“All These Half-Lit Lives”

Historiography and Humanity in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*

Emma Keates
Rajeswari Mohan
12 April 2018
“All These Half-Lit Lives”: Historiography and Humanity in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*

“He has come across a love story. This is only a love story. He does not wish for plot and all its consequences. Let me stay in this field with Alice Gull…” (Ondaatje 160). This plea, born from the anguish and grief of Patrick Lewis, the protagonist of Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*, at once encapsulates what makes this novel so unique, so frustrating, and so ultimately human. How are we to comprehend the thread of a plot whose very actors appear radically aware of, and at times able to stand outside of, the inherent and prescribed confines of their own narrative linearity? How are we to react to the pain of a man who seems to reach out from the page and call directly to us? How are we to relate to a self-declared “work of fiction” that seems to reject the conceit of plot altogether?

In a moment of characteristic meta-commentary, the narrator presents the following truism: “The first line of any novel should be: ‘Trust me, this will take time but there is order here, very faint, very human.’ Meander if you want to get to town” (Ondaatje 146). While this adage might not be as universal as the narrator suggests, it certainly finds unique and urgent footing within this particular tale. Echoing Walter Benjamin’s principal that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin 256), Ondaatje works in parallel throughout his own text to make visible these “fragments of a human order” that were systemically erased from Toronto’s official, civic archive.¹ The resulting, deeply corporeal narrative certainly “meanders” through not only history but its own

¹ “Think about those who built the intake tunnels. Do you know how many of us died in there?” “There was no record kept.” (Ondaatje 236)
telling, at once placing its reader immediately amongst the laboring bodies of its subjects, while simultaneously imbuing them with the agency to live separate, unseen lives within the “darkness…outside the plot” (Ondaatje 143). The fluidity of these transitions, as well as the tangled, a-temporal nature of thread that weaves them together combine to render *In the Skin of a Lion* as something apart from the conventional novel altogether, at least by the text’s own definition:

All his life Patrick Lewis has lived beside novels and their clear stories. Authors accompanying their heroes clarified motives. World events raised characters from destitution. The books would conclude with all wills rectified and all romances solvent. Even the spurned lover accepted the fact that the conflict had ended. (Ondaatje 82)

From its outset, it is clear that *In the Skin of a Lion* does not seek to provide its reader with innocuous clear stories, rectified wills, or resolved conflicts. Rather, the intersecting lives illustrated so evocatively throughout this work converge to initiate a larger Benjaminian “moment of danger” (Benjamin 255), which, through its inherent and guiding humanity, has the power to not only disrupt violent conformism, but also reach far past its textual bounds to color the experience and world of its external receivers. Perhaps the human order here isn’t so faint after all.

Of course, this line in its quoted form does not open the novel directly; instead, in the narrative’s actual introduction, the journey it promises is transposed into the world of the present and concrete, initiating the literal road that we are to follow through its telling. The opening passage of the novel’s preface reads:

---

2 Ondaatje also made the following remark in an interview with the New York Times: “The novel has been quite slow in picking up what the other arts are doing…for years they have been doing things that are much more suggestive, much freer of chronological sequence” (Ondaatje qtd. in Uhlig 1)
This is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. She listens and asks questions as the vehicle travels through darkness. Outside, the countryside is unbetrayed. The man who is driving could say, “In that field is a castle,” and it would be possible for her to believe him. (Ondaatje, unnumbered)

So, as the reader travels and “listens” alongside this as of yet unnamed “young girl”, they are immediately aligned with her radical open mind and sublime, dream-like vision of the surrounding world; in order to fully understand and appreciate the project of this text, then, we too must learn to overlook the normative bounds of the field of the real to perceive the imaginative possibilities of the castle that stretches up from its flat, expansive foundations.

This is, of course, not to say that we must turn a blind eye to this allegorical countryside altogether. Indeed, without its historic foundations, this particular story would have no pretense or grounding at all. While these instances are not explicitly delineated within the text, one of Ondaatje’s most fundamental – and simultaneously most controversial – moves in this novel is the interweaving of real, historic figures with the fictionalized life and experience of his protagonist. Major characters throughout this narrative, such as the bridge builder, Nicolas Temelcoff, or the murdered Finnish revolutionary, Cato, were living, breathing people whose labor, love, talent, and pain *In the Skin of a Lion* works throughout to honor and give new, conscious visibility to (Duffy 2-5). In their real lives, for example, the left-wing, unionist efforts and wrongful deaths of Cato’s “progenitors” were quite literally written out of history through what Dennis Duffy implies to be a deliberate state cover up.\(^3\) In its literary form, however, the

---

\(^3\) Cato in *In the Skin of a Lion* is actually the amalgamation of two men, Viljo Rosvall and John Voutilainen, who met the same fate: what a jury determined to be “accidental drowning” but an autopsy revealed conclusively to be an aggressive execution (Duffy 2). The men were shot in the skull and, like their literary counterpart, found “buried in the ice of a shallow river” (Ondaatje 156). The book addresses the collapsing of these two figures with the follow aside: “You must realize that Cato was not his real name, it was his war name” (Ondaatje 140). *In the Skin of a Lion* also notably includes some very specific details from their diaries, transposed into
sacrifice of these two men retroactively receives the humanity, mourning, and anger it deserves through the unconditional love of Cato’s fictionalized daughter, Hanna\(^4\), sensual memories of his lover, Alice, and ardent, indignant esteem\(^5\) of Patrick respectively. So, it is clear that Ondaatje is not seeking to wholly obliterate and rewrite the archive, but rather to mend its holes and “barbarisms” with a previously absent, necessary infusion of empathy and visibility.

On the surface, this practice may seem reminiscent of Linda Hutcheon’s notion of “historiographic metafiction” – here defined as “novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 275) – which does serve as a useful contextualization in a number of ways. For example, as we have previously established, In the Skin of a Lion seeks consistently to set itself apart from its own internal understanding of “novels and their clear stories,” which it does, in many ways, seems to accomplish quite effectively. If we dig a little deeper, however, it becomes clear that this outright rejection of literariness is more easily said than done. Hutcheon productively complicates this situation by pointing out that the postmodern writer must inherently confront the “paradox of the reality of the past but its (only) textualized accessibility to us today” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 284, original emphasis), a point which is essential to keep in mind in regard to the scope of Ondaatje’s project as a whole. In light of this intrinsic constraint, the author’s inclusion of private, humanizing experience such as those illustrated through Cato’s story (and so many others in this text) becomes even more

---

4 “Oh, I love him even if I never met him. That’s just the truth.” (Ondaatje 139)

5 “And who is he to touch the lover of this man, to eat meals with his daughter, to stand dazed under a lightbulb and read his last letter? He remains standing alone in the room…as if the letter stared back at him.” (Onaatje 156)
essential, while the urgent danger of compressing those same lives such into a flat, oppressive textuality looms closer.  

This is, of course, not a new or unique literary bind; Ondaatje’s approach to it, however, is what makes this novel so worthy of attention. While many critics and theorists (including Hutcheon herself) have read *In the Skin of a Lion* solely through a historiographic metafictive lens, this interpretation misses the essential moments where Ondaatje is able to transcend these generic bounds to enter an entirely new realm of historic representation. Hutcheon, for example, prescribes the following as a definitional tenet of the genre: “it installs totalizing order, only to contest it, by its radical provisionality, intertextuality, and often, fragmentation” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 286). *In the Skin of a Lion* certainly follows each of these steps; however, the novel then goes one step further to rectify this necessary fragmentation with an ultimate ex-centric connective bond, as exemplified by the following passage:

> He saw the interactions, saw how each of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves…The street-band had depicted perfect company, with an ending full of embraces after the solos had made everyone stronger, more delineated. (Ondaatje 144-145)  

While the singularity expressed through these solos is essential for the overall strength of both piece and player, they could not exist at all without this ultimate, backing sense of union, which is “more than themselves” and allows each individual to feel a part of the larger, harmonized but not homogenous whole.

---

6 There is a pervasive trend among certain critics of *In the Skin of a Lion*, such as Frank Davey, Julie Beddoes, Dennis Duffy, and Jody Mason to, in the words of Rod Schumacher, “read the novel…as a proletarian novel and subsequently condemn it for its failure to maintain its critique of wage labor and the class system...[betraying] the reader, who is either duped into a false consciousness or must actively resist her interpellation within the structures of bourgeois ideology” (446). Holding this multiform work to one rigid generic definition or framework completely ignores the project of the text, as I will attempt show throughout this paper.

7 To borrow Hutcheon’s original term, here defined as “the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 283).
Ondaatje also makes another essential break from historiographic metafictive tradition, which we can see most clearly through a passage that Hutcheon includes from Fredric Jameson’s “Periodizing.” The latter writes:

The most intelligent ‘solution’ to such a crisis does not consist in abandoning historiography…as an impossible aim and an ideological category all at once, but rather…in reorganizing its traditional procedures on a different level…the historian should reformat her vocation – not any longer to produce some vivid representation of history ‘as it really happened,’ but rather to produce the concept of history. (Jameson, “Periodizing” 180 qtd. in Hutcheon, “Pastime” 282, original emphasis)

In other words, the historian or writer of the past should not strive towards objective Truth in their writing, but rather seek to produce a “concept” of history as pieced together through the reordering of previously established ideologies and “traditional procedures.” While Ondaatje certainly displays a similar skepticism towards the representation of history “as it really happened,” this more epistemological, academic stance towards the historic “concept” does not find ground in his text. If we return to Walter Benjamin’s claim that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” it is clear to see that Jameson’s suggestion of “reorganizing…traditional procedures” would simply constitute a rehashing of the modes of oppression and dehumanization contained at their core.

In the Skin of a Lion, on the other hand, explicitly warns against a reliance on abstract interpretive practices with the following claim: “The trouble with ideology…is that it hates the private. You must make it human” (Ondaatje 135). In practice, this philosophy manifests in what we will call a “human aesthetic,” which underlies every word, every character, and every structural choice in this novel. It is important to note that by “aesthetic” here, we are not referring to the term’s conventional understanding, which generally suggests a sort of reductive
beautification of the violences and banalities of true, lived experience. In the Skin of a Lion rather seeks to intertwine the ugly with the beautiful, the prosaic with the sensual, and the personal with the public to create a nuanced rendition of the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in any individual’s private narrative. If we take the concept of sensuality in its most base sense, we see that even the text’s erotic passages are intertwined with almost grotesque descriptive language, such as the following: “What he remembered…was the acrid shit and urine he could summon up now even in the heart of Toronto. The smell had paraded grandly over his first seduction in a hay bed, the angry girl slapping him when both were full and guilty” (Ondaatje 53). So, it is abundantly clear that this feature is not simply being used to make the lived experience of the oppressed delicate enough for the eyes of the privileged, but rather that something far more egalitarian and fundamental to the underlying thread of this novel is at play.

This privatized aesthetic truly does apply to all ex-centric bodies and figures in the text. To fully understand this, it is useful to consider Lee Spinks’ understanding of Ondaatje aestheticism, which he defines as follows:

> The power of art lies in its ability to disengage experience into the singularities that compose it and alert us to other possible realms of sensibility beyond our known and extended world. Some of Ondaatje’s most astonishing literary effects derive from his ability to extend perception beyond its human location, although this liberation of point-of-view is not necessarily in the service of a Utopian politics. (Spinks 19)

---

8 Frank Davey, for example, takes issue with Ondaatje for, in his view, “making ‘use’ of the unempowered to create bourgeois art” (Davey 146), a claim taken up by many of his followers, such as Beddoes and Mason.

9 This reference to “Utopian politics” is a specific response to the work of critics who place In the Skin of a Lion’s aesthetic in direct relation and opposition to its politics. Julie Beddoes, for example, claims, “For a text to be fully persuasive, its formal [read, aesthetic] and thematic politics must be on the same side. This may seem to be the case with In the Skin of a Lion, but I suggest that is postmodern aesthetic practices neutralize – or even oppose – its tentative thematizing of a radical class politics” (Beddoes 2).
By Ondaatje’s “extension of perception beyond its human location,” Spinks is specifically referring to the fondness the author displays throughout his work for “exposing us to the infinitely complex and intense flux of life that flows through and beyond us” when we remove the constrictive, anthropocentric concept of “Man” as the central and only perspective from which “all other being is determined” (Spinks 18). This move to subvert the primacy of man is certainly visible throughout the text at hand in a number of quite different valences, from Patrick’s sympathetic identification with the insects that gather around his small cottage – about whose language and life he notably wonders, “perhaps they are not mute at all, it is just a lack of range in his hearing” (Ondaatje 10) – to the ultimate foregrounding of women and femininity that becomes clear by the novel’s conclusion. However, while Spinks sees Ondaatje’s ability to direct sympathy outside of the human body as one of his most impressive accomplishments, I would argue that this strength is perhaps rivaled only by his parallel moves in the text at hand to direct this aesthetic identification back into the bodies of others in an inescapable, and at times quite uncomfortable manner.

Look for example to the following passage, which serves as a brilliant encapsulation of this wider practice:

In the tunnel under Lake Ontario two men shake hands on an incline of mud. Beside them a pickaxe and a lamp, their dirt-streaked faces pivoting to look towards the camera. For a moment, while the film receives the image, everything is still, the other tunnel workers silent. Then Arthur Goss, the city photographer, packs up his tripod and glass plates, unhooks the cord of lights that creates a vista of open tunnel behind the two men, walks with his equipment the fifty yards to the ladder, and climbs out into the sunlight.

Work continues. The grunt into hard clay. The wet slap. Men burning rock and shattering it wherever they come across it. Filling hundreds of barrels with liquid mud and hauling them out of the tunnel. In the east end of the city a tunnel is being built under the lake in order to lay intake pipes for the new waterworks. It is 1930. (Ondaatje 105)
If we focus briefly on just the second paragraph here, it is easy to perceive the physicality with which laboring bodies are portrayed throughout the narrative as a whole, as well as the historic mode with which these descriptions are so often intertwined. First, it is important to note the very deliberate ordering of information above. In a textbook or even a realist novel, this account would likely have appeared only as its last two sentences, if at all; in *In the Skin of a Lion*, however, it is only after we experience the reality and physicality of the labor that would have otherwise been erased, that we learn the why and when of its initiation. Not only does this format structurally place the exertion of these laboring bodies in front of the actual product they are creating, but also allows Ondaatje to transport the reader – somewhat forcefully in this specific instance – to the physical space of their work.

This intense corporeality, of course, lies in stark contrast to the sanitized, government-ordered photograph illustrated immediately above. Arthur Goss’ image, the antithesis of the human aesthetic, is not only intricately staged – bringing an artificial “cord of light” into a subterranean world that has learned to live without it – but further renders its historic, privileged viewers complicit in the literal silencing of its subjects. As Goss ascends into the sunlight, however, the reader is left behind in ex-centric darkness¹⁰ as the true nature of things recommences with a cacophony of sound and sensory detail.¹¹ Not only do the passage’s short, ....

¹⁰ Martha Butterfield accurately claims that “by far, most of the book’s action transpires in darkness” and further suggesting that the pattern of repetition formed by the literal words “blackness,” “darkness,” and “night” form an “underlying ostinato, a pulse to the novel” which allows the text’s ex-centric characters space to work, move, and survive (Butterfield 163-164).

¹¹ Karen Overbye also brings up the important consideration of an appropriative artistic or bourgeois gaze, claiming that in scenes such as this bodies “are brought to our attention, not by being objects of the narrator’s gaze (or anyone else’s), but, in part, by the many references to physical sensation: cold, heat, damp, hunger, longing, exhaustion, and, especially, pain” (Overbye 1), a process which – through the inclusion of the photograph – is literalized in this particular instance.
choppy sentences create an underlying rhythm resembling the incessant pounding of metal on stone, but they also convey the uncomfortable reality of this subterranean world. “The wet slap” and “liquid mud” are not pretty phrases, but they do convey and disseminate real, lived experience. These images also – along with a later assertion that “each blow against the shale wall jars up from the palms into the shoulders as if the body is hit” (Ondaatje 105) – work to collapse the boundary between the body and the earth itself, performing Spinks’ “expos[ure] to the infinitely complex and intense flux of life that flows through and beyond us” in a radical show of sympathy towards the violence being committed through and towards both entities.

Further, through both this aesthetic logic as well as the power of the language itself, we clearly feel the reverberations of this violence in our own bodies, radically carrying and disseminating the urgency and attention this disruption demands into the larger world beyond the text.

To fully understand the true gravity of this transference, we will turn to the writings of Walter Benjamin – specifically his foundational “Theses on the Philosophy of History” – which, when read in parallel with In the Skin of a Lion, holds considerable implication for the true scope and impact of the reparative archive being created throughout the text.12 Consider, for example, the following passage, which speaks directly to the larger historic project at stake not only in the moment above, but throughout the narrative as a whole:

12 While “Theses on the Philosophy of History” can almost be read as a distillation of Ondaatje’s project, these two works have curiously never been put in conversation. This is not to say that Benjamin has not been referenced in regard to Ondaatje’s larger corpus. Marlene Goldman, for example, provides a thorough analysis of the presence of Benjaminian imagery and the Angelus Novus in The English Patient in her essay, “‘Powerful Joy’: Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient and Walter Benjamin’s Allegorical Way of Seeing” while Barry Maxwell applies a similar analysis to Coming Through Slaughter in his article, “Surrealistic Aspects of Coming Through Slaughter”. Milena Marinkova is the only critic, at least that I have encountered, who specifically applies Benjaminian theory to In the Skin of a Lion, although she references “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and “The Storyteller” rather than “Theses on the Philosophy of History” specifically (Marinkova 8).
To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling class. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. (Benjamin 255)

Benjamin, who can certainly be cited as a major influence among the critics previously discussed in this paper, begins in now-familiar territory; like Jameson and Hutcheon who follow him, the theorist also categorically rejects the concept of history “the way it really was,” as an appropriate or viable narrative strategy. While Hutcheon argues (through Jameson) that this search for objective Truth is irresponsible and inherently flawed, however, Benjamin rather conceptualizes it as a form of outright, inter-generational violence; thus, it is to his principles specifically that we must turn in attempting to understand the parallel, at times “idiosyncratic” (Bök 109) bursts of brutality that pervade and puncture Ondaatje’s own writing.

The sudden, embodied pain illustrated above constitutes just one of the many instances of this phenomenon throughout In the Skin of a Lion. While we have previously discussed the

---

13 Fredric Jameson has written at length on Benjamin, including a well-known article, “Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia” in which he speaks to the philosopher’s “obsession with the past and memory” (Jameson 53), demonstrated moral code, and “unresolved, ambiguous attitude towards modern industrial civilization” (Jameson 67). Hutcheon, also, heavily cites Benjaminian philosophy in her A Theory of Adaptation. Ultimately, while all three critics undeniably belong to the same larger theoretical school, the latter two each work to unpack, problematize, or build on the former’s writing. While we do not have the space here to fully investigate the exact divergences of these analyses, it is simply important to note here that while they may seem similar at first glance, these thinkers cannot and should not be made equivalent to each other.

14 Hutcheon argues both that “there are only truths in the plural, and never one truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just other truths” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 280) and that “both history and fiction are cultural sign systems, ideological constructions whose ideology includes the appearance of being autonomous and self-contained” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 282), or in other words, that anything we take “for granted” in a historical account is inextricably dependent on the culture and language that has produced it, and thus not universally transferrable. Both of these statements, then, preclude the existence of singular objectivity.
Benjaminian idea that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” it is important to briefly investigate the reasoning behind this audacious claim. Benjamin explains that historic empathy will always inevitably fall “with the victor” in any instance of conflict or oppression, thus allowing the members of this controlling group or class to “step over those who are lying prostrate…carry[ing] along [the spoils] in the procession” (Benjamin 256). These spoils, or “cultural treasures” as Benjamin also deems them, “owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds who have created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries,” therefore, not only producing these violent erasures but further disseminating them through their “transmi[ssion] from one owner to another” (Benjamin 256).

In this context, it is easy to understand Goss’ propagandic, material photograph as one of these “cultural treasures” which not only hides the true labor of its subjects, but also its own, insidious artificiality.\(^\text{15}\) The “true picture of the past” (Benjamin 255), then, must necessarily be an immaterial experience, one which is not dangerously “transmitted” but directly felt, experienced, and internalized. In this way, we can easily read the violence and vulnerability inherent in *In the Skin of a Lion*’s human aesthetic as that necessary moment of danger which is uniquely able to incite the “flashing up” of this image. It is not merely the sympathetic experience of pain that is able to accomplish this radical transference, however; on a grander scale, it is the truly unprecedented closeness to another human being that we have already begun to explore. It is important to note the crucial use of the word “memory” in reference to the historic image here; while Hutcheon asserts that we can only truly access the past through its textualized representation, Benjamin’s spontaneous memory wholly precludes this notion,

\(^{15}\) In walking up, out of the tunnels, and into the sunlight above, Goss is also quite literally “step[ping] over those who are lying prostrate.”
instead gesturing toward a network of affect through which we can actually experience the consciousness of the past as if it were our own long buried, truly lived experience. Through his characteristic “liberation of point-of-view,” then, Ondaatje proves the true malleability of boundaries between bodies, eras, and even the individualist mind itself – the conceit around which the novel’s oppressive elite both construct their identity and cultivate their power.¹⁶

Of course, this permeability is double-edged, leaving the subaltern world quite vulnerable to what Benjamin identifies as the “threat [that] hangs over both [content and receiver]: that of becoming a tool of the ruling class.” If the collective can penetrate and radically manipulate the individualist mind, it is only natural that – in its own moment of danger – the individual will be able to re-assume and re-stratify the collective. We see this frightening potential for one brief instant, as Commissioner Harris is allowed voyeuristic, barbarous access into this world through Goss’ photographs, which his appropriative gaze wholly integrates into his own circumscribed ideal:

Ash-grey faces. An unfinished world. The men work in the equivalent of the fallout of a candle. They are in the foresection of the cortex, in the small world of Rowland Harris’ dream as he lies in bed on Neville Park Boulevard. Such a strange dream for him. The silence of men coming out of a hole within an envelope of steam…Swallowing water one-and-a-quarter miles away, bringing it back into his body, and spitting it out clean. (Ondaatje 111)

To fully understand the gravity of the trespass illustrated here, it is useful to look to Deleuze and Guattari’s figurations of smooth versus striated space, summarized by Spinks as follows:

A smooth space…is open, indefinite and potentially unlimited; it lacks both a single organizing principle and a set of fixed boundaries…Smooth space is activated and dynamic space…constituted by the free association of bodies.

¹⁶ When Ambrose Small, a corrupt millionaire, disappears, the police send out his Bertillon record, which “consisted of the measurements of certain parts of the body: the length of head, width of head [etc.]” (Ondaatje 55). Thus, Ambrose’s entire public identity literally revolves around the shape of his head and singular, closed off dimensions of his brain.
A striated space, by contrast, expresses a vertical and hierarchical principle of organization by combining multiple points of connection into a circumscribed territory… Striation functions most effectively by imposing a standardized ‘work-model’ upon every other type of activity. (Spinks 146)

So, seizing on the unprecedented accessibility he has perceived through the “unfinished” nature of this smooth and indefinite world, Harris immediately works to re-instill order and strict process; in this new striated system, men are made small and silent as the work-model being imposed reduces their vital humanity solely to the products of their labor, simultaneously trapping them within the subdivided cell of the commissioner’s brain. Further, it is implied that this entire domain has been consumed within the physical being of Harris himself, in a truly disturbing perversion of the human aesthetic’s guiding doctrine of empathic embodiment.

This particular manifestation of conformism is, admittedly, one of the narrative’s more opaque metaphors. The sustained tension and extraordinarily fragile boundary between smooth and striated space, however, is essential to the fabric and mechanics of In the Skin of a Lion and is worth briefly investigating within a more straightforward symbolic register. The temporal “fluidity” (Spinks 146) that characterizes smooth space, for example, is literalized in the novel’s pervasive water imagery, which forms an ex-centric river of affinity that flows throughout the text. This particular stream has its origins in Patrick’s childhood memories, as his father,

---

17 Ambrose also cites Clara’s “unfinished nature” as the sole reason why men want her and he has been able to essentially claim her as one of his possessions (Ondaatje 93).
18 I am using the word “brain” (rather than “mind”) intentionally here. It is important to note the connection between the dry, scientific language of “foresection of the cortex” and the Bertillon record used to identify Ambrose.
19 In a major turning point in the novel, Ambrose sees Clara from afar “sitting there thinking, looking at Patrick’s river…she felt somehow deliriously happy between the two points of this journey” (Ondaatje 100). In this moment, the physical stream becomes a site of radical freedom; not only is it untouchable by Ambrose, but it also allows Clara a brief, ecstatic moment of release from the “world of wealth” (Ondaatje 61) she is usually forced to exist within. In this moment, the river also becomes interchangeable with the flow of Patrick’s life as a whole, which, by the end of the novel, carries Clara back into its current (Ondaatje 243).
Hazen Lewis, undertakes the dangerous job of dynamiter for a lumber company, setting off charges meant to “free” the flow of the river from logjams (Ondaatje 17); this “activation” then at once allows the river to flow towards other provinces and unseen human actors, while simultaneously exposing Patrick to the revolutionary potential of explosion, which will become essential to the progression of his own life in later chapters.

As this river flows deeper into the space of the narrative, however, it performs a characteristic “variation and self-differentiation,” preserving it from any form of rigid mapping or other such “fixed standardization” (Spinks 146); in these sensualized elemental transformations, the flowing water becomes exactly what each individual receiver needs in that particular moment to feel free, unrestrained, and radically whole. For the immigrant dyers that Patrick will come to know later in life, for example, the “one moment of superiority came in the showers at the end of the day…[when] the color disrobed itself from the body…in the erotica of being made free” (Ondaatje 132). A curiously similar aesthetic character also pervades one of the novel’s most primal scenes, in which Alice and Clara find wild, animalistic freedom in “unnaming things” through the following, almost ritualized outburst:

They crash down the wood steps, Clara’s growl unnaming things…leaping up as the rain breaks free of the locked heat clouds, running into the thunder of a dark field…the damp rustle of it against their skirts and outstretched arms…The rain comes through their thin cotton clothes against their muscles…a sudden flinging sheet of lightning…sees Alice subliminal in movement almost rising up in the air, shirt removed, so her body can meet the rain.” (Ondaatje 76)

In both of these previously demarcated spaces, then, the sudden burst of flowing water introduced is imbued with the radical potential to quite literally melt the constructed perimeters between entities as they stand. Bodies melt into other bodies, the earth, the air, and even the water itself in this radical reciprocity of “being made free.” As Clara’s wildness erases the anthropocentric hierarchy of the named world, she is simultaneously able to release this
“activated” rain from “the locked heat clouds,” which in turn re-incorporates her and Alice into the half-lit world\textsuperscript{20} which its deluge creates. In this instance, then, Ondaatje provides yet another example of the affective transference that occurs in a moment of danger between body, earth, and reader, the danger being figured here as the “sudden flinging sheet of lightning” that pierces the sky and seems to consume Alice for a split second. However, while the specific instant of sympathetic transfer flashes up through pain in the space of intake tunnels, here it is through pure ecstasy; thus, through the unprecedented freedom smooth space provides, the reader is not only able to carry the pain of this era into the world, but its moments of untempered joy and pure, subliminal beauty as well.

As powerful as this smooth river is, however, it is no less vulnerable to the threat of conformism than its historic and human counterparts. Although the above instances of free flowing water may have loosely aligned along certain thematic and affective bearings, the corresponding, striated representation of ice creates a literal “fixed…vertical principle of organization” that notably cuts through both time and space in the text. Returning to Patrick’s childhood, the reader experiences an early memory of Patrick and his father rescuing a lost cow which they find “mid-river, half submerged in the ice” (Ondaatje 11). This image then directly translates into a deep-seated perception in Patrick that “in books…women were rescued from runaway horses, from frozen pond accidents” (Ondaatje 61), which of course both foreshadows for our sake, but also retroactively hearkens back to the tragic fate of Cato, who as we recall, was executed and found “buried in the ice of a shallow river” (Ondaatje 156) sometime before the events of this novel, both in the real world and in the world of \textit{In the Skin of a Lion}. Finally, near the end of the novel, “Beware of frozen ponds, peroxide blondes, stocks and bonds…” (Ondaatje

\textsuperscript{20} “They crawl delirious together in the blackness. There is no moon.” (Ondaatje 77)
172) becomes the refrain of a song Patrick sings to himself immediately after a failed, “unhistorical” attempt at explosive, revolutionary destruction, which accomplishes nothing but his own imprisonment, or viewed slightly differently, his systemic incorporation into yet another rigid “state apparatus” (Spinks 146). Thus, it is clear that – at least in the world of In the Skin of a Lion – once a space becomes striated, wholly restoring it to a purely smooth state is extremely difficult, if not utterly impossible. Within this conquered space, to borrow the words of Benjamin, “the enemy has not ceased to be victorious” (255), and will indeed remain eternally in this position of power if their rigid control over time itself is not contested.

In these moments of violent striation, we are able to perceive just how dire the threat of conformism truly is to In the Skin of a Lion’s overarching project, which we can now figure explicitly as Ondaatje’s Benjaminian “attempt…to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it”; it is the pivotal moment of danger which this stratification and appropriation presents, then, that incites the flashing up of Patrick’s memorial telling in the first place. We have already seen, however, just how utterly defenseless truly smooth space is to the threat of regulation; in fact, Spinks goes on to specify that in practice, Deleuze and Guattari’s oppositional states can “exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being stratified; striated space is continually being smoothed” (Spinks 146). So, to truly “subdue the Antichrist” of conformism, some amount of productive structuring is necessary in the retention of this grand “image of the past” that constitutes the novel.

To fully comprehend the nature of the temporal spatialization which Benjamin relies on here, we must turn to a crucial aspect of his theory which we have not yet explored – namely, his foundational concept of “historical materialism,” the school of thought which is directly responsible for the preservation of this image. According to Benjamin, the historical materialist
views history as “the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now” (Benjamin 261); simultaneously, they also understand that they must “recite events without distinguishing between major and minor ones…for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin 254-255). In other words, the content of “history” is constantly affected, changed, and infused by the concerns and events of the present, while the present must be, at the same time, vitally concerned with the circumstances and vestiges of the past, no matter how large or small. Thus, the Present and Past meet in the eternally intermixing, intertwining, and reciprocal (though not homogenous) “open (though not “empty”) air of history” (Benjamin 261). On the surface, this “open air” may seem functionally equivalent to Deleuze and Guattari’s smooth space, yet there is an essential distinction which must be made here. While the latter is somewhat paradoxically bound by “time and place” (Spink 146), the former instead interweaves all possible eras to form an almost palpable, entwined dynamic of temporality itself.

Like all ex-centric boundaries in this discussion, however, the ordering principal used here is radically, ultimately malleable. To borrow one of Alice’s ideological mantras, we must here “re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of things” (Ondaatje 163, original emphasis)\(^\text{21}\), a principal which can be assumed to underlie any mention of form or structure that

---

\(^{21}\) Even this quote is, notably, quite “loosely attributed”. This particular quote originates from the journal of Anne Wilkinson, a Canadian poet, who in the novel shows up as the rich woman Caravaggio meets during his escape from jail. About this homage, Glen Lowry writes: “Without an intimate knowledge of Wilkinson’s writing, one might pass over the sentences; only the demarcation of the text, the fact both sentences are in italics, draws attention to the gesture” (Lowry 66). Further, the line first appears in In the Skin of a Lion in a slightly different form, as the following: “Let me now re-emphasize the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects,” which this is directly attributed to “a letter [Joseph] Conrad had written to a newspaper” (Ondaatje 134-135, my emphasis). Even this, however, is an intentional misquote, as the original text was not from a newspaper but rather a “rhetorical letter…written to a Scottish publisher,” in which it is implied that the specific wording above did not actually appear at all
appears in either text. The bounds of time in this “open air,” then, are rendered not just malleable but radically permeable, as Benjamin provides two illustrations of the dynamics of such a space, and how movements through and within it might occur. First, he writes, “This jump [fashioning one society after another] takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives commands. The same leap in the open air of history is a dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution” (Benjamin 261). This is then followed later in the piece by the following fundamental illustration:

[An event] became historical post-humously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (Benjamin 263)

In this, then, we can begin to recognize the true significance of the “human order” with which we began. In a strikingly similar image to Benjamin’s constellation, Ondaatje puts forth his own spatial and temporal philosophy as follows:

His own life was no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices. Patrick saw a wondrous night web – all of these fragments of a human order, something ungoverned by the family he was born into or the headlines of the day. A nun on a bridge, a daredevil who was unable to sleep without a drink, a boy watching a fire from his bed at night, an actress who ran away with a millionaire – the detritus and chaos of an age was realigned. (Ondaatje 145)

Just as the soloists in the street band discussed earlier found harmony and higher purpose in the “thread of a hum” (Ondaatje 144) which connected them to something larger than themselves, these “fragments” created by Patrick’s friends, lovers and contemporaries are strengthened by their structuring. It is in this “realignment” that they are imbued with the revolutionary potential (Bower 3). Here, then, Ondaatje contests the singularity of canonical literary ownership, but is able to do so in such a skilled and subtle way that the singular mind could not hope to reincorporate it.
to build an a-temporal, collective world which is untouchable by standard techniques of social stratification – such as family name or reductive, barbarous narrative – and as such, retains the freedom and safety to initiate the moments of affective transference we have already discussed.

In the combination of Benjamin’s constellation with Ondaatje’s night web, then, we are finally able to perceive the full scope of the latter’s successful attempt to wrest the historic actors he portrays away from the conformism of not only his own era, but his individualist mind itself. In Benjamin’s interpolation of “the time of the now” with the prophetic, “messianic” time of past ages, he reconfigures temporality as a fluid entity sown into the web along with its human constituents, one which can – owing to the malleable nature of this constellation as a whole – be experienced at different speeds by different individuals. In a letter to Clara, Patrick remarks that the people around him are all living “strange half-lit lives,” an evocative, important suggestion which is further expanded in the follow passage:

Patrick never believed that characters lived only on the page. They altered when the author’s eye was somewhere else. Outside the plot there was a great darkness, but there would of course be daylight elsewhere on earth. Each character had his own time zone, his own lamp, otherwise they were just men form nowhere. (Ondaatje 143)

So, through this radical ability to not only exist within but control their own personal time zone, each character is thus imbued with the power to disappear from the text completely, living partly or wholly unseen, autonomous lives, free – as we remember from the opening of this discussion – from the tyranny of “plot and all its consequences” as well as the appropriative gaze of the victors who would seek to subject them.

However, these characters do not merely hide among the constellation – the structure created here also allows them to radically traverse time, history, and even the content of embodied, individual memory itself. Benjamin’s dialectical “leap in the open air of history,” for
example, is dramatized through the work of the daredevil Nicholas Temelcoff, who notably exists in the liminal space “somewhere in the distance between bridge and river…link[ing] everyone” (Ondaatje 34). So, just through his spatial positioning, Temelcoff is already directly implicated within the connective fabric of both the constellation and night web. He is able, further, to literally make this “dialectical” leap throughout the landscape of not only history, but time itself. As the narrator informs us, “It does not matter if it is day or night, he could be blindfolded. Black space is time…He knows his position in the air as if he is mercury slipping across a map” (Ondaatje 35). Perhaps more than any other character, then, Temelcoff is able to not only “grasp” the constellation of time but radically traverse it, manipulating not only his corporeal fate, but his historic legacy as well. Consider the strange and abrupt disruptions in tense and address used in the following passage:

He stands in the air banging the crown pin into the upper cord and then shepherds the lower cord’s slip-joint into position. Even in archive photographs it is difficult to find him. Again and again you see vista before you and the eye must search along the wall of sky to the speck of burned paper across the valley that is him, an exclamation mark, somewhere in the distance… (Ondaatje 34)

Here, the narrator almost dizzyingly flits between timeframes, beginning with Temelcoff’s reality as he “stands” in present tense, but immediately switching to his historic representation, as he disappears from the archive years later. Suddenly, then, it is not just the narrator but an intimate and abrupt “you” who is searching for – and eventually finds – Temelcoff’s image, thus in just these three sentences both acknowledging his absence and restoring his presence to the bounds of History. How is Temelcoff able to impact his place in time in such a large, almost uncanny scale, however? Much later, after Patrick has reminded him of the nun who fell off the

---

22 It is consistently emphasized that Temelcoff takes the most dangerous jobs on the bridge, and that “no one dreams of doing half the things he does” (Ondaatje 35). Thus, there is an implication here that in his movements Temelcoff is quite literally defying death.
bridge, the narrator channels Temelcoff, remarking, “Patrick’s gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories” (Ondaatje 149). The use of the word arrow, specifically, is important here, for an arrow is able to “shoot through” a plane, leaving it to be filled, in Benjamin’s imagery, with “chips of Messianic time”. Thus, having been given this gift, Temelcoff himself has been imbued with this “messianic” power of historic reparation through story telling, as is displayed on a larger scale by the novel’s existence as a whole.

It is not just autonomous actors, however, but images and even objects that are able to travel through this web. If we return to the novel’s framing preface, we will recall that its underlying thread is not just told but “gathered” by Hanna, as Patrick “picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms” (Ondaatje, unnumbered). The corporeality indicated here treats the novel’s thread “as if it were a palpable thing” (Hutcheon, The Canadian Postmodern 93), or, a physical web that is being sewn in this open air of history. We can even see the places where “various corners of the story” actually seems to meet or cross over one another in a series of images, moments, gestures, and words that show up repeatedly throughout the text, always in a slightly different mask, or performed by a new actor.

Unlike the striated ice, which cut a lateral, unbreakable wake of violence through the text on its own terms, these ex-centric resonances rather seem to follow characters or aesthetic valences, actually influencing the telling and flow of the narrative as they travel. One of the most fascinating instances of this is the journey of what this theory would suggest to be the image of a single earring, which over the course of the novel attaches itself to each major female character. When Patrick first lays eyes on Clara, she is “bending to one side as she attached an
“I missed the earrings” (Ondaatje 61). After she leaves Patrick, then, the earring briefly travels to Alice, who—in her one night with Patrick before they truly re-enter each other’s lives—leaves after realizing “she had lost and earring when she got up. She said it didn’t matter, that it was artificial” (Ondaatje 89). Finally, the earring ends up with Caravaggio’s wife Gianetta, as the thief watches her while “Removing one, she drops it to the floor. Her hands go up to the other ear—unscrewing the second pin of gold…she pins the earring her fingers had strayed upon into his arm muscle, beginning a tattoo of blood” (Ondaatje 204-205). These are, of course, not random moments in any of these characters’ lives; each contains within it not only the inherent danger and ecstasy of impending sexual intimacy, but—perhaps more importantly—the crucial instant when each of their storylines took on a wholly new and unexpected trajectory.

This whole thread might initially be easy to miss, if not for Patrick’s sudden and, in its objective place in the narrative, seemingly random recollection:

*Can’t find my earring, does it matter?* As if another woman would find it. Alice departed with one ear undressed. *If we meet again we can say hello, we can say goodbye.* (Ondaatje 153, original emphasis)

Thus, as each woman embarks on her own personal journey, she passes off the earring to the next, who may in turn enjoy her time in the narrative spotlight. In its explicit travel along only female lines, then, the earring almost exactly play out the novel’s titular reference:

Alice had once described a play to him in which several actresses shared the role of the heroine. After half an hour the powerful matriarch removed her large coat from which animal pelts dangled and she passed it, along with her strength, to one of the minor characters. In this way even a silent daughter could put on the cloak and be able to break through her chrysalis into language. Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story. (Ondaatje 157)
As the earring travels through these three women, they too receive their respective moments of strength and language, ultimately all acting as “the powerful matriarch”\textsuperscript{23} to Hanna, who serves as the receiver of their courage, wisdom, and embodied experience through the novel’s frame.

This insistence on generationally transferred oral tradition to preserve historic knowledge, however, marks Ondaatje’s most important break from Benjaminian tradition in two essential ways. First, Benjamin’s assumed actor and audience are both explicitly and violently masculine, as is much of the language used throughout the piece; he declares, for example, that “the historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history” (Benjamin 262). In her “gathering” of Patrick’s story, however, it is implied that it is in fact Hanna herself who is narrating the novel at hand, thus personifying the female voice which, in its radical empathy, “politically and culturally personifies Canada” (Irvine 11 qtd. in Hutcheon, \textit{The Canadian Postmodern} 6) and has been passed down through the generations.

In Benjamin’s above doctrine, it is also easy to perceive his pervasive fondness for explosion and destruction; paradoxically, to \textit{preserve} a moment in history, he suggests that a historical materialist “takes cognizance of [a cessation of happening] to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history…as a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work…in the lifework, the era, and in the entire course of history” (Benjamin 262). It is essential, then, that in his confrontation with Commissioner Harris, Patrick – who carries a

\textsuperscript{23} Each of these characters has a real matriarchal relation to Hanna. Obviously, Alice is Hanna’s real mother, but we also learn that Clara has become Hanna’s stepmother in \textit{The English Patient}. In the same novel, then, Caravaggio becomes a father-figure to Hanna after Patrick’s death; while the younger girl never actually Gianetta (at least in the space of \textit{The English Patient’s} narrative) she does loosely this matriarchal role by association.
blasting-box “like a chicken under his right arm” (234) – is presented with this exact chance to blast a lifework out of history, but does not follow through. Instead, he “finds in Harris a receptive listener” (Gamlin 70), to which he can pass down his story and initiate this process of emotional, empathic transfer that the reader at this point should already quite familiar with. By incorporating this privileged figure into the aesthetic world of the ex-centric, however, Patrick is accomplishing perhaps an even greater revolutionary action. After he finishes his story, “there was a permanent darkness to the room. A permanent silence. Harris was still, quiet, unable to see. All he knew now was where the voice had been” (Ondaatje 241). Whereas “black space” constitutes radical, free time to so many of the narrative’s working class characters, when gathered around Harris it becomes permanent, oppressive and utterly silencing, radically reversing Harris’ own attempt at photographic conformism and robbing him of any true power he might have held in that interaction.

Here, then, it is clear that the restorative transference effected under the suggestion of a “moment of danger” is indeed far more powerful than any destructive force could be in itself. Through the passing along of this sympathetic bond, the human web In the Skin of a Lion weaves has grown and stretched not only touch the reader, but also find concrete presence in the space of our world. In 2009, a plaque was erected at the entrance to the Bloor Viaduct bearing the following text:

> Then there was no longer any fear on the bridge. The worst, the incredible had happened. A nun had fallen off the Prince Edward Viaduct before it was even finished. The men covered in wood shavings or granite dust held the women against them. And Commissioner Harris at the far end stared along the mad pathway. This was his first child and it had already become a murderer. (Ondaatje 31)

Faced with the historic moment of danger and violence, commuters and visitors from all over the world will experience and carry with them the true picture of those who created, suffered, found
connection in, and died for this space ages ago. After all these years, there has finally been a record kept.
Works Cited


Bower, Rachel. “‘Yes, but ... Have You Read His Letters?’: Epistolary Correspondence with the Past in Michael Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion.” Canadian Literature/Littérature Canadienne, vol. 219, 2013, pp. 57–74.


---. “‘The Pastime of Past Time’: Fiction, History, Historiographic Metafiction.” Genre: Forms


