Estetisk-filosofiska fakulteten

Håkan Tallgren

“…that wondrous thing about the human being, it can change”
Performativity and Agency in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*

Engelska
D-uppsats

Termin: Vårterminen 2009
Handledare: Mark Troy
Examinator: Åke Bergvall
Abstract

This essay uses the concept of performativity to illustrate how identity change and the possibility to shape one’s identity, agency, are treated in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. Originally a theory introduced by queer theorist Judith Butler, performativity explains how a sense of identity stems not from innate qualities but from behaviour, or stylized acts, that is regulated by the norms of society. These acts are not the effect but the cause of a sense of identity. Butler argues that since identity is shaped through interplay between the individual and society, it can be actively re-shaped, and that there thus is a possibility for the individual to achieve agency. As other theorists have pointed out, there are great difficulties and dangers in trying to subvert one’s identity in undesired directions. Some writers even question the suggestion that active identity change is at all possible. These theoretical ideas are fruitfully illuminating when reading *The English Patient*, where identities are shaped and re-shaped through performative patterns. By looking at the main characters of the novel, it becomes clear that while identity change is possible, most characters are not in control of these changes. Only characters that try to re-shape uncontroversial aspects of identity manage to achieve agency. This paper shows that not only does the text point to the dangers of trying to subvert controversial aspects of one’s identity. It also points to the difficulties of disentangling oneself from the societal mechanisms that one tries to oppose, and hence to the multilayered difficulties of achieving agency. While identities in *The English Patient* are not fixed but change, identity change only rarely entails agency.
Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (1992) features characters with different backgrounds in Europe and Northern Africa at the time of World War II. At the centre is the patient of the title. As the ambiguous nature of his identity is gradually unfolded, the identities of the other main characters are questioned too. They have “been disassembled by the process of war, their sense of their identity and selfhood shattered” (Thomas 227). They are all forced to face the wounds that the war has inflicted on them and ask themselves who they really are – if that question can be answered.

What constitutes and forms one’s identity is a question that has received much attention from authors and scholars. The traditional view of identity as stable has shifted to a view of identity as fragmented and unstable (Turnau). One of the most important writers on the subject of how identity is formed and can be reformed is queer theorist Judith Butler. Her main ideas were first presented in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), where she describes how a sense of gender is developed. Here she introduces performativity, “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler *Gender* 179, emphasis removed), as the source of gender identity. There is no inherent gender that makes a person behave in a certain way, but instead repeated acts that are regulated by society create the illusion that they reflect and stem from a person’s identity. These acts are thus not the effect but the cause of gender (Butler *Bodies* 2). While Butler focuses on gender identity, “performativity can equally effectively be applied to the construction of other identities” (Philip 43).

Butler writes that “[p]erformativity is […] a reiteration of […] a set of norms” (*Bodies* 12). These norms, however, can be challenged. Butler’s central idea is that since identity is constructed through interplay between the individual and society, it is not fixed but can be re-shaped. When behavioural, or performative, patterns change, there is a possibility for agency: “when the repeated acts for some reason fail to repeat in exactly the same way, […] a space for agency and transformation is opened” (Philip 42). Other critics argue, though, that an extensive reworking of identity is a risky undertaking: “Resistant or subversive performatitive repetitions […] are always done […] under surveillance and the threat of potentially severe punishment” (Thompson 132). Hence, while there is a possibility for agency, society often hinders a person from achieving that agency. In addition, it has been suggested that “even those [actions] apparently in opposition to the identity categories of the power structure, are […] already a function of it” (Scheie). Thus, while agency is possible, identity change does not necessarily entail that an individual has achieved agency. The purpose of this essay is to

---

1 For this essay, agency is when characters manage to re-shape themselves by breaking free from societal constraints and instigate changes of their own volition in their performative patterns.
show that in *The English Patient*, identity is shaped and re-shaped by performative patterns, but that identity change only rarely entails agency.\(^2\)

Performativity requires the acting out of performative patterns. As I focus on each character, for the purposes of the essay, I’ll relate each one to a concept, to one aspect of identity. The factors that govern characters’ performative patterns differ, and thus the role of agency, which necessitates looking at one character at a time. The structure of the essay is as follows. I will first focus on how performativity works on a basic level and how agency is illustrated by characters that re-shape uncontroversial aspects of identity, Hana and Caravaggio. Then the question of agency will gradually become more complex as I focus on characters that fail to achieve agency. Katherine attempts to subvert her gender identity and almost succeeds, but remains trapped by societal constraints. Almásy and Kip, on the other hand, may seem to achieve agency when their identities change radically, but, as I will show, they fail to break free from societal norms.

I will begin by looking at Hana, who nurses the patient, and how she manages to subvert the performative pattern that victimizes her. Instead, she reforms herself when there is space for agency. Hana is one of several characters that face a situation where their bodies are physically deformed. Regardless of whether this is the result of injuries inflicted by themselves or others, it remains clear that the human body is intricately linked to human self-conception, and that wounded bodies create a sense of victimization in the characters. Hana is traumatized by the war, and the war leaves traces in her physical appearance. When she is introduced to the brutality of war and the endless amount of patients, her body soon becomes a part of her experiences:

> After three full days without rest, she finally lay down on the floor beside a mattress where someone lay dead, and slept for twelve hours […]. When she woke, she picked up a pair of scissors […] and began to cut her hair, not concerned with shape or length, just cutting it away – the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind – when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in a wound. She would have nothing to link her, to lock her to death. (Ondaatje 49-50)

\(^2\) Since identity is understood as shaped by reiterated patterns of behaviour, identity change is taken to depend not only on the disruption of the initial performative pattern, but on the development of a new pattern that establishes a new sense of identity. For clarity, behavioural changes will therefore be divided into different performative patterns, even though one might argue that such changes are in fact more fluid and less clear-cut.
For pragmatic reasons, Hana is forced to cut her long hair in a sequence filled with symbolism. She lies down next to a dead soldier, and the young girl that had decided to help in the war in Italy and that been shocked by the violence, is transformed. When the new Hana gets up, her cut hair becomes the physical symbol of her as an adult and experienced woman. It also becomes an outer reflection of the inner scars that the war has wrought in her: “I know death now […]. I know all the smells, I know how to divert them from agony” (Ondaatje 84). On an even more personal level, her stepfather, Patrick, dies some time before she is left with the patient at the villa. Receiving the news of this nearly kills her:

Nurses too became shell-shocked from the dying around them. Or from something as small as a letter. […] They broke the way a man dismantling a mine broke the second his geography exploded. The way Hana broke in the Santa Chiara Hospital when an official walked down the space between a hundred beds and gave her a letter that told her of the death of her father. (Ondaatje 41)

Hence, at the time when she starts nursing the patient, she is as much a patient as he is, and it seems that she is on the verge of collapsing. Even her colleagues note that she “was in rough shape […]. She should have been sent home” (Ondaatje 28). Hana is here stuck in a performative pattern that makes her internalize the feeling of being a victim.

This pattern is broken when she decides to stay with the patient at the villa, where they remain alone until Caravaggio arrives. She now adopts a new performative pattern that is in some ways a denial of her tough experiences, but also a way for her to survive. Free from the patronizing attitude of her colleagues, she is free to do as she likes, and this is the first step. When Caravaggio meets her, he notes how the war has deformed her physically: “she […] looked taut, boiled down to just body enough to get her through this efficiently. Her body had been in a war and […] it had used every part of itself” (Ondaatje 81). When Hana remains at the villa when the other nurses leave, there is suddenly space for agency as the regulatory norms of the war break down. Now, it is Hana that will regulate a new performative pattern for herself, not so much in terms of what she wants to do but in terms of what she needs to do. Ondaatje himself describes the villa as “an Eden, an escape, a cul-de-sac” (Bolland 30). The restraints of society are largely absent here, and the harsh realities of war are to some extent put aside. Instead of the regulating forces of doctors, nurses, and wounded soldiers, there is now only Hana and the patient, which means that she will now to a large extent regulate
herself. One of the things she does is to “remove all mirrors and stack them away in an empty room” (Ondaatje 23), which means that she does not have to face her mirror image and her changed physical appearance. Alone in the large villa, she is free to do as she pleases: “she had taken a dead man’s hammock and begun to use it. She would bang spikes into whatever walls she desired, whichever room she wanted to wake in, floating above all the filth and cordite and water on the floors, the rats that had stared to appear” (Ondaatje 47). Being in control gives her the opportunity to literally rise above the destructive elements of war and avoid being ‘drowned’, or breaking down. Instead of changing from a nurse into a passive victim, as it seemed that she would, she can now start an active and meaningful healing process on her own. That this is the case, even though she also functions as the patient’s nurse, becomes clearer towards the end, when she writes to her stepmother, Clara. Here, we learn that her tending to the burned patient might be a way for her to redeem herself in her own eyes for not being able to take care of Patrick when he was wounded: “He was a burned man and I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. [...] He was alone, without lover or kin” (Ondaatje 296, italics removed). Like the ‘English’ patient, Patrick was severely burned, and later died from his wounds. Tending the patient, then, Hana can work through the loss of her stepfather without breaking down, tending simultaneously to herself in a constructive way. As John Bolland notes, her caring for him works as a “consecration of herself for her dead father and as a mythic quest for redemption in a world bereft of value” (83). This explains why she comes to view the patient as a “despairing saint” (Ondaatje 4), uninterested in his real origin. That Hana is working through the trauma that the war has caused in her also explains some of the more odd sequences, such as when she, a 20-year-old, plays hopscotch: “[she] draws [...] rectangles, so there is a pyramid of them [...]. She leaps forward” (Ondaatje 15). She also plays hide-and-seek with Kip. These games become not only a way to pass the time in an isolated environment, but also rituals that can help to heal the wounds from the war by focusing on other things. As the novel closes and Hana writes to her stepmother, Clara, of her plans to go back to Canada, there is a strong sense of sadness but also recovery as she decides to go home. In spirit then, Hana is not and will not become the deformed woman that Caravaggio observes when he arrives at the villa. While she is traumatized by the war, she never accepts the victimization of herself that corresponds to the destruction that the war has caused in her physically. When she stays at the villa, the negative performative pattern where she is on the verge of internalizing a feeling of helplessness is broken. Instead, she can care for herself. Revealing the functions of performativity, she treats her internal and external scars
as the cause and not the effect of her status as a victim. She develops a new performative pattern of her own volition, becomes a changed person and thus achieves agency.

Like Hana, Caravaggio is forced to question the extent to which he identifies himself with his body. In contrast to Hana, he initially surrenders to the notion that he has changed because his body has, and only through a painstaking process that lasts the entire novel does he reinvent himself. Caravaggio, like Hana and Patrick, figure in Ondaatje’s ‘prequel’ *In the Skin of a Lion*. As readers of that novel know, Caravaggio is a thief. When we meet him in *The English Patient*, he is a spy, for practical rather than political reasons: “They couldn’t believe their luck, they were falling over themselves to use me” (Ondaatje 35). He is Italian and a thief, a perfect person for the Allies to use for missions like stealing documents or retrieving photographs in a war-torn Europe. As a spy, then, he is still a thief, only now he is paid to steal. Then, he is caught when he tries to steal a photograph, and later subjected to torture. When he arrives at the villa, he is a changed man and declares that he has lost his nerve to steal. Hana asks him why and he simply answers that “I was caught” (Ondaatje 34). Having been caught does not seem to be his primary concern, though. He has been caught before – he was even put in prison in *Skin of a Lion* (Ondaatje *Skin* 179) – but what has changed is that his body has been brutally tortured and that, above else, his hands have been damaged. In an attempt to make him incapable of stealing again, his thumbs are cut off during torture, and this is the turning point for the man who has based his living on his finger skills. It seems that Caravaggio at this point identifies himself with his body, as his body is the means by which he can define himself as a thief: “For months afterwards he found himself looking at only the thumbs of people, as if the incident had changed him just by producing envy. But the event had produced age, as if […] they had poured a solution into him that slowed him” (Ondaatje 59). Here he acquiesces to the performative pattern started by his interrogators when they cut off his thumbs, convinced that he cannot be a thief anymore. Though he is injured, it appears that it is not so much his physical wounds but his identifying himself with his body that make him go into a state of self-denial and take refuge in a secret identity at the hospital, where he does not utter a word until he hears of Hana, the child of his friend Patrick. It seems that without his thumbs, he is nothing, and he spends “more than four months” (Ondaatje 27) recuperating in silence at the hospital. At the villa, he initially even opposes Hana’s suggestion to remove the bandages from his hands: “They’re comfortable. Like gloves” (Ondaatje 53). His wounds have become a place for him to hide and he has acquiesced to the status of a victim.
As the story progresses, Caravaggio’s attitude appears to shift. While he never verbalizes a changed attitude, we can see a final showdown between the body and mind of him at the end of the story. Such a reading sheds light on his somewhat mysterious penultimate appearance in the novel, when he makes “a one-strand bridge with hemp rope down to the roof of the next villa” and is “in midair half across the gorge that lies like a deep scar alongside the villa” (Ondaatje 297). The choice of words here is crucial. Caravaggio refuses to accept his status as a handicapped person and uses his hands to build a bridge that lets him cross over his own ‘scar’ and thus defeat it. While it is not made explicit, it seems that Caravaggio “is attempting to steal a statue of Demetrius” (Ferrell 116), which he knows has no value in terms of the money he might be able to sell it for. What is important is that the statue has great value to him as the symbol of his reclaimed identity as a thief. He thus transcends the notion of being hindered as a thief because he has no thumbs. This episode is the most clear-cut example of how Caravaggio manages to break free from the notion that he cannot be a thief, but I would suggest not treating this as an isolated incident or a sudden revelation on his part. When the narrator notes that “[h]e is just a thief” (Ondaatje 251), this does not simply reflect that he used to be a thief but that he actually is becoming one again. Caravaggio’s return to thievery may at first seem sudden and simplified, but it is not. As I will demonstrate, it is rewarding to view earlier events during his stay at the villa as parts of a performative pattern that leads him from his initial feeling of victimization to a regained identity as a thief.

The performative pattern that makes Caravaggio feel like he is only a victim and no longer a thief is initially disrupted when he decides to leave the hospital. Now, he is free from the hospital and its definition of him as a victim. He is still not in balance when he arrives at the villa, but a change slowly takes place as he discovers that the regulating factors of the hospital are gone. Soon after his arrival, he tries to go to sleep but cannot:

He undresses, rubs his palms gently over his neck and for a while lies down on the unmade bed. […] An hour later he is on the roof of the villa. Up on the peak he is aware of the shelled sections along the slope of roofs, the two acres of destroyed gardens and orchards that neighbour the villa. He looks over where they are in Italy. (Ondaatje 31)

Caravaggio surveys the villa and its surroundings, a small but significant first step away from his status as a passive victim trapped in his room. He is not simply admiring the view, for a
deep knowledge of one’s surroundings is essential for a thief and the watching is thus of symbolic importance here, as it exemplifies his changed behaviour. It should also be noted that this is one of only two instances when Caravaggio is naked, and his nakedness here mirrors the incident when he is caught stealing the photograph.\(^3\) The scene on the roof is also echoed in the episode when he goes across the ropes over the garden to the neighbouring villa. The roof sequence, then, works as a link between his former and subsequent status as a thief. This remains inference, however, since it is never commented on by the narrator or Caravaggio himself, just like much of his healing process. While it is seemingly a non-dramatic scene, when seen in context it is part of his becoming a thief again. Later, there is a scene that seems to be a development of his watching the surroundings. Now, he is not only observing the territory but actively scrutinizing it, and his senses are alert. He is becoming an active person again, rather than a passive victim:

On two occasions the sapper trails Caravaggio’s wanderings at night. But two days later Caravaggio stops him and says, Don’t follow me again. He begins to deny it, but the older man puts his hand across his lying face and quiets him. So the soldier knows Caravaggio was aware of him two nights before. (Ondaatje 73)

Caravaggio’s nightly wanderings remain unexplained as the novel closes, but they are important in that they highlight his reassured independence. Free from the confinement of the hospital, the performative pattern that makes him feel unable to be a thief is broken, and he becomes a thief again step by step. He even ‘steals’ morphine at the villa, as a first, careful attempt at thievery: “He […] sniffed out [Hana’s] medical supplies […]. The small tubes of morphine were now a source for him” (Ondaatje 166). In a similar fashion, he is suddenly in possession of a bottle of wine, which he says that he has “managed to scrounge” (Ondaatje 84), as if he does not quite acknowledge his own stealing even to himself. These are all small steps but together they form a new performative pattern. There is an additional uncommented scene that highlights his development, and that is the seemingly innocent incident when Kip prepares dinner for the three to celebrate Hana’s birthday. Caravaggio eats and drinks just like the other two, but the attentive reader will remember an earlier bit of information: “He […] prefers to eat alone, though he always sits with Hana during meals. Vanity, he thinks. […] She has seen him from a window eating with his hands […], not a fork or a knife in sight, as if

\(^3\) When Caravaggio steals the photograph, his nakedness is foregrounded and he even pretends to use his penis as a key to open a door (Ondaatje 38).
he were learning to eat like someone from the east” (Ondaatje 39-40). At that point, Caravaggio is ashamed of, and defined by, his missing thumbs. By contrast, it is a strong indication that he has regained his self-assurance and the ability to use his hands when he eats with the others at the party without thinking about it. During his stay at the villa, then, Caravaggio slowly breaks free from the destructive performative pattern that made him feel unable to become a thief again. One step at a time, he slowly regains his independence, self-assurance, and physical ability, which makes him able to finally take the large step and go across the wires to reach the statue. When he arrives at the villa, the destructive performative pattern that victimizes him is broken. Through a repetition of a new set of acts, he actively recreates the sense of being a thief again, thus achieving agency.

The examples of Hana and Caravaggio show how disrupted performative patterns can allow for agency and active re-shaping of identity. Often, however, it is not that simple: “While Butler's performative is theoretically provocative, it ultimately suggests less how to enact a strategic deconstruction of gender or other subject positions than how difficult such an endeavor might be” (Scheie). The rest of this essay will look at the difficulties and dangers of changing more fundamental and controversial aspects of the self. This part of the essay will focus on characters that do not achieve agency. I will begin this section by looking at how performative patterns shape gender in a discussion that will be close to Butler’s original idea of the possibility to subvert gender. This is exemplified by Katherine’s attempt to break free from her traditional gender role. She never, however, manages to break free from the men around her and her move towards agency is ultimately aborted by her death. The novel has been criticized for “question[ing] the idea of fixed identity for nations but not women” (Burcar), but this is, as I will show, erroneous. To begin with, she is locked into a performative pattern where she is defined only through her husband. A member of the upper middle or upper class, she is a “socialite” (Ondaatje 230) who has learned to love “family traditions […] and] would have hated to die without a name” (Ondaatje 170). In the rich and adventurous Geoffrey Clifton, she finds the perfect match. She becomes his trophy: “Clifton celebrate[s] the beauty of her arms, the thin lines of her ankles. He describe[s] witnessing her swim” (Ondaatje 230). For her husband, she is only the object of sexual desire and an object to display; their marriage represents a traditional view of the marital institution where the man provides wealth and ancestry and the woman handsome looks and companionship. The

---

4 Burcar also mentions the ideas of Butler in her article on Katherine, but her main argument lies in pointing out that Katherine is reduced to a sexual object in the eyes of the males around her. As will become evident in my discussion, this is an oversimplification of her function in the novel.
objectification of Katherine is primarily a reflection of Geoffrey’s view of her, but also shows that she is still only defined as his wife. Since she is not given a voice at this stage in the narrative, for the reader she is defined by Geoffrey’s constant appraisal of her beauty but disinterest in her as a person. Hence, her gender role and function as a trophy is reiterated on several levels.

There is a change in Katherine in the desert. As she starts reading, she steps out of the role as simply the object of male gaze: “she was muted, read constantly, […] as if something had occurred or she realized suddenly that wondrous thing about the human being, it can change. […] She was discovering herself” (Ondaatje 230). Katherine now takes an interest in whatever there is to read. Through education on a small scale, she initiates the disruption of the performative pattern in which she is only a passive object, and takes the first step towards agency. In a scene that seems to suggest that Katherine is introduced to or now contemplates the idea of adultery or leaving her husband, she reads the controversial story of Gyges in The Histories aloud to her husband and the other explorers. In this story, which partly mirrors what happens to Geoffrey, Katherine and Almásy, a man brags to Gyges about the looks of his wife and Gyges ends up taking the man’s place. Almásy notices the importance of Katherine’s reading this story: “a path suddenly revealed itself in real life. Even though she had not conceived it as a first errant step in any way. I am sure. […] She stopped reading and looked up. […] She was evolving. […] With the help of an anecdote, I fell in love” (Ondaatje 233-34). This scene displays a previously unseen nerve on Katherine’s part, and she even makes sure that Geoffrey pays attention. The story she reads also seems aimed at Almásy, since she just borrowed the book from him and makes sure that he hears the story too. She thus invokes Almásy’s interest and instigates the affair, soon actively and not only through hints: “she […] shook my hand, […] turned back to me and said, ‘I want you to ravish me’” (Ondaatje 236). Becoming involved with Almásy is another part of a new, more independent performative pattern as she starts to break free from the constraints of her traditional gender role.

As the love affair between Almásy and Katherine develops, however, it soon becomes quite complex. Katherine realizes that she is not liberated just because she is with Almásy. Initially, the lovers find themselves in an impossible situation, since the affair must be kept secret from Geoffrey. This, they are aware, will never be possible in the long run since they are inevitably seen together by others: “The machine would not necessarily have revealed to Clifton, married only eighteen months, his wife’s infidelity, but it began to encircle the fault, the disease in the system” (Ondaatje 237). Possibly as a result of the trying situation,
Katherine begins to strike Almásy repeatedly, leaving him visibly battered: “He would step into an embrace with her, glancing first to see what moveable objects were around. He would meet her with others in public with bruises or a bandaged head” (Ondaatje 154). It is never explained, though, exactly why she hits him. It is also possible that her desperation is linked to the reasons she subsequently gives Almásy for leaving him: “I think you have become inhuman […]. You slide past everything with your fear and hate of […] owning, of being owned, of being named” (Ondaatje 238). Katherine cannot stand that Almásy refuses any notion of ‘ownership’ of her (or her of him), which, it may seem, for him would be to question the independence of both Katherine and himself. But, his view of Katherine is really confined to her as a sex object: “[he] struggle[s] with her nearby presence, […] obsessed […] with her possible mouth, the tautness behind the knee, the white plain of stomach” (Ondaatje 235). His ‘refusal of ownership’ thus seems to be the result of a fear of giving up his own “self-sufficiency” (Ondaatje 238) rather than a display of respect for Katherine. He is in fact extremely possessive of her, not only as his obsession with her grows stronger after she leaves him, but also during their affair: “This is my shoulder, he thinks, not her husband’s, this is my shoulder” (Ondaatje 156). Personally, then, Almásy is extremely possessive of her, but openly makes it seems as though he refuses ownership. It would be a mistake, though, to assume that Katherine wants Almásy to declare his love for her openly because she is used to such appraisal from Geoffrey. Her violence and leaving Almásy should, rather, be read as the consequence of her not feeling recognized. She leaves him because she is “[t]oo proud to be a lover, a secret” (Ondaatje 171). She thus wants to be recognized not in terms of her body, which is what she is only to Almásy, but as a person. As she is too proud to be a lover and mentions Almásy’s hatred of being named as reasons for leaving him, she possibly hints at marriage, or at least a wish for their affair to become public. Marriage or commitment, however, is something that Almásy would never accept: “Women want everything of a lover. […] I would sink below the surface. So armies disappear under sand” (Ondaatje 238). Rather than refusing ownership, then, Almásy escapes commitment and this is unacceptable to Katherine. While she succeeds in transcending her status as a passive object and a trophy in her marriage, she instead finds herself as an unacknowledged mistress with whom Almásy refuses to become seriously involved. One might therefore read her violence and leaving him as an attempt to break free from this new but yet similar role. She does not accept a position governed by her lover anymore, be it as an unacknowledged wife or a mistress. Her attempt to subvert gender thus continues.
Katherine’s attempt to subvert her gender identity is not uncontested. It is, rather, continually challenged and her identity is now what Butler calls a “site of permanent […] contest” (Bodies 222). While Katherine may be on the way towards agency after her self-discovery, she is not free of the regulatory norms of society, embodied in the men around her. Both Geoffrey and, ironically, Almásy try to claim ownership of her and to punish her for her attempt to achieve agency. First, Geoffrey demonstrates his determination to control his wife. As the adultery becomes known to Geoffrey, he makes it clear that nobody has the right to be with Katherine but himself. In an attempt to take permanent control of her he tries to kill her: “Her husband had crashed his plane. It had been planned as a suicide-murder by her husband that would involve all three of us” (Ondaatje 171). Almásy, in turn, refuses to accept her impending death when they are in the cave after the plane crash and tries to make her into his own icon: “her whole body was covered [by Almásy] in bright pigment. Herbs and stones and light and the ash of acacia to make her eternal” (Ondaatje 260-61). It seems that with Geoffrey dead, Almásy can finally live out his obsession with Katherine to the fullest, an obsession that means claiming possession of her. Even after she is dead, then, the fight for the control of Katherine continues. When Almásy returns to the cave, he even has sex with her dead body: “I approached her naked […], wanting to undress her, still wanting to love her. What is terrible in what I did? […] You can make love to a woman with a broken arm, or a woman with fever” (Ondaatje 170). Now, he can possess her completely. This becomes a final and complete violation of Katherine, whose lack of agency is here made manifest as Almásy controls her even after her death in an even more extreme gesture than Geoffrey’s attempt to murder her. The acts of both men exemplify that “subversive performative repetitions […] are always done […] under […] the threat of potentially severe punishment” (Thompson 132). She had tried to break free from her confining performative pattern and to subvert her traditional gender role, but she still depended on the regulators of society. The space for agency that the disruption of the initial performative pattern gives space for does not remain unchallenged. While the new performative pattern starts to change her, she is killed for trying to change her identity in undesired directions. Thus, she almost manages to re-shape herself and subvert her gender role, but, ultimately, fails. Her attempt to achieve agency is thwarted by the acts of Geoffrey and Almásy, by whom she is still governed.

The nature of nationality is investigated through the mysterious Almásy, also known as ‘the English patient’. From the beginning, it is obvious that his background will only

---

5 Note that this is a positive phrase for Butler. She strives to move away from the notion of identity as stable and fixed and sees this, as opposed to submissiveness and closure, as the path towards subversion.
gradually be revealed. For some time, the other characters at the villa project their expectations, fears and desires onto the patient, whose burned body mirrors his unknown past. He is called ‘the English patient’ by the nurses when Hana meets him because he speaks English so well, and this epithet sticks with him since nobody knows of his background. Kip, Hana, and Caravaggio all have their own theories about Almásy’s identity. Ironically, it turns out that they are all both right and wrong in their assumptions about his nationality, and in this way these characters reflect Almásy’s conflicted self. For Kip, the Indian sapper, the patient is an old and wise Englishman, and seems to function as a replacement for Lord Suffolk, Kip’s former mentor in England. Almásy is thus a possibility for Kip to continue his contact with Englishness: “He was most comfortable with […] autodidacts, like his mentor, Lord Suffolk, like the English patient” (Ondaatje 111). Caravaggio correctly suspects the patient to be the Hungarian desert spy Almásy from the very beginning, and tries to prove this by drugging him with morphine and making him talk about his memories from the war. Hana’s interest in the patient, by contrast, lies at a different level. She is not interested in him as the representative of a culture, like Kip, nor is she interested in his place in international politics, like Caravaggio. For Hana, only his function as her “despairing saint” (Ondaatje 3) is of interest, not his background. When Caravaggio begins to uncover his ‘true’ identity, she is not interested: “It doesn’t matter who he is. The war’s over” (Ondaatje 166). Hana’s attitude, which might at first seem naïve and a way of rejecting reality, turns out to be the one truest to the patient’s conception of himself, not as a saint but as someone without a stable nationality. (Though, as we shall see below, this notion is not always accepted and can be questioned.) Almásy develops a sense of not belonging to any nation, and this begins with his cosmopolitan background. He is Hungarian in the sense that he was born in Hungary. He is English in the sense that he was educated in England and “is very English” (Ondaatje 96), which earns him his nickname. In addition, he speaks German and works for the Germans during the war, which makes him a traitor, at least in the eyes of Caravaggio, and raises questions about where he belongs. He is all of those things, yet none of them. Almásy embodies the idea that one is what one does. For him, it is not a matter of being English or Hungarian, but ‘being’ none of those and no other nationality either, at least on a personal level. The constructed nature of national identity is thus highlighted, and even though the world around him constantly tries to put a national label on him, Almásy himself experiences a sense of ‘nationlessness’. This is the result of changes in his behaviour, of one performative pattern replacing another.
The performative pattern that leads Almásy away from a sense of nationality begins with his mixed background but becomes all the more apparent in the story of his desert explorations. He is sent as a cartographer to Northern Africa to look for the lost oasis of Zerzura and to map areas of the Libyan Desert. The desert has a profound effect on him: “For some years I lived in the desert. I learned everything I knew there” (Ondaatje 177). He works with a group of explorers gathered from all over Europe in the ever-changing desert, which cannot be “claimed or owned” (Ondaatje 138). The exile-like existence makes him become like the Bedouins they meet: “We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless” (Ondaatje 138). Butler writes that “‘sex’ is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time […] and] a forcible reiteration of [regulatory] norms” (Bodies 1-2). It is when such regulatory norms break down and the performative patterns are disrupted that a change in a person can take place. Then, that person will no longer necessarily identify themselves with the feelings and behaviour that is the cause and not the result of, as in this case, nationality. While it is hard to track the exact development for Almásy towards a feeling of nationlessness since his narrative is non-linear and incomplete, it is the disruption of performative patterns that leads to a change in his view of his own identity. After he has been born in Hungary and schooled in England, a new performative pattern develops in the desert, one where his ‘nationality’ is of no importance, or rather does not exist. For Almásy, this is clearly not a painful process, for he recognizes a change in himself: “I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states” (Ondaatje 138). His sense of nationlessness is further deepened by the realization that the creation of nations and the notion of nationality are destructive and lead to warfare, essentially a feeling comparable to what Butler calls “disidentification with regulatory norms” (Bodies 4). His new performative pattern proves to be more positive for him, when he realizes that he has been ‘forced’ to conceive of himself as belonging to a nation. In a passage often cited, Almásy talks of his feelings towards ownership, which in some ways contradict his former job as a cartographer and his attitude towards Katherine, but explain his political views:

I believe in such cartography – to be marked by nature, not just to label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal books. We are not owned or monogamous in our taste or experience. All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps. (Ondaatje 261)
These views are developed in between the two world wars, when he lives in a society defined by not belonging to a nation. Nationality, then, is not something that has to be part of one’s identity, or at least this is what Almásy himself claims. This is not only a political view; years of travelling in a place where nationality is only a notion actually results in a sense of nationlessness for him. Ridding himself of the cloak of nationality gives him a sense of freedom so strong that he never deviates from a hostile attitude towards nationhood again. The idea that nationality must be part of a person’s identity is thus partly rejected when Almásy’s performative patterns change. As will show below, though, the individual is not solely in control of his identity just because a performative pattern is disrupted.

Almásy claims to be without ties to nations, but the text questions what nationlessness really means in practice for someone caught up in the war. He can claim to be nationless but cannot ‘be’ nationless as this notion is in conflict with the regulatory norms of society outside the isolation of the desert. This is highlighted when Almásy is interrogated first by British Military Intelligence and later by Caravaggio, who try to determine his nationality and make him responsible for what he has done. It must be noted that Almásy’s ‘nationlessness’ (and obsession for Katherine) makes him detached from moral guilt and the real consequences of his actions. An example of this is when he decides to go back to the cave to take care of the corpse of Katherine. Though he is well aware that he will become a part of the raging war, he does not hesitate to help the Nazis: “I volunteered to take Eppler across the desert” (Ondaatje 254). This is a decision he never seems to regret, even though it carries strong political and moral implications judged by normal conceptions. He refuses to acknowledge such implications and does not see his actions as taking a stand for anything. This attitude shows not just how strong his disidentification with regulatory norms is, but also that his claim to be nationlessness seems to fall outside common norms and conceptions. From a societal point of view, nationlessness is an impossible position. Essentially, Almásy’s declared hatred of ownership and nations primarily results in him advocating his own freedom, as in his refusal to accept moral responsibility for helping the Nazis. Most importantly, whether he actually is nationless is, even on a personal level, a matter of debate.

Almásy’s ‘nationlessness’ can be further questioned. When the performative patterns of nationality are disrupted in the desert, it might seem that he achieves agency since he is positive about the changes he goes through, but this is not so. That becomes apparent when one examines his nationlessness more deeply. Indeed, one could say that one notion of nationality is traded for another, since the desert becomes a stand-in nation. First, he describes the explorers as “desert Europeans” (Ondaatje 135), which might indicate that they belong to
both places. This, however, soon shifts into identification with the desert only: “We were a small clutch of a nation between the wars […]. An oasis society” (Ondaatje 136, emphasis added). The desert is for Almásy a place of history and ancient cultures, and the possibility for him to become part of the history of a unique, utopian area that “could not be claimed or owned” (Ondaatje 138). He carries around a copy of Herodotus’ Histories, into which he adds his own observations, literally rewriting history. His explorations earn him a place in the history of these areas: “Look at a map of the Libyan Desert and you will see names. […] Almásy – Madox 1931-1937” (Ondaatje 136). Almásy’s strong feelings for the desert could even be viewed as a mere replacement for nationalistic feelings: “I was [a lover of the desert]. Show me a desert, as you would show another man a river” (Ondaatje 240). This becomes especially striking if one considers his aggressive attitude towards nations, and that his love for the desert functions similarly to nationalism in that he wishes to define himself through his connection with the desert culture only: “I came to hate nations. […] All of us […] wished to remove the clothing of our countries. […] Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert” (Ondaatje 138-39). Juxtaposing those statements implicitly questions the agency that it might seem that Almásy achieves in the desert. The notion of nationlessness is not a stand that the explorers choose but the result of their strong feelings for the desert, their notion of the utopian way of life there and their desire to be part of that culture. While nationality as a stable and necessary part of one’s identity is questioned in the novel because it depends on undisrupted performative patterns, the agency of nationlessness can thus also be questioned because Almásy’s sense of this seems to stem from identification with the desert and work in a similar way as nationalism. It has been suggested that “[a]ll actions, even those apparently in opposition to the identity categories of the power structure, are […] already a function of it” (Scheie), and this aptly describes Almásy nationlessness. In his attempt to attack the notion of nationality, he becomes an unwitting prey of its very functions, and never manages to break free from the societal norms he tries to oppose.

Nationality as well as racial identity is investigated in Kip, the Sikh sapper. Due to the fact that two different performative patterns are at work in him, I will devote the remaining part of this paper to discuss identity changes and the question of agency in relation to him. Born in Lahore, India, he is a person positioned between two cultures. On the one hand he has his Indian family and their traditions, on the other the values of the British Empire. He admires the English and becomes more and more a part of English culture. He goes to England to join the army ‘voluntarily’, but we should read this as the result of a process of identifying himself with England that started earlier in India. He has a, to his family,
controversial respect for the colonizers: “my brother thinks me a fool for trusting the English” (Ondaatje 217). His upbringing has made him develop two distinct notions: that he regards the English as superior and believes that he has the duty to help them: “he is a man from Asia who has in these last years assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son” (Ondaatje 217). To maintain these notions, Kip must adhere to performative patterns that keep reaffirming them, but as we shall see, it inevitably becomes impossible to maintain such notions. Instead, the performative patterns that reaffirm these notions break down when Kip’s attempt to become one with the English is hindered by the view of him as the ‘other’. I will begin, however, by looking at how Kip’s feelings for the English are initially strengthened.

Step by step, Kip participates more and more in English culture. The most crucial step may be when he joins the army, which directly puts him in a position where he might one day have to sacrifice himself for England. But being in England also brings him into contact with direct Englishness, at least as far as he is concerned. While there is no reason to suspect that Kip spoke anything but English in India, it certainly was not British English. Now, he begins to feel a connection through the language. He studies a map: “Countisbury and Are. Mapped by R. Fones. Drawn by desire of Mr. James Halliday. ‘Drawn by desire…’ He was beginning to love the English” (Ondaatje 190). It becomes important for him to master this ‘new’ language himself: “He walked over to a wall and stared at a barometer […]. He muttered the words to himself with his new English pronunciation. ‘Wery dry. Very dry.’ (Ondaatje 187). It is a small but an important step for him. Here we can see how the cause – the performative pattern that strengthens his sense of Englishness – becomes mixed up with the notion of it as being the effect of his belonging to the English. Lord Suffolk, the leader of the team of sappers that Kip joins, and his secretary, Miss Morden, are important characters in this process. They become a kind of surrogate parents for him, which might be emphasized when they ask him if he would like to see a play. Kip chooses Peter Pan, a story about children who live without their real families. At the theatre, he finds himself among unruly children (Ondaatje 197), and the play incident thus foregrounds his position as ‘their’ child on two levels. Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden are, in particular, crucial to Kip’s connection to Englishness. They introduce the young sapper to a number of English customs, including tea-drinking, which he learns to love. Most importantly, they make him feel at home: “If there had been no war he would never have roused himself from Countisbury and his retreat” (Ondaatje 187). Here he forgets, of course, that if there had not been a war, he would never have met Suffolk and Miss Morden, and that it is only his work as a sapper that is of real interest to them. The couple’s function as symbols of Englishness is also foregrounded by
their names: “Suffolk is the name of an English county, 100 km from London, and […] Morden is the name of a suburb of London” (Oatley 9). Particularly in Suffolk, Kip finds the epitome of Englishness: “He was introducing the customs of England to the young Sikh as if it was a recently discovered culture” (Ondaatje 184). For Kip, Suffolk also embodies superiority: “He was a brilliant man” (Ondaatje 177-78). Thus, Suffolk makes Kip feel at home in England, and affirms his sense that the English are, within the areas that he experiences, superior. In this way, the performative patterns that make Kip respect the English and feel that he belongs to them continue to be reiterated, seemingly without being challenged.

One of the most visually striking episodes where Kip is literally juxtaposed with whiteness and Englishness is when he is given his first real mission as a sapper. He travels with Suffolk and Miss Morden to Westbury, where Germans have dropped bombs on the giant chalk horse that was made in 1778. He “stands where the horse’s saddle would have lain across its back. […] Then he descends, down into the giant white chalk horse […] his boots scuffing the rough white chalk as he moves down the slope” (Ondaatje 181). It is important that his first mission is executed on a horse and places Kip in a pose similar to that of a rider, since horse riding is traditionally a sport for the English aristocracy that Lord Suffolk belongs to. It is also important that this takes place on this historic location, an English landmark, as if Kip is now symbolically becoming a part of English culture and history. The white chalk that he stirs up – note the repeated use of the word ‘white’ in this section – even falls on his dark skin and covers him, which thus suggests that he becomes white as he works on the hill: “He is in the white horse. He feels hot on the chalk hill, the white dust of it swirling up all around him. […] The chalk dust lifts, then settles on everything, his hands” (Ondaatje 202). His dark skin colour is hidden beneath the white chalk. Miss Morden even makes him take a break in his bomb disposal and pours them tea, hence foregrounding the Englishness of the situation. His Indian heritage is slowly being covered by English customs.

As exemplified above, names are very important in this novel. Sometimes they have a symbolic function and sometimes they are used to show changes in characters. The name of the patient is unknown for most of the book, and Hana’s name is not revealed until the second chapter, which is circa 30 pages after she first enters the story. A similar and developed strategy is used for Kip, who is first known as ‘the young sapper’ or ‘the Sikh’. It is as if his name is not revealed until the reader has learned who he is, as with Hana, whose name and family background we learn through Caravaggio. The special thing about Kip, however, is
that he is referred to in different fashions even after we have come to know him. As it turns out, ‘Kip’ is not his real name but his nickname. When he is in England, he is referred to as Kirpal Singh, which is his original, Sikh, name. It seems then that Ondaatje’s strategy is to use the name for Kip that corresponds to how he perceives himself at that point in the narrative. When in England, a crucial step towards Englishness for Kip is when his re-birth as an Englishman is foregrounded by his new name:

The sapper’s nickname is Kip. […] The name had attached himself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, and the officer had exclaimed, ‘What’s this? Kipper grease?’ […] The young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week his real name […] had been forgotten. He hadn’t minded this. (Ondaatje 87)

His re-naming is a significant performative act that establishes his new self since “the act of naming equals the act of creation” (Sireteanu 169). Bolland notes that ‘Kip’ is “an abbreviation of Kipling, and a near homophone for Kipling’s Kim” (33). The name thus hints simultaneously at a famous English writer and at one his most famous imperial novels, which takes place in India. The two sides of Kip’s name hence foreground his divided self since it hints both at his Indian background and at his connection to the English. Most importantly, his re-naming of himself does not reflect his Englishness, but is part of the cause rather than the result of his growing sense of belonging to the English.

It must be noted that the nickname ‘Kip’ could be viewed as degrading, even though Kip seems unaware of this, since it derives from a breakfast fish. This dimension of his relation to the English becomes increasingly more important. While Kip becomes a part of English culture, there are also forces working against that very development. Within Lord Suffolk’s protected environment, the sapper’s sense of belonging to the English is strengthened, but this is not true outside of that domain. In this way, there are two conflicting societal norms: one that treats Kip as belonging to the English and one that defines him as the ‘other’. One way to look at this is to treat these views of Kip as two distinct performative patterns that work in him simultaneously. Since both patterns are governed by societal norms and thus the cause of Kip’s identity change, he never achieves agency. The performative pattern that makes him feel like the ‘other’ explains his last scenes at the villa. In one of the most dramatically intense episodes of The English Patient, Kip hears news of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, rejects all affiliation with England and the white race, and leaves for India.
Seemingly for the first time in his life, he now feels that he does not and does not want to belong to the West. It is a painful revelation: “she hears a scream emerge from his body which had never raised its voice among them. He sinks to his knees, as if unbuckled” (Ondaatje 282). Shocked, angry and frightened, Kip takes his rifle and threatens to kill Almásy, but Caravaggio informs him that he is not English. “American, French, I don’t care”, Kip says, “[w]hen you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman”. Caravaggio understands his view: “They would never have dropped such a bomb on a white nation” (Ondaatje 286). This is a radical change for Kip. He not only turns against his new-found friends at the villa, but symbolically also against the white race and the imperialism of the English when he threatens Almásy. This is of course highly ironical since Almásy sees himself as a person without nationality and had earlier been accused of working for the Nazis.

Now, the young sapper identifies himself not with the English or the West but with the coloured race. He feels a strong sense of betrayal, of his whole life having been based on a lie: “All those speeches of civilisation from kings and queens and presidents […]. Smell it. Listen to the radio and smell the celebration in it” (Ondaatje 285). For Kip too, there is an ironic twist. He has helped the English in the war by working in a bomb disposal unit, which might be seen as a way to illustrate how problems can be overcome if two cultures wish to unite – in the preservation of Europe. The ‘undisposable’ atomic bomb, by contrast, makes it evident that there is still a deep rift between the cultures, which can only be ignored as long as the characters remain isolated in the villa. Kip’s attempt to negotiate and be a mix of cultures – he tries to become one with the English yet never cuts his long Sikh hair and always wears his turban – for him now becomes self-betrayal. Instead he identifies himself with India and decides to leave: “His name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here” (Ondaatje 287). We see him many years later working as a doctor, again referred to as ‘Kirpal’ to denote his breaking with the English. He has taken on Indian performative patterns instead, since his family did initially expect him to become a doctor like a second-born son should. He has left all connection to the English behind.

The ‘sudden’ transformation in Kip when he hears the news on the radio has often been questioned and these scenes are probably the most debated ones of the entire novel. The following is an excerpt from an interview with Ondaatje where this matter is addressed:
[Interviewer:] “I had some questions about Kip's radical change after the A-Bomb was dropped, when he becomes enraged and breaks with everyone. It made sense intellectually, but it seemed a little *deus ex machina*-like to me.”

[Ondaatje:] “When I realized that that was where something was going to happen, when I went back and rewrote the book, I tried to somehow prepare the reader for it, with the arguments with his brother, the stuff in Naples, in a city that's been blown up, references to words like ‘nuclear,’ buried bombs, all those things [...].” (Kamiya)

Reet Sool is also critical of the ending and Kip’s reaction to the atomic bombings: “Kip’s postcolonial rage seems psychologically oversimplified and too straightforward” (177). While Kip goes through an experience that seems to change him fundamentally, the reader should not, however, be surprised at this turn of story. Besides the parts in the book that Ondaatje mentions in the interview above, Kip’s change can be explained by looking at performative patterns. The news of the atomic bombing of Japan should not be viewed as an isolated incident, for there are many times throughout the story where Kip is reminded of his otherness and inability to perform the patterns of Englishness perfectly. This, as we have noted earlier, theoretically allows for agency and thus for Kip’s subsequent break with the English, though agency becomes an erroneous term in this case, as will become apparent below. New norms, rather, change him. It should also be noted that Kip initially tries to avoid the feeling of not belonging to the English. For him, it is not a simple development towards independence or healing, as for Katherine and Caravaggio, but a complex fight within himself of where he belongs.

The difficulties for Kip in repeating the patterns that affirm his belonging to the English and keep him seeing them as superior can be seen in his relation to his fellow soldiers. His service in the army is for him of crucial importance. At the villa, he “is the only one of them who has remained in uniform. Immaculate, buckles shined, [...] the boots clean” (Ondaatje 74). That he is basically working on his own, without contact with the rest of the forces, does not change his determination to wear his uniform, since it affirms his sense of being a part of the English army and thus belonging to the English. But joining the army and wearing a

---

6 The “term *deus ex machina* is [...] used for cases where an author uses some improbable (and often clumsy) plot device to work his or her way out of a difficult situation” (Lynch).

7 The political dimension of Kip’s uncontested outburst at the nuclear bombings has also been criticized, especially by American critics, as well as his siding with the Japanese, who, as Kip himself notes, have been aggressive toward Sikhs in Malaya (Ondaatje 217). See Bolland for a discussion on this (72).
uniform does not always entitle him the respect that he hopes for. Initially, he takes this rather lightly: “The secretary watched him sternly. An Indian boy. […] She had probably never seen a turban before. The English! They expect you to fight for them but they won’t talk to you” (Ondaatje 188). The same distance between Kip and the English soon interferes in the line of duty as well: “He was […] no Englishman [and t]here was always hesitation of the soldiers to call him ‘sir’” (Ondaatje 213). These incidents are related to the atomic bombings of Japan, as they all exemplify the racism of the colonial power that Kip works for. Being in the military, then, sometimes reminds him of his otherness when patterns – which are in this case even regulated by military discipline – that should affirm his connection to the English are not repeated in the correct way. The importance of this is foregrounded when Lord Suffolk dies. As the most suitable person to replace him, Kip is unexpectedly assigned to lead the team of sappers in England:

He knew he was now a king […], and those men who would not cross an uncrowded bar to speak with him when they were off duty would do what he desired. But he did not like it. He was accustomed to his invisibility. In England he was ignored in the various barracks, and he came to prefer that. [His] self-sufficiency […] was a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. (Ondaatje 196)

Kip soon decides to join the Italian campaign instead, seemingly unaware that it is his Indian origin that makes him do so. It is his choice to leave for Italy, but it is a choice founded on the fact that he does not want to lead troops in order not to be reminded of his otherness. This is indicated: “He hid there for the rest of the war” (Ondaatje 196). In the villa, he can show off his immaculate uniform, sing Western songs (Ondaatje 127), and go back to doing his duty for England without anybody interfering, but his breaking with the English has already begun.

The example of Kip is more intricate than the ones dealt with earlier in this essay, as he, unlike characters like Caravaggio and Katherine, does not wish to use the space for agency that the disrupted performative pattern creates. Instead he tries to deny or belittle the racism of the English and his unfamiliarity with English customs. Every night when it is time to sleep, however, becomes a reminder of his otherness: “Most of his childhood […] he slept on a mat on the floor […] He has never gotten accustomed to the beds of the west. […] In England

---

8 It is later revealed that the secretary is in fact Miss Morden, who is not prejudiced towards Kip, though we must assume that Kip’s feelings here mirror earlier experiences during his time in England.
when staying with Lord Suffolk he sank claustrophobically into the dough of a mattress, and lay there captive and awake until he crawled out to sleep on the carpet” (Ondaatje 280). Significantly, this works differently when he joins the regular army and moves to Italy, as he is forced to sleep on a mattress here like all soldiers and thus does not need to face the uniqueness of his Indian habits. In this way too, his journey to Italy stalls the realization of belonging not to Europe but to Asia. Indeed, one could say that he here manages to successfully negotiate a solution between English and Indian customs. He sleeps on the floor of his tent even as he joins the group of the villa, but uses an air pillow: “He has been charmed by this Western invention. He dutifully releases the air and folds it into three each morning, as he has done all the way up the landmass of Italy” (Ondaatje 270). But such a successful negotiation only works as long as he is strictly confined, here in the area around the villa, and as long as he is in control of the situation. In a section that echoes Hana’s removing the mirrors because she wants to avoid seeing her wounded body, the narrator notes that Kip also tries to live protected from his mirror image: “The one thing he will never consider is himself. Not his twilit shadow […] or the reflection of himself in a window or how they watch him” (Ondaatje 218). It is even made clear that “he has no mirrors” (Ondaatje 219). In this isolated environment, Kip can escape his brown skin colour. His attempt to ignore his feeling of otherness is a battle with himself that cannot be won, though, for in the end he must face the origin of this feeling when the villa is invaded by the realities of the war. Kip, who for his whole life has regarded the English as the epitome of correctness, begins to see this notion fall apart when he discovers their racist behaviour, even though he may ignore this himself at first. The atomic bombings are simply another step in this direction, and they give Kip a political and historical context to his own experiences of racism. His sense of belonging to the English and having the duty to help them in the war is already fading when he arrives at the villa. By tracking Kip’s development as a character, one can hence see that a part of him is distancing itself from the English much earlier than when he hears of the atomic bombings. His leaving for Italy is in some ways a denial of this, a retreat from that realization. In the end, the performative patterns that affirm his belonging to the English and their superiority have become completely disrupted and the process of identifying himself with India – partly because he feels that he does not belong or want to belong to England – is rapidly developed.

Kip is possibly the most complex character of the novel. The changing performative patterns may repeatedly seem to provide him with agency, but could in fact be viewed as denying him exactly that. One can see this in his ‘voluntary’ attempt to leave India to become part of English culture, which stems from a young boy’s view of the English as superior. One
can also see this in his ‘voluntary’ breaking with the English, which is the result of his growing identification with his Asian origin but also, more importantly, of the racism of the English and their refusal to accept him as one of them. Indeed, one could say that it is only as Kip realizes that he has been subjected to othering just like the Japanese and that it is impossible for him to be accepted by the English that he feels that he does not desire to be so. As mentioned earlier, it has been suggested that “[a]ll actions, even those apparently in opposition to the identity categories of the power structure, are […] already a function of it” (Scheie). This explains Kip’s situation. His quest for his ‘real’ self as he moves away from and back to identification with his Indian origins highlights the complexities of identity change. His identity is formed by a continuous conflict between expectations and punishments from society, and desires of his own, but his desires are often the result of the very mechanisms of society that he tries to oppose or break free from. For Kip then, neither his attempt to become one with the English nor his breaking with them are examples of agency, since they are not based on changes in his performative patterns of his own volition. His identity changes are always governed by societal norms and constraints, and hence not so much a rebellion as an acquiescence. While his identity changes, it remains in control by outside regulators.

To conclude, this essay has shown that it is fruitful to read the theory of performativity alongside The English Patient. This theory sheds light on how the novel treats identity. As proposed by performativity, identities are in this text not fixed but shaped through performative patterns and re-shaped when performative patterns change. This is exemplified in all the main characters, whose identities are initially governed by performative patterns that work as the cause and not the result of a sense of a certain identity. Identities change when the norms that govern them disappear, as in the isolation of the villa, or change, as when respect for the English faces their racism, and new performative patterns develop.

For Butler, the central idea of performativity is to show that people can break free from the societal norms that govern their identities and actively change their identities, thus achieving agency. As other theorists have pointed out, there are great difficulties in trying to re-shape more fundamental or controversial aspects of the self. While all of the main characters in The English Patient experience identity changes, only uncontroversial aspects of identity are reformed as the result of changes in performative patterns instigated by characters’ own volition. Hana and Caravaggio, who subvert their status as victims, are the only characters that actively change their performative patterns and manage re-shape themselves, and the only examples in the novel of agency. Primarily, the text deals with more
conflicted identity changes. While the theoretical possibility to subvert one’s gender role is seen in Katherine when her performative patterns change in the desert, she never breaks free from the regulatory norms of society, which are embodied in Geoffrey and Almásy. When she is killed and her body violated, the difficulties and dangers of changing controversial aspects of identity is highlighted. The text also deals with identity changes that are governed by societal norms just like the initial identity was. This is seen in Almásy, whose disidentification with the regulatory norms that expects nationality to be part of one’s identity is based on identification with the desert and functions strikingly similar to nationalism. He becomes an unwitting prey of the regulatory norms he tries to break with. A variation of this is seen in Kip, who is initially locked into a performative pattern that affirms his identification with the English, and then becomes governed by a new set of norms, a new performative pattern that leads to his breaking with them. In the continuous shaping of identity, his needs and desires become inseparable from the regulatory norms of society that he tries to oppose. Both Almásy and Kip exemplify that when identities change, the individual is not necessarily in control of these changes.

In *The English Patient*, identities are not stable but shaped by performative patterns and re-shaped when performative patterns change. Though the novel features examples of agency and identities that are actively reformed when societal regulators break down, this reading has shown that it is primarily concerned with the conflicted nature of identity change. Not only does the text point to the dangers of trying to subvert controversial aspects of one’s identity. It also points to the difficulties of disentangling oneself from the societal mechanisms that one tries to oppose, and hence to the multilayered difficulties of achieving agency. While identities in *The English Patient* are not fixed but shaped and re-shaped by performative patterns, identity change only rarely entails agency.
Works cited

Primary sources


Secondary sources


