

**RESPONSE:****VENTURING INTO UNDISCOVERABLE COUNTRIES:****READING ONDAATJE, MALOUF, ATWOOD & JIA IN AN  
ASIA-PACIFIC CONTEXT**

Both "Race, Representation and Nationhood" and "Language, Time and Introspection," produce timely comparisons of major authors and their works—and by extension, of the Asia-Pacific region—and hence raise important questions about the difficulties of "reading" such a vast region comparatively. Certainly recent debates and public figures in Australia have emphasised the divide in no uncertain terms. And differences in cultural views, in human rights, and even in arguments over greenhouse gas emissions, make plain that comparative readings of this vast region are difficult.

This is not to say, however, that comparative work should not be done. On the contrary, the very difficulties compel us to look at ways in which we re/present ourselves to the world and to each other. The critical difficulties are themselves signals to us that we cannot take similarities for granted; that we cannot accept surface images lightly. Comparisons are difficult precisely because we are called upon to know two or more authors, regions, nations as well as we feel we know our own context. Ironically, few of us stand solidly, and unproblematically, in one place or even with/in a single identity. Indeed, frequently—usually—our own ground is contested space. To speak with any certainty about *another* region, therefore, is particularly brave; it is to venture into undiscovered—in some respects eternally undiscoverable—country.

But it is crucial that we venture into that territory. As bell hooks has argued in a different context,

Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often improvised. Theorizing about this experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice.... this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge.

Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk. (hooks 1990, 149)

For both Ray Younis and Yiyan Wang, the comparison of specific writers enables an analysis of the ways in which authors are both empowered to question, but also shaped by their particular nation, so that their questions can never be seen as unmediated by the spaces they inhabit. Younis and Wang, by their very project of comparison, venture out to the "profound edge," the risky margin where at times irreconcilable differences are brought together and made to speak meaningfully to each other.

This is made clear in the comparison of Margaret Atwood's and Jia Pingwa's work, where the paper focuses specifically on the way language itself is at issue in all self-representations—not simply because the authors use the medium of language, or because they concentrate frequently on characters who are implicated in the act of writing, but also because Atwood and Jia are themselves complicit with, and yet trapped by, the very forms they seek to deconstruct or deploy. But how much more interesting is this textual "game" when it is located within deep, and for some, unfathomable cultural differences. That language is itself invested with the "mark of gender," as Monique Wittig (1986, 63) has said, not of the French but of the English language, is now a commonplace observation. That writing has been used to represent the discursive disempowerment of minority cultures and groups is equally well rehearsed in contemporary theory. The value of the insight here is in the way such practices are brought into relief through the comparative method. Certainly Atwood's word games are legendary. Jia Pingwa is a mystery to me, and I can't pretend to be familiar with his work. But read together one is forced to reconsider perhaps the material effects of both authors' metaphors and textual games.

To read that "because the Chinese writing code is not essentially phonetic, and the style for writing history changed little over two millennia, the records of the remote and the recent past look much the same," forces me to re-read my own unconscious tendencies to accept pronouncements on historical method—even ironic and politically

challenging ones—in a different manner.

Those who have read *The Robber Bride* will remember that one of the main characters is that rarest of creatures—a *female* war historian—who enjoys recreating famous battles by using food instead of toy soldiers. Her habit of eating the losers is particularly interesting, given the argument in some quarters that academics consume and cannibalise their subjects of research. Tony, in *The Robber Bride*, not only enjoys consuming the victims of history, she is also a wordsmith, who revels in puns and palindromes, and has a penchant for writing out a message with one hand and reversing it simultaneously with the other. This is entirely fitting since, as Tony herself puts it in *The Robber Bride*, "*All history is written backwards.*"

This perception, of course, underpins a great deal of contemporary theorising and method, particularly concerning the re/vision of history which many of us, particularly post-colonialists or indigenous theory specialists, are engaged in. The story alters in interesting ways, however, if we change the very epistemological and ontological models upon which we base our conclusions. Western teleology founders in the space of Aboriginal Dreamtime narratives, for example, which to some degree seem to approach the pattern outlined in Yiyan Wang's paper for Chinese language and history which is characterised by its cyclical nature, and where history is seen as ahead of, rather than behind, the individual.

This has profound implications for the metonymic nature of one literature as opposed to another. My questions, as I read the paper, were oddly to do with different types of texts—Tiananmen Square, for example—and to wonder whether the re-writing of that particular event by the Government was made easier given the circular, non-linear, nature of memory, language and history in Chinese culture. And yet, ironically, despite this different system of knowing and speaking, it is surprising that both authors—Margaret Atwood and Jia Pingwa—undertake similar textual journeys, critiquing and deconstructing similar dimensions of individual self-construction, and by extension, of story and of myths of nation.

It is precisely this intersection between nationalism and literature which underpins R.A. Younis's paper, one which revolves around texts by Michael Ondaatje and David Malouf. The choice of authors is particularly interesting because they themselves—though particularly Ondaatje—can be seen to contest the very specificity of nationalistic definitions.

As a Sri Lankan who migrated to Britain and then to Canada when he was eighteen, Ondaatje can be said to resist categorisation. Moreover, his very canon of work has itself repeatedly slipped out of the grasp of critics and readers, blurring genres and styles, fusing poetry and prose, autobiography and fiction, until the categories themselves became useless.

For Malouf, as a Lebanese Australian, born in Australia but living mostly in Tuscany, his rise to fame has, like Ondaatje's, obscured his "ethnic origin," so that more recent migrants like Ania Walwicz and Antigone Kefala continue to be spoken of as migrants, where Malouf is not.

*The English Patient* is an interesting choice for an analysis of "Race, Representation and Nationhood," rather than say, *Running in the Family* which locates Ondaatje in Sri Lanka looking for his father, or *In the Skin of a Lion*, which specifically engages in a critique of migrant issues and re-views history and the history-making process. *The English Patient* is an altogether different text, about memory and responsibility, about identity and fabrication. And it is available, not merely in two forms, but in fact in at least four—given that there are now two different versions of the script and screenplay on sale (Minghella 1995; 1996) as well as the film and novel.

What all these different stories offer is the unstable and contradictory accounts of place and nation which the very forms of their representation allow (which brings us back to the first paper again). As Younis has argued, Ondaatje's book is indeed an attempt "to dismantle racialised perceptions and representations" through its important concentration on Kip and his ambiguous relationship to English values and ideals. Younis is correct when he argues that "Ondaatje wishes to affirm differences within identity in order to show that internal divisions and discontinuities are not only possible and tolerable

but can also be sources of a rich and complex life." These views are made possible, however, in part because they emerge in a highly elliptical and "high art" product, which is independent of the social and economic pressures which are brought to bear on, for example, medium budget Hollywood films—hence the importance of the comparison. Perhaps this is why Kip all but disappears, in any substantial sense, from the film by Anthony Minghella. This is probably why, despite the romance genre of the movie, Kip does not get to kiss Hana goodbye, as though somehow such miscegenation would bring the film apart (the way 1950s films feared such moments, or contemporary Hollywood now fears same-sex kissing). And more centrally, this is why the greatest condemnation—the loudest, and for some the most problematic moment in the novel, the explosion of Hiroshima which indicts the West in unarguable terms—is left out.

This act of "creative vandalism" as one critic put it, was the result of pressure from not entirely unpredictable quarters. Originally the bombs exploding saw Kip storm into the English Patient's room and confront him:

Can you hear? Can you hear what they're celebrating? I listened to you, Uncle. Sitting at your feet—always sitting at somebody's feet—trying to learn. The right way to hold a cup of tea, otherwise you're out, the pukka knot in your tie—as if everything can be explained in terms of a cricket bat and an accent. (Thornhill, 21)

Later he says, "They're excited! They're happy about destroying a whole city. Would they do that to a white man's city? Never!" As Michael Thornhill argues,

Three months later the financially troubled project goes into production and with further rewrites (some during shooting or maybe in post production), this scene has been liquidated. The US Midwest audience is appeased—no mention of atomic bombs and Kip becomes another exotic, token brown man. (Thornhill, 21)

Such information lends me to be harsher in my judgement of the film, since there does indeed seem to be a “wilful” exclusion at work. The irony is that the novel’s scope is extended in other ways. Younis argues, for example, that in the film “The English Patient, a Sikh and a German spy find some happiness in the company of French- and English-speaking Canadians.” Hana, however, only becomes *French Canadian* in the film, and then only because the director wanted to cast the French actor Juliette Binoche in the role and had to account for her accent. So the vicissitudes of film have elided one migrant figure and refigured another. And in the end, both “Canadians”—Caravaggio and Hana—were played by non-Canadians for the same reasons—to secure American funding.

My reading of the novel is also somewhat different (Turcotte 1993). To me the novel did not suggest that the two cultures could “meet effectively and fruitfully”; on the contrary, the novel seemed to be about the enormous betrayals and lies which will always detonate at the point of contact. This is why Kip and Hana cannot be together at the end of the novel, even though they seem to share an almost psychic and physical space in the ambiguous closing lines. Ondaatje seems to argue that the political structures of racism are too fully and deeply embedded in the narratives which make communication possible for them to be overcome, even by a profound and psychic understanding which eludes most of us.

This seems also to be the theme of much of David Malouf’s work, made clearest perhaps in *Remembering Babylon*, but certainly there too in *Conversations at Curlow Creek*. Both novels attempt to re/view and certainly to re-write White Australian settler history and are, in that respect, post-colonial novels—that is, they are concerned with, as Gareth Griffiths puts it, “linguistic displacement, physical exile, cross-culturality and [questions about] authenticity or inauthenticity of experience” (cited in Neilsen 1990, 200). We could add to that that they are novels preoccupied with the power of words—of language—to shape our reality, and in this respect they remind us of the themes of the first paper. Like many novels being produced in today’s Australia they are also books about accountability.

They are novels which analyse what it means to be Australian, and what the history of settlement and the British legacy means for both the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

*Curlow Creek* is certainly a novel about the “meeting between two cultures and the complexities which unfold within the space of this connection,” but it is probably important to remind ourselves that the two cultures are not necessarily best understood as “old and new world” cultures *per se*, or at least that neither of these cultures is, in any respect, *indigenous*. The convict body is the abject component of the European self. Malouf’s texts are specifically centred on the uncanny moment when the “clean and proper body” meets its other. Malouf’s books are profoundly about the national and about identity, but they rarely attempt to speak *for* Aboriginal people. This is why Germaine Greer’s (1993) blistering mis-reading of *Remembering Babylon* is so offensive: because it fails to recognise how careful Malouf is not to appropriate the other, even whilst contesting and questioning the relationship of Australia to its past and present responsibilities.

Younis is right when he argues that “the novel reinscribes through metonymy ... and metaphor ... the troubled relationship between the supposedly enlightened and sophisticated subject, on the one hand, and the object it demonises or peripheralises on the other hand. But the novel overturns this hierarchy of value.” It is possible, through such a method of inquiry, moreover, for Malouf to force us to extend our insights and to re-consider those same prejudices and values which have subordinated and subjugated Aboriginal people in Australia. And he does this without speaking for them.

At issue with the texts discussed in these papers, then, is how these central literary figures have responded to the “cultural and historical changes” which have so marked our time—how have they responded to and how have they transformed the very forms through which their inquiry is penned. I do not think that any of the authors discussed here have produced answers to the weighty questions of our times. But they have certainly suggested ways to begin the interrogation. And I am enough of an optimist to believe that that is how and where the useful work is done.

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## LISA LAW

# THIRD CULTURES IN VANCOUVER, HONG KONG AND SINGAPORE: FILIPINO NGOS AND SITES OF TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

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This paper examines a phenomenon of the late twentieth century: the return of domestic work to the popular and academic imagination. Whether it be framed in terms of global economic restructuring, the gendered and/or ethnic segmentation of labour markets, or the transformation of gender relations which necessitates employing "outsiders" within the home, domestic work is firmly on the agenda. Domestic workers, as they are increasingly called, are individuals—usually women and increasingly from the so-called developing countries—employed to manage the domestic chores of upper- and middle-class families around the world. Whether they migrate to North America, Europe, the Middle East or the affluent countries of Asia, their importance to local and global economies and cultures is increasingly apparent.

The emphasis of this paper is on Filipino women who migrate to Vancouver, Hong Kong and Singapore to engage in paid domestic work. The context of domestic work varies considerably across North American and Asian contexts. Because Filipino women have found a niche in these markets they often suffer ethnic and gender discrimination as *Filipinos* in each place. In Hong Kong, for example,