the proliferation of non-western bodies that appear in multitudes, “frequently starved, beaten, murdered, restless, sometimes even laughing or dancing” (Nancy 9).

These non-western bodies are apparently of no account, raw numbers that form the undifferentiated contrast to the western subject. Only western bodies, the chosen few, ascend to the status of traumatized. Nancy is not talking specifically about trauma, but the representation of trauma is precisely what is at issue here. How do we make sense of the traumatic image, whether in sickness, exhaustion, or death? How can we think about
multiple bodies as one, without taking leave of specificity but also accounting for the heterogeneity of spacing (the distance between bodies) that forms the essence of any self-Other relation?

In this moment when Nancy is focused on the meaning of body for the west, the gaps in his thought cannot help but gesture involuntarily to non-western experience. In other words, Nancy’s call for a new way of writing produces a richness of possibility that exceeds his original terms of engagement. His demand today finds realization in the circulation and rise of postcolonial literature, in this literature’s ability to make sense of, distribute, and account for bodies in traumatic representation. Those “starved” non-western multitudes transcend Nancy’s description, acquire their own singularity within the scope of postcolonial literature. The “foreign bodies” about whom we apparently know nothing end up telling us something vital about trauma: the possibility of postcolonial literature and its metaphors as prosthetic supplements to the representation of trauma, supplements that originate in the reader’s encounter with the text itself.

In using the image of the prosthetic, it is not my intention to suggest that postcolonial literature is merely a supplement to western conceptions of trauma, a tidy and bounded solution to a niche deficit in western knowledge. On the contrary, I invoke prosthesis as a way to describe how contingent needs give rise to modes of representation that exceed the discursive space set out for them, just as those undifferentiated non-western bodies acquire more space within Nancy’s philosophy than he himself intends. These modes of representation are neither “natural” nor naturalized within the scope of a given pattern of thought, but rather just at its limit or outside it, provisional and always in the process of changing. In this way, a prosthetic conception of postcolonial literature forms a connection to Bill Ashcroft’s notion of articulation to describe the contemporary transnational moment, an idea that “returns us to the rather spasmodic and contingent manner in which subjects ‘hook on’ the various subject positions they may occupy … to the very powerful element of individual agency in the process” (17). To put it another way, the postcolonial as prosthetic creates unexpected forms of agency and experience, generating a unique encounter with the reader: an awareness of vexed contact that prompts the reader to evaluate and re-evaluate the representation of trauma that confronts
her. But the very contingency of this prosthetic encounter should make a claim on our attention, as we come to the realization that while we may be close to the text before us, we are not necessarily drawn into a “pure” relationship with trauma in its representation.

This project centres on the ethics of representing trauma and violence, and more specifically, on what takes place in the encounter between reader and trauma text. It also examines how postcolonial trauma literature reshapes our understanding of what it means to encounter a text, to come into contact with it, to touch it, as it were. In a way, this discussion opens up another question: how does the Other appear to us? The Other, of course, manifests in flesh-and-blood encounters of being seen or unseen, touched or untouched, with a presence of its own, an enclosed interiority of self and subjectivity. The Other also emerges as a figure of representation within forms of media such as literature, which gives us a “canvas” on which to examine a particular character or marginalized subject position. I speak here of literature as a means of representation, of figuring a person whose story or voice would otherwise be unheard. But the Other, it seems to me, is also the literary narrative itself: the corpus of the text, the body, if you will, of the literature, which leads us to the reader’s encounter with the text as a mass.

Over the course of the analysis to come, I will argue that our experience of reading is necessarily tactile: a contact or touch, an embodied encounter. However, this argument also acknowledges the inherent difficulty both in discussing touch as an isolated sense and in establishing touch and tactility at the apex of a hierarchy of senses. What I see as a tactile engagement between reader and text predicates itself on the literal act of seeing, of reading words on the surface of a page (whether the page is virtual or print). This is not a problem I intend to “solve,” but rather to interrogate productively, to put into service of a larger discussion on the practice of reading trauma in postcolonial literature. We find ourselves, then, faced with a series of questions. Why trauma? Why postcolonial trauma? And why literature as the vehicle for representing postcolonial trauma?

By focusing on trauma, I make a choice: to discuss a form of experience that offers perhaps the most ethically relevant account of how difficult it is to live in the world, to come up against representations that do not include you. In both discourse and lived
experience, the trauma survivor is always at risk of having the pain of the wound — physical or psychic, singular or collective — heightened and re-triggered, both by the toxicity of social exclusions and by attempts to account for traumatic experience that fall short of the complexity of the survivor’s position. Complicating the issue is the problem that arises when the survivor’s trauma is appropriated by others, when, as Dominick LaCapra argues, “the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity” (47). In the latter case, we are at risk of devolving into a “wound culture” (64), in which a specious and diffuse sense of “trauma” obscures and even effaces the real, concrete, and embodied experiences of actual trauma survivors. The trauma survivor, then, is constantly beset by the possibility of unwelcome touches from both the material and the signifying world, as well as the question of how to survive these touches, how to come into contact with the representation of trauma.

A major factor in differentiating postcolonial trauma from trauma in other contexts is the degree to which the traumatic experience of survivors is frequently not exceptional. That is, trauma is not an unusual or singular occurrence that takes place against a social and cultural backdrop of normalcy. When trauma is woven into the political structure of a nation, when it finds expression as a pervasive daily reality, the outgrowth of an ongoing collective violence, it becomes difficult to speak of trauma as exceptional. Postcolonial literature, then, gives us the opportunity to examine instances of individual trauma within a larger web of social and cultural relations, to discuss the extent to which narratives of trauma spring up around the survivor herself, and how she chooses to navigate these structures: at times engaging with the community strategically, and at others submerging herself in past trauma apart from or in opposition to the community. In other words, the survival strategies of postcolonial trauma victims may not be predicated on individual engagement, nor even on working through trauma in the way western trauma theorists might conceive it. In this latter model, we can see the extent to which a model of exceptional trauma depends on the subject falling back into an individuated routine in order to work through trauma, a routine that reflects western cultural specificity, rather than universal traumatic experience.
LaCapra argues that working through loss involves the recognition of the past’s difference from the present: the ongoing, sustained engagement with the daily reality of a present that is temporally and psycho-spatially distinct from the past. Moving on from the past — refusing to dwell in the painful memory of the past event — is how western trauma theorists such as LaCapra conceive the process of working through trauma, a position that is not without merit. When dealing with subjects who experience lapses in how they live physical time, subjects whose disconnection from the world necessitates a clinical intervention, we may well be justified in prioritizing an awareness of being in the present: distinguishing present from past, establishing and maintaining the possibility of a healthy relationship with the trauma that was. However, dwelling in the memory of past trauma does not necessarily mean being unable to distinguish past from present; conflating the two puts us at risk of erasing important cultural differences, which challenge the universality of the idea that detaching absolutely from the “pastness” of the traumatic event is always desirable. Scholars such as Veena Das, Urvashi Butalia, Antjie Krog, Ritu Menon, and Rita Barnard have written extensively on the complex ways in which postcolonial trauma survivors use an immersion in the trauma of the past event to their advantage. For example, when the survivor is compelled to perform the grief of the community in both clothing and gesture, the social pressure of the community does not allow her the time and space to distance herself from the past event. However, submersion in past trauma becomes a way for her to expand and even renegotiate her relationship to that same community. Essentially, the survivor inhabits the enforced re-triggering of her trauma but finds the means — in daily life, over months and years — to make sense of her trauma.

Furthermore, in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, Stef Craps makes a persuasive case for western trauma theory’s “general blindness to, or lack of interest in, the traumas visited upon members of non-Western cultures” (11-12). Discussing Caruth’s now-famous analysis, in *Unclaimed Experience*, of the film *Hiroshima mon amour*, Craps takes issue with Caruth’s willingness to flatten out Japanese collective trauma in order to dwell on the personal experience of the white European woman:

Hiroshima is reduced to a stage on which the drama of a European woman’s
struggle to come to terms with her personal trauma can be played out … Nor is [Caruth] discomforted by the fact that the connection that is established in the film between the collective memory of atomic destruction and the—historically less significant—personal tragedy of a femme tondue would appear to magnify the latter and down play or eclipse the former. (18)

In an incisive critique of western trauma theory that includes discussions of LaCapra, Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Ruth Leys, and Geoffrey Hartman, Craps demonstrates the extent to which western reaction to postcolonial trauma is characterized largely either by silence or by a tacitly neocolonial “exportation” of western psychiatric concepts to postcolonial regions, without much consideration of whether such treatments are even suitable to the region in question. In more recent case studies, he notes that western psychiatric concepts, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), are viewed as ahistorical, transcendent disorders and diagnosed arbitrarily in postcolonial nations (22-23). The treatments for supposed PTSD, in these cases, take the form of western therapy, in which the subject is made to confront her past trauma in words, speaking individually to a therapist. Craps also analyzes Ethan Watters’s Crazy Like Us, in which Watters discusses “the Western trauma counsellors who arrived in Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami and who, in their rush to help the victims, inadvertently trampled local expressions of grief, suffering, and healing, thereby actually causing the community more distress” (22). Instead of being allowed to turn to their community, which relied on Buddhist and Hindu beliefs in the reward of reincarnation for earthly suffering, to cope with the trauma of the tsunami, Sri Lankans were instead subjected to a “‘debriefing’ technique, which consisted of making the survivors retell or rework the traumatic event they had witnessed verbally or otherwise so as to allow them to process or master their traumatic memories” (23). Watters argues that such an approach actually did more harm than good by stripping away layers of communal protection from Sri Lankan trauma survivors precisely when that protection was most needed.

As part of redressing the deficit in understanding postcolonial trauma, Craps proposes a recuperative psychoanalytic approach informed by Frantz Fanon’s pioneering work in Black Skin, White Masks. For Craps, and others such as Rebecca Saunders and Kelly
Oliver,3 Fanon’s work allows a psychoanalytic reading of postcolonial trauma that accounts for and honors the complexity of postcolonial experience, without doing epistemic violence to the everyday lives of postcolonial subjects. Craps points to the paradigmatic experience of postcolonial trauma that Fanon describes when he encounters a white child who is frightened by his blackness, who sees him as “demonic black figure” (29). The shock of being figured as this monstrous, racialized being objectifies Fanon to himself, leaving him “amputated” from any healthy bodily schema: “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day” (Fanon, Black Skin 113). Moreover, in addition to charting the psychic effects of colonial trauma, Crap argues that Fanon “calls attention to the social nature of the traumas caused by racial oppression,” while challenging “the tendency of European psychoanalysis to focus exclusively on relations within the family unit and to assume a basic continuity between the family and the nation” (Craps 30).

Fanon’s work certainly constitutes a powerful exploration of what Maria Roots calls “insidious trauma” (qtd. in Craps 26), which emerges as an ongoing set of “covert, subtle, ambiguous, and complex racist incidents operating at institutional and cultural levels” (Craps 26). However, I am reluctant to invoke Fanon to make sense of apartheid and partition trauma, in part because this project is necessarily invested in exploring ways of responding to trauma that challenge psychoanalytic models. Furthermore, the Fanon of Black Skin, White Masks has very little, if anything, to say about black female subjectivity. In "The Woman of Color and the White Man," Fanon sketches a pathological obsession with shedding blackness that drives black women to adore white men "unconditionally"; in one case, he cites a woman who "asks for nothing, demands nothing, except a little whiteness in her life" (Fanon, Black Skin 25). Later, he observes that while "[t]hose who grant us our findings on the psychosexuality of the white woman may well ask us what we have to say about the black woman … [w]e know nothing about her" (157). This contemptuous dismissal of black female subjectivity is particularly problematic in the case of female experience of apartheid violence. As Rosemary Jolly notes, the initial hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission accorded a

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3 See Oliver, The Colonization of Psychic Space (2004), and Saunders, Lamentation and Modernity in Literature, Philosophy, and Culture (2007).
disproportionate importance to the violence that black men had suffered during apartheid (83). Women, initially, “were more often than not perceived as secondary players in a story whose focus was seen to be the interaction between male perpetrators and their overwhelmingly male ‘primary’ victims” (83). Violence towards male subjects inflicted not only personal trauma but an eradication of male identity — active and aggressive by default; female subjects, by contrast, were identified as body and seen as inherently passive, so that traumatic experience, such as rape, was “seen to accentuate a ‘core’ female sexuality of passivity and shame” (95). In such a context, Fanon’s reductive construction of black female experience — seen only as a desire to be mastered by a white man, unsupported by any meaningful clinical casework — is not helpful to my project’s investigation of postcolonial trauma.

The complexity and range of responses to trauma underline the importance of literature in the arena of traumatic representation. Literature, I argue, is not important because it offers a more “authentic” experience of trauma, but rather because literature, being in some sense a fictional medium (though not wholly fictional, in many cases), provides a fulcrum for addressing these issues openly. Analyzing fiction, we have no option but to confront the representational decisions of a given text: what it chooses to withhold and reveal, and how those choices sign themselves through plot, character development, symbol, theme, motif, and so on. All these elements fall under the aegis of the text, which has no concealment from the responsibility of representation, unlike, for example, historical testimony or journalism,⁴ which can frequently hide behind a veneer of objectivity (or at least an objectivist style of writing). I do not, of course, mean to suggest that testimony and journalism are inauthentic and unsuited to the task of representing trauma. Rather, the elasticity of literary form provides a way to address and engage with different aspects of trauma that cannot seek refuge in a specious definition of objectivity. Despite my earlier criticism of LaCapra, I find it productive to invoke his caution against the appearance of objectivity, which may in fact be nothing but a “blandly generalized, unearned judiciousness that harmonizes problems and may even signal a numbing

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⁴ In making this distinction, I acknowledge that certain forms of journalism and testimony cross over into the realm of the literary when attempting to represent trauma. Far from disproving my point, these
insensitivity to their import and implications” (35). Literature furnishes us with a medium through which we can approach the limits of representation, pushing against these limits in order to represent certain types or aspects of trauma that non-literary forms may not be able to access.

On the other hand, pushing against limits is not synonymous with self-conscious, formal experimentation or hyperbolic language. As LaCapra notes, an objective, quasi-realist work can be useful and innovative, just as a self-consciously postmodern novel can be harmful and reductive (71). In this caution, I characterize literature as the potential site of what we might call a productive excess — a zone where we can raise the question of how to “engage in forms of hyperbole but still attempt to signal the importance of, and help bring about, a viable interaction between excess and legitimate normative limits” (71, f. 38). Here, LaCapra is at pains to acknowledge the ethical complexity of both hyperbole (excess) and more muted, objective styles of writing (“legitimate normative limits”). Both styles can be productive or reductive, depending on the work and its context. Similarly, I hold hyperbole, in this formulation, to strict account, just as I do with more restrained styles of writing: stylistic excess for its own sake is as unsuitable to the ethical task of representing trauma as the “unearned judiciousness” of certain objective or realist styles of writing. Thus, if literature is sometimes a “form of hyperbole,” it offers us an opportunity to characterize hyperbole not as apolitical vacuity, but rather as a place where excess (in different forms and genres) can constitute the beginnings of an attempt to narrate the experience of trauma in good faith.

My project pairs a selection of South Asian and South African texts and their specific collective traumas in order to demonstrate the corporeality, the tactility, of the reader’s encounter with trauma as text. In other words, trauma texts are not just accounts of traumatized bodies, but are also themselves “bodies” with their own particular shape, trajectory, and ethical “mass.” In the analysis to follow, I suggest that each of these texts uses narrative structure to engage the reader in a relationship that is at once aesthetic and ethical.

convergences demonstrate the significant role literature has to play in refining our understanding of trauma even in forms that are not wholly or consciously literary.
My suggestion may be at odds with the larger frame of postcolonial studies, which frequently subordinates aesthetics and narrative structure to political and historical concerns. Trauma, in this model, becomes a politically determined tension between silence and disclosure; aesthetics is minimized as a factor in how the reader encounters the traumatic event. Without wishing to deny the importance of history and politics, I believe that an overemphasis on situating the work in its attendant local context has hampered our ability, as scholars, to make productive connections across different postcolonial regions, identifying patterns in how writers from different parts of the world shape the narratives of trauma. The identification of a pattern is thus not a reduction, but rather an opportunity to expand the critical vocabulary of postcolonial literature.

I am certainly aware of the risk in identifying patterns of representation in postcolonial literature. Too often, the establishment of a pattern becomes a way to construct types and elide difference rather than examine the experience of the postcolonial subject in its singularity. On the other hand, we are no less vulnerable to such elisions by hiding behind a disingenuously postmodern erasure of all difference, where inequalities of representation might persist. Instead, I argue for a critical literary approach informed by a poststructuralist suspicion of the centred subject but not willing to devolve into apolitical celebration of endless aporias and double binds.5 In this approach, my project resists the conflation of post-structuralist thinking with postmodern relativism.6

The literary text, in the realm of postcolonial trauma studies, is an artifact with its own specific formal and affective meaning; it is capable of enhancing the representation of trauma by drawing on elements of history and theory to offer a truth claim that transcends questions of fact as defining categories. Far from arguing that fact and evidence are irrelevant, I want to call our attention to how fiction, and postcolonial fiction in particular, can inhabit and transform these forms of knowledge, juxtaposing the undeniable value of truth claims with the “poetic, rhetorical, and performative

5 As LaCapra notes, we need not restrict ourselves to a binary consisting of “full ego identity” and “total mastery” on the one hand and “endless mutability, fragmentation [and] aporias” on the other (71).
6 Gayatri Spivak argues that such a conflation is a convenient way for contemporary critics to avoid examining the hegemonic relationship between the development of western theories of subjectivity and the historical moment of decolonization and postcolonialism. As she asks, “why was it structurally necessary … to neutralize the potential for a critique of modernization in poststructural thinking?” (313).
dimensions of art which not only mark but also make differences historically” (LaCapra 15). This space is mutually transformative, accommodating both historical contingency and aesthetics. It characterizes postcolonial literary trauma as both the site and the method for linking psychic empathy, within the context of trauma survivors, to reader empathy. Here, I build on LaCapra’s notion of empathic unsettlement, which compels the secondary witness of trauma to put herself “in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (78). For LaCapra, empathic unsettlement “resists full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other” (41). In the postcolonial realm, empathy emerges out of an engagement with literary form that requires the reader’s experience of reading trauma to be tactile. The vexed quality of this encounter produces a different and perhaps difficult new form of empathy, which is capable of processing the experience of trauma without “unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage” (40).

This chapter will discuss both the potential and limits of Derek Attridge’s characterization of literature as a creative encounter between reader and text. From there, I explore recent theorizations on the relationship between art and its viewer. In juxtaposing movements in art criticism with the study of literature, my aim is to make the reader available as an object of scrutiny, just as one might be more inclined to do for the viewer, who inhabits a more openly embodied relationship to the art she or he views. I subsequently move into an interrogation of the philosophy of touch, circling a cluster of relevant texts on phenomenology — the study of consciousness and its relationship to the world. Through this interrogation, I will provide the conceptual basis for rethinking touch and tactility in relation to reading literary trauma texts. The chapter concludes by establishing the terrain on which my project will engage in comparative analysis of trauma texts from different postcolonial regions and eras.

1.1 Singularity and creative reading

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge proposes an approach that recognizes aesthetics as a significant factor in the experience of reading without making it a mere exercise in solipsistic pleasure. For Attridge, literature offers a unique mode of contact in which the creativity of the author gives rise to an otherness that is outside our readerly
horizons (19). Encountering the Other as text shares a common characteristic as 
encountering the Other in embodied form: one must respond to the Other’s uniqueness, 
but creatively, continually rearticulating one’s subject position in a permanent 
interruption of “sameness,” — that is, one’s comfortable position within a unique 
repository of beliefs, ideals, and cultural values, which Attridge refers to as one’s 
“idioculture.” Reading calls on the reader to disrupt that sameness, to accept that 
disruption as the precondition of doing justice to the richness of possibilities raised by the 
text. These possibilities arise not in every work of literature, but rather in works that are 
inventive and original according to a particular scheme. To be inventive, Attridge argues, 
a work must possess a “quality of innovation which is directly sensed in the present” 
(Attridge 45). The reader authentically senses inventiveness because inventiveness is 
always in the present, always a departure from the reader’s sense of “now.” This 
engagement with literary inventiveness requires an encounter between one’s own 
idioculture and the text’s alterity, an encounter that is both the failure to “master” via 
understanding and the awareness that one’s understanding is changing and has been 
changed by the process of engagement. Attridge sees this encounter as carrying an 
inherent risk, since there is no guarantee that alterity will be beneficial or non-destructive; 
however, the undecidability or risk of the “event” of reading is part of what forms its 
vitality, keeps alive the encounter as an interpenetrating process between reader and text.

Attridge acknowledges both the value of aesthetics and the problematic ways in which 
critics typically mobilize aesthetics to further cultural ends. If all aesthetic judgment has a 
specific cultural formation, he notes, we should be wary of judging individual works of 
literature according to standards that masquerade as universal. Instead, Attridge sees 
creative reading as a process by which “Otherness may be brought into the world” (79), a 
willfulness to interrogate one’s own cultural context (82). Correspondingly, he ascribes 
an uncertainty and apparent irrationality to the process of artistic creation:

I seem to be composing new sentences out of nothing, or rather out of a largely 
inchoate swirl of half-formulated thoughts and faint intimations; from time to time 
the nebulous outlines take shape as phrases or argumentative links, but I keep 
losing the thread, deleting, going back over my typed words, making one more
attempt to say what needs to be said, or even, it sometimes seems, what demands to be said … Motivated by some obscure drive, I sense that I am pushing at the limits of what I have hitherto been able to think. (17-18)

This is a moment when Attridge is grappling with the difficulty in thinking about writing as a rational process governed by a self-conscious subject, a self-transparent “I.” The ambiguity of the process ("nebulous outlines" that the author is always at risk of “losing”), the involuntary equivocations ("I seem to be," “one more attempt to say”), the fuzziness of motives ("obscure drive") — all dramatize the ways in which the creative process escapes the control of the author and makes the encounter between reader and text a matter of contingency. By his own admission, Attridge is not “seeking a psychological description or explanation of the process of creation,” but rather an account of what results from this process, which he see as a network of “shifts between different structural relations and the possibilities and constraints they bring into being” (18). He sees the attempt to detach the results of creating from the process of creation as a practical necessity, since he is focused not on this process, but on how literary Otherness emerges within and pushes at the boundaries of culture, “outside the horizon provided by the culture for thinking, understanding, imagining, feeling, perceiving” (19). Essentially, Attridge wants to set aside the question of artistic creation as a process in order to focus on the implications of artistic creation for the reader.

The encounter with this literary Otherness, by definition, requires an immersion in and appreciation of culture. In Attridge’s thought, we find a persistent emphasis on the ideal reader’s awareness of cultural context: “And the more fully I have absorbed the cultural materials that surround me—including those that make up the institution of literature (its history, its range, its linguistic and generic conventions)—the richer the encounter is likely to be” (82). Though Attridge slips into a mild equivocation here — the encounter is “likely,” not guaranteed, to be more fruitful — his faithfulness to cultural awareness is fairly transparent. If the reader has little sense of wider culture or bases the reaction to a text on personal idiosyncrasy, the inventiveness of the text will be short-lived. Ethical attentive reading, Attridge argues, demands
a mode of attention to the specific and singularity of literary writing as it manifests itself through the deployment of form (a term which will require redefinition), as well as to the unpredictability of literary accomplishment that seems connected with that deployment—an approach that at the same time fully acknowledges the problematic status of all claims to universality, self-presence, and historical transcendence. (13)

The weight of Attridge’s proposal leaves him open to charges of a utopian vision of reading literature. It is difficult to imagine how this approach to reading would be able to resist “universality, self-presence, and historical transcendence,” given Attridge’s preoccupation with the original and inventive quality of a given literary text, which reflects his unconscious elevation of western European genres (including modernism) as the most suitable literature for this creative engagement. In Attridge’s thought, a certain type of formal complexity acquires privilege, with the reader assumed to be transparent to him- or herself and also possessing a wide understanding of the work’s cultural context. Shading the possibility of the “culture at large” determining the literariness of a given work (61) is the question of whether it is even possible to demarcate and separate cultures in order to make these types of evaluation. Furthermore, why must the reader enter into a potentially elitist appreciation of literary inventiveness in order to be ethically engaged with literature?

If appreciation of culture is the necessary requirement for engaged reading, its importance also reveals Attridge’s conception of the ideal readerly posture, which involves “the suspension of habits, a willingness to rethink old positions in order to apprehend the work’s inaugural power” (80). This posture frames reading as a disembodied activity, characterized by metaphors of lexis and rational thought: decoding, text, think, and rethink. The reader is sedentary, reflective, and rational; literature appears as a text to be decoded in patterns of sequential, self-conscious thought. Attridge’s writing, as if disobeying the creative impulses of its author, insistently slips back into specific cultural value judgments; he raises a rich array of possible textual practices, only to foreclose them by invoking the metaphor of the decoded text. The deeper Attridge sinks into the discourse of literary production — deleting typed words, struggling with
their relationship to what must be “said” — the further we get from understanding that “largely inchoate swirl of half-formulated thoughts and faint intimations.” The writer fixates on articulation and the typed word, the exemplars of writing and reading as lexical practices. In other words, despite Attridge’s attempt to account for the limits of reason in his definition of creative reading, we find rationality, and the text as an object to be “decoded,” creeping into an argument that is supposed to be invested in challenging these very terms. Essentially, the flow of Attridge’s argument militates against relating to the text solely within the parameters he sets out, taking him further than he wants to go.

Reflecting on the difficulty of artistic creation, he cannot help but visualize the writer as primarily a rational creator and organizer of words; in so doing, he shortchanges his own argument about the unpredictability and givenness of literary creation. If the hypothetical writer of Attridge’s example only seems to be creating words where none exist, he also gestures to the limits of representing the creative process purely within the framework of a self-willed subject sitting down, with conscious intent, to write words that mysteriously form out of the “swirl” of his thoughts.

1.2 Literalism and affect theory

Attridge’s project is, of course, preoccupied with challenging proponents of reading literature as a solitary and apolitically pleasurable activity. Accordingly, he offers his own theory of literature, which, “when it is responded to as literature—is not a political instrument, yet it is deeply implicated in the political” (120). However, this question of the appropriate posture for “reading” a work of literature can acquire a richer dimension in a broader historical and creative context: the rise of minimalist or literalist art (including both painting and sculpture), a genre that dramatizes the relationship between viewer and art within its very morphology. Minimalism, as an artistic trend, opposes the critical approach of scholars such as Attridge, who prioritize careful, contextualized interpretation. Minimalism, by contrast, commands the viewer not to interpret the work, but to inhabit it on a visceral level.

In the 20th century, minimalism arises primarily in reaction to modernist art, which is increasingly alienated from the holistic unity of a single object within a painting or sculpture. This alienation leads to an engagement with shapes, often in three dimensions
of space, which “must belong to painting” and “must be pictorial, not, or merely, literal” (Fried 120). Modernist artists such as David Smith and Anthony Caro attempt to free themselves from an aesthetic dependence on the aura of objects as ordinary, everyday things. Michael Fried has famously characterized the project of modernist art as one that compulsively wants to “suspend its own objecthood” (120). Modernist art, for Fried, must reject the theatricality of objects as non-art, which makes the viewer uncomfortably aware of her own temporal and cultural proximity to “ordinary” things: if these objects are ordinary, and not art, they cross over into the viewer’s space. The connection between the bounded world of artistic production and the materiality of objects that could pass for household items is insupportable in the modernist aesthetic. Working with a non-literal (perhaps even anti-literal) conception of space in which “specific elements...separate from the whole, thus setting up relationships within the work” (Judd qtd. in Fried 118-19), modernist art invites the viewer to probe beneath the surface of the work, or rather, to cast off the definition of surface as being engaged with the project of representation in any way. This opposition to surface, Fried argues, is why modernist artists find the application and conception of colour to be problematic: in its basic application, colour is equivalent with the surface of a piece of art, “and inasmuch as all objects have surface, awareness of the sculpture’s surface implies its objecthood” (Fried 138).

Minimalist or literalist art, by contrast, works to embed surface in the conception of art itself, and it does so by relating surface to the everyday nature of objects. Objecthood is not something to avoid or disparage but the very foundation upon which the concept of minimalist art rests. Where modernist art moulds the shape of its material into a relational field with other objects on canvas or in sculpture, minimalist art contends that “[t]he shape is the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of the shape” (Fried 119, emphases added). To the extent that shape defines the object, the symmetric repetition of shape projects a geometric and tacit order onto the space where the viewer beholds the object. Object-oriented repetition creates a unity that is not born of the relationship between components; unlike modernist art, there are no discrete objects or components constitutive of a whole. Rather, what comprises the whole is the anthropomorphized “inner, even secret, life” (129) of the art, which is interpenetrative with the space of viewing, an intensity of magnitude rather than of totalizing design. This
“secret life” or presence remains unverifiable by third-party analysis, inextricable from the personal experience of the individual viewer. What Smith calls the “inscrutability and mysteriousness of the thing” (qtd. in Fried 129) is for Fried “incurably theatrical” (130) in its studied manipulation of context and aura to generate the “effect” of presence.

Literalism is no longer merely art, but the performance of art’s relationship to the viewer enfolded in the parameters of the setting. Self-consciousness inheres in this presentation, with art, artist, object, and viewer all becoming enmeshed in the theatricality of a context in which the given

object, not the beholder, must remain the center or focus of the situation, [while] the situation itself belongs to the beholder—it is his situation … But the things that are literalist works of art must somehow confront the beholder—they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way. (127)

Control of spatiality belongs to the viewer, whose relationship to the object is coiled with tension, drenched in awareness of the situation’s theatricality. If the object is in the viewer’s “way,” it says something about how the viewer has chosen to behold the object: position, angle, proximity, and area of visible illumination. Colour, in this schema, is not the unbearable reminder of objecthood which must be purged from painting or sculpture, but the confirmation of the surface of the art, and thus its objecthood. In individuating the relationship of viewer and art almost to the level of mysticism, the viewer gains the impression that “the work in question has been waiting for him” (140).

In its purest form, Fried argues, the minimalist aesthetic not only resists interpretation, but eradicates interpretation as a category of meaning. Its preoccupation with infusing the viewer with a sense of the art’s objecthood comes at the expense of the viewer entering into the process of interpreting the art itself. According to Fried, political and social critique disappears into a critical space populated only by the visceral, individuated reaction of the viewer. However, minimalism is not an isolated trend, but consonant with similar critical turns in fields that touch on the study of literature, such as trauma theory and affect theory. Recently, Ruth Leys has extended Fried’s critique of literalism into a more wide-ranging interrogation of affect theory, which she sees as being prone to reducing all questions of trauma to the postulation of the existence of “basic” human
emotions. Theatricality and isolation, which provided a revelation to literalist artists such
as Tony Smith, have now led to a tendency among both trauma theorists and affect
theorists to privilege “anti-intentionalism”:

[B]oth trauma and affect are characterized by the absence of intention or meaning;
[according to] the same commitment to materialism, with the result that trauma
and affect are literalized or corporealized in the body; and the same tendency to
look for support in the neurosciences, which operate with the same materialist
assumptions. (12)

Despite the apparent ethical call, in affect theory, for readers to “confront” the text before
them in the “right way by suspending or deferring their desire to interpret in order to
respond to its affective intensities,” Leys isolates and interrogates the fatalism of such a
model, noting that “the effect of the text’s violence on readers is ineluctable, so that it is
not clear that they have any choice but to respond” (17). While Leys acknowledges that
“the reader-viewer becomes a constitutive element in affect’s implementation or
accomplishment” (18), she also laments “the intellectual poverty” of affect theory’s
hyper-focus on generating a reader response that has “nothing to say about content, plot,
characters, psychology, mental states, narrative or descriptive strategy, or any other
features of the text except such as can be viewed as a means — a technology — for
producing subjectivity effects” (20). According to Leys, we shift from interpreting a text
to exposing ourselves viscerally to the text, in a “mesmerized-masochistic way so as to
actualize its forces and intensities and be transformed in turn” (21).

For Leys and others with whose ideas she aligns, such as Fried (as I discussed earlier)
and Walter Benn Michaels, 7 shifting from interpretation to reception is coextensive with
retreat into a non-signifying reader response bereft of political and social vitality. Leys
and Fried juxtapose viscerality and interpretation in order to make the case for
interpreting a work of art or text, rather than simply inhabiting the aesthetic effects it
generates. Attridge, by contrast, attempts to unify interpretation and visceral reaction
within a single framework, focusing on both reading and artistic creation. However, in

7 See “Neoliberal Aesthetics: Fried, Rancière and the Form of the Photograph” (2011) and The Shape of the
both instances, he ends up reifying the encounter with literature as a purely lexical practice. In his desire to preserve the ethical component of reading, he unwittingly evacuates embodiment and tactility from the discussion.

My own critical practice is more engaged with the tactility of the literary reading encounter than Leys and Fried. In a sense, I am trying to do what Attridge attempts but to my mind fails to accomplish: to preserve the idea of a visceral reader reaction to literature without evacuating that idea of ethics, agency, or broader sociocultural meaning. Viscerality does not preclude interpretation. For “content” — plot, characters, etc. — still comes under the purview of cognition, which determines the visceral impact of art. What constitutes the “proper” components of visceral art is a question of interpretation, no less than the assumption that visceral reaction depends on a blank viewer or reader. The novels that form the literary focus of my project metonymize this “masochistic mesmerism,” breaking it out of isolated and apolitical cognitive experience by tying affect to a shared cultural context. What I am offering is a suggestion as to how we might read postcolonial texts, how we might inhabit the reading space necessary to experience postcolonial texts as trauma texts. By speaking of a reading posture, an orientation towards certain types of narrative structures, it also becomes possible to speak of a productive hypnosis, a way to mobilize the visceral element of affect theory without taking leave of context and interpretation. Conversely, if we wish to interrogate literature’s claim to universality, Attridge’s sweeping call to redefine form falls short of the mark, because distinctions between form and content fail to account for the sensory experience of reading within the broader philosophical tradition of phenomenology. This experience includes literary criticism but also exceeds its discursive parameters. Instead, it characterizes the reader’s encounter with the text as inherently tactile: a contact between two supposedly discrete masses that also touches on the metaphoric representation of touching within the text itself.

1.3 The double apprehension
What is the connection between metaphor and phenomenology, and how does that connection mediate the act of reading trauma? Is there a “correct” theorization of touch to be found? The more we delve into an analysis of touch, the less we are able to speak of
any pure, immediate sense of the body touching or being touched; instead, what appears
is an originary scene at which metaphor constitutively shapes our sense of touch. The
primacy of tactility is undone in its founding moment by the preexistence of our
enmeshment in a set of metaphors with their own exclusions, boundaries, and
orientations. In this turn towards a contingent conception of tactility, we must also
rethink the ethics of reading as inherently contingent: when we “touch” a text, we do not
acquire mastery over it by the purity of a tactile encounter. The encounter is a touch, but
it is also a contentious touch. In the previous section, I juxtaposed Ruth Leys’s critique of
affect theory with Derek Attridge’s account of the singularity of the reader’s interpretive
engagement with literature. In each case, the pressing issue is one of contact: how to
make sense of the encounter between reader and text, what to do with this problematic
touch. This juxtaposition, which sheds light on the debate surrounding the reader’s
response to literature, also allows me to take the discussion a step further, into a more
broadly philosophical consideration of what it means to theorize contact and tactility. In
this section, I want to examine the idea that one’s choice of metaphor is crucial to how
one conceives of touch in the world, how the originary tactile encounter comes to be
narrated and spoken into existence. When we speak of tactility, we are, of course,
speaking of a way of thinking and knowing the world that remains open-ended, at issue,
contestable within the very matrix of cognitive and linguistic frameworks that call such a
concept into being. In other words, understanding tactility requires coming to grips (the
metaphor is deliberate) with how the branch of knowledge called phenomenology creates
this thing that we call “touch.”

To begin this discussion, I pick up a tensive moment in Edmund Husserl’s thought on the
immediacy of tactile experience, as related in Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology
and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution
(Book II). Husserl attempts to position the body as the only originary source of
sensation, contrasting the “mediate” quality of non-organic, mechanical objects with
bodies, which are “immediately spontaneously (‘freely’) moveable” (159). Only in
“tactuality” can the body “be constituted originarily”; within this “tactuality” lies

8 Hereafter referred to as Ideas II.
“everything that is localized with the sensations of touch: for example, warm, coldness, pain, etc.” (158). However, in a portion of his exegesis of the philosophy of tactility, *On Touching*—Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida takes aim at Husserl’s characterization of touch:

> [T]he authority of the “eidetic” figure and of optical intuitionism, the implicit philosophy of the gaze—as paradoxical as this may appear—always and necessarily fulfills itself, firmly and incessantly strengthens and confirms itself, in an intuition actually filled-in and in the hyperbole of continuistic haptocentredness. (161)

The paradox here is that sight actually relies on touch, formally and rhetorically, to be intelligible as a framework for cognition. Let me tease out this strand of Derrida’s thought. The “eidetic” figure is drawn as if perfectly from memory, which generates a sense of recall as image, confirming the “optical intuitionism” that Derrida assigns to Husserlian thought (and to indeed, many other philosophers in the western tradition). However, this intuitionism only emerges as absolute truth, Derrida notes in a brief discussion of Plato’s Phaedo, when psyche “is troubled neither by vision nor hearing, nor any pleasure or displeasure of the body … when it has dismissed the sensible, when it has been able to say hello [salut] to the senses and to the body” (120). The intuition of seeing gains ascendency by expelling everything sensible, including a certain idea of touch as merely one sense among others (hearing, taste, sight, smell). However, this expulsion also confirms or reifies touch in another manner: as that ultimate expression or confirmation of “intuitive, immediate, current, and certain plenitude in the experience of present being” (162).

Three distinct ideas of touch emerge in Husserl’s thought. First, we encounter touch as one sense among many, one thing which the subject must discard, in Platonic terms, to ascend to truth. Second, touch is the absolute, pure, and purely given experience of present being for the individual, a “group of sensations” with “an immediate Bodily localization” that “belong in a way that is immediately intuitable, to the Body as to his particular Body” (Husserl 160). Lastly, touch is the primal mode by which subjects experience each other in the world, and of the experience of beings “in general” (Derrida 162).
The task, for Derrida, is to track how and why western philosophers, within a long-standing tradition of discourse on tactility, conflate and recirculate these three distinct notions of what touch is. If touch is what we must leave behind to ascend to truth (one sense among many), what do we find at the “summit” of that truth but another configuration of touch, the absolute presentness of presence? Still further, leaving the purely solipsistic realm, why must we make another leap towards touch as intersubjectivity, the confirmation not of solipsistic sensation but the foundational encounter with the Other? These leaps trouble Derrida so much that he is unable to take leave of critiquing them, even when he declares himself ready to abandon this line of argument (161). These excesses, these skips along metonymic chains of meaning, determine and inhabit his analysis, giving it shape, trajectory, and force. For if these philosophers return “incessantly” to a definition of touch, this return reveals a space of confusion within which contradictory “axiomatics” take root: one sense of touch, and then another, and so on. These chapters are “tangents,” structural ironies that take shape in the circularity of Derrida’s thought, which always wants to come back to the inherent contradiction we perform when we try to think touch.

In the image of the double apprehension — touching one hand with the other, feeling oneself as both toucher and as the thing touched — we find the locus of Derrida’s critique. Husserl is at pains to distinguish between sensible impression and extension, a distinction that forms the basis for talking about or theorizing the phenomenological subject who is able to characterize psychic states, cognition, lived experience, and bodily qualities to himself. For Derrida, “Husserl is intent on grounding the privilege of the tactile in the constitution of the body proper on the properly phenomenological necessity of this distinction” between sensible impression and extension (174).

Within the realm of solipsistic experience, the subject experiences absolute tactility, as well as empathy for the other, by way of the double apprehension of the hand on hand. Let me explain this figuration. The image that Husserl uses is of a person touching one hand with the other. In this moment, the subject comes to feel two sensations: one
sensation of being touched, and another sensation of doing the active touching. This moment is originary in Husserlian thought, the scene of auto-affection *par excellence*, in which the subject retreats into a private realm composed of sensing, sensation, and the soul’s plenitude. Paradoxically, though, Husserl sees this double-apprehension as a foundational *ethical* moment, a general awareness of limits. Via the hand on hand, solipsistic experience expands to include the realization that sensation consists of contact *between limits* (between two hands bounded by skin). Consequently, I, as the subject, become aware of the possibility of the Other’s hand as limit, since the Other, like me, has two hands\(^9\) and is capable of performing this same originary action of touching one hand with the other. Awareness here is the recognition of an intellectual impasse: this Other is like me, but my knowledge of his body (as opposed to mine) is by definition indirect, available only “through appresentation, comparison, analogy, projection, and introjection” (Derrida 190). Completing this detour, which is itself a circuit of analytic relations keyed to a vexed metaphor, is the awareness of the Other’s interior experience as fundamentally unknowable: the Other’s solipsism, his own private and discrete realm of hand-on-hand sensation, is irreducibly his own, sealed from my senses.

This last awareness of the Other’s irreducible realm of solipsism, never given to me and only available indirectly, through mediation, is what generates empathy for Husserl. However, this generation takes place by way of a peculiar emphasis on sight at the point of ethical transformation: it is through *seeing* the other’s hand and *not* partaking of his solipsistic experience that I become empathically aware of him. Empathy uses sight as the intermediary to an experience that is fundamentally one of negation: the Other’s solipsistic experience refused. Again, we have an imbrication of two supposedly discrete senses within a figuration that wants to be originary: in perceiving the surface (through sight) of the Other as something that conceals the Other’s own solipsistic experience, I reach the possibility of empathy.

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\(^9\) The subject of Husserl’s phenomenology is certainly male, Ego-presumed masculine, which, of course, carries with it an ethical concern for the gendered rhetorical exclusion performed at the moment when Husserl is speaking of originary, universal experiences.

\(^{10}\) The emphasis on digits and handedness also presumes a type of subject: abled, human (not animal).
At the same time, Husserl argues that recognition of the Other as a discrete limit is also the moment when the subject begins the ascent towards “introjective” experience, a “late and upper layer of experience” in which the varied characteristics of animal experience are “inserted” into solipsistic sensation (Derrida 176). This formulation finds Derrida circling a problem in Husserl’s sequencing, where introjection comes after a certain phenomenological experience that must actually presuppose introjection in order to be intelligible. Without introjection, one has no experience of “the body proper allowing one to say, ‘it is I,’ ‘this is my body’” (176-77). If the limit of the Other as body allows me to define myself as “I,” that limit is already present before introjection “inserts” itself into the subject as constituted by auto-affective, solipsistic experience. And thus we come to “the immense problem of phenomenological intersubjectivity (of the other and of time)” (176), a conceptual space within which we interrogate the philosopher’s attempt to establish an originary, primal, pure, auto-affective sense of touch that precedes experience with the world. This attempt is the basis for Husserl’s contrast between “sensible impression” and “extension.” Sensible impression, here, appears by way of a disparate cluster of descriptors: the soul, sensation, the act of sensing, and the distinction between “I” and “not-I,” within the radius of an action that is itself, for Husserl, not even a state. Opposed to sensible impression is “extension”: outlines or “adumbrations” of physical qualities (colour, the roughness of the hand, etc.), all of which constitute a “sensuous schema” that also appears here as the “real” (réell).

What I am trying to do here goes beyond troubling the phenomenological subject at his (again masculine) inception. The issue winds its way towards the prosthetic quality of empathy within Husserlian phenomenology, the way in which the root metaphor of the hand on hand imposes a set of ethical and cognitive constraints on the subject of touch, and tactility in general. The alternative is the possibility of touch as inherently hetero-affective, not according touch a primacy via the hand that runs the risk of reinscribing hegemony, but one in which the formation of “the body proper … would already presuppose a passage outside and through the other, as well as through absence, death, and mourning, as well as through ‘ecotechnics’ and the ‘techne’ of bodies” (Derrida
Here, Derrida uses a twinned descriptor to describe the relation to the other, an “outside and through.” At this moment, when he is on the way to staging a full-blown critique of what he sees as the fundamental issue with Husserl’s originary motif, there appears a curious and fascinating image of the other defined by two parallax movements, mutually incompatible yet joined in an off-hand and characteristically oblique phrase. A passage outside the other and yet through the other: an indication, perhaps, of the hetero-affection that Derrida is intent on revealing and elevating, but a rhetorical pause nonetheless, revealing the impossibly vexed issue of ethics with respect to spacing and heterogeneity. Whether it is the hand on hand in Husserl or the Other both overrun and punctured in Derrida’s constitution of the “body proper,” neither ethics nor empathy appears within tactility through anything less than a substitution or prosthetic supplement. We are unable to discover any originary ethics even in Derrida’s alternative conceptualization of touch. What we can potentially discover is a wariness of encounters predicated on an originary (axiomatic) sense that claims to arise from specific tactile moments, such as the hand on hand. In other words, be wary of touching as that which announces ethical attentiveness as originary.

Through and within the analysis of the hand on hand, we arrive at the moment of defining critique, one that puts into question the whole conceptual apparatus of empathy spontaneously generated at the moment of contact:

I ask whether there is any pure auto-affection of the touching or the touched, and therefore any pure, immediate experience of the purely proper body, the body proper that is living, purely living. Or if, on the contrary, this experience is at least not already haunted, but constitutively haunted, by some hetero-affection related to spacing and then to visible spatiality…” (Derrida 179)

For Derrida, the possibility of spacing announces the death of auto-affection in a certain “sense.” Spacing is the awareness of the layer of mediation between all bodies, upon which any notion of solipsistic experience depends in order to be intelligible, but which it

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11 Derrida opposes the terms auto-affection and hetero-affection to distinguish between characterizations of touch as a “pure” experience (auto relating to self, as a combining form meaning “the self” or “the same”) and characterizations that acknowledge heterogeneity in the experience of being and touching (i.e. hetero-affective). It should not be related to heteronormative sexuality or homophobia in any way.
must *disavow* to retain primacy as the originary experience of the body. We can never detach our awareness of “visible spatiality” from our own embodied experience; nor can we aver that the latter constitutes an original scene of tactility that precedes the encounter with bodies in space. Solipsistic experience is thus undone by the problematics of the axioms of touch. Trapped within its stated terms, solipsism is now permeable, first punctured and then sutured to non-solipsistic experience via spacing, the constitutive element of spatiality. Because spacing determines, in advance, the “visible spatiality” of the world, we are always already hetero-affective in our relationship to other bodies: always “impure,” so to speak, always driven out of any “pure” experience of the body without reference to other things. The emergence of spacing turns the question, for Derrida, from the fallacious primacy of auto-affection to “several types of auto-hetero-affection without any pure, properly pure, immediate, intuitive, living, and psychical auto-affection at all” (180).

### 1.4 Metaphor and philosophy

Foiling this interrogation of Husserl’s originary moment is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s invocation of surface in dramatizing the ethics of touch. This invocation begins in the subject’s rootedness in a given place, the body as “the field within which my perceptive powers are localized” (Merleau-Ponty 166). The world is both what we see and the sense by which we must grow into the process of seeing it, a process that requires us to “match this vision with knowledge, take possession of it, *say* what we and what *seeing* are” (Merleau-Ponty 4). This declaration announces a train of thought that insistently focuses on the world we can know via surface, intersecting with a critique of the same hand-on-hand encounter in Husserl’s thought. For Merleau-Ponty, though, this encounter rests on “the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing” while seeing itself touching objects (146). This double vision, this “flesh” that for Merleau-Ponty “is not matter,” determines the relationship that I, the subject, have with the world, “dominating” all sense of the tangible, compelling me to “follow with my own eyes the movements and the contours of the things themselves … these two mirror arrangements of the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touched” (146). From this position, I access the world as a succession of inexhaustible singular experiences:
each of these arrests my gaze while promising “an indefinite series of experiences … a concretion of possibilities real here and now in the hidden side of the thing, which was a lapse of duration given all at once” (167). This tether between seeing and feeling is part of how Merleau-Ponty frames the “sensible element” of being, an indication that “things are only half-opened before us, unveiled and hidden” (167). Within this schema, the mind is no longer able to reduce objects to essences, nor can it take refuge in a Cartesian teleology of intuitive nature that operates in all human subjects: “We give just as poor an account of all these characteristics by making the world an aim as we do by making it an idea” (167-68).

Within a framework that privileges the impact of seeing the Other’s body as irreducibly Other, as surface, Merleau-Ponty opens up the possibility of ethics as predicated on visual substitution: ethics awakens to an intersubjective experience of being in the world, but one that transcends indirection, comparison, or analogy. Because I can take the Other’s hand in mine, the act of shaking the Other’s hand makes me aware of the possibility of substituting the other’s hand for mine in the act of touching. In this foundational moment, empathy gains both its mode and root concept. Since touching one of my hands with my other hand and shaking hands with another being are both part of the same world, and more importantly for Merleau-Ponty, part of the world of perception, my awareness of the world is now predicated on co-perception, the double act of perceiving the other and perceiving that other as a perceiving subject. This framework leads us to a passage that becomes the exemplary evidence for Derrida’s critique of what he sees as Merleau-Ponty’s misuse of Husserlian phenomenology. This misuse is a theme within which the critique of sensory conflations moves and takes shape, a critique Derrida formulates insistently through “Tangents II” and “Tangents III.” In so doing, he brings us up against what he sees as a near-unpardonable lapse in Merleau-Ponty’s thought: the substitution of metaphorical configurations of thought for “rigorous” phenomenological analysis.

For Derrida, these substitutions take place at the point where Merleau-Ponty’s thought on sight converges with the tactile moment in Husserl’s Ideas II, the point at which the hand
on hand becomes less about tactility than in the “sensible reflexivity” of touching-touched (Derrida 187):

The physical thing becomes animate. Or, more precisely, it remains what it was (the event does not enrich it), but an exploratory power comes to rest upon or dwell in it. Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes “a sort of reflection.” In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body… (Merleau-Ponty 166)

We encounter diffused touch at a moment when Husserl (as Derrida sees it) would never have characterized it as such, the imbrication of sight and touch, and the reliance on metaphor that obscures a “properly” phenomenological interrogation of the concepts at work. Can touch be diffused into the body, such that the experience of touch, though localized in a given “here,” is at risk of being auto-affective? Why does Merleau-Ponty accord so much of the potency or primacy of touch to “reflection” in the perceptual sense, to seeing a limit, a surface doubled and reflected on the surface of another object, or person? Derrida urges us to distinguish between powers that “comes to rest upon or dwell in” touch; two movements, not parallax this time but concentric, announcing metaphor’s confusion within the thought of Merleau-Ponty.

It seems a curious move for Derrida to chastise Merleau-Ponty for what he clearly feels is an egregious use of Husserlian grammar, resulting in an ethics of tactility that he believes that Husserl would never have claimed. At the moment when we appear to be deep in the process of tracking a set of substitutions within a philosophical mise-en-scène, we discover a certain asperity in how Derrida reclaims Husserl from Merleau-Ponty, how invested he is in preserving Husserl’s terms of engagement from Merleau-Ponty’s reliance on metaphor:

We can never sufficiently emphasize that Husserl’s resistance is precisely to a metaphorical slant on the subject of the becoming-touch of sight or the becoming-seeing or becoming-visible of touch … Even if translating or metaphorizing
Husserl’s language is unavoidable, does one have the right to disregard its axiomatics on the subject of what language should be or should not do? (189)

Couching one of the most apposite and indispensable parts of his own argument in the form of a rhetorical question, Derrida thus ends by “telling” us that he is not posing a question at all. Instead, he provides the answer within the question itself: that one does not have the right to disregard the “axiomatics” on which Husserl’s phenomenology rests, that such disregard is tantamount to a heretical violation of “proper” phenomenological rigour. But this vehement opposition to a “metaphorical slant” takes place within the framework of a chapter (“Tangent II”) that is nothing if not predicated almost completely on the malleability, significance, and subversive potential of metaphorical slants, which Derrida himself uses to destabilize Husserl’s scene of originary, auto-affective solipsism.

In a similarly interrogative mode, I ask: is the right to make use of Husserl restricted only to a certain critical apparatus, in defence of selected theorizations of touch?

To use language that Derrida and Husserl would perhaps have questioned as overly metaphorical, I see “a sort of reflection” (Merleau-Ponty 166) of the same problem in “proper” phenomenological thought: the inability to discuss origins within terms that defy the discipline’s categories of knowledge. In other words, what does it mean to analyze this tactile moment rigorously and not metaphorically? How is it possible for Derrida, after performing such an exhaustive interrogation of the givenness of Husserl’s own choices of metaphor (including the hand on hand), to fall back into the traditional language of philosophy as a self-enclosed discipline that does not use and rely on metaphor? Into this moment I read a trembling uneasiness, as if the implications of Merleau-Ponty’s analysis are too troubling for Derrida to acknowledge directly. We have reached a point where western philosophy’s insistence on “proper” readings cannot acknowledge that such readings depend upon a certain set of metaphors, which carry their own assumptions and exclusions that determine the types and limits of knowledge available to the philosopher.

At issue, I submit, is the threat of being seduced by the conflation of sight and touch. The rhetoric of imbricating sight and touch asks us to inhabit a “confusion” of thought, a discursive space in which my perception of the other’s surface may appear to me as auto-
affective, representative of the plenitude of tactile experience. From this risk, narcissism emerges as the possibility: to be seduced into thinking my perception is complete and intuitive. The spectre of this possibility, this seduction, is what preoccupies Derrida in his critique of Merleau-Ponty, as he warns of the risk, “in one blow … of reappropriating the alterity of the other more surely, more blindly, or even more violently than ever” (191). However, at the exact point of delivering a critique of the intuitionism of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, Derrida’s choice of metaphor actually demonstrates his enmeshment within the folds of a metaphor that he is determined to expel from the discussion. Privileging sight, we perform an appropriation “more blindly,” following the violent “blow” of contact. Awareness founders in the night into which we descend narcissistically, so enamoured by the cognitive act of perceiving the Other’s surface that we inflict further violence on that person. This descent seems inevitable to Derrida; once begun, it stops the subject from “watching over the other’s alterity,” in contrast to a type of “vigilance” that “Husserl’s cautious approach” still allows, whatever its other limitations (191). As we descend (or perhaps degenerate) into “blind” intuitionism, is there no way for us to halt, to arrest ourselves in these moments of vexed contact, to remain on guard against reducing the experience of the Other to our perception of the Other? The project that follows in these pages will never take leave of this question. To inhabit the space of descent into seduction without succumbing, it seems to me, is how postcolonial literature makes the figurative limit of trauma’s representation ethical, how figurations of trauma can dramatize traumatic experience without universalizing it or inviting the reader into the dubious position of vicarious victim of trauma.

From these passages, we gain a sense of the inherent seduction in the conflation of sight and touch, which emerges both in the issues at stake and in the nonlinear, radial shape of the critiques. What we have is critique folding back in on itself, dramatizing the instability of the subject, the occupier of the “I” pronoun and his (with an emphasis on the masculine) supposed primacy, his ability to apprehend phenomena, render their memory identical with his cognition of them in a given moment. This discussion of tactility and touch, then, is also a discussion of how the western subject, in privileging thought, accords an equal privilege to presence over absence, to the immediacy of meaning that echoes the immediacy of the hand-on-hand scene. I turn now to Levinas’s
engagement with the concept of intentionality in Husserl, drawn from “Diachrony and Representation.”

1.5 The hegemony of “I think”

In “Diachrony and Representation,” we find the beginnings of a critical gesture that vaults us from physical tactility to the expression of how thought “reflects on itself in interrupting its continuity of synthetic apperception, but still proceeds from the same ‘I think’ or returns to it” (Levinas 162). Western thought is caught within the hegemony of the thinking, speaking subject, the mind always unitary even (and especially) when thinking about itself, about its own inner workings, subordinate to language via the linguistic utterance “I think.” Why do we grant privilege to the thematizing instinct of the “I” who couples the first-person pronoun with the present tense of “think”? How does the conscious declaration of my intent to vocalize a thought and frame it according to my intention acquire currency? Restlessly, Levinas returns to this question and all the difficulties that proceed from it. “I think” in this western tradition becomes the given by which we proceed to the transparent presence of the object to the subject — in other words, the subject’s ability to reduce alterity to the unity of presence. We give priority to the said; we sediment the said, the indicative, as Levinas phrases it, into our understanding of the other:

Here the thinking subjects are multiple dark points, empirically antagonistic, in whom light is produced when they see each other, speak to each other, and coincide. The exchange of ideas will produce presence or representation in the unity of an utterance or an account naming or displaying a field of knowledge. It would fit within a single consciousness, within a cogito that remains Reason: universal Reason and egological interiority. (Levinas 162)

For Levinas, this retreat into a “single consciousness” announces capital-r reason’s primacy. The security of knowledge latent in the “I think” reduces complexity to unity of expression and utterance, to the perception of a single consciousness. The self renders temporal distance to the object of its scrutiny a matter of conscious thought, the sole province of a consciousness that is identical to itself in its own recollection. Everything pivots on our ability to think ourselves out of and into focusing on a given object.
Consciousness arrives at being and presence through the “evidence,” as it were, of its intentionality. First, we have thought’s ability to transcend the object of its scrutiny. At the moment of imaginative deficit, I become aware of my ability to transcend. Reason can conceive imaginative lack; in this conception, I inaugurate myself into selfhood through the “glory” of conscious presence. Second, in thinking, I experience the thing not identical to itself, in the world, but as a concept reduced to the parameters of my imaginative capacity. The general existence of this experience is part of what produces intentionality in presence. Lastly, I dwell in the ideality of the experience of objects reduced in my thought. I accede, in this instance, to the pleasure of transcendence as a process I can perceive, consciously, as process. Essentially, I exult in the notion that I can transcend.

In this moment of conscious thought, the ascendance of the present tense inversely corresponds to the decline of the present continuous, the saying; the declarative “I think” announces action and unity by definition, eclipsing the ongoing process of speaking, the moment within which an account of the Other might otherwise coalesce. We draw closer here to the terrain on which Levinas will eventually situate his foundational ethic of the face, the alternative to what he views as the subordination of the Other’s experience to the unity of “I think” and (implicitly) reason. Levinas offers this critique without explicit interrogation, except for the fugitive preface to the statement, in which he characterizes the subjects of western philosophy as “multiple dark points.” Certainty and rationality emerge in the absence of light, which gives way to an illumination of the speaking subjects who see each other and “coincide.” In coinciding, these subjects allow Levinas to warn us of another hegemony, one that betrays his profound distrust of visual metaphor and that returns us to the topic of surfaces and sight. Once again, perceiving a surface becomes the root metaphor for the expression of the subject’s cognitive descent into narcissism, as the other is reduced to the subject’s unified, tacitly rational consciousness.

I find it productive to recall Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s reading of the formation of the subject in Kant’s Critique of Judgment, a fascinating and fruitful reading because, in Spivak’s own words, it is “mistaken,” the product of an engagement with Kant that
traditional philosophical language would find incorrect, inapt, possibly lacking in rigour, and so on. The Kantian subject enters into the realm of citizenship when he becomes aware of imagination’s inability to make sense of sublime experience. For Kant, rational cognition accomplishes a task that confounds the imagination, which is to process and make sense of the sublime. As reason gains primacy by mastering what imagination cannot (the sublime), it demonstrates its own preeminence. However, Kant’s attempt to make aesthetic judgment only aesthetic hinges on the a priori acceptance of a certain subject position: “Indeed, who would want to call sublime such things as shapeless mountain masses piled on one another in wild disarray, with their pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea?” (Kant 113). While this acceptance seems like common sense — from the perspective of Kant’s ideal citizen, shapeless mountain masses would not be sublime — this common sense, as the underlying basis for judgment, depends on a tacit understanding of who qualifies as that citizen, and who does not. Within a moment of supposed inclusivity, we have a series of images and symbols — “uncivilized” mountain masses, “pyramids of ice, or the gloomy raging sea” — that exclude the non-western subject in toto:

Here is the raw man of the Analytic of the Sublime … He is only a casual object of thought, not a paradigmatic example. He is not only not the object as such; he also does not quite make it as an example of the thing or its species as natural product. If you happen to think of him, your … judgment cannot prove to itself that he, or a species of him, need exist. (Spivak 26)

The Kantian subject arrives at the supremacy of reason by way of the perception of his own imaginative limit, but this arrival requires the effacement of the non-western citizen, the Other, at precisely the moment when we are supposedly talking about universal subject formations. The subject who could possibly find sublimity in these gloomy seas and mountain masses — the “Laplander” or “Samoy” to which Kant alludes — is culturally Other; the critique brings up this subject, this raw man, only to demonstrate in passing how he “does not quite make it” as an example of the rational subject. The choice of metaphor — the citizen-subject whose grounding in European culture sets him apart from these “shapeless mountain masses” — limits the scope of Kantian ethics, establishing aesthetic judgment within an instant of cultural Othering that will later
become a foundational moment, unavailable for further critical inquiry. Within a Kantian framework, this process happens naturally, but only within the “developed” western culture that produces moral subjects. Culture allows us to create sublimity as a category of knowledge, giving us the triumph of reason, after which we erase all traces of this process.

In deploying Spivak’s critique of the Kantian sublime to complement my earlier reading of Levinas and the unified consciousness, I want to emphasize the danger in positing an untroubled cognition that emanates from a unified, rational subject. This subject, not burdened by the Other that he excludes (Spivak’s raw man), becomes the purveyor of a violating sense of touch that is constitutively unable to encounter the plenitude of the Other without violence. We thus circle back to the exegesis of touch and tactility, where I have discerned a similar refusal to acknowledge the trembling uncertainty of originary terms, to acknowledge the similarity between such terms and the givenness of metaphor. In varying degrees, both Husserl and Derrida take refuge in “rigorous” analysis at the moment when it should be clear that any semblance of self-contained “rigour” is only the axiomatic of a discipline, an arbitrary constraint on how we can conceive of tactile experience. Derrida’s reluctance to talk about prosthesis occurs at a point where he has done nothing if not underline the idea of touch as a prosthetic supplement, inserted into the discussion after the fact and then remade into the image of something foundational. All philosophy takes shape within a foundational metaphor, which traces and retraces the limits of what philosophy can view as experience. Transgressions of that limit inevitably come to be seen as “category mistakes” (a criticism Spivak wryly anticipates in her critique of Kant) or lacking in analytical “rigour” (as Derrida says of Merleau-Ponty). Both these terms — category mistake and lack of rigour — expose the hermeneutics of philosophy as a discipline, revealing the givenness of philosophical origins, and preparing us, then, to step warily into the realm of postcolonial studies.

This project dwells in the overlapping, imbricated space of the global and the local, examining representations of trauma from different periods and regions: the 1947 Partition of India, and the late apartheid and post-apartheid eras in South Africa. Earlier in the chapter, I discussed Nancy’s characterization of writing as ex-scription, paying
attention to how, for Nancy, the contemporary moment demands a new form of writing, one that can account for the flow of bodies on a global scale — a form capable of recognizing and making ethical sense of the prosthetic quality of writing and its metaphors. What Nancy asks for, it seems to me, is a writing capable of touching the reader and problematizing the gesture of touching: a form of writing that seeks to keep alive the hetero-affective quality of tactility (and other senses such as sight), inviting the reader both to touch and to question the nature of what separates the toucher from the touched. As I have argued in this chapter, postcolonial representations of trauma are the most poignant and consistently meaningful frames for thinking through this hetero-affective writing, which demands the self-reflexivity of engaged reading. My aim is not to erase the distinction between literature and representation, on the one hand, and material phenomena and the lived experience of trauma, on the other. Such an erasure would replicate certain types of post-structuralist thinking that dubiously eliminate the distinction between theory and practice, giving us a falsely utopian idea of literature’s capacity to represent trauma. Instead, I offer a strategy for reading postcolonial trauma that shifts ethics away from temporal proximity, originary tactile encounters (the hand on hand), or any hierarchy of senses, in order to dramatize the experience of reading postcolonial trauma as vexed contact, a continual imbrication of sight and touch.

Each literary text in this project demonstrates its status as a tactile “body,” but along different axes of representation and meaning unique to the work’s historical and cultural context. Broadly speaking, I position these works of literature in two distinct but related ways. First, I suggest that these texts represent traumatized bodies, containing sets of metaphors, themes, and symbolic elements that speak to both aesthetic and ethical concerns. Second, I argue that the narrative structure of each text gives it its shape or contour, elevates the text to the status of body. However, both the traumatized bodies of the characters and the traumatized “bodies” of the texts themselves dramatize aesthetic and ethical concerns within the postcolonial arena. Physical and textual immediacy become the objects of scrutiny, unsettling proximity as the basis for full and present being with respect to trauma’s representation. The fallacy of haptic immediacy, then,

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12 See Spivak’s incisive interrogation of Foucault and Deleuze in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. 
creates the condition of possibility for postcolonial literature to emerge as a viable prosthetic supplement, in this place where phenomenology “itself touches its own limit and exceeds it” (Nancy qtd. in Derrida 200).

The contemporary moment, as critics such as Frassinelli, Frenkel, and Watson have argued,\(^\text{13}\) is increasingly defined by the transnational, by the way in which bodies and currency flow from one region to another. Laura Doyle, in her turn, contends that literature replicates the fluid world of the transnational in miniature (what she calls the “micro-world”) but also forces the reader to engage with how that world is produced and reproduced, over and over again (3). Without wishing to subscribe to a utopian view of transnationalism, such as the one that Bill Ashcroft comes close to espousing,\(^\text{14}\) I believe in the importance of putting literature from different postcolonial regions into productive dialogue. By initiating this dialogue, we interrogate the givenness of region-specific postcolonial analysis, opening ourselves up to the ways in which employment, narrative structure, motif, and metaphor evolve across regions. We address cultural specificity while also paying attention to the global, replacing “structural hierarchies” with “a concept of flow between the local and the global” (Ashcroft 15).

When historical context interfaces with literary representation in a way that is attentive to the problematics of representation as a strategy, we have the potential for an enriching and self-reflexive engagement with the task of representing trauma. LaCapra suggests that this enrichment involves the recognition that a truth claim about collective trauma forces us to examine narrative structure. It requires us to look at the repetition and specific patterns of reference of literary texts, their “general structures or procedures of emplotment” (15). As a whole, my project is bound up with the study of “emplotment,” the deep structures of each novel. At the level of structure, I am attempting to identify how strands of narrative recur, join, and transform to present regionally and culturally specific literary representations of trauma. If these strands touch in difficult and potentially problematic ways, they also call on us to acknowledge the depth of postcolonial literature’s ability to reframe what it means to “read” trauma, to touch

\(^{13}\) See “Traversing Transnationalism.”

\(^{14}\) See “Globalization, Transnation and Utopia.”
trauma as a representation — and to have that touch initiate a lasting and vital self-interrogation.
2 Between Ending and Suspending in *The River Churning* and *Age of Iron*

This chapter examines suspension and resolution as narrative techniques in Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *The River Churning* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*. Each of these novels focuses on a distinct period of collective trauma: the 1947 partition of India and the late apartheid era in South Africa, respectively. I want to look at how the formal choices of each author reflect a willingness to challenge the dominant state narratives in each region. My aim is to situate my analysis of the texts within the historical and literary frameworks of each period, interrogating the critical tendency to see certain literary forms and genres as more suitable for representing trauma.

2.1 Collective violence and South Asia

Collective violence does not originate solely from systemic inequalities or social conflicts, nor is it merely an atypical “eruption” which contrasts with a speciously theorized “everyday” life. Rather, it combines both political and affective charge to emerge as what Stanley J. Tambiah calls “a self-legitimating sphere of social discourse and transaction” in its own right that actually structures and directs political action (223). While Tambiah acknowledges the necessity of accounting for both semiotic and social explanations for collective violence (221-22), he urges us to pay closer attention to the morphology of collective violence, according to which

each side develops its repertoire of strategies and counterstrategies, actions, conventions, codes, and countercodes and espionage. All sides thus engage in a discourse of violence whose logic, techniques, strategies, and objectives they increasingly understand, anticipate, and counteract. (223)

The structure of the mob spawns an interpenetration of understanding between mobs, a shared sense of how to decode the actions and performances of the antagonist in whose collective gesture the subject discerns both his own identity and the irresistible call to violent action. Tambiah locates this transformation particularly in situations of ongoing violence, such as the conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers, in order to demonstrate the influence that time exerts over what otherwise appears to be a
naturally eruptive phenomenon. The configuration of collective violence becomes its own referent over time, sedimenting particular ways of thinking and acting into the collectivity which increasingly “becomes efficacious in the construction, production, maintenance, and reproduction of ethnic identity and solidarity itself. What was previously seen as an effect now serves as a cause” (223). Mob violence is no longer the correlative outgrowth of a prior social phenomenon but is now itself the social phenomenon that controls the point of action.

The ease with which collective violence assimilates into existing social structures suggests that a fundamental integration of both morphology and “content,” if you will, has taken place: it has become all too easy to speak of the mob as a self-referential descriptor implying a host of assumed behaviours, configurations, and ideologies. A conception of violence as mere madness grounds the act in a single moment or cluster of moments, restricting the scope of ethical inquiry. By contrast, a conception of violence as embedded in the everyday structures of life forces us to examine the “force and agency” through which the mob unit has gained autonomy (223).

Coming into gradual alignment with everyday life in its pace, choice of forms, and cyclical regularity, mob violence configures its space and practice like a community or a household:

The concepts of routinization and, more importantly, ritualization of collective violence may help us to perceive some of the organized, anticipated, programmed, and recurring features and phases of seemingly spontaneous, chaotic, and orgiastic actions of the mob as aggressor and victimizer … Some of the components of this repertoire may well be drawn from the everyday forms of ritualized life and from the ritual calendar of festivities. (230)

We can immediately note the contrast between the perception of the mob as a “chaotic” entity and the gestalt of routine and ritual that structures the actions of the mob and infuses those actions with valences that reflect the collective sense of ethnically determined community identity. Perceived as random and spontaneous, the mob actually draws on singular, individual experiences of the everyday in order to maintain
intelligibility and cohesion as a unit of human expression, intersecting with community life in its use of the “ritual calendar of festivities” that inscribes the marks of community identity through religious celebration and kinship ties.

Through repetition of ritual, mob actors acquire a relational place in the syntax of collective violence, making the task of controlling mobs easier by requiring less personal magnetism on the part of individual actors. The decreased emphasis on individuality dovetails with Tambiah’s critique of Gustave Le Bon’s theories of crowd violence. While Le Bon believes that “[t]he leaders of crowds wield a very despotic authority” (qtd. in Tambiah 300), Tambiah rightly troubles the universality of this model in the context of India, where many cases of organized violence featured “no great charismatic leaders of enduring, stable mass movements” (Tambiah 300). Shortly thereafter, Tambiah challenges the concept of crowds, and extensively mobs, as the structural exemplar of “underlying, enduring, timeless, essentialized, unconscious, and basically racial propensities” (301). Instead, he tethers the trauma of community-generated ethnic violence to “communicational processes and practices of mass politics” (301); violence is thus never decoupled from the totality of the historical, cultural, and social context.

Collective violence is thus not merely what it does in the moment of physical violence, but what it continues to do in the space of the everyday, via practices such as the spreading of unverified rumours. In the hands of the mob, rumours

    have the dubious honor of inflaming the aggressor to orgasms of destructive violence … They relate to horrors such as the raping and disemboweling of pregnant women, the poisoning of public wells and water supply, and other standard kinds of desecrations and violations. At a time of charged emotions, such reports, repeated again and again, are seen as highly credible, although subsequently recognized, after the storm, to be improbable. (236)

The persistence of discredited rumours in the collective imagination demonstrates the difficulty in countering “improbable” rumours within the context of collective violence. Even discredited, these rumours acquire a circulatory intensity, which becomes seductive. Tambiah goes on to list several instances in which rumours were decisively used to
foment collective violence despite no actual truth to the rumour or even the opposite being true, in the cases of the anti-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi’s assassination (237), the Sri Lankan independence riots in Gal Oya (238), and the communal riots of partition (240). Attention shifts from the toxic effect of these rumours on partition survivors to the figure of the Other (whether Muslim or Hindu) whose basic humanity slips from the discursive register: raping and disemboweling a pregnant woman, for example, implies that this Other is outside the circuit of human consideration, and not an ethical subject.

2.2 Partition and its aftermath

In “official” terms — that is, the terms of nationalism — trauma is confined to the realm of political recovery, framed in the discourse of national honour; the experience of women during and after partition subordinates to the state’s need to secure its borders and consolidate its national identity. In the wake of the 1947 partition of India, the governments of the newly formed states collaborated in a cross-border operation designed to retrieve women who had been abducted and displaced as a result of the general violence. Hundred of thousands of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs crossed newly established borders to conform to the new distribution of ethnic groups in what was now two states: India and Pakistan. The collaboration in itself was peculiar, the result of the two states suspending hostility in order to conduct a “recovery” operation for women who had been kidnapped and assaulted during a time of intense collective violence. This recovery operation was part of a larger discourse of recovery and healing for both India and Pakistan, in which the singularity of traumatic experience gave way to a national desire to forget and “move on” from the trauma of partition. The bodies of women became metonymies for national honour: securing the desired unity of the newly formed state elided the ways in which nationalist discourse actively repressed and marginalized its own female citizens.

In consolidating and recovering national honour and repairing the physical and social stability of homes and villages following partition, the two newly formed states of India
and Pakistan were united, producing an effacement of the abducted women as subjects. As Das notes, the formative notion of India and Pakistan as states arose through “the rightful reinstating of proper kinship by recovering women from the other side” (21), exemplified by the Inter-Dominion Agreement of 1947 and the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949 (24-25). Through these and other legislations, both countries assisted each other in the recovery of abducted women, characterizing “the question of the recovery of abducted women and children” as “a matter of national honor” (24). A second but equally significant goal was to “produce a sense of security and rehabilitate homes and villages, which have been broken up and destroyed” (Nehru qtd. in Das 22). The wishes of individual women were often overridden by police, social workers, and other agents of both governments who disregarded the fear many abducted women expressed at the prospect of returning to their natal families as merely signs of trauma (24); the abducted woman’s resistance to return was often explained away as “false consciousness or a kind of misrecognition” (29). Rita Menon and Kamla Bhasin cite the example of a Punjabi woman (identified only as S) who was abducted as a teenager during partition but only discovered by the military and returned against her will from Pakistan to India in 1956; though S had been happily married to a Pakistani police officer, the mother of a family of four, the state intervened to return her to her natal kin in India (219). The state not only presumed to know the interior life of abducted women better than the women themselves did, but in so doing, forcibly aligned such an imagined interiority with the nationalist agenda.

Collective violence creates a condition in the abducted and subsequently “recovered” woman that, over and above the temporal singularity of collective violence, becomes an everyday kind of violence. Mob violence is not simply enacted with a finite end, just as the germination of mob violence is not the first shot fired or knife wielded, because the structural logic of the mob finds its most painful reflection in the structural logic of the household that is itself an ongoing form of collective violence directed at the abducted woman, who must now learn to “inhabit the same space now marked as a space of

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15 In the alliance between India and Pakistan, we can see a collusion of supposed antagonists in a collaborative and performative web of oppositional ritual, recalling how variously opposed mobs understand and respond to each other’s gestures, syntactical register, and grammar of violence.
destruction” (Das 62). Narratives about national honour and the women who have been “polluted” by the touch of the other permeate the spatiality of the natal household and the natal community, in which “[t]he formation of the subject as a gendered subject is then molded through complex transactions between the violence as the originary moment and the violence as it seeps into the ongoing relationships and becomes a kind of atmosphere that cannot be expelled to an ‘outside’” (62).

Not only can the household itself be construed as a kind of mob unit, but the fluidic morphology of the mob inflicts psychic violence on the survivor as she realizes that the same men who inhabit her household may have been part of groups who inflicted physical violence on other women, or who killed women in their community to “preserve” their “honour.” This realization holds true for ‘recovered’ women, as well as for women who remained with their abductors to begin families and new lives (Butalia 193): the geometry of collective violence exposes the casual violence of ‘recovered’ women who faced criticism from their communities concerning their sexual purity (195-96).

What collective violence does, then, is introduce a form of social arrangement that consigns the survivor of violence to a living death, thereby obliterating the subject’s sense of what it means to be alive. In Veena Das’s case work on partition, the survivor becomes a non-presence in her own household where she must perform the social lament of dishonour in dress, body, and speech:

> It is not that grief is seen as something that shall pass with time. Rather, the representation of grief is that it is metonymically experienced as bodily pain and that the female body will carry this pain forever within itself. A mimesis is established between body and language, but it is through the work of the collectivity that this happens rather than at the level of individual symptom. (Das 50)

In this spatial arrangement, the work of recovery is accomplished slowly, over time, stretching out the apparent singularity of an act of collective violence into years and even decades. There is something unbearably poignant about the blazing public display of
collective violence that shrouds the interiority of the survivor in silence and rumours, which circulate within her own community as freely and as poisons as the rumours which fuel collective violence. Das’s case work, in this instance, centres on a woman identified only as Manjit, whose husband frequently expressed anger at having “been made into a sacrificial scapegoat in marrying a ‘spoiled’ girl,” while his family constantly made “veiled references to women who eat the dung of men” to suggest that Manjit was impure (88). For Das, the “widely circulated” rumours of partition brutality “created a certain field of force within which [Manjit’s] later narrative moved,” establishing a cone of silence around the actual events that became “frozen” in time to Manjit herself (88).

We find violence fixated on the atemporality of a moment that can never be named, alongside the lived experience of Manjit, who must inhabit this “frozen” moment in real physical time. Yet the recirculated violence of the everyday, manifested in rumours, allusion to trauma, and social stigma, opens the memory of violation up to the survivor, who must face the hegemonic power of words that “do not belong to anyone in particular” (105). It is “the work of the collectivity” to create a “mimesis” (50) between the allusive language of pollution and dishonour and the body of the survivor which must henceforth perform the grief of the community in clothing and gesture.

I do not, of course, mean to conflate physical violence and psychic violence. My aim, rather, is to locate the gestural and notional trace of collective violence in the everyday life of the community in order to destabilize the singularity of collective violence. I also want to trouble any perceived disconnection between the mob’s technical practice and that of the community, which forces the survivor of violence to displace the pain of violation from the surface of the body to its depth, a “holding of pain inside” that “must never be allowed to be born” (55).

2.3 Transfixion and partition

The degree of absorption in the image of the Other resonates with both the mob and the collective social unit in everyday life. It generates a kind of routinized seduction, if you will, an invitation for subjects to be transfixed by hypostatized images which gain power through circulation in the everyday. Christopher Pinney’s work on reproduced images as the locus of devotional practice is useful here. Using the development of contemporary
Indian cinema as his starting-point, Pinney posits a shift in the relationship between viewer and object in the field of chromolithography that subverts the colonially imported “Cartesian perspectivalism” intent on using “single-point perspective” to nullify “the magic impact of images” (362). Instead of subordinating to the techno-hierarchical rationality of a single perspective that orders the field of view in clear relation to a disembodied, unseen viewer, Indian chromolithography invites the spectator into a dialogical relationship with the image of the divine predicated on the Hindu devotional practice of darshan – seeing and being seen by the deity. God watches the devotee watching God, whose immanence in the surface of the reproduction unfolds through what Pinney calls “a continual burdening of the surface with traces of … devotion … vermilion tilaks placed on the forehead of deities, the ash from incense sticks, smoke stains from burning camphor” (365). Thus the devotee sediments worship of the deity over time, often using available methods of image duplication (such as mounting chromolithographic prints behind mirrored glass) to refract the divine image through a “visual intermingling” (364) of worshipping subject, deity, place, cultural context, and temporality. Pinney attempts to recuperate Benjamin’s theory of the impact of mechanical reproduction on art by demonstrating the emergence of a “visceral domain” (357) in viewer response to images. Specific, technologically enhanced “auras” reside in individual mass-produced prints: aura congeals in the “copy” whose mimetic relationship to an “original” is now effaced.

We can now embed at least part of the mesmeric quality of collective violence in the technological framework of modernity: the mass production of images creates a field of potentially infinite devotional icons that heighten the intensity of the religious practice which increasingly underpins communal identity. The collectivity of the mob mobilizes these reproductive techniques to invest the geometric space of its public expression with affective charge; the reproduced image of the divine becomes the locus of a technical practice to motivate and direct groups toward violence.

If acts of collective and everyday violence possess a phenomenal time that can extend far beyond their physical time, this extension is also the space in which acts of resistance to that violence can germinate, allowing the work of repair to be accomplished patiently, in
fragments, over time. For Manjit, who was abducted and likely violated during partition, her silence was frequently overtaken by time as “an agent that ‘works’ on relationships—allowing them to be reinterpreted, rewritten, sometimes overwritten—as different social actors struggle to author stories in which collectivities are created or re-created” (87). The unspeakability surrounding Manjit’s experience of partition gave way over time to her struggle to escape the everyday violence of her husband, who sought to prevent their son’s marriage because he felt the son was closest to the wife he considered polluted; he initially allowed the marriage to proceed but refused to act as the head of the household, then gave in and staged an elaborate wedding, only to reveal afterward that he considered the entire wedding a theatrical set piece which had no meaning and that the girl must be sent back to her natal family (83-84). Years of domestic violence against the son’s wife ensued until the son, aided by Manjit, was able to arrange house separation that effectively freed all of them from the violence of her husband (85). In this case, Manjit’s husband sought to change the parameters by which she, her son, and her son’s wife could expect to experience life, but was ultimately defeated through Manjit’s “patience in biding her time—shadowing time to seize particular moments when she could impose her vision of the truth on her family” (85). Essentially, the husband’s attempt to obliterate her social existence, thereby annihilating her humanity in life, produced the fragmentary subject position by which Manjit was gradually able to effectuate a repair: a psychic as well as a social and economic recovery.

To the extent that collective violence seeks to smash the target of its violence into psychic fragments, imposing fantastic displays of violence that “tear apart the very fabric of life” (89), it colludes with everyday forms of violence that “define the edges at which experimentation with a form of life as a human form of life occurs” (86). In both cases, violence becomes fantastic, unspeakable, turning words into “broken shadows of the motion of everyday words” (89). In this collusion, we can perhaps begin to sketch a provisional answer to the question of why the perpetrators of collective violence experience no quantifiable or consistent feeling of guilt or shame when they return to their “normal” lives (Tambiah 230). The configuration of the mob is the configuration of the everyday space of violence: not equivalent or equal, but interpenetrating and traumatically contiguous. Mob rumours, like community rumours, are conceived as
virulent strains of discourse that must spread quickly without legible signature. Das details a number of rumours during the time of Indira Gandhi’s assassination that proved to be false, such as the story that “militant Sikhs were planning to poison Delhi’s water supply” (Das 122). The veracity of specific rumours only surfaces after the events, at which time it becomes “virtually impossible to find out where and when and by whom a rumour was begun” (Tambiah 236). If rumours are self-fulfilling, they are exemplars of “the perlocutionary force of words” because of “their capacity to do something by saying something” (Das 119). We find a corresponding performativity in everyday ritualized annihilations which are “objectified and made present by the performance of symbolic mourning for the ‘dead’ person, by such ritualistic devices as the breaking of a pot that comes to stand for the person who is socially dead but is physically alive” (49).

Furthermore, the virulence of rumour by which a family could gradually come to hold the widow of their dead brother responsible for his death (69) has no source, but seeks to destroy through the telling and the magnitude of the rumour as it grows and spreads. In Das’s case work, the survivors of violence are never able to track local rumours to a specific person; the source generally locates itself in a family unit or filial configuration, making it impossible to directly address. In these configurations, the community becomes the mob in relation to women attempting to recover from the trauma of partition.

In light of this discussion of mesmerism and seduction, the response of Manjit’s husband to the wedding is particularly illuminating:

He simply laughed. He had staged a drama—couldn’t you all see it? [...] Do marriages take place like that anymore? No, it was a scene designed by him, literally lifted out of a scene from a Hindi film, but the film was over—the heroine must go back. (Das 84)

The husband invokes the popular medium of Hindi film to turn the taken-for-granted structures of marriage ceremonies into a source of pain and anxiety for Manjit and the rest of her family. Essentially, his retreat into the fantasy of film narrative illustrates the intersection of mass culture and structural forms of violence, evoking the mob “fantasy of writing political slogans on the private parts of women” (89). The husband, like the mob,
is seduced by the possibility of the endless magnitude of his desires being reflected in the physical world.

As we approach the discussion of partition literature, I want to reemphasize the importance of focusing on the ongoing trauma that partition survivors face in their own community — hostility, isolation, verbal and physical abuse based on their perceived status as “polluted.” And while all partition novels, in their very morphology, attempt to represent the violence and trauma of partition, surprisingly few novels of this genre written in the past thirty years are interested in the lived experience of female trauma survivors after partition. In light of this omission, it becomes necessary to reexamine early partition literature, which, I suggest, has something significant to tell us about partition experience despite its ostensible lack of formal sophistication.

Critical scholarship tends to characterize partition fiction written prior to 1980 as formally uncomplicated and thematically polarized: texts either take refuge in romance, explain away partition as a period of temporary communal madness, or offer explicit political protest. For example, Amrita Pritam’s novella The Skeleton (1950) has received relatively little critical attention as a partition text of considerable complexity. An abducted Hindu woman, Pooro, comes to develop a real love for her Muslim husband after her parents reject her pleas to be taken back. To them, Pooro has both religion and place in her Hindu household: “Daughter, it would have been better if you had died at birth” (Pritam 10). Caught between her love for her husband and an unshakeable connection to her family, she discovers that her brother has burned her husband’s crop in retaliation for the abduction of his sister. At this point, Pooro, now renamed Hamida, realizes that she belongs “to the people whose year’s harvest had been reduced to ashes” (33). Ultimately, Pooro/Hamida decides to remain with her husband in Pakistan rather than return to her natal family in India, but the decision is framed by her emotional and social choices, rather than filial connections or any sense of restoring or sullying national honour. Pooro, the abducted woman, assists at the reconciliation of another abducted woman with her natal family, generating a sense of closure even as she herself questions the masculine kinship ties that subordinate, distribute, and regulate female bodies.
Bede Scott uses *The Skeleton* primarily to recuperate (in somewhat problematic fashion) the state’s role in partition:

Only as a result of state intervention, Pooro implies, was it possible to clear this space for abducted women within the parameters of the family and the religious community — reshaping, at least to some degree, prevailing social attitudes towards the victims of such atrocities. (45)

Within the terms of Scott’s argument, *The Skeleton* merely serves to emphasize the positive influence of the state as a social and political unit of organization. Discussion of the effect of form on the representation of Pooro’s trauma is largely absent. Other partition texts, such as Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), use the singularity of individual sacrifice as a touchstone for reader comprehension in what is portrayed as a time of temporary national “madness.” Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) views the events and aftermath of partition through the lens of a love story between Laila and Ameer. Gyanendra Pandey, speaking of Saadat Hasan Manto’s short story “Toba Tek Singh,” reaches the “somewhat trite conclusion” that “‘in this time of madness,’ it was only the insane who retained any sanity’” (qtd. in Singh 126).

These characterizations unconsciously privilege later fiction, such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1986), whose cosmopolitan, postmodernist style is seen as inaugurating the “true” self-reflexivity of partition fiction. The implication is that a particular model of formal sophistication is coextensive with thematic and ethical complexity. I find this implication troubling because it impoverishes our understanding of literature as a mode of representing trauma, and partition trauma in particular. Nor is it, I would argue, a particularly accurate representation of early partition literature as a whole. I turn now to Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel *The River Churning* (1968), a partition novel that unsettles facile categorizations of early partition fiction as unsophisticated in form and limited in representational scope.

2.4 The shape of trauma

*The River Churning* examines the social consequences of partition trauma on a Hindu woman, Sutara Dutta, whose rape as a young girl during pre-partition riots results in her
being sheltered by a Muslim family for several months. Her own family, when she returns, views her with hostility, ostensibly for reasons of caste purity. However, it becomes gradually clear that Sutara’s “polluted” status as a rape survivor is what fuels the antagonism of her community, even though no one, including Sutara herself, is able to provide an explicit account of what happened to her during the time of partition violence. First exiled to a boarding school and then forced to study history abroad, Sutara only finds acceptance when Promode, one of her distant cousins, asks her to marry him, thus providing Sutara with “hope, assurance, security, companionship, love and kindness” (Devi 133). The novel thus touches on much of Jyotirmoyee Devi’s literary output by examining “how women’s bodies are made the preferred sites for the hieroglyphics of power diffused through everyday domestic life” (Mookerjea-Leonard 1).

Born in 1895 into a prosperous Jaipur family, Jyotirmoyee Devi was married at age 10 and widowed by 26, with six children and no formal education. Her early life thus gave her an intimate experience of the effect of the public domain (history, state discourse) on interiority and private space (antahpur). The supposed purity of the latter, she soon discovered, concealed the “cruelty, harassment, and violence … often perpetrated in the name of preserving the social order” (Bagchi xxvi). Confined to the domestic space, she nonetheless began to write, in her own words, “limping along, like a blind person groping” (ix). At age 28, she published her first piece of writing in the journal Bharatbarsha, explicitly criticizing the regulation of sexual purity in Indian women.

Jyotirmoyee Devi’s16 attention to the intersection between history and myth resonates in the original title of The River Churning — Itihasey Streeparva (The Female Chapter of History) — poignantly framed by the Stree Parva section of the Sanksrit epic Mahabharata, in which the widows of dead soldiers visit the field of battle strewn with bodies but are not given the narrative space to discuss the violence that they and other women experienced during the Kurukshtretra War.

16 Since the surname “Devi” (“goddess”) is merely an honorific taken by many upper-caste female Hindu Bengali writers of a certain generation, I use the author’s full name throughout this chapter. As Debali Mookerjea-Leonard notes, using the surname Devi on its own makes no distinction between writers (Jyotirmoyee Devi, Mahasweta Devi, etc.) (2).
Scholarship on *The River Churning* accurately notes the novel’s concern with the aftermath of partition for female survivors, and the connection between that aftermath and a history of women’s bodies and sexual purity being policed and controlled by the state. Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, for example, argues that the novel tells “a story that has been deleted … re-inscribing the obliterated, unspeakable women’s bodily experience” of partition (12). However, the emphasis on the novel as a piece of political protest writing draws our attention away from the formal choices that Jyotirmoyee Devi uses to render this account of partition trauma. While not self-consciously experimental, *The River Churning* adopts a quasi-realist narrative that gestures to the state discourse of healing and recovery while slyly undercutting the stability of its own position. In situating Sutara’s trauma at the time of partition, the narrator asks: “Which year was it? Sutara knew, of course. The entire world knows. You know, everybody knows” (Devi 5). Here we have a direct address to the reader. However, this address does not announce a text beset with the impossibility of expressing the full extent of trauma in words; instead, it’s merely the preface to a narrative that quietly slips into third-person limited omniscience. The text embeds one voice within another, leaving a marked formal rupture at the centre of a novel concerned with political and social ruptures whose facticity has left Sutara wounded. This early slippage offers us a glimpse of how *The River Churning* will go on to critique the state model of unity, recovery, and healing, not as explicit polemic, but within the very model that the text seems to adopt in good faith.

Trauma resides not simply in Sutara’s initial experience of rape, but in her subsequent encounters with the narrative structure of the community discourse on rape. At one level, this may seem like an obvious point, since *The River Churning*, as a partition novel, is by definition preoccupied with narrating the survivor’s attempt to reintegrate into a community that views her trauma as social stigma. However, I would like to draw a distinction between the undoubted hostility that Sutara faces from family and community — the representation of trauma — and the way in which the novel manipulates narrative structures — the shape, one might say, of trauma’s representation. This shape, I argue, is a crucial part of how the novel challenges the dominant partition narratives of wholeness, unity, and happy endings. *The River Churning* frames this challenge in its opening pages, beginning with an authorial note about the omission of violence towards women in a
certain section of the *Mahabharata*. Almost seamlessly, from one page to another, without even a blank-page insert, the novel begins with an epigraph from the main character herself: “Well, Sutara reflected, in no other country since the Mahabharata has history given an account of Stree Parva” (1). Working with mythic traditions,\(^\text{17}\) such as the Mahabharata’s narration of an episode of mass violence in which the trauma of female characters such as Draupadi is hinted at but not *rendered*, Jyotirmoyee Devi embeds these traditions firmly within historical accounts of partition violence. This embedding happens right at the inception of the narrative, situating the story within larger state and community discourses of what is acceptable to write. Sutara herself, a history teacher lecturing at a Delhi college, provides the bridge into the text, both as a trauma survivor and as a liminal narrative figure: she appears in the epigraph, but is also a character in the story.

Beyond its critique of the discourse of healing and recovery at a formal level, the novel demonstrates an awareness of the mythical resonances that make Sutara’s situation not merely individuated, but also representative of the weight of collective experience. These resonances find expression in the narrator’s interpolations, which constantly remind the reader that “even the great Ramchandra [Rama]” was unable to protect his wife Sita (50). The epic *Ramayana* is silent on the ethical implications of Rama’s exile of Sita following her abduction, an exile he imposes in capitulation to his subjects’ discontent with Sita’s supposed impurity (having lived in another man’s house, albeit forcibly). Through these interpolations, Jyotirmoyee Devi presents a composite of textual fragments that pertain to Sutara’s partition trauma but which consistently allude to other stories, such as national myth. Furthermore, mythic trauma is always touching upon Sutara’s own trauma according to the discourse of Hindu nationalism, in which men protect the honour of the newly formed, feminized nation.

The form of the fragment delicately works to create readerly distance, only to render the reader aware of that distance, particularly in the first third of the book, which ends with

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\(^{17}\) Analogous to the formation of mob violence, the construction of women as totemic symbols of national honour existed prior to partition, stretching back to the colonial era and even classic myth in the Indian literary imagination. Veena Das notes figures such as Gandhari mourning the loss of her hundred sons in
the family’s decision to send Sutara away to school. Sanat’s initial series of letters to Tamijuddin are not only vague, according to the narrative description (24), but veiled from the survivor of trauma, Sutara, who rarely gets to read these letters herself. Instead, Tamijuddin is the interpreter, accorded the task of parsing Sanat’s concern with family honour and relative indifference to Sutara’s well-being. This is narrative delicately and masterfully woven into the social fabric of rumour and innuendo, generating a kind of ethical lattice through which we can view Sutara’s day-to-day experiences with post-partition trauma. The voices that re-trigger her trauma are multiple and diffuse, in contrast to the unnamed yet conversational third-person narrative voice, evoking the anonymous yet toxic quality of mob formations that I discussed earlier in the chapter.

With respect to specific acts of violence, the text rarely permits itself the luxury of direct description — of Sutara’s rape, of the specific issues of pollution relating to rape that form the unspoken component of Sutara’s treatment. Toxicity balloons outward from an originary traumatic point that is missing both from the narrative voice and from Sutara’s own thoughts as we receive them: she struggles to understand what happened to her on the night of her rape, and cannot (initially) fathom the reason for the hostility she senses from Amulya Basu’s wife. Even when her understanding increases, her response dramatizes the recurring trauma of her treatment by her family without shedding any light on her rape. At each step, we encounter the same narrative circuit: the unvoiced trauma of rape produces the social trauma of exclusion and hostility that loops back to an event that the text refuses to name or clarify. Was it rape, or assault without rape? No one, not even the third-person narrator who has direct access to Sutara’s thoughts, can present a clear picture. Readerly contact with this loop is the persistent, disquieting touch that engenders an ethics of reading as an encounter with the unspeakable. But the novel refuses to fetishize this encounter, which takes place entirely within a burgeoning trajectory of trauma, trial, penance, and seemingly harmonious resolution. Sutara embarks on a pilgrimage, a deliberate allusion to the holy pilgrimages undertaken by Sita and other women of both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to “purify” themselves. The text’s ruthless adherence to this formal trajectory — wedded as it is so inextricably to the

the Mahabharata as literary instances of women transforming the work of mourning and “witnessing death” (52) into the practice of everyday life.
discourse of history and myth that the narrator repeatedly invokes — entraps the reader’s gaze, subordinates it to the state discourse of closure precisely in order to dramatize the limits and exclusions imposed by that discourse.

Between the moments after Sutara’s rape and her eventual exile to school abroad, the novel offers twenty scenes and nearly forty pages in which the pattern of psychic trauma is virtually the same: Sutara experiences hostility at a social level, some attempt is made to explain it away plausibly, and the text stops short of proffering the explanation that the reader can already guess. In the aftermath of Sutara’s rape, Sakina’s mother, in a discussion of the general partition violence, says: “If only the men had confined the killing to themselves…” to which “Aziz stared at the ground” and “Sakina could not look up” (13). Sutara is an unseen witness to this conversation, having slipped out of her room at the prospect of receiving news of her family via letter. The conversation she overhears is toxic, as the Muslim family calmly discusses the extent of partition violence while criticizing the Hindu myths that encourage such violence (explicitly mentioning the attack on Draupadi). The conversation is also hyper-focused on honour and social stigma. The language with which one could describe Sutara’s own physical and psychic trauma as a result of rape is both absent and unable even to signal the condition of possibility for its emergence. This scene is one of the most direct appraisals of the violence of partition in the first third of the novel, but it too operates studiously within the limits of what its characters are willing to say. From this scene, we move to another instance of the fragment:

Yes, a letter was sent to Sutara’s brother. Only Sutara has survived, he was informed, she is very sick but she wants to come to you. If you wish, we can send her but it would be better for you to come and fetch her. (15)

Opening with a passive-voice construction, which makes it impossible to determine who exactly in Tamijuddin’s household actually sent the letter, this passage lances the epistolary with private, unmarked reflections that seem to constitute the actual text of the letter without being marked as such. The first sentence is outside the letter, “properly” speaking; the second and third sentences, by contrast, are of the letter, syntactically informal, addressed to Sutara’s brother in the second-person pronoun. Yet the text offers
no formal indication of the switch between registers and voices, a move that recurs throughout the novel. Social codes circulate freely within daily forms of communication, constraining action through language (the idea that Sutara is merely baggage that someone can “fetch” as needed), but all within the space of the everyday. The letter essentially becomes a metonym for the novel as mixed epistolary.

In characterizing Jyotirmoyee Devi’s prose style, Debali Mookerjea-Leonard speaks of her

use of short, crisp sentences, mostly unsentimental prose … frugal descriptions, short paragraphs, and hence frequent breaks … [which] intensifies the feel of the sad, broken lives she narrates. (131)

Mookerjea-Leonard is referring to Jyotirmoyee Devi’s short story “That Little Boy,” which she has translated from the original Bengali. The description aptly reflects the prose style of *The River Churning*, itself broken into a multitude of short increments of text in brief, numbered vignettes, folded into three fairly discrete sections. The first section of thirty pages charts Sutara’s trauma during partition, her physical recovery, and her eventual return to her extended natal family. The second section (Anusanan Parva: The Imposition) documents the everyday trauma Sutara experiences as a result of her family viewing her as polluted, ending with her being sent to boarding-school. The experience of reading is not simply one of tracking the “sad, broken” life of Sutara, but of reading as an endlessly interrupted ethical act within a narrative that consistently appends a supplementary trauma (the epistemic violence directed towards Sutara after partition) to the first (Sutara’s rape during partition). The brief form of the fragment is both the mode for describing this supplementary trauma and the interruption of this description; fragments end arbitrarily, at the close of a given scene or with Sutara reflecting on the trauma that women have suffered in history and myth. The text presents a type of narrative continuity indicated by numeric, sequential scenes that would seem to proceed “logically” from each other. However, this presentation ironizes the incremental nature of narrative progression, attaching numbers and sequences to a series of loosely connected episodes. Through this irony, the novel situates Sutara’s predicament within the experience of social trauma as *radial*, drifting outward from a point of origin that varies
according to the scene. Each numbered section, essentially, is its own radial encapsulation of daily trauma.

*The River Churning* thus constitutes a series of stalled and repeated social gestures, couched in the form of invitations, letters, dinners, weddings, and classroom encounters; the form of each category is always troubled by another version of it. Shortly before Sutara embarks on her pilgrimage, Promode unexpectedly visits her at the end of the summer holidays, bringing news of Subodh’s marriage. Subodh’s bride is from another caste, which leads Promode to explain why Sutara has heard nothing of the marriage:

“I thought she was a nice girl. But such marriages only provoke people so it was a good idea not to invite a lot of guests. It would not have served any purpose.”

He was reminded of another day, another conversation at Subha’s wedding. He did not say more. (Devi 80)

Promode is alluding to Subha’s family ostracizing Sutara at the wedding: forcing her to eat large quantities of food alone in the kitchen, never saying anything directly, but creating an atmosphere of such persistent hostility that Sutara herself becomes aware of it and leaves the wedding. Bringing up Subodh’s wedding re-triggers Sutara’s trauma, which propels the text radially towards the memory of a third wedding. When Promode returns to Calcutta, he discusses his visit to Sutara with Subha, who brings up the wedding (Reba’s) from which Sutara was intentionally excluded under the guise of a late wedding invitation. Promode and Subha then share a brief discussion on the politics of arranging marriages, and why finding a suitable husband for Sutara is a difficult, if not impossible task, given that she “stayed with a Muslim family for so long” during partition (81). The scene concludes with Promode “thinking something” but refusing to share his thought with Subha: “No, it’s nothing of any importance. I’ll tell you later” (82).

The language in both scenes is allusive, bereft of specific detail and direct description. Promode’s memory of Subha’s wedding appears without clarification, the reader left to drift, inevitably, towards the trauma of Sutara’s rape, which lies buried beneath layers of social convention and vague innuendo. If this moment is the inception of Promode’s turn towards sympathy for Sutara, the narrative veils this turn from the reader’s perception,
with Promode even claiming that what he’s thinking is “nothing of any importance.” Each scene stalls, unable to express meaning, flowing radially towards the circular “limit” of Sutara’s originary trauma. The disarming simplicity of Jyotirmoyee Devi’s style — the “unsentimental prose” and “frugal descriptions” to which Mookerjea-Leonard refers — frames the aesthetic of the text as one of textual hypnosis (to invoke Christopher Pinney). However, this hypnosis is not ethics transfixed by the devotional Hindu image (darshan), but rather a representation of partition trauma that halts the dominant state discourse of transfixion (via the happy ending) before the detritus of that representation: its unpresence, its disavowed trauma, the thing it seeks to conceal.

Repetition, within the community circuit of exclusion, rumour, and household taboo, produces a hypnotic intensity, collapsing the material into a field of oversaturated representation, within which Sutara, as the trauma survivor, finds herself frozen, rooted to physical spaces that encode the memories of past trauma. Veena Das uses the image of partition survivors sitting in stone, signifying their “absence from life” (107) to gesture to the way rumour displaces the subjectivity of the woman both in the everyday cycle of community life and in the circuit of collective violence, where rumour is the trigger for violent action. However, Das also locates a second valence in this petrification, one that returns us to the concept of the fragment as a temporally engaged response to violence:

My sense is to think of the fragment here as different from a part or various parts that may be assembled together to make up a picture of totality. Unlike a sketch that may be executed on a different scale from the final picture one draws, or that may lack all the details of the picture but still contain the imagination of the whole, the fragment marks the impossibility of such an imagination. Instead, fragments allude to a particular way of inhabiting the world, say, in a gesture of mourning. (5)

The narrative fragment opens up a space in which the survivor may begin to negotiate a daily existence “in the service of life, its creativity and unpredictability” (107). Consequently, we do not speak of certain gestures as encoding final and ultimate meanings. Silence, for example, may be the body’s way of turning back to the space of trauma in which one seeks to live again, which resonates with the responses of many
survivors of partition violence who refused to discuss what had happened to them. This act, like the narrative fragment, does not necessarily add up to a “picture of totality,” as Das puts it. Instead, the silent return to traumatic space evokes the desire to re-inhabit and reclaim that space without declarative speech acts, or talking through one’s pain. In other words, the “gesture of mourning,” as much as it may connote a perpetual and even toxic state of anguish, is for some survivors the means of re-occupying their trauma in a way that enabled repair to transact in the daily scale of life.

2.5 Transfixion and trauma

The incessant return to a space of absence, an absence that neither the narrator nor the protagonist can ever quantify or replace with a known whole, is part of how The River Churning represents partition trauma as textual hypnosis. Obsessively, the narrative returns, over the course of each of its three discrete sections, to a trauma which no one, including Sutara herself, can articulate explicitly. Calling this return a deferral is, of course, valid within a certain ethical framework; it is neither implausible nor unfair to take the novel to task for fetishizing partition violence as absence and thus validating, narratively, the very hostility and social stigmatizing of the trauma survivor that the text wants to oppose. But The River Churning still forces the reader to engage with the social ramifications of Sutara’s trauma as they affect Sutara herself; this engagement, with its stalled attempts at constructing meaning out of everyday trauma, slows narrative momentum to a crawl. Each brief scene (usually not more than one or two pages) becomes the formal recommencement of a trauma narrative, and in so doing, sediments a hypnotic “unstory” within the margins: the readerly gaze is drawn to that unstory, in all its permutations, over and over, played out against the narrator’s repeated gestures to the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, to Draupadi’s violation and Sita’s exile following her abduction.

In the context of Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel, hypnosis works by transfixion, arresting the reader before the image of something that ought to inspire devotion but is instead unmistakably toxic. One cannot sympathize with the family that persistently marginalizes Sutara, regards her as polluted, and ostracizes her at large social events (such as Subha’s wedding) where her isolation magnifies the extent of the hostility directed towards her in
the community. The textual gaze is dispersed, multiplied, riven by allusion to history and myth, intermingled with traumatic flashback, speculation on trauma, and comments from family members that are unmarked in the narrative, emerging from both past and present. In this way, Jyotirmoyee Devi’s novel operates within the field of social and technohierarchical relations that Pinney describes. However, it would be, I think, a mistake to overemphasize the Foucauldian (surveillant) element of the novel’s relationship to the reader, because the novel is also invested in challenging the stability of the dominant discourse. In other words, surveillance still leaves Sutara, the trauma survivor, a place where she can resist the effects of power, ward off the attempt to reduce her subjectivity to nothing but her status as a “polluted” woman.

The omnipresent field of interspersed devotional gazes may prompt Sutara’s oppressors to sink into the fantasy of myth and image at the expense of her subjectivity, but it is not a totalizing field: it allows its actors discursive and ethical space in which to challenge harmful representations (such as the "polluted woman") and puncture the hypnosis of the socio-devotional image. Promode is the character who grows into ethical maturity and eventually accepts Sutara, pledging himself to her:

I hope you won’t say no. We talk of you often, Subha and myself. We like you so much. I don’t know about love, but we felt so sorry for you. Can you try to like us? (129)

Promode offers not love, but understanding and reconciliation, dependability and the promise of further intimacy. His marriage proposal spurs Sutara to wonder whether “the dream would shatter,” at which point she hears a “message” emerging from the darkness around her: “Don’t you worry, Sutara, I am taking charge of you” (133). This message closely mirrors what Promode wants to say to Sutara just a few lines earlier, but does not; instead, he can “do nothing, not even touch her” (132). At this moment, which closes out the novel, trauma appears to have given way to a harmonious resolution, in which Sutara’s experience — including the trauma of her rape and the hostility she faces from her community — finally gains its voice. Everything, apparently, has ended well for Sutara, as “her body, which had been weighed down with all the heaviness of the earth, suddenly lifted, and she felt as light as air” (133).
On the surface, the text has reduced Sutara from college professor to a “young dreamy girl” (133) whose emotional recovery from trauma is entirely located in a man protecting her. Here, Jyotirmoyee Devi would seem to be at risk of reinscribing precisely the normative patriarchal values that she has allowed the novel to critique so effectively through the course of its narrative. However, the text is not to be so easily coded and dismissed; we cannot assume that all closure that ends in conjugal bliss is automatically guilty of facilely resolving tension at the expense of ethical and narrative complexity. I argue instead that The River Churning punctures such a misreading by gesturing to the intertwined formal and thematic difficulties of representing trauma. In other words, Jyotirmoyee Devi uses the happy ending to point us towards the ways in which different forms of narrative — fiction, myth, history — obscure the reality of violence towards women, by imposing arbitrary resolutions and unities on the complicated, fraught, ongoing task of working through trauma. Crucially, the novel does not end with Sutara and Promode’s wedding, but rather in an uncertain moment after Promode has made Sutara promise to wait for him until he has returned from a journey abroad. It still remains for Promode to convince members of his family to accept Sutara, and though the text allows him to reassure Sutara on his chances of success on that front, it nonetheless concludes on a question, giving Sutara a temporary feeling of hope by way of a disembodied message that Promode himself thinks but never actually speaks. The question of whether Promode is “troubled by the same fear” (131) as Sutara is left open, nor does the text allow him to challenge the discourse of closure and reconciliation, a discourse that actively marginalizes the lives of trauma survivors such as Sutara. We confront both Sutara’s hope for belonging and healing and her fear that what she refers to as her “long nightmare” (133) is not actually over; focalization remains fixed on the uncertainty of a specific moment in time, within which Sutara can only fantasize about a happy ending of return, recovery, and healing. In other words, what appears to be a formulaic conclusion to an early partition novel is actually a carefully chosen strategy, which demonstrates how history and myth, as hegemonic modes of narrative, shape the kind of representations of partition trauma that can be told.
2.6 Apartheid and the zero ending

Jyotirmoyee Devi’s work illustrates the subtle and formally sophisticated ways in which South Asian authors have responded to the state’s discourse of recovery and healing. Faced with the social command to replace trauma with happy endings, authors such as Jyotirmoyee Devi present an apparent replication of this discourse; however, the replication is deliberately imperfect. This imperfect replication finds a compelling inversion in apartheid-era South African fiction, which adopts the technique of the zero ending — essentially, a false ending, without meaning or permanence — in order to undermine the late-apartheid governmental fixation on the present, on its refusal to acknowledge the possibility of the end of apartheid.

The task of offering a literary response to the collective trauma of apartheid has presented a thorny problem for South African writers. Characterizing this response as an imaginative act, André Brink argues that “it doesn’t help you just writing the real of what you see, you must bring yourself to a point where you can imagine that” (Mengel 7). Essentially, the writer imagines a space in which the trauma of apartheid can find expression, but without foreclosing the difficulty of that endeavour. Brink conceives of this responsibility “to try to bear witness, and do this sort of schizophrenic thing, being there and reporting on the being there, especially in a time of terror, in a time of atrocities, in a time of trauma” (6). Witnessing, then, is tied to literary imagination, “being there” but not merely as an instrument of reportage. The search has been and continues to be for an ethically attentive model for representing trauma: that is, a model that does justice to the depth and specificity of apartheid’s trauma.

Following the Soweto uprising of 1976, the apartheid government began to refine its totalitarian security apparatus, mobilizing police into a perpetual state of readiness to combat anti-apartheid activism. The planks of this policy were explicitly military and anticommunist, with an emphasis on technology-driven forms of surveillance. What united these policies was known as Total Strategy, a response to the “total onslaught” of anti-apartheid activity and labor unrest. As governmental policy, Total Strategy embodied the apartheid regime’s obsession with freezing itself into a perpetual present, annihilating any sense of futurity by framing action and intervention as a series of endlessly generated
processes, in response to the threat of anti-apartheid activism. The dominant state discourse, during the late apartheid era, was therefore one of presentness worshipped to sickness, investing, in an almost Foucauldian sense, all spaces with ideological charge, and thereby creating, in any given space, the very “criminality” that its policies were supposed to prevent and oppose.

In response, South African writers interested in challenging the state discourse on apartheid tended to adopt the governmental “zero ending” as a formal device in their fiction. In Miriam Tlali’s *Amandla* (1980), a fictionalized account of the Soweto uprising of 1976, the fate of both the townsfolk and the revolutionaries remains as clouded as the magistrate in J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), a man who “lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (152). For Maureen Smales, the protagonist of Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* (1981), the future refuses to be born even as the past is no longer viable: the novel ends before she can find out whether the people in the helicopter are friends or foes. Her retreat into the bush, then, is escape without purpose or sense of futurity. This use of the zero ending to reflect apartheid’s lack of future prompted Elleke Boehmer to lament what she saw as the refusal to break with convention, the reluctance to formally innovate and thereby give South African writing a sense of uniqueness and place on the world literature stage:

> Even though an ending may be plural or indeterminate, even though a sense of things to come may not be completely blocked out, more often than not we encounter a reluctance to speculate or to dream, certainly to give any sort of positive reading about what might happen from now on, other than in the most obvious, formulaic, and limited ways. That is to say, tomorrow is represented as struggle, or cataclysm, or the further disintegration of society. Endings are arrested in a difficult and frozen now: belief in an ongoing, unfolding destiny is largely absent, and this in turn constrains the possibilities for stylistic risk-taking… (48)

For Boehmer, the late-apartheid literary output of the ‘80s represents futurity only in “the most obvious, formulaic, and limited ways” — in terms of cataclysm, disintegration, and the process of falling without a definitive endpoint to the fall itself. In this formulation, the refusal to end is the symptom of a reluctance to offer stylistic innovation. Boehmer
contrasts this refusal to end with what she views as a more fruitful time of experimentation prior to the emergency era of apartheid, invoking Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930), and Bessie Head’s experimental novel *A Question of Power* (1974). Boehmer argues that compared to earlier writers of South African fiction, emergency-era authors seem to be “less comfortable with, and less creative, less exploratory about, indeterminacy … in form and language as well as in subject matter” (44).

What remains unclear, however, is why the zero ending automatically “constrains the possibilities for stylistic risk-taking,” unless we accept that innovation necessarily defines itself along the axis of a postmodern prose style, the specifics of which Boehmer does not make very clear. Emergency-era apartheid fiction, for her, is “rarely creatively disruptive,” offering only a stagnant “indeterminacy” — distinct, apparently, from the indeterminacy of explicitly postmodern fiction — that “justifies itself with reference to a framework of apartheid, which means there can be no surprises, no reversal of expectations” (51). It seems both odd and needlessly constraining to argue that all late apartheid fiction offers “no surprises,” given the richness of stylistic responses to apartheid that characterize the fiction Boehmer is so intent on reducing to the “indeterminacy” of the zero ending. Disintegration and cataclysm as themes may contain their own formal complexity, just as a certain type of postmodernist experimentation may be nothing but a vacuous celebration of plurality that does not critically engage with the political and ethical concerns of South Africa. Insofar as emergency-era apartheid fiction is framed by apartheid, Boehmer’s criticism has some validity, but the rather sweeping stricture that such fiction can only indicate an end without future reveals the degree to which Total Strategy, as an apartheid philosophy, has unconsciously constrained and shaped critical focus, rather than the literary texts themselves.

Nor is it evident just what constitutes the reader’s “expectation” in relation to the idea of surprise at a narrative and formal level. One of the central goals of writers during the apartheid era was to bear witness to the trauma of apartheid as a totalizing discourse and

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18 With its hyper-emphasis on lexical manipulation, wordplay, and intertextuality, Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) comes perilously (if unwittingly) close to this type of celebration.
political apparatus without necessarily having to use protest fiction as the chosen genre. The range of possible literary responses to apartheid is informed by apartheid, certainly, but not limited by it; moreover, a certain type of formal innovation is evident in the late-apartheid novel I will examine in this chapter: J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* (1990). This is not innovation for its own sake, but rather a way to widen the scope of apartheid trauma narratives available to us, to prevent us from reinscribing the violence of apartheid (and Total Strategy) in any reductive characterization of the literature of the period.

Furthermore, the willingness to dismiss a certain kind of formal “simplicity” (simple because it does not measure and present complexity according to the now-familiar rubric of postmodernist experimentation) shares an uncomfortable resonance with the exclusions and limitations both of western trauma theory and of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I want to discuss this resonance at some length.

While Total Strategy undoubtedly had an enormous impact on the everyday lives of black South Africans, that impact, as I have suggested, was capillary rather than merely hierarchical, producing a host of psychic effects that overdetermined the nature of black South African trauma during apartheid. In addition to the litany of legislative acts that made the act of living as a black South African during apartheid analogous to living “in a state of war” (Borzaga 84), we encounter the idea of apartheid as a “trauma machine” (81), the apparatus for the production of a continuous and omnipresent stream of traumatic effects that disrupts and problematizes an event-driven, western-imported notion of trauma. Observing a common refusal to accord Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe the same weight in trauma studies as white western theorists, Borzaga contrasts the “punctual” nature of western trauma theory scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Elaine Scarry, with “a country which, until 1994, officially and legally entitled white people to traumatize black people systematically” (80). If the trauma of apartheid is pervasive, not exceptionalized, Borzaga argues, it becomes crucial to interrogate western trauma theory, particularly given the recent history of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) being exported as a “prêt-à-porter concept” (Beneduce qtd. in Borzaga 69) to African countries, “an instrumentalist tool to order and to domesticate … what often belongs in the realm of the incomprehensible and the chaotic” (Borzaga 69). Because this export of western trauma theory individualizes patterns of
suffering and trauma without taking systemic traumatic conditions into account, it also erases any discussion of how African trauma survivors relate experiences of trauma to a loss of *community*. Finally, this model continues to deny black South African trauma survivors the opportunity to display their own strength and resilience in working through trauma in nonstandard fashion (read, nonstandard for western audiences).

As the cornerstone of her argument, Borzaga examines *There Was This Goat*, an interdisciplinary examination of the testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile, the mother of Gugulethu Seven activist Zabonke John Konile (murdered in 1986 by apartheid police). Combining investigative journalism, fictional fragments, and interviews, the book focuses on Mrs. Konile’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony, notable for its refusal to follow the accepted TRC format, which usually began with biographical detail from the victim, established the “circumstances and content of the violation” during the middle, and ended with clarifications and the victim putting forward her “desire and/or needs,” after which the chair would close that particular interaction (Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele 85).

Mrs. Konile’s recounting of her trauma began with the striking phrase (albeit translated): “There was this goat.” Crucially, this statement, and others in which Konile described being buried beneath coal rock, were taken by the TRC as evidence of her disconnection from reality. The second chapter of *There was this Goat* includes an *imaginary* account of three unnamed white academics discussing Mrs. Konile’s testimony using the received language of western trauma theory. While one of the academics asserts unequivocally that “to have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt,” another expresses profound disappointment in the apparent incoherence of Mrs. Konile’s testimony, in which she “talked mostly about herself and the bizarre things that happened to her which had nothing, absolutely *nothing*, to do with gross human rights violations” (23). As Borzaga notes, all three fictional white voices “immediately disentangle Mrs. Konile’s account and the brutal killing of her son by the apartheid police from the larger biographical, political, and cultural context” (67). The victim’s pain acquires a kind of hyperfocus, over and above the specificity of her experience as a Xhosa woman in a Xhosa community; trauma, as theorized in this imaginary conversation, eclipses both
Mrs. Konile’s uniqueness as a person and her ability to resist and work through her trauma within her community framework. The authors of *There was this Goat* do not deny the value of examining “the relationship between language and pain, trauma and representation, [and] the parallels between the aporetic nature of trauma and the aporetic nature of language” (Borzaga 67). However, they also observe that such western theory fails to offer us any insight into Mrs. Konile as an individual within a Xhosa community whose specific cultural traits might resist such readings. Trauma theory, in this particular instance, acts as a barrier, rather than a conduit, to understanding.

Mrs. Konile’s reference to a goat illustrates her tendency, as in many Xhosa communities, to use dreams as a real and tangible reference-point for events in the world. Far from being simply a hallucination or evidence of insuperable trauma, the vision of the goat represented both “guide and a warning … part of a psychological world, a culture, of unspoken politics” (Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele 58) that connected Mrs. Konile to her community. In the TRC testimony, the translators left out Mrs. Konile’s place of origin in their transcription, leading the audience to assume that she came from Cape Town; as a result, her reference to being buried beneath coal rock, which is not found in Cape Town, was incomprehensible and seen as further evidence of her psychic trauma. These references only became intelligible once the authors visited Mrs. Konile personally in her natal East Cape village of Indwe, which is surrounded by coal and where “it is a common survival practice for poor people to dig for and collect coal with tin plates, and then either to sell it or to use it to bake bricks for the construction of houses” (73). In each reference, to goat and to coal, the cultural and social context for Mrs. Konile’s statement was absent from the TRC record, creating a public sense of her experience as disjointed and schizophrenic, localized within her individual experience but not comprehensible as part of a larger phenomenon of collective trauma. What Mrs. Konile expressed, though, was not a case of exceptional trauma (the death of her son), but trauma that was contiguous with her everyday life:

> For much too long, the story of trauma has been told in terms of events and accidents, but to what extent can we conceive of poverty as a traumatic event that overwhelms the subject from the outside, too unexpectedly to be processed? (73)
Borzaga draws a contrast between event-driven conceptions of trauma and “layered” trauma; the latter term encompasses various forms of systemic and personal trauma overlaid and interdependent, allowing the discursive space to talk about unorthodox survival strategies employed by black South Africans during apartheid. Furthermore, the case of Mrs. Konile exemplifies the extent to which the TRC, as a discourse, was unable to adequately convey the depth and complexity of a survivor’s experience. The form — speak, grieve, heal — mediated the types of stories that could be told, and thereby set limits on the access certain survivors had to working through their own trauma.

Furthermore, the gendered construction of TRC testimony frequently prioritized law over custom, which rendered the requests of many female trauma survivors, particularly the mothers of deceased anti-apartheid activists, unintelligible before the commission. Through this “disjuncture and conflation of law and custom,” the testimony of black female trauma survivors exposed “the limits of the commission’s machine of advocacy” (Sanders 61).

When we return to the question of the zero ending, then, we return with an awareness of how critics, trauma theorists, and TRC officials alike have tended to privilege certain modes of narrative for the purposes of representing the trauma of apartheid. Between these three groups, there are, of course, substantive and important differences. It is not my intention to homogenize their respective positions. Instead, I want to underline the connection they share in the South African context to challenge the model of representing apartheid trauma as one that must necessarily subscribe to a specific model of formal “sophistication.” Complexity, I would suggest, is not synonymous with postmodernist experimentation. The novel I will examine through the remainder of this chapter, J.M. Coetzee’s Age of Iron (1990), shifts the standard by which we might judge narrative complexity: from self-consciously experimental prose to the disquieting emergence of the literary trauma text as body, the ethical posture of both the body of the text and the body of its narrator.

2.7 The dying body

Written in the last years of apartheid and published a year before its official dissolution (1990), Age of Iron both typifies and defies the paradox of Coetzee’s subject position as a
white South African writer: opposed to the systemic violence and oppression of apartheid as a system, but attentive to the problem of representing the traumatic experience of black South Africans living under apartheid. The privileged white narrator, enfeebled by a combination of half-hearted liberal posturing and veiled desire, is a familiar figure in Coetzee’s work, particularly in the years directly preceding the publication of *Age of Iron*. The elderly magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) desperately wants to believe that the “barbarian” girl he routinely coerces into sexual intercourse views their relationship as consensual and equal. In *Foe* (1986), Susan Barton’s attempt to “civilize” Friday is as much about her desire to project narrative and meaning onto an enslaved Other as it is about a feminist project of reclamation.

However, *Age of Iron* is also, in many ways, a retreat from the overt formal experimentation and allegory of Coetzee’s earlier work. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for example, takes place in a nameless frontier of empire, a kind of shimmering allegorical apartheid “present” without clear sense of place, while *Foe* journeys back to Britain’s colonial past, revising Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in an explicit critique of the conventions of literary realism that Defoe helped to inaugurate. By contrast, *Age of Iron* is set in contemporary South Africa, a return to a recognizable place (Cape Town) and a specific historical moment (the late emergency period of apartheid). The novel contains no explicit breaks with realist convention, narrative descents into allegory, or fragmented perspectives. In presenting the novel as a series of letters from Mrs. Curren to an absent daughter long since emigrated to America, Coetzee quietly adopts the epistolary style without breaking the epistolary frame; the text never discloses whether Vercueil actually mails the letters, as he has agreed to do.

*Age of Iron* begins with Mrs. Curren receiving the news that she has incurable cancer, at roughly the same time she decides to take a homeless black or Coloured South African, whom she names Vercueil, into her home. A series of tense encounters follow between Curren and two black South African teenagers (one of them, Bheki, is the son of Curren’s

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19 The ease with which Curren assigns this man the name “Vercueil” speaks, of course, to the privilege of her position as a white Afrikaner during apartheid. Moreover, it recalls the practice of naming slaves, echoing Susan Barton’s relationship to Friday in *Foe*. Verskuil, one of the variants of Vercueil that Curren
servant Florence). After their initial arrival at Curren’s home, the boys each suffer injuries as a result of a collision while attempting to flee the apartheid police. Bheki is later shot to death by police in a turbulent area of Cape Town referred to only as Site C, which Curren visits unwillingly, at the behest of Florence. Temporarily evicted from her house on the grounds that she has been harbouring insurgents, Curren is subsequently mugged by a group of children, and returns to her house, finally confessing her role in perpetuating and maintaining the apartheid system to Vercueil. The novel ends with Curren’s final strand of written narrative: the moments just before Vercueil (it is implied) will assist her in taking her own life.

This quiet use of the epistolary as the formal structure of the novel has led critics, such as Elleke Boehmer, to include Age of Iron in a characterization of apartheid fiction as subservient, prisoner even, to the convention of the zero ending. The fact that Curren is narrating her own end in written form (the letter) means that the novel cannot end exactly when her life ends, since “the process of falling and lapsing is still not yet completed: the anticipated ending is postponed” (Boehmer 49). Following this line of reasoning, the novel is “locked down” by the hermetic enclosure of Curren’s narrative, and thus unable to represent apartheid trauma except through omission and absence. The zero ending, then, is the supposedly inevitable byproduct of the novel’s adherence to apartheid convention, since the ending is given prosaically, without drawing attention to itself as a narrative strategy. As in the case of Jyotirmoyee Devi’s The River Churning, the critical tendency is to see historical specificity and absence of overt formal experimentation as evidence of narrative transparency, an unselfconsciousness naturalized by the novel’s formal structure. I want to dispute this tendency. Through the remainder of this chapter, I will examine the ways in which Age of Iron does indeed challenge the zero ending of apartheid discourse at both formal and thematic levels. Curren’s questionable attempts to make the reader cognizant of her limited perspective only serve to underline the almost convulsive status of the novel as the product of the apartheid government’s obsession with zero endings, borne out of the discourse of Total Strategy. The story is not “locked down” by Curren’s zero ending; instead, it crosses over into a new “chapter,” so to speak,

initially mentions, translates from Afrikaans as “hide.” His actual race is never specified, though Bheki and John's anger at his condition reflects some racial solidarity.
connoting the presence of a very real future by dwelling precisely at the limits of apartheid discourse in a vanishing present.

*Age of Iron* opens with a tacit question, residing within a paragraph that localizes Mrs. Curren’s nostalgia for bygone days within a curiously undefined and abstracted space:

> There is an alley down the side of the garage, you may remember it, you and your friends would sometimes play there. Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot. (Coetzee 3)

The obvious question is: who is Curren’s addressee? From the point of view of emplotment, of course, we soon discover that the words on the page are part of a series of letters Curren writes to her adult daughter. Whether or not her daughter will read these letters hinges on whether or not Vercueil, the homeless man whom Curren encounters in the alley, actually delivers the letters as promised, after Curren’s death. However, the tacit question is not one of emplotment, finally, but rather one of audience. Beginning *in medias res*, the novel implicates an as-yet-unknown reader in the framing of the focalizer, Curren, but this implication is localized to a curiously abstract space, devoid of specific geographical reference to Cape Town. An undifferentiated alley, with its piles of rotting “windblown” leaves, is situated only in reference to “the side of the garage” in Curren’s home, which is itself ungrounded, unlocalized. The tacit question is thus: in such an abstract and deterritorialized space, what does mean for Curren to put memory into question, to say only that her daughter (and/or the reader) “may” remember the alley?

*Age of Iron* is the only Coetzee novel explicitly set in apartheid-era South Africa, the only novel to link the ethical dilemma of Coetzee’s white South African focalizer directly to specific historical events. Curren’s eventual visit to “Site C” evokes the 1986 destruction of the townships such as Gugulethu, Crossroads, in which some 60,000 black South Africans were displaced by the witdoeke, the white Afrikaner vigilantes whose opposition to the efforts of the ANC and UDF were covertly funded by the apartheid government. *Age of Iron*, then, is unusual in Coetzee’s œuvre, the more so because it

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20 *In the Heart of the Country* has South Africa as its setting, certainly, but the time period is uncertain, and the eccentricities of Magda’s focalization eclipse political and historical specificity. *Life and Times of Michael K* seems to be set in a version of South Africa, but without reference to specific geography.
makes use at times of reportage as a narrative strategy to represent violence that is neither allegorical nor phantasmatic. And yet, the novel opens onto a scene almost blank, fixing the reader’s eye on rotting leaves within a windswept alley “without use,” while simultaneously casting doubt on the ability of either Curren’s daughter or the reader to remember the scene itself.

Abstraction, I suggest, is not merely a rhetorical strategy of Curren’s, a way to avoid the facticity of apartheid violence that dramatizes the limits of her discourse as a white, privileged classics professor, but a metonym for the abstract space of the novel. Following the abstraction of this opening, Curren proceeds to describe receiving the news of terminal cancer from her doctor, news that almost immediately gives way to her initial encounter with Vercueil, the homeless man who becomes her audience, of sorts, through the novel. Vercueil is also the man who we later learn is entrusted to mail Curren’s letters to her daughter, after Curren herself is dead. Blankness embedded within blankness: the abstract, frequently abstruse confessions of the dying Curren are “trapped” within the pages of a document that may not actually have ever been delivered to its intended audience (Curren’s daughter). The initial chapter restricts the reader to the space in and near Curren’s house, allowing news of her terminal cancer to leak out slowly from her narrative but keeping the narrative lens fixed, within the novel’s “present” time, on two actors on a circumscribed stage: Curren and Vercueil. The police who visit her house are incidental, barely characterized in comparison to Curren’s own meditations on the “stupidly unchanging” messages of the apartheid government as shown on television (Coetzee 29). Within a chapter that refuses to open itself to the events to come, to the very specificity that would situate the alley of the opening more concretely, the hermetic quality of Curren’s musings signals the interaction between narrative structure, character, and symbol that will permeate the entire novel. In restricting the chapter’s scope and ability to ground itself in scenic detail from Cape Town, Coetzee presents a chapter that not only narrates the “closing days” of emergency-era apartheid — apartheid discourse as a dying body, trapped in and constituting a “dead place” — but is also itself a dying body, a corpus not yet aware of its own future death (since the question of whether or not Vercueil has indeed posted the letters is left open, suspended). The chapter, as a body that
cannot by definition know its own imminent demise as a document, is thus funereal in distinct but interrelated ways:

1. Its stated, emplotted content — the news that Curren is dying.

2. Its formal frame, the chosen mode (the epistolary) of Curren as the representative of a dying liberal humanist ethics, which the novel will persistently satirize as deceitful, enfeebled, shamed into silence by the trauma for which it has no answers.

3. The narrative’s inability to do more than be cognizant of its status (dying, not death), a metonym for the larger frame of apartheid as discourse, as Total Strategy.

The novel gives itself, as a body about to be given up, to the reader for whom contact with the narrative is indicative of an attempt by Curren (not Coetzee) to seduce via transfixion, to enfold the reader in trauma as diffuse affective sensation, confusing one’s sense of distinction between specific actors in this drama of emergency-era apartheid conflict. From Curren’s cancerous, dying body to the prone form of Vercueil whom we first encounter “[a]sleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette’s, his jaw agape” (Coetzee 4), the novel introduces bodies only to undermine the distinction between them. Bodily distinction blurs through their proximity, within a chapter that itself constitutes a dying body. These bodies press against each other, invading each other’s space, generating the awareness of being caught within fields of cognitive sensation that are also deadening, dulling. Curren finds herself watching television as the rain falls during an afternoon; the segment is “[o]ne of the tribe of ministers and onderministers … making an announcement to the nation” (9). Gradually, she becomes aware that Vercueil is watching through the window:

    The curtains behind me were open. At a certain moment I became aware of him, the man whose name I do not know, watching over my shoulder through the glass. So I turned up the sound, enough for, if not the words, then the cadences to reach him, the slow, truculent Afrikaans rhythms with their deadening closes, like a hammer beating a post into the ground. Together, blow after blow, we listened. (10)
Transfixion is shared, premised on the visual initially but then reduced to an awareness of rhythm. Vercueil cannot even make out the exact political speech outside; only the mere “cadences” reaching him. Scene, stage, actors: all imbricated in the spectacle of apartheid government rhetoric, sharing the form of devotion, staring and transfixed, but displaced from sincere devotion by bodily posture, as well as by the body’s increasing inability (through sickness) to do what this posture requires.

2.8 The narrative “false start”
Subordinated to liberal “posture,” Curren’s body mimics the narrative body: each approaching an end announced well before the end itself arrives, forced to inhabit the putrescence of late-apartheid emergency rhetoric. Ostensibly opposed to the “disgrace” of living under apartheid’s laws, she nonetheless still aligns herself with liberal ideas of “proper” behaviour, civility, and restraint. Her condemnation of anti-apartheid activity as it emerges in the persons of Bheki and John, the two teenage boys, takes the form of filial relation, but that relation is complicit with apartheid governance in its subordination of ethics to hierarchy, as well as its blind refusal to acknowledge the structural, racialized inequities responsible for active resistance among black South African youth.

The first chapter concludes with Curren enjoining Vercueil to post the contents of this “manuscript,” the letters to her daughter in America. The scene is at once intensely affective and bereft of sensory detail. The pair sit in the kitchen of Curren’s house, with Vercueil eating biscuits, but the scene’s focus is constituted by a series of exchanges, a kind of unbalanced dialogue marked chiefly by Curren’s exposition, doubt, and musings on death. Vercueil offers only the barest spoken acknowledgment, his three moments of speech a deferral of responsibility (wondering whether she can ask someone else to post the letters), a general expression of uncertainty, and finally, unemotionally agreeing to post the letters. His latter words conclude the chapter, deflating Curren’s hyperbolic declaration that the “dead cannot be cheated, cannot be betrayed, unless you carry them with you in your heart and do the crime there” (Coetzee 32). The chapter is itself zero end, an inscrutable promise (Vercueil’s) highlighting the text’s metatheatrical quality, Curren’s focalization allowed to digress into private musings on how the dead were buried in ancient Egypt. She then ruminates on how Vercueil’s own dead body, in a
barely visualized future, will not be given the same rite of mourning that Curren would accord to her old cats (32). Vercueil’s brief responses circumscribe the text’s narrative “life,” reduce it almost to nil, as both it and Curren herself take on a soon-to-be-corpse-like valence.

The subsequent chapter swiftly quashes the stage-like quality of the first chapter in its opening lines: “Florence is back, bringing not only the two little girls but her fifteen-year-old son Bheki” (35). Narratively, the cast of characters widens to admit Curren’s servant Florence and her family; the advent of Florence, a black South African, interrupts Curren’s wearisome soliloquizing, her abstruse, academic meditations on death. The interruption is fixed within a hierarchical set of relations: Florence is Curren’s servant, the person who swiftly transforms the “sour, clammy odor” and “dirty sheets” of the house into “the smell of furniture polish” and “shining” kitchen (36). But this interruption is also a sign of narrative vitality, the text jolted out of its funereal musings by Florence’s arrival, her efficiency in cleaning, the news of the closing of schools in Gugulethu, Langa, and Nyanga. Curren’s shame over her inability to keep her own home clean in Florence’s absence immediately gives way to the two of them discussing Bheki and the closure of the schools. Curren says that Bheki will be “restless” without anything to do, to which Florence returns no comment: “She shrugged, unsmiling. I do not believe I have ever seen her smile. But perhaps she smiles on her children when she is alone with them.” (37). The posture of Florence — shrugging, not speaking, offering no placating smile to Curren’s commonplaces, which are meant to erase and minimize the inequity of their respective positions — is the posture of the text, which is hostile, one could almost say, to its narrator and focalizer, the middle-class white South African woman living alone in a house that could easily accommodate many more children displaced by the violence and school closures in Gugulethu.

Juxtaposing the situation of Florence’s family with the bizarre relationship between Curren and Vercueil, the chapter sets up a pair of contrasts between action and posturing, vitality and senescence. These contrasts operate both across and within scenes, as the white liberal relationship Curren strives to set up between herself and Vercueil ghosts its way into her conversations with Florence, as well as her interactions with Bheki and
John. The irony of comparison — Curren is content to welcome the homeless Vercueil into her house as an act of charity, but wonders whether Bhek is restless — reveals her ethics as enfeebled, unable to accommodate forms of temporal and ethical complexity within the growing framework of black South African unrest and resistance to apartheid rule. The novel gently allows her to fall back into the theatrical: speaking words aloud to no one, ruminating on waking dreams, or overlooking scenes of violence and confrontation as a spectator, physically detached from the point of action.

Structurally, the novel is composed of a series of false starts, four ostensibly discrete chapters in which Curren’s rhetorical and psychological tendency to double back into contemplation is immediately undone by an outside action. This action is either violent or a prefiguration of violence to come. For example, Curren reflects on a weekend that her servant Florence spent with her husband: the weekend is filled up with work but also contains moments of reflection, in which Florence and her husband “were able to put the children to bed in an empty bunk and go for a walk, just the two of them, in the warm dusk” (43). This reflection is an act of imagination, which the narrative belatedly acknowledges: “All of this happened. All of this must have happened” (43). What Curren imagines is an idyllic life full of hard work from which Florence and William are nonetheless able to extract some personal satisfaction, “an ordinary afternoon in Africa” (44) in which the systemic inequalities of apartheid can happily remain invisible in Curren’s discursive register. The scene comes at the expense of any sense of time or progress; Curren compares Florence’s husband, in his capacity as a slaughterer of chickens at a shop, to someone “sitting in front of a clock all day, killing the seconds as they emerged, counting one’s life away” (45). Time is not only halted, but “assaulted” by Curren’s framing; the metaphor arrests motion within the terms of its trope while imposing a similar zero ending on Curren’s own story.

However, the ensuing scene — and this is the “undoing” violence I spoke of earlier — finds the young black South African boy, John, hurling abuse at Vercueil for his consumption of alcohol and eventually forcing him to leave, albeit temporarily. The altercation anticipates the violence that takes place within a few pages, as Curren encounters an unmarked police van outside her home. She asks them whether they are
here about the boys, to which they respond with mockery and feigned ignorance. Curren’s supposedly well-meaning interference is actually the catalyst for the trauma that Bheki and John experience shortly thereafter: the police pursuit of the boys leads to them being accidentally injured on the street by a random passer-by emerging from his vehicle. Curren’s attempt to intervene using what she herself admits are the “discredited, comical” (53) platitudes of white South African gentility only winds up generating further trauma.

Whenever Curren descends into a posture of self-involved contemplation, the novel proffers a trauma that defies her control. In the middle of the night, news that Bheki is in trouble in Gugulethu reaches Florence; she, her children, and Curren set off in the car to find Bheki. The events of chapter three mark an abrupt, and for Coetzee unusual, stylistic shift into reportage; this shift again galvanizes Curren out of her introjective posture. She meets Mr. Thabane, Florence’s cousin, an anti-apartheid activist and former teacher who guides them to the location in Site C where apartheid vigilantes (witdoeke) are setting fire to and destroying black houses. After a harrowing walk in the rain, Curren is overcome with exhaustion and terror; her immediate wish is to swoop in and save Bheki without confronting any of the vigilante violence in the black townships. However, Thabane refuses to legitimate Curren’s feeble, privileged desire to avoid all “trouble,” her insistence on reducing the systematic destruction of black housing to an isolated “terrible” incident:

“It is not just terrible,” he said, “it is a crime. When you see a crime being committed in front of your eyes, what do you say? Do you have, ‘I have seen enough, I didn’t come to see sights, I want to go home’?”

I shook my head in distress.

“No, you don’t,” he said. “Correct. Then what do you say? What sort of crime is it that you see? What is its name?” (98)

Curren’s immediate response is to note, within her own thoughts, that Thabane must be a teacher, in order to explain “why he speaks so well” (98). In her observation, we can perceive a tacit racism — only liberal education can permit a black South African to speak “well,” despite the problem of trying to define what it means to speak “well” (read,
to speak like an educated white South African). Curren also perceives the trauma of the situation as if at a great distance, even though she is physically close to the event itself. Curren’s own space of reflection thus becomes, through irony and repetition, a type of proto-crypt: the linguistic expression of an end, a dying character mouthing a dead narrative of white liberal restraint and civility, both of which are not only powerless in the face of apartheid violence, but unintelligible to both sides of the conflict. Events and characters swirl around Curren, their movement constituting the narrative drive towards a beginning marked by her future death — a refutation of the zero ending, the stasis she herself strives for.

Against Curren’s death, which does not inhabit the pages of the novel, the death of Florence’s son Bheki is not deferred or “zeroed,” but a death which Curren characteristically is unable to “approach,” both narratively and cognitively. His offstage death can only find expression in Curren’s shocked response to his corpse laid out with four others against a wall, eyes “open and staring,” “neatly laid out” within a house that is little more than a “mess of rubble and charred beams” (102). Even in the case of the death of a teenage boy known to her, Curren cannot help pushing the trauma of apartheid violence to a distance, ironizing, descending into allegorical comparison, and (while staggering through the rain at Site C) drawing racialized contrasts between herself and those who suffer: “One more such blow, I thought, face down in the sand, and I am gone. These people can take many blows, but I, I am fragile as a butterfly” (96). If Curren draws this comparison to remind the reader of her terminal cancer, she also homogenizes nonwhite experience in the process, contrasting the individuality of her cancer-stricken white body with healthy black bodies who “can take many blows.” By allowing Curren the audacity of such rhetorical gestures (from what vantage-point can she presume that “these people” have a greater capacity for suffering?), the novel removes Curren’s condition (cancer) from the text’s realist frame, makes her body speak for the corpus of liberal white South African thought, its refusal to face and acknowledge its share in creating collective trauma.

Dwelling almost perpetually at this liminal site, the text forces Curren into movement of various kinds, working against her urge to fix events into stasis, not merely by the events
of the story, its emplotted content, but through a kind of narrative disjuncture — a sense that the epistolary form and Curren’s own choices (what to frame and depict, what to omit, what words to use) are unsuited to the task of representing apartheid trauma. But just as Curren finds herself transfixed by the television images of apartheid government officials mouthing the platitudes of Total Strategy, the reader is invited to halt before this unsuitable narrative frame, to dwell precisely at this limit where the urge to be seduced, to fall back into the posture of transfixion before apartheid image, is undone by the corpus of trauma “poking through” and puncturing Curren’s adopted narrative structure.

The remainder of the novel, following the visit to Site C and Bheki’s death, returns us to the theatrical stage: the temporary eviction of Curren from her own house, the attack she experiences at the hands of black children, the winding confessions she offers not to Florence, but to Vercueil, on her complicity in the discourse of apartheid, and finally, after a further consultation with her doctor, her decision to end her own life. We are faced again with an ungainly structure, as Age of Iron seemingly has nowhere to go, dramatically, after Curren returns from Site C; however, almost one hundred pages follow before the novel concludes. Vercueil’s embrace, from “which there was no warmth to be had” (198), is the macabre conclusion to Curren’s wish to end her own life, a fatal embrace, excessive contact, from which seduction is conspicuous by its absence. It is also a final parting shot at the inadequacy of the epistolary form in this context: if the novel is ostensibly composed of a series of letters written by Curren to her daughter, from what vantage-point would she have been able to narrate the closing pages of the novel, in which Vercueil takes her life? The novel’s ostensible zero ending, the moment right before Vercueil presumably assists Curren in ending her own life, takes place after the novel has exhausted the range of possibilities available to Mrs. Curren, whose tiresome moralizing both colludes with and emerges from the repressive tactics of the apartheid regime. Curren has achieved nothing positive in the novel, which has detached futurity and change from her ineffectual handwringing. This detachment actually spurs the novel towards the future, as it is the “movement” or inevitability of change that the novel, but
not the narrative, is impatiently anticipating.\textsuperscript{21} The novel treads sedulously within Curren’s discourse, satirizing the limits she puts on what can be said, demonstrating that her death is the future of post-apartheid South Africa. Her own half-truths, confessions, and apologies all parody the zero ending, the state’s hyperfocus on the present, the Total Strategy of denying past crime and post-apartheid future.

In discussing Jyotirmoyee Devi’s \textit{The River Churning} and J.M. Coetzee’s \textit{Age of Iron}, I have argued that both texts make minute but significant alterations to the borrowed governmental discourse, destabilizing the state’s attempt to control the representation of trauma. In so doing, they undermine transfixion before the state’s “discursive image” through the image’s inverse or opposite (suspension or resolution, zero ending or happy ending). If the possibility of being seduced by the dominant discourse is allowed to circulate within each text, it is also undone \textit{within} the parameters of each discourse, constituting a productive similarity in how writers respond to collective trauma across different regions and periods of history.

\textsuperscript{21} We can certainly read Curren’s own physical state, someone ill with terminal cancer, as a symbol of such a “will to future,” while acknowledging the undoubted ethical problem with cancer being used to metaphorize a condition larger than the cancer patient herself.
3 The Seduction of Narration in *The Smell of Apples* and *Cracking India*

Consciousness is never present at its own examination; however much it wants to be self-reflexive, inevitably, in the act of self-examination, it betrays its prior formation, exalts discovery as proof of the supremacy of knowledge as a conscious process. As I discussed in chapter one, thinkers such as Levinas have characterized the limits of western self-reflexivity as corollaries of the western intellectual tradition, which privileges intentionality even in moments when it struggles or strains to transcend intentionality (Levinas 81). Levinas notes that according to this tradition, we live by existing reflexively on the noetic plane (the state of intuitionism in conscious thought), forgetting consciousness as the lens through which we glorify all sense in recollection (160-62). I invoke Levinas here not as a convenient way to make sense of the novels that constitute the focus of this chapter (in what would likely amount to a problematic mapping of western philosophical inquiry onto postcolonial texts), but instead to demonstrate a parallel between the philosophical and the literary, specifically in the postcolonial arena. If philosophy is never free of its subjection to the ontic (the factual, the material) via example, literature, in its measure, is not free of a prior theoretical formation: a reliance on the transparency and ease of the conscious subject (narrator) looking back at self-identical and historical “objects.” This reliance is what is at stake in two postcolonial novels — Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*.

Throughout this chapter, I will be framing this reliance on the innocence of child narration as a deferral of the full presence of trauma, in which an initial narrative caress leads to the seduction of the reader. Let me explain what I mean in more detail. The term “caress” usually connotes a positive action, the prelude to some type of physical intimacy or sensuality between beings. However, I am choosing to use “caress” as indicative of misdirection, false euphoria, and even delusion, all of which the narrative propagates in order to effect a kind of seduction of the reader. Essentially, the text continually tantalizes or caresses the reader with the experience of encountering a limit — the limit of the text’s willingness to represent trauma, a limit that is at times conscious and at other times
unconscious for both the authors whose works I examine in this chapter. This 
willingness to offer partial representations that masquerade as full representations 
depends on a normative conception of psychic health that assumes the reader has not 
experienced primary trauma in some fashion. To put it another way, a very specific caress 
is offered to a very specific, presumably non-traumatized reader, who can easily shuttle 
between experiencing literary trauma at a distance and inhabiting an uncomfortable realm 
of traumatic signification. The act and ease of shuttling are what constitute the seduction 
of the (untraumatized) reader. Child narration, then, becomes the method of legitimating 
this seduction within the normative logic of literary form — the author’s choice 
disappears within the candour of the child, and if the child leaves anything out of the 
account of violence, the unselfconscious quality of childhood is sufficient explanation for 
the text’s omissions, deferrals, and representative lapses. The figure of the child is a 
comfortable, self-explanatory method of concealment.

I use the word “caress” because I feel that a caress indicates the deep-seated ambivalence 
in the subject’s encounter with trauma. Both the literal and the figurative caress contain a 
similar ambivalence, each a potential source of both empathy and narcissism. In the 
literary context, a caress can be positive, negative, or both simultaneously, to the extent 
that the text can powerfully evoke trauma in spite of flaws or limits in what it chooses to 
represent. In Levinas’s description of the subject’s inaugural encounter with the beloved, 
and consequently, the face, the caress emerges as the gaze of the subject before the 
absolutely denuded feminine Other, whose voluptuosity and animality seem to invite the 
very profanation the ethical subject is supposed to renounce. For Levinas, the moment of 
absolute vulnerability is what generates awareness of ethical responsibility — one must 
fall just short of what he terms profanation (violence against the Other) in order to 
understand that violence against the Other is precisely what is ethically forbidden. 
However, in her analysis of the Levinasian ethic, Irigaray notes that while a caress can 
generate a positive empathic connection to the Other, it can also devolve into the 
narcissism of introjection (46), the end result of the purely phenomenal left unchecked by 
any perspective outside the realm of sensation. Irigaray’s analysis is one of several 
possible critiques of how Levinas conceives of the universal within a western 
philosophical tradition. For Levinas, the caress is generative of ethics, but the metaphor
of the caress produces representational difficulties that his philosophy has trouble resolving.\textsuperscript{22} The question of the limit of representation is equally pertinent to the study of literature, and specifically to postcolonial representations of trauma, which employ imagination both as a means to tell a story and as a tacit check on the kind of story that can be told, and to whom it can be told.

I do not mean to suggest that every literary representation (or an ideal literary representation) of trauma should be didactic in form and tone, or that the literary texts in this chapter have no value as moving accounts of collective trauma in their respective eras. Sophisticated, profoundly evocative works of fiction, both novels display a high degree of self-reflexivity in acknowledging the complexity of representing collective violence and narrating the experience of the Other on whom this violence is inscribed. I open up this field of inquiry not to castigate the authors for representational shortfalls, but instead to draw our attention to what I see as recurring patterns in the narration of postcolonial trauma. Working only with these patterns, we run the risk of perpetually consigning certain figures, and certain types of traumatic experience, to the margins of literary representation.

In both the texts in this chapter, I suggest that the transparency of the subject looking back constitutes a seduction of the reader, a liminal seduction that situates voyeurism and empathy on the same axis. If the fundamental preoccupation of postcolonial trauma texts is how to give voice to the experience of collective trauma during periods of colonial and postcolonial upheaval, then both Sidhwa and Behr implicate themselves in a potential solution — what Victoria Burrows refers to as the process of psychic release “through the act of being compassionately listened to and affirmed” (Burrows 164). However, both texts, to varying degrees, also mobilize the implicit rhetoric of cultural insiderness to elide the complexity of collective trauma. In other words, both protagonists are at pains to position themselves as people who can speak without omission or reduction on behalf of relatively undifferentiated groups.

\textsuperscript{22} For an extended discussion of the problem with the face as an ethical concept, see “The Unbearable Burden of Levinasian Ethics” (Rajiva).
In her critique of Cathy Caruth, Burrows scrutinizes the racial privilege of Caruth’s call to reformulate the landscape of trauma studies, noting that “the ‘we’ remains undifferentiated and can be assumed almost exclusively to hold the privilege of whiteness” (163). This privilege finds tacit expression in Behr’s *The Smell of Apples*, which deploys a white South African, Marnus Erasmus, as the ironic standard-bearer of fading apartheid rhetoric during a historical period whose political and social upheavals ultimately mock the Erasmus family’s attempts to deny the collective trauma of black South Africa. Conversely, a different kind of undifferentiated ‘we’ exists in Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*: not a straightforward racial omission, as in Behr’s novel, but an omission along lines of class, language, and ethnic privilege. The protected child of an English-speaking, middle-class Parsi family, Lenny can record, scrutinize, and judge without attention being called to the privilege of her position. For example, in describing the hardening of ethnic identities in the text, Lenny notes that she and her family have been reduced to their status as Parsis, to “irrelevant nomenclatures” (102). This so-called reduction is part of what allows Lenny to ascend to a supposedly neutral realm of objective testimony. At work in Lenny’s ethical mobility is Sidhwa’s characterization of English as the language of polyvalent nuance and expression, compared to the more restricted shadings and meanings of Urdu and Gujarati. The metropolitan and colonial resonance of this characterization demonstrates the problem of postcolonial representation, transcending an uncomplicated binary of white outsiderness, on the one hand, and ethnic insiderness, on the other. In other words, being Pakistani and Parsi does not stop Sidhwa from presuming a collective subject, the undifferentiated “we” of Burrows’s critique.

Finally, both texts trade on the apparent innocence of their narrators’ subject positions as children to shift the terms of engagement of listening to the traumatic experience of the other. The ostensible candour of the child’s focalization allows the author to frame the literary experience of postcolonial trauma in terms of innocence lost. Little-Neville’s assault gives way to Frikkie’s rape, which overwrites the possibility of Frikkie being raped by Marnus’s father, or of Marnus himself being raped by his own father. Ranna’s witnessing of the murder of an entire Muslim community during Partition is only made possible by his survival, which replaces any explicit account of Ayah’s violation. The
secondary trauma of the child witness subsumes the primary trauma of the victims themselves, enfolding the reader in a purgatorial process of identification: as the act of witnessing transforms the child, the act of reading transforms the reader. One could almost say that these texts call upon the reader to inhabit the narrator as child, to embark on a similar process of discovery and maturity, as the children do in these novels. However, this passage into maturity incorporates and effaces a trauma that each text can suggest but not explicitly represent.

Ultimately, the problem of who speaks on behalf of the traumatized other is perhaps too easily glossed in postcolonial literature by a specious claim to insiderness, which consistently mediates the kind of story we receive as readers. I am not speaking of the colourful imaginative shortfall featured in novels such as Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, in which a character’s imaginative lack exists mainly as a foil to the bourgeois cosmopolitanism of those who can imagine themselves to be anywhere. Rather, this gloss represents itself as imagination at its most expansive and inclusive, even as it conceals areas where text and author do not want to go, based on very particular subject positions informed by race, class, ethnic affiliation, and language. Behr’s use of irony, combined with his own visible status as a white South African, tacitly invites the reader to scrutinize Marnus’s account of his family life. By contrast, Sidhwa’s exuberant treatment of Lenny, in a text that never challenges the privilege and selective vision of an English-speaking Parsi narrator, discourages this same scrutiny.

The problem of representation thus becomes a function of each author’s ease with the act of writing as an interpretative and provisional method of accessing cultural memory. To provide a useful frame, I would like to invoke Veena Das’s interpretation of Bergson’s work on memory. For Das, the importance of Bergson’s meditation on duration lies in his characterization of attention (that is, perception and cognition) as possessing “the power of appropriating without dividing and thus of being both one and several” (Das 98). The paradox of being both one and several coheres only through the conceptual framework of memory as a process of translation and rotation:

Memory, laden with the whole of the past, responds to the appeal of the present state by two simultaneous movements, one of translation, by which it moves in its
entirety to meet new experience, thus contracting more or less, though without dividing, with a view to action; the other of rotation upon itself, by which it turns toward the situation of the moment, presenting to it that side of itself which may prove to be the most useful. (Bergson 99)

In translation, I subordinate the past as a discrete entity to my immediate present need. In rotation, on the other hand, the past appears in an unmasterable configuration, “independent of my will,” in which “certain regions of the past are actualized and come to define the affective qualities of the present moment” (Das 100). If we can consider the postcolonial text as a form of cultural memory, particularly with regard to specific historical trauma such as partition and apartheid, Das’s use of Bergson gives us the conceptual breadth to accommodate the paradoxes of literary representation in the two novels in this chapter.

In The Smell of Apples and Cracking India, both translation and rotation presume and depend on absences that balloon out from disavowed narrative surgeries, absences that contain both narrative and lexical or linguistic silences, evincing patterns of omission, substitution, and withholding of trauma. In imagining accounts of partition and apartheid violence, Sidhwa and Behr situate themselves, to use Das’s conception of the Bergsonian memory, “not generally in the elements of the past as such but in a particular region of the past” (99). However, Behr discloses the body of the narrator as a silent touch at whose contact we experience both the joy and threat of narrative seduction. Marnus, as a physical, narrative, and ethical body, is constantly obstructing any attempt to represent memory as coextensive with historical record. Time and again, Behr sets Marnus’s fantasy of harmonious white family life during apartheid against the text’s silences, omissions, contradictions, and falsifications. Though we are always at risk of succumbing to the fantasy of the text as enclosure or cocoon, that risk is counterbalanced by Behr’s persistence in demonstrating how innocuous, everyday language can generate a passivity that eclipses and denies the trauma of the other. Sidhwa, by contrast, uses Lenny to legitimate and cover over a type of narrative seduction that implicates and marks the violated body of Ayah. In Ice-candy-man’s transformation from predator to lovestruck poet, closure functions as a type of ethical prosthetic whose advent is almost too soon for
the trauma that the text wants to represent. In each work, the attempt to bear witness to trauma by writing literature is fraught with the affective silences borne of the author’s selective engagement with an unverifiable and continually mutable historical past.

Toward the end of Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples*, the adult version of Marnus, the white South African child narrator, perishes while fighting in the Angolan War. The violence of apartheid returns to the adult white soldier in a future anterior to the temporality of the child narrative, which ends the novel with child-Marnus repeating a white Afrikaner homily of peace and security in the face of the daily trauma of apartheid. Behr does not permit the child to offer a direct account of trauma; only in Marnus’s adult future is the body explicitly acknowledged as a site of traumatic inscription. This future, though, can never arrive within the conventional first-person narrative. Child-Marnus’s internalization of apartheid rhetoric allows the novel to position the discourse of apartheid violence as a narrative caress, which threatens to seduce the reader into treating the focalization of the white child narrator as a transparent mode of representing trauma. However, by projecting Marnus’s awareness of the brutality of apartheid into a deferred future, Behr’s novel presents a dominant colonial voice only to undermine it, suspending the traumatized body of Little-Neville, the black victim of white Afrikaner assault, in silence between temporally disparate narrative surfaces.

This section of the chapter is primarily concerned with the representation of the trauma of Little-Neville, the black South African body, as compared to the trauma of rape that Frikkie, Marnus’s close friend, experiences at the hands of Marnus’s own father Johan. My focus is not meant to suggest that one instance or form of trauma is somehow more authentic and worthy of representation than another. Indeed, the circumstances of Frikkie’s rape demonstrate the profound interrelationship between forms of apartheid hierarchy: Johan’s double role as military general and family patriarch is precisely what gives him the social authority make Frikkie’s body vulnerable to abuse. Michiel Heyns has poignantly interrogated the novel’s complex representation of sexuality, framing the relationship between Marnus and Johan as a “male bond established by Marnus’s complicity … in the rape of his best friend [Frikkie]” (85). For Heyns, the novel ultimately suggests that “paternal tenderness is yet another form of coercion” within the
framework of apartheid (93-94). Cheryl Stobie uses the concept of the interstitial taboo to track the novel’s representation of “the contradictions, rationalizations, slippages, and inconsistencies in constructing myths and ideologies about race, nation, religion, masculinity, gender, and sexuality “(76). My analysis, while indebted to the work of these and other critics, focuses instead on linguistic repetition (specifically, the rhetorical devices of aphorism and antithesis), using phenomenology and the reading practice of Roland Barthes to frame the novel as a “body” with its own ethical mass.

Behr’s rocky relationship to the question of ethics and truth in fiction is well-documented. A white South African who worked as an informer for the apartheid regime from 1986 to 1991, Behr formally confessed to his role at a literary conference in 1996, reading the text of a lengthy speech in which he apologized for his activities and wondered whether he was now doomed to be known only as “the voice of betrayal: a voice that cannot be trusted, that is incapable of truth” (Behr 119). Critical response to Behr’s confession has been severe. Nic Borain has castigated Behr for being more concerned with how his words are judged than with legitimately attempting to answer for his crimes; for Borain, Behr’s confession was merely a facile “shutout” that forced everyone to either support Behr or else align themselves with “those who deny perpetrators the right to change heart […] to seek a language to express their grief and regret” (Borain 27). Less polemically, Sarah Nuttall has chastised Behr for eliding “the possibility of truth where ‘truth’ matters […] in the sense of which story you tell, or who you make your apologies to” (87). In light of Behr’s confession, one could plausibly see Marnus’s narrative as overburdened with Behr’s own yearning for political forgiveness; Behr’s problematic relation to narrative truth finds ambivalent and at times manipulative expression in Marnus’s desire for parental love and approval. As a result, both Marnus

23 Behr’s plea for forgiveness evokes the uncertainty of the meetings between Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, psychologist for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the notorious Eugene de Kock, the imprisoned former head of the apartheid death squads. In Gobodo-Madikizela’s account, de Kock oscillates between wanting to undermine "the boundary between interviewer and subject" (40) and reaching out, both figuratively and literally, the actions of a "desperate soul seeking to affirm to himself that he was still part of the human universe" (47). De Kock’s reference to one of his hands as the "trigger hand" (39) was his way of disavowing the killing that he had either done or organized; it was also a powerful metonym for the willingness of white South Africans to disavow the violence of apartheid following the end of the apartheid regime. To this extent, Behr’s plea resonates as a plea to avoid localizing guilt and blame entirely in the figures of informers and covert operatives.
and Behr are implicated in the violence inflicted on black South African bodies; both are potentially also secondary victims of trauma, in terms of their proximity to scenes of violence.

However, if we view _The Smell of Apples_ only as a thinly veiled confession of authorial guilt, we are left with little to say about it. We either brand Behr a disingenuous self-promoter, and condemn his opportunism, following Borain and Nuttall to some extent, or else we treat the novel as a child’s tale in which an “inclination to trust in itself becomes the first step towards complicity” (Medalie 513). My argument rejects this binary. There is, I would suggest, a great deal of complexity in Behr’s novel, a complexity of representation that extends beyond the deceptive candour of a child’s story. The novel is always in the process of presenting two forms of narrative to the reader. One form is explicit and apparently unselfconscious, the shell narrative of the child Marnus guilelessly telling the story of his life in South Africa as the son of a military general, unable to challenge apartheid doctrine. However, this shell narrative contains another form of representation, which emerges in a variety of narrative silences: the Erasmus family’s reflexive use of aphorism, inductive logic, and stereotype promote and embody a kind of white self-surveillance and hyper-secretive memory, which gradually overwhelm the apparent innocence of the child Marnus’s account. At this level, any break in the self-defeating and doomed logic of apartheid comes in the form of white characters who are themselves defeated. Marnus’s sister Ilse struggles against the family’s apartheid ideology, while the adult Marnus’s morbid reflections, as a soldier fighting and eventually dying in a colonial dirty war in Angola, puncture the main body of the text, evidence of the hopelessness of his position.

The word “reader” is, of course, a broad term. South African readers, particularly those living in South Africa, have a more direct relationship to the political and historical backdrop of the novel, as well as the material conditions of the post-apartheid era in which Behr chose both to write the novel and stage his confession. Though the novel, in its use of aphorism and shell narrative, is undoubtedly and uncomfortably familiar to South African readers, its persistent reluctance to break the frame of the Erasmus family’s ideological insularity also resonates in the post-apartheid era with readers outside South Africa; in this latter era, it constitutes a literary archive of the doomed and self-defeating apartheid regime that was eventually overthrown. Without wishing to conflate the two readerly positions, I am nonetheless more interested in the historical specificity of the post-apartheid reader as the presumed audience for Behr’s novel.
I argue that Behr offers his strongest commentary on the trauma of colonial apartheid precisely in the disjuncture between these two levels of representation. To the extent that Marnus is able to look back, what he beholds is not vitality or the “ultimate vigor of presence in representation” (Levinas 67), but rather a compulsion to cover over and obscure, as if his memory is tethered to the past, acting out his attempts to avoid bearing witness to the trauma of the Other. At every step, the narrative traces the possibility, in literary terms, of direct access to trauma, only to redouble that trace with a pathological erasure. On the one hand, the erasure codes an expression of specific racial and cultural memory: the Erasmus family’s insistent connection to the land, the revisionist chronicling of Afrikaner history. On the other hand, through irony, the erasure negates its own coding, generating an exhaustive and exhausting silence around the act of bearing down, of exerting pressure: everything that finds no home in Marnus’s narrative is also what subverts his story as an attempt to bear witness to trauma. But *The Smell of Apples* is not merely the sum of Marnus’s thoughts. I contend that Behr has purposely designed the novel to contain both the narrative (its historical futility) and the ethical futility of oppression as narrative pressure. In this contention, I locate a negation in Behr’s writing: the way that the force and trajectory of the novel constitute its most profound ethical statement as a result of how little it actually says or directly represents.

Rita Barnard has characterized *The Smell of Apples* as “a veritable compendium of the sayings, stereotypes, and justifications that made up the everyday banality of apartheid” (207). She identifies the claustrophobia of the text as a closed circle that evokes what she calls the “moral airlessness” of a narrative suffocated by the patriarchal law of apartheid (208). Indeed, child-Marnus casually and frequently oscillates between explicit aphorism and unmarked vocal interpolation. At times, Behr uses the rhetorical device of anaphora as hypnosis, repeatedly beginning Marnus’s sentences with the phrase “Dad says.” Elsewhere, Johan’s voice lurks without attribution in Marnus’s apparently unmediated speech. As these interpolations increase in frequency, they cluster around politically significant events, undermining Marnus’s ability to challenge his father. Johan’s silent presence is, on an apparently formal level, merely evidence of realist technique: young Marnus imitates the adult language he hears his parents speaking. But this presence also stands as an ethical critique: the increases in interpolative frequency and intensity
dramatize the gap between what Marnus initially wants to say and what his father cajoles and eventually coerces him into saying. *The Smell of Apples* transforms reading into coercive surveillance, in secret, a pressure through containment that only intensifies as we move between temporalities. Spying is what binds us to the text — the unease of transgression in watching, of seeing what the text’s participants do not know we see. Collusion is the result of awareness of one’s readerly position as an operative — a sense of voyeuristic revulsion at one’s implication in a larger system of political and narrative signs.

### 3.1 Parental voice, vocal overlay

The purview of Marnus’s narrative is never consonant with the limits set on his language by the implied narrator. Marnus’s voice is indistinguishable from the vocal overlay of his parents (primarily Johan but also Leonore at times); the cadences of parental authority double Marnus’s voice like a unison line lagging slightly behind the original vocal “melody.” Aphorism infiltrates point of fact, presaturating physical space with ethical tautology. In other words, no space in the novel is free of the parental vocal overlay, which emerges in the novel’s opening lines: by invoking Marnus’s nicknames, “son,” “little bull,” and “piccanin” (1), the narrative foreshadows the inescapable grip of parental authority and thus of apartheid hegemony. These nicknames have already presaturated Marnus’s sense of himself, and by extension, the narrative space of the story about to be told. Though they indicate heteronormative masculinity (little bull), filial obedience (son), and the ugly history of colonialism and segregation (piccanin), their off-hand, seemingly harmless appearance at the start of the novel is contiguous with the narrative’s obsession with chronicling South African history as a series of self-evident and inevitable events. The Afrikaner right to possess the physical space of South Africa cannot remain ethically intelligible without this presaturation:

Dad says Nixon will be out of the White House before Christmas and it looks like the Americans are going to lose the war against the communists in Vietnam. Dad says it’s typical of the Americans to try and prescribe to the Republic how we should run our country while their own president is such a rubbish. Dad says you
don’t tell someone else how to make his bed when your own house looks like a pigsty. (12-13)

Marnus parrots Johan’s belief that President Nixon will be forced to resign (due to the Watergate scandal) and that the U.S. will eventually lose in Vietnam. Behr tethers irony to the reader’s sense of historical inevitability, since Nixon’s resignation and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam have long since come to pass at the time of the novel’s publication25 (1995). Immediately, though, Marnus attaches aphorism to political facticity in the explicit voice of his father. Here, as elsewhere in the text, factual description bordering on a sub rosa realist technique appears on the heels of a declared aphorism, stifling Marnus’s ability to offer any honest critique of his father’s views: Johan’s strictures on American hypocrisy disqualify America from judging apartheid without actually addressing apartheid as a system of racialized oppression and discrimination. Through Marnus, Johan shifts the terrain of the discussion from politics to political relativism, with child-Marnus complicit both in the shift and in the subsequent erasure of the traces of this shift; each sentence uses structural similarity (the anaphoric style of “Dad says”) to elide ethical difference. After all, apartheid as a political system is not any less oppressive because the American president is mired in a political scandal and his country is losing the war in Vietnam.

The novel is always in the process of overtaking Marnus’s ethical position, jamming a list of facts, anticipated events, and relational dates through the aperture of Marnus as focalizer. Ilse is older than Marnus; she will soon be “on her way to Standard Ten at Jan Van Riebeeck High”; she finds out whether she is head girl in December, before the holidays; Jan Van Riebeeck High is the “oldest Afrikaans school in the country”; Marnus’s father was once a head boy there; for the latter two reasons, this “head girl business is a big thing” (13). The elements in this list are not random, nor do they proceed out of an ingenuous and childlike desire to evoke comfort by clustering familiar things and places together. On the contrary, each element carefully prepares the way for the next element by sedimenting materiality into the reader’s mind, overwhelming any

25 This sense is true, I would suggest, of both South African and non-South African readers, insofar as knowledge of the referenced political events is what allows one to approach the irony of the passage, not one’s readerly status as such.
potential response to apartheid as a repressive system. Though the text has hinted at the larger context in the previous paragraph, it quickly retreats into the enumerative style of a list, reducing each element to the status of its neighbouring element by virtue of their mutual inclusion in Marnus’s supposedly child narrative. For example, Ilse’s chances of becoming head girl do not contain the same depth as the history of Jan Van Riebeeck as an Afrikaans school, a history that touches on the policy of racial exclusion and segregation of apartheid. However, because both appear on the same list, the Erasmus family connection to and implication in the apartheid system flattens out and eventually disappears below the surface of visibility in Marnus’s shell narrative. This flattening constitutes one of Behr’s subtlest uses of irony, as we discover that certain elements in these types of lists are not the same as others, have a deeper ethical resonance that the child’s list resolutely strives to eliminate. In sum, the matrix of the (child’s) list obliterates ethics. Only by accessing the second level of representation can we perceive how the narrative (but not Behr) resolutely retreats from any acknowledgment of white culpability in the experience of black South Africans during apartheid.

Retreat is not merely the text imposing its will on the reader; retreat is the historical and cultural context of the narrative escaping the narrator’s control. Speaking of classical texts, Roland Barthes observes that “[t]o read, to understand, to thematize (at least a classic text), is therefore to retreat from name to name” (93). At stake, for Barthes, is the unspoken trajectory that defines the so-called classical text, whose teleology must always conform to the apparent exigencies of a plot in which the brazen absence of departures and returns would constitute a “scandal” (105). Codifying, in the Barthian sense, is thus a retreat; naming, the specific act of codification, is, correspondingly, a reduction. In the formulation “to retreat from name to name,” unity is not cognate with understanding. Rather, textual unity gives way to what Jean-Luc Nancy would call ex-scription, writing conceived as an infinite line of tangents, touches, intersections, and dislocations (14). In The Smell of Apples, retreat encompasses the term’s military usage — the army’s retreat and the failure of the covert war in Angola — only to expose other withdrawals: in politics, as the apartheid system fails, and in ethics, as the child Marnus ends the novel by repeating his mother’s earlier declaration that “the Lord’s hand is resting over False Bay” (Behr 90). The text is always already in self-conscious retreat, coming to rest in the
presence of names whose evanescence signals the permanent dislocation of meaning in the apartheid context. Thus *The Smell of Apples* seems to invite closure only because these lexical clusters of meaning (names) are innocuous, gleaming, seeming either to be depthless or to contain easily navigable depths. These clusters take figurative shape in the child narrator, acquire semantic fixity in and against the child narrator’s body, which, in its fragility and eventual subordination to apartheid logic, performs “the truth of intersection and copenetration of all monads in their totality” (Nancy 27, translation mine).

The voice of adult apartheid authority overlays the voice of child-Marnus, creating a narrative gap or silence, which is any engagement with the black experience of trauma during apartheid. The deferral of this engagement to a phantasmatic future evokes Barnard’s “moral airlessness,” to which I alluded earlier. For example, in the initial dinner for the visiting Chilean general, Johan’s revisionist account of the history of Tanzania after the departure of the white colonial regime transitions seamlessly into Marnus’s internal stereotypes of nonwhites. Beginning with the pseudo-scientific claim that “those with black skins across their butts also have the smallest brains,” Marnus then ties blackness to a lack of civilization, noting that “[e]ven if you can get a black out of the bush, you can’t ever get the bush out of the black” (Behr 39). Any sense of Marnus’s voice uncontaminated by the discourse of apartheid is almost impossible to discern, except for his brief acknowledgment that Doreen “might go to heaven,” but even her ascent is provisional and segregated; she will only live “with other Christian Coloureds in small houses,” provided she is not “boozing it up like the rest.” Marnus ends by characterizing Gloria, “the real floozy with the purple lips who fancies herself to be a real madam” (39), as the archetype of black dereliction and sexual promiscuity.

The vocal overlay of Johan and Leonore suffuses the discursive space Marnus has at his disposal to tell his story. Behind Marnus, the implied narrator falls silent on the topic of black trauma by stitching together the pure interiority of the child with the hegemonic voice of apartheid authority. Nothing can be said in this space; no statement can turn its face toward black experience, as it were, in order to examine white culpability, to approach the trauma of apartheid’s deadly logic visited on actual black bodies. There is
no space to offer counter-narratives, or even counter-logics. Marnus’s feeble defence of Doreen illustrates the extent to which he is already in the process of acquiescing to his father’s view of South Africa: he cannot formulate an adequate rebuttal to apartheid logic even in his own thoughts.

### 3.2 Narrative catachresis

The intrusion of the father into the very thoughts of the child narrator signals the double function of the text. It demonstrates the relays between overt and covert forms of power by filling the text with the anxious, compulsive, and pathological need to have one touch and subtend the other. However, it also punctures the authenticity of the child narrator Marnus by casting doubt on the whole realist enterprise of narrative plausibility.

Ethically, Behr’s novel is engaged in a kind of narrative catachresis, constantly touching on improper connections generated by the double schism of displaced chronology (two narrative times) and disjointed narrators (two versions of Marnus overlaying the same ethical critique in different places and times). If child-Marnus is the primary focalizer for whom the narrative fragments of his older, adult self are interventions from an as-yet unrealized future, the novel loses realist plausibility: the child is being visited by the future self prior to death. Conversely, if the soon-to-die adult-Marnus is the focalizer revisiting the memories of his childhood, marginalizing the adult narrative mocks the transparency and temporal primacy of the self looking back. Both possibilities give a pro-forma nod to plausibility without engaging mimetic realism on its own ground.

The subcurrent of tension in the text is whiteness, of narrator and of author; as a category of racial identity, whiteness is the analgesic of representation, dulling readerly sensibility to the direct encounter with trauma. The privilege of whiteness is what permits the novel to shy away from representing black trauma. Marnus, as the novel’s focalizer, is unable to come to grips with Little-Neville’s attack, with Chrisjan’s homelessness and psychic trauma. Against this analgesic, the structure and focalization of Behr’s novel are opportunistic in their appropriation of tenses and forms, because telling the kind of story that ought to be told about apartheid necessitates a formal transgression. Moreover, the transgression is not textually self-conscious but simply given, matter-of-factly, as if needing no justification, and it is this unassuming strategy, this unapologetic recourse to
narrative implausibility, on which the representation of trauma pivots and the business of fashioning an ethical account of apartheid can begin.

Suspended between childhood and adulthood, within two overlapping vectors of narrative time, Marnus is the subject of a formal and ethical rupture. If the child consumes the apartheid ideology of his parents, erasing any encounter with black trauma in the process, the adult performs and enacts the destructive effects of that consumption: he enlists in the South African Defense Force, attains rank, and eventually perishes in Angola. The future offers an ethical critique through oversaturation of meaning: at every step, Marnus’s perception bears the weight of recollection, carries the threat of regression into the affective backflow of the past. If his fellow soldiers are apathetic, Marnus is embittered; if they are resentful, he is nostalgically melancholic; both temporally and ethically, he is out of step with the soldiers around him, only at home within his childhood memories, and unable to speak in any meaningful sense. Each narrative thrust that might reveal the presence of an explicit critique is turned aside and countervailed by the text, until the only intelligible foil to the adult Marnus is the child Marnus whose formation drenches the adult’s memories, feelings, and perceptions. The text comments on the problematics of representing trauma precisely in the tension between these two figures, neither of whom can ever really speak.

The two versions of Marnus are the representatives of mutually incompatible systems of ethics. Barthes describes the foil as an implacable opposition in the text, not merely a convenient arrangement of antagonists or even opposites within a delimited system, but symptomatic of “the battle between two plenitudes set ritualistically face to face like two armed warriors” (27). In Behr’s text, the narrators, child and adult, interlock in representation, but come face to face within the narrative only by way of the ethical paradox, or what bridges these two figures, namely the fact that they are temporally distinct versions of the same person. Paradox, then, arises from Marnus’s inhabitation of both positions: he corresponds to both terms within the Antithesis, a deeply ethical transgression that touches on the rhetorical transgression of the antithetical figure. Whenever the reader might acquiesce to apartheid’s “closed circle” (Barnard 207) of which child-Marnus’s narrative is a typical example, Behr interposes the body of the
narrator (in two distinct temporalities) to disrupt the “harmoniously closed loop” of the whole (Barthes 27). As focalizer, the body of the narrator is a supplement whose narrative presence is epidermal, exemplary of colonial penetration; Marnus is the figure of Antithesis mobilized from strictly rhetorical terrain to both rhetorical and ethical terrain. Something has entered the text, punctured the skin and deposited a residue of unease that becomes coextensive with the reader’s unease with the “moral airlessness” that Barnard describes. Comfort and truth, like oxygen, do not escape the collapsing trajectory of Marnus as the perishing future narrator, alerting the reader to the vicious circular logic of apartheid, which is a diminished and rapidly diminishing circle made evanescent by our awareness of its lack of historical future: its future is the past, dried up and reduced to memory. The puncturing of the shell narrative touches on the futility of history by way of the persistent and ironic use of aphorism.

3.3 The transgression of aphorism

In *The Smell of Apples*, aphorism baffles the reader by resisting penetration. Meaning only emerges in the slide across a surface, irony heightened by the contemporary reader’s awareness of the eventual end of apartheid as a political system. Aphorism is narratively transgressive in its simplicity, particularly when a child repeats the maxims of his parents, as Marnus does throughout the novel. Aphorism does not only give rise to silence (on the scope and facticity of Chrisjan’s trauma, for example); aphorism is *itself* a silence, allowing parental and authorial voices to compartmentalize lived experience in order to corrode or trivialize its ethical meaning. Consonant with the apartheid image of South Africa as a family (“Uncle John” Verwoerd)\(^\text{26}\), aphorism consumes Frikkie, Doreen, Little-Neville, and Chrisjan at an experiential level, folding racial difference back into silence. The anaphoric present tense (“Dad says”) elevates each aphorism to the status of meaning, only to reduce it to non-meaning, because “Dad says” is merely a syntactical shortcut to asserting anything as truth, without the burden of having to prove it. Discursively, such a shortcut does the opposite of what the child Marnus (but not the novel) wants: instead of reifying the rightness of apartheid, it only reconfirms apartheid’s

\(^{26}\) While "Uncle John" is a general expression of respect in Afrikaans, the expression invites that respect by way of a family relation (one’s relationship to an uncle) to Hendrik Verwoerd, the prime minister whose regime implemented formal apartheid in South Africa.
weakness as a legitimate social model. Through Marnus’s repetition, the axiom acquires metric force at the cost of semantic meaning, until it comes to be one and the same as Johan’s voice. As a rhetorical device, aphorism here connotes askesis — a ruthless mental discipline devoted to the furtherance of apartheid as religious doctrine. Out of Johan’s discourse in proverbs comes the interpellation of Total Strategy,27 years before it comes to pass in historical time. In this sense, trauma is visible in the text as a dappled shape beneath the epidermis of the text: a cognitive silence or aporia.

In the Erasmus family’s use of aphorism, generalized abstraction masquerades as lived experience, suturing unverifiable metonymies together until the narrative body is riven by wounds whose source is always missing. The trauma of apartheid violence that Little-Neville suffers never finds expression in the ethics of the Erasmus family narrative. Leonore at first ridicules the suggestion that something terrible has happened to Little-Neville, first saying that “worrying only makes one age before one’s time” (Behr 62) and later assuring Doreen that “no news is good news” (124). Leonore’s worn commonplaces attempt to efface the real danger and trauma that the black South African body can experience in everyday life. That this attempted effacement is ironic to the reader, given the consistent and recursive brutality of the apartheid system, infuses the aphorism with a shadow depth, a doubling below the surface of what is spoken and even implied. Beneath that surface lies both the facticity of what the future will bring for Little-Neville (assault, injury, trauma) and Leonore’s non-recognition: a white Afrikaner, she occupies the only subject position from which the proverb ‘no news is good news’ can, and indeed must, legitimately evoke comfort and safety. The apartheid government’s very propensity for making world-headline news is part of what its proponents would rather avoid. We can readily modulate “no news” into “nothing new” as the archetypal Erasmus family position: stasis, arrested temporality contiguous with diminished or impoverished ethical reserve, and hermeneutic shielding from traumatized bodies, traumatized characters, the trauma of narrative.

27 Faced with growing labor unrest and the collapse of its colonies in Mozambique and Angola, the South African government “refined its elaborate and already totalitarian security apparatus. The central emphases of policy at this time were therefore managerial, technocratic, anticommunist, and military. The umbrella concept linking all of these policies—defined as a response to what was called the ‘total onslaught’—was ‘total strategy’” (Attwell 73-74).
Aphorism touches on without touching. It is contiguous and associative, rather than metaphoric, as its object is never available for metaphoric comparison. In the text, aphorisms appear as much to displace meaning as to cement it; the child Marnus bridges them to the non-aphoristic language of his parents via association, so that both will eventually come to look like nothing in particular both to Marnus and to the reader. Indeed, part of the difficulty in isolating the instances of aphoristic speech in *The Smell of Apples* lies in how so much of the text tacitly functions as a closed set of signs in which the declarative and the object occupy fixed, visible, ordained positions in a predetermined linguistic hierarchy. Whereas other white writers such as J.M. Coetzee employ the middle voice to gesture to the impossibility of the white South African position with respect to apartheid, Behr, by contrast, adheres to strict, childlike, almost martial speech rhythms: the subject performs an action on the object with a minimum of subordinate clauses and feelings are self-consciously synonymous with their immediate expression. Internal contradictions quietly keep their silence, such as the obvious discrepancy between Marnus’s assertion that “[o]pen eyes are the gateway to an open mind” (Behr 160) and Johan’s belief that “a quick mind requires only half an explanation” (162). The evidence of writing as craft vanishes in the framework of an apparently seamless and artless narrative structure; Behr grafts aphorisms to commonplace speech and naively pastoral descriptions of the South African landscape, until the specific racial and historical singularities that give rise to the aphorisms disappear within what is now natural, naturalized, made everyday by routine and repetition.

Contiguity comes to rest in the gathered folds of the family aphorisms, within which other axiomatic meanings can take root and grow, eventually effacing their origins. Marnus’s child narrative is never entirely free from the overdetermination of his parents’ views, though he’s not dominated overtly so much as made to internalize their willingness to subordinate the specificity of lived experience to apartheid stricture (Tannie Karla’s conflict with Leonore over Chrisjan’s alleged thefts is a fairly clear example). More than just a case of generalizations and apartheid rhetoric superseding the black South African experience of apartheid, this internalization actually announces the morphological rigidity of the shell narrative. Within the formal framework of proverb and aphorism, half-truths and fabrications mediate the history available for the shell narrative.
to tell, sharpening the edge of readerly unease by stripping ironic awareness from child-Marnus. The morphology of child-Marnus’s story parallels Ilse’s uptempo rendition of the anthem, in which melody and word evoke the growing consternation of the audience members: they want to stop singing, find they cannot within the bounds of decorum, and instead misremember and sing the third and fourth verses, which are rarely heard. The novel disdains overt textual critique of the closed system of apartheid. Ilse’s resistance to Johan and Leonore, like her remonstrations with Marnus, finds both expression and limit in adolescence; her opinion that Little-Neville, after his trauma, would be better off dead, arises from her assumption that he will “hate white people” once he becomes aware of what his assailants have done to him (191). Even to the most progressive member of the Erasmus family, Little-Neville’s racialized experience of trauma is less disturbing than the thought that the survivor of a violent assault might come to feel animosity toward white Afrikaners. Ilse’s subject position both circumscribes and performs the range of empathic response available to white South Africans, with respect to black trauma.

3.4 Contiguous bodies
By reducing Little-Neville’s trauma to the white Erasmus family’s experience of its implications for their position in South Africa, the text joins the body of the narrator Marnus, the supplementary body of the implied narrator (Behr), and the corpus of the Total Strategy era of apartheid. Their touch is an ethical silence, revealing the gap between what Marnus is willing to avow as a narrator and what Behr discloses through irony and implication. In other words, Behr’s treatment of the representation of trauma is far more nuanced than the shell narrative we obtain from Marnus. In literary terms, Behr presents the antithesis of Total Strategy, the text wearing the mask of continuous surveillance but quietly exposing every discontinuity in overt apartheid strategy. The reduction of Little-Neville’s trauma foreshadows Marnus’s later difficulty in accepting that it is his father, not the visiting Chilean general, who he sees raping Frikkie; the discourse of Total Strategy brings a similarly totalizing blindness to the trauma of vulnerable bodies. The text’s ostensibly childish account of the lives of the Erasmus family has no apparent object except a stasis in which emotional well-being and a racial hierarchy maintained by violence are no longer distinguishable from each other. Everything of ethical consequence happens when these bodies touch each other as and in
spite of limit: forbidden and improper touches between entities that are not supposed to be in dialogue with each other, at least not according to the driving logic of apartheid.

The novel’s manipulation of narrative, lexical choice, and aphorism constitutes a trenchant indictment of white privilege in the act of representing trauma. In essence, the novel is not afraid to draw attention to the precariousness of its own position as both a work of literature and a piece of historical testimony.

The text speaks through Marnus but also speaks with and against him. The very presence of the traumatized nonwhite victim’s body is a sign that there is no proper place, within the text, to store the trauma of that body. Every setting and location is stage-like and unreal. The nonwhite body is always in the middle of displacement, taking up residence in a margin not even visible as such. Frikkie’s rape is thus not only an explicit illustration of the coercive violence of the apartheid hierarchy, but also symptomatic of other types of violence (towards Little-Neville and Chrisjan) that the discourse of apartheid cannot even register as trauma. The parables, proverbs, aphorisms, and declarations of the Erasmus family coalesce into an ethical contagion, suffusing the narrative until there is no intelligible way to discuss or represent black trauma, or to examine apartheid as a set of historically contingent omissions, assumptions, and tautologies. This suffusion is what allows the text to speak, bringing us to the limits of representation, only to throw us back into a narrative that has no way of crossing that limit. With this technique, Behr gestures to the achievement of Total Strategy as a response to the Soweto riots, to growing black unrest in South Africa: oversaturation of every discursive space, each signifier touching each other in a pathological vice-grip, which precludes even the naming of the violated darker-skinned body.

To metaphorize black trauma is to operate in the realm of extension, as Johan and Leonore so frequently do when discussing any black subject. In this context, I characterize extension as the physical act of extending transposed into literature by way of phenomenology. As Derrida notes in his critique of Husserl, the concept of extension depends on a phenomenological distinction: on the one hand, extension as the pure contact with things (physical qualities, such as the roughness of a hand or its colour), and
on the other hand, the twin sensations of touching and feeling oneself touched, which form what Husserl refers to as the double apprehension. For Husserl, this distinction makes auto-affection (self-touching) an originary experience preceding all others. However, Derrida argues that such a distinction is inevitably undone by its disavowed other, leading to the possibility that the experience of extension is “constitutively haunted, by some hetero-affection related to spacing and then to visible spatiality” (179).

In Behr’s novel, I submit that auto-affection is white South African narcissistic introjection in its last state of self-deception, representing apartheid logic as the originary experience from which all material things can only exist as pure extension. The Erasmus family tendency (indeed, compulsion) is to infer black degeneracy and culpability from the slightest anecdotal evidence. Thus the disappearance of both Chrisjan and the fishing equipment must mean that Chrisjan is a thief, while Little-Neville must have brought his assault on himself in some way. I am less interested in the obvious discontinuity between what Leonore assumes and what actually transpires than on the pathological insistence on inductive logic, on the facticity of the body in front of Leonore as the body from which she can extend, chain-like, to imagined acts of black crime, historical revisionism, and the ceaseless justification of apartheid as an ethical system. The body must always speak the justice of apartheid, with Little-Neville’s body the limit case for the Erasmus family’s amplification of this message. However, the precondition of that speech is secrecy, an unspoken agreement in apartheid logic that contact between discrete, segregated bodies of all kinds is invalid, mistaken, forbidden.

3.5 Secrecy, passivity, and the caress
Expression of the secrecy of the white subject position never occurs throughout the novel, as apartheid rhetoric suffocates any direct acknowledgment of black trauma. Hence the fascination of secrets for Marnus and Frikkie, for Marnus vis-à-vis his family (and the General), and for the novel as a partially biographic expression of Behr’s past. Secrecy leads the reader to a vicarious delight in the keeping of a secret, as the deferral of acknowledgment produces the dramatic irony that allows the reader to suspend betrayal of the secret until the “proper” time. Characteristically, though, *The Smell of Apples* defers that time past the time of its own existence; exposure of the secret never arrives,
and with that realization comes the voluptuosity (to mobilize a Levinasian term) of a delay without resolution. Secreted in this delay is the thrill of caress, of contact with the epidermis of trauma’s representation but without the expected encounter with the Other. The reader, who presumes to receive, in passivity, the pearl of an ethical secret whose contours can be known in advance, instead colludes in keeping the secret from the child’s active perception. This collusion is a touch that does not puncture but in fact diverges into a caress, running limit across limit, creating the expectation that perception, experience, and knowledge will converge. However, this convergence only happens partially, in a future of which the novel’s main narrative cannot be aware: ethical plenitude is both dystopic and utopic to The Smell of Apples. It would be facile to say that the text is the “skin” at whose touch or even rupture we accede to the body of trauma, because the text is skin only insofar as we demand the epidermis as both barrier and mediator. The body beneath is at once too much and not enough for the reader of literary trauma. What the shell narrative must disregard is the connection between forms of tactility: traumatized bodies, victims of trauma; bodies of text, masses that resist or invite readerly puncture; our own passive bodies as we read.

Behr’s text exposes the problematic passivity of the Erasmus household, forcing the reader to inhabit that passivity through Marnus’s pathological refusal to puncture the apartheid narrative and access the trauma of the other. Leonore’s homilies and calls for quiet acceptance of suffering frame passivity as a certain attitude to deferring engagement that signals the white guilt of apartheid. As the text turns its face to and from the trauma of black South Africa, complicity, for the white South African, becomes choice, the only model in which passivity is cognate with an ethical principle. The hermetic enclosure of the child’s story connotes a kind of textual and ethical stasis. The reader, as the implied recipient of Marnus’s ethical framework, is seduced into inertia, unable to operate within the enclosure as an ethical agent. Passivity therefore becomes not only the absence of motion in the immediate present, but the expectation of stasis in any foreseeable future.

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28 The delay forms an interesting contrast with the idea of post-apartheid literature as the vicarious expression of trauma accompanied by a "catharsis of suppressed emotions" (N van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 60). Instead of healing and a corresponding “increase in insight” (60), the text proffers deferral, turning away from any notion of the writer’s task as merely one of “revealing what is good, but also what is lacking” (N van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 61).
Hence the lacerating interjections of the adult Marnus whose future death in Angola deprives the total narrative of any possibility of movement: the future is as barren as the ethical awareness of child-Marnus’s story. The British soldier who complains about conscription prompts Marnus to retort that both of them had a choice but that the soldier chose “the easier one” (Behr 83). The British soldier has no answer for Marnus, who himself has no answer for the impossibility of the white position that the soldier represents in spite of his status as an outsider (and representative of an earlier colonial regime in South Africa). As the soldiers huddle around the radio to hear Marnus’s father publicly denying the presence of South African soldiers in Angola, we witness a belated recognition of systemic and hierarchical oppression now that it has finally, at the bitter end, brought its pressure to bear on the colonizers themselves. The roar of the tanks and the obscene energy of the mechanical and the military touch on the fatality of passivity as a principle. But even here, the representation of black trauma is absent, rendering the terrain on which the soldier and Marnus voice their positions a staged drama, as figuratively artificial as it is ethically unreal.

Behr’s text is always in the process of sedimenting one form of passivity within another. The passivity of the narrator concedes to the passivity of Little-Neville, burned almost to the point of death by white assailants, lying motionless in a hospital ward, an object of pity to ostensibly concerned white citizens for whom the passivity of prayer is actually a retreat from engagement. The rape of Frikkie, the burning of Little-Neville, Marnus’s own beating at the hands of his father: at each event, Marnus degenerates into spectator, offering belated, ineffectual, and incomplete reportage after the fact, at times taking refuge in outright denial (putting his fingers in his ears while his father rapes Frikkie in the room below). Likewise, the text’s preoccupation with saturating child-Marnus’s narrative with the thoughts of others demonstrates its formal passivity: waiting, with patience beyond awareness of its own death, for the barren logic of apartheid to fill out, eclipse, and retrace Marnus’s story.

3.6 The weight of thought
As the narrative arc of the story layers forms of passivity into the space of reading, the congealing of these layers into the interstices of textual reading practice signals a
transformation: thinking, or thought, acquires weight, and by weight, the force of ethics in motion. If the text dramatizes the tension between Marnus’s relentless parroting of apartheid rhetoric and the trauma on the ground, such a dramatization also confronts the reader with a horrible intimacy, a performance of the pressure and trajectory of narrative as seduction. In other words, seduction becomes the weight of a narrative thought detached from the specifics of the thought itself, modulating the novel’s indirect encounter with the representation of trauma. There is, I would suggest, no way to figure the claustrophobia of Behr’s narrative except as a convulsive expression of white Afrikaner discourse of which Marnus, in both child and adult form, is at once vessel and proponent. We never lose sight of the awkwardly visible frame of the novel. Even child-Marnus’s essay, an unwitting parody of the form of political-platform rhetoric, stands in for The Smell of Apples: a child playing at writing a story. The formal limits of the novel displace a certain mimetic realist imperative to let the contours or structures of the novel, as writing, disappear into a steady accretion of details, which would then quietly efface all traces of a state anterior to their self-evident presence:

I learned from Dad to first dry myself almost completely while I’m still in the shower cubicle. Otherwise it gets the tiles on the bathroom floor wet, and that makes unnecessary work for Mum and Doreen. When we’ve finished drying ourselves off, we tie the towels around our waists and I comb my hair in a side parting just like Dad’s. (Behr 63)

The cited passage embeds perceptual detail in the account of Marnus learning how to be more like his father. Showering, drying in the cubicle, towel around the waist, side-part in the hair — Johan suffuses Marnus at both a factual and a meta-narrative level. Marnus tries to emulate his father’s actions and appearance; the reader, within the larger context of the story, absorbs the irony of this emulation. Reposing in bland domesticity, the passage saturates the reader’s space with blankness of being, offering itself innocuously, to no one in particular, as if the reader has accidentally stumbled onto a scene whose only purpose is unselfconscious transcription. In exemplary fashion, the passage’s steady refusal to judge encages the pressure of response: the irony of a child lovingly and artlessly learning, in all possible and problematic ways, from a father implicated in the perpetuation of the apparatus of apartheid.
The context of this passage anticipates a similar moment in Marnus’s future. The child Marnus is checking for the arrival of pubic hair; the adult Marnus, having just finished urinating against a tree in the middle of Angola, takes several moments to fondle and appraise his penis. The novel sutures temporalities through contiguous association; the penis appears in two different times; in both, the focalizer scrutinizes his own body seemingly without judgment or context. The body’s vulnerability, in both time periods, becomes a compulsive absence in the focalizer’s consciousness. The textual obsession with Barnard’s “moral airlessness” produces a kind of narrative anti-oxygen: pressurization, compression at every turn, until escaping containment becomes the encounter to which the text responds in prolepsis, over and over again: the devastating evidence of Total Strategy as ethical and political pathology.

If collusion is the corollary of readerly intervention in Behr’s text, it also indicates the reader’s complicity in Marnus’s own elevation of the act of looking back. Marnus stages both his adult and child narratives as acts of nostalgia — the letters from his mother he receives while in Angola evoke his sense of longing to recapture an apparently formative childhood moment whose full ethical weight he never discovers, even in the moment before his own death:

I feel Dad’s face against my chest and my arms around his head, and I feel safe.
But now it is a different safety. Death brings its own freedom, and it is for the living that the dead should mourn, for in life there is no escape from history. (Behr 198)

The resonance, in the above passage, is the unconditional love Marnus has sought but never received from his father, and not the self-deceiving rhetoric of apartheid that has led to Marnus fighting and dying in a meaningless war in Angola. In the past, Johan’s embrace meant safety, while in the present, individual death is the metonym for apartheid: the safety of stasis, of bodies absent or about to be absent of life, the airlessness of a political and narrative space in which explicit challenge is never permissible or even intelligible. Marnus’s invocation of history in this last moment is thus all the more startling when set against the text’s near-total refusal to acknowledge the history of colonialism, which is also the history of sustained, collective trauma.
Tellingly, Marnus recalls his father’s embrace at the moment when the black sergeant beside him is offering a hollow assurance that Marnus will recover; the staging inverts the traditional logic of apartheid, returning us to the scene of Little-Neville in the hospital, where Leonore mouths platitudes about patience in the face of suffering.

The trauma of Little-Neville shadows the act of looking back, as child-Marnus substitutes pastoral and family origin for any encounter with the face of the trauma victim, and the black trauma victim in particular. During Frikkie’s rape, Behr allows Marnus to record the event in cognitive detail: the position of the two on the bed, the childlike persistence in euphemizing the penis as “John Thomas,” the birds outside the window. However, the frame is already saturated with meaning. Images appear not only to divert attention away from the trauma that vulnerable bodies experience, but to instantiate a white South African claim to the land that eclipses and transcends the historical specificity of apartheid, the casual brutality and frequency of black trauma. The mountains are pink, the clouds blue over False Bay; these stylized images embed the colonial claim in the tropes of the pastoral. Marnus’s psychic flight to the pastoral is not the prelude to spiritual resurgence, but symptomatic of cultural and historical introjection: a retreat into the white fantasy of naturalizing the colonial claim to the land.  

The fact that Johan, not the Chilean general, is raping Frikkie only surfaces obliquely in Marnus’s observation that “the scar is gone from the General’s back” (Behr 177). By hyperfocusing on the destruction of Marnus’s innocence, the text dramatizes the insularity and introjection of an apartheid narrative that suffocates direct expression of “unacceptable” forms of trauma: the rape of Marnus’s best friend, the assault on Doreen’s son. Marnus can only act out against his father, but eventually capitulates and allows Johan to sow on the military epaulettes, thereby completing the erasure of trauma from the shell narrative.

Behr’s text satirizes the tyranny of presence, using the child narrator Marnus to demonstrate how memory finds plenitude in its ability to be aware of itself caught in the act of looking back. This arrested act of memory gestures to the noetic structure of western philosophical inquiry: the intuition of thinking, without which a metaphysics of presence is not possible. Derrida writes: “It is when—and insofar as—thinking is thought

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as a means that intuitionism is dominant” (202). Here Derrida is concerned with isolating a tendency in philosophy to use self-conscious experience as the basis for knowledge: thought, in this model, is never itself, never available as the subject **modifying** experience by looking back. By effacing the workings of Marnus’s consciousness, Behr seduces the reader, offering the apparent transparency of intuitionism as thinking in order to perform the limits of such an intuitionism, with respect to postcolonial trauma.

Marnus’s body lies between reader and text, pressuring both at each end, enjoining a kind of ethico-tactility. The body of the narrator is prosthetic, because supplementary: an extension without visible extremities, a prosthesis that simply does its work quietly, as if its entrance were not the product of a prior agreement, an understanding between author and audience that its weight should encode but never comment on its own authority, its own inalienable right to govern bodies of all kinds. But the body of the narrator is also transgressive, exceeding the prosthetic as an operational category; the text always leaves a remainder, beyond what the literary convention of the narrator-figure has tabulated. The body of the narrator is never contained except by our collusion. Moreover, the body itself is not the body, but a cluster of bodily metonymies, as the figurative body of Marnus, the ostensible narrator, shadows, touches, and caresses Behr, the implied narrator. For *The Smell of Apples*, commentary on trauma thus emerges in the improper contact between images and bodies, between proverbs and characters, between systems and ideologies and daily realities, each of them resting on the catachresis of narrative, as if the text’s very basis for existence were itself fallacious, a mistake that calls into question the novel’s legitimacy but paradoxically also constitutes its strongest reason for being.

In both Behr’s *The Smell of Apples* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*, language is never at rest or at home with itself, but works through apparently innocuous repetition as it attempts to bridge vast narrative silences over trauma and violence. The repetition of words and phrases, the substitution of one word for another, the lexical choices of each child narrator, the tendency of each narrator to dwell on certain recurring images, the gaping holes in each text where the focalizer drops out, leaving us with only the implication of trauma: all these narrative techniques combine to tell a specific type of story, one based on the reader’s ability to see past what the child narrator sees or refuses
to see. The key difference between the texts in this chapter is the degree of self-reflexivity of each author. In other words, Behr demonstrates a level of awareness in his manipulation of Marnus as narrator, using narrative silence to comment ironically on Marnus’s position. By contrast, Sidhwa deploys Lenny fairly reflexively, seemingly unaware, at least judging from published interviews, of the limits of Lenny’s ability to represent and witness trauma. Behr consciously builds his novel to contain both Marnus’s narrative and the narrative silences that give the lie to Marnus’s attempt to frame South African history as white Afrikaner mastery of the land; these silences, conversely, surface in Sidhwa’s novel as involuntary questions, which challenge the ethical framework of the novel in ways it can’t resolve and which Sidhwa does not seem interested in addressing. In one sense, the problem arises from historical hindsight: too obviously, the reader can find the crushing hypocrisy and self-delusion of Marnus and his family as white South African proponents of a political regime that has long since been exposed as oppressive and unethical. With Lenny, there is no such easy recourse to history, as the Parsi community in India was not a racial majority enacting its own unjust laws.

3.7 Indian English

*Cracking India* aims to represent the trauma of the Partition of India and Pakistan, in what Ambreen Hai refers to as an attempt to “reclaim agency both by remembering belatedly, and by trying to heal, to undo that trauma by recalling in a public venue—but in the mode of the personal—the violence of nation formation” (388). In addition to the difficult task of representing “the displacement of over ten million people, and the massacre of at least one million crossing in both directions over new national borders” (387), *Cracking India* examines the violence done to women in the name of national honour within a highly fluid cultural and linguistic space. Like her chosen narrator, Sidhwa is Parsi, not Muslim, born Indian but Pakistani by virtue of Partition, occupying a liminal status that unsettles the easy presumptions of collective national memory and stable South Asian identities. Furthermore, Sidhwa’s text is notable for its self-conscious deployment of the child narrator Lenny to describe events in a perceptual register that vacillates noticeably between “child” and “adult.” Though Lenny narrates the bulk of the story, the maturity and linguistic authority of the narrator is never fully subsumed to the
child’s perspective, leading to moments of slippage when a clearly adult voice comments on historical and cultural events of the period. Moreover, the adult voice generally speaks using an “acrolect” of British Standard English (BSE), deviating “from BSE [only] in pronunciation and lexis” (Rahman 32). In the adult voice, the narrator shuns the innocence of the child Lenny’s narration and the frequent lexical interpolations from other South Asian languages that dot the text. In a novel riven with ambivalence toward the formal independence of India in opposition to British colonial rule, what does the use of Indian English tell us about Sidhwa’s ethical engagement with the violence of Partition?

The use of English in *Cracking India* reveals the ambivalence of English as the language of colonial legacy: both betrayer and liberator, English is the syncretic expression of Partition violence, functioning as an ethical check on the excesses of communal violence, but also providing the discursive register in which violence emerges. As the vehicle for communicating Lenny’s thoughts, English can “travel” where other Indian languages cannot: it is fluid, mobile, surveying the landscape often unseen, like Lenny herself. Sidhwa positions English as the language of both reason and romance, but only through narrative “surgeries” that, under the guise of a child narrator’s innocence, distance the reader from violence done to central characters at crucial moments. This distancing constitutes a clinical manipulation of the narrative, establishing a conception of linguistic modularity that both forms and is formed by the modularity of actual violence that the text describes: physical amputations and dismemberments speak to the metaphorical amputation or “cracking” of India during Partition. Violence, therefore, inhabits English as the untold Other of the text. English does not merely narrate a set of events that take place “outside itself,” but convulsively seeks to amputate its own role in deepening and refining ethnic anxieties prior to and during Partition, tacitly aligned with the bourgeois, secular Parsi perspective that mirrors the position of British colonialism.

*Cracking India* uses the physical and historical partition of India as a starting-point, but quickly evolves into a meditation on the nature of division, on the arbitrary boundaries of nation, identity, and cultural affiliation that led to the violent erasures of Partition. For the text, division of narrative is coextensive with division of nation, neither of which can
survive the transformation from supposedly unmarked community into a state partitioned along rigid, unforgiving lines of ethnic and religious affiliation. Sidhwa’s propensity for conflating narrative and ethical divisions has come under critique before, most notably in Hai’s trenchant problematization of the ease with which the text enacts and valourizes border crossings of all kinds. In this treatment of divisions and crossings, Sidhwa shares common ground with contemporaries of her generation and era, contemporaries who brought the literary expression of Partition to western audiences: Amitav Ghosh, for instance, imagines the unnamed narrator of *The Shadow Lines* (1986) as the inheritor of Tridib’s metropolitan worldview, a traveller at home nowhere, whose imagination transcends cultural and regional boundaries. That these frequent and romanticized crossings are enacted by characters of particular privilege — middle-class men in *The Shadow Lines*, middle-class Parsi women in *Cracking India* — poses a particular problem in terms of the representation of trauma. Hai’s essay focuses on the substitution of Ranna for Ayah’s experience at the height of Partition violence; at precisely the moment when Ayah is abducted and presumably being raped by the customers of her abductor Ice-candy-man, Sidhwa offers instead Ranna’s story, focalized in a limited third-person style that subordinates the exactitude of description to impressionist technique and no direct account of trauma. However, I would like to extend my analysis beyond an examination of Sidhwa’s unwillingness, in *Cracking India*, to represent trauma. The interest, I would suggest, lies not so much in the facticity of this substitution, but instead in the complex relationship between the narrative structure of withholding representation, on the one hand, and the representative limits of Sidhwa’s chosen language, English, on the other. Despite its status as a postcolonial text, *Cracking India* cycles through different languages of mastery without transcending the vocabulary of western trauma theory.

3.8 **The subject of trauma**

To be the subject of trauma is to be the target of an experience that perforates the continuity of the subject’s prior experience. This is the received wisdom of western trauma theory: that trauma dislocates the subject from place, disjoins subject from time, and shunts language into the affective reiteration of endless melancholy. Within the context of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben argues that “not even the survivor can bear
witness completely, can speak his own lacuna”; for Agamben, “language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness” (39). In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth invokes the concept of the belated to characterize trauma as an event which the subject cannot experience at its inception; rather, the memory of trauma discloses itself again and again after the fact, throwing the subject into disarray precisely because what is at stake is not graspable as either object or event: “Is trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?” (7). Finally, Dominick LaCapra deepens this theory of traumatic repetition by distinguishing between acting out trauma — convulsively performing the psychic trauma of the past event in one’s present actions, without any meaningful cognition of the difference — and working through trauma, which establishes “a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present” (70).

Though LaCapra acknowledges the practical slippage between these two categories, the basis for the distinction between acting out and working through remains unclear. Working through a specific trauma, for example, may emerge out of or find expression within a process of acting out. Conversely, differentiating present from past may well involve a psychic rupture that brings about second-order or ancillary trauma, which would then require a further process of working through. While LaCapra is certainly cognizant of the difficulty in distinguishing between acting out and working through as operational categories, the basis for his distinction is at times tenuous. One can only trace a distinction between acting out and working through by taking for granted a prior structure that relocates the traumatic event to the realm of the extraordinary. In this model, trauma is a singular laceration of a wider social fabric, which does not cast the subject back into the past or call upon her to revisit and re-inhabit her trauma.

The relocation that LaCapra performs here — shifting the traumatic event to the domain of the exceptional — is not neutral or blank, and always bears the trace of prior formations that encompass culture and ethnic affiliation without being solely a function of them. We can characterize LaCapra’s assumptions as indicative of a privileged subject formation in a certain stratum of the white western world, untouched by continuous, unsettling collective violence. Essentially, we assume that the world around the subject is
mostly or almost completely untraumatized. In so doing, we imply that this world doesn’t actively trigger the subject’s trauma except insofar as it provides a painful contrast to her own situation. Finally, we make three further assumptions about trauma:

1. The world around the subject allows her to dwell in the present, not in the trauma of her past.

2. The subordination of the past to the presentness of the present (to its embodied and practical reality) is always desirable for the trauma survivor. Extensively, Caruth’s notion of belatedness suggests that returning to the traumatic event in its past is undesirable.

3. There are no cultural associations with the conception of a trauma survivor establishing a singular, highly personal relationship with her trauma.

By implying that the world that enfolds the subject is itself largely free of trauma, both LaCapra and Caruth rely on an untroubled (because untheorized) baseline model of the subject prior to trauma. This reliance reflects their disciplinary investment in psychoanalysis, which seldom frames trauma as a collective phenomenon (and this is a problem that I discussed in the previous chapter). Using normative individual psychic health as an unacknowledged baseline from which to measure and trace the impact of trauma effaces the author, the subject, the ideology, and the sociopolitical systems that inhabit and shape the text. If you presume the subject is free of trauma, you are also making an implicit statement about the customs, norms, and beliefs of the society of that subject. Thus LaCapra’s notion of working through trauma, as he develops it in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, lacks any sustained discussion of particular social and filial configurations that might aid and/or obstruct a subject’s ability to work through her traumatic experience. Undoubtedly, this lack has implications for postcolonial trauma texts. In contemporary postcolonial literature, family configurations are inevitably shaped by the legacies of colonialism, and are by no means fixed in either form or function.

Lenny’s privileged existence as a child in a middle-class Parsi family entitles her to a series of lower-class ayahs whose ethnically marked bodies stand in for the vulnerability that the text cannot ascribe to Lenny and her family. Whether it is the Hindu Shanta being abducted and raped during Partition, or the Muslim Hamida performing the national grief
on her body by beating her chest and railing against her fate, the novel never confronts the possibility of Lenny, her parents, or Godmother directly experiencing trauma.

Lenny’s particular and privileged family structure limits the representation of trauma and the exploration of its possibilities even as it is obviously and necessarily the enfolding narrative framework within which the story of Partition violence can be told. Though Shanta’s exile is problematic on an ethical and representational level, it is quite at home within the lexical and social register of Sidhwa’s text. The figure of the ayah is an immoderate metonym, occupied or filled by lower-class bodies who exceed the figurative container by constitutive textual function: the text would not exist if the ayah, as a social category, were not both more and less than the full (Parsi) subject: more as the idealized receptacle of Lenny’s disavowed sexual desire, less as the text’s figurative and literal exile, the body that must endure whatever trauma the text has to offer before leaving, as a thing no longer alive, so that the family can mourn and work through, for their recovery and for the reader’s benefit.

3.9 The universality of English
Perhaps as much any Indian or Pakistani writer engaged with the task of representing the trauma of Partition, Sidhwa has no qualms about situating herself between languages, worlds, and conflicts; clearly, she accords a certain privilege to English, particularly with regard to its flexibility and wealth of lexical and syntactic choice. English is the language of narration in the novel, while words in Punjabi, Gujarati, and Urdu appear as colloquial tags to spoken sentences whose sense we can usually discern via grammatical structure and narrative context. For example, the term arrey baba, an exclamation that can convey anything from annoyance to exasperation to fear, recurs frequently enough in different contexts that its meaning becomes fairly clear to the reader. In cases where word meaning might not be obvious, Sidhwa usually works a concise description into the sentence itself: “She weighs less than this phulka,’ says Ayah turning her back on us and tossing a thin disk of wheat onto the fire until it is swollen with trapped air” (Sidhwa 59). These types of tacit interpolations are not accidental in Sidhwa’s work, revealing her “impatience with words which are alien and meaningless to me, and which I feel are often inserted by the author as a lazy way to add color or create atmosphere with little effort to explain or
embed the words. The inclusion of French or Latin words aggravates me in books I read in English. If I can ignore them, well and good; if not, I ignore the book” (Sidhwa 236).

Sidhwa clearly wants to separate herself from Indian writers in English who “often refuse to gloss untranslated words / expressions to be true to their respective roots” (Sarangi qtd. in Rollason 4).

Sidhwa has gone out of her way to disavow the connection between her literary work and that of a “new crop of British writers of South Asian origin who have spent most of their lives in England and its educational institutions and who have absorbed the traditions of the language together with the thought patterns of the British” (Sidhwa 239). In differentiating her use of “English as a Pakistani vernacular” from writers whose English “is indistinguishable from that of the native population of England” (239), Sidhwa turns the question of English proficiency into an inside-outside dyad. Those whose ‘thought patterns’ are British are outsiders to Pakistani writers such as herself, though what exactly constitutes a British thought pattern never quite materializes.30 In the same breath, however, Sidhwa is “content to be landed [...] in English,” which “besides having its own tradition of genius, is useful by today’s standards in terms of commerce, communication, and technology” (Sidhwa 231). English becomes the language of literary output of a certain educated class whose ease of expression in the language signals a distance from lower-class Indians for whom English is not the language of the household and the local. In this sense, we may consider *Cracking India* in its entirety a “translation” of many languages (none of which Sidhwa considers suitable as a primary mode of literary representation) into English, representing the lives, conversations and thoughts of Indian characters who more often than not are presumed to be speaking and thinking not in English at all, but in a plurality of Indian languages” (Rollason 1). Considering the novel as a translation opens up the question of what exactly this translation fails to render in the language of the colonizer.

In *Cracking India*, Sidhwa deploys language to indicate “the adult consciousness informing [Lenny]” (Kanaganayakam and Sidhwa 43), but can only do so through the
colonial language whose kinship with the reality of British imperialism indicates the privilege of Lenny’s position. The trope of polio stages the dilemma of an independent India: polio, like English, is at once the potentially dangerous infection and the unavoidable consequence of British colonial rule, which ostensibly guarantees the maintenance of order and the suppression of communal violence. Furthermore, through her infection, Lenny gains insight into the political situation of the Parsi community in Lahore: admitted to see Colonel Bharucha on account of her polio, she witnesses his sudden denouncement of the English as being responsible for polio’s introduction to India (Sidhwa 26). From this witnessing, we experience one of many ‘accidental’ slippages between the apparently artless candour of the child narrator Lenny and the adult voice that speaks through Lenny, slippages to which Sidhwa quite openly confesses in her assertion that “a childish voice would have made the book boring,” while “a very adult voice might have made it very artificial” (Kanaganayakam and Sidhwa 43). The scene is fissured by the presence of a prior normative and linguistic framework:

“The goddamn English!” I think, infected by Colonel Bharucha’s startling ferocity at this “dastardly” (one of Father’s favorite words, just as “plucky” is Mother’s) instance of British treachery. (Sidhwa 26)

The very words Lenny uses in her own thought to describe the reprehensibility of the British — dastardly, goddamn — are Britishisms to the core, resonating with other British loanwords, such as plucky, which reflect the Anglicization of Lenny’s household. Though Lenny believes that the revelation of the British bringing polio to India is her “first personal involvement with Indian politics,” she registers shock at Bharucha’s declaration precisely because she is already aware that the Parsis “have been careful to adopt a discreet and politically naive profile” (26). Polio is interpenetrative with the linguistic reality of English.

Our initial understanding of Lenny speaks directly to a prior engagement with English as the determining terrain of an encounter with class and ethnic affiliations. Though polio is an infectious disease, we are never given any sense that others are at risk, nor do we

30 Nor is it ever made clear how “British thought patterns” differ from the "British complex" Sidhwa sees herself and other South Asian authors such as Anita Desai and Khushwant Singh as having inherited in
discover how Lenny contracted polio in the first place, except for her mother’s cryptic confession that she herself is responsible because she consigned Lenny to the care of ayahs (18). The word ayah, originally “[a] native nurse or maidservant, [especially] of Europeans in India and other parts of South Asia” (OED, ayah), already aligns Lenny’s Parsi family with colonial hierarchies. The reference to *multiple* ayahs reveals the existence of previous servants whose care of Lenny was presumably poor enough to warrant their dismissal, entrenching Shanta in a class-based reality: one servant among many even as the singular descriptor Ayah displaces her given name (Shanta) in all but one instance in the text. Linking Lenny’s polio to her proximity to servants suggests a middle-class anxiety over the unfettered, lower-class sexuality and temporal mobility that Ayah represents (though for all that, Lenny is put right back into Ayah’s care afterward). Lenny’s mother frames the cause of polio as a class problem in English, using a colonial term to characterize Shanta according to an occupation that first acquired relevance in a British colonial context. In distinguishing Lenny through polio, Sidhwa inadvertently gives the reader a sense that victims of polio are almost predestined by linguistic affiliation: only the English-speaking child can catch an English disease, because only through English is such a disease intelligible (like the Partition itself). The continuity between disease and language surfaces in Lenny referring to herself as being “infected” by Bharucha’s anti-British sentiments: English, initially the language of the colonizer, is paradoxically the site of Lenny’s burgeoning awareness of the colonizer’s oppressive rule.

3.10 Linguistic “exactitude”

If Sidhwa demonstrates a marked ambivalence toward the viral mobility of the English language, which anticipates and informs the impending violence of Partition, this ambivalence takes on an additional meaning when we examine the textual representation of Ayah, whose lower-class, ethnically Hindu body is synonymous, in the colonial perception, with the verdant colonized territory available for inscription and conquest. Sidhwa wastes no time in furnishing the reader with Lenny’s heavily sexualized description of Ayah. Men of all faiths and creeds stare at her “chocolate-brown,”

childhood (Kanaganayakam and Sidhwa 50).
“round,” and “plump” shape that complements her “[f]ull-blown cheeks” and “pouting mouth” (Sidhwa 12-13), while her “rolling bouncy walk [...] agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colorful saris and the half-spheres beneath her short sari-blouses” (13). Ayah’s skin color registers as dark or brown, which Lenny likens to an edible substance (chocolate) waiting to be consumed. Yet in choosing to employ this salacious type of language, particularly in reference to the Englishman whom Lenny believes was quite alive to Ayah’s sexual attraction, Lenny “remains unaware (as indeed does the narrative) of her replication of what she indicts” (Hai 395). Desire here is the consumption of that which is available to the privileged colonial gaze of both Lenny and the Englishman, who share the same desire. Lenny’s description of Ayah resonates with early European representations of the female body and the colonized land as “interchangeable terrain on which colonial power could be deployed”; Loomba invokes the description of the African woman in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness to argue that “from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolise the conquered land” (Loomba 152). In Conrad’s description of the African woman’s dress and demeanor, “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent” (qtd. in Loomba 151), we see the literary precursor to Sidhwa’s portrayal of Ayah’s body, visually distinguished by the color of her saris rather than by any informed attentiveness to the details of her dress. To Lenny, Ayah moves “with the unconcern of the Hindu goddess she worships” (Sidhwa 12), but Sidhwa does not provide us with the name of the Hindu goddess, aligning Lenny’s description with the same colonial mentality that consigned the plurality of Hinduism to reductive, generalized categories of “knowledge.”

Hai has rightly characterized Ayah’s relationship to Lenny as “both an idealized self and other—beautiful, desired (before Independence) by men of all religious and class backgrounds—an adolescent body through whose adventures the narrator vicariously acquires dangerous knowledge from a safe distance” (390-91). Such a characterization accurately tracks the narrative’s latent desire to distance the victim of communal violence from the middle-class narrator, a distance which widens through the language of the apparently innocent child telling the story. We never perceive how and why desire coalesces around a certain construction of Ayah, nor does Sidhwa explicitly tether the racialized component of Lenny’s description of Ayah to the trauma that Ayah suffers.
during Partition. While Ayah proudly displays Adi’s pale skin, which allows him to “run across the space separating native babies and English babies” (34-35) in Queen’s Park, the text never offers a connection between the implicit privilege of whiteness that the narrative very carefully detaches from British identity and Ayah’s own “chocolate” complexion. If active masculine desire maps to this detached, privileged subject and passive female desire to the brown object, both Lenny and Sidhwa are silent both on the implications of this mapping and the existing social and cultural hegemonies that bring it into being, hegemonies which Lenny and her family are themselves complicit in maintaining. The text’s construction of Ayah appears fully formed through the child narrator whose “coyness of childlike innocence [...] remains unrevoked by adult introspection” (Hai 395).

Lenny’s desires are given a priori, confirmed by those around her, and finally, through poetic abstraction, sedimented into universality, concealing any trace of their formation that might link them to a specific subject position correlated to the language of narration. Watching Ayah and Masseur in the park, Lenny “intuit[s] the meaning and purpose of things. The secret rhythm of creation and mortality. The essence of truth and beauty” (Sidhwa 28), but the lexical choices are highly abstract, transforming the sexual exchange between Ayah and Masseur into generalized, romantic declarations of love. Despite Sidhwa’s fondness for “the wealth of choice which makes for exactitude and nuance in English” (Sidhwa 233), the English Lenny uses is quite far from exactitude and nuance. Her chosen nouns — creation, mortality, meaning, purpose, essence, things, truth, beauty — evoke abstraction rather than tangible and specific objects, while the absence of any verb except the unsatisfactory “intuit” strips the passage of any clear sense of who is exercising agency: secrets apparently disclose themselves without actions, actors and roles. Is the “secret rhythm of creation and mortality” to be found in Masseur’s “knowing” fingers groping “Ayah under her sari,” or do we locate this rhythm in her “fragile, piteous sound of pleasure” (Sidhwa 28)? Why is Ayah to be pitied for taking pleasure in sexual intercourse? If we pity her, is this the essence of truth and beauty — the woman “still and languid” (28) in the face of the man’s touch? Or is this an off-hand reference to Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which ends with the speaker proclaiming that “beauty is truth, truth beauty” (line 50)? After spying on Ayah and Masseur engaged
in sexual activity, Lenny now believes heaven “has a dark fragrance” (Sidhwa 28), which corresponds to her observation of the couple next door whose “night-long ecstasy” is comparable to “the dark fragrance Masseur’s skillful fingers generate beneath Ayah’s sari” (51). Here, and frequently throughout the text, the adult emerges temporarily from Lenny’s narrative to proffer an unverifiable “truth” using the language of abstraction.

Through these textual examples of sexual relations, Sidhwa wants to link the pleasure of sexuality to “the earthy gusto of Punjabi” (Sidhwa 232), but does so in the colonial register, lapsing into English abstraction. English, for all Sidhwa’s valorization of its ability to convey nuance and subtlety of expression, is merely its own referent in these passages, calling on an implicitly western reader to gloss Lenny’s musings based on their unspoken, intertwined emotional and literary kinship with canonical English poets such as Keats. Is the duality of English as a precise, exact language of nuance and the purveyor of vague, high-flown rhetoric incompatible? In the section that follows, I argue that this duality becomes possible if we link the implied violence of Lenny’s sexual essentialization of Ayah to the textual violence that foreshadows Partition. By cloaking the problematics of Ayah’s sexuality in English abstraction, the novel drives the ensuing violence of Partition into the realm of the incomprehensible, effacing the connection between the language of the colonizer, English, and the violence that follows. The Englishman whom we first encounter at the start of *Cracking India* is contiguous with Lenny’s use of English throughout the novel. Violence, then, is the repressed other that returns, as the excess of what the text wants to “remember,” in unexpectedly chilling scenes of implied or actual violence that betray the limits of the author’s ability to represent the trauma of Partition in English.

### 3.11 Textual surgery

As the language of Lenny’s imagination, English informs the surgical precision of violence which then bleeds into dreams and returns as unmasterable, apparently phantasmatic images, a dissonance that opposes Lenny’s conscious thought. When Bharucha performs the operation on Lenny’s leg in the hospital, the language, hitherto playful and effervescent, abruptly and clinically switches to the language of terror. Terrified by the “frightening muzzle” forced upon her mouth to produce a “brutal smell,”
Lenny struggles to escape the “milky cloud” (Sidhwa 15) that is presumably the anesthesia taking hold to shield her from the worst of the pain. With toxic clouds, dimly realized but intensely felt horror, and Lenny’s mother failing to console her by reciting a grisly story about a mouse with seven tails that were all chopped off, the scene is evocative of Nazi concentration camps, particularly Josef Mengele’s experiments in Auschwitz: forced amputations, horrific surgeries of various kinds, and the reduction of the prisoners to animals subject to lab experiments. However, the unrestrained language of violence that is transacted within the hospital room is at odds with the surgical precision by which the narrative shifts to and from these scenes of violence; once again, we run up against Sidhwa’s characterization of English as offering “a wealth of choice that makes for exactitude and nuance” (Sidhwa 233). The “exactitude” and “nuance” lie not in precision of description, but in the way Sidhwa uses English to equivocate, prevaricate, delay, and keep violence in abeyance until the text is ready to accommodate it: we are speaking of schematic, rather than object-oriented, complexity.

The violence of Partition, which seems to appear organically once the British withdraw, is actually the result of a narrative strategy that seeks to confine the violence to a kind of “hospital room” or bounded enclosure where violent acts can be performed out of public view. However, this narrative confinement is ultimately unsuccessful, as the violence spills out of the enclosure and into Lenny’s nightmares: the Nazi soldier pursuing Lenny triggers a recollection of earlier childhood nightmares of Godmother “smiling indulgently as men in uniforms quietly slice off a child’s arm here, a leg there. She strokes my head as they dismember me. I feel no pain” (Sidhwa 31). In Lenny’s claim that “no one had taught [her] to fear an immaculate Nazi soldier” (31), we can see violence bleeding back into the realm of the perceptible through the symbolic: no one has taught her to fear a Nazi soldier, yet Nazi imagery permeates the scene of the hospital room which has already transpired. Sidhwa treats a specifically European image as a given to her characters, presuming that its transparency to her implicitly western readership will

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31 Sidhwa’s deployment of Nazi imagery evokes something of Primo Levi’s ethical “gray zone,” in reference to the experience of Auschwitz. Agamben refers to this zone as an “incessant alchemy in which good and evil and, along with them, all the metals of traditional ethics reach their point of fusion” (21). However, the novel’s containment of these images renders this “fusion” transitory at best, after which the executioner will recede into the demonized shape of the partition mob.
require no further explanation. In its surgical precision (slicing and dismembering), the
language of the nightmare mocks any orderly division between the outside world and the
chaotic trauma of the hospital room: the only order is in the methodical amputation of
limbs after which, like the Partition (division) of India, there will only be disconsolate
fairy-tales and the ghost pain of prosthetic substitutions (Hamida for Shanta).

Though English is the chosen language of *Cracking India*, the novel struggles to
reconcile the privileged, heightened understanding that Lenny’s use of English accords
her with the growing sense that English is directing the trajectory of violence. After all,
Lenny’s ready use of English and willingness to speak when other children of her age are
silent contribute to her betraying Ayah’s location to Ice-candy-man. She has learned to
tell tales by cheerfully reconstructing fictitious jokes to her father at her mother’s behest,
in order to maintain the illusion of a happy home (88). In other instances, Lenny’s voice
permits the introduction of western cultural references into situations where such an
introduction is both an intrusion in and of itself and a harbinger of the violence to come.
Sitting with Ayah in the park, Lenny has just proclaimed that she has “confidence in
Ayah’s chocolate chemistry,” when suddenly “lank and loping the Ice-candy-man
cometh” (28); the latter is a reference to Eugene O’Neill’s 1939 play *The Iceman Cometh*
in which the initially Christ-like figure of Hickey is actually a false messiah, who
murders his wife and thereafter begins to spread his gospel of broken, futile dreams in the
Greenwich Village Saloon. The comparison to the wife-murdering Hickey prepares the
reader for Ice-candy-man as the spiritual and emotional murderer of his “wife” Ayah.
Injecting a western cultural reference into the text is a reminder of the western readership
Sidhwa explicitly wants to court (Kanaganayakam and Sidhwa 51), and incongruous with
the limited experience of a child narrator living thousands of miles away from where the
play was written and staged.

If English is the language of narration, it is also the means of conveying the ominous
hardening of ethnic identities in Lenny’s world. The first narrated instance of the
household attempting to strip Hari of his dhoti is playful and good-natured, with lexical
choices such as *rowdyism, genial-faced,* and *high-spirited gambol* (Sidhwa 52-53) mixing
British Standard English with Indian English to invest the scene with a comfortable sense
of colonial paternalism. The physical presence of the British in India supports Lenny’s use of English, which switches frequently between stock British expressions and Indian English heavily inflected by Parsi humour. This easy linguistic plurality converges with early descriptions of raucous Parsi community meetings in which code-switching between British English and Indian English occurs almost too frequently to follow and speakers proffer British proverbs as solutions to Parsi dilemmas (26).

However, with the announcement of the impending Partition and the reality that colonial rule will soon give way to formal independence, the narrative voice jettisons the easy and humorous interplay between BSE and Indian English, mirroring the unease of the characters with lexical choices that convey a sense of latent violence waiting to be unleashed. In the second dhoti scene, the blend of Indian English with BSE all but disappears, as Lenny’s fear “assumes a violent and cruel shape” and she characterizes Hari’s dhoti as “that preposterous and obscene dhoti! Worn like a diaper between his stringy legs—just begging to be taken off!” (126). The language is mainly British both in lexical choice (preposterous, obscene) and perspective (though the use of "diaper" instead of "nappy" is an interesting Americanism): while Lenny is quite familiar with the concept of a dhoti, she now speaks in the colonial register, making a degrading comparison between the loincloth and an infant’s diaper. As the household attempts to strip Hari of his dhoti, Ice-candy-man appears:

Stirred by a breeze, the shadows cast by the eucalyptus tree shift and splinter, and define the still figure of a man. The man moves out of the darkness, and as he approaches, I am relieved. It is only Ice-candy-man. (127)

Juxtaposed with assonance, the sibilance of alliteration (stirred, shadows, shift, splinter, still) provides the reader with a sense of threat, intensified by the inertness of the ominous figure watching the proceedings in shadow. There is none of the jovial, loose code-switching of the Parsi meeting at Colonel Bharucha’s house; Sidhwa’s prose has actually become more “writerly” in a European sense, divesting the reader of any sense of cultural syncretism through language. The only evidence of Indian English in the passage is the descriptor Ice-candy-man, the seller of popsicles (ice candy) who will eventually abduct Ayah. Eucalyptus, a fast-growing tree not native to India and
presumably imported by the British, symbolizes the swift growth of violent sentiment in India. The scene is rife with ambivalence toward the colonial presence: Lenny uses BSE to foreshadow the violence that will occur once the purveyors of English in India, the British, have departed. Syntactic and grammatical interplay between the two variants of English disappears, leaving a language variant almost indistinguishable from BSE to position the violent, lower-class Muslim Other as the spiritual instigator of the violence in Lenny’s community. However, we are never privy to the specifics of Ice-candy-man’s descent into violence. Instead, he becomes the “noisy and lunatic holyman” with “hairy calves” whom Lenny sees in the park “shouting: ‘Ya Allah!’” (106) as if magically transformed by the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding the concept of Partition itself.

Once the violence begins, English is unable to represent the plenitude of what is happening, instead retreating into imprecise phantasmatic images of mob violence. As Lenny witnesses the riot at Queen’s Garden, she describes “a mob of Sikhs, their wild long hair and beards rampant, large fevered eyes glowing in fanatic faces,” while she herself has a vision of diving into the mass of humanity to rip out the hearts, minds, limbs, and entrails of the perpetrators of violence (Sidhwa 144). The “evil, paralyzing spell” emanates from the mob whose “terrible procession” somehow leaves in its wake “the pulpy red flotsam of a mangled body” (145). Religious cries in a variety of non-English languages litter the passage, all communicating aggression without specificity.

Violence has passed into the realm of the non-descriptive. Sidhwa has unexpectedly withdrawn the clarity and sophistication of the adult precisely at the moment when the reader would demand such a perspective to make sense of the situation: Lenny the impossibly evolved narrator has conveniently become Lenny the child narrator. After Lenny betrays Ayah’s hiding-place to Ice-candy-man and his band, she refers to herself as “the trained circus elephant, [...] an animal with conditioned reflexes that cannot lie” (195), but what trains her movements and conditions her reflexes is her absorption into a linguistic register (English) that can indeed lie, omit, and distort, but which crucially must deny all traces of its lies, omissions, and distortions to position itself as “an interethnically neutral link language” (Schneider 167). Sidhwa expends a full paragraph of description on Lenny gazing at Ayah as she is dragged out of hiding by her eventual rapists:
Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s screamless mouth. Her violet sari slips off her shoulder, and her breasts strain at her sari-blouse stretching the cloth so that the white stitching at the seams shows. A sleeve tears under her arm. (Sidhwa 195)

Through the lasciviousness of this description, Lenny anticipates the sexual violence that Ayah will suffer. Curve suggests the female form; coupling "resisting" to "throat" suffuses the scene with menace, as if the reader is invited to violate Ayah as the prelude to what will follow off-stage; the comparison to a dead child is already transforming Ayah into “the phantasmal [other] from whom all human subjectivity has been evacuated” (Das 7). The frequency of this kind of voyeuristic language in Lenny’s narrative positions Ayah as the sexually objectified figure constantly held out to the denizens of Queen’s Park (Ice-candy-man, Masseur, Sharbat Khan, the Chinaman) but who has no protection once the colonial presence withdraws. She transforms from the “magical goddess of racial harmony” and “the locus of convergent desire” (Hai 398) into the specter of “the abducted woman, with its associated imagery of social disorder as sexual disorder” (Das 21).

Lenny’s narrative and the protection of her family refine, direct, and intensify the magnitude of sexual desire for Ayah, whose body is invested with heightened sexuality because it is unavailable to Ice-candy-man, Masseur, Sharbat Khan, and the rest of the Queen’s Park occupants. Lenny’s middle-class home, once the inviolable space where lower-class, ethnically inscribed Indian men are not permitted, is subsequently invaded by the arrival of Ice-candy-man and his band of “thugs.” However, the text remains silent on Ayah’s captivity, rape, and enforced prostitution, giving way to a reconstructed account of Lenny’s friend Ranna surviving a Sikh attack on his Muslim village. If English is the language with which Sidhwa feels the most comfort (Kanaganayakam and Sidhwa 51), it is puzzling that

the narrative cannot report on what will happen to Ayah; it directs the imagination of horror in her direction but refuses to follow it, redirecting attention instead to its own stance of separation. As it conflates rape and prostitution into the unspeakable, it shrinks from the scene of the rape into a child’s disingenuous
innocence, leaving a gap at the center of Lenny’s narrative, from which, at this key moment, Ayah emblematically drops out. (Hai 399)

Hai implicates Sidhwa’s idealized depiction of Ayah’s recovery, effected by upper-class Parsi women who intimidate the lower-class Muslim perpetrator of violence into silence, in the reproduction of a Pakistani state discourse that used these types of images of violation to refute “the possibility that ‘respectable’ female bodies may be equally vulnerable— or rapable by lower-class men” (Hai 400). The text’s silence on Ayah’s rape speaks to what Das, in her analysis of Wittgenstein, refers to as the possibility that “the experience of being a subject is the experience of a limit” (Das 7). The reader of English reaches a limit in Sidhwa’s unwillingness to deploy her chosen language to represent the violence, whose presence throughout the novel dissolves into absence at the narrative’s most tensive point. This unwillingness resides uneasily within a novel that mirrors the violence of the act of rape with the epistemic violence of rape as the narrative climax, after which both narrative and characters enact “[t]he classical ritualistic solution,” which is for “the social body to cut itself completely off from the polluted individual” (Das 48). Ayah returns after the confrontation between Godmother and Ice-candy-man, but as a figure “not alive” (Sidhwa 274), with a “harsh, gruff” voice, “as if someone has mutilated her vocal cords” (273); soon after, she decides to return to her family in Amritsar and vanishes from both Lenny’s household and the narrative.

3.12 The language of modularity

We have arrived at an understanding of English in Cracking India as the language of modularity — of discrete, consumable parts which constitute an entity but which can be extracted and replaced without destroying the whole. Forms of affective, thematic, linguistic, ethical, and narrative modularity both anticipate and emerge from the modularity of bodies which are available for amputation, dismemberment, and eventual symbolic annihilation. The symbolic recurrence of images of amputation in Lenny’s conscious perception become our clue to how Sidhwa deploys Lenny to construct the impending cracking or dismemberment of India. These same images of amputation return in nightmare form, along with the convergence of these nightmares with narrative reality.
in atemporal terms, rendering the violence of Partition as inevitable, magical, monstrous, and outside the scope of literary imagination.

Furthermore, the representation of actual amputations inflicted on characters during Partition, as when Dost Mohammad is beheaded by the Muslim mob (Sidhwa 213), only surfaces when Lenny’s first-person narrative withdraws, amputating imagination from the facticity of violence. This amputation points to the linguistic modularity of English and non-English South Asian languages, whose intermittent presence in the narrative varies according to the emotional tenor of the situation Lenny is describing, evinces Sidhwa’s facility with English as the “body” of Indian identity from which discrete units of Urdu, Gujarati, and Punjabi may be amputated and later “re-stitched” without trauma to the whole. From this linguistic modularity, we can discern the thematic modularity of bodies coming, going, and dying, only to be replaced by other bodies (Hamida for Ayah), signaling the narrative’s attempt to naturalize the trauma of Partition. Sidhwa ultimately wants this attempt to fail on some level, as Lenny cannot even bear to refer to Hamida as Ayah, but the ease with which Sidhwa, rather than Lenny, replaces one abject survivor of violence with another in an identical, class-bound role (that of the ayah) suggests an unwillingness to let the absence of the missing “limb” obtain presence through its singular absence. In this sense, Hamida is a visibly marked prosthetic for the missing part that is Ayah.

Finally, narrative modularity “amputates” levels of emotional and psychic interiority from the “body” of the linguistic register, registering affect as a contagion whose spread into the subject’s psychic space must be prevented. At the moment of Ayah’s trauma, *Cracking India* amputates her textual body from the narrative in order to efface “a national and ethnic past too violent, shameful, and traumatic to be told except through the distancing of a child’s censored vision, and the displacement of national history to a female body rendered multiply other” (Hai 413). The “form of realism” (Kanaganayakam and Sidhwa 47) which has hitherto anchored Lenny’s narrative temporarily accedes to an incongruous magical realism in which Lenny can imagine Ranna’s experience and inhabit his body as if she were experiencing the violence in his village through his eyes.

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32 This may serve to explain the infrequent but equally sexualized descriptions that Lenny provides of her own mother. The lower-class body of Ayah can be abducted and raped; Lenny's mother remains inviolate.
The novel’s pattern of representation amounts to a surreptitious metalepsis, wherein substitutions, stretched out on dubious chains of contiguous meaning, stand in for specific bodily trauma, eventually coming to subsume that trauma to the narrative’s very self-conscious sense of individual and collective loss.

By valorizing multiplicity in a monolingual register, Sidhwa carefully effaces the privilege of an authorial middle-class position that allows her to subordinate the violence and trauma of Partition to the English language of romance, which falls silent on how the efforts of figures like Godmother to rescue abducted women “effectively reconstituted the multiple patriarchies at work in women’s lives within the family and the community” (Menon and Bhasin 210-11). Bodies are torn away, reconstituted, and pushed from one physical location to another in an English narrative that seeks to contain trauma by distancing itself from the lived experience of the survivors themselves. Ayah’s family in Amritsar becomes the symbol of a possible future recovery, despite the undeniable reality that for abducted women during Partition, “it was not only ‘miscreants’, ‘outsiders’ or ‘marauding mobs’ that they needed to fear—husbands, fathers, brothers, and even sons, could turn killers” (Menon and Bhasin 210). No mention is made of any possibility that Ayah’s family might not wish to take her back, as was often the case following Partition (Butalia 195) when families would charge the partition survivor with having stained “the ‘purity’ of the community” (193). Sidhwa permits Ice-candy-man, Ayah’s abductor and rapist, to haunt the narrative’s closing moments as a “moonstruck fakir who has renounced the world for his beloved [...] a truly harmless fellow” (Sidhwa 288). Such a heavily romanticized description can hardly seek refuge in Lenny’s innocence as a narrator without raising the question of why Lenny is so charitable toward the man who visited such trauma on the body of her Ayah, or why Sidhwa allows the image of a spurned lover pursuing his unattainable love across the newly created border between India and Pakistan to stand as the final emotional resonance of the novel. It is as if English escapes the control of both Lenny and Sidhwa in the final pages: unable to individuate the relationship between Ayah and her abductor, Sidhwa finds no option in her language of choice but a return to romantic abstraction, and negotiates this return by transforming Ice-candy-man into a love-struck poet.
In its irreducibility to a single ethnic, cultural, or linguistic affiliation, Sidhwa’s novel wants to undermine any attempt to make sense of the violence of Partition by aligning a single language with a single culture or stable ethnic identity. However, the text’s chosen literary language (English) points to the author’s self-imposed restrictions on the limits of representation, leaving us with a startling subversion of this very language. Sidhwa’s choice to write in English is inflected by ethnic affiliations. As a member of the Parsi community, Sidhwa considers herself an unbiased chronicler of the horrors of Partition: “Being a Parsi, I wrote it from an objective perspective. [...] My emotions were not aligned one way or the other. I could keep an objective point of view to some extent” (Kanaganayakam and Sidhwa 45). Stitching together Sidhwa’s characterization of English as the language of communication and her positing of the existence of a Parsi objectivity in describing Partition violence, we witness a fusion of language with ethnic identity: the Parsi subject’s fluidity, multiplicity, and easy yet strategic use of English allow a perspective, a degree of objectivity, that Sidhwa implicitly considers unavailable in other South Asian languages. When Sidhwa sets the “poetry and delicacy of Urdu,” “the earthy gusto of Punjabi,” and “the comedy, farce, and burlesque that erupts so spontaneously out of Gujarati as spoken by the Parsees” against “the wealth of choice which makes for exactitude and nuance in English” (Sidhwa 232-33), she grounds non-English languages in cultural and emotional specificity, situating English at a very colonial distance. Non-English languages evoke localized moods, which render them unfit for the general task of literary fiction: in a sense, they function metonymically in *Cracking India* as bursts of linguistic “colour” which the English narrative diligently records and explains.

In Sidhwa’s privileging of English, there is something of the colonial anthropologist who classifies, surveys, and tacitly controls as if disembodied, operating outside time and space, maintaining a fiction of neutrality; one could certainly be forgiven for detecting a “British thought pattern” in many of the rhetorical strategies and lexical choices of the novel. In the end, English both actualizes and is produced by the “thought patterns” accorded to it by Sidhwa: a narratively individual and subtly Europeanized account of national identity. The supposed “outsiderness” of English, aligned with outsiderness and the liminality of being Parsi, leads Sidhwa into an overvaluation of her own comfort with
English through the idealized notion that an objective account of the Indian experience of Partition exists, and that this account can be rendered in English. Instead, we are left with the possibility that Indian fiction written in English is “paradoxically, a text that, though written only once, has, in its gestation, been the object of a process of translation” (Rollason 1).

If western trauma theory falls short of being an adequate means of understanding collective and historical trauma in a postcolonial context, it also falls short by way of a disavowed kinship with postcolonial literature across two distinct regions and traumatic eras, the apartheid of South Africa and the Partition of India. Like trauma theory, postcolonial literature is beset by the problem of how to let traumatized bodies inhabit the text in ways that might be excessive to the reader, but which, following Bergson’s conceptions of translation and rotation, might also allow for a more spatio-temporally inclusive idea of how to represent trauma. The possibility of this inclusion is what the text is always in the process of shunning and yet offering to the reader: what I provisionally call, in ethico-narrative terms, a state of liminal seduction.

My exegesis of Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* and Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples* has followed two broad and interpenetrative paths. I have tracked the representational slippage that occurs as and when the text falls silent on describing trauma, as well as the implications of this silence for postcolonial literature. But my analysis has also engaged with tracing the structural, modal, and schematic contours of these novels: how they disclose trauma, distribute references to traumatic events. In this chapter, I have argued that the figure of the child narrating and then withholding a trauma experienced by a servant (ethnically or racially Other) provides us with a convergent point in postcolonial literature: the alignment of Marnus, a white South African child, and Lenny, a Parsi child living in pre-Partition India, performs the complex relationship between class, race, ethnic identity, and social privilege. Such a convergence signals a persistent narrative overdetermination in postcolonial literature, in which a sense of dispossession, in relation to the colonial presence, marks the narrative, both facilitating and inhibiting its ability to represent trauma.
Each novel uses a child narrator to inflect the act of representation with an apparent innocuousness. As the child acts in an apparently artless manner, wielding language to represent trauma, a second narrative action doubles the first, shearing the field of traumatic representation to a child’s perspective that will now stand as the subject transparently looking back, eliding all traces of that action, and of the representational difficulty that necessitated the action in the first instance. In other words, the child only comes into being as a transparent narrator if we ignore the artifice of investing any narrator with the ability to look back in self-identical reflection. The figure of the child thus becomes a means of establishing a literary realism that would otherwise be untenable. The elision of this initial action touches on each text’s preoccupation with bodies of all types escaping narrative, physical, and ethical containment. More than the content of specific images, symbols, and character actions, it is this preoccupation that generates the textual pressure necessary for a complex representation of trauma.
4 Parabola and Tableau in Bitter Fruit and Anil’s Ghost

This chapter examines the topic of narrative as surface, problematizing the idea of a dialogical relationship between the reader and the stable text by demonstrating how Achmat Dangor’s Bitter Fruit and Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost undermine the trust in what narrative and ethical surfaces can reveal of postcolonial trauma. I draw on certain works of post-structuralist theory, most notably Jean-Luc Nancy’s Corpus, Roland Barthes’s S/Z, and Jacques Derrida’s On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy, to establish a connection between the concept of the text as body and the impossibility of touching that text except by parabola.

Bitter Fruit and Anil’s Ghost bring the reader into confrontation with a surface of traumatic representation that resolutely refuses to provide closure, or “depth.” Both authors are reluctant to allow their respective novels to settle into a comfortable approach to a stable trauma “object,” on which surface disclosures would ultimately give way to a specious textual and ethical unity. To this extent, both novels are deeply implicated in critiquing the attempt to position textual “bodies” as objects available for conscious, intentional knowledge or (perceptually) apprehension. Ondaatje approaches an ethics of knowing by way of syncretism and meditative stillness, although his preoccupation with subordinating the representation of trauma to aesthetic concerns illustrates the ethical precariousness of the reader’s double position as critic and audience. Dangor strips even the possibility of syncretism from the narrative trajectory of Bitter Fruit, producing a vision of post-apartheid South African bodies living between spaces, living as and in the awareness of that “betweeness” or liminality. Yet the ethical imperative to resist the surface-depth paradigm remains vigorously present in both works.

This ethical imperative gestures to the concerns of the poststructuralist critics with whose work I will engage in this chapter. In his exegesis of Husserlian phenomenology, Levinas critiques the formalization of a reflection “in which the descriptive process ‘synchronizes’ the flux of consciousness into knowledge” (81). In other words, Levinas is wary of any metaphysical “sleight of hand” that seeks to reduce the vagaries of consciousness to a process that consciousness itself can control, dispose of, and use as the
untroubled basis for all further cognition. Correspondingly, Derrida stresses the danger of privileging the intuitionism of consciousness, calling it “the risk of reappropriating the alterity of the other more surely, more blindly, or even more violently than ever” (191). Finally, Nancy temporarily risks the use of a “certain vocabulary” of which he is otherwise suspicious to assert that while “knowledge wants an object … with the body there’s only a subject” (97). However, he quickly reframes the issue, saying instead that “in the absence of an object there’s also no longer a subject … What’s left is precisely body, bodies” (97).

Nancy’s swift rhetorical move (from object-subject to only subject to the absence of a subject entirely) illustrates the difficulty in talking about the intuitionism of the body in a language so beholden to the metaphorical and syntactical immediacy of touch and touching. It also points to the problem of addressing the phenomenological issue of the text as body when we discuss postcolonial representations of trauma. By disposing of the subject, we run the risk of allowing the representation of any and all bodies to proliferate, under the guise of an apolitical relativism that blurs distinctions between victims and perpetrators and erases the possibility of agency. By contrast, the two novels acknowledge that accessing embodiment in postcolonial trauma is impossible, except in the experience of trauma’s parabolic quality, its facticity as extension that nonetheless still contains meaning. While the novels take up the poststructuralist critique of intuitionism, they also challenge the poststructuralist tendency to relativize and decontextualize specific modes and instances of embodied experience. As this chapter will demonstrate, the two novels have their own mass, but they also acquire another valence, another weight, when read one against the other.

33 Dominick LaCapra’s discussion of the middle voice as an alternative method of narrating trauma is salient here. The middle voice is neither active nor passive, and does not exist as a formal voice in modern language, but rather only as the potential object of a “discursive analogue” (19). LaCapra writes in response to Hayden White’s veneration of the middle voice, a position White himself bases on an examination of Barthes’s essay “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?”. LaCapra warns that a “ rashly generalized middle voice would seem to undercut or undo systematically … any distinction … between victim and perpetrator, as it would seem to undercut the problems of agency and responsibility in general” (26). If LaCapra’s analysis of the middle voice hinges on the doubtfulness of a grammar in which there is no active subject to act on an object, Nancy’s willingness to work precisely at the limit of “body, bodies,” without subjects or objects, replays the same concern when we attempt to conceptualize writing, and literature specifically, as a body. The task is to keep alive the ethical question even in the clustered space of only bodies: for whom are these bodies written, and what kinds of trauma do they represent and elide?
4.1 Postcolonial parabola

*Bitter Fruit* plays out against the historical and political backdrop of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), formed in order to provide “restorative rather than retributive justice” (Frenkel 157) for the crimes of the apartheid era. Instead of punishing perpetrators, the TRC encouraged both victims and perpetrators (and by extension, those who had occupied both roles during apartheid) to offer personal testimonies, using “individual catharsis” as the basis for “national reconciliation” in the newly post-apartheid state of South Africa (157). While the TRC certainly provided a powerful channel for approaching the collective trauma of apartheid, it also made itself the target of critics for eliding the victims’ right of redress, for flattening out the differences between victims and perpetrators, for allowing white South African perpetrators to disavow their complicity with the apartheid regime, and for using the Judeo-Christian process of confession (speak, grieve, heal) as a civic model for working through collective trauma. At issue in all these criticisms of the TRC is the conflation of judicial inquiry with the Christian conception of forgiveness. To forgive, in the Christian context, placed the emphasis not on the well-being of apartheid survivors, but rather on the construction of a stable post-apartheid national identity, over and above demands for justice and redress of the systemic inequality of wealth. Forgiveness, then, becomes the channel for an instrumental form of political reconciliation; the state’s interest in fostering reconciliation is always an act of “political calculation,” never wholly (or even primarily) addressing itself to the specific trauma of the victim (Derrida 40). For Derrida, instrumental forgiveness is forever at odds with true forgiveness, an intensely personal act where one forgives the unforgivable and which has “has precisely nothing to do with [state] judgment” (42). Furthermore, Derrida is wary of the contemporary valorization of the “simulacra, the automatic ritual” of confession, whereby sincerity obtains only insofar as the confession’s witnesses are satisfied that the repentant party has adequately performed his confession as a theatrical exercise (Derrida 29). It becomes all too easy, using only this standard, to simulate repentance in bad faith, for political reasons or out of naked self-interest (for example, the fear of being punished for apartheid-era crimes).

The TRC’s tacit mandate to negotiate political reconciliation, from its inception and through its five years of life as a judicial body from 1994 to 1999, thus opens up a space
for us to question the different registers, public and private, within which accounts of trauma can find voice. This space, in its turn, makes it possible for novels such as *Bitter Fruit* to offer alternative models of representing trauma, models that leverage literature’s ability to address the singularity of experience without minimizing or effacing the political and cultural effects of the TRC in post-apartheid South Africa. In this way, we can certainly view *Bitter Fruit* as a trauma text, albeit one that is constantly suspicious of and resistant to any facile or strategic attempts to “forgive” in the name of national reconciliation.

*Bitter Fruit* employs both the shell of the trauma text, in which the character’s trauma mediates the narrative trajectory from the outset, and what Roland Barthes describes as the readerly convention: the givenness of narrative coincidences that must occur in order for everything to “hold” in terms of narrative plausibility, the “compatible nature of circumstances” that fixes the discourse firmly in a “circle of solidarities” (156). Organized around the aftermath of a rape, the novel begins with Silas encountering his wife Lydia’s rapist by chance in a supermarket, and concludes with Lydia in flight, escaping both her family and the weight of her trauma, telling herself that even Du Boise, her rapist, “does not matter anymore” (281). Silas’s encounter with Du Boise is unforeseen within the scope of the plot, a chance meeting not apparently planned by either of the two characters, yet this random meeting fires the pivotal events of the novel: first in the ensuing argument between Silas and Lydia that leads to her self-wounding and hospital stay, and in the subsequent reel of events, as Lydia’s prolonged absence from the house provides an opportunity for Mikey to read her diary and discover that Du Boise, and not Silas, is his biological father. Here, then, we have the narrative drive towards Mikey’s murder of Du Boise, Lydia’s emancipation from the family unit, and by extension, the history of the Ali family from the British occupation in India.

We can, of course, locate this structure within a purely Barthian frame of reference: assuming *Bitter Fruit* to be a readerly text, we can then attribute the implacability of its movement to a genre which quietly affirms that “meaning is a force, that it is devised within an economy of forces” (Barthes 156). Such an attribution would not, in and of itself, be misguided; I am using Barthes here precisely because the novel, as a trauma
text, is preoccupied with the constraints of discourse, of history as discourse, of the TRC as the shadow discourse that constantly infuses the words of the characters with secondary and ironic meanings. However, in Barthes’s own terms, the novel still presents problems of categorization. Its insistence on dissecting narrative *within* the narrative — characters such as Mikey analyzing and critiquing forms of writing (novels, testimonies, diaries) as units of specific meaning with their own personally inflected forces — classifies it as a contemporary, possibly postmodern novel that substantially conforms to Barthes’s concept of the *writerly* text.

A quandary, then: *Bitter Fruit* abstracts the classical, readerly forms of fictional narrative — pivotal encounter “compatible” with the exigencies of the novel’s plot, structured in three acts, with climactic violence in the third act and the circularity of the opening in its conclusion — to offer a relentless, frequently mordant critique of the futility of master narratives and genre conventions of all kinds. This is not self-satire: the novel is not in explicit dialogue with the convenience of its morphology, and has no ability to comment directly on the focalizers’ selection and sequencing of events, in part due to the third-person limited narration, which disqualifies each focalizer from addressing the reader directly. The novel layers highly self-reflexive focalizers into the body of a narrative that, constitutively, has no means of bringing that self-reflexivity to bear on the novel’s own deep structure. On one level, we can read this disjuncture as quintessentially contemporary: self-reflexivity of characters in fiction has become so embedded in popular culture that it now stands in for any commentary on the enclosing form as a construction. In other words, we consider any novel postmodern if it makes some kind of in-text reference to its own status as a literary artifact, if it displays any cognizance of the enfolding novel structure in violation of the convention of first or third-person limited narration. On another level, though, this disjuncture is not a sign of acquiescence to a form of postmodernism in which deconstruction has degenerated into routinized, apolitical performance; rather, it is the *postcolonial expansion* of the genre of the trauma text, an expansion that reframes what it means for a text to be self-reflexive.

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34 As for example, Humbert Humbert does in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, or, to use a contemporary South African novel, Ivan Vladislavic’s *The Restless Supermarket*. 
I want to interpret *Bitter Fruit* not as surface without meaning, but rather surface *as* meaning, through which we can come to know Barthes’s idea of departure *without* the idea of return. Returning in the classical sense requires the “inside” of a textual and cultural space, an a priori sense of home, enclosure, and belonging; correspondingly, not returning only becomes scandalous (to use Barthes’s word) if the departure is from a structure that has not changed in the time between departure and any possible return. By contrast, I speak of *Bitter Fruit* not in terms of a surface-depth binary but rather as a work of *parabola*:

**FIGURE 1**

In its most basic form, a parabola is a u-shaped curve in space, set against a non-connecting straight line (the directrix). The essential principle of the parabola, visible from the diagram above, is that the directrix and the parabola never actually touch. The parabola approaches the directrix at the point of its greatest curvature but the two do not meet. Therefore, the movement of the parabola is fundamentally asymptotic — always approaching a limit without arriving. Asymptotic movement is how I would like to characterize the narrative of *Bitter Fruit*. The novel does not offer a discourse of stability within which we can cleanly narrate departures and returns. Instead, the concept of departure without return calls into question the structural integrity of the “object” in flight. It troubles what it means to “return” to a postcolonial space where both subject and text only gain meaning by *refusing* to return.

### 4.2 The scandal of return

Before moving into a detailed analysis of *Bitter Fruit*, I want to examine two aspects of Barthes’s theory of the five codes of the readerly text: the cultural code and the proairetic
code. An elucidation of these two aspects of Barthian theory will demonstrate the tension between the assumptions of what constitutes a readerly frame in Western literature and the permutations of those assumptions in the postcolonial domain.

For Barthes, the cultural code references different types of knowledge, such as medical knowledge, historical details, science, or psychology (20). In conjunction with other distinct but interpenetrating codes, the cultural code creates a “topos” that binds and determines the entirety of the readerly text (20). Barthes is not particularly interested in the specificity of a given cultural code; rather, he is content with the existence of the code purely as reference, never “going so far as to construct (or reconstruct)” the specific culture in question (20). In short, the term “cultural code” encompasses any and all “extra-textual” knowledge that the text invokes as a given. For Barthes’s purposes, the cultural code is important only insofar as its status as a referent allows the reader to make meaning out of essentially random and reversible narrative elements. In a curious leap, though, Barthes explicitly tethers the overarching goal of the readerly text to what appears to be the cultural code, which he has just finished reducing to the status of one element among many: “The (ideological) goal of this technique [of readerly plausibility] is to naturalize meaning and thus to give credence to the reality of the story: for (in the West) meaning (system), we are told, is antipathetic to nature and reality” (23). The West, though parenthetical in this citation, is actually the whole, non-parenthetical system of meaning wherein the cultural is able to operate, undifferentiated, at the same level of importance as, for example, the hermeneutic. Barthes is thus presuming a self-consciously blank Western reader evacuated of cultural specificity, a reader for whom the cultural is merely a discursive container, a box into which a type of bounded knowledge can be stored and “deployed” as needed. On the one hand, he presumes this Western reader; on the other, he sets up an apparently universal configuration of codes that determines the readerly text. This aporia remains at the heart of S/Z: the universal, but western.

35 Barthes posits the existence, in the readerly text, of five separate but interpenetrating codes: the hermeneutic, the semiotic, the symbolic, the proairetic (action and action sequences), and the cultural (19-21).

36 This is already a loaded word, which Barthes further reduces to the “Voice of Science” (21).
The second aspect of the five-code theory, the proairetic code, comprises a series of actions that the text stitches together into an arbitrary sequence, which for Barthes “is never more than the result of an artifice of reading” (19). Actions, therefore, are not important except as illustrations of the arbitrariness of narrative sequences. Using this definition of the proairetic, I want to discuss the concepts of departure and return both at the level of physical movement of characters — someone leaves a place and returns to that place — and at the level of narrative movement — how the story progresses or “moves,” and to what purpose. In the Barthian calculus, any action — whether departure, return, struggle, trauma, or otherwise — operates according to the proairetic code, which compels the text itself to “depart” from somewhere (narratively) and “return” to that somewhere (again, narratively). In other words, the text must generate the illusion of a narrative movement that is not arbitrary, that appears to come from an apparently artless configuration of actions (not artificial, not authorial): a character must have a change of heart, or murder someone, in order to refashion her identity. In short, she must do or say or perform whatever fits the semiotic content of the text without breaking the readerly frame; the text must supply her with a narratively “valid” reason for her transformation. The story must erect this facade of plausible event sequences to reassure the reader that neutral, impersonal plot is always and only what drives the novel’s trajectory. For Barthes, this facade evinces the readerly text precisely in its refusal to let the reader glimpse the author as the architect of the story; plot is only plausible because the author lays down a particular sequence of events, all the while taking care to shield the reader from the arbitrariness of such sequencing.

In the postcolonial context of Bitter Fruit, by contrast, the cultural code interrupts and eventually disrupts the circuit of departure and return. The scandal, here, is not that the novel form must supply departures and returns to maintain the illusion of motion, but that such a supplement exposes the radiality of the technical (authorial) gesture. This gesture is an extension outward with only the catachresis of return: that is, a return to something whose form has changed in the interval, a return as mistake, generating meaning through the form’s failure to reassure the reader, its inability to provide narrative certainty as a bulwark against ethical and political uncertainty. Hajera’s rape appears within Imam Ishmail’s story of Ali Ali, and is further attenuated by Ishmail’s use of speculative
language to describe the events surrounding the rape. The Imam is disappointed in Michael’s “questions, his querulous tone, his silence at the end [that] betrayed an incapacity to grasp a fine, delicately woven moral” (Dangor 205). Michael, for his part, is annoyed by the fable’s unsatisfying conclusion, with its “crass, banal” assertion that rape is neither forgivable nor forgettable (205). The “mistake” is ostensibly one of understanding: neither Ismail nor Michael believes the other has quite understood his position. However, the more significant "mistake" is the novel’s refusal to use the proairetic code to supply the expected meaning that would complete the circle of Ismail’s narrative: the story is inconclusive, hinting but never explicitly declaring that Ali Ali murders the British officer, covers his tracks, and flees India. Ismail admits that tracing Ali’s trajectory is largely a matter of “guesswork” and “educated calculations” (202); after speculating, he suddenly ends by declaring that rape cannot be forgiven or forgotten.

Ismail’s account of Hajera and Ali Ali lacks a clear return, a sense of denouement, or even a convergence whereby an action in the story functions as a metaphor for a larger moral in the novel itself. The reader’s eye finds no rest in anticipating what the latter part of the circle, the narrative “return,” will provide to supplement the gap that the departure initiates. The proairetic code has failed to make itself invisible and given. Instead, the fable trails to a close, lanced and ultimately eclipsed by two cultural codes: the speculative language of inquiry into trauma, and the broader historical canvas of colonial violence, to which Ismail explicitly refers in the concluding words of his fable: “The Romans and the Sabine women, the Nazis and Jewish women in concentration

37 Hajera has no voice within his narrative, and therefore cannot refute the Kacholie townsfolks’ innuendo: “[S]he is known to go wandering by herself, loves music, singing aloud, and is provocative even in the way she allows her body to respond to the rhythms that inhabit her (200). Ismail defends her conduct, even while avowing that he “would never condone promiscuity of any sort,” noting that the British officer accused of raping Hajera “knows all the defences, all the believable things to say” (200). No one believes Hajera, and her subsequent pregnancy angers her family, who believe she has disgraced them by openly accusing a British officer instead of remaining silent. Ismail elides Hajera’s voice from the account, superimposing the voices of others, all of whom are eager to speak or speculate: her rapist, the townsfolk, even Ali Ali. From rape to the death of her baby while nursing, which ultimately leads to her imprisonment in a mental ward, Hajera never utters a single word in her own defense, never furnishes the narrative with a clear sense of her character. Even Ali Ali’s sympathy for his own sister only emerges from similarities in “age and temperament” (201): a vague and unsatisfactory sense of family bond.

38 That speculation appears as a subgenre of a trauma narrative, particularly of rape, is not surprising: the difficulty of “establishing” rape according to factual record is precisely what renders the TRC, as a public forum for recording trauma, problematic for a rape survivor such as Lydia. In a sense, speculation shadows rape discursively, itself becoming the secondary trauma of the initial act.
camps, the Soviets in Poland, Israeli soldiers and Palestinian refugees, white South African policemen and black women” (204). A few pages later, we find an apparent reprise of the fable’s message in Michael’s encounter with Vinu, who discloses that she has been engaging in sexual intercourse with her father. Michael, after reflecting on the Sufi poetry mentioned by Ismail at the mosque, roughly wakes Vinu up to dash any sense she has of her incestuous relationship as beautiful: “Vinu, listen. Don’t fool yourself. There was nothing beautiful about it. It was rape, Vinu, simple, crude rape” (210).

We can discern at least one obvious link between the two scenes: out of the genre of fable comes a lesson about the circularity of violence. This circularity, in a sense, restricts Michael’s options, “driving” him (in narrative terms) toward the murders of Vinu’s father and Du Boise, his mother’s rapist, just as Ali Ali once murdered the British officer who raped his sister Hajera. Almost imperceptibly, the narrative embeds filial retribution in an account of trauma: men undertake acts of violence in retribution for crimes committed by other men against the women of their blood. This embedding is not spoken in the text, merely assumed through the geometric deployment of figures and characters. However, the other, less readily obvious link between the two scenes, lies in the doubling and pacing of events that follow Michael’s talk with Imam Ishmail and his declaration to Vinu that she has been the victim of “simple, crude rape.”

The final section of the novel contains six major events, which are not revelations or disclosures but rather the specific actions (with one exception) of each of the major characters: Mikey’s murder of Johan Viljoen, Lydia’s decision to have sexual intercourse with Joao on the billiard table at Silas’s party, Mikey’s murder of Du Boise, his subsequent flight, Silas’s encounter with Vinu that does not end with sex, and Lydia’s final flight from her family. Within this cluster of events, trauma splits and doubles: the murder of Johan is, as Mikey himself acknowledges, a “dry run” for the murder of Du Boise, while the sex that Lydia does have with Joao, a younger man, finds its troubled opposite in the sex Silas does not have with the teenage Vinu, whose “down of bastard gold” (274) Silas fetishizes. Mikey and Lydia both take flight, setting themselves in motion but without a clear idea of where they’ll end up: Mikey arranges passage to travel to India, in an inversion of his grandfather’s flight to South Africa, but views the act of
departure symbolically, noting that “Michael is to die” so that “Noor,” the prophet’s light, “will be incarnated in its place” (277). Lydia’s status is also uncertain: though she speculates that she could reach Cape Town by mid-morning (280), the narrative provides no sense of what awaits her in Cape Town, or how exactly “distance, even this paltry distance, will help to free her” (281).

In these doubled non-disclosures, the narrative places a premium on distributing trauma, diffusing affect across subjects, so that collective trauma is less about individual suffering multiplied by many separate cases as much as it is given to the radial, shifting intensity of a field of force. Quanta, then, instead of individual cases, magnitude coming to stand in for discrete experiences of trauma. This is not to say that Dangor is intent on reducing all trauma to a collective post-apartheid experience, but rather that the novel has little interest in dramatizing the psychological and emotional effects of a single trauma over linear time. Connections between forms and instances of trauma flare up in moments of unguarded reflection, with characters such as Mikey acting as historical conduits to increments of experiential truth. Before abruptly awakening Vinu to tell her that what she thought was a beautiful relationship with her father was nothing but “simple, crude rape” (210), Mikey reads a page of Sufi poetry, using the light of his grandfather’s blue stone, prompting him to wonder why Vinu’s father has not at least left her the illusion of beauty in their incestuous relationship. There is no stated reason for the abrupt turnaround of his declaration, no transition from Mikey’s thoughts on the complexity of incestuous relationships to “simple, crude rape” except that he is suddenly “filled with a quick, seething irritation” (210). At what? Mikey’s irritation is the irritation of an outsider here, a friend of Vinu’s certainly, but one who passes judgment and presumes to instruct her in the facticity of her own experience. At his declaration, Vinu “weeps, the way he imagines she wept as a child, bewildered, unsure of herself” (210). The chapter concludes with this image, resonant with a revelation or disclosure that Mikey has wrought in Vinu, at ease with the masculine didacticism of Mikey’s approach, his willingness to speak on behalf of the subject of trauma, and in that way, the text lets him speak, accords him that paternalist discursive mastery. Illumination, here, resides in the body’s ability to galvanize itself into resolute action, after having considered the weight of history and opaquely disposed of the complexity of relationships. Problematically, the novel aligns
Mikey’s descent into violence with a kind of onto-ethical fundamentalism, as Vinu’s revelation spurs him to two murders and the adoption of a new identity (Noor).

Doubling is not the flat substitution of one figure for another at a similar moment in the text, generating a self-enclosed resonance on a fixed grid, whereby points gradually coalesce into patterns. The novel rejects the double as a self-contained figure, negotiating instead a passage into superimpositions or overlays, breaking a character into distributed and fragmentary components — personality, status, appearance, mood, individuated trauma — that permit subsets of commonality to emerge between characters. For example, though Mikey and Joao both have sexual intercourse with older women, the novel illustrates the differences in each one’s potential for agency: Joao sinks into the role of the exoticized black Other for Lydia, just as Cathy once did, while Mikey’s coloured status allows him the temporal and social mobility to resist categorization and containment. Lydia’s ability to cast off the domestic and social constraints that her family imposes on her is at great variance with the silence that engulfs Hajera, whose voice the novel resolutely refuses to provide.39 Therefore, we cannot say of each pairing that they are doubles, because the attributes that differentiate each element of a pairing are inescapably significant, rooted in the painful history of colonialism in South Africa and tied to the march of supposed progress in post-apartheid South Africa. These attributes are not discountable or reducible to non-difference in order to transform one character into another’s double; the figure of the analog is the shadow or textual ghost that the novel is partly engaged in remodulating from its prominence in European fiction.

In swift succession, Dangor offers a series of events either inherently violent or else suffused with a response to past trauma or trauma that is to come. Michael first purchases a gun, visualizing the reactions of the men he has decided to kill, before murdering Johan Viljoen in one short, sparingly narrated scene. Later, at Silas’s birthday party, Lydia and Joao have sexual intercourse on the billiard table, which Silas eventually sees. Michael, after an unexpected and brief street encounter with Nelson Mandela, seeks temporary

39 Among other doubles we can find in the text are Du Boise and Johan Viljoen, the two white South Africans, one a rapist and the other a pedophile, both targeting coloured women (Lydia and Vinu); Mikey and Ali Ali, each forced to flee the country for retributive crimes; and Cathy and Frances Dip, both othered Chinese figures on whom Lydia and Silas offload their respective sexual fantasies.
refuge at the mosque, where he confesses to the Imam that he has only carried out part of
the violence he intends to do. Silas, upon arriving home from the party, finds Vinu both
devastated by her father’s murder and enraged at Michael’s part in it; he eventually falls
asleep next to Vinu. Michael then murders Du Boise and prepares to escape to India,
reversing the trajectory of his grandfather Ali Ali. Lydia, finally, flees the suffocation of
the Ali family unit, using the car to escape into an unvisualized future, but one that
clearly does not include Silas or Michael.

All these events take place within the brief span of fifty pages, the sense of compression
palpable in the hectic pacing, as if Dangor, having lost patience with the aeonian pace of
memory, is now only interested in stitching bizarre, violent increments of experience
together into a narrative without name or purpose.

The narrative rescinds its right to expand on violence, withholding detail and
inventiveness of expression, minimizing context, side-stepping plausibility. We see no
police investigations, no real attempts to track Michael’s status as a fugitive from justice
within the convention of police investigation. Moreover, the symmetry of these grand
gestures puts the section, and indeed the novel, at risk of becoming a fable. As Michael
murders Johan, Silas desires Johan’s daughter Vinu; Lydia finds some provisional relief
from the trauma of her rape only a few pages after her rapist, Du Boise, dies; Michael’s
words, before he shoots Du Boise, lay bare the inexorable violence that has now come to
fulfill the symbolism of the novel’s title: “My heritage, he says in a whisper, unwanted,
imposed, my history, my beginnings” (276). The cultural code is in the process of welling
up from the contours of the text, but this welling up is also an emergence, a
transformation: freedom from past trauma means, paradoxically, the initiation of further
trauma (murders, Vinu’s rape, abandonment). Trauma becomes the purity of action
stripped of judicial convention: everything becomes permissible in practical and ethical
terms, and this permission signals the narrative’s ease with unexplained transformations.
The “implausible,” frenetic pacing of the novel’s final events stands in for the
development of post-apartheid South Africa: accelerated, improbable urban development
combined with the rending of old conventions, without anything to replace those
conventions. There is a touch here, between the narrative as literary technique and the narrative as evidence of the author’s awareness of the breach of formal convention.

The scandal of the novel’s narrative structure subverts Barthes’s analysis of circularity in S/Z, because the crucial distinction is not a chrono-hierarchical break between a classic readerly text, on the one hand, and a modern writerly text on the other. Rather, the scandal introduces a cultural code — the TRC-mediated legacy of apartheid and the historical canvas of colonial conquest — into the sum total of the text, defying its easy consignment to the status of one element among many, as Barthes would have it. This is narrative both quickened and constituted by its attendant cultural memory, eviscerated in its final section by the limits of historical testimony as a means of working through trauma, with its major focalizers (Lydia, Michael, Silas) possessing semi-transparent and interpenetrating awareness of those limits. Out of awareness, each focalizer breaks out from the stifling configurations of family, TRC, and platitudes of reconciliation to become bodies improperly in motion and, furthermore, never coming to rest.

4.3 Vexed cognition

In Bitter Fruit, narrative perception does not sail along smoothly, as if carried, in phenomenological terms, by the hidden momentum of an “idealized tendency” that ruthlessly shapes “its logic of approach” (Derrida 125). By “idealized tendency,” I take Derrida to mean the perception of one’s own perception as transparent, indistinguishable from any other part of the person’s form or thought. In other words, I see myself seeing the world reflexively, without an awareness of the gap between how I see the world and my ability to critique how I see the world. By contrast, Dangor’s novel cheats the eye of this reflexivity. Furthermore, the novel aligns this frustration with the cognition of its primary focalizers, as perception folds back into patterns of striated, vexed movement. Beginning with the monosyllabic invocation of dawn, Mikey’s perception transcribes a series of halting reflections into the specificity of a moment, welded to a cluster of physical locations within his house: bedroom, bathroom, hollowed alcove between Lydia’s room and the door to the balcony, patch of garden. These reflections acknowledge the temporality of their own approach, in that Mikey is always doubling back, within a given physical space, to the disjuncture between the attempt to represent
and the trauma and anxiety surrounding any attempt to represent. Recalling his mother in the hospital, Mikey thinks that “she is burrowing into her pain for comfort,” but swiftly dismisses his own thought as nothing more than a “tendency to bury uncomfortable thoughts in ‘constructions’” (Dangor 28). Dangor lets Mikey form this thought, but strips it of authenticity by making Mikey immediately aware of its artifice (28). Mikey’s attempt to access his mother’s trauma runs aground on what representation cannot acknowledge: the way representation itself is a distancing, an attempt to contain and ultimately mitigate traumatic affect not for the survivor herself, but for those around her.

Mikey’s perception is ruthless in its refusal to let declarative statements lie at rest, its ability to strip away maudlin sentiment from what he feels are attempts to project ontologies onto others, to displace the frequently violent origins of such ontologies. While this ruthlessness epitomizes a certain masculinity that Lydia observes has already transformed him into a man “incapable of loyalty to any one woman” (162), it also signals an experience of perception that battles intuitionism at every turn. Mikey is constitutively incapable of being at ease with the ready intuition of what he sees, an uneasiness that manifests in the way each scene, each reflection or observation in which Mikey participates, is scored with equivocations that visualize alternative ontologies on the page. For example, his contempt for his white teacher, Miss Anderson, who attempts to disseminate the European canon to a class full of skeptical coloured teenagers with the “desperate intensity of a writer still struggling with her words” (26-27), relents long enough for him to envision the possibility of the “gaunt-faced” teacher somehow animated, in the arms of a hypothetical admiring student, by “the promise of unleashed passion” (27). Miss Anderson tries to frame the truth of literary genealogy in a declarative statement, asserting that “Homer’s Odyssey is the basis of the modern novel,” until the indifference of the students forces her to add, “Well, I think so” (26) as a confession of subjectivity in perspective, of opinion masquerading as fact. What poses as the a priori foundation of literary discourse cannot find refuge in givenness to a

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40 This perception is heavily gendered, voyeuristic, as Mikey, at not quite twenty years of age, has learned to subordinate women to his gaze, as the objects of both desire and scrutiny; the novel’s investment in his focalization puts it at risk of framing the post-apartheid vision as inherently masculine and implicitly misogynist. I would argue that the range of Lydia’s focalization foils such a reading, given the temporal
classroom of coloured students whose status as “post-apartheid hedonists” (26) shapes their cynical willingness to deconstruct and undermine the remnants of white colonial authority.

The scene uses the fragment of Miss Anderson’s declaration on Homer to shuttle into speculation and innuendo concerning her personal life: her unsuccessful attempts to be a writer, her furtive and failed relationship with a South African Cabinet minister. Metonymy ironizes the act of colonial education in the postcolony, as Michael grasps a portion of Miss Anderson’s life to make broad claims about her desire to “wear the mantle of the literary prophet” (27). In bed, Mikey recalls himself and his fellow students interrogating the givenness of a metaphor from Homer’s *The Odyssey*, “the pink fingers of dawn.” Dangor sets this image against Mikey’s own state of recollection: lying in bed at dawn, but observing a “pale, feeble” sun (26) that belies the grandiosity of the Homeric image of the classroom. The students mock the image of dawn with pink fingers, despite Miss Anderson’s protest that it is “a metaphor for its time” (27). One student characterizes it as Eurocentric, since according to the terms of the image, “[d]awn would have to be a white woman” (28), while Vinu insincerely wonders if Miss Anderson has pink fingers, and asks to see the schoolteacher’s hands (28). The emphasis on the fingers of a hand grasping the ungraspable (dawn) allows the students to produce unexpected meaning: the dawn is not the object of scholarly contemplation, replete with universal metaphor, as Miss Anderson tries to tell them, but is rather an active agent, a white hand with pink fingers, a metonymy for their own teacher. What begins as a metaphor apparently sheathed, somnolent in its own inner life and significance, evolves into metonymy, unable to be at rest unless tethered, by indirect comparison or implication, to the legacy of colonialism, of which Miss Anderson, as a white teacher, is a direct representative. In sum, the metonymy of the pink-fingered hand generates a pulse, not a discrete unit of cultural and literary meaning, but a textual resonance that will have changed by the time the reader has finished with the scene, has discovered the way the

and emotional freedom she is able to negotiate for herself, up to and including her flight from filial and domestic roles, from “[m]other, wife, lover, lover-mother, lover-wife, unloved mother” (281).
image of dawn has “travelled” across both the text itself and the history of post-apartheid South Africa.41

Though Mikey is sometimes at risk of synchronizing everything he sees into a continuous, smooth line of perception, he is able to maintain perspective on his own perspective, as it were, by taking refuge in disjunctures and contradictions. In conversation about religious belief with his cousin Sadrodien and Imam Ishmail, he professes that “[y]ou are marked not by what you believe, but by what you do not” (194). Mikey initially adopts this stance out of boredom with his cousin’s refusal to recognize anything other than a binary opposition between belief and non-belief; however, he quickly admits to himself that “he has created a riddle in his own mind, one that he will need to resolve by himself” (194). His focalization recurs the most frequently in the novel, contains the most field-oriented intensity: dwelling on the inner significance of objects, he constantly tries to connect that significance to the collective traumatic legacy of apartheid, of which he is too young to be directly aware. Keeping in mind my discussion of Das and Bergson in the previous chapter, Silas and Lydia, as apartheid survivors and coloured South Africans of a different generation, are always in the process of translating and rotating the plenitude of their respective memories42 to answer “the appeals of the present state” (Bergson 99). By contrast, Mikey stands within the Memory section as the inheritor of a half-intuited sense of vision as coterminous with painful, ambivalent contact (to see is to wound by “touching”): between bodies riven by the brutal geometries of apartheid, struggling to reorganize themselves in a post-apartheid world in which colonial legacies (racial hierarchies, the Eurocentrism of classroom learning) have imprinted on the collective memory of all South Africans.

41 Returning to the narrated present, Mikey recalls a mocking verse from the apartheid struggle, which connects his father’s past activist struggle to the discursive struggle between teacher and student, but the memory is not altogether celebratory, as Mikey is unable to overlook the nihilism, the sadness in the verse — “We bring down the false gods / All the gods / Until there are none” — which is immediately followed by Mikey overhearing his father in the bathroom and wondering if he too will “harrumph-harrumph” when he grows to be his father’s age (28).

42 For example, Silas’s recollection of a particular voice on the night of Lydia’s rape allows him to identify a similar “metallic” and “brittle” quality in Alec’s voice, which triggered his seizure at the hospital. But the memory is impressionistic, a fleeting impression that forces Silas himself to ridicule his own sudden suspicion that Alec was present when Lydia was raped: “Voices like that come from a vast genetic pool … Any one of a hundred thousand men could have a voice exactly like that” (101).
Mikey’s sophistication, his ability to let perception and reflection constitute a synthesis without reduction, to hold ideological contradictions, finds its catalyst in the luxuriance of the body (the pleasure of being naked, of urination, of touch). That this sophistication is accompanied by an increasing sadism, an unwillingness to do anything but indulge the functioning of his own will, signals a descent that foreshadows Mikey’s later violence: murdering both Du Boise and Vinu’s father, then fleeing the country, in an inversion of Oupapa Ali’s flight from colonial India. The descent also precipitates Lydia’s break from the family unit, from the economy of pure sensation within which she is expected to dwell as Mikey’s mother and Silas’s properly decorous, grieving wife, the silently suffering image of the trauma survivor. The brief carnality of Mikey and Lydia’s kiss characterizes touch as a spacing out, of distance and alienation rather than intimacy. However, this transaction is tyrannical, as Mikey offloads the import of the kiss onto his mother, which contributes to her eventual emancipation from the family.

According to a framework of realism within the genre of postcolonial fiction, Mikey’s perception is, of course, perfectly plausible: he has no supernatural or magical powers that would break the frame of Dangor’s chosen literary mode. However, if we recall the earlier discussion of how the postcolonial cultural code troubles the parameters of Barthes’s analysis, we can see that Mikey’s cognition is not just unique to his specific character, but metonymic of a melancholic, compulsively self-reflexive postcolonial vision that is finding greater expression in the post-apartheid era of the novel. There is something preternatural about the ruthless clarity of Mikey’s perception, as if the kinesis of the apartheid struggle, up to and including Lydia’s rape, overtakes the specificity of character individuation. In other words, the novel presents history as a quantic of racialized hierarchies and liberation struggles within which bodies struggle, a force that fatalistically “gives birth” to a mode of cognition, Mikey’s cognition: a type of postcolonial areality, at once contacting the world but projecting the seduction of vision outward from Mikey into “lesser” vessels (Kate Jessup, Miss Anderson, Shirley Graham, and of course, Lydia).
4.4 Confession and narrative “smoothness”

If Mikey’s narrative typifies a certain hyper-saturated post-apartheid discourse that can only find expression in the thoughts and observations of an adolescent, Lydia, in her turn, refracts that discourse into the singularity of her trauma. Mikey’s lens trains both inward and outward, where Lydia attaches significance to outer events by means of synecdoche, connecting wholes to parts in order to demonstrate their constructed nature, the artificiality of their alignment. Discursively, Lydia is not a prisoner of the limits of genre convention, as Silas is in his official capacity: her contempt for his ethical code is evident when she reflects on “how little his rule — if you make a law, apply it, to the letter, there is no other way — had helped all those ‘victims’ who had told their stories before the Commission” (155-56). Neither does she succumb to the ruthless exercise of her own will, as Mikey eventually does by murdering Du Boise and Johan Viljoen. Instead, Lydia touches on the memory of her rape through a type of traumatic catachresis, taking advantage of “mistaken” situations and contexts to make sense of her trauma without the social and legal pressure to confess or make herself the “stoic image of violation,” representative of all “grave-faced women” in the anti-apartheid struggle (119). This is not the binary of silence and disclosure; quite deliberately, I would argue, Dangor does not use Lydia to focalize any of the Confession section of the novel. The genre of confession is part of an apparatus, a legal machinery that extracts singular increments of speech, freezing them indelibly within the time of the Christian confession:

This is not human nature, but the nature of “confession” that the Church has taught them. Confess your sins, even those committed against you — and is rape not a sin committed by both victim and perpetrator, at least according to man’s gospel? — but confess it only once. There true salvation is to be found. In saying the unsayable, then holding your peace forever after. (127)

This is an extract from Lydia’s diary that Michael finds while she is in the hospital. Essentially, it is a narrative layer removed from the reader — written reflections being read by Michael in an invasion of privacy, addressed to the diary, not the quasi-juridicial entity that is the TRC. The passage yokes confession to the singularity of a moment, only to pass or code the weight of trauma into an abiding silence, “holding your peace” indefinitely. The exceptionality of a single confession, followed by silence, trumps any
order of culpability, since in the above excerpt from Lydia’s diary, the subject is confessing both her own trauma and the trauma others have forced upon her. Through the private medium of the diary, Lydia refuses to romanticize either silence or the confessional mode. The genre of confession is part of the TRC apparatus, which extracts moments of speech to freeze them indelibly within the time of Christian confession. *Bitter Fruit* gestures to that apparatus but then goes on to offer a model for making sense of apartheid trauma that is quite different.

The novel touches on Lydia’s trauma repeatedly through multiple forms of narrative expression. Most obviously, there is direct personal reflection, caught within multiple focalizations. Mikey, having found Lydia’s diary, reads her account of the night she was raped; the novel mixes first-person testimony with third-person “reportage,” using Mikey as the interlocutor for passages in Lydia’s diary. Interestingly, the narrator fails to provide the exact moments of physical penetration directly in Lydia’s words: we have only Mikey’s evaluation of her “clear, translucent” writing, her ability to describe the rape in “cold detail, Du Boise’s eyes, his smells, his grunts, the flicker of fear when he reached his climax and, for a moment, was not in control” (127). In place of direct expression, the narrator presents abstract details, such as smells and grunts without any particular specificity, and an equally abstract description of Du Boise’s fear during orgasm. The clarity and detail of the trauma of rape never surface by way of Lydia’s own words. 

Smoothness again gives way to seamed, ridged stretches of testimony, so that Lydia’s reflections, as infrequent as they are, nonetheless become, in their turn, symptomatic of a guiding logic or onto-theology within the novel. The novel presents gaps or elisions in its narrative fabric, not silences per se — not places where the reader is drawn to an obvious absence — but rather lengthy stretches of text from which Lydia is casually absent as a focalizer. Trauma remains elusive even to Lydia herself, in her own interior reflections, recalled only in fragments and fleeting sense-impressions, such as Du Boise’s “sour” smell and Silas screaming in the background. Withholding acute textual detail even from

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43 Less obtrusive but undoubtedly significant is how male characters — Silas, Mikey, even peripheral figures such as Dr. Scott — all presume to read Lydia’s thoughts, and attribute motives and feelings to her.
many of Lydia’s own recollections, the novel rotates and displaces the axes of silence and confession along which bodies such as the TRC construct “authentic” testimonies of trauma. In other words, Lydia’s trauma is frequently opaque to Lydia herself, and thus, to any readerly “penetration” through smooth textual surface into depth; Lydia’s own struggle to recollect her trauma gives the lie to personal testimony as the vehicle through which authenticity is measured. This opacity speaks to a recurring concern with approaching the traumatic event and then withdrawing, as asymptote, a concern that encompasses focalization and symbolic resonance as well as narrative structure, evoking what I will call a textual sensuality, a sense by which the novel luxuriates in brief, fugitive, and parabolic “touches” of trauma.

Textual sensuality does not present itself as the reader’s ability to descend into an economy of sensation without any ambivalence in pleasure; it shuns any connection between “pure,” uncontaminated self-contained acts of sensuality on the page and any pleasurable thrill that those acts inspire in the reader. What I am speaking of here is the text proffering a tangential touch to the reader, a glancing blow, offering the parabola of contact with a scene that rests between contexts, permanently shuttling between the competing interpretive frameworks of the novel’s many focalizers (major and minor). Yet this tangential touch is not random, does not proceed from a cascade of apparently neutral sense-impressions, in a familiar postmodern narrative style that takes the proliferation of signs as a stable entity within which it can locate “free” subjects “at play” in a floating, free-signifying world. Dangor’s partial adoption of classical structures (three-act novel, circular plot) and symbolism (the resonance of doubled actions and events) stands in the shadow of the colonial canon, paying stylistic and structural tribute to white European literature even as Mikey and his classmates mock its supposed universality. Ronit Frenkel argues that Dangor divided the novel into three parts (Memory, Confession, Retribution) in order to ironize “the three steps laid out by the TRC—speak, grieve, and heal” (159). The argument has some validity, insofar as the novel is in such deep dialogue with the TRC as a historical and political phenomenon that such a structural choice is unlikely to be accidental on Dangor’s part. However, the novel does not always adhere to the structure it sets up, nor is it, to my mind, particularly interested in directly parodying the TRC’s sequential process of expiation at a narrative level. The Memory section is hardly
the only place in which memory recurs both as narrative technique and evidence of trauma. The Confession section, for example, opens with Mikey reading Lydia’s diary, remembering the day when his grandmother was visited by Du Boise, while Lydia’s involuntary “confession” of rape to Mikey takes place in the Memory section. Retribution does indeed come to pass in its titular final section, as Mikey murders both Du Boise and Johan Viljoen, and Lydia deliberately has intercourse with Joao before leaving Silas for good. However, these events, in their directness, orient *Bitter Fruit* away from parodies of reconciliation and towards a future that exceeds the discursive category of retribution. In its similarity to, and difference from, the TRC process (speak, grieve, heal), the novel’s three-part structure puts the everyday ambivalence of post-apartheid South Africa on display: coloured characters such as Mikey and Lydia are bound by the majestic sweep, the confessional machinery of the TRC, even as they rebel against it in overt and covert ways. What carries the pretence of a sequential process is quite messy, not neatly divisible into segmented actions whose valence can be purged in the act and then shunted into an unchanging, hallowed past. To this extent, the novel’s commentary on the TRC is quite clear, indeed, openly contemptuous at times; however, the fact that Lydia does achieve some kind of healing — believing that “[t]ime and distance, even this paltry distance, will help free her,” deliberately reconstituting the Leonard Cohen lyrics into a refutation of guilt and silence (281) — signals a rough and unusual parallel with the processes of the TRC. Impurity is not merely the purview of the plot, nor does it manifest as a simple opposition to any kind of attempt to make sense of the country’s traumatic past; rather, it resides beneath the plot itself, is woven into the fabric of the narrative’s progression, its climax and resolution.

Ethics never takes leave of narrative and metaphoric departures; instead, ethics becomes a kind of fluidic wound within which departure becomes intelligible in the post-apartheid TRC era. By fluidity I mean a wound that is unstable in its signification; Lydia’s rape, for example, signifies the denial of her bodily expression in the early stages of the novel, but also relates somewhat opaquely to her eventual decision to break with the rigidity of her domestic roles within the household, a permanent displacement within a larger framework of black and coloured South African trauma. Seduction emerges here ambiguously: it revels in near-proximity to trauma, skirting its narrative edge, diving into
euphemism, but it also gives out an ambivalence at the moment that the text constructs a limit that invites crossing. Inscribing a limit presaturates the space prior to the act of inscription as the space where a discrete tracing will animate the page; the guiding hand that inscribes, in a sense, has already traced the limit before it actually arrives, and this presaturation finds expression in the novel’s willingness, or even compulsion, to arrest focalization in perpetual hesitancy, as if falling into doubt when faced with the prospect of “shaping” an object inwardly, within a focalizer’s train of thought. Lydia’s forecasting of how Mikey will eventually seduce Kate displays the danger in presenting people as objects for viewers to “consume” unproblematically, without any sense of self-examination in the act of viewing; for Lydia, such a presentation mobilizes drama and cold intention merely to generate an effect (65), not unlike the TRC’s gamut of public disclosure and confession, which turns speech into the simulacrum of repentance. The killing of Du Boise, in its turn, strips the ambiguity from Michael’s focalization; Du Boise “cocks a hand over his eyes” to ward off the sun as he looks up, providing Michael with what he feels is a “signal” that a “ceremonial execution” will begin, as if Du Boise has had his “blindfold fixed” (276). As perceptual ambiguity vacates the scene, violence becomes permissible and even necessary, evincing a type of ethico-narrative fatalism.

4.5 From symbol to asymptote
Lydia’s relationship with “Cathy” dramatizes the novel’s preoccupation with prosthetics, with embodied substitutions that evoke the parabola of contact with trauma without any stable sense of approach and disclosure. While the story of Cathy only occupies a few scant pages within the Memory section, it shifts displacement from a purely symbolic function into the realm of the sexual, but as asymptote, continually approaching the fulfillment of desire without ever arriving. Though Sister Catherine is the original object of Lydia’s desire, possessing “full lips with a ruby of their own, stern beauty and insinuated sensuality” (115), that desire never finds gratification in Lydia’s sexual life until she fuses Sister Catherine with “Cathy,” the young Chinese sex worker who crystallizes Lydia’s yearning to “love one of those women, with the same head-thrown-back pleasure of a beautiful sin confessed” (118). Cathy, the Chinese sex worker, becomes the body or mass against which the image of Sister Catherine can find expression within a Judeo-Christian discourse, generating an “image of Christ and his
bride Catherine, entwined with Cathy, snake-like and amber-skinned” (119). The text animates phantasms into substance, providing a symbolic framework for peripheral characters half-remembered and then metastatized into vectored masses. At base, Cathy is the objectified Oriental Other in Said’s terms, her “amber skin and shiny black hair” fetishized, with Lydia stripping Cathy’s blemishes from her own imagination “the way a clever photographer edits out the flaws in his composition” (118). Lydia consciously makes the comparison to the photographer, seemingly comfortable with the parallel between her sexual fantasies and the simulacra of edited photography. If the novel works over the images of Catherine and Cathy, painstakingly demonstrating the parabola of fulfillment — Lydia, the coloured Other of the apartheid era, constructs Othered fantasy women to satisfy her own desires in the post-apartheid era — it also wrenches symbol away from metaphor, toward metonymy as perpetual deferral. Though certain images do return to offer a kind of limited symbolic meaning to the characters, the novel generally is content to stretch its chosen images into the distance, alternating between parabola and asymptote, keeping lines of movement taut and in motion towards a future that defies visualization.

As Lydia approaches, touches, and withdraws from the memory of her trauma, so does the novel approach, touch, and withdraw from the possibility of infusing specific events, objects, memories with more than glancing or asymptotic significance. Lydia is quite willing to exoticize the Chinese sex worker, dubbing her Cathy and fusing her image to Sister Catherine in a gleeful defilement of her strict Catholic upbringing. Correspondingly, Frances “Fanny” Dip, the Chinese girl who once showed a young Silas her vagina, passes into legend amongst Silas’s friends, who believe that he had intercourse with a girl with a crosswise vagina, or, in their racist and misogynist rhetoric, that he “conquered ‘a left-to-right Gong poes’” (Dangor 104). Years later, Silas dispels the myth, implying instead that Fanny had been the victim of rape:

[The scar] ran from the inside of her groin right around her leg. Fell on some rocks at a picnic, she said. Real bullshit story. That was a wound, you know, a knife wound that hadn’t been properly stitched. It was so deep. If she had allowed me to
touch it, I guess my whole fingertip would have gone in. Fuck, Alec, she was trying to tell me something, but I was too stupid to know. (108)

In describing the memory of Fanny Dip, Silas acknowledges the shame of disclosure, scoffing at her story of falling at a picnic. However, he also displays a certain posthoc sensitivity to experience that undermines both the performativity of language — Fanny never says anything directly to him about possible trauma, within the narrative — and what Nancy, in a discussion of the theory of touch, calls “the privilege of an immediacy that would fuse all senses and ‘sense’” (87). Silas is an outsider whose prior mockery and shaming of Fanny preclude him from speaking her trauma aloud; to speak of trauma explicitly, in this instance, destroys the possibility of an empathic connection to the trauma survivor. Conversely, to touch Frances’s wound, as Silas crucially is not allowed to do, would elevate the immediacy of the moment in physical time, reinscribe the authenticity of “being there,” of being a corporeal witness, making the whole trauma nothing but a matter of verification in the public register (did it happen or not? What was penetration? The fraught language of “establishing” rape in legal terms is on trial here). The suspension that the scene proffers is ethical: Silas is invited to see, to behold, but forbidden to touch a wound so deep that if he had touched it, his “whole fingertip would have gone in.” This is not the physical touch of a distanced probing, clinical and relentless, intuited depth from contact with a surface and then smoothly withdrawing. Silas must either not touch or else let his own part — the finger of a hand, another digital reference, an echo of the “pink fingers of dawn” — enter the wound itself, become enmeshed in the fluid of a wound not “properly stitched” (healed), and risk the possibility of reopening the wound and thereby generating further trauma. Fanny forbids this latter entry, explicitly telling Silas that he cannot touch her, leaving him to stare without privilege, to be uncomfortably aware of the suspensive point or threshold at which he stands, unable to take refuge in a knowing touch as such. This is privilege forced to view itself as an agent of power, caught in the act of epistemic violation, a scene that troubles an uncomplicated narrative of white-on-coloured oppression in the apartheid era: Silas and his friends, all coloured township boys, conspire to ridicule and victimize a Chinese girl (though the text does not explicitly say it, the probability is that Fanny’s rapist was one of Silas’s friends). Again, the metonym snakes back to the larger narrative, as the
reader’s experience of trauma finds its corresponding expression in the uncomfortable pose of the arrested stare, framed as voyeur by the novel’s refusal to let us (privilege a sense we might call) touch.

Lydia, Silas, Fanny Dip, Amin Barfi: doubled traumas, intersecting relationships, superimposed metonymies. Amin, the “weird, thin little guy who used to write poetry” (Dangor 102), desires Lydia, but eventually marries Fanny. Both Lydia and Fanny are trauma survivors, yet Lydia uses the ‘exotic’ image of the Chinese sex worker to kindle her own desire, demonstrating within the parameters of the novel, the complex hierarchy of racialized identities during and following apartheid. To the extent that Lydia and Silas share any common ground, it is this ambivalent relationship with the Chinese Other. Lydia rebukes Silas for joking about Fanny Dip to his friends, but the novel never gives us any indication that she is remorseful for her own secret fetishization of the lower-class Asian figure.44

Shane Graham argues that Bitter Fruit offers a “critique of uneven development … the phenomenon by which some spaces are carefully developed and maintained, while others are allowed to fall into ruin and remain undeveloped” (42). For Graham, the novel “emphasizes the perpetuation of the malignities of apartheid, segregation, and patriarchy through the structuring of space and the containment of mobility in contemporary South Africa” (42). In a sense, my reading extends Graham’s argument beyond pure geopolitics, isolating the way Bitter Fruit evokes the parabolic relationship of the coloured subject to post-apartheid South African space. The novel discourages the reader from tracking the significance of post-apartheid trauma solely within the arc of the story; it sets character against the weight of competing narrative trajectories even as it clusters narrative strands into looped segments, letting representation emerge in parabolic repetitions, as if portions of the text are only partially superposed. Distinct from the free play of cascading postmodern narratives, Bitter Fruit actually displays a modernist concern for decline and future possibilities, its textual strategies unfolding fatalistically,

44 Dangor himself, as a South African writer of Indian origin, remembers growing up in Newclare, Johannesburg before it was forced “to conform to the ethnic and race policies of the State. African, Indian and Chinese people were evicted from the area and there was an influx of people classified as coloured” (Oliphant 30).
its characters frequently helpless and carried into crisis as remarkably coincidental events transpire and dictate actions, trigger traumas.

The stories of Mikey, Lydia, and Silas become tangential through filial relation and the merciless constraint of narrative plausibility. The uniqueness of each person’s position is melodramatic, exaggerated: implausible that the murderer of Lydia’s rapist should happen to be the rapist’s son Mikey, who finally rejects association with the politics of compromise that Silas, ex-resistance member and now functionary of the TRC, so pathetically embodies. The novel loops these bodies together, making plausibility out of improbable configurations, setting up the anti-heroic arc of Mikey’s vengeance on Du Boise as a sardonic foil to the European literature Mikey and his friends are forced to absorb and praise in class. Dawn is the signifying setting of *The Odyssey*, the scene for grasping “pink fingers” that Mikey’s classmates interpret as Eurocentric. Mikey thinks back to the classroom altercation at dawn, witnessing its “pale” light illuminating books in his room (26); later, just before encountering Nelson Mandela, he reflects on the religious significance of “daybreak, when the bilal hangs” (267). Mikey occupies the dawn-space, but holds it at arm’s length in *The Odyssey*: though the novel compels its actor to reside within a limit, a moment in time between day and night, Mikey’s final, decisive actions — murdering Johan Viljoen and Francois Du Boise, then fleeing the country — do not happen at dawn.

Action defers to the inception of narrative; the text has no place for the lingering resonance of metaphor, of symbols stitched into the fabric of continuous meanings. The murder of Du Boise occurs in the late afternoon, shorn of any association with daybreak (Du Boise in fact shades his eyes as he looks up at Michael: the sunlight is too bright, overpowering, blazing). Between Michael’s encounter with Mandela, Vinu encountering Silas, and the death of Du Boise, we have the thread of events woven into place within a narrative that is nevertheless not interested in furnishing them with a single meaning. After contemplating the dawn, Mikey meets Mandela accidentally, in a surreal moment that leaves him “stunned” and “tongue-tied” (269), before finding his way to Imam Ismail’s mosque and falling asleep, drowsily wondering whether he would have “shot that grand old man, as something in his mind was subliminally suggesting when he stood.
before Nelson Mandela’s open window” (270). The grandioseness of the setting, the expensive car with its muted shades and bodyguards, all of this conspires to set Michael on alert, compels his body to wear the “vulnerable look he instinctively assumed when he was being examined” (270) as he subconsciously contemplates violence toward the president of post-apartheid South Africa, the then-living exemplar of the anti-apartheid struggle. The awareness of the gun in his pocket, the tangible weight of a weapon that he will use to shoot his mother’s rapist, is part of what inhibits Michael’s response to Mandela.

Interestingly, the narrative says nothing explicit about Michael’s “subliminal” thoughts of violence until the moment has passed. Here, violence is not the purview of stated intentions or political affiliation but instead resides in a kind of inert coiled posture of narcissism, the body working to gratify the urges it feels when set in motion, through streets of “staged revelry” that trigger the memory of his mother and Joao, tableau-like, engaged in intercourse on the billiard table, with Silas “staring intently, like a voyeur” (269). There is a ruthless compression here: Dangor begins with the dawn contemplation, then spirals the scene back into time, allowing Mikey to revisit the memory of his mother with Joao, ahead of randomly encountering Mandela. The clue is Michael’s abiding sense of “dreamlike euphoria” (268), which presaturates his encounter with Mandela, despite the fact that the euphoria, chronologically speaking, only emerges after he meets Mandela. In this way, the body’s descent into self-fulfillment through sensation detaches from the plausibility of plot. Though Mikey’s light-headedness is ostensibly from lack of sleep, as well as the strangeness of the “place and the hour” (268) of the Bilal, the euphoria descends from outside his focalization, imposes itself on the exigency of plot via a kind of narrative hallucinogenic. The novel’s preoccupation with the parabolic movement of bodies in post-apartheid South Africa is what drives the scene towards euphoria. The scene approaches a shocking limit and the possibility of its transgression: first, that Michael (and thus the reader) would randomly encounter Nelson Mandela on the street, and second, that the limit of plausibility, already erased through the implausibility of this meeting, might give way to violence. History shapes the reader’s willingness to contemplate this scenario, as Mandela’s continued survival (until his death by natural causes in 2013) obviates the need to track this encounter historically (by
contrast, see the assassination of the Sri Lankan president in *Anil’s Ghost*). The hallucinogenic of implausibility forms the scene’s exscription, the thing that defies articulation within the narrative or in first-order analysis of it; it isn’t captured on the page, stated or revealed by omission, but is rather that which, in terms of the concept of writing as body, “is produced in the loosening of unsignifying spacing” (Nancy 71).

*Bitter Fruit* portrays the survivors of apartheid violence as constitutively unsettled, forced to move through and exist in spaces haunted by the legacy of apartheid. Each of Lydia’s actions — self-wounding, initiating sexual contact with her own son, fleeing the household — anchors focalization to the interiority of a personal decision, while also setting in motion major events in the narrative, such as Mikey’s decision to murder his mother’s rapist and his eventual flight from South Africa. Silas is the representative of the old idea of surface as barrier, emblematic of the spirit of the TRC: compromise, dealmaking, consensus-building, and management. Through Silas, the novel critiques the TRC’s reliance on instrumental and negotiated reconciliations, which present a political and ethical “surface” disconnected from the trauma survivor’s inner life. Lydia’s movement, by contrast, drives the novel to the apparent ambivalence of its conclusion, which finds her abandoning her role as a wife and mother, leaving her life with Silas and Michael behind. Her physical and psychic progression complicates our understanding of what it means for a survivor to work through trauma in the post-apartheid era.

To the extent that *Bitter Fruit* is compatible with trauma models put forward by such scholars as Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth, it also offers startling departures from these models, most notably in its treatment of the body in motion. I have argued that *Bitter Fruit* locates meaning in the encounter between traumatized bodies that are at rest and in flight, with passivity and motion emerging as contrapuntal elements, rather than antithetical, opposed forces. Through its engagement with trauma at the levels of narrative structure, phenomenology, and language, *Bitter Fruit* troubles a conflation of postcolonial literature with history, anthropology, and cultural studies, refocusing our attention, instead, on the literary itself.
This chapter, so far, has taken the representation of literary trauma as the pivot for a discussion that involves technique, narrative structure, and the text as body. In both *Bitter Fruit* and Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, the literary technique of fragmented, introspective narration arises from a modernist sensibility that the world is in decline. Both novels also mobilize third-person limited omniscient narrators to service a range of focalizers, employing a modernist technique that favours the interiority of a given focalizer’s consciousness and constantly doubles back into awareness of the subject’s own position. But unlike traditionally modernist works such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the postcolonial subjects in *Bitter Fruit* have no sense of a hallowed cultural tradition of the past. Thus, the decline becomes an ambivalent act wherein the colonial ideal, which was not one’s own self to begin with, is withdrawn, leaving a legacy of alienation, but severing the individual from any sense of affiliation with even the ghost of a grand narrative or tradition. *Anil’s Ghost* dramatizes the ambivalence of this decline through omission, making very little reference to the British colonial presence of the past. Instead, the novel examines the neocolonial interventions of western outsiders in a protracted civil war between the Sinhalese government and the Tamil Tigers, taking up the conflict at the end of the 1980s.

Margaret Scanlan intimates that while Ondaatje risks “repeating the modernist gesture of turning away from atrocity to timeless form,” he is ultimately successful at generating “a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror” (Scanlan 302). My own reading of the novel is somewhat less celebratory. The novel’s cultural context has placed the focus, in much critical scholarship, on its problematic capacity to represent both historical trauma and the process of working through historical trauma. Certainly, the novel attempts to bear witness to the dislocation and defamiliarization of collective violence. Ondaatje asks us to become uncomfortably familiar with the process of tracking the effects of collective violence through and between spaces that already contain a prior trace of trauma. What emerges throughout much of *Anil’s Ghost* is the passivity and stillness of death, the unexpected and everyday vulnerability of bodies of all classes and ethnicities in the midst of a protracted Sri Lankan civil war. However, the novel is also guilty at times of privileging the Western, self-consciously artistic *mise-en-scène* of the tableau at the expense of the representation of trauma, troubling its own attempt to situate
itself within a discourse of inclusive syncretism that accommodates different cultural, historical, and religious specificities. In light of these issues, I will examine the text’s treatment of syncretism in the next two sections, concluding the chapter with an analysis of how Ondaatje deploys the tableau to present certain traumatic representations as authentic and given, effacing the artifice and origin of the tableau as a formal device.

4.6 The strands of syncretism

*Anil’s Ghost* tells the story of a forensic pathologist revisiting Sri Lanka, in the early 1990s, for the first time in many years, investigating the death and disappearance of civilians in the conflict between the Sinhalese government and the Tamil Tigers. The focus of Anil’s visit is a skeleton whom she is determined to identify; in her search to identify “Sailor,” she is aided by Sarath, an archaeologist in Colombo and occasional apologist for the government, and Ananda, a bereaved artisan whose reconstructive work on Sailor’s head is part of an ongoing attempt to recreate the face of his missing wife and work through his personal trauma. After discovering that Sailor was a miner abducted by the government as a possible terrorist suspect, Anil is forced to contact a doctor in Colombo and disclose her location in exchange for material assistance. The disclosure leads to the confiscation of the skeleton by the pro-Sinhalese government and the expulsion of Anil from Sri Lanka. Anil only regains possession of her notes through the intervention of Sarath, who is murdered as a consequence just as the president of Sri Lanka is assassinated, a reference to the real-life assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa in May of 1993.

Syncretism, the concatenation of different strands of thought and narrative, is the key to negotiating the representation of literary trauma in *Anil’s Ghost*. Syncretism comes into being by quietly eclipsing non-religious space, offering a Sinhalese Buddhism subtly modified by the assumed Christianity of the reader. Anil arrives in Colombo with the mentality of the western scientist: cover the terrain, establish the evidence, dissect and reconstruct truth out of inert fragments that can speak, allowing her to fashion Sailor as a “representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest” (56). The text circulates a mood of anticipation, weaving in and out of the form of detective fiction, but the geographical space of the setting prohibits the fixed enclosures, the easy
definitions of centre and periphery, that provide the calculus of classic detective fiction. Anticipation is thus constantly in the process of winding its way down the wrong corridor, so to speak; the uncertainty of civil war allows the materiality of a given object to defy the viewer’s ability to “read” it within a fixed system of signs. Unlike in the detective fiction of Borges, for example, there is no convergence between an ostensibly stable narrative that suddenly sheds its mask to invert the truths and assumptions of the detective himself. Instead, anticipation grafts itself to the shape of syncretism, the apparently preternatural sense that the text will find plenitude in the novel’s denouement, delivered by the quiet religiosity of stillness. As characters descend into thought, their posture takes on a meditative quality, which mobilizes the common language (in both Buddhism and Christianity) of religious contemplation to frame the representation of trauma. In so doing, the novel betrays a tension between the need to challenge monolithic and tacitly Western conceptions of truth and the tendency to rely on culturally specific forms of understanding (Sinhalese Buddhism). My goal is to examine the complexity of each position, highlighting the ways in which the novel effectively fulfills its promise of textual and ethical syncretism, while also interrogating instances when it lapses from syncretism into a convulsive universality.

The fabric of the text, its syncretic shape, is “quilted,” as is the Buddha’s statue that the sculptor Ananda reconstructs in the conclusion of the novel. Many forms of logic and modes of understanding constitute the narrative “quilt.” The calculus of detective fiction insists on solving mysteries through painstaking reconstruction of evidence, while the language of the trauma text lances the progression of events with echoes and asymptotes of violence. Additionally, the pastoral form evolves within a specifically postcolonial space that mocks the easy promise of answers but which nonetheless views nature as something divine, contrasting the interiority of the modernist novel, which suggests a persistent obsession with the experiential truth of each focalizer. Finally, the implicitly Sinhalese Buddhist ethos of revelation evokes a religiosity that is both an aspect of the narrative “quilt” and the guiding ontology of the whole text.

45 For Antoinette Burton, Ondaatje “draws our attention to the obvious parallels between forensic science and detective fiction, a link which effectively marks the escalation of dramatic tension” (44), while John
Anticipation runs laterally over the seams of different forms of narrative: the opening line of the novel signals a trauma text, gesturing to the grief of family members searching for the bodies of loved ones. The novel begins with a fragment, a fugue of Anil’s memory as she recalls searching for bodies in Guatemala, “the grief of love in [a grieving woman’s] shoulder” forming an image “she will not forget, still remembers” (8). More specifically, the passage opens within a presaturated physical space: at the start of each day, Anil’s team invariably finds family members of the missing and presumably deceased waiting for them at the site (7). Here, we encounter mystery, both within and outside the genre of detective fiction, as if the reader is grasping the initial threads of a puzzle the scope of which is not yet known and which only surfaces in the clipped, terse use of the word “evidence.” Evidence, at the outset, is always at risk of disappearing, of becoming lost or never found; the concerns of the family members, who quite naturally do not want the body of a loved one to be lost again, intersect with the reader’s ability to parse bodies as clues, as evidence to be sifted against the structural logic of the novel as mystery. But these bodies are “half-revealed” (7), partially excavated, bearing still the poses of activity in life, exposed to the elements and yet a part of the soil: liminal, certainly, suspended between the clarity of categorization and the anonymity of a hidden grave, but also liminal as symbolic elements within the text. In a sense, these “half-revealed” corpses constitute a frame narrative for the search for Sailor, for Ondaatje’s attempt to work his way inside the lingering moment of trauma, to approximate the temporal and physical working through of trauma within a latently modernist form of narrative.

Like the bodies, the text is always only half-revealed, its language fugitive and oblique, as if words are themselves falling short of a fuller “excavation” that expresses itself as spacing or unpresence. This is not a euphoric silence: the novel rarely relaxes its grip on the exigency of representing and dealing with trauma, nor does it allow itself to retreat into an unmediated realm beyond speech. If silence is the name for the unrepresentable, for what exceeds the narrative as a system of signs, the opening passage gestures to the possibility of silence even as it refuses a full retreat from representation. The primary example is the woman squatting in a grave beside the remains of her husband and

Thieme argues that the novel’s “whodunit aspects are subsumed in the larger issue of what kinds of knowledges can be brought together to respond to the archive of violence” (40).
brother, “her legs under her as if in formal prayer” (7). Though Anil initially believes that she has “no words” to “describe, even for just herself, the woman’s face,” her next thought identifies a “grief of love” in the woman’s shoulder that “she will not forget, still remembers” (8). Having just proffered a description of trauma that exceeds verbal representation, the text immediately sutures this excess to a synecdochic image: the body part, the shoulder, speaks the grief of the grieving face, becomes an indelible image for the focalizer Anil, after which the woman climbs out of the grave, in order for the team to work. The team here is at once Anil’s forensic team, within the parameters of the novel’s plot, and the reader who will now need “room to work” out the truth of the text to follow. It is not accidental that this brief opening fragment relates to a collective trauma from another nation, Guatemala, and not to the civil war in Sri Lanka. This displacement is Ondaatje’s attempt to locate the novel within a fairly universalist discourse of trauma and loss, establishing Anil’s credentials as an attentive “reader” of the site of trauma. By solidifying the terms of engagement of these scientists at a site that is not directly relevant to the novel’s events, the narrative provides a template for the reader to understand Ondaatje’s preferred terms of engagement, to take a step toward inhabiting Anil’s role and finding her own personal “grief of love” in the story to come. Through this fragment, the reader eases into an assumed role, at once detective and empathic witness, engaging a text whose mystery exceeds the operational category of the puzzle, stretches the parameters of detective fiction.

Another key part of what brings the novel’s textual syncretism into being is the persistent incarnation of the postcolonial space in the genre of the pastoral. This is not a blank incarnation borrowed from classical forms without any modification; indeed, much of the narrative and structural tension of Anil’s Ghost resides in the way the novel problematizes any attempt to contrast the violence of urban Sri Lanka with the romanticized serenity of the forest. Violence, as we discover throughout the text, is everywhere. Ondaatje subverts the pastoral trope of nature as the serene Other of civilization, embedding trauma in the pastoral landscape, demonstrating the latent potentialities for violence in the grove of the ascetics, in the field of Buduruvagala where thieves smash the statue of the Buddha in search of plunder. To this extent, Ondaatje is able to draw on his childhood memories of Sri Lanka without succumbing to the desire...
for an idealized precolonial past. Nonetheless, it is difficult not to view Ananda as a postcolonial iteration of the Herdsman-Lover-Poet pastoral archetype, who uses artistic creation to rise above the tension between love and frustration. In this case, Ananda is not suffering frustration, but rather the loss of his wife, which compels him to act out his grieving by seeking to recreate the peace he hopes his wife experienced in death on the face of any new sculpture he creates.

Paul Alpers has argued that “what connects pastoral works to each other, what makes them a literary ‘kind,’ is the way each deals, in its circumstances and for its reasons, with the representative anecdote of herdsmen and their lives” (26). Alpers deploys Burke’s term, the representative anecdote, to position the pastoral as emerging from a foundational scene that can point synecdochically to broader concerns, but which ultimately focuses on herdsmen and their individual lives in nature, “rather than landscape or idealized nature” itself (22). However, he also argues that the features of classical pastorals “belong to a central fiction and that different features can be emphasized and developed in various ways as this central fiction itself is developed and transformed” (22). Examining Theocritus’s first idyll and Virgil’s first eclogue, Alpers draws out the ways in which pastoral is by turns a romanticized ideal, a historical reality, and illustrative of a “harmony between human and natural music” (24). His analysis of Virgil is particularly consonant with my point about Ondaatje: in contrasting the differing functions and positions of the two herdsmen, Tityrus and Meliboeus, Alpers allows for a complexity of pastoral representation to unfold within a single work.  

Ananda’s expression is obviously not poetic in a traditional sense: the text does not let him speak directly to the reader, nor is he ready to burst into songs that explicitly dramatize his embodied relationship to nature. However, the third-person narrator describes Ananda, perched on the ladder next to the Buddha’s statue, becoming aware of “the smallest approach of a bird,” perceiving a “great churning weather above the earth” (Ondaatje 307). Furthermore, this perception drifts into an awareness of his dead wife

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46 Thus Tityrus’s lines, for Alpers, represent his life “in a ‘timeless present,’” with nature as the scene of his disclosures but “not central to his representation of it” (25). Conversely, Meliboeus’s lines embody the tension between the responsiveness of man and nature, on the one hand, and nature as evocative, musical space, since “the actual sounding” of his song “is attributed to the woods alone” (25).
Sirissa: “The tiniest of hearts in [the birds] beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance” (307). Ondaatje develops the pastoral form in the postcolonial arena by encoding the dialogue between the “herdsman” and nature in third-person prose, indelibly linked to the violence and trauma of civil war that always informs the lives of subaltern figures such as Ananda.

If Ananda is the postcolonial pastoral figure, the text itself functions as the framework within which the herdsman-lover-poet can find intelligibility. In “The Grove of Ascetics,” the enfolding ethos of Palipana’s approach to archaeology mirrors the section as enclosure, generating a sense of craft as artistic creation, as means of transcending the uncertainty of violence and ethnic conflict. Ananda emerges in the text as an outgrowth of Palipana’s history; functionally independent of Sarath and Palipana, Ananda is the subaltern artisan who can legitimate Sarath’s profession, who can provide the ethical contiguity between two classes of character, the one a professional, the other plunging himself into the work of sculpture to escape personal trauma. We obtain Palipana’s narrative first, then encounter Ananda wending his way into the text, as if naturally emerging from Palipana’s history, as if a concrete, “authentic” subaltern has spontaneously appeared to be the transparent example “on the ground” that the text has just finished preparing us to seek.

It would be tempting to read the pastoral opposition between nature and urban space as self-contained, continuous, and consonant with an overriding textual logic. Certainly, Ondaatje is at some pains to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of western rational science in the person of Anil, whose determination to uncover the truth gives way to a realization that truth is gradated, filamented with untold stories, and deeply implicated in the subject-position of the outsider, the role of the scientist. Anil’s triumphs do not ultimately relate to truth as she initially conceives it: the Sinhalese government rejects her conclusions, and it is Sarath, not she, who smuggles Sailor’s skeleton out and preserves her recorded findings. Saving the life of the driver crucified on the expressway is indicative of what Anil can do when galvanized to act on behalf of live bodies, rather than clinically dissecting dead ones. In effect, the text strips the efficacy of the scientist from Anil,
converting her into a field medic and thereby situating her with Gamini, the doctor, at the intersection point of trauma survivor and healer.

However, Anil’s transformation does not take place neatly within the two spaces of nature and civilization. The act of rupture, to my mind, is less about an explicit “spatial symbolism” that foregrounds “the split between the self and the Other within” (Staels 981) than it is evidence of the quiet religiosity of the text. It is through the religiosity of eruption and limit case, of revelation puncturing the fabric of the text, that the novel speaks: the desire of the text to disclose, to reveal through mystery, and then descend into a posture of immobility. Momentum strips down to hermetic contemplation, as if the text is preoccupied with sabotaging its own progress, arresting the reader’s perception in a kind of postmodern euphoria mediated by the ethical in the postcolonial. Gamini retreats into the impersonal liberation of conversation with strangers, in the “storm of the last stages of a party or in the chaos of emergency wards” (223). Correspondingly, the novel takes refuge in exegetical impersonality, embedding the intensity of religious contemplation in non-religious events, in relationships gone wrong, in the mute but speaking faces of trauma survivors. However, this intensity would be inexpressive without the modernist stream-of-consciousness technique, barren without Ondaatje’s inclination to let each focalizer descend into a posture of hermetic contemplation.

*Anil’s Ghost* depends on contiguity, on touching by accident, association, or historical congruence, blending forms of contact through the intensity of detached contemplation. Smoothly, the text changes location, moves back and forward through time, and switches focalizers within the span of a few pages. Tense, time, and perspective are deliberately arbitrary within a modernist tradition; each one lacks an association to a single category of meaning, or to a discourse in which ethical truth might comfortably and stably reside. What appears as a sequence of concatenated events is instead a cluster of quanta with a recurring pulse or frequency: violence is uncontrollable and unknowable within humanist categories of law and scientific truth. Representation is less sequential than superpositional, the text depicting the erasure of trauma synchronically, as if each narrative strand is coming to rest, palimpsest-like, in the same contemplative space. Anil’s quest to discover the story of a single victim of violence plunges her into a
“Hundred Years’ War with modern weaponry” (43), a conflict whose only purpose, according to the narrative, is war for its own sake; adjoining this characterization is a list of victims without any context but their Sinhalese origin. Just prior to this passage, we encounter a spare description of the National Atlas of Sri Lanka, the quiet observation that on this atlas, there are “no river names. No depiction of human life” (40). Afterwards, Anil and Sarath share a conversation on the mutability of truth in a war zone, in which Sarath questions western journalists who “file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel,” mocking their “false empathy and blame” (44). In this scene, categorization hits a dead end. Anil characterizes Sarath’s stance first as an endorsement of censorship, then as antipathy toward journalists; Sarath, conversely, links witnessing to location, proximity to traumatic events, and the “archaeological surround of a fact” (44): the ethical geography of narrative in which giving an account of the Other at a comfortable distance is hollow performance. Yet from another perspective, the entire purpose of the novel is the attempt to access an empathic understanding of the traumatized body at precisely that same distance: the novel itself is arguably its own Galle Face Hotel.

Sarath’s characterization of western journalists in Sri Lanka, then, is also a literary autocritique that the novel has trouble resolving. Characteristically, however, Ondaatje encodes an awareness of spatial constraints within the narrative’s very morphology. The atlas presents and explicates topography: cities, historical and contemporary borders. The list tracks each disappearance at the last known location of the victim: a house, a college playground, an army camp. The conversation brings up a recurring location, the Galle Face Hotel, as the site at which representation subordinates to material comfort; later, Sarath and Anil bathe in a river, the type of landmark that is absent from the atlas.

These stories suffuse the readerly space with unease, a sense that narrative trauma may be triggered in response to the lightest touch. As Anil works in the courtyard, reconstructing the skeleton of Sailor, the novel offers a flashback: we see Sirissa, Ananda’s vanished wife, at home in her community before discovering the heads of murdered children mounted on stakes lining the walk to the school at which she works as a labourer. Anil looks over a desolate courtyard with Steve Earle playing in the
background; in a time years past, Sirissa runs in terror toward a courtyard in which schoolchildren learned Sinhalese and English. The shift in focalization, from Anil to Sirissa, is matter of fact, given within the flow of the narrative, with no attempt to code Sirissa’s story in realist terms; the account of her last moments, like so many of the narrative fragments in Ondaatje’s novel, unfolds from the resonance of the courtyard as a space. It is never confirmed that Anil stands in the same courtyard where Sirissa worked in life. Yet the act of inhabiting a given location illustrates the extent to which narrative intimacy anticipates and even depends on the possibility of bodies falling into and out of spaces of traumatic resonance. While Anil occupies a specific position within the courtyard, Sirissa’s narrative ends before she reaches the courtyard, as she runs toward the school. By presenting a space where violence occurred in the novel’s past, Ondaatje alludes to the trauma of a schoolyard massacre without providing the closure of direct representation. If Anil grasps the site as absence, Sirissa supplies the trauma of the encounter with violence in that absence; the novel brings them together briefly, in transitory contact, across different times. Following Sirissa’s brief story, focalization immediately shifts back to Anil:

Anil stood lost in the stricture of no movement, in a precise focus of thought. She had no idea how long she had been there in the courtyard, how long she had been thinking through all the possible trajectories of Sailor, but when she came out of it and moved, her neck felt as if it had an arrow in it. (176)

As Sirissa breaks into a run, Anil stands “lost in the stricture of no movement,” constrained by the memory of a thought which is not hers, emerging from recollection only into the figuration of a wound — the arrow in the neck — not the wound proper. As one body falls out of the representation of trauma, another stands in, almost prosthetically, coming to rest in the constraint of motionlessness, which is also the ethical constraint of the narrative. Tellingly, we never access Anil’s analysis of Sailor’s possible trajectories; the novel substitutes Sirissa’s story in that temporal gap but withholds explicit acknowledgment of these parallel encounters, allowing trauma to sign itself as belated and spectral, as two characters touch, by way of the intimacy of a given spatio-temporal configuration. At this touch, we trace the contours of the novel’s aesthetic
framework: bodies suspended between movements, within spaces given and re-given across time, beset by the possibility of violence, and the violence of displacement.

4.7 Stratification and universality

If the text suggests that the stratification of formal elements is a necessary part of representing the trauma of violence in Sri Lanka, it makes that suggestion in the awareness that Anil’s Ghost is a text written for an international audience, implicitly, for western readers. The forensic pathologists and western readers share a commonality: cultural outsiderness, which partly explains why the setting of the opening fragment is Guatemala and not Sri Lanka. Reconstruction of the trauma by western hands (eyes) is a job that needs the requisite “room to work” (8), and the double entendre of the phrase is a sly invitation to a specifically western reader to begin his or her own journey in experiencing what Sarath later refers to as the “archaeological surround of a fact” (44). Anil’s status as a “diasporic returnee” (Thieme 40) does not protect her from criticism, both from the novel’s characters and from the structural ethico-logic of the novel itself. Questioned by Lalitha’s niece and constantly forced to reevaluate her Enlightenment-era perceptions of truth and rationality, Anil is seemingly fated to play out the trajectory that Gamini mockingly envisions for the Galle Face journalist types: spend a few months in Sri Lanka, return home comfortably on a plane, and embark on the routinized performance of the book tour circuit. What she takes as a virtue (the supposedly neutral gaze of the outsider) actually becomes evidence of her ethical immaturity, her inability to cope with the complexity of conditions “on the ground,” or to acknowledge the cultural and political hegemony that makes terms such as “outsider” possible in the first place. In this way, the text trades on the assumptions of its Western readership (with respect to neutrality) in order to deliver a critique of that same subject position.

The critical tendency has been to polarize the syncretism of the novel. Thus Ananda’s reconstruction of the statue of the Buddha has come under considerable scrutiny from critics who view the act as either evidence of the novel’s inclusive representation of the inherently syncretic culture of Sri Lanka, as Marlene Goldman does, or else a facile

47 Like Sri Lanka, Guatemala resides in the political and economic margins of the post-Cold War context in which the novel is published.
reinscription of Sri Lanka as tacitly Buddhist and Sinhalese, following Quadri Ismail. A secondary and unintentional consequence of this polarization is that the novel’s syncretism is largely seen as being a matter of plot and symbolism; in discussing the issue, scholars invariably focus on Ananda’s work on the statue within the context of the story, on the value of artisanal labour, and on the potentially transgressive quality of the low-caste sculptor’s work closing out the novel, rather than Anil’s departure.

Marlene Goldman has defended Ondaatje against the charge of privileging a transcendent Sinhalese Buddhism as the model by which the novel’s characters can work through trauma. Noting the quilted nature of the reconstructed face of the Buddha, Goldman invokes an image of Sri Lanka as a country “where symbols of temporal and racial unity and fragmentation are historically embedded and politically charged” (8) to characterize Ananda’s work as disruptive of tyrannical wholeness and hegemony. The text, though, appears to waver between the politics of anti-unity and a willingness to let Sinhalese cultural symbols act as the loci for the transformation of identity. The Buddha’s face is quilted, certainly, but it remains the face of the Buddha; whatever polyvalence we may assign to the image, it is a specific religious symbol that, in Sri Lanka, originates from the religious affiliation of the majority of the population. That this image attempts its own form of syncretism is salutary but not, to my mind, admissible as conclusive evidence somehow of a counter-unitary view of identity and politics in Sri Lanka. In the end, the identity of the dissident population must still be subordinate to the majority’s cultural symbol, and the text aids and abets this subordination by quietly nudging the reader into tacit sympathy with the official position of the Sinhalese government: Gamini’s denouncement of the Tamil insurgents is the last word in the given chapter, a denouncement to which Ondaatje does not permit Anil an answer; the names of the victims of violence in the hospital are all, without any marked attribution, Sinhalese in ethnic origin; and the phrase Lakma cuts into the submerged rock after Palipana dies is written in Sinhala letters (107).

The text substitutes universality for particularity in its use of symbol, not tyrannically, with the explicit intent of “converting” either its characters or readers, but rather as an expression of ethos: in the act of conciliation, of rebuilding and drawing closer, the novel
expresses the possibility that specific religious and cultural symbols can transcend their own localized valences, becoming catalysts for ethical and spiritual transformations that bring new ontologies into existence. Emerging from both the direct use of implements and tools with one’s hands (craft) and an embodied connection to nature, this transformation hinges on the inner life of symbols that are resolutely striving to detach from any side of the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict. Shunning the impersonality and the ominous absence of the national atlas, which describes waters and currents but omits city names, rivers, or any human life at all (40), the text lifts natural elements into an intimate dialog with human artifice by way of the embodied craft of archaeology, particularly the work of Palipana, for whom unverifiable theories of the existence of ancient texts become truth:

Still, the patterns that emerged for Palipana had begun to coalesce. They linked hands. They allowed walking across water, they allowed a leap from treetop to treetop. The water filled a cut alphabet and linked this shore and that. And so the unprovable truth emerged. (83)

Each metaphor establishes contact between identical objects: a hand holds another hand, a leap from one treetop to another, two shores linked by water in a cut alphabet. Particularity diffuses into identical shapes and functions. Location gives way to the free association of pairs of images, each synecdoche nested within the next: hands form parts of bodies, which leap from treetops beside a shore. But the source of Palipana’s ability to intuit archaeological truth remains ambiguous: is it his forty years of training, the “historical version,” or rather the “pragmatic awareness of locally inherited skills” (82)? The patterns have no specific origin, no emergent point in Palipana’s personal history, yet they ascend to universality through a trick of perception: beginning with the premise that Palipana has a heightened awareness of historical truth, the novel locates the germination of intuited patterns somewhere in his past, as unverifiable to the reader as it is impervious to traditional methods of archaeological research. As a character, Palipana embodies the convergence of craft and nature, the universal deposited into his method, his conclusions, which, according to Sarath and his other students, are “nearly always right” (80), and his fingers, which he “spread[s] … over every discovered rune” (83). Within Palipana, historical truth arises from an engagement with material fragments; correspondingly, the
text locates ethical truth in Sinhalese Buddhist iconography, reconstructed out of fragments. Palipana’s frame narrative speaks to the text’s difficulty in reconciling its wish to disrupt reductive conceptions of universality with a reflexive and at times problematic tendency to let the reader’s eye settle into a comfortable posture before an object seen as a whole, in its entirety.

### 4.8 The seen and areality

In describing the phenomenological space in which bodies, as distributed masses, keep their individual senses of physical integrity, Nancy deploys the term *areality*, which signifies the “slight, faint, suspended reality” of a displacement “localizing the body” (43). In such a displacement, everything real becomes areal: the “finite absolute” of the horizon, in perceptual terms, converges with the “infinity of maximal existence” (43). In other words, Nancy asserts that the fundamental state of existence is a space where mediation does not exist, where neither the finite horizon (and our perception of it) nor our infinite sense of corporeal existence in our own bodies is reducible to the status of a logical element in a calculus. For Nancy, there is no “going outside” this state, which forms our experience of the world a priori. We are constantly and intuitively aware that what separates one body from another is the areality of the space between bodies: how the world distributes, attenuates, displaces, multiplies, and extends our bodies within finite spaces. Lacking any scope in which to process this areality as a condition, we can only touch on it discursively.

I argue here that *Anil’s Ghost* finds its most profound statement about representing postcolonial trauma in the irreconcilable tension between what we can know through seeing and what escapes representation: that is, the areal experience of embodiment. Hence the textual focus on dissection, reconstruction, autopsy. But structurally, the text is itself sutured, a composite of grafts, each of which sits at a different “level,” each one bespeaking a certain verticality or altitude; trauma signifies and signs its traces as the narrative falls, rises, and affirms the metonymy of trauma in disjuncture. Between the exposition of Palipana’s scholarly trajectory and Anil and Sarath’s encounter with Gunusena, the crucified man on the road, there is no bridge, no transition, only a jagged switch from one chapter to another. The initial encounter with Gunusena is textually
brief, illustrative of how the preconceptions of casual, reflexive sight inform both the ability to move and the direction of that movement. This encounter takes place over three sections, each of which begins with the third-person plural pronoun (“they”):

“They set out for Colombo…” (Ondaatje 109)

“They reached the truck…” (111)

“They were going south again…” (111)

Each sentence indicates physical movement: departure (first sentence), arrival (second sentence), and transitional motion (third sentence). Correspondingly, the anaphoric repetition of the third-person plural stresses the undifferentiated collectivity of Anil and Sarath: “they” have no individuation in these sentences, only physical actions and forward momentum. However, the text swiftly undoes this drive to move forward by forcing Anil and Sarath to revisit the significance of what they see. At first, it is simply a case of mistaken posture, with Sarath initially assuring Anil that Gunusena is only sleeping on the road (109). Only after they continue to drive and note the absence of dogs near the truck do they drive back and tend to Gunusena. The encounter with Gunusena closes out “The Grove of Ascetics,” after which the full narrative of Gamini’s life begins, the two sections linked only by the barest tether: that Anil and Sarath are taking Gunusena to the emergency room, evoking the “base hospital” mentioned at the beginning of the next section, the hospital where Gamini receives his medical training. This pro forma link invites the reader into accepting the necessity of permanent gaps between increments of text: the novel is not interested in moulding its prose to suit the development of a seamless narrative interiority. The linkages are instead brief, fugitive, almost at risk of being arbitrary or too lightly conceived. This is not a sign of lack of artistic craft, but rather evidence of the way specific words, chapters, and linguistic patterns join and interpenetrate without the comfort of grand narrative. The narrative seduction is thus at ease with structural “failure,” with submersion in quasi-religious understanding of what binds metonymies, symbols, motifs. This “failure” gestures to the slumbering, coiled shape of the narrative, with its bizarrely discrete sections, its abrupt “treetop” jumps from one passage to the next.
Through the morphology of the novel, Ondaatje displays an unease with the apparent transparency of unobstructed sight. The narrative is not interested in clearing out spaces where meaning can then be seen, apprehended by way of sight that is itself local. As Nancy frames it, “the body is seen by a body” (45), and this syllogism constitutes part of the key, the deep structure of *Anil’s Ghost*. Bodies — embodied, localized, given to fluxes of perception, uncertain in cognition — are what see other bodies, and this “fragmentary, fractal, shadowy” vision fails to “penetrate, but instead glides along swerves and follows along departures (45). Nancy’s syllogism resonates on multiple levels in *Anil’s Ghost*: characters, as bodies, see other characters, as bodies. But the novel *itself* is also a body, a mass riven by contradiction, since the reader, as the interrogating body, reads the body of the text in order to access meaning that lies outside the text. The text, then, is a contradiction: at once the meaning sought after by the reader, the mass to be deciphered, read, experienced, and also what lies between the reader and the bodily experience of collective trauma.

The double bind of the text as both the object and means of disclosure emerges as the narrative offers Gamini’s story intermittently, his appearances striated across the textual surface. His first appearance in the text exemplifies the novel’s distrust of sight: Anil sees a blood-stained man sleeping in the reception area of a hospital ward, assumes he is a patient, and is subsequently surprised to find out that he is a doctor (38). The markers of trauma — bloody clothes, addiction to painkillers, sleeping in the same area as the patients — fail to correctly identify Gamini to Anil. After this brief encounter, Gamini drops out of the narrative until his backstory emerges in the “A Brother” section. More than any other narrative, Gamini’s story feels like a traumatic return, tethered to the oblique, muted backdrop of his childhood, during which he was ignored by his parents and left to grow into an adult uncomfortable with personal intimacy. His narrative function is initially unclear, his appearance tantalizing to the reader in its opacity. Gamini illustrates how Ondaatje views the progression and dispersal of trauma narratives within a story: by disappearing and reappearing in “unfit” or unexpected spaces in the novel, Gamini points to collective trauma as radial, dispersive, giving out the story of trauma and loss in the form of quanta:
Anil sitting beside him assumed she was to get a confession. The mercurial doctor about to expose his heart. That category of seduction. But there was nothing he did or said during the remaining journey—to the ayurvedic hospital he had offered to show her—that used the reins of seduction. Just his slow drawl as the train swept unhesitatingly into the darkness of tunnels and he would turn from looking at his hands towards the reflection in the glass. That was how he told her, looking down or away from her, and she seeing him only in a wavering mirror image lost when they moved back into the light. (251)

The train in which Gamini confesses resonates with meaning because the text is beset by an urgency, a need to condense disclosure into fleeting, hurtling increments, all of which coalesce into a romance centred on the figures of doctor and archaeologist, of Gamini and Sarath. Through Anil’s focalization, the passage characterizes disclosure, the exposing of the heart, as a “category of seduction”: confession, we learn, is merely one among many genres of seduction. So what stops Gamini, in the act of baring his soul to Anil, from being a seducer, someone who attempts to generate false attractions or representations at odds with reality? On the face of it, nothing but Anil’s awareness of the existence of multiple genres of seduction, an awareness that punctures the artlessness of the moment. Though Anil herself asserts that Gamini never says or does anything that employs “the reins of seduction,” what we get, in this brief chapter fragment, is a confession: Gamini describes his hopeless love of Sarath’s wife, how he overloaded her with painkillers to keep her alive so she would know that it was he, and not Sarath, who was there in her final moments. After initially framing disclosure in terms of the simple act of confession, Anil differentiates Gamini’s account from a “category of seduction” through his unwillingness to look at her while talking, “looking down or away from her,” and his “slow drawl” at odds with the speed of the train barrelling “unhesitatingly into the darkness of tunnels.” The text gives us no reason to distrust Anil’s perspective here, as it sometimes does elsewhere (particularly in the hospital scene mentioned above); Anil is the primary focalizer when the text is centred on Gamini, who only reappears in the narrative after Sarath has been murdered, when he is preparing Sarath’s corpse for autopsy.
Does Anil (or, more daringly, Ondaatje through his chosen focalizer) truly believe that confession is any less seductive when slowly spoken, without eye contact or grand gesture? Confession, the text is saying, allows the truth of trauma to emerge, but only as if spoken to no one, in the posture of soliloquy, as if no one is watching. What lurks beneath this type of confession, which ostensibly rejects seduction, is the *romance* of the confession as soliloquy; the text elides this romance in order to present us with a confession that is supposedly authentic, free of performance or calculation in the act of confessing. This elision is a consequence of the novel’s tendency to abbreviate actions, disclosures, and chains of events in order to allow characters to “shut down,” to stop moving, transfixing the reader by encasing characters in crypts of self-reflective meaning, constituting what we might call a postcolonial melancholia. In other words, the oblique, sutured nature of the rest of the narrative drives the text to invest confessions such as Gamini’s with transparent significance: Ondaatje has to find a way to generate meaning in spite of the narrative barriers he himself has created to problematize or obscure meaning. As events bear down on the characters, forcing them to admit the futility of the quest to link Sailor’s identity and the circumstances surrounding his murder to the actions of either the government or a paramilitary group, they find respite in singular moments of memory or confession, the value of which remain unclear: Anil remembering the brothers in conversation, Gamini confessing without appearing to confess.

Knowing, in the novel, is not only fractal, surface-driven, and malleable, but also temporal, in that meaning changes when the train moves from one location to another, shifts “back into the light.” Yet the evanescence of sight remains the only mode of understanding, incomplete as it is: the novel acquiesces to the model of literature as grasping vision. Though Gamini’s image is lost when the train returns to the light, he remains a significant part of the novel’s denouement, performing the autopsy on his dead brother, remembered by Anil as she flies out of Colombo. As she recalls the night they spoke to each other in her presence, the passage reifies both brothers as “the strange middle-class pair who were born into one world and in mid-life stepped waist-deep into another” (285). Meaning, so far deferred and transient, has finally sedimented into materiality, not accidentally as the western character, Anil, is on a plane journeying home; the same passage contains Gamini’s mocking characterization of the western
movie lead who experiences trauma in another country but who is then able to return home on a plane, preparing to write a book and “hit the circuit” (286).

My reading of Anil’s Ghost has so far located a productive, if sometimes vexing, tension between the novel’s attentiveness to the complexity of representing trauma and its reduction, at times, of that same complexity in order to privilege the aesthetics of representation. This tension is part of what makes Anil’s Ghost at once troubling and fascinating as a trauma text. On a broad narrative scale, the novel effectively problematizes the universalism of the western scientist (and tacitly, western reader), linking the privilege of being physically distant and detached to the type of narrative that forecloses the representation of trauma in order to soothe an audience removed from the facticity of violence. As it encapsulates Anil’s journey home, Gamini’s commentary on the western movie lead who returns home on a plane speaks to the reader’s relationship to the novel, a form that provides “enough reality for the West” (286). The text is not interested in showing a failure to represent. Rather, the text invests representation with an abiding tension that reveals itself in singularity, rather than synecdoche (as Anil tries to do with her insistence on one victim standing in for the rest). Ondaatje welds trauma, in its full weight, to the specificity of bodies. There is, in a sense, a failure to represent that the novel must show its reader, but that failure is not a function of the crippling bind of linguistic representation; it is, instead, the impossibility of doing more than addressing this body or that body, in a given context.

The narrative borrows religious idiom, invoking the pose of the pietà, the biblical posture of Mary cradling the dead body of Jesus, to describe Gamini dressing the wounds of his dead brother. Embracing the risk in using the Christian pietà as a broad synecdoche for suffering in postcolonial Sri Lanka, Ondaatje expands the posture to include pietàs between brothers, lovers, and parents and children (288). All these different configurations evoke the “sexuality of spirit” Gamini recalls seeing, in the waiting room at the hospital, of “mothers sleeping against their children […] the sexuality of care, so the children would be confident and safe during the night” (119). However, it is difficult to parse “sexuality of spirit” as a category that references the sexual act without viewing each element as interchangeable. Working on his brother’s corpse, Gamini leans “over
the body, beginning to dress the wound,” with the “horizontal afternoon light” holding them “in a wide spoke” (288). Is sexuality to be found in ministration, in tending wounds, even hopeless ones, the wounds of a corpse? Different forms of pietà appear in Gamini’s focalization. He remembers Sarath and his wife after the sexual act, the woman “stroking his back, her face with the acceptance of his transformed physical state,” as well as the myth of Savitri reclaiming her husband from the figure of death itself, herself joyous, while the husband’s “face looked capsized, in the midst of his fearful metamorphosis, this reversal back into love and life” (288). Finally, the pietà between brothers is what forms the current scene, an opportunity for Gamini to close the distance between himself and his brother by what he refers to as a “permanent conversation” (288). This conversation emerges in an appreciation of the body’s vulnerability, as Gamini notes the “gentle chest [that] was what Gamini had fought against,” but which now lies “on the bed undefended” (289). From vulnerability, Gamini proceeds to touch, contrasting the warmth of his hand with his dead brother’s still face, before lapsing into remembrance of their differing trajectories in life, and finally, sitting in broad daylight with Sarath’s corpse even when the assassination of the prime minister brings in bodies from different parts of the city to his hospital.

However, in none of the three items — vulnerability, memory, proximity — do we find an adequate bridge to the concept of “sexuality of spirit.” By evoking “sexuality of spirit,” these configurations of pietà exceed the descriptive category they themselves reference, transcending the stated metaphor. In the first example, physical transformation is coextensive with the approach of a limit: Sarath’s wife strokes the epidermis of bodies that have changed states, as if reinforcing the impossibility of reducing experience to the fractal nature of vision playing over or “touching” a surface. In the second example, the joy of Savitri, the one who embraces, contrasts with the “capsized” face of her rescued husband, caught at a limit, dragged back into “love and life” in the midst of a transformation that can find no expression or relief in the arrested image of the pietà. In the last example, the trope of conversation is not actually borne out by the remainder of the scene, which finds Gamini falling first into medical work, then into memory, and finally into motionlessness. The binding element in these postures of grief is not “sexuality of spirit,” but rather textual devotion to aesthetics at the moment of
representation. The tableau, with its still figures of myth or memory, informs the corresponding stillness of the scene’s active participant (Gamini) by lingering on his arrested movements: leaning over his dead brother, turning on “seven central lights” and returning to sit with Sarath’s corpse, as if playing out the final moments of a tableau vivant on stage. The illumination of the lights is alliterative (“seven central”), the moment an invitation to pause at the threshold between light and darkness, to locate both brothers in the “darkness they had invented around themselves” (289). It is difficult to imagine the text suggesting that one’s own trauma, in the midst of ongoing collective violence, is nothing but a personal invention. Therefore, if the darkness around the two brothers is truly their invention, it must reflect their personal narratives of loneliness and alienation, and not the enfolding context of collective trauma. Ondaatje’s gestures here are deliberate and stylized; the text, in this short scene, turns its gaze to the reader or “audience,” saturating the reader’s field of vision with a command to contemplate both the theatrical and literary artistry of the scene of mourning. This command or knowing “look” at the reader, this self-conscious privileging of the theatricality of the tableau’s still pose, once again threatens to undo the novel’s largely productive and self-reflexive representation of trauma.

I am not arguing that there is anything inherently unethical in stillness, particularly as it pertains to working through trauma, nor am I suggesting, conversely, that motion is a more authentic way of mourning and thus “moving on” from trauma. The issue to me is Ondaatje’s tendency to over-value stillness as an aesthetic object, which then comes to stand in for and eventually eclipse alternative responses to trauma. This over-valorization elevates artistry and the artist, and runs the risk of effacing the specificity and messiness of trauma, which cannot necessarily be neatly disposed of and worked through in tableau. It also gives Ondaatje, as the novel’s creator, a way to retreat from the inequality of representation in the novel, such as its discernible sympathy for the Sinhalese side of the conflict, or the problem of the metropolitan writer who perhaps allows his characters to work through trauma too easily to placate a tacitly western audience. Broadly speaking, the text’s aesthetic preoccupations sometimes threaten to overwhelm its attentiveness to traumatic specificity, within the frame or textual space of the literary. The text wants to represent space, and thus trauma, as transposable and fluid on the one hand and
irreducibly unique on the other. Spatial paradox: the co-presence of modularity and singularity. The field of Buduruvagala contains the statue of the Buddha: modular, because geographically unremarkable in the novel, comparable to other regions in its blank invocation of noon heat, unnatural silence, and the poverty which drives thieves to smash the statue for treasure. However, the field is also singular, because of the uniqueness of beings in this stilled space: the statue becomes a reclamation project, the means by which Ananda can at least partially work through the trauma of the loss of Sirissa, a process that only begins after Anil, the western scientist, has gone home (I will discuss this working through of trauma in more detail shortly). Through this example, our definition of space acquires an appreciation of the irony of the epilogue’s title, “Distance.” Space here is literal and tangible, the facticity of specific locations in certain places (Buduruvagala field, Colombo hospital, Anuradhapura dry zone), of matter lying inert in particular physical configurations. However, space is also the cross-stitching of locations within larger, distributed geographical areas (Sri Lanka, America), magnifying the issue of cultural hegemony: to whom is the privilege of storytelling granted? Then too, the space of artisanal creation binds geography and culture into specialized forms of activity: analyzing bodies, digging up bones, treating physical trauma, sculpting heads onto skeletons. These spaces expand from the acts of violence that haunt the text, widening the novel’s narrative and ethical vocabulary, shaping the trauma that can be told. In this latter movement, Ondaatje’s novel synthesizes our previous characterizations of space into another category: space as the abstract possibility of any kind of movement, the anticipation of the filling of a void, what both Derrida and Nancy characterize as spacing. Yet, in an echo of the paradox that I alluded to earlier, the proliferation of spaces limits the representation of trauma, rather than expanding it. Our perspective widened by remote locations, by a narrative spanning continents and nations, we’re nonetheless constrained by the novel’s tendency to fetishize moments of perceptual transcendence that allow characters to disclose or “recover” from trauma in ways that are perhaps too clean, too quick to privilege aesthetic considerations over the difficult, time-consuming process of working through trauma.48

48 In this refusal, Ondaatje has difficulty countering the charges of scholars such as Geeta Ganapathy-Doré and Tom LeClair, who have critiqued the novel for being apolitical, for aestheticizing violence, for elevating the work of the artist at the expense of direct engagement with trauma.
If Ondaatje, in representing Gamini’s confession and personal pietà, is more concerned with the aesthetics of trauma as tableau than with doing justice to how such disclosures elide or reify certain types of traumatic experience, Ananda’s reconstruction of the statue of the Buddha dramatizes those same concerns at the perceptual level. Where Anil focalizes Gamini’s experience, Ananda focalizes his own cognition in the closing moments of the novel. This is a perceptible shift in narrative intimacy, as the third-person narrator describes Anil’s attempt to access Gamini’s thoughts and experience but then allows Ananda to be his own focalizer, without any interlocutor but the unnamed narrator. Such a shift further ironizes the section’s title (“Distance”), layering narrative space within physical space in order to hold out the promise of an authenticity that hinges on narrative intimacy. Though the novel largely maintains a nuanced, self-reflexive conception of working through trauma as a complex, ongoing negotiation with both past and present, its final section settles into a certain euphoric stillness that runs the risk of eclipsing the act and perspective of writing literature. Three unnamed men blow up the statue of the Buddha in search of treasure. In response, an archeology department spearheads a reconstruction project, entrusting Ananda with the task of recreating the Buddha’s head. The project spans months, and concludes with Ananda himself mounting a long bamboo ladder to complete the eyes as part of a Buddhist ceremony. After finishing his work on the eyes, Ananda becomes momentarily entranced by what he can see of the world below the statue:

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him there. The eyes he had cut and focussed with his father’s chisel showed him this. The birds dove towards gaps within the trees! They flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest of hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared.

He felt the boy’s concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world. (307)

As the novel closes, the reader is aware of the traumatic resonance that mediates Ananda’s creative act: a sculptor by trade, he has already reconstructed the face of Sailor to reflect the calmness and peace he needs to imagine in his vanished and presumably
dead wife Sirissa. The Buddha’s reconstructed face bears a similar calmness. Perched on the ladder, Ananda comes to rest after the text has exhausted any sense of security in rational humanism, law, and secular responsibility. We might call it a moment of transcendence, both figuratively and literally: Ananda’s proximity to the statue’s head makes him the recipient of “[T]he first and last look given to someone so close” (306). The statue can only hold him in its gaze because he is suspended on a ladder, from a greater-than-normal height, where his perception incorporates everything he sees into everything he does not see, or rather, into everything he is capable of imagining, such as the beating hearts of the birds. The body, elevated yet passive and still, synthesizes matter in motion, so that it may mourn what it has lost: figurative and literal elevations counterbalance the trauma of corresponding falls.

As I noted earlier, there is nothing inherently problematic about stillness, particularly as it finds expression in the posture of mourning and coping with trauma. What is problematic, to my mind, is the novel’s refusal to provide any other model for working through trauma. Equally vexing is the erasure of the cultural origins of such a position: western, modernist contemplation inhabits the supposedly grieving form of Ananda, relentlessly moulding stillness into an aesthetic object until the reader has lost any sense of the specificity of traumatic experience. Ananda is allowed not only to work through his trauma, but to speak in place of his dead wife Sirissa, a substitution with its own ethical difficulties that accords the living the dubious right to narrate the experience of the dead. Ananda can perform this substitution because the novel needs to draw the reader from the “distance” of reading into a space suffused with the artistry of the tableau, the arrested movement: not working through an aporia by residing within it, but reducing the process of working through to the reader’s aesthetic experience of a moment. What Anil’s Ghost attempts to position as a check on the seduction of Ananda’s vision — the contact of his nephew’s hand on his own — is actually contiguous with that vision. Contact reinforces the narrative and ethical hegemony of the body in contemplation, surveying a world in motion, reinscribing the primacy of a sense of touch that the novel wants to detach from its specific context: who touches whom, within and by way of writing. The novel subordinates Ananda’s fall (the loss of his wife) to his spiritual and physical rise, reestablishing the purity and unity of a narrative framework.
that elides the specificity of his trauma and flattens out the potential complexity of working through trauma. Ondaatje sacralizes the worker as artisan, enmeshing the reader in a vicarious victimhood, to use Dominick La Capra’s term: the sublimity of Ananda’s experience makes his survival, his working through trauma, representative and paradigmatic, rather than singular, foreclosing any possible unsettlement that might arise if Anil’s departure and Sarath’s death were allowed to conclude the novel.

Detachment, stillness, and physical touch attain ethical sublimity in the transcendent act of artistic creation: as Ananda brings the statue of the Buddha “to life,” Ondaatje creates the figure of the deified subaltern as a category of knowledge for the reader, just as the novel quietly animates Sinhalese Buddhism as a supposedly neutral ethical principle. The “sweet touch” of the hand on hand, then, is not “from the world,” but from a world in particular, a gesture that illustrates the novel’s discursive and ethical limits. Speaking of the tactile quality of writing, Nancy claims that “touching on the body, touching the body, touching finally — all this happens constantly in writing” (12-13). If, in Anil’s Ghost, the body of the victim of collective trauma is only ever the provisional occupant of a given space, its precarious position touches on the novel’s unwillingness to acknowledge its own role in making certain things touch, and in keeping others separated by an unspoken limit.

I began my analysis of Bitter Fruit by problematizing Roland Barthes’s formulation of readerly and writerly texts, arguing that in the postcolonial literary realm, the tension between plausibility and self-reflexivity gives rise to an unstable cultural and social context within which the concepts of departure and return lose meaning. The events of Bitter Fruit circle the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the inquiry founded to make sense of the collective trauma of apartheid by allowing victims and perpetrators alike to speak of their experiences in public, without legal sanction. I have argued that the TRC, as a cultural code, is a totalizing textual presence that allows us to shift from the Barthian readerly circuit of departure-return to a formulation of postcolonial surface that achieves depth through extension. In other words, meaning, in postcolonial terms, emerges in narrative parabola, where trauma finds signification as and in motion, not as a stable depth with a surface readily available for transparent, unmediated access. I developed this
analysis by examining Mikey and Lydia as focalizers and emblems of the two valences of passivity and motion. Though Mikey’s cognition initially doubles back on itself in reflection, rejecting intuitionism, the novel’s parabolic narrative eventually spurs him into violent action, after which the urge to take flight, to stay in motion, constitutes his surrender to the seduction of the exercise of his own will. Lydia, by contrast, concludes the novel by rejecting the endless self-reflexivity and melancholia of acting out trauma, instead choosing the parabolic trajectory as a means of working through trauma, as liberation without violence. Lastly, I have suggested that the presence of doubled figures and events allows the text to touch on, but withdraw from, the representation of trauma, distributing the traumatic wound radially through the story. This distribution gestures to the complexity of South Africa’s racial hierarchy: the novel is constantly engaged in partially tracing and then troubling substitutions, never quite offering the easy symbolic pairings that would allow the reader to draw stable, comfortable parallels between different forms of trauma.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, I have argued that multiple genres (trauma text, detective fiction, pastoral) intersect with a syncretic definition of ethical truth: the awareness of the disjunction between what sight can “know” and the immediacy of the body, which eludes representation. The novel’s introspective, subtly modernist focalization girds these genres together, stitching the characters’ experience of trauma into the larger narrative pattern of religiosity in stillness and contemplation. This religiosity allows the reader to parse the novel’s representations of joining, seeing, confession, and religious mourning (pietà) as metonymies that depict trauma precisely in terms of what the eye is never able to see and the page is never able to capture. Furthermore, Ondaatje wields syncretism to facilitate a specifically western audience’s entry into reading the text. The novel’s obsession with blending different forms of narrative demands a narrator whose evolution gives the western reader a sense of the experiential, rather than rational and/or judicial, nature of truth in representing trauma. Anil stands in for the western reader, observing and participating in the events of the narrative but always pushed into awareness of the “quilted” nature of the enfolding story. Finally, I have juxtaposed the syncretism of the text against its tendency to privilege the aesthetics of the tableau, using Gamini’s pietà and Ananda’s work on the statue to demonstrate the text’s valorization of motionless
bodies that find their tacit analog in the reader as spectator, aesthete, and vicarious victim of trauma. In this juxtaposition, the novel problematizes its own distrust of sight, letting the reader make ethical meaning out of scenes that use sight as the aesthetic basis for reducing the process of working through trauma.

Deeply concerned with narrative as a mode of ethical cognition in the postcolonial context, each novel is always in the process of troubling the relationship between what characters see and what the narrative, as a structure with its own shape, allows the reader to see. This concern reveals the specificity of each novel’s cultural and historical context. The presence of a white ruling population (Afrikaners) that also thought of themselves as a settler colony, within South Africa, mediates Dangor’s engagement with the hierarchical framework of apartheid racial categories, in which an ascending class of coloured South Africans (Silas, Alec, Lydia) constitutes the new hegemony, even as each member of the class carries memories of marginalizing and sometimes even abusing racialized Others. By contrast, the absence of a settler population in colonial Sri Lanka animates Anil’s Ghost as a text that can make use of a certain type of quiet syncretism, taking refuge in fraught religious symbols and a devotion to the embodied facticity of the “sweet touch from the world” (307), the boy’s hand resting on Ananda’s shoulder as the novel’s concluding, abiding image. The posture of inertia that foreshadows or itself constitutes violence in Bitter Fruit is what leads to recovery from trauma in Anil’s Ghost. Ultimately, the two novels speak to each other both across a distance of cultural and historical difference and within a shared space of ethical concerns.

49 Indeed, the inverted flights of Ali Ali from India to South Africa and Michael from South Africa to India establish a direct connection between forms of anti-colonial resistance: Ali Ali kills a British officer who raped his sister Hajera, while Michael murders Du Boise, the white South African who raped his mother Lydia during the apartheid era.
Epilogue

This project has taken tactility as the basis for rethinking how we read postcolonial trauma. Broadly speaking, I have attempted to develop and extend our understanding of how the contours of narrative structure create postcolonial trauma texts as bodies. At its core, my project has focused on the ethical dilemma of attempting to represent trauma, arguing for a tactile encounter between reader and trauma text. The tactility of this encounter partakes of a mixed and varied relationship to touch as one among many senses, evoking the complexity of the survivor’s relationship to trauma. In coming into contact with literary trauma in the postcolonial realm, the reader is drawn into the ambivalence of an encounter that touches without touching, that problematizes the expectation of what it means to access traumatic experience, to make sense of it.

I began this project by situating the need to rethink postcolonial trauma in relation to the question of recuperating the aesthetic in postcolonial literature. That need, through the evolution this project, has remained constant, given the extent to which well-meaning and legitimate forms of political and cultural analysis can become totalizing fields, reducing and impoverishing the range of literary responses to trauma. The question turns not merely on making these responses available for critical inquiry, but also on creating the conceptual space in which their richness of experience can flower. The novels in this project bear witness to the parabolic quality of postcolonial trauma, the deferred encounter that is essentially asymptotic: approaching a limit without arriving. This thread of asymptotic continuity runs through the given historical and cultural contexts of the project: the apartheid and post-apartheid eras in South Africa, the partition of India, and finally, the protracted ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka.

Within each region, my chosen literary texts reflect the different facets and orientations of postcolonial parabola. Jyotirmoyee Devi’s The River Churning requires the reader to enter into an ethical engagement that recasts the narrative fragment in specific relation to Indian epics, such as the Mahabharata. Using unassuming, almost quiescent prose, the novel undermines the fantasy of the happy ending in a partition context, but without self-consciously performing its status as a literary text. Trauma, within the novel, is the
recursive contact with the narrative “memory” of an event (Sutara’s rape) that is unavailable both to herself and to the reader. In these moments of recursive contact, the fugitive sense of postcolonial trauma delicately signs itself, without stylistic excess. Correspondingly, J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* adopts the epistolary form in order to demonstrate the discrepancy between Mrs. Curren’s narrative and the apartheid trauma she can only approach in asymptotic fashion. The novel compels the reader to halt before this ethical discrepancy, working quietly with the convention of the zero ending to bring the facticity of black South African trauma into uneasy contact with Curren’s privileged experience. The potential for seduction in this asymptotic deferral of trauma finds expression in Mark Behr’s *The Smell of Apples* and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*, both of which employ child narrators to engage the reader in what I have referred to as a purgatorial process of identification. The child narrator’s secondary trauma transforms the reader, effacing the primary trauma of the victims but leaving traces of that effacement on the margins of the text. In the post-apartheid era, Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* challenges surface-depth paradigms of accessing traumatic experience. What resists stasis, in Dangor’s novel, is precisely the element of fiction that tends to slip through the cracks in postcolonial scholarship: the tactile, not solely in terms of its fraught relationship to the former colonizer, but also as the key to the kinetic quality of postcolonial literature, its drive to remain in motion, its refusal to sediment into codification. Picking up the strands of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* raises the stylistic and aesthetic preoccupation with traumatic deferral almost to quintessence, framing the reader’s contact with trauma as the exposure to the sublimity of Ananda’s fall and rise.

As this project has grown, the parabolic quality of my framework for analyzing postcolonial trauma has become apparent. So too has the discovery that some of the most useful resources for thinking about postcolonial trauma come from outside the field: from trauma theory and phenomenology. To me, crossing over into other disciplines is part of how historical change happens within any field of study. However, this crossing over also involves a healthy suspicion of imposing master narratives onto to postcolonial regions, an imposition with a painful historical past in both South Asia and South Africa, as well as in other postcolonial regions across the world. If this project compels us to
reevaluate how we read postcolonial trauma, it also calls for a reciprocal transformation of fields such as trauma theory. Relying on the naturalization of western psychoanalytic precepts, trauma theory can too easily lead to the “misinterpretation and misrepresentation of a testifier” when applied indiscriminately to unique postcolonial moments, such as the partition of India or the apartheid of South Africa. In such moments, what we require is not the transcultural application of a western theory, but rather an attentiveness to forms of “intimate cultural knowledge” (Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele 55), which demand ethical vigilance in the researcher, the witness — and the reader. Embracing the self-reflexivity of this “intimate cultural knowledge” is and will continue to be the difficult but necessary task of the postcolonial literary critic.
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