

RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES AND ESCAPING TRAUMA IN MICHAEL  
ONDAATJE'S THE ENGLISH PATIENT

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## ABSTRACT

In my analysis of Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient I will discuss how identity is reconstructed among four characters who are avoiding many lost aspects of their previous lives in an Italian villa during World War II. By using mainly the tools of postcolonial criticism and new historicism, this thesis will focus on how the characters unsuccessfully try to escape their names/labels, bodies, and places of origin while reconstructing identity. I argue that the novel is mostly about resisting the Eurocentric view of the world, while that it focusing on human relationships and human resilience. Eventually, after the bombs are dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the English patient is assumed by the reader to die in the Italian villa. The surviving characters Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio decide to return to the countries where they were born, where they feel that they belong.

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Raymond Michael Bussi and Deborah Anne Bussi, who have taught me nothing regarding literature, but everything concerning life.

## RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES AND ESCAPING TRAUMA IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S THE ENGLISH PATIENT

Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient focuses on the relationships among four characters who have all been deeply damaged by World War II. Ondaatje himself was born during World War II in Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, is of Dutch/Indian ancestry, grew up in London, and is currently living in Canada. The characters in Ondaatje's novel have also traveled extensively and have ended up in a damaged villa in an unfamiliar country where they must reconstruct new identities. These characters who find themselves living in Italy include Hana, a nurse; Almásy, who made maps during the war; Caravaggio, a thief; and Kip, who disarms bombs. Although all four characters have different reasons why their lives have led to the Villa San Girolamo, they are linked through World War II and their experience with trauma.

While residing in Italy, the characters try to reconstruct their identities, influenced by the "world" that surrounds them as well as their own feelings, beliefs, memories, or imaginations. Lois Tyson explains from a new historicist perspective that individual identity "and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect, and define each other. Their relationship is mutually constitutive (they create each other) and dynamically unstable" (Tyson 280). As Tyson suggests, identity's creation relies on culture as well as individual will and desire. Nothing is permanent, useless, or independent in forming identity because everything is relational and important. In a sense, no completely individual self exists, because a subject's identity is reconstructed through a collage of names, stereotypes, body image, the imagination, memories, relationships, environment, books, and "history." All of these elements will be specifically analyzed in this thesis as guided by Tyson's explanation of individual identity formation.

In the novel's present, the war is ending between nations, but its chaos is still operating through trauma in the characters themselves. As a result of their experience with World War II, Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient all have endured great trauma. The characters find that it is easier to escape their trauma than to face it. In the beginning of the novel the characters are not mentally or physically capable of facing their lost selves, loved ones, innocence, youth, worth, or honor. The characters' identities are being shaped and reshaped by their attempts to escape from their names, their bodies, and their environment. However, it does not matter how deeply the characters bury their trauma, because it resurfaces due to real events, such as the catastrophic explosions of two nuclear weapons on Japan.

This thesis will investigate the trauma that creates the characters' need to escape their old identities as well as ways the characters attempt to escape names, bodies, and places to begin anew. This thesis gives one explanation of how the reconstruction of identity takes place, regardless of the characters' attempts to escape separate versions of their identities. It is important to be aware that there are other means of escape, such as drugs, alcohol, and music, and other interpretations of each escape that are not being examined in this thesis. I have chosen to focus on names/labels, bodies, and place because they are major themes regarding what, who, where, when, and how the characters' identities are subtly woven throughout the novel. This thesis will only investigate the assembling of identities, not the discovery of one stable, unified identity for each character. It is, by no means, my intention to label a character with a definitive identity that does not exist.

While taking other scholarship into consideration, I have decided to depart from analysis already circulating on the novel, such as the psychoanalytic perspective, which focuses on such themes as the transference of Hana's father onto the English patient. I maintain instead that the

combination of postcolonial criticism and new historicism is imperative for interpreting The English Patient and have not come across adequate scholarship which applies both methodologies. By accepting the position that identities and social structure cannot be separated, critics must discuss the war in the novel because it is an event that has affected society significantly. This thesis is an analysis of the novel, using Clifford Geertz's method of thick description, which "is not a search for facts but a search for meanings" (Tyson 285). Thick description is used to discover Ondaatje's methods of characterization through the escapes and distractions that the characters endure, the labels and names that they acquire or have, perceptions of their bodies, sexually and physically, and the places that characters envision through books that they read or places they have actually visited.

The technique of thick description in new historicism is more efficiently practiced to interpret literature with the help of postcolonial studies, because both methodologies focus on factors that are often overlooked in "history;" new historicism focuses on contextual details, such as the books in the novel that the characters read, while postcolonial studies focuses on how certain characters are left out of those same books because of their differences. Postcolonial criticism is necessary to interpret the reconstruction of identity in relation to the people and nations that do not belong in a Eurocentric view and have been overlooked by "history." Although new historicism and postcolonial criticism are both equipped to address the novel singly, linking the theories together will provide a more efficient explanation of identity in the novel: As Edward Said suggests, "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically innocent; [...] society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together" (Said 2011-12). It is important to use postcolonialism for readers to position themselves in relation to the characters' identities and to understand their significant struggle with Eurocentrism's

position on “history” and culture. The characters and the novel’s readers are influenced by Eurocentrism, shaped by both Western Europe and North America, whether they are aware of it or not.

Another principle of new historicism that is enhanced by postcolonial criticism is that “history” cannot always be considered “progressive.” It is unreasonable to propose that an event, such as World War II, is “better” for everyone in the world. Anything that is deemed progressive in “history” is likely to be Eurocentric, because “history” has documented dark-skinned nations suffering for white-nations’ “progress.” To progress implies to positively advance, and the novel does not present war or its outcome positively. World War II is depicted negatively, which deviates from the common interpretation of the war as a triumph over the Axis powers.

To survive the negativities of the war, Ondaatje’s characters explore different aspects of their identities (names, bodies, and place), but ultimately revert back to what is familiar and appropriate for their particular situations by abandoning the villa in one way or another. The English patient is assumed by the reader to die from his severe burns in the villa. Those characters who survive choose to leave Italy to return “home,” or at least to their country of birth, where they feel that they belong the most. Although they return home altered, their change is not necessarily one that can be deemed completely progressive or positive.

After leaving the villa, Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio all remember and yearn for the time that they spent together in Italy but accept and are satisfied with their choice to leave it. It is unclear whether the three surviving characters could have overcome the stereotypes and expectations attached to their names, bodies, and places if they had remained in the villa or remained together elsewhere. However, while in Italy, it is clear that all four characters try to save, learn from, and attach to one another in a time of war, when they are defeated in every

possible way; they have lost family, lovers, friends, their innocence, a sense of usefulness, body parts, their confidence, security, youth, a trust in nations, children, ignorance, and/or their lives. The characters have lost and are lost. In an interview, Ondaatje states that “there are a lot of international bastards roaming around the world today. That’s one of the book’s main stories. Those migrants don’t belong here but want to belong here” (Wachtel 257). The characters in the novel become refugees and attempt to escape their names/labels, bodies, and environment in order to belong in the villa that becomes their temporary residence. Eventually the shock over the adjustment to the war and its aftermath causes the characters to return to the countries that they abandoned before World War II because it is easier to fit into the inaccurate limitations of their names, labels, bodies, place, and “history” than to live as an “other.”

## CHAPTER I: NAMES/LABELS

A character's name, or label, holds great significance as to how society or the other characters categorize him or her racially, politically, culturally, or by his or her gender. It is unreasonable, yet unavoidable, for characters' identities to be judged by their names, because a name is usually fastened to a person by someone else, like one's parents. Many times a name is selected by parents before birth or before the character or identity is even formed. A name conveys connotations of race, gender, or culture, while being limited to a single word. The single word is superficially judged by society and does not define characters' identities. Just because a patient has an English label does not mean that he can be defined as the stereotypical English man, or in this case, that he is a British citizen at all. And although the English patient is also named Almásy in the novel, for clarity and consistency, this thesis will refer to the burned character as the English patient because "the English patient" has become a new signifier for Almásy. Although identity is affected by environment and relationships, identity is not limited to being reconstructed by environment and relationships. Although characters and their identities can embrace all that their names signify, a character's identity cannot fit into the label's limits. However, that is not to say that characters in The English Patient do not try to fit into, escape from, or characterize others by a single name to attempt to reconstruct a distinct and ultimately nonexistent single identity.

Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient express a need to escape the limitations of their names or labels because such tags usually do not change throughout their lives, no matter what the character experiences, while an identity is constantly altered through experiences. The four characters' traumatic war experiences alter their identities through decisions, events, sights, sounds, and pain. The characters provide examples of what Elizabeth A. Waites describes as

“individuals who repeatedly experience alterations in self-experience, for example, sometimes [they] begin constructing their identity over and over until the pattern of their life resembles a patchwork mosaic” (Waites 21). Because of World War II the characters are experiencing, significant and traumatic events that cannot be limited or properly represented by a name or label, because identity changes with every moment.

With that said, Michael Ondaatje chooses to withhold from readers many names/labels in The English Patient to make a statement about the significance of labels through the lack of a name, rather than the presence of one. Although the novel begins with a quiet interaction between the English patient and Hana, the first character that is named in the novel is Caravaggio. The novel introduces three major characters before taking thirty-one pages in one paperback edition to reveal the name of one. Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient become acquainted with each other and with the reader in an intimate fashion. Readers get a complete description of the English patient’s body, sexually and anatomically, glimpse Hana’s daily routine, and get an account of both the war and the villa all before a character’s name is specified. What does this say about the importance of a character’s name? The fact that the missing names are noticeable to the reader, before everyone eventually receives a name, is proof that a name bears influence. However, the reader becomes intimate with these characters, without having any trouble keeping them separated, during the pages where they remain unnamed, without access to a signifier revealing their “identity.” The denial or lack of a name opens up the possibility for the characters to reconstruct new versions of their identities.

Eventually, the “man with the bandaged hands,” who “had revealed nothing, not even his name, just wrote out his serial number, which showed he was with the Allies” (Ondaatje 27) in the hospital in Rome, is named: Caravaggio. His name is not of importance to the hospital

officials, because the only thing that they are interested in is what his name would reveal: whether his allegiance is to the Allies or the Axis powers. Since Caravaggio's serial number, or label, already assures the hospital officials that he is not part of the Axis powers, his name is of no other importance. Caravaggio dwells at the hospital for over four months without ever exposing his name because it is no longer representative of who the war has turned him into. The serial number does not label him sufficiently as an individual either, but just as a statistic. Caravaggio has become introverted and feels inadequate without the full use of his hands. He no longer is the daring individual he used to be, but just another bandaged man in uniform in a hospital, thus separate from his name/label. Darryl Whetter claims, "The achievement of this disappearance into landscape, not simply through the renunciation of past citizenship but also by the forsaking of individual names, graphically illustrates the movement into the communal" (Wetter 228). Instead of returning to the limitations of his name, Caravaggio temporarily becomes part of the hospital community, as just another soldier in pain. When Caravaggio leaves the hospital, he is recognized and greeted with his name by Hana, who had known him in the past when he had not yet been tainted by the war. It is unknown if Caravaggio would ever have claimed his name at the villa if Hana had not already known it, but the Caravaggio, who comes to the villa is not the same Caravaggio that Hana once knew.

Initially, Caravaggio chooses to ignore his given name, which has caused him problems in the past. By escaping his name, he tries to escape himself, or his previous identity. For example, Caravaggio almost sympathizes with the nurse, who was commanded to cut off his thumbs because she "knew nothing about [Caravaggio's] name or nationality or what [he] may have done" (Ondaatje 55). Ranuccio Tommasoni, the man in charge when Caravaggio is caught, asks him, "Your name is David Caravaggio, right?" (Ondaatje 58). Unsure, and in the midst of trying

to intimidate Caravaggio through torture, he asks again, “Caravaggio, right?” (Ondaatje 59). Caravaggio does not answer Tommasoni because the mere possibility of being named David Caravaggio will cause the removal of his thumbs. It is likely if Caravaggio had confirmed that he was, in fact, the man named Caravaggio, the reality would have condemned him to death. Nevertheless, he is saved by the serendipitous event that the Germans were leaving the city and thus were too distracted to deal with a man who might be David Caravaggio. Caravaggio is saved by not claiming his name.

Later in the novel, when Caravaggio visits the villa, the English patient analyzes Caravaggio’s name: “David Caravaggio--an absurd name for you, of course,” to which Caravaggio responds defensively, “At least I have a name” (Ondaatje 116). The English patient insinuates that Caravaggio does not measure up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century Italian artist, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, who became one of the first influential artists of the Baroque school. As J. U. Jacob argues, “Ondaatje exploits the names of his characters at both the thematic and metafictional levels to define the central dynamic of his narrative” (Jacobs 9); he uses Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s painting of *David with the Head of the Goliath* to explain the inappropriateness and the necessity of names. In the painting, Goliath’s head is a representation of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s head and thus depicts “David” decapitating “Caravaggio,” just as the novel’s fictional Caravaggio has been disfigured due to his own actions as a thief. Ondaatje ironically implies that his character, David Caravaggio, is self-destructive. The central dynamic of Ondaatje’s narrative is that identity is not defined but continuously reconstructed. Names and labels are included in identity reconstruction, but do not delineate it. And although the allusion embedded in Caravaggio’s name conveys some truth as far as his internal struggle with the amputation of his thumbs goes, names are not a complete

representative of a person, because Ondaatje's Caravaggio survives the war and returns to Canada, unlike Caravaggio's Goliath.

It seems as though a character's name, or label, only incriminates a character in the novel, such as when Caravaggio attempts with the help of the English patient to name the stray dog that he found wandering around the villa. The English patient offers a couple of humorous names before suggesting Cicero, Zerzura, and Delilah, which confirms Caravaggio's idea that the English patient is the missing desert explorer named Almásy. "'Cicero' was a code name for a spy [...who] got away" (Ondaatje 163), "Zerzura" was a lost oasis found by Almásy and colleagues, and Sansom's "Delilah" was the name of a fellow explorer of Almásy's. The attempt to name the dog confirms that Caravaggio's suspicions are correct, and the English patient is forced to acknowledge his name.

The English patient's name, Almásy, historically references Ladislaus de Almásy, or Count László Almásy, who was born on August 22, 1895 into an untitled, but noble, Hungarian family. Unlike Ladislaus de Almásy, who died in 1951 of dysentery in Salzburg, Austria, the fictional Almásy eventually dies in the Villa San Girolamo in Italy from the burns he suffered in a plane crash (Török). Therefore, even though there is a real person of "history" that the reader can reference for the novel's protagonist, the name offers an unreliable version of the fictional Almásy's identity and personal "history."

Ondaatje states that he "drew on Count Almásy the spy, but mostly on the explorer, a really respected explorer. [Ondaatje] used the first part of his life and then moved on into fiction" (Wachtel 255). The first mention of the English patient's given name, Almásy, is nearly halfway into The English Patient. Ondaatje gives a brief introduction on desert expeditions and research, in which Ladislaus de Almásy is mentioned, among other names and dates: "By the mid-1930s

the lost oasis of Zerzura was found by Ladislaus de Almásy and his companions” (Ondaatje 134). The English patient’s name is subtly mentioned while the narrator is retelling “history” in the novel in a way that makes it easy for the reader to miss the reference. As Stephanie M. Hilger suggests:

[The English patient] has become a signifier without a signified. Yet, the novel teases the reader with the possibility of knowing who the “English” patient really is by mentioning the name “Almasy.” The name appears without any direct reference to its bearer. The reader establishes the link between “Almasy” and the “English” patient him/ herself when he/she realizes that “Almasy” is the only name without a clear referent and must therefore designate the unnamed and unnamable character in the novel. (Hilger 4)

The English patient’s name, which is kept from the other characters in the novel and from the readers, is more significant to him when it is not claimed. By escaping his name, he allows the reconstruction of his identity, free from the connotations associated with this name, such as the “history” of the real Ladislaus de Almásy.

The reader enters the life of the fictional Almásy through flashbacks in which his name labels him as an enemy to the Allies. Almásy has become a target for the Allies; he is considered dangerous enough to be singled out and followed by Allied intelligence. Caravaggio informs the English patient that “because Intelligence has your name, knew you were involved [...]. You were supposed to be killed” (Ondaatje 255). Therefore, Almásy is not reluctant to throw his name into the wind of the desert, to discover a new version of his identity, because his name marked him to be murdered: “A man in the desert can slip into a name as if within a discovered well, and in its shadowed coolness be tempted never to leave such containment” (Ondaatje 141).

The English patient chooses to slip in and out of his labels to escape dangerous situations.

Escape from the restrictions of a name allows identities to be explored. However, an exploration of identity, like the constant movement of the desert, does not stay stagnant.

The fact that the English patient's flesh is burned beyond recognition and his memory is vague makes it easy for the English patient to escape the clutches of his name. "The English patient" becomes a new signifier for Almásy while at the villa. Stephanie Hilger notes that the English patient's identity tag is removed by an unnamed tribe:

The removal of this sign opens up a blank in his identity, which could also have made him into the ' \_\_\_\_\_ ' patient. But by deciding to bring 'their' patient to the British base, the \_\_\_\_\_ tribe establishes his identity as British. (Hilger 2)

The unnamed tribe is referred to by a blank space and exists without a signifier to validate their identity, and therefore represents how labels and names do not define, but only influence identities. The unnamed tribe casually renames Almásy as the English patient, meaning that he could have just as easily been named something else. This thesis refers to the burned man as the English patient, instead of Almásy, because it is the English patient's version of identity that the reader is acquainted with in the novel. Furthermore, the English patient is unconcerned with the tribe's dismissal of his name: "All that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron" (Ondaatje 96). In fact, it is a common occurrence that men who enter the desert do not return with identification, if at all: "One of the Arabs is probably wearing [the English Patient's] name tag. He will probably sell it and we'll get it one day, or perhaps they will never sell it. These are great charms. All pilots who fall into the desert--none of them come back with identification" (Ondaatje 29). A military identification tag, or dog tag, is not of great worth to the English patient, because the reason for

having one is to identify a body, not to bestow an identity. Therefore, when his name tag is assumed to have been stolen by an Arab, the English patient is pleased to escape from the limitations of his name and its stereotypes, to follow a new path, like the unnamed tribe, to reconstruct another version of his identity.

To the English patient a name is something that limits who the characters are and who they can be. A name and its title tempt an individual to worry only about what connotations his or her name will carry in the future as a result of his or her actions:

When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, our legend, what our lives will mean to the future. We become vain with the names we own, our claims to have been the first eyes, the strongest army, the cleverest merchant. It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself. (Ondaatje 142)

The English patient compares the vanity thrown into a name as one ages to the psychology of Narcissus, a Greek mythological hero who foolishly fell in love with his own reflection, which became the source of the term “narcissism.” The English patient is not concerned with his own legacy, like Narcissus; instead he thinks of a legacy, or a name, as narcissistic. Although the English patient is no longer a young man when he reaches the villa and asks Hana to bring him a mirror to observe his burns, he prefers to die anonymously, free from what or how the world or society would label him. Therefore, for him a name only carries the negative nuances and limitations of the past and present: “Erase the family name! Erase nations. I was taught such things by the desert” (Ondaatje 139). The English patient’s loss of his family name, and therefore his nation, is his escape from an old identity and allows him to recreate a new version of identity.

However, some characters cannot, and choose not, to escape the clutches of their names. The English patient, as told through flashbacks, falls in love with a married woman, Katharine Clifton, who is referred to by the English patient as “Clifton’s wife” (Ondaatje 97). Katharine is eventually acknowledged by the English patient with her own name forty-six pages later, virtually halfway through the novel. Katharine is much more connected to her labels than is the English patient: “[Katharine] would have hated to die without a name. For her there was a line back to her ancestors that was tactile, whereas he had erased the path he had emerged from. He was amazed she had loved him in spite of such qualities of anonymity in himself” (Ondaatje 170). The English patient is told to hate nothing more than ownership of people, but becomes very possessive of Katharine, claiming parts of her body, such as “the hollow at the base of [Katharine’s] neck” (Ondaatje 162) that he becomes intent on naming. Madox informs his friend, the English patient, of the name of his favorite part of Katharine that he wishes to possess, by pointing “his thick finger to the spot by his Adam’s apple and saying, ‘This is called the vascular sizood.’ Giving that hollow at her neck an official name” (Ondaatje 241). By naming parts of her, like her neck, the English patient feels ownership over her, even though her married name has already limited which of the lover’s desires are considered acceptable. She, as Katherine Clifton, is linked to an individual through marriage and is no longer able to court another man, such as the English patient, without societal and religious shame. Katharine has married into an ancestral legacy and gives up her maiden name, which is another limitation placed upon women. Through marriage, she has abandoned a part of herself, her birth name, to be claimed by her husband. And in this case, the woman is owned by her lover as well. The English patient, trying to name and possess Katharine, is hypocritical and sexist because naming and owning are not something he wishes for or believes in for himself.

After Katherine is severely injured in her husband's suicidal plane crash, which is intended to kill all three of them, the English patient carries her into the Cave of Swimmers, ironically evoking images of water. Katharine, who is "a woman who misses moisture," (Ondaatje 153) thrives upon water by always surrounding herself with it, which is the opposite of the English patient, who will be burned in the desert. It is important to Katharine in her final hours with the English patient, that he "stop defending [himself]. Kiss [her] and call [her] by [her] name" (Ondaatje 173). Unlike the English patient, Katharine does not wish to separate from her name. Despite the English patient's attempt to save Katharine by entering the desert to find help, it is three years before he is able to return to the cave to retrieve Katharine's corpse. Katharine dies clinging to her given name, while the English patient tries to delete her labels: "Almásy insists on naming and describing Katharine in terms of the desert, while she firmly defines herself by her 'Britishness'" (Emery 1). Unfortunately, when the English patient finds help, his name and his decision to modify Katharine's name, once again, brings devastation. Instead of searching the desert for Katharine, no one cares, because "[he] didn't give them a right name" (Ondaatje 251). Instead of labeling Katharine by her married name, the English patient labels her with his own name: "I said she was my wife. I said Katherine. Her husband was dead. I said she was badly injured, in a cave in the Gilf Kebir, [...] I was yelling Katharine's name. Yelling the Gilf Kebir. Whereas the only name I should have yelled, dropped like a calling card into their hands, was Clifton's" (Ondaatje 251). The fact that class and a specific name would have saved Katharine's life, whereas the English patient's name caused her to be abandoned, shows the relative worth associated with names. The English patient is Hungarian, the enemy, and labeled as insignificant by his captors, whereas the Cliftons are labeled as privileged and worth more than "others."

Kip, or Kirpal Singh, is also considered of lesser status than those with European names and is also first categorized only by his job as a sapper, a military engineer that finds and disarms bombs. Kip's nickname is finally introduced after he starts to become a more established character in the villa: "The sapper's nickname is Kip. 'Get Kip.' 'Here comes Kip.' The name had attached itself to him curiously" (Ondaatje 87). In this instance, the nickname "Kip" is not something that he is, just something that has attached itself to him when he entered the war. However, a nickname has connotations just like a given name. For instance, Kip's nickname is not one that he has made up for himself, but one of ridicule that an English officer made for him. Kip believes that his nickname, which is shortened from "Kipper grease," is a way for the English officer to "translate [his body] into a salty English fish" (Ondaatje 87). The officer is insinuating that Kip is inferior, which emphasizes his Eurocentric view of Kip's "otherness." As a result, Kip is laughed at and named for a species of cold-blooded animals: "This practice of judging all who are different as inferior is called *othering*, and it divides the world between 'us,' the 'civilized,' and 'them' - the 'others' - the 'savages.' The 'savage' is usually considered evil as well as inferior (the demonic other)" (Tyson 366). The othering apparent in Kip's non-European name is comparable to the fact that the "Clifton" name, but not Almásy's, would have saved Katharine. The "other," the "savage," or the fish are not considered, from a Eurocentric view, to be worth as much as the "civilized." Kip's nickname is a constant reminder that their contributions and needs are disrespected.

Because Kip's "otherness" is drummed into his head as separate from a Eurocentric "norm," he adopts his new nickname, and "within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten" (Ondaatje 87). Kip's submissive escape from his Indian name allows him to reinvent a new label and reconstruct a new version of identity for himself. However, this reconstruction is

not successful, as the reader discovers when Kip has an epiphany towards the end of the novel. While he is able to escape his name, he is not able to escape the stereotypes associated with his name and nationality. His epiphany compels Kip to reclaim his family name and return to his country of birth. The narrator states, “His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here [in Europe]” (Ondaatje 287).

Before the characters’ names are revealed, they are introduced solely by pronouns, which embed many gender stereotypes. Automatically, the reader applies the stereotypes of a patriarchal society to both the male and female characters. The first word in the novel is “she.” Of course, we later find that Ondaatje is referring to Hana, but not until well into the second chapter. The characters’ personal pronouns serve as temporary names for the characters. “He” and “she” hold connotations, just as names and labels hold connotations. She, or Hana, is initially the damsel in distress for Caravaggio to save, the caregiver to the English patient, and the lover of Kip. And although Hana is finally intent on saving, caring for, and finding herself, her gender and how other characters perceive her gender are part of, and limiting to, the reconstruction of her identity. Even after a character’s name is revealed, in this case Hana’s, the novel reverts back to explaining a character in gendered terms: “Caravaggio and *the girl* will bury him” (Ondaatje 287). Thus, either by a name or a personal pronoun label, a character is categorized, and therefore limited.

This restricting categorization explains why Hana is another character who tries to escape her own name, as well as others’ names. She feels as if naming someone immediately makes them part of her life and likely exposes her to more suffering when that name can ultimately end up on a headstone during a war. Hana has already lost, by death or distance, her family, whose names are engraved, not only on headstones, but in her identity: “In her life there was her mother

Alice her father Patrick her stepmother Clara and Caravaggio. She had already admitted these names to Kip as if they were her credentials, her dowry. They were faultless and needed no discussion” (Ondaatje 268). Her family is already named in her memory, and she does not wish to name anyone else that she may lose. While caring for injured soldiers, Hana calls the dying soldiers “Buddy” to desensitize herself from their deaths: “Hello Buddy, good-bye Buddy. Caring was brief. There was a contract only until death. Nothing in her spirit or past had taught her to be a nurse” (Ondaatje 51). However, Hana will find that just because she can escape the soldiers’ names does not mean that she can escape their memories, identities, or the effects of their deaths.

Hana chooses not to call them by name while alive and to become numb and to distance herself as much as possible from what is around her, for her own survival. Looking back after their deaths she does not know the soldiers’ names that she cared for, but she still remembers their pain. Moreover, even though she does not feel like a professional nurse, she is labeled as one. And although she tries to escape her sorrow for soldiers by not giving them names, she still feels it. Therefore a name is part of a person, but not the essence of identities. Hana feels that a name that can be limiting, incriminating, and the basis for escape, as Caravaggio, the English patient, and Kip have found, is still only one part of identity reconstruction.

The English patient believes that it does not matter to the world how poorly labeled people’s identities are, just as long as everyone is in his or her place and categorized into “a fully named world” (Ondaatje 21-22). Such classifying constitutes a form of colonization because names become a way to generalize people, not individualize identities. For instance, the English patient is categorized as relating to the entire population of Britain, and also as a patient, a victim, which is not accurate. Naming a character colonizes a person, limits him, through race,

nationality, and/or gender, restricting the actions that he can or will take; such limitations explain why the characters wish to escape names. In the novel, names and labels (mostly English) make the world less diverse and more Eurocentric.

In The English Patient, Caravaggio, the English patient, Kip and Hana all try to escape their names/labels to find another version of their identities, a version that is accurate and stable. However, an identity is not something that can be accurately categorized, especially not by a single name or label. Although all four characters temporarily escape their names and try to reconstruct a nonexistent single identity, they all end up having to come to terms with their labels and/or names, regardless of the truth or lack of truth that names carry. Almásy is assumed by the reader to die at the villa with the English patient label. The three surviving villa residents, Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio, all reclaim their names at the end of the novel, by denying a nickname and/or by returning home.

## CHAPTER II: BODIES

Characters' body images in Ondaatje's text are just as inconsistent as their names and labels. A physical body is reconstructed by a person's mind and point of view. Although the body is influenced by materiality, the body in the novel is not a reflection of materials or reality, even though The English Patient claims that "a novel is a mirror walking down the road" (Ondaatje 91). Just as the characters unsuccessfully reject their names, and fail at forming single, unrealizable identities because they change constantly, they also continuously reconstruct their bodies, forming components of their identities.

It is important to discuss briefly what is being claimed as a character's body. It can be interpreted as the shell that others signify as a character's identity. In other words, the body provides a way of labeling identity from a physical perspective that is experienced through the five senses: image, scent, touch, smell, and sound. When discussing the change in body, not only am I analyzing the aging or maturing process, but I am also considering the change of a character's point of view when viewing the body. Bodies are both something the characters have and something they are. However, bodies are not all they have or all they are. Therefore, the characters in the novel cannot help but utilize their bodies as they try to reconstruct new identities. The characters endure either voluntary or forced alterations of their bodies that reflects the characters' trauma.

The war has affected all of the characters, physically as well as mentally. The weathering of Hana's body is noticed often by the men, particularly Caravaggio, who knew Hana before the war and has a frame of reference to compare her old to her new body image: "Her face became tougher and leaner, the face Caravaggio would meet later. She was thin, mostly from tiredness" (Ondaatje 50). Due to Caravaggio's history with Hana as a child, he considers her change to be a

negative one. However, Kip's perspective on Hana's bodily transition is that "she did not inherit that look or that beauty, but that it was something searched for and that it will always reflect a present stage of her character" (Ondaatje 301). The "present stage of her character" is only one version of Hana's identity that represents her for just a single moment in time, which has now passed. Kip's and Caravaggio's observations of how Hana's body changes in the short time that they reside together in the villa forms the basis for how they inaccurately "see" her identity. Hana does not reflect two men's definitions of what it is to be a young woman. Not only do they fail to acknowledge much of her past, during which they were not completely present, but they consider their interpretation of her appearance to be "accurate," even though the two men see the same body from two different perspectives, one negative and one positive.

Hana is the youngest person and the only female character in the villa. Her physicality changes significantly, with World War II as a backdrop, when she comes to the villa "half child and half adult" (Ondaatje 14) and is transformed into a woman. Before residing in the villa with the three men, Hana's body had become pregnant. Hana is neither psychologically nor environmentally prepared to care for the unborn child during the war: "I lost the child. I mean I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war" (Ondaatje 82). Her body was ready for a change that her identity, at the time, was not prepared to undergo, which resulted in her choice to have an abortion. Hana is not in an environmentally or mentally stable situation to have a child, even though anatomically her body is prepared. And although her body and identity cannot be completely separated from each other, they can be at odds. However, Hana feels a sense of remorse that makes it hard for her initially to acknowledge her abortion: "I courted one man and he died and the child died. I mean, the child didn't just die, I was the one who destroyed it. After that I stepped so far back no one could get near me" (Ondaatje 85). Hana feels as if she

lacks substance, meaning, or identity, and is not ready for any part of her body, in this case her womb, to be anything but hollow. The link between body and self is not created until Hana takes action to make it so. In this instance, Hana crawls inside herself “so far back no one could get near me,” using her body as a place to escape the chaos of the outside world.

After Hana is introduced to the most heinous scenes of World War II, such as three days of caring for dying soldiers without sleep, the death of the father of her unborn child, and an abortion, Hana changes her physical appearance by cutting her hair:

When she woke, she picked up a pair of scissors out of the porcelain bowl, leaned over and began to cut her hair, not concerned with shape or length, just cutting it away--the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind--when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in a wound. She would have nothing to link her, to lock her, to death. She gripped what was left to make sure there were no more strands and turned again to face the rooms full of the wounded. [...] She never looked at herself in mirrors again. (Ondaatje 49-50)

Reducing Hana’s physical contact with blood and death is not the only reason why she cuts her own hair. Due to her fragile mental state and increasing resistance to a Eurocentric ideology, Hana alters her body image, but her change in image is done by her own actions and will. She wishes to look as she feels, incomplete and unstable, even though her youth and beauty reflect otherwise. Her long hair distinguishes her as an attractive young woman among soldiers with uniform, buzz cuts. By rejecting the hair that distinguishes her as female on the outside, she aligns herself with her rejection of other female characteristics, such as her reproductive organs.

Hana is a lost individual investigating her identity, who becomes disgusted by her physical image, which causes her to remove all of the mirrors. When her body fails to produce a

single identity to fill the emptiness and confusion that she feels, Hana chooses to deny the body's presence and escape inside herself. As Elizabeth Waites explains, "Flight from the body as a dissociative reaction to trauma has often been prepared in advance by a tendency to be at odds with the body and to consign it to the status of a bothersome, even alien entity" (Waites 135). Hana has had so much experience with the death of those unknown and those that she has loved that she has been deeply and traumatically affected. Her physical appearance, which represents youth and beauty, is at odds with the death that is around her. Hana decides to alienate her self from her own body image. However, just because one decides to ignore his or her reflection in a mirror does not mean it does not exist: "She had refused to look at herself for more than a year, now and then just her shadow on walls. The mirror revealed only her cheek, she had to move it back to arm's length, her hand wavering. [...] Hi Buddy, she said. She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself" (Ondaatje 52). Hana catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror and addresses herself, just as she greets all of the unnamed soldiers that she treats, "Hi Buddy." Acknowledging her own, alienated image is not an example of an intimate connection, because she does not claim her current image. Hana's reflection does not define her body, just as Hana is not defined by her name or labels. Even though Hana's reflection is unfamiliar to her eyes, the memory of her body image still is a component of her changing identity. Furthermore, just because Hana refuses to look at her reflection does not stop other characters from seeing her body image in their own way.

Unlike the psychologically driven changes in Hana's body, Caravaggio's bodily alteration is physically forced upon him by the war. Although amputation was the result of his own actions as a thief, the consequences of his actions, the removal of both thumbs, causes him to feel useless. He used to be a man with a talent for thievery who was "capable of standing still

and causing havoc within the caravan of women he seemed to give himself over to. He now lay in his darkness” (Ondaatje 47). Caravaggio’s self is altered by his change in appearance, whereas Hana’s altered body image followed an internal change. Just as their bodies have changed through the years and the war, so has Hana and Caravaggio’s relationship. Their relationship has grown from an uncle/child relationship to a more equal and respected connection. Caravaggio enters the villa with the intention of saving Hana from her surroundings because he has been like an uncle to a younger Hana, who is now without a father to protect her. Protecting Hana also gives Caravaggio a purpose after he has sunk into depression and silence in a Roman hospital. Since Caravaggio’s confidence has diminished and Hana has increasingly gained her own independence as an adult, they become crutches for each other.

Caravaggio is no longer able to use his abilities as a thief, skills which he claims his country “taught [him]. It’s what I did for them during the war” (Ondaatje 85). He becomes just another body in bandages in a military hospital in Rome. Without a purpose, Caravaggio changes from a charming thief into a taciturn victim. Not being able to use his talent for thievery due to the dramatic alteration to his hands, an essential part of his body image, he feels as if he is useless to society. Thievery made Caravaggio useful in the war and could be useful in providing food in the villa, which is suggested to him by Hana. Caravaggio has survived the war, but not without serious injuries that threaten to kill his enthusiasm for life. Elizabeth Waites explains such trauma, “Yet, even if the body survives, subtle or dramatic alterations occur, some of which resemble a kind of psychic death: An emergent identity may die; a sense of aliveness may be temporarily or even permanently lost” (Waites 21). Caravaggio’s vegetative-like state is revealed as temporary when he breaks his four-month silence to the doctors to find out where Hana and her patient are living. Without his skills to define him or any family to care for, Caravaggio’s

lack of cooperation from his hands has caused him to die mentally. To begin to reconstruct a new self, Caravaggio searches for Hana to provide him with purpose.

The mutilation of his body with the removal of his thumbs and his damaged pride have instilled in him a fear of losing his sanity. If a person's body image is wounded, his sense of identity is damaged as well. Caravaggio had once been a confident thief, entering guarded homes and even entering a bedroom undetected while a couple was having sex. The consequence of losing part of his body has caused Caravaggio to develop a fear of losing other parts of himself. He frequently thinks of the amputation of body parts, such as the removal of Hana's tonsils, and notices decapitated statues, envisioning his own head being removed: "They never touched my head, he thought, that was strange. The worst times were when he began to imagine what they would have done next, cut next. At those times he always thought of his head" (Ondaatje 30). Thus, the removal of Caravaggio's thumbs is followed by the removal of his confidence in his own immortality. However, it is not the exploration of his own body image and how it affects the reconstruction of his own identity that regenerates Caravaggio's morale; instead he examines other characters' bodies for their identities, to give his own identity meaning. For example, Caravaggio becomes rejuvenated when he initially tries to restore Hana back to the youth that he remembers after witnessing her new, rough body image. When he finds that Hana does not need his help, he then tries to help the English patient. Caravaggio makes it his new mission to find the identity of the body of the English patient. It is the other characters' bodies that engage and distract his mind and bring Caravaggio back from his vegetative-like state.

When Caravaggio begins to search for the English Patient's true "identity," he has to resist the urge to "invent a skin for him, the way tannic acid camouflages a burned man's rawness" (Ondaatje 117). To "invent a skin" insinuates that the skin, which represents the

physical body, can be a false representation of a character's identity. It is not difficult for Caravaggio to create a false body image for the English patient. Caravaggio once was employed in Cairo "to invent double agents or phantoms who would take on flesh. He had been in charge of a mythical agent named 'Cheese,' and he spent weeks clothing him with facts, giving him qualities of character- such as greed and a weakness for drink when he would spill false rumours to the enemy" (Ondaatje 117). Caravaggio's first impulse is to identify the English Patient's material body. However, the villa is a place where "they were shedding skins [not inventing them]. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defense but to look for the truth in others" (Ondaatje 117). So instead of inventing a false identity for the English Patient, Caravaggio waits for his "true identity" to emerge. However, there is not a single identity to completely and accurately represent the English patient, or any character, for that matter.

The English patient, who has his own unique interest in maps, books, places, stories, and events, continues to be defined through his body image by the other characters. The English Patient, who has had "all identification consumed in a fire" (Ondaatje 48), has his dark, burnt body described by its image, smell, and feeling. Since he has been totally disfigured by fire, his apparent British education and accent point towards the likelihood that he is English; thus he is called the English patient. The characters perceive the English patient through his body to be English and assume their perception is true. However, we find at the end of the novel that the English patient is not English at all, but Hungarian, aligning his national identity with the Axis powers, proving that although the body can guide characters to create parts of their identity, it cannot holistically define identity, especially if that body is disfigured. Disguising his Hungarian national identity beneath the distortion of his body, the English patient prevents hostility from the other characters, who are aligned with the opposite side of the war effort.

By the time that Caravaggio finds out that the English patient's body was not identified "accurately" after being burned, it does not seem to matter that they are on opposite sides of the war. When Hana asks if Caravaggio's suspicions about the English patient's past were correct, Caravaggio does not inform her of his findings, but tells her that "he's fine. We can let him be" (Ondaatje 265). The English patient has intentionally used his newly distorted body to temporarily escape the persecution that he would have experienced from Caravaggio, who had once been ordered to track him. The role and the political position that the English patient displayed before coming to the villa is no longer important and is not all that he is defined by. The relationship that Caravaggio and the English patient have developed, while disconnecting from their war initiatives, has become more important. The English patient's body has not only been used to escape his previous identity, but has also been used to create a new identity for Almásy.

Another character who wishes to escape his bodily identity is Kip. Kip faces racial obstacles, because of his body, that are not products solely of the war, but have intensified because of the war. After World War II began, Kip "joined a Sikh regiment and was shipped to England," (Ondaatje 182) where his "otherness," his dark skin and turban, singled him out from the crowd: "He turned and caught the woman's eyes on him again [...]. She had probably never seen a turban before. The English! They expect you to fight for them but won't talk to you" (Ondaatje 188). As a result of such British prejudice, Kip, who has always had others label him by his physical appearance, has become introverted in an environment where he is not welcome: "[His self-sufficiency and privacy were] as much a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world" (Ondaatje 197). The Eurocentric view considers white

nations as the center and the “norm” of the world and regards Kip as abnormal, if his identity, perspective, beliefs, or body are even considered at all.

The Eurocentric view of his body by others creates several versions of his identity. Kip does not realize just how much of himself is tainted by such stereotypes until the end of the novel when World War II comes to an end with the dropping of two bombs on an “other” nation: “[Kip] is a hundred yards away from her in the lower field when [Hana] hears a scream emerge from his body which had never raised its voice among them” (Ondaatje 282). Finally, the oppression and devaluation of his life because of his body, which he has ignored for so long, has come to the surface. Kip’s body has its own voice to scream. Kip has been screaming inside for a long time, even while consciously disregarding his brother’s ideas that white nations disrespect dark nations because of racism. Edward Said states, “the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action” (Said 1993). Edward Said suggests that the depiction of the Orient, which Kip represents, is forcibly reliant on Western Europe and is “almost a European invention” (Said 1991). Kip then begins to see the other characters’ perspectives on what his dark skin represents, and this new awareness allows him to see the oppression that he has endured for many years.

Although Kip’s epiphany about the Eurocentric view of his worth enables him to return to India and try to retrieve the identity that he left for the war, his frustration with not belonging in Italy and with years of mechanical obedience to the Allies as a sapper is released by sexuality. Through his sexuality Kip becomes his own person, instead of just another body in a uniform. The relationship between Kip and Hana is instigated through Hana’s curiosity about his body, which is foreign to her. Kip’s body image has previously been a part of him that has impaired his military career and limited the respect he received socially. However, his “exotic” body is what

initiates the interest of Hana, while Kip becomes familiar with and aware of his body compared to Hana's: "He learns all the varieties of his darkness. The colour of his forearm against the colour of his neck. The colour of his palm, his cheek, the skin under the turban. The darkness of fingers separating red and black wires, or against bread he picks off the gunmetal plate he still uses for food" (Ondaatje 127). Although her curiosity is respectful and interpreted positively, Kip's identity is defined incompletely for Hana by his body: "[Kip] seems unconsciously in love with his body, with his physicalness, bending over to pick up a slice of bread, his knuckles brushing the grass, even twirling the rifle absentmindedly like a huge mace as he walks along the path of cypresses to meet the other sappers in the village" (Ondaatje 75). Hana is attracted to what she observes as Kip's intimacy with his own body, which is something that she has recently lost in Italy. In all fairness, Kip's attraction to Hana is, if only at first, also fueled by the physical. He is interested in and unfamiliar with the landscape of her body, and is able to contrast his own body with hers as well. In this sense, Hana and Kip are both using each other through sexuality to explore their own bodies and emotional selves.

With time, Hana and Kip's relationship develops beyond just a sexual relationship, even though the body continues to play a large role in their connection. They talk through their bodies and watch each other in silence, as if admiring art. Just as their names provide a poor representation of who they are inside, their bodies contain negative, racial connotations and unfair judgments. However, Kip and Hana use each other's bodies as just one tool to reconstruct and to share their identities: "In the tent there have been nights of no talk and nights full of talk. They are never sure what will occur, whose fraction of past will emerge, or whether touch will be anonymous and silent in their darkness. The intimacy of her body or the body of her language

in his ear--as they lie upon the air pillow he insists on blowing up each night” (Ondaatje 270). Not only do Kip and Hana contrast their differences, but they combine and compare their bodies.

The physical body and its sexuality are a way to explore the characters’ desire to find themselves. In this instance, it is the physical connection between them that inspires stimulation of the imagination, as well as an escape into each other’s past that helps reconstruct identity. The disruption of their lives, due to the war, is the cause of the new and drastic reconstruction of identities. The relationship between Kip and Hana is fueled by, but not limited to, sexual desire that allows an escape into someone else’s identity, for just a moment. They experience the tender intimacy between people that they lacked during the war and that they have come to need. Consequently, they also try to shed the superficial stereotypes of their bodies by sharing them and discovering that they are both worthy of love and respect. Although the physical connection ends when they all leave the villa, the love and respect remains between Kip and Hana when they explore their memories of their time in the villa in the future.

The use of the body for thick description in The English Patient is relevant to how Ondaatje represents their reconstruction of identity. Through sexual or platonic relationships, voluntary actions, the violence of the war, or the passage of time, the body is altered and as a result, so is identity. Ondaatje has stated in an interview that “it is a book about very tentative healing among a group of people. I think it is that most of all” (Wachtel 254). All four characters use their bodies or the bodies of others by comparing their differences, questioning their assumptions about body stereotypes, or evaluating new versions of their bodies, to escape or heal their trauma together. The body and identity are the same in that neither is static nor defined. However, they are not entirely the same. The body helps to shape identity, just as identity influences the body. Neither can be defined without the other. Thus, when the English patient

dies, he can no longer influence his identity or body. However, the surviving characters come to terms with their handicaps, physical ailments, sexuality, or ethnic difference and return home.

## CHAPTER III: "HISTORY" AND THE LOCATION OF PLACE

### Space and Identity

In The English Patient, the reconstruction of identity is affected by places, such as nations, the villa, and the desert. A place is not only described by setting, but also by time, such as World War II, which displays imaginary boundaries that emphasize the importance of "national identities." World War II itself becomes the antagonist of the novel because Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient are all at odds with the war in one way or another, regardless of their side, Allies or Axis. Places, like the desert, villa, and the arenas of war are used as an escape or a reason to escape. The characters are trying to flee from their "national identity" and escape the limitations of "history," as described in the books that the characters read. The English Patient is not a novel exemplifying a Eurocentric view but instead makes the reader aware of Eurocentrism's existence, while describing views of individuals who are for a time removed from "history."

Place is not something that can be truly owned, closed, or pinned down, contrary to what national boundaries propose. Places, Ondaatje suggests, continue to change throughout time and will outlast the life of their "owner." Ultimately the characters find out that they cannot completely escape into places or from the places where they belong. The English patient dies in the villa and those who survive leave Italy and the war to return home.

Characters draw upon places from their past and present to develop relationships that contribute to their evolving identities as they try to escape from their trauma. As Kateryna Longley observes, "space and spatiality are key terms for postcolonial studies [...] because the postcolonial condition is commonly one of reconstructing one's way of belonging in a particular place, either a familiar place that has undergone radical change as a result of its colonial past (or

present) or a new and alien place where one seeks refuge” (Longley 8). Ondaatje’s characters seek refuge from the arenas of World War II, which forms alien places, like the villa, blurring national borders. The war has blurred boundaries and formed a large undefined space where categorization of the characters’ “national identities” becomes more important. Nothing in their pasts has properly prepared them for the war or for living amongst strangers in an abandoned villa. Another example of a place that is significantly familiar to one of the characters, the English patient, yet still ever-changing, is the desert that becomes “one of the theatres of war” (Ondaatje 134). The English patient knows how to find his way through the shifting sands and how to find a buried plane without signs to guide him because he is familiar with the place.

#### War Trauma and “Otherness”

While location is used as a means of escape by the four main characters, place is also what they are escaping from: the battlegrounds of World War II, the boundaries of nations, and the idea of what the “world” represents all limit and traumatize the characters significantly. War is not portrayed as leading to a victorious outcome in the novel, even though three out of the four characters have worked for the “winning” Allies. Although Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio aligned themselves with the Allies, a political and national debate switches to a racial one when the bombs are dropped on Japan. Instead of experiencing triumph, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient are ashamed, and Kip becomes angry at the actions of the Allies. Caravaggio admits that he “knows the young soldier [Kip] is right. They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation” (Ondaatje 286). Kip’s otherness is evident through his location in a white nation and through his decision to leave Europe immediately after he hears the news of the bombs.

At the end of The English Patient, Kip, who “looks condemned, separate from the world, his brown face weeping” (Ondaatje 283), after hearing on the radio about the dropping of the bombs, blames the English patient: “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” (Ondaatje 283). Kip is directly acknowledging the ability of white nations to impose their Eurocentrism upon the world. Up until the news of the bombs, Kip has been satisfied living in Europe with three members of white nations. The dropping of the atomic bombs, which killed approximately 140,000 people, many of whom were civilians, emphasizes the hierarchy of worth placed upon certain nations. Kip’s interpretation of dropping the bombs is one that has usually been ignored throughout “history” due to its origin in “otherness,” but in this instance, his personal disgust for those who feed elitism becomes evident to him: “People think a bomb is a mechanical object, a mechanical enemy. But you have to consider that somebody made it” (Ondaatje 192). The idea that a bomb, and further, that a war, is man-made asks for people to take some sort of responsibility and to have empathy for devalued “other” cultures and asks for the act of devaluation of the Japanese to be acknowledged by the citizens of white nations.

Kip blames the dropping of the bombs on Europe and all affiliated nations. Kip transfers his anger and vengeance to the English patient and tells the English patient:

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. [...]. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have

fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English. (Ondaatje 284-6)

Kip is acknowledging and criticizing the Eurocentrism that has spread worldwide. Italy is no longer a place where Kip feels that he can escape his “otherness,” or the war, following the dropping of the bombs on Japan. Like Ondaatje himself, who was born in Sri Lanka, as an Indian, Kip was born in an Asian country--India is Asian, like Japan-- and therefore Kip takes the attack personally. Kip leaves the English patient in bed, after threatening his life, and returns to India at the end of the novel. He has given up his hope that white nations would respect him equally, and returns to a place where his skin is less foreign. Returning home does not diminish the impact that Europe, the war, and the other characters have made upon Kip’s identity. Instead, his experience throughout the novel has assured Kip that he would always have an inferior “place” in a Eurocentric world and therefore he belongs in India.

Kip is not the only one who comes to the conclusion that relocating may aid one’s emotional health and contribute to the development of his or her identity. Before the bombs are dropped, Caravaggio argues that the war infects their lives and impedes their chances of recreating their new selves. It is hard to escape everything that the war has brought to the characters’ lives, when the places that surround them are damaged as well. For example, the library is laced with bombs and missing portions of its roof. Caravaggio states:

The trouble with all of us is we are where we shouldn’t be. What are we doing in Africa, in Italy? What is Kip doing dismantling bombs in orchards, for God’s sake? What is he doing fighting English wars? A farmer on the western front cannot prune a tree without ruining his saw. Why? Because of the amount of shrapnel shot into it during the *last* war. Even the trees are thick with diseases we

brought. The armies indoctrinate you and leave you here and they fuck off somewhere else to cause trouble, inky-dinky parlez-vous. WE should all move out together. (Ondaatje 122)

Caravaggio, who is Canadian, takes responsibility, claiming that all four of the characters brought the disease of war. He understands that he has participated in the war, but finds no reason to remain living among its ruins.

All four characters were part of a war that has contaminated the land with disease, blood, hate, and prejudice. None of them are completely innocent and none of them can forget what they saw. However, the fact that the characters are experiencing the horrors of the war together has helped them cope with the trauma. They have become a community, dependent on each other's company. Elizabeth A. Waites states that "[...] when a danger is commonly shared, those who share it sometimes escape the devastating sense of social isolation that so often magnifies trauma" (Waites 31). Caravaggio would agree with Waites because while he wishes to escape the war, he does not wish to separate from the other characters, particularly Hana. He feels that staying in the villa that is a reminder of war, with active bombs remaining in the earth and the English patient's imminent death plaguing them, only infects them all over again. To escape the war and its aftermath together would be a totally different experience from facing the world alone: "Even extremely painful or life-threatening experiences, for example, mean something different when they are socially typical and shared or even valued by the general community" (Waites 31). The community that shares a traumatic experience in the novel changes its meaning by condemning the war together. For instance, Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient are residing in an unfamiliar place and are all adjusting to the weather, food, and the overall way of life during a war, on top of their traumatic experience. Caravaggio believes that the

relationships among Hana, Kip, and himself can provide their means for escaping the war and eventually its haunting memory, together. Unfortunately, the English patient is left out of the equation because his burns have made him physically unable to leave the villa.

Even if they are all experiencing trauma together about the same thing--the war-- they each are experiencing different types and levels of intensity of trauma because each has a different social status and personal "history". Homi Bhabha focuses on the obligations of critics and readers to acknowledge perspectives of "others" when reading literature: "For the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the un-spoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" (Bhabha 147). Therefore, it is apparent that there are different, unexplored areas of the "other's" perspective of trauma in "history." (Henceforth in this thesis the word "history" will not be surrounded by quotation marks; however, the marks express its inaccuracy because all history is imprecise.) History does not represent the trauma that Kip and the English patient have endured during the war as being equal to the trauma of those who feel they belong to the Allies, like Caravaggio and Hana. The English patient informs Hana, "Kip and I are both international bastards—born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back to or get away from our homelands all our lives" (Ondaatje 176). Kip and the English patient do not feel as if they belong anywhere because both are "othered" by race and/or politics. The English patient and Kip differ from Caravaggio and Hana, who are accepted by white nations, in the way that Kip and the English patient are others in all countries, even their birthplaces. For example, Kip is a Sikh, a member of a group found particularly in the Punjab region of India, which only represents two percent of India's population; therefore, Kip is an "other" in his own country (Encarta).

However, it is not just race and culture that have silenced the experience of trauma in history. Hana's account of trauma may be overlooked by historians because she is female and has fought death in a hospital, instead of with men on battlefields. Even though Hana's efforts have been of great significance in the war, she does not sacrifice in the same way that the men do. For example, her experience with an abortion during the war is not something that the other three men could possibly relate to physically or emotionally. Hana's unborn child is described as being lost and killed, before she acknowledges that the pregnancy was aborted: "I lost the child. I mean, I had to lose it. The father was already dead. There was a war" (Ondaatje 82). Hana sacrificed her child, who would have provided her with a possible surviving, intimate relationship following the death of both her lover and her father: "In my head. I was talking to him [the child] while I bathed and nursed patients. I was a little crazy" (Ondaatje 82). Hana stopped talking to her unborn child when she was bombarded with patients, many of whom died.

While male soldiers kill as heroes in battle and become hardened by doing so, Hana is criticized for being unfeminine or insensitive to dying soldiers as a nurse, when she accidentally closes the eyes of a dying soldier who is not yet dead: "Can't wait to have me dead? You bitch!" (Ondaatje 83). Hana is not always treated negatively because of her sex, but she is always treated differently: Hana is "sick of being treated like gold because [she is] female" (Ondaatje 81).

Even a Western male, Caravaggio, is not a typical example of a soldier since he provides his services as a thief to his nation. Thus, Ondaatje's novel is representing characters that history usually disregards. Although Hana and Caravaggio are accepted in white nations, they are still "othered" by their gendered or professional "place" in society. The novel accounts for

individuals who would usually be left out of history by making all of the main characters atypical; thus “otherness” becomes the norm.

#### National Identity and Belonging in the “World”

History usually provides a foundation for the stereotypical idea of “national identity,” which is assigned by place and/or nations but is not an accurate or definitive representation of an individual. Is a “national identity” somewhere a character is from, somewhere a character belongs, or both? As with a name or label, a character does not choose which country or nation he or she was born into. Nationality carries connotations of race, religion, language, politics, culture, history, or territory. For instance, Hana, from Canada, is portrayed as privileged because she is a nurse from a white nation; and Kip, from India, is considered an “other,” and is a sapper with a darker complexion that classifies him as less privileged. The novel makes these characters’ original nations obvious, and like their names, or labels, nations are shown to limit a character’s identity significantly. For instance, Hana and Kip’s love affair ends after their stay in the villa. Their physical relationship ends because of their cultural differences and the geographical distance between the places that they are from and intend to return to, Hana to Canada and Kip to India. Hana writes a letter to her stepmother asking, “Do you understand the sadness of geography?” (Ondaatje 296) For Hana, geography, or place, refers to the limitations that place imposes upon characters. When Hana asks this question, she is focusing on the fact that she was not able to nurse her father to health when he died because the distance from him was too great, but also, perhaps, that she is not able to remain with Kip. However, the letter continues with a confession that she wishes to return home, regardless of its limitations, so she can be rescued from “this place we all entered,” meaning Italy and the war (Ondaatje 296).

Like Hana, the English patient considers a national identity to be limiting and is the most active of the four main characters in resisting what nations, history, and places represent and how these constrain his identity. To him, a nation signifies war and restrictions that force a large number of people to accept the ideas of nations' leaders, instead of allowing each person to have his or her own voice: "We were German, English, Hungarian, African--all of us insignificant to [desert people]. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation states. Madox [the English patient's friend] died because of nations" (Ondaatje 138). While in the desert with colleagues, he states, "All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries. It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape. Fire and sand" (Ondaatje 139). By including Europeans in the mix of people who wish to remove nationality from their own identities, the English patient makes the statement that it is not only the "others" who are limited by and unsatisfied with a "national identity." In other words, Europeans, "the contract makers," (Ondaatje 284) wish to remove the superficial clothing of nationality, too, as another constraining shell--like their names, labels, and body images--that does not completely define each person's identity. It is because of the characters' nationalities that they lose their independence and disappear into the landscape during the war.

However, belonging to the Eurocentric view is much easier than not belonging at all. To belong is to be represented in history, even if one is not accurately portrayed. Yet, this is not a novel about the Eurocentric view of belonging; history has already tried to capture that point of view. The English Patient emphasizes "otherness." The novel gives the reader another kind of historical account, as one critic points out: "Ondaatje is Sri Lankan but Canadian; he then writes of a world in which Hungarians (the elusive patient himself) and Indians (a stern Sikh employed

by the British army) are central characters” (Maynard 68). The significant presence of the Hungarian European and the Sikh Indian in the novel destabilizes the “norm” of a Eurocentric view. It is easier and more satisfactory for Kip to remain in Italy before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki because he feels as if he belongs, as the only one remaining in uniform, which represents a country and a community that his skin does not. Kip tries to belong, even though he does not, by listening to western music while defusing bombs and by drinking English tea: “[Kip] is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son” (Ondaatje 217). When the reality of not being accepted in Europe, despite his efforts, becomes obvious after bombs are dropped on an “other” nation, Kip becomes defensive and angry. As Kateryna Longley explains: “Moving freely through familiar spaces (in narrative and in lived experience) is more than an expression of physical belonging--it also signifies the cultural belonging that is possible when one has absorbed the local webs of dominant rules, conventions, colloquialisms and gestures, and all the nuanced signposts which, when they are not understood or shared, turn social space into a minefield” (Longley 12). Kip once moved through Europe freely by adopting bits of European culture, such as music, but he has now realized that he has been walking in a minefield in Europe, figuratively when he no longer understands the actions of white nations. Kip, who has always been greeted with hesitation when rank dictated that soldiers were supposed to respectfully and rightfully call him “sir,” and who is unwavering when diffusing bombs, cannot accept, and should not have to accept, the feeling of not belonging in a place or a nation. It is particularly insulting when he is risking his life daily to restore white nations that do not accept him. The novel criticizes the prejudice against “otherness” in the “world,” the reason why Kip has previously tried unsuccessfully, to escape his name, body, and birthplace.

Kip is not accepted by a white “world.” The “world” is usually considered to include everything that surrounds the globe, including all organisms, objects, environments, and countries. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the “world” as the “earthly state of human existence; this present life” (“world”). However, the idea of the “world” in The English Patient does not include the characters’ present lives. In fact, to the characters, the “world” exists only outside the boundaries of their lives: “[...] there was nothing here that belonged to the outside world” (Ondaatje 112). Before the bombing of Japan, they have escaped the “world” and its consequences by entering their own separate space in the villa.

However, each person’s own separate space is occupied by three other people reconstructing their identities as well, which connects the characters to each other in a way that only tragedy can do. Yet as they enclose themselves inside of their own spatial existence, they forget about the outside “world.” Kristina Kyser asserts, “[Ondaatje’s] characters [...] oscillate between this connection with others and a tendency to withdraw from the world” (Kyser 3). And they have clearly withdrawn from the world, since none of them are where they are supposed to be: Caravaggio should be recovering in a hospital in Rome; Hana was supposed to have left the villa with the doctors, soldiers, and other nurses; the English patient should have been dead, either by fire or the actions planned by the Allies’ Intelligence; and Kip could have wandered anywhere in Europe to diffuse bombs. Other than by word-of-mouth, which is how Caravaggio found Hana in the villa, there is “no representation of them in the world” (Ondaatje 112). Therefore “there is hardly [a] world around them and they are forced back on themselves” (Ondaatje 40). They find refuge in themselves and in a community that they have built in the villa, their place to temporarily escape.

To the characters, they are not inhabitants of the “world” that is full of expectations and rules that they are unwilling to continue to follow. For example, when the English patient was part of the outside “world,” which is represented through flashbacks, he notes the distance that place and nations put between people: “If he could walk across the room and touch [Katharine] he would be sane. But between them lay a treacherous and complex journey. It was a very wide world” (Ondaatje 113). Therefore, even though Katharine and the English patient share a room, they are worlds apart because of their backgrounds, beliefs, obligations, and national identity. But later on, by taking the “world” out of the equation in order to find a more personal stance for interaction with others, the characters try to escape the world’s limits, to feel like Hana, who is “secure in the miniature world she had built [...]” (Ondaatje 47).

However, this separation from the “world” is not necessarily something that is completely voluntary. The trauma that the characters have endured has caused them to feel useless to the outside “world,” unable to adapt to what is to come. Caravaggio is more than mentally and physically handicapped by the war: the “war has unbalanced [Caravaggio] and he can return to no other world as he is, wearing these false limbs that morphine promises” (Ondaatje 116). The “world” war has handicapped Caravaggio. He can no longer steal what he needs without thumbs or nerve, and he has developed a dependency on morphine as a result of his injuries. While he is on morphine, which he shares with the suffering English patient, Caravaggio is described as becoming numb to the “world.” The time at war has made a very independent man dependent on morphine and on three other characters residing in the Villa San Girolamo. The effects of war and place on the characters are not only traumatic, but limiting to identity. However, they become part of the process of identity reconstruction. Although Kip,

Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient can hide from and deny being part of the “world,” they will eventually have to come to terms with its existence.

### The Villa San Girolamo

The Villa San Girolamo is a more specific example of a place that the characters retreat to. The war has managed to tear many people apart, but has brought Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient together in a decrepit villa in Italy, just north of Florence in Tuscany. The villa becomes an important character in the novel, disturbed by the war, just as Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient have been. The Villa San Girolamo also shows many phases of its existence by having had many different names and identities reconstructed throughout its history, based on its various uses. The characters discuss its uncertain history by claiming that it used to house famous artists and was known as the Villa Briscoli, and that it once served as a nunnery that “housed hundreds of troops” (Ondaatje 12) while the German army attacked, and that it became a war hospital for the Allies. Finally, the villa becomes a place of escape for Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and the English patient, a place where they can temporarily forget where they have traveled, what they have seen, and who they once were. However, the attempt to escape into new, definitive identities is not successful, not even for the villa.

The villa represents neither the world nor the characters’ home; it is just somewhere where they can temporarily deny and escape their problems. It is simple, secure, and solitary. They are not faced with questions about what went on during the war that returning home would prompt, nor do they have to perform the social etiquette that they left behind for the war. Instead, they sit in silence, play the piano, think, and read to escape the war and their home. As one postcolonial theorist states about such spaces: “In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each

other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha 141). Even though the characters are satisfied being separate from the “world” and less disoriented than when they first arrived at the villa, the characters know that their stay is only temporary. Kip, who eventually clears the land of bombs, does not expect to make his tent outside somewhere to grow old: “The landscape around [Kip] is just a temporary thing, there is no permanence to it” (Ondaatje 86-7). The characters discuss what the end of the war means for them and where they will go afterwards: “When the war with Japan is over, everyone will finally go home. Kip said. ‘And where will you go?’ Caravaggio asked. The sapper rolled his head, half nodding, half shaking it, his mouth smiling” (Ondaatje 269). Before the dropping of the bombs, Kip and the other three characters are unsure as to where, if anywhere, is home, the place that they belong. The beauty of residing in the villa is it is a sanctuary that has no rules or expectations for the future. They can just exist; and, for now, existing is enough. However, even though the characters are using both their homes and the villa to escape their trauma, both play a part in the reconstruction of identity.

### The Villa’s Library and its Books

The characters can always locate themselves physically, especially in relation to a library. A library always seems to find its way into every situation that the characters endure. Books become a guide to the characters, in more ways than one. For example the English patient first sees Katherine in the Oxford Union Library; Kip meets Hana in a library; and Kip tries out for Lord Suffolk’s experimental bomb squad in a library.

One of the Villa San Girolamo’s most described and utilized rooms is the library. The library is a place that represents the dangers of the “world,” laced with mines from the war that the characters wish to forget, as well as being a reading portal to a safe place within their own

imaginations and memories. Like the villa, the library within it becomes an additional character in the novel and epitomizes the damaged and vulnerable qualities of the four characters:

Between the kitchen and the destroyed chapel a door led into an oval-shaped library. The space inside seemed safe except for a large hole at portrait level in the far wall, caused by mortar-shell attack on the villa two months earlier. The rest of the room had adapted itself to this wound, accepting the habits of weather, evening stars, the sound of birds. There was a sofa, a piano covered in a grey sheet, the head of a stuffed bear and high walls of books. The shelves nearest the torn wall bowed with the rain, which had doubled the weight of the books. Lightning came into the room too, again and again, falling across the covered piano and carpet.” (Ondaatje 11)

The library has been devastated by the war and has begun to blend with nature. It has been wounded and is trying to survive bad weather and the bombings. Like the library, all four characters have survived the war, but not without being traumatically damaged and forced to adapt to their current surroundings. The library is a place of retreat and familiarity. Here Hana, Caravaggio, Kip, and the English patient find the same books available to them in their previous lives. These books allow all four of them to escape their current situations through imagination or distraction. In fact, Caravaggio and Hana each make it a habit to sleep alone in the library, in hopes of forgetting momentarily the war that caused the large hole in the roof: “Caravaggio enters the library. He has been spending most afternoons there. As always, books are mystical creatures to him. [...] He is in the room about five minutes before [...] he sees Hana asleep on the sofa” (Ondaatje 81). Libraries are representative of a safe, war-less “world” to Hana, yet the dangers of reality always find a way to creep back in. Her lover, Kip, tries to eliminate the

danger in the library by dismantling any bombs that may be inside: “Bombs were attached to taps, to the spines of books [...]” (Ondaatje 75). However, even when the library is cleared of bombs by Kip, it is impossible, except by reading, to ignore how the war has affected the villa when lightning constantly enters the room through the hole in the ceiling.

The English patient and Hana use the books to escape into their imaginations and the past together. For example, the English patient tries to conjure up the room in the villa’s history after Hana asks him to “tell me [...] take me somewhere” (Ondaatje 57). The English patient goes on to imagine and read from his commonplace book that “this must be Poliziano’s room. This must have been the villa we are in [...]. It is a famous room. They all met here” (Ondaatje 56). Ignoring Hana’s realistic information that the villa was a hospital after it was a nunnery, the English patient gives lists of influential men of the fifteenth century, such as “Pico and Lorenzo and Poliziano and the young Michelangelo [who] held in each hand the new world and the old world” (Ondaatje 57) in the very room where he lies. The English patient uses his imagination to compare himself to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, claiming that “Pico” was his nickname as a child and “as Poliziano stood on the grass hills smelling the future [...Pico was] down there somewhere as well, in his grey cell, watching everything with the third eye of salvation” (Ondaatje 58). Quickly the English patient escapes the present through books, and his imagination turns to reflection upon his past. The English patient declares himself Pico, a man who was thrown into prison because of an affair with a married woman and was nearly killed, just as the English patient was nearly killed for his affair with Katherine. Thus, reading from his commonplace book allows the English patient to temper his suffering, which is his version of Pico’s cell, in the same way that Hana finds escape in books: “This was the time in her life that

she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell” (Ondaatje 7). Hana and the English Patient find an escape from reality in the pages of books.

There are many instances when other books are mentioned in The English Patient. The most prominent example of a book referenced in the novel is The History of Herodotus. Many critics have commented on the English patient’s rewriting of history by adding his own words, or remnants of his life, written or pasted over Herodotus’s text. For example, Robert Clark declares, “This fictional volume seems to replicate and extend the wandering and separate nature of Herodotus’s own Histories and to figure the authority of a history which comprises the personal with the public and the evidentially consequential with the merely contingent in a discontinuous writing in differing modes” (Clark 59). Nonetheless, rewriting identity and reevaluating this character’s available history in Herodotus, which is used as a guide, does not eliminate the varying influence of a national, fictional, local, or personal history. For example, when Katherine asks to borrow the English patient’s copy of Herodotus, before they become lovers, he claims that it is personal and contains needed notes, maps, and cuttings. The English patient’s copy of the Histories has come to symbolize a part of himself as well as a part of Herodotus. It no longer only contains the identity of Herodotus, but also the alterations by an individual:

No more books. Just give me the Herodotus’ [...] I have seen editions of The Histories with a sculpted portrait on the cover. Some statue found in a French museum. But I never imagine Herodotus this way. I see him 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.” (Ondaatje 118-9)

Thus history has become personalized by the English patient; it is “mine.” A common story that is available to all readers is seen uniquely through the English patient’s eyes. A book of history has helped the English patient, not only to attempt to consider his many identities of the past, but also his identities in the present. However, this consideration does not lead him to a single, conclusive identity, but just to a continuation of overlapping versions of the self. The characters’ increasing ability to recognize that identities are unstable and malleable brings more clarity to the characters than a single identity ever could. One critic contends, “It is in part through the *Histories* that we are able to see the patient as an ambiguous and complicated figure containing many meanings and narratives, rather than simply as a stock character-- the enemy spy. [...] this simultaneous invitation to emotional investment and complication of identity ultimately allows for the novel’s primary motion of revaluation” (Westerman 353). As Molly Westerman argues, it is through the commonplace book that the English patient’s identity is made complex, multiple, and evolving.

The English patient is not the only character who uses books to discover the place that he or she belongs. First, Hana begins writing a physical description of Caravaggio in James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans. Cooper’s book is previously described in the novel as enchanting Hana into a world with an “aquamarine sky and lake [...], the Indian in the foreground” (Ondaatje 12). By writing a description of Caravaggio in the book, Hana becomes part of it, and is able to escape through her imagination into different places. Significantly further into The English Patient, Hana refers back to the classic, The Last of the Mohicans, by claiming that she is a “Mohican of Danforth Avenue” (Ondaatje 224). Hana has blended her feelings for and words describing Caravaggio into those of the novel, just as the novel’s words and her own have merged into Hana’s reality. She is no longer sitting among books, bruised, in a ruinous villa

in an unknown country; in her imagination, Hana is an Indian, moving through the adventures of a novel. Her location has changed through her imagination, provoked by books. Her relationship with the English patient and his example of using a commonplace book enable Hana to find this creative release.

Next, Hana writes in a different commonplace book, Rudyard Kipling's Kim, about the guns that Kip has previously described to her. And finally, Hana writes about the English patient and what he has told her about the ancient city, Lahore, in a random book of poetry. Hana has escaped into several literary worlds and places. Her three male companions are inserted into diverse versions of these books by her writings. She has included her point of view of the characters or their words, as well, thus embracing the bravery of the Mohicans and of Caravaggio, who risked his life during the war; the adventurous and hybrid youth of Kim and Kip; and the ambiguity of a random book of poetry and of the English patient, whose name and past are unknown at this point in the novel.

Hana finds sanctuary in books that link her to own past or to worlds with which she is unfamiliar: "She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams" (Ondaatje 12). Hana's use of books to reminisce about her past usually involves a childhood memory of her father. Books are used not only to escape into the unknown, but to escape back into where she has already been. Hana already has belonged in Toronto, where she once felt safe and free of the weight of the world's war:

Then she began to read.

Her father had taught her about hands. About a dog's paws. Whenever her father was alone with a dog in a house he would lean over and smell the skin at the base of its paw. This, he would say, as if coming away from a brandy snifter, is the greatest smell in the world! A bouquet! Great rumours of travel! She would pretend disgust, but the dog's paw was a wonder: the smell of it never suggested dirt. It's a cathedral! Her father had said, so-and-so's garden, that field of grasses, a walk through cyclamen- a concentration of hint of all the paths the animal had taken during the day.

A scurry in the ceiling like a mouse, and she looked up from the book again. (Ondaatje 8)

Like the dog's paws, the book she is reading is used as a portal for travels into other times and worlds. Books conjure up worlds and memories free from the tragedies of the war.

Hana's relationship with books offers an escape into her own past, as well as into imaginary lives of other characters in different novels, such as those of the Mohicans and Kim, who do not represent the "dominant" white culture that she has formerly inhabited. But, she no longer possesses that white culture, or home, now that she has been living among men of different backgrounds and can be considered as an "other" herself, made different by her gender. Hana resents her own country, Canada, because it is responsible for teaching her a trade, nursing, that would benefit the war, which has traumatized her: "I wanted to go home and there was no one at home" (Ondaatje 85). Even though she has surviving relatives in Canada and helps to create a diverse family with the men at the villa, she cannot find solace in any place when she is not secure in her self. Books provide an escape from this feeling of not belonging. Lois Tyson suggests:

This feeling of being caught between cultures, or belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives, is referred by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness (Tyson 368).

Thus, Hana is rewriting her identity and in the midst of unhomeliness becoming something that used to be foreign to her.

Hana's trauma of cultural displacement during World War II has caused her to lose her stable identity and her Canadian home. Homi Bhabha states that, "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and the public spheres" (Bhabha 141). While Hana does not wish to return home early in the novel, she does not belong in Italy either. Her "unhomeliness" is spawned from her experience with the war and from her disagreement with the waste of soldiers' lives. Before the dropping of the bombs, she does not feel that she can return to the person she used to be or to what she used to believe; she has seen life through many new perspectives in books, which help her to grasp her three roommates' new points of view. However, Hana does return to Canada at the end of the novel, but not without being altered by her experiences. She is no longer the youthful girl who left for war. Hana has particularly been stricken with grief over her father's lonely death and her own experience with death as she writes a letter home announcing her desire to return.

The library and its books take on the role of a refugee camp for the four lost souls in the novel. An escape into a book allows the characters, particularly Hana and the English Patient, to reevaluate their memories and explore their imaginations. However, the escape is only temporary

because every book has a conclusion. The English Patient itself concludes after the momentous world event of the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This event curtails the exploration of nostalgia and imagination by exploding the reality of the war in the characters' faces. The hope that books allowed each character to enter other worlds is thus shattered: "In the future, if and when the patient dies, Caravaggio and the girl will bury him. Let the dead bury the dead" (Ondaatje 286). The biblical reference from Matthew 8:22 reflects the characters' lack of hope and loss of belief that follows the bombs, because the dead that are doing the burying, Hana and Caravaggio, are those without faith or spirituality, and they are using the dead, the English patient, as an excuse to remain in the villa.

Although the characters focus on the current events of the war at the end of the novel, this is not to say that books are entirely disregarded. Hana and Caravaggio plan to bury everything that once belonged to the war with the English patient when he dies: "The body, the sheets, his clothes, the rifle" (Ondaatje 286). They will bury everything except the English patient's commonplace book, because otherwise his name will be forgotten, his body will disintegrate, and nations will stop searching for him. The jumbled pages of constantly changing thoughts, ideas, pictures, maps, feelings, lies, imagination, fears, and memories, which are all pasted on top of a foundation of Herodotus's Histories, are the best representation and preserver of his unstable identity and history. Their escape into imagination and memory through books fails to satisfy the characters' need to deny the trauma imposed on them by World War II, and the limitations set upon them by names, bodies, and places. They eventually are forced to face reality, either by the bombs, the official end of the war, or the death of the English patient, and to return to where they may belong.

## Desert

While this thesis has already discussed the desert as a place for a character to elude names/labels, the desert must again be mentioned as a place that represents Bhabha's "unhomeliness," a place that cannot be pinned down, named, or owned: "The desert, and equally the villa [...] are extreme examples of unhomely, life-threatening spaces [...] and are] both are positive metaphors for the shedding of the conventional commitment to national and personal identity and the related abandonment of narrative certainty and closure" (Longley 16). The desert is for the English patient both a positive and negative place to escape the war, offering a disconnected space like that which Kristina Kyser compares to limbo: "The onset of the war only accentuates the patient's affinity for the limbo of the desert" (Kyser 4). "Limbo" is defined by The Oxford English Dictionary as being an "unfavourable place or condition [...]. A condition of neglect or oblivion to which persons or things are consigned when regarded as outworn [or] useless" ("Limbo"); this is how the four characters feel and are described as becoming while in the villa. For example, Caravaggio is now useless in his profession without thumbs and the English patient is useless by being restricted to his bed because of his burns. The desert is a place full of movement by the wind, a place that is forgotten and neglected by the "world." The desert is a place of escape, which is considered outworn or useless to the "world." Limbo also implies dislocation, which is why the English patient seeks the desert for an unhomed condition.

The English patient considers the desert a place where he can escape from the "world." Kristina Kyser suggests, "It is in the desert that Almásy becomes 'nationless'" (Kyser 4). The English patient is against possession of objects, land, and people, and is against what it means to possess or be possessed by nationality: "There is God only in the desert, he wanted to acknowledge that now. Outside of this there was just trade and power, money and war. Financial

and military despots shaped the world” (Ondaatje 250). The English patient is much happier and more secure in escaping nations by disappearing into the desert: “The place [in the desert where the English patient and colleagues] had chosen to come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry. [The English patient] knew during these times how the mirage worked, the fata morgana, for he was within it” (Ondaatje 246). The English patient refers to the fata morgana, a mirage, as a place outside of the “world.” Robert Clark points out, “He seeks fertility in desert places. He is not Gyges, not able to marry and take his place as master of the law, for everything he believes in is opposed to the very notion: law, property, names, identities, designations, maps” (Clark 65). The English patient is not concerned with possession of material goods or with society; he is more impassioned by the ever-changing desert.

The characters in The English Patient use various places, like the desert, to escape their current mental and physical state. They attempt to reconstruct single identities that cannot exist, but instead achieve some mental stability that allows them to eventually leave the villa. However, the many places of the war, the villa, the library, and the desert, are only temporary escapes. All four of the characters plan to leave or actually leave the villa at the end of the novel: Kip returns to India and becomes a doctor, Hana plans to return to Canada to her stepmother, Caravaggio also returns to Canada, assumedly with Hana, and the English patient eventually dies. Even though they attempt to escape the connotations and experiences of the places in which they have lived or are living, they cannot. Ondaatje has revealed in an interview that “one of the things that [he] discovered in the book was that [he] thought that this was an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war, and this was where healing began. Then, with the news of other bombs, suddenly this became, perhaps, the last Eden” (Wachtel 252). The jolt back into reality

ends Ondaatje's characters' imaginative and nostalgic escape from the "world" and eliminates the idea of a possible nonrestrictive Eden. Instead they choose to return to the places in which they feel that they most belong, where they are received without prejudice or violence, a place they once called home.

## CONCLUSION

When I began my research on Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient, I initially saw the end of the novel as a negative reflection upon human interaction, a portrayal of the characters' desertion of each other and of their failure to develop their identities. The novel ends with the death of the protagonist, the abandonment of lovers, and the bombing of two Japanese cities. The fact that the characters are unable to escape the prejudices and limitations of their names, bodies, and places is disheartening. However, after writing this thesis, I have come to realize that the novel is more about human resilience and reconstructive relationships. The characters are broken individuals who use and help each other to heal.

Through the techniques of new historicism and postcolonialism, readers see that the novel rejects Eurocentrism and focuses on the human relationships that form, regardless of the political and social connotations associated with names/labels, bodies, or places. The characters' experience with and awareness of "otherness" permits them to engage in the complexity of identity reconstruction and helps them heal. The awareness of "otherness" is then communicated to the reader, which is a step towards eliminating the ignorance of political and social complexities.

Even though Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient all come from diverse circumstances that have brought them to Italy, they are linked by the war and the need to escape their name/label, body, and place. Ironically, the diverse survivors make a similar decision to eventually return home. World War II, which has employed all four characters, has ended. There is no reason for them to remain in Italy and there will soon be nowhere for them to live because the villa has been slowly deteriorating. The characters have escaped the reality of war for long enough, and now they must face its effects on them. After the bombs, they decide to either perish

with the villa and the English patient, or to survive. Ultimately, the characters realize that they belong with family or friends, in places that they once called home. Even though at home their shifting identities are not accurately reflected in a name/label, body, or place, they belong there more than amidst the aftermath of a war between nations. The characters' identity reconstruction is not hindered by their return to their nations of birth, but home offers the surviving characters a future, opposed to the limbo of the villa at the end of World War II. Instead of wasting away in a broken villa, Kip becomes a doctor and raises a family, while Hana and Caravaggio return to Canada. Unfortunately, Ondaatje suggests that the English patient's inevitable death occurs in the Italian villa. However, all four characters have evolved dramatically through the impact of the war and their relationships with each other. The surviving characters continue to have a strong connection with the other three characters through memories. Hana and Kip's connection has particularly transcended national boundaries, as we see in the mystical ending when Hana drops a glass at the same time that Kip catches a falling fork. By sharing the memories and trauma of the war, Kip and Hana continue to heal.

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