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Project Description *Liminal Communities in Contemporary Postcolonial Novels*

In Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, the young Canadian nurse Hana retreats to a dilapidated Tuscan villa at the end of World War II in order to tend to a supposedly English, possibly Hungarian patient, whose severe burns and (professed) amnesia make him impossible to identify. Traumatized by personal loss and her experiences as a military nurse, Hana can initially only bear the presence of the hardly human Patient, with whom she traverses a vast imaginary realm that includes the dying man's scraps of memories and his immense knowledge of Western and Middle Eastern literary and cultural history. Gradually, their intimate relationship develops a dynamics of its own and leads to the formation of a temporary, heterogeneous community of individuals traumatized by the war in different ways.

Apart from *The English Patient* (Michael Ondaatje, 1992), the corpus of primary literature analysed in this PhD project consists of *Divisadero* (Michael Ondaatje, 2007); *The Lost Dog* (Michelle de Kretser, 2007); *The Wasted Vigil* (Nadeem Aslam, 2008); and *The Road to Wanting* (Wendy Law-Yone, 2010). These texts, brought together for the first time in my project, not only have in common that they can be situated in the field of postcolonial studies. They also revolve around characters that must come to terms with certain events in their personal past in order to be able to conceive of their future. For their ability to do so, the sojourn in a temporary community located in a place that exists independently of the surrounding social structures (e.g. the Tuscan villa in *The English Patient*) is of prime importance.

In my PhD project I will investigate the ways in which the communities at the heart of my primary texts prepare the ground for a more stable space for the characters to enter into after the dissolution of their small social units. The concept of liminality, which plays a central role in Victor Turner's anthropological research on life in ritualised societies, will be at the heart of my analysis of the communities established in the novels. In order to deepen my understanding of the temporary communities' ability to open up a more lasting environment I will draw on several concepts of space and time.

Initially I will approach the environment opened up by the novels' communities as a form of the "in-between" (Bhabha 1), i.e. the hybrid space, infused by but not subordinated to

different cultures (Rutherford 211), in which postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha locates the negotiation of cultural identity and social organisation. The concept of hybridity therefore forms the backbone of my research.

To date, the ‘in-between’ and the notion of empowering hybridity associated with it have been approached from a postcolonial perspective (e.g. Kalra et al. (2005) and Kuortti and Nyman (2007)), often in combination with a study of globalisation (e.g. Kraidy (2005) and Prabhu (2007)). The aim of my project is to depart from established approaches to the ‘in-between’ and to discern recent developments in the novelistic approach to one of the central concepts in postcolonial studies.

In order to arrive at my analytical aims I will carry out a close textual analysis and employ a narratological approach. Considering the association of my project with postcolonial studies, it is mandatory that I engage in detail with theories on the formation of community (e.g. Young (1990) and Anderson (2006)). I will also draw on, amongst others, Jean-Luc Nancy’s concept of the heterogeneous, political community, established in *The Inoperative Community*, and Maurice Blanchot’s emphasis on the significance of death in inter-subjective communication, forwarded in *The Unavowable Community*.

The novels in my corpus share several features generally associated with postmodern literature (e.g. non-linear narratives, intertextual references, and intermedial strategies). In my project I will build on previous analyses of the potential of postmodern narrative strategies to forward postcolonial concerns (regarding *The English Patient*, for example, Tötösy de Zepetnek (1999) and Hilger (2005) on non-linearity and intertextuality). However, I endeavour to depart from this established field of research by considering the non-linear, intertextual, and intermedial qualities of the novels together with the significant role played by literature and art in the novels’ plots. Ultimately, I aim to provide a multifaceted perspective on the parameters of cultural identity and social interaction negotiated in the novels.

With my PhD project I hope to contribute to the on-going discourse on the role of postcolonial theory in the contemporary, globalised world. The research undertaken in my project revolves around the hybrid space within which ever more individuals (are compelled to) locate their sense of self. Therefore, the project addresses issues that are not only relevant to literary studies and postcolonial theory but also to current socio-political discussions on globalisation, migration, integration, multiculturalism, etc. These topical points of debate all concern the question of how the individual’s sense of self may be productively consolidated in relation to various sociocultural backgrounds. The reverse question of how such a

(voluntary or involuntary) placement of the individual's sense of self influences established social, political, and cultural models of human coexistence is equally pressing. The reconceptualization of the hybrid 'in-between' therefore has implications for critical discussions taking place in the academic world as much as it does for current socio-political debates.

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