

**THE CHANGING ISOLATION OF THE OUTSIDER:
A TIME-BASED ANALYSIS OF FOUR CANADIAN IMMIGRANT WRITERS**

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Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the M.A. degree in English

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Abstract

This thesis addresses four Canadian immigrant English-language prose writers in order to identify commonalities and differences in their literary representations of the immigrant experience over time. While origin and ethnicity factored in the selection of writers so as to ensure diversity, the primary selection criterion was to obtain a significant historical range, from the 1830s to the present. The writers selected are: Susanna Moodie, an immigrant from England in the mid-19th century; John Marlyn, an immigrant from Hungary in the early-20th century; Michael Ondaatje, an immigrant from Sri Lanka via England in the mid-20th century; and Rawi Hage, an immigrant from Lebanon via the US in the late-20th century. I conclude that there are significant similarities among the works of all four writers, generally attributable to their shared experience of being immigrants, and equally significant areas of divergence, generally attributable to the development of Canada, with Moodie and Marlyn on one side of an important watershed in the mid-1950s, and Ondaatje and Hage on the other. All four write extensively of the experience of the immigrant with a fundamental similarity in their depiction of isolation, non-belonging and dislocation. Over time, the representations of isolation have become more complex, mirroring the increasing diversity and complexity of Canadian society. The mid-1950s shift in Canadian immigration policy from preferred British, US, and Northern European immigration to multinational immigration has resulted in increased diversity of both the Canadian immigrant population and Canadian literature. While the environment of the immigrant to Canada changes, one constant has been and is likely to continue to be a sense of dislocation, non-belonging and isolation, of being an uninvited outsider, or *survenant*. Canadian literature has reflected this reality consistently for almost 200 years and will no doubt continue to do so.

Acknowledgements

Although it is customary to acknowledge one's thesis supervisor, it is in no way out of a sense of duty or custom that I would like to state that I owe enormous thanks to Professor Janice Fiamengo. She was one of the first members of the English Department whom I encountered when embarking on this project of obtaining a Master's degree at a "mature" age; she has consistently encouraged me in every way possible and assisted me with great knowledge and good humour to bridge the gap in my pursuit of formal university education. I have enjoyed our wide-ranging and always helpful conversations, and appreciated her sure hand as questioner and editor. I have learned a great deal from her. More than anything, I would like to thank her for wholeheartedly supporting my position as a life-long learner.

I also want to thank my husband, David Osborne, for supporting this project, for telling me that there was nothing I could not accomplish if I put my mind to it, for allowing me all the time I needed to take, for never complaining about my long absences at the keyboard, and for cheerfully forgoing at least one winter vacation.

My nephew Dr. Paul Huebener provided practical help and encouragement by patiently explaining MLA style, the proper role of Wikipedia, and other matters critical to the modern pursuit of an M.A.

And of course I want to thank my best friend Tessa for her constant enthusiasm and willingness to go for long walks with me while I talked over my challenges in wrestling with this thesis.

Thank you to all of you.

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What emigrant ever regarded the country of his exile as his *home*?
- Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush* (40)

Nobody would be able to tell that he had ever been a foreigner.
- John Marlyn, *Under the Ribs of Death* (17)

We don't belong anywhere, I guess.
- Michael Ondaatje, *The Cat's Table* (251)

I guess this is my destiny to be an exile, always an exile.
- Rawi Hage, *Cockroach* (140)

Chapter I: Introduction

This thesis has developed from two primary questions: how have Canadian immigrant writers in English represented the experience of immigration; and how has this representation changed over the course of Canadian literary history? Several Canadian critics and immigrant writers have addressed similar questions with results that tend to emphasise the differences across ethnic or minority communities (e.g. Asian Canadians, the African diaspora). In this thesis, I take an alternative approach, one that is immigrant-based and time-based, but not ethnicity-based. The focus is to identify both commonalities and differences among the literary representations of the immigrant experience by immigrant Canadians over time. Origin, ethnicity, and reason for emigration are factors in the analysis but are not the primary emphasis (other than that the selection of writers ensures a broad range). This is an important difference in focus because it enables the direct comparison of representations in Canadian literature of a similar circumstance, the fact of being an immigrant, over a period of around 180 years.

To that end, I look at the prose work of four Canadian immigrant writers from the 19th to the 21st centuries:

- Susanna Moodie, an immigrant from England to Ontario in the mid-19th century

- John Marlyn, an immigrant from Hungary to Manitoba in the early-20th century
- Michael Ondaatje, an immigrant from Sri Lanka via England to Ontario in the mid-20th century
- Rawi Hage, an immigrant from Lebanon via the US to Québec in the late-20th century.

It is central to my project that these four writers appear to have almost nothing in common other than the fact that they are all immigrants to Canada and write in English. I chose them for two reasons. First, these writers provide rich and complex representations of the physical, emotional and psychological experience of immigration and its challenges and rewards: their texts are worth studying for their intrinsic literary value. Secondly, they represent a significant time span and different backgrounds. I want to look closely at a few aspects of representation considered across time and across cultural and ethnic diversity.

I began my research with an untested hypothesis that this study would uncover noteworthy similarities and differences in the literary representations of Canadian immigrant experience over time. As work progressed, the hypothesis was validated, allowing me to conclude that there are significant similarities among the works of all four writers, generally attributable to the writers' shared experience of being immigrants, and equally significant areas of divergence, generally attributable to the development of Canada over the timeframe of the 1830s to the early-21st century, with Moodie and Marlyn on one side of an important historical watershed in the mid-1950s, and Ondaatje and Hage on the other. All four writers, while not writing exclusively of the experience of immigration, do write extensively about it, evidence of its importance to them. All four writers create personae who present a picture of isolation and non-belonging, whose cultural and social backgrounds affect their ability to

form a life in Canada, who are “*survenants*” or uninvited outsiders,¹ and who must struggle to adapt to their new circumstances. All four have key passages in their writing that express similar thoughts of non-belonging, of a moment when the outsider wonders, “How did I get here and what am I doing here?”, reflecting his or her dislocation, alienation, and pain.

Moodie arrives with her husband at her Ontario bush lot and responds: “I gazed through tears upon the singularly savage scene around me, and secretly marvelled, ‘What brought me here?’” [*Roughing* 286]). Marlyn’s Sandor Hunyadi as a child compares the lifestyle he glimpses in his job cutting lawns for the rich English with his life in Winnipeg’s immigrant slums, and concludes, “That was where he belonged - not here” (*Under the Ribs* 74); as an adult, still in the immigrant slums despite all his efforts, he wonders, “When was he going to get out of here?” (180). Ondaatje’s character Kirpal Singh (who is a *survenant* but not an immigrant), hears of the bombing of Hiroshima by Westerners and reacts: “His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” (*English Patient* 287). Hage’s anonymous Lebanese immigrant walks down a cold, snowy Montréal street “and I asked myself Where am I? And what am I doing here?” (*Cockroach* 9).

While all four writers depict physical, cultural and psychological isolation, the nature and extent of that isolation changes over time, as Canada itself changes, from a defined, physically and culturally isolated landscape, to an increasingly multicultural, globalised society larger than the immediate landscape or community. Moodie and Marlyn, the two earlier writers, depict seclusion in the Ontario bush and in a Winnipeg immigrant community. Ondaatje and Hage, the two later writers, describe alienation within a larger

¹ The word *survenant* is from the 1945 novel *Le Survenant* by Québécoise writer Germaine Guèvremont. The word is defined in the novel: “A survenant, if you want to know, that’s someone who stops at a house where he hasn’t been invited... and who decides not to leave” (54). (My translation.)

world, not limited to Canada or a cultural community, or even necessarily to immigrants. Also significantly, there is a shift from acceptance of the British rule and way of life as the model for Canada, to a sense of its irrelevance. The personae in the texts of Moodie and Marlyn overtly accept the supremacy of British culture and governance; those in the texts of Ondaatje and Hage do not. While the latter writers depict class and race struggles, they are not a simple “British - other” opposition (or in the case of Hage, whose novel *Cockroach* is set in Québec, a “French-other” opposition). Thus, while there is a fundamental similarity in the personal challenges faced by the personae of all four writers, including the isolation that they experience, the time-based focus reveals increasing diversity and complexity of these challenges, mirroring the increasing diversity and complexity of Canadian society.

There has been substantial critical focus on “ethnic” or “minority” writing in Canada, but less on “immigrant” writing; these concepts, although different, have on occasion been conflated. As phrased by Margaret Atwood, “We are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here” (qtd in Staines, Foreword, x). Rawi Hage has said that “Everyone here [Montréal] is a minority” (*Arts and Opinion*). Nonetheless, critics tend to group Canadians into two types: the British and French majority; and the “ethnics” or “others.”²

Some question the practice of reserving ethnicity for those who are not of British or French origin. Linda Hutcheon contends that “All Canadians are ethnic, including French and British” (Introduction 2), and that “just as even the English and French were once immigrants to Canada, so too are they ‘ethnic,’ at least insofar as they possess distinctive cultural customs and languages” (*Splitting Images* 47). Enoch Padolsky argues that minority writers “are generally perceived as having ‘ethnicity’ [while] majority writers are often perceived as lacking it” (27); “[f]rom a pluralistic perspective,” he says, “the first task is to replace the

² Indigenous or aboriginal peoples are generally classified as “others” or as their own third group.

current terminology - 'mainstream' and 'ethnic' writers/writing - by the terms 'ethnic majority' and 'ethnic minority'" (25). The notion of Britishness (i.e. people from the British Isles, specifically English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish) has also been used with some confusion, and has been identified by some as an attempt to establish a single British ethnicity in response to colonial pressures. According to Daniel Coleman, the term British is largely "an invention of colonial Britishness" ("Canadian Trance" 33), invented in the 18th century to foster a "pan-ethnic notion of Britishness," particularly relevant in British North America (*White Civility* 17). He cites Donald Akenson that "there was no 'British' culture to draw on, but instead, there were several vigorous, distinct, and in many of their details incompatible Anglo-Celtic cultures found in the homeland. ... The melding of the several Anglo-Celtic cultures to establish a new and synthetic 'British' culture was coterminous with the creation of new national identities" (qtd in *White Civility* 87). Padolsky contends that the development of the notion of Britishness in Canada is rather the result of the need to develop a strong British identity in the face of growing minority pressure: "over time, a shift occurs from a strong awareness of 'sub-group' differences (Moodie on the English, Irish and Yankees; Connor on the Scots; etc.) to a growing sense of nested, macro-group ethnicity vis-à-vis non-British ethnic groups in Canadian society" (29), something he calls "the developing British-Canadian ethnic identity" (29). These arguments suggest that Britishness was an invention that attempted to establish both a larger British identity and a British dominance in Canada and other colonies. We will see that both Moodie and Marlyn express some confusion as to its significance as an identifier, and that neither Ondaatje nor Hage concerns himself with it.

More attention has been given to the nature and politics of non-British and non-French ethnic writing in Canada. For example, Smaro Kamboureli, in introducing her 1996 anthology *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature*, explains that the selection principle was that the writers included are all “non-Anglo-Celtic” (1, 2), allowing the reader to infer that Kamboureli does not consider Anglo-Celtic writers to be part of a multicultural Canada or among the “authors who come from a wide range of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds” (1). Others highlight the diversity and disunity among these non-Anglo-Celtic ethnic groups. Say Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (although not specifically of Canada): “There is a clear lack of proliferation of relational discourses among different minority groups, a legacy from the colonial ideology of divide and conquer that historically pitted different ethnic groups against each other” (2). Lily Cho has focused on the divisive effect of the number of minority communities writing in Canada, noting that “it is not only that minority literatures such as Asian Canadian, black Canadian, and Native Canadian literatures exist problematically in relation to Canadian literature, they also exist problematically in relation to each other” (“Dreaming” 190); she contends that “[t]he issue is not whether or not these [minority] literatures should be included in a vision of the Canadian literary canon but, rather, whether or not the Canadian literary canon can exist in perpetual contradiction without falling into the temptations of overarching and ultimately empty inclusivism or ghettoizing factionalism” (193). Discussions based on ethnicity or on the differences among the many ethnic communities, while important, are only indirectly relevant to my argument, which focuses on immigrants of any origin or background.

The practice of dividing Canadian English-language writing along the lines of “British” and “others” (as distinguished from “ethnics”) is more relevant, due to the historical

patterns of Canadian immigration and settlement and the role of the British as early colonists who established their mastery in English Canada (as did the French in French Canada until defeated by the British). The issue of “others” has existed from early colonisation, but the identification of the “others” has changed over time, as our four writers clearly demonstrate: Moodie discusses the Irish as quite different from the English in the 1830s and 1840s; Marlyn and Ondaatje (*In the Skin of a Lion*) write about the marginalisation of continental European immigrants to Canada in the early 1900s; Ondaatje further positions the ambiguities of nationality in the 1940s (*The English Patient*) and the “otherness” of homeland in the 1990s (*Anil’s Ghost*); and Hage describes the suspicions of the Québécois towards Middle Eastern immigrants in the late-20th century.

For this thesis, I do not deliberately create a divide by isolating Moodie as British and grouping Marlyn, Ondaatje and Hage as “other,” “ethnic,” or “minority,” or by even further isolating them within their regional and national identities as British (English), Eastern European (Hungarian), Asian (Sri Lankan), and Arabic (Lebanese). While I do place each within his or her historical context, including origin and reason for emigration, I will focus on them as individuals who are immigrant Canadian writers, rather than as representatives of certain ethnic or cultural groups, however defined. The sample is, of course, far too small to try to draw any generalisations based on such representation.

Given the time-based focus of this project, the history of Canadian immigration is important, and will be established as part of the context of each writer. Also of significance is David Staines’ 2004 article “The Globalization of Canadian Fiction,” in which Staines provides a general historical pattern for the development of Canadian literature, summarising that Canadian fiction can be divided into two periods: the rise of Canadian fiction up to 1954,

and the globalisation of Canadian fiction after 1954. He argues that the second phase has been marked by a “period of tremendous growth in Canadian fiction” (22), characterised by “many non-Canadian authors, who have settled here, [who] are writing their stories of their own lands,” and who “have globalized the Canadian mentality” (23). Without providing such a specific historical connection, Eleanor Ty in 2011 also notes the globalisation of Canadian writing in her discussion of several recent “global Canadian novels.” Ty’s argument augments Staines’ in her contention that “postcolonial cosmopolitanism” (citing Benita Parry) has “rendered more complex the notion of ‘diasporic’ people and their relationship to homelands, real or imaginary” (98).

My reading of four immigrant writers in the context of the history of Canadian immigration validates the significance of the mid-1950s (specifically 1956 rather than 1954) as marking a critical change in Canadian immigration patterns, and a subsequent change in Canadian literature on the basis of increasing complexity, multiculturalism, and globalisation. Prior to 1956, Canadian immigration policy and practice targeted the immigration of persons of British or Northern European origin (including from the United States) who would make a strong contribution to filling Canada’s prevalent economic needs (Knowles 131). Beginning in 1956, with the acceptance of Palestinian and Hungarian refugees, immigration became double-streamed (131), with both planned immigration targeting persons of any national origin who could contribute to Canada’s wellbeing and prosperity, and ad hoc response to crisis situations requiring compassionate acceptance of refugees regardless of other considerations. My thesis will elaborate on the 1956 divide as representing the shift from preferred British, US, and Northern European immigration to the eventual opening of Canada’s gates to both targeted and refugee-based multinational

immigration to Canada, with the resultant increasing number and diversity of immigrant communities and their subsequent effects on Canadian literature.

The thesis will be organised chronologically. Chapters II and III address Susanna Moodie and John Marlyn, who arrived in Canada in 1832 and 1912 and, as immigrants from England and Hungary, present different views of the pre-1956 British-dominated Canadian demographic.³ Chapters IV and V address Michael Ondaatje and Rawi Hage, who arrived in 1962 and 1992 from Sri Lanka (via England) and Lebanon (via the US). Both exemplify the globalising effect of increasingly multinational immigration, with Hage also uniquely within this project a refugee from civil war. Each chapter will follow a similar pattern of providing contextual historical background and a sketch of the author's life, followed by a detailed reading of his or her relevant texts.

In Chapter II, I contend that there are three significant factors to understanding Susanna Moodie's representations of the challenges of emigration/immigration in her two Canadian semi-autobiographical memoirs, *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings*. First, Moodie, despite being of the ruling nationality of 19th-century Canada, experiences extreme physical, cultural and psychological isolation. Secondly, although Moodie slowly adapts to hardship and learns new attitudes, she retains her position as self-described exile from England and never adopts Canada as her home; she reserves this important step for the next generation, her Canadian-born children. Moodie as immigrant pays a high personal price in isolation, stoicism, tears, and homesickness, but at the last appears to take consolation from her hope that her emigrant aim of improving life for her children will be realised. Finally, although Moodie's Englishness does not protect her from the isolation of the

³ Although Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death* was published in 1957, it was written in the late 1930's and early 1940's.

immigrant, and likely exacerbates it, it does put her in the position (uniquely among the four writers examined) of finding that as Canada develops, it becomes more like her English home, thereby more nearly meeting her own aspirations. In sum, a study of Moodie establishes themes that will be echoed in our examination of Marlyn, Ondaatje and Hage and also establishes the uniqueness of her position as both isolated immigrant and member of the ruling class.

In Chapter III, I address John Marlyn through his semi-autobiographical novel, *Under the Ribs of Death*, for which Marlyn drew heavily on his own background in early-20th century North End Winnipeg. The main character, Sandor Hunyadi, who changes his name as an adult to the more English-sounding Alex Hunter is, like Marlyn, a child immigrant to Winnipeg from Hungary. The central question in *Under the Ribs* is how the experience of being an immigrant resident of Winnipeg's North End influences the development of Sandor's notions of success and his personal goals. He accepts that the English are the natural rulers, that all non-English immigrants are a single class called foreigners, and that to become a Canadian and to succeed in Canada, he needs to be English or taken for English. This is an impossible goal, as the English refuse to accept him within their ranks. Sandor/Alex fails in his goal of becoming Canadian, and remains a foreigner, isolated from his family, the rest of the immigrant community and the English community. His hope for the future is invested in his son, with no guarantee that he will not become isolated also from the boy. While Moodie and Marlyn both write of isolated immigrants focused on being English in a Canada dominated by a British model of governance and society, and whose hopes for the future are centered on their children, Marlyn's viewpoint is bleaker than Moodie's, as he

depicts an individual who is both ruined and rejected because of his beliefs, and he offers little cause for optimism for the next generation.

In Chapter IV, we turn to Michael Ondaatje; in contrast to Moodie and Marlyn, he does not clearly foreground his immigrant status and experience, and it is not immediately obvious that he consciously or even unconsciously writes from a minority or ethnic position. I will argue, however, that there is a direct, although perhaps more subtle, link between Ondaatje's immigrant background and the common themes and preoccupations of his body of prose work (with a focus on *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* and *The Cat's Table*). Ondaatje writes from global and inclusive rather than individual or regional perspectives of statelessness, lack of allegiance to homeland or nationality, the permeability and impermanence of human-imposed borders, and the isolation of human beings; additionally, he provides alternative versions of history, telling stories about the same subject or event from different points of view and blending fact and fiction. Ondaatje is a complex writer whose stories are linked by representations of "international bastards" and cultural outsiders, of uncertain allegiances and many nationalities, sometimes undetermined, where immigrants and non-immigrants alike can be distanced from the notions of homeland and belonging, where isolation is a common human experience, not directly linked to nationality or homeland, and where ambiguities prevail. His interest is in the people who live outside recorded history, who do not have the power or ability to turn their stories into history; Ondaatje tells their stories himself, creating fiction to propose these other points of view and to bolster or supplement the records of history. Ondaatje's immigrant's "double perspective" has enabled him to write inclusively about isolation, non-belonging and the power of storytelling.

Finally, in Chapter V, we will see that Rawi Hage, in his two novels about exiles from the Lebanese civil war, *De Niro's Game* and *Cockroach*, writes of the isolation and “non-belonging” that are common to immigrants, both before and after immigrating. He represents being an immigrant as a form of exile, and immigration as not always a change immediately for the better. While the immigrant brings the violence, hatreds, prejudices and challenges of the homeland to the new country, the latter is not free of violence and prejudice, adding its own challenges to the burdens that come with the immigrant. Both of Hage’s first two novels⁴ depict protagonists who are isolated in their environments and who sense that their destinies are to be exiles; images of isolation and rejection are common to both the native in Lebanon and the immigrant in his new country. This stance is consistent with my overarching position that Hage depicts immigration as a relocation of isolation and non-belonging, brought about initially by the political and social deterioration of the homeland, and reinforced by the new life. Framing these works in a historical context, with increasing immigration to Canada by multinational refugees escaping civil war, famine, oppressive regimes and genocide, Hage represents the reality of the present-day challenges of many immigrants to Canada.

I will conclude in Chapter VI with a discussion of the significance of my findings for Canada as a country which continues to accept immigrants of diverse backgrounds and cultures and for Canadian literature. In summary, while the environment of the immigrant to Canada changes, one constant has been and is likely to continue to be a sense of dislocation, non-belonging and isolation. Canadian literature has reflected this reality consistently for almost 200 years and will no doubt continue to do so.

⁴ His third novel, *Carnival*, was published in late-September 2012, too late for inclusion in this thesis.

Chapter II Susanna Moodie

“What emigrant ever regarded the country of his exile as his home?”

Introduction and Context

Susanna Moodie (1803 - 1885) and her husband, John Wedderburn



Dunbar Moodie, emigrated in 1832 from England to Ontario (Cobourg/Port Hope, then Peterborough and finally Belleville). She is the author of five novels, eight works of fiction for young adults and two books of poetry, but is best known for her two memoirs, *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), and *Life in the Clearings* (1853), and it is on these two “Canadian books” that I shall focus. The first covers 1832 - 1839, the unsuccessful period when the Moodies attempted to farm in the “bush,” which Moodie defines as “wild lands in remote localities” (*Clearings* 9). The second covers 1840 - 1852, a time of greater prosperity after J.W.D Moodie obtained a public service position in Belleville, the “clearings,” and also includes some incidents from the earlier years in the bush. Although both of her Canadian books are in the form of memoirs, they are neither strictly chronological nor complete, and the accuracy of some of her anecdotes is questionable. Carl F. Klinck, for example, observing that Moodie was “a professional writer of instalment fiction” (xiii), concludes that “there is no way of telling how much in any given chapter is due to experienced fact and how much to literary artifice” (xii).⁵ As Moodie wrote in *Roughing It in the Bush*, “It is not my intention to give a regular history of our residence in the bush, but merely to present to my readers such

⁵ The most obvious example of Moodie’s willingness to forgo accuracy in favour of a good story occurs in *Life in the Clearings*, as she begins her recounting of the story of Grace Marks by acknowledging that she has forgotten both the year of the event and the township in which it occurred. She also gets the names of the two victims wrong, but nonetheless tells the story in considerable detail as narrated by the convicted murderer, whose name she misspells (196).

events as may serve to illustrate a life in the woods” (328). Her recounting of the settlement of Upper Canada does shed considerable light on this period, and the three chapters in *Roughing It* written by her husband are especially significant for their treatment of the economic and political environment. Once I have sketched the relevant historical context from reputable external sources and placed the Moodies’ lives into that context, I will not further consider the Moodies’ contribution to history, as my focus is on her representation of her immigrant experience. Nevertheless, understanding the historical and personal context within which Moodie wrote is essential to a critical discussion of her books.

Immigration to what is now Ontario up to the end of the 19th century was almost exclusively from the US, Scotland, Ireland and England (Brown 129, 221, 281). There were two major periods of immigration in this timeframe: 1783 - 1812, largely by American Loyalists and other American settlers; and 1830 - 1850, predominantly by Irish, but also including Scots and English (Kelley and Trebilcock 22). The American Loyalist migration that got under way in 1783 “furnished British North America with its first large influx of English-speaking settlers and constituted the first major refugee movement in British North America” (37). By 1791, the European population of Upper Canada numbered around 12,000, and was mainly Loyalist (40). These early Loyalists received land grants and other forms of assistance, such as food, clothing, implements, building materials, and seed. In addition, Loyalist compensation claims for abandoned property often involved significant British payments (40). The population of Upper Canada had reached 50,000 by 1800 and by 1815 had grown to 95,000. About 80 per cent were of American origin, of whom 25 per cent were Loyalists (41). The considerably smaller percentage of colonists from Britain were primarily Scottish Highlanders (Knowles 29).

After the war of 1812, when Britain was at war with the US, the British government reversed its policy of encouraging migration from the United States by denying Americans the right to buy Crown land if they had been in the colony for less than seven years and by encouraging immigration from Britain (Kelley and Trebilcock 43). Craig Brown notes that this change in immigration strategy was of great significance to the future of Canada, as “for the next century and a half, British newcomers would lead the list of sought-after immigrants for British America, later the young Dominion of Canada” (27). As Lord Elgin, the Governor-General of Canada was to say in 1848: “Climate and contiguity point out Canada as the most natural resort for the surplus population of England and Ireland, and I am convinced that filling up the back settlements of the Province with resident agriculturalists furnishes the only possible chance of preventing Canada from becoming a State of the Union” (Kelley and Trebilcock 44). During this second wave of immigration in the 1830s and 1840s, approximately 60 per cent of the immigrants were Irish, most arriving destitute (Kelley and Trebilcock 44, Knowles 38). Immigration tapered off sharply in the 1850s (Kelley and Trebilcock 50; Knowles 43) and by 1867, two-thirds of the population of British North America was of British origin (English, Scottish, Irish) (Knowles 30), and 79 per cent had been born in Canada (Kelley and Trebilcock 22).

The question of the granting of free land to settlers is of considerable relevance to the story of the Moodies (and discussed in detail by J.W.D. Moodie in his chapter in *Roughing It* entitled “Canadian Sketches”). Generally, land had to be purchased, except in special cases such as settlement by American Loyalists and British half-pay officers (including Moodie) (Brown 296). Say Kelley and Trebilcock:

Beginning in 1832, the practice of making large grants to officials and others either unconditionally or conditionally upon subdividing and settling the land became much less common, and the sale at auction, subject to an upset price, of individual farming units to individual settlers became much more the norm. Indeed, very few immigrants in the mass migrations of the 1830s and 1840s benefitted from free land grants. ... A free grant of land to a poor settler was often a liability instead of an asset (48).

By 1837 (five years after the arrival of the Moodies), of 17 million acres surveyed in Upper Canada, only about 1.5 million acres remained ungranted and less than one-tenth was actually occupied (48), again a subject of analysis by Moodie in "Canadian Sketches."

Wallace's *A History of the Canadian People*, the high school history textbook in use in Ontario in the 1930s, provides commentary on the value of the early English settlers, as well as indications of the prevailing view in the early 20th century of their positive role and impact:

The Scottish and Irish immigrants tended to settle in homogenous groups or communities; but not so the English. Except for some military settlements formed in Upper Canada of disbanded English soldiers after the close of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the English immigrants settled here, there, and everywhere. For this reason their numbers are difficult to gauge; but what they may have lacked in numbers they made up in quality. Not a few of them were retired naval and military officers, who took up land in the Eastern Townships or in Upper Canada, and tried to supplement their pensions by farming. As farmers they were not, as a rule, a conspicuous success; but they proved, nevertheless, a valuable element in the life of Upper and Lower Canada. Their standards of taste and manners, their superior education, even their

Tory ideas, made a distinct contribution to Canadian life. An example of this class of settler is to be found in Colonel Samuel Strickland, a member of a family notable in the history of early Canadian literature. Colonel Strickland's *Twenty-seven Years in Canada West* is perhaps the best description of the experiences of an early settler which has come down to us; and his sisters, Mrs. Moodie and Mrs. Traill, wrote books - such as Mrs. Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* - which are scarcely less noteworthy. Settlers of this type helped to lift life in Canada above the level of a mere struggle for existence. (167)

This commentary introduces two important themes: that the English military immigrants were generally not successful as agricultural settlers, being less suited to the physical, social and economic environment of 19th-century Ontario, and that they left a long-lasting perception of cultural superiority to other settlers. We will see these factors in Moodie's representations of her isolation and of the social superiority of the educated English.

In immigrating to Canada in 1832 with their England-born infant daughter, the Moodies were thus in the majority of immigrants of the time in that they came from Britain, but also in the minority in that they were Scottish (Dunbar) and English (Susanna), educated, and although, as they considered, too poor to continue to live well in England, far from impoverished, having Moodie's officer's half-pay and a free land grant to draw upon. Susanna's brother Samuel Strickland, who had preceded them to Canada, had obtained for them a grant of land in Douro Township on the Otonabee River north of Peterborough, but the Moodies decided that a cleared farm near a major settlement would be preferable to an uncleared bush lot. They bought such a farm, where they lived for 18 months, first in two log shanties before they were able to move in to the house. This first farm was "a well-situated,

two-hundred acre farm” eight miles west of Cobourg and four miles east of Port Hope, which included “an extensive orchard, two log houses, and a frame barn” and “was sufficiently cleared to allow for immediate and productive farming” (Peterman 76). During this period, Dunbar gave up his officer’s half-pay, investing the proceeds in a Lake Ontario steamship, from which he never made any money. The combination of loss of dependable income, inability to run the farm at a profit, and lack of understanding of how Upper Canadian agriculture, economics, politics and society worked, led them to sell that farm and move to their Douro bush lot in February 1834 to become backwoods farmers. This new farm comprised two adjoining lots of 360 acres on the east side of Lake Katchewanook, a widening of the Otonabee River between present-day Lakefield and Young’s Point; it was a mile north of the bush farm of Susanna’s sister Catharine Parr Traill and her husband and about two miles from the more established bush farm of her brother Samuel (Peterman 89). The Moodies’ experience on these two properties forms the basis for *Roughing It in the Bush*.

In the Rebellion of 1837, led by William Lyon Mackenzie, Dunbar Moodie left the farm to support the British war effort, and spent the next two years in Toronto and Belleville working for the military, while Susanna struggled to maintain the bush farm with only modest hired help, and eventually five young children (two more children were subsequently born in Belleville, after they left the farm; five of the seven survived to adulthood). Ultimately, Dunbar managed to turn his army service into a permanent appointment as Sheriff of Hastings County (formerly Victoria District), whose centre was Belleville, and Susanna was able to leave the bush on January 1, 1840 and join her husband in Belleville, where they remained. The new life had its challenges also, due to the significant political rivalry between Tories and Reformers in Belleville, which made Dunbar’s position almost

untenable at times, and largely unprofitable. This latter period is covered in the second book, *Life in the Clearings vs. the Bush*. After the publication of both books, J.W.D. Moodie continued to struggle as Sheriff until he was forced to resign his position in 1863, after which the Moodies managed to live in relative comfort in Belleville until Dunbar's death in 1869, but they were never prosperous. Susanna Moodie spent her remaining years partly in Belleville and partly living with her children Kate and Robert until her death in 1885.

Moodie's writing career began in England. She was the youngest of several literary sisters who published poems, short stories and sketches as a means of making money in a manner suitable to their genteel background but straitened financial circumstances. Her first book was published in 1822 (Ballstadt et al, *Susanna Moodie* 14), and as long as she remained in England, she continued to develop a minor reputation as a writer, publishing several novels for young adults and two books of poetry (one with her sister Agnes). Once in Canada, her life on a bush farm with young children and the lack of remuneration for her early pieces gave her little time or incentive for writing (Peterman 97, 98; Moodie, *Roughing* 457). Her breakthrough came in 1837, after the Rebellion separated her from her husband. To support the British side in the rebellion, she wrote some patriotic poems which gained widespread popularity in Upper Canada (Peterman 106). Then, in 1838, she discovered that in writing for the new Canadian publication the *Literary Garland*, she could contribute financially to her family's support; writing thus became for her a means of survival, rather than simply a calling or a pleasure. Moodie writes of this breakthrough in *Roughing*:

Just at this period [early 1838] I received a letter from a gentleman [John Lovell], requesting me to write for a magazine (the *Literary Garland*), just started in Montreal, with promise to remunerate me for my labours. Such an application was

like a gleam of light springing up in the darkness; it seemed to promise the dawning of a brighter day. ... This opened up a whole new era in my existence; and for many years I have found in this generous man, to whom I am still personally unknown, a steady friend. I actually shed tears of joy over the first twenty-dollar bill I received from Montreal. It was my own; I had earned it with my own hand; and it seemed to my delighted fancy to form the nucleus out of which a future independence for my family might arise. (457, 458)

Moodie became a major contributor to the Canadian publications *Literary Garland* (1838 - 51), and *Victoria Magazine* (1847 - 48, edited by the Moodies themselves) (Peterman 73). For the former, she contributed a few stories in 1839, then virtually an annual serial from 1840 through 1851, along with poems, short stories and sketches (125). In the 1840s, both Moodies wrote material for a book on Canada (including sketches published in the *Victoria Magazine* which became the first two chapters of *Roughing It in the Bush* [138]), and as early as 1848 and 1849 Susanna was revising the material that became *Roughing It in the Bush* (104). Says Michael Peterman, “Clearly, the period 1846-48 was crucial for Moodie as a writer. Little that she wrote would be of so much interest in Canada today if she had not so fully given herself to the retrospective and deeply personal impulse that seized her in these years” (138). He also notes that although Moodie published six books in the 1850s, “That output, however, is very misleading. It belies the creative energy she poured into her writing in the 1840s, when most of what went into those books was actually written” (141). Carl Ballstadt states that some of the material for *Roughing It* may have been written as early as the 1830s (xxiii, xxvii).

Roughing It in the Bush was published in England in January 1852 by Richard Bentley and was immediately successful. In the second edition, published in November 1852, some sketches by J.W.D. Moodie were added (Peterman 107). A Canadian edition was not published until 1871. Bentley requested more Canadian material, which resulted in *Life in the Clearings* in 1853, which was a series of sketches (including three that had been written for but not included in *Roughing It in the Bush* and other already existing material), loosely connected by the framing device of a boat trip Moodie took to Toronto and Niagara Falls in 1852 to help her recuperate from a serious illness (146). It generally received poorer reviews and less popular success than its predecessor (110). These two books, plus *Flora Lyndsay* (1854), an expansion of the serial “Trifles From the Burthen of a Life” published in *Victoria Magazine* in 1851 (Thurston xxi), and providing a fictionalised account of the Moodies’ emigration journey, comprise her published works on her Canadian experience. *Flora Lyndsay* is, unfortunately, no longer available in print. By 1868, Moodie published four other novels, all with English settings and subject matter, and one further book of fiction for young adults. With the exception of her 1837 patriotic poems, her work was consistently better received in Britain and the US than in Canada, and her popularity in Britain fell off with her later books. Her modern reputation rests on *Roughing It in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings*, sufficient to guarantee her an important place in the Canadian literary canon.⁶

Susanna Moodie remains an enigmatic figure. Critics have recorded two different versions of her adaptation to Canada: a Moodie who gradually learns to become Canadian and to love Canada as her adopted home; and a Moodie who resists and rejects Canada all

⁶ This is necessarily a brief summary of the lives of the Moodies. Readers are recommended to Michael Peterman’s *Susanna Moodie: A Life*, and Ballstadt, Hopkins and Peterman’s *Susanna Moodie: Letters of a Lifetime* and *Letters of Love and Duty: The Correspondence of Susanna and John Moodie*. Audrey Morris’ *The Gentle Pioneers*, while interesting and easy to read, is not recommended for scholarly purposes.

her life. Similarly, two versions of her character have emerged: on the one hand, intelligent, courageous, resourceful, patriotic, God-fearing, self-deprecating, heroic, and the backbone of her family; on the other hand, intolerant, autocratic, unyielding, opinionated, unadaptable, complaining, and interfering. No study of Moodie can fail to try to reconcile these different readings, or this apparently contradictory nature. I will contend that there are three significant and closely-related factors to understanding Moodie's representations of the challenges of emigration/immigration. First, Moodie, despite being of the ruling nationality of 19th-century Canada, suffers physical and psychological isolation. This is especially evident on her first farm, where she is surrounded by Americans and Irish, most of whom despise what she represents to them, but also throughout her life, even in Belleville, where homesickness, local political rivalries and estrangement from her English family are continued sources of isolation. Secondly, although Moodie is changed by her experience of Canada, slowly adapting to hardship and learning new attitudes, she fundamentally retains her British outlook and never adopts Canada as her home; she reserves this important step for the next generation, her Canadian-born children. Finally, although Moodie's Englishness does not protect her from the isolation of the immigrant, and likely exacerbates it, it does put her in the position (unique among the four writers examined in this thesis) of finding that as Canada develops, it becomes more like her English home, thereby more nearly meeting her own aspirations. In sum, a study of Moodie establishes themes that will be echoed in our examination of John Marlyn ("slowly, slowly, . . . they were becoming Canadian"), Michael Ondaatje ("the double perspective of the immigrant") and Rawi Hage ("my destiny to be an exile"), and also establishes the uniqueness of her position as both isolated immigrant and member of the English ruling class.

Argument

Although Moodie is English, of good background and education, and therefore theoretically of Upper Canada's ruling class, her Englishness is of no advantage to her as the wife of a poor half-pay officer setting out to become a Canadian farmer. It is a theme of both books that she and her husband are of the class least likely to succeed as backwoods farmers, having lost their private income and being unused to the hard physical labour required. It is clear from the outset that Moodie is isolated and dislocated in Canada, a condition that is to a large extent due to sheer homesickness. She is a reluctant emigrant, stating in her Introduction to *Roughing It in the Bush*: "In most instances, emigration is a matter of necessity, not of choice" (1). She never overcomes the notion of emigration as "an act of severe duty, performed at the expense of personal enjoyment" (1), explaining that "I had bowed to a superior mandate, the command of duty; for my husband's sake, for the sake of the infant, ... I had consented to bid adieu for ever to my native shores, and it seemed both useless and sinful to draw back" (203). "The heart," she writes, "acknowledges no other home than the land of its birth," and seeing herself as an exile from England, she asks "what emigrant ever regarded the country of his exile as his *home*?" (40).

This is not the whole picture, however, for Susanna Moodie was genuinely isolated within Canada for both physical and social reasons. Upper Canadian farms in the 1830s, even in the more established regions such as Cobourg, were tied to small communities and had primitive transportation and communication. In the less established backwoods areas, bush lots were generally fully forested, spread apart, and without infrastructure. Perhaps even more important for a woman who considered herself an English gentlewoman (notwithstanding her father's background in trade and the family's lack of money) is the fact

that her first farm was in an area primarily populated not by English like herself, but by Americans and Irish, with whom she had little in common and a mutual distrust.

Moodie considers the Americans who are her near neighbours with undisguised dislike, consistently representing them as unpleasant, sly, and ignorant. They are a major reason for her initial unhappiness. She comments on the “lower order of Americans” who squat on others’ land, and states that “unfortunately, our land was surrounded by these odious squatters, whom we found as ignorant as savages, without their courtesy and kindness” (*Roughing* 85). She further observes that the “semibarbarous American squatters . . . detested us, and with them we could have no feeling in common. We could neither lie nor cheat in our dealings with them; and they despised us for our ignorance in trading and our want of smartness” (207). Their immediate American neighbours, Joe and Mrs. Joe, live in the house which the Moodies have bought, but the Moodies are unable to persuade them to leave; in the fall, Joe claims that as his wife is pregnant, they cannot leave the house until after the baby is born in the spring. Yet Mrs. Moodie too is pregnant, giving birth to her second child in June of 1833 after a difficult first Canadian winter spent in a shack unlike anything that she has previously experienced (177). Further, Joe’s wife is “gratuitously spiteful,” reportedly telling Moodie: “Don’t think I come here out of respect to you. No, I hate you all; and I rejoice to see you at the wash-tub, and I wish that you may be brought down upon your knees to scrub the floors” (141). When Joe and his family finally leave the Moodies’ house, they flood the house, girdle the apple trees and put a skunk in the cupboard (171). There is no other society available for Moodie to console herself with: “When we came to the Canadas,” she writes, “society was composed of elements which did not always amalgamate in the best possible manner We were reckoned no addition to the society of Cobourg” (211).

As for the Irish, Moodie cannot see herself as forming other than a mistress-servant relationship with them. She regards the first Irish emigrants she encounters upon landing at Grosse Isle with distaste, describing them as having an “uncouth dialect, and all accompanying their vociferations with violent and extraordinary gestures, quite incomprehensible to the uninitiated.... perfectly destitute of shame, or even of a sense of common decency” (*Roughing* 20). Her opinion of her superiority to the Irish changes little over the course of time and she writes in *Life in the Clearings*, thinking that she is being generous, of the Irish Catholics’ “child-like trust ... They break and destroy more than the Protestants, but that springs from the reckless carelessness of their character more than from any malice against their employers. ... The principle on which they live is literally to care as little as possible for the things of today, and to take no thought at all for the morrow” (27). Moodie’s view of the Irish is a product of her upbringing and the reality of 19th-century Canada. In England, she would not have encountered Irish socially, and in Canada, Irish immigrants were generally impoverished, unable to afford to buy land, and forced to work as labourers and servants (Kelley and Trebilcock 21, 50). So while the Americans of Moodie’s early acquaintance were actively hostile and to some extent frightening, the Irish to whom she was exposed were almost exclusively of a social and economic status that she would naturally deem her inferiors, a servant class with whom she could have little in common.

Although Moodie consistently refers to herself as British, a word which comprises English, Scots, Irish and Welsh, Daniel Coleman explains that she would be aware of a vast divide between herself as English and her Irish neighbours and servants. Coleman identifies “Britishness” as a “pan-ethnic term” invented in the 18th century (“From Canadian Trance” 33); “British,” he says, is not synonymous with “English”, but a term by which “Scottish,

Welsh, and, later, Irish immigrants in the colonies who would have hated to be called ‘English’ in their homelands loosened themselves from the restrictions of these old sectional identifications by espousing Britishness” (*White Civility* 17). According to Coleman, the English “used Britishness to name an imperial family resemblance from which they then politely distanced themselves” (87). Thus, he says, while Moodie refers to herself as British and demonstrates her understanding of the word in her pre-emigration poem “Britannia’s Wreath,” in which Britannia’s wreath comprises Irish shamrock, English rose and Scottish thistle (19), she does not embrace the concept of the equality of all under the British banner. In a different interpretation, Enoch Padolsky believes that the development of the notion of Britishness in Canada was the result of the need to develop a strong British identity in the face of growing minority pressure; he points out that Moodie’s “strong awareness of ‘sub-group’ differences,” in her descriptions of the Irish, for example, predated an eventual shift by others “to a growing sense of nested, macro-group ethnicity vis-à-vis non-British ethnic groups in Canadian society” (29). In any event, Moodie, despite her patriotic poetry, clearly feels no real kinship to the Catholic Irish and remains English to the core.⁷

In a position of physical isolation and discomfort on her cleared farm, with neighbours who disliked her Englishness, servants whom she was barred by her upbringing from viewing as potential friends, and “the loss of the society in which I had moved, the want of congenial minds, of persons engaged in congenial pursuits” (*Roughing* 205), Moodie was doubly isolated, both physically and socially, from the outset. When she moved to the bush farm in Douro, she discovered that while she was closer to congenial society (her brother Samuel and sister Catharine Parr Traill and their families), the physical isolation and

⁷ Moodie’s brother, Samuel Strickland, also an emigrant to Canada, appears even less inclined to include the Irish as British, writing in his own book of “the working classes of Great Britain and Irish” (Vol I,137), thereby differentiating between English and Scots from the island of Britain, and the Irish.

hardship were worse. She recalls that upon first sight of her new home, “I gazed through tears upon the singularly savage scene around me, and secretly marvelled, ‘What brought me here?’” (286). Her fears are proven valid. In August 1834, she is forced “to struggle through, in the best manner I could, with a sick husband, a sick child, and a new-born babe”; the family is suffering from ague, which “did not leave us until the spring of 1835” (351, 352). In 1836/37, “milk, bread and potatoes during the summer became our chief, and often, for months, our only fare” (385). From rejoicing when “a noble buck” escapes the Indians (388), she learns to rejoice when servant Jacob kills “a fine buck” to feed her nearly starving family (390). There is no doubt that the years of farming were very difficult for the Moodies, and that Susanna can be forgiven her homesickness, tears and moments of despair, and sympathised with for her mental and physical unfitness for the challenges of colonial Canadian farming.

In her final move to Belleville, although she was less isolated physically and generally better off, matters did not improve to the degree that she had hoped. Here, at least, her English gentility was not a significant burden, and it is notable that it was through the Moodies’ connections with the Lt-Governor of Upper Canada that they were able to leave the bush, clearly an advantage of their being English.⁸ Nonetheless, the volatile political factionalism between Tories and Reformers in Belleville caused her husband major difficulties and constrained her own social position. Further, although still emotionally closer to England than to Canada, Moodie became estranged from her family at Reydon Hall in

⁸ Although Moodie claims in *Roughing It* that it is a letter she wrote to the Lt-Governor, without the knowledge of her husband, that secures him the post of sheriff, it is clear from a letter that J.W.D. Moodie wrote to her both that his own representations played a major role in the appointment, and that he knew about her entreaties on his behalf. He gives her the good news that the Lt-Governor has replied to his own letter with a promise of service, and continues, “Your letter I have no doubt has had its full effect” (Ballstadt et al, *Letters*, 156). This is an apparent example of Susanna Moodie’s revising of history in order to put herself in the best possible light.

England; she writes to her sister Catharine on December 25, 1853, “And from Reydon I never hear, and suppose I never shall” (Ballstadt et al *Susanna Moodie* 137), and to her publisher and confidante Richard Bentley five days later,⁴ “I have never heard from Reydon since the publication of [*Roughing*]” (145). She is even estranged from her Canadian brother Samuel, writing to Richard Bentley in February 1854: “The *Major*⁹ has been staying with me for the last week. . . . His literary honours have sadly spoiled a naturally frank, goodnatured, but vain man, and made him pompous and arrogant, a sort of *he blue stocking*” (149). In Belleville, Moodie is still socially isolated, both from her Canadian peers and from most of her family (she maintained her close relations with Catharine).

Within her consistent position of reluctant emigrant and exile isolated within Canadian society, Moodie is inconsistent on several other subjects, stating opinions that are apparently contradictory or open to different interpretations. For this project, the question arising from the apparent self-contradictions and ambiguities is their relevance to Moodie’s status as emigrant/immigrant. Not surprisingly, given that she drafted parts of both memoirs in the 1830s and 1840s, completed them in the early 1850s with the perspective of hindsight and intermingled their stories and chronologies, it is difficult to perceive the evolution of her ideas and unclear to what extent her contradictions indicate that she has changed. As stated by Susan Glickman: “The two roles of Susanna Moodie, who is both the protagonist of the story and its narrator, remind us that we are reading a literary reworking of events that happened some time ago” (595); and by Michelle Gadpaille: “Long-term autobiographical memory is, of course, highly interpretive” (48). Moodie, a professional writer, as Carl Klinck reminds us (xiii), writes with the reactions of her readers in mind. Nevertheless, it is evident

⁹ At this time, Strickland was Major of the 2nd Battalion of the Peterborough regiment of the militia (Strickland, II, 268).

that from her tearful and reluctant beginning of life in Canada to her more settled but still socially and economically uncertain position in the town of Belleville some 20 years later, Moodie does demonstrate some genuine change in attitudes, while in at least one fundamental area, her views have changed little: she begins as a self-described exile and remains an exile, and although somewhat reconciled to her position, she maintains at best an ambivalent attitude to Canada.

Twentieth-century critics have tended to cast the dualities of Moodie's opinions in the context of her adaptation to Canada, linking her contradictions to her dislocation as an immigrant, and seeing them as indicators of her adaptation to her changing circumstances. As early as 1930, V.B. Rhodenizer optimistically and perhaps naïvely discerns in Moodie "the gradual growth of a sympathetic attitude toward Canadian scenes and life" and states that her work contributes to a "sense of nationality and unbounded faith in the future of Canada" (Ballstadt xxxix). Robert McDougall (1959) and Michael Peterman (1999) tend towards seeing Moodie as developing an uneasy compromise between her British background and loyalties and the North American pull toward the Republican model represented by the United States, in effect identifying Moodie as an embodiment of an iconic 20th-century Canadian dilemma. Robert McDougall concludes that "The way of compromise between the Old World and the New, which was Mrs. Moodie's way, was to become the Canadian way" (xx). He expresses her duality as a conflict of social climate. On the one hand, "democratic influences produced a change in her social values" (xvii), as "her experiences in the bush and her acquaintance with the great 'practical' nation to the south have taught her to have this good opinion of resourcefulness and utility" (xviii). On the other hand, he says, Moodie is not a "republican or a thorough-going democrat" (xviii) and she "accepted from the new

environment only what she considered fundamentally reconcilable with the monarchical principle and with the already established values of British colonial society” (xviii). Michael Peterman argues that “Moodie herself was torn - without necessarily realizing it - between contrasting values and possibilities” (17). He concludes that

she was an English gentlewoman with a clear sense of her rightful social position.

She would thus function like a member of the working class only so long as it was absolutely necessary. She would not, however, forget what she had learned in doing so, and that learning would feed her vision of Canada as a country evolving - like herself - in a new and better way. (101)

These critics draw a parallel between Moodie’s identity and Canada’s, seeing the development of the person as a metaphor for the development of the nation. Carol Shields, writing in 1977, calls Moodie “the voice of the cornered middle, trying to look in both directions at once and attempting, with fairness and intelligence, to reconcile a fragmented world” (68), and “a bridging figure, a woman whose consciousness spanned two continents, two cultures, two political philosophies” (74). “Each new experience,” says Shields, “had a transforming effect on her, preventing her from arriving at a fixed position in her social philosophy” (52), and “a comparison of the two Canadian books shows how she learned to compromise, at least to a degree, with the new democracy” (51). Shields concludes, however, that “it is stretching a point to say that Mrs. Moodie embodied the Canadian ethos; her roots were in English literature, and her mature life was lived mainly in pre-confederation Canada when national consciousness was neither defined nor encouraged” (73 - 74).

While it is no doubt true that Moodie experiences a pull between the influences she

has left behind and her new environment, I argue that a closer look at the immigrant's "doubleness" as expressed by Moodie does not foreshadow the contradictions of a 20th-century Canadian search for identity as much as it reveals that Moodie's personality and upbringing militate against any tendency to modify the attitudes of her English youth. Moodie does adapt to Canada in some respects: the most obvious changes are the result of physical necessity, rather than adaptation of fundamental beliefs or attitudes. Most of her commentary on this form of adaptation to Canada occurs in *Roughing It in the Bush*. Initially seeing her role as undertaking minor domestic chores and child care, leaving the heavy labour to the servants, she is gradually forced to become substantially more involved in farm work and eventually to do heavy labour. Terrified of cows, she early on is forced by circumstances to undertake milking them; she justifiably congratulates herself upon receiving "a useful lesson of independence" (192). Nevertheless, she says "It was long, very long, before I could discipline my mind to learn and practise all the menial employments which are necessary in a good settler's wife" (329), and "I had a hard struggle with my pride before I would consent to render the least assistance on the farm" (383). Finally, she says, she arrives at the point on the Douro farm where "I have contemplated a well-hoed ridge of potatoes on that bush farm, with as much delight as in years long past I had experienced a fine painting in some well-appointed drawing-room" (384), and she concludes that "You must become poor yourself before you can fully appreciate the good qualities of the poor" (464). That she learnt her lesson of survival in the Canadian bush, and approached it with stoicism, determination and courage is made particularly clear during the extended absence of her husband following the 1837 rebellion; her brother-in-law Thomas Traill writes to J.W.D. Moodie in 1838:

Your wife deserves all you say of her. She has commanded the esteem of every one.

Your spring crops are nearly in. She was anxious to spare you every trouble when you came home. In fact she is farther advanced than her brother or me, or indeed any of the neighbours.... [Y]ou will find on your return that every thing has been managed admirably in your absence and every difficulty met with energy, constancy and courage. (Ballstadt et al, *Letters of Love and Duty* 95)

Her political views also change over the course of her life in Canada. She acknowledges that in the 1837 rebellion, “The honest backwoodsman, perfectly ignorant of the abuses that had led to the present position of things, regarded the rebels as a set of monsters ... and obeyed the call to arms with enthusiasm” (*Roughing* 452). Once relocated to Belleville, with more direct exposure to the governance of the colony, both Moodies become sympathetic to the concerns of the reformers, but Susanna Moodie does not ever advocate American republicanism over British monarchy. Further, she believes that the reformers also are loyal to Britain:

The Tory party, who arrogated the whole loyalty of the colony to themselves, branded, indiscriminately, the large body of Reformers as traitors and rebels. Every conscientious and thinking man, who wished to see a change for the better in the management of public affairs, was confounded with those discontented spirits, who had raised the standards of revolt against the mother country. In justice even to them, it must be said, not without severe provocation; and their disaffection was more towards the colonial government, and the abuses it fostered, than any particular dislike to British supremacy or institution. ... But the odious term of rebel, applied to some of the most loyal and honourable men in the province, because they could not give up their honest views on the state of the colony, gave rise to bitter and resentful

feelings.... (*Clearings* 56)

Ballstadt, Hopkins and Peterman summarise: “After 1837 [the Moodies] began to divest themselves of their naïve conservatism and came to share increasingly with Robert Baldwin the view that responsible government as it was practised in England was consistent with loyalty to England, the maintenance of traditional values, and improved government in Canada” (*Susanna Moodie* 83). In this respect, Moodie’s experience in Belleville allowed her to become more open to new political ideas, while remaining staunchly loyal to the British monarchy and model of governance.

In other respects, Moodie’s fundamental nature does not change; she does what needs to be done to survive in Canada and to support her husband, but at her core, she retains the views of an upper-class English gentlewoman. While this leads to the appearance of contradictory opinions, it was likely essential for Moodie both to bring her stoicism to bear and to cling to the beliefs of her genteel upbringing in order to retain her self-respect and not to succumb to the physical hardships of life in the bush. Despite her descent into manual labour and poverty, Moodie continues to operate from an assumed superiority that is a product of her upbringing and that renders her unable to understand the points of view of those who are different from her. Consequently, she often appears to be naïve, insensitive or patronising, unable to detect her own inconsistencies, particularly in the marked distinction she makes between the theoretical and the real. For example, she says that over time, class relations in Canada have improved: “The gentleman no longer looks down with supercilious self-importance on the wealthy merchant, nor does the latter refuse to the ingenious mechanic the respect due to him as a man” (*Clearings* 13). But these generous ideals (in which she seems to cast herself as a member of the gentleman class) are undermined by the revelation

that she believes that there are higher and lower classes who must learn how to get along, largely through the deferential actions of the lower classes. Moodie accepts that “The rich and the educated will never look upon the poor and ignorant as their equals” (333), although “many kind, good, and noble traits are to be found among those classes, whom at home we regard as our inferiors” (59). She is pleased that “[a]s long as they are treated with civility, the lower classes shew no lack of courtesy to the higher” (89).

In her views on the role and status of servants in particular, Moodie can be ambiguous, as in the following example taken from her 1871 Introduction to the first Canadian edition of *Roughing It in the Bush*:

A class formed mainly from the younger scions of great families, naturally proud, and not only accustomed to command, but to receive implicit obedience from the people under them, are not men adapted to the hard toil of the woodsmen’s life. Nor will such persons submit cheerfully to the saucy familiarity of servants who, republicans at heart, think themselves quite as good as their employers. (582)

Moodie does not clarify whether she believes that the upper-class employers are justified in resisting “saucy familiarity” in their servants, or that they should be more sympathetic to the republican notion that servants are as good as their employers. For her own part, she is genuinely wounded by the animosity shown to her by her first American neighbours and the disrespect and “saucy familiarity” accorded her by her servants, until she claims to come to understand their unexpected republican spirit of equality: “the principle is founded in nature; and, however disgusting and distasteful to those accustomed to different treatment from their inferiors, it is better than a hollow profession of duty and attachment urged upon us by a false and unnatural position. Still, it is very irksome until you think more deeply upon it; and then

it serves to amuse rather than to irritate” (208). It is likely that she reveals her true opinion of servants in the following passage on the value of hiring Cornish miners who had settled in Dummer: “All our best servants came from Dummer; and although they spoke a language difficult to be understood, and were uncouth in their manners and appearance, they were faithful and obedient; performing the tasks assigned to them with patient perseverance; good food and kind treatment rendering them always cheerful and contented” (*Roughing* 483). It appears that Moodie accepts that the servant class is inferior to the gentleman class, but believes that the latter should be generous to the former, who both deserve and respond well to kind treatment and civility. She does not apparently understand that members of the lower classes might see the matter differently or be offended by her opinion.

Moodie’s personal naïveté and insensitivity to those not of her own class extend to matters particularly Canadian. She writes of the thrill of viewing Québec City, eulogising: “Canadians! - as long as you remain true to yourselves and her, what foreign invader could ever dare to plant a hostile flag upon that rock-defended height, or set his foot upon a fortress rendered impregnable by the hand of Nature?” (*Roughing* 29). Later, she writes that “... we find that the worst members of our community are not Canadian born, but importations from other countries” (588). She does not appear to realise the *gaucherie* of these sentiments, first insulting the Québécois population who lost Québec City to Britain, a hostile foreign invader, and then oblivious to the possibility that Canadian-born citizens might view Moodie herself as an unwelcome importation from another country.¹⁰

A clue to her contradictory opinions and apparent insensitivity can be found in her story “Rachel Wilde: Trifles From the Burthen of a Life” (published in 1851 in *Literary*

¹⁰Moodie does not define “Canadians”, but it seems that she sees them as the Canadian-born children of immigrants, whom she curiously treats as similar in appearance and behaviour, despite their various origins.

Garland magazine), a semi-autobiographical story of a young girl, modelled on the real Susanna Strickland.¹¹ In this story, Rachel, “the daughter of a great gentleman, had been brought up with very aristocratic notions” (110), and refuses to visit the uncle of her dear friend Miss Long because, despite his excellent credentials as a wealthy, respectable gentleman, he owns a shop. Rachel draws back at the door, saying “I don’t mean to stop here. Papa never visits with tradespeople” (110). Despite the enticements of the uncle in the form of food and a doll, Rachel remains conflicted about the shop. It is evident from her language in the story that Moodie is reporting her own upbringing and learned childhood opinions and as an adult claiming some distance from them. The beliefs of childhood are strong, however, and Moodie does not escape them entirely, retaining her belief in her genteel English superiority. Still, it is reasonable to consider that had she remained in England, she would not have changed even to the extent that she did. Paradoxically, Canada’s democratising impact probably is responsible for some of her least sensitive remarks (at least to modern readers), such as those on servants.

It is in her views on Canada itself that we see most clearly Moodie’s resistance to becoming Canadian. Here, her contradictory opinions appear to be the product of her decision to publish opinions that she felt would be most acceptable to her potential audience in England and Canada, and to reserve her true beliefs for her private correspondence. In her published works, speaking from the perspective of having lived in Upper Canada for 20 years, Moodie has progressed from disliking Canada to loving Canada, and represents her initial homesickness for England and dislike of Canada as a short-term situation. Thus, she

¹¹ “Rachel Wilde: Trifles From the Burthen of a Life” is to be distinguished from a later story entitled “Trifles From the Burthen of a Life”, which covers the next period of her life. Elements of both appear in the novel *Flora Lyndsay*, which carries her story to the point where *Roughing It in the Bush* begins. Moodie frequently reworked her stories, and was not averse to reusing a title. See Thurston, xi, xx.

compares her early days in Cobourg, when “the home-sickness was sore upon me, and all my solitary hours were spent in tears” (*Roughing* 86), to her current perspective: “Now, when not only reconciled to Canada, but loving it ... I often look back and laugh at the feelings with which I then regarded this noble country” (89). She explains: “At that period my love for Canada was a feeling very much allied to that which the condemned criminal entertains for his cell - his only hope of escape being through the portals of the grave” (138). But she also counsels: “How many home-sick emigrants, during their first winter in Canada, will respond to this gloomy picture! Let them wait a few years; the sun of hope will arise and beautify the landscape, and they will proclaim the country one of the finest in the world” (170). In *Life in the Clearings*, she says that “Canada has become almost as dear to me as my native land” (12), and reworks some of the remarks in *Roughing It* that garnered negative reaction, explaining that she believes that Canada is a good destination for British emigrants, provided that they do not try to settle in the bush. She remains firm that “[t]o persons unaccustomed to hard labour, and used to the comforts and luxuries deemed indispensable to those moving in the middle classes at home, a settlement in the bush can offer few advantages” (9), but adds that “I have never said anything against the REAL benefits to be derived from a judicious choice of settlement in this great and rising country” (10). She concludes that “The sorrows and trials that I experienced during my first eight years’ residence in Canada, have been more than counterbalanced by the remaining twelve of comfort and peace”, and “I no longer regard myself as an alien on her shores, but her daughter by adoption - the happy mother of Canadian children - rejoicing in the warmth and hospitality of a Canadian Home!” (333).

In her private correspondence, Moodie has less positive things to say about Canadians

and Canada. Between 1852 and 1865, she writes with consistent bitterness to her publisher Richard Bentley of the reaction of the Canadian public to her books on Canada, as the following excerpts illustrate:

- I will think over the new Canadian work, but the little that I have said of Canadian society has made me so unpopular with the natives, that I believe it would be better to leave them alone for the future, if I would hope to live in peace. Yet I have said nothing of them beyond the truth, nor told half of what could, and ought to be said, of their unfaithful dealings, and utter disregard of all honorable feeling (July, 1852). (Ballstadt et al, *Susanna Moodie* 127)
- You don't know the touchy nature of the people. Vindictive, treacherous and dishonest, they always impute to your words and actions the worst motives, and no abuse is too coarse to express in their public journals, their hatred and defiance. ... If I write about this country again, it shall never be published till my head is under the sod (August 1856). (169, 170)
- The Canadians will never forgive me for disclosing the secrets of that rural prison-house the Bush. I have no doubt, they consider our present distress a just punishment for telling the truth... (April 1865). (217)

In July 1861, having received a proposal from Henry Morgan to include her in a book to be called *Celebrated Canadians*, Moodie declines with some asperity: "By birth and education English I cannot have the least claim to the honor you intend me" (Ballstadt et al, *Susanna Moodie* 191). As late as 1869, shortly before the death of her husband, Moodie writes to Anna Ricketson, an American acquaintance (199) that Canadian daisies "all look in the last stages of consumption, as if they were pining to death for the salt breezes, and moist climate

of England. They always make me sad to look at them. It reminds me of my own heartsickness, to return and die upon my native soil” (247 - 248). It would appear that despite her published words, Moodie does not consider herself Canadian even after over 30 years, and never gets over her homesickness for England.

In sum, while Moodie’s immigration to Canada modifies her to some extent, particularly in her ability to respond to adversity with courage and determination, and gives her at least a theoretical start to modifying her inherited views of class relations, she does not adapt to Canada as home and at least one belief remains firm and unshaken: Britain is her home, and the future of Canada lies with Britain. Despite her incipient and minor republican sympathies, Moodie adheres firmly to the view that only Britain can provide the right model for the future governance of Canada. She concludes *Life in the Clearings* with the sentiment: “The country is not yet in existence that can present us a better government and wiser institutions than the British. Long may Canada recognize her rule, and rejoice in her sway! ... May the blessing of God rest upon the land! and her people ever prosper under a religious, liberal and free government!” (333), and follows that with the emotional patriotic poem, “For London: a National Song” (333,334) (first published in England in 1832 [Peterman *Susanna Moodie* 67]), a purely English poem with no mention of Canada, Scotland, Ireland or Wales.

English she is and English she shall remain.¹² It is also true that the more Canada changes to resemble England, the more she comes to appreciate Canada: for Moodie, becoming Canadian means staying British while Canada becomes British. Indeed, the Canada she writes about after 20 years in the country has changed more than Moodie. The very landscape has become more pleasing to her in that it is more reminiscent of neat, settled, landscaped, rural England. Her description of modern Belleville shows how its changed

¹² While Moodie refers to her home as Britain, she clearly sees herself as English.

appearance approaches her English ideal: “Where you see those substantial stone wharfs, and the masts of those vessels, unloading their valuable cargoes . . . , a tangled cedar swamp spread its dark, unwholesome vegetation into the bay, completely covering with an impenetrable jungle those smooth, verdant plains, now surrounded with neat cottages and gardens” (*Clearings* 22). And of Niagara, she says with admiration: “This part of the province might justly be termed the garden of Canada, and partakes more of the soft and rich character of English scenery. . . . Here, for the first time in Canada, I observed hedges of the Canadian thorn - a great improvement on the old snake fence of rough split timber which prevails all through the colony” (295); and “Trees that grow in open spaces after the forest has been cleared away are as graceful and umbrageous as those planted in parks at home” (296). This Arcadian image is in sharp contrast to the bleak description Moodie provides of the unimproved Canadian forest: “The forest trees seldom possess any great beauty of outline . . . One wood is the exact picture of another; the uniformity dreary in the extreme. . . . A stern array of rugged trunks, a tangled maze of scrubby underbrush, carpeted winter and summer with a thick layer of withered buff leaves, form the general features of a Canadian forest” (295, 296).

So we find the answer to the ambiguities and contradictions in Moodie’s writing, and a fix on her position as immigrant. She has scarcely changed her ideas at all in 20 years in Canada, and it is Canada that is changing, not she. As her portion of Canada becomes less bush and more clearings, more civilised and more like England, Moodie becomes happier. Were enough time to pass to complete the transformation, she would likely be able to feel at home again, in a Canada that replicates and pays tribute to her first and true home:

I have often imagined a hundred years to have passed away, and the lovely sloping

banks of the Bay of Quinte, crowned with rural villages and stately parks and houses, stretching down to these fair waters. What a scene of fertility and beauty rises before my mental vision! My heart swells, and I feel proud that I belong to a race who, in every portion of the globe in which they have planted a colony, have proved themselves worthy to be the sires of a great nation. (*Clearings* 55)

Moodie alone, among the four writers included in this study, will not have to adapt and change in order to be at home in Canada. She will remain an exiled Englishwoman with hope that the transformation will complete itself for her children.

In two early passages from *Roughing It in the Bush*, Moodie expresses the essence of her immigrant beliefs and attitudes: love of Britain, nostalgia for the past, permanent exile, courage in facing survival in Canada, begrudging acceptance of her duty, love for her husband and children, hope for her children's futures in Canada, and belief that Canada must and will follow the British way to become a great country. If these qualities, and the following passages, seem contradictory, they form the essence of Susanna Moodie, and her doubleness as emigrant/immigrant. First:

British mothers of Canadian sons! - learn to feel for their country the same enthusiasm which fills your hearts when thinking of the glory of your own. Teach them to love Canada - to look upon her as the first, the happiest, the most independent country in the world! Exhort them to be worthy of her - to have faith in her present prosperity, in her future greatness, and to devote all their talents, when they themselves are men, to accomplish this noble object. Make your children proud of the land of their birth, the land which has given them bread - the land in which you have found an altar and a home. Do this, and you will soon cease to lament your separation

from the mother country, and the loss of those luxuries which you could not, in honour to yourself, enjoy; you will soon learn to love Canada as I now love it, who once viewed it with a hatred so intense that I longed to die, that death might effectively separate us for ever. (30)

Secondly:

Dear, dear England! why was I forced by a stern necessity to leave you! What heinous crime had I committed, that I, who adored you, should be torn from your sacred bosom, to pine out my joyless existence in a foreign clime? Oh, that I might be permitted to return and die upon your wave-encircled shores, and rest my weary head and heart beneath your daisy-covered sod at last! Ah, these are vain outbursts of feeling - melancholy relapses of the spring home-sickness! Canada! thou art a noble, free, and rising country - the great fostering mother of the orphans of civilisation. The offspring of Britain, thou must be great, and I will and do love thee, land of my adoption, and of my children's birth; and, oh, dearer still to a mother's heart - land of their graves! (68, 69)

Moodie as immigrant has paid a high personal price in isolation, stoicism, tears, and homesickness, but at the last, appears to take consolation from her hope that her emigrant aim of improving life for her children will be realised.

Chapter III John Marlyn

“Nobody would be able to tell that he had ever been a foreigner.”

Introduction and Context

Within the framework of this thesis, John Marlyn provides a historically-illuminating but bleak rendering of an eastern European immigrant in early 20th-century Manitoba, identified and isolated as a “foreigner” in Canada. In his novel *Under the Ribs of Death*, this single circumstance both shapes the development of the protagonist’s definition of success, to become Canadian by being accepted as English, and condemns him to failure, as the English refuse to accept him within their ranks. As a consequence of this failure, exacerbated by the impersonal actions of circumstance and fate, the protagonist is ultimately isolated from his family and the rest of the immigrant community as well as from the dominant English community.



John Marlyn was born in April 1912, in Debrecin, Hungary.¹³ Frank Marlyn, John Marlyn’s brother, confirmed that the family name was Mihaelovitz (Kadar 81), but did not elaborate on the circumstances of the name change. Marlyn emigrated to Winnipeg with his mother, aunt and cousin as an infant of six months, his father having preceded them, and grew up on Henry Street in the North End, across from the CPR freight sheds. In Winnipeg, said Marlyn, “We were very poor, but not in the important things” (Rasporich 36). His father was first a barber, later a house painter; Marlyn stated that his father had wanted to be an electrician, but the apprenticeship in Hungary was too expensive (Arnason and Hughes 12, Rasporich 37). Marlyn quit school at the age of 14 to work in the Holt Renfrew stockroom

¹³ Marlyn said in two interviews that he was born in Debrecen/Debrecin (Rasporich 36, Arnason and Hughes 12); it is variously identified as the second or third largest city in Hungary. John Miska states, without citing a source, that Marlyn was born in Nagybekskerek, or Becskerek, Hungary (*Literature* 101, *Sound* 100). This city was transferred from Hungary to Yugoslavia in 1918, is now called Zrenjanin and is part of Serbia.

because his father was ill, and “I was trapped there for five years” (Arnason and Hughes 12). He finished his high school matriculation while working fulltime and in 1930 managed to go to the University of Manitoba for two years, but could not afford to continue because of the Depression. Unable to obtain reasonable employment, he moved to London, England, where he married his girlfriend from Winnipeg; they returned in 1938 to Montreal, then Ottawa, where they settled. In Ottawa, he worked in a variety of public service writing positions and as a freelance writer and taught creative writing at Carleton University. He died in 2005 in the Canary Islands. (Biographical details are from Swayze, Miska and Marlyn’s two published interviews [Arnason and Hughes, and Rasporich].)

Marlyn’s published output is sparse: two novels, *Under the Ribs of Death* (1957), (which won the Beta Sigma Phi First Novel Award) and *Putzi, I Love You, You Little Square* (1981), and some anthologised short stories. While he began sending work to publishers from the age of 14, finding the opportunity to write and finding a publisher for his work were life-long challenges (Arnason and Hughes 13). John Miska wrote in 1974 that Marlyn had received Canada Council grants for two other works to be published, one a novel titled *So Runs My Dream*, and the other a three-act play (*Sound* 100). Walter Swayze mentions a novel tentatively titled *Echoes from Afar* (196). In 1982, Marlyn declined to elaborate to Arnason and Hughes on his early employment at Holt Renfrew because “I’ll be dealing with it later in my writing” (13). He also mentioned his grandmother, on whom Fraulein Kleimholtz in *Under the Ribs of Death* was partly based, adding that “in my third novel, I want to pick up and take the rest of her” (14). None of these works was published.¹⁴

Of his published works of fiction, *Putzi*, a short novel or novella, relies on the oddity

¹⁴ The play possibly became the novella *Putzi, I Love You, You Little Square*, which Marlyn said he had written as a play but rewrote as a novel after it was rejected by “every theatrical group in Canada” (Arnason and Hughes 14).

of a talking fetus named Putzi who embarrasses his mother by speaking critically of her family and friends in front of them, but the story was not well-received commercially or critically. *Under the Ribs of Death*¹⁵ (hereafter *Under the Ribs*) is the story of a young Hungarian immigrant in Winnipeg, Manitoba, between 1913 and 1932. It is the stronger work, and will be the focus of this chapter. Marlyn began writing *Under the Ribs* in Montreal before the Second World War and finished it in Ottawa about five years later (Arnason and Hughes 13). It was rejected by several publishers (saying “there’s not enough oomph, there’s not enough sex,” according to Marlyn [13]) before finally finding a British publisher, Arthur Barker. *Under the Ribs* consciously endeavours to represent accurately the facts and flavour of growing up Hungarian in North End Winnipeg in the early decades of the 1900s. Reaction to the novel generally treats it as of greatest interest for its historical and documentary value. Julie Beddoes records that when reprinted in 1964, *Under the Ribs* “on the whole attracted no more attention than it had done after its first publication in 1957” (5), underscoring that it has never been a popular success. Nonetheless, it has been included in the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library series of important Canadian texts, and Robert Thacker calls it “a valuable social [document]” (34). Beddoes explains that “Nearly all critics have chosen to read *Under the Ribs of Death* as a realistic, omnisciently narrated account of the experience of a Hungarian immigrant to Winnipeg [and] have concentrated mainly on its themes and plot events as representations of a lived reality” (5). The historical context of Canadian immigration patterns and the situation of Hungarian immigrants to Winnipeg in the early 1900s is therefore of great importance to reading *Under the Ribs*.

According to historians, Hungarian immigration to North America before the

¹⁵ As indicated in the epigraph to the novel, the title comes from Milton’s *Comus*: “I was all ear, / And took in strains that might create a soul / Under the ribs of death.”

First World War is attributable to a desire for improvement of personal circumstances, and “clearly reflected the general patterns of European emigration” (Dreisziger et al 29).

Hungary’s “social and economic problems were those of an agrarian society undergoing gradual industrialization” (30), and “[w]hile emigration cannot be attributed to any one set of social-economic indicators, it appears likely that agricultural unemployment coupled with retarded industrial development constituted a major determinant of emigration” (32). Adds Patrias, “By the decade before the First World War, many Hungarians, especially in the countryside, had come to view transatlantic migration as an accepted, perhaps the only, means to improve their lot” (22). Most of the immigrants to Canada settled in the Prairies.

Canadian Prairie settlement took place largely in the late 1800s and early 1900s, through immigration of non-English-speaking northern, central and eastern Europeans (Brown 387). Russian Mennonites were the first post-Confederation European immigrants to the Prairies, particularly southern Manitoba, in the 1870s and 1880s (Knowles 51), followed by Scandinavians and Hungarians in 1885 and 1886 (53). Between 1896 and 1905, Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior (a post which included responsibility for immigration), targeted immigrants from Britain, the US and parts of Europe. Particularly wanting agricultural workers suited to Prairie settlement, he wrote to Prime Minister Laurier in 1901 that “Our desire is to promote the immigration of farmers and farm labourers. We have not been disposed to exclude foreigners of any nationality who seemed likely to become successful agriculturalists” (59). Sifton believed firmly in the desirability of immigrants from central and eastern Europe for this purpose, later stating in a 1922 article in *Maclean’s* that “the stalwart peasant in a sheepskin coat, born to the soil, whose forefathers have been

farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and half-dozen children, is good quality” (Kelley and Trebilcock 120, 477). By 1903, Britain and the US together still accounted for about 2/3 of the immigrants to Canada, but the remainder were largely from Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Russia; of these “Others,” many were destined for Prairie settlement (Knowles 72).

Not all Canadians agreed with Sifton on the advisability of recruiting from this demographic group, including his successor in the post, Frank Oliver, who had said in July 1899 that central and eastern Europeans, whom he called Slavs and Galicians, were “people who have no ideas in regard to our system of government or our social life, who have no ambitions such as we have, who are aliens in race and in every other respect” (Kelley and Trebilcock 132, 480) and in 1901 had reaffirmed, “let us look to our own people and to kindred people upon whose industry and loyalty we can depend” (132, 480). Once he became minister responsible for immigration, Oliver oversaw the discontinuation of efforts to attract immigrants from eastern and central Europe and the strengthening of efforts to attract more British immigration, and public opinion was generally supportive of this shift (Knowles 82, 83). In 1906, within a year of assuming the post of Minister of the Interior, Oliver introduced into Parliament a new Immigration Act whose sole purpose, he explained “is to enable the Department of Immigration to deal with undesirable immigrants” (Kelley and Trebilcock 136); this Act was the “first legal mechanism for enforcing a policy of selective, i.e. restrictive immigration” (Knowles 78). Oliver told Calgary’s *Albertan* in 1906 that “we are not pushing Continental immigration at all” (Kelley and Trebilcock 136). The 1910 Immigration Act that followed strengthened Cabinet’s power to regulate the composition of immigration; Frank Oliver explained, “We want to be in such a position that ... we may have

the power ... to exclude people whom we consider undesirable” (Knowles 80). Nonetheless, European immigrants continued to arrive, until the outbreak of World War I. Summing up the situation, the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Canadian history textbook of the early 1930s taught secondary school students that:

Between 1896 and 1914 there came into Canada more than two and a half million people. Not all of these immigrants were of an equally desirable type. Among them were large numbers of people whose standards of living were inferior to those of native-born Canadians; and especially unhappy was the importation of the Doukhobors - a group of Russians whose ideals were scarcely compatible with Canadian citizenship. But there were also among the immigrants ever increasing numbers of settlers of the best type - Americans from the Middle West of the United States, who thoroughly understood the conditions they had to face; settlers from the British Isles, who found a little difficulty in adjusting themselves to the new conditions, but who were of a sound stock with sound ideals; and Scandinavians, people of a stock akin to the Anglo-Saxons, who were destined to prove the most desirable of the non-English-speaking people. (Wallace 341, 342)

In implying that eastern Europeans were neither “of the best type” nor among “the most desirable of the non-English-speaking people,” historian Wm. Stewart Wallace is, with unconscious irony, illustrating the general feeling of the early-20th-century Canadian public concerning these immigrants.

The First World War had the effect of almost halting immigration and confirming public fears of and hostility towards “enemy aliens” in Canada, including almost 400,000 Germans and over 100,000 former citizens of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Hungarians,

Poles, Romanians, Czechs and Ukrainians [Kelley and Trebilcock 169, Knowles 93]). The 1914 War Measures Act authorized the governor-in-council to undertake actions deemed necessary for the “security, defence, peace, order and welfare of Canada,” including internment and deportation of “enemy aliens”; during the war, between 8,000 and 9,000 such aliens (i.e. fewer than 2%) were placed in 24 internment camps across the country (Kelley and Trebilcock 168 - 170). After the war, immigrants from former enemy countries continued to be held in distrust, and the Immigration Act of 1919 specifically excluded immigrants from countries with which Canada had been at war (175). Said the President of the Canadian Manufacturers’ Association, W.J. Bulman, in 1919: “We should not encourage the immigration of those whose political and social beliefs unfit them for assimilation with Canadians. While a great country such as Canada possessing millions of vacant acres needs population, it is wiser to go slowly and secure the right sort of citizens” (184, 185).

The Winnipeg General Strike of May 1919 struck a further blow to the perception of eastern Europeans, who were widely seen as fomenting a Bolshevik revolution. Typical of the public view was the comment of John Dafoe, editor of the *Manitoba Free Press*, who called on the government “to clean the aliens out of this community [and ship them back to their] happy homes in central Europe, which vomited them forth a decade ago” (Kelley and Trebilcock 180). Arthur Kroeger notes in his autobiography that after the Winnipeg General Strike, “the federal minister of justice, ignoring the fact that most of the principal organizers had been Anglo Saxons, deplored the ‘bad habits, notions, and vicious practices’ of non-British immigrants, and declared them to be ‘thorough-paced Bolsheviks, disciples of the torch and bomb’” (172). Canada re-opened its gates to Hungarians in 1921 (Patrias 133), thereby becoming especially attractive to potential immigrants as the US imposed restrictive

quotas on immigration from eastern Europe in 1921 and 1924 (22). By 1926, Canada had essentially a four-tiered immigration-admissions system, in order of preference and ease of admission: British and white Americans; Scandinavians; eastern and southern Europeans, who required special permits; and all other nationalities, who were “virtually excluded” (Kelley and Trebilcock 189).

This, then, was the atmosphere of distrust and exclusion which *Under the Ribs* captures. While it is dominated by the historical reality of its time and setting, its carefully-crafted structure makes it more specific than a general history. Marlyn divided it into two almost equal sections, the first taking place in 1913 and the second from the mid-1920s through to 1932. In the first section, the protagonist is Sandor Hunyadi, a rough-mannered Hungarian schoolboy; in the second, he has become Alex Hunter, an up-and-coming young businessman. The two sections serve as a framing device: the book does not include or even mention the two significant events of World War I and the Winnipeg General Strike. Only one indirect reference to either event exists: the mention of a failed job interview in which “there was a misunderstanding; [Alex] was taken for German and the interview closed before he had time to explain. ...[T]he man who had interviewed him was wearing a war-service medal in his buttonhole” (137). In a book that is otherwise historically accurate, Marlyn has chosen to omit two events of seminal importance to Hungarian immigrants in Winnipeg. It seems that he wanted to emphasise two significant periods in the transformation of Sandor into Alex, and to omit the larger historical events in between, in order to make the story more specific.

Under the Ribs of Death can be read as autobiographical, as the surface details are similar to Marlyn’s life: the protagonist, Sandor Hunyadi, is, like Marlyn, a poor Hungarian

emigrant who arrives in Winnipeg in the early 1900s with his parents, lives on Henry Street, and adopts a more “Canadian” name. Marlyn admitted to interviewers that many of the details in the novel were reflections of his own life, for example: “Yes, these non-paying boarders lived upstairs” (Arnason and Hughes 12); “[A]lthough he read very few books, [my father] was prompted essentially by the same thoughts that I attribute to Joseph Hunyadi. . . . My father was always against materialism” (13); and “I got a job looking after a lawn in River Heights” (14). Marlyn denied, however, that *Under the Ribs* was autobiographical: “No, I am not the protagonist but I have taken parts of people and incorporated them into characters” (Rasporich 37); “You see, I sat at home and read books. The things that happened in the novel happened to my brothers, my sister, relatives, friends, acquaintances. . . . I wanted to present the viewpoint of the North End” (Arnason and Hughes 13).¹⁶ Marlyn also acknowledged that his writing was affected by his environment, and it was only possible to write *Under the Ribs* based on his experience in Winnipeg:

In [*Under the Ribs*] I knew what had happened to the people behind the characters in great detail. But when they were grown up it would have been necessary for me to be in Winnipeg for me to see what had happened to them after they’d grown up. I didn’t know. I could work it out in the abstract, but the people and the situations wouldn’t be grounded. When we were younger we were all together and I could describe events in detail when I was in Winnipeg, but I couldn’t when I was away. (Arnason and Hughes 14)

One could safely say, therefore, that Marlyn’s depiction of Sandor’s environment is based on personal experience and indirectly autobiographical.

Certainly, historians of Winnipeg and of Prairie settlement have welcomed it as such.

¹⁶Sandor is also older than Marlyn, presumably in order to have him the right age for the role of the Depression.

For example, in his study of class and race relations in Winnipeg between 1880 and 1910, Kurt Korneski cites *Under the Ribs* for its depiction of the impact of the class divide on immigrant youths:

Pressures from Anglo-Canadians on both sides of the class divide encouraged non-British immigrants in the city to develop organizations that expressed both their class standing and their alternate - i.e. non-British - ethnic identity. ... It is also suggested by the fact that some male youths who were either immigrants or the children of immigrants, as John Marlyn recalled, sometimes joined working-class street gangs composed of other young men of their own ethnic background - gangs whose members ... viewed 'the British', particularly in the south end of the city, as totally divorced from themselves. (175)

In *Under the Ribs*, one such North End gang figures prominently in Sandor's youth. The text stresses that this gang was not of a single ethnic background, but included Italian, French, Hungarian, German, Swedish and Russian members (47, 48), united largely by the fact that they were not English (Sandor's gang also includes one English boy, an inclusion which is not explained). Marlyn also explained in one interview that when he was growing up "there was no sense of prejudice against any other ethnic or culture group" but that the English were different: "these people were the ones who attacked us. The English, we called them" (Arnason and Hughes 14).¹⁷

In providing a snapshot of the isolation of the non-English-speaking immigrant in early-20th-century Manitoba, *Under the Ribs* is rendered both credible and moving by its

¹⁷ Unlike Moodie, Marlyn consistently uses the word English, not British. Protagonist Sandor Hunyadi does not distinguish among English, Scots and Irish. This too is a reflection of Marlyn's background: foreshadowing the commentary of Daniel Coleman, Marlyn said of his childhood, "It wasn't until years later ... that I realized that the English included the Irish and Scottish. In some way they were put together." (Arnason and Hughes 14).

faithful depiction of Winnipeg's North End. Like Moodie, Marlyn portrays the dominant role of the British, but from the opposite perspective of one who is not British. He uses verifiable events and plausible situations to recount how being an eastern European immigrant in the early-20th century equates to Sandor's being identified and isolated as a "foreigner" in Canada. This single circumstance shapes both the development of Sandor's goals and definition of success. Sandor classifies all around him as either "foreigners" or "English." As boy and adult, Sandor Hunyadi/Alex Hunter accepts that the English (i.e. British) are the natural rulers, and that all non-English immigrants are foreigners, a single class of unimportant and unacceptable people. By his definition, to become a Canadian and to succeed in Canada, one needs to be English or taken for English, and he makes that his goal. This is an impossible goal to achieve, as the English refuse to accept him within their ranks. As a consequence, Sandor/Alex fails in his goal of "becoming Canadian," and remains a "foreigner," isolated from his family, the rest of the immigrant community and the dominant, ruling English community. His hope for the future is invested in his son, with no guarantee that he will not become isolated also from the boy.

Marlyn has identified *Under the Ribs* as a moral story rather than an immigrant novel (Rasporich 37): I argue that the fact of Sandor's being an immigrant isolated on the basis of his ethnicity is at the core of this novel. While Sandor/Alex makes bad moral and business choices in his single-minded pursuit of becoming Canadian, it is his status as excluded, isolated foreigner that shapes his actions and is at the root of his failure. His worst choice is to believe the promise of a book given to him by a member of the dominant English that a poor foreigner can be accepted by the English, and, therefore, he infers, become Canadian. Further, his isolation and his failure are influenced by external and impersonal forces

(especially the Great Depression) over which he has no control, lending an element of fate; his own actions and choices have little impact on the outcome. With active discrimination and impersonal fate both acting against Sandor/Alex, the morality of his actions is of little consequence. It is reasonable to conclude that Marlyn held a bleak view of the prospects for early-20th-century Hungarian immigrants to Canada.

Argument

Under the Ribs is a novel of binaries. Within a structure of two almost equal sections, each concerning one of the two central questions, how Sandor develops his personal goals and definition of success, and how Alex acts in order to attain those goals, Marlyn establishes three binary conflicts: two types of people (“English” and “foreigners”); two forces affecting the success of individuals (individual action and fate); and two philosophical approaches (Joseph Hunyadi’s humanism and Sandor/Alex’s materialism). It is my contention that the first conflict is the most significant: the experience of being a “foreigner,” a non-English immigrant resident of Winnipeg’s North End slum, is the single biggest influence on the young Sandor and the adult Alex, affecting all of his major decisions and their outcomes. Fate has seemingly placed Sandor in this position and has made it impossible to alter the relationship between English and foreigners, and fate also intervenes in the form of the Depression, rendering futile all of Alex’s efforts to succeed. The philosophical conflict, while substantial, is of smaller significance.

Marlyn would likely dispute this conclusion; in 1982, he denied the importance of Sandor’s ethnicity or immigrant status: “The overriding element is not ethnic but humanistic. The basic conflict is the philosophical dichotomy between the father and the son, Sandor, between humanism and blatant, rampant commercialism” (Rasporich 37). That conflict, he

says, is relevant to “the immigrant dilemma”¹⁸ “only in the sense that it is so very intensive. There is an Oedipal situation at the bottom of it. Immigrant fathers are so often supplanted by sons” (37). Acknowledging Marlyn’s intention, Eli Mandel says, “it is precisely in the link between the themes of intolerance, materialism, and the quarrel of the generations that Marlyn is most perceptive” (9). Most critics, however, tend to place *Under the Ribs* into the category of an immigrant novel, with Sandor’s ethnicity and immigrant status the most important factor in his development. This is made clear in the titles of scholarly articles such as “*Under the Ribs of Death: Immigrant Narrative of Masculinity and Nationality*” (Hunter), “Irony in an Immigrant Novel: John Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death*” (Roberts), and “Foreigner: The Immigrant Voice in *The Sacrifice* and *Under the Ribs of Death*” (Thacker). I will argue that Sandor’s response to the challenges presented by his immigrant situation is the single most important factor driving him to materialism and puts him in direct philosophical and moral conflict with his father, a quarrel that is not resolved within the novel.

It is clear that his immigrant status disadvantages the boy Sandor and the young man Alex and that his perception of the “English” as opposed to the “foreigners” is the single biggest factor in his development. Sandor is obsessed from a young age with obtaining acceptance by the English; this obsession leads Alex to choices and actions that ultimately estrange him from his own family and community without achieving the acceptance or the status that he craves. Sandor’s first encounters with the English are with the adulation of Canada’s British heritage at school, and the gang of schoolboys who taunt him by calling him “Hunky, Hunky, Humpy Ya-Ya” (referring both to his being Hungarian and his having an

¹⁸ Rasporich’s exact question was: “Is the conflict, between father and son, humanism and materialism, special to the immigrant dilemma?” (37).

unpronounceable foreign name), beat him up, cause him to fight, and make his life miserable (23, 36). In this milieu, Sandor adopts wholeheartedly what he is taught at school, despising his foreignness and accepting that the English are the natural rulers. The foreigners of his youth are poor, live in the North End, and include different non-British European ethnic groups, both immigrants and children of immigrants. They are the people whom Sandor encounters daily: the members of his gang, his classmates, and the members of his own family. Two of the foreigners in his neighbourhood are better-off and more successful, and consequently have a great influence on Sandor. Kostanuik is a small contractor who has been able to move away from the poorest neighbourhood of Henry Street, and whose wife, as a result, looks down on Sandor and his family, and humiliates him at her daughter's birthday party. At this party, Sandor suddenly realizes why Mrs. Kostanuik and her neighbours want nothing to do with him: "He was something out of their past. All of them had come from Henry Avenue. He was everything they wanted to forget" (40). Sandor vows to exceed the success of the Kostanuiks. The other successful foreigner is Mr. Nagy, a North End property manager with immigrant clients, whom Sandor admires as a shrewd businessman, someone to emulate.

In his black-and-white world, Sandor's ambition in becoming Canadian is not the more realistic and attainable goal of becoming successful within his own community, someone like Mr. Nagy, but to become one of the English. His first vision of success is that:

Some day he would grow up and leave all this, ... leave it behind him forever and never look back, never remember again this dirty, foreign neighbourhood and the English gang who chased him home from school every day. He would forget how it felt to wear rummage-sale clothes and be hungry all the time, and nobody would

laugh at him again, not even the English, because by then he would have changed his name and would be working in an office the way the English did, and nobody would be able to tell that he had ever been a foreigner. (17)

Conflating the concepts of being Canadian, being English, and being successful, Sandor explains to his father: “Pa, the only people who count are the English. Their fathers got all the best jobs. They’re the only ones nobody ever calls foreigners. Nobody ever makes fun of their names or calls them ‘bologna-eaters,’ or laughs at the way they dress or talk. Nobody ... ’cause when you’re English, it’s the same as bein’ Canadian” (24). Sandor’s early attitude is solidified when he obtains a job maintaining the River Heights lawn of Mrs. Hamilton and her son Eric, and discovers a world beyond the North End, populated by English who are wealthy, self-assured, cultured and powerful, with beautiful homes in the South End. The Hamiltons¹⁹ appear to accept Sandor on reasonably equal terms, but the relationship is false, as he has lied about his name and background, and when the Hamiltons accidentally discover the truth, Sandor breaks off the relationship in humiliation, not giving them the opportunity to reject him, as he is certain they will (106). But the Hamiltons cement his ambition, both by their personification of the success he wants for himself, and by the promise of an unidentified book that Eric Hamilton gives him. This book is in the tradition of the American Horatio Alger’s rags-to-riches poor-boy-makes-good narrative, and promises Sandor that he is on the right path. He believes the promise and adopts it entirely: “The great men his father talked about, what were they after all but talkers like himself? The great ones in this book were the doers, the men of wealth and power, the men who counted, whose words people listened to. And one had only to work hard and devote oneself wholeheartedly to the things they believed, to become one of them” (108 - 111). Sandor’s ambition is complete: to

¹⁹ Mr. Hamilton does not appear and we do not know what he does or how he would react to Sandor.

become accepted by the English, to become wealthy, and to live in the South End. How he will accomplish this is by becoming a successful businessman of the same type and magnitude as the English. And this, to him, entails adopting materialism as his primary philosophy.

As an adult, the renamed Alex Hunter never lets go of his childhood ambition and his childhood binary juxtaposition of English-Canadian-South End and foreigner-nobody-North End. Setting out to become successful in the English world, Alex interacts with English who are at best aloof (e.g. Brown and Williams) and at worst prejudiced, discriminating against him as a foreigner (e.g. Atkinson). Businessman Atkinson is subtle but devastating: when he interviews Alex for a job at Imperial Crown Investment, he does not ask questions related to the candidate's knowledge or skills, but to his personal background, and when Atkinson uncovers that Alex, despite his English name, is Hungarian, the interview is over (136). The impersonal racism is staggering and Alex cannot combat it. Most of the English are like Atkinson, closing all doors to him; only the insurance man Lawson appears to treat Alex professionally as an equal, and even more surprising to Alex, offers a different definition of what it means to be Canadian, one that does not base itself on Englishness, but on a new (to Alex) concept called "Canadian ways": "If anything, Lawson went even further than he in condemning foreigners who refused to adapt themselves to Canadian ways; Lawson included Englishmen in his denunciation, and what was more, objected violently to being called anything but a Canadian" (162). Alex does not consider this new concept further, only experimenting with it somewhat when he tells his father and his father's friend and partner in philosophical discussion Mr. Schiller: "I'm not English, I'm not Hungarian, I'm Canadian" (128). Yet it becomes clear through his actions that Alex does not believe this himself.

Defeated at least temporarily by the prejudice against him, Alex becomes a North End businessman. He works very hard to achieve his success, going to night school, cultivating relationships, and spending long hours at the Agency (117), taking little personal time for himself. Still in his twenties, he is well on his way to becoming a successful foreigner: he has his own home in a nice neighborhood, even if still only in the North End (197); he has a beautiful wife, Mary Kostanuik, who does not look like the child of foreigners (150); he is the manager of a small but growing property management agency in the North End; he employs Kostanuik and an office boy. But Alex cannot be satisfied with remaining in the North End. At first proud of his success in acquiring Nagy's property agency, it is not long before he begins to look upon it as a "hole" where he is wasting his time (177) and he wonders when he is "going to get out of here" (180). His clients are the foreigners, and he despises them and the fact that he must deal with their small issues. He sneers at the sons of bricklayers and sewer-diggers (163) and views even Mr. Kruger, one of his wealthiest clients, as a peasant, and wonders why he is wasting his time on him (176, 177). More importantly, Alex has concluded that even the successful foreigners, Kostanuik and Nagy, are not worthy of his admiration; in this one respect only, his childhood illusions are shattered. He comes to realise that Kostanuik lives in an "ordinary North End working man's house" and is only a small contractor, barely better off than the unsuccessful foreigners (145). Mr. Nagy reveals himself to be an unpleasant, petty, vindictive and miserly old man (118, 124, 207), content to stay at the lower reaches of success. Alex sees no inspiration in either of them and rejects what they represent.

Although Alex sees clearly enough to be disillusioned with Kostanuik and Nagy, he is not able to see the flaws in his childhood adulation of the English and the promise of the

book that cemented his childhood ambition. Despite his negative experiences with the English men of wealth and power, which belie that hard work and devotion are to the keys to acceptance and transformation, Alex continues to believe this promise and models his life on it. Why Alex sees clearly on the one hand, and continues to act naively on the other, is not made clear. He accepts that if he behaves in a certain way, then he will succeed; the failure of others to react in the prescribed way only leads him to conclude that he has done something incorrectly. Alex continues to believe that to be a successful Canadian, he must be accepted by the English and shed the North End; it will never be enough for him to be a successful foreigner. It is not only a false goal, but also an impossible goal and it leads directly to his downfall.

For Alex cannot achieve his dream, and the best he could ever have hoped for was to be a successful foreigner. Sandor's strategy of hard work, single-minded attention to a goal, and becoming English/Canadian, is destined to fail: in this novel, the promise of the book, that an immigrant boy will succeed through this strategy (111), is a lie. Why this is so can only partly be ascribed to Alex's own actions, despite his questionable ethics, and despite his naïve belief in the book's promise. While the gains he achieves result mainly from his hard work, devotion to his objective, and willingness to ignore the morality of his actions, the setbacks result mainly from external situations beyond his control. Alex, despite his new name, faces a subtle but very real barrier, as he is clearly discriminated against by the English because he is Hungarian (136), and with the possible exception of Lawson, is not seen by them as potentially anything more than a successful foreigner. Alex has erred, says Daniel Coleman, in believing the promise of the book that he can cross the invisible barrier and become English: "Because Sandor believes in the liberality of Englishness, he thinks he too

can enter its charmed civil circle. He believes a change of name, fluency in the English language, and a few stolen accoutrements will gain him access to the class ascendancy that comes with belonging to the British family” (*White Civility* 84). But Alex does not understand that being British is exclusionary and “he never secures a place among them. He has not realized how impervious to outsiders the entwined thistle, shamrock, and rose could be” (85), nor does he comprehend that “Britishness operates in this novel as a fortress, an impervious social echelon that keeps people considered enemy aliens, such as Sandor, in their inferior positions in the vertical mosaic” (215). Alex cannot be accepted in the South End.

While it seems impossible that Alex could achieve the nirvana of the South End, it is the intervention of fate, in the form of the Great Depression, that causes his failure even as North End businessman. It might be that, aided by his wife and son, soothed by his pleasant new neighbourhood, and mellowing over time, Alex would have learned to accommodate himself to this lesser goal, but he does not get the chance. We know from history that Alex is far from alone in misreading the signs and losing everything to the Depression; he cannot be blamed for this failure. Ironically, it is Lawson, the only representative of the English to accept Alex as a business colleague, and to suggest a different way of becoming Canadian, who introduces Alex into the farthest orbit of businessman Brown, allowing Alex to obtain a coveted contract that leads directly to his total financial downfall (175, 196). His adulation of the English is thereby the direct but impersonal cause of the magnitude of his failure. Nowhere does the text suggest that the Depression is the action of a Supreme Being punishing Alex for his moral lapses or his materialism.

Given the significance of the ethnically-based discrimination against the child Sandor and the adult Alex on his ambitions and behaviour, as well as the apparently impersonal intervention of the Depression, it is difficult to agree with Marlyn, as he has suggested to interviewer Rasporich, that *Under the Ribs* is primarily a moral tale, and only secondarily the story of an immigrant. But the question must be examined. Certainly, Sandor and his father Joseph respond differently to the challenges of “the immigrant dilemma.” While Joseph retains his philosophical humanism, Sandor adopts materialistic goals based on his understanding of what it means to be Canadian and his definition of success in Canada. The difference between their responses can be explained at least partially by the fact that although they are both immigrants, Joseph arrives in Canada as an adult and Sandor as an infant; while the former brings his philosophy with him from his native Hungary, the latter, who has no personal memory of or allegiance to Hungary or its culture, develops his in the North End of Winnipeg. Neither is able to adapt his views in concession to the other, and they remain diametrically opposed. Sandor’s humiliating experiences as a child and his naïve adoption of the promise of the book he is given form his world view. It is his understanding of the meaning of being Canadian and his desire to achieve that status that lead to his adoption of a materialistic success-driven philosophy that includes willingness to cut ethical corners, and it is this philosophy that conflicts with his father’s European philosophy, which is worlds apart from his son’s.

According to Joseph, “It is meaningless to call anyone a foreigner in this country. We are all foreigners here. ... Nationality is of no consequence. In the things of the spirit there is no such barrier” (24). He tells Sandor that the boy is “ashamed of the wrong things.... It is shameful to be a money-chaser, to be dishonest and to remain ignorant when the opportunity

for learning is so great here. But to be ashamed of your name because you are Hungarian and are poor!” (25). Joseph is ambitious for his son, telling him: “I am a working man. But you will go to University, Sandor, and do great things” (25). Years later, Joseph tells Alex that buying and selling is “an abomination,” turning man “into an animal with only a mouth to fill. ... This is spiritual death. Where is there room here for what is good and beautiful, for time to re-formulate the eternal questions, for study of man’s conduct? A savage who worships a tree lives a richer life” (216). Despite the difficulties and humiliations that he too has experienced, Joseph does not change the views he has brought from Europe and reveals himself to be an optimist when he says to Alex’s son, “Ach, what a wonderful world awaits you!” (218). As for Alex, he not only adopts materialism and rejects his father’s humanism, but also demonstrates his willingness to cut moral corners to achieve his success. As a child, Sandor vigorously waves a flag at the Victoria Day parade celebrating Canada’s British Queen, but acquires the flag by stealing it from a smaller English boy (the cheap flag Mr. Nagy gave him having already disintegrated) (34). As an adult, Alex persuades his wealthy aunt to acquire Mr. Nagy’s agency and install Alex as manager through two deliberate betrayals of her husband, Uncle Janos, at great cost to his uncle, who ultimately is disfigured when she throws a pot of boiling lye at him (151, 187). Alex regrets the result of his intervention but believes that he will make it up to his uncle once he becomes successful.

Whatever the reasons for the vast differences between the visions of Joseph and Alex, Marlyn, in opposing their views, seems to have been attempting to construct a moral tale with a clear differentiation of right vs. wrong. When interviewer Rasporich asked him, “Is the father’s final philosophic statement then to Sandor that peddling is spiritual death – that a savage who worships a tree lives a richer life, your own?” Marlyn answered simply “Yes”

(37). Nonetheless, Marlyn's juxtaposition of Joseph's viewpoint and Alex's viewpoint is not a clear-cut case of good vs. bad, right vs. wrong. In denying Sandor's concerns with being seen as a foreigner, his father proves himself to be unsympathetic to and dismissive of Sandor's very real struggles with the members of the English gang who taunt him and beat him up because he is a foreigner, and Joseph makes Sandor's situation worse by punishing him for fighting (18). Furthermore, Joseph's philosophy and kindness to others worse off than himself hinder his ability to support his family or assist Sandor to consider potentially better goals. A skilled watchmaker, he is forced to work as a janitor for a "landsman" (fellow Hungarian immigrant), who treats him disrespectfully and fires him unfairly (31, 93). He is able eventually to establish his own small storefront shop in shared accommodation with Mr. Schiller the barber, where Joseph, his younger son Rudolph and Mr. Schiller heatedly debate philosophy, but as Mrs. Schiller says, "And who pays the groceries and the milk bills while the father makes the world better for the neighbours?" (129). Joseph, for all his philosophy, is an unsympathetic father who cannot make a good living, and whose goal of education for his son is unrealistic and unattainable. As Benjamin Lefebvre notes, Sandor knows that because of the family's financial situation, there will be no possibility of university for him even if he wanted it (30). Unless he is willing to accept Joseph's limited prospects as his own future, Sandor/Alex is forced to make his own way. Alex is on the road to material success, but makes bad ethical choices; Joseph is a humanist and philosopher, attentive to the needs of fellow immigrants, but sacrifices his family's comfort and limits his sons' prospects.

Is there a middle way? Rudolph, Joseph's second son and Alex's younger brother, accepts his father's bent for philosophy and does not follow either his father's yearning for a university education, or his brother's drive for material success and acceptance. Rudolph,

however, in his early twenties, appears to have no personal ambition, and is content with the status quo.²⁰ This middle way also seems flawed. If this were primarily a moral tale, one would wonder whether Marlyn could offer a clearer resolution to the moral dilemmas of the father-son relationship, and what that resolution might be. Would he suggest that Alex should have been content to be a successful foreigner or that Alex could have been successful in the English world if he had behaved with more integrity? Would he suggest that Alex's ethical lapses would doom him to failure in both worlds, or that he would become successful but morally bankrupt like Nagy and Atkinson (who, unlike Joseph, believes that nationality is of the utmost consequence)? One can only conclude that Marlyn was unable to resolve this conflict himself and so left it unresolved, leaving the intervention of the Depression to provide the negative conclusion.

The depiction of the impact of the crash of 1929 on Alex two and a half years later brings together the threads of prejudice, ambition, morality, philosophy, and fate into an ambiguous conclusion. Alex has lost everything except his wife and infant son, apparently because of his desire to become English: he has tied his prosperity to the English Brown, and when Brown's business collapses, Alex also falls. Indeed, Alex has lost more than most. Joseph, who pays no attention to material success, and has been unable to improve the circumstances of his family's life, is able to continue to make a bare living (210). Alex's brother Rudolph (214) and Uncle Janos (211) are both working, and reasonably happy; Uncle Janos is actually better off, having left his vicious wife, got a job, and found another woman. Of the other foreigners, Kostanuik (210) and Nagy's lawyer (207) are also working: Kostanuik has kept his home, while Alex has lost his. Of the English, Lawson is still working

²⁰ It is unclear why Sandor reacts as he does to the stresses to which he is exposed and his younger brother does not. Having set up the opposition between father and elder son, Marlyn does not explore the question of "nature vs. nurture" in the differing personalities of the two brothers, and Rudolph remains an undeveloped character.

(210), but Eric Hamilton's home is empty and deserted, and the garden is nothing but weeds (212). In an ironic twist of fate, Alex has achieved one goal: he is more like Eric's English family, who have apparently lost everything, than he is like the foreigners, who are still eking out a spare living. Alex muses on fate and the existence of God: "Perhaps this being, if it did exist, acted upon motives as inexplicable and capricious as his own. Maybe that explained what had happened to him. Maybe it was only a bigger finger, raised not to help but to harm, flicked unwittingly or out of boredom or curiosity" (211). The question, alluding to the many possibilities of combining the notions of fate and a supreme being, is rhetorical only and unresolved.

Alex's goal, however, has not changed. At the very moment that his world crumbled, and his English mentor Lawson announced his ruin with "open malice," calling him a "smug bastard," Alex was briefly exulted that Lawson "was drunk and mad at me ... but he never called me a foreigner" (205). Two years later, in response to his father's remarks on the "spiritual death" that is Alex's goal, Alex muses to himself that

The way of life his father condemned had taken him to the very threshold of everything he had hoped to achieve. But how could he explain, how tell his father that without it there was nothing left to him? He had started with nothing at all but the belief that this could be accomplished, and if he had not succeeded the fault lay with him and not with what he believed in. (218)

Alex Hunter at the end of the novel has the same dream as Sandor Hunyadi at the beginning, even though he knows that it is no longer likely to be attainable, and still believes that his failure is not because the goal is flawed, but because he himself is flawed. He still believes the promise of the English book, that "one had only to work hard and devote oneself

wholeheartedly to the things [the great men] believed, to become one of them” (111). He has not apparently learned that that promise does not extend to foreign immigrants. Marlyn’s representation of Sandor/Alex’s quest seems very bleak at this point.

The conclusion of *Under the Ribs* has been described as “ambivalent” (Lefebvre 25) and “ambiguous” (Thacker 33). Thacker further suggests that “the ending Marlyn provides is not genuine. It represents a romantic hope rather than a technically-realized fiction” (33). Only John Roberts suggests optimism, concluding that Alex sees that “he has sacrificed an organic identity for an artificial one [and] has allowed himself to idealize an alien culture founded on false principles” (47) and “[realizes] his mistake in identifying [being Canadian] with being rich, English, and respectable. He learns that to be Canadian is to synthesize the Old World and the New” (47). It is difficult, however, to concur with Roberts. There is a reconciliation of a sort between father and son - they smile at each other as they part after Alex has refused to move back in with his family (219) - and Alex smiles and weeps as he looks into the eyes of his own son: “He was filled too with a gladness such as he had rarely known, because in those mild depths, it seemed to him, were all those things, miraculously alive, which he had supposed in himself; stifled for the sake of what he had almost felt within his grasp, out there, over his son’s head, out and beyond in the grey desolation” (219-220). Yet, given Alex’s increasing instability and mood swings from optimism to pessimism and from indulgence to violence, in the days leading up to the collapse and in the two long years after it (196 - 199, 209, 210), this glimpse of insight seems unlikely to last. Particularly telling is the similar internal drama Alex plays out before the collapse as he contemplates the future of his unborn son (Alex has no doubt that his firstborn will be a boy). Alex shifts swiftly from smiling at the thought of his son growing up in the South End with English

friends, working with his father in the office, to anger that his son might prefer playing piano with his mother and reading books with his grandfather (200); from tenderness and affection at the thought of the mother-son relationship to rage that his wife and father would inevitably try to set his son against Alex's wishes for him (201). *Under the Ribs* ends on an upward mood swing, but it is difficult to accept Roberts' contention that this is a permanent redemption, not to be followed by a downward plunge and renewed despair. There is no evidence that Alex has at last learned to "synthesize the Old World and the New" in order to become Canadian; the evidence is rather that the stresses that he has endured have led to emotional instability.

Somewhat more realistic are the conclusions of Marlyn, Lefebvre and Coleman that there is room for optimism, not for Alex, but for his son. Says Marlyn: "In Sandor Hunyadi you have a deformed father, but there is hope in the son, in the next generation" (Rasporich 40). Lefebvre contends that "The final image of the narrative opens up the potential for change and growth beyond the end of the novel, but one that might be possible for the third generation" (36). Coleman concludes: "So although Alex is never welcomed into the British Canadian family, he does feel the stirrings of a return to the Hungarian one" ("Immigration" n.p.). Alex, a foreigner, will remain isolated, denied his dream of "bein' Canadian," both by the refusal of the English to admit him to their ranks, and by the fateful intervention of the Depression. For the Canadian-born infant son and grandson of immigrants, there is possibility, but no certainty. Alex and Joseph may transfer their different ambitions to the boy, but there is no guarantee that he will not reject his father's and grandfather's dreams, just as Alex rejected his own father's. While Alex is not successful in his quest to become

Canadian, and by the end of the novel is even more isolated than when he began, it remains unclear what he will learn from this experience.

This novel, like the other texts in this project, is a product of its time. Both Moodie and Marlyn write of isolated immigrants focused on being English/British in a Canada dominated by a British model of governance and society. Moodie, the English emigrant, represents this focus as being of benefit both to the individual and to Canada. Marlyn, the Hungarian emigrant, depicts an individual who is ruined and rejected because of his belief, and does not venture beyond the specific story into a larger discussion of Canada. Instead, Marlyn has created a simplistic binary distinction in which the English dominate Canada and all others are isolated as foreigners and denied the opportunities the English have assumed for themselves. Furthermore, while both Moodie and Marlyn indicate room for optimism for the prospects of the next generation, the first generation to be born in Canada, Moodie concludes with great hope for the future in Canada of her children, but the proposition seems more dubious with Marlyn, who offers no firm grounds for optimism in the conclusion of *Under the Ribs*.

In the next two chapters, we will explore Michael Ondaatje and Rawi Hage, who continue the theme of the isolation of the immigrant as immigrants themselves in the mid-to-late-20th-century circumstance of the increasing multiculturalism of Canadian and Québécois society. We will see that they offer more complex depictions of the isolation of the immigrant and de-emphasise the role of the dominant English. The historical reality is that after the mid-1950s, it became increasingly difficult to create the simpler, British-focused view of Canada that was depicted by Moodie and Marlyn.

Chapter IV Michael Ondaatje

“We don’t belong anywhere, I guess.”

Introduction and Context

Michael Ondaatje (1943 -) was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in what was a well-to-do family. His childhood, however, contained a mix of both prosperity and near-poverty as the fortunes of his family shifted. After his parents’ divorce, his mother moved to England, and Ondaatje left Ceylon in 1954 at the age of 11 to join her and to attend Dulwich College. He was separated from his three older siblings until 1962 when, aged 19, he immigrated to Canada where his brother Christopher was living. He received his university education at Bishop’s University in Lennoxville, Quebec, the University of Toronto, and Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, and has taught at both the University of Western Ontario in London and York University in Toronto. He travelled to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, blending those experiences in his 1982 fictionalised memoir *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje currently resides in Toronto. In addition to the memoir, he is the author of 11 volumes of poetry and six novels: *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), *The English Patient* (1992), *Anil’s Ghost* (2000), *Divisadero* (2007) and *The Cat’s Table* (2011).



It was in 1962, the year of Ondaatje’s arrival in Canada, that Canadian immigration policy began to take a significant turn away from accepting almost exclusively British, US and European immigrants. Immigration of Europeans other than British or Scandinavians began in earnest in the post-war years when Canada began the practice of admitting refugees, nearly a quarter of a million between 1946 and 1962, largely European displaced persons and refugees resulting from the Second World War (Kelley and Trebilcock 313, 337), while

routine targeted immigration continued with an emphasis on persons of British or European origin. In 1956, Canada accepted both Palestinian and Hungarian refugees, marking the beginning of what became double-streamed immigration (Knowles 131), with both planned immigration targeting persons of any national origin who could contribute to Canada's wellbeing and prosperity, and ad hoc response to crisis situations requiring compassionate acceptance of refugees regardless of other considerations. Still, during the period 1946 - 1961, "with the exception of a small Chinese intake between 1952 and 1955, non-European immigrants were not represented at all in the top ten source nationalities" (Kelley and Trebilcock 314). Among Europeans, in 1956 and 1957, Italians ran a close second to British immigrants (Kelley and Trebilcock 314), surpassing them in 1958 (Knowles 140). Also during this time frame, large-scale illegal Chinese immigration continued to concern the government, which in June 1960 announced an amnesty for all Chinese who had entered the country illegally before 1 July 1960. While this measure served to regularise over 11,000 illegal Chinese immigrants by 1970, it did not stop illegal immigration rings (Knowles 142, Kelley and Trebilcock 331).²¹ In 1962, Canada eliminated racial discrimination as a major feature of its immigration policy, becoming the first of the three major receiving nations (US and Australia being the other two) to do so (Knowles 143). In 1962 and 1963, the number of immigrants from heretofore untargeted areas increased substantially, in order of magnitude: Middle East, West Indies, South America and, to a smaller extent, Africa (Knowles 145). The new policy did not affect the restrictive quotas limiting the number of South Asian immigrants because these were the result of international treaties with the governments of India, Pakistan and Ceylon (Kelley and Trebilcock 333). Ondaatje, coming to Canada from

²¹ A second significant factor in post-war immigration was the move to urbanisation. While in 1948, one in five immigrants was a farmer or agricultural worker, by 1961 the figure was closer to one in twenty (Kelley and Trebilcock 313).

Ceylon via England, can be seen as one of the first non-Europeans to immigrate into the modest beginning of a new cultural climate in Canada that has led to Canada's current multicultural identity.

Of the four writers included in this project, Ondaatje is unique in several respects. He is the most mainstream of the writers, having received widespread public acceptance and high sales, both in Canada and internationally. He has also won several prestigious literary awards, including the Man Booker Prize (for *The English Patient*, which was also the basis for the Academy Award-winning movie of the same name), the Governor-General's Literary Award for Fiction (for *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* and *Divisadero*), the Giller Prize (for *Anil's Ghost*) and the Prix Medicis (for *Anil's Ghost*); he has also received the Governor-General's Literary Award for Poetry (for *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do*).

Also uniquely among these four writers, Ondaatje has a readily apparent sense of humour, a feature of his writing not frequently remarked upon by critics. His books contain many unexplained and unattributed references to books, songs and other writers, of which I provide three examples. In *Anil's Ghost* we read, "She loved the way the lecturer had stated it, offhand, but with the air of a pompatus" (140). Pompatus, not a real word, previously appeared in the Steve Miller Band 1973 song "The Joker" ("I speak of the pompatus of love"), and has been a subject of speculation and dissection on the part of music writers and fans of Steve Miller ever since. Its appearance in *Anil's Ghost* is entirely playful, serving no purpose in the novel apart from fun. In *The Cat's Table*, an unknown friend of Cassius scrawls in the guest book at his art show, "A little old lady got mutilated late last night" (132), a line from the 1978 Warren Zevon song "Werewolves of London." Ondaatje

compounds the joke in his acknowledgements, by adding in apparent seriousness that the line is by “[Cassius’] friend, Warren Zevon, who was visiting from New Jersey” (268). Such deliberate mixing of known fact and plausible fiction is characteristic of Ondaatje and will be discussed in a more serious vein later in this chapter. More elaborately, in *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje both anonymously introduces a young Al Purdy (“- What’s your name? - Alfred.” [181]) and foreshadows Purdy’s appearance in the first chapter with the young Patrick’s recitation of exotic place names he finds in an atlas (“Caspian. Nepal. Durango” [9]). Patrick lives in Bellrock, a town in the same region as Purdy’s poem “The Country North of Belleville,” which opens with the recitation of unexotic local place names (“Cashel township and Wollaston / Elzevire McClure and Dungannon” [Purdy 79]). These references have the playful air of insider jokes, whose humour comes primarily from the reader’s ability to recognize and enjoy the allusions. In a remark that applies equally well to Ondaatje’s use of allusions, Canadian writer Thomas King has remarked of his *Green Grass, Running Water* that “there are a number of Canadian allusions, and there are a number of US allusions, and not everybody’s going to get all of them, but if you get ’em, the book’s a lot more fun, and if you don’t, I don’t think it hurts it at all” (Gzowski 68). This may be what Ondaatje is referring to when he tells Eleanor Wachtel that one of the lasting influences of Sri Lanka on him is that “there’s a kind of odd kind of sense of humour” (Wachtel, *Writers*²²). Readers are advised to remember that Ondaatje’s sense of humour is never far from the surface of his novels and is an important element in his writing.

Ondaatje cannot easily be classified as to genre or literary influence. He was a poet first and gradually turned to writing novels as well as poetry. His novels draw on poetic

²² All citations from this interview were transcribed by me from the audio broadcast. My transcription may therefore differ from the approved transcription once it is available.

traditions, and are frequently written as a series of vignettes, with lines of stunning beauty and power. Indeed, although *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) was awarded the Governor-General's Award for Poetry, and *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) is considered Ondaatje's first novel, it seems artificial to draw the poetry-prose line between *Billy* and *Slaughter*, which are similar in form and language. Ondaatje explained in 1992: "That need to move out of poetry into prose happened only with *Billy the Kid* Since then I know when I'm writing poetry and when I'm writing prose" (Wachtel, *Essays* 256).

Ondaatje muddies the distinction not only between novel and poetry forms, but also between the genres of fiction and memoir, and fiction and history, compounding the difficulty in mapping details of his life to his writing. He has been unrevealing about himself in many of the interviews that he has given, nor can one depend on the veracity of his two apparent memoirs: *Running in the Family* (labeled a memoir) and *The Cat's Table* (labeled a novel). Both take the form of recollection of events of his life and family, but as several critics and biographers have demonstrated with *Running in the Family* (*The Cat's Table* being too recent for considered commentary), the facts cannot be relied on. Ondaatje acknowledges that both *Running in the Family* and *The Cat's Table* are based on fact, and that both lay considerable fiction over the factual base. In 2011, he told Wachtel that "*Running in the Family* is the fake memoir," in which "I kind of built up a family mythology, so that became real, even though it was fiction, a lot of it," and that *The Cat's Table*, which takes place on a ship, "gives me a kind of past, a journey, which is a fiction, but at the same time it now begins a sort of example of something that happened," and "I invented the story as I went along ... I had to populate the ship" (Wachtel, *Writers*). Similarly, the historical contexts within which Ondaatje writes cannot easily be mapped to his experience. Unlike the

texts of Moodie, Marlyn and Hage, which have precise parallels with their personal experience, those of Ondaatje concern widely differing eras, places, settings, nationalities and events. The novels share only that they all take place in the 20th century, are all connected in some way to real events, and all pursue more than one storyline and more than one main character, with multiple points of view and narrative versions:

- *Coming Through Slaughter*: New Orleans, Louisiana, around 1900, telling the story of jazz trumpeter Billy Bolden.
- *In the Skin of a Lion*: Toronto in the 1920s and 1930s, telling the stories of the building of a bridge and water treatment plant and the search for missing entrepreneur Ambrose Small.
- *The English Patient*: Egypt, Libya and Italy in the 1930s and World War II, telling stories of desert exploration and four temporary inhabitants of a ruined Italian villa.
- *Anil's Ghost*: Sri Lanka and Arizona in the late-20th century, telling the story of human rights-related forensic analysis during the Sri Lankan civil war.
- *Divisadero*: California, Nevada and France from the 1970s to the present and France throughout the twentieth century, telling the stories of families, lovers, gamblers, and gypsies.
- *The Cat's Table*: a passenger ship sailing between Sri Lanka and England in 1954, telling the story of the voyage of an 11-year-old Ceylonese boy named Michael immigrating to England to join his mother.

It is evident, therefore, that in contrast to Moodie, Marlyn and Hage, who clearly foreground their immigrant status and experience, Ondaatje's identification as immigrant has no such clear or unambiguous relationship with his writing. It is not even certain that he

consciously or unconsciously writes from a minority or ethnic position, as one might expect from a native of Sri Lanka. Indeed, this circumstance has been the subject of complaint on the part of the minority writer and critic Arun Mukherjee, who has criticised Ondaatje by saying that “[his] success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada...” (qtd in Huggan 118), and also on the part of the politically engaged critic Frank Davey, who cavils that the text of *In the Skin of a Lion* shows “preference for art over history, economics, and cultural context” (Davey 156), implying that the latter three are the subjects about which Ondaatje should be writing. It is my contention, however, that there is a direct, although subtle, link between Ondaatje’s immigrant background and the common themes and preoccupations of his body of prose work. Rather than choosing to write from a specifically ethnic minority point of view about his homeland, his past, his experience of otherness, conventional history, politics or economics, Ondaatje consistently and consciously writes from different points of view about statelessness, lack of allegiance to homeland or nationality, the permeability and impermanence of human-imposed borders, and the isolation of human beings; additionally, he provides alternative versions of history, telling different stories about the same subject or event, with a blurring of fact and fiction. Further, Ondaatje’s immigrant experience has influenced his outlook on these themes, allowing him to take global and inclusive, rather than individual or regional, perspectives. Although these emphases differ in many respects from those of the other three writers under consideration, he, like them, consistently writes about outsiders from what he has termed the “double perspective of the immigrant” (Hutcheon, “Interview” 197). While these themes permeate all of his prose work, they are most readily

demonstrated in *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient*, *Anil's Ghost* and *The Cat's Table*, and it is on these works that I shall therefore focus.

Argument

A discussion of Michael Ondaatje as an immigrant to Canada must focus on the evidence of his published books, as he has generally spoken indirectly concerning his immigration. The following comments are presented in chronological order from interviews:

- 1990: “I *do* feel I have been allowed the migrant’s double perspective.... I came here at the age of 19 when everyone changes.... I was lucky to come then and go to university then. It is much more difficult to arrive at thirty or forty and begin again.” (Hutcheon, “Interview” 197)
- 1990: “As a writer I don’t think I’m concerned with art and aesthetic issues, any more than I would want to be just concerned with making the subject of being a Sri Lankan in Canada my one and only subject. I go to writing to discover as many aspects of myself and the world around me as I can.” (Hutcheon, “Interview” 198)
- 1990: “In the period of time [*In the Skin of a Lion*] covers, the main immigration influx was European, not Asian, as it is today. And at the same time, I didn’t want to write an Asian story for the very reason it would have been interpreted as a personal saga. I wanted to step away from a private story into a public one - although obviously much of the emotion that the migrants feel in the book has a personal source.” (Hutcheon, “Interview” 199)
- 1992: “I feel Canadian. As a writer I feel very Canadian. I became a writer here.” (Wachtel, *Essays* 260)

- 2000: “I’m a Canadian citizen. But I always want to feel at home in Sri Lanka. I’m a member of both countries.” (Kanner)
- 2011, responding to a question as to whether he has ever regretted having left Sri Lanka at a young age: “No, I don’t think so. I *know* so ... I’m very glad, you know, because I am where I am now. I don’t see the past as a kind of tragedy. ... I feel [Sri Lanka] is a part of my past, I don’t feel that I’m really Sri Lankan now. I’m more a Canadian than a Sri Lankan.” (Wachtel, *Writers*)
- 2011, responding to the question about *The Cat’s Table*, “You didn’t have any memory before the age of 11?”: “That’s true. That’s why I’m writing this book, so I can remember things...It does give me a kind of background.” (Wachtel, *Writers*)

Ondaatje does not focus in his novels on immigration and immigrants, and seldom refers to specific discrimination against immigrants, as Marlyn and Hage do; nor does he provide explicit commentary on the nature of immigration and the immigrant’s feelings of exile, as Moodie does.²³ Of his novels, only *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The Cat’s Table* directly concern immigrants to Canada and England and there are few overt references to active discrimination against them. Ondaatje notes in one line of *Skin of a Lion* that the Eastern European immigrants in Toronto speak their own languages in private because “...if they speak this way in public, in any language other than English, they will be jailed: A rule of the city” (133).²⁴ This is a far cry from the emphasis that John Marlyn places on discrimination

²³ *The Cat’s Table*, his most recent work, does provide brief commentary on immigration as exile, perhaps a reflection of a mature Ondaatje considering his life. I will discuss this later.

²⁴ In the 1930s, Chief Constable Dennis Draper ran the Toronto Red Squad, a branch of the municipal police force commonly known as “Draper’s Dragoons,” for the purpose of suppressing communists and left-wing groups; among other “heavy-handed” actions, Draper “prohibited meetings in ‘foreign languages’” (Maurutto 86, 87).

against Eastern European immigrants in Winnipeg in the similar timeframe of the early 1900s. In *The Cat's Table*, Ondaatje writes of the “slights and insults and embarrassments over the pronouncing of the letter v and our rushed manner of speaking” (59), the very subtle signs of “otherness” of a Ceylonese in England. But in general, Ondaatje cannot be considered as drawing heavily or directly on his immigrant background. Ondaatje does refer to the relations between dominant English and racial minorities, irrespective of the latter’s immigrant status, but these also are infrequent and low key in comparison to Moodie, Marlyn and Hage. Italian Caravaggio (who is probably an immigrant, as he describes himself as “born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere” [176]) is attacked and nearly killed in the Kingston Penitentiary for no other reason than that he is a “wop” (*Skin of a Lion* 185). In *The English Patient*, Sikh sapper Kirpal Singh is not an immigrant, but as a native Indian and minority anglophile in the British Army in World War II, he learns much about British culture and habits. His relations with the English are correct, but he recognises that they do not accept him (“The English! They expect you to fight for them but won’t talk to you” [188]), or even acknowledge him (“It was as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world” [196]). As Don Randall observes, “[Singh’s] discovery of minority status is evident in his recognition that his visible difference renders him culturally invisible in England” (133, 134). The book ends with Singh’s sudden and total rejection of the English and other Westerners as a result of the bombing of Hiroshima; he says, “And Indian soldiers wasted their lives as heroes, so they could be pukkah. You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this?” (283), and “My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. ... Never trust Europeans, he said” (284). His extreme turnabout is in response to what was arguably one of the most horrifying acts of war against civilians in

human history, and Singh's reaction of empathy with the victims and rejection of the perpetrators ("When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman" [286]) may seem uncharacteristically sudden, but given the clarity with which Singh has understood the attitude of most of the English towards him, is not surprising.

With Ondaatje's subtle representation of both immigrants and minorities, we must look elsewhere for a sense of how he fits into a discussion of immigrant writers in Canada. What Ondaatje does write about extensively is the condition of "international bastards" (*The English Patient* 176, 251), stateless, nationless persons of any race or colour (including white Canadians), who are "displaced outsiders who would normally remain unimportant or unrecorded in history" (Ty 103) and whose stories are unknown or distorted. This phrase provides a touchstone for a deeper discussion of Ondaatje's primary concerns.

First, I look at how Ondaatje uses recorded history as a thin base to supplement with his own created stories in order to present his point of view on these "international bastards." Critics have been variously puzzled, indignant, or accepting of this practice. On the side of puzzled critics, Dennis Lee writes of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*:

But while the dates and locations are accurate, and while Ondaatje doesn't entirely ignore the gunslinging that made Bonney famous, the book draws very little of its strength from the domain of historical fact. Ondaatje has completely invented many incidents (those with the Chisums, for instance), and he has assigned Billy meditations on nature and violence which are not even conjectural biography. (166)

Paulo Lemos Horta provides an example of what happens when one tries to verify Ondaatje's sources. Horta examines archival material of the Royal Geographical Society in London and discovers that in *The English Patient* Ondaatje has "borrowed selectively" (81) from a 1923

article on the journey of Hassanein Bey from Jaghbub through Kufra to Darfur, which appeared in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 64 No. 4 (October 1924), and which contains several inconsistencies with Ondaatje's depiction of desert travel in the 1920s and 1930s:

Ondaatje's selective use of the source material allows his "rivers of desert tribes" and Zerzera explorers to flow with ease across tribal, national and colonial boundaries even though Bey's account indicates they could not. In the universe of the novel it is this boundless mobility that allows the explorer to learn from the Bedouin how to forsake the pull of ethnic, linguistic and national belonging. ... And yet the easy camaraderie Ondaatje spies between Bedouin and explorer runs counter to Bey's account of the Bedouins' suspicion that the explorer's map-making could be a prelude to conquest. (73, 74)

and:

Ondaatje's sources make evident that the colonial scramble for South Libya between European powers was already underway in the twenties and early thirties and detail the difficulties of navigating the borders of modern nation states for both Bedouin and explorer. Hassanein Bey's account mentions the Italian occupation of Cyrenaica and Tripoli and describes the Bedouin suspicion of the activity of map-making in the context of the claims on Libya by Italy, France, Germany, Turkey and Britain. (77)

Among the indignant critics is Leslie Mundwiler, who writes of "the unreality of Ondaatje's one-dimensional treatment of [Buddy] Bolden" (112) in *Coming Through Slaughter*:

As in previous books, he has ostensibly written about a time, a place and a condition which he could not be expected to write about well without more painstaking research than is indicated in the credits. ... [Ondaatje] approaches Bolden not only on the basis

of meagre biographical information but decades after the principal events in what is known of Bolden's life. ... [He] chooses to follow the shape of certain historical clues without changing any major assumptions about his art and, most important, without apparently thinking through history itself. ... Disturbing as the realities of insanity, alcoholism, and prostitution are in the novel, more disturbing - and more fundamental - realities have been all but excluded: racism, poverty, work. (104)

Mundwiler's commentary is similar to Frank Davey's concerning Ondaatje's "preference for art over history, economics and cultural context" (see page 76).

On the side of more accepting critics are Douglas Barbour and Winfried Siemerling. Barbour comments on *In the Skin of a Lion* that "History, then, but the unacknowledged history left out of the official texts, is the matter of *In the Skin of a Lion*" (179); and on *The English Patient* that "Because history itself can be defined as a kind of invention, Ondaatje has taken great pleasure in reinventing various episodes that have caught his fancy. In his hands, even the documents of history slide away from factual representation toward a haunting apprehension of indeterminacy" (206). Winfried Siemerling says of *Skin of a Lion*:

the as-yet unnamed world of the immigrants that emerges in fragments of oral history, conversations, and passages closely related to dreams is associated throughout the novel with lights that are seen in the night. They are thus perceived against the negative of historical daylight and in the interstices of historically known (and constructed) perception of reality. (154)

Ondaatje cheerfully acknowledges that he has taken liberties with facts, dates, and events in his desire to tell a story the way (or ways) he feels it should be told, and he has been consistent in this regard in almost 30 years of interviews. As early as 1974, he said that he

was never “interested in the real Billy the Kid. In fact, I think he was probably a dull, boorish character” (Herbert Whittaker, qtd in Jewinski 65), and that “It’s not a case of being tactful or misrepresenting something but of making art; art is, to a certain extent, deceit. And what disturbs me in having my work interpreted as either physically or biographically right or wrong is that there’s an emotional or psychological rightness which, for me, is more important than the other two” (Solecki 23). In 1977, he reportedly told Mark Witten that *Coming Through Slaughter* should be “a statement about an artist, not a true history of a man,” so why should he “hold facts sacred when they can be more valuable as clues, beginnings to truth?” (qtd in Jewinski 98). Regarding *In the Skin of a Lion*, in 1990 he said “If you look at the archives of Toronto - it’s all so neutral, factual. So much sand was used, so much concrete, as if that was all. But none of the books mentions this guy [Harris] or talks about the waterworks or the bridges” (Fagan 118, 119). In 1992, concerning *The English Patient*, he said that “the research at the Geographical Society put me in touch with certain stories that were half fiction, half fact” (Wachtel, *Essays* 254), and “I don’t believe stories are told from A to Z anymore ... That sense of discovery, of memory, and how we reveal ourselves to each other - none of that is chronological” (258). Most recently, in 2011, upon being reminded of his statement in *Running in the Family* that “In Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (176), Ondaatje chuckled and said “completely false of course ... I made that up... I made *everything* up” (Wachtel, *Writers*).

What should we make of these varying viewpoints? Aside from the obvious conclusion that Ondaatje enjoys re-imagining the stories that history has given us, there is a seriousness to his comments, epitomised by the John Berger quotation which he included as the epigraph to *In the Skin of a Lion*: “Never again will a single story be told as though it

were the only one” (n.p.). Ondaatje has said of this quotation that “...the last thing I put into the book was the epigraph because it helped how you read the book. And justified its scattered approach” (Fagan 120). Recently, Ondaatje, speaking about *The Cat’s Table*, said “I like the element of many voices being there ... as opposed to just one voice” and quoted the Berger epigraph, saying, “I think in a way that’s the key line in this book as well. It’s the boy’s story but he’s learning from all these other voices. I think it’s an artistic statement but also a political statement. ... In fiction, you could open up other voices, other personas, that’s what art does for me” (Wachtel, *Writers*). The notion of many voices, sub-texts, degrees of truth beyond or under official recorded history, is common to Ondaatje’s novels, and one of the most significant elements of his point of view. Ondaatje consistently represents history as a form of sanctioned storytelling, a necessarily incomplete version of the past, no matter how thoroughly researched and documented; in his fiction, he both alters and supplements historical records to present other stories artistically appropriate to and representative of the voices of outsiders who do not figure in published history.²⁵

Ondaatje has said of *Skin of a Lion*, “If there was a kind of direction in this book, it was making sure that something got said, to write about that unofficial thing that was happening” (Fagan 121), and “this is Toronto history, but the people who actually built the goddamn bridge were unspoken of. They’re unhistorical!” (Barbara Turner qtd in Barbour, 21). In this book, Ondaatje represents the construction of two real Toronto landmarks, the Bloor Street Viaduct and water filtration plant, from the point of view of those who built

²⁵ The following are relevant extracts from *The Oxford English Dictionary* definition of history: I. Senses relating to the narration, representation, or study of events or phenomena. 1a. A written narrative constituting a continuous chronological record of important or public events ... or of a particular trend, institution, or person’s life. 2a. The branch of knowledge that deals with past events; the formal record or study of past events, esp. human affairs. II. Past events and related senses. 7a. The whole series of past events connected with a particular person, country, institution, or thing. b. the aggregate of past events; the course of human affairs.

them, largely European immigrants. Since history has not recorded their stories, and archives have not documented them, Ondaatje has constructed them himself, based on snippets of information (including on the real Nicholas Temelcoff)²⁶ and his own artistic sense. Although Frank Davey concludes that Ondaatje has chosen “art over history,” it is perhaps more accurate to say that Ondaatje is using his imaginative art to create alternative versions of history, some of which could have happened, and some of which are palpably fiction, but all of which, Ondaatje contends, are artistically valid.

Ondaatje contrasts the records of official history and the unrecorded “behind-the-scenes” stories in his description of the photographs of Arthur Goss.²⁷ While Goss takes his official photographs of the building of the water filtration plant, “for a moment, while the film receives the image, everything is still, the other tunnel workers silent” (105). After Goss has finished, packed up his equipment and gone up the ladder back into sunlight, “Work continues” (105). Goss captures a staged moment of two men shaking hands, and does not see the actual work of “the grunt into hard clay. The wet slap. Men burning rocks and shattering it wherever they come across it. Filling hundreds of barrels with liquid mud and hauling them out of the tunnel” (105). Says Ondaatje, “... even though it’s a straight photograph, you know it’s not a straight photograph. It’s a commission: this guy was sent to photograph a tunnel. You have to see what’s the social context behind that. ... That kind of context behind the photograph, or what happens after the photograph is finished” (Fagan 118). Later, researching in the Riverdale library, Patrick sees the results of decisions by

²⁶ Nicholas Temelcoff was a Macedonian immigrant, who died on 12 September 1988 in Toronto, and who was the subject of research and interviews by historian Lillian Petroff (Barbour 161, Siemerling 164).

²⁷ Arthur Goss was the City of Toronto photographer from 1903 - 1940. His documentary photos of Toronto are preserved in the City of Toronto Archives and Library and Archives Canada (LAC) as of historical value; one of his photos of the building of the filtration plant is on the front cover of the 1996 edition of *Skin of a Lion*. (See the web sites of the City of Toronto Archives and LAC.)

reporters, photographers, city officials, archivists, librarians and historians on what becomes the recorded, official history of the construction of Toronto's Bloor Street Viaduct: "The articles and illustrations he found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually built the bridge" (145). Those who built the bridge are the unidentified workers who have not been given a place in the history and are therefore outsiders to it ("They're unhistorical!" says Ondaatje [Barbara Turner qtd in Barbour, 21]). When Patrick finally comes face-to-face with Commissioner Harris, who has been given a place in history,²⁸ Patrick asks, "Do you know how many of us died in there [the water filtration plant's tunnel]?" and Harris replies, "there was no record kept" (236). Without records, the number of deaths is not part of the official history, but, says Ondaatje, deaths did happen and are important to the unidentified workers whose stories he is telling. Shortly after, Harris tells Patrick: "You reject power" (238), but Harris has already demonstrated that Patrick, being outside history, could not have any power to reject. As the facts pertaining to those without power, the workers and the immigrants, are sparsely recorded, if Ondaatje wants to fill in the historical gaps, he must create fiction. He is relying on the "emotional or psychological rightness" (Solecki 23) of his artistic creativity to help correct the balance.

Of *The English Patient*, Ondaatje says "I didn't want the reader to feel locked into one character. I love that sense of history is not just one opinion. I prefer a complicated history where an event is seen through many eyes or emotions, and the writer doesn't try to control the viewpoint" (Beverley Slopen qtd in Jewinski 133 - 134). It is in the stories of the exploration of the Libyan desert that Ondaatje's vision of history is most apparent. He begins

²⁸ Roland Caldwell Harris was the Commissioner of Public Works for Toronto from 1912 until his death in 1945.

his description of the desert with the history by Herodotus in 425 BC (132), followed immediately with that by the English Royal Geographical Society in the 1920s. He explains that “[the desert] was the world that had been civilised for centuries, had a thousand paths and roads” (140). While basing the bulk of his exploration stories on records held by the Royal Geographical Society (as thoroughly researched and documented by Paulo Lemos Horta), Ondaatje chose what parts he would use unaltered and what parts he would adapt, in order to convey his artist’s point of view:²⁹ “What I was tapping into was not my take on the desert, but the English take on the desert, the mental state of those Englishmen who were happier in the desert than they were in Putney” (Wachtel, *Essays* 255). Desert explorer Almasý’s reliance on the history of Herodotus and Ondaatje’s frequent use of images of water in the desert, “which had been an old sea” (22), underscore that the desert has a longer history than that recorded by the English, that “in the emptiness of deserts you are always surrounded by lost history” (135). Ondaatje makes explicit that the history recorded by the Royal Geographical Society is one fragment of the multi-faceted history of the ancient Libyan desert, that “the English take on the desert” need not be venerated as the whole truth; he makes no apology for choosing to present his own versions.

While Ondaatje stated early in his career that he was “not interested in politics on [a] public level” (Barbour 9), his treatment of history has become more political over time. From the brief discussion of the role of power in the recording of history in *In the Skin of a Lion*, we see a greater emphasis on this phenomenon in *Anil’s Ghost*. This novel is partially based on the Sri Lankan civil war, with which Ondaatje has no direct personal experience, having left Ceylon decades earlier. Ondaatje represents Anil, a Sri Lankan emigrant who has returned to conduct forensic studies for a human rights organisation, as an outsider to the

²⁹ Evidently, despite his remarks to Slopen, Ondaatje is not averse to trying to “control the viewpoint.”

country and to the war, while her Sri Lankan colleague Sarath, an archaeologist, and his brother Gamini, a doctor, are directly involved in and understand the reality of the war. Anil believes in the power of truth to reconstruct and correct history: she believes her work to identify a single victim of the civil war will make a difference, that his identification will be “representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest” (55). Sarath knows that Anil is wrong, and that both truth and history in Sri Lanka can be manipulated: he tries to explain the politics and reality of the war to Anil, saying “Sometimes law is on the side of power not truth” (44), and “Most of the time in our world, truth is just opinion” (102). In the end, Anil is shown to be naïve, and her naiveté and failure to understand that the “truth” of official history in wartime is the construct of those in power are partly responsible for Sarath’s torture and murder, while she, humiliated but untouched, is able to return unscathed to the US. Despite being a native of the country, Anil is an observer only, a non-participant in the stories of modern Sri Lanka, resembling, as Gamini recounts, the hero of Western movies: “the American or the Englishman gets on a plane and leaves ... The camera leaves with him. ... He’s going home. So the war is over” (285, 286). Yet after Anil leaves, the story continues without her, leaving Sarath dead, Gamini grieving, and the civil war far from over. Anil has had no effect on the history of Sri Lanka.

The parallel story of the aging archaeologist Palipana, Sarath’s old teacher, also demonstrates what happens when someone without power attempts to determine history. Palipana is so knowledgeable, so in tune with the past that he has painstakingly reconstructed, that he can “take one imagined step and be in an earlier century” (191), seeing the site as it was. He begins to skip academic protocol and recreates archaeological sites as he sees them. But Palipana is not in a position to dictate the truth, or to declare history, and

he is excoriated and ostracised, his career finished. It is irrelevant whether Palipana's reconstruction is accurate, for he, a person without power, is not granted the right to declare an accepted version of history. In this novel, outsiders are unable to participate in or influence the recording of official history.

Moving from history to storytelling, we see that Ondaatje represents the informal telling of stories as both a partial basis for creating history and a separate process. The more voices there are, the more stories there will be, and only some of these stories become part of the formal product that is history. Recalling the Berger epigraph, "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one," Ondaatje says, "I like the element of many voices being there ... as opposed to just one voice ... I think in a way that's the key line in [*The Cat's Table*] as well. ... I think it's an artistic statement but also a political statement. ... In fiction, you could open up other voices, other personas, that's what art does for me" (Wachtel, *Writers*).

In *Running in the Family* ("the fake memoir"), he writes of the process of developing family history from the stories families tell: "No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way history is organized" (19). In examining the relationship of narrative storytelling to the genres of history, biography, and memoir, Linda Hutcheon argues that Ondaatje goes "beyond the boundaries of what we conventionally accept as *literary* genres and into history and biography" (Hutcheon, "Running" 302). She proposes her own terminology for this approach, "when novelists choose to write of actual, real people" (302): it is "a new, curiously paradoxical form that we might call 'historiographic metafiction' rather than historical fiction" (302), because "the

fictionality of the referents is repeatedly stressed by the text's self-reflexivity, while their historical nature is also constantly being implied. ... Unlike the historical or real referent, this one is created in the text's writing (hence *historiographic*)" (305). Hutcheon concludes that "History, like narrative, becomes, therefore, a process, not a product" (306).

Ondaatje would likely endorse the notion of history's being not a product, but a process, not only in the fictionalised family history *Running in the Family*, but also in his later works of fiction and fictionalised memoir. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje demonstrates how storytelling is a part of the process of the creation of history, how unstable that process can be, and how only some stories can become history. He reports a conversation between Patrick and Clara twice, with subtle differences, such as "What did you think of her?" (78) and "What did you think of my friend?" (128). It is the beginning of a process of organising history, but we do not know which version, if either, is accurate; Ondaatje presents both as equally plausible. The title *In the Skin of a Lion* itself evokes the process of developing many stories: the actress and activist Alice Gull describes a play in which the power of language is handed on among several heroines:

Alice had once described a play to [Patrick] 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 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. (157)

The voice of Patrick, who can be seen as the protagonist, the one most frequently responsible for the story, is but one among many, and he recognises this fact after an afternoon

researching at the library: “He saw himself gazing at so many stories” (144). As Patrick, who has always been a solitary person, considers this insight, “He saw the interactions, saw how each one of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves” (144), and he realises that “His own story was no longer a single story but part of a mural” (144 - 145), built by many persons of many nationalities, including Canadian, Finn, Italian, Portuguese, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Turk, Serbian, Pole and Lithuanian. While sometimes the stories are recalled by others, such as Alice’s daughter Hana’s retelling of the story of “Cato and the socks” (142), at other times alternate, equally important storytellers, such as Caravaggio and Temelcoff, put on the skin coat and take over large portions of the narration of the novel, presenting their own point of view in stories where Patrick is only an onlooker or absent. No story is told just once or as though it were the only one.

In Ondaatje’s most recent novel, *The Cat’s Table*,³⁰ the boy Mynah has a moment of insight when he realises that, among the people on the ship that is taking him to England, those whose stories are of the greatest interest and importance to him are not the people of greatest importance to the world at large, whose stories will become part of history:

“Gradually it became clear to us that Mr. Mazappa and his musical legends and Mr Fonseca with his songs from the Azores and Mr. Daniels with his plants, who had been until then like gods to us, were only minor characters, there to watch how those with real power progressed or failed in the world” (69). Mynah understands that

... nearly all at our table, from the silent tailor, Mr. Gunsekara, who owned a shop in

Kandy, to the entertaining Mr. Mazappa, to Miss Lasqueti, might have an interesting

³⁰ The cat’s table is the table in the dining room of a passenger ship that is furthest from the captain’s table, where the least significant people on board are placed. It is Ondaatje’s metaphor for the places and people “where there is no power” (75).

reason for their journey, even if it was unspoken or, so far, undiscovered. In spite of this, our table's status on the *Oronsay* continued to be minimal, while those at the Captain's Table were constantly toasting one another's significance. That was a small lesson I learned on the journey. What is interesting and important happens mostly in secret, in places where there is no power. (75)

Ondaatje agreed with Wachtel's observation that in *The Cat's Table* he was more interested in those who do not have power than those who do: "Yeah ... much more interesting things going on in the shadows - away from the action" (Wachtel, *Writers*). His implication is that it is in the action, among those with power, that history is recorded, but that events of interest and importance can also take place elsewhere, among the minor characters.

In his novels, Ondaatje acknowledges the recorded history, where the "important" events take place, but is careful to ensure that the reader is also provided with the unrecorded, "unimportant" stories of the people that make up the sub-text of history. It is here that the outsiders live, and it is their stories that Ondaatje fictionally brings to life. While some might question whether Ondaatje is taking too much authority upon himself to present these stories even as fiction, he would likely be the first to say that this is where his art takes him, and that anyone can choose to assume this same role; he does not claim this space exclusively for himself. If "never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one," then it is also true that no single storyteller can claim that his or her story is the only true one, and no writer can claim that his or her point of view is the only valid one. This logic liberates Ondaatje in two ways: it frees him from the necessity of confining himself to his own background and experience, and from what Arun Mukherjee appears to claim is his proper place, an ethnic minority point of view of "regionality, his past, and his experience of

otherness” (see page 76); it also frees him to slip on the skins of many different storytellers, creating fiction to supplement the records of history. How his identity as an immigrant has influenced the stories that Ondaatje chooses to tell is an important question to answer, but first, we need to consider further the nature of the stories and the people who figure in them.

Ondaatje has consistently represented in many of his stories a condition of statelessness, of outsiders living as “international bastards” without strong national ties. Concomitant with this notion is that of the permeability or irrelevance of man-made borders. Statelessness is not exclusively the province of the immigrant, nor of any specific nationality, but belongs to what Eleanor Ty refers to as “cultural outsiders” (102). While all of his books feature individuals who are not at home within either the borders of their native country or a new country to which they have immigrated, the most immediately relevant discussion of physical borders and of nationality is in *The English Patient*, where the nationality and allegiances of the title character are a mystery whose solution is ultimately irrelevant. By the time that Caravaggio finally pieces together the clues and identifies the patient as not English, but a Hungarian named Almasi, the identification is of no importance: “It no longer matters which side he was on during the war” (251). Almasi himself has already learned the unimportance of nationality or borders from his experiences in the desert. The explorers ignore international borders, the desert itself changes form and shape, and navigation is by unrecorded maps, based on knowledge of the positions of stone markers, the sun and the stars (249). Almasi learns that “the desert could not be claimed or owned” (138), that although “We were German, English, Hungarians, Africans,” the explorers and their nationalities are insignificant to the desert tribes. “Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (138). “All of us,” says Almasi, “wished to remove the

clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. ... I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation” (139).

Almasy also says that to the English troops who arrest him in the war, he is “just another international bastard” (251). In this, he is unconsciously repeating the words of Italian-Canadian Caravaggio about Sikh Indian Kirpal Singh, known as Kip: “Kip and I are both international bastards - born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives” (176). International bastards, Ty’s “cultural outsiders,” populate Ondaatje’s novels. They are the ones who figure only in the margins and sub-texts of the events of recorded history, whose stories are generally not part of history; they are the ones who are stateless, nationless. They have uncertain identities, changing names or having names assigned to them. Alice Gull renames herself after a parrot, and Anil buys her name from her brother. Kirpal Singh, Gamini and Michael all have nicknames (Kip, Mouse and Mynah), assigned to them by others. Gamini refuses to name his lost love, saying “What would you do with a name? What would you do with her name?” (*Anil’s Ghost* 252, 253). Patrick and his fellow workers at the abattoir and tannery know each other by nationality, not name (“Hey Italy!” ... “Hey Canada!” [*Skin of a Lion* 135]), and for most of the book, Almasy has no name other than “the English patient.” Ondaatje’s characters frequently cannot be pinned down to a specific identity or taxonomy.

Although they share many attributes (nationless, even nameless, largely without power), Ondaatje’s “international bastards” are not necessarily immigrants. It is to this question of the nature, role and equivalencies of his “cultural outsiders” that I now turn, to

conclude the analysis of Ondaatje as a late-20th-century immigrant to Canada. All four of the novels of focus have something to reveal in this regard.

One of the main stories of *In the Skin of a Lion* concerns continental European immigrants living in Toronto. Another is that of Patrick Lewis, who, although born and raised in rural English-speaking Ontario, is portrayed as sharing many of the characteristics of the immigrants. As an adult, he recognises that the Finnish loggers of his childhood had a familiarity with his neighbourhood that he, the native, did not, that they “used the river, even knew it by night.... This he had never done” (157). When he moves to Toronto as a young adult, Patrick is no more at home there than any of the European immigrants in Toronto: “He was an immigrant to the city” (53). He “has always been alien, the third person in the picture. He is the one born in this country who knows nothing of the place” (156). It is his nature to be introverted, to be an observer. He lives and works beside immigrants (in Toronto, they are bakers, sausage makers, drillers, dyers, tanners, skilled and unskilled construction labourers) and shares a similar lifestyle, but in their neighbourhood, it is Canadian-born Patrick who cannot communicate because of his inability to speak the language. This circumstance is both liberating (“he walked everywhere not hearing any language he knew, deliciously anonymous” [112]) and isolating (“trying desperately to leap over the code of languages between them” [113]), until the discovery of the name of his pet iguana in Macedonian (“gooshter” [112]) opens the door. This simple act of communication allows Patrick to become a member of the immigrant community and leads him directly back to Alice Gull and the events of the rest of the novel. Patrick’s growing relationship with Alice and her daughter Hana, who is thoroughly at home in the immigrant neighborhood and interprets it for Patrick, coincides with his assuming the skin of a lion: learning to find a voice, to

communicate with his neighbours, to take responsibility for the story. His sharing of stories with Temelcoff illustrates clearly the value of language and storytelling, even for those who live below the horizon of history. Immigrant Temelcoff, who arrives “in Canada without a passport in 1914, a great journey made in silence” (43), recognises immediately that he must learn English, that “If he did not learn the language, he would be lost” (47). The desire to find a voice connects Patrick and Temelcoff, the native Canadian and the immigrant. In Toronto, they are both storytellers and outsiders.

Eleanor Ty writes that Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* has “rendered more complex the notion of ‘diasporic’ people and their relationship to homelands, real or imaginary” (98). Grouping Ondaatje, Camilla Gibb and Dionne Brand, Ty contends that these authors, “Instead of basing their novels on their own specific ‘cultural identity,’ ... have written about displacement of other diasporic peoples” (100). Ty records “the emergence of global Canadian novels, where dislocated and/or diasporic writers inscribe alternative worlds that create nostalgia or evoke memories of a homeland or past to which they do not belong” (100), and she identifies the primary characteristics of Ondaatje’s novels as “their international cast, their mobility, and their culture of globality” (102). The protagonists of *In the Skin of a Lion* in particular, says Ty, are “displaced outsiders who would normally remain unimportant or unrecorded in history” (103). Ty’s is an intelligent and apposite analysis, with one significant anomaly, as Patrick is both displaced and isolated but not diasporic; this point is more than a mere quibble, as it is central to my argument that Ondaatje’s cultural outsiders are not exclusively diasporic.³¹

³¹ Diaspora is defined in Dictionary.com as (relevant meanings only): “any group migration or flight from a country or region; any group that has been dispersed outside its traditional homeland, especially involuntarily, as Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade.”

For more on this definition of Ondaatje's isolated outsiders, we turn to *The English Patient*, where Ondaatje writes not of immigrants, but of "international bastards" who are losing their nationalities and who navigate without maps. In 1992, Ondaatje said, "The characters in *The English Patient*, especially the Patient and Kirpal Singh, are displaced, or, as one of them says, 'international bastards.' There are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today. That's one of the book's main stories" (Wachtel, *Essays* 260). Similarly, Annick Hillger writes: "While evoking the idea of homecoming, [*The English Patient*] questions the very notion of home as a fixed point of origin where the essence of self is firmly rooted" (144). Hillger's statement, like Ty's, is true to a degree. While all four of the main characters of *The English Patient* are "international bastards," only two do not identify with a home to which they belong. Almasi is born Hungarian, but assumed to be English: he has lost not only his sense of nationality in the desert, but also all physical clues to his identity in his disfigurement from the burns he has suffered. Caravaggio is Italian-Canadian, probably Italian born, and he self-identifies as one of the "international bastards" (176). The third, Kirpal Singh, is Indian, initially eager to leave his homeland and go to England, earning him Caravaggio's appellation as one of the "international bastards." When disillusioned with the English, mourning the dead of Hiroshima, he meditates: "His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here" (287). He returns to India and makes his permanent home there, and at the end of the book, is apparently content, no longer dislocated. And the fourth, Hana, identifies with a specific homeland, Canada, and genuinely misses her connection with the Canadian landscape and with her Canadian family. As she "sinks into cautious love" (130) with Kip, "most of all she wished for a river they could swim in" (129). Lost from "her own rivers" (130), she tells him: "I want to take you to the

Skootamatta River, Kip.... I want to show you Smoke Lake. The woman my father loved lives out on the lake, slips into canoes more easily than into a car. ... I want you to meet Clara of the canoes, the last one in my family” (130). In Italy in the war, Hana is shellshocked, traumatised, dislocated, and mourning her father’s death, but feels that she has a home and longs to go back to it.

In *Anil’s Ghost*, Anil is the emigrant from Sri Lanka and Gamini, the doctor, is the native who stays. Both the emigrant and the resident are stateless and outsiders in their native country. Anil thinks, “He’s the native and I’m the visitor” (141); she is the one who leaves again, who does not participate in the stories of Sri Lanka. But Gamini is as isolated as she is. Like Patrick in *In the Skin of a Lion*, Gamini can be seen as “an immigrant in his own country”: there were places in Sri Lanka he “had never heard of and couldn’t even locate on a map” (228). He has the experience of returning to his own house and finding it inhabited by strangers (209); “he was conscious that they were looking after the place much better than he had” (216).

It is in his most recent book, *The Cat’s Table*, that Ondaatje speaks most clearly about immigrants specifically: they have lost their attachment to a country or nationality, and do not belong in either the homeland or the new country. As an adult, Michael’s cousin Emily, who had travelled to England on the same ship, remarks of Sri Lanka, “But I don’t even belong there anymore. I’m like you,” and Michael replies, “We don’t belong anywhere, I guess” (250, 251). Michael muses: “Every immigrant family, it seems, has someone who does not belong in the new country they have come to. It feels like permanent exile to that one brother or wife who cannot stand a silent fate in Boston or London or Melbourne. I’ve met many who remain haunted by the persistent ghost of an earlier place” (139).

Although *The Cat's Table* talks of the statelessness of the immigrant specifically, the evidence of the other novels discussed makes it equally clear that the native in his homeland, such as Patrick or Gamini, can share the immigrant's feelings of non-belonging and isolation. This is the clue to Ondaatje's identification as immigrant writer, for Ondaatje too is an international bastard. Although only recently, he has described being a Sri Lankan emigrant in *The Cat's Table*, albeit mildly and in a cautiously fictional form, and has declared himself to be "more a Canadian than a Sri Lankan" (Wachtel, *Writers*), he described himself as early as 1990 as having the immigrant's "double perspective." When asked by Linda Hutcheon whether he felt like a "Sri Lankan Canadian" writer, he replied: "Sure, I guess I feel like *that* more than anything else.... But I don't feel much of 'England' in me. I *do* feel I have been allowed the migrant's double perspective" (Hutcheon, "Interview" 197). It is this immigrant's sensibility which has underpinned his awareness of and empathy with all cultural outsiders and international bastards, whether immigrants or natives. While Arun Mukherjee writes that Ondaatje has "[sacrificed] his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada..." (qtd in Huggan 118), the fact is that Ondaatje draws on his past to write with consistent sensitivity of the otherness of the cultural outsider. Similarly, while Eleanor Ty has astutely observed that Ondaatje's novels, with "their international cast, their mobility, and their culture of globality" (102), are representative of "the emergence of global Canadian novels" (100) featuring "displaced outsiders who would normally remain unimportant or unrecorded in history" (103), Ty too errs in confining Ondaatje to being one of the "dislocated and/or diasporic writers" (100), who "[i]nstead of basing their novels on their own specific 'cultural identity,' ... have written about displacement of other diasporic peoples" (100). For Ondaatje does not write

exclusively of diasporic people or immigrants, but does write from his immigrant's perspective of all cultural outsiders.

In summary, Ondaatje is a complex writer who writes about both immigrants and non-immigrants as sharing characteristics frequently identified with immigrants. His stories are linked by representations of international bastards and cultural outsiders of uncertain allegiances and many nationalities, sometimes undetermined, where immigrants and non-immigrants are distanced from the notion of homeland or belonging, where isolation is a common human experience, not directly linked to nationality or homeland, where ambiguities prevail. A common thread among these outsiders is Ondaatje's treatment of history and storytelling. Rather than choosing to write from a consciously ethnic minority point of view of regionality, his past, his experience of otherness, conventional history, politics or economics (to echo Mukherjee and Davey), Ondaatje deliberately adopts multiple points of view of statelessness, loss of homeland, the permeability and impermanence of human-imposed borders and the isolation of human beings, and consistently provides alternative versions of history, memory, and storytelling, different versions of truth and fiction. His interest is in those people who live outside recorded history, who do not have the power to incorporate their stories into history; Ondaatje tells these stories himself, creating fiction to bolster or supplement the records. "No story is ever told just once," he writes in *Running in the Family* (19), and "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one," he adopts from John Berger (*Skin of a Lion* n.p.), applying the statement directly to *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The Cat's Table*. It is in his interest in using his art to provide multiple points of view and alternative versions of history that Ondaatje excels. Those without the power to authorise versions of truth find a voice in Ondaatje, who writes fiction

in order to propose these other points of view. Ondaatje's immigrant's "double perspective" has enabled him to write with different, ultimately global and inclusive perspectives about isolation, non-belonging and the power of storytelling in the margins of history.

Chapter V Rawi Hage

“I guess this is my destiny to be an exile, always an exile.”

Introduction and Context

Rawi Hage (1964 -) was born in Lebanon, the son of a Maronite Christian father and Orthodox Christian mother. He emigrated from Lebanon to New York, US, in 1982 when he was 18, and then in 1992 to Montréal, Québec, where he continues to live. In North America, Hage has worked in a variety of trades, including photographer, taxi driver and writer. Hage has published three novels: *De Niro's Game*, 2006 (which won the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award), *Cockroach*, 2008, and *Carnival*, 2012 (*Carnival* was published on 29 September 2012, too late for inclusion in this thesis and will not be further discussed). The first is set in Beirut, Lebanon, and the second in Montréal. Like several of Ondaatje's texts, both concern the isolation and non-belonging of the immigrant both in his war-torn homeland and in his new country, and represent the duality of the immigrant who carries the double burden of exile from his homeland and non-integration into his adopted country.



Hage's two earlier novels must be placed within the contexts of the Lebanese civil war and the Lebanese diaspora. Civil war began in Lebanon in 1975, when Hage was 11, and did not end until 1991. The war's causes, factions and events are many and complex, centering on conflict between the majority Muslim and minority Christian populations, the presence of Palestinian refugees, and interventions by the US, Syria and Israel. Although estimates of the casualties of the civil war vary, historian Fawwaz Traboulsi records an estimated 71,000 killed and 97,000 injured (238). The period of the war that Hage writes about in *De Niro's Game* is 1982, the Siege of Beirut. The following events of 14 - 17

September 1982 are of particular importance in *De Niro's Game*:³² Bashir Jumayil, the commander of the Christian Lebanese Forces (LF), who had been elected President in August 1982, was killed in an explosion that destroyed the Christian Phalange Party Headquarters; Israeli troops, who had invaded Lebanon in June, entered Beirut; and the Lebanese Christian militia massacred an estimated thousand or more Palestinian civilians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps (Traboulsi 208 - 219). It is also 1982 when both the protagonist of *De Niro's Game*, Bassam Al-Abyad, and Hage himself leave Lebanon, although for different destinations. The unnamed protagonist of *Cockroach*, an immigrant to Montréal, is also apparently from Lebanon, and also apparently experiences firsthand the violence of its civil war.³³

The civil war caused a massive Lebanese diaspora, of which Hage was a part. Traboulsi estimates that nearly a third of Lebanon's population, almost 900,000 people, left the country as a direct result of the war (without specifying a timeframe) (238), while Syrine Hout records that "1.2 million Lebanese, i.e. over one-fourth of the population, left their country between 1975 and 2007 to settle abroad" (330). According to another source, of those who left, "perhaps a quarter of a million emigrated permanently" (Global Security). Whatever the final figures are, it is clear, as Hout states, that younger Lebanese authors, writing in English and French, are as a result in "Australia, UK, US, Canada and France," writing

a transnational body of diasporic literature, characterized by their affiliation with

Lebanon as a continuous source of artistic inspiration. ... These diasporic narratives

³² I provide only specific details without attempting to include explanations of motivations, causes or results: as indicated, the Lebanese civil war is too complex to explain in only a few sentences.

³³ Although Lebanon is not directly named in *Cockroach*, one can infer with some certainty from details within the text that the homeland is Lebanon, and I will refer to it as such.

share... a generation-specific awareness of a dichotomous existence, a life split and defined in terms of the here and now (the host country or second home) vs. the there and then (Lebanon). (332)

Najat Rahman adds that *De Niro's Game* in particular “joins a growing corpus of literature written by transnational Arab authors whose words can no longer be anchored simply in a specific language or place. Deterritorialized, ... their work speaks of the predicament of homelessness and is itself testimony to it” (807). Hage’s writing thus invites comparison with that of other former Lebanese nationals writing in Canada and other countries.

In two important respects, therefore, as part of a global diaspora and as a refugee from civil war, Hage’s background is unique among the four writers included in this project. Only Moodie can also be seen as part of a global dispersal of nationals of one homeland within a short period; although one could speak of a 19th-century British diaspora, however, it would be in the different context of colonisers with hopes for improvement of personal wellbeing, not of refugees fleeing hostile domestic circumstances. Also noteworthy is the fact that Hage is the only one of the four writers for whom English was neither a first nor second language, Arabic and French being his first two languages of childhood.

Hage is also in the unique position among these writers of living in a predominantly non-Anglophone culture and governing body within Canada. The context of Québec immigration in the 1980s and 1990s is especially significant to a reading of *Cockroach*. The modern history of immigration to Québec has diverged from that of the rest of Canada. Focusing on requirements for “controlling the selection of immigrants to recognize the specific economic and cultural needs of Québec society” and “the harmonious integration of newcomers of all origins with the French-speaking community” (Gouv. du Québec, *Let's*

Build 6), Québec created its own Ministry of Immigration in 1968, and in 1978 negotiated with the federal government the Couture-Cullen Agreement confirming Québec's control over the selection abroad of its immigrants (7). Between 1968 and 1989, Québec received 180,000 French-speaking immigrants, representing approximately 35% of the total immigrants to Québec (12). In 1990, the Government of Québec under Premier Robert Bourassa published an 88-page policy statement on immigration and integration, in which it declared a renewed interest in the importance of encouraging immigration to Québec. Linking immigration overtly to "the process of developing a distinct society" (9), the immigration portion of the policy was based on two major orientations:

1. An immigration selection process that contributes to development of a French-speaking society and a prosperous economy, yet respects Québec's values of family reunification and international solidarity.
2. A gradual increase in immigration levels based on Québec's needs and receptive capacity. (19)

In a 2006 analysis related to housing needs, Rose, Germaine and Ferreira trace the recent history of immigration to Montréal, where a large majority of immigrants to Québec, including Hage, has settled. They explain that beginning in the 1970s, of the top three destinations of Canadian immigrants, Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver, the profile of immigrants settling in Montréal has differed from those of the other two centres in three main respects, due largely to Québec's independent policy orientation and special efforts to recruit immigrants from "European French-speaking countries and former French colonies":

Firstly, fewer immigrants settled in Montréal, which resulted in a lower percentage of immigrants in the total Montréal population. Secondly, Europe retained greater

importance as a region of origin than in the other two metropolises, due largely to France's rank within the top ten countries of birth of recent immigrants. Thirdly, some countries and regions of birth scarcely represented among Toronto and Vancouver's immigrant population provided major contingents in Montréal, particularly Haiti and the Maghreb countries (in North Africa). Thus, Montréal's visible minority profile came to diverge considerably from that of Canada in general.

(5)

In 2001, the top six countries of birth for immigrants in Montréal who arrived in the 1990s were Haiti (6.6%), China (6.4%), Algeria (5.8%), France (5.8%), Lebanon (4.9%), and Morocco (4.1%) (8). Demonstrating the significant divergence of Québec from the rest of Canada, comparable data for Toronto are China, India, Philippines, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka and Pakistan; and for Vancouver are China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Philippines, and South Korea (8).³⁴ For novelist Rawi Hage, the setting of Montréal thus provides a different picture of the situation of the immigrant in Canada, with different social and cultural patterns, particularly including *la francophonie*.

Hage has commented in interviews and public appearances on the contexts of his homeland, his adopted country, and his novels, articulating a consciously global perspective. In his acceptance speech upon the receipt of the 2008 IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for *De Niro's Game*, Hage said in words reminiscent of those of Almasy in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, "Little did I know then that my departure [from Lebanon] would transform me into a creature who loathed borders and their violent winds that give importance to the flags of warriors marching to the battlefield," and "... as a traveler, a citizen, a worker, a reader, and

³⁴ Despite Québec's interest in encouraging immigration, its share of total Canadian immigration dropped in the 1990s to about 16% (Rose et al 6). Immigrants accounted for 17.8% of the Montréal population in 1996, compared to 41.9% for Toronto and 34.9% for Vancouver (8).

a writer, I was, fortunately, bound to become a global citizen I long for the day when we humans realize that we are all gatherers and wanderers, ever bound to cross each other's paths, and that these paths belong to us all" (IMPAC, n.p.). In an interview with Rita Sakr (conducted in Arabic and English, translated, and agreed by Hage with some editing [345]), Hage said:

As an individual born and raised in Lebanon, I was influenced by the crisis of identity and the conflictual nature of the question of belonging in that nation with its myriad denominations, historical layers, and geopolitical relations. As a result, my imaginative perspective transcends exclusionary regionalities, clear-cut historical frameworks, or unidimensional approaches. (346)

While interviews with members of the Canadian media have tended to focus on Hage's status as recent Canadian, immigrant and member of a racial minority, Hage has steadfastly resisted such labels, as well as discussion of his Canadianness or his ethnicity. Addressing these interviews, Hage wrote: "After publishing my second novel, *Cockroach*, the questions that I had to face most often and which I loathed the most were: Are you Canadian? Do you feel Canadian or Lebanese? In short, where do you belong, and who has a claim on you?" ("On the Weight" 233). A sampler of such interviews conducted between 2007 and 2009 includes the following statements by Hage:

- "One of the questions I often get is 'Are you a Canadian writer?' I consider myself a universal writer. Like someone said, 'What is a Canadian writer? Someone who is Canadian and a writer.' ... I think literature inherently is not about places....literature could be and should be about anything, and any place as long as it is substantial and it contributes" (Hammoudi).

- “[*Cockroach* is] a reflection of people like me. We are not quite immigrants. We are not quite rooted in this culture” (Donnelly).
- “[*Cockroach*] is a Canadian book” (Medley); “it’s set in Canada, but it’s very cosmopolitan. There’s a lot of cultural references to literature, to other places, religion, geography. It’s not a local, parochial book, at all. Geography is irrelevant” (Donnelly).
- Regarding his Lebanese and Canadian background, “I have no problem with multiple identities” (Donnelly).
- “Everyone here [Montréal] is a minority. ... Canada is host to many minorities who have somehow managed to co-exist without the kind of borders you find in other places in the world” (*Arts and Opinion*).
- “This [Montréal] is home. I have friends here. And at a certain age, you get tired of wandering. If I went back to Lebanon or moved to some other place, I’d have to go through another immigration” (Wagner).

To read Hage’s first two novels in a context of immigrant writers in Canada, therefore, one must be mindful of his own perception of the larger global context of his work.

While the immigrants in Hage’s novels represent the refugee stream, a new factor in this thesis and a phenomenon of the latter half of the 20th century for Canada as host country,³⁵ it would be irresponsible to try to read one writer as representing the category of refugee immigrants; nevertheless, it is within the scope of this thesis to draw some broad conclusions about Hage’s representation of the state of isolation and non-belonging of the refugee immigrants in his novels. Hage has indicated that regardless of the reason for leaving

³⁵ Although the United Empire Loyalists could be considered as refugees from the US, their refugee status is not a significant factor in Moodie’s writing about them, nor can their admission into British North America be seen as relevant to the development of a future Canadian immigration policy.

one's homeland, isolation and non-belonging are common to immigrants: being an immigrant is a form of exile, and immigration, even from a hostile environment, is not always necessarily an immediate change for the better. Contributing an article for a project for PEN Canada, "an organization dedicated to defending the freedom of expression in Canada and around the world" (Bland 4), Hage writes of the Lebanese civil war: "I found my early years of displacement [as an immigrant] more brutal and devastating than the war itself" ("On the Weight" 229). "Transformation," he says,

is bound to affect every immigrant and exile. The transformation can encompass a range of emotional states, from happiness and well-being to depression, culture shock, longing, anger, resistance, acceptance, and, in extreme cases, madness. The existence of an immigrant is volatile, and this volatility can lead to aimlessness and a perpetual sense of loss and non-belonging.... (229)

Immigration, says Hage, does not draw a permanent line between the person in his or her homeland and the immigrant in his or her new country, and has both positive and negative outcomes:

To be on the margin, to live outside the boundaries, is to be in a permanent state of duality, a condition that is harsh in its losses but rewarding in its gifts of freedom and openness. ... Those who left in tears, who carry a persistent longing for home, and who exist in a new place that will never fully be their own, are both the burdened and the blessed. (235)

In his novels, and particularly in *Cockroach*, Hage has represented this condition of non-belonging in both homeland and adopted country, emphasising the double burden of exile from the old and non-integration into the new, and the additional complexity that while

the refugee immigrant brings the violence, hatreds, prejudices and challenges of the homeland to the new country, the latter is not free of violence and prejudice, adding additional challenges to those that come with the immigrant. Unlike immigrants in the works of Moodie, Marlyn and Ondaatje, whose relocation forms a barrier between themselves and their homelands,³⁶ Hage's Middle Eastern immigrants do not sever themselves from their past: none of the immigrants in his novels is able to leave behind the violence and the factionalism that has led him or her to leave, nor can the unnamed protagonist of *Cockroach* leave behind the seeds of mental illness sown in his homeland. The fact of his mental illness is significant, and takes the form of a vicious spiral in which on the one hand, his rejection and isolation are exacerbated by his increasing instability and erratic behaviour, rather than solely by his identification as a minority immigrant, while on the other hand, his instability and erratic behaviour are exacerbated by his increasing rejection and isolation. One can ask whether *Cockroach* is a novel about an immigrant with mental illness or a mentally ill person who is an immigrant: Hage depicts both factors as equally important to the development and outcome of *Cockroach*. Such a stance is consistent with his representation of the reality of immigration, which is that the volatility of the life of an immigrant can lead to "a range of emotional states, from happiness and well-being to depression, culture shock, longing, anger, resistance, acceptance, and, in extreme cases, madness" ("On the Weight" 229).

In sum, Hage depicts immigration as a relocation of isolation and non-belonging, rooted in the political and social deterioration of the homeland, and reinforced by negative experiences within the new country. Based on his first two works of fiction, one can argue

³⁶ Moodie never sees England again and finds herself increasingly psychologically distanced both from her own family and her English readership; Marlyn's Hunyadi is embarrassed by Hungarian culture and traditions and consciously rejects them; many of Ondaatje's characters, both immigrant and native alike, are stateless "international bastards," while the Macedonian immigrants in *Skin of a Lion* make substantial efforts to learn English and to adapt.

that Hage's outlook on the state of the Lebanese refugee immigrant is more bleak than optimistic.

Argument

The roots of isolation and dislocation are in the pre-emigration homeland of the protagonists of both *De Niro's Game* and *Cockroach*. Their relationship to Lebanon is shaped by its state of civil war, which has existed throughout most of their youth. Bassam of *De Niro's Game* and the unnamed narrator of *Cockroach*³⁷ are isolated within their environments and sense that their destinies are to be exiles. The violence, randomness and arbitrariness of the war, depicted in both novels, are particularly drawn out in *De Niro's Game*. Although Bassam's home is Beirut, Beirut is not the home he knew as a child, and the prevailing culture is fractured, with reckless and pointless violence, random chaos, lawlessness and a breakdown of social norms. Bassam is caught up in a civil war where there is no clear ruling party, allegiances shift, and loyalty to faction or individual can be betrayed, where it is never possible to state who is on your side or will offer support. None of the factions appears to have a moral superiority, and heroism is suspect. One young man becomes a "martyr" because he was too incompetent to use a grenade properly: "everyone claims to be a hero in this war," says someone who knew him (131). Within the chaos that is Beirut, Bassam too adopts random, violent behaviour, openly carrying a gun, which, as he is leaving Beirut, he uses to hunt down and kill Rambo, the man who has brutally tortured him (171). Rambo is part of the Christian Lebanese Forces (LF), on the same side as Bassam and his friend George (nicknamed De Niro). George is drawn inexorably into the war, becoming a member of the Christian militia in time to participate in the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee

³⁷ For purposes of convenience, I will hereafter refer to the narrator of *Cockroach* as C (for Cockroach).

camps; he is later revealed as also an agent for the Israeli Mossad (265). George, traumatised by the massacre, and with orders to return Bassam to the LF for more torture (possibly having volunteered for this job [266]), dies a meaningless death playing Russian roulette (De Niro's game) (179). Although less directly involved in the civil war, C too experiences the chaos and danger of life in Beirut. Of particular importance to his young adulthood is the murder of his sister, which is at least partly his fault. She is killed by her husband because an elaborate scheme C has concocted with a thief friend backfires. The murder goes unpunished because law and order have broken down: "All Tony had to say was she had an affair. It was war and he knew the militiamen. He got away with it. Sometimes people don't pay the price of their crimes" (244).³⁸

Both Bassam and C leave Lebanon, looking for a better life, but neither is successful in that goal. To a large extent, their common goal is impossible because of the psychological damage done by conditions in the civil war, and the physical danger that follows them. Hage draws this connection deliberately. Commenting on *De Niro's Game*, for example, he equates the condition of Bassam's living in a civil war with the condition of immigration, saying that Bassam's "sense of non-belonging, of living an existential dilemma, of introversion ... is based on my early experience of immigration" ("On the Weight", 229 - 230); he describes that experience as one of uprootedness, physical separation, and sense of non-belonging (234). Both books follow the immigrant to a new country, and *Cockroach* especially pursues the post-emigration life of the refugee.

³⁸ In a similar experience in *De Niro's Game*, Bassam's mother is killed because of his refusal to go into the bomb shelter and her decision to stay above ground to try to persuade him (81). Although they share many similarities, the two protagonists do display one opposite tendency, with Bassam refusing to go underground into the shelters, preferring to face the bombs aboveground, and C preferring the underground both in Beirut and Montréal, claiming, as half cockroach, to fear the sun and the light. Oddly enough, once in Paris, Bassam does willingly go underground, into its sewers, in a form of fantasy Parisian tour (216).

When Bassam and C leave, as part of a general exodus, they depart alone, without parties or farewells. Bassam arranges an illegal passage to Marseilles and when he leaves, “I did not look around me. I did not greet anyone or cry. I was just leaving” (172). C “disappeared, took a plane, left and never came back” (248). In this Lebanese diaspora, where the emigrants go seems arbitrary. In *De Niro’s Game*, the wealthy go to France (31), Bassam’s friend Saad to Sweden (28), and M. Laurent, who leaves before the war, to Africa (140). Bassam goes to France, almost goes to Canada, and at the end of the book, sets out for Rome. In *Cockroach*, C goes to Canada. The departures are generally one way. Says Bassam of his friend Saad, “But those who leave never come back” (29), and he describes emigration as like waves under the boat that takes him to Marseilles: “for days the ship slid over the waves, and waves passed by and never came back” (189). Of the émigrés, only M. Laurent returns to Lebanon from Africa, because of his nostalgia for a pre-war Lebanon (122), and his return is a mistake. Recognising that Beirut has become “vraiment dangereux,” M. Laurent reconciles himself to the fact that it is time to leave again, and says, “I guess this is my destiny to be an exile, always an exile” (140). He is killed shortly after.

De Niro’s Game ends in ambiguity after the emigration of Bassam from Lebanon, with Bassam at the Paris train station: “The woman at the ticket office asked me, *Monsieur. où allez-vous aujourd’hui?* Roma, I said. Roma” (273). We do not know whether Bassam arrives in Rome; it is possible, even likely, that he is heading instead to his death, for the Israeli Mossad are on his trail, and Bassam has earlier used going to Roma as a metaphor for dying. In Beirut, when a young girl is dying after being hit by a bomb, Bassam reacts: “The little girl was leaving to go to Roma, I thought. She is going to Roma, lucky girl” (24). Najat Rahman concludes that, while the tone of *De Niro’s Game* is “unmistakably apocalyptic”

(807) and the end of the novel “remains indeterminate” (801), “it nonetheless implies a new beginning” (806). Both *De Niro’s Game* and *Cockroach*, however, describe the new beginning as significantly burdened with the past, and not a new beginning at all. Bassam may follow the young girl to the metaphorical Roma, death, and even if he does get to the real Roma, it is unlikely that he can escape cleanly. C’s new beginning too is clouded, especially as he clearly carries from Lebanon the psychological damage that cripples him in his new country. Further, he finds himself in a Montréal where Lebanese and Iranian émigrés live in poverty, leading desperate lives of crime, drugs and violence, haunted by connections from their past. At the time that the story takes place, the narrator has been living in Montréal on his own, with no family, for seven years, dislocated from and both wooed and feared by the majority Québécois, and interacting primarily with the small community of Iranian immigrants,³⁹ although he neither speaks nor reads Farsi. The Iranians too are refugees from violence, some of them having been tortured by “both the Shah and the mullahs” (146),⁴⁰ and they too have brought their past with them.

While *Cockroach* presents a negative view of the Middle Eastern refugee immigrant’s chances of acceptance and integration into Québécois society, it is too facile to say that the cause lies solely or even primarily with the host culture. C’s uprootedness, isolation and non-belonging are clearly related to his similar condition in Beirut, and his relationships with the émigrés underscores this situation. With the exception of his lover Shohreh and her friend Majeed, who was a poet in Iran and is a taxi driver in Montréal (191), the Iranians are

³⁹ Iranians formed a relatively small community in Montréal in the 1980s and 90s: Iran was 22nd on the list of countries of birth of immigrants in Montréal in 1996, with 5,340 persons, or 1.2% of the immigrant population (Gouv du Québec, *Population* 74).

⁴⁰ The Islamic Revolution in Iran took place in 1979, when fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah, declared an Islamic republic, and became supreme spiritual leader.

generally not his friends; he describes them as “Iranian exiles - runaway artists, displaced poets, leftist hash-rollers, and ex-revolutionaries turned taxi drivers” (13). He looks down upon successful immigrants (“they consider themselves royalty when all they are is the residue of colonial power. ... nothing but the descendants of porters, colonial servants, gardeners, and sell-out soldiers for invading empires” [159]) and also upon his *semblables*, “marginal impoverished welfare recipient[s] like me” (122). These include the Algerian Professor and his cronies at the Artista Café, whose “overt pride in spite of their destitution amuses me” (144): “All they can do is howl about the past, and their howls are lost between taxi fumes and their own shrinking cigarettes” (144). C queries Majeed as to who he means by “us” when the latter talks about “an acquaintance of ours,” and Majeed answers: “Us! Exiles!” (224). Like the Iranians, C too feels the loneliness of the exile, the non-belonger. After seven years, C is still dislocated. While he refers to his small, cheap, cockroach-infested apartment as “home,” he also refers to Lebanon as “my homeland.”

Nonetheless, it is also clear that C’s relationship with his new home and the host society is tentative. C is initially wooed by the Québécois and Québécoises: the women are drawn to “the fuckable, exotic, dangerous foreigner” (199), while “The preppie boyfriends felt that they were in the company of a noble savage, and they liked it” (183). They see him as exotic, but dangerous: “the exotic has to be modified here - not too authentic, not too spicy or too smelly, just enough of it to remind others of a fantasy elsewhere” (20). C is not alone in this relationship; after his affair with the piano teacher Sylvie ends, she is attracted to his Iranian musician acquaintance Reza (“I knew Sylvie wouldn’t be able to resist anything foreign,” says C [196]), and she is delighted to be invited to an Iranian party. Over the longer term, C is rejected as more dangerous than exotic: “they feared me still, but no longer

admired me. The phase of the foreign savage was gone. Now was the time of the monkey with the music box” (282). The Middle Eastern immigrant becomes a *survenant*, the uninvited guest who wears out his welcome. Not only the people, but also the landscape and climate of Canada itself appear to reject him. C describes his Québécoise therapist as nurtured by Canada: “Gentle, educated, but naïve, she is sheltered by glaciers and prairies, thick forests, oceans and dancing seals” (104). He, however, is not: “If you ask why the inhumane temperature, the universe will answer you with tight lips and a cold tone and tell you to go back where you came from if you do not like it here” (193).

C has little interaction with government or bureaucracy other than the local Welfare Office, and his Government-appointed therapist. Nor does he directly contact the industrialist class, other than through their spoiled children, Jean-Mathieu, “the son of some big-shot industrialist” (183), and his “gang”.⁴¹ But he comes to believe that the industrialists are acting to promote and protect their business interests to the detriment of the Middle Eastern immigrants. Majeed reveals to C that Shaheed, the Iranian enemy of Majeed and Shohreh, is working with and protected by Canadian interests selling weapons parts to Iran. “Do you think the West prospers in manufacturing cars, computers and Ski-Doos?” says Majeed (281), who explains that the West is not free from complicity in the plights of Lebanese and Iranians:

We came to these countries for refuge and to find better lives, but it is these countries that made us leave our homes in the first place. . . . You know these countries we live

⁴¹ Unlike the personae of Moodie, Marlyn, and Ondaatje, the government and society with which C deals are francophone; C has no direct connection to the British, and the only anglophones he encounters are McGill students and recent graduates, whom he neither understands nor trusts. They dress in camouflage, and “love to hide their degrees, their old money, their future corporate jobs” by dressing like “beggars, hoodlums, dangerous degenerate minorities”; they live in “fine old Québécois houses, complain about money, and work small jobs” (228).

in talk about democracy but they do not want democracy. They want only dictators. It is easier for them to deal with dictators than to have democracy in the countries we come from. (223, 224)

From the point of view of Majeed, and apparently C as well after this revelation, the cards are stacked against the *survenant* immigrants, the Middle Eastern “brownies and darkies.” Whether the Canadian industrialists are anglophone or francophone, or whether they are hostile or indifferent to the Lebanese and Iranian immigrants, they are depicted as complicitous in the tragic course of events in the immigrants’ homelands solely out of self-interest.

The way C sees it, Parisian-born French-speaking immigrants are better received by the Québécois than are the “brownies and darkies,” even those who speak French, such as the Lebanese. The Parisians are “highly sought after and desired by the Québec government” (27) because the Parisians can “increase their own breed... or at least for a while balance the number of their own kind against the herd of brownies and darkies coming from every old French colony” (28). The “brownies and darkies” are compared to cockroaches: “Doomed you will be, doomed as you are infested with newcomers!” (30). In this, Hage, through C, is providing a negative commentary on official Québec policy, as articulated in the Bourassa government’s 1990 Immigration and Integration Policy:

Québec is facing a crucial choice, with the anticipated demographic decline and its foreseeable political, economic and cultural consequences. ... [The Government] is committed to meeting the challenge of redressing the demographics and integrating immigrants today, to ensure the perennial reality of the French Fact in Québec tomorrow. In fact, it considers vital the contribution of French-speaking immigrants

in the short term. (Gouv du Québec, *Let's Build* 13)

Although the policy indicates that the likeliest sources of French-speaking immigrants are Western Europe, North Africa, and the Sub-Sahara (28), as well as Lebanon (29), and does not make distinctions as to their desirability, C is posing an alternative view, that the Québécois unofficially prefer white French nationals to the “brownies and darkies”.⁴²

C feels “the desperation of the displaced, the stateless, the miserable and stranded in corridors of bureaucracy and immigration” (13). He contemplates his botched suicide attempt, pictures himself “hanging by a thread, with only a thin link to existence,” and asks himself, “But how, how, to exist and not to belong?” (210). He finds himself walking in cold, snowing Montréal “and I asked myself Where am I? And what am I doing here?” (9). In this, Hage is replicating sentiments expressed by Susanna Moodie (“I gazed through tears upon the singularly savage scene around me, and secretly marvelled, ‘What brought me here?’” [286]), and Kirpal Singh in Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (“His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” [287]). This is neither deliberate nor unconscious intertextuality; rather, it is an expression of a common sentiment. Of Moodie, Singh and C, C’s point of view is most obviously based on both current and previous despair and pain, linking experiences in the homeland and in the new country.

Certainly, C’s isolation and non-belonging in Montréal have elements of past and present pain which finally come together in violence. Hage represents the violence resulting from the breakdown of the norms of society in war-torn Lebanon and revolutionary Iran as inevitably exported to the new country, and adds elements of inherent violence in Montréal society. Initially, Montréal is peaceful: “here in this northern land no one gives you an excuse

⁴² In 1996, the number of French and Lebanese immigrants in Montreal was nearly equal: Lebanese were the third largest group, with 20, 980 persons, and French were the fourth, with 20, 490 persons (Gouv du Québec, *Population*, 74).

to hit, rob, or shoot, or even to shout from across the balcony, to curse your neighbours' mothers and threaten their kids" (4), all activities that both Bassam and C had come to find normal in Beirut. But as *Cockroach* progresses, the situation changes. Violence is imported into the Iranian émigré community, as Shohreh accidentally encounters Shaheed, who was her brutal jailor and rapist in Iran, and feels the need to exact revenge upon him. Violence is also revealed to be a characteristic of at least part of the Québécois society. C, who had a gun in his homeland, but is unable to find a gun to kill himself with in Montréal ("I did not know where to get one in this land. And I did not have any money!" he tells his therapist [78]), is later able to steal a gun from the rich, violent and unstable Jean-Mathieu, who possesses a Magnum which he points at C "playfully" while high on cocaine: "c'est pour ceux qui want to mess with me," he says (183). It is with this gun that C eventually shoots Shaheed: the imported violence of the émigrés and the latent violence of Jean-Mathieu and his wealthy ruling-class friends intersect at this pivotal point. Eventually, even the wet snow flakes falling on the street take on a violent aspect: "Little creatures that seem insignificant and small are murderous in their sheer vast numbers, their conformity, their repetitiveness, their steady army-like movements, their soundless invasions" (209). The climate of "this northern land" that has already refused to nurture or welcome the immigrant now appears to C as actively hostile.

Cockroach, like *De Niro's Game*, ends ambiguously, as C takes over the job of shooting, presumably killing, Shaheed in a restaurant when Shohreh fails, after which he attempts to escape via the drain in the kitchen: "Then I crawled and swam above the water, and when I saw a leaf carried along by the stream of soap and water as if it were a gondola in Venice, I climbed onto it and shook like a dancing gypsy, and I steered it with my glittering

wings towards the underground” (305). The ambiguity stems from the important question of the nature of C’s mental illness. In his self-image as a cockroach, it is reasonable that he would escape through the drains, and indeed, throughout the book, C as thief has been able to slip in and out of locked houses easily, claiming to enter through the places where a cockroach would enter. The final question cannot be answered definitively in either *De Niro’s Game* (does Bassam go to the real Roma or is he killed, thereby going to the metaphorical Roma?) or *Cockroach* (does C escape to a real underground or has he succumbed to madness and a metaphorical underground?), but one suspects in both cases that neither truly escapes. The isolation, exile and non-belonging of both protagonists, the psychological damage that both have incurred, and the violence that both have witnessed and participated in, Bassam in Beirut and C in Beirut and Montréal, lead to a bleaker conclusion than that either can finally escape to a new beginning.

The ambiguity of the ending of *Cockroach* confirms that there is more to the novel than a representation of life in Montréal in the late-20th century for an impoverished Arab immigrant, as all of C’s relationships within the new homeland are coloured by his developing madness. Sylvie and her friends are right to be afraid of C and to reject him; the Algerian Professor is right to want to avoid him. He has already tried to commit suicide, he hallucinates a relationship with a large cockroach, especially when he uses cocaine (201), he thinks that he is actually becoming a cockroach, he is a thief, he has tendencies towards violence to women, including his lover Shohreh (74), he steals from Sylvie and her friends (183) and from his therapist Geneviève (80), and he acts violently to the Professor and his friends for no apparent reason (278). He is clearly on the verge of further deterioration, which the ending appears to represent. In this reading, Sylvie’s rejection of him as a savage is

more related to his behaviour than to his race or immigrant status.

The nature of his madness is related to his life in his homeland, to his responsibility for the death of his sister and to the fact that he is unable to avenge her death when the opportunity arises to shoot her killer. In leaving Lebanon, and coming to Canada, he is hoping to escape that guilt, to start again:

Suddenly I remembered how, after my sister's death, I had avoided windows. I remembered sitting in the dark for days, stretching and measuring the length of my beard, inviting fleas and other little creatures to invade my beard and feed on my dirty skin. I found darkness in my bathroom and a cradle in my bathtub. I wept until I heard echos in the drain, like the fluttering of sails, telling me to leave. I shaved and then I sailed away from that room, that house, that land, thinking that all was past, all was buried, all would come to an end. (299, 300).

In Montréal, in a moment of absolute lucidity, he admits to himself that he is afraid that if he were given another chance to kill his brother-in-law, history would repeat itself: "What if I could not pull the trigger again? What if I turned and left again? What if I walked away and grew a beard and stayed silent for years and disappeared and took a plane, left and never came back?" (247, 248). His killing of Shohreh's torturer and rapist is his attempt at self-redemption, but may also trigger his final descent into madness. Says Hage:

[*Cockroach*] was often perceived as an immigrant story, and furthermore an ungrateful immigrant story, but this reading disregards the multilayered and complex issues that the novel portrays, including questions of displacement, secularity, religion, class, and madness. I have presented a creature that cuts across geographical, cultural, fantastical, and stylistic boundaries. ("On the Weight" 233)

Both immigrant story and story of madness, the two are inextricably linked, as C's madness has been at least partially brought on and undoubtedly exacerbated both by trauma enabled by the collapse of law and order and societal norms in the civil war in his homeland, and by his experiences as an impoverished and isolated immigrant in Montréal.

In *De Niro's War* and *Cockroach*, Hage has chosen to portray immigration as a relocation of isolation and non-belonging, a form of exile laden with the baggage of an inimical homeland. Hage is the only one of the writers we have looked at who has represented the circumstances of immigrating as a result of war and revolution and he has clearly articulated the close relationship between the "here and there" and the "now and then" of immigrant/emigrant. In Hage's words, "immigrant stories emphasize the parallels and the distinctions between here and there" (Hage, "On the Weight" 233). In the words of the narrator of *Cockroach*, "I was split between two planes and aware of two existences, and they were both mine. I belong to two spaces ... and am wrapped in one sheet" (119). Framing these works in a historical context, with increasing immigration to Canada by multinational refugees escaping from civil war, famine, oppressive regimes and genocide, Hage represents the reality of the present-day outlook and challenges of many immigrants to Canada.

Within the imposed framework of this thesis, one can further say that Rawi Hage is not unlike Michael Ondaatje in providing insight into the global challenge of stateless persons both within their homeland and in their new countries, although Ondaatje does not write exclusively about immigrants, and to date Hage has confined himself to writing about Lebanese and Iranians fleeing the civil war and the revolution, subjects within his personal experience. It is, however, safe to conclude that Hage does not see *Cockroach* as solely

about Québec or Canada, but as an international novel “transcend[ing] exclusionary regionalities, clear-cut historical frameworks, or unidimensional approaches” (Hage, “On the Weight” 346). Two of his comments in particular apply: “I think literature inherently is not about places” (Hammoudi), and “[*Cockroach* is] set in Canada, but it’s very cosmopolitan. . . . It’s not a local, parochial book, at all. Geography is irrelevant” (Donnelly). Hage is inviting readers to consider both *De Niro’s Game* and *Cockroach* in the larger context of the Lebanese diaspora.

Notwithstanding Hage’s cosmopolitan intentions, it is also noteworthy that while he is very different from Moodie and Marlyn in his settings and subject matter, there are strong comparisons that can be drawn to these two earlier writers. Moodie too in some respects can be seen as an “ungrateful immigrant,” a self-described exile suffering from isolation and rejection albeit under the different context of her time and place, while Marlyn posits a bleakness of outlook as to the chances for success of a Hungarian immigrant in early-20th-century Winnipeg that resembles the bleakness of the outlook for a late-20th-century Middle Eastern immigrant in Montréal. The pain, isolation and non-belonging of the outsider immigrant are common factors to all three writers. I will pick up this theme and explore it further in the concluding chapter.

“I gazed through tears upon the singularly savage scene around me, and secretly marvelled,
 ‘What brought me here?’”
 - Susanna Moodie, *Roughing It in the Bush* (286)

“When was he going to get out of here?”
 - John Marlyn, *Under the Ribs of Death* (180)

“His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here”
 - Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*, (287)

“I asked myself Where am I? And what am I doing here?”
 - Rawi Hage, *Cockroach* (9)

Chapter VI Conclusion

In this thesis, we have seen that four Canadian immigrant writers of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries have written extensively about the experience of the immigrant in semi-autobiography and fiction. While each writer expresses a unique point of view and has a different background, environment and relationship to Canada, each also offers similar insights into the physical and psychological isolation of the immigrant, stressing the loneliness, dislocation, non-belonging, and sense of being a *survenant*, or uninvited outsider who does not leave. In an analysis of Canadian identity and literature, Northrop Frye famously asks “Where is here?”(220),⁴³ these writers ask “Why am I here?” or “What am I doing here?” Looking at the texts of Susanna Moodie and Rawi Hage, the two most widely-separated writers in this thesis, both in time (with books published in 1852 and 2012) and background (the wife of a British half-pay officer with a Canadian land grant and a refugee from the Lebanese civil war whose first languages are Arabic and French), we see images of exile, lack of acceptance by those already in Canada, and severe depression.

⁴³ Frye’s complete statement, written in 1965, is “It seems to me that Canadian sensibility has been profoundly disturbed, not so much by our famous problem of identity, important as that is, as by a series of paradoxes in what confronts that identity. It is less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (220).

We have also seen that over time, while the fact of isolation is common, the context of the isolation changes. The earlier immigrants are isolated in a defined area of Canada dominated by the British; the later immigrants are isolated within an increasingly globalised and multicultural society. Susanna Moodie portrays herself as physically and culturally isolated in Canada; even after leaving the bush for the town, she is keenly aware of her exile. John Marlyn's Sandor Hunyadi struggles in an immigrant neighbourhood in Winnipeg, whose residents come from different backgrounds, but share the isolating definition of "foreigners." Michael Ondaatje writes of psychologically isolated "international bastards" in the US, Italy, North Africa, Sri Lanka, France and the open ocean as well as Canada; his outsiders may or may not be immigrants but share separation from homeland. Rawi Hage describes the underground life of the dispossessed, who are exiles wherever they are, isolated from both homeland and country of residence. I have also identified the significant shift from representations of British dominance to representations of a multicultural society as occurring in the mid-1950s and have linked this shift to changes in Canada's immigration policies and practices. The personae of the two earlier writers agree that becoming Canadian involves becoming more English: according to Moodie, becoming Canadian will happen as Britain brings British order to Canada and re-creates "home," while Marlyn's Sandor Hunyadi/Alex Hunter believes that becoming Canadian will happen when he is accepted as English and not a foreigner. The personae of the two more recent writers are not overtly concerned with becoming Canadian or with British dominance of Canada, but do find themselves on the wrong side of a ruling class, both in Canada and elsewhere. While Ondaatje depicts British dominance in *Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, he does not indicate that becoming Canadian means emulating the British, and Sikh Kirpal Singh clearly

rejects them. Hage does not address the subject of British dominance in his two earlier books (nor in the third). In sum, in these four writers, we have seen a similarity in the personal challenges faced by immigrants, despite the diversity and complexity of these challenges, and an increased reflection of the developing multicultural and globalised nature of Canada.

What are we to make of the themes identified in the work of these writers and why are they important? It is undeniably true that a sample of four individuals, even though chosen to provide a significant range of historical and cultural background, is of no statistical significance, and cannot be used as the basis for firm conclusions about Canadian immigrant writers in general. Even so, I am sufficiently encouraged by the results of this study to suggest that further, follow-on work would be both warranted and worthwhile.

This work could take several directions. For example, this project has opened questions which were not within its scope and therefore could not be pursued, but which merit further investigation. I am intrigued by possible linkages among the development of Canadian immigration policies and practices, the increasing multiculturalisation of Canadian literature and the analysis of post-colonialism in Canadian writing. I propose that there could be value in further investigation of the mid-1950s turning point that I have identified as the divide between a British colonial focus and a non-British globalisation of Canadian literature. David Staines wrote in 1995: “the 1950s were the time when Canada’s colonial literary mentality gave way to a post-colonial mentality” (*Beyond the Provinces* 23). The striking difference between the attitudes towards the British of the earlier Moodie and Marlyn and the later Ondaatje and Hage could be explored and supplemented by a reading of other immigrant writers on both sides of the historical divide.

Indications of the connections between history and literature extend beyond post-

colonialism. Of the four writers, Michael Ondaatje has most concerned himself with the history-literature relationship, playing in several of his texts with the functions of history and fiction in telling the stories of events and their participants. In their texts, Moodie, Marlyn and Hage draw extensively on their own lives and their experiences of events that are also the subject of formal histories: the early settlement of Canada by British and American immigrants; the relocation of Eastern Europeans in Winnipeg in the early 1900s; and the diaspora that resulted from the most recent Lebanese civil war. Wm. Stewart Wallace's *A History of the Canadian People*, quoted in Chapters II and III, illustrates Ondaatje's points that stories of one event can be told from several points of view, and that history and fiction can be seen as different forms of storytelling. While the excerpts from Wallace's history likely seem biased to current readers, the book was accepted by the Ontario government as a history textbook for its students in 1930. One could ask whether a history such as Wallace's, with an apparent pro-British cultural bias, contributed to the isolation of the immigrant?

In a larger sense, I have cited several sources which could be termed history, in that they provide organised historical information, in some cases compiled, and in some cases also analysed and interpreted to varying degrees: Brown; City of Toronto Archives; Dreisziger et al; Global Security; Kelley and Trebilcock; Knowles; Korneski; Library and Archives Canada; Maurutto; Morris; Patrias; Petroff; Rose, Germain, and Ferreira; Statistics Canada; Traboulsi; and Wallace. I have also referred to works of literary criticism that have a clear relationship to history, most obviously by the following: Atwood; Ballstadt, Hopkins, and Peterman; Coleman; Davey; Horta; Hout; Hutcheon; Kamboureli; Lionnet and Shih; Miska; Peterman; Staines; Thurston; and Ty. Comparisons of historical and literary texts and the writings of Canadian immigrants could provide a useful analysis of the questions implied

in Ondaatje's fiction and underscored in Wallace's textbook. Such questions are, of course, not new. Among many relevant discussions, the remarks of Hayden White and Stuart Hall exemplify the issues. White writes in *Tropics of Discourse*: "What should interest us ... is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other. Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same" (121), in that "[b]oth wish to provide a verbal image of 'reality'" (122). Ultimately, says White, "Once it is admitted that all histories are in some sense interpretations, it becomes necessary to determine the extent to which historians' explanations of past events can qualify as objective, if not rigorously scientific, accounts of reality" (51). More specifically, Hall, writing about the relationship of globalisation and ethnicity, discusses "history as a minority event" (35), and "the hidden histories of the majority that never got told" (35): "the subjects of the local, of the margin, can only come into representation by ... recovering their own hidden histories" (34). Hall, of course, uses majority and minority to indicate that the rulers form a racial minority, while the native population is in the majority. Relating these and other commentaries to Canadian immigrant writing should contribute to discussions of important literature-history-culture relationships.

Most importantly, I propose a simple expansion of this project to examine Canadian immigrant writers across time. A short and far from complete list of some writers who could be considered for inclusion contains Anita Rau Badami, Neil Bissoondath, Dionne Brand, Austin Clarke, Frederick Philip Grove, Janette Turner Hospital, Thomas King, William Kirby, A.M. Klein, Henry Kreisel, Rabindranath Maharaj, Daphne Marlatt, Thomas McCulloch, Rohinton Mistry, Brian Moore, Bharati Mukherjee, M. NourbeSe Philip,

Thomas H. Raddall, Carol Shields, Audrey Thomas, Catharine Parr Traill, M.G. Vassanji, and Ethel Wilson. Such a study or series of studies would provide a larger base for analysis, enabling greater insight into such questions as whether my preliminary findings are a result of coincidence, whether there are discernable time-based patterns of isolation and globalisation in Canadian immigrant writers, whether other important patterns and finer distinctions emerge, and, ultimately, whether there are significant similarities and differences to be drawn among immigrant writers on the basis of time.

Why focus on the work of immigrant Canadian writers, when substantial effort has already been devoted to ethnicity and otherness in Canadian literature? It seems to me that, as alluded to in Chapter I, my project occupies a quite different area for analysis. While immigrants and ethnics or others are all outsiders, Dionne Brand makes the difference explicit when she says:

I knew that the problems that I would have would not stem from my being an immigrant, but would stem from my being black. If I had been white, within a generation my family would have been assimilated. I could escape being an immigrant, but along with the black people who have lived in this country for three centuries, I would not escape my race at any point. Racism was the focus of my encounter with Canada, not immigrancy. (Novak, 272)

In her work on diaspora, ethnicity and otherness, Lily Cho also clearly distinguishes immigrants from “ethnics” or “others,” differentiating “diasporic communities from those that are defined as immigrant or transnational” and stating that her interest is in “minority literatures in Canada” and their “histories of dislocation and racialization” (“Diasporic” 98). When Smaro Kamboureli rejects an approach of looking for similarities among minority

groups, writing that “ethnicity designates difference” (*Scandalous* 37) and “differences among [minority subjects] cannot be neutralized by considering them all under the same rubric” (120), she is writing about multi-generational communities defined by ethnicity and culture, not about immigrants. Immigrants exist throughout Canadian history; they are a single generation within their family, the first to arrive, and are not defined by ethnicity, race, diaspora, or culture. In their focus on ethnic minorities, critics such as Cho and Kamboureli are concentrating on important elements in Canadian literature that are, however, quite different from my look at immigrants as a coherent category of Canadian writers that is worth its own study.

The question remains, however: is a focus specifically on the work of immigrant Canadian writers over time and across diversity of current value? I suggest that immigration has always been a fundamental element of Canada’s society, culture, governance, and literature, and continues to be so. Canada continues to be a country of immigrants and its immigration patterns continue to change. According to the most recent Statistics Canada Census data, in the decade between 2001 and 2011 net international migration accounted for two-thirds of Canada's population growth and natural increase for about one-third (“2011 Census: Population and dwelling counts” n.p.). Three time-based snapshots clearly illustrate the changing patterns and diversification of immigration. First, more than 80% of the total immigrant population before 1967 was from Europe, and almost half of the remainder from the United States (Knowles 191). By 2006, the top ten countries of origin overall (based on landed immigrants who landed in Canada prior to May 16, 2006) were United Kingdom, People's Republic of China, India, Philippines, Italy, United States of America, Hong Kong, Germany, Poland, and Viet Nam (Statistics Canada, “Immigrant population by place of birth

and period of immigration [2006 Census]” n.p.). Finally, in the period 2001 - 2006, the top ten countries of birth of immigrants were People's Republic of China, India, Philippines, Pakistan, United States of America, South Korea, Romania, Iran, United Kingdom, and Colombia (ibid). When detailed immigration data breakdown for the 2011 Census is released in late 2012, no doubt the immigration picture will have continued to evolve. If further analysis demonstrates that isolation and non-belonging remain significant factors in the literary representations of their situations by immigrants over time and across cultural groupings, then these findings should be applicable to current and future immigrants, whatever their origins.

This look at Canadian immigrant writers indicates a hypothesis that the experience of immigration to Canada can be seen as both cross-cultural and transhistorical. My findings point to some important literary themes and provide an entrée into future work on the issues and themes engaged. The large questions that sparked this project remain valid: how has the representation of the immigrant experience changed over the course of Canadian literary history; and what is the significance to Canadian literature of this change over time? An initial approach such as that undertaken here will not provide definitive answers, but indicates that the methodology of looking at immigrant writing over time is sound and can yield valuable results. An expansion of the project to add additional writers and possibly second-generation writers (children of immigrants) could also add value to our understanding of the nature of Canadian literature and the existence of a unique Canadian canon.

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