

Becoming Pluricultural in Ondaatje's *Oronsay*

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The *Oronsay* is a ship featured in two novels by Michael Ondaatje that explores the difficulties and promise of pluriculturalism: his most recent book, *The Cat's Table* (2011), and *Anil's Ghost* (2000). The protagonists in both texts, born in Ceylon, begin the process of becoming transnational and pluricultural aboard this ship – but in radically different circumstances. In *The Cat's Table*, eleven-year-old Michael is shipped off, like a parcel, from Colombo to England, to rejoin the mother who left him behind three or four years before. His *Oronsay* is a luxury liner at the height of its glory, a floating “castle,” “better lit than any town or village” in his country (*TCT* 4). Although temporarily mobilized during World War II, it has resumed its normal function of connecting East and West, the colony with the imperial metropolis (in the boy's case, a twenty-one day journey in late August / early September 1954, less than two years before the Suez Canal crisis). But Ondaatje's reader has seen this ship's future before: in *Anil's Ghost*, a book probing the Sri Lankan civil war of the late 1980s, the ship is then a land-locked, rusted, vermin-infested makeshift laboratory used by the Western-trained forensic pathologist Anil Tissera and her state-appointed partner, the anthropologist Sarath Diasena. Sent by the Geneva-based Centre for Human Rights to investigate the government's possible involvement in “organized campaigns of murder on the island” (*AG* 16), Anil begins and ends her mission in the ship's hold, holding the bones of one of the countless victims of ethnic violence.

Michael's *Oronsay* constitutes what Michel Foucault would call a heterotopia, a real space that represents, contests, and inverts all other

spaces produced by established relations of power and knowledge (“Different Spaces” 178-9). The floating “castle” juxtaposes and correlates such heterogeneous zones and figures as Sir Hector da Silva, the knight ensconced with his entourage in a palatial suite in Emperor Class, and the convict Niemeyer chained in his “small jail” and his guards; elaborate costume balls in first class and performances on deck by a “small rural [Indian] circus” (TCT 180); a secret garden in the hold, awash in colour and poison; films about imperial desert adventures; cut-throat bridge games, sports tournaments, and lecture series; scholars and spies, musicians who have “hit the skids” and pickpockets on the prow; the officers and privileged few enjoying the Captain’s table and a rag-tag, international group of adults and three boys assigned to the Cat’s Table. The latter term, which denotes the least privileged place and alludes to the expression “even a cat can look at a king,” was invented by the character Miss Perinetta Lasqueti, who seems to be all about the “twenty or thirty pigeons” she is transporting and the cheap detective fiction she ravenously consumes, but is rumoured to have “often been seen in the corridors of Whitehall” (TCT 75). It’s all about perspective.

For all of its potential, heterotopia is a concept with a curious history in Foucault’s writings – broached three times in close succession, then dropped abruptly.¹ It emerges in laughter: the Preface to *The Order of Things* (1966) claims that the writer was provoked to elaborate his *Archaeology of the Human Sciences* by an incongruous list of animals in Luis Borges’s fiction, which caused “the laugh that shakes... all the familiarities of thought – of our thought, one that is our age and [has] our geography” (xv).² At this juncture, Foucault conceives of heterotopia as a property of language that can detach cultural codes from their relations of power by making visible the contingency and variability of their accepted truths. Whereas utopias provide “consolation”

¹ For an outline of how the term has been used and adapted, see Daniel Defert, “‘Hétérotopie’: tribulations d’un concept” (2009) and Arun Saldanha, “Heterotopia and structuralism” (2008).

² Our translation of “le rire qui secoue à sa lecture toutes les familiarités de la pensée – de la nôtre: de celle qui a notre âge et notre géographie” (*Les mots* 7).

through idealizing *fabula*, heterotopias unsettle the grounds of such myths, “desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks” (*Order* xviii/10). Constituting a “median region” between “the already ‘encoded’ eye” of common knowledge and the “reflexive knowledge” of science and philosophy, heterotopias manifest the raw experience of order as such, in “the non-place” of language (*Order* xxi, xvii / 12-13).³ By December of the same year, however, during a radio broadcast on *France-Culture*, Foucault reformulates heterotopia to mean actual spaces, counter-emplacements rather than counter-discourses. Again, heterotopias work to destabilize the grounds of established order, but do so now by juxtaposing several spaces or times in a single location. The concept has become so malleable as to include a parental bed that children happily invade at playtime as well as a garden or a cemetery; a theatre, a cinema, a sauna, but also a prison and an asylum; a Club Med hideaway and a retirement home. Foucault’s list is almost as incongruous as Borges’, yet heterotopia is to be the object of a new science, the philosopher insists: heterotopology.

Three months later, while addressing the Architectural Studies Circle, he refuses the status of science for heterotopology but maintains the importance of such a “systematic description” of different spaces that instantiate a “contestation, both mythical and real, of the space in which we live” (“Different Spaces” 179). This overly general concept of heterotopia, one which uneasily straddles epistemology, phenomenology, and empiricism, then disappears from Foucault’s texts, yet its main characteristics (spatio-temporal distribution, visibility, processes of contestation and transformation) continue to shape his historically-specific investigations. One could argue, for example, that *The Order of Things* performs a heterotopic critique of the human sciences. But for Foucault, the heterotopia *par excellence* is the ship, that “piece of floating space, a place without place, living by itself, closed onto itself,

³ Not until Foucault connects domains of knowledge to relations of power in the mid-1970s, in lectures, interviews, and in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), will concepts such as codes and essences be superseded by the more historically inflected “power-knowledge.”

free in a way, but fatally delivered to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from red light district to red light district, from broadside to broadside, goes as far as the colonies to look for the most precious [goods] that they have hidden in those oriental gardens.... [The ship] has been simultaneously the greatest economic instrument and our greatest reserve of imagination" (*Le corps* 36; our translation).

The following paper analyzes how Ondaatje's fiction not only explores spaces of dissension and defamiliarization, but does so through discursive practices that can themselves be described as heterotopic. Books such as *The Cat's Table* and *Anil's Ghost* constitute experimental "experiences" that temporarily include the reader in other spaces of comprehension that foster altered subject positions and new elaborations of the self (*EW* 3: 239, 243). In other words, his heterotopias are both place and process, the effect of his methods; they disrupt traditional reading patterns and sympathies, and reposition readers in what Foucault terms a "field of virtual work" (*DE* 4: 414).

In *The Cat's Table*, the boy begins his maritime journey unmarked, new, as "green as he could be about the world" (*TCT* 3) – or so states the dissembling narrator, who invites the reader to "try to imagine who the boy on the ship was. Perhaps a sense of self was not even there... in this green grasshopper or little cricket, as if he has been smuggled away accidentally, with no knowledge of the act, into the future" (*TCT* 4). Yet, soon the reader knows otherwise. As the narrative exposes, Michael is the product of middle-class parents who neglect and abandon him to the care of servants, who in turn introduce him to the rich and varied textures of the island and his ethnic community. These "essential and affectionate guides" bring Michael to "question the world [he] supposedly belonged to. They opened doors for [him] into another world" (*TCT* 55). At school, he is subjected to the colonizing forces of imperialist education, examined, judged, and classified on his knowledge of "pounds and shillings," "how many men were on the Oxford rowing team and who had lived at a place called Dove Cottage" (*TCT* 39-40) – and he is punished and caned for the slightest failing or infraction. At play, someone's idea of masculinity and character

is instilled by *Boy's Own* adventure books and his cousin Emily's record collection (TCT 6, 11). Thus, up until the journey, his subjectivity is compartmentalized, managed, "trained" into a carefully governed "cautiousness" (TCT 12, 10). Within the heterotopic space of the *Oronsay*, however, "there was the chance to escape all order" for the youths; as the narrator reveals, "I reinvented myself in this seemingly imaginary world" (TCT 13). Determined to "do at least one thing that was forbidden" each day (TCT 25), "Mynah" (as his friends call him) transforms himself in heterotopic spaces of their own fashioning. The turbine room becomes "a permanent headquarters" where "the *Oronsay* tribe – irresponsible and violent" (TCT 52, 88, 132) can plan adventures. Creeping along "the narrow struts above the false ceiling of the ballroom" or crouching in lifeboats with the loot that they pirate from first class, the boys spy on adults and struggle to discern patterns and meaning in their behaviour (TCT 61). Yet, the narrator explains, "We were never sure of what we were witnessing, so that our minds were half grabbing the rigging of adult possibility" (TCT 52). Why would a man silently "move the strap" of a woman's dress or quietly slit the throat of a tailor (TCT 52, 236)?

Happily, willfully, the boys grab hold of every opportunity to embrace the pleasures of knowing, diving into what Mikhail Bakhtin terms *beteroglossia*, the irreducible diversity of discursive practices. Mr. Fonseka, who will soon be teaching literature to schoolboys in the industrial north of that other island, England, shares his transnational literacy: "his manner and accent were a product of the island, but at the same time he had this wide-ranging knowledge of books" (TCT 58). With a surname that recalls both a Spanish students' ballad, and the famous contemporary Ceylonese essayist, "He'd sing a song from the Azores or recite lines from an Irish play" by heart (TCT 58).⁴ Miss Lasqueti

⁴ Joseph Peter de Fonseka (1897-1948) was a Sri Lankan editor and essayist who was trained as a lawyer but preferred to teach English literature (St. Joseph's Catholic College, Ceylon) and write humorous, trenchant essays in the style of G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Fonseka too was a Catholic apologist. Thus the empire is inscribed in the name of the figure young Michael admires. The surname also recalls a Spanish folk song popular with students:

is “the only one from the Cat’s Table who was able to force us out of ourselves in order to imagine another’s life” (TCT 74). Mr. Mazappa, “half Sicilian, half something else” (TCT 29), lavishes stories of love and duels, and “regale[s]” them “with confusing and often obscene lyrics from songs he knew” (TCT 9) – then abruptly, without explanation, jumps ship at Port Said. But – heterotopias are *not* utopias. Mazappa’s lessons about the “formal and luxurious tone of a clarinet” or a “surprising and fatal rhyme” also carry lessons in misogyny that go unchallenged and remain “hidden in us like a stone-hard truth” (TCT 32, 30). When Flavia Prins, the friend of a friend who promised to keep an eye on Michael, summons him to the First Class lounge and tells him what to wear for the occasion, she is literally teaching him to know his place (TCT 7). When Baron C. feeds him cakes and delicious tea, it is to lure him into thievery – however good-natured the game of slipping into cabins is made to seem. When Larry Daniels the botanist guides them through “the hollow and mysterious world of the hold” to experience the garden’s “field of colours” (TCT 173, 47), he introduces them to the wonders and the dangers of plants, supplying them with betel, the mild narcotic so popular in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia that soon inspires new adventures. It is Mr. Nevil, however, the “large and gentle” engineer and ship dismantler, who teaches Michael – and the reader – the painful lesson that “nothing was permanent, not even an ocean liner,” yet “anything can have a new life, be reborn. ... You take that older life and you link it to a stranger” (TCT 72).

But only Michael will take such lessons to heart. Through the children, the novel stages three different stances towards pluriculturalism: stasis, exile, and practice. Seemingly the most transgressive, Cassius, who

“*Triste y sola/Sola se queda Fonseca/Triste y llorosa/Queda la Universidad/Y los libros/Y los libros empeñados/En el monte/En el Monte de Piedad ...*”: “Sad and alone/Alone remains Fonseca/Sad and tearful/Remains the University/And the books/And the books pawned at the pawnshop.” The song’s “Fonseca” (describing perfectly the nostalgia evoked by Ondaatje’s Fonseca burning hemp rope while reading his books alone in his cabin) refers both to a university residence and to the Archbishop Alfonso (or Alonso) de Fonseca y Ulloa, born in Santiago de Compostela in 1476, and closely tied to the history of the University of Santiago de Compostela.

becomes a recognized figure in the world of art, never goes beyond the attitude of the rebel without a cause. Although he recalls his school days “with the energy of someone remembering a resistance movement,” the “celebrated” revolt he led against the conditions of the lavatories served to increase his reputation as “one of the roughs” but had no other effect (*TCT* 38, 145). Years later, when the school seeks his patronage, he, who had taken his act of “scorning, snorting at the pooh-bahs of art and power” on the road, telegraphs the school with the selfsame childish bravado, “FUCK YA! STRONG LETTER FOLLOWS” (*TCT* 145). Even his paintings reproduce “the exact angle of vision” experienced on the *Oronsay* the night they travelled through the Suez Canal – as Michael realizes when he sees them in a London gallery and thinks, “I was back on the railing, watching, which was where Cassius was emotionally, when he was doing these paintings” (*TCT* 132). Ramadhin, on the other hand, can never be anywhere else than in “permanent exile. . . that one brother or wife who cannot stand a silent fate in Boston or London or Melbourne” (*TCT* 139). Never able to move on from the country he left behind, as an adult he remains with his parents in a house in London’s Sri Lankan expatriate neighbourhood. He becomes obsessed with one of his students – displaced even in his affections – and eventually succumbs to his long-suffering weak heart in his early thirties. Until the end, Ramadhin will have been one of the “many who remain haunted by the persistent ghost of an earlier place” (*TCT* 139).

Michael struggles towards the practice of pluriculturalism – it doesn’t come naturally. As a boy of eleven, he is obsessed with safety – his, the ship’s, everyone’s. “‘Are we safe... are we all right?’” he keeps asking adults. His sense of insecurity intensifies after he and Cassius endure the full force of a cyclone while tied precariously to the ship’s deck and he realizes that, “What we had witnessed was only what had been above the sea. Now something shook itself free and came into my mind. It was not only the things we could see that had no safety. There was the underneath” (*TCT* 97). As an adolescent in London, he stays close to Ramadhin and his family, finding pleasure in the familiar, even marrying Massi, Ramadhin’s sister, after his death.

Only after this marriage fails does Michael assume the risk of abandoning the very concept of identity as being fixed or substantial. Only then can he embrace becoming other as a way of life.

This effortful practice is demonstrated in the text's refusal to describe Michael as other than a writer at "various Cat's Tables" throughout his life, learning from strangers "who would alter" him and surprised to find that one of them is himself: "This journey was to be an innocent story within the small parameter of my youth I once told someone. With just three or four children at its centre, on a voyage whose clear map and sure destination would suggest nothing to fear or unravel. For years I barely remembered it" (*TCT* 196, 243). Instead, this novel of indirection, of temporal and spatial dislocations, insists on the vital need to abandon security, sameness, repetition, and other such "sure destinations" of being through identification. This autobiographical fiction is not written to confirm a specified present, but to enable a series of unmapped futures. The *bildungsroman* is dismantled into episodic experiences that enfold sensations and emotions only to "give them a new role and purpose" (*TCT* 253) – neither rebellious stasis nor aching exile but selving,⁵ the difficult and always unfinished process of becoming pluricultural.

These three stances are possible in peace; *Anil's Ghost* stages their impossibility in wars fuelled by ethnic nationalism. Invented by the revolutionary middle classes in their struggles against both church and landed aristocracy, ethnic nationalism has proven to be a formidable apparatus of war, enabling the establishment of empire as well as its opposition – persisting from the United States and France in the late eighteenth century to Sri Lanka, Serbia, Rwanda, and Spain in the twentieth and twenty-first. Refusing to identify combatants in ethnic terms, Ondaatje's anti-war novel specifies "three essential groups" defined only through their relation to the state: "the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south, and the separatist guerillas

⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins invented the verbal form of the noun (selving/self) in order to underline subject formation as process ("(As kingfishers catch fire)" 141).

in the north” (AG n.p.). Guilt is generalized, both within the nation and without, because the violence answers to transnational capitalist interests: “Every side was killing and hiding the evidence. *Every side*,” Sarath insists. “This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it’s secret gangs and squads.... Importing state-of-the-art weapons from the West, or manufacturing homemade weapons. ... There’s no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are” (AG 17).

Brought to a very different *Oronsay* to investigate governmental complicity in war crimes, Anil Tissera, “citizenized by [the] friendship” of those who re-acustom her to local practices and subjugated knowledges, eventually repurposes her mission in order to (re)cognize *all* victims (AG 200). To elaborate new practices of the self, pluricultural citizens must first refuse governmental procedures that work by fixing identities and loyalties.⁶ Thus the novel instantiates Foucault’s call for a new ethics and politics: “Maybe the target nowadays,” the philosopher suggests, “is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. ... The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries” (“The Subject and Power” 336). The goal of this refusal is the production of pluricultural alliances in an international citizenship of the governed (“Confronting Governments” 474).

Whether or not Anil will be allowed to leave the war zone, much less accomplish anything with the report that Sarath dies to protect, remains unspecified by the novel. The reader is left with the haunting image of Anil and Sailor, the pathologist and the victim’s tortured skeleton,

⁶ For a discussion of Foucault’s theory of governmentality in relation to identification processes, see Higgins and Leps (1998).

its “ribs like struts on a boat,” awash in the “dim” and “porous” light of the lab in the *Oronsay*’s hold (*AG* 284).

Thus, *Anil’s Ghost* and *The Cat’s Table* produce the *Oronsay* as heterotopia and as site for the generation of heterotopic processes: juxtapositions and spatio-temporal dislocations that interrogate established relations of power and knowledge, disrupt convenient causality, and refuse either essential or totalizing identification. Repeatedly situated within a complex network of other works of art (literary, musical, visual), *The Cat’s Table* also implicates other Ondaatje novels about pluriculturalism – not only *Anil’s Ghost* but also, through a series of enfolded figures, tropes, and episodes, *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and *Running in the Family* (1982). A thief greases an accomplice’s body to facilitate his break-and-enter (*Skin/TCT*); a rabid dog attacks (*Running/TCT*); a boy listens intently to the sounds emanating from animal feces (*Skin/TCT*); a Sri Lankan exile opts for a safe marriage within the expatriate community, which fails (*AG/TCT*); women who long to understand, finally, the whole of their lovers’ lives are served instead with the robber-barons’ incoherent death-bed ramblings (*Skin/TCT*); a much-abused prisoner escapes custody (*Skin/TCT*); “shards of glass,” literal or metaphorical, separate people who can never cross a “wide” emotional gulf (*Skin/TCT*). Thus literature indwells literature, a figure that is repeated throughout the *Oronsay*: lifeboats hang over the ship’s deck; pools float in the ocean; the ship holds a garden in “the sea [which] is also a garden” (*TCT* 48). *A Cat’s Table* itself is reassembled and mirrored in the letter Miss Lasqueti intends for Emily but Michael appropriates – another conversation stolen and repurposed.

Yet these novels are cautious enough to avoid triumphalism, for they know the limits of the literary, which historically has served imperialists as well as their opponents, forces of terror as well as liberation. Michael, who is forced to learn the lessons of Dove Cottage and Kipling and Conrad, is also inspired and protected by the “something extraterrestrial and indelible” in writing, by “verse. . . bulletproof and watertight” (*TCT* 30). As a child, he uses “an empty school examination booklet” to document inscrutable “overheard conversations” aboard ship; as

an adult, he can navigate the speech of others to become elsewhere (*TCT* 7, 42). Resistance and new practices of freedom come from within, from below, from beside, with the writer always sitting at the cat's table, willing to abandon the one to become the many – what Foucault might call *le beau danger*, the beautiful danger that is pluriculturalism.

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