Breaking Binaries and Blurring Boundaries: The Quest for Identity in David Malouf’s *An Imaginary Life* and Michel Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*

Frances Reading

Elleke Boehmer has stated that the theme of identity is a ‘rallying place’ in postcolonial texts; a central focus whose trajectory can be mapped in literature across the globe. In order to destabilise the discourses supporting colonisation it is essential for the colonised to assert their own collective or individual identities. This is so they can transcend the labels and ideologies thrust upon them through the hegemonic systems of the colonisers. Owing to the disruption, dislocation and denigration inflicted by settlers or invaders, a dialectical relationship between the metropolitan centre and the subjugated periphery is necessary to construct or recreate an identity that can no longer remain monocentric. David Malouf and Michael Ondaatje produced much of their oeuvres in the latter half of the twentieth century while they were living in Australia and Canada respectively; former settler colonies of the British Empire. Although the world was rapidly globalising at this time, the Cold War was on-going and the Iron Curtain was still raised, resulting in extreme polarity between the West and East. With the eyes of the world’s media trained upon the United States and the Soviet Union - and widely disseminating and emphasising this divide - it was difficult to recreate a new, coherent identity for the rapidly changing world. Therefore, a new identity could
only be formed by an absence of polarity; by binaries breaking down or subverting.

The ethnographer, Arnold van Genepp has identified three key stages in the process of losing and constructing a new identity, which can typically be found in ritualistic practice; separation, margin (or *limen*), and aggregation. Victor Turner has adopted van Genepp’s theory and surmised it as follows:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more...³

In this vein, within the liminal spaces, between the binaries and where physical and metaphysical boundaries become blurred, symbolic and cultural interactions occur between the centres and edges. In the liminal places, which Homi K. Bhabha calls the Third Space, it is possible to ‘elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.’ This implies that liminality is necessary for the creation, or re-creation, of identity. This essay posits that in *An Imaginary Life* and *In the Skin of a Lion*, where the protagonists are colonisers in exile (whether that be voluntary or involuntary), the quests for identity can only succeed by utilising periods of liminality, where binaries collapse and boundaries dissolve, resulting in characters emerging re-identified. Moreover Fredric Jameson argued that ‘the story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled structure of the public [...] culture and society’ and so this
piece will bear in mind how reflective these texts are of the postcolonial situation in Australia and Canada.

A primary theme in both *An Imaginary Life* and *In the Skin of a Lion* is exile. In *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid, the famous Roman poet, has been exiled by Emperor Augustus to the ‘desolateness’ of Tomis, an outpost at the edge of the Roman empire. At the beginning of the novel, a naïve Ovid believes Tomis is ‘at the ends of the earth.’ This notion of being at the very precipice of the world itself denotes how far removed Ovid is from the imperial centre. Patrick, the principle character in *In the Skin of a Lion*, on the other hand, has detached himself from the edge; the nameless place of no colour, where the landscape is full of ‘dry stalks of dead mullein [and], grey trees’ and situates himself in the centre. The semantic field of aridity and lifelessness seen in the description of Patrick’s home, that comes to be known as Depot Creek, is comparable to Tomis’ apparent emptiness. If Ovid, the voice of Rome, cannot find inspiration in the wilderness, and claims that the environment reflects his frame of mind he must believe himself to be completely alienated when his exile commences. Patrick moves from the aridity of Depot Creek and into Toronto ‘to begin his life once more.’ This infers that Patrick is hoping to re-invent and re-identify himself within the bustling metropolis. Similarly, Ovid notes that he is ‘the least person here’, illuminating his need to recuperate his identity. Furthermore this phrase establishes that there are other people in Tomis who are more complete, more human, with a firmer grasp upon their own identities than Ovid has upon his, despite the fact that the Getae people are considered to be barbarians by the Roman colonisers. Likewise, as Douglas Barbour notes, Patrick ‘despite belonging to the race and gender that control Canadian power’ is isolated because he comes from the colonial edge of the country. He attempts to integrate himself into the polyphonic world of Toronto, which is compiled of dominant Canadian businessmen, such as Ambrose Small and Rowland Harris, and migrant workers from a plethora of Eastern European backgrounds. However despite being an
English-speaking white male, Patrick struggles in his self-exilic state.

Bronwyn Lay postulates that ‘exile is about being severed from your past and thrown into an unreadable future.’\textsuperscript{14} This suggests that during the first stages of exile a person has willingly or unwillingly broken through the boundaries of their known, comfortable world and entered into a period of flux, while attempting to construct the boundaries of their future life. Conversely, Edward Said advocates that ‘the Exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actually here now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation.’\textsuperscript{15} This contradicts Lay’s concept of being severed from one world, as severing denotes a complete physical and mental separation. Said, on the other hand, promotes a plurality of vision, whereby a person in exile is aware of two modes of existence; one pertaining to where they came from, and one relating to where they are now. Indeed when Ovid discovers a poppy in the wasteland in \textit{An Imaginary Life} he associates it with Sulmo, his childhood home.\textsuperscript{16} Equally, when Alice Gull, Patrick’s partner, tells him about Cato, the deceased biological father of her daughter Hana, Patrick is reminded of figures skating upon a frozen pond in Depot Creek.\textsuperscript{17} Alice narrates Cato’s life, adding to the doubling-effect by creating a polyphony of voices, and informs Patrick that Cato’s father ”moved here from Finland as a logger.”\textsuperscript{18} This results in Patrick finally being able to name the group of men he witnessed working and playing when he was a child. Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford are in agreement with Said because they state that ‘each person is a fossil in so far as each man carries within himself remnants’\textsuperscript{19} of the past. Although Petersen and Rutherford mean an antecedent past, the sentiment is the same. Despite the conflicting views, Petersen, Rutherford, Lay and Said acknowledge that there is an implicit transitional period during early exile, stemming either from the need to make the unknown known or to create a single perspective out of a dual outlook. Throughout the early stages a
person in exile experiences a feeling of *unheimlich* (unhousedness), a Heideggerian term, which has links to the Uncanny and can be understood as the opposite to all that is familiar and homely. The exile has lost one home and is yet to find another. It is within this liminal period of unreadableness or dual-vision where the exile has to attempt to identify himself in order to reach his new mental and physical Home. Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia comment that a person ‘not only benefits, but in some sense needs to be in exile to develop the capacities for free-ranging’ life. Indeed, as Ovid notes, he ‘had to enter the silence [or liminal space] to find a password that would release’ himself, while Patrick had to descend into the polyphonic, Eliotic, Conradian, cacophony of Toronto in order to find his new self.

The process by which we identify the Self fills the pages of numerous texts of theory and criticism. To Jacques Lacan, a child identifies himself in a mirror before he is able to utilise language to define himself. By recognising himself, he is able to construct the concept of ‘I’. At the beginning of Malouf’s novel, while Ovid is in the early, liminal stages of exile, he has a dream where centaurs speak to him. Centaurs are physical – albeit mythical – examples of the man/beast binary collapsing. The boundaries of the two species have become blurred and it is partly through interacting with these creatures that Ovid is able to identify himself. Moreover if one was to adopt the Derridean notion that myths are fragmentary and protean, it enhances the liminality of the dream. The process of dreaming itself is, to Sigmund Freud, a space in between being awake and being completely asleep. This is because, to use Freud’s terminology, dream-thoughts are a complex of conscious ideas and memories that relate to ‘all the attributes of the trains of thought familiar to us in waking life.’ Ideas and memories become disjointed and indistinct while a person is dreaming, hence why dreams can often seem bizarre. So, while a person is dreaming the awake/asleep binary folds and a liminal space is created within his mind. In Ovid’s dream he saw that ‘something came out of
the depths of [his] sleep towards the point where [they] stood facing [each other], like a reflection rising to the surface of a mirror. It was there, outside [him], a stranger. And something in [him] that was its reflection had come up to meet it. For Lacan this first recognition and identification of the Self usually happens during infancy. Although Ovid is an adult, he is rendered infantile in Tomis owing to its unfamiliarity and his need to redefine himself. In a scene, notably reminiscent of the ending to Sylvia Plath’s poem ‘The Mirror’, Ovid is faced with a part of himself that he had not previously been aware of before his exile, but he recognises the stranger as a section of himself during the liminal space of a dream.

Patrick, in Ondaatje’s novel, feels ‘deliriously anonymous’ when he walks down the street and realises that the ‘Macedonians and Bulgarians were his only mirror.’ In Patrick’s delirium he is in a disrupted, hazy state of mind, similar to that of a dream. Although Lacanian discourse is utilised here, with the various nationalities portrayed as reflective surfaces for Patrick, he is aware that he is not truly one of them. Karl Marx theorised that a person or group only becomes aware of, or forms, their own class when they are faced with people in a different economic situation to themselves. By noticing alterity, they find their own class. Similarly, in Said’s theory of Orientalism, the Occident contrasts itself to the Orient and in doing so it is able to identify itself. Patrick is, in theory, representative of the Occident, being a white, male Canadian (despite Canada being a British settler colony), and although he can identify parts of himself within other nationalities, he is aware that he is ‘their alien’ and so, in a Marxian process, needs to form his own identity. For Bhabha, identity is ‘constituted through the locus of the Other’, which implies that in order for a person to find their own identity, they need to be removed from a homogenous, familiar place. Without this dislocation a person would not be aware of the Other. Although Ovid has identified a new part of himself, this does not necessarily mean that he has recreated an identity, however he is aware that
he is different to the Getae tribesmen and to the Child. Likewise, Patrick has acknowledged that he is an alien, but the realisation does not mean that he has constructed a complete identity. Therefore, by utilising the Other, both the protagonists are able to further construct an individual identity for themselves while in their realms of dislocation, where they are still unsure of their own binaries and boundaries.

In a subversion of the coloniser/colonised binary, Patrick and Ovid find themselves having to learn the language and culture of the people who either live at the margins of history or at the margins of empire. A starting point for appropriating the language and culture of a group is through mimicry. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin warn that mimicry is never a simple reproduction, but instead a blurred copy of the original. Bhabha believes that mimicry is disruptive and ambivalent when utilised by the colonised, suggesting that it threatens binaries enforced by the coloniser. Moreover he contests that mimicry ‘rearticulates the whole notion of identity’, proposing that identity can be recreated or discovered through mimicry. While attempting to refashion his identity in his exilic state, Ovid utilises mimicry, a form of blurring, in an attempt to express himself and his identity to the Other. He finds himself at a ritual, where he feels alienated, and is approached by an old man who ‘throws back his head and lets forth a blood curdling cry. Then nods and looks expectant.’ Ovid realises that he is expected to repeat the sound, which he self-consciously does and describes it as his ‘feeble parody.’ Ovid’s seemingly weak rendition elucidates the mimetic nature of his actions because it is not a perfect, natural replica of the original sound. Bhabha employs the refrain ‘almost the same but not quite’ throughout his essay, ‘Of Mimicry and Men: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, to describe the attempted imitation. This exemplifies the problem of mimesis, in that it is not presenting an opposite, but attempting to duplicate an original. Consequently binaries are being dissolved, but not reinstated, which insinuates they can be exploited. When Ovid
repeats the unnatural cry he notes that he felt ‘freed of something’40, indicating that his identity has been rearticulated, because he has released part of his old Self. It is within this moment that Ovid understands that he has to ‘push out into the world’41 by forcing his past Self away.

In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Patrick goes to an illegal gathering of multiple nationalities at the half-built waterworks. While the primary objective of the meeting was politically-motivated, Patrick becomes fascinated by the entertainment; a puppet show. 42 An artistic performance would be one of the most obvious demonstrations of mimicry and a puppet show in particular because they often parody society. In this instance the puppets are symbolic of all the different nationalities found in Toronto as they are dressed in an ensemble of clothes from varying nationalities. Their movements are ‘exaggerated’43 and form a parallel with Patrick’s need to embellish his gestures in order to be understood in the multicultural east end of Toronto.44 Mita Banjereee contests that Patrick’s mimicry ‘is modified from a strategy of resistance towards a means of overcoming the language barrier’45, claiming that the puppet show is utilised in a more threatening fashion because it comes close to mocking the colonial centre. Patrick observes that one puppet is significantly larger than the others and Ondaatje describes the marionette as an ‘alien’46, a word commonly associated with Patrick, which could illustrate that the large puppet represents him. Indeed the alien puppet is unable to speak the language of the smaller puppets and consequently is beaten in a manner described as the ‘caricature of culture.’47 In this instance the caricature provides the audience with a hyperbolic version of society. The mimicry of the puppet show is exacerbated by the reappearance of boundaries that were previously blurred throughout the performance. During the show, Patrick realises that the large puppet is actually a man and then eventually comes to establish that the man is truly a woman, Alice Gull. As the recital finishes and comprehension dawns upon Patrick, the gender binary of man/woman is
reinstated. Bhabha argues that ‘the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonym’ during mimicry, which can be seen not only through the symbolic performance as a whole, but also when Alice Gull is able to convincingly change her identity as a woman and her identity as a human. Furthermore, the puppet show dramatises the plight of the immigrant workers in Toronto during the first half of the twentieth century, reminding the reader that although the workers are at the centre of In the Skin of a Lion, they were historically a subjugated group. They are given a voice and an identity by Ondaatje, whereas in reality they were the puppets of white, English-speaking businessmen.

Mimicry provides Patrick, Alice and Ovid with a way to interact with society, if only at a superficial level. By developing a closer relationship with other characters in the texts, Patrick and Ovid are able to more effectively pursue their quests for identity. In Raymond Williams’ interpretation of Marx’s theory of Base and Superstructure, he argues that there is a dynamic relationship between the two echelons of society, contradicting the Orthodox Marxist view that the Base alone influences the Superstructure. It is undeniably more beneficial to have a reciprocal relationship between the two strata of society, however it dissolves the Base/Superstructure binary imposed by Orthodox Marxists. Malouf and Ondaatje break the Adult/Child and Teacher/Pupil binaries within their texts, and allow the relationship to become more oscillatory as the adult characters are able to profit in their quest for identity, just as Williams and Gramsci see the Base and Superstructure benefitting from a dialogical connection. Patrick adopts Hana (providing Patrick with an identity as a father) and Ovid attempts to educate Lullo and the Child. Wilson Harris advocates accepting the ‘void’ that becomes apparent when binaries break and boundaries blur, and descending into it with willingness in order to ‘participate in an alien territory and wilderness [that] has become a necessity for one’s reason or salvation.’ Patrick and Ovid enter into
Harris’ void – Bhabha’s Third Space – by allowing the children in the novels to become guides upon their quests for identity.

Rod Schumacher argues that Hazen Lewis, Patrick’s father, offers Patrick no support in his quest for identity, attesting that when Hazen declares: ‘I am going under now’ as he prepares to enter the icy water to rescue a cow, it is evocative of Hazen’s inability to assist Patrick because he wishes to remain anonymous. This concept is developed by Ondaatje when he portrays Hazen as ‘an abashed man, withdrawn from the world around him, uninterested in the habits of civilisation.’ Again Hazen is depicted as a man who is disappearing from the world; a recluse who has no desire to find a new place or identity outside the margins of Canada. Schumacher and Gordon Gamlin are in agreement that Patrick’s parochial upbringing makes him similar to Enkidu from The Epic of Gilgamesh, the epic poem from which In the Skin of a Lion takes its title, and is in need of entering the centre from the periphery so that to discover more about himself. Having gleaned little from Hazen and experiencing perpetual frustration by trying to build a coherent identity for the ‘half-lit’ lives of Clara and Alice, he enters Wilson Harris’ void and turns to Hana to help him. Hanah becomes Patrick’s translator and teacher. When they enter the Balkan Café and order ‘bop and manja. Hana [tells] him in her clear, exact voice what the names meant. Bop was beans. Manja was stew.’ By using the indigenous language of the immigrants, Hana is not only the guide Patrick in her clear, exact, pedagogical manner, but she also bestows more meaning and identity onto the immigrant workers. In this section, titled ‘The Palace of Purification’, Patrick is still searching for his identity as he was in the proceeding chapter, however with Hana’s assistance he is able to recover himself from the state of ‘almost nothing’ that he had previously experienced. Alice, Hana’s mother, had reminded Patrick of Joseph’s Conrad’s belief in ‘the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects’ and this quotation can be expanded to include the structure of binaries,
which are broken so that Patrick can start to find himself within Ondaatje’s heteroglossic text and polyphonic world.

Similarly, in *An Imaginary Life*, Ovid’s quest for identity is assisted by the Child. Claudette Kemper Columbus, Maryanne Dever and Saadi Nikro are all in agreement that inversions of the Adult/Child and Teacher/Pupil binaries allow Ovid to metamorphosise and create his new identity. The Child’s Rousseauian interaction with nature sets an example to Ovid. He sees the Child ‘being the bird’ rather than simply imitating its call and becomes filled with the certainty that ‘he [the Child] is the teacher.’ This is reminiscent of William Wordsworth’s famous line “The Child is the Father of the Man” because the Child encourages Ovid to absorb nature, to metamorphasise and become transcendent. Ovid tries to think as the Child does, saying ‘I am raining, I am thundering.’ Rather than thinking that the storm is separate to his own self, Ovid has to accept it as part of him. Ovid realises that he must drive out his old Self and let the universe in, because only then will he have a complete vision, or identity. The storm is purifying, employing an Eliotic, even religious, trope of redemption and recreation through water. Through the teaching of the Child, Ovid’s dream where he sees himself as a pool of water that has an interdependent relationship with nature becomes his reality. Ovid discovers that nature supplies the foundation for discourse, on top of which spiritual, individual and collective identities can be built with no need for binaries and boarders; a space where the Base and the Superstructure work symbiotically.

As metaphysical boundaries become blurred in both texts, so do physical ones. As snow falls in Tomis and Toronto the landscapes become concealed and blurred. Ovid speaks of the need to adopt or experience ‘a hundred false identities’ in order to discover his one true Self. Tomis itself becomes transformed into a ‘new land’ when the winter comes, however it is only an illusion. The snow disturbs the Day/Night binary, making time unidentifiable and creating an ethereal and false vision. Don Randell observes that the blurred reality of
Tomis – a land that has lost its identity under a blanket of snow – causes the villagers and Ovid to believe that the Child is a lycanthrope. This hybrid between beast and man is reminiscent of the centaurs in Ovid’s dream, however although the dream permanently changed Ovid, it is only sickness, instigated by the veil of snow, that is temporarily causing the Child’s limbs ‘strain to grow claws.’\textsuperscript{71} The Child is a ‘separate centre’\textsuperscript{72} and does not need to assume false identities because he is his true Self. The Child is the catalyst in the novel and so he remains unchanged and is not questing for a new identity, but instead assists Ovid.

In \textit{In the Skin of a Lion}, snow also covers the identity of the earth. The men who are working on the bridge – the connector between East and West Toronto, which will carry traffic, water and electricity across Don Valley upon completion – question: ‘Where does the earth end?’\textsuperscript{73} The workers cannot see the unfinished end of the bridge; it becomes impossible to distinguish between earth and sky as the ground is covered in snow and the workers are in danger of falling off the incomplete edge. Yet, they have to get there to continue their work.\textsuperscript{74} Yet the confusion and blurring created by the weather is advantageous to the nun who becomes Alice Gull. The group of nuns enter ‘into a landscape they did not know existed’\textsuperscript{75} and as a result one is flung off the edge of the bridge. Alice has no identity before her fall as she is anonymous in a group of nuns, but while she is physically tumbling through the air she falls out of her old identity and assumes a new skin. Patrick believes Alice is the character who ‘delivered him out of nothing’\textsuperscript{76} and so the blurring of the landscape, owing to the snow, enables Alice to create a new Self and also aid Patrick in his quest for identity.

In a similar way to snow, clothes conceal or reveal a person’s identity. Oiva Saarinen refers to a ‘cultural mosaic’\textsuperscript{77} found within settler colonies, suggesting identities are becoming more fragmentary as the boundaries between nationalities are blurring. Anthony Moran agrees with this argument, positing that in the globalising world, people ‘must keep themselves
constantly open to change, including ongoing personal transformations, otherwise they will become lost. This notion of continual change and renewal is demonstrated by Ovid in *An Imaginary Life* and reminds the reader of Ovid’s epic poem *Metamorphoses*: ‘And every passing moment is renewed’. The Child only wears ‘a loose robe, which he tears off as soon’ as he leaves the village. Reina Lewis argues clothes are merely performative items which can ‘always be removed when one needs to revert to a type’. The Child wears the clothes because it is expected of him in society, however he does not allow the garments to define him and removes them as soon as decency allows. The Child does not need to wear clothes to create an identity. In comparison, Patrick does. He dons a Finnish suit and grows a Macedonian moustache in an attempt to identify with the Easter Europeans. Lewis would argue Patrick’s cross-cultural dressing is simply a superficial fantasy that suppresses his true identity. Alternatively, Gamlin would claim by Patrick clothing himself in unfamiliar attire he is absorbing ‘previously foreign attributes’ and making them familiar. Lewis’ argument relating to superficiality of clothes is supported by the Child, however for Patrick, Gamlin’s belief in the acquisition of foreign attributes and making them known to you seems more appropriate. This is because Patrick starts to find his place within the community by visibly blurring the boundaries between cultures and finding an identity via his clothing.

Liquid is another physical state that becomes blurred and is utilised in both texts to aid the quest for identity. Ovid describes the River Ister as ‘the final boundary of [his] life, waiting to be crossed.’ This suggests that a boundary has to be broken down in order for Ovid to reach is final destination and his final identity. Lay notes that when Ovid crosses the river he is leaving the Roman Empire, illustrating how water is a border to territories. Conversely the ocean is also what connects Britain to her colonies, demonstrating the changeable nature of water. The River Ister is ‘frozen solid and waiting, in these last days before it breaks up and flows again, to be crossed.’ The river
acts as a bridge for Ovid and the Child – his guide – by connecting them to land that is ‘the unreal unknown’. In this statement Ovid breaks the barrier of Known/Unknown in the context of Empire. The colonised lands had previously been identified as the Unknown and Ovid has established that they are not. The unstable nature of water allows Ovid to complete his final journey and his final transformation into his true Self. As Ovid dies he cries ‘I am there’88 denoting that he has reached his last identity by breaking through the barrier of empire and fulfilling his quest for identity. Similarly the characters in In the Skin of a Lion use liquid to conceal and reveal their identities. Water removes the blue dye from the tanners’ skins, which had previously made them look as though ‘they had removed their own skin’89 and donned another. This is of course reminiscent of the ending to the novel’s namesake, The Epic of Gilgamesh and is a theme that is repeated when Patrick and Buck paint Caravaggio blue ‘until he was gone.’90 Banjeree contests In the Skin of a Lion is ‘a story of reconstruction’91 and in light of this it could be argued that liquid provides the means for characters to reconstruct their identities by blurring the very boundaries of their own personal identities so they can free themselves from the conformity of their jobs or prison.

Malouf and Ondaatje subvert or break contextual binaries and blur boundaries while writing their novels so they can comment upon the postcolonial situations in Australia and Canada. Although An Imaginary Life is not set in Australia, Lay calls Tomis an ‘antipodean Eden’92 hypothesising that Tomis is symbolic of Australia before it was colonised, implying that it had a biblical innocence before the settlers arrived. Alternatively Moran speaks of Australia’s ‘culture of dislocation’93, which connects to the theme of exile seen in An Imaginary Life. Therefore Ovid’s quest could reflect the settlers first moving to Australia and their struggle to find their new identity. However it could be argued that the Child is an allegorical representation of a virgin land that settlers attempt to ‘civilise’. Malouf has said ‘that the notion of polarity really only exists for those who
are at the edge; the people at the centre just think of the centre.”94 By breaking the Centre/Edge binary, Malouf brings the periphery to the foreground and gives a voice to the edge as if he were giving a voice to Australia. Ondaatje also gives a voice or multiple voices to the periphery in his heteroglossic text. Between 1896 and 1914, three million immigrants moved to Canada and their marginalised voices were lost to the white, English-speaking centre.95 Ondaatje illustrates that there is an alternative history behind the monolithic master narrative and so ‘the novel allows an egalitarian voicing of previously marginalised perspectives.’96 Douglas Barber posits that between 1914 and 1940 – the dates among which the book is set – Canada ‘came of age’.97 As with the Child in An Imaginary Life, Patrick’s bildungsroman could be an allegorical portrayal of Canada in the first half of the twentieth century as the country attempts to find a new identity in the globalising world. Also both novels turn to history – Ovid’s exile and Toronto’s development in the 1900s – and are influenced by a dialogue with the literary past and present, which spans from creation myths to postmodern literature. By blurring truth and fiction and amalgamating numerous genres Malouf and Ondaatje collapse the centre of Empire and bring the edges to the centre of history, giving a voice and an identity to the peripheries.

In conclusion, boundaries and binaries are fetishised, subverted, blurred and broken in An Imaginary Life and In the Skin of a Lion. In Malouf’s Rousseauian world of recreation through nature or Ondaatje’s multi-cultural, polyphonic Canadian peripheries, both texts attempt to take the reader beyond the very concept of “border”. Physical and metaphysical boundaries such as water, dye, paint, the weather and language have to be crossed or dissolved in order for Patrick and Ovid to find their true selves within Toronto and Tomis. The binaries of Myth/Reality, Consciousness/Unconsciousness, Adult/Child, and Coloniser/Colonised are disrupted through the processes of mimicry, locating the Self, and exile. Patrick and Ovid both find themselves in an exilic state; the ultimate liminal space, Third
Space or void, which they have to descend into so they can find their true identities. Ovid becomes unified with nature and Patrick’s role at the end of the novel is simply being Hana’s father. Although An Imaginary Life concludes more satisfactorily in terms of the quest for identity, Ovid dies. Patrick lives on in In the Skin of a Lion and in Ondaatje’s later novel, The English Patient, illustrating that his quest has not been completed. Moreover both novelists collapse the predominant colonial Centre/Edge binary, giving a story, a voice and an identity to those marginalised at the edges of empire.

Notes

8 Ibid.

10 Malouf, p. 8.

11 Ondaatje, p. 55.

12 Malouf, p. 9.


16 Malouf, pp. 24-25.


18 Ibid.


20 Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, p. 73.


23 By referring to T.S. Eliot and Joseph Conrad I am alluding to *The Waste Land* owing to its heteroglossic nature and *Heart of Darkness* because of the interminable dissonance coming from within the jungle.


27 Malouf, p. 17.


29 Ondaatje, p. 117.

30 Ibid.


33 Ondaatje, p. 118.


37 Ibid., p. 129.
38 Malouf, p. 37.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., p. 38.
41 Ibid., p. 74.
42 Ondaatje, p. 121.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., p. 144.
46 Malouf, p. 122.
47 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ondaatje, p. 12.

54 Ondaatje, p. 15.

55 Arguably more parallels can be drawn between the Child’s upbringing in An Imaginary Life and Enkidu’s, however Patrick and Enkidu both have similar adulthoods.


57 Ondaatje, p. 87.

58 Ibid., p. 143.

59 Ibid., p. 117.

60 Ibid., p. 141.


62 Malouf, p. 87.

63 Ibid., p. 91.

65 Malouf, p. 92.

66 Ibid., pp. 92-93.

67 Ibid., pp. 55-56.

68 Ibid., p. 90.

69 Ibid., p. 107.

70 Ibid., p. 101.

71 Ibid., p. 113.

72 Ibid., p. 74.

73 Ondaatje, p. 30.

74 This could be symbolic of the separation between East and West during the Cold War.

75 Ondaatje, p. 32.

76 Ibid., p. 158.

77 Oiva W. Saarinen, Between a Rock and a Hard Place: A Historical Geography of the Finns in the Sudbury Area (Waterloo: Wilifried Laurier University Press, 1995)


80 Malouf, p. 85.

82 Ondaatje, p. 118.

83 Lewis, p. 314.

84 Gamlin, p. 72.

85 Malouf, p. 134.

86 Lay, p. 432.

87 Malouf, p. 134.

88 Ibid., p. 153.

89 Ondaatje, pp. 136-138.

90 Ibid., p. 168.

91 Banjeree, p. 111.


93 Moran, p. 3.


96 Gamlin, p. 68.


98 Although Patrick is dead in this novel, he lives on in Hana and she, his first teacher in a new world, continues creating his identity in her memory.