MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY AND THE ORAL NARRATIVE

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the function of oral narratives in Michael Ondaatje's representation of history. Ondaatje employs a variety of thematic, structural and stylistic oral narrative strategies in this inquiry. In the course of this work he faces the challenge of translating the open oral quality of the "tale" to the page. Ondaatje's longer prose works counter the printed text's tendency towards stasis through oral narrative and paralinguistic devices. Gradually, the aesthetics of public storytelling inform the process of historiographic revision. Within the oral model, ostensibly verifiable historical facts are no longer subjected to the laws of linear causality; therefore, any central single voice must relinquish its conventional claim to authority. Instead, several "speakers" tell of a shared history. Whereas conventional historiography often focusses on the effect of major historic forces, Ondaatje's oral model reveals how those on the periphery shape and define a given incident. Ultimately, the various participatory agents create the central event in the telling. The study concludes that Ondaatje employs oral narrative strategies to revise monolithic notions of history and to offer an open representation which draws attention to complexities ignored by conventional accounts.

SOMMAIRE

Cette étude examine la fonction des narrations orales dans la représentation d'histoire de Michael Ondaatje. Ondaatje emploie une variante thématique, structurale et stylistique des stratégies de la narration orale. Au cours de ce projet il fait face à la difficulte de traduire la qualité ouverte de l'histoire orale à la page. Les oeuvres d'Ondaatje évitent la tendance statique du texte imprime par leurs stratégies orales et paralinguistiques. Graduellement, l'aspect esthétique des récits publiques informe le procès de la revision historiographique. Selon le modèle oral, les faits historiques ne sont plus subjugués à la causalité linéaire. La voix centrale doit rétracter son autorité conventionnelle; plusieurs narrateurs et narratrices racontent une histoire partagee. Tandis que l'historiographe conventionnel s'occupe souvent des effets des grands forces historiques, Ondaatje nous montre comment l'individu périphérique définie et forme un evénement. Les divers agents participent en racontant pour créer l'événement central. L'étude conclut qu'Ondaatje emploie des narrations orales pour réviser les notions monolithique d'histoire et pour nous donner une représentation ouverte qui attire l'attention sur les complexités ignorées par les rapports conventionnels.

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INTRODUCTION

Until now, no attention has been paid to the relevance of the oral and aural medium of story telling to Michael Ondaatje's writing. Yet Ondaatje not only depicts performances and explores the themes of oral tales and anecdotes but also applies techniques of oral story telling in his works. Ondaatje's exploration and application of oral narratives are especially pertinent to his representations of history.

Ondaatje struggles against a conventional historiography best summarized by Hayden White. In his consideration of the relation between narrative discourse and historical representation, White provides the following definition of conventional historiography:

> Since its invention by Herodotus, traditional historiography has featured predominantly the belief that history itself consists of a congeries of lived stories, individual and collective, and that the principal task of historians is to uncover these stories and to retell them in a narrative, the truth of which would reside in the correspondence of the story told to the story lived by real people in the past. (White 1987, ix)

Such conventional history, referring to annals, chronicles and archival reports, records a set of events presumed to

have occurred in the past. White calls such recordings of conventional history "history proper" (White 1987,4). The above definition constitutes this study's notion of conventional historiography.

In Metahistory, a structural analysis of the historical imagination, White argues that any historiographic narrative is subject to the four tropes of poetic language: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony.[1] Michael Ondaatje's concerns with historiography parallel those of White. As Ondaatje consults and edits his conventional historiographic sources to retell the lives of actual historical figures, he faces a related and important issue: to what extent and in what manner should one transpose existing chronological records of events into fiction and thus accept previous accounts? All such sources are potentially biased, as White insists:

> [T]he historical work . . . is a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse. Histories . . . contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically

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[1] White thus establishes a prefigurative concept of "language of the poetic nature." He distinguishes further between three narrative modes: Mode of Emplotment (Romantic, Tragic, Comic, Satirical) and Mode of Argument (Formist, Mechanistic, Organicist, Contextualist) and Mode of Ideological Implication (Anarchist, Radical, Conservative, Liberal) (White 1973, 29). Simply put, the poetic tropes inherent in language prompt predictable historiographic modes.

> linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritical accepted paradigm of what a distinctively 'historical' explanation would be. (White 1973; ix; emphasis mine)

Ondaatje's response to the causality and linearity of conventional historiography and its repressed "poetic" content outlined by White is to fuse the techniques and procedures of oral narrative with the restriction of the printed word in an attempt to avoid interpretive closure. The partiality of conventional historical discourse is thus challenged by oral narrative strategies as the works unfold, and Ondaatje offers not only new histories but also a new approach to history. These reformative oral narrative strategies help Ondaatje dramatize events from a new perspective: those who were previously marginalized "voice" several versions of events. Together, the tellers enter a new inclusive "intercourse" rather than an exclusive discourse, and call into question the authority of any single rendition of historical events. Thus, Ondaatje employs the oral narrative to offer a revised representation of history.

For the purpose of discussion, I have divided my approach to Ondaatje's oral narrative. I distinguish between paralinguistic elements of oral tradition on the one hand and narrative proper on the other. Paralinguistic

(non-verbal) elements such as gestures, facial expressions, mnemonic devices and intonation constitute an important aspect of oral/aural story telling. I will consider how these performative elements have been translated to Ondaatje's printed page as non-verbal notations such as pictographs, defined blank narrative spaces and photographs. At the same time it will become apparent that these elements introduce the potential for variability into Ondaatje's texts, and thus help him to elude the inherent static properties of the written word.

Unlike the paralinguistic elements, the narrative proper is obviously subject to the poetic tropes of language mentioned earlier. Writing, Ondaatje's preferred medium of communication, is apparently more restrictive than the oral medium: the printed word becomes synonymous with a confining linguistic structure. His incorporation of oral literature successfully challenges this structure. Multivocality, variability and fragmentation counter the text's inherent tendency towards stasis, and the resulting open representation of history resists the predictable structural modes of emplotment, argumentation and ideological implications outlined by Hayden White. Finally, historical "facts," too, are allowed to stand unaltered, but such "facts" must work within the new open representation.

Within the above twofold approach to Ondaatje's oral narrative strategies in his representation of history, the following chapters are devoted to The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Coming through Slaughter, Running in the Family, and In the Skin of a Lion. The focus of each discussion is the making of individual histories in the contexts, respectively, of frontier history, jazz history, family history and civic history. Complicating these histories are themes from mythologies arising from American, African, Oriental and Indo-European oral narratives such as the Tamil Gananath myth and the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic. Through the introduction of these ancient tales, notions of the outlaw, musician, father, and city dweller gain complexity. The works share the following rough design: readers are intermittently introduced to historic records which claim to be objective renderings of a given event. The illusion that such objectivity exists is vital to a dominant discourse which, in turn, propagates the "official line" of ideology and power. In the course of the works, however, this illusion is dispelled by Ondaatje's employment of oral narratives, themes and motifs and illustration of their potential for variability. Collectively, the oral narratives of outsiders replace the previous historical account. Thus, Ondaatje employs oral narrative strategies to offer a new historiographic version and a revised concept of 'history'.

In order further to distinguish Ondaatje's oral narrative structures from his conventional historiographic source texts, I will draw upon Robert Kroetsch's distinction between the picture and the game theories of language. "Game theory is the conception of language as serious game, picture theory of language as identical with reality" (Kroetsch 16). With the picture theory one may associate realism, verisimilitude and linear development that leads to closure. Conventional historians choose to work within a picture theory of language because it allows for clear cause-and-effect relations and thus for an analysis of events. If so desired, the linear logical framework makes it possible to identify a party as "other" and then to engage in polemics. In one of the source texts of Coming through Slaughter, for example, music historian Martin Williams closes his description of Buddy Bolden's "decline" with a sermon on the evils of alcoholism and promiscuity. Such narratives, however, are cast in static modes which make it necessary to rewrite history regularly in light of changing social and political trends. Several examples of such texts constructed according to picture theory are included in Ondaatje's longer prose works. The limitations of the source texts are thus exposed in the context of Ondaatje's narratives.

A game theory of language, on the other hand, treats it

as a serious game. Within game theory, language is characterized by variability, randomness and parataxis. Game theory thus coincides with oral narrative strategies. When attributes associated with the game theory of language are translated to the medium of print, the result is an open representation in which meaning is negotiated during the telling of the story. For the most part, Ondaatje's works are informed by game theory. But this theory has, of course, no place (yet) in conventional representations of history, because it undermines any analytical framework and the claim to verisimilitude in so called "realistic accounts" that carry ideological implications in their "true and objective" historiographic representations. Instead, a text which follows game theory is by definition subversive: in it, original "facts" are rearranged according to popular narrative strategies which often challenge the former accounts.

The notion of a game theory of language in this study is based on an interview with Robert Kroetsch by Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson published as Labyrinths of Voice. My discussion of translations from the oral to the printed medium draws upon the findings of Ruth Finnegan, who charts some of the no-man's land between oral and literary worlds. Her work applies the findings of Milman Parry and Albert Bates Lord to the literatures of indigenous people.

Similarly, Walter J. Ong demonstrates the relevance of the oral tradition to literature in light of the rapid "technologizing of the word." He privileges the spoken word over the written text because--in his eyes--the word is vested with an immediate authority that is lost in print. Barbara Godard, too, privileges the oral narrative in her study of native women's stories. Unlike Ong, however, she values the "oral text's" ability to preserve the central concerns of a community in the face of adverse dominant forces. For the discussion of one sub-genre of oral literature--the tall tale--Carolyn Brown's study serves admirably. Brown traces the origins and sets out the characteristics of this particularly North American oral literature.

While this study draws upon the above critics to define the technical aspects of oral narrative strategies in Ondaatje's work, my discussion of themes responds to the body of Ondaatjean criticism. Stephen Scobie was the first to point out the complexities and challenges historiography poses in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid. He notes Ondaatje's departure from chronological facts but ascribes the strategy to poetic license rather than to any specific mode of storytelling.

Lorraine York turns to the role of photography and "the fusion of art and life" in Ondaatje's works. She points out the diversity of Ondaatje's artistic interests and shows how

the author brings his skills as a film maker to bear on the visual aspects of his texts. Her discussion, however, mentions neither the context in which the photographs first appear, nor Ondaatje's treatment of his visual source material. While her study contains insights into the kinetic qualities of Ondaatje's photos, she ignores historiographic aspects and the impact of visual material on Ondaatje's oral narrative strategies.

Sam Solecki links writing (considered both as process and as product) to Ondaatje's characterization. He sees an absolute distinction in the dichotomous relation between the static written text and the attempt to reflect a free creative will in that text. According to Solecki, Ondaatje's characters are shown in a struggle against the "tormenting order" in their lives which parallels the fixity of the written text. In the end, Ondaatje's protagonists break under a tension which is both aesthetic and real. Solecki does not allow the individual's story to stand as a manifestation of the protagonist's ultimate fulfillment and immortality.

Most recently, Linda Hutcheon discusses the postmodernist challenge to conventional historiography in Ondaatje's works. For her discussion, she draws on Hayden White to explore the growing attention Canadian writers have paid to historiographic representation. Her reading of <u>In the Skin of a Lion</u> focuses on the process of socialization

in a class-conscious environment. In her study of that process, she makes, however, no mention of the role of narration in Ondaatje's work.

Leslie Mundwiler is the first critic to point out the importance of oral history in Ondaatje's writing. To Mundwiler oral history is "the narrative motor" of Running in the Family. However, Mundwiler's emphasis rests on "history," by which she means essentially "family history." Although she sees oral history as the driving force behind the narrative, she does not recognize that oral qualities or strategies are also found within Ondaatje's text.

Another critic to acknowledge the role of oral narrative strategies in Ondaatje's historiographic representation is Silvia Albertazzi.[2] Her study points out that Ondaatje's vision of history eludes analysis from "any single, schematic point of view," primarily, because it is rooted in the story-telling tradition of Sri Lanka. In addition she points out Ondaatje's unconventional use of blank spaces and photographs. While Albertazzi mentions the oral quality of Ondaatje's narrative and its effect on conventional historiography, she does not devote any detailed attention to either specific oral narrative strategies or conventional historiography as it relates to Ondaatje's works.

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[2] Her study is the result of the work of a research group of students and teachers.

In response to the above criticism, this inquiry traces the development of a number of oral narrative strategies and themes of oral literature in each of Ondaatje's longer works. Ondaatje's use of source texts here receives particular attention in light of his emphasis on a revision of conventional historiography. Throughout the study, the dichotomies implied by Kroetsch's picture and game theory of language serve to illuminate central conflicts, such as those between Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett, Buddy Bolden and Bellocq, Mervyn Ondaatje and Sammy Dias, and Patrick Lewis and Ambrose Small.

Leslie Mundwiler and Silvia Albertazzi are the first literary critics to recognize the role of oral narratives in Ondaatje's writing. Nevertheless, the scope of this inquiry demands a larger framework for analysis which reflects both findings from studies of oral literature and Robert Kroetsch's critical observations. In the course of this work, variability, multivocality and fragmentation emerge as the primary means of translation of oral qualities to the printed page. The inherent particularity of the subject matter, therefore, demands that a more thorough discussion of oral literature is best conducted on the basis of examples from Ondaatje's stories.

The first chapter examines the conventional representation of William Bonney as outlaw and Ondaatje's re-vision of him as New World man in The Collected Works of

Billy the Kid. Though the "heroic outlaw" seems to be a contradiction in terms, oral narrative strategies help to reconcile the two implied models of fictive masculinity in Ondaatje's work.

The second chapter studies Ondaatje's representation of Buddy Bolden and his place in recording history. Bolden--arguably the founding father of jazz--was never recorded yet audiences and musicians have felt and studied his influence continuously. In Coming through Slaughter, Ondaatje explains the paradox by showing that Bolden valued a fluidity and variability in his music which is also characteristic of oral narratives. In the end, Ondaatje's Bolden succeeds in his attempt to apply these strategies to all aspects of his life, but to his own severe cost.

The third chapter turns to family lore in Running in the Family. The product of that family history is not only the text but also the text's author, Ondaatje. As the son of his father and his mother and their respective households, Ondaatje explores the composition of the basic dichotomies that make up his fictional autobiography. The text becomes the manifestation of resolved conflicts associated with the tension between oral and literal or game and picture aesthetics.

The fourth chapter studies the dynamics of socialization in the development of civic history. In In the Skin of a Lion, oral narration in general and the epic

of Gilgamesh in particular take part in that development. Patrick is drawn into an emerging order only to find that his newly assigned role denies him his humanity. He is gradually driven to extreme actions but ultimately discovers communication as a means of preventing irrevocable harm. Contrary to conventional cynicism, the word here triumphs over action.

Ondaatje's thematic, structural and stylistic adherence to oral narrative strategies gradually evolves in his longer prose works. The variations of these narrative strategies range in form from the early prose poems of The Collected Works of Billy the Kid to the novel In the Skin of a Lion. The development includes a changing portrayal of the relation between "picture" and "game" language, different approaches to source texts, and a varying usage of tall tale conventions. Ultimately, the altered oral narrative of In the Skin of a Lion makes the revised historiography more accessible to all readers.

As the Gilgamesh epic and its many adaptations and translations suggest, there are only a finite number of possible emplotments, though the potential for variations of the resulting stories is limitless. All writers owe the mastery of their craft to the efforts and practices of storytellers who have gone before them. Every writer is

first and foremost a storyteller. Regardless of its literary and literate qualities or timely appearance, a story that is not well told will earn little or no attention; this study, therefore, redirects the critical focus to the essence of Ondaatje's storytelling.

THE COLLECTED WORKS OF BILLY THE KID: FRONTIER HISTORY

In The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, Michael Ondaatje represents ostensibly verifiable facts through oral narrative strategies. Ondaatje's transliteration of oral modes for the purpose of dislodging conventional historiography includes multivocality and paralinguistic elements such as blank narrative spaces, mnemonic devices, pictures and photos.[3] In addition, Ondaatje's exploration of the themes and conventions of the tall tale contributes to an open historiographic representation.

A number of biographies and historiographic sources are devoted to Billy the Kid. Stephen Tatum's Inventing Billy the Kid gives the most comprehensive account of the many portrayals of the Kid.[4] Tatum comments on the changing representations of Billy from "ruthless outlaw" to "heroic loner." Historically, Billy the Kid was also known as William Bonney, Austin Antrim and Henry McCarty. He was born in 1859 in New York City.

Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid is set within the period of the following recorded events: at age eighteen, Billy killed blacksmith Frank P. Cahill and was

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[3] For a study of mnemonic devices in the oral tradition, see Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), 36-9.

[4] The information below is taken from Stephen Tatum's Inventing Billy the Kid.

forced to flee to Lincoln County. When in 1877 the Lincoln County war broke out, Billy fought along Alex McSween, John Turnstall and John Chisum against L.G. Murphy, James Dolan and Sheriff Brady in rival cattle rings; the war lasted until 1879. Pat Garrett was made sheriff in Lincoln in November 1880. On November 27, 1880, a sheriff's posse surrounded Billy, Tom O'Folliard, Charles Bowdre, Dave Rudabaugh, Billie Wilson and Tom Pickett. Posse member James Carlyle was held hostage and killed by the group. On December 19, 1880 Garrett's men ambushed Billy and others, and Tom O'Folliard was killed. The rest escaped but were caught on December 21, 1880 after a siege in which Charlie Bowdre was killed. On March 28, 1881 Billy and Wilson were sent to Mesilla for trial. Billy was found guilty of the murder of Sheriff Brady on April 9, 1881, and was sentenced to be hanged on May 13, 1881. On April 28, 1881 Billy killed guards Olinger and Bell and escaped from jail in Lincoln. On July 14, 1881, Pat Garrett shot Billy in a dark room at Pete Maxwell's place.

As Stephen Scobie points out, Ondaatje mentions some of these important events of Billy's life only in passing: "the narrative . . . ignores, almost completely, what is for all the biographers, however, 'true' or 'authentic,' the most important event of Billy's life: the Lincoln County War" (Scobie 194). Chronology, too, is slightly altered. Ondaatje's Billy claims he was twelve at the time he killed

blacksmith Cahill, when--according to historians--he was eighteen. Ondaatje is little concerned, however, with Billy as a legal "person" or with the justifications for Billy's arrest. Instead, Ondaatje shows Billy as an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances, so readers can begin to see the man behind the public record. In an interview, Ondaatje draws attention to Billy's universal traits:

> It wasn't specifically Billy the Kid, but cowboy that was important . . . I was writing about something that had always interested me, something within myself, not out there in a specific country or having some political or sociological meaning. I'm not interested in politics on that public level. (Ondaatje 20)

As Ondaatje makes history into Billy's story, he de-emphasizes "factual" records to introduce variations of events infused with his own personal experience. The author's point of view is detached in relation to the depicted events. From an outpost of "civilization," the outsider's voice tells Billy's story. This peripheral perspective helps to subvert conventional history and its established value judgements. Throughout the text, the speakers dismantle the clear distinctions between "good" and "bad" and resulting monomorphic notions of history:

> There was good mixed in with the bad
> in Billy the Kid

and bad mixed in with the good

in Pat Garrett. (89)

Such moral labels previously put Billy in his place. They must, therefore, be subverted by the oral narrative. Nor is Pat Garrett safe from such revisionist strategies; he is "--a sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane assassin sane" (29)[.] As Billy breaks down and recomposes language, morality is stood on its head and the "sane assassin" becomes the "insane assassin."

This process of recomposition, which directly challenges conventional historiography, is well rooted in the oral tradition. Storytellers are always able to place unusual emphasis on syllables and words of their choosing. The resulting ironic intonation undercuts the made statement. Such strategies deflate dichotomies between "picture" and "game" language and create what Robert Kroetsch calls the "interesting in-between." Throughout the text, Ondaatje associates "picture" literature with official accounts and historical records, which in turn bring about the stasis of scientific exactitude. But in the course of the story even the "facts" come alive through the narrative "game" strategies in which they are embedded. Linda Hutcheon points out that history, like narrative, becomes a "process, not a product" in what she terms "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 306). The often colourful tale

replaces the static source text.

Ondaatje's revision of William Bonney's widely chronicled frontier history draws on several tall tale narrative conventions and themes. Many of these conventions are summarised by Carolyn Brown.[5] Like the protagonist of the tall tale, for example, Billy outwits his captors in his prison breakout (86). He frees himself from seemingly inescapable conditions. Another characteristic of tall tales is the merging of protagonist, narrator, and author. When the narrative closes, the distinction between Billy-as-narrator and Ondaatje-as-narrator dissolves. Evidently, the narrator in the hotel room cannot be Billy who has just been shot dead: "It is now early morning, was a bad night. The hotel room seems large. . . . I smell the smoke in my shirt" (105). The blurring has an unsettling effect on the reader. Until the merging of narrators, Billy's accounts could be viewed as his subjective contributions to a larger multivocal rendering of events. The diversity of that rendering makes the work appear more objective than the sources on which it is based. After the merging of narrators, however, the illusion of objectivity breaks down. Even Billy's lines that stand seemingly unaltered and "speak

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[5] For a discussion of tall tale conventions and the role of the protagonist in the tall tale, see Carolyn S. Brown, The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature (Knoxville: Tennessee UP, 1987).

for themselves" are now explicitly revealed to be filtered and edited and ultimately delivered by one author. Ondaatje's historiographic revision, too, like the conventional history, becomes limited and subjective, though tall tale strategies avoid univocality. In his later works, Ondaatje addresses these implications by modifying the narrative voice.

Other tall tale conventions are reflected in Billy's hyperbolic description of the evening at the Chisum ranch, which shows him as one who instigates liberating festivities and seizes control in the ensuing chaos. Such a temporary state of anarchy may mirror the anarchistic state of much of the frontier in Billy's times; more importantly, the "extreme looseness of all things"[6] as portrayed in these scenes reflects the variability and randomness of the oral narrative. Accordingly, the tall tales of Billy subvert conventional historiography, since they undermine the linear and coherent framework conventional historiography seeks to establish.

One episode in particular illustrates how a shift of narrative power away from the controlling centre to the periphery leads to a liberation within the community.

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[6] Ondaatje quotes the lines from Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese in In the Skin of a Lion.

During a gathering at the Chisum Ranch, Billy tells of excessive drinking and promiscuous disorder and directly challenges Garrett's authority as keeper of the status quo directly (67). The scene opens on the porch, and previous evenings in the round of the storytellers in that place are recalled: "The thing here is to explain the difference of this evening" (67). Garrett's presence eliminates the usually buzzing conversation. Silence and excessive drinking prevail. The opening of the scene conveys the mounting tension through repetition in a crescendo: "John in the silent rocking chair . . . the rest of us are quieter. Garrett sits on the sofa with Sallie the quietest of us all. He doesnt [sic] talk much" (67, emphasis mine). On the verandah, at the frontier's edge, Garrett finds himself suddenly without the supporting power structure of the centre. The ranch lies almost outside the jurisdiction of the town and without the men of his posse Garrett lacks the courage to take on Billy. His influence diminishes along with his voice, and thus allows for the liberation to come. As the evening progresses, Billy becomes a bacchic protagonist of the tall tale who wins the favour of dancer and prostitute Angela D. and consequently earns Garrett's enmity. Billy's version of events thus emerges from the confusion he causes, and in his rendering the former outsider takes narrative control.

Billy's successful challenge to social restrictions

hence establishes an alternative point of view and prepares the ground for other previously marginalized voices to enter the revised version of frontier history. During the revision, narrative control shifts from the once dominant centre to the periphery. Billy's world order will thus supplant but tolerate that of Garrett. At the ranch the sheriff's dominant official view merely provides the contrast against which the process of revision defines itself. The shift of narrative control does not eliminate the voice of the once dominant centre altogether. Unlike his sources, Ondaatje's narrative allows for the syncretic reconciliation of all participants. This quality is characteristic of the oral tradition.

Critics have pointed out the similarly cathartic communal function of the medieval oral folk tradition:

> The carnivalesque need to invert norms felt by those living in the medieval world is said to be linked to their feelings of insecurity in the face of the stronger forces of both nature and the social order. (Hutcheon 32)

In the oral tradition, voicing the tale effectively releases frustrations and helps to challenge the existing power structures by demystifying them. Oppositional entertainment thus provides political and social criticism from a hitherto dominated perspective. Once this preliminary process is under way, history can be retold.

Ultimately, the dynamics of oral storytelling privilege the outsider's perspective and help revise the shared events which make up history. Barbara Godard defines this wider "communal nature of oral text [sic]" and its dynamics as: "author-to-reader, reader-to-context, both-to-extratextual history" (Godard 9). Strategies which are deliberately excluded from conventional historiographic renditions are thus at work in oral literature.

Furthermore, fragmentation and multivocality ensure that individual accounts offer alternative and often contradictory portrayals of personages and shared events. Several prominent voices are introduced as individual "speakers" who interrupt the stylistic coherence of the narrative. In her description of Garrett, Miss Sallie Chisum, for example, emphasizes his paradoxical appearance:

> Despite [Garrett's] crooked mouth
> and crooked smile which
> made his whole face seem crooked
>
> he was a remarkably handsome man. (89)

Later, Garrett's helper Poe briefly questions Billy's death and suggests that Garrett--not Billy--is the true crook: "'Pat,' replied Poe,' I believe you have killed the wrong man'" (103). The many voices may be fragmented in form, yet they contribute to the story which does not claim to be the

only version of events.

No matter how apparently digressive the "speakers," their commentaries are stitched together thematically. The following scattered fragments tell, for example, of the relation of pictures to narratives of given events:

> Paulita Maxwell: The Photograph
> In 1880 . . . Billy posed . . .. I never liked the picture. I don't think it does Billy justice. (19)

> Jim Payne's grandfather told him that he met Frank James of the James Brothers once. It was in a Los Angeles movie theatre . . .. Jim's grandfather asked him if he would like to come over and have a beer after the film, but Frank James said "No, but thank you" and tore up the next ticket. He was by then an alcoholic. (42)

> This is Tom O'Folliard's story . . .. Said want to hear a story and he told me. I was thinking of a photograph someone had taken of me, the only one I had then. (50)

At first, the excerpts may seem digressive. Nevertheless, they are thematically linked, as each explores the relation between film and narrative and the ironies and inadequacies

of representation. The photo mentioned by Paulita Maxwell directly contradicts her description of Billy as a "courteous, little, gentleman" (87). Jim Payne's story shows a wild west in transition; outlaws become attendants to the industry that remakes their stories. Similarly, O'Folliard's tale of his survival in the desert is linked to the limited representationalism of a picture of Billy. Each of the above excerpts carefully maintains a comprehensive range of interpretations while advancing Billy's story. The shift to a chorus of first-person narrators, then, allows readers to experience individual versions of events. At the same time, subjective multivocality poses a direct challenge to conventional "objective" historiography.

Much of that official history deals with violent deaths. Some of the quoted historical records are lists of murder victims. Under the guise of factuality, the description of the burial ground "Boot Hill," for example, reinforces common notions of a violent Wild West (9). Similarly, the first photograph incorporated in the text captures the antithesis of the work's oral dynamics: at the centre of the enlarged detail an obscured figure paints an epitaph. The open field around is littered with bleached bones (13). In the foreground of the frozen image, a lieutenant oversees both the permanent order he has just established with raw power and the first recording of it as

history.

Like the lieutenant, Sheriff Garrett and Judge Warren H. Bristol possess the means to eliminate those who threaten their power by order of their offices' authority. The judge, for example, emphasizes "dead" repeatedly as he reads out Billy's death sentence (7). (Billy's escape later ridicules its confident finality.) Garrett, too, seeks Billy's execution. Garrett's collection of stuffed birds reminds readers of his aim to silence, preserve and possess Billy and those like him. Once Billy's voice is eliminated, his story becomes the property of his murderers. Like the lieutenant, Bristol and Garrett both carry out their decisions and record them for posterity, as they appoint themselves as the law enforcers and spokesmen of those amongst whom they live. They then target any renegade individual who threatens their social construct or refuses to conform. Billy's life is just such a challenge to the emerging frontier society; an enthusiastic endorsement of his complete self-reliance would test any fixed social order. Billy dismisses those who irritate him and tempt him to limit his freedom and to make irrevocable decisions: "[He] avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish" (17). Billy's nature which is itself characterized by fluidity and ambiguity is reflected in both his actions and in the narrative methods of his story. Although Billy opens the narrative with a list of those he

has killed in gun battles and other fights, he is later portrayed as peaceful and forgiving: in a play on a cliché, readers see him as one who "would not hurt a fly" but instead listens to them before simply freeing them: he is forever "catching flies with [his] left hand / bringing the fist to [his] ear / hearing the scream" (58). Billy then opens his fingers and releases the flies, to allow for new possibilities and new voices (58). His gesture of liberating the voice contrasts with Garrett and Bristol's acts of violent suppression and their official pronouncements of conventional historiography.

As previously pointed out, many of the ostensibly verifiable facts Ondaatje "edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked" (110) are presented as source material and historical records within the overall narrative of The Collected Works of Billy the Kid. But in order to recreate some of the original complexities of a given recorded event, textual and paralinguistic elements combine to bring the once silenced voice of the outsider Billy back into the presentation. Formally, the work achieves this oral narrative quality through a number of technical translations of oral narrative structures to the printed page. Innovative strategies recall aural as well as gestural effects, such as songs, frame tales, storyteller rounds, pauses and mnemonic devices, and render them as blank space,

photograph and multivocality.

One gestural effect, the blank space, plays a special role throughout, because it constitutes an emphatic absence of narrative while maintaining narrative space. In an Ondaatjean twist, the opening (blank) frame, for example, defines a telling silence or nonverbal narrative space. The frame attracts and focuses the reader's attention, whereupon the first voice appears and immediately establishes a relation between narrator, audience and story: "I send you a picture of Billy" (5). As Lorraine York notes, the following work gradually becomes that image of Billy: "any portrait of Billy, Ondaatje suggests, which demands fixity can only be incomplete, a blank portrait" (York 107). Individual readers are invited to construct their own forever changing picture of Billy.

Another example in which the blank space focuses the reader's attention, builds suspense and adds emphasis is found immediately after Livingstone's tale of mad racing dogs (62). The tale stops four lines short of the page end (62). On the page following, sixty-seven lines out of seventy-one are omitted to leave a vast open space. The blank narrative space adds emphasis to the short dramatic announcement at the bottom of the page: "Up with the curtain . . ." (63). Readers then turn the page, which at this

point fulfils the role of a curtain, and find the song of William Bonney. His song ends with an acknowledgement of the saloon's audience, which to some degree includes the readers. Through his song, Billy is shown as a member of a frontier community. He uses his talent and contributes to the entertainment of a group that welcomes him in their midst. His conventional portrayal as outlaw is thus undermined.

Ondaatje achieves another technical translation of oral narrative strategies through his innovative use of photography. Most of the photos in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid are found in Mark H.Brown and W.R.Felton's The Frontier Years: L.A.Huffman, Photographer of the Plains.[7] The first photo of the lieutenant is originally entitled "The Grave of Colonel Keogh." In Huffman's original the lieutenant's pensive look rests on a large wooden cross which bears the inscription: "Col. Keogh, and 38 soldiers of the 17th Cav. Killed here June 25, 1876" (Brown & Felton 111). (Hence the photo was taken a year before Billy killed blacksmith Cahill and is irrelevant to Billy's story as Ondaatje frames it.) The elongated cabin, on Ondaatje's page twenty-two, is actually Huffman's first studio.

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[7] The cover of the second edition is a notable exception. "On the cover is an image taken from the studies of human and animal motion done by Eadweard Muybridge at Princeton during the 1880s" (MacLulich 108).

Huffman entitled the photo "Ye Studio--La Atelier 18 x 40.3 rooms." The interior of the cabin, on page forty-five, and the detail of its bed, on page ninety-one, are Huffman's "Interior of a Wolfer's cabin in the breaks of Missouri" at the turn of the century. The detail of the dog stems from Huffman's "Wolfer's two-wheeled outfit used in rough country." Although the photos in Ondaatje's work are thus taken out of their original historiographic context, they enhance the narrative through the use of the detail. Like a visual metonym the captured image stands for aspects of Billy's frontier reality without claiming relevance or verisimilitude. The details each tell their own story. Their relevance to the text is to be accepted although no explicit connection is made. They appear only as versions of scenes and general conditions within the work. As such they open the representation and undermine any single historiographic depiction through variability, like the oral narrative strategies of the text in which they are set.

Thus the pictures play an extraordinary and unique role in the overall representation. Some of the photos are taken from previous accounts of Billy; others relate to frontier history in general. Out of focus and obfuscated, they do not illustrate. Instead, they are to the printed page as the tangible object or mnemonic device is to an event of oral storytelling. (Preliterate cultures, for example,

would use bones or carved sticks.)[8] The mnemonic device helps the teller, as well as those members of the audience who already know the story, recall entire episodes of tales which may otherwise be forgotten. Thus the photographic detail of a dog (59) marks the tale of Livingstone's race of mad dogs (60). On the other hand, the photo of the lieutenant and, more important, its detail of the private inscribing the tombstone mentioned earlier (13) do not correspond to any of the work's anecdotes. Even conventional portraits in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid lack subtitles to establish direct links to the text. Thus, Sallie and John Chisum are shown well before their identity can be established (31); there is no direct reference to link the photo to any specific passage of the text at that time. Similarly, the drawing of several men lying in a drunken stupor depicts them "snoring like a bunch of snakes." Still, the connection to the surrounding action is merely found in the theme of bacchic indulgence (69). At other times, text and photo evoke distinctly opposite images. A picture of Miss Angela D, for example, follows a song, which describes her imposing physique through such stylistic devices as hyperbole (65); the drawing, however, recalls an earlier description which stresses her delicate features (25). Again the mnemonic device helps readers

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[8] See Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), 36.

recall parts of the narrative to offer differing points of view. Although the photos and pictures play a supplementary role, there is obviously no attempt at a realistic correspondence to the narrative (13). The potential role of the photos as authoritative historiographic evidence is questioned. Their overriding authority as visual object is restrained, but they remain one version of events in history.

As pointed out earlier, Ondaatje links the role of photography to that of the narrative blank space. Yet the opening framed blank also self-consciously draws attention to the larger written text as a narrative space. The textual space of The Collected Works of Billy the Kid closes with a photo of the young Ondaatje at "about the age of seven. Roughly when the last picture in the book (of [Ondaatje] in Ceylon in a cowboy outfit) was taken" (Ondaatje 20). Within the physical parameters of the written narrative from the framed blank to the visual blurring of protagonist and author, the story progresses from a literal void to the picture of the author as a young "kid" set in the corner of the larger framed space. The latter parallels the merging of narrator and protagonist according to tall tale conventions. At the same time the blank space as photograph questions the inherent authority of photography as an accurate recording of events. The

picture sent by the first person narrator--a blank which invites readers to construct their own image of Billy--questions any monomorphic rendering of personages and incidents. The insertion of the author's childhood image into the closing frame further questions whether readers can ever arrive at a clear picture of Billy. By drawing attention to the author--albeit a disguised author--the text's visual frames point to two purely subjective pictures of Billy. The many reflections on Billy are positioned between the reader's and the author's image of "the Kid." To use Kroetsch's phrase, a chorus of tellers grows to "talk towards the story"--the historiographic attributes of which emerge from the sum of all tales of the individual participants in the events. Billy, Garrett, Sally Chisum, Paulita Maxwell, journalists, and many more join in a presentation of songs, poetry and prose. Within the narrative space of the participants' realm, history is actively negotiated--not handed down. The work's many open spaces remind readers that the audience remains an important player in this revision of history.

In the Collected Works of Billy the Kid, then, Ondaatje demonstrates how the process of historiographic revision is to be initiated. Throughout the work, oral narrative poses a structural and thematic challenge to the dominant centre of narrative power. Limited references to extra-textual

history remind his reader of conventional renditions of a given series of events. At the same time, conventions and themes of the tall tale are instrumental in a subversion of those renditions. They target the controlling centre and open the narrative space to previously marginalized voices. Once the subversion is under way, the grounds are prepared and history is open to revision. The "outlaw," who was once labelled and persecuted, steps out to retell history from his perspective. Conventional historiography which formerly led to an entrapment of the individual is revised to allow for his liberation.

COMING THROUGH SLAUGHTER: RECORDING HISTORY

Early in Coming through Slaughter, Ondaatje's narrator distinguishes between conventional historiography and oral accounts of given events: "there is little recorded history, though tales . . . come down to us in fragments" (8). For the narrator, oral tales are thus an alternative to conventional historiography. Although the two modes of historiography may be fused into a single narrative, they differ substantially and could be viewed in terms of Kroetsch's language model,[9] whereby a 'Game theory' of language is applied to the narrative's historical representation. Whereas the written word and its tendency towards stasis negate oral qualities which are vital to the work's revision of history, the written text also lends an immortality and accessibility to the oral tale which only the medium of print can offer. As a result, a tension arises between the Bolden story's aspiration to oral qualities and its need to be preserved unaltered in time. The tension which drives much of the narrative is created in "the fascinating place . . . right in between the two conceptions of language," as Kroetsch describes it.

Ondaatje addresses this problem of written oral literature on two levels. Thematically, the narrative

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[9] "Game theory is the conception of language as a serious game, picture theory of language as identical with reality. . .. Typically I would suggest that the fascinating place is that place right in between the two" (Kroetsch 73).

explores Bolden's lifelong struggle against the closure of "wax history [and] electronic history" (37). Structurally and stylistically, oral narrative strategies translate Bolden's aesthetics to the medium of print. The narrative is in a sense imitative of Bolden's artistic work. Ultimately the text, which uses the static properties of the written word, is set and arranged in such a way as to bring some of the variability and multivocality of oral tales back to the printed version. These qualities, in turn, help to challenge conventional representations of Bolden's history.

Many of the historical sources found in Coming through Slaughter give readers examples of conventional historiography. The quotations from official reports and chronicles of Bolden often contrast sharply with the oral narrative in which they are embedded. The new context highlights the official account's tendency to force a label on Bolden. Several of the accounts assume an air of factuality by listing events in note form. For example, the segments entitled "Charles 'Buddy' Bolden" (132), the "Interview with Lionel Gremillion at East Louisiana State Hospital" (137), and "Selections from A Brief History of East Louisiana State Hospital" (143) are characterized by their abrupt style, which interrupts the stylistic coherence of the story. In these official histories Bolden is labelled explicitly, as a "Paranoid Type" (132) and

"Hyperactive Individual" (137).

The judgemental tone of the source texts is perhaps the prime reason Ondaatje resists conventional histories with oral narrative strategies. For example, Ondaatje's narrator comments directly on Williams's description of Bolden: "There was the sentence, 'Buddy Bolden who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade . . .' What was there in that . . . that made me push my arm forward and spill it through the front of your mirror and clutch myself"? (134). In part, Coming through Slaughter may be seen as a response to the final pronouncements of historians like Williams. At the same time, the narrator's intrusion provides his direct reaction to his own text. The breakdown of the distinction between narrator and narrative thus recreates the oral performance in which audience, teller and narrative are equals in the negotiation of meaning. Ondaatje's narrator eliminates the music historian's critical remarks and instead identifies explicitly with Bolden in an instance of narrative intrusion:

> Bolden began verbally abusing himself in the mirror, and he began threatening, and on one occasion beating, his women. (Jazz Masters 12)

> When I read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself, there was the shock of

memory. For I had done that. (CTS 133)

Here the narrator attacks any subject-object opposition between Bolden, himself and the audience. Such attack on the subject-object relation is a common oral narrative strategy. In tall tale narratives, for example, the tellers assume the subjects' voices and often their identity as well (Brown 116), thus making the magical real to their audiences. These elements of the oral tradition which defy chronology, mock epistemology and invert cause-and-effect analysis also subvert conventional notions of history.

In another response to his biased source texts, Ondaatje undermines univocal labels with oral sources which allow for multiple perspectives on any given event. Many of the eyewitness accounts found in the source material of Coming through Slaughter thus contradict the official records of Bolden. Willy Cornish (145), Frank Amacker (154), T. Jones (155), and Brock Mumford (76), to name a few, concentrate on Bolden's achievements as a musician and either ignore Bolden's alleged madness or mention it only in passing. Ondaatje introduces the many tales of these witnesses of a past era in order to do justice to the complexity of Bolden's life and to allow for different voices and views in a more open representation of events.

Along with the adaptation of source anecdotes, Ondaatje includes several thematic similarities to oral narratives in

Coming through Slaughter. His emphases on the tale-telling quality of the work, its resistance to closure, and the notion of audience participation help undermine conventional historiography.

The tale-telling quality of Coming through Slaughter is largely created by the many speakers and by the nature of Bolden's art. As in Ondaatje's other prose works, each person has a story to tell and wants to participate in the telling. Frank Lewis, for example, talks about the variability and flux in Bolden's work and life. According to Lewis, the essence or organizing principle behind Bolden's art which brings about flow and variability is "mood" (37). Bolden would privilege emotion and its inherent flux over form and its inherent stasis. His music, like the performance of a skilled story teller, was custom-tailored to his audience and their environment: "If you never heard him play some place where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes - then you should never have heard him at all. He was never recorded" (37). Because of the inherent values of jazz--the apparent variability and unpredictability of which seem diametrically opposed to John Robichaux's "clear forms" (93)--Lewis asserts that improvisational performance art and conventional recordings of any kind are incompatible. But here too "Bolden br[eaks] the path" for jazz musicians and shows them new possibilities: he influences generations of

musicians through his legacy (37). The same openness is found in Coming through Slaughter. As a result of such oral narrative strategies several versions of an event are offered, and a story is no longer told as if it were the only authoritative account of an event. The music aesthetics of Coming through Slaughter thus also contribute to its tale- telling quality.

As the potential for variability in the story increases, so does its resistance to closure. Like a conventional author, Webb tries to arrive at a single definitive account of historical events, but he is continually disappointed in his attempt to bring the strands of Bolden's story together. Early in the work, for example, readers are told the tall tale of Nora's mother and the Envictor, in which Nora's mother is strangled by a giant snake in her car. As the tale progresses, there are interjections, digressions and unexpected turns; however, Webb intervenes to close the story in the manner of a conventional historiographer. He cites Isadora Duncan's accidental death and stipulates on circumstantial evidence that Nora's mother shared Duncan's fate. At the same time, he provides a more immediate connection between the late Isadora Duncan and Bolden (27).[10] Webb's closure is

[10] Incidentally, the performances of Isadora Duncan--like those of Bolden--were never recorded.

followed after intervening blank spaces by the formulaic phrase, "There were his dreams of his children dying" (28). For Bolden the phrase, which echoes through the narrative like a refrain (24, 28), bespeaks a fear not only of closure and stasis but also of having his work obliterated. The "accidental encounter" with "the first death [Nora's mother's], almost on top of him, saved by its fictional quality and nothing else" (24) enhances that fear. For the first time, Bolden is reminded of his mortality, and the artist is caught in a dilemma. To become immortal he must record his work. But once recorded and explained, Buddy realizes his "children" or creations would lose their life and become static.

The thematic similarity to oral narrative strategies in this resistance to closure is once again exemplified by Bolden's music. Coming through Slaughter addresses the inherent problems of the "recorded live-performance": both the musical performance and the act of oral storytelling are conceived and valued as unique events. In many ways the dilemma of recording a musical performance mirrors the paradox of "oral literature." Ruth Finnegan has pointed out that jazz uses written notations merely as a point of departure for individual improvisations, while classical music demands a much stricter adherence to conventional notations. Similarly, the oral tradition allows for variations and embellishments of a commonly known story,

whereas literature preserves the narrative verbatim (Finnegan 126). She contrasts the game of making up new oral variations on a shared body of traditions with the authoritative and ostensibly clear picture the canon of written works presents in both fields. Perhaps one may thus expect the history of a jazz musician to be told in the "literary" equivalent of jazz. Within the universe of Coming through Slaughter, jazz and oral narratives are in fact synonymous:

> Webb went to hear Bolden play . . .. He watched him dive into the stories found in the barber shop, his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change . . . he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story. (43)

Here too, the performance of the jazz musician merges with the performance of the story teller. One need only consider the text as a "live performance" (art that is infused with life through audience participation) rather than the static recording of an event to see the oral narrative's challenge to closure. As the pages become the space--the round--of the story tellers, the text comes alive.

Ondaatje's Bolden provides a model for such writing himself in The Cricket, with its "stray facts, well-told lies and gossip about jazzmen" (24). The paper illustrates how oral narrative strategies humorously tease official history: "Bolden took all the thick facts and dropped them

into his pail of sub-history" (24). The sub-history accompanies official history and those who make it: "a servant's memoirs told everyone that a certain politician spent twenty minutes each morning deciding which shirt to wear" (24). The routine of so called decision-makers is thus ridiculed.

In his position as barber, Bolden is exposed to a wealth of such information and sub-histories. Because of his insights the people of Storyville seek his advice. Nevertheless, he rejects that authority and undermines it by giving mock advice in response to his clients' many confessional tales (42). He escapes the wrath of those mocked only by keeping several tales going at the same time: "He would have to leave his customer and <u>that</u> man's flight of conversation, take the angered one . . . and suggest variations . . .. His mind became the street" (42). Bolden similarly evades death--the ultimate closure--with his musical work-in-progress as he counters reactions to a murder with his "Tiger Rag":

> Buddy was on stage. Man A shot Man B with a gun, the pianist Ferdinand le Menthe between them leaning back just in time and disappearing before the first scream even began. Bolden seeing what happened changed to a fast tempo to keep the audience diverted which he had almost managed when the police arrived. Tiger Rag. (43)

Bolden applies this refusal of closure to all aspects of his life--not only in music but also in the tales he tells to children:

> He taught them all he was thinking of or had heard, all he knew at the moment, treating them as adults, joking and teasing them with tall tales which they learned to sift down to the real. (13)

While Bolden parades the children to school, tall tales exercise their critical capacity. Thus Bolden links the open flow of his music to storytelling. He treats his audience as equals and pours out all he had heard in one moment, leaving the children to find and define that aspect of his art they deem real. The children appreciate that they are invited to question rather than believe. Thus his work remains open and in constant flux. His verbal tales do not feign verisimilitude; instead they are imitative of the complexity of a given event.

Nonetheless Bolden finds himself drawn to means of artistic expression which are as "carefully patterned" as the closed music of John Robichaux (93). The "clear forms" would lend permanence to Bolden's constantly varying work. While he is torn between the two extreme models of self-expression, Bolden becomes acquainted with Bellocq, who explores the medium of photography but challenges its inherent tendency towards pictorial verisimilitude. Bellocq's portraits of Storyville prostitutes, for example,

depict pensive women against the homely backdrops of drying laundry or a pet dog. While the photographer successfully undermines stereotypical notions of life in Storyville, he becomes frustrated with the still rudimentary technology he must use and the ultimate impossibility of fully capturing the conditions around him. Finally, he attacks the images he has created and embarks on a suicidal self-portrait by turning his room into a sinister parody of a camera obscura. Despite Bellocq's self-destructive legacy, his photography seems to capture a given instant in time accurately. He therefore attracts conventional would-be historians such as Webb who seek to impose closure on their subject.[11] At one point, for example, Webb coaxes Bellocq into assisting him in the act--so to speak--of fixing Bolden:

> Webb watches "the paper . . . as if the search for his friend was finally ending . . . [Bellocq] tapped the paper ... so it would be uniformly printed and . . . cleaned the soakboard in a fussy clinical way . . .. Then the sudden vertical lines . . . which were the outlines of the six men and their formally held instruments. (52; emphasis mine)

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[11] More recently, traditional historians such as Al Rose make use of Bellocq's work: "Bellocq, by appointment of their worships, the madams of the district, was the "official" photographer of Storyville" (Rose 59). Rose here emphasises authority and officialdom and shows the photographer as an ally of the conventional historian.

Given the above attention to static order, formal precision and closure it may be fair to say that Bellocq's aesthetics under Webb's influence are here diametrically opposed to those of Bolden. Webb's aspiration is to capture the moment in a picture with verisimilitude, while Bolden brings to life all the possibilities of that moment in a playful manner. Webb may use the photographer's skill to fix Bolden onto the page, but Bolden "in reality had reversed the process and gone back into white" and defied all attempts to record him (53). Ultimately the photograph of Bolden reminds teller and audiences alike that there is no conclusive portrait of Bolden, nor can there ever be such a portrait.

In many ways Bolden's resistance to closure is reminiscent of the protagonist of the conventional tall tale. The escape motif which shows the tale's hero eluding enemies and their traps further adds to the thematic similarities in Coming through Slaughter to oral narrative.[12] On one level Ondaatje's story of Bolden tells of the traditional conflict between the protagonist and death, personified as the grim reaper. Death, the adversary, takes many shapes and forms but, as in a traditional tall tale, Bolden repeatedly outwits the mortal

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[12] Brown cites the collection of European tall tales in R.E. Raspe's Munchausen as examples of the tall tale hero's repeated escape from danger and confinement (Brown 12).

enemy and escapes all confinements. Initially, fame poses an unseen threat to the musician: at first Buddy is "unaware that reputation made the room narrower and narrower" (86). As Bolden's work grows, so does the "reputation and fame" which stifles his effort. By "drinking in only your own recycled air" the artist gradually suffocates "full of [his] own echoes" (86). In time, he feels the destructive impact of history "on top of his own life" (37). He therefore escapes the "sure lanes" (15) of his life with Nora and his nightly performances and, with the help of Robin, "drain[s his] body of its fame" (86).

Among other figures, Bolden's antagonist Death appears in the guise of Webb, who endorses conventional notions of history as he seeks to label, to exclude and to eliminate. As Bolden recalls Webb's intrusion into his life he links images of entrapment and closure to his growing sense of isolation:

> When Webb was here with all his stories about me and Nora, about Gravier and Philip Street, the wall of wire barrier glass went up between me and Robin. And when he left we were still here, still, not moving or speaking, in order to ignore the barrier glass. God he talked . . .
> Here. Where I am anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading. . . . Where I am King of Corners. (86)

Webb arrives with a chronology of Bolden's past and intentionally puts an end to the story between Buddy and Robin. The stasis of that history spreads to the lovers, and suddenly "everything in the world is the history of ice" to them (87). Yet Bolden carries on; his ventures do not end with Webb's intrusion. Inadvertently Webb introduces another history (the return to his life in Storyville) to Bolden and changes the course of his future. Thus Bolden escapes not only Webb's influence but also the growing tension in Robin and Jaelin's home.

At first glance Bolden's role as successful tall tale escapee appears to end in the "House of D[etention]." Civic powers feel threatened by his growing popularity and declare Bolden like many a genius before him "mad." He leaves for the "House of D." silenced--his tubes tied. The throat from which the air is pushed through the cornet and into the audience has been severed: "You see I had an operation on my throat. You see I had a salvation on my throat" (139). The stomach, once a place where ideas could ferment to challenge an existing order, and the mouth, which would voice the new free sound, are no longer connected. Bolden has been raped (139) and muted: "Boot in my throat, the food has to climb over it and then go down and meet with all their pals in the stomach" (139). The former place of fermentation is now a prison community. Bolden's physical confinement may blind

readers, however, to his ultimate success. While his legendary life as a musician ends in his last parade, and while his fellow inmates know him only as barber, Bolden's spirit lives on nonetheless. More importantly, his sensational disappearance from public life and its constraints spawns innumerable stories about Bolden which remain forever open ended. As one anecdote leads to another, Bolden's absence from Storyville ironically results in his immortality instead of his oblivion.

Unlike Bolden, Webb is "free" to investigate further. Yet his end merely provides an ironic contrast to Bolden's. Although Webb thought he could capture Buddy's history for generations to come, he ultimately finds himself defeated in the face of Bella Cornish and her narrative strategies:

> She talked on and on repeating herself and her descriptions, going back to things she'd mentioned and retelling them in greater detail for Webb. . . he [was] trying to escape the smell of her words as if the air from her talking came into his mouth . . . excusing himself out loud I gotta throw up 'scuse me 'scuse me, but knowing there was nothing to come up at all. (151)

Webb's creative stomach is empty--even of regurgitable material. Webb, who thought he was in a position of power to shape the history of Bolden through the written word,

finds that he had unwittingly helped Bolden undermine that history. Though Webb is free to move around Storyville, he is imprisoned by his work, which ultimately excludes him from the community he investigates. Bolden, on the other hand, may be physically removed from Storyville, yet his name and the spirit of his work have become synonymous with the early days of New Orleans Jazz.

Perhaps the realization that he will only live on in others prompts Bolden to place so much emphasis on his audience. As in the event of oral story telling, Bolden's audience participates actively in his artistic work. To Bolden, audience participation and feedback are integral parts of his musical performance. Similarly, Bolden's tall tales and the advice he gives in his barbershop all vary with the specific make up and concerns of his individual audiences. Bolden values the moment of his artistic onslaught on his listeners. He invites audiences to identify with him, but they are not forced to take sides. To the degree to which they participate in the shaping of the tale or the song, they are part of a procession of "people talking toward a story" (Kroetsch 171). Thus the parade (129-131) in which Bolden instantly transforms his audience's response into ongoing music epitomizes the oral narrative strategies found in Coming through Slaughter and stands as the work's synecdochic scene. The public event in

which themes and anecdotes move to the final point of transcendence or epiphany is also the sacrifice or slaughter--the historical moment in which the tale enters the collective consciousness of the audience. The climactic parade thus reflects the narrative as a whole; it is the paradoxical "live recording" of a historical event.

Bolden's going "mad into silence" (108) is also his one perfect performance and his march into immortality. The parade mirrors the ideal telling of a tale. Bolden draws from the response of his roaring and dancing audience for his creation, and gradually the "boundary of crowd" (129) dissolves and a muse figure "moves free" (129): "She's Robin, Nora, Crawley's girl's tongue . . . hitting each note with her body before it is even out" (130). At the moment of merging, the personified audience thus takes an active part in negotiating the "notes" which become both live event and history.

At the same time, the parade shows how the creative force of the oral narrative comes into being. Not surprisingly, that force is closely connected to the artist's physical creative power. The muse figure, herself a "tongue" (230), "mirrors" Bolden's "throat" (130). Ultimately, the description of Bolden's transcendence touches upon his creative force:

> All my body moves to my throat . . . my cock

> . . . my heart . . . my throat . . .
> through the brain and down into the stomach,
> feel the blood . . . through my teeth, it is
> into the cornet . . . from my mouth . . . Air
> floating. (131)

Combined, the six references to the "throat" in that passage further identify the place of inspiration--where creative thought is given breath to voice Bolden's statement. At the same time, the creative impulse is depicted as sexual craftsmanship. "Cock, heart and brain" spark the ejaculation of "air" which earlier fermented in the stomach and now rises "up to the throat," through the teeth, mouth and cornet "outward" (131).

Bolden gives the creative ejaculation of "air" special emphasis: "He was obsessed with the magic of air . . . his mouth would drag a net of air in and dress it" (14). "Air," therefore, is both the raw material and process of a continuous creation. It is a pervading influence, melody, chorus voice, public utterance, and public exposure: "What I wanted, always, loss of privacy in the playing" (130). "Air" further aids the oral narrative effects of his art. Throughout, the mouth becomes the womb for creation, which makes the weaving of his story with musical notes an oral process. Bolden's creative and sexual power is thus associated with the oral/aural tradition, making the mouth a place of origination: "I had wanted to be the reservoir

where engines and people drank, blood sperm music pouring out and getting hooked in someone's ear" (112).

The climactic parade scene thus describes the roles of audience participation, creative impulse and artistic vision in the musical live-performance. The thematic similarities to oral narrative strategies epitomized in this scene further illuminate Bolden's notion of resistance to closure, his role as tall tale hero and the escape motif discussed earlier.

Such thematic affinities to oral narratives are also borne out in the structure and style of Coming through Slaughter. Multivocality, fragmentation, and the mnemonic device help create the work's resemblance to an oral text. In form, the story is characterized by the fragmentation typically associated with oral telling. Any linear storyline is replaced with several fragments which combine into a mosaic of Bolden's history. A number of diverse speakers and a variety of excerpts from source texts bring about the fragmentation of Bolden's story and open blank narrative space as part of Ondaatje's paralinguistic strategies. The generous spacing of the lines and the large number of open spaces in Coming through Slaughter has been widely noted (Albertazzi 57). Thematically, these spaces of silence also have communicative value. One scene in particular exemplifies how these silent spaces may function.

Despite the charged atmosphere, Bolden, Robin and Jaelin talk for hours "about things like the machinery of the piano, fishing, stars" (65). As a result, a constant subtext of silence accompanies every word and action: "The silence of Jaelin Brewitt understood them all" (65). Because of the "story" between Jaelin, Robin and Bolden, their elliptic exchanges become a knowing silence and an invitation to read between the lines. Jaelin's "minimal" remarks and the hours of apparent small talk reverberate with allusions to their love triangle. Since the resulting silence is highly evocative, it can undermine a character's preceding words. Like the thematic exploration of silence in the above scene, the structural blank spaces within the text challenge closed representations of Bolden's story. Any linear storyline is replaced with several stories which combine into a mosaic of Bolden's history.

Much of the structural and stylistic fragmentation rests on multivocality. Single stories are told by minor and main characters alike. Different speakers thus lend the text its oral narrative quality. Even within a given source text several speakers can offer various versions of life in Storyville. Therefore, the role of multivocality and its structural similarity to oral narrative strategies in Coming through Slaughter is perhaps best illustrated by a study of one of Ondaatje's sources. Although the source is univocal,

Ondaatje adapts it for multivocal incorporation. "Many points of historical information," Ondaatje acknowledges, "were found in Martin Williams's Jazz Masters of New Orleans" (158).[13] Ondaatje quotes extensively from Williams's pages twelve to fourteen, as well as page seventeen of Williams's first chapter "Buddy the King." Pages thirteen and fourteen of Jazz Masters of New Orleans, for example, become pages eighty and eighty-one in Coming through Slaughter. (See Appendix A). Ondaatje introduces a number of changes to the original account. Buddy's song titles, for example, are announced without Williams's moralizing introduction (Slaughter 23 / Jazz Masters 12). Tom Pickett's "face-off" with Bolden, which is merely summarized by Williams, becomes a vivid first person narrative told from two perspectives. Throughout, the first-person narrative moves back and forth between the two speakers. Like a jazz duo, they retell the same storyline with different emphasis. In the process, the stereoscopic point of view results in a complex representation which conveys at once that the event is a turning point in the lives of Pickett, Buddy and Nora.

Williams's original summary of Pickett's fight with Bolden (on his page twelve) is followed by Dude Botley's

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[13] Some of these facts have since been challenged by Donald Marquis in "In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz."

Lincoln Park memories (Williams 13).[14] The shorter segment enters Ondaatje's work virtually unaltered. Ondaatje drops two ungrammatical adjectives in the beginning but maintains one ("them") at the end. He further inserts "especially" and changes the punctuation as well as the spelling of "colour." The quotation is followed by a short statement which is also attributed to Botley: "Bolden played nearly everything in B-Flat" (18; emphasis mine). The line, however, is quoted from Frederic Ramsey's Jazzmen, which is a mutual source for both Williams and Ondaatje.[15] In Jazzmen, William Russell and Stephen W. Smith write: "Bolden, as a rule, played everything in the key of B Flat" (Jazzmen 14; emphasis mine). The comparison shows how Ondaatje mutes the certainties stressed by the music historians.

In another example of conventional historiography, music historian Martin Williams uses Dude Botley's eyewitness account of Bolden at Lincoln Park to warn of the dangers of excess, alcoholism and promiscuity as he sees them personified in Bolden. Subsequent to Botley's tale,

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[14] A shorter Lincoln Park segment follows on Williams's page seventeen. Williams's account is likely based on an interview of Dude Botley by Danny Barker which may well contain both Lincoln Park segments.

[15] Williams acknowledges: "I owe my first knowledge of jazz history to Jazzmen, edited by Frederic Ramsey, Jr., and Charles Edward Smith" (Jazz Masters, i).

Williams draws the following conclusion: "Things were building up in [Bolden], and on an afternoon in 1907, while playing a parade with Henry Allen Sr.'s Brass Band, he went berserk in the street" (Williams 14). Ondaatje strips his sources of the judgments made by historians, and the various artists are ostensibly allowed to speak for themselves.

The best example of an unimpeded voice which retains its original stylistic particularities and opinion in Coming through Slaughter is Dude's substantial Lincoln Park segment, which Ondaatje divides into four parts (CTS 80-81). Although he cuts Botley's voice free from the historian's narrative in which it was embedded, he alters the extensive quotation only slightly. In addition, Ondaatje mirrors Botley's description of Bolden "mixing the blues with the hymns" with his own deliberate confusing of both reference pronouns and syntax, and thus the form of his writing becomes imitative of its content. As in the shorter Lincoln Park segment in Coming through Slaughter, Ondaatje falsely attributes one line to Botley when he describes women dancing to Bolden's music as "chicks getting way down and slapping themselves on the cheeks of their behind" (81). The comment was originally made by Louis Armstrong, who watched Bolden's show at the age of six: "And to a tune like 'The Bucket's Got a Hole in it,' some of them chicks would get way down, shake everything, slapping themselves on the cheek of their behind" (Williams 14). Ondaatje's blending

of Botley's and Armstrong's voices may explain an added seemingly minor detail. Botley observes: "There's about three of us at the window now . . ." (81). The single verb (there [i]s) and the pronoun (us) imply a new multivocal perspective. In his work, Ondaatje thus balances the conventions of the historian with the voices of individual eyewitnesses. Their tales replace the monolithic representation with a multifaceted open one. As in an oral presentation, multivocality therefore alerts readers to the subjective nature of the historical account.

Another structural similarity to oral narrative strategies and a paralinguistic element employed in oral story telling is the mnemonic device. Although such devices are usually tangible objects, they function mostly as a visual stimulus. In Coming through Slaughter, the first image greeting the reader is the photograph of Buddy Bolden's Band. Those rereading the story will be able to associate Bolden's smile with his "mad dignity" (53) and his creations--the essence of which escapes the grasp of a clear form. As a discernible object, the photo helps to prompt the story of the band. At the same time, the image is faded and unfocused and thus gives emphasis to the fragility of this sole surviving record of Bolden (53). Specific details such as the cornet or the composition of Bolden's band are also visually "preserved." Photography thus demonstrates

how the confines of language in the representation of an event can be broken without compromising the illusion of accuracy: the photo also gives the illusion of verisimilitude. Still, it cannot claim historiographic accuracy, since the momentarily caught image can never capture the entire sequence of events. Ultimately, the photograph remains a mnemonic device which merely helps to recall a version of Bolden's story.

In Coming through Slaughter, then, thematic, structural and stylistic similarities to oral narratives revise conventional histories of Buddy Bolden. As Ondaatje reworks source material in the telling, his emphasis rests with the speakers. They form the chorus which challenges any monolithic notion of history. To some extent the narrative is in keeping with the jazz tradition it depicts, and history in Coming through Slaughter emerges not as a single history but as the voicing of variations on a shared body of themes.

We have seen oral narrative strategies already at work in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid. The merging of teller and protagonist, the escape motif, and Billy's role as hero of the tall tale contribute to the work's oral narrative quality. In Coming through Slaughter Ondaatje links his protagonist Bolden who "taught [the children]... with tall tales" (13) for the first time explicitly to the

tall tale and its conventions. The many "voices" found in both works further heighten the sense of multivocality and fragmentation which is characteristic of the oral text.

In addition, Ondaatje identifies Bolden's written tall tales in The Cricket as exemplary unconventional historiography of Storyville: Bolden's publication combines "stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies . . . gossip. . . [and] thick facts." He introduces the notion of "sub-history," (24) which Bolden writes for those who are marginalized by official history. Music historian Frederic Ramsey notes in one of Ondaatje's sources that "Buddy was able to scoop the field with the stories brought in by his friend, a 'spider', also employed by the New Orleans police" (Jazzmen 11), before he "dropped them into his pail of sub-history" (24). That 'spider' is Webb. Thus Bolden is able to employ Webb's closed conventional stories and those of 'spiders' like him, in his story telling. Bolden's "sub-history" draws specific attention to the way in which oral narrative strategies can offer a revision of a linear conventional history.

RUNNING IN THE FAMILY: FAMILY HISTORY

In Running in the Family, the travels of Ondaatje's narrator lead to his discovery of family lore. These stories are placed in turn within the context of Ceylon's colonial history. Throughout the work, the tales of friends and family members contradict official reports of colonial Ceylon. Often, Mervyn Ondaatje emerges as these tales' hero. At the same time, references to conventional historiographic accounts and canonized travel literature emphasize the tension between a world order which shaped the language of the past and a changing order which nevertheless relies on past language. The same tensions which accompany such historic changes are felt in Ondaatje's family. Older static modes of representation which allow labelling are continually challenged by evolving oral narratives such as tall tales. Ondaatje's narrative accommodates both modes and offers his revised family history as an example for larger historiographic revisions.

Within the family, Ondaatje's mother is connected to the revisionist open narratives of tall tales:

> [F]rom my mother's side . . . we got . . . the tall stories . . . she would take the minutest reaction from another and blow it up into a tremendously exciting tale . . . Ordinary tennis matches would be mythologized

> to the extent that one player was so drunk that he almost died on the court. An individual would be eternally remembered ... (169)

The father, too, is associated with the written tall tale which he uses in defense against Sammy Dias (152). The "half-page attacks" (151) Dias launches against Mervyn Ondaatje in visitors' books all over Ceylon show the literature of conquest in action. In keeping with the antics of a tall tale hero Mervyn's reprisal exceeds that of his adversary both in volume and intensity and a "literary war" of "gossip" breaks out (152). Ultimately, of course, there are no winners and "the pages continued to be torn out [of the visitors' books,] ruining a good archival history" (152) and replacing it with a humorous myth. The static language of aggression is a self-invoked death sentence. Even though reading resembles an act of communion, it is essentially a harbouring of solitude: "my father swallowed the heart of books and kept that knowledge and emotion to himself" (168). Like a conventional historian he preserves information in time, but he thereby becomes removed from his contemporaries and their evolving discourse. Even Mervyn finds himself confined to silent solitude and becomes a "'man whose balm turned poison'" (198). In the end, the static voice of the past stands in opposition to progressive contemporary speakers.

Thematically, the father's fate and his enthusiasm for writing do not obscure his central role within the oral tales that make up the family history. Like the hero of a tall tale Mervyn repeatedly escapes from precarious situations which gradually increase in intensity. In an early episode, young Mervyn leaves Ceylon for Cambridge where he "simply eliminate[s] the academic element of university" (31) to lead a comfortable life on his family's allowances. When his parents finally confront Mervyn after two and a half years he pacifies them with an advantageous engagement to "the notable Kay Roseleap of Dorset" (32). Two weeks after his return to Ceylon, Mervyn escapes the looming 'marriage of convenience' by becoming engaged to Doris Gratiaen and leaves it to his family to sort through the havoc he has wrought: Mervyn "continue[s] with his technique of trying to solve one problem by creating another. The next day he return[s] home saying he ha[s] joined the Ceylon Light Infantry" (31). Yet at all times, Mervyn emerges as the hero from the confusion he provokes.

In a later incident Mervyn is to be hospitalized for alcohol abuse. On the way to the clinic he becomes drunk and takes over the Trinco-Colombo train, thereby grounding services in Southern Ceylon. Under the pretext of an impending security threat, he follows up his hijacking with a bomb scare which allows him to extricate himself from the "chaos and hilarity" (154) he has caused. Hyperbole thus

lends the escape motif unmistakeable tall tale characteristics. Thematically, the humorous retelling of these events makes Mervyn into the hero of the tall tale.

In contrast to the anecdotes from family lore, Ondaatje repeatedly demonstrates how the voices of conventional historiography have become remote to successive generations. One notion that is fostered by colonial historiography and early travel literature is that of the "alien." For example, in the case of Defoe's Crusoe, cited in a publication of the Ceylon Historical Association, a narrator consciously uses literature to define himself against his new surroundings and then to assert his dominion over the "alien land":

> If you peer into the features of Crusoe you will see something of the man who was not the lonely inhabitant of a desert island but who lived in an alien land among strangers, cut away from his own countrymen . . . and striving hard not only to return but also to employ profitably that single talent that had been given him. (82)

"The[se] lines quoted in 'The Karapothas' sequence linking Robinson Crusoe with Robert Knox's An Historical Relation" (207) invoke early travel novels in which the relation between subject and object is defined clearly: the narrator

reduces the "other" to a servant.[16] Thus the colonialist uses the label arbitrarily to establish a social hierarchy and to place himself at the top of that hierarchy. At the height of British colonialism, language is in such a way "employed profitably" against the "alien."

If we now substitute Ondaatje's narrator for the characterization of Defoe's Crusoe as offered by the Ceylon Historical Association, the words "alien land," "stranger" and "return" take on a new significance: Ondaatje's narrator is a resident alien "striving to return," but the return is not a circumscribed movement from the 'other' to the 'own' land. Unlike Crusoe, the narrator of Running in the Family lacks the defined imaginative centre from which early novelists and historiographers could pronounce their 'truth' and history. Where, for example, should Ondaatje return? Ceylon, once home, is now the destination, while Canada, the former destination, now is home. The distinction between the 'other' and the 'self' dissolves along with the difference between 'home' and 'foreign' lands. The boundaries between subject and object are no longer clearly defined; Friday becomes Crusoe and Crusoe Friday--an alien in his homeland. In order to come to terms with this paradoxical condition, Ondaatje's narrative incorporates multiple speakers. Different voices of the past render

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[16] See Jager, 329.

otherwise static accounts in a dynamic changing context. Multivocality explains the narrator's paradox since conventional sources recall a dichotomy between Crusoe and Friday which has become archetypal in traditional travel literature, while the voices of Ondaatje's family lore subvert that distinction. Thus the oral narrative strategy of multivocality helps to maintain a paradoxical representation without jeopardizing artistic unity.

Within the work, different 'speakers' appear not only in direct quotations but also as the implied creators of photos and maps. They are authors of conventional historiographic source texts, such as Oderic the Friar, Douglas Amarasekera, Robert Knox (73), and Paul Bowles (76); writers of canonized travel literature, such as D.H. Lawrence, Leonard Woolf and Edward Lear (78); and recordings of lost voices found amongst miscellaneous sources for historiographers such as the inscriptions on a gravestone (66), the church register, the map of Insular Ceilan, as well as popular songs and archival material (207). Most of these documents and 'speakers' belong to a once dominant discourse. Canonized voices such as D.H. Lawrence and Edward Lear reiterate the colonial view that Ceylon is a dangerous jungle. Lear, for example, reports in his journal of a "noisy . . . early dawn with crows and cocks . . . All the while the savages go on grinning and chattering to

each other" (78). The colonial notion thus stands unaltered, but it does not go unchallenged. Lear explicitly names the alien a "savage" who "chatters" because Lear does not speak his language. But one may recall Ondaatje's earlier anecdote of family members exchanging stories: "We are all chattering away like the crows and cranes so that it is often difficult to hear" (27). "Chattering" thus loses its negative and racist connotations. Later, Ondaatje's narrator integrates the crow as tale bearer into an elaborate structure of storytelling animals, each with its distinct significance.[17] The contexts of Ondaatje's narrative thus transform Lear's original remark from an intended insult which is now solely Lear's responsibility, to a recovered statement of reverence. The foreigner thus comes to the "alien" land and casts his experience in Eurocentric terms. His reaction ranges from the falsification of facts to openly hostile attempts to render the exotic beyond recognition. In an earlier example, Oderic the Franciscan Friar lists fabrications to transform Ceylon into an alien dangerous unknown (iii). D.H. Lawrence, too, unwittingly reveals his xenophobia: "Ceylon. . . [is] only the negation of what we ourselves stand for

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[17] In traditional folklore around the world the crow is seen as a tale bearer. The crane is the bird of the alphabet, and the grasshopper is the storyteller of First Nations. A study of the role of animals in Ondaatje's works would undoubtedly yield further interesting insights. See Jobes' Dictionary of Mythology Folklore and Symbols.

and are" (78). In response, Ondaatje subverts the terms and employs oral narrative strategies to make the 'alien' familiar. The chattering of Lear's "savages" becomes "our chattering."

In the context of Ondaatje's narrative, then, the colonial writers reveal their cultural bias. Still, the voices of conventional historiography are not dismissed outright but shown as an integral though minor part of Ondaatje's narrative. For example, the narrator thematically connects Lear, one of the fathers of nonsense literature, with his own father who, "hitting the state of inebriation . . . would start rattling off wonderful limericks" (154). In another instance, Robert Knox projects demonic qualities onto a lizard found in the 'alien' land: "'he hath a blew forked tongue . . . and hisseth and gapeth'" (73). Ondaatje's narrator, on the other hand, praises the quality of the lizard tongue which lends extraordinary powers of articulation to those who swallow it (73). Although the many colonial speakers are "put in their place" they are, nonetheless, integrated into Ondaatje's representation. The once dominant voice is now playing a dissenting minor part, against which oral narrative strategies revise colonial and family history.

Such dissonant 'voices' need not be confined to one medium. Like the maps, the photos reiterate the once

dominant point of view of conventional historians. One photo shows a group of men posing formally in knee-deep monsoon floods which are tearing through a Singhalese shopping district. They appear estranged from the landscape. Their faces reveal no surprise. One man has even brought his bicycle along, and the group conveys a stoic indifference to the deluge. In the course of the story, the narrator undoes the notion of such artificial distancing from one's natural habitat, not only in his "Monsoon Notebook" sequences (69, 135, 190) but also in his intricate web of rain imagery that is foregrounded in the scene entitled "The Passions of Lalla" (113). The family is one with the elements of Ceylon--even to the point of transcendence.

An earlier photo (19) similarly depicts a Eurocentric vision. In it spacious grounds lead to the seat of colonial power. Divided into three levels the grounds are to represent Singhalese society. The carriage conceals members of the ruling colonial elite. On the sea-walk next to them a group of formally attired men constitutes the "upper class." A middle class is notably absent from the photo. Instead there is a sharp drop to the sea. A solitary figure, perhaps a woman, wanders along the beach. Like a mnemonic device, the photo thus recalls the colonial lie of an orderly garden in which nature has been subjugated to the will of man, and reminds us of outmoded aesthetics which

demand that "high art" must deal with high characters and their servants.[18] Within the context of the story, the photo is no longer an illustration but merely a contrasting background. It takes the role of a mnemonic device which recalls traditional historiography in a narrative which undercuts the conventional picture of colonial history.

Of course, the narrative itself avoids the class segregation of the photo, and Ondaatje mocks such class consciousness when he employs the hyperbole of the tall tale to inflate the social status of his family:

> There was a large social gap between [his family] and tne Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community. (41)

> Pages continued to be torn out, ruining a good archival history of two semi-prominent Ceylon families. (152)

> They had come a long way . . . from being the products of two of the best known and wealthiest families in Ceylon. (172)

Later Ondaatje subverts these statements: "the Ondaatje's were absolute pariahs" (17). The result is a unified self-

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[18] "The political dimension of Running in the Family is tied to the aesthetic" (Solecki 308).

contradictory representation of the family. Again the colonialist voice (or image) from the past is allowed to stand uncensored within the narrative and to contribute its cultural bias to the open design of oral literature as characterized by hyperbole and repetition.

Multiple speakers, however, need not always be antagonistic. Ondaatje repeatedly divides authorial control in a given telling. He follows an oral strategy whereby several tellers share the stage to shape the tale. In Running in the Family Ondaatje introduces a frame narrator who refers to himself as "he." But "he" also denotes five narrating "I"s: the father in a delirium tremens--"his nightmare"; Ondaatje's narrator who "snaps on" the stage lights; Ondaatje's narrator as a young boy ("up to the age of eleven he slept"); and Ondaatje's narrator as author: "Half a page--and the morning is already ancient" (17). Grandfather "King Coconut" links the Ondaatjes to nature and is only mentioned in passing; nonetheless, he helps to form the "human pyramid" of the five narrating "I"s who act as one (17). The narrative voice thus comprises three generations of Ondaatjes whose family history is tied to that of Sri Lanka. The father takes a special place within that family history. Ondaatje's narrator identifies with Mervyn Ondaatje like an oral storyteller with his or her protagonist.

Once the oral tale is written down the distinctions between the narrator and the subject are usually made more explicit. In the opening of the story Ondaatje's narrator thus sets out to mediate family history by adapting this convention of the tall tale:

> In a fully developed written tall tale, the writer describes a framing scene in which he is himself present and then introduces a character who tells the fabulous yarn. The writer thus pretends to be part of the audience, claiming that his only role has been to record the teller's story in the teller's own words. (Hauck 51)

The opening of Running in the Family maintains the narrator's role of recorder as in the written tall tale. His preparations for the trip are followed by meticulous notes on his travels:

> What began it all was the bright bone of a dream. . .. (21)
>
> It was a new winter and I was already dreaming of Asia.(22)
>
> 2:15 in the afternoon. I sit in the huge living room of the old governor's home in Jaffna. (24)

Later the narrator merges with the protagonist as in an oral telling. The merging is completed within the "Thanikama" section where the protagonist and the narrator become

gradually indistinguishable:[19] the statement "This was 1947" (186) is the last clear reference to Mervyn and his era. The following drive in a Ford may have been taken by either Mervyn or Ondaatje's narrator, and the narrative returns to the conventions of the oral tale.

Given the static quality of the written tall tale, the teller's ultimate challenge lies in making audiences feel that they are participating in the act of telling. Within the oral tradition the story teller can work with the listeners' responses. Thus, the teller can lead up to a key scene, prompt the audience response and modify the tale accordingly. For a brief moment the teller crosses established boundaries and the audience takes relative control of the telling. At times readers of written tall tales can be led to feel a similar sense of immediacy:

> It was page 189 . . . the mirror he had been moving towards . . . The white rectangle moved with the busy arduous ants. Duty, he thought. But that was just a fragment gazed at by the bottom of his eye.

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[19] As the teller tells the tale he or she assumes the persona of the protagonist and becomes closely associated with the tale even after it is told. The mystical merging in frame tales is best illustrated by Thomas Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas." In it the protagonist is named after a bear. The name is then transferred to the narrator. In the end readers are presented with a story teller who is only known as The Big Bear of Arkansas. See Inge, 105.

He drank. There. He saw the midnight rat.

(189)

This "Thanikama" or "Aloneness" section differs from other sequences in that it allows for several possible identifications of the protagonist. For example, perhaps Ondaatje's father finds his novel attacked by ants. The novel may belong to Mervyn. When the father enters delirium tremens he hallucinates "the midnight rat." Equally possible is that the narrator picks up his manuscript and opens it to "page 189" (189). For a moment he ceases to impose form and surrenders to the ants which carry the print away from him. He drifts into the pre-creative phase before resuming writing--"forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards . . . and wait[s]" (189). As he types, the white rectangle moves with black little letters and words resembling "arduous" ants. The paper inches out of the typewriter, but in his eyeball it is only a fragment of a reflection. He drinks and sees himself in the mirror. The creative impulse the narrator has been waiting for takes shape as the image of "the midnight rat."

These are merely two of many possible responses to the passage. In addition, readers may find that they are drawn into the narrative in an unconventional way. One by one, readers come to page 189 and experience the breakdown of the hitherto defined relation between themselves, the text and the author. They are made conscious of their role as

readers. Ondaatje's narrator, here, briefly gains the immediacy of an oral storyteller who is able to provide an intimate link between teller, tale and audience which is usually only possible in the performing arts. Regardless of how one reads the above scene, any single limited interpretation of the event is prevented by its subsumption of characters. Ondaatje thus employs a narrative strategy of the oral tradition to ensure an open representation in which 'meaning' is shared between narrator, text, and reader. Unlike, say, Robinson Crusoe's personal record, which is consciously literate and argues didactically, Ondaatje's narrative allows for multiple, equally valid responses. The historic event is thus opened to a number of versions and interpretations.

As Running in the Family closes, the narrator further subverts the notion of the ostensibly verifiable fact. The episode entitled "The Bone," for example, is introduced as if it were not an integral part of the narrative: "There is a story about my father I cannot come to terms with" (181) in which black dogs embody a hostile "alien" nature:

> My father is . . . huge and naked. In one hand he holds five ropes, and dangling on the end of each of them is a black dog . . . he has supernatural strength . . . He had captured all the evil in the regions he had

passed through and was holding it. (182)

At first the "Bone" sequence may seem remote from earlier descriptions of Mervyn. However, Ondaatje's narrator places special emphasis on the image in the opening of Running in the Family: "What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto. . . . I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs" (21). As the story nears its end, readers learn that "[Mervyn] made up lovely songs about every dog he had owned--each of them had a different tune" (201). Thus the context created by oral narrative strategies and their potential for variations on a given theme challenge the labels that could be attached to Mervyn and the dogs in the "Bone" sequence. Even the combined account of various witnesses, however, can only approximate a given historical event. The "bone" exemplifies such an ostensible fact or historical truth. But to the narrator who pursues such facts of the past, they remain "dreams" (21). As the narrator recalls these dreams he finds more "bones" or facts remembered by witnesses, relatives and friends which are according to his definition merely their "dreams." Those chasing after such "bones" are therefore much like the dogs the father holds at bay. They can only perpetually approach "facts" which must always remain individual dreams. Each "bright bone of a dream" may bear similarity to another though they can never be in complete accordance with each other.

Running in the Family's thematic, structural and stylistic similarities to oral narratives develop as the text progresses. Ondaatje's narrator all but erases the opposition between "picture" and "game" narrative of earlier works. His treatment of source material appears changed as well. He carefully integrates not only family lore but even excerpts of conventional historiography along with their original bias. In addition, the mnemonic devices remind us of related aspects of Ondaatje's family history, though many of the photographs tell their own story of life in Ceylon. Tall tale conventions, too, gain in importance. For the first time, the point at which teller and protagonist merge makes explicit that the narrator's involvement in the story is in his function as writer. Whereas the narrator's presence is almost accidental in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and whereas his role in Coming through Slaughter is that of a mere observer, readers see him for the first time record events in writing in Running in the Family. As the following chapter will show, in In the Skin of a Lion Ondaatje points to the importance of a narrator's role in historiographic representation. Intricate thematic links, furthermore, counter the fragmentary quality of Running in the Family. While readers have seen the above strategies at work in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and in Coming through Slaughter, they find a more coherent adaptation of oral narrative strategies in Running in the

Family.

Running in the Family, then, is a written oral tale which undoes conventional historiography. The written word may be inherently limiting, but it is not inherently oppressive. Once subject and object merge according to conventions of the tall tale, and the narrating "I" becomes the "alien" protagonist, space opens for multiple speakers and potentially conflicting voices which are allowed to position themselves along the narrative continuum. No longer is a story designed to one end, nor does a work's coherence derive from that end or centre. Instead, narrative strategies of the oral tradition such as multivocality, repetition and variation provide artistic unity. At the same time, Ondaatje's work allows narrative and interpretive power to be widely shared.

IN THE SKIN OF A LION: CIVIC HISTORY

Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion revises Toronto's civic history. While official accounts mention chiefly the town's city planners and corporations, Ondaatje allots less narrative space to such functionaries and their visions and concentrates on those who built the city and their stories instead. His "study of the New World" (79) does not focus on the controlling centre but turns to the workers at the periphery. Their diversity is rendered best through oral narratives which defy conventional monomorphic presentations. In search of a narrative model, In the Skin of a Lion reverts to oral narrative strategies and to the beginnings of story telling. The work finds structural and thematic underpinnings in the Gilgamesh epic from which its title and much of its characterization stems.[20] Like his previous prose works, Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion presents a number of thematic similarities to oral narratives, such as its emphasis on the tale-telling nature of the story and its resistance to closure. The notion of audience participation is also prominently featured. Ondaatje's retelling of hitherto unwritten history emphasizes especially the problem of immigration and the

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[20] The three versions of Gilgamesh "are stories of folklore and romance which run back from the medieval courts through Celtic legend and minstrelsy to archaic Sumer, and perhaps further, to the very beginning of story-telling . . . We do not know how long the poem was recited, but the retention of those passages suggests an oral tradition alongside the written" (Sandars 46-8).

continuous struggle for an acceptable division of power within changing social constructs. Ultimately, the novel allows an egalitarian voicing of previously marginalized perspectives.

One of the workers who helps build Toronto's infrastructure and whose story sheds a new light on conventional civic histories is Ondaatje's protagonist Patrick Lewis. Inspired by Alice and her political activism, he acts out her will and gets to "the centre of the city" (29) to undo its order. Patrick "literally 'infiltrates' the filtration plant from the outside tunnel he had earlier helped blast out of rock" (Hutcheon 102). The subsequent climactic scene of the novel is closely modeled after the Gilgamesh epic. With some preparatory work and help from others, Gilgamesh and Patrick both use artificial weights to dive deep into the waters towards the seat of power. Whereas Gilgamesh's quest led to the well, Patrick's travels end in what can be seen as the well of all of Toronto. Ondaatje's description of the descent echoes Gilgamesh repeatedly. As in the ancient epic, repetition intensifies the images of darkness and claustrophobia. Ondaatje retains a further detail: Patrick injures his hand. Like Gilgamesh, Patrick questions the outcome of his undertaking. In an earlier scene Patrick sees "his visage never emerging out of the shadows. Unhistorical" (172).

Given the odds against him, Patrick's entrance into the "Palace of Purification" is in itself an achievement and a reward for his struggle. He has successfully overcome the danger of being obliterated by official histories.

Patrick's intrusion recalls also the Gilgamesh epic's notion of the outsider's move to the controlling centre. In the oral source text the autocrat's civic order is created solely for his indulgence and veneration. Enkidu, the outsider, steps in to improve conditions for the citizens after he is lured from the wilderness by the goddess Ishtar and her servant. Similarly, the designs of Pomphrey and Harris are megalomaniac. Their vision initially excludes those who transform that very vision into reality. At first, their plans appear valuable in themselves: "Before the real city could be seen it had to be imagined, the way rumours and tall tales were a kind of charting" (29). In the process of creating, however, Nicholas the daredevil soon emerges as the hero of the bridge. His and Patrick's courage in shaping Toronto's infrastructure gives the city its character. As accounts of building the bridge are passed on and gradually become history, those who fought at the front line are immortalized while the planners who made the front page at its official opening sink into obscurity.

In the climactic confrontation between Harris and Patrick, with its oral narrative echoes, the values of the periphery oppose the values of the centre. Fittingly, a

dynamiter comes to impress upon Harris "the extreme looseness of the structure of all objects" (135) and threatens to destroy the monumental project. "Do you know how many of us died in there"? Patrick asks. Harris invokes official history in a feeble attempt at a defense: "There was no record kept" (236). Conventional history has deliberately shut out the majority. Like Scheherazade, Harris resorts to tales to delay the threatening execution of Patrick's plans. He is talking for his life (235), and hastily he assembles limited stock arguments to justify capitalist excesses (236). At one point, he refers to classical literature to avoid Patrick's criticism (239). Thus he invokes canonical authority to stay in power. Given his life's work, this is the only credible position left to him.

Patrick, however, will not debate Harris on such terms. Instead of Harris's static confrontational mode, he seeks an exchange that will put him at peace with himself and others. Patrick's formative years include a distinct natural division of language: on the one hand, the letters found frozen in his rural mailbox after a snowstorm testify to the stasis of the written word, and on the other hand the square dance calls of his father form a body of ritualistic language. Verse, rhyme and repetition of the oral tradition found in "the only moments his father was verbal" (19) become a source of reassurance and life to Patrick. All

that is frozen in time or static poses a threat and must be exploded. As dynamiters he and his father move about the countryside and employ their power to free the river's flow. To them, much that appears locked in certainty hangs merely in a precarious balance to be unhinged instantaneously. Harris, therefore, does not convince Patrick through argumentation. What he says is immaterial to his former employee. How and that he says it, on the other hand, saves him. Through the rhetoric, Harris not only gains time, but his strategy also leads to an unexpected opening. Overcome by the moment, Patrick finds in Harris a receptive listener. He therefore shares his story of Alice's death, and unburdens himself. In the end it becomes apparent that Patrick has sought the confessional more than the destruction of the waterworks. For him, the telling of the tale has inherent healing powers.

While the work's multiple individual histories dislodge conventional history, In the Skin of a Lion is also characterized by thematic similarities to oral narrative strategies. The novel announces itself as an oral tale. Hanna "gathers" the story in Patrick's Ford, and thus the opening frame tale defines the time and place of the telling and immediately identifies the teller as well as the audience. An Ondaatjean word play invokes the car's status as "vehicle of the story" and as a symbol of "the American

way of life" but avoids the banality of both the pun and the cliché. The closing frame returns to the storyteller's round, and the final "Lights, he said" (244) signals, ironically, the start of a performance and further emphasises the tale-telling nature of the novel. Throughout the work, multiple tales combine into a shared history. The end itself, therefore, invites a retelling in which audiences can follow previously neglected strands of the story. Expanding curiosity replaces any sense of finality as readers encounter a series of beginnings which invite as many readings of the text, and history becomes subject to individual interpretations. As Robert Harlow puts it: "There is no such thing as history. There is only individual consciousness expanding" (Harlow 87). In the process, history is opened to questioning and investigation.

The story's resistance to closure is further apparent in Ondaatje's use of oral narrative strategies in his treatment of the theme of initiation. As the title "Little Seeds" suggests, the first chapter is devoted to origination. Patrick explores the prehistoric composition of the natural world around him, and his apprenticeship includes naming and mapping (9). After this primary context is established, "The Bridge" opens. For the second time in the novel, a Ford truck magically carries a Promethean flame to signal the coming of the new metropolis (25). Once the

civic infrastructure is in place, the inauguration ceremonies become themselves a relay of beginnings: an anonymous cyclist claims the bridge before the official, but much earlier the workers and their lights commemorate their dead (27). Perpetual geneses thus create the sense of a resonant past in the making. The individual stories of all participants share tangential points. Yet these points are not plotted along a simple storyline and the novel thus resists closure. From the onset, the representation defies linearity, and the circles of narratives widen to include new characters and their associates. One after another the outsiders assert themselves in the New World, while the official dignitaries at the centre of civic history are much muted.

In many ways the novel's typically oral resistance to closure is personified by Clara, who makes her influence felt throughout the novel. Patrick's final rejection of destructive power in the waterworks dream sequence, for example, may well have been prompted by her. Like Ishtar's servant in the Gilgamesh epic, Clara effaces the destructive impact of individual self-assertiveness. Instead, she favours the anonymity oral strategies paradoxically offer by replacing individual authorship with a shared responsibility for a story. As Patrick and Clara love each other and share the "white character" of Patrick's ejaculation, Clara is

associated with history, oral narratives and fertility:

> [H]e bent down and put his mouth on hers. He took it, the white character, and they passed it back and forth between them till it no longer existed, till they didn't know who had him like a lost planet somewhere in the body . . .. He loved the eroticism of her history. (69)

The oral exchange of the seed makes the mouths wombs for a process of origination which subverts linear notions of causation. Infused with many individual contributions, history thus becomes a vigorously charged process. In a remark to Patrick, Small points to the source of Clara's influence: "It's her unfinished nature" (93). Both Clara's and Alice's powers are thus rooted in sexuality and the language of performance arts. Their emphasis and approach, however, differ, as do the contributions they make to their surroundings.

As mentioned earlier, the remaking of history draws together characters from vastly diverse backgrounds, many of whom initially join as participating audience members. Alice offers the following model for audience participation, which Patrick recalls when he sees himself as "a watcher" rather than "a hero of one of the [many] stories" that comprise the novel (157):

> The powerful matriarch removed her large coat from

> which animal pelts dangled and she passed it, along with her strength, to one of the minor characters . . . Each person had their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story. (157)

Alice's description of the oral performance model reminds readers also of the Gilgamesh epic and king Gilgamesh's acquisition of the lion skin. In Ondaatje's novel, the key gesture of taking the animal pelts precedes the telling. Amongst other conferred powers associated with the skin, the apparel transfers a character's identity to the storyteller. Individual players thus successively shape In the Skin of a Lion with the urge to tell their story. Yet their interconnectedness emerges only gradually, as audiences learn that the various tales belong to a shared history. While the appearances of the characters provide colourful and often eccentric details, audience members must enter into active negotiations of meaning to form their impression of focal events. As authorial hierarchies are dismantled and passed to the minor actors, the participants become equals. No single 'hero' or 'heroine' commands the audience's attention.[21] Instead, each character offers a unique perspective on a number of shared events and thus invites a revision of history.

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[21] Martha Butterfield was the first critic to note the absence of a central hero.

As different characters take control of the story, the animal skin becomes associated with the challenge to official history offered by individual oral tales.[22] As if to draw attention to the lion skin as emblem, Ondaatje's only direct quotations from the Gilgamesh epic are the two references to animal pelts or lion skins. In the original tale, the passages follow each other immediately, though they are chronologically far apart. Gilgamesh's mourning and his enigmatic killing of two lions not only frames Ondaatje's story, but as his title suggests, the skin of a lion also defines the novel in its entirety: Patrick's taking the hide allows his participation in the process of retelling and shaping history. The actor's coat and the lion pelt are one.

Ondaatje enriches the skin-imagery in the tannery scenes, in which one's skin is emblematic of the gaining of a new cultural identity. At the same time, the workers' tales revise romanticized official accounts of an early Canadian trade:

> [men] leapt in embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals . . . pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they

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[22] "The ex-centric, those on the margin of history--be they women, workers, immigrants (or writers)--have the power to change the perspective of the centre, and that power is given voice in In the Skin of the Lion [sic]" (Hutcheon 103).

had removed the skin from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as if into different countries. (130)

Thus, the "skins" of the workers are associated with their cultural identity and with their position in the social power structure around them (130). In both the Gilgamesh epic and in Ondaatje's novel, the skin of the lion, therefore, suggests the acquisition of previously foreign attributes and qualities. Like the lion skin of the epic, these new qualities ultimately come to define the individual.[23] Once such a "skin of a lion" is attained, the workers are ready to tell their story and to take part in the social event that is the performance of history. Since his or her active contribution determines not only a character's identity but also the composite identity of the group of which he or she is a part, the negotiating or constructing of society and of history lies with all participants and not with any single dominant interest group.

The process of acquiring a skin or identity is accompanied by another obvious prerequisite to audience participation within the oral tradition. Nicholas Temelcoff soon notes that the immigrant's first step towards social

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[23] The newly gained identity, however, also contains new limitations and paradoxically fosters the need to "step out, in the erotica of being made free" (132).

consolidation is language acquisition (46). Shortly after his arrival in Canada--the country he chooses after listening to "Daniel Stoyanoff's tall tales" (44)--he participates in performance arts as a first step towards adopting a new culture and language. The process begins in silence and ends in a unified uproar: "the audience around him was silent . . .[then] a terrible loudness entered the silent performance. The audience began to clap in unison" (117). Yet, the process need not always be charged with tension:

> [W]atching a Chaplin film he found himself laughing out loud, joining the others in their laughter. And he caught someone's eye, the body bending forward to look at him, who had the same realization--that this mutual laughter was conversation. (138)

Here, the popular medium of visual story telling becomes a meeting ground. In the absence of an audible narrative, audience members become aware of their articulated reactions. Subsequently, the audience response to the presented images turns into a sub-story. The laughter sparked by the performance gives the audience a feeling of security and thus liberates it from external and internal censors. In this relaxed atmosphere of the performance arts, the new language becomes accessible to all levels of learners: "Most immigrants learned their English from

recorded songs or, until the talkies came, through mimicking actors on stage" (47). Nick joins others in songs and plays, and although they remain mere parroting audience members, the immigrants prove that they are ready to take the stage at any time (47). As the new Canadians enter the work place, the live performance becomes their metaphor and means of successful association and first step towards cultural participation.

Failure to acquire the new language, on the other hand, results in the loss of political power. For example, Alice's silent puppet show demonstrates how the language barrier prevents the access of so-called ethnic minorities to society's institutions (116). But Alice's show does not end here. Following the exposure of social injustice, her presentation turns didactic. The climax of her performance requires audience participation for its resolution, and one evening Patrick commits himself and steps onto "this dangerous new country of the stage" (116). His dramatic intervention is both allegorical and actual. Thus, the open medium prompts Patrick's response and exemplifies how the newcomers' acts help to create a "neighbourhood intricate with history and ceremony" of their own (133).

Alice may favour gesture in her dramaturgy, but elocution remains the main source of her influence. Hers "was a party and a political meeting, all of them

trespassing, waiting now for speeches and entertainment" (115). Alice's political theatre targets specifically the history of the nearly completed waterworks by foregrounding the lives of those who actually built the works as opposed to those who conceived them. Here "events of art" thus replace the "official histories [or] news stories [which] surround us daily" (146). Alice's effective blend of art and social criticism is most apparent backstage, where Patrick is reminded of Mogul Akbar--a potentate who displays his dominance by imposing intermittent stasis on his subjects under the threat of execution (118). In Alice's sphere, however, the king is hung (119).[24] The appeal of the performance arts transcends the dictator's decree. But Alice's most effective instrument in challenging existing versions of history is the spoken word. Similar to the 'word' in the Canadian native oral tradition, Alice's "'word' carrie[s] the power to create, to make things happen" (Petrone 10). After a discussion of the brutalities of early capitalism, Patrick asks Alice: "So what do you do"? Alice explains her strategy: "You name the enemy and destroy their power" (124). For Alice at least, audience participation leads eventually to audience empowerment.

Increasingly, Patrick experiences the arresting quality

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[24] The puppet is a giant which is linked to the giant Humbaba of the Gilgamesh epic (117). Alice and Patrick reenact the slaying of that giant when Patrick steps onto the stage to resolve the dramatic crisis.

of Alice's oral narrative strategies. At first he is captured by Clara's and Alice's stories: "the night kitchen with these two actresses is overwhelming. Clara and Alice slip into tongues, impersonate people, and keep each other talking long into the night" (74). In telling their histories, they employ professional skills to lend a voice to all parties involved. Yet they also use their creative power as a means to indulge themselves:

> Patrick . . . abandons himself to the sofa . . . The two women continue talking and laughing . . . After an hour or so they say to each other, 'Let's get him.' . . . One travels along a descant of insight and the other follows, completes the phrase, making the gesture safe. (75)

Their prehistoric "cave mural" (76) is a ritualistic mapping of Patrick. But while Alice would complete the picture, Clara begins a "riotous laughter." Her "mouth explodes with noise and she tugs Alice out . . . Clara's growls unnaming things" (76). Clara thus instigates a freeing catharsis, while Alice initially attempts to use the performance to fix Patrick's image. Alice is ready to transgress the boundaries of oral/aural worlds to her own ends. Without Clara, Alice later achieves her objectives, and Patrick is surprised when he learns that Alice has made him into a political activist: "He th[inks], I am moving like a puppet" (120). Her didacticism prompts him to break

with safe routines in order to change the course of events to his cost.

The Gilgamesh quotations, however, foreshadow the inherent dangers of Alice's strategy by warning of the damaging consequences of her action. Patrick's destructive intentions, for example, are bound to harm him. Throughout the Gilgamesh epic, Ishtar and her servant control Gilgamesh and Enkidu, much as Alice and Clara influence Patrick and Nick. Alice's destructive naming which is to destroy the power of the enemy (124) further recalls Ishtar's morally equivocal power. As Alice inherits both Ishtar's power to influence others, and Enkidu's tragic fate, she reveals the limitations of her manipulative use of oral strategies. Therefore, her story warns against any didactic or polemic usages of oral modes in historiography. It is a cautionary tale about cautionary tales.

Nevertheless, Ondaatje discredits neither Alice's political theatre nor her social criticism. Instead, her challenging of exploitative civic power structures is thematically anticipated in the ancient epic. Enkidu, for example, fights the ruler of the city not only to attain a place in his society but also to end the ruler's oppression. Similarly, Alice's tales of the workers testify to capitalist exploitation. Initially, Alice's "grand cause" (125) echoes Enkidu's cry to change the city's order. The refusal of the outsider to serve and to accept existing

power structures finally leads to the death of both Alice and Enkidu. Thus, Patrick is made tragically aware of the static properties of Alice's destructive naming of the enemy: "Alice . . . He breathes out a dead name. Only a dead name is permanent" (165). Still, Patrick--like Gilgamesh--takes up the cause of his deceased companion. Like Gilgamesh who as "king and conqueror of the dreadful blaze" (Gilg. 84) controls fire, Patrick is a dynamiter who has the knowledge and tools to carry out the destruction his friend wishes for. Here too, the ancient epic serves as the model for the retelling of Toronto's history.

At the same time, Gilgamesh provides a character study which undermines the conventional portrayal of individuals of historic impact. Neither Patrick nor Gilgamesh has a zealous commitment to changing the existing order. Instead, they are motivated by sorrow and guilt over the loss of a loved one. As Patrick puts it: " I don't believe the language of politics, but I'll protect the friends I have. It's all I can handle" (122). This partly explains why he lets destructive power slip away when it ultimately lies literally within his grasp in the shape of a detonator. Patrick's tacit rejection of such power finally enables him to carry out Alice's brand of political activism without again endangering lives. His evasion of any final commitment is an affirmation of life, but it also obliges him to rely on others to carry on where he leaves off.

Patrick's course of action thus allows for further communal participation, in accordance with oral narrative aesthetics. Unlike the heroic individual at the centre of conventional historiography whose actions are said to be felt by generations to come, Patrick is part of a human web and who is influenced by others as much as he influences them. His portrayal thus undermines conventional history and its official chronology of conflicts amongst "historic figures."

Like the ancient Gilgamesh epic, the novel lacks a conventional conclusion. Alice dies and Patrick embarks on a new course of action, perhaps to redeem himself. In the climactic dream sequence which concludes in the waterworks (220-242), he reaches his goal and holds power, only to let it slip away, "as if, having travelled all that distance to enter the castle in order to learn its wisdom for the grand cause, he now turns and walks away" (164). While Harris sees in Patrick merely an unwillingness to assume responsibility, his claims lack the resonance of Patrick's tragic awareness. Both men agree that the initial wish and even the process of acquiring power in the skin of a lion is worthwhile. The instant of attaining this skin, however, holds potential limitations. Thus Patrick endorses the struggle but rejects the position of final dominance. To do otherwise would mean a betrayal of his father, of his friends and even of Alice: Patrick would be written into

history to be used by would-be followers to their ends.

As Patrick drowses off in the waterworks, Harris cites Gilgamesh's emblematic slaying of the lions: "He fell upon them like an arrow from the string. . ." (242). However, because of his own fear, he omits the epic's original images of fragmentation and explosion in which Gilgamesh ". . . struck and destroyed and scattered them" (Gilg. 97). Patrick is successful without having to destroy the waterworks. He can assert himself without dealing the final blow. His arrows connect where others sever.

Earlier Patrick sends off such an arrow, when he brings Nicholas an awareness of history. He shows Nicholas a photograph which recalls their shared story like a mnemonic device: suddenly everything falls into place as Patrick frees the flow of history.

> Nicholas is aware of himself standing there with the pleasure of recall. It is something new to him. This is what history means. He came to this country . . . Language, customs, family, salaries. Patrick's gift, that arrow into the past, shows him the wealth in himself, how he has been sewn into history. Now he will begin to tell stories. (149)

Both In the Skin of a Lion and Gilgamesh address three

aspects of socialization and history: the emergence of civilization itself, immigration and the access to power. Ondaatje gives particular emphasis to the immigrant myth of the epic in which freedom is increasingly defined as the access to power in an evolving community. Although many of the details are rearranged, In the Skin of a Lion echoes Gilgamesh repeatedly. The resulting sense of rich intricacy and complexity--the "architecture of the past" (66)--is suggestive rather than conclusive and stands in direct opposition to linear conventional historiography.

Modeled after an oral poem, In the Skin of a Lion shares many thematic similarities with oral narratives. Compared to Ondaatje's earlier prose works, oral narrative strategies have lessened somewhat but oral narrative themes have been enriched and complicated. A many-layered web of symbolic connections replaces simple cause and effect relations and shifts the focus from the functionaries to the common worker. Just as Patrick rejects the power and finality of a destructive blow, Ondaatje surrenders the authority of a closed narrative system. In each episode, his oral narrative strategies instead allow several points of departure for further tales. Ultimately, Toronto's civic history is negotiated in an interpretive retelling of events.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Michael Ondaatje employs a variety of oral narratives and their strategies in his revision of history and historiography. While Ondaatje's narrative strategies remain essentially unchanged, they are nonetheless developed in the course of his work. Ondaatje resists conventional historiography for a number of reasons. Early historians in particular emphasize what they perceive to be central conflicts between historic figures and the events that lead up into such confrontations. They thereby introduce fundamental polarities to their histories which may not have had any impact on the events that comprise the life of their subject and which may not account for the multiple motivations of historical events. Furthermore, the conventional historians Ondaatje cites throughout his fiction are biased to various degrees. In many instances their histories are judgmental in tone and designed to make a moral point. Such historians necessarily exclude relevant material and colour the remaining fragments to fit their agenda. Faced with their limited perspectives, Ondaatje undoes the histories of such authors by countering the restrictive effect of their narrative strategies. Ondaatje's oral narratives allow him to offer an open representation and to revise histories as well as the notion of history.

With the exception of Running in the Family, the works'

original sources are limited in scope. For example, in the cases of Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, brief chronologies, some official reports and a few contradictory eyewitness accounts are the only available source texts. While Ondaatje's use of such source material is selective, he nevertheless includes conflicting points of view in his work. On the other hand, conventional historians who are trained to shape the diverse original material into a coherent whole tend to do so at the expense of any variance that could threaten such artificial coherence. Their writing, therefore, perpetuates limitations.

In addition, certain underprivileged individuals are initially shut out from official history. The open oral narrative, however, allows them to find the voice and position necessary to enter and shape the revision of history. Whether on beh·lf of the outsider, the colonialized family or the city workers, oral narrative strategies help to revise frontier, music, family, and civic histories respectively. Ultimately, oral narrative strategies are the means through which those at the periphery may revise history according to their perspective in a representation that is open, fluxional and egalitarian.

Ondaatje's development of his structural and stylistic adaptations of oral narrative strategies is paralleled thematically by a gradual erasing of boundaries between

"picture" and "game" language. In The Collected Works of Billy the Kid the division between the two is unambiguous. Billy the outlaw lives outside order, with Garrett and his law as his mortal enemy. The men assume clearly defined roles, and the triumph of one inevitably means defeat for the other.

In Coming through Slaughter the distinction between languages of stasis and flux is translated into the conflict between recording history and the live performance. Buddy Bolden, the underprivileged black artist, is struggling to become a part of history without being subjected to closure. The tension between the longing for freedom on the one hand, and the need for order on the other is portrayed as a universal struggle. Bolden faces opponents who embody rigid forms of artistic expression such as Bellocq and Webb, but he is also attracted to them. The early distinctions between clear form and artistic freedom are no longer absolute.

In Running in the Family the individual is the product of two families. The mother is mostly associated with the oral tradition while the father is at one point related to written tall tales. Through references to the author Edward Lear, the literate father is also linked implicitly to Ceylon's colonial history. Yet Ondaatje stresses Lear's role as father of a nonsense literature which privileges oral narrative strategies. Thus, Ondaatje partly reconciles

the colonial literary heritage with his version of Sri Lanka's history. The storytellers of the family tell mostly of Mervyn Ondaatje who becomes the hero of their tall tales, and family dynamics are offered as a model for the revision of colonial history.

Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion traces social dynamics and draws on the Gilgamesh epic. In the retelling of the ancient epic, animal hides and more specifically the lion skin become emblems of both the stasis of destructive power and the flux of social change. Furthermore, the pelts are both a coat of mourning and a trophy which testifies to the assertion of the self in foreign lands. In this sense the apparel marks the successful integration of recent immigrants. At the same time Alice emphasizes that the skin also bears the narrative power to retell one's story. The quest for the narrative power to create and destroy in the process of negotiating history is not only associated with the skin of a lion but is also a major theme in In the Skin of a Lion. An affinity emerges between the wish for an open representation and the need for a clear form in which to express that new story: one can only define itself in terms of the other. Thus the emblematic skin deflates the dichotomies applied by the "picture" and "game" theories of language. "Picture" literature may well hold a place within a narrative driven by "game" dynamics.

One obvious oral narrative strategy in Ondaatje is multivocality accompanied by fragmentation. In The Collected Works of Billy the Kid readers find a host of "voices," often separated by blank narrative space. In Coming through Slaughter, too, the sense of fragmentation prevails, as speakers interrupt to "voice" their version of events. In Running in the Family multivocality is as strong a feature as ever, yet the intricate thematic links among individual voices counter any fragmentary quality. Finally, the narrative of In the Skin of a Lion is integrated according to oral narrative strategies without the apparent fragmentation of the earlier works. The tellers pass the skin with its powers and responsibilities to contribute to a coherent narrative whole.

Another Ondaatjean structural adaptation of oral narrative strategies is the use of the mnemonic device, especially as exemplified by the role of photography. The mnemonic device, too, undergoes several changes in Ondaatje's works. Initially, in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, readers find an abundance of visual material. Yet the many photos do not "illustrate" the text. Instead, they become "voices" in their own right. In Coming through Slaughter a photo of the protagonist is offered, only to stress the impossibility of capturing or recording him. Running in the Family pairs portraits from the family album

with vistas of colonial Ceylon; however, the relation between photo and narrative is thematic rather than illustrational. Within In the Skin of a Lion Ondaatje abandons photography as a means of representation in his works.

In light of Ondaatje's emphasis on a revision of history, his original sources gain special importance. In each case Ondaatje carefully edits such source texts. The Collected Works of Billy the Kid shows perhaps the most drastic shifts of emphasis. Ondaatje omits periods in Billy's life that conventional historians deem crucial. Instead, he replaces passages that are specific to Billy's experience with explorations of the notion of "cowboy." In Coming through Slaughter, music historian Martin Williams is a source, but Ondaatje stands Williams's original moralistic intention on its head. In Running in the Family the sources of family history are for the most part oral, while colonial history is handed down in excerpts. After the two are combined, Ondaatje's Running in the Family becomes itself the source text for anyone trying to rewrite his history. In In the Skin of a Lion, newspapers provide the source for Ondaatje's revision of Toronto's civic history. Since this is a common source for conventional historians as well, Ondaatje ultimately seeks to preempt any bias with which such historiographers may colour events. He mentions

official reports only in passing and allots most narrative space to the tales of workers. Their stories ultimately replace the authoritative accounts.

Another strong development is found in Ondaatje's occasional adaptation of the tall tale. Traditionally, the teller of a tall tale assumes the role as intermediary of the tale and takes on the persona of the tale's protagonist. Author, narrator and protagonist thus merge in the telling. It has become an Ondaatjean trademark that one brief instance of the merging of point of views occurs in each longer work. The first instance of this narrative strategy in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid merely adds a "voice" to the representation. The narrator could be Billy, the author, or one of the other "voices" of that work. In Coming through Slaughter, however, the intrusion is explosive, and a voice belonging unmistakably to the narrator comments on his own tale and identifies himself explicitly with Bolden. In Running in the Family, Ondaatje takes the convention a step further. Within the narrative "I," the narrator (then and now) and the father are united in a moment of transcendence. Linear chronology is briefly suspended in the representation. In In the Skin of a Lion, Patrick and the narrator briefly become one. But more importantly the scene in the Riverdale Library also shows the narrating "I" researching the history that is set forth

in the work (143). The merging of tall tale conventions occurs at the point at which the narrator acts out the initial steps taken by responsible historiographers. History and oral telling briefly become one.

Thus Ondaatje employs a number of oral narrative strategies. As they gain complexity and sophistication, they ironically become simpler and more accessible to readers. The novel In the Skin of a Lion seems the most conventional of Ondaatje's works. Here, however, oral narrative strategies achieve the highest degree of complexity in Ondaatje's development as story teller. Today's social multicultural complexities demand an equally resonant yet simple literary forum, and oral narrative strategies provide the aesthetics for a newly emerging artistic meeting ground.

Appendix A.

The following are excerpts from Martin Williams' Jazz Masters of New Orleans (Macmillan, 1967), 12-16. (Highlighted words and phrases are found verbatim on pages eighty and eighty-one of Coming through Slaughter.)

Bolden "drank all the whisky he could get a hold of" and had all the women he wanted. . . he spelled out the conditions in which many of his most avid fans lived: **"If You Don't Like My Potatoes Why Do You Dig So Deep?," "All the Whores Like the Way I Ride," "Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor," "Funky Butt". . . Bolden began verbally abusing himself in the mirror,** and he began threatening, and on one occasion beating, his women. He broke down one afternoon after shaving one of his former cronies, Tom Pickett, who had been kidding him about his love life. Slowly and carefully, Bolden went over Pickett's face with his razor several times. As soon as he could escape the barber chair, Pickett fled into the street, yelling. Then Bolden was in trouble with the police, with his friends, and with the members of his band.

Frankie Dusen took over the group, called it the **Eagle Band** and had Bunk Johnson playing cornet in Bolden's place. The first night that Bolden saw the new billing and Bunk on the stand **at Lincoln Park,** he looked, **turned,** and slowly made his way out of the hall, alone and silent, with **the**

crowd separating to let him pass. Dude Botley followed him home to try to look out for him. He peeped through a crack in the door to the rear of the barber shop and saw Bolden sitting in a chair with his head in his hands, apparently crying bitterly. Then he saw him walk out of the room, get a bottle and his cornet. He tried a drink but began crying again. "The tears came to my eyes too," Botley remembered, "and I got to thinking about how many thousands of people Bolden had made happy and all them women who used to idolize him and all of them supposed to be friends. 'Where are they now'? I say to myself. Then I hear Bolden's cornet. I look through the crack and there he is, relaxed back in the chair, blowing that silver cornet softly, just above a whisper, and I see he's got his hat over the bell of the horn. I put my ear close to the keyhole. I thought I had heard Bolden play the blues before, and play the hymns at funerals, but what he is playing now is real strange and I listen carefully, because he's playing something that, for a while sounds like the blues, then like a hymn. I cannot make out the tune, but after a while I catch on. He is mixing up the blues with the hymns. He plays the blues real sad and the hymn sadder than the blues and then the blues sadder then the hymn. That is the first time that I had ever heard hymns and blues cooked up together. A strange cold feeling comes over me; I get sort of scared because I know the Lord don't like that mixing the Devil's music with

his music. But I still listen because the music sounds so strange and I am sort of **hypnotized, I close my eyes, and when he blows the blues I picture Lincoln Park with all them sinners and whores, shaking and belly rubbing. Then, as he blows the hymn, I picture my mother's church on Sunday, and everybody humming with the choir. The picture in my mind kept changing with the music as he blew. It sounded like a battle between the Good Lord and the Devil. Something tells me to listen and see who wins. If Bolden stops on the hymn, the Good Lord wins; if he stops on the blues the Devil wins."**

It was not quite the end. . . **Things were building up in him, and on an afternoon in 1907, while playing a parade with Henry Allen Sr.'s Brass Band, he went berserk in the street.**

Exactly how did Buddy Bolden play? We don't know, and unless the records he is supposed to have made are someday found, we may never know. Louis Armstrong heard him when he was about five or six at the nearby hall nicknamed Funky Butt. He remembered that he would look through big cracks in the wall of the building to see what was going on. "It wasn't no classified place, just a big old room with a bandstand. And to a tune like **"The Bucket's Got a Hole in it," some of them chicks would get way down, shake**

everything, slapping themselves on the cheek of their behind. Yeah! At the end of the night. . .

Even Mutt Carey. . . with a note of reluctance. "When you come right down to it, the man who started the big noise in jazz was Buddy Bolden. Yes, he was. . . But the recordings by Keppard that we have, sometimes flawed as some of them are, offer us a compelling, forceful musician, as well as an historically important figure. . ..

"The New Orleans Blue Book, a directory of red lights, listed Lulu White's Mahogany Hall. . .. The music most frequently heard was jazz, an expressive sound derived from combining European melody with pure African rhythms. . ..

"The great ragtime pianist Tony Jackson, who could play a thousand songs ranging from the blues to operatic arias, used his slow blues for the Naked Dances at Madam Tonia's. These dances, used as 'come ons,' were performed by pretty Creole girls."

Dude Botley told Danny Barker: **"Them Monday nights at Lincoln Park was something to see, when them madams and pimps brought their stables of women to hear Bolden play, each madam had different color girls in her stables. For instance, Ann Jackson featured mulatto girls; Maud Wilson featured high browns; and so forth and so on. And them different stables was different colors just like a bouquet."**

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