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Adopting Canada: The Multiculturalism Debate and the Writing of Michael Ondaatje

Résumé

Le respect de toute forme de famille élargie est comme un fil conducteur dans l'œuvre d'Ondaatje. Adoption, substituts de mère et de père, familles grandes ou passagères, aussi bien qu'héritiers accidentels usurpent la prédominance des généalogies et récusent le mythe de l'adoption. Cette tendance anti-essentialiste ouvre un espace d'où des voix marginales font appel à un Canada qui accueille un avenir fait de pluralisme ethnique, racial et linguistique. Les personnages d'Ondaatje, trouvent une famille par hasard ou agissent en remplaçant la leur, nucléaire et dysfonctionnelle, par une autre, et, ce faisant, ils héritent de nouvelles histoires et mémoires. Ajouté à cela, la métaphore de la famille élargie dans les ouvrages d'Ondaatje propose une acceptation d'une histoire interrelationnelle complexe qui rejette une perspective linéaire ou déterministe et rend possible à la place plusieurs variantes de tout récit. Anthropologues, explorateurs, archéologues et détectives retournent les roches, les ossements et les photographies pour découvrir ces histoires jamais racontées. Le passé du Canada n'est ainsi pas seulement celui de la Grande Bretagne – malgré des efforts considérables pour y fonder une «société d'invasion» et de peuplement ayant pour objectif un pays homogène peuplé de Blancs protestants anglo-saxons (WASP) avec une région française adjacente – mais il est l'héritier de mémoires à la fois nouvelles et anciennes. Malgré une grande part de critique, des débuts douteux et des difficultés à appliquer cette théorie dans la pratique, l'œuvre d'Ondaatje apporte donc son soutien au Canada, état constitutionnel et multiculturel.

Zusammenfassung

Ondaatjes Wertschätzung für alle Arten von Großfamilien zieht sich durch sein gesamtes Werk. Adoptionen, Ersatz-, Großfamilien oder provisorische Familien, aber auch zufällige Erben stellen das Primat der Blutsverwandtschaft in Frage und verdrängen den Mythos der Adoption. Diese anti-essentialistische Haltung schenkt jenen marginalisierten Gruppen Gehör, die nach einem Kanada verlangen, das eine ethnisch, rassisch und sprachlich pluralistische Zukunft befürwortet. Ondaatjes Charaktere finden durch Zufall eine neue Familie oder sie wählen sie bewusst anstelle ihrer nicht funktionieren-

den Kernfamilie, wodurch sie auch neue Geschichten und Erinnerungen erben. Darüber hinaus erlaubt die Metapher der Großfamilie in Ondaatjes Werken, von einer komplexen Beziehungsgeschichte auszugehen, was einerseits die Ablehnung einer linearen oder deterministischen Sicht der Dinge impliziert, andererseits aber die Möglichkeit bietet, verschiedene Versionen ein und derselben Geschichte zu erzählen. Forensische Patholo-gen, Forscher, Archäologen und Detektive drehen jeden Stein, jeden Knochen und jede Fotografie um, um jene nicht erzählten Geschichten zu finden. Trotz der unermüdlichen Bemühungen Kanadas seit seiner Gründung als Gesellschaft von Eroberern und Sied-lern, ein homogenes weißes, englischsprachiges und protestantisches Land mit angren-zender französischsprachiger Region zu sein, liegt die Vergangenheit des Landes nicht nur in der britischen Geschichte begründet, sondern ist auch das Erbe neuer und alter Erinnerungen. Ungeachtet wiederholter Kritik, eines fragwürdigen Beginns und der Schwierigkeiten, die Theorie in die Praxis umzusetzen, bejaht Ondaatjes Werk Kanada als verfassungsmäßig multikulturellen Staat.

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1. Introduction

"I am obliged to record the things I am told, but I am certainly not obliged to be-lieve them," (Herodotus 1998, 457) wrote Herodotus, the man who is commonly accredited with inventing the discipline of history in the fifth century B.C.E. If even a treatise of *The Histories*'s calibre recognises that any account of the past – historical or literary – is fragmentary and unreliable, it is unsurprising that fiction should ex-ploit this capriciousness for the sake of a good story. Because myths are the great shapers of civilisation,[1] *how* a story is told is as important as *what* is being said. Ca-nadian writer Michael Ondaatje, not unlike Herodotus, shows his appreciation for a good story when he says of his fictional memoirs *Running in the Family*: "A well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (Ondaatje 1982, 206).

The Enlightenment, which rendered obsolete any remaining traces of Herodotus's liberal approach to history, imposed that thereafter all history would be seen as objective, progressive, and deterministic. In this age of reason, ideas were seen as a force that could only lead to progress, and the collection of reliable, accurate, objec-tive historical facts would reveal the one true story of the past. Ondaatje's desire to unearth subversive, marginal pasts undermines this view that reigned uncontested until finally met with the challenges of post-modernism. Historian Paul Carter ex-plains that the function of such spatial histories, which may appear in fiction in

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1   Historian Jan Assmann suggests: "All history that finds its way into collective memory as norma-tive tradition becomes myth. Myths are the fundamental figures of memory. Their constant re-petition and actualization is one of the ways in which a society or culture affirms its identity." See Assmann 2002, 10.

addition to non-fiction, is to deny the linearity of history and the imperial concept of a progressive history (see Carter, 1987). The following paper will illustrate that Michael Ondaatje's writing features stratified histories and the blurring of fact and fiction to ensure the denial of a solitary and deterministic history. His fiction embraces an understanding of the past as consisting of multiple frames of reference and a recognition that "stories are not told from A to Z anymore. […] This sense of discovery, of memory, and how we reveal ourselves to each other – none of that is chronological" (Wachtel 1992, 258). Archaeologists, historians, explorers, forensic pathologists, and detectives thus people the novels of Ondaatje and look to the past in order to right its wrongs. In so doing they seek to give silenced voices a chance to speak.

In a 1992 interview, Michael Ondaatje confesses the importance in his work and life of

> a sense of an extended family, as opposed to the usual nuclear family. There were my mother and father, but also, after the breakup of their marriage, all the uncles and aunts who took one step forward. I felt supported; I had no real sense of rift. [… I]n terms even of a book like *The English Patient*, or *In the Skin of a Lion*, the nuclear family is replaced by a kind of extended family. [… It] has very much to do with family, but nothing to do with blood. (Wachtel 1992, 250-261, 259)

Ondaatje's esteem for all kinds of extended families runs throughout his oeuvre. Adoption, surrogates, extended or makeshift families, as well as accidental heirs, thematically renounce the literary model of the "foundling myth," whereby an abandoned or stolen child raised by lower class substitute parents is restored to the biological parents just in time to save an imperilled dynasty.[2] In Ondaatje's novels, families are selected and familial love is signified by the stories they share.

As will be demonstrated in the following, Ondaatje's repeated emphasis of the extended family is actually an appeal to Canada to adopt in practice and not just in theory its constitutional policy of multiculturalism. It is a call to Canada to recognise that it is not heir only to Britain's history – as the predominantly English leaders until the 1960s would have preferred – but to the unofficial histories of all its citizens: First Nations, French-Canadians and ethnic minorities alike. After a brief assessment of how and why multiculturalism came to be in the first part of this paper, the varied kinds of families that can be found in three of Ondaatje's novels, *Anil's Ghost* (2000), *The English Patient* (1992), and *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), will be illustrated as sources of storytelling that reveal an understanding of a past comprised of layered, interrelated histories. Non-nuclear families are welcomed in these novels, thereby exemplifying a multicultural Canada viewed as an extended family. The second half

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2   The definition of the adoption myth is provided by Estrin 2002.

of the paper will conclude with an examination of the novels and how they petition Canada to see itself as bearing a past made up of countless competing histories.

2. Adopting Multiculturalism

As an invader-settler society, British culture remained a provisional, temporary source of nationness until Canada began its (now notorious) quest for its own national identity. Therefore, when questions of nationalism arose after the passing of the 1947 *Canadian Citizenship Act*[3] and were exacerbated over the next two decades through factors such as post-World War II immigration, Quebec nationalism, fear of American imperialism, and growing demands from peoples of the First Nations, the emphasis of the Canadian concept of nation was necessarily shifted from a community imagined to be homogeneously "white,"[4] to the need to define an identity independent from Britain that reflected its changing face.

Retrospectively ashamed at being one of the countries that brought to safety the smallest number of Jews during the Nazi regime (about 5,000),[5] Canada guiltily opened its doors in the early 1950s to less "preferred" immigrant groups. Despite its tireless efforts since its inception as an invader-settler society to be a consistently WASP country with an adjacent French region, Canada soon realised that it could no longer deny its multiethnic population. In 1965, the government requested a report on how Francophones and Anglophones[6] manage to co-exist as Canadians. After the publishing of the *Preliminary Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism*, it became clear that the ethnic groups already in Canada – and others still to arrive – would have to be incorporated into the expanding definition of Canadian identity. Subsequently, Canada took the first step towards expressing its multicultural identity and recommended the "'integration' (not assimilation) into Canadian society of non-Charter ethnic groups with full citizenship rights and equal participation in Canada's institutional structure" (Leman 1999, 4). The Commission concluded by recommending the extension of bilingualism in federal policy to achieve better relations between French and English Canada as well as reinforcing

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3   Until this act was passed, all Canadians were defined as British subjects. After 1947, they were considered Canadian citizens, but there was no national flag other than the Union Jack until 1965.

4   The understanding at the time was that only Anglo-Saxon and Nordic peoples were "white." It was less a matter of race than religion and ethnicity. Jews in addition to Catholics, especially the Irish and Southern Europeans, were decidedly not "white."

5   To learn more about Canada's closed immigration policies, see Abella/Troper 1991. The United States, though having enforced similarly restrictive immigration laws, is said to have allowed nearly 200,000 Jews in during this twelve-year period.

6   The terms "Francophone" and "Anglophone," despite the suffix, do not only refer to the language one speaks, but they demarcate one's belonging to either French Canada or the dominant English culture. In this paper these general terms are used as liberally as they would have been in the 1960s. Their casual usage back then made an understanding of ethnic groups difficult because, for example, North African Jews who may have immigrated to Montreal would not have been considered French Canadian even though they were French-speaking.

the bilingual environment within which ethnic groups could thrive. In Pierre Trudeau's famous speech to the House of Commons in 1971, he proposed, in line with the Commission's recommendation, that there should be multiculturalism lodged within a bilingual framework.

A concept born of bilingualism, multiculturalism was initially a political term employed in paper-pushing but nonetheless an official recognition that a variety of ethnic groups exist within Canada's borders who have specific needs and concerns that the government should address (see Stratton/And 1994, 1-23,3). The switch from imagining itself as an invader-settler colony and placing the importance on being racially uniform to valuing and prioritising the variety of ethnicities came only with the multiculturalist policy. In 1982, multiculturalism was officially adopted into Canada's constitution in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Bill C-93, the official *Multiculturalism Act,* followed in 1988. The government intended to lead its citizens toward the incorporation of minorities into society. The state, which was multicultural in its makeup before its constitution, and which was multicultural in its constitution before its mentality, finally adopted an attitude of tolerance and belonging. Slowly but surely, despite a great deal of criticism, doubtful beginnings, and difficulties when putting the theory into practice, Canada's "imagined community" (see Anderson 1991) became a constitutionally multicultural state. Although it can be claimed that the road to multiculturalism was a deliberate cover-up of earlier mistakes, what is now of importance is how Canadians voluntarily support the propagated ideology of a multicultural and inclusive nation.

Regardless of the emotional investment Canadians have now placed in multiculturalism, it has, as of late, been the recipient of much censure. Arguments against multiculturalism insist that ethnic groups are used as a pawn between French and English Canada. Critics maintain that it is a means to further marginalise Quebec by reducing French-Canadians to an ethnic phenomenon instead of recognising their rightful role as a Charter group. Alternatively, multiculturalism is seen as a concept of two national communities that exclude those who do not belong to either the French or the larger English population. First Nations have also expressed resentment of multicultural policies for tending to relegate them to an ethnic role instead of acknowledging them as Canada's original inhabitants. Furthermore, multiculturalism is accused of being created as an attempt to secure the ethnic vote or as a means of pigeonholing immigrants by not letting them out of their pre-defined identities as members of an ethnic community. Some critics argue that it is used as an excuse to "manage" or "tolerate" a group while politically still engaging in social racism (see, for example, Henry 2002, 231-242). According to this view, multiculturalism engenders the loss of Canadian culture and promotes the formation of ghettos and enclaves. It is said to provide no identity for those who wish to escape their ethnicity and assimilate into a larger national identity.[7] One of the most prominent

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7   To read up on the multiculturalism debate, see Bissoondath 1990.

arguments against multiculturalism is that of the "hyphen," whereby members of ethnic groups are marginalised by never being "just Canadian" but rather "Chinese-Canadian," "Jewish-Canadian," or even "French-Canadian." It is often disapproved of because the hyphen is said to create spaces of distinction and to further complicate the question of national identity by positioning ethnicity outside of Canadianness (see Mahtani 2002, 1-35).

In *The Location of Culture,* Homi K. Bhabha contends that

> The very concepts of homogeneous national culture, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or 'organic' ethnic communities […] are in a profound process of redefinition […] there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities (Bhabha, 1994, 5).

Transnationalism has long been perceived as being in tension with multiculturalism; it is said to bear the qualities of fluidity and exchange that multiculturalism lacks. Transnationalism recognises identity as a process and embraces fragmented identities that can cross geographic, cultural and political borders where they continually mix and blend cultures. Until now, transnationalism and multiculturalism have been mistakenly perceived as mutually exclusive, because multiculturalism has been understood to fix and contain ethnic identities. Although many critics have suggested an absolute eradication of the multicultural policy as a result,[8] perhaps a revision would be a more effective approach to addressing the flaws of an already constitutionalised concept. While multiculturalism is accused of forcing ethnic groups into a static identity, the ideology itself is also victim of a similar assumption. If identities are dynamic, fluid, multiple, and historically situated, then the focal point within a national identity should be the negotiation and compromise of inter-relationships, entailing an understanding of the past as formed of a comparably

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8   Many critics, including Bissoondath, have recommended an abandonment of the project of multiculturalism. Janice Kulyk Keefer, on the other hand, suggests renaming and reconceptualising multiculturalism in order to abolish its "divide-and-conquer" (80) effects. According to Kulyk Keefer, multiculturalism is retrogressive – but not without promise – and her theory of the "transcultural" hopes to "salvage that part that can be salvaged – the play of cultural differences engendered by diverse experiences and constructions of race and ethnicity" (87). She argues that whereas multiculturalism is about defending borders instead of crossing them, about essentialising and not exploring, transculturalism is about exchanging and sharing, while foregrounding the liminal positions between two or more different countries, cultures or communities. She suggests that when Canadian writers of ethnic origins are called "ethnic" writers or "immigrant" writers, this classification equates them with foreignness and does not accept them as Canadians, contrary to what the mythology of multiculturalism should entail. See: Kulyk Keefer 1996. However, changing multiculturalism's name will not remedy its inherent problems. As a constitutional policy, Canadians should work with and improve on the existing multiculturalism. Continual revision will ensure that it is adapting to evolving needs of ethnic communities and carrying out the goals proposed by Kulyk Keefer for transculturalism.

dynamic and overlapping network of stories. If multiculturalism can accept every ethnic group's stories, this will further promote negotiation by acknowledging that a national identity is not fixed and can flexibly invite others in. Multiculturalism will then be read as a symbolic space where different cultures live among one another, encouraged to express the narratives that are important to them. Fluid identities – personal and national – need to continually renegotiate the past, consequently creating a model of history as spatial, that is, made up of several different pasts.

Multiculturalism may have its failings, but it is encouraging to know that, as a constitutional multicultural state, Canada continues working towards an inclusionary, tolerant society. Benedict Anderson suggests for his definition of "imagined communities" that they "are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (Anderson 1991, 6). Even though multiculturalism may be imperfect, its adoption by the nation is an official attempt to style a society of acceptance, tolerance and exchange. As will be illustrated in the following, Michael Ondaatje's work suggests that multiculturalism can function only when all the stories belonging to a nation's cultures and peoples are embraced in its official history. If Canada is a country that sees itself as being a part of a web of relations,[9] then its policy of multiculturalism must also recognise its responsibility to a variety of groups that are constantly shifting and have evolving needs.

3. Adopting Canada

To begin the analysis of Ondaatje's extended family metaphor as a proponent of multiculturalism, examples from his most recent novel, *Anil's Ghost*,[10] will be examined. In this novel from 2000, Anil Tissera returns to her homeland Sri Lanka after she has not seen it for fifteen years. It is the late 1980s when the UN sends her as a forensic pathologist on a human rights mission to find the untold stories buried deep within the bones of the dead. In a land ravaged by civil war, "truth [was] just an opinion" (102), and it was "the wrong time for unburials" (132). Anil is paired with Sarath Diyasena, the local archaeologist assigned by the government to help her in her findings. He is described as a man who "believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use" (157). In order to introduce the reader to the theme of believing that it is the hidden, buried stories that are those worth telling, it is made clear that Sarath's desire is to write a book "about a city in the south of the island that no longer existed. Not a wall of it remained but he wanted to tell the story of that place" (29). The perpetual tension in Ondaatje's work that exists between official and unofficial histories is thus directly exemplified. In *Anil's Ghost*, when there is a discovery of illegal stories that were banned by kings and priests in the fourth century, history is described as "entering a dream. Someone nudges a stone away and there's a story" (259).

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9   Compare, for instance, Francis 1997 and New 1998.
10   Michael Ondaatje, 2000, *Anil's Ghost*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Anil also meets Sarath's brother, Gamini, "a container of secrets" (225), who is a doctor working himself to death trying to save as many victims of the civil war as possible. Gamini values the past in a way similar to Sarath and Anil. This occurs, for instance, when he tries to save an infant from cholera. She cannot hold anything down until he remembers an old Sinhalese song sung by his *ayah* (nanny). The easy to digest pomegranate figured in the song as a food for the infirm, and this saves the girl's life. Alternatively, Gamini is offered a future by being given the chance to be remembered. He performs an operation – the first of its kind in the country – on a boy suffering from a fatal heart condition. Although it is complicated, the boy's parents are so thankful for its success that they rename their son after the doctor. The childless Gamini has an heir after all.

Anil was orphaned soon after she left Sri Lanka to study abroad, but she becomes a sister to the "two Colombo brothers" (285), Gamini and Sarath. She also has a sister in the United States, the "adopted country of her choice" (285). Leaf Niedecker, like Anil, is a forensic specialist. These surrogate "sisters" adore old John Wayne Westerns. Unable to set their professional selves aside, they rewind and replay scenes in order to figure out if minor characters will die or not based on where it appears they have been shot. The sisters' love of these films, which leads them to writing the films' directors for answers to their questions, symbolises the function of memory in the novel. Even though memory, like a video, can be re-examined and newly appraised, some truths will always remain out of grasp. Truth is elusive because there are many versions to every story. Moreover, every time a scene is watched, their current state of mind affects its perception.[11] Needless to say, the directors never wrote them back.

If names have the power to confirm and confer identity, as Ondaatje suggests many times throughout his oeuvre, then Anil, in choosing her name, constructs her own identity. She buys from her brother his unused middle name, a male moniker that had once belonged to a grandfather neither of them ever met. Victoria Cook suggests in "Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" that Anil's self-naming, which still connects her to her ancestry, "demonstrates a syncreticity and hybridity that is involved in the construction of identity, and is revealed through a transnational examination of this exploration of naming" (Cook 2004, 3). Self-identification is but one means through which Anil's transnationality "provides a forum for the expression of a range of cultural identities – one in which the post-colonial voice does not simply speak from the margins, but is represented as an integrated component of a transnational identity" (Cook 2004, 2). That transnation-alism has the potential to give the post-colonial voice a central position is paralleled by multiculturalism's spatial history that eschews the official for the unofficial. In the same vein, when she is able to find the real name of the skeleton she is working on,

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11   It is not insignificant that Leaf is suffering from Alzheimer's, a disease manifested by attacks of memory loss.

Anil is identifying a heinous crime committed by the government. This skeleton's name has the power to identify all those who can no longer name themselves. By being named, he is bearing witness to all those murdered by the government. Who is Anil's ghost? It is Sailor, the nickname she has given the skeleton who will eventually reveal dark secrets; it is Sarath who dies secretly ushering Anil out of Sri Lanka; it is the artist Ananda's wife for whom Anil mourns. Anil's ghost is the one victim who speaks for many victims. In Ondaatje's work, a powerful thematic trinity reigns: history, memory, and truth. They are in constant conflict and tension with each other. Since truth is not singular, the official and the unofficial histories continue to battle it out.

Analogous to the "adopted" individual's quest to find buried stories, Ondaatje also expresses the community's desire for its marginal stories to be told. One factor in the Sri Lankan civil war is that the Tamil accuse the Sinhala not only of discrimination, but even more severely, of tampering with history. They indict the Sinhala with trying to turn the island's history into a purely Buddhist one. In response to charges against *Anil's Ghost* as following a Sinhalese majority's agenda, Marlene Goldman argues that Ondaatje uses Buddhism in the novel not to further condemn the Tamil but as a leitmotif in order to gesture toward the ideals of "transcendence, wholeness, and unity" (Goldman 2004, 2, 7). It is important to add that *Anil's Ghost* is a plea for a Sri Lankan mosaic[12] and is, in fact, a warning that multiculturalism can only work if all histories of a nation's people are accepted. The concluding image of a Buddha reconstructed from "a hundred chips and splinters of stone" (303), whose face is a patchwork – a mosaic – represents the hope for multiculturalism. This image can be taken to mean that there cannot be peace in Sri Lanka until each ethnic group's version of history is accepted and interwoven into the official history of the nation.

Ondaatje evinces in *Anil's Ghost* that history does not follow a straight path; the past is made up of several competing yet interlinked stories. By stressing the importance of surrogacy and adoption, he also illustrates that the family as a community possesses a similarly non-linear history. That families encompass a variety of overlapping and interrelational pasts is portrayed even more clearly in his most famous novel, *The English Patient*.[13] In war-torn Europe, an unlikely group of four find themselves taking shelter in an abandoned northern Italian villa and become a family for one another. The Canadian protagonist, Hana, is a young military nurse who has given up on the war. She abandons her post and remains behind to tend to the unidentified dying man known as the English Patient. Hana is determined to wait out his life with him because she recently lost her stepfather, Patrick, to a similar death. She writes to her stepmother Clara: "He was a burned man and I was a nurse

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12 Although the mosaic may be an imperfect analogy that does not accurately convey Canadian multiculturalism, it nonetheless functions in the novel as a symbol towards an ideal of mutual tolerance.

13 Ondaatje, Michael, 1992, *The English Patient*. London: Bloomsbury.

and I could have nursed him. […] I could have saved him or at least been with him till the end" (314). As time goes on, Hana becomes both patient and nurse for the man burned the colour of aubergine. It does not matter to her that he does not know who he is, for his stories and vast knowledge give her strength and comfort; they help her move beyond the tragedy of war.

The other two adopted members of the family are Kirpal Singh (Kip), a Sikh sapper stationed in the area to defuse hidden bombs and landmines, and who also becomes Hana's lover, and Caravaggio, an old friend of her father's from Toronto who was used as a spy for the Allies. With her replacement "father," ersatz "uncle" Caravaggio, and acting "husband" Kip, Hana's makeshift family begins to heal each other's war wounds by sharing their stories and histories – until the family is ripped apart by the bombing of Hiroshima. Kip wishes to return immediately to India.[14] His view of the villa inhabitants as family has been shattered and for him, the others turn into a representation of the West because he suddenly adopts the same bifurcated view of the world – East vs. West – he had been trying to deny all along: "American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman" (304). The world is not ready at the end of the Second World War for the redemptive powers of inclusive belonging. At this point in history, multiculturalism is still an impossibility.

What Ondaatje's novels demonstrate is that the surrogate, extended or makeshift families are the most love-filled relationships imaginable. His characters fortuitously find a family or actively choose one over their own dysfunctional nuclear families, thereby inheriting new histories and memories. These relationships are shown to be more fruitful than bloodlines. To believe in the power of narrative over blood is an anti-essentialist stance. In Ondaatje's work, the effect is that linear history is rejected, thereby opening up a space for multiple histories. It makes room for stories to be told that would otherwise have been stomped out by the hegemony of bloodlines. No longer at the margins, once-stifled voices call out to be heard. Maurice Halbwachs's understanding of families in *On Collective Memory* can help illustrate Ondaatje's assertion that it is not blood but a compilation of stories that lends a family its most important kinship bond: "No matter how we enter a family—by birth, marriage or some other way—we find ourselves to be a part of a group where our position is determined not by personal feelings but by rules and customs independent of us that existed before us" (Halbwachs 1992, 55). Although culture, class and politics can complicate the exchange since all memory is examined through socially constructed frameworks, new family members bring with them different customs and new experiences. The family thus becomes a site of exchange and negotiation where memories confront one another. New members do not forget

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14 Not insignificantly, Kip is a Sikh from the predominately Muslim city of Lahore. The city is also representative of a dividing line of irreconcilable national differences. After Partition, Lahore became the capital of Pakistan.

the memories they already possess and instead enjoin and adapt them to the new family's. The family's collective way of thinking will alter with the influence of each new member, ensuring "the family's cohesion and [guaranteeing] its continuity" (Halbwachs 1992, 83). The adoptive family can be understood as a metaphor for Canada, which is not only British in its blood, despite having originally tried as an early invader-settler society to be a "white" country. Ondaatje's metaphor of the extended family reads as a request that Canada – as a constitutional multicultural country – should not lament its loss of a purely British ancestry and instead embrace a future of ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic pluralism.

It is no coincidence that the English Patient, when he is found after the accident that eventually kills him, carries with him Herodotus's *The Histories*. Out of the recognition that employing many forms of narrative can best reveal the past, Herodotus intentionally integrated gossip, rumours, legends, myths, and contradictory stories into his eyewitness accounts. It is because Ondaatje's character carries with him an English translation of *The Histories* that his rescuers are convinced the badly burned man is an English soldier. Ondaatje seems to be asserting with this case of mistaken identity that identities are fluid and are constructed out of narratives – facts and well-told lies alike – that have been chosen and patched together, just like the English Patient's copy of Herodotus with its appended pages, inserted pictures and random scribblings. Comprised of inherited narratives, identity must be practised. What one chooses to do with the inherited or adopted narratives is what defines a person. A community's history also consists of narratives purposely selected to define that group. Canada deliberately wrote the concept of multiculturalism into its constitution. Consequently, the stories and narratives belonging to each ethnicity and culture considered a part of Canada through the tenets of multiculturalism must be accepted as Canada's own. Because immigrants and members of various ethnic or minority communities have differing experiences of Canadian space, it is important to continue to revise and expand Canada's definition of itself to accommodate this multiplicity.

The protagonist of *The English Patient*, Hana, also appears in the novel's prequel *In the Skin of a Lion*.[15] This novel amalgamates real and fictional histories of the building of Toronto in the 1930s from the perspective of the working class. It recounts Patrick Lewis's story, a "Canadian," who moves from a rural town to Toronto where he finds himself working dangerous hard labour alongside members of various immigrant communities. While the novel questions the motives of the powerful who imagined the city into being, it rewrites the mainstream historical record in order to include the unofficial stories of those who risked their lives building it. *In the Skin of a Lion*, in a blending of genres, is also a passionate love story and a tale of mystery and adventure that contemplates the meaning of family. Hana is the child of an ex-nun and a union fighter who does not live to see the birth of his child. She is

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15   Ondaatje, Michael, 1987, *In the Skin of a Lion*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.

brought up by her mother Alice Gull, and later, her stepfather Patrick, who falls in love with Alice only after having his heart broken by her best friend, Clara (who will later become Hana's stepmother). When Alice dies and Patrick is sent to prison for trying to punish the powerful, Hana is raised by Nicholas Temelcoff, the Macedonian immigrant who saves Alice's life when she, as a young nun, falls off the Bloor Street Viaduct while it is still under construction. Alice names herself after a parrot befriended by Temelcoff because that night, after he catches her falling off the bridge, he begs the woman in shock to start speaking. It is by naming herself, relinquishing the name her mother and later Mother Superior gave to her, that she defines herself and chooses her family.

The prefatory framing scene of *In the Skin of a Lion* explains: "This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness […] She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms" (no page). The story Hana learns is Patrick's, but his story is "no longer a single story but part of a mural, […] something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day" (145). It is an unofficial story, undeniably bound and entwined with the stories of others, those with whom he decides to be. By being the listener, Hana learns different versions of and new stories about the people she loves most: her mother, Nicholas Temelcoff, and Patrick. Interestingly, it is only when Hana is adopted by Patrick – it is just that morning that he declares for the first time: "I am her father" (218) – that Hana learns his entire history. True adoption here entails the handing over of a narrative as inheritance. Adoption is shown to be the absorption of another's history and memories. Moreover, these adoptions are the only way that a character feels connected to the world. Ondaatje's figures often remark how they feel either banished or brought back to the world by someone else. Patrick, for example, feels anonymous and emotionally homeless, until Alice and Hana come into his life. Correspondingly, once Canada adopted multiculturalism as an ideology, an identity even, by constitutionalising it, Canada was making a promise to its multiethnic citizens. Similar to the families in Ondaatje's writing who adopt with each new member another's memories and histories Canada's pledge was to officially endorse the concept that the nation has not only a British past, but adopts the unofficial history of each new immigrant and member. In return, Canada gains the identity – Halbwachs would say *cohesion* – it relentlessly sought for so long.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to note that suggesting Ondaatje's work endorses multiculturalism is not without an ironic twist. As Gillian Roberts has pointed out in her paper "Prizing the Nation: Canadian Writers and the Booker Prize," Ondaatje's Canadianness was actually contested (mostly outside of Canada) when he won – or rather shared – the Booker Prize for *The English Patient* in 1992. Some British review-

ers for instance seemed uncomfortable classifying Ondaatje as a Canadian. The *Financial Times* called him "a Sri Lankan poet, domiciled in Canada" (Roberts 2003, 3-4). Questions of his "true" nationality ensued. Victoria Cook holds that Ondaatje "could be said to exemplify [...] transnational identity" due to his "colonial background" that "enables him to explore, in depth, the conflicts and contradictions of the type of identity that incorporates a colonial past and a post-colonial present" (Cook 2004, 1). However, his transnationalism does not occlude his being Canadian. Reporting for the Toronto newspaper *Globe and Mail*, Charles Foran reiterates the concept of Canada's national identity that should without question include writers such as Ondaatje[16]: "It's like this [...]: choose Canada, and you are Canadian" (Foran qtd. in Roberts 2003, 8) – or, in terms of this paper, adopt Canada and you are Canadian. Admittedly, this is a very optimistic view of multiculturalism. As Roberts correctly points out: "such a declaration forgets that the nation-state of Canada is in the position of power when it comes to choices, that it has the power to invite immigrants within its borders and the power to reject them" (Roberts 2003, 8). Those immigrants deigned lucky enough to be welcomed in are then promptly told that they are not "just Canadian" but "South Asian-Canadian" or "Japanese-Canadian." They learn about the voyageurs and fur-trading but – despite their hyphenated identities – are not encouraged to talk about political rioting in India or the bombing of Hiroshima. If Canada honestly seeks to imagine a multicultural community, then its literature[17] needs to include all the stories significant to the identities of its citizens. It needs to abolish the hierarchy whereby "white" stories take primacy. Only

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16 Equally striking examples of other successful Canadian writers who initially suffered similar fates include Yann Martel, Rohinton Mistry, and Carol Shields. Since these internationally acclaimed writers were not born in Canada, critics appeared to have difficulty referring to them as Canadian writers. Born in Spain, Yann Martel, author of the Man Booker prize-winning *Life of Pi* (2001), is the son of two Canadians in foreign service who spent the majority of his childhood abroad. He now lives in Montreal. Carol Shields, best known for her Pulitzer prize-winning *The Stone Diaries* (1993), *Mary Swann* (1990) as well as many other successful and acclaimed novels, poetry collections and non-fiction, was born in the United States. She married a Canadian in 1957, began her career in Ottawa, and continued it in Winnipeg while raising five children. Rohinton Mistry, the Governor-General award-winner for *Such a Long Journey* (1991) among other novels and short stories, was born in India and immigrated to Canada in 1975. Interestingly, Mistry is still considered by Indians to be an Indian writer who is, according to the *Indobase* website, "presently settled in Canada." <www.indobase.com/indians-abroad/rohinton-misrty.html>. Theoretically, multiculturalism should not only allow, but also encourage, Mistry's inclusion in both canons and each nation's claim on him.

17 Canadian literature has always played a conspicuous role in substantiating the national identity. Because Canada has exploited, since the 1960s, its national canon as a representative of its ideology and identity, Canada's active attempts to rise above its marginality became evident when it began fostering the creation of a literary culture and institutionalised Canadian literature in schools and universities in the 1960s. A hastily assembled Canadian canon was meant to provide the nation with an identity. However, a revision is greatly needed to represent in the 21st century a Canadian literature that honestly reflects the constitutional multicultural state.

when all these stories are adopted under the rubric of Canadian literature will Canada live up to Ondaatje's model and become a multicultural "extended family."

Ondaatje articulated his interest in uncovering history's concealed stories in an interview:

> I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer. […] One of the things a novel can do is represent the unofficial story, give a personal, complicated version of things, as opposed to competing with the newspapers and giving an alternate but still simplified opinion, saying "No, this is right." I think a novel can become, in this way, a more permanent and political reflection of your time. (Bush 1994, 238-250, 247)

Ondaatje is hence concurring with Herodotus's view that rumours, myths and gossip are all an equally valuable part of history. As an author, he invents or manipulates histories in order to show that it is not bloodlines that matter, but the narratives one inherits. A history that disrupts the deterministic understanding of eighteenth-century history also disturbs the modern notion of the nineteenth-century nation-state. With the adoption of spatial history, a new concept of a nation needs to be formulated. The only chance appears to lie with a multicultural nation that can accommodate the multiple and overlapping histories of its various citizens. After defeating the French at the Plains of Abraham in 1759, Canada's history did not follow a direct path, a straight, progressive line through time. Canada did not become the "white" country it had initially planned to be. Canada's history is made up of interlinking, overlapping, interrelational histories belonging to a variety of peoples and cultures, each with its own story to tell, its own way to tell that story, and its own experience of Canada. Michael Ondaatje's characters are forensic scientists, explorers, archaeologists, and revolutionaries who turn over stones, bones or photographs in order to discover these untold stories. Through his metaphor of the extended family, as exemplified here in three of his novels, Ondaatje shows that adoption is about how and whom one chooses to love.

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