

**Calling People Names:
Reading Imposture, Confession,
and Testimony in and after
Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient***

CARRIE DAWSON

MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *The English Patient* explores the relationships among four people who inhabit a deserted villa in Italy towards the end of World War II. One of them is identified only as "the English patient." Following the death of his lover and an airplane accident that has left him burned beyond recognition, the traumatized patient claims to have forgotten his identity and suggests that he does not remember which side he fought for in the war. Although the patient contends that he "could have been, for all he knew, the enemy he had been fighting from the air" (6), at least one of the other characters suspects that he feigns memory loss in an attempt to avoid recriminations for his wartime actions. Certainly, there is textual evidence that the patient is, as his housemate suspects, Count Ladislaus de Almásy, a Hungarian aristocrat accused of spying for the Germans in North Africa. But the patient does not recognize this name as his own. For the most part, he refers to Almásy in the third person and offers elliptical personal narratives that are largely uncontextualized and thus frustrate any attempts to secure his "true" identity or expose his false one.¹ Because the patient does not offer a coherent self-explanatory narrative, the young Canadian nurse, the Italian-Canadian thief, and the Indian sapper who also live in or around the villa project a variety of identities onto his unrecognizable body, reconstituting him in the image of their own loved ones and adversaries. At the same time as these three emotionally scarred individuals project identities onto the patient, they also attempt to elicit a confession of imposture from him in hopes that his admission of mistaken identity will affirm the possibility of an integrated, "properly" identified subject, and will allow them to reconceive of themselves as such.

The idea of imposture is, however, as untenable as it is socially efficacious. It is efficacious because it constitutes the “self” as a proprietary entity which can be conceived of as the rightful owner of an identity that is quantifiable, legislatible, and disciplinary. But it is untenable insofar as it rests upon the expectation that the subject is stable, continuous, fully self-cognizant, and consequently capable of assuming a “truth” value. By undermining the truth-based assumptions that imposture requires and choosing, instead, to preserve the ambiguities surrounding the identity of his consistently inconsistent protagonist, Michael Ondaatje confounds attempts to characterize his protagonist as an imposter. In doing so, he suggests that the “truth” about the patient’s identity cannot emerge referentially, as name-calling or confession. If indeed such a “truth” can be discerned, it must emerge from an exchange that allows for both the impossibility and the necessity of confronting that which is never wholly available for the telling.

Trauma, writes Cathy Caruth, is “the response to an unexpected or overwhelmingly violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). Because “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (91-92), traumatic experience involves a complex and paradoxical relationship between knowing and not knowing. Literature that is concerned with the nature and the experience of trauma re-enacts this dialectic by simultaneously engaging the reader’s desire to know and circumscribing the limits of his or her knowing. While the act of reading about a traumatic experience cannot, of course, be straightforwardly equated with the lived experience of trauma, reading can nevertheless function as a mode of bearing witness to an event that is repeatedly relived as and through its forgetting. This paper considers how Ondaatje elicits this kind of reading from his characters and his readers.

The first part of the paper explores the various attempts Ondaatje’s characters make at eliciting a self-explanatory narrative from the enigmatic protagonist. In doing so, it traces the narrative progression *from* a desire for “true” identity constituted in opposition to an acknowledgement of misidentification *to* an idea of identity reconceived in and as a “testament” or testimony (269). It also explores differences between these modes of address. Using the distinction Shoshana Felman draws between confession as a mode of address that constitutes language as a “straightforward referential witness” and testimony as a dissonant discursive practice that reflects a fragmented memory “overwhelmed by occurrences that have not

settled into understanding or remembrance” (148, 5), I consider ways in which these discourses interpellate their audience differently, and I investigate what happens when an (intra- or extradiegetic) audience expects one and receives the other. In the second part of the essay I identify ways in which Ondaatje also provokes his reader’s desire for an admission of mistaken identity and I argue that Ondaatje advocates replacing this process of reading for imposture with a process of reading through imposture. By considering the narrative shift between the characters’ desire to elicit a confession of mistaken identity and their subsequent adoption of an alternative narrative practice that accommodates multiplicity without attempting to impose a false continuity, I suggest how the process of reading through imposture might enable us to forego the desire for stable identities which, to borrow Ondaatje’s words, “makes the story errant” (*English* 248), in favour of a reading practice that considers how “our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place” in the departure from “sense and understanding” (Caruth 56).

I

Names do not constitute identities. But because identities tend to be agreed upon and stabilized through the mutual recognition and reiteration of names, it is useful to begin by considering the nature and effect of the names that are exchanged and withheld in this novel. Jacques Lacan suggests that “naming constitutes a pact by which two subjects simultaneously come to an agreement to recognise the same object” (qtd. in Butler 152). Although he does not argue that names guarantee identities, Lacan suggests that they are offered and received as guarantees. Moreover, he suggests that a proffered name enacts an image of otherness, a “not I,” against which an individual can confirm his or her own identity, and consequently constitutes name-calling as a process of self-recognition. Accepting this, we might understand why the patient’s desire to “erase [his] name” sits so uneasily with the nurse, the thief, and the sapper, who struggle to make sense of the horrors of war and to reconstitute themselves in the wake of those horrors (139).

While travelling in the North-African desert, the patient is overcome by a desire to recreate himself outside of the institutions through which identities are most often secured and codified:

Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Kbottara, Shaduf. I didn’t want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert.

Still, some wanted their mark there.... But I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. (139)

In light of the passion that appears to underlie the patient's desire for namelessness in North Africa, the reader is encouraged to ask whether his apparent inability to identify himself after coming to Italy is a ruse. At the same time, the reader is made to wonder about the identities of the other characters, whose names are also under erasure in the first part of the narrative. For example, in the twenty-three pages that constitute the first section of the novel, the nurse is pictured attending to the patient, but her name is not given. At the beginning of the second section, the thief arrives and eventually identifies the nurse by name. But names are strangely absent from the greeting he extends after seeing her for the first time in many years. "Tell me what a tonsil is," he says (30).² The effect is unsettling. By offering "tonsil" as a noun where the reader expects and hopes for a name, Ondaatje encourages the reader to acknowledge her own desire for a guarantee of stable identity and her expectation that a name will function as a guarantee.

This desire for stable and stabilizing names is exacerbated by the variously unsatisfactory names that are eventually offered. The man who enquires after a tonsil is called David Caravaggio. Because this name is shared by a famous Italian Renaissance painter, it fails to guarantee singularity. On the other hand, the nurse's name is so singular that it cannot be used to place her socially. She is referred to as Hana. Her family name is notably absent. Likewise, the sapper's name is also truncated. Shortly after arriving for military training in England, he is nicknamed "Kip" by his fellow soldiers. That name is a derivative of his given name, Kirpal, but also has other resonances: it contains an allusion to kippers, the salty English fish with which the sapper is unfamiliar, and also to Rudyard Kipling's Kim, a character with whom he is compared. But it is the patient whose (non-)name is most obviously catechrestic: given the record numbers of wounded soldiers at the end of the war, the title of "patient" fails to designate individuality. Likewise, the nominal attribution of Englishness misidentifies one who is, we learn, most likely Hungarian.

The reader who recognizes Hana from Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* will remember that her biological parents were killed when she was a child. That reader will also recognize Patrick, the man whose recent death Hana mourns in *The English Patient*, as her stepfather. When Patrick is killed in the war, Hana is orphaned for the second time. In light of this, the singular nature of her name suggests that her claim to the illusory permanence of the patronym has been thrown into crisis. It could also be argued

that Hana's failure to constitute herself through the use of a patronym represents her refusal of the contingency and impermanence that women's names have traditionally assumed. But, as Susan Ellis argues, Hana's wartime decision to refer to everyone she meets as "Buddy" indicates that she has been so affected by the deaths of soldiers whom she has nursed that she abandons "the relational imperative created by [all] names" (28).

Accepting for the moment that the attribution and reiteration of a name also stabilizes the identity of the subject doing the naming, the question Hana puts to the patient can also be understood to signal her own desire for self-validation: "Who are you?" she asks (5). "I don't know. You keep asking me," responds the patient (5). Although it may be that Hana "keep[s] asking" because Patrick's death has forced her to renegotiate the extent to which her place in the social order is contingent on the use of a patronym, it is also true that she asks because she sees the patient in the image of Patrick, who also died as a result of burns.

Given that one of the books from which Hana reads to the patient is Kipling's *Kim*, the question she puts to the patient also echoes the question at the centre of Kipling's narrative: "Who is Kim?" The difference is that Kipling's cross-culturally identified Irish boy asks this question of himself, while Ondaatje's nurse externalizes it. In both cases, the question is an index of the self-alienation felt by the speaker. But because the patient does not answer Hana, she is forced to find another avenue for securing a reintegrated self-image. Accordingly, Hana undertakes to reinvent herself and her housemates as characters in the narratives she reads. She watches Kip and the patient together and imagines that she sees a scene from *Kim* in reverse:

Hana had watched [Kip] sitting beside the English patient, and it seemed to her a reversal of Kim. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English. But it was Hana in the night who stayed with the old man, who guided him over the mountains to the sacred river. They had even read that book together, Hana's voice slow when wind flattened the candle flame beside her, the page dark for a moment. (111)

Although the narrator's observation that "the sapper entered their lives, as if out of this fiction" underscores the nominal likeness between Kip and Kim (94), Hana likens herself to "the young boy in the story" (111). She decides that "if Kip was anyone, he was the officer Creighton" (111). As part of an attempt to discern a relationship between identity, confession,

and imposture, Hana's rendition of Kim is significant because it suggests the inconstancy of the identifications that she makes. Likewise, it is significant insofar as it is symptomatic of what Stephen Scobie identifies as "a recurrent theme of deferral or substitution" (99).³

Scobie argues that each "character deflects his or her true desire through the image of another," and that the "nameless, passive" English patient becomes a "screen" onto which they project their own histories (99). While Hana sees the patient in Patrick's image, Kip reconstitutes him in the image of his recently deceased friend Lord Suffolk, who was the leader of the unexploded-bombs unit in which Kip served. But it is Caravaggio whose desire to (re)ascribe a particular identity to the patient is the most pressing and the most complex:

War has unbalanced [Caravaggio] and he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises. . . . All his life he has avoided permanent intimacy. Till this war he has been a better lover than husband. He has been a man who slips away, in the way lovers leave chaos, the way thieves leave reduced houses.

He watches the man in the bed. He needs to know who this Englishman from the desert is, and reveal him for Hana's sake. Or perhaps invent a skin for him. (116-17)

Caravaggio not only "needs to know who [the] Englishman from the desert is," he "needs" the patient to be Count Ladislaus de Almásy, the English-educated Hungarian whose shifting war-time allegiances made him inadvertently responsible for the torture undergone by Caravaggio.⁴

Caravaggio hopes that the patient's self-explanatory narrative will allow him to make sense of his own suffering. Equally, he hopes that the patient's confession will allow him, Caravaggio, to claim a more legitimate identity for himself. As Scobie notes, Caravaggio is a particularly "unorthodox" thief who is constantly distracted by the idiosyncrasies of the people from whom he steals: "in a sense, he steals not so much their property as their identities" (98). When he goes to war, his penchant for stealing identities is made temporarily legitimate by the British army, where he is trained in this practice and is assigned to projects that require him to "invent double agents" (98). But as the war comes to an end, Caravaggio thinks:

He had lived through a time of war when everything offered up to those around him was a lie. He had felt like a man in the darkness of a room imitating the calls of a bird.

But here they were shedding skins. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defence but to look for the truth in others. (117)

Stripped of the opportunity to “imitate” or concoct alternative identities, Caravaggio hopes that the patient’s admission of mistaken identity will confirm the “truthfulness” of the social identity that he, Caravaggio, renegociates. To this end, he supplies the patient with a cocktail of drugs that causes him to speak freely. However, by the time the patient finishes speaking, Caravaggio has decided that it “no longer matters which side he was on during the war” (251): when Hana asks him, “Is he what you thought he was?” Caravaggio answers, “He’s fine. We can let him be” (265).⁵

One of the reasons for Caravaggio’s apparent change of heart is that the narrative offered by the patient is not the confession he expects. It is not a confession at all. It is, rather, a testimony. Confession, at its most generic, is a self-explanatory and referential narrative that traces a path from fall to redemption.⁶ Testimony is neither continuous nor transparent. Shoshana Felman defines it this way:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not been settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (5)

According to Felman, confession assumes the self-transparency of language and lies in the name of a truth that is coordinated through the imposition of false continuity (149). The “meaning of the testimony,” unlike that of the confession, is, she argues, “not completely known, even by its author” (163). Thus, where confession is ostensibly referential, testimony is an avowedly excessive, dissonant mode of relating to “the traumas of contemporary history” (5). As a means of understanding Caravaggio’s response to the patient’s very fractured narrative, the distinction outlined by Felman is useful because it suggests the extent to which the two genres interpellate their audiences differently. Confession is received as a matter of truth, but the fractured and insufficient nature of testimony means that it cannot be configured as such. Because testimony does not constitute a “true” identity, it cannot be evaluated on the basis of its truth-value. Instead, it demands to be understood as a question of self-knowledge. This has ramifications for Caravaggio, who receives one where he expects the other and is thus forced to reconstitute a crisis of truth as a crisis of self-knowledge.

Insofar as confession typically involves an explicit or implicit appeal for reintegration into a community, it tends to construct its audience as integrated members of a community who can, through their receipt of the confession, offer absolution. Although Caravaggio's ploy is certainly underpinned by the desire for an image of himself as personally and socially integrated, the proffered narrative offers no opportunity for integration. The patient provides the personal details about his affair with Katharine Clifton that corroborate Caravaggio's suspicions, but does not construct his relationship to the subject of that narrative as stable or consistent. Occasionally, he refers to himself as Almásy. At other times he speaks of Almásy in the third person. For example, at the end of a passage describing his love affair with Katharine in the first person, the patient switches to the third person, saying:

Almásy was drunk and attempting an old dance step he had invented called the Bosphorus hug, lifting Katharine Clifton into his wiry arms and traversing the floor until he fell with her across some Nile-grown aspidistras.

Who is he speaking as now? Caravaggio thinks. (244)

Evidently, the patient is so overwhelmed by war-time experiences, which "cannot be constructed as knowledge" or "assimilated into full cognition" (Felman 5), that neither he nor his listener can know whether the identity created within the narrative is in fact his own. Because his narrative does not constitute a penitent subject at and as its centre, it does not offer the listener a "not I" against which to affirm the centredness of his own subjectivity. And because it does not involve an appeal for absolution, absolution cannot be actively denied or granted by Caravaggio.

"I promised to tell you how one falls in love" (229). This is the line with which the patient begins his testimony. Erratically, he proceeds backwards in time, occasionally interrupting his disorienting narrative to address Caravaggio directly. "When Almásy speaks [Caravaggio] stays alongside him reordering the events" of what he knows is likely an "apocryphal story" (248). As the addressee who witnesses and receives the testimony, Caravaggio becomes what Felman calls "the vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension *beyond himself*" (3). He is both a vehicle of transformation and is himself transformed. Like Elias Canetti, the Nobel Prize laureate who has described the "life-testimonies" of Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky as having "penetrated" him like "an actual life," Caravaggio is changed (qtd. in Felman 2). Most notably, he speaks more freely. Although Caravaggio is one from whom "words

did not emerge easily” (252), he “[begins] to talk” with a new purpose at the end of the patient’s morphia-induced testimony (268). When the patient says, “You must talk to me Caravaggio. Or am I just a book? Something to be read, some creature to be tempted out of a loch and shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies?” the thief responds with a tentative attempt to narrativize his own wartime experiences (253). Specifically, Caravaggio acknowledges that the war “legitimized” his talent for stealing things and inventing identities in a way that civilian life never did (253). In doing so, he suggests that it is the spectre of illegitimacy that makes returning to the “other world” so difficult (116).

“Bearing witness to a trauma,” argues Dori Laub, “is a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*— in the position of one who hears” (Felman and Laub 70). As the “one who hears,” Caravaggio actively participates in the patient’s fragmented attempt to communicate something of the trauma of war and the pain of lost love. In the process of “reordering the events” of the patient’s testimony, Caravaggio decides that he is ready to exchange his thief’s tendency to court shadows for a more open, intimate relationship with the world: “What Caravaggio wants is his arms around the sapper and Hana or, better, people of his own age, in a bar where he knows everyone, where he can dance and talk with a woman, rest his head on her shoulder, lean his head against her brow, whatever” (251).

“Or am I just a book?” On one hand, this rhetorical question indicates the extent to which the inhabitants of the Villa have attempted to “read” the patient to their own ends. On the other hand, the question elicits a modest attempt at testimony and suggests that one of those inhabitants has reconsidered his relationship to the patient and has reimagined a more dynamic and dialogic role for himself as reader. This is confirmed in the following scene. When Caravaggio leaves the patient’s bedside and joins Hana and Kip in a celebration of Hana’s birthday, their comfortable conversation stands in stark contrast to the halting speech and lengthy silences that characterize earlier exchanges. Over dinner, the sapper asks for stories about Toronto “as if it were a place of peculiar wonders” and, like Caravaggio, “he beg[ins] to talk about himself” (267). “Pacing with pleasure at all this” (268), Caravaggio responds by telling a story about a time when a much younger Hana sang the ‘Marseillaise’ (268). When Kip responds by making a faltering attempt to sing a version of this song, Hana says, “No, you have to sing it *out*,’ . . . ‘you have to sing it standing up!’” (269). She then climbs on the table and sings it for a second time:

“She was singing it as if it was something scarred, as if one couldn’t ever again bring all the hope of the song together ... Singing in the voice of a tired traveller, alone against everything. A new testament” (269). When Hana repeats this song for Kip, she invests it with the pain and estrangement of her recent experience while also “echoing the heart” of her audience (269).

If the bedside encounter between Caravaggio and the patient marks a shift from the appeal for confession to the appreciation of testimony, the song Hana sings celebrates that shift. At the same time, it suggests how the shift from confession to testimony might be also understood as a progression from misidentification to disidentification. Disidentification is a term coined by Michel Pêcheux to address the process by which an individual negotiates the various political and discursive practices through which her subjectivity is produced. Specifically, he suggests disidentification as an alternative to identification and counteridentification. The first is the freely given consent or *méconnaissance* for which the Althusserian paradigm of subject formation has been criticized.⁷ The second is the ideologically oppositional form of self-definition which, as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* note, “may inadvertently support what it seeks to oppose” insofar as it remains locked within the logic which it seeks to undermine (170). Only disidentification involves an attempt to negotiate and transform dominant ideologies. Following Pêcheux, I want to argue that disidentification underlies and enables testimony. As a discursive practice, a process that does not present itself as a “completed statement” but rather, by way of its simultaneous insufficiency and excessiveness, enables an encounter with “events in excess of our frames of reference” (Felman 5), testimony requires the ongoing “transformation-displacement” of the “subject-form” that is disidentification (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 170).

As a disidentificatory practice, Hana’s rendition of the French national anthem invests the song with difference through repetition. Although Kip reflects that it is traditionally sung “by groups of men, often during strange moments, such as before an impromptu soccer match” (269), Hana’s version of the song is not a rousing salute to the nation. Sung in a “tentative” voice that acknowledges that “one couldn’t ever again bring all the hope of the song together” (269), the song is a requiem expressing Hana’s inability to put her faith in the nation as a locus of socially grounded subjectivity. While not so definitive as the patient’s proclaimed desire to “erase nations,” Hana’s rendition of the ‘Marseillaise’ nevertheless testifies to her attempt to renegotiate the relationship between citizenship and subjectivity in light of the violence she has seen waged in the name of nationhood.

Given that she twice tells Kip “This is for you” (269), it can also be argued that Hana’s “testament” is the medium with which she extends this sentiment to Kip, an Indian who loves the fact that the English inscribe their maps with the phrase “drawn by desire” but loathes the colonialist ideologies colouring the land-grabs represented on the maps themselves (190).

Echoing Laub’s characterization of testimony as a process that includes the “intimate and total presence of an *other*” who actively participates in the proffered narrative (70), Caravaggio observes that Hana “was singing with and echoing the heart of the sapper” (269). And, looking at the little candles that Kip has created from snail shells filled with paraffin oil and scattered throughout the garden in honour of Hana’s birthday, Caravaggio also calls her song a “song of snail light” (269). In answer to Caravaggio’s comment that there must be at least forty shells spread before him, Kip explains that there are forty-five, representing “the years so far of this century” (267). “Where I come from,” Kip says, “we celebrate the age as well as ourselves” (267). Like Hana’s sung “testament,” Kip’s gift of “snail light” celebrates their love for one another while also exploring feelings of cultural, national, and racial difference (269). Although they form a “ring of light” (268), the forty-five lights that live in “dead shells” also comment on the separateness that exists between the woman who wants her lover to “know her only in the present” and the man who “moved at a speed that allowed him to replace loss” (267, 268, 272). While the fragile lights can thus be understood as broadly representative of the unassimilated fragments of memory that are variously coveted, exchanged, and reckoned with in the course of the narrative, any attempt to see Kip’s lights or Hana’s song as modest images of hope shored up against the detritus of war must be mediated by an acknowledgement that the hopefulness of this scene is overshadowed by the impending bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁸ To do otherwise is to overlook the awful irony that Kip’s warning regarding bombs concealed in books (75) is contained within a bombed-out narrative whose fragments have as much to do with shrapnel and shell-shock as they do with “snail song.”

II

“Even among those she worked closely with [Hana] hardly talked during the war” (85). When she arrives at Villa San Girolamo, she still speaks reluctantly and is, for the most part, unable to narrativize her wartime experiences. Instead, Hana prefers to immerse herself in other, pre-existing narratives. Books become “half her world” (7). In the library she seeks

respite from the destruction that is everywhere evident in and around the bombed-out villa.⁹ She conceives of the library as a place where she can disappear, literally: when entering and leaving the potentially mine-filled library, Hana steps again on the old marks her footprints have made on the dust-covered floor “for safety, but also as part of a private game, so it would seem from the steps that she had entered the room and then the corporeal body had disappeared” (12). At the same time as Hana’s visits to the library engender a fantasy about the disappearance of the corporeal body, they also allow her to reconceptualize her body as a repository of texts: “She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments” (12). But hers is not the only body that Hana imagines as a text. At the patient’s bedside, “She watches Kip lean his head back against the wall and knows the look on his face. She can read it” (178). Although Hana’s confusion of bodies with texts does not enact violence in and of itself, her literary “escape” emerges as a fanciful and defensive act which is premised on an untenable opposition between textuality and violence and which fails to admit the violence done by representation.

Ondaatje’s critique of reading practices that fail to explore the relationship between text and context is encoded implicitly — but powerfully — in his characterization of the patient and the sapper. These two characters are not only described as textual entities, they are also inscribed in ways that the other two are not: the patient has history written into his flesh with fire; and, while going through the procedures involved in enlisting in the British army, the sapper is identified by a number that he has inscribed on his body with chalk, the same chalk that is, he notes, “scribbled on the side of bombs” (199). In light of these events, the attempt to represent either of their bodies — or any body — as an inscribed entity without acknowledging the context and circumstances of inscription repeats the violence of that inscription.

Kip warns the other inhabitants of Villa San Girolamo that they must take care when using the library because bombs are frequently attached to the spines of books (75). With this metaphorically loaded image of books as literal sites of violence, Ondaatje overtly rejects any semblance of an oppositional relationship between textuality and violence. The rhetorical question put by the patient makes the same point with more subtlety. “Am I just a book?” he asks. Because the question draws attention to the act of reading, it reminds the reader that the patient is, indeed, “just a book.” But it has other implications. Most signifi-

cantly, it undercuts the opposition between representation and the real by suggesting that the blackened body which lies prone and unmoving on a white sheet (like a letter on a page) is seen as a text by those who view it. However, as a counterpoint to Hana's optimistic image of the body as a repository of language, the patient's textualized corpus affirms the violence with which history is written on the body.

If Hana's attempt to lose herself in the vestiges of books damaged by bombs affirms a tension between text and context, that tension is exacerbated in her repeated attempts to produce her experiences as intertext by writing herself into the books that fill the Villa's library:

She opens *The Last of the Mohicans* to the blank page at the back and begins to write in it.

There is a man named Caravaggio, a friend of my father's. I have always loved him....

She closes the book and then walks down into the library and conceals it in one of the high shelves. (61)

Before his accident, the patient did something similar. When in Africa, he carried a copy of Herodotus's *The Histories*. In it he pasted numerous texts, some of which he had composed and some of which he had collected from other writers. The book is the only object he manages to salvage from the fire that nearly kills him and, significantly, it is the one to which he accords a unique, even super-textual, significance: "No more books," he says to Hana. "Just give me the Herodotus" (118). As Hana passes *The Histories* to him, the patient quotes its author: "'This history of mine,' Herodotus says, 'has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument'" (119). Ondaatje's explicit reference to the "supplementary" in and of the patient's book suggests that he flirts very consciously with Jacques Derrida's reading of the supplement. But there is reason to be wary of attempts to constitute Ondaatje's reading of supplementarity and intertextuality as affirmative. Admittedly, the additions the patient makes to Herodotus's text and those which Hana makes to the texts she finds in the library can be said to supplement or add to the existing narrative while also pointing to the totalizing but incomplete nature of any form of representation. However, their intertextual practices are not sustainable and are not widely available.¹⁰ The opportunity to lose oneself in a text or to recreate oneself as text without context is, Ondaatje suggests, a privilege which exists only for those whose bodies have not been written on. It is a privilege which is not, for example, available to Kip.

Kip's relationship to literature and, more specifically, to the English

textual tradition is deeply ambivalent. Unlike the other characters, he has no “faith in books” (111). Instead, he is said to have a “rogue gaze” which recognizes “the false descants” encrypted on a given page (110, 111). Although Kip tells Hana that he did not feel insulted by the Army physician’s inscription of his body with chalk-marks, this unsolicited protestation suggests that the incident had an impact on him, and it inadvertently constitutes that experience as one which played a role in providing him with the “rogue gaze” that performs different readings of the nineteenth-century colonial romances which Hana favours.¹¹ But the vast differences between Hana’s reading habits and Kip’s relationship to the texts that circulate at Villa San Girolamo do not become glaringly obvious until the end of the narrative when Kip, who has his radio turned on as he works in a field adjacent to the villa, hears that Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been bombed. Unlike Hana, who has (or had) the ability to lose herself in texts, Kip is irrevocably located by what he hears: “he closes his eyes [and] he sees the streets of Asia full of fire” (284). And, unlike Hana’s temporary book-found freedom from the burden of corporeality, Kip’s receipt of this radio text renders him keenly aware of his own bodily difference. For the first time, a seemingly unbridgeable racial and cultural chasm separates him from those whose company he keeps:

All he knows is, he feels he can no longer let anything approach him, cannot eat the food or even drink from a puddle on a stone bench on the terrace. He does not feel he can draw a match out of his bag and fire the lamp, for he believes the lamp will ignite everything.... His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here. (287)

As an Indian in Europe, Kip has had to become “accustomed to [the] invisibility” which is wrought by unspoken racism (196). But when he learns about the Allied bombing of Japan, his own cultural and racial differences seem suddenly insurmountable. In particular, the Englishness and — implicitly — the whiteness encoded in his nickname become untenable and undesirable. Thus, the sapper rejects that name and reconstitutes himself as Kirpal Singh. In doing so, he also rejects his nominal affiliation with a textual tradition (Kipling) and a cultural tradition (kip-pers) that cannot, in light of the recent event, be his own.

Judith Butler argues that names that fail to stabilize multiple identifications offer “an occasion for the retheorization of cross-identification or, rather, the crossing that is, it seems, at work in every identificatory practice” (143). While this holds true for each of the variously misnamed and un-

named characters in *The English Patient*, it is particularly true in regards to the sapper. Even as the instability and insufficiency of Kip's name mark it as an occasion for a reappraisal of cross-identification, Kip's refusal of that name marks it as the site of disidentification. He claims not to have minded the name "Kip" when it was first used, preferring it to the English habit of calling people by their family names (87-88). He refuses it only when it fails to offer the self-recognition or cohesion that Althusser calls *méconnaissance*. Thus it might be said that, in the course of the narrative, naming comes to be constituted less as an occasion for *méconnaissance* and more as an opportunity for scrutiny or *réconnaissance*.

Immediately after hearing that Japan has been bombed, the sapper rushes to the Villa and confronts the patient. Kip is desperate and wields a gun:

I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I'd be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had the histories and printing presses?

Here ... listen to what you people have done. (283)

With that, Kip throws the rifle on the bed and fastens his earphones onto the burned man's head. Significantly, Kip's determination to constitute the patient as English and as broadly representative of the colonialist epistemologies that make the bombing of Japan conceivable is imagined as an inverse of Caravaggio's earlier attempt to constitute the patient as *not* English. Caravaggio attempted to establish the patient as answerable for his (Caravaggio's) suffering, whereas Kip constructs the patient as answerable for all of the death and dispossession wrought by the English imperial project, culminating in the Allied bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In answer to Caravaggio's demand, the patient, "shot full of morphine ... [and] lies" (253), is able to produce a narrative "drawn by [the] desire" of his audience (190). He tells Caravaggio what he wants to hear, though not in the way that he wants to hear it. In contrast, the patient meets Kip's accusations with silence. He tugs the earphones from his ears and pulls away his hearing aid. "I don't want to hear any more," he says (285). With this self-imposed silence, the usually voluble patient acknowl-

edges that this occurrence so exceeds his frame of reference that he is unable to constitute it in or as language.

When Caravaggio enters the room and reminds Kip that the patient is not English, Kip quips, “American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman” (286). The seemingly simple and oppositional logic underpinning this statement has met with criticism. For example, Morton A. Kaplan argues that Kip’s response is historically inaccurate and does not account for the cruel paucity of choices offered in war-time.¹² What Kaplan does not consider is that this very personal response is not offered or intended as an historical account. Indeed, it is offered in opposition to the measured mediocrities of more formal historical discourses. When Kip says, “I’ll leave you the radio to swallow your history lesson” (285), the “lesson” to which he refers is concerned not with historical accuracy, but rather with a relationship to history that is, in the wake of an unassimilated encounter with trauma, no longer straightforwardly referential.

Stephen Scobie counters Kaplan’s criticism with the argument that “everything about the novel has surely indicated to the intelligent reader that the logic of the imagery will take precedence over any strict adherence to the conventions of realism” (94). Given Ondaatje’s efforts to account for trauma without aestheticizing suffering, Scobie’s suggestion that imagery has its own — privileged — logic is unsettling. Nevertheless, his point is worth exploring. Like Scobie, I am inclined to defend the logic of the scene between Kip and the patient, but not, as he does, by privileging the sovereignty of images. Rather, it is the logic of testimony that takes precedence over the conventions of realism. It disallows them. In much the same way as the strangely formal command with which Caravaggio greets Hana (“Tell me what a tonsil is”) signals the uncertainty with which its speaker negotiates a world that no longer appears “fully named” (21), the simple prose in which Kip’s desperation is first figured acknowledges the excessiveness of an event whose significance cannot be registered immediately or with ease.

On the one hand, Ondaatje registers the excess of trauma by refusing to allow it to pass through language. On the other hand, he affirms the process of narrativization as potentially rehabilitative. In the wake of Kip’s silent departure from Villa San Girolamo, Hana composes a letter to her stepmother, Clara. Throughout the war Hana has carried Clara’s letters with her but has been unable to respond. Though she “has missed Clara with a woe,” she finds herself unable to compose a response because she

“cannot bear to talk of or even acknowledge the death of Patrick” (92). The letter which she finally writes is both an acknowledgement of his death and an avowal of her own newly formed desire to leave Europe and return to Canada. It is also a final testament which, in the wake of the preceding crisis, affirms her journey through silence and misidentification to narrative and disidentification. Although the tone of Hana’s letter is tentative, the questions she asks in her letter to Clara differ significantly from the question which she had repeatedly put to the patient at the beginning of the narrative. Once she had asked “Who are you?” to the patient in hopes that he would respond by offering a name that would confirm his identity and that might, in its reiterative possibility, allow her to reconceive of herself as integrated and stable. Now she asks, “*how was my father burned?*” and “*How did Patrick end up in a dove-cote, Clara?*” (296, 295).¹³ These are not rhetorical questions. They are questions that require something of the asker because they put hope not in the plenitude of language, but in the possibility of reckoning and the necessity of witnessing.

After his impassioned outburst in the patient’s bedroom, the sapper does not speak to his housemates again. By choosing to register Kip’s realization of his own subalternity with silence, Ondaatje acknowledges that the self-consciousness of the subaltern subject cannot be articulated outside of that discourse which also provides the hierarchies of value that denigrate the subaltern’s race and ethnicity. But because he has Kip name English “speeches of civilisation,” “histories” and “printing presses,” in his passionate indictment of the bombing of Japan (285, 283), Ondaatje also draws attention to the ways in which the institution of literature has fostered and maintained the sense of alienation that overwhelms Kip when he “closes his eyes [and] sees the streets of Asia full of fire” (284). In the final section of the novel, Ondaatje negotiates the questions that are inevitably raised about his own relationship to the literary establishment and to the figure of the “great” writer by including — in his cast of characters — an authorial figure who distances himself from the privileged knowledge traditionally associated with the “great” writer.¹⁴ In a sort of extradiegetic aside, a figure referred to only as “the writer” intrudes on the narrative and describes Hana in this way: “She is,” he claims, “a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life” (301). With this comment, Ondaatje’s “writer” abandons any pretence of authorial control, suggesting that he (the writer) does not name the patient because even he is unable to determine whether that man is uncertain of his identity or whether he lies. By eschewing any claims to omniscience, the “writer” accords a great deal

of responsibility to the reader, who must re-evaluate all of the “writer’s” characterizations on the basis of this belated admission of limited insight. In the final pages of this essay, I want to consider the consequences that Ondaatje’s inclusion of a “writer” has for his reader.

In an interview with Stephen Smith, Ondaatje claims that the image of a man falling from a plane is the image around which the narrative is organized. “I had this little fragment of a guy who had crashed in the desert. I didn’t know who he was, or anything” (“In the Skin of a Patient” 69). Stephen Scobie points out that Ondaatje’s admission of uncertainty means that “the business of the novel becomes the telling of a story to explain who he was. How did he get there? Why was he burning” (93). Certainly Scobie is right to suggest that Ondaatje toys with the genre of detective writing, provoking the desire to establish social identities which underpins that genre. But Ondaatje uses the detective genre ironically; he appeals to detective fiction in order to undercut the realization of stable categories of identity. Although the reader of both texts is encouraged to look for evidence of “whodunit” or, more to the point, “who is it?,” a dénouement that allows for the restitution of stable social identities is conspicuously absent. Instead, the author figure admits that he does not know his characters well enough to say anything conclusive about their lives, thus forsaking his traditional function as the supposed “mediator of truth” and transforming the narrative into what Dennis Foster calls “an object of desire” (112).

Although Foster’s comment about the author-figure’s traditional role as a privileged purveyor of truths is offered in the context of an argument he makes about Samuel Beckett’s novel *The Unnameable*, it has resonance for a discussion of *The English Patient*. Foster contends that while narrative reference to an “I” has, since the romantic period, traditionally represented “the particular subjectivity narrating a tale,” the “I” in *The Unnameable* refers to “no unified subject, to no single creating mind that can shape the words into a whole” (105). In contrast, the “I” in *The English Patient* represents the authorial voice as singular, if not unified, but unable to satisfy the desire to possess a truth concealed by language. That is, Ondaatje’s “writer” would have the reader believe that he does not name the patient because even he is unable to determine whether that man is uncertain of his identity or whether he lies. Thus, the “writer’s” intrusion in a book that has a bomb at its centre “explodes” the conceptual frame that might otherwise be seen to contain the shards of the story as a whole.

Whereas I have suggested that Ondaatje alludes to the detective genre as a means of provoking the reader’s desire for conclusiveness, Stephen

Scobie argues that *The English Patient* fulfils its generic mandate as detective fiction and “answers the questions implied by Ondaatje when he remarks, ‘I didn’t know who he was, or anything’” (98). In an attempt to construct the text as “complicit with Caravaggio’s desire” for an admission of mistaken identity and a restitution of more “legitimate” identities, Scobie cites the narrator’s use of the name Almásy to refer to the patient (98). But the narrator does not use that name exclusively. He refers to the patient as “Almásy” and as “the English patient.” And there is also a second, more significant reason to resist Scobie’s conclusion that the text allows for the restoration of rightful identities. The patient describes himself as “shot full of morphine, full of corridors, lies” (253). In light of this reference to “lies,” one wonders if the story that he tells Caravaggio enacts a retelling of the “lies” that the thief has fed to him. That is, one wonders if the dying man appropriates the lies that Caravaggio wants to be true and reconstitutes himself in the image of Caravaggio’s desire. Although this version of events is no more plausible than any other, it is carefully constituted as possible. If nothing else, this means that the reader who accepts the patient’s story at face value must wonder at her own appetite for “lies.”

In *The English Patient* the tension between the desire for the restitution of stable identities, on the one hand, and the author’s determination to provoke but not meet that desire, on the other, is carried out at two levels. In the first place, it exists between the “writer” and those characters whose reading practices are reformed in the course of the novel. But it also exists between the “writer” and the reader, who is given a reading lesson of her own. With his refusal to offer any insight into the “true” identities of the characters, the “writer” creates the same desire for conclusiveness in his reader that he challenges and amends in his characters. In doing so, he urges the reader to evaluate her own desire to see stable identities through an admission of mistaken identity. That is, he urges the reader to consider the extent to which she has been reading for revelations of imposture.

Although the intervention of the “writer” is not overtly pedagogical, it serves a pedagogical function. In this, the relationship between “writer” and reader is not unlike that between the patient and Caravaggio. Like Caravaggio, the reader is urged to adapt her reading practices in response to a disjunctive narrative address. And, like Caravaggio, the reader is offered testimony where she expects and hopes for a referential discourse that will enable the restitution of rightful identities. The “writer” claims that

She is a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if
writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life.

And so Hana moves and her face turns and in a regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a cupboard and a glass dislodges. (301-02)

This insistently visual passage can be characterized as testimony because testimony, as a form of address, depends for its efficacy on the assumed uniqueness of vision. Although the “writer” indicates that he does not know Hana, he suggests that he has a privileged, unique vision and is able to see her. Thus, as he disavows the authority and the privileged knowledge traditionally attributed to authors, he simultaneously claims the authority of an eye-witness, an individual whose command as speaker or narrator proceeds from the singularity of his vision. What is significant about this is not that it allows Ondaatje’s “writer” to establish his authority within an alternative paradigm, but that it establishes the preceding narrative in its entirety as testimony. Testimony, argues Felman, “cannot be simply relayed, repeated or reported by another without thereby losing its function as testimony” because its significance proceeds from the irreplaceability of the witness’s vision (3). By simultaneously inscribing and describing testimony, Ondaatje establishes the narrative as a radically unique and occasionally dissonant, but non-interchangeable vision/version of history.

While Kip warns that books can house bombs, Ondaatje warns that books cannot contain bombs because violence exceeds its representation. The only faithful inscription of a violent act is one which registers this paradox. While the patient’s belated telling of his lover’s death and his own complicity is fragmentary and erratic, it is also a faithful record of events that exceed all frames of reference and are thus not wholly available for the telling. Towards the end of the book, the other characters sense this and renegotiate their own narrative practices accordingly: Caravaggio foregoes his desire for a (mis)identificatory narrative and acknowledges that he “shall have to learn how to miss” his wartime companions (289); Hana writes a letter that begins by registering both the “formality” of language and the “eternal” beauty of “Maman,” a “personal word that can be shouted in public” (292); while Kip leaves the villa in silence, taking with him the sound of the English patient singing, “*And my words which I put in thy mouth shall not depart out of thy mouth*” (294). Years later, Kip sits in his garden and “watches Hana, her hair longer, in her own country” (300):

This is a limited gift he has somehow been given, as if a camera’s film reveals her, but only her, in silence. He cannot discern the company she moves among, her judgement; all he can witness is her character

and the lengthening of her dark hair, which falls again and then again into her eyes. (300)

The silent image that conscientiously negotiates the limits of its own knowing is the author's "gift" to the character who has a "rogue gaze," but it is also a challenge to the reader in whom he hopes to cultivate such a gaze. In the moments when his bombed-out narrative "resonates beyond what we can know and understand," Ondaatje challenges us to recognize that "it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our witnessing may indeed begin to take place" (Caruth 56).

"Desire," writes Ondaatje, "makes the story errant" (248). Reflecting this at the level of plot, Ondaatje creates characters whose desire to establish a consolidated self-image is manifested in variously "errant" attempts to identify others as having mistaken identities. At the same time, Ondaatje interpellates a readership whose reception of the story is at least as errant as the story itself. Specifically, he suggests that the reader's desire for (self-)consolidation ensures that the errors made by the characters will be repeated and exacerbated by the audience. By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that Ondaatje attempts to ameliorate these forecasted misreadings by advocating an alternative reading practice that involves replacing the habit of reading *for* imposture with a practice of reading *through* imposture. The difference is a significant one. While reading *for* imposture is a practice that culminates in the usually overdetermined assignation of identity, reading *through* imposture is a practice that involves articulating the expectations underlying the desire to determine a consolidated identity. Because imposture exists as an ascription of a fraudulent identity, the project of reading through imposture allows us to shift the critical gaze in the reception of imposture from "truth"-based dis/avowals of fraud and authenticity to more textually oriented investigations of the ways in which identity gets assumed in and through the narrative process. In short, the use of imposture as a lens through which to investigate the processes of subject formation allows us to re-evaluate the variously "errant" consequences of our desire for what Ondaatje calls a "fully named world."¹⁵

NOTES

¹ My decision to refer to the English patient as "the patient" is not a matter of convenience. It is an attempt to avoid foreclosing on the ambiguity surrounding his identity. Although the detailed and intimate nature of the patient's narrative suggests that he is likely

to be Hungarian-born Count Ladislaus de Almásy, the title of the text and the narrator's use of both names preserve a degree of ambiguity.

² Not only is the thief's name also withheld, but the first image of him describes an instance during the war in which he refused to give his name when asked and offered his serial number in its stead (27).

³ As numerous critics have noted, another instance of intertextual identification occurs in relation to the patient's memory of a time when Katharine, his wartime lover, reads the story of Candaules and Gyges aloud, constructing herself as the much-coveted queen and establishing the patient as Gyges, who slays the queen's husband Candaules. See Scobie's argument about the ways in which the text consistently destabilizes the identifications made by the characters and allows for alternative readings (99-100). Also see D. Mark Simpson's analysis of the intertextual reference to Caravaggio's painting *David with the Head of Goliath* (236).

⁴ See 163-65. Caravaggio explains that he worked with the British intelligence forces in North Africa and was assigned to track a "spy-helper" called Almásy (164). While doing so, Caravaggio was tortured by the Germans. Some time later, he tells Hana: "I'd like to talk with him some more.... Talking it out. Both of us. Do you understand?" (166).

⁵ The text is carefully ambiguous as to the identity of the person who gives the drug-injection to the patient. Caravaggio says to Hana, "You will have to give him the altered shot." She responds, "No, David. You're too obsessed. It doesn't matter who he is" (166). The next chapter opens with the following unattributed reference: "(3 CC'S BROMPTON COCK-TAIL. 3:00 P.M.)" (167). The suggestion that Hana is an unenthusiastic co-conspirator in Caravaggio's plot means that she might continue to have a desire to determine the patient's identity that is belied by her protestations.

⁶ For a more thorough exploration of the generic conventions of this narrative tradition, see Foster. Also see Thomas O'Donnell's *The Confessions of T. E. Lawrence: The Romantic Hero's Presentation of Self*. Although O'Donnell is not centrally concerned with the generic conventions of confession, his reading of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars* as a confession suggests a number of interesting parallels between Lawrence and the patient.

⁷ See, for example, Judith Butler's reading of Althusser in Chapter 4 of *Bodies that Matter*. Butler argues that the relationship which Althusser establishes between the individual and the state does not allow for "the range of *disobedience*" which the interpellating call by the law might produce (122).

⁸ Because references to specific dates and to the length of time between narrated events are conspicuously absent, it is difficult to locate this or any other scene in time. However, the last section of the text is entitled "August," suggesting that the scenes in the villa take place in the couple of months before August 1945.

⁹ So, too, does Caravaggio: "Caravaggio enters the library. He has been spending most afternoons there. As always, books are mystical creatures to him" (81).

¹⁰ Stephen Scobie also reads this excerpt from *The Histories* as "a dramatization, on Ondaatje's part, of the ideas that critical theorists would designate as 'supplementarity'" (100). However, his reading of supplementarity is, I think, more optimistic than the text warrants. Following Jacques Derrida, Scobie argues that the supplement "presupposes both that the original is complete ... and simultaneously, that [it] is *incomplete*" (100), but he does not address the violence implicit in Derrida's description of the supplement as an "evil eye" which "takes-the-place" of a textual lack (Derrida 146). Also see D. Mark Simpson's reading of this same passage in *The English Patient*. Simpson characterizes the patient's copy of *The Histories* as "a kind of talisman for Ondaatje's distressed text, wrought up in all manner of conflicting and insurgent knowledges" (223). He argues persuasively that the "distressed text" is not offered as a "utopian dissolution of alterity," but is "an irascible and tantalizing [im-

age of] proximity in difference that at once compels and agonizes imperial ambition, imperial memory, [and] imperial desire” (223).

¹¹ Hana is pictured reading *Kim*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *The Charterhouse of Palma*. The text also contains explicit allusions to John Milton, Anne Wilkinson, Christopher Smart, and Daphne du Maurier.

¹² Josef Pesch argues that the largely hostile responses of American reviewers (including Kaplan) to this section of the novel must be understood in relation to the “unresolved national trauma” surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (134-35n14).

¹³ Patrick dies in a dove-cote in France. See 292-93.

¹⁴ I have put the word “writer” in quotations in order to differentiate between Ondaatje and his author-figure.

¹⁵ I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting my research. Thanks, too, to Sam Durrant for his thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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