“We Live in a State of Terror”: Transcending Territorial Violence in Romesh Gunsekera’s *Heaven’s Edge*

Sabine Lauret-Taft

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/4748>

DOI: 10.4000/ces.4748

ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 September 2016

Number of pages: 47-55

ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Sabine Lauret-Taft, “We Live in a State of Terror”: Transcending Territorial Violence in Romesh Gunsekera’s *Heaven’s Edge*, *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 39.1 | 2016, Online since 05 April 2021, connection on 18 June 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/4748> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.4748>

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

“We Live in a State of Terror”: Transcending Territorial Violence in Romesh Gunsekera’s *Heaven’s Edge*

In *Heaven’s Edge* (2002), British writer Romesh Gunsekera, who was born in Sri Lanka, accounts for the sharp contrast between the images that the island conjures up of a paradise destination for tourists and the extremely violent past of its people. Terror and beauty collide to portray a dystopian reality. This paper will examine how Gunsekera voices conflicts and how reverie serves as a coping mechanism to come to terms with inevitable violence.

The luxuriant island of Sri Lanka promoted by tourist brochures was for more than two decades the stage of one of the most deadly civil wars of the postcolonial world. At the heart of the conflict lay questions of religion and language. The land has been torn apart, disfigured and reshaped by politics. “From the ethnic riots of July 1983 until the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May 2009, Sri Lanka consistently dealt with the issues of terrorism, human rights, ethnic violence, and political uncertainty” (Jayasuriya 1). Conflicts opposed Sinhalese and Tamils and were characterized by riots, assassinations and suicide bombings. Such violence and turmoil have had quite an influence on the works of Sri Lankan writers, both at home and abroad. As Minoli Salgado aptly puts it, “after twenty years of sustained violence on an unprecedented scale, the erosion of traditional social and cultural ties, and the collapse of the economy, [...] Sri Lankan literature in English is increasingly read in terms of its relationship to the country’s ethnic conflicts and the ability to narrate history *as it is being made*” (“Writing” 5). In this context, the diasporic voice of Romesh Gunsekera stands out in the choice of a poetical triptych in which his migrant characters struggle with a past that “choked with wars, disputes and borders as pointless as chalk lines in water” (102). In all three novels, *Reef* (1994), *The Sandglass* (1998), and *Heaven’s Edge* (2002), against the backdrop of the writer’s birth island juxtaposed with London, an undercurrent of violence is present through even the most mundane details. Yet, *Heaven’s Edge* differs. While in *Reef* and *The Sandglass*, Sri Lanka is depicted in great detail, in *Heaven’s Edge*, the island is but an allegory, a symbol of a place that exists out of time, a “heterotopic site of conflict where discourses are negotiated and tested” (Deckard 177). In fact, the story takes place on an unnamed island, in an undetermined time, but everything points to the Sri Lankan civil conflict. The only reference the reader is given stands in a video cassette and a letter dated 1998, which is particularly significant as the bomb attack mentioned in the letter can be linked to the January suicide bomb attack on the Temple of Tooth (17). The narrative is thus framed by the questions raised by Mbembe in his essay on necropolitics. In the unnamed island that Marc visits, life and death depend on the state. Prompted by his father’s letter, the main protagonist, Marc, goes East, leaving London, to go (back) to his parents’ island. Dislocated from time and space, the novel reads as “a dystopian fantasy set in the future marked by guerilla warfare and random state violence” (Salgado, *Writing* 18). Marc is on a quest for his past, on a quest for meaning. Gunsekera explains, in an interview, that the novel is “about the kind of sacrifices you might have to make, the negotiation you have to make between imagination and reality” (“Odyssey”). He goes on to argue that is it not

so much about the place. Yet, the violence encountered by his characters, forcing them to negotiate with reality, is inevitably linked to territoriality. The “terrain” (5) Marc sets out to discover is organized around sentry points, a mall “for pass-holders only,” (40) and refugee camps in the jungle; it is mapped out by soldiers who “hunt everything” (69) and regulated by authorities that decide which crops to grow. The reign of terror also looms in the predatory tourism suggested by Marc’s presence. What this article will focus on is the exploration of the terrain itself. To voice conflicts, Gunesekera chooses to follow the initiation journey of Marc in the jungle. Terror and beauty, love and death, bring him exaltation. Lost in his fantasy, Marc is nevertheless caught up by the ugly reality of civil war. Violence makes its way through the narrative, giving Marc’s fantasy strategy new meaning as it appears that he is not so much evading reality than trying to make sense of the brutality of the world through myth.

Reality Distorted

When the novel starts, Marc has just left everything behind to follow in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps. While he converts some of his assets into cash deposits, the clerk tries to warn him about the dangers of the trip he is about to embark on. But Marc replies: “the island [...] was not an actual war zone anymore” (19). Marc’s naiveté is clearly derived from his ancestors’ account. Reading the letter his father, Lee – a war pilot – left behind, he feels drawn to the island as if to a dream place. “He had found a dream, even though Eldon had always insisted his – ours – was an island where dreamers often have to destroy their dreams, if they are not to be destroyed by them” (19). The only danger he understands is a metaphorical one. In the first part of the novel, then, Marc represents the archetypal tourist, filled with expectations, dreaming of an idealized location. He is surprised that the locals do not talk to him and that the hotel staff is unfriendly. He blames “permanent hunger, or some parasite in the gut” (7) for their rudeness. Even though he refuses to see himself as a tourist and wants to embrace the wilderness of the island, he remains an outsider. This is particularly crucial in his encounter with the refugees in the jungle, since he is unable to communicate with them without the help of Jaz as an interpreter (102). In “The Return of the Natives,” Pascal Zinck underlines that “the novel bears the hallmarks of a tourist narrative with which it struggles. Touristic discourse – masquerading as a traveller’s discovery – exists in tension with the anxiety of origins or recovery” (218). Marc’s touristic gaze, further conditioned by his father’s testimony, reflects a romanticized image of the island that fails to collide with reality straight away. As though he is a prisoner of his own mind, Marc fails to see or acknowledge disruptive details. On his arrival at the Palm Beach Hotel, though signs of an uglier reality lurk – “I could see that the paint on the outside wall had cracked and peeled” (4) – he decides to give in to exoticism. His consumerist gaze stands as a reminder of colonial tensions. The island has been commodified, which points to the way the authorities deal with the land: a territory to be chartered, controlled and exploited. Besides, Marc’s vision of exoticism re-enacts colonial archetypes. Pushkala Prasad explains that in the “discursive production of Third World tourism destinations, the land itself is constituted as a source of excitement with [...] jungles to be ‘penetrated’” (161). Marc’s account of his exploration of the jungle with Uva is highly saturated with the desire he feels for her and his initiation really starts when they become lovers.

Yet Marc's enchantment has begun before he even meets her. The first paragraph itself, in fact, sounds like a spell, like an invitation to a poetic journey: "I arrived on this island, by boat, the night of the fullest moon I had ever seen in my life. The sky was clear and the sea phosphorescent; the coastline, from a distance, looked entrancing" (3). With the superlative form and spectrum of radiant colors, the narrator sets the scenery for dreaming. As Marc explores the island, the heat strikes him and his descriptions underpin the idea of a mirage. Right before Uva, the eco-warrior he falls in love with, comes into the picture, he feels dizzy. "Perhaps it was a premonition" (12) he thinks. Uva seems to be a figment of his imagination, as though she had no real presence. She seems to vanish into thin air: "then suddenly she was gone, leaving behind only the scent of her ardour" (31). Her apparitions are infused with an esoteric quality. As he follows her, he notices that "the forest path dark ferns genuflected as she brushed past." The idyllic scenery that surrounds them further mirrors a biblical Eden when Uva tells him the names of the ferns is "noli-me tangere," (22) evoking John 20:17. Uva and Marc's relationship comes to a brutal end when she has gone missing after an attack by soldiers. Marc sets out to look for her as if chasing a ghost, reliving every moment they spent together. Later in the novel, her re-appearance is also infused with this daydreaming quality as she resurfaces out of a pond surrounded by a "garden full of butterflies" (201). It seems as though Marc is entrapped in a state of confused reality.

The island's geography is somewhat mysterious as well. Most of what Marc knows, he has heard from Eldon, his grandfather, and belongs to the past. "The shape of the island itself had changed. Political gerrymandering had played socks with every bloody thing" (8). At first, he sticks to the immediate surroundings of the hotel:

A broad strip of macadam meandered up to a sentry-point [...] In the other direction, about five hundred metres down the road, here was a village. I was keen to explore it, imagining that perhaps there I might discover the hidden charm of a long-suffering but colourful island. (9)

It is obvious here that Marc is unable to grasp reality as he sees everything through a romantic filter that aestheticizes even war. Even when he seems to want to confront the reality of the island, it is in an idealized way: "I wanted to know what a night in a hot country was really like. To hear the cricket and the cicadas, to smell the citrus and the citronella, the warm earth dreaming, and feel the spirit of the place brush against my skin" (6). The binary rhythm creates a hypnotic effect that reflects the state Marc is in. The narrator seems to be lulled into a daydream in which his senses are heightened. In his experience of the island, body and mind coalesce. The violent history of which his father was a part seems to elude him at first. But his encounter with Uva and the passion they share are what give him access to it. Through her gaze, he feels judged; he wants to justify himself, awakening to an inherited sense of guilt. "I remember feeling some serious misgivings then about what my father might have been involved in and the true nature of my peculiar inheritance" (15). Yet, it is only very gradually that he comes to term with the reality of a conflict he only approached through "clips of muted bombs and missiles" (100). Entranced by Uva, he is quick to dismiss any ideological questioning: "My father's ghost, Eldon's shadow, my disjointed past and all the corruption around us receded from my mind as I gazed at her" (28). Uva and Marc's love story re-enacts the story of Marc's parents. With her, Marc is able to relate to his father, or at least to a romantic father figure, and he surrenders to his desire. The way

senses are exacerbated in the first chapter underpins the idea of a desire to know. Marc aches for his family past. When he reads his father's letter, he feels "the numbness inside [him] thawing to its irresistible call" (18). The passion – from the etymological root, to suffer – of the past runs in their blood, and his: "I feel the blood pump in my head," (1) "I felt my blood ignite" (155). He also feels driven by an urge to understand: "I had come to learn too" (23). Uva deflates this ideal, pointing out to him: "Desire, my love, is all you feel" (41). Though the story of his father is "inscribed" (18) in him, though he feels committed to the island (41), Marc is still an outsider looking at the island's conflict from a distance and seems bound to be "perpetually enchanted or permanently detained" (41).

Reality Restored: The Contamination of Violence

The novel reads as an initiation journey in which dreams and reality co-exist. Lost in the jungle, Marc sees footprints on the ground and lets his imagination run wild: "Anything was possible: that was the point, I told myself, about an island of dreams" (12). Marc's viewpoint relates to avoidance coping. In fact, right from the start, signs of death and instability are interspersed in his description of his arrival: "The steps down the jetty were a little rickety and the iron handrail had corroded in several places" (3). On the way to the hotel, "dead urchins and broken crabclaws" (3) lie on the ground, foreshadowing the extreme violence Marc will witness. As the story unravels, signs of terror and conflict become more and more visible. What are just "warnings about civil strife, oppression and levels of residual radiation," (7) mentioned in passing, slowly invade Marc's dream vacation. Still, despite the military plane and the sentry point he notices, he seems oblivious of the violence that runs on the island. It is only when he ventures into the jungle and meets Uva that his fantasy vision of the island becomes tainted. Uva has chosen resistance, reclaiming the jungle through her sanctuary farm. The ecological disaster she tries to fight is an allegory of the political turmoil of the island. Lands are seized and the authorities regulate which crops to grow, so that farming one's land can become illegal. She is the one who exposes the reality of these brutal policies. In fact, Marc's first real encounter with violence is when she shows him a house that was burned down because the farmers grew sugar cane (29-30). Even if Nature fights back ("the cane is coming up again" 30), life on the island is not what it seems to be: "We live in a state of terror. Can't you see it? It is not just that we are just a little shabby here. We have had to adjust our thresholds. Abuse our mind as we do our bodies when we have to control pain" (27).

Additionally, violence is depicted as a disease. "As the days passed, I began to feel disheartened. The sun seemed cancerous on my skin, and the water was starting to feel too hot for swimming, even in the dark" (10). Marc seems to be infected, contaminated by some exotic bug, but the subtext is clear. Nature itself is hostile. It is even an accomplice:

She showed me the empty shell of a cartridge she had picked up. There were two more in the sand. "They do it on the beach. The executions. They must have shot him here last night. The blood just drains away." Her voice trembled slightly. "This sand never stains, you know, no matter how much blood is spilled." (35)

As the novel unravels, violence escalates and Marc, who is at first just a passer-by, becomes an active agent. There is a clear change of atmosphere in chapter II. The des-

criptive elements lay emphasis on an obvious dichotomy between the concrete world of the city, epitomizing the authorities, and the lush jungle, which stands for resistance. Marc is held by the authorities in a “compound of concrete cells. Each with one barred window and a metal door” (48). Violence seems to spread like the “icy chemical” (44) used to tranquilize him. The claustrophobic and metallic environment he finds himself in highlights both the inescapability of violence and the proliferation of weapons. In the city, looking for Uva, Marc notices that meat is separate from the rest of the supplies sold on the market: “where I supposed the smell of blood would not cloud the minds of the new recruits patrolling outside” (55). In this moment, preceding Marc’s escape and what will turn out to be a riot, violence has infiltrated every aspect of daily routine. Soldiers are dehumanized, depicted as bloodthirsty animals; a comparison paving the way for the manhunt that will follow.

Moreover, throughout the novel an aesthetic of decay prevails. For example, in *Maravil*, there are “a wood-apple rotting [...] a shrunken waterhole [...] [a] mutilated tree-frog [...] [and] deformed geckos” (50-1). The whiteness of the sand no longer conjures up images of purity, but also reminiscences of executions: “The sand was white with pulverised sea skeletons” (53). Like in *Reef*, the sand is a reminder of death and destruction: “The sea will rush in. The sand will go. The beach will disappear” (48). Only in *Farindolas* and *Samandia*, oases of peaceful nature, untouched by violence (or almost), can life and desire be fully celebrated. *Heaven’s Edge* is the story of the inevitable embrace of Eros and Thanatos. Desire and death are intertwined, as when Marc realizes: “I choked for the want of her skin around me” (29). In this world of decay, the future is stuck in limbo. As Gunasekera underlines: “I want to take us on a journey, look at things we know about in a backward glance, and go out into the unknown, see the lost future” (“Odyssey”). The conflicts have altered time as they have the land. This is mirrored in the narrative itself with the juxtaposition of time frames. As Marc is more and more sucked into the violence of the island, memories of deaths, reinforcing the imagery of decay, put the narrative on hold (16, 90, 138). In the way past and present are juxtaposed, Marc seems to be processing communal violence as his own. This contrasts with the anonymity of violence in the first chapter conveyed by the vagueness of “the middle of a war” (9). In chapter II, Marc starts giving in to violence – “my blood began to rise” (51). He is captured and is made an actor of the conflict; he no longer stands at the periphery.

Another aspect of violence must not be overlooked: it is inherited, “like a malady from one jumbled generation to the next” (109). Uva defends the legacy of her parents, their dream of the world as an “interdependent thing,” (36) but in doing so is unable to distance herself from the conflicts: “her eyelids drooped, trapped in her parents’ web of unravelled hope” (39). Her fight is fraught with a sense of duty, very similar to the one Marc feels towards both his father and grandfather. The past haunts him:

Something in my brain slipped, like a wheel on wet grass. Pictures of my father, and of my grandfather standing against the same landscape, materialized. I imagined the two of them with me, at last finding a place where we might all be close together again, free of discord. (91)

Even more than pictures, father and grandfather are spectral voices echoing in the jungle. His father’s “phantom voice” resonates: “I came, son, because I love this place” (176). But unlike Uva, there is a blank in his story, for he was raised mainly by his pacifist

grandfather. In the novel, competing perceptions and understandings of violence are presented through different generations but also through parallels with other conflicts, such as World War II, like in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* in which the Independence of India is outlined against the background of Indians serving in the British Army. Marc's grandmother, Cleo, who came "from what she always called the West Indies," (95) had wanted to join the RAF, a commitment Eldon could not understand. Gunsekera thus introduces a questioning of the genealogy of conflict but leaves it to the reader to ponder. In fact, as Cordula Lemke underlines, "the description of violence is clearly categorised, and there is no obvious dividing line between the acts of violence of the coloniser or the colonised." Gunsekera's novel is then "a critique of [the] celebration of violence even if used for a good cause" (295).

There is no denying violence. From chapter II onwards, scenes of torture, combat and execution proliferate in the narrative. Sovereignty is lost to the "demiurgic surgery" which disfigures bodies that Mbembe, using Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, associates with war machines. He notes, "as a political category, people are disaggregated into rebels, child-soldiers, victims or refugees" (35). Marc comes across a refugees' village where a child starts singing a nursery rhyme only to stop point blank. The innocence of the song is tainted by the violence he endured. "We learnt that the child has seen his two elder brothers and a baby hacked to death in their home by the village pond" (108). And yet, the children in this village play at war: "One child, a boy with a shaved head, picked up a stick and pretended to shoot us [...] the other children observed him, and us, as though they were watchful moths" (104). The episode seems rather pessimistic but reflects what Uva has tried to explain to Marc: "after so many years of fighting, violence became ingrained in our way of life" (37). This is also the moment Marc feels a sense of responsibility about the events. Looking at the children, "the mutilated remains of an assortment of communities where pain had passed like a malady from one jumbled generation to the next," (109) Marc is made a witness to a state terror that stigmatizes bodies to perpetuate fear. The mutilated bodies are constant reminders of the violence the state can perpetrate, keeping before the eyes of the victims – and of the people around him or her – the morbid spectacle of severing" (Mbembe 35). The children in the village have no choice but to live in fear and cut themselves off from their past, numbing it to keep on living. Violence is everywhere, but a choice has to be made. In his need to understand, Marc finds comfort in Eldon's stories and looks for answers in the "ancient days" (110).

Transcending Violence, Embracing Myth

Myth seems to be the only thing that can help Marc make sense out of the atrocities he has witnessed. Like Nirmal in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* – a novel with similar ecological concerns – who, faced with the violent removal of refugees by local authorities, finds comfort in the words of Rilke, Marc chooses to follow the poet, the voice of Eldon, to make sense of it all. Nirmal, waiting with the refugees in fear of the brutality to come, starts writing a journal opening with a quote from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*:

"beauty is nothing
but the start of terror we can hardly bear,
and we adore it because of the serene scorn
it could kill us with..." (69)

Unable to accept violence, he chooses to give a voice to the victims and juxtaposes the violence of nature to the violence of men. Similarly, Marc tries to find meaning in what surrounds him. His is a journey of acceptance of the violence in the world, but he chooses not to comply. When given the possibility to kill a soldier, Marc hears the spectral voice of his grandfather and chooses not to shoot: “my fingers were on the trigger, but the cat’s eye in the centre of the nearest soldier’s forehead stopped me” (72). The other, though a threat, is still seen as a person. The soldier’s forehead may be seen here as a metonymy of the face which is at the heart of Levinas’ ethics. However, Marc’s will not to participate in violence is put to the test when his dream life is at stake. He resists violence as long as he can, but in the end fires, as if caught by a primeval instinct for survival, in the assault against his Eden. Necropolitics has transformed him and his ideals, forcing him into the “lowest form of survival,” “killing” (Mbembe 36). Marc is no longer a witness; he becomes an agent of violence. On the run in the jungle, Marc finds refuge in a cave. The paintings on the walls “seemed to shift with every movement of the eye, reviving stories of long lost ties [...] these were the memories I had wanted to trace: history, myth, legend all defined in one supple line marrying the seen to the unseen, the spirit to the bone” (93). In this Plato-like epiphany, the stories Eldon had told him seem imbued with new meaning. The Hydra, Circe, the Argonauts are borrowed narratives to help him cope with the absurdity of civil war. In the face of never-ending violence, Marc turns to Eldon’s poem:

The teardrops of the original inhabitants,
Our old gods,
Destroyed by invaders,
Wreak perpetual revenge on their descendants...

The words absorbing, renewing, however dispiriting the story; performing our only true human magic: transforming even pain into a line, a scrap of verse, a rhyme. A greater design. (111)

Lemke’s analysis of the narrative strategies in *Heaven’s Edge* highlights the role of borrowed narratives in Marc’s appropriation of both the family and the collective pasts. “Change but the name and the tale is of you,” (226) like Icarus, or like the “bird becoming human,” (38) Marc, in his peacock plane, flies away from his pursuers. Marc’s flight prefigures the collapse of his edenic fantasy. It also echoes, as Deckard has evidenced, the Hindu *Ramayana* and its mythologizing of Sri Lanka as a land that needs to be cleansed. Deckard argues that the epic subtext is a way for Gunesekera to look at “Sri Lankan history not only from the perspective of Buddhist myth” but to “construct a polyphonic gateway into the past which unites the opposing mythologies” (182). To the Buddhist and Hindu myths, the narrative weaves part of Genesis when Marc finds himself in Farindola. His understanding of violence underpins a creation impulse. To transcend violence through writing, one needs a story to tell. Here, Marc’s diasporic stance needs to be re-evaluated. Entranced by his will to belong, he has been on a quest for his family past, which is also a quest for “the original home of (the) chance migrants” (180). This is the same quest that he pursues with Uva, whose name refers to a regional home to venerable Gods (25), transforming her into a metaphor of the mythical home, of the idealized past he is looking for.

The Edenic descriptions of “home” then illustrate what Vijay Mishra refers to as “memorial reconstructions of prior (sacred) narratives. These reconstructions act as

points de caption, nodal points, that both connect a displaced subject to his/her past and also give a sense of continuity" (230). The diasporic subject depicted by Gunese-kera is looking for his own narrative, but also tries to re-build a sacred narrative of the origin. The exotic island, as it remains unnamed, becomes a paradigmatic Eden. The lush descriptions of the landscape in Farindola and Samandia echo Marc's first impression at the hotel: "I stood on the beach and breathed in. I felt elated: this was the moment I had been waiting for" (3). Furthermore, water plays an important role in these descriptions. Uva re-appears in a pond: "her gleaming naked body shot up in a terrific breath-taking breach. The whole lake convulsed as it released her ripples" (202). Water is what gives life, and also the promise of a rebirth as when Marc offers to bathe Uva to heal her from her past:

I didn't know how to reach her. "Come to the well," I entreated. "Let me bathe you." I wanted a hundred pails of water to wash away those tears, her wounds. I wanted her to heal soon, and myself too, and drop all the scabs of her ugly past. (216)

In his Crusoe-like attempt to domesticate nature, watering the crops is his main concern. In Farindola, Marc projects onto his surroundings the fantasy of a cradle where family can be restored. With Uva, the new Eve, who dreams of a fruit she cannot reach (230), he imagines that they "might become the beginning of something new" (223). The quest for the origins turns into a tale of recreation. Marc, forlorn in the jungle, assumes a demiurgic role. "I wanted space and order, light and colour. I wanted the place teeming with a hundred different types of birds, of bees, of squirrels" (193). The subtext of Genesis paves the way for the impossibility of harmony. The only way for the characters to reconcile their fragmented identity is to embrace their violent origin. The novel ends on the powerful image of a darkening sky "drawing a broken eclipse over another fragile world for ever altered; riven" (234). The acceptance of a broken past seems to be the way to survive in a brutal world, the only way to have hope of a future, however uncertain, as the trees seem to symbolize: "their roots nourished by the whole of the earth's past, and harbouring the future already in their buds" (224). In parallel with the tale of recreation, the imagery of cycle should be noted. Stories repeat themselves and Marc dreams of rebirth for one of the little girls from the refugee camp (224). Zinck underlines "the numerous syncretic echoes of the paradise of Dharma or the Garden of Eden, as well as references to samsara and death and rebirth." He also shows that "the process of regeneration culminates with Uva's rebirth in the amniotic fluid of the lake, a scene that is heralded by the hatching of a myriad butterflies from their chrysalis" (224). At the end of the novel, the blood, which ignited a passion for the past, nourishes hope: "with every pulse that pushed my blood another fraction through the cycle of this earth, I felt able to believe a little more that our lives somehow will be replenished" (218). Marc's rebirth as his own self at the end of the novel is set in motion by his decision to never leave (233).

Gunesekera summed up the stakes of the novel in one question: "Should we remember things as a way of learning, or forget them as a way of healing?" ("Odyssey") His characters, whether victims or perpetrators, all face the same curse. How does one live through such violent conflicts, through the absurdity of communal violence? The novel illustrates a need to invest violence with meaning, with justification maybe, as Marc wonders: "is there a need to help the innocent, the weak, against the strong?" (100) But the question of the greater good seems to be dismissed to focus on the ways

of dealing with inevitable violence. Marilena Zackheos points out that “[the novel] reveal[s] through a discovery of ‘primal’ human violence that subjectivity must be re-constituted specifically by moving beyond fixation of idealized space and embracing an exilic subjectivity that [...] moves out of the island space” (65). The diasporic subject needs to confront violence, needs to identify with the locals. But to be able to make sense out of it, Marc, as he distances himself from the island space, moves from local stories to embrace universal myths. Only then may the narrator be able to reconcile his past with his present: “this land and its tragic past – its ruined children – become, like the whole of the tainted world, as much mine as anybody else’s” (109).

Sabine LAURET-TAFT

University of Bourgogne Franche-Comté

Works Cited

- DECKARD, Sharae. *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism and Globalization, Exploiting Eden*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- GHOSH, Amitav. *The Hungry Tide*. 2004. London: Harper Collins, 2005.
- . *The Glass Palace*. 2000. London: Harper Collins, 2001.
- GUNSEKERA, Romesh. *Reef*. 1994. London: Granta, 1998.
- . *The Sandglass*. 1998. London: Granta, 2011.
- . *Heaven’s Edge*. 2002. London: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- . Interview by Aamer Hussein. “Romesh Gunsekera: After an Odyssey, Paradise Regained.” *The Independent*. 13 April 2012. <http://www.uni-saarland.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Professoren/fr43_ProfGhoshSchellhorn/Tas_Datenbank/South_Asia___Diasporas/Gunsekera_The_Independent_Heaven_s_Edge.pdf>
- JAYASURIYA, Maryse. *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lanka Anglophone Literature, 1983-2009*. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2012.
- LEMKE, Cordula. “‘Change But the Name and the Tale is of You’: Narration and Agency in *Heaven’s Edge*.” *British Asian Fiction: Framing the Contemporary*. Ed. Neil Murphy and Wai-chew Sim. Amherst: Cambria, 2008. 289-308.
- MBEMBE, Achille. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 11-40.
- PRASAD, Pushkala. “The Return of the Native: Organizational Discourses and the Legacy of the Ethnographic Imagination.” *Postcolonial Theory and Organizational Analysis: A Critical Engagement*. Ed. Anshuman Prasad. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. 149-70.
- SALGADO, Minoli. “Writing Sri Lanka, Reading Resistance: Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy* and A. Sivanandan’s *When Memory Dies*.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.1 (March 2004): 5-18.
- . *Writing Sri Lanka, Literature, Resistance & the Politics of Place*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- ZACKHEOS, Marilena. “The Ex-isle Reinvention, Postcolonial Trauma and Recovery in Contemporary Island Literature.” Dissertation, The George Washington University, 2011. <<http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/887713843.html?FMT=AI>>
- ZINCK, Pascal. “The Return of the Natives: Infernal Paradise in Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* and Romesh Gunsekera’s *Heaven’s Edge*.” *India and the Diasporic Imagination, L’Inde et l’imagination diasporique*. Ed. Judith Misrahi-Barak. Montpellier: PULM, 2011. 217-31.