FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY IN ONDAATJE’S ANIL’S GHOST

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Here is my monograph upon the tracing of footsteps, with some remarks upon the uses of plaster of Paris as a preserver of impresses. Here, too, is a curious little work upon the influence of a trade upon the form of the hand, with lithotypes of the hands of slaters, sailors, cork-cutters, compositors, weavers, and diamond-polishers. That is a matter of great practical interest to the scientific detective – especially in the cases of unclaimed bodies, or in discovering the antecedents of criminals. But I weary you with my hobby.¹

“Sailor worked in a mine too. Come here, look at the strictures on the ankle bones of the skeleton – this is what Ananda has under his flesh. I know this. This was my professor’s area of speciality. See this sediment on the bone, the buildup. I think Sailor worked in one of the mines in this area …. So we have a story about him, you see. A man who was active, an acrobat almost, then he was injured and had to work in a mine.”²

The resemblance between these passages from Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Sign of Four and Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost invites analysis. Despite the fact that over a hundred years separate the writing of these narratives and very different cultural conditions inform their production, they both demonstrate the power of science to identify, in this instance by discovering the “markers of occupation” (177). However, the particularity of their cultural moments ensures that these texts hold distinct attitudes towards the legitimization of knowledge. While the forensic methods displayed in the passages above are similar, the authority granted to them is markedly different.

² Michael Ondaatje, Anil’s Ghost, London, 2000, 179-80 (all further page references will be given in the text).
Moreover, the forensic clues discovered in each novel generate contrasting narratives. For example, Holmes’ confidence in his expertise is apparent in his documenting of his discoveries – and his superiority over Watson – but he is also confident about the role of his work. It is charged with social importance because of its potential to aid detectives seeking to identify “unclaimed bodies” and to advance knowledge of criminals. His insights can be applied to strengthen the power of the police to contain and control the socially deviant. In contrast to Holmes’ amateur engagement with forensic methods and devices, Anil in Anil’s Ghost is a professional forensic anthropologist, educated in western institutions. Instead of deploying her skills to make the criminal body legible to ensure national security, she uses them to give voice to the victims of human rights abuses in her native Sri Lanka. Holmes’ expertise renders the body readable, and thus inert, whereas Anil’s ambition is to let the body speak. This marks an important shift in the objectives of forensic science, in part a product of its connection with human rights discourses from the late 1970s onwards, at the same time as signalling the different cultural and political authority accorded to it.

In Anil’s Ghost Sailor is the name given to a particular exhumed skeleton thought to have been killed by the Sri Lankan government during the civil war. By means of composing the story of Sailor’s life, Anil hopes to use him as evidence to make convictions and find justice – although the appropriateness of this particular Western idea of justice for Sri Lanka is brought into question as the narrative unfolds. Holmes and Anil are therefore comparable as they both strive to use their scientific expertise to recover the past and turn it into narrative, and, in the process, grant a great deal of authority to the capacity for science to identify persons and to expose the truth. According to Anil, “Truth comes finally into the light. It’s in the bones and sediment” (259).

This preamble detailing points of correspondence between Holmes’ and Anil’s projects affords a context in which to think

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3 At times the language of Anil is quasi-religious. She places herself in a position resembling that of a medium. The links between modern forensic science and telepathy require scrutiny, especially in the light of Arthur Conan Doyle’s interest in spiritualism.

4 Antoinette Burton also notes Anil’s “passionate belief in the capacity for forensics to tell the truth about history” (see “Archive of Bones: Anil’s Ghost and the Ends of History”, Journal of Commonwealth Literature, 38 [2003], 42).