

Introduction to Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing

Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek
University of Halle-Wittenberg

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Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek,

"Preface to *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/1>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 6.3 (2004)**
Thematic Issue ***Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing***
Edited by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek
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Steven TÖTÖSY de ZEPETNEK

Introduction to *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*

Michael Ondaatje's work represents the best of contemporary Canadian literature in English and so with an international appeal with many of his works translated into several languages. In many ways a reflection of Canada's inclusive and multicultural society, it is not without significance that Ondaatje is an immigrant to Canada and that much of his writing is about identity, history, and about people of "in-between." Identity, whether that of an individual or that of a people, history, and hybridity are of great relevance in the age of globalization, disappearing borders, and the migration of people whether for economic, political, or other reasons. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why Ondaatje's texts raise much interest among readers of fiction as well as in scholarship and why his texts are of great relevance in today's world. It is a given that Ondaatje's poetry is lyrical; what is important is that his prose is also deeply poetic in content and, one could argue, also in form, and certainly so in language, and this view appears to be confirmed in several of the papers presented in this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/>>.

The theoretical basis of this thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* follows the aims and scope of the journal paradigmatically: Comparative cultural studies is a field of study where selected tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with selected tenets of the field of cultural studies meaning that the study of culture and culture products -- including but not restricted to literature, communication, media, art, etc. -- is performed in a contextual and relational construction and with a plurality of methods and approaches, interdisciplinarity, and, if and when advantageous, including team work. In comparative cultural studies it is the processes of communicative action(s) in culture and the how of these processes that constitute the main objectives of research and study. However, comparative cultural studies does not exclude textual analysis proper or other established fields of study. In comparative cultural studies, ideally, the framework of and methodologies available in the systemic and empirical study of culture are favored (see Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "From Comparative Literature Today Toward Comparative Cultural Studies." *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2002. 235-67, and "From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative Cultural Studies." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.3 (1999): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3/2/>>). The papers in the volume represent recent scholarship about Michael Ondaatje's work by scholars working in English-Canadian literature and culture in the context of comparative cultural studies. The abstracts of the papers in the volume explain the thematic cohesion of the volume, as follows.

Victoria Cook, in "Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/2>>, addresses issues of identity raised in the narrative of Michael Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost*. Cook's paper is a close analysis of Ondaatje's novel, paying particular attention to the way in which Ondaatje examines identity as both a "construct" and a "process." The approach used is one that draws on postcolonial theory and takes a "transnational" perspective. Cook argues that Ondaatje's text moves beyond the concept of a postcolonial literature of "resistance" into an area that requires a theory of process rather than product. Transnationalism is shown here to be just such a theory, in that it captures something of this fluidity: the analysis is underpinned, therefore, by the application of transnational theory, as put forward by critics such as Paul Giles. Names and naming are the main themes addressed in the course of this argument, with regard to the way in which they impacts on issues of identification. Finally, Cook explores in her paper issues of identity in *Anil's Ghost*, identity that traverses cultural and national boundaries and encompasses both central and marginal positions.

Beverly Curran argues in her paper, "Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Altered States of Narrative" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/3>> that Ondaatje reconfigures in his novel the "romantic" figure of the father/artist as a clandestine lover, a drug addict, or an eccentric translator, all figures with dependencies. In *The English Patient*, the father or artist's sense of source, continuity, or authority are translated into a narrative which rejects the perverse captivity demanded of the lover and the translator by fidelity or by the tenets of realistic representation. Using sex, drugs, and translation, Ondaatje deranges both time and space to reconfigure the role of the artist as a translator in an attempt to dislocate the "false rhapsody of art" or historical explanation and their authority and relocate the site of the story. Creation is less a preoccupation than contradiction and the consequences of choice in this novel, and instead of the textual strategies of realist narrative to "maintain self-other relations of dominance" to establish authority, Ondaatje applies translation to narrative in the novel so that, at the story's heart there is deferment, for a translation is never definitive.

Marlene Goldman suggests in her paper, "Representations of Buddhism in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/4>> that at first glance Ondaatje appears to promote the idea of a Sri Lankan Buddhist faith as transcending history. Ondaatje introduces the subject of Buddhism early on in the novel, emphasizing initially the devastation wrought by imperial and colonial forces. Goldman, however, argues that subsequent references to Buddhism undermine the initial portrayal of a religion besieged by external imperialist forces. For example, at

one point, the character Palipana refers to the assassination of his brother, Narada, a Buddhist monk. Narada was possibly the victim of a "political killing" and rumours suggest he was killed by a novice and thus his death recalls the historical connection between the JVP (termed "the antigovernment insurgents" in the novel) and young Buddhist monks. Goldman argues that rather than offering a sanitized account that ignores Buddhism's enmeshment in politics, Ondaatje's novel addresses the complex relationship between religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka.

Stephanie M. Hilger, in her paper "Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Rewriting History" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/5>>, situates the novel within the long-standing Western tradition of writing about the cultural "Other," from Herodotus to Michel de Montaigne to Rudyard Kipling. Michel de Certeau's notion of history serves as a reference point for the analysis of Ondaatje's presentation of the "English" patient's story as well as of twentieth-century history. Hilger argues that the protagonist's physical mutilation is a metonymic representation of post-World War II and postcolonial consciousness. In the same way that the characters in the novel attempt to understand the mystery that is the "English" patient, Ondaatje's readers are led on a search for the understanding of a brutal and fragmented reality. While the novel questions and undermines the opposition between the "civilized" and the "barbarian," Ondaatje also suggests that certain historical realities, such as the dropping of the atomic bomb, force characters into a binary that they have been trying to deconstruct throughout the narrative.

Hsuan Hsu, in his paper "Post-Nationalism and the Cinematic Apparatus in Minghella's Adaptation of Ondaatje's *The English Patient*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/6>>, discusses Anthony Minghella's cinematic version of Ondaatje's novel. In Hsu's view, Minghella and Ondaatje (Ondaatje collaborated on the film script) emphasize in the film the visual and social implications of mapmaking in order to align imperialism with the cinematic apparatus. While the film explores the workings of visual power, it also explores their adulteration by unmapped forces of desire: Almásy's and Katherine's adulterous relationship transgresses marital and national constraints, but also reinscribes them when Almásy desires to possess her body and Katherine dies immobilized looking at illuminated pictures in a cave. However, the film's narrative frame presents a more promising version of apparatus theory: Hana's relationship with Kip involves both a transnational way of loving and an "adulterated" way of seeing. Whereas nationalist ideology links knowledge to the notion of a disembodied and objective gaze, both the film's eroticism and its melodramatic evocation of tears remind us that vision is fundamentally embodied.

Glen Lowry, in his "The Representation of 'Race' in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/7>>, bases his discussion on the observation that critics tend to view Ondaatje's writing in terms of a progression towards complex issues of "race" and post-coloniality. In contrast, Lowry argues that the matter of "race" forms an integral aspect of Ondaatje's oeuvre and Lowry proposes that *In the Skin of a Lion* is a key site in the development of Ondaatje's engagement with issues of "race" and the cultural politics of post-coloniality. Focusing on Ondaatje's depiction of Toronto in terms of its complex history of shifting social spaces and his representation of Patrick and Caravaggio as "racialized" figures, Lowry discusses Ondaatje's engagement with whiteness as a social construct. Rather than critiquing Ondaatje's novel for an apparent absence of race-writing, i.e., writing about so-called "visible minorities," Lowry suggests that Ondaatje in fact "reverses the gaze" and throws the question of "race" back on the readers. Adding the figures of Patrick and Caravaggio to the writing of the city, *In the Skin of a Lion* undermines presumptions about the racial stability and hegemonic power of Toronto's and ethnic communities. Last, Lowry argues for a more thorough discussion of Ondaatje's critique of nationalism and multiculturalism vis-à-vis the cultural politics of reading and the construction of "whiteness."

Jon Saklofske, in his paper "The Motif of the Collector and History in Ondaatje's Work" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/8>>, recognizes that Ondaatje rescues Buddy Bolden from historical obscurity by elevating and complicating the musician's largely forgotten history with a self-conscious and largely fictional synthesis of memory and imagination. The liberties Ondaatje takes in *Coming Through Slaughter* with his subject to achieve this re-presentation and the ownership of the portrait that results exposes this type of authorial activity as a problematic appropriation. Saklofske suggests that to understand the implications of Ondaatje's activity it is useful to compare his efforts with Walter Benjamin's "collector" figure, who is both a selfish, destructive thief, and a careful preserver. As a collector, Ondaatje becomes the owner and an essential part of this transformed and personalised image of Bolden. Further, Saklofske argues that Ondaatje preserves Bolden's presence, actively confronts historical exclusivity, and interrupts his own authority over his subject. Although his interaction with actual historical figures decreases with successive novels, Ondaatje's personal encounter with the impersonal machine of history continues, asserting itself repeatedly as a successful strategy against destructiveness or authoritative exclusion.

Sandeep Sanghera, in her "Touching the Language of Citizenship in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/9>>, discusses questions which make Ondaatje's novel a text about postmodern identity: who is this woman Anil who lives mostly in the West, travels on a British passport, works for an international organization, and no longer has any real ties to her first home? In the paper, these questions are examined via the languages Anil adopts and abandons in the novel. Sanghera elaborates on the question of foreign-ness represented by the protagonist of the novel; however, this foreign-ness is examined in the particular context concerning the substance of family and kinship as well as language and nation. Sanghera's analysis

represents the questions and thoughts of readers who are themselves migrants between languages and homes.

Winfried Siemerling argues in his "Oral History and the Writing of the Other in Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/10>> that the simulation of oral narratives in *In the Skin of a Lion* imagines the conveyance of oral histories of immigrant experiences obscured by historiography. The narrative device of simulated orality -- the written text casts itself as the outcome of serial story-telling -- serves here to introduce erstwhile anonymous societal actors as makers of history, and emphasizes the collective production of story and history. Oral narratives emerge dreamlike like light out of darkness in this text; yet light, like writing, creates a problematic visibility whose multiple sources must be acknowledged. A critique of previous writing of history, *In the Skin of a Lion* "betrays" in both senses of the word history, silence, and darkness -- by imagining necessary possibilities and necessarily omitting others. The interdependence of orality and writing and of darkness and visibility evokes in the novel the romantic valorization of darkness that inverts the classical metaphor of light as purveyor of truth. Yet, this interdependence also critiques orality: articulations of history and the "survival" of events have to cope with the lacunae created by writing and with the hazardous transmissions and temporalities of orality. The title of *In the Skin of a Lion* evokes the *Epic of Gilgamesh* intertextually, whose eponymous hero fails to achieve immortality because of his inability of staying awake several nights. Similarly, the oral narratives Patrick Lewis collects and conveys throughout the novel almost remain in darkness when he falls asleep at a critical moment. The "immortality" of these narratives and their silenced subjects is assured only by a listener who later keeps the speaker awake in the night, and the stories alive in a conversation that sees the light of day in a written text and its simulation of oral history.

In the last paper of this thematic issue, Eluned Summers-Bremner pursues in "Reading Ondaatje's Poetry" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/11>> a psychoanalytic reading of Ondaatje's poetry based on Lacan's thought, highlighting occasions where nature and culture meet. Focusing on the volumes *Secular Love* and *The Man with Seven Toes*, Summers-Bremner explores how nature's troubled regions are navigated through the structural estrangement of looking for a name. In Lacanian terms, a proper name signals the contradiction of one's belonging to a biological or other kind of family, whence one's name often arises, and being a user or respondent of language, which produces meaning through its infringement or exceeding of its users' intentions, language being prototypically Other or alienating in this sense. Ondaatje's poetry engages nature continually, in a dynamically architectonic fashion, as a world at once embodied and infused with cultural and linguistic losses, a field of structural liminality whose correlatives are memory, love, and desire. The poetry's engagement of nature in the guise of a reading -- as of a letter, code, or name -- puts loss, as does psychoanalysis, in its proper context as the enabler which drives reading and writing subjectivity as a colloquy with these other terms.

The papers in this thematic issue are followed by a selected bibliography of scholarship about Ondaatje's texts <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/12>>

and a list of Ondaatje's published texts <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol6/iss3/13>>. It is hoped that the work presented here -- with the objective to render appreciation of both Ondaatje's writing and thought about his writing -- will prove useful to readers, critics, and scholars alike. This thematic issue of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* is published also in a hard-copy volume, *Comparative Cultural Studies and Michael Ondaatje's Writing*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. Purdue Books in Comparative Cultural Studies 6 <<http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/ccs-purdue.html>>. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>>, 2005. ISBN 1-55753-378-4. 147 pages, bibliography, index, concurrently Annual 3 (2004) of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>: Orders to <<http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>> or 1-800-247-6553. In the hard-copy volume, see also the updated version of Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's "Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, 'History,' and the Other," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 1.4 (1999): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4/8/>>.

Last but not least I thank Joe Pivato -- chair of the Department of English at Athabasca University, noted scholar of Canadian ethnic minority writing Canada, and editor of the Canadian Writers series of Guernica Editions (Toronto) -- for his interest and support and who invited me in 2001 to publish this collected volume in his series. Unfortunately, for undisclosed reasons after the volume has been complete with papers I selected after a widely advertised call for papers and edited, typeset, and advertised since 2002, Guernica Editions decided to abandon the volume. Thus it comes that the volume is now published online in *CLCWeb* and in hard copy in the Purdue series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies I am series editor of. I apologize to the contributors of the volume for the undue length of seeing their work published. At the same time, the volume published by Purdue serves the topic of the volume, Michael Ondaatje's work, perhaps better, indeed, owing to the internationalization of a prominent Canadian author.