

The Nation as “International Bastard”: Ethnicity and Language in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

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Perhaps what all of us have to look at more closely is the perspective, the positioning implied by the concept of ethnicity as it is used and how it has been translated and responded to by the institutions and realities of our society.

— Enoch Padolsky (“Establishing” 27)

MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S *The English Patient* explores the problem of cultural identity as the characters negotiate the end of an era of political and cultural organization. As Lorna Irvine notes, the novel, set at the end of the Second World War, “illustrates, by its very imagery and content, the breakdown of Empires” (144), demonstrating “crises of legitimation, not only for the dispossessed characters whose fiction this is, but also in terms of the institutions of western culture” (140). Kip’s thoughts about Hana in the English patient’s bedroom emphasize the urgency of interpreting such crises, as they produce the potential for new forms of cultural interaction: “If he could walk across the room and touch her he would be sane. But between them lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world. And the Englishman woke at any sound, the hearing aid turned to full level when he slept, so he could be secure in his own awareness” (113). Kip presages a new form of self-knowledge that will emerge from the decentralization of cultural and political influence, suggested by the sleeping English patient. He struggles through the narrative to control the interpretation of his own experiences and actions but too often feels, as he does while Hana sleeps in the field, “as if in someone’s rifle sights, awkward with her. Within the imaginary painter’s landscape” (114). The scene in the bedroom dramatizes an optimistic response to the decline of a homogenizing Western influence, suggesting the possibility of self-invention:

But what he does is this. He is halfway across the room, his hand sunk to the wrist in his open satchel which still hangs off his shoulder. His walk silent. He turns and pauses beside the bed. As the English patient completes one of his long exhalations he snips the wire of his hearing aid. ... He turns and grins towards her. (115)

With the snip of the wire, Kip challenges the authority of the West to legitimate his actions and define his identity. The decentralization of political and cultural power means for Kip the opportunity for a new understanding of identity, organized around difference and disunity, responsive to his own particular experiences of cultural diversity. Ondaatje thus returns to World War II to introduce contemporary questions about cultural identity, privileging the context of this resulting decentralization and the concomitant imperatives to rethink identity.

The English patient's own attempt to interpret this decentralization impedes the narrative realization of Kip's optimistic response. The relationship between Kip and the English patient figures the struggle Stuart Hall identifies between the "new identities" ("Old" 41) of the local, organized around difference, and the centred identities of the declining national era. Kip's opportunity to explore new understandings of identity occurs concomitant with the English patient's growing sense of insecurity: "Sometimes at night the burned man hears a faint shudder in the building. He turns up his hearing aid to draw in a banging noise he still cannot interpret or place" (15). In response to this insecurity, the English patient conflates his experiences with Kip's. He tells Hana, "Kip and I are both international bastards — born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere" (176). The English patient's response is to try to produce a singular identity definitive of the new decentralizing global culture. He posits a unified identity characterized by difference and rootlessness. The differences between his and Kip's experiences become insignificant in this assertion of a shared identity characterized by difference. In this conflation of their experiences, the English patient paradoxically perpetuates an understanding of identity as unified and coherent, consistent with an older era of cultural organization. This conflation, while privileging multiplicity and difference, erases their particular relationships to the process of cultural decentralization — Kip's emerging opportunity for self-invention is a crisis of legitimacy for the English patient — and thus neutralizes the nascent opportunity, represented in Kip, for a new understanding of identity organized around difference and disunity.

This erasure is exposed in the characters' different access to the iden-

tity of “international bastard,” specifically their different means of signifying the qualities of rootlessness and difference. The English patient’s self-construction as “international bastard” is produced in terms of the indeterminacy of language, and thus suggests an unlimited possibility of identification. Kip, in contrast, signifies as “international bastard” through the naturalization of his experiences of exclusion within Western culture. His experiences, thus, suggest an impossibility of identification. The English patient’s linking of the two men in a single identity conflates the unlimited possibility for identification in language with the impossibility of identification based in experiences of cultural multiplicity.

Describing his experience of the desert, the English patient invents himself within the indeterminacy of language and representation:

It was as if he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller. . . . The place they had chosen to come to, to be their best selves to be unconscious of ancestry. Here, . . . he was alone, his own invention. He knew during these times how the mirage worked, the *fata morgana*, for he was within it. (246)

He locates the possibility of self-determination outside the realm of determinate meaning. The English patient identifies himself as the failure of representation. Within the mirage of language itself, the only invention — the only identity — is that of pure difference. Going into the desert, he says of himself and the other explorers: “We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand. . . . I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from” (139). The desert into which they disappeared figures the difference of language. It “could not be claimed or owned — it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names long before *Canterbury* existed” (138-39). The English patient renegotiates identity as difference itself produced in the endless possibility of signification. Identity emerges paradoxically as the very insignificance of identity: “There were rivers of desert tribes, the most beautiful humans I’ve met in my life. We were German, English, Hungarian, African — all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless” (138). The explorers, in all their diversity, are unified in the shared quality of insignificance, but only through the removal of the desert tribes from the spaces of political and cultural power. Blurring the “rivers of desert tribes” with the landscape itself, the English patient constructs a rhetorical experience of difference and erasure that forms the basis of his self-construction.

In contrast, Kip generates the qualities of rootlessness and difference very much within the spaces of political and cultural power. Kip says to the English patient: “I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from *your* country” (283). His experiences of cultural mobility and diversity result in his self-identification as the foreign other, silenced and invisible. In this context, he signifies the privileged quality of insignificance as a function of racial exclusion. Reflecting on his sudden key role in the British military unit after the death of Lord Suffolk, Kip considers this familiar position: “He was accustomed to his invisibility. . . . His self-sufficiency . . . was . . . a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world” (196). The English patient’s positioning of Kip as “international bastard” exploits this experience of exclusion from British identity, naturalizing it as the basis of a newly renegotiated identity for the decentred global context. As he envisions for himself an escape from determinate identity, the English patient secures Kip within the context of fixed cultural identities, or, in fact, within his exclusion from the fixed categories of identity. Kip explains to Hana his attempt to occupy this position of exclusion and invisibility: “I had discovered the overlooked space open to those of us with a silent life” (200). However, as I discuss at the end, Kip’s narrative is ultimately a rejection of this position of difference and invisibility as a productive basis of cultural identification.

The English patient’s identification as “international bastard” is based on a faith in the unmediated circulation and consumption of knowledge. His comments on Herodotus reveal the assumption of coherence that guarantees his understanding of identity:

I see him [Herodotus] more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. ‘This history of mine,’ Herodotus says, ‘has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.’ (118-19)

In his construction of the desert, the English patient envisions a coherent space of signification characterized by the potential for the simultaneous circulation and consumption of all knowledge. His vision privileges the supplementary, suggesting, in opposition to a singular story, an unlimited multiplicity and diversity of experiences available for consumption. All knowledge is available to be consumed without suspicion. Yet, particular experiences within this space of diversity are united, finally, in a shared condition of indeterminacy and inconsequence suggestive of a mirage. This condition of shared inconsequence is the basis of his understanding of iden-

tity. The English patient legitimates his vision as a central image in his narrative of Katharine and Almásy: "All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. I carried Katharine Clifton into the desert, where there is the communal book of moonlight. We were among the rumour of wells. In the palace of the winds" (261). Kip's experience of the "palace of the winds" is much less romantic. While the English patient floats in the endless possibility of signification, Kip generates the qualities of difference and insignificance as a function of his exclusion from the process of identification. He is an "international bastard" because of his restricted ability to participate in the consumption and circulation of knowledge. In the end, Kip's experiences expose the illusion of unsuspecting consumption, highlighting the mechanisms of power and privilege that inevitably position him within the "communal book of moonlight." His response to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki emphasizes the struggles for power that are obscured in the English patient's romantic communal vision: "He feels all the winds of the world have been sucked into Asia" (287). Kip closes his eyes and "sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, ... [a] tremor of Western wisdom" (284), indicting the English patient's complacency towards the notion of identity as indeterminate: "We disappeared into landscape, Fire and sand" (139). Finally, Kip gives the English patient his own earphones and forces him to listen to "this tremor of Western wisdom."

I

In his construction of himself and Kip as "international bastards," the English patient conflates Kip's experiences with his own self-construction in the indeterminacy of language. His vision fixes Kip within the terms of colonial exclusion and, so, neutralizes the hope implied in the latter's smile as he snips the wires of the hearing aid. The same conflation occurs within Canadian criticism as a means of securing the legitimacy of literary nation-building as a basis of literary consecration. Agents exploit recent cosmopolitan theoretical approaches to draw on the cultural capital of difference and heterogeneity in the interests of literary nation-building. This criticism shares a privileging of disunity over unity, fragmentation over coherence, a questioning of the nature of representation and an understanding of language and identity as constituted by difference. As a product of such interpretive approaches to literary activity, the national identity emerges very much in the form of the "international bastard" envisioned

by the English patient. Ethnic writing is central in this criticism to legitimating the application of such theoretical concerns to the national literature, but it takes on this role solely through the normalizing of its traditional social exclusion within Canadian society, and it signifies, in the end, only as the objective qualities of exclusion and difference. The interpretation of ethnic writing in this context thus positions the ethnic writer much as the English patient positions Kip: as the natural signification of difference.

The criticism thus reinforces the same conflation made by the English patient of the “trendy nomadic voyaging” of Hall’s global post-modern (“Culture” 362) and the experiences of cultural and racial exclusion. The difference of the global postmodern, as Hall argues, is significant only in its insignificance. Particular experiences signify as difference, “but it doesn’t make any difference that they’re different, they’re just different” (“Old” 52). The conflation of these sources of difference produces the literary nation in the qualities of difference and heterogeneity, aligning the project of literary nation-building with the new cultural capital of globalization.¹

In the following, I examine, as it is illustrated in essays by Alison Conway, Robert Kroetsch, Linda Hutcheon, and Smaro Kamboureli, how a new manifestation of literary nation-building deploys contemporary theory in the negotiation of the relationship between the imperative to address cultural diversity and the production of an homogeneous national identity. My aim is to highlight not the individual works of criticism, but, through them, a change in the project of literary nation-building as a salient position within the literary field. These agents align their arguments with the imperative to address diversity, which they link to a critical concern with questions of language and representation, and thus disavow assumptions about cultural unity and distinctiveness. However, a critical attention to ethnicity, in which the difference of ethnic writing in Canada signifies as the difference constitutive of language and identity, paradoxically produces a coherent national identity in the qualities of difference and heterogeneity. Ethnic writing becomes exemplary of the new national literature defined by difference; however, its potential to signify as difference and thus as national is dependent upon naturalizing its exclusion from the traditional homogenizing definitions of the nation. As lived experiences of cultural diversity increasingly exceed the idea of a unified identity, national or otherwise, the value of literary nation-building as a basis of literary consecration demands scrutiny. The paradoxical nature of the nation figured as difference exposes the limitations of this model. Assumptions of unified identity cannot account for experiences

of difference and disunity characteristic of today's global culture. Further, the consecration of ethnic writing inasmuch as it signifies an objective and singular idea of difference, occludes the exploration and so the legitimation of particular differences in cultural representation. Both Frank Davey and Francesco Loriggio critique the connection between the tenets of recent literary theory and ethnic writing. I read *The English Patient* as a cautionary tale that challenges its readers to reject the English patient's vision, carefully wrapped though it is in the alluring romance of Almásy and Katharine. Kip's own narrative turns on the rejection of the English patient's conflation of their positions and, thus, of the alignment of ethnic identity with the difference of language itself.

These arguments have roots in the ongoing debate between cosmopolitan and native approaches to the national literature. The perceived threat of contemporary theory to the project of nation-building is reflected in T.D. MacLulich's article "Thematic Criticism, Literary Nationalism, and the Critic's New Clothes" (1987). MacLulich positions the native and sociologically based thematic criticism as the guarantor of literary nation-building and places it in opposition to "the labyrinthine intricacies of European critical theory" (18), thereby highlighting the cosmopolitan roots of such theory: "None of this [post-thematic] critical activity, however, addresses the question that motivates the work of the major thematic critics: what is 'Canadian' about Canadian literature? ... This is the only question that will justify our isolating Canadian literature as a distinct field of inquiry" (31). His central concern is the legitimacy of a national approach to literary interpretation. His repeated appeals to protect the idea of a Canadian literature as a distinct and legitimate field of analysis suggest an anxiety about the national context: "if we discard thematic criticism entirely, we may wake up one morning to discover that we need to reinvent it in order to justify staying in business" (33). By "we," MacLulich really means those, like himself, whose authority "in [the] business" of literary criticism is based in the cultural capital of literary nation-building. Underlying his argument is a reluctance to reconsider assumptions about the relationship between literature and nation: "In fact, the practice of dividing literature into national units is deeply, and perhaps inextricably, embedded in the way we study literature" (20). He argues that the "desire to identify a distinctively Canadian literature has its origins in the widely prevalent assumption that every self-respecting nation ought to have its own linguistic and cultural identity" (19). As experiences and identities increasingly exceed the boundaries of traditional national units, however, the role of literature in the process of

cultural identification seems unnecessarily hampered by this conventional practice and its underlying assumptions.

MacLulich aims his argument at “anti-thematics” like Barry Cameron and Michael Dixon. The debate between MacLulich and the “anti-thematics” is, however, really a debate over how best to mark the distinct national literature. As Lianne Moyes argues in her article “‘Canadian Literature Criticism’: Between the Poles of the Universal-Particular Antinomy” (1992), the two streams or traditions, cosmopolitan and native, are in fact “radically continuous with one another”(29) in criticism, and the use of the binary opposition “allows critics to ... naturalize and authorize the hegemony of specific interests within the Canadian literary/political context” (29). MacLulich and Cameron and Dixon invoke the opposition as a rhetorical basis to support their respective arguments for sociological or formal analysis, but the underlying interest in understanding a national cultural identity is consistent. MacLulich reacts to the rejection of a social context for understanding the national literature, arguing that “the idea that literary works are autonomous products of the literary imagination seems to directly contradict the idea that literary works embody ... the essential spirit of a particular group of people” (24). MacLulich, however, misreads the goals of Cameron and Dixon. Their introduction does not question the nation as the basis of literary consecration; rather, they argue for a shift of “Canadian” from a social or content-based context to a formal one:

[Formal values] are the key to an understanding of what *Canadian* means as a literary term. Form is the universal in art, and its study permits us to discern how our writers have made specific adaptations and choices which distinguish them from the common background of literature in general. To ignore such value and search only for sociological uniqueness in our literature is to deny ourselves a clear perspective on Canada’s cultural identity. (141)

The distinctly national or “plus” quality emerges here as formal variation within the universal context of literary forms.

The relationship in Canadian criticism between literary nation-building and the advocacy of a cosmopolitan approach, such as the one Cameron and Dixon offer, has long been characterized by claims of disavowal. A.J.M. Smith’s definition in *The Book of Canadian Poetry* of the cosmopolitan tradition, for example, emphasizes “the universal, civilizing culture of ideas” in opposition to “what is essentially and distinctly Canadian” (qtd. in Kokotailo 163). However, just as in the criticism of

Cameron and Dixon, underlying this rhetoric of disavowal is a consistent concern with a distinct national tradition. In his article on the critical relationship between A.J.M. Smith and John Sutherland, published in 1992, Philip Kokotailo argues that ultimately the critics posit similar visions of a unified national tradition of English-Canadian poetry based in a harmonizing of the contradictory cosmopolitan and native streams, marking the coming of age of the literature.

MacLulich's argument in favour of a return to the sociological context for national identity is a response to the threat to nation-building that is based in a disavowal of the new cultural capital of difference and heterogeneity. At one level, his argument functions to discredit a new form of knowledge and bolster the critical practice on which his own authority is based. However, the advocacy of such a return to an approach based explicitly in the qualities of unity and coherence is unlikely to be a successful antidote. As Davey argues, "thematic criticism, with its simplified structuralism, weak epistemology, and ignorance of the critique of metaphysics . . . had been no match for the arguments poststructuralism had directed against it in the 1970s and early 80s" (266). Since the "Minus Canadian" volume of *Studies in Canadian Literature*, the eroding value of cultural distinctiveness and unity has also complicated the attempt to produce a unified national identity within a universal or cosmopolitan rhetoric. In fact, the criticism I will consider in the following pages is attentive to cosmopolitan theory but shares with MacLulich's argument, in contrast to works like "Minus Canadian," an anxiety about the very status of literary nation-building. A new form of nation-building reveals an attempt to link theoretical concerns with language and nation-building through a critical attention to ethnic writing.

Where MacLulich rejects the new theory and looks to a traditional critical past, other agents illustrate an attempt to exploit rather than disavow the authority of contemporary cosmopolitan theory and its new focus on discontinuity and difference. The new cosmopolitanism they illustrate follows the same pattern as earlier models in its rhetorical disavowal of nation-building, but ultimately engages in a paradoxical deployment of the cultural capital of difference in the interests of a coherent national identity. It is paradoxical because the cosmopolitan is now defined specifically through the erosion of the national. And this is where ethnic writing takes a place in this ongoing debate, as ethnicity becomes the vehicle facilitating this paradoxical nation-building. Agents' attention to ethnicity works to suggest an inherent connection between the national identity and the cultural capital of difference. Specifically, ethnicity signifies in arguments si-

multaneously as an historically excluded social position within Canada and as a formal, generic characteristic. Agents employ ethnicity as simultaneously a social and a formal characteristic, conflating the two categories. As a result, the nation emerges as the natural subject of a theoretical concern with difference and, thus, as the subject of cosmopolitan theory.

II

Robert Kroetsch has worked consistently to introduce a questioning of language and representation into debates about a distinct Canadian literary tradition. In "Disunity as Unity: A Canadian Strategy" (1985), he argues for resistance to privileged metanarratives as a way to resist the threat of the "empires" of America and the USSR that, in asserting their meta-narratives, "turn all other societies into postmodern societies" (22-23).² The idea of Canada maintains cultural significance and continues to be a legitimate context of consecration for writers like himself because it is undefined: "This willingness to refuse privilege to a restricted or restrictive cluster of meta-narratives becomes a Canadian strategy for survival" (23). Kroetsch also suggests, however, "that the writing of particular narratives within a culture is dependent on these meta-narratives," defined as the "assumed story [that] has traditionally been basic to nationhood" (21). In order to secure the authority of the national and, by implication, the conditions for his own writing of particular narratives, he must thus pose a metanarrative: "Canadians cannot agree on what their metanarrative is. ... This very falling apart of story is what holds our story together. ... Canada is a postmodern country" (21-22). In Kroetsch's essays, "Canada," Davey argues, is revealed "to have been the unsuspecting subject of ... post-structuralist theory" (257). Out of disunity comes unity and the articulation of a distinct and unified national identity in the qualities of that which threatens it.

Ultimately, Kroetsch's understanding of difference reveals the limitations of his claim to offer a break from the modernist assertion, represented in his article by Frye's criticism, of "the oneness, the unity, of all narrative" (24). When he argues that "the unity is created by the very debate that seems to threaten the unity" (25), Kroetsch leaves little theoretical space for analysis of the enactment of debate; in the end, authority rests in the possibility of debate rather than in its practical manifestation. Particular challenges to the very idea of unity itself are neutralized as only a constitutive feature of that which they challenge. Rudy

Wiebe's Big Bear becomes Kroetsch's "archetypal Canadian": "The divisions within him become the mark of his unified 'Canadianness'" (29). The idea of particular differences in contest functions only to produce the new unifying signifier "Canadian."

Ethnicity appears at the end of Kroetsch's article as a final guarantor for the argument. He uses the fact of ethnic experience in Canada as rationale for his construction of Canada as postmodern. He declares that "we are held together by that absence [of narrative]. There is no centre. This disunity is our unity" (31). He goes on: "Let me end, however, by glancing at one metanarrative that has asserted itself persistently in the New World context — and that is the myth of the new world" (31-32). The one meta-narrative of the New World is the "characteristic narrative of the ethnic experience" ("Grammar" 84). Kroetsch's formulation of "Canadianness" is thus demonstrated in the supposed characteristics of ethnic experience. His argument homogenizes ethnic experience, fixing it as the illustration of the assumed inherent disunity of narrative and identity. He illustrates his argument in a reading of *Settlers of the Marsh*, going back to this early novel with a contemporary theoretical focus and highlighting current questions of identity. Kroetsch argues that at the beginning of the novel, in the silence of a blizzard, "two men are unhooked from their old stories, and from the unified world-view ... the two immigrants enter into the Canadian story. And the hero is, again, two, as if the disunity is so radical that it physically splits the hero. And yet, out of that division comes the discovery of unity" (32). This understanding of the narrative of ethnic experience invokes in the interests of Canadianness the authority of a global cultural condition characterized by migration and hybridity. In his introduction to *Canadian Ethnic Studies* (1982), Kroetsch argues that ethnic writers "who for a variety of reasons may for several generations remain, if not outsiders, at least marginal participants in Canadian society, are particularly apt symbols for twentieth-century man" ("Introduction" v). But then these inherent outsiders in Canadian society, as symbols of the new global culture, become the illustration of the national metanarrative. The narrative of this experience demonstrates "Canadianness," as Kroetsch's argument invests his construction of the national in the authority of the global cultural condition. At the same time, the experiences of exclusion are naturalized and become determinant of the ethnic writers' identity.

Kroetsch's identification of ethnic writers as symbols of a larger global cultural experience is suggestive of Stuart Hall's argument, but Kroetsch's argument then attempts to objectify the experience as a coher-

ent national identity. Ethnic experience is, as a result, celebrated as illustrative of the terms of contemporary cosmopolitan theory, yet simultaneously removed from the assumptions and mechanisms of that theory as it is able to *be* a metanarrative. Ethnicity is the metanarrative of the impossibility of metanarratives, and, in this role, is distinctly Canadian. The theoretical qualities of multiplicity and disunity are, through the ethnic writer, purchased for the national identity but then ironically denied in the ultimate positioning of that writer, who is objectified as difference.

While influenced by Kroetsch's critical approach, Alison Conway, in "Ethnic Writing and Canadian Literary Criticism" (1989), integrates her attention to ethnicity more overtly within her theoretical approach. Conway's focus on the characteristics of ethnic writing is central to her rejection of thematic criticism in favour of a poststructuralist emphasis on questions of language and form. Her article is a response to the imperative to address issues of cultural diversity: "The purpose of this paper is not to 'represent' Canadian ethnic writing, but rather to raise the subject of ethnicity as an issue with which critics of Canadian literature must contend" (53). Conway challenges thematic criticism for its "quest to establish common belief in a Canadian 'identity' [which] necessarily involved the denial of significant differences amongst Canadians" (54). She explores how "the concept of ethnicity [might] disrupt this homogeneous tradition" (58). Despite this disavowal of unity, Conway's understanding of ethnicity and its relationship to the national identity reveals more of a continuity with thematic criticism than she openly admits. Specifically, her argument is an attempt to articulate a unified national identity. Conway is critical of thematics for its "refusal to recognize difference" (57). Arguably, however, the underlying problem with thematic criticism in the argument is not simply its failure to address diversity, but its failure to secure the authority of literary nation-building. She legitimates nation-building in the authority of a critical attention to inclusion. Her recognition of difference addresses the blind spots of thematics but denies engagement with particular differences and the challenges they pose to the understanding of identity as unified.

Conway's declared purpose is to analyze "the way in which the 'characteristics' of ethnic writing interrupt the ideology of 'sameness' which controls thematic criticism" (53). Her challenge to thematic criticism's "ideology of 'sameness'" involves the conflation of two arguments. She argues that thematic criticism is based on the false assumption of a single unified identity. As well, she argues that it produces an anglocentric tradition based on the exclusion of ethnic writing. The conflation of these distinct argu-

ments occurs in her understanding of the “characteristics of ethnic writing”: “Ethnicity . . . represents difference established by social, political, and historical circumstances, often most noticeably marked by language” (53). The difference of ethnic writing that is a product of the circumstances and experiences of the Canadian context is the difference of language; in this way, the article links the national identity to the qualities of language itself:

the problems encountered by the ethnic writer demonstrate that difference divides language and subjectivity, and hence ethnicity challenges the term ‘Canadian signature’ . . . The Canadian ‘identity’ is recognized to be split within itself . . . for there exists no ‘whole’ which might encompass all of the self-divided subjectivity in Canadian society. (59-60)

The experience of exclusion from the category Canadian becomes the basis of a newly imagined national identity paradoxically constituted by difference. Further, this new national identity is secured in the authority of a theoretical examination of the nature of language and identity. Conway is critical of a policy of multiculturalism which, in its concept of “unity in diversity,” “whitewashes questions of gender, race, ethnicity and class” (60). She argues that in the field of literary criticism, where the critic has access to knowledge regarding questions of language and form, it is possible to outline the potential for a “*genuinely* multicultural discipline” (60). Such a discipline appears to argue for unity *as* diversity.

The quality of difference emerges from two distinct sources in the article; ethnic writing signifies simultaneously as the difference constituting language and as difference within Canadian society. When ethnic writing signifies the difference of language, it demonstrates “the Canadian ‘identity’” (59), discernible through Conway’s “*genuinely* multicultural discipline.” In this way, she invests the national in the authority of a critical imperative to recognize difference and heterogeneity. In her argument, however, the precondition for ethnic writing to signify the difference of language is the experience of exclusion within the nation. At the same time, ethnic writing is understood as writing by those groups within Canada that, by their historical exclusion, can be positioned as marginal and different from “the Canadian ‘identity.’” The article naturalizes the exclusion of ethnic experience within the nation as that which produces the distinct national identity constituted by difference. Conway’s argument conflates a formalist concern with language as constituted by difference and the experiences of ethnic exclusion within Canadian society. As a result, the same writing that demonstrates the new national identity simultaneously signi-

fies as difference within the nation, two significations that together amount to a second construction of the nation as constituted by difference. The significance of ethnic writing is limited in the article to its ability to provide a generic quality of difference. The argument exploits the idea of difference to secure nation-building but does so at the expense of attention to particular differences that would threaten the viability of the coherent national identity.

Conway's article ultimately functions to conserve the authority of nation-building as a legitimate basis for the consecration of literary activity. Her critical attention to ethnicity works to secure the legitimacy of a distinct national identity: "Contrary to the discourse of thematics, I believe that a critical practice which emphasizes difference will further enable Canada in its struggle to maintain national autonomy.... The vitality of regional and cultural groups suggests their strength is constituted by their difference" (64). The nation is secured in the cultural capital of difference. Conway ultimately invokes a rhetoric of inclusion that is based on the naturalizing of exclusion, exposing the underlying anxiety of the argument. The vitality of the regional and cultural groups is not, notably, in their multiple differences; the significance of ethnic writing is limited to the characteristic of its exclusion. Strength is not constituted by the particular differences but only by the potential to signify the quality of difference as the basic principle of language. Conway's argument does redress the exclusion of thematic criticism in its enthusiastic recognition of difference; however, that recognition is limited to the demands of nation-building.

Like Conway, Linda Hutcheon mobilizes multiculturalism as a critical strategy or "discipline" in her introduction to *Other Solitudes*, published in 1990. She positions her revisioning of the national literature squarely within the imperative to recognize cultural diversity: "The purpose of this collection of fiction and conversations is to investigate not only how multiculturalism is *lived* but how it is *written into* Canadian life. The cultural richness that immigration has brought to this country has changed forever our concept of what constitutes 'Canadian literature'" (6). By identifying the writing in the volume as a function of what she calls the "institutionalization of multiculturalism" in both Canadian society and literature (15), Hutcheon exploits the double possibility of "lived" and "written into" for the purpose of naturalizing the national as a legitimate basis for literary consecration. The conflation of the distinction between the "lived" and the "written into" works to legitimate her canonical revision. She makes an appeal to changing immigration patterns as the direct source of a new understanding of Canadian literature,

naturalizing both the national context itself and her own canonical revision, in the terms of cultural diversity. From a Bourdieu-informed perspective, any construction of the national literature must, however, be considered a function of the interest of an agent occupying a position within the field, and not directly of changing social demographics. Hutcheon's appeal draws on the cultural capital of difference and heterogeneity in her reference to the changing social context without acknowledging how, within the logic of the literary field, such capital threatens the very assumptions of literary nation-building as a legitimate basis of consecration. The argument thus trades on the cultural capital of ethnic writing but rhetorically denies it any agency to transform the literary field, except inasmuch as it reinforces the legitimacy of nation-building.

Hutcheon also makes use of a double construction of ethnicity as social condition and as literary category to define a coherent national literature. The volume embraces the multiple voices that have been neglected in Canadian society: "This expansion of what is published — and thus, taught and read — as 'Canadian' is one of the most exciting and productive results of multiculturalism ... in Canada today" (15). Ethnicity signifies here as a social condition, referring to the condition of exclusion from the label "Canadian." Simultaneously, Hutcheon invokes ethnicity as a generic category for literary interpretation: "What we may have become more aware of is that for a Hodgins, for instance, a certain Irish element cannot be ignored, nor can the Irish-Scots for a Munro" (15). Employing the two understandings of ethnicity, Hutcheon posits a coherent and shared national condition — of ethnicity constituted by difference — that is a product of a multicultural ideology. Difference is understood as the distinctive feature of the national literature. The unrecognized or, in Hutcheon's terms, "ex-centric" condition of ethnic writing within Canada introduces the coveted quality of difference into the national context, and that quality then becomes simultaneously and paradoxically a generic interpretive category, legitimating a coherent national literary voice as the basis of literary consecration.³

At the same time, Hutcheon argues for a connection between the shared condition of difference characterizing the national literature and the difference of contemporary theory: "The literary products of Canada's multicultural ideology can be seen to partake of both cultural phenomena [postmodernism and postcolonialism]. Their common valuing of the 'different' and what has been considered marginal over what is deemed central has marked a major shift in cultural thinking" (9-10). The effect of such a connection, finally, is the production of a coherent na-

tional literature as a product of contemporary theory and its concern with difference. The argument is originally legitimated by the experiences of ethnic exclusion within Canadian society, which are in turn generalized as a shared national experience of difference, and then shown to be consistent with the concerns of cosmopolitan theory. Ironically, in the process, employed in the interests of producing the national, particular cultural differences are rhetorically limited in their potential to initiate shifts in cultural thinking.

Hutcheon's explanation of the volume's title, as meant to "recall and revise Hugh MacLennan's earlier designation of Canada as two 'two solitudes'" (1-2), reinforces a rhetorical link between her proffered canonical revision and the terms of her own theorizing of postmodernism, characterized, as Davey argues, "as a conflicted discourse ... which is frequently complicit with the ideologies it acts to refuse, and as a parodic discourse that must maintain the discourses it parodies" (260). Hutcheon's canonical revision is certainly responsive to the fact that, as she notes in "Multi-cultural Furor," "a liberal humanist notion of universality [has been replaced by a] postmodern valuing of difference" (16). However, in the objectification of difference as a new shared national condition, her response rhetorically functions to reinforce the unifying impulses of literary nation-building. Hutcheon argues that the volume's aim to read Canadian writing "in a multicultural context is not to homogenize differences" (5), but "it is, in the end, to help ourselves understand that there are ways of seeing the world, and of writing in and about it, that may be different from our own ways — whatever they might be — and valuable because of that difference" (5). The argument does, however, position difference, limiting its significance to the production of a national tradition.⁴ Particular differences within Canadian society are the justification for her argument, but, ultimately, they signify only together as difference itself. Despite the rhetorical privileging of difference, the language of the passage suggests a coherent reading community and the assumption of a shared national condition manifest in the national literature.

In her article "'Ethnic Literature,' 'Minority Writing,' 'Literature in Other Languages,' 'Hyphenated-Canadian Literature' — Will it ever be Canadian?" (1996), Natalia Aponiuk includes *Other Solitudes* in her analysis of how so-called "ethnic literature" in Canada is excluded from the category of "Canadian Literature." She is forced, however, when discussing the volume, to change the terms of her argument, suggesting that *Other Solitudes* "rigidifies the division of Canadian literature into that of 'the first and founding nations' and 'multicultural fictions'" (3). Here, no longer one side

of an opposition, “Canadian literature” refers to the opposition itself. The shift suggests how, in contrast to Aponiuk’s argument, *Other Solitudes* does make “multicultural fictions” integral to a redefinition of the national literature. In fact, Hutcheon produces Canadian literature as the condition of radical difference implied by that opposition. In practice, however, if not appearance, Aponiuk’s argument that the collection perpetuates the exclusion of ethnic writing is valid. The significance of the “multicultural fictions” is limited to the implications of their exclusion. Aponiuk does not take into account how the collection invests in the cultural capital of multicultural identities and experiences. She argues that what links Richler, Ondaatje, and Skvorecky in the collection “is that they are not of British or French origin. They are, therefore, ‘multicultural’ writers, international recognition and recent legitimation by the *Oxford Companion* notwithstanding” (3). *Other Solitudes*, however, is predicated not on an opposition between “multiculturalism” and “recognition” but on their association; it invests in the authority of writers like Ondaatje and their connection to a global cultural context but simultaneously limits the threat that context represents to literary nation-building.

In her introduction to her own national multicultural anthology, *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* (1996), Smaro Kamboureli addresses the issues that form the basis of her criticism of *Other Solitudes* and Hutcheon’s other criticism.⁵ She defines the contributors to her anthology as “Canadian writers” in order “to dispel the ‘marginality’” attributed to them and so avoid “consolidating [their] minority positions” (3). Critical of a “tokenism” that “assigns a single meaning to cultural differences” (3), she emphasizes the multiple differences “of race, of ethnic origin, of gender, of place, of ideological affiliations, or of thematic concerns and aesthetics” (1) characterizing the literature. She argues that “difference, then, is always a matter of intensity, and is weighed differently in given historical moments. Its meanings are variable, shifting, even provisional” (3). Kamboureli does not include writing from what Hutcheon calls the “first and founding nations”; she avoids what she critiques in Hutcheon — the positing of ethnicity as a general category — which risks erasing the uneven histories of access to the label “Canadian” (*Scandalous* 172).

Focussing only on the designated multicultural literature, her discussion does, however, employ the same double construction of multiculturalism, as a social and formal category, in the interests of producing a coherent national model in the terms of contemporary theory. While Kamboureli emphasizes the “nuances” of difference (3) to avoid collapsing the writing into a shared condition of marginality, she does impose her own

basis of coherence under a national banner: “The narrative that emerges from these comments [by the writers and in the literature] is, then, one of contradictions, of differences. What is consistent is the anxiety many of these authors share about any homogenous image of Canadian culture” (6). Kamboureli, in this argument, does not so much rethink the problem of a singular national identity through a concern with questions of representation as she does refigure the nation *as* this concern. The anxiety of the multicultural writers towards a homogeneous national identity is linked to, and reinforces, the particular and defining “Canadian anxiety” about identity. The former, based in the questioning of the very legitimacy of a unifying national cultural identity, is paradoxically exploited to produce that identity. “Canadian literature,” as evidenced in Kamboureli’s volume, is characterized by the questioning of unity and sameness. The nation is figured in the valued terms of contemporary theory and the justification for this rests in the very “nuances of difference” that characterize the literature in the volume.

Multicultural literature stands, in Kamboureli’s argument, as a reflection of society. In reference to the volume’s title, she argues: “*Canadian Multicultural Literature*. In some respects, one word too many. For Canadian literature is, should be thought of, as reflecting the multicultural make-up of the country” (1). At the same time, multiculturalism stands as a preoccupation with questions of representation: “In my selection process I was guided by the belief that multiculturalism disputes certain kinds of representation, the kinds that are built around the principles of sameness, of cohesiveness, of linear development” (5). The first use of the term invokes the critical notion that literature reflects the nation and, thus, implies the assumptions of coherence and unity, while the second use of the term is grounded in the questioning of those very assumptions. While she avoids “tokenism,” Kamboureli imposes the determining quality of a concern with representation on to ethnic writing, at least in as much as it signifies as “Canadian literature.”

Using this double construction of multiculturalism, Kamboureli first equates the challenge to “sameness” and “cohesiveness” in language and narrative with a challenge to the “persistent attempts to compose a unified vision of Canadian culture” (1). Then, paradoxically, she asserts this very challenge as the basis of a coherent image of a newly constituted national literature. She raises the problem of a singularly defined national identity within the concern for a viable national cultural identity:

I believe that within this complex web of historical changes, cultural differences, and politics there still remains the fundamental question

of what constitutes Canadian identity. But in the 1990s this question has been reconfigured, and, I think, irrevocably so. For we can no longer afford to think of Canadian identity in singular terms. Its imaginary cohesiveness has already collapsed upon itself. Nor can we afford to cavalierly dismiss the current interest in cultural differences as a mere fad, or an obsession. (12)

While Kamboureli's argument addresses the issues of singularity, it perpetuates the "imaginary cohesiveness" within a rhetoric of difference. She does not really posit a reconfigured form of this question of the national identity, exposing a reluctance to rethink assumptions about the nature of identity and its relationship to literature:

The literature in *Making a Difference* offers different soundings of the social and cultural body of Canada. Since its beginnings, the making of Canadian literature has coincided, in many respects, with the making of the Canadian state. Far from being a Canadian phenomenon alone, this overlap shows how literature, like other cultural expressions, measures the pulse of a nation. What might be particularly Canadian, however, is the kind of anxiety that has continued to characterize both what Canadian literature is and what constitutes Canadian identity. (6)

Stuart Hall argues, in contrast, that addressing the experiences of migration and cultural diversity might in fact lead to such rethinking ("Old"). Kamboureli, in this passage, offers two familiar assertions. Literature is best interpreted as a measure of the national psyche; this assumption depends on the understanding of identity as unified and coherent — the nation as a closed and continuous *body*. As well, she invokes the tradition of a national anxiety as the basis of identification. Kamboureli's argument embraces the imperative to challenge a homogeneous notion of Canadian identity but does so while perpetuating the assumption that literature be understood as producing a coherent national culture.

In sustaining the assumptions of cultural coherence, Kamboureli limits the significance of the writing in the volume:

The writers in this anthology make a difference because, when read together, they invite the reader to consider the social, political, and cultural contexts that have produced Canadian literature in general and their work in particular. As a collage of voices, *Making a Difference* fashions an image of Canadian culture that reveals how we have come to our present moment in history. (1)

Kamboureli uses ethnic writing to produce the nation within a theoretic-

cal questioning of unity, suggesting not, as does Hutcheon, a long history of Canadian literature as marginal, but a consistency with the long-standing national anxiety about identity. Functioning within the expectations of a coherent national image, the questioning of representation can never engage in a questioning of the very nature of identity as unified. The writers “make a difference” only within the assumption that literature be interpreted as producing an image of the national culture. Kamboureli’s “image of Canadian culture” takes its distinction from the terms of contemporary theory, including a commitment to questions of representation. Rhetorically positioned to produce a national image that is increasingly anachronistic, such writing, in all its difference, arguably fails, in Hall’s terms, to make a difference (“Old” 52). It is valued only for its ability to signify difference in the interests of the nation. The argument forecloses on the possibility that such “nuances” might suggest a challenge to the very notion of the nation as a basis of literary consecration.

Frank Davey suggests, in *Canadian Literary Power*, that in “the 1990s in Canada, the margins get increasingly crowded, as numerous groups vie for the legitimacy marginality can bestow” (284). He argues that “postmodernism’s struggle against hegemonies have [*vis*] been taken up within Canadian literature by various constituencies under specialized banners” (285). Davey is critical of the conflation of the struggle of postmodernism, which he argues has come to denote in this context “a complex of textual convictions and practices” (286) and the struggles of socially and culturally defined groups. The latter, he argues, mark the “depoliticizing of postmodernism as a sign” (286). The nation, then, does not appear in Davey’s arguments as a rehearsal or product of contemporary theory, but as the “network of institutions” (70) that facilitates literary activity. By shifting the idea of the nation to the context of production, Davey moves it outside the opposition of social and formal designations and thus, arguably, away from the expectations of coherence and unity. His contribution to the cosmopolitan/native debate might, then, be characterized by this sidestepping, configuring the nation as that which enables, but is not a product of, cosmopolitan theory, refusing the legitimacy of the opposition itself.

Davey’s positioning of the nation supports his call for a new approach to cultural resistance: “the political task that this depoliticizing of postmodernism creates is the finding of new common ground among those with continuing interest in opposing hegemony” (286): “the success of all [the constituencies’] projects depends most of all on an effort

to valorize *politics*, to enrich and open political process so that contestation and negotiation within it are available to as many groups within one's culture and literature as possible" (286). Davey asserts the value of ongoing political process as an effective counter to the hegemony of global industry and mass culture. He argues of this contestation and negotiation that "it is in all our interests ... that such debate not be foreclosed, that it remain 'political,' and that 'Canada' remain a site of dialogue and argument" (292). Attempts to posit a coherent voice of resistance depend on assumptions of identity as unified and stable and arguably compromise the potential for open political contestation. The political task set by Davey illustrates the need to rethink the expectation that the production of a coherent national identity, even in all its diversity, can be an effective opposition to the hegemony of multinational culture and industry. This expectation may in fact impede the opportunity for resistance in the interests of multiple and diverse constituencies.

In his consideration of the treatment of ethnic writing in the Canadian context, Francesco Loriggio is critical of the reluctance to rethink assumptions of coherence and unity in understanding cultural identity. Further, he comes to implicate contemporary theory in perpetuating this ongoing reluctance. In "The Question of the Corpus: Ethnicity and Canadian Literature" (1987), he advocates the notion of "tensional totality" (63) as a critical approach more appropriate than those based on either coherence or incoherence: "The in-betweenness of ethnicity, its simultaneous tangencies with language and culture, could seem, rather, to call for paradigms that assert both stability and instability, the centrifugal and the centripetal" (60).⁶

The arguments examined above exploit ethnicity simultaneously as both a social and a linguistic designation, but in doing so maintain the sanctity of the opposition, using that double role to reinforce, rather than question, the opposition between stability and instability in the understanding of identity. They exploit that opposition as the basis of competing theories, ultimately using an attention to ethnicity to invest the cultural capital of disunity and difference in the hidden interests of the former, coherence and unity, in order to bolster the legitimacy of the national identity as the basis of literary interpretation. Loriggio addresses the limitations of both sides of the opposition. Ethnic writing, he argues, challenges the assumption in thematic criticism of a closed coherent system based in the equivalence of language and culture ("Question" 59): "the addition of ethnic texts shifts the emphasis from the model and the cohesion it imposes on the corpus to the internal dynamics. ... Dominant

and subordinate voices, majority and minority cultures, official and non-official languages permute with each other” (59). In introducing the possibility of alteration, Loriggio names the very threat that the arguments discussed above work to neutralize; they attempt to commodify the difference of ethnicity without granting agency to ethnic writers to challenge assumptions about a coherent cultural identity and the context for literary interpretation.

The very multiplicity of writing in Canada forms the basis of Loriggio’s challenge to thematics, and he immediately anticipates the potential relevance of more recent theoretical concerns: “where multiplicity is, there difference, intertextuality, polyphony, dialogue and the other notions that constitute the most powerful *argot* of current criticism will more likely and more legitimately be” (“Question” 60). However, he argues, if ethnicity is not addressed by the assumption of a coherence of language and culture, it is also not addressed by the assumption “that discourse may be inherently fragmentary and multivocal” (60). Such an approach, he argues, claims “an intrinsic essentiality for literary discourse” (60) and so removes from consideration the temporality and so specificity of the condition of ethnic writing: “Minoritarian discourses ... cannot be defined on purely literary, intrasystemic grounds: they send back neither to form as such nor to genre or styles for accreditation, but, rather, to historical phenomena” (“History” 42). Ethnic writing must be interpreted with “reference to” its history and the circumstances of its writing. For Loriggio, ethnic literature reveals the limitations of literary theory that fails to “deal with the dialectic between stability and instability, order and disorder” (44). In the end, he argues, ethnicity, “the multifocality, the stepping in or out of selves, of positions it allows, is an ontological condition” (“Question” 65). He argues that this condition is marked by Canadian literature: “The problem in contemporary Canada is not just how to react to the lack of national ghosts (to the ghost story *manquée* that is Canadian literature) but also how to react to the superabundance of unmonumentalized, nondescript, small-time, small-space ghosts hidden in every household or under our skin” (65). Thus, Loriggio asserts that “Canadian literature or Canadian criticism [can be used] to interpret, to ‘read’ theory” (66).

Loriggio is less interested, however, in literary nation-building than in exploring, in terms similar to Hall’s, ethnic writing in the context of the processes of globalization: “Decolonization, the changes in the demographic composition of many new countries through continuous migration, the influx of wave after wave of immigrants, have created a new

breed of individuals, a new subjectivity and hence new virtualities, new categories of discourse" ("History" 31). Understanding ethnicity as a new kind of knowledge, Loriggio posits the particular historical and temporal circumstances of ethnic writing as its constituting features. His characterization of the "new subjectivity" is based in the experience of "disemia":

The most proper denominator could be said to be a hodge-podge of customs, the doing, the knowing, we consign to the rubric 'culture' but it is also more than that. Up to now, literary criticism has carried out its role — intellectual, institutional — on the largely unexamined premise that literature, culture, territory and language coincide. The literature emerging in Africa, in Asia, or being written by ethnic authors in Canada and elsewhere, is a literature of non-coincidence. . . . Their culture of origin often differs from the language they write in. A discrepancy, large or small but there somehow, keeps linguistic enunciation, literature, culture territory, always out of synchrony. (32)

Loriggio invokes here an understanding of identity which approximates Hall's notion of the "local" ("Local"), with its emphasis on process and hybridity. The only subject position not available to the ethnic writer, Loriggio argues, is that "full" subjectivity associated with the traditional national cultural identity, based in the coincidence of culture, land, and language. The new subjectivity and the new knowledge it represents, also a particular historical construction, thus challenges, as I have been arguing, the cultural capital of the national identity as the basis of literary consecration. Critical approaches that either exclude ethnic writing in the desire for coherence or, as discussed above, include it as an objectified mark of incoherence, foreclose on its challenge to older understandings of identity based in unity and coherence. By exploiting the theoretical opposition between coherence and incoherence, agents are able to manage the critical engagement of ethnicity in the interests of literary nation-building, upholding the romantic assumptions of the coincidence of land, language, and culture.

Loriggio's emphasis on the notion of "tensional totality" as an interpretive approach demanded by ethnic writing demands an acknowledgment of the condition of "non-coincidence" that the criticism discussed above avoids. Loriggio questions whether "one is doing multicultural texts such a service by consigning them to poststructuralist theory," which occludes their features every bit as much as a thematic approach ("Multiculturalism" 196). He argues that ethnic discourses are normalized by and

become allegories of such theories (195), revealing how these theories are unable “to confront the specter of pluralism without diminishing it” (198): “Poststructuralism integrates [minorities] into the here and now ... [but] such relocation is mandated by precise theoretical assumptions, and the very process which installs minority literatures into society dilutes or erases altogether their idiosyncrasies, their identity” (198). Poststructuralism, he argues, in its “reduction of dialogue to polyphony” (199), recognizes ethnic writing at the expense of agency: “Without the ... reciprocity inherent to dialogue, there would [be] no provisions by which to effect real change: societies would, for all intents and purposes, lapse into pure repetitiveness, into cultural consciousness. The opposite of continuous negotiation is uncaring ossification, a continuous spinning of the cultural wheels” (200). When ethnic writing signifies as this understanding of difference, as an ungrounded “spinning of the cultural wheels,” it suggests the authority of the global postmodern while denied the potential to “effect real change.” The understanding of ethnicity as the difference of the global postmodern protects nation-building from the transformative potential of those “idiosyncrasies” of particular acts of cultural identification. Loriggio emphasizes the need to “acknowledge the presence of minority discourses without normalizing them” (“History” 45) but is acutely aware of the risk that poses to the national identity as a basis of consecration. Nation-building is threatened, he argues, citing Robert Stam and Ella Shohat, by any “epistemological advantage” granted to those whose experiences result in “double consciousness” (in “Multiculturalism” 195). He cites Henry Giroux to point out that such advantage requires that cultural differences play a substantive role in “the discourses and practice of democratic life” (in “Multiculturalism” 195). In the interests of nation-building, the use of theory has been effective exactly because it celebrates diversity without granting this “epistemological advantage.”

III

Kip’s narrative in *The English Patient* echoes his work as a professional sapper. It traces his effort to decode experiences of cultural diversity and to achieve an understanding of identity that is responsive to those experiences. His search for self-consciousness contains a hidden trick, and Kip makes an error, consuming without suspicion the products of Western culture. Unsuspicious consumption implies an acceptance of the illusion that cultural consumption grants the agency to participate in the processes of cul-

tural change. In general, Kip consumes almost nothing without suspicion. His caution as a sapper permeates his character — “his mind, even when unused, is radar, his eyes locating the choreography of inanimate objects for the quarter-mile around him, which is the killing radius of small arms” (87) — and serves to highlight his mistake. As Kip follows the lines of war through Europe, he seeks solace in art: “Every night he had walked into the coldness of a captured church and found a statue for the night to be his sentinel. He had given his trust only to this race of stones, moving as close as possible against them in the darkness” (104). In the chaos of war, Kip turns to the universal stability of art. He embraces culture with a faith in its ability to provide recognition and sense of belonging. Culture becomes the ultimate distraction, culminating in his reliance on the short-wave radio and popular music to block out thought as he works as a sapper:

Later he would need distractions. Later, when there was a whole personal history of events and moments in his mind, he would need something equivalent to white sound to burn or bury everything while he thought of the problems in front of him. The radio or crystal set and its loud band music would come later, a tarpaulin to hold the rain of real life away from him. (194)

The white noise of the radio, like the “communal book of moonlight,” serves as a distraction, creating the illusion of recognition while obscuring the underlying structures of power that naturalize Kip’s identity as foreign “other.” Ironically, Kip’s unsuspecting consumption, motivated by the need for stability and belonging, buries the extent to which his access to British culture, illustrated by his success as a sapper, is determined by the conditions of his exclusion.

The distraction of unsuspecting cultural consumption enables Kip to do his job in the service of the British military: “He was pulling the radio earphones on over his head, so the sound came back into him fully, filling him with clarity. He schemed along the different paths of the wire and swerved into the convolutions of their knots, the sudden corners, the buried switches that translated them from positive to negative” (101-02). His actions coincide with the movement of music, suggesting that his professional skills are enabled by his embrace of Western culture. However, Kip’s professional success is inseparable from his construction as difference within that culture — from his role as professional ethnic:

If he were a hero in a painting, he could claim a just sleep. But as even she [Hana] had said, he was the brownness of a rock. ... And something in him made him step back from even the naïve innocence of

such a remark. The successful defusing of a bomb ended novels. Wise white fatherly men shook hands, were acknowledged, and limped away, having been coaxed out of solitude for this special occasion. But he was a professional. And he remained the foreigner, the Sikh. His only human and personal contact was this enemy who had made the bomb and departed brushing his tracks with a branch behind him. (104-05)

While positioned to play the hero, in the end Kip is unable to locate himself within the role as he is denied the potential for self-determination and agency. Hana's demand that Kip provide a point of stability and order — "you have to be a still bed for me, let me curl up as if you were a good grandfather I could hug" (103) — occurs simultaneously with her emphasis on his race — "I wanted to touch that bone at your neck, collarbone, ... I've always liked flesh the colour of rivers or rocks." The connection emphasizes his limited access to a British identity, figured here as the quintessential hero. He provides stability and reaffirms order only in as much as he signifies difference. Hana, in her love for him, "learns all the varieties of his darkness" (127). His success as a professional sapper, protector of Western culture, is inseparable from this identity. Hana's desire to recognize Kip as difference impedes rather than enables his potential for self-invention. In contrast to the traditional heroes — the wise white fatherly men — Kip, burdened with the imperative to supply the desired quality of difference, is denied the complexity of self-determination; he is granted recognition without agency. While positioned within the tableau of Western culture, Kip is denied the agency to participate in its construction. Kip's faith in his consumption of Western culture is undermined as he realizes the limitations of an identity based in exclusion and "otherness." The passage calls for the renegotiation of the narrative hero; Kip's "successful defusing" of the complexity of cultural interaction will demand the rejection of this identity based in exclusion. While the English patient's identification of Kip as "international bastard" seeks to celebrate this identity as difference, Kip ultimately rejects an understanding of identity that precludes the agency to participate in processes of cultural change.

Kip's realization of his limited cultural agency is marked in his response to the news of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Within the "palace of the winds" and the "white noise" of the radio lie the structures of power and authority that position his experiences of cultural diversity, limiting him to the identity of "other." The same wires that carry the distraction of unlimited cultural consumption bring news of the bombings, exposing these structures of power. The news travels up the wires, explod-

ing in Kip's ears, to reveal his mistake of unsuspecting consumption — the trick within the “bomb” of cultural interaction:

[Hana] sees him in the field, his hands clasped over his head, then realizes this is a gesture not of pain but of his need to hold the ear-phones tight against his brain. He is a hundred yards away from her in the lower field when she hears a scream emerge from his body which had never raised its voice among them. He sinks to his knees, as if unbuckled. (282)

In the light of the betrayal, Kip confronts his limited ability to participate in the production and circulation of knowledge: “I sat at the foot of this bed and listened to you, Uncle. These last months. When I was a kid I did that, the same thing. I believed I could fill myself up with what older people taught me. I believed I could carry that knowledge, slowly altering it, but in any case passing it beyond me to another” (283). His consumption of Western culture has been predicated on his inherent difference, exposing the illusion of belonging. Kip's words echo the English patient's vision of Herodotus in the desert, exchanging knowledge like seeds, piecing together a mirage. His identity, however, takes shape through his exclusion from that very economy. He consumes knowledge but is unable to transform or circulate it. Kip retreats from his error, retracing, in his journey back through Europe, the process of his engagement with Western culture: “He was travelling against the direction of the invasion, as if rewinding the spool of war. . . . He rode the Triumph up the steps to the door of the church and then walked in. A statue was there, bandaged in scaffold. . . . He wandered around underneath like somebody unable to enter the intimacy of a home” (290-91). The narrative is not a rejection of cultural interaction in the context of increasing social and political decentralization and diversity, but a search to interpret the experiences of cultural diversity without leaving the subject always fixed “in rifle sights,” objectified as difference. The slight of hand that brings an end to Ondaatje's novel rewards the undistracted reader with a playful closure to the story of Hana and Kip that seems to offer faith in the possibility of cultural interaction: “[Hana's] shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles” (301-01). Yet, this final trick with language offers its gift without diminishing the scale of the challenge we all face in today's global culture to learn, as Hall states it, “to live with difference” (“Culture” 361).

Ondaatje's narrative as a whole contains a trick that parallels Kip's unsuspecting consumption of Western culture. Figured as a bomb, the novel demands suspicious consumption to find its trick: "A book, a map of knots, a fuze board, a room of four people in an abandoned villa lit only by candlelight and now and then light from a storm, now and then the possible light from an explosion" (111-12). The challenge of the novel is to reject the authority of the English patient and his vision of the "palace of the winds," alluring though it is when wrapped in the romance of Katharine and Almásy. The English patient's identification as "international bastard," much like the constructions of the national identity examined above, conflates the difference of language with the difference of social exclusion to generate, paradoxically, a singular identity constituted by difference. The process exploits Kip's experiences while limiting his potential for self-invention. The rejection of this conflation exposes the limitations of an identity based in the conditions of cultural exclusion, legitimating Kip's retreat at the end of the novel in search of a more productive understanding of identity. Anthony Minghella's movie adaptation provides an example of a reading of the novel which falls for the trick, privileging the distraction of the romance of Katharine and the English patient. In its removal of the context of the nuclear bombing and its near-removal of Kip, the movie shunts aside the narrative rejection of the English patient's vision, leaving intact the authority of his understanding of identity and cultural coherence. That there exists a North American cultural reluctance to step outside the safety of this distraction, evidenced in the reluctance to rethink an understanding of identity as unified and coherent, is reflected in the explosion of commercial success surrounding the movie.

NOTES

¹ In an unpublished article "In all their diversity: Ethnicity and the anxiety of nation-building," I argue that, in response to pressures of globalization, literary nation-building is reappearing paradoxically in the very qualities that threaten its saliency as a basis of literary consecration. The construction of the nation as difference relies on the use of ethnicity as a particular source of difference. My argument here is that contemporary theory is one tool in this construction, as it is used to create the conflation, at the site of ethnic writing, of social difference, and the nomadic difference of Hall's global postmodern.

² Kroetsch's emphasis, in reference to the postmodern, is on the resisting of metanarratives and challenging the wholeness and stability of language. Davey argues in *Canadian Literary Power* that Kroetsch "writes as if postmodernism and poststructuralism shared common projects" (278). In fact, Davey argues convincingly, especially in reference to Kroetsch and

Hutcheon, that postmodernism in Canadian criticism most often refers to the practice of poststructuralism.

³ Smaro Kamboureli argues, in reference to Hutcheon's *Splitting Images* (1991), that when made a universal condition, "difference ... becomes a banality, frustrating any attempt not only at revisiting history but also at recognizing the exigencies of the present" (*Scandalous* 172).

⁴ Kamboureli writes of the role of the "ex-centric" in Hutcheon's criticism: "History emerges as a single narrative — with a difference: it now includes its own nervous double ... Thus the 'losers' and the 'unsung' are brought forward into the light; yet now, strangely enough, the 'losers' and the 'unsung' find themselves inscribed in this kind of history exactly as such: 'losers' and 'unsung' — namely 'ex-centric'. This 'simultaneous' existence of differences becomes the measure of [the Enlightenment project's] success" (173). In "Back to the Future: Plus or Minus Canadian?" Sylvia Söderlind argues, in reference to *The Canadian Postmodern*, that "Hutcheon's discussion begins ... with the assumption that the postcolonial and 'ex-centric' status of Canadian writers is analogous to that of women and ethnic minorities. ... What happens here is that the Canadian, as well as the female, risks getting absorbed or reduced into a kind of universal marginality typical of (or should we say central to?) the post-modern condition. The presumed replacement of the simultaneously universal and exclusive sameness of 'Man' with a multiplicity of differences collapses into a new kind of sameness — a 'same difference'" (635). What I am arguing is that this "risk" Söderlind notes is, in fact, exactly the product of the new manifestation of nation-building, as it reveals a search for a "new kind of sameness" based in difference. The universal marginality becomes the new national identity.

⁵ Kamboureli notes, first in "Canadian Ethnic Anthologies: Representations of Ethnicity" and then in the revised version in *Scandalous Bodies*, that *Other Solitudes* "inaugurated a decisive shift in the articulation of ethnic difference in Canada, for — unlike the ethnically and/or racially singular first-wave ethnic anthologies — it brings together writers from various ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds. It is a multicultural anthology in the literal sense of the word" (*Scandalous* 162; see also "Canadian" 44). Kamboureli argues of the volume's editorial strategies: "they perform a double legitimating act: they endorse the sedative politics of the Canadian state's appropriation of ethnicity, and they construct ethnicity as a normative identity" (162). Kamboureli's own editorial strategies in *Making a Difference* can, to an extent, be read as a corrective response.

⁶ In this article, Loriggio points as an example to polysystem theory, exemplified in the work of Even-Zohar. However, in "History, Literary History, and Ethnic Literature" (1990) he is more critical of this theory.

⁷ Loriggio cites Michael Herzfeld's "Disemia."

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