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## **CLCWeb Volume 6 Issue 3 (September 2004) Article 2**

**Victoria Cook,**

### **"Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*"**

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#### **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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**Abstract:** Victoria Cook, in "Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*," 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 impact 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.

## Victoria COOK

### Exploring Transnational Identities in Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

Michael Ondaatje could be said to exemplify the type of transnational identity that provides the focus for this paper. Born to Dutch parents, in what was then Ceylon and is now Sri Lanka, his family ancestry has been described as a polyglot mixture of Dutch, English, Sinhalese, and Tamil; his paternal grandfather was a wealthy tea planter in Kegalle. At the age of ten, Ondaatje was sent to a public school, Dulwich College in London and at nineteen followed his older brother, Christopher, to Canada, where he took citizenship, went to university, married, and began his writing career. As a product of this somewhat "colonial" background, Ondaatje's position 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. Complex cultural backgrounds such as that of Ondaatje may be seen frequently to instigate a literature of dislocation and displacement. His latest novel, *Anil's Ghost*, provides an examination of identity reflective of the cultural clashes that are an inevitable consequence of such an interweaving of nationalities, histories, and border divisions. In his discussion in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha states that "the very concepts of homogenous national cultures ... are in a profound process of redefinition ... there is overwhelming evidence of a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities" (5). Bhabha's work mirrors the cultural diaspora that is a result of the contemporary move towards internationalism. His reference to "imagined communities" echoes the title of Benedict Anderson's influential book of the same name, and opens up the possibility of "nation" and "nationalism" as being constructed modes of identification.

Ondaatje explores the notion of nationality as just such a construct and examines the roles played by syncretism and hybridity through the discourse of *Anil's Ghost*. This is a novel that moves beyond interpretation as a post-colonial literature of "resistance" to challenge traditional perceptions of "Self" and "Other," incorporating and transgressing boundaries in a way that invites interrogation from a transnational perspective. As long ago as 1916, the American intellectual Randolph Bourne wrote a piece entitled "Trans-National America." In it Bourne urges his readers to reject the "melting pot" metaphor, which he says will result in a culture that is "washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity" (1736): he envisages instead a world in which a variety of cultures co-exist, "inextricably mingled, yet not homogeneous. They merge but they do not fuse" (1737). This approach -- very similar to the concept of multiculturalism in Canada -- defies ascription to any one national culture, thus rendering it applicable in the context of Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, in respect of the influence of acculturation on Ondaatje's construction of identity.

The central character of the novel, Anil Tissera, is a female forensic pathologist: born in Sri Lanka and educated in the West, she returns to the country for the first time in fifteen years to investigate "unknown extrajudicial executions" (18) on behalf of the United Nations -- working with a local archaeologist Sarath Diyasena. Their discovery of a recently interred skeleton in an ancient burial ground points to a government killing, a fact that places them both in danger, but despite this Anil is determined to identify the skeleton she has nicknamed "Sailor." Closer examination of Ondaatje's construction of Anil Tissera raises a number of points, such as: she is Westernized; she has an adopted masculine name, which we learn she "bought" for herself from her brother; she is a scientist and spokesperson for the United Nations -- a combination of factors which render her the antithesis of Gayatri Spivak's "subaltern woman." From a post-colonial perspective, hers is a voice that not only breaks the silence previously imposed by an Imperialist discourse, but also speaks for those silenced by the neo-colonialist ideology that Ondaatje exposes in his examination of the war in Sri Lanka. The language of transnationalism, which Ondaatje speaks through Anil, incorporates the contradictions and paradoxes that are displayed in human and cultural diversity.

Sophia A. McClennen suggests that "transnationalism renders the borders of a nation insignificant" (*The Dialectics of Exile* 30). Also Robert Gross considers there to be a need for

"transnational thinking" (384) in a world where "intellectually, people cross borders as they please" (390) and national identity is no longer seen as single and unified: he describes a global culture that becomes "increasingly a transnational *mélange*" (392). In the character of Anil Tissera, Ondaatje inscribes a cultural formation that could, in many ways, be described as postmodern, in that she transgresses the conventional notions of identity and boundaries of gender and position. However, neither a postmodern, nor a postcolonial perspective or indeed the point of intersection between, is sufficient to encompass the multivalent integration of ideologies and cultures that form the fluid whole that is Anil Tissera. Hers is, more accurately, a transnational perspective; she does indeed cross and re-cross many ideological boundaries, but she does so as a migrant returning to her once colonial homeland. This is not to say that Anil is empty of any national identity at all, but rather that her multiculturalism demonstrates the possibility of a fundamental parity between various nationalist discourses, ascribing multivalency to each of the cultures she encounters. The examination of Ondaatje's work from a transnational approach uncovers some of the clashes that occur between national cultures and the ambivalence inherent in a multicultural identity such as that of Anil's.

The character of Anil Tissera occupies a "dis-located" position, in terms of her name, her nationality and her family; in problematizing notions of individual identity, Ondaatje explores the concept of "Self" as something constructed, and yet whole and realizable. In other words, Ondaatje reveals Anil's transnational nature as being a continually changing mixture of a variety of cultures, which incorporates, encompasses and contains various fragments in one unified being. He examines anxieties about the way in which we construct our own personal identity in terms of name, language and culture. Robert Kroetsch describes the problem of identity as "not so much that of knowing one's identity as it is that of how to relate that newly evolving identity to its inherited or 'given' names. And the first technique might be simply to hold those names in suspension, to let the identity speak itself out of a willed namelessness" ("No" 51). For Ondaatje, it appears that it is possible, indeed necessary, to move beyond fixed expressions of identification in order to perceive of identity in terms of a process of construction. Frank Schulze-Engler speaks of "a veritable maze of globalized spaces in-between -- not between the 'West' and 'the rest', however, but between innumerable intertwined histories that ... at one stage or another -- have all been caught up in modernity and yet have produced a unique reality of their own" ("Changing" 13). Ondaatje focuses in his work on the complications that arise from just such a multicultural reality, exposing the gaps, but also providing structures of contact and exchange that confront the interwoven nature of an increasingly syncretized and hybridized global community. His voice is one of those involved in re-defining the boundaries, speaking from beyond preconceptions of "the Other" and "writing back" to "the West," and reconfiguring the "postcolonial" perspective into one of "transnationalism." *Anil's Ghost* provides a forum for the expression of a range of cultural identities -- one in which the postcolonial voice does not simply speak from the margins, but is represented as an integrated component of a transnational identity.

Kroetsch suggests that "it is possible that the old obsessive notion of identity, of ego, is itself a spent fiction" ("Unhiding" 63), and for Ondaatje this does indeed appear to be so. He calls into question the possibility of a definitive view of identity or identification, and denies the fixity of identity that is inscribed in the neo-colonial action of naming. As Stuart Hall points out, "identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point" (16). For Ondaatje identity -- either personal or public, individual or national -- is always provisional and shifting; his work continually crosses and re-crosses the boundaries between real and fictional identification. The characters of *Anil's Ghost* are often placed between these lines of demarcation in liminal zones of namelessness and placelessness, becoming situated paradoxically by their position as "dis-located." Clearly, names and namelessness are central to Ondaatje's problematizing of identity: he points out in the acknowledgements section of his semi-autobiographical work, *Running in the Family*, that the use of names "may give an air of authenticity" (206). In other words, names are capable of providing verification; they have the power to distinguish, substantiate and confirm, and above all they confer identity and establish identification. To be named, therefore, is to belong, to be located: Rocio Davis comments that "not to know and belong to a family or have a

role in history is to be denied the very basis of identity" (267). Ondaatje confronts this denial of the foundations of identity when he examines the plight of 'the disappeared' through the text of *Anil's Ghost*. Anil feels that by attempting to establish the identity of the skeleton "Sailor" and find the family to whom he belongs, she will be locating all those who Sailor represents: "who was this skeleton? ... This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (56). In this sense to be nameless is, indeed, to be without an identity, a "lost voice" that must be "called" back into existence. "Sailor" is representative of all who cannot name themselves and who rely on others to locate them, or call them into being. Some of the implications of naming in relation to identity are foregrounded in Anil's defiant act of self-naming. Anil was not the name given to her by her parents, but one that she acquired for herself from her brother:

She had been given two entirely inappropriate names and very early began to desire "Anil" which was her brother's unused second name. She had tried to buy it from him when she was twelve years old, offering to support him in all family arguments. He would not commit himself to the trade though he knew she wanted the name more than anything else. ... Finally the siblings worked out a trade between them. ... After that she allowed no other first names on her passports or school reports or application forms. Later when she recalled her childhood, it was the hunger of not having that name and the joy of getting it that she remembered most. Everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its feminine air, even though it was considered a male name. Twenty years later she felt the same about it. She'd hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way. (67-68)

For Ondaatje, names and identities are not fixed entities, but cultural and ideological constructions. Through choosing a new name for herself, Anil takes on a new identity; she becomes a "stranger" to her past "self" -- to the person she was before she became "Anil." We are not told the name she was known by for the first twelve years of her life. In fact, prior to becoming Anil, she remains un-identified; missing a name, she is akin to the nameless skeleton "Sailor." In acquiring her name Anil ruptures the boundary between "Self" and "Other." She does not merely take on a new mask or disguise, but is recreated, defining herself through the trade with her brother. It is significant that Anil does not choose a name at random; rather she desires one that she already has a relationship with, one that belongs both to her brother and to the grandfather she has never known. Anil's gesture is not only one that asserts her independence, but it is also a liberating and self-creating action that affirms her identification with her ancestry, and assimilates her origins into her new persona. Furthermore, it 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. From a transnational perspective Ondaatje constructs Anil's personal identity as one that defines the individual in terms of a "state" of "self-hood"; thus the private persona stands as a figurative representation of nation, and as such individual identity is subject to the effects of transnationalism.

In the struggle to gain her chosen identity, Anil trades that which she possesses, confirming that there is a price in the liberation from "other" into "self-hood." However, this deal is negotiated and agreed by both parties; her brother gains "one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favor he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse" (68). It is clear from this quotation that this exploration of identity through the acquisition of a name has other complex elements of transgression; for example, there are indications of incest, and the challenging of constructions of gender. Anil, after all, "was considered a male name" (68) and perhaps reflects a "masculine" side to her identity that is revealed further in her choice of a career as a forensic scientist, one that is also seen as predominantly masculine. Anne McClintock suggests that in imperial terms naming is a "male prerogative" (26), and that in colonial discourse "the world is feminized and spatially spread for male exploration ... explorers called unknown lands 'virgin' territory" (23-24): she points out that by "naming 'new' lands, male imperials mark them as their own" (29). As such, Ondaatje blurs the boundaries of gender in his construction of the character of Anil Tissera; by naming herself, she claims the territory of her identity, her own "state" of self-hood, in what can be construed as not only a neo-colonial, but also a gendered, masculine, action.

Anil abjures the position of Spivak's gendered subaltern through her rejection of an imposed cultural identity and the traditional role of the colonial female. Instead she claims a syncretic gender construction that assumes both male and female traits, and is transnational in nature, in that her individual "state" includes characteristics from areas that are traditionally constructed as *either* masculine *or* feminine. Thus, the concept of Anil's gendered self is one that is multiple, contradictory and fragmented in nature: in the novel, Anil makes it a point to "distinguish female and male traits as clearly as possible" (137) in her work; she loves "being one of the boys" (147) and yet also appreciates that being a woman makes her "better at dealing with calamity in professional work than men" (137). In terms of gender, Ondaatje bestows on Anil "the peculiar freedoms of ambiguity rather than the fixity of one identity" (McClintock 174). This is reflected in the fact that, in the business deal to secure the purchase of her name, Anil's behavior is predominantly stereotypically masculine, and yet part of the price she pays is a "sexual favor" that her brother demands. This act of prostitution on Anil's part serves to underline her subordinate female status prior to gaining her name, but it also reveals an ancient form of feminist resistance to patriarchal control: by bartering her sexual services for profit (her desired name), Anil gains a measure of economic power and independence.

As I mentioned earlier, Ondaatje posits here the possibility of an incestuous relationship between brother and sister, one which may be usefully examined from the perspective of transnationalism. In order to do this, it is necessary to first consider the relationship between nation and gender. McClintock points out that the etymology of the word "nation" reveals it as stemming from *natio*: to be born, and that discussion regarding nations frequently centers on the semantic field of the familial and the domestic. She describes how we often refer to our "homeland" and speak of nations in terms of "motherlands" or "fatherlands," we say that foreigners "adopt" a new country and in Britain matters to do with immigration are dealt with by the "Home Office" (357). Paul Gilroy also discusses how "gender differences" are "extremely important in nation-building"; in fact he says, "it can be a nation only if the correct version of gender hierarchy has been established" (127). Anil can be seen to have adopted both male and female traits and, therefore, in her construction of a transnational identity, to incorporate the possibilities of both "motherland" and "fatherland" and their colonial offspring. Taking the trope of nation as familial and gendered one step further, Gilroy examines the relationship between "diaspora" and "masculinism" and points out that there is a "close etymological relationship between the word diaspora and the word sperm" (126). However, he also states that the alternative "family term" for diaspora is the word "spore" which allows for an "asexual" method of reproduction, and he confirms that "diaspora can be used to conjure up both" (127). In the gendered "family" of nation, then, the reproductive possibilities of diaspora may be seen to inseminate nation with nation to produce a hybridized cultural identity; or to reproduce asexually, through a process of fission from the originating culture, which results in the syncretism that is an essential part of transnationalism. The incestuous act between Anil and her brother may therefore be seen in the light of the conception of a new transnational identity, one that is not prohibited from inter-relationship by any barrier or taboo.

Further, Gayle Rubin argues that according to the work of Lévi-Strauss, the prohibition of incest ensures that sisters, daughters and mothers must be given in marriage, and thus creates a "wide network of relations" (173), a group of people who are connected together by a "kinship structure" (174): moreover as a result, "the incest taboo and the results of its application constitute the origin of culture, and is a prerequisite of culture" (176). Therefore she concludes that in order to succeed, "the feminist program must include a task even more onerous than the extermination of men; it must attempt to get rid of culture and substitute some entirely new phenomena on the face of the earth" (176). As Rubin concedes herself, it is neither probable nor feasible that there will be an eradication of culture (or indeed of either men or women); however, Ondaatje demonstrates the possibility of -- if not removing -- at least transcending or breaching the divisions and boundaries between cultures. He does this by establishing the notion of identity as a process that involves continual cultural syncretism and hybridity, and by substituting the outmoded idea of a fixed cultural identity with the emerging concept of one that is truly

transnational. The cultural anthropologist, David Schneider, in his book *American Kinship*, argues that in American culture, any sexual act outside of the "husband-wife relationship is defined as "morally, and in some cases, legally, wrong"; he states that "between blood relatives such an act is "incest and prohibited" (38). Although this argument relates specifically to "Western" American, culture, it is applicable here in that Anil's transnational identity incorporates her complicity with the West. By making an incestuous act a prerequisite for the purchase of Anil's name, Ondaatje indicates that the origination of her transnationalism is the breaking of a taboo; to become transnational involves the transgression of the boundaries that differentiate between us and them, insider and outsider, national and international.

Ramón Gutiérrez suggests that to have American nationality one must either be "born into the nation (the order of nature)" or enter it "through a legal process (the order of law) and become citizens through a process we call 'naturalisation' he confirms that "nature and law thus create citizens" (255). Ondaatje demonstrates that a transnational identity, such as that of Anil Tissera's, is not created through either "nature" or "law but comes into being outside of the accepted order that is required for belonging to a single nationality. In order to gain transnational "citizenship Anil moves beyond the traditional modes of national identification. As a "Trans-national" then, Anil provides a figurative representation of the feminized nature of the land as an object of desire, the "earth mother"; and in taking possession of a male name she also subsumes something of the patriarchal role: "she'd hunted down the desired name like a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way" (68). In his book of poetry, *Handwriting*, Ondaatje describes "the way someone's name holds terraces of character, contains all of our adventures together" (55). Anil's name, her demand to define herself within and through that name, to name herself, reflects this poetic representation; viewed from a transnational notion of syncretism, her name "holds" her character. In this context it is significant that Anil has a fascination with names: her favorite rock star is "The Artist Formerly Known As?" (37), a celebrity who replaced his name with a symbol; and her questioning of her lover, Cullis, reveals that his middle name is Biggles, "as in *Biggles Flies East* and *Biggles Wets His Bed?*" (37). These two book titles, one genuine and one obviously fictitious, may be seen as indicative of some of Cullis's characteristics; the true title, *Biggles Flies East*, alludes to Cullis's involvement with Anil, while the invented one not only connotes him as being false and untruthful in nature, but also evokes a sense of childishness and insecurity. Here Ondaatje's problematizing of identity through naming takes on a playful irony in terms of a postcolonial, or more particularly a transnational perspective. "Anil had courted foreignness" (54) both literally and figuratively in her affair with Cullis Biggles Wright, named (as Anil points out) after the central protagonist "Biggles" from the series of books by Captain W.E. Johns: these are boys' adventure stories which were very popular in the early part of the twentieth century.

Cullis's namesake "Biggles" is a stereotypical representation of an English pilot and hero who fights for his country in the First World War: Anil's association with Cullis therefore represents her ambivalent relationship with the West, in that she conducts a relationship with him and appreciates some of his qualities, but at the same time she refuses to be controlled or contained by him. Ironically it is Anil who constructs her own identity in the rejection of her original name and the appropriation of her new one; Cullis, on the other hand, accepts the identity given to him by his parents -- he is named Biggles as his "dad grew up on his books" (37). Ondaatje's reversal of the roles of colonizer and colonized is one that demonstrates the way in which power and control are no longer necessarily negotiated in line with traditional hierarchies and systems of authority. Anil and Cullis can be seen, therefore, to form a transnational relationship, which bears further analysis in that it spans the cultural delineation between East and West. Ondaatje empowers Anil through a transnational identity that encompasses both Western order and Eastern disorder; her Western proclivity towards naming and appropriation, and Eastern passion and impulsiveness leave her free to plunder Cullis both physically and emotionally. Cullis's lack of freedom is implied in the "carefulness" and worry that he wears as protective "clothing which Anil attempts to "strip off" and "unbuckle" (263-64). The car in which he sits and his marriage, stand as metaphors for the constraints imposed on Cullis by a fixed cultural identity, boundaries that

Anil's transnationalism has no difficulty in transgressing. In the self-construction of her identity, Anil is complicit, then, in allowing herself to be "colonized" by Western culture. However, in exploring the effect of acculturation on individual identity, Ondaatje exposes some of the dichotomies between Eastern and Western cultures in the conflicts that Anil experiences. Anil's brief, unsuccessful marriage to a Sri Lankan whilst studying in England is a significant episode in this context. Her husband is a controlling and jealous character: "at first this presented itself as sexual jealousy, then she saw it as an attempt to limit her research and studies. It was the first handcuff of marriage, and it almost buried her" (144). Anil's treatment of her marriage "as something illicit that deeply embarrassed her" (144) is paralleled in her subjugation of her Eastern cultural identity in favor of the West. However, Ondaatje highlights acculturation as being an evolutionary process, rather than a product, in Anil's subsequent return to Sri Lanka. It is notable that Anil's husband remains nameless throughout the narrative and after the marriage is over Anil "would never say his name out loud" (144). By refusing to name her husband, Anil erases him from the cartography of her life in an action reminiscent of the imperial map-makers that Ondaatje refers to in his mimetic reproduction of the *National Atlas of Sri Lanka* (39). The "extract" from the Atlas concludes " *There are pages of isobars and altitudes. There are no city names? There are no river names. No depiction of human life*" (40-41). Here Ondaatje exposes the map as an usurpative imperialist tool, which may name "a territory into existence while simultaneously making the native population invisible" (Renger 112): the suggestion being that naming, like mapping, is an act of "cognitive appropriation" that has "never been innocent" (Jacobs 4). The effacement of her husband contrasts strongly with Anil's desire to name the skeleton of the Sri Lankan victim that she calls "Sailor." Thus in the action of naming, in Anil's emulation of imperial methods of control, Ondaatje demonstrates the construction of an individual's transnational identity as being one of transgression, process, and fluidity.

In conclusion, through his novel *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje problematizes notions of either individual or national identity as being fixed and immutable, adopting instead a perspective that considers such boundaries as both flexible and permeable. It is possible to conclude that Ondaatje offers a tri-phasic model of the process of acculturation, as examined through the construction of Anil Tissera's personal and cultural identity. Anil is initially dependent upon the cultural and individual identity given to her by her parents; however, she moves into an independent phase signaled by her desire for another name and her adoption of a different culture. Finally, Anil moves into the third phase of interdependency, when she returns to Sri Lanka developing a multicultural perspective that is transnational rather than global or universal in its construction.

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