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“The animal out of the desert”:
The Nomadic Metaphysics of Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion

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Article abstract

In In the Skin of a Lion, Michael Ondaatje explores mobile figures through the trope of nomadism. Linking a series of the novel's mobile figures together and suggesting their equivalence as nomadic migrants, Ondaatje dissolves the distinction between native and foreign workers. He thus attempts to resist the essentialist links between people and place that are prevalent in the arborescent metaphors of belonging that poststructuralists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari critique. Instead of what Liisa Malkki calls "sedentarist metaphysics," the novel subscribes to what Tim Cresswell refers to as "nomadic metaphysics" - an interest in the routes of travel and a concomitant dismissal of the fixity of rooted identity. Ondaatje's strategy of "nomadic metaphysics" obscures the material history of, and important differences among, specific migrations, routes, and/or patterns of mobility that his novel identifies. The novel seems to assert a citizenship that exceeds the nation-state and challenges the class hierarchies of liberal conceptions of citizenship; however, because of Ondaatje's use of patterns of equivalence, the cosmopolitan citizenship he gestures to is not realized.

"The animal out of the desert": The Nomadic Metaphysics of Michael Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*

Jody Mason

In his poem "Loop," first published in the 1973 collection *Rat Jelly*, Michael Ondaatje demonstrates an early fascination with unfettered mobility and the untamed animal world. The speaker of "Loop" leaves behind "social animals" for a mythic dog, "transient as shit," who is "only a space filled / and blurred with passing" (46). In "Loop," transience and velocity allow for metamorphosis, such that any particular animal is really a "nest of images" — a borderless montage that lacks individuation (46). Ondaatje is clearly attracted to human mobility as well; from Buddy Bolden of *Coming Through Slaughter* to Mervyn Ondaatje's train-riding escapade in *Running in the Family*, his oeuvre is replete with elusive figures whose individual lives are difficult to apprehend. In the novels *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and *The English Patient* (1992), Ondaatje's exploration of mobile figures moves toward an interest in the trope of nomadism. Linking a series of the novel's mobile figures together and suggesting their equivalence as nomadic migrants, *In the Skin of a Lion* dissolves the distinction between native and foreign workers. Ondaatje thus attempts to resist the essentialist links between people and place that are prevalent in the kind of arborescent metaphors of belonging that poststructuralists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari critique. Instead of what Liisa Malkki calls "sedentarist metaphysics," *In the Skin of a Lion* subscribes to what Tim Cresswell refers to as "nomadic metaphysics" — an interest in the routes of travel and a concomitant dismissal of the fixity of rooted identity ("Introduction" 15–16).

Using theoretical critiques of both discourses of mobility and the trope of the nomad, however, I will argue that Ondaatje's strategy of "nomadic metaphysics" obscures the material history of, and therefore important differences among, specific migrations, routes of travel, and/or patterns of mobility

that his novel identifies. Ondaatje's novel seems to assert a citizenship that exceeds the nation-state and challenges the class hierarchies of liberal conceptions of citizenship; however, because of Ondaatje's use of patterns of equivalence, the cosmopolitan citizenship the novel gestures to is not realized. While I will complicate Ondaatje's romanticization of undifferentiated roving figures, I will first explore how the migrant figure in *In the Skin of a Lion* attempts to frustrate the power of controlling structures to monitor and restrict human mobility.

Migrant Routes

In conflating a series of migrant figures, *In the Skin of a Lion* emphasizes the apparent power of the migrant to move through what Deleuze and Guattari characterize as "*espace lisse*" — the smooth space — that is irreducible to and outside the mastery of the bourgeois state (437).[1] The figure of the migrant in the novel thus becomes a trope for that which lies outside official history, literary realism, state knowledge, the boundaries of the nation, and the control of capital.

Using migrant figures who are variously historical and fictional, *In the Skin of a Lion* explores narrative realism and the realist impulses of modern documentary art as controlling and limiting structures. Linda Hutcheon's well-known term "historiographic metafiction" encapsulates the novel's ambivalent relationship to narrative realism.[2] Hutcheon's theorization of the "ex-centric" figures of historiographic metafiction, for example, usefully points to the ways in which such figures emphasize the narrative qualities of historical "fact" and the simultaneous, if somewhat contradictory, need for a rewriting of historical narratives that erase marginal experiences. Indeed, *In the Skin of a Lion* demonstrates an interest in the migrant as a marginal figure who appears in a multitude of ever-changing factual and fictional guises.[3] The novel does not give the reader the information with which to discern between factual and fictional figures, and some figures are a combination of both. Patrick is variously "an immigrant to the city" (53) and an incarnation of Gilgamesh who, mourning the death of his companion, Enkidu, dons the skin of a lion and wanders in the wilderness. Other important mobile figures are the sojourning Finnish bushworkers who appear in "Little Seeds" and whose presence recurs via Cato in "Palace of Purification"; Ambrose Small, the elusive millionaire who does not wish to be found; Nicholas Temelcoff, the Macedonian immigrant who ends up running his own bakery

in Toronto; and Caravaggio, the Italian-Canadian thief who cannot stay still for fear of arrest. Significantly, the migrant figures who constitute the thematic and structural centres of the novel are sometimes historical personages and sometimes not: the Finnish loggers and the politically radical Cato, Ambrose Small, and Temelcoff are all derived from textual records that Ondaatje used in the writing of the novel.[4]

If *In the Skin of a Lion* employs migrants — marginal, mobile figures — as part of its resistance to literary realism, the migrant figure also challenges homogenous national identity and the controlling boundaries of the nation-state. This undermining of "simplistic conceptions of national identity" is common to many post-Centennial documentary poems and novels (Heath 300). Using the irony of historiographic metafiction and documentary, Ondaatje asks how we know a nation's history (and, by extension, its culture and identity) and implies that the version we commonly tell ourselves is constructed from the point of view of men like the Toronto Commissioner of Public Works R.C. Harris — wealthy, powerful, Anglo-Saxons. To right the historical record might be an impossible act, however, and this is an important aspect of the novel's treatment of migrant figures. Ondaatje's resistance to realism complicates the rendering visible of the historically invisible, such that the reader's new knowledge of the migrant figure does not necessarily give her direct access to him. Patrick's knowledge of the Finnish loggers, for example, is mediated through an unreliable memory, the oral accounts of Cato's wife and daughter, and Cato's letters (all of which Ondaatje invents). In attempting to mentally recreate Cato's last moments through the architecture of his letters, Patrick is frustrated by the distance between them: "Patrick reads, aware that the smell of smoke is no longer on the porous paper. The words on the page form a rune — flint-hard and unemotional in the midst of the inferno of Cato's situation" (156). Rather than simply insisting on the reinsertion of migrants into the historical record, *In the Skin of a Lion* suggests that migrant figures explode the very epistemological and geographical borders with which a national history is commonly constructed.

The interests of capital, which are most obviously embodied in the novel's grand public works projects, are coterminous with the state's interest in monitoring the mobility of immigrant labourers and limiting the claims that such workers can make upon the state. The Finnish loggers of Patrick's childhood, for example, form part of an economy that depends on the state's regulation of mobility. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the state's goal is

to "*Fixer, sédentariser la force de travail, régler le mouvement du flux de travail, lui assigner des canaux et conduits, faire des corporations au sens d'organisme*" (456).[5] Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "*le nomade*" is meant to contest the state's desire to regulate the movement of workers. *In the Skin of a Lion* similarly challenges the collaboration of the state and capital in the control of human mobility; however, the novel constructs a pattern of migration that makes it difficult for the reader to apprehend any one individual or any one story.

In making the assertion that *In the Skin of a Lion* uses pattern as an aspect of both form and content, I draw on the arguments of countless other critics and reviewers who have noticed Ondaatje's use of repetition. In particular, I am indebted to Julie Beddoes's claim that the novel's "most striking formal device is, perhaps, repetition" (207). Identifying Ondaatje's postmodern aesthetics of self-reflexive repetition, Beddoes asserts that these aesthetics "neutralize — or even oppose" the novel's "tentative thematizing of a radical class politics" (206). For Beddoes, this does not necessarily mean (as it does for Fredric Jameson) that the postmodern is ahistorical, but that Ondaatje's postmodern tendency to emphasize the construction of "fact" through repetition also serves to render "equivalent those scenes that the book's thematics suggest should have quite *different* ethical value" (207–08). Susan Spearey's apprehension of migration and metamorphosis as recurrent structural and thematic elements of *In the Skin of a Lion* also influences my thinking about Ondaatje's use of repetition. Like Spearey, I focus on tropes and structures of migration, but, unlike hers, my argument does not privilege Ondaatje's "synchronic method" of characterization. Spearey describes this synchronic method as the linking of migrant characters through an obliteration of their "respective origins"; it is a method of spatialization that frustrates the possibility of both "linear progression" and "essential and predetermined character" (52).[6] One might think of Spearey's formulation of synchronic method in relation to Cresswell's concept of "nomadic metaphysics," to which I referred earlier; if Ondaatje abandons the diachronic roots of migrant figures in favour of their synchronic (and analogous) routes of travel, then he is subscribing to a "nomadic metaphysics" that favours movement over location. Unlike Spearey, I find the synchronic quality of Ondaatje's "nomadic metaphysics" responsible for a host of conflations that obscure class, race, and gender differences more effectively than they, as she argues, resist essentialism. Arguing that the novel's various migrating characters are linked together, Spearey misses the fact that the novel's "accounts of migration" are

not all literally migrations. She compares, for example, millionaire Ambrose Small's "mysterious disappearance underground and subsequent calculated movements about the province" to both Nicholas Temelcoff's "harrowing passage from Macedonia to Canadian shores" and Patrick's "voyage from hinterland to metropolis" (47–48). These are clearly radically different itineraries involving dissimilar modes of travel and material privilege. Spearey is right to suggest that *In the Skin of a Lion* compares these migratory journeys, but the effect is not simply a resistance to foundational discourses of origin and determinism. If Ambrose Small is linked to Caravaggio by virtue of the fact that both are elusive figures who must plan their escape routes, then what of the difference between Small's self-indulgent game of hide-and-seek and Caravaggio's dangerous flight from prison?

Materially grounding terms like diaspora and migration in their specific routes and itineraries is a current concern in many fields that deal with culture. The relationship between mobility and class, for example, is one that is vexing diaspora studies and a host of related disciplines — cultural studies, anthropology, postcolonial studies, and migration studies, to name a few. In the early 1990s, James Clifford's "Traveling Cultures" was an important meditation on the intersections of place and human mobility in anthropological methodologies; his article opened the question of the use of "travel" as an all-encompassing metaphor to describe varieties of migration and tourism. More recently, scholars have interrogated the critical yield of this trope in relation to diaspora studies. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, for example, warn that an "explosion" in the use of the term diaspora to include "all movements, however privileged, and … all dislocations, even symbolic ones" ignores the fact that "some forms of travel are tourism, and every attempt to mark movements as necessarily disenfranchising becomes an imperialist gesture" (3). In light of these legitimate concerns regarding mobility and subject position, it is critical to trace how the wandering migrant motif in Ondaatje's novel functions to obliterate differences among those who move.

Patrick is linked to the novel's various migrant characters through a process that emphasizes, to use Deleuze and Guattari's term, his rhizomatic quality. Like Patrick, the rhizome has "*des entrées multiples*" and, like a map, is "*ouverte*" and "*connectable dans toutes ses dimensions*" (23, 20). Patrick is able to "*devenir minoritaire*" — to transform himself into other mobile characters in the novel — by virtue of "*un médium et un sujet déterritorialisés*" that are the elements of becoming as Deleuze and Guattari theorize it

(357).[7] In other words, Patrick's specific subject position is unimportant to the process of becoming. One of the most compelling of the patterns in *In the Skin of a Lion* is the one that sews together Patrick and the enigmatic Finnish loggers who open the narrative. As a young boy, Patrick is fascinated with the sojourning loggers he sees skating on Depot Creek because they physically embody the resistant mobility of their working lives: "Their lanterns replaced with new rushes which let them go further past boundaries, speed! romance! one man waltzing with his fire" (22). That Ondaatje uses this image to connote the mobility of a single, romantic male figure as resistance to boundaries of all kinds is somewhat ironic, given that its source is likely Al Purdy's memoir of his childhood in Trenton, Ontario, in which Purdy recalls how boys and girls would skate on the mill pond with "lit torches of bulrushes dipped in coal oil or gasoline, skating away and waving them over their heads, into the hinterland of creeks and winding little streams" (*Morning* 11). If Purdy uses such memories in his poetry to forge a "sedentarist metaphysics" — a fixed regional and national identity — Ondaatje puts them to much different use. For the young, impressionable Patrick, the mobility of the skating Finn represents a transgression of boundaries of all kinds.

Patrick and the sojourning Finns are equally represented as migrants of a sort, but Patrick is also linked to the loggers through the image of flame that recurs throughout the novel: the flaming sheaves of cattails in a nighttime skate on Depot Creek become the fire that cooks the tar in the dark Toronto morning of "The Bridge," the candles "for the bridge dead" (27), and the "temporary light" of the explosives Patrick uses to enter the water filtration plant in "Maritime Theatre" (231). Each image of flame against blackness conjures the idea of literal or figurative illumination, which is appropriate given that Patrick's initial sighting of the Finns suggests that he will one day come to a greater knowledge of the world *through* them. Indeed, Patrick's later naming of the Finns is an integral part of his movement into political consciousness after Alice's death. He comes to know more about the sojourning loggers through Cato, who was Alice's lover and a radical Finnish union organizer in the logging camps of northern Ontario, where many Finns were seasonal labourers. Cato's letters teach Patrick about the "union battles up north … in the winter of 1921" and induce him to enter the sphere of political engagement that he had resisted in his conversations with Alice (157). Through Ondaatje via Patrick, the nameless Finns may gain some visibility in history, but it is important to note that the Finns

are not developed characters in the novel; they are rather expressions of Patrick's future self, metonyms of his eventual recognition of the need to take "responsibility for the story" (157). The patterns of movement and of light and darkness that link the Finns and Patrick together suggest their equivalence, but clearly this equivalence mostly serves to develop Patrick's character; the Finns function primarily as catalysts for the illumination of Patrick's character. If likeness can suggest that migrant figures — or "ex-centrics" generally — cannot be unproblematically recuperated from the dim past into the light of the present, Patrick's centrality in the novel undermines the ironic effect of this suggestion. I am not objecting to what Hutcheon, in her rebuke of Fredric Jameson, calls the "mixing" and "tampering" with the "'facts' of received history" ("The Postmodern" 367); instead, following both Frank Davey and Smaro Kamboureli, I am pointing out that *In the Skin of a Lion* suggests equivalence *while* privileging the role of a single character — Patrick — who, owing to his place of birth, his Anglo heritage, and his privileged point of view, has greater agency than any of the other migrant characters in the novel.

While disingenuously implying equivalence, the novel's attention to Patrick's role effaces the Finns' specific history of radical politics and migration. As I have argued, the Finnish loggers represent for Patrick a potentially radical mobility, but it is also the collectivity of their skating that attracts him because "he could no more have skated along the darkness of a river than been the hero of one of these stories" (157). This collectivity is similarly represented in Cato through his involvement in labour politics. Patrick has been a "searcher" (for Ambrose Small), a watcher, and a collector, but through the story of Cato and the memory of the loggers, he becomes aware of the need to act politically as a resistant, mobile figure. Thus, like the wandering Gilgamesh, he must assume the skin of a wild animal and avenge Cato's and Alice's deaths, which he does by travelling north and bombing a Muskoka resort. Yet, as Davey observes, Ondaatje favours Patrick's action as an individual over the collective action that Alice and Cato represent (148). Given this observation, it is important to note that the historical figure upon whom Cato is based is not a single individual, but rather two men named John Voutilainen and Viljo Rosvall. Radforth points out that these organizers for the Lumber Workers' Industrial Union of Canada (LWIUC) set off in 1929 for various Onion Lake camps to attempt to organize and extend a strike that had begun in Shabaqua, Ontario. Like Cato, they disappeared en route and their bodies were eventually found five

months later by a union-organized search party. Voutilainen's and Rosvall's deaths (like Cato's) were eventually judged "accidental drownings," but the LWIUC rejected this judgement (Radforth 124–25).[8] The lacunae left by this verdict obviously intrigue Ondaatje, for he restages the murder as an execution perpetrated by men who say of Cato, "there have been union men before him and there will be union men after him" (156). Radforth is also clear that Finnish-Canadians played a central role in the radical politics of northern Ontario lumber camps, especially in the period between the two World Wars. Two strong labour organizations developed in the 1920s, which were organized "almost exclusively" by Finnish-Canadian radicals — the International Workers' of the World-affiliated Lumber Workers' Industrial Union and the Communist Party of Canada-affiliated LWIUC (Radforth 119–20).[9] Despite the historical evidence of a well-established culture of collective radical politics in the community of Finnish-Canadian bushworkers, Ondaatje chooses to reduce the evidence to Patrick's individualist, politically ambiguous actions. Moreover, Ondaatje's alignment of mobility and resistance to the state — which is figured in Patrick's bombing of a Muskoka resort and his later attempt to detonate the water filtration plant — is undermined in this negation of the transnational connectivity of Finnish labour radicalism.

Kamboureli reads the characterization of Temelcoff and Caravaggio as possible exceptions to Ondaatje's harmonization of difference through the figure of Patrick (51). Yet the textual patterns that link Patrick to the Finnish loggers also define Patrick's relation to both the daredevil bridge-builder and Macedonian immigrant Nicholas Temelcoff and the Italian-Canadian thief Caravaggio. Ondaatje thematizes relations across space by linking Patrick and Temelcoff through their mutual qualities of spatial mastery. Davey points out that while Temelcoff has an intimately physical knowledge of the space of his work under the bridge, Patrick memorizes the geography of a room so well he can negotiate it blindfolded (151). This uncanny ability to master space also aligns Temelcoff and Patrick with Caravaggio, who "trained as a thief in unlit rooms, dismantling the legs of a kitchen table, unscrewing the backs of radios and the bottoms of toasters" (189). While Patrick comes to see his fate as imbricated in the lives of others, and while Ondaatje's aesthetic patterns (in this case, of spatial mastery in darkness) are meant to anticipate this realization, they also playfully conflate diverse journeys. As I have argued, Patrick's journey from passive observer to political actor draws on and effaces the particular history of Finnish migrant experi-

ences. His journey is similarly inspired by the radicalism of the Macedonian community to which Alice introduces him and which she has presumably come to know through Temelcoff. Yet this Macedonian radicalism is part of a pattern within which the Finns and the Macedonians equally serve as metonyms of Patrick's journey into political consciousness. As a result, Macedonians and Finns become almost indistinguishable within the narrative, and yet their histories are quite different.

Moreover, the mobility that Patrick adopts as a political strategy is gleaned from the novel's migrant figures in a manner that fails to distinguish his movement from that of others. Patrick enacts his solitary, ill-defined political resistance through the mobility that he must assume as part of wearing the skin of the lion. Ondaatje represents this new mobility in a manner that explicitly calls attention to its evocation of the mobility that Patrick admires in Cato, the Finnish bushworkers, and Temelcoff. Patrick's route thus celebrates the covert, marginal, and resistant aspects of constant movement. For instance, his new mobility takes him out of the world of apprehension. When he travels north to plant his first bomb, for example, he moves in the darkness of a nighttime landscape, unseen or unnoticed by the rich whom he targets, and positioned in the "no man's land" between train carriages (165). Though he walks through light, it "has not attached itself to him" because he is "transparent, minuscule" (166). In the process of becoming minor, Deleuze and Guattari note that, like Patrick, the observable subject disappears:

> Le mouvement est dans un rapport essentiel avec l'imperceptible, il est par nature imperceptible. C'est que la perception ne peut saisir le mouvement que comme la translation d'un mobile ou le développement d'une forme. Les mouvements, et les devenirs, c'est-à-dire les purs rapports de vitesse et de lenteur, les purs affects, sont en dessous ou au-dessus du seuil de perception. (344)[10]

Patrick's invisibility allows him to perpetrate his violence upon the "playground of the rich" (166). Yet if his movement draws on Cato's ability to "disappear under the surface" of "snow country," the Finns' transgression of boundaries on Depot Creek, and Temelcoff's ability to metamorphose out of history, it also, as noted above, confounds divergent kinds of mobility (155). Moreover, the anonymity of the Macedonian and other immigrant communities in the novel functions as a trope "that fulfills Patrick's own need for invisibility" without threatening his enjoyment of anonymity — a privilege that comes from his white skin (Kamboureli 49).

Despite the novel's insistence otherwise, Patrick's route is very different from that of the Finnish bushworkers. While Patrick is a migrant to the city of Toronto and, later, a roving anarchist of sorts, the Finnish loggers are transnational migrants who, as I argued earlier, have no claim to the land on which they work because they are a "collection of strangers" with no permanent home (7). As the work of Radforth and other historians demonstrates, the covertly resistant and romanticized mobility that Patrick eventually embodies has little in common with the history of Finnish migration to Canada. Varpu Lindstrom-Best's research shows that Finnish migrants came to Canada in large numbers during the first few decades of the twentieth century (see 7). Those Finns who ended up working in the bush camps of northern Ontario were not migrant workers in sociologist Vic Satzewich's sense, meaning that their residence in Canada was not restricted by the Canadian state, but, due to the seasonal nature of the early twentieth-century logging industry, most of the Finnish immigrants who found work in this sector were unemployed for at least part of the year, when they would have to move to find other employment (see 26–27). Although Radforth identifies the bushworkers' practice of "jumping" from camp to camp in search of better conditions and wages as an expression of agency, Finnish migrants to Canada in the early twentieth century were clearly subject to the whims of capital and the nation-state; the unemployment they experienced was a structural part of the Canadian economy and was not protected by the state in the form of insurance or other payment.[11] Moreover, the relative control that Finns exercised over their transnational mobility in the early part of the century did not endure; the Canadian state halted immigration in the 1930s and subsequently targeted immigrant groups, especially those with ties to radical political groups, for deportation (see Lindstrom-Best 13). Therefore, in his synchronic representation of routes — in which mobility is a politically radical route that unites diverse characters — Ondaatje effaces important differences among kinds of travel and degrees of agency.

The romanticized, undifferentiated mobility that I have identified is an object of critique for many theorists of the relationships among culture, place, and movement. Cresswell argues that many postmodern (and, I would add, postcolonial) approaches to migration indulge in an "overly general celebration and romanticization" of human mobility ("Introduction" 17–18). In his theorization of the use of the trope of travel in anthropological discourse, however, Clifford resists the idea of a celebrated "nomadology":

> I'm not saying there are no locales or homes, that everyone is — or should be — traveling, or cosmopolitan, or deterritorialized. This is not nomadology. Rather, I'm trying to sketch a comparative cultural studies approach to specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling *and* traveling: traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling.
>
> ("Traveling" 108)

Yet Ien Ang invokes the term "traveler" to critique the ways in which nomadology "only serves to decontextualize and flatten out difference, as if 'we' were all in fundamentally similar ways always-already travellers in the same postmodern universe, the only difference residing in the different itineraries we undertake" (4). While careful differentiation on the basis of class, gender, and ethnicity is certainly important, I also concur with Caren Kaplan's call for historically sensitive theorization and representation that must be suspicious of a desire for authenticity: "posing 'real' exiles against 'false' ones does not adequately address the subject positions that arise in the complex circulations of transnational cultures in postmodernity" (95). My reading of *In the Skin of a Lion* is therefore less concerned with sniffing out the "real" nomads / migrants from the "false" — with differentiating the immigrant characters in the novel from Canadian-born Patrick — than with critiquing the patterns of movement and mobility that suggest that all of the characters whom I have discussed have equal access to mobility. The "real" and "false" categories of displacement that Kaplan identifies relate to Pheng Cheah's concern about mobility as a privileged category of human behaviour. Cheah makes a valid point when he argues that, for Clifford, physical mobility is the only "basis of emancipatory practice because it generates stasis-disrupting forms of cultural displacement" ("Given" 297). This salubrious warning is useful; while metaphors that describe human mobility must be carefully deployed, so the assumptions informing the *value* of mobility must be carefully examined.

Travelling in the Desert

Thus far, I have identified Ondaatje's novel as subscribing to a "nomadic metaphysics" — the tendency of postmodern thought to create a world of travel in which "nothing is certain or fixed" (Cresswell, "Introduction" 15). Like the Finn who waltzes with fire as he speeds across the ice, and thus indicates Ondaatje's fascination with velocity, Deleuze and Guattari's work is preoccupied with the potentially radical fluidity of movement that exceeds

structures of control and domination, such as the state. In their collaborative work *Mille Plateaux* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari employ the trope of *le nomade* to theorize their conception of fluid and mobile "rhizomatic" groups:

> Les meutes, les bandes sont des groupes du type rhizome, par opposition au type arborescent qui se concentre sur des organes de pouvoir. C'est pourquoi les bandes en général, même de brigandage, ou de mondanité, sont des métamorphoses d'une machine de guerre, laquelle diffère formellement de tout appareil d'Etat, ou équivalent, qui structure au contraire les sociétés centralisées. (443)[12]

The essence of *la machine de guerre* that the nomad embodies is "*le tracé d'une ligne de fuite créatrice, la composition d'un espace lisse et du mouvement des hommes dans cet espace*" (526).[13] As I noted earlier, this "*espace lisse*" conflicts with the interests of the state, which attempts to fix and regulate the space occupied by the nomad. This opposition between the interests of centralized structures like the state and those of amorphous, fluid, nomadic groups is, as I have argued, present in Ondaatje's use of migrant figures to challenge the boundaries of realism and the nation-state.

Deleuze and Guattari, however, distinguish between the fixed trajectory of the migrant and the constant mobility of the nomad; while "*le chemin sédentaire*" parcels out "*un espace fermé, en assignant à chacun sa part, et en réglant la communication des parts,*" the "*trajet nomade*" "*distribue les hommes (ou les bêtes) dans un espace ouvert, indéfini, non communiquant*" (471-72).[14] This distinction is important for theorizing Ondaatje's use of what I have called the migrant as a series of undifferentiated figures who move about in "*espace ouvert*" rather than having specific routes (and roots) of their own. Deleuze and Guattari's designation of "*le nomade*" for such a figure is therefore more germane to the terms of my argument than the term "migrant," which I have employed thus far.

Representations of nomadic movement permeate the form and content of *In the Skin of a Lion*; more specifically, the trope of the desert nomad appears in Ondaatje's deliberate blurring of the characters of Patrick and the thief whom he meets in prison, Caravaggio. Ondaatje thematizes his fusing of these characters and their resistant acts in the first scene in which they are presented together. Patrick, Caravaggio, and another prisoner named Buck are painting the roof of the Kingston Penitentiary "blue up to the sky so that after a while the three men working on it became uncertain of clear boundaries. … They would scratch their noses and realize they

became partly invisible. If they painted long enough they would be eradicated, blue birds in a blue sky" (179).[15] Caravaggio recognizes the potentially subversive quality of their tedious task: "*Demarcation…. That is all we need to remember*" (179). Indeed, he is able to use the lack of demarcation as a means to escape the confining boundaries of the prison. This merging of lost demarcation and mobility is similarly evoked in Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*; the English patient Almásy remarks that it is easy to "lose a sense of demarcation" in the desert, which is the geographic location of nomadism in the novel (18).[16] In a later scene in *In the Skin of a Lion* that recalls Caravaggio's escape from prison, Patrick is symbolically merged with Caravaggio when he becomes invisible in order to attack the water filtration plant: "Patrick is invisible except by touch, grease covering all unclothed skin, his face, his hands, his bare feet. *Demarcation*" (228). Patrick and Caravaggio thus inhabit a borderless space that is reminiscent of the "*espace lisse*" or the "*milieu sans horizon*" of the nomad — the "*steppe, désert ou mer*" (Deleuze and Guattari 469).[17] Furthermore, the militance of Patrick's underwater sabotage and the defiance of Caravaggio's transgressions of the law, both of which they effect through resisting demarcation, align them with the resistant qualities of the nomadic "*machine de guerre*." Deleuze and Guattari contend that this "*machine de guerre*" will engage in combat if it "*se heurte aux Etats et aux villes, comme aux forces (de striage) qui s'opposent à l'objet positif*" (519).[18] Such "*forces de striage*" are certainly embodied in R.C. Harris, whose water filtration plant symbolizes the structured order of "the ideal city" (109).

The trope of the desert nomad that aligns Patrick and Caravaggio is more explicit in Ondaatje's method of conveying their respective capacities for mobility. In Caravaggio and Giannetta's violent lovemaking/reunification scene, this trope becomes bestial: "She smells him, the animal out of the desert that has stumbled back home, back into oasis" (205). Deleuze and Guattari similarly see the desert beast and the nomad as analogous; they compare, for example, nomadic society to "*les meutes*" and "*les bandes*" of animals (443). Moreover, as in the scenes that represent a lack of demarcation, this scene recalls the "*espace lisse*" of the nomad, which, like a desert, is "*un espace ouvert où les choses-flux se distribuent*" (447).[19] For example, the border between Caravaggio's and Giannetta's physical bodies and the boundaries of the room's objects are destabilized: "When she opens her eyes wide he sees glass and crockery and thin china plates tumbling down from shelf to shelf losing their order, their shades of blue and red merging, her

fingers on his scar, her fingers on the thumping vein on his forehead" (205). Giannetta's eyes ("her eyes") open but, in an unexpected narrative trick, it is Caravaggio ("he") who sees the chaos of the tumbling blue and red crockery, which both merges with and evokes the red of Caravaggio's scar and the blue of his "thumping" vein.

While Caravaggio's mobility is represented through the trope of the desert beast, Patrick is likened to a wandering desert inhabitant when he adopts his plan to resist the rich and those allied with the power and authority of the state. In Sandars's translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (which Ondaatje used), Shamash the sun goddess comforts Enkidu, who is about to die, by telling him that when he is dead Gilgamesh will "let his hair grow long for your sake, he will wear a lion's pelt and wander through the desert" (88). This prophecy is, of course, mirrored in Ondaatje's epigraph, which is taken from Gilgamesh's speech over Enkidu's body: "The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion." In the epic, Gilgamesh then proceeds to wander through the desert in search of everlasting life and eternal youth, which prove to be elusive. Like Odysseus, the epic hero then returns home. Though his quest also fails, Patrick does not return home; instead, the novel closes with a dream-like night scene in which Patrick has just awoken and is on the road between Toronto and Marmora. Unlike his epic counterpart, Patrick remains an elusive, mobile figure who is linked until the closing words with Caravaggio — the "animal out of the desert" — and other nomads in the novel.

Patrick and Caravaggio are not the only characters who draw on the trope of the desert nomad, although they are the most important. Dennis Duffy observes that the Macedonian immigrant community in the novel might be conceived allegorically as Israelites in Egypt, which is the first land of captivity in the Old Testament. Aligning the filtration plant with references to ancient Egyptian culture and history, Duffy contends that, for the Macedonians, "Toronto is the Egypt of Exodus, the site of exploitation and slavery in the building of monuments to alien powers" (132). If this is so, then only a sojourn of 430 years in the desert will lead the Israelites — and the Macedonians — out of bondage. As is typical in this novel, however, the Macedonians do not actually undertake the journey. Patrick, moving in the name of all those immigrants who "built the intake tunnels" (236), becomes a desert wanderer who amalgamates the biblical story of Exodus and the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh. Deleuze and Guattari argue that Moses, flee-

ing the oppressive Egyptian state, forms a "*machine de guerre*" in the desert (520). Patrick's subversive "war machine" thus borrows its mobility and derives its militant power from a range of characters who are collapsed in the representation of his journey.

As I have argued, this pattern of nomadism that links characters together has potentially radical implications; the novel favours the mobile qualities that enable characters to avoid being seen and apprehended by realist literary forms, by state structures, and by boundaries of all descriptions. While I have questioned the confounding of various types of mobility, however, one must also consider the particular import of the trope of the nomad. Deleuze and Guattari clearly link this trope to a specific geography; while they locate "*la culture aborescente*" in the West and its fascination with agriculture and plant and animal breeding, the rhizomatic cultures of the East are associated with "*la steppe et le jardin (dans d'autres cas, le désert et l'oasis)*" (28).[20] Caren Kaplan's critique of "poststructuralist deterritorializations" posits that tropes of the desert nomad and of desert space in general have been employed in both modern and postmodern thought in ways that solder them to colonial discourse. Kaplan identifies the ironic fact that the deterritorialization Deleuze and Guattari explore through the nomad or minority figure is always a colonizing act that "raids *other spaces*," such as the "margin" of the desert. Consequently, "deterritorialization is always reterritorialization, an increase of territory, an imperialization" (89). Moreover, Kaplan asserts that the Euro-American perspective that views the nomad as a "gypsy" or "immigrant" erases "temporal and spatial differentiations" (87-88), an erasure of the kind I have been tracing in the "nomadic metaphysics" of *In the Skin of a Lion*.

Deleuze and Guattari seem aware, however, of the exoticist dangers and colonizing gestures that accompany the trope of the nomad. They ask,

> Car: comment faire pur que le thème d'une race ne tourne pas en racisme, en fascisme dominant et englobant, ou plus simplement en aristocratisme, ou bien un secte et folklore, en micro-fascismes? Et comment faire pour que le pôle Orient ne soit pas un fantasme, qui réactive autrement tous les fascismes, tous les folklores aussi, yoga, zen et karaté? (470)[21]

They reply that they have attempted to ground their idea of the nomad in a singular race rather than a universal thinking subject, but recognize that this geographic and temporal grounding will not necessarily avoid the dangers of racism and orientalism (469–70). Indeed, *In the Skin of a Lion* is a good

demonstration of the fact that the trope of the nomad, despite Deleuze and Guattari's attempts to specify its material contexts, can be easily employed in a fashion that is less careful about geographic, cultural, and temporal distinctions. Yet race, Deleuze and Guattari contend, "*ne se définit pas par sa pureté, mais au contraire par l'impureté qu'un système de domination lui confère*" (470). Since race is impure and cannot be rediscovered as an authentic, pure essence, so "*l'Orient n'est pas à imiter*" (470).[22] In other words, Deleuze and Guattari are arguing that a subject and its attributes cannot be wholly captured in language because thought is a "*un devenir*" — a becoming — rather than a stable sign system (470). This radically poststructuralist argument, however, cannot account for the epistemic and physical violence that has been wrought in the name of orientalizing discourses. Edward Said's analysis of British Lord Cromer's assertion that "Orientals" are less capable of logic and reason than Europeans — that they meander both intellectually and physically and thus cannot use roads as Europeans do — is a good example of the negative uses to which the orientalizing discourse of nomadism can be put (see 38–39).

While I agree with Kaplan that the trope of the nomad cannot be dissociated from specific histories of colonization and past and present struggles for decolonization, I nevertheless appreciate Deleuze and Guattari's attempts to conceive of a non-hierarchical epistemology. Deleuze and Guattari's thinking has been useful for considering, for example, women's diverse relationships to space and mobility. As Cresswell points out, the fluidity and lack of structure implied by the nomad metaphor can serve to deconstruct "the familiar dualisms of man/woman; white/black; true/false," which are all "tethered to the geography of here and there" ("Imagining" 367). Although the trope of the nomad is not, as I have discussed, without its attendant problems, it does point to the need for both a recognition of women's mobility and transnational feminist critical practices that can account for mobility — and location — in ways that are sensitive to differences of ethnicity, sexuality, and class. Significantly, however, there are some characters in *In the Skin of a Lion* who do not form a part of the patterns of movement and nomadism that I have identified. Although Ondaatje is subscribing to a "nomadic metaphysics" that privileges roving, unfixed subjects, his novel generally represents women as immobile. When Patrick blindfolds himself to show Clara his dexterity in darkness, for example, he is clearly responding to her impending journey toward Ambrose Small, over which he has no

control. He thus "positions Clara on the bed and tells her not to move," and proceeds to dazzle her with his blind flight of unfettered mobility:

> Then he takes off into the room — at first using his hands for security then ignoring them, just throwing his body within an inch of the window swooping his head down parallel to shelves while he rushes across the room in straight lines, in curves, as if he has the mechanism of a bat in his human blood. (80)

Although Clara thinks Patrick is "magnificent" and "perfect" in his bat-like flight, she nonetheless resists his parcelling out of space to her. She "moves off the bed," where he has told her to remain, and incurs physical pain because of her mobility: "Suddenly she is hit hard and her left hand jars against her skull, knocking her over" (80). Patrick is contrite but reminds her of his bidding: "You moved. I told you not to. You moved" (81). Although Clara is the only female character who is actually wounded as a consequence of her mobility, other women in the novel similarly serve to contrast male movement. Giannetta, for example, plays Penelope when she is found at home waiting for Caravaggio to arrive after having escaped from prison, and she is also represented as a still, sleeping figure while he practises his thief's trade. Just as Caravaggio somehow sees through Giannetta's eyes and thus appropriates her sexual experience in their violent lovemaking scene, so she must move vicariously through him instead of on her own. If, as I have argued, the novel's privileged form of mobility is that of the nomad, female characters are clearly excluded from inclusion in this trope. Moreover, in rendering all of his female characters similarly immobile, Ondaatje further elides the differential access to movement that exists within gender categories and across ethnicity and class.

The Cosmopolitan Citizen?

The "nomadic metaphysics" of *In the Skin of a Lion* seems to assert a citizenship that exceeds the nation-state and challenges the class hierarchies of liberal conceptions of citizenship. Working with this assumption, Frank Davey's analysis of *In the Skin of a Lion* argues that, like other works of fiction in the post-Centennial period, the novel does not "inhabit any social geography that can be called 'Canada'"; rather, it creates a "post-national space, in which sites are as interchangeable as postcards, in which discourses are transnational and in which political issues are constructed on non-

national (and often ahistorical) ideological grounds" (259). Davey is clearly dissatisfied with how *In the Skin of a Lion* (or any of the other novels he surveys) resolves the tension between a global network and the narrow local "home"; he posits that the novel leaves one with "ambiguous binary models" of the postnational culture and its alternatives, models in which the alternative is the "humanist construction of the male individual as artist" (260–62, 155). Davey suggests that the "male individual as artist" in the novel could include a "bridge builder, lover, choreographer, or dreamer" (155), but I have demonstrated that these various male characters are generally merged in the character of Patrick, who subsumes the novel's mobile figures within a pattern that privileges his role as a nomad. Moreover, Cynthia Sugars points out that Davey's argument paradoxically laments the lack of nationalism it decries and thus recapitulates the old native/cosmopolitan split in literary criticism in Canada (131–32). This recycling of nationalist paradigms prevents a fuller investigation of the relationship between Ondaatje's "nomadic metaphysics" and the kinds of citizenship his novel gestures to.

The issue of citizenship is implicated in my broader discussion of Ondaatje's representation of mobility because the relationship between territorially bounded place and national identity has been central to modern conceptions of citizenship (Falk 5); in other words, the transnational migrant has historically constituted the antithesis of the idea of the citizen. Although Ondaatje's characters move in a world that is clearly marked by the need for a flexible citizenship that is not exclusively defined in terms of natal or national culture, the novel's refusal to distinguish varieties of mobility, and its appeal to the colonizing trope of the nomad, prevents the imagining of cosmopolitan citizenship practices that are routed through local, national, and transnational spaces.

While acknowledging the continuing relevance and power of the nation-state, many theorists of citizenship point to the transnational character of emerging citizenship practices. Gerard Delanty's notion of "cosmopolitan citizenship," for example, departs from modern notions of citizenship in that it is based on residence rather than birth and is "decentered" across three levels of affiliation — subnational, national, and transnational (134–35). The new "civic culture" of Delanty's cosmopolitan citizenship would entail not a national culture (a cultural identity) but a "constitutional patriotism" (a legal identity) that would be rooted in "an identification with democratic or constitutional norms and not with the state, territory, nation or cultural traditions" (115). Like Delanty's understanding of the cosmopolitan, Pheng

Cheah's term "cosmopolitical" is meant to describe how transnational political commitments are embedded within the "shifting material linkages and interconnections created by global capitalism at a particular historical conjuncture"; Cheah thus resists the vogue of postnational prophecy in the work of Arjun Appadurai and other theorists of globalization ("Introduction" 31–33). Cosmopolitical citizenship, therefore, is not exclusively identified with the nation, but neither does it imaginatively colonize ostensibly unmapped space in an attempt to unmoor itself from the limiting space of the Western nation, as "nomadic metaphysics" does.

Through his depiction of nomadism in *In the Skin of a Lion*, therefore, Ondaatje fails to differentiate among diverse practices of mobility that are routed through transnational networks to exist in local, banal contexts. Put somewhat differently, Patrick's prominence in the narrative and the narrative's reliance on colonizing tropes are symptoms of the novel's failure to grasp the complexity of transnational labour migration. While Ondaatje's "nomadic metaphysics" points to the important disaggregation of identity and place, which is central to a citizenship that can account for flows of labour and other migration, the novel does not ultimately represent migration as a historically differentiated set of phenomena. The reader is thus left with a citizen rather than varieties of citizenship, and a celebration of mobility that does not attend to the fact that labour migrants have not historically fared very well against the nation-state or the interests of capital in Canada.

Notes

[1] All further footnoted English translations are taken from Brian Massumi's 1987 translation of *Mille Plateaux, A Thousand Plateaus*.

[2] See, in particular, her arguments in *The Canadian Postmodern* and in her 1987 review of *In the Skin of a Lion*. Of course, Hutcheon's term shares much in common with critical assessments of the postmodern documentary form in Canada. See, for example, Jones.

[3] Other critics have noticed that Ondaatje's use of the migrant figure is also manifest in the form of *In the Skin of a Lion*. See Spearey and Salgado.

[4] Ondaatje draws on Ian Radforth's study of northern Ontario bushworkers in the early twentieth century for his representation of Finnish migrants. The figure of Ambrose Small became known to Ondaatje through historical research; Small was originally the protagonist of the novel but Ondaatje began to "dislike him intensely" and thus shifted his focus to other characters (Turner 21). Nicholas Temelcoff is borrowed from the work of Lillian Petroff, whom Ondaatje acknowledges in *In the Skin of a Lion*. Petroff turned her doctoral work on Macedonian migration to Toronto into a book entitled *Sojourners and Settlers* (1995), in which she recounts her 1975 interview with labourer Nicholas Temelcoff.

[5] "Settling, sedentarizing labour-power, regulating the movement of the flow of labour,

assigning it channels and conduits, [and] forming corporations in the sense of organizations" are the goals of the state (368).

[6] One of the works from which *In the Skin of a Lion* draws an epigraph — John Berger's 1972 novel *G.* — provides many examples of the spatialized, synchronic thinking that may have influenced Ondaatje's literary method.

[7] Like Patrick, the rhizome has "multiple entryways" and is "open and connectable in all its dimensions" (12, 14). Patrick is able to "become-minoritarian" — to transform himself into other mobile characters in the novel — by virtue of the "deterritorialized medium and subject" that are the elements of becoming as Deleuze and Guattari theorize it (292).

[8] Radforth notes that the LWIUC and the Finnish-Canadian left in general found it hard to believe that "two experienced bushworkers — one of them a trapper with a camp on Onion Lake — could have drowned in shallow water, especially as Rosvall had received a blow to the skull and his clothing was torn" (124).

[9] For a fuller account of the socialist tendencies of early twentieth-century Finnish-Canadian communities, see Lindstrom-Best.

[10] "Movement has an essential relation to the imperceptible; it is by nature imperceptible. Perception can grasp movement only as the displacement of a moving body or the development of a form. Movements, becomings, in other words, pure relations of speed and slowness, pure affects, are below and above the threshold of perception" (280–81).

[11] A federally administrated program of unemployment insurance did not exist until World War II, when it was instituted as a measure to aid future unemployed war veterans.

[12] "Packs, bands, are groups of the rhizome type, as opposed to the arborescent type that centers around organs of power. That is why bands in general, even those engaged in banditry or high society life, are metamorphoses of a war machine formally distinct from all State apparatuses or their equivalents, which are instead what structure centralized societies" (358).

[13] The essence of the war machine that the nomad embodies is "the drawing of a creative line of flight, the composition of a smooth space and of the movement of people in that space" (422).

[14] While the "sedentary road" parcels out "closed space to people, assigning each person a share and regulating the communication between shares," the "nomadic trajectory" "distributes people (or animals) in an open space, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating" (380).

[15] Given Ondaatje's playful insertion of a variety of historical figures into *In the Skin of a Lion*, it is not unlikely that "Buck" is meant to be Tim Buck, the leader of the Communist Party of Canada who was sent to the Kingston Penitentiary in 1931 after his arrest under Section 98 of the Criminal Code, an anti-sedition law that was passed in 1919 (see Avery 138).

[16] The trope of the desert nomad in *In the Skin of a Lion* anticipates Ondaatje's later use of the nomad in *The English Patient*. In this novel, the moveable desert serves as a metaphor for Almásy's unstable position between life and death and, more significantly, his troubling of the boundaries between black and white skin and among the strong national identities of the postwar period. For conflicting interpretations of the nomad figure in *The English Patient*, see Renger and Horta. While many postcolonial readings of *The English Patient* have accepted and even endorsed Ondaatje's use of the desert and the nomad figure, Horta's article begins the work of interrogating these tropes.

[17] Patrick and Caravaggio thus inhabit a borderless space that is reminiscent of the "smooth space" or the "horizonless milieu" of the nomad — the "steppe, desert, or sea" (379).

[18] Deleuze and Guattari contend that this "war machine" will engage in combat if it "collides with States and cities, as forces (of striation) opposing its positive object" (417).

[19] Deleuze and Guattari similarly see the desert beast and the nomad as analogous; they compare, for example, nomadic society to "packs" and "bands" of animals (358). Moreover, as in the scenes that represent a lack of demarcation, this scene recalls the "smooth space" of the nomad, which, like a desert, is "an open space throughout which things-flows are distributed" (361).

[20] Deleuze and Guattari clearly link this trope to a specific geography; while they locate "arborescent culture" in the West and its fascination with agriculture and plant and animal breeding, the rhizomatic cultures of the East are associated with "the steppe and the garden (or in come cases, the desert and the oasis)" (15–18).

[21] "For what can be done to prevent the theme of a race from turning into a racism, a dominant and all-encompassing fascism, or into a sect and a folklore, microfascisms? And what can be done to prevent the Oriental pole from becoming a phantasy that reactivates all the fascisms in a different way, and also all the folklores, yoga, Zen, and karate?" (379).

[22] Yet race, they contend, "is defined not by its purity but rather by the impurity conferred upon it by a system of domination" (379). Since race is impure and cannot be rediscovered as an authentic, pure essence, so "the Orient is not something to be imitated" (379).

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