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Event and Writing: Michael Ondaatje's Ethics of Peaceful Co-existence in *Divisadero*

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Michael Ondaatje is interested in crossing different kinds of borders. There is the border between art and reality, which he crosses by impersonating Billy and appearing in a photograph at the end of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) (Scobie 1978, 18). There is also the border between literary genres, when *Running in the Family* (1982), instead of being a factual memoir, turns out to be a fictive reconstruction of his Sri Lankan past (Mundwiler 1984, 135–36). He plays upon the limits of identity in *The English Patient* (1996), when the patient talks of human bodies and says, “We are communal histories and communal books” (261). Borders also play a significant role in *Divisadero* (2007), and the dual function of borders in this work—to connect and to separate—follows Ondaatje’s interest in writing as a tool for exploring reality and his concern for peace,

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whether inner peace or peace in the world. Borders contribute to the exploration of reality through writing, because writers can better understand people's actions by listening to their resonances in their writings. This exploration further reveals an ethics of peaceful co-existence based on constant attention paid to different people and to the natural world.

In what follows, I argue that in *Divisadero* Ondaatje presents his ethics of co-existence through his characters' search for inner peace. Along with focusing on the characters' attempts to understand their intentionally or unintentionally suppressed pasts, he draws his readers' attention to the injustices done to socially marginalized people as well as to the neglected natural world. In this novel, "divisadero" means "division"—separation—and "to gaze at something from a distance"—connection (2007, 142). With regard to the characters' search for inner peace, *divisadero* signals the ability to be unconcerned with personal interests (separation) and more interested in the truth about the past (connection). *Divisadero* as separation and connection is also the condition for characters to understand themselves through resonations between past and present. As for the production of peaceful co-existence in the world, *divisadero* refers to the recognition of the interdependence among men, their fellow beings, and the natural world. Ondaatje exposes people's failures to free themselves from haunting pasts and start new lives as related to their inability to free themselves from personal interests and be interested in the truth of their past. By presenting how a deeper understanding of a past depends upon the production of more resonations with that past, he argues for the endlessness of that production and the need for a constant care for what is excluded from people's representations of reality. As inner peace presupposes an understanding of the suppressed past, peaceful co-existence in the world must be based on people's recognition of the interdependence among different people and of the damage done by their anthropocentric approach to the natural world.

Alain Badiou's views about the nature of an event serve as the theoretical framework for the present study, because of his concern for the overlooked elements in any situation. For Badiou, an event is an unpredictable and incalculable supplement to a situation (2005b, 46). A situation is a "presented multiplicity" (24), that is, a collection of what are actually different yet have been treated or counted as ones. These ones are then re-counted, or re-presented, so that they are categorized. In terms of human beings, people are elements in a situation, while the groups each person belongs to are the result of the second count, or re-presentation. A person can belong to different situations (2009a, 36, 114), and each situation has a different established organizing structure (101). For example, a novelist can belong to the situation

s/he live in and to the fictive situation s/he is constructing, while the real situation and the fictive one are structured differently.

In mathematics, each set contains an empty set, and for Badiou each situation has its void. The event that happens to a situation comes from its void and “compels [the inquirer of an event] to decide a *new* way of being” (2001, 41), since “an event is a site which is capable of making exist in a [situation] the proper inexistent [the element that appears most dimly] of the object that underlies the site” (2009a, 452)—the proletariat can be inexistent in a society because of its removal from political representation (2009b, 131). Therefore, in investigating an event, an inquirer is constituted into a subject “in the divided form of a ‘not. . . but’ . . .” (2003, 63–64). The “not” is the “potential dissolution” of the subject’s earlier belief in re–presentation, while the “but” indicates “the faithful labor, in which the subjects of the process opened up by the event . . . are the coworkers” (64). That is, a subject is constituted because of its decision to be faithful to an event, the existence of which is otherwise undecidable. The process of being faithful to an event—making inquiries about how to transform a situation according to the revelation of the event—makes the subject go beyond representation in its perception of reality and constitutes a subjective truth of the event. This subjective truth is a process, and its completion remains in the future (2004, 114–19).

An Event of Violence and the Problem of Ethics

For the study of an ethic of peaceful co–existence, Ondaatje presents in *Divisadero* a situation in which human demarcation of reality distorts the expression of life, and violence erupts when the need to control reality encounters unexpected resistance. What happens to the situation on the isolated farm in Pentaluma, California, poses an ethical problem because the expression of life there is distorted. On the farm where Anna, her father, the adopted Claire, and the worker Coop live, the father dislikes change, and his desire for control sets limits on his own life as well as those of others. He distrusts the new: he “once ventured across the border in Nevada and spoke of it . . . as something foolish and unnecessary, perhaps dangerous” (2007, 24). He wants his world to remain the same. When his wife, Lydia Mendez, dies during her childbirth, he takes in Claire the newborn baby as a replacement. As Anna recalls, the family picture was always taken between Christmas and New Year, and the children would “be herded into the pasture beside the outcrop of rock (where our mother was buried)” (17). The father “insisted on modest clothing” even though Anna and Claire preferred to dress differently (17). In addition to his attempts to stop time, the father also imposes roles on the people on the farm. For example, Coop was taken into

Anna's family after the murder of his parents, and he has been trained "as a farmer and nothing else" (9). Coop's inferior position on the farm explains why he does not appear in the family photographs (20). In terms of Badiou, the father's law is "the operation which, within the situation, codifies its parts or subsets [categorizes the individuals]" (2005c, 143). However, because the father is blind to the needs of the three youths on the farm, his control leads to their rebellion.

The event that changes everyone's life occurs because of the father's discovery of the love affair between Anna and Coop. For the father this affair is unexpected because it comes from the unrepresented—uncontrolled—part of a situation. Coop is present—counted as one—on the farm, but he is not re-presented—re-counted as one—in the father's photographs. He is more like a working horse for the father. Indeed, even the place where Coop lives is easily overlooked by the father, as he rebuilds Anna's grandfather's cabin and stays away from the family most of the time. Anna, rather than Claire, makes this event possible because she is more interested in crossing into the unknown. For example, she challenges Claire to walk across the highway by the reservoir blindfolded, and, when she refuses, does so herself (2007, 25). Accordingly, one day Anna goes to see Coop at her grandfather's cabin, and subsequently becomes his lover because they happen to be drenched by rain, take off their clothes in the cabin, and instinctively start making love.

To make the event haunting for the four people on the farm, Ondaatje has them shaken by the father's discovery of the affair. To prevent her father from beating Coop to death, Anna stabs him with a piece of glass and nearly kills him. When Anna and then Coop leave the farm, Claire wonders whether or not she should have tried to interfere before the father's discovery. After all, she has been aware of the secret love all along. After the event, the father raises "his palm into the air with an awful plea for her to stop" whenever she speaks of Anna (2007, 100). A Badiouan event comes into being when it is treated as one that demands inquiry, and it is through the characters' study of this event that Ondaatje presents his ethics of co-existence.

Resonance and Truth, Limited Understanding and Precarious Justice

Ondaatje examines the necessity of confronting an event and the way to understand people's actions by presenting Coop's and Claire's reactions to the discovery of the love affair and the stabbing of the father. Along with the affirmation of the necessity and the discovery of a way to understand experience, an embryonic ethics of co-existence starts to appear. Badiou contends that to interrupt the truth procedure is Evil, while the Good

consists in the subject's ability to keep inquiring about an event (2001, 85). Similarly, Ondaatje's study of the event through Coop's and Claire's stories soon makes it clear that justice depends on constant concern for the possibly unexplored rather than any fixed system of laws.

Ondaatje establishes the necessity of confronting an event through Coop's experience after his departure from the farm. In this part of Coop's story, Ondaatje also reveals that resonations between experiences are necessary if a character is to better understand them. For Badiou, an event comes into being for someone because the person decides to take that experience to be an event, rather than dismiss it as a meaningless accident (2005b, 46). Unlike Anna and Claire, Coop tries to erase the past rather than understand it. Ondaatje exposes Coop's mistake by first indicating his self-dehumanization, and then by revealing his failure to suppress the past. Coop's dehumanization is implied in the representations of his new acquaintances at the Tahoe casinos. These gamblers try to forget their past, and their success in gambling depends on their ability to be efficient machines. For example, Coop's best friend is Edward Dorn, "The Deadhead," a nickname which suggests a robot. Coop also learns from "The Gentile," a card mechanic recommended by Dorn, that a good gambler only cares about winning the game. The Gentile says to Coop, "You have to forget the content, think about the wheel. . ." (2007, 51).

Coop is haunted by the past because it co-exists with the present. His decision to forget his past produces a void in his present situation, since a person can belong to different situations and the denied past intersects with the present (Badiou 2009a, 114–15). This void in Coop's situation thus becomes the source of haunting echoes. Just as the father cannot face the loss of his wife, Coop vainly tries to forget his life on the farm. Lina, The Gentile's lover, rides a horse in the desert and reminds Coop of Claire (2007, 49), while Bridget scares Coop because "she look[s] like Anna" (119).

Ondaatje confirms the necessity of confronting an event by Coop's involvement with Bridget, the woman Gil uses to seduce him so that he gambles for them. Coop's seduction proves that he has failed to dehumanize himself. After Bridget's sudden disappearance, he feels so lonely that, when he finally finds her and learns of Gil's plot, he knows that he is willing to deceive himself and succumb to it if she returns to his arms, "offering herself like a genuine truth" (2007, 130). Unsurprisingly, Coop decides to refuse Gil's demand when he encounters Claire, Anna's double (15, 23), at a bar. The encounter offers him a much-wanted chance to get reconnected to his past, because he realizes that he must face the violence on the farm before he can hope to improve his life. As Anna later says, "if you do not plunder the past, the absence feeds on you" (141). Yet Coop's decision to face his event may also

be due to his vague understanding of the violence itself. After all, his attempt to start a new life allows him to be aware of resonances to the farm event.

Writing about how resonance illuminates, Jean-Luc Nancy observes in *Listening* that the differences between the perceived and intended senses are the condition for resonance (2007, 11). “The difference between cultures, the difference between the arts, and the difference between the senses are the conditions, and not the limitations, of experience in general” (Nancy 2007, 11). Without separating himself from his past and adopting a new viewpoint toward his surroundings, Coop would not have the chance to come upon resonances to his experience on the farm. By showing Coop’s awareness of the resonances, Ondaatje reveals the function of resonance in illuminating experiences and begins to connect his characters’ search for inner peace to a wider peace in the world. Those resonances occur during the first Gulf War, which breaks out the night Coop and Dorn beat The Brethren in a game of Texas Hold ‘Em. So on the one hand, the TV screens in the casinos of Nevada show “U.S. helicopters and stealth bombers . . . firing missiles and dropping penetration bombs into the city” while the “three thousand gamblers inhaling piped-in oxygen at the Horseshoe” treat the war as “a video game” (2007, 53). On the other hand, at the River Café, Dorn “describes some news footage he has watched of the massacre” in the Gulf War to distract Pounce Autry, leader of The Brethren, when Coop “slips in the slug, low in the deck” (56). Coop wins the game, but his defiant gesture proves that he has learned from the similarities between the violence on the farm and that showing on the screen.

While being attacked by Anna’s father, Coop did not defend himself; now, at the moment of his success in the game, he waves to the “eye in the sky” that “looks down on every hand played on the surfaces of green baize” (53, 58). His defiance signals his anger at the violence on the farm since the father’s head, “looking down at her” (31), appeared as if in the sky when he caught Coop and Anna making love. Nick Mansfield’s discussion of Jean Baudrillard’s view of the Gulf War also illuminates Coop’s reaction here. Mansfield observes that “[w]hat happens is not being determined on the battle-field, but is being organized as a spectacle that will reinforce certain truisms about the New World Order, announced to be the consequence of the end of the Cold War” (2008, 145). If the administration of violence in one place serves to secure peace elsewhere (Mansfield 2008, 155), the rights of the outsiders are not taken into account. In *Divisadero*, Coop’s defiance against the “eye in the sky” is an outsider’s protest. The screens show the coalition forces achieving the “great high-tech massacres” of the Iraqi troops, the massacre being punishment for invading Kuwait. Coop can see the parallels with his exclusion from Anna’s family, since he violated the father’s property when he and Anna became lovers.

Resonance continues to play a significant role and is emphasized in Claire's story, because, unlike Coop, she does not want to suppress her past and treats her new understandings about the terrible event more seriously. By making resonance clearly useful in Claire's case, Ondaatje further shows that resonance depends on the co-existence of different situations, and that a way to produce as many resonances as possible must be discovered. He also indicates that the question of outsiders is not limited to interactions among human beings. Thus Claire and her foster father's failure to study the event on the farm resonates with Coop the gambler's vague understanding of the father's injustices as well as with Claire's later, more successful, inquiries about the past. On the farm, Claire and her foster father would circle "the episode that led to the absence of Anna in their lives, never speaking of it" (2007, 99-100). Shlomo Breznitz, a Holocaust survivor, observes that it is easier for survivors of the Holocaust "to enter the Holocaust state of mind than to exit from it" (2006, 49). In *Divisadero*, the father and Claire are too close to the scene of family tragedy to be able to make the past resound. Indeed, the emotional impact can be too strong for them even to look at the past.

Ondaatje develops the issue of maltreating outsiders by presenting Claire's experiences, when she gets a job at the Office of the Public Defender in San Francisco. Claire accidentally meets Coop in Tahoe, and they agree to meet again. When he fails to appear, she looks for him and finds him at a chalet, having been beaten up by Gil's gang and lost his memory. To help him recover, and to escape from Gil's gang, Claire travels with him to places he has been, and her experience during this journey undermines human demarcations of reality and questions the border between insider and outsider. Claire's learning about the lack of correspondence between reality and human demarcations of it starts with her boss Aldo Veá. When she asks Veá for advice on helping Coop escape from Gil's gang, Veá tells her to take Coop away and to make her route illogical (154). This advice resonates with Claire's experience with a horse called Territorial on her foster father's farm. Territorial does not allow a second mount on the same day unless Claire can devise some tricks not learned from books (7). Claire can also sense the arbitrariness of people's representation of reality when Coop misnames her. The first time Coop calls her Anna, Claire does not comply. She even tries to correct him the second time he calls her by the wrong name (153). Ondaatje says of Coop's misnaming her, "What these verbal accidents do is aim a flashlight into the brain, reveal its vast museum of facts and desires" (152). Claire thus becomes Anna for Coop, and meets his longing for his lost lover, although herself knows that she is not her.

Claire's experience at Dorn's place further reveals that the border between insider and outsider is arbitrary. In the night, Dorn's dog creeps onto her bed.

Initially, Claire thinks that Gil and his gang have found them. When the dog tries to push her out of the bed, it becomes clear to her that the dog has been treated like a man. Claire's acceptance of the dog's viewpoint and of its company attests her new understanding of reality and her willingness not to exclude the dog from human society. By resonance, Claire can see the father's maltreatment of Coop, and even of the neglected cat on the farm, Alturas.

Ondaatje makes clear such injustices in the exclusion and maltreatment of outsiders in the medieval-feast scene. By juxtaposing wars in the past and in the present, he points out that it is impossible for a new age to be born without active peace-making efforts to stop the persecution of outsiders. On the day of the feast, people are dressed in medieval costumes, and Claire finds "herself alongside medieval monks carrying antiwar placards" "[t]welve years after the American bombing of the Gulf in 1991" (160). The past seems to have returned when Dorn breaks "the time capsule of the Middle Ages by persuading the high school band to play 'Fire on the Mountain'" (161), and when the couples there dance "as if coupled in another time, at an outbreak in the Hundred Years' War" (162). The connection between wars and the failure of a new age to be born becomes clearer when Dorn learns from Finnegan's radio of America's new attack on Iraq. With the several wars referenced at once and people dressed in medieval costumes, time appears to have stopped. Since the new war against Iraq can remind Claire of her foster father's treatment of Coop, as the first Gulf War recalled for Coop the violence on the farm, Dorn's lamentation becomes significant for her, because in it he emphasizes everyone's guilt in having taken no action to prevent the war.

Thus the ethics Ondaatje proposes through Claire's story is similar to Badiou's. For Badiou, justice is synonymous with community (2008a, 153), and community is a medium through which "the collective emerges in the form of a coming forth devoid of substance or founding narrative, of territory or borders" (148). In other words, justice exists in a situation where each element expresses itself "without any differential trait that would allow it to be placed in a hierarchy on the basis of a predicate" (Badiou 2008a, 174). The ethics proposed through Claire's story differs from Badiou's in that Claire has not attempted to fully understand the event on the farm. She takes Coop back to the farm even though she worries over what might happen with her father (2007, 164). This worry implies Ondaatje's dissatisfaction with Claire's approach to her family tragedy. He has to find a way to treat as many elements in the situation as possible.

Creative Inquiry and an Ethics of Co-existence

Ondaatje finds a way for such an exploration in story-telling. His study moves from reading to writing because reading, like Claire's encounters during her travels with Coop, depends on chance, while a writer can actively contrive the plot of a story. Since the situation in a story can intersect with the situation of an event in many ways, a story-teller can try to understand an event by devising many plots that resonate with the elements in a situation. In *Divisadero*, Anna writes to explore her family tragedy after she has learned the value of stories from helping her lover, Rafael, talk of his traumatic past. To avoid the pitfalls that a writer cum explorer can fall into, Ondaatje also has Anna write of another writer, Lucien Segura, who tries to understand the past by writing.

Ondaatje begins his search for a way to treat many elements in a situation because books contain various possible resonances to a reader's past. As the black driver, who travels with Anna after her departure from the farm, says to her, books "[signal] the possibilities of [people's] lives" (2007, 147). The driver convinces Anna because she is surprised by his understanding of her: While she mostly keeps silent and speaks only in her "mother's Spanish, or [her] tentative French" (147), he keeps talking to her in English. However, Anna cannot grasp the driver's teaching about creativity at first, and that is why, when she next appears, in France and as a scholar, she remains haunted by her past, and dares not reveal it to anyone. The difficulty of being creative explains why years later Anna claims that she was greatly impressed when the black driver quoted from the opening lines of *David Copperfield*: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show" (147). The opening lines emphasize the differences among people and the requirement for each person to creatively discover specific ways to develop her/his life.

In France, Anna learns from her lover Rafael, as he has a traumatic past, too. Badiou calls "the subjects of the process [of inquiry] opened up by the event . . . the coworkers" (2003, 64), and Anna and Rafael are co-workers for two reasons. First, Badiou argues that, when lovers look at the world, "[i]t is an examination of the world from the point of view of the Two" (2008b, 49). The lovers are different yet connected. When Anna or Rafael examines the past, the viewpoint is that of two lovers. Secondly, while their pasts differ, the resonances they discover in each other make mutual help possible. Indeed, their abilities to understand each other are evident even when they are still strangers. Rafael discovers that Anna's room "belongs to a child" the first time he enters her bedroom, (2007, 75). When she first listens to him playing guitar, Anna recognizes his "refugee" look (67). As Anna helps Rafael's inquiry about an event, Ondaatje develops a possibility planted earlier in the

case of Veá, who tries to free himself of his haunting Vietnam War past by constantly re-telling it from various perspectives. By having Rafael talk of his event, Ondaatje makes clear both the usefulness and limitations of talking of one's past.

Rafael failed to talk of his past because he had no sympathetic audience. He suffered from a disastrous first date at the age of seventeen. He was late and hitchhiked, and he got his white shirt and ironed trousers dirtied in a van that transported donkeys. After his girl embarrassed him, his acquaintances added ridicule and aggravated his shame. As the education from his parents—who did not have high social expectations—did not provide him with a tool to comprehend this humiliation, Rafael hid himself in the world of music (2007, 91-92). His isolation grew deeper after his mother's death and his father's sudden disappearance, because he had no one to talk to.

The beneficial effects of talking about the past surface when Anna asks Rafael about his story. He eventually begins to relate more and more that seems to be irrelevant to his traumatic event. Significantly, Anna helps him conduct a creative inquiry of the event he now faces, because she wants to know more about him than simply the facts about his first date. The connections between her questions and his event are thus random, and Anna bears witness to Rafael's narration without trying to interpret it. This randomness of her questions and the lack of intentional guidance in Rafael's narration have their virtues. If the Badiouan event erupts from the unrepresented part of a situation, instead of trying to analyze an event by the recognized rules in the situation, an inquirer should try to approach it with as few preconceptions as possible. Thus, in *Divisadero*, the way Anna poses her questions helps Rafael connect different and unexpected elements in his situation to his event.

In terms of life control, Rafael's stories about his past benefit both himself and Anna, because those stories contain a life-centered ethics. The stories about his parents indicate the superiority of lives unrestricted by a belief in a hierarchical world. His parents were very different from Anna's. Rafael's father, Liébard, was a thief by profession. In him, Anna can see someone protesting against the belief in property and against the capitalist subjectification of human beings. Liébard "never stole from houses he was invited into" (71), and did not have a stable identity. Rafael's father, Liébard, wanted to possess Rafael's mother, Aria, by marrying her. However, she maintained control, of herself and of him, by refusing to do so, and in this way, she rendered Liébard inferior.

The stories about Aria further undermine the human-centered belief in hierarchical representation because of the way she approached reality. Aria was determined that her son should not take social representations of reality

too seriously, and “they would strip off their clothes and swim” when they traveled near Plaisance (184). For Rafael, that trip was the time “when he felt most clearly that there was no distinction between himself and what was beyond him—a tree’s sigh or his mother’s song, could, it seemed, have been generated by his body” (184). Boundaries between the human and the non-human, and those between the inside and the outside have been blurred.

Ondaatje points out the beneficial effects of this inquiry on the lovers by having Anna and Rafael constituted into Badiouan subjects (2003, 63–64). Anna thus becomes both Rafael’s lover and mother, and they can express and enjoy their lives. After Aria’s death, Rafael had no parents “to coax him back into the world” (2007, 94). Now, after telling Anna about his mother, Rafael feels that Anna gives him the warmth that used to come from her (85). The most significant evidence of the couple’s change is one of the photographs on the kitchen wall in Dému, in which Anna appears “naked from the waist up,” with “the roots of two small muddy plants” woven into her hair, laughing at the photographer, Rafael (188). Dominick LaCapra contends that by examining the past, the examiner gains a critical distance, can see the difference between the past and the present, and thereby is extricated from a painful past to some degree (2001, 143–44). Also, while a full recovery seems difficult, one sign showing a person’s partial recovery is “the ability to find a new partner, to marry, to have children” (LaCapra 2001, 151). In *Divisadero*, both Anna and Rafael find new partners in each other; nonetheless, Anna does not imitate Rafael when inquiring about her event.

Instead, Ondaatje has Anna write of her event creatively. She does not talk as Rafael has because of the inherent limitations of a spoken inquiry. For one thing, Rafael may not be as good a questioner as she is. After all, unlike Anna, he can talk of his past, even though with “a layer of casual irony” (2007, 92), and, consequently, he may not be eager to listen to resonances in her past. By offering questions not centered on Rafael’s event, Anna has learned to creatively investigate an event. Rafael’s talk about Lucien’s teaching points to a way for Anna to be creative and emotionally detached when inquiring about her event. When Rafael was a boy, Lucien told him that writing stories could make a solitary writer understanding and content (93–94). Then the writer would be “in his busy and crowded world of invention” (94). As V. N. Vološinov has contended with regard to story-writing, “I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong” (1994, 58). Writing would not deprive Anna of an audience. Instead, she gains a chance to inquire about her event from many viewpoints so that she can find resonances in different situations and not be impeded in her inquiry by her own personal interests.

Nonetheless, Anna conducts a tortuous exploration, because, in exploring her event, the tool employed should also be taken into account. Accordingly, there are not only resonances between her story and her event but also resonances between Anna and Lucien the two writers. By presenting Lucien's interested approach to his own event, Anna reveals the undesirable consequences of such an approach: an inquirer's obsession with some elements in a situation necessarily leads to the marginalization of other elements, and turns the latter into possible sites of contention. As a result, Anna makes it possible for resonance to occur almost anywhere, since Rafael's story about his merging with a horse already questions human demarcations of reality.

Another reason for Anna's writing about Lucien has to do with her need to understand her world. Slavoj Žižek has noted that personal violence is rare (2008, 207), because violence basically comes from the beliefs of a social system, such as a country or a company (2, 207). In *Divisadero*, by examining Lucien, Anna can see herself by resonance and relates her family tragedy to violence in the wider world. She traces the source of violence to artificial demarcations of reality, the consequent neglect of the socially unrepresented, and the ignorance of the interdependence between human beings and the natural world.

In Anna's writing, her main character, Lucien, also suffers from a baffling event. His world is turned upside down by an unexpected note from a woman who was his teenage companion, and whom he has long neglected. With regard to love, Badiou has observed that the "declaration of love" invokes a void in the lover-listeners and forms an event (2000, 272). Out of fidelity to that event, the lover "travers[es] the entire situation bit by bit" and attempts to ascertain the beloved's desire so that the lover and the beloved are neither separated nor fused into one, but are a body of two sexes (Badiou 2000, 272). In *Divisadero*, the unexpected note from Marie-Neige constitutes an event for Lucien, because it comes like a supplement to a situation that he understands, drastically changes his views of emotional attachment, and leads to his decision to inquire about their relationship. Marie-Neige's note surprises Lucien because he has never suspected the existence of a strong amorous attachment between them since their teenage years, and because he insulted her a few weeks before his wedding when she came to his house to condole his mother's death (2007, 217). The note Marie-Neige unexpectedly hands him on his wedding day says only two baffling words: "goodbye" and "hello." Lucien could dismiss it as insignificant; however, this note "turn[s] his heart over on the wrong day" (219), and he recalls a sentence that he and Marie-Neige read in their teens: "*A message sent by pigeon to The Hague can sometimes change everything*" (219).

Badiou claims that an inquirer is both interested and disinterested. The inquirer is interested in inquiring, but, even with limited viewpoints, inquirers are also disinterested because they are concerned with the truth of an event, instead of with personal interests (2001, 49–50). Lucien’s interested study results from his physical and mental proximity to Marie-Neige. Peter Goldie observes that to find one’s way around the world and to gain knowledge about it, one must be in the right emotional disposition (2004, 99). Lucien’s proximity makes him too emotionally attached to the past to clearly hear resonances to his relationship with the Roman couple in his fictive situations. That emotional attachment also causes his neglect of his family. When he first writes of the Roman couple, Lucien writes in his stepfather’s workroom in a house near Marie-Neige’s (2007, 220). He isolates himself from his wife and daughters because he has been interested in writing about Claudile, a *grisette* who is enthralled by her man (224–25), just as Marie-Neige seems to be by Roman, her husband. His neglect of his new family is evident because, when he has finished his trilogy of tales about Claudile, he emerges from his study to find the world changed and “a chaos of in-laws around him on the estate at Marseillan” (225). Moreover, even his writing is a failure. He has only a vague idea of what he writes about at first, before he knows his strong desire for Marie-Neige when he is in the army.

Lucien does not even know that he is writing about Marie-Neige and Roman before he is recruited for the First World War and stationed at Épernay. When he is in the army, he writes of his past, and the effect surprises him. It is like having been “handed a mirror for the first time” (Ondaatje 2007, 247), so that he sees now what he holds “only faintly in his memory” (247). With the physical and mental distance between him and Marie-Neige, Lucien realizes his love for her, and, because of that realization, he makes love with her when he is back in Marseillan during a furlough. However, Marie-Neige’s sudden death destroys any chance for Lucien to see their relationship clearly, because this loss makes him possessive.

Through Lucien’s possessiveness, Anna demonstrates how resonance sheds light on experience. More importantly, she learns the impossibility of ending an inquiry. After all, even if a writer is interested only in understanding an event, as a Badiouan disinterested inquirer, the writer cannot but exclude some elements.¹ Marie-Neige’s death makes Lucien long to re-possess her because “[f]or the first time in his life he ha[s] no one around him” (Ondaatje 2007, 262), and he starts to write about her so that she lives on in him. She, Roman, and “One-Eyed Jacques”—Lucien lost one eye when he was a teenager—are “the central trio of each book” (264). Each time before a story ends, the hero would plunge his rapier into a villain’s heart and “fling out the line ‘Say your good-byes’” (263). Instead of

conducting a disinterested inquiry to understand his love event, Lucien tries to free himself from Marie-Neige's haunting by re-possessing her. Accordingly, Lucien's last book ends with a description of his death with Marie-Neige (266), a scene recalling his hallucination in which his worry for her safety makes him see her dying (257-60). His writing comes to an end when he feels that he has her "within-him" after so many stories (267). However, just as he was surprised to learn of his need for Marie-Neige when he was in the army, Lucien's writing of the Roman couple must lead to another surprise. An interested exploration can only lead to another eruption of surprising event.

It is thus no wonder that the consequences of another surprise finally drive Lucien to despair, and this event stems from his family. His disastrous marriage comes from his neglect of his family while he is engrossed with Marie-Neige. After he leaves his family and lives alone in the neighborhood of Rafael and his parents, Lucien grows more and more lonely. He waits for the boy Rafael's arrival with a "clenched fist" (Ondaatje 2007, 270), and he "does not feel this present life is real without the boy" (272). His need for his family also explains why, after Rafael's departure, Lucien recalls his neglected daughters and regrets his irresponsibility (272). The eruption of this surprising discovery exposes the incompleteness of the exploration of his love event, and he is thus haunted by this event and becomes a child again at his death. Lucien stays in a sinking boat, which is of "the size of a child's bed" (173), and looks back at the land where he has been (273). Lucien's interested approach to his love event has blinded him as to his biased exploration. His belated discovery is a powerful blow that finally overwhelms him.

Lucien's suicide emphasizes the necessity of considering all the elements in a situation, even those that seem to be outside of it, as situations can intersect. To prevent the eruption of another haunting event in addition to her earlier one, Anna must try to avoid an interested inquiry as much as possible. A few examples suffice to prove that Anna tries to conduct an exhaustive study of her family tragedy, and these indicate that she is not limited by human demarcations of reality in her choice of resonances. With regard to the resonation between human relationships, Anna's family echoes Lucien's. Just as she and Claire love Coop, Lucien's two daughters, Lucette and Thérèse, love the poet, Pierre Le Cras, even though the poet is married to Thérèse. Besides studying her father through Lucien, Anna also studies her father through Roman. Lucien sees in Roman "the dangerous possibility of a figure of a father he no longer ha[s]" (Ondaatje 2007, 200). Roman is old enough to be the father of both Lucien and his own wife, and, just as Anna's father does not allow for his daughter's love affair, Roman would certainly not accept Lucien's love for Marie-Neige. A more interesting example of

Anna going beyond human demarcations of reality occurs when she uses a dog attacking Lucien to shed light on her father's violence against Coop. According to Anna, the dog might not have attacked Lucien if he had not kept watching it behind the window and aroused its fear. Lucien's one eye recalls Coop's beating by Anna's father because, when Anna last saw Coop, he had "[o]ne eye badly closed, covered in blood" (32). In short, when examining her family tragedy, Anna produces resonations in different situations, and her choice of elements in fictive situations can be unpredictable. Yet, the unpredictability of her choices also implies the endlessness of her inquiry.

Anna's study of her family tragedy is not futile, and Badiou's comments on courage are relevant here. He notes, "[W]hen you receive a global blow, the courage that responds to it is local. It is at one particular point that you are going to rebuild the possibility of living without losing your soul under the depressive effects of the blow received" (2008b, 75-76). Similarly, the study of an event starts with achieving a single truth rather than the whole truth of the event, and continued study is justified as long as any truth reached is recognized as provisional. Anna is aware of the endlessness of her study, as she says that "the raw truth of an episode never ends, just as the terrain of my sister's life and the story of my time with Coop are endless to me" (2007, 267). Indeed, given that the truth of her event cannot be exhausted, justice requires Anna to continue her study.

So, by resonances, Anna traces her family tragedy to her father's lack of respect for life and to his desire to control it. Anna focuses her study on her father because the event appears to start with him, and traces his desire to control life to his sense of tradition and the loss of his wife, and she avails herself of Lucien's mother and Rafael's in her study because both mothers echo the little Anna knows of her own, and thus their relationships with their husbands might shed light on Anna's parents. Just as Aria is superior to Liébard, who desires to possess her by marrying her, Lucien's mother, Odile, keeps her man by refusing to let Lucien's stepfather-husband feel secure about her. After she was abandoned by Lucien's father, Miguel, and married to Lucien's stepfather, Odile would "gather the boy [Lucien] to the *corrida* at Vic-Fézensac, searching the streets day and night, until she return[s] home empty-handed and with a mixture of disappointment and relief" (Ondaatje 2007, 195-96). From the little Anna gathers about her own mother, Lydia, she knows of her "affection for the goat man" (11). Odile's and Aria's strategies in controlling their men can thus suggest Lydia's. In addition, Anna's father would have had a wife to modify his beliefs if she had survived childbirth. After all, his inclination to control life derives partly from tradition: he "had been raised with a few male rules" (12).

Besides imagining how Lydia might have modified her father's inclination to control life, Anna examines Lucien, Roman, and the dog is attacking Lucien to study the cause of her father's physical violence against Coop. In Anna's writing, Lucien "move[s] from a complex, finely tuned poetry to a blunt, coldly prepared vendetta" after he learns of Marie-Neige's death, because "[f]or the first time in his life he ha[s] no one around him" (Ondaatje 2007, 262). If Lucien's violence results from his loneliness and sense of insecurity, Roman's violence, which leads to his imprisonment, has a similar cause. Roman, while working on the top of a tower, looks down and imagines some men "gazing openly at [his wife]" (236). He is later imprisoned because he becomes enraged and nearly kills one of them (238). Anna also discerns animal instincts in her father's attack on Coop. Thinking of the dog that attacked boy Lucien, Anna sees that the dog might not have attacked if Lucien had not kept watching it and aroused its fear.

With her discovery that violence can stem from a lack of respect for the unknown and from a sense of insecurity, Anna looks for the possibility of peaceful co-existence with strangers and outsiders. She has Lucien refrain from interfering in the lovemaking between Lucette and Pierre, because he sees in the relationship among himself, his daughter, and Pierre resonance of that among old Roman, Roman's young wife, and the young Lucien. The echo between the two pairs of sisters also implies a way to resolve Anna's competition with Claire (Ondaatje 2007, 17). If Thérèse tolerates Lucette and Pierre's love affair, it can be because, as Anna and Claire have been like twins, or resonances of each other, Thérèse and Lucette understand each other and care for each other's feelings.

Anna's inquiry into her family tragedy through writing therefore contains an ethics for taking care of all elements in a situation and against the hierarchical demarcation of reality. By going beyond the human demarcation of reality, she traces her family violence from her father's desire to control life to his tradition, his lack of respect for other people's lives, and his sense of insecurity in front of the unknown, and she sees the futility of trying to control life and the wisdom of understanding and caring for other people. Moreover, Anna's care for the unknown and the strange in her inquiry extends to concern both people and the wider natural world. As such inquiries have to be endless, justice requires recognition of the limits of knowledge and thus a constant respect and care for the unknown.

Anna's written exploration also contains Ondaatje's answer to the issue of inner peace and peace in the world. Inner peace rests on incessantly and creatively inquiring about what has been intentionally or unintentionally excluded or suppressed in memory, and on changing one's attitude towards reality by the knowledge gained from this inquiry. As for peace in the world,

Ondaatje argues against the practice that distinguishes an insider from an outsider and instead for constant attention to be paid to the natural world and to people from different cultures. What best expresses his argument in *Divisadero* is Liébard's advice to Lucien about the balance in nature (2007, 180-81), which recalls the land ethics of Aldo Leopold, who argues for the interdependence of all beings (2001, 168). The acknowledgement of interdependence is to accept the separation and connection of different lives that might be beyond mutual understanding. So Anna says, when last mentioning her father, that he was once surprised by a fox, and that, while he held it in view, cautiously, the fox moved "back and forth, on a different tangent," "as if mocking him" (268). Citing Annie Dillard's experience of being surprised by a weasel, Neil Evernden observes their unaccountability to each other and says, "There are no abstractions, just a celebration of animate being that can only be fleetingly encountered, and never understood" (1992, 122). Evernden's observation on Dillard and the weasel explains the fox's mocking of Anna's father in *Divisadero*. If all lives are interdependent for their survival, hurting others is tantamount to hurting oneself.

Conclusion: Written Inquiry and Ondaatje's Solution for Peace

A Badiouan subject would try to improve a situation by the knowledge gained from exploring an event. It is therefore strange that, with Anna's concern for her family violence and the violence resulting from social systems, she should have satisfied herself with her Lucien story and not have tried to make her ethics more relevant to the wider world. Anna's concern explains the strong suggestions throughout the whole novel about her being the narrator of what happens to her family after her departure from the farm. Those suggestions challenge the reader's desire for clear demarcation of reality, and constitute Ondaatje's attempt to make his ethics more relevant to his readers. After all, the ethics proposed through *Divisadero* is concerned with the relationship among men, their fellow beings, and the natural world, and this ethics offers answers to problems of the contemporary world, such as environmental damage, objectification of human beings, fear of strangers, and the crisis of ethics.

Ondaatje leaves many clues for his readers to trace the narrator of Claire's, Coop's, and the father's stories to Anna. One clue appears when Anna says, "In my story the person I always begin with is Claire" (2007, 137). *Divisadero* begins with a description of Claire. A stronger hint comes when she claims that she would "sometimes borrow Claire's nature, as well as her careful focus on the world. Though no general reader will recognize my sister, not even she, I suspect, if she would happen to pick up a book of mine" (138). If Anna can place herself in Claire's mind and write for the latter, she

can probably imagine Claire's life after their separation, too. Admittedly, Anna does not understand Coop and her father as much as she does Claire. Nonetheless, the little she knows of the men is still enough for her to narrate their stories. Coop's story shows that he tries to control chance by becoming a skillful gambler. This story is not beyond Anna's imagination, since Coop was good at poker (29), and she knows that for him "all things were held in the palm of chance" (24). The father's story reveals his being frozen in the past, and Anna knows all along that he considered leaving the farm to be foolish.

Anna's concern for the peaceful co-existence of different lives leads to the question of whether or not Ondaatje's proposed ethics meets the needs of this century. His argument for peaceful co-existence between human beings and the natural world is in agreement with current environmental concerns. Traces of John Muir's and Leopold's thoughts appear in *Divisadero*, and Anna's endless inquiry also implies the existence of an ever-present neglected void in our world that demands attention. Such a life-centered, instead of human-centered, approach to reality offers corrections to arguments for environmental protection based on the need for human survival.

Ondaatje's study of violence and war is also timely in its denunciation of the objectification of human life on the battlefield and in the society. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri write that "[w]ar has become a *regime of biopower*, that is, a form of rule aimed not only at controlling the population but producing and reproducing all aspects of social life" (2004, 13). Because of violence against life, the boundary between peace and war is blurred. In *Divisadero*, Ondaatje juxtaposes the bridge games in the casinos with the massacres in the Gulf War and makes victories in both places seem empty by revealing Coop's companions in the casinos to be dehumanized robots. However, the life-centered approach to reality propounded in *Divisadero* seeks more than re-humanization. By emphasizing the interdependence among different lives, and by undermining the boundaries among them, Ondaatje questions the idea of basing one's prosperity on exploiting one's fellow beings and the natural world.

The problem of objectification also appears in people's growing reliance on computers. In his discussion of war, Manuel DeLanda contends that people's approach to reality has changed at the end of the twentieth century because the computer has become a useful tool of oppression for the military and has opened a new window for its operatives to observe nature (1991, 6). If people are becoming computers, that is, if people are merging with technology, then Ondaatje's emphasis on multiple viewpoints and the ever-present danger that can arise from some overlooked parts in a situation alerts us to the incalculable risks that can result from people's over-reliance on artificial intelligence.

Finally, the twenty-first century's challenge to ethics is also relevant to the present study. In *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that, while globalization is irresistible (2008, 26), and “[o]ur mutual dependency is [therefore] planetwide” (26), “[t]here are, however, few if any signs that we who share the planet are willing to take up in earnest the *subjective* responsibility for that objective responsibility of ours [for one another]” (26). Bauman's main target is Emmanuel Levinas's assertion of an individual's preconscious sense of responsibility for the other human beings in her/his proximity. Bauman argues that, in order to survive in a competitive consumer society full of strangers, a person can willingly deny the sense of responsibility and accept his/her own alienation and commodification. For example, people can prefer separation from connection with other human beings. Consequently, the fear of strangers “is a highly predictable and widespread reaction to the mind-boggling, spine-chilling, and nerve-racking variety of human types and life-styles that meet and jostle for space in the streets of the contemporary cities . . .” (67). In the society of consumers, time is “broken into a multitude of separate morsels” (172). It is not uncommon for people to voluntarily and constantly redefine and recreate their new selves and kill their old ones so that they can be of higher market value (135-37).

The ethics Ondaatje proposes in *Divisadero* constitutes a timely help for people suffering from alienation and commodification, as it exposes the self-deception of Bauman's consumers and shows them how to really start a new life. Bauman's description of broken people recalls Ondaatje's Coop, who wants to start a new life by forgetting the past, and Anna's father, who separates himself from the world outside his farm. Ondaatje uses Anna's case to show that the possibility of a prosperous new life depends on attention being paid to as many elements of a situation as possible, including those belonging to an intersecting one.

In this regard, Anna's written inquiry of her family event, besides serving as a model for adopting various viewpoints in such investigations, also constitutes a practical tool for people dealing with alienation and commodification. Self-protection does not require annihilation of the past and isolation from strangers, and writing enables a solitary individual to reach self-understanding and to understand people. Finally, the reason why writing is a good tool for investigating an event is significant because of Ondaatje's emphasis on creativity in an inquiry. As long as his proposed ethics attracts his readers, they should creatively look for means to produce a world in which peace resides, because in this way the socially unrepresented get a chance to be understood and taken care of.

Notes

¹ Actually, whether or not Anna can be truly disinterested, her study has to be endless. In terms of the power-set axiom, “if a set a exists (is presented) then there also exists the set of all its subsets” (Badiou 2005a 82). The numerical value of that set exceeds set a 's by an order of magnitude increasing exponentially with the size of set a . While the number of elements on Anna's farm counted and uncounted by her father is limited, the elements contained in Anna's situation on the farm can be infinite.

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