

Bodies of land and  
flesh: human and  
environmental  
geography in the  
english patien...



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Textual, mnemonic, and physical gaps leave room in which identity is found through body and environment in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. Ondaatje's characters retrieve their absent personas by mutually colonizing lovers' bodies, thus developing a metaphor for the body as topography. Morrison spins this in reverse, personifying and merging the City's infrastructure with human structure as the characters synergistically carve out their selves through the City's spaces. Though geographical boundaries do impede characters' ability to connect, both novelists optimistically argue that the bonds of human affection can span the physical borders of the world, for between these no chasm exists. In *The English Patient*, empty spaces are represented by Almasy's and other characters' porous memories of history, their bodies, and geography. Ondaatje draws a parallel between human memory and written texts: "So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms" (7). The use of a geographical simile also foreshadows the connections between humans and environment Ondaatje will explore. Hana's self-identity, too, is endangered by her unwillingness to recognize or celebrate her body: "She had refused to look at herself for more than a year, now and then just her shadow on walls...She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself" (52). Hana's "shadow" is illustrative of her problem; in her eyes, her body's sensuality has been squeezed out of a voluptuous three-dimensional form "the way maps compress the world onto a two-dimensional sheet of paper" (161). Ondaatje clarifies these associations between selfhood and geography by suggesting that the desert is the true house of memories: "When we meet those we fall in love with, there is an aspect of our spirit that is historian, a bit of a pedant, who

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imagines or remembers a meeting when the other had passed by innocently...I have lived in the desert for years and I have come to believe in such things. It is a place of pockets” (259). Not text, nor cartography, but contoured land is the signifier of identity for Ondaatje’s maimed and nebulous characters. Land serves a similar purpose in *Jazz*. The City’s physical spaces provide room for human connection: “...in the space between two buildings, a girl talks earnestly to a man in a straw hat. He touches her lip to remove a bit of something there...The sun sneaks into the alley behind them” (8). The City is also a structured grid upon which its citizens can lean: “ Do what you please in the City, it is there to back and frame you no matter what you do. And what goes on on its back lots and side streets is anything the strong can think of and the weak will admire. All you have to do is heed the design” (8-9). By not heeding the design, however, and spilling out past the boundaries, characters emotionally identify with the City: “ The service trails, of course, are worn, and there are paths slick from the forays of members of one group into the territory of another where it is believed something curious or thrilling lies. Some gleaming, cracking, scary stuff...Where you can find danger or be it” (10-11). Paradoxically, it is these very borders that create areas of freedom between two land masses or two people, a paradox that highlights the union of body and City in *Jazz*. The body plays an equally important role in its relationship to geography in *The English Patient* – it is an evocation of spatial, and not temporal, memory: “ She smells her skin, the familiarity of it. One’s own taste and flavor...it seemed a place rather than a time” (90). Almasy’s burned body is also reminiscent of a place, the desert, and of a body’s capacity to be explored, in this case by a ladybird: “ Avoiding the sea of white sheet, it begins to make <https://assignbuster.com/bodies-of-land-and-flesh-human-and-environmental-geography-in-the-english-patient-and-jazz/>

the long trek towards the distance of the rest of his body, a bright redness against what seems like volcanic flesh” (207). The novel’s lovers approach each others’ bodies with the same sense of explorative wonder as the ladybird. Love drives them to colonize their New Worlds, despite Almasy’s claim that he hates ““ Ownership”” most (152). Yet even the bruise Katharine leaves him with after that remark piques (and peaks) his interest in the topography of his face: “ He became curious, not so much about the bruise, but about the shape of his face. The long eyebrows he had never really noticed before, the beginning of grey in his sandy hair. He had not looked at himself like this in a mirror for years. That was a long eyebrow” (152-3). His mirror-gazing reflects Hana’s gesture, and though each character’s act of self-perception is a solitary activity, it is an offshoot of an alteration in perception through another character; “ this nameless, almost faceless man” that forces Hana to reconsider her own face, and Katharine, who awakens fullness and sensitivity in the man who had heretofore been faceless to himself. Ownership in *The English Patient* is permissible so long as each lover owns the other and willingly gives up his body: “ This is my shoulder, he thinks, not her husband’s, this is my shoulder. As lovers they have offered parts of their bodies to each other, like this. In this room on the periphery of the river” (156). The juxtaposition of the lover’s nest and the river is not coincidental; Kip’s arm is likewise “ geographized” as a river in his relationship with Hana: “ She likes to lay her face against the upper reaches of his arm, that dark brown river, and to wake submerged within it, against the pulse of an unseen vein in his flesh beside her” (125). Hana’s love for Kip, at first glance, seems like a Conradesque exploration of the Dark

Continent: “ At night, when she lets his hair free, he is once more another  
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constellation, the arms of a thousand equators against his pillow, waves of it between them in their embrace and in their turns of sleep” (218). Kip’s “equators” of hair are a metaphor for Hana’s mapping of his body, but their free, wavy arrangement in a constellation dissolves the rigid boundaries between them. Completing the symbiotic cartography, Kip inspects Hana’s body with equal discovery: “As if organs, the heart, the rows of rib, can be seen under the skin, saliva across her hand now a colour. He has mapped her sadness more than any other” (270). Their bodies, culture, and geography unite when Kip consoles the mourning Hana: “...as Hana now received this tender art, his nails against the million cells of her skin, in his tent, in 1945, where their continents met in a hill town” (226). Kip’s nails and Hana’s skin, and the topography of the surrounding environment, fuse and defy their differing continental ancestry. In Jazz, however, the amalgam of body and geography forms an exoskeleton that distorts identity. The anonymous, androgynous narrator absorbs emotional shape from the City’s towering and expansive landscape: “A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things...When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I’m strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible – like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one” (7). The narrator’s confident peacetime declaration intimates the delusive qualities of reliance upon the City for bodily identity that s/he will later repudiate. An even more salient look at the junction of flesh and concrete arises in the manifestation of desire in the City: “But if she is clipping quickly down the big-city street in heels...the man, reacting to her posture, to soft skin on stone, the weight of the building stressing the delicate, dangling

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shoe, is captured” (34). As the narrator points out, this is a willful delusion on the observer’s part: “ And he’d think it was the woman he wanted, and not some combination of curved stone, and a swinging, high-heeled shoe moving in and out of sunlight. He would know right away the deception...but it wouldn’t matter at all because the deception was part of it too” (34). This deception dissolves the exoskeleton the City once provided: “ But twenty years doing hair in the City had softened [Violet’s] arms and melted the shield that once covered her palms and fingers. Like shoes taking away the tough leather her bare feet had grown, the City took away the back and arm power she used to boast of” (92). The once border-less City that embodied the limitless dreams of migrant blacks, that bolstered a community in which people go “ in and out, in and out the same door” and “ settle thighs on a seat in which hundreds have done it too,” turns into a rigid, confining system of streets without the tricks of mirrors (117). In detailing Joe’s new fate, the narrator implies racism’s power to suppress physical freedom in the City: “ Take my word for it, he is bound to the track...That’s the way the City spins you. Makes you do what it wants, go where the laid-out roads say to. All the while letting you think you’re free; that you can jump into thickets because you feel like it...You can’t get off the track the City lays for you” (120). This is a far cry from the narrator’s opening remarks on the City’s tolerant design: “...considerate, mindful of where you want to go and what you might need tomorrow” (9). Ondaatje indicts Almasy for a similar geographical racism. His membership in the National Geographic Society emphasizes the dichotomy between the open desert and cartography’s allotment of borders. As Almasy maintains, “ The desert could not be claimed or owned – it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred

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shifting names long before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East...after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation” (138-9). The desert’s own anonymity, another jab at the imprecise textual history of the West, furnishes characters with the ultimate crevasse in which to pack a landfill of identity: “ It was as if he had walked under the millimetre of haze just above the inked fibres of a map, that pure zone between land and chart between distances and legend between nature and storyteller... The place they had chosen to come to, to be their best selves, to be unconscious of ancestry” (246). This area with a lack of preordained identity is rightfully labeled a “ zone,” since its purity lies in its ambiguity of placement. Almsy’s racism, or that of whites in general, is rooted in hubristic colonization that has corrupted the zone: “ On one side servants and slaves...On the other the first step by a white man across a great river, the first sight (by a white eye) of a mountain that has been there forever... We become vain with the names we own...It is when he is old that Narcissus wants a graven image of himself” (141-2). Almsy gains redemption by indicting himself: “ This country – had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?” (260) Kip affirms this, condemning the whites for dividing and bordering the country with their “ histories and printing presses” (283). Despite the propensity towards geographical borders, each novel concludes that humans can obliterate them with their own bodies, which have acted as more accurate geographical markers throughout the texts. In *Jazz*, the narrator laments dependence on the City’s spaces for identity: “ I was the predictable one, confused in my solitude into arrogance, thinking my space, my view was the only one that was or that mattered...I dismissed what went <https://assignbuster.com/bodies-of-land-and-flesh-human-and-environmental-geography-in-the-english-patient-and-jazz/>

on in heart-pockets close to me” (220-1). Too consumed with external boundaries, s/he is unable to enjoy the intimacy that Joe and Violet have: “ I envy them their public love...That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you” (229). Joe and Violet have crushed the space between them: first manipulating it to gain desire, but ultimately permitting it to collapse under the weight of their mutual love. Kip and Hana finish off *The English Patient* in a comparable manner; despite being separated by miles and years of memory, Kip still “ sees her always, her face and body, but he doesn’t know what her profession is or what her circumstances are” (300). Her true identity, that of her unchanging, mapped-in-spirit body, is what clings to his vision, not a labeled profession. Their love bridges their respective countries once again, as Hana dislodges a glass in her home and Kip, now Kirpal, catches a fork at his dinner table. The “ wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles” is the novel’s final contour of his body, a topography that is nearly hidden but retains the past as well as any history book. With the much-hyped millennium approaching and new advances in cyberspace and interplanetary space travel on the horizon, many new questions will unfold as to whether these technological leaps will dissolve or erect new borders, and if the new distance will inhibit bodily exploration or promote room for intimacy. As Ondaatje and Morrison would attest, so long as we remain essentially human and locate our identities with our bodies, and not street names, then the New Worlds will not be so alien after all.