

“Colour Disrobed Itself from the Body”: The Racialized Aesthetics of Liberation in Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*

In the first of CBC Radio’s now annual Canada Reads programs, celebrity participants selected Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* as the novel that all Canadians should read. That this novel, which depicts ethnic minority labourers building Toronto’s public works in the early 1900s, should in 2002 prove useful to a state-sponsored exercise in national community-building prompts renewed inquiry into its ideological and aesthetic dimensions. During the debate, the novel’s advocate, Barenaked Ladies’ front man, Steven Page, supported his claim that the novel is “a beautiful book about the immigrant experience” (qtd. in Moss 6) by citing the representation of men who work as dyers in a tannery:

Dye work took place in the courtyards next to the warehouse. Circular pools had been cut into the stone—into which the men leapt waist-deep within the reds and ochres and greens, leapt in embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals. In the round wells four-foot in diameter they heaved and stomped, ensuring the dye went solidly into the pores of the skins that had been part of a live animal the previous day. And the men stepped out in colours up to their necks, pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they had removed the skin from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries. (130)

That Page recalled the beauty of the imagery rather than the suffering of the workers attests to the risk involved in depicting what is finally lethal work as a visual spectacle. The focus on beauty further obscures both the racial connotations of the colour imagery, and the relevance for a multicultural nationalist thematics of such an image as leaping “into different colours as if into different countries.”

In a *Canadian Literature* editorial, Laura Moss, mentioning Page, criticizes the “watered down aestheticism” of the readings typically performed by the celebrity contestants on Canada Reads (8): “most often it has been the politics of the novels that is lost in the commentary on the texts” (8). The celebrities’ aestheticism finds reinforcement in the wider critical reception of Ondaatje’s work. As Glen Lowry points out, the predominantly “formalist readings” have ignored the texts’ political implications and have “effectively [elided] ‘race’ as an element of [Ondaatje’s] writing” (par.1). This separation of aesthetics and politics—tenuous at the best of times—is especially unsustainable in the case of *In the Skin of a Lion*. At the same time as the novel’s repeated images of adopting and shedding coloured skin are visually compelling, they deploy discourses of ethnicity, nationality, race, and class. Indeed, the imagery borrows intensity metonymically from the power struggles associated with it.

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton espouses a definition of the aesthetic as “a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought” and that “signifies a return to the sensuous body” (9). As Peter Hitchcock explains, this definition of the aesthetic as sensuousness opens up a new strategy for “readers of working class culture” who have found it difficult to “maintain the aesthetic as a viable category” (25). Hitchcock further notes that although Marx “takes seriously labor’s sensate experience in his elaboration of class, . . . it remains severely undertheorized in working class representation” (27). I argue that Ondaatje’s novel not only attests to historical injustice (specifically, to the existence of a “vertical mosaic” of ethnicity) in Canada, but also attempts to liberate or redeem the exploited workers through the sensate representation of labour, harnessing what Herbert Marcuse calls “the emancipatory power of . . . sensuousness” (*Aesthetic* 66). Defined as sensuousness, of course, the aesthetic cannot remain autonomous of the social discourses that constitute the body, and, although the novel’s overt emphases on class and ethnicity threaten to elide the others, the discourse of race structures and delimits the novel’s central image of liberation: the shedding of coloured skin. Its logic hinging on the fact that populations have been enslaved because of skin colour, this image restricts the possibility of liberation to the racially unmarked body.

Significantly, the novel was written during a peak period of immigration from Asia and the Caribbean and appeared in print the year before the federal government passed the Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Ondaatje, once

accused of disguising his Sri Lankan heritage (Mukherjee 114), said in a 1990 interview that he “didn’t want to write an Asian story for the very reason that it would have been interpreted as a personal saga.” In discussing elsewhere what motivated him to write the novel, Ondaatje says both that “Canada has always been a very racist society—and it’s getting more so” (Turner 20) and that a novel “can be a permanent and political reflection of your time” (“Michael Ondaatje” with Bush 247). Thus, although Ondaatje deliberately chose to distance the story by writing about European immigrants in an earlier era, his comments cue us to read *In the Skin of a Lion* as an implicit critique of the ongoing racial stratification in contemporary Canadian society.

A vertical mosaic of ethnicized class divisions informs the relations among the characters in *In the Skin of a Lion*. Although “Canada as a nation is built on immigrant labour” (Ng 474), when Ondaatje conducted research on the history of Toronto, he discovered that the “armies of immigrants who built the city” are unrepresented in its pages (Turner 21). Astounded that he could find out “exactly how many buckets of sand were used” to build the Bloor Street Viaduct, but that “the people who actually built the goddamn bridge were unspoken of” (Turner 21), Ondaatje perceived an opportunity to redress this historical imbalance. In its focalization through working class characters, his novel counters the absence noted by Canadian sociologist John Porter in 1965: “there is almost no one producing a view of the world which reflects the experience of the poor or the underprivileged” (6), “nor does class appear as a theme in Canadian literature” (6, n.3). Porter, who encapsulated the results of quantitative research in the title of his seminal work, *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*, identifies a major representational challenge faced by Ondaatje when he notes that the “idea of an ethnic mosaic, as opposed to the idea of the melting pot, impedes the processes of social mobility” (70). Considering that “any form of class politics is ultimately concerned with overcoming or at least lessening class differences, not with affirming and celebrating them” (Felski 42), the concept of ethnic pluralism as the affirmation of cultural difference stands revealed as an ideological tool that secures the continued dominance of white, anglophone Canadians (71-2).¹ The patterns of imagery in Ondaatje’s novel question this ideology but remain embedded within a racialized logic that ties liberation to the shedding of coloured skin and/or the attaining of whiteness.

The importance of ethnicity, and implicitly of whiteness, within *In the Skin of a Lion* undermines the humanist rhetoric advanced at times by the

protagonist, Patrick Lewis, a Canadian-born working class man of unmarked ethnicity (hence presumably of British descent) who has arrived in Toronto in 1923 as part of a wave of “native off-farm migration” (Porter 57). As a member of the “landless proletariat,” Patrick joins with an urban “immigrant proletariat” in filling the ranks of the “lower level of unskilled workers” in Toronto (Porter 57). A withdrawn, even anti-social person, Patrick tells Alice Gull, the anarchist actress who becomes his lover, that he does not “believe the language of politics” (122) and, later, that “the trouble with ideology . . . is that it hates the private. You must make it human” (135). Alice, who performs allegorical political theatre for illegal gatherings of immigrants, accuses Patrick of believing in “solitude” and in “retreat,” and calls attention to his privilege as a member of the dominant British Canadian ethnic group, in contrast to “three-quarters of the population of Upper America,” who cannot “afford” Patrick’s “choices” or his “*languour*” (123). Whether or not Patrick enjoys as much social privilege as Alice claims (he points out that he has only “ten bucks” to his name [123]), these conversations sensitize Patrick, as point of view character, to questions of class, ethnicity, and representation, themes that recur in metafictional passages from this point forward in the novel.

The connections among skin, colour, nationality, language, and ethnicity receive their most overt, and ultimately self-reflexive, articulation in the scene depicting tannery workers stepping out of vats of red, ochre, and green dye, having “leapt into different colours as if into different countries” (130). Lest the identification of nationality with dye be considered solely metaphoric, the text clarifies that the dyers “were Macedonians mostly, though there were a few Poles and Lithuanians” who “on average had three or four sentences of English” (130) and to whom “the labour agent” gave “English names” (132).² Whereas the assigning of English names obscures the men’s linguistic differences, their national identities actually determine, and are reinforced by, their status as dyers.

By themselves, the emphasis on colours and the analogy between “wet hides” and the workers’ skin (130) in this key passage might encourage objectification of the men or idealization of their occupation. This possibility dissolves immediately, however, in Patrick’s awareness of representation as a process: “If he were an artist he would have painted them but that was a false celebration” (130). That the men have, nevertheless, just been verbally painted is, as Linda Hutcheon notes, ironic (98). Yet this instance of self-reflexivity conveys more than irony; it motivates the reader to reflect on the function of aesthetics and on the politics of representation. Patrick wonders:

What did it mean in the end to look aesthetically plumaged on this October day in the east end of the city five hundred yards from Front Street? What would the painting tell? . . . That they had consumed the most evil smell in history, they were consuming it now, flesh death, which lies in the vacuum between flesh and skin, and even if they never stepped into this pit again—a year from now they would burp up that odour. That they would die of consumption and at present they did not know it. (130-31)

The superficial spectacle of bright, playful colours belies the life-threatening consequences of the dyers' jobs. This scene thus illustrates the idea, shared by both Theodor Adorno (160) and Herbert Marcuse, that guilt inevitably imbues the aesthetic because art "cannot represent . . . suffering without subjecting it to aesthetic form, and thereby to the mitigating catharsis, to enjoyment" (Marcuse, *Aesthetic* 56). Despite this belief in art's inherent guiltiness, Marcuse goes on to argue in *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* that art enlists sensuousness to subvert the tyranny of reason, mobilizing images that foster in the audience both the desire for liberation from oppression and the will to enact it (62-63; 66). From this perspective, the aesthetic intensity with which Ondaatje depicts the dyers creates effects other than the simply cathartic or conciliatory. For example, after the introduction of the dyers, the reader, disarmed by the intensity of the imagery, is likely to absorb the empirical statements about working conditions that follow. An affective response, in other words, need not preempt a critical reaction and may even precipitate cognitive transformation. In a related vein, Carol Becker argues in an article on Marcuse that subversive art "does not necessarily move the intellect to a direct perception of injustice"; rather, it may "move the spirit and thus indirectly affect social change" (120).

The relations between sensory experience and emancipation remain, however, particularly fraught in the case of the sensate representation of labour. Although many of the work scenes in *In the Skin of a Lion* respond to Marcuse's call for emancipation of and through sensuousness, the text is honest about the distortion of sensory experience within the institution of alienated labour. In the case of the tannery workers, for example, the dye eventually rinses off, but this cleansing proves superficial since their bodies have been permanently altered: "What remained in the dyers' skin was the odour that no woman in bed would ever lean towards. Alice lay beside Patrick's exhausted body, her tongue on his neck, recognizing the taste of him, knowing the dyers' wives would never taste or smell their husbands in such a way" (132). Such sensory details serve as a reminder that, at least in

the Marxist framework, “only with the supersession of private property will the senses be able to come into their own” (Eagleton 201).

The text’s liberatory elements are further compromised by the racialized discourse of colour that accompanies (and often provides the grounds for) them. For example, in a later scene, the workers leave the factory on a Saturday afternoon, “the thirty or so of them knowing little more than each other’s false names or true countries. *Hey Italy!* They were in pairs or trios, each in their own language as the dyers had been in their own colours. . . . *Hey Canada!* A wave to Patrick” (135). That Patrick is used as a synecdoche for Canada establishes the British heritage of the unmarked Canadian citizen. Importantly, Patrick does not work as a dyer, thus retaining, as Alice insists, some advantage over immigrants whose first language is not English. Consequently, for the dyers, emancipation is directly linked with disrobing from the colours that have been tied to their non-anglophone country of origin:

For the dyers the one moment of superiority came in the showers at the end of the day. They stood under the hot pipes, not noticeably changing for two or three minutes—as if . . . they would be forever contained in that livid colour, only their brains free of it. And then the blue suddenly dropped off, the colour disrobed itself from the body, fell in one piece to their ankles, and they stepped out, in the erotica of being made free. (132)

Since the colours have been associated with the labourers’ various non-British countries of origin, their loss suggests loss of heritage and rebirth as generic, English-speaking Canadians, like Patrick. A metaphor of assimilation, this scene invites a critique similar to that made by Smaro Kamboureli of the 1988 Multiculturalism Act. In fact, in the following excerpt from Kamboureli’s *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*, the dyers’ shower scene might be substituted for the Act with only modest alterations:

[It] advocates a sort of pan-Canadianism through a universalizing rhetoric By releasing “all Canadians” from the specificity of their histories, this legal document seeks to overcome difference rather than to confront incommensurability. Belying its intent to address systemic inequities, it executes an emancipatory gesture in the name of homogeneity and unity. (101)

Like the Multiculturalism Act, Ondaatje’s text releases the dyers from the “specificity of their histories,” executing an emancipatory gesture that nevertheless presumes a common European heritage: that “colour disrobed itself from the body . . . in the erotica of being made free” racializes this moment of emancipation as white. As Eric Schocket argues about Rebecca Harding Davis’ story “Life in the Iron Mills,” whiteness here emerges as “the promise

that the working class will not be forever excluded from the political and social prerogatives of . . . white skin privilege” (47). This image correctly anticipates that these European immigrants or their descendants will become more evenly distributed among the economic strata of Canadian society. Just as the members of these groups attain social mobility, however, Canada will open its gates to third world immigration (starting in 1962), and, as sociologist Raymond Breton remarks, “whether or not the overall pattern of socio-economic mobility for minorities of European origin will repeat itself for visible minorities is not clear” (88). Noting that race, rather than ethnicity, “has become critical in accounting for patterns of inequality,” Breton speculates that “colour difference may be of greater significance since it makes ethnic boundaries more visible. Accordingly, it may lead to more persistent patterns of social exclusion and discrimination than is the case when culture is the prime factor of differentiation” (105). If the socio-economic mobility of “visible minorities” depends on the metaphor of freedom that Ondaatje employs—that of shedding coloured skin—then the prospect is not encouraging.

As an Italian Canadian, the professional thief Caravaggio, an important secondary character in the novel, belongs to the immigrant group that holds “the lowest position in the class system” (Porter 84) during the time period of the novel. While he is in prison, “three men who have evolved smug and without race slash out” with the intent to murder him. Their only apparent motive is racism or xenophobia, as these racially unmarked men accompany their physical attack on Caravaggio with shouts of “Fucking wop! Fucking dago!” (185). This attempted murder constitutes the novel’s most blatant evidence that some “immigrants of European origin” were seen as “racially different and inferior” and subject to “prejudice and discrimination” (Breton 105). Caravaggio survives the prison attack thanks to Patrick’s vocal intervention, but his escape from prison (and from possible future attacks) depends on altering his skin colour: “*Demarcation*, said the prisoner named Caravaggio. *That is all we need to remember*” (179). Fellow members of a crew painting the prison roof “daubed his clothes and then, laying a strip of handkerchief over his eyes, painted his face blue, so he was gone—to the guards who looked up and saw nothing there” (180). As Glen Lowry notes, the “notion of ‘demarcation’ . . . functions to further establish Caravaggio as a ‘racialized’ figure” (par.10). If Caravaggio must adopt colour to attain freedom, however, to sustain his liberty requires stripping himself of it. He accomplishes this with a can of turpentine and a shirt-tail (181-2). This figure

of delible racial demarcation suggests the “innate” commonality of European Canadians within an economically and ethnically stratified society. The figure used to signify Caravaggio’s freedom supports the idea that non-British European immigrants can assimilate into the social order—especially if, unlike Caravaggio, they adopt “English names” (132)—at the same time as it casts doubt on the ability of visible minorities to do the same.³

Significantly, when, near the end of the book, Patrick prepares to swim through the intake tunnel of the Waterworks (which he has earlier helped to build) in order to confront Commissioner Harris and to dynamite the plant, he changes his skin colour with the help of Caravaggio and Caravaggio’s wife, Giannetta:

On deck Giannetta watches Patrick, a small lantern beside them, the only light on the boat. He takes off his shirt and she begins to put grease onto his chest and shoulders. He watches her black hair as she rubs this darkness onto his body. . . . Caravaggio begins to dress Patrick with water-resistant dynamite—wrapping the sticks tightly against his chest under the thin black shirt. They both wear dark trousers. Patrick is invisible except by touch, grease covering all unclothed skin, his face, his hands, his bare feet. *Demarcation*. (227-8)

The racial connotations of the “darkness” that is rubbed onto Patrick’s body are then foregrounded momentarily in a descriptive passage: “The lemon-coloured glare from the waterworks delineates the east end. Caravaggio could lean forward and pluck it like some jewel from the neck of a negress” (229). As Eric Schocket says of Rebecca Harding Davis’ story, “race is everywhere” in this novel and particularly in this scene, though characters of colour are not (47). When Harris, who is spending nights in the building because of working-class unrest and union agitation, sees Patrick, he is confused: “Even if he had known the man before he would not recognize him now. Black thin cotton trousers and shirt, grease-black face—blood in the scrapes and scratches” (234). Patrick’s counterfeit blackness is emphasized again as he condemns the tunnellers’ exploitation: “Harris watched the eyes darting in the man’s dark face” (235). Clearly, in this scene, as in the antebellum American literature discussed by Schocket, “blackness is used to give evidence of class difference” (Schocket 57). Yet, as Frank Davey argues, “throughout the episode the novel creates a Harris who refuses to be constructed as Patrick’s opposite” (154): “My mother was a caretaker,” Harris tells Patrick. “I worked up” (Ondaatje, *Skin* 235). Indeed, the racialized imagery of difference reinforces Harris’ insistence on the fundamental commonality between himself and Patrick, for, were Patrick to remove the

black grease that distinguishes him from Harris, “what lies beneath is a whiteness that can be claimed as common property in a nation economically divided” (Schocket 57). In this scene, racialized representation reinforces the equation between social mobility and white skin, thus further reifying the vertical mosaic.⁴

The imagery of whiteness receives an alternate articulation in the case of Macedonian immigrant Nicholas Temelcoff, who perceives the acquisition of English as integral to upward mobility: “If he did not learn the language he would be lost” (46). Although he initially learns English from “radio songs” (37), like many of his fellow labourers, he decides to work nights at a Macedonian bakery and attend school during the day, where he engages in “fast and obsessive studying of English” (46). Distinguished by his powerful drive to master the language, which he finds “much more difficult than what he does in space” (43), Temelcoff also sets himself apart as an exceptional, aerial bridge worker. In the bridge scenes, Temelcoff’s display of highly refined skills illustrates Marx’s idea that capitalism’s “massive unleashing of productive powers is . . . inseparably, the unfolding of human richness” (Eagleton 218). As Eagleton explains, “the capitalist division of labour brings with it a high refinement of individual capacities . . . Through capitalism, individuality is enriched and developed, fresh creative powers are bred, and new forms of social intercourse created” (218). The scene that describes Temelcoff’s spatial awareness illustrates such situated knowledge:

His work is so exceptional and time-saving he earns one dollar an hour while the other bridge workers receive forty cents. . . . For night work he is paid \$1.25, swinging up into the rafters of a trestle holding a flare, free-falling like a dead star. He does not really need to see things, he has charted all that space, knows the pier footings, the width of the crosswalks in terms of seconds of movement—281 feet and 6 inches make up the central span of the bridge. Two flanking spans of 240 feet, two end spans of 158 feet. . . . He knows the precise height he is over the river, how long his ropes are, how many seconds he can free-fall to the pulley. . . . After swinging for three seconds he puts his feet up to link with the concrete edge of the next pier. He knows his position in the air as if he is mercury slipping across a map. (35)

The spatial and temporal mastery Temelcoff exhibits in this scene rivals the dominance that Commissioner Rowland Harris exerts over space in his masterminding of Toronto’s public works. By valorizing Temelcoff’s skill over any that Harris exhibits, the text constructs an alternate economy, even granting Temelcoff cognitive mastery over Harris: “*He* knows Harris. He *knows* Harris by the time it takes him to walk the sixty-four feet six inches

from sidewalk to sidewalk on the bridge” (43). Furthermore, “he knows the panorama of the valley better than any engineer. Like a bird. Better than Edmund Burke, the bridge’s architect, or Harris, better than the surveyors of 1912 when they worked blind through the bush” (49). The text valorizes sensate, situated knowledge without overestimating the impact of its own subversions of value on the economic base, however, in that Temelcoff also knows Harris “by his expensive tweed coat that cost more than the combined weeks’ salaries of five bridge workers” (43). This materialist reminder exemplifies the way that Ondaatje both reveals injustice *and* imagines alternatives: he dextrously moves between the idealist alternate economy he constructs by aestheticizing labour, and the antagonistic social reality that that alternate economy counterposes and implicitly questions.

The scenes of labour offer some aesthetic compensation for the distortion of sensory experience, working, as Fredric Jameson writes of modernist art, “to restore at least a symbolic experience of libidinal gratification to a world drained of it” (63). The bridge scenes with Temelcoff accomplish this compensation by invoking a discourse of skilled play that rebels against the “prevailing reality principle of domination” (Marcuse, *Aesthetic* 62). Since the pleasure of Temelcoff’s activity takes place within the context of labour, it appears to illustrate Marcuse’s thesis that “a society split into classes can afford to make man into a means of pleasure only in the form of bondage and exploitation” (“Affirmative” 115). Yet, Marcuse also believes that this physical exploitation contains the seeds of its own undoing:

When the body has completely become an object, a beautiful thing, it can foreshadow a new happiness. In suffering the most extreme reification man triumphs over reification. The artistry of the beautiful body, its effortless agility and relaxation, which can be displayed today only in the circus, vaudeville, and burlesque, herald the joy to which men will attain in being liberated from the ideal. . . . When all links to the affirmative ideal have been dissolved, when in the context of an existence marked by knowledge it becomes possible to have real enjoyment without any rationalization and without the least puritanical guilt feeling, when sensuality, in other words, is entirely released by the soul, then the first glimmer of a new culture emerges. (“Affirmative” 116)

In Ondaatje’s representation, Temelcoff does appear to triumph over his own exploitation and to prefigure a new cultural order of realized human potentiality. Moreover, Marcuse’s insight that the aesthetic provides a momentary release from instrumentality accounts for much of the power of Ondaatje’s descriptions of labour. That these poetically heightened scenes comprise, by their impact, the core of the text’s progressive contribution to

the representation of working class lives finds support in that, time and again, reviewers isolate these passages for praise:

Ondaatje describes manual work as well as any writer I have read, not the psychological effects but its physical sensations: he describes it from the inside, as if he knows it. Work brutalizes, but it is one's connection to the world. (Packer 3)

Descriptions of the skill and agility of the bridge workers and the laborers who build a tunnel under Lake Ontario, going about their work in the yawning maw of danger, are . . . graphically stunning. (Steinberg 70)

Finally, one is left remembering the descriptions of work and men at work. . . . And the desperate hardships and terrible exploitation of the workmen, which led to injuries, deaths, desperation and anarchism. (Kizer 13)

The last review, in particular, suggests that, as strategy, the practice of aestheticizing labour does not idealize it, but honours those who performed it and commits their suffering to memory. As Marcuse argues, this remembrance performs a radical political function: it “spurs the drive for the conquest of suffering and the permanence of joy” (*Aesthetic* 73), a conquest that can occur only through social transformation. If the need for “transformation . . . of oppressive social circumstances” (Reitz 82) becomes lost as the circumstances are aestheticized, however, then the results are reactionary, as Patrick acknowledges when he reflects that to paint the dye-workers would be “false celebration” (130). Instead, through its self-reflexive aesthetics and materialist details, Ondaatje's text never lets the reader forget for long that the characters perform their work as alienated labourers.

Although I have argued, adapting Marcuse, that the novel's celebration of physical skill models a future “rich, all-round expansion of human capacities” (Eagleton 223), Temelcoff's labour takes place within “exploitative social relations”: “the division of labour maims and nourishes simultaneously, generating fresh skills and capacities but in a cripplingly one-sided way” (Eagleton 219). To concretize this maiming, the novel features Daniel Stoyanoff, who had returned from North America to Nicholas Temelcoff's Macedonian village, buying “a farm with the compensation he had received for losing an arm during an accident in a meat factory. . . . Nicholas had been stunned by the simplicity of the contract” (44). This exchange of a limb for money starkly denotes the commodification of the human body. A similarly haunting image emphasizes the human dispensability in construction work: Temelcoff's “predecessor had been killed” in an accident, “cut, the upper half of his body found an hour later, still hanging in the halter” (41). As far as Temelcoff is concerned, then, personal liberation occurs only

when, having saved enough money to “open up a bakery,” he “slides free of the bridge” (49). Rather than participating in collective struggle, Temelcoff rises to the status of entrepreneur as a “solitary” (34) man of exceptional ability.

Even though Ondaatje’s protagonist, Patrick—a literate, Canadian-born working class man of British descent—is a prime candidate to rise within the vertical mosaic, he becomes an anarchist (albeit of dubious ideological commitment), spends several years in jail, and, as is revealed in the partial sequel to *In the Skin of a Lion*, *The English Patient*, will be killed in World War II, shortly after his release from prison. In contrast, Temelcoff, who emigrated to Canada without a passport or “a word of English” after war erupted in the Balkans, achieves social mobility by studying English and by distinguishing himself as an extraordinary labourer who eventually becomes an entrepreneur. Particularly since the success of Temelcoff’s bakery transcends the Macedonian community—“His bread and rolls and cakes and pastries reach the multitudes in the city” (149)—the contrasting careers of Patrick and Temelcoff illustrate the fluidity of the vertical mosaic among European immigrants in the early decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, the text’s recurring metaphor of losing skin colour and/or attaining whiteness as liberation from class oppression makes clear that the novel encodes the mobility only of European immigrants. Just as Patrick covers himself in black grease when he becomes the self-appointed spokesperson and avenger for the working class, so whiteness characterizes Nicholas when he appears as a businessman. In his first appearance as a baker, Temelcoff is “meticulously dressed in jacket and tie” but wears “no apron so that the flour dust [continues] to settle on him as he [moves] through the bakery” (139). Later in the novel, Patrick, released from prison after serving time for wilful destruction of property, walks to the “Geranium Bakery,” which is coded as a large and prosperous establishment: “He passed the spotless machines, looking for Nicholas. Buns moved forward along rollers till they were flipped over into the small lake of sizzling shortening. Finally he saw him in his suit covered with white dust at the far end of the bakery, choreographing the movement of food” (210). As proprietor, Temelcoff’s realm of expertise is no longer movement but the orchestration of production: the term “choreograph,” previously used to denote the spatial territorializing of the tycoon Ambrose Small (58) and of Commissioner Harris (111), now applies to Temelcoff. More importantly, the repeated image of Temelcoff’s being covered with flour signifies his success as a baker and once again associates

upward mobility with whiteness. By emphasizing the centrality of whiteness to the class mobility of immigrants from continental Europe in the 1930s, Ondaatje's text exposes the racial stratification in existence at the time of the novel's composition.

The narrative's attempts to resolve the social contradictions present at its time of composition deserve particular scrutiny in the wake of the novel's endorsement by the inaugural "Canada Reads" program. As Marxist aesthetic theorists Theodor Adorno, Fredric Jameson, and Herbert Marcuse acknowledge, artworks do not, by themselves, effect social transformation (Adorno 190; Jameson 266; Marcuse, *Aesthetic* 32). Yet, as Marcuse notes, art "can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world" (*Aesthetic* 32-3). *In the Skin of a Lion* works to transform the consciousness of its readers not only by revising history—which, it insists, can no longer be told from the totalizing point of view of the ruling class—but by revolutionizing representations of labour via the aesthetic. At the same time, however, its patterns of emancipatory imagery naturalize and reinforce a racialized vertical mosaic that compromises its vision of human liberation. Ultimately, the images of social mobility in *In the Skin of a Lion*, depending as they do on the ability to adopt or disrobe oneself of skins, coloured paint, dark grease, or white flour, unfortunately signify that the mosaic's verticality will not be dissolved as easily—or at least it will not happen as "naturally"—for non-white people in Canada as it has for those of European descent.

NOTES

- 1 Writing in 2000, Smaro Kamboureli updates Porter's analysis—but reconfirms its basic precepts—using a quotation from Michael Ryan: "the prominence of ethnic discourse today . . . is symptomatic of a culture in which 'the contradictions that arise within . . . society are resolved in ways that assure the continuation of a ruling group's hegemony'" (94). Porter treats as banal the privileges assumed by charter groups, including the prerogative to decide "what other groups are to be let in and what they will be permitted to do" (60). Contemporary scholars of multiculturalism, in contrast, perform rigorous analyses of its manifestations in order to reach similar conclusions (see, for example, Bannerji, Mackey, and Day). This may indicate that multiculturalist rhetoric has developed as a more subtle way to achieve the same goal of perpetuating the ruling group's hegemony, while the continued banality of dominance—as exemplified by such adages as "the majority rules" and "the strongest prevails"—remains a fundamental barrier to social and global equality.
- 2 Notably, Caravaggio, an Italian Canadian who later becomes a professional thief, retains his Italian name when he works as a tarrer. Perhaps not incidentally, he fights regularly

- with his foreman. In this context, the foreman's use of Caravaggio's actual surname (28) may signal his anger (as when a parent reprimands a child by using the child's full name), but it also suggests the refusal of the wily, bilingual Caravaggio to conform to an anglophone norm.
- 3 Interestingly, in *The English Patient*, Caravaggio's ability to assimilate works in reverse. In the Canadian military, he is identified as "Italian" (35), and he serves in Italy as "not quite" a spy at the end of World War II (34). Moreover, Caravaggio, frequently referred to in *The English Patient* by his first name, a linguistically and nationally indeterminate "David," appears as a cultural insider, especially in contrast to Kirpal Singh, nicknamed "Kip" by a commanding British officer and characterized as "the Sikh" for much of the novel. After the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is tellingly Caravaggio who agrees with Kip that "they would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation" (286). Although, as in the first novel, Caravaggio's Italian Canadian identity occasions suffering in prison (in this case, torture by the Germans), within the narrative of *The English Patient*, his whiteness exempts him from the worst atrocities. Caravaggio's career in the second novel thus remains consistent with the racial ideology at work in *In the Skin of a Lion*.
- 4 Although Ondaatje's novel helps to thematize the missing Canadian discourse of class, its use of racialized imagery to express class relations re-opens the discursive aporia, for the figure of common whiteness underneath counterfeit colour finally (and falsely) erases class disparities. As Schocket contends, "to experience race as a modality of class is often to experience class not at all" (57).

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