

Entangled Ecologies and Hybrid Selves: A Comparative Study of Ondaatje and Hiromi Goto through the Lens of New Materialism

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ABSTRACT

This abstract dives into the key disagreement that arises from the works of Michael Ondaatje and Hiromi Goto, both of which offer fascinating literary explorations of "entangled ecologies" and "hybrid selves," all through the lens of new materialism. Even though they come from different contexts, both authors push back against anthropocentric views by showing how humans are intricately woven into lively, agentic material worlds. New materialism, which highlights the active role of matter and the fluidity of boundaries, sets the stage for a comparative look at how they engage with nonhuman vitality, multispecies connections, and the intertwined nature of self and environment.

Keywords: *New Materialism, Michael Ondaatje, Hiromi Goto, Entangled Ecologies, Hybrid Selves, Posthumanism, Multispecies Studies, Canadian Literature, Japanese-Canadian Literature, Material Ecocriticism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century marks the re-evaluation of humanity's place in the web of life. Escalating ecological crises challenge the anthropocentric worldview and urge the recognition of nonhuman vitality and agency. New materialism posits that all entities are dynamically interconnected and actively shape our realities. Understanding this intricate entanglement is ethically imperative for planetary coexistence.

This study argues that a new materialist comparative reading of selected works by Michael Ondaatje and Hiromi Goto reveals their shared preoccupation with "entangled ecologies" and "hybrid selves." Both authors, from their Sri Lankan-Canadian and Japanese-Canadian lineages, challenge human exceptionalism. Their prose illuminates how human lives, identities, and memories are co-constituted in a vibrant, agentic material world. A new materialist lens, which emphasizes the active role of matter, enables a nuanced comparative analysis of their engagements with nonhuman vitality, multispecies entanglements, and the intra-active processes of self and environment.

A comparative study of Ondaatje and Goto is fruitful precisely because of their distinct yet convergent perspectives. As significant Canadian authors from diasporic and multicultural perspectives, they inherently explore identity formation beyond fixed categories. Their cultural inheritance enriches their depictions of entanglement, revealing varied expressions of material agency. This study highlights shared post humanist concerns and acknowledges the diverse manifestations of "entanglement" within Canadian literature, offering a richer tapestry of hybridity and ecological connection.

This paper focuses on Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and *The English Patient* (1992). In *In the Skin of a Lion*, characters like Patrick Lewis are "made by the landscape of Canada." *The English Patient* depicts Count Almásy as "a cave of sand, a broken map," his being dissolving into the desert. For Hiromi Goto, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) and *The Kappa Child* (2001) are analyzed. *Chorus of Mushrooms* shows hybrid selves through "the mushrooms began to grow on her skin, tiny spores erupting through her pores." *The Kappa Child* literally presents a woman's body hosting a mythical creature, demanding that "we must learn to live with what isn't human, inside or out." Through these texts, this paper demonstrates how both authors foreground the active role of nonhuman entities in shaping human experience.

istory of women with coagulation disorder and all women on anticoagulant therapy were the exclusion criteria for this study. All the antenatal women were willing to participate and signed the informed consent document was enrolled in the study. Demographic characteristics included age, booking status, area of residence, socioeconomic status, and gestational age at presentation were noted. Clinical characteristics including presenting complaints, fetal heart sounds (normal, reduced, and absent), and obstetric factors were

This study has significant implications for literary criticism, offering a novel comparative framework for the materialist dimensions of these authors' works. Ecocriticism engages with material agency beyond conventional nature writing. Posthumanism showcases literature's role in decentring the human and illustrating human-nonhuman co-constitution. Canadian literature studies enrich our understanding of the nation's literary landscape by highlighting diverse authors' contributions to discourses on entanglement and hybridity. Ultimately, this study adopts a nuanced appreciation of the complex materialities that shape identity and ecology in contemporary literature.

Theoretical Framework: New Materialism and its Literary Applications

New materialism diverges from post-structuralist approaches by reinstating the active, agentic role of matter in shaping reality. It proposes a relational ontology, focusing on dynamic processes which were all things, human and nonhuman, come into being.

Defining New Materialism: Vibrant Matter and Intra-action

Key figures include Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Rosi Braidotti. Barad's agential realism emphasizes "intra-action" as the mutual constitution of entangled agencies, where phenomena emerge from relationships rather than pre-existing them. This ceaseless "becoming" collapses classical dichotomies such as subject/object, mind/body, and nature/culture. Jane Bennett's "vibrant matter" and "distributed agency" argue for the inherent liveliness of all material things. She highlights "thing-power"—the capacity of matter to affect and influence human affairs, revealing its distributed agency within complex assemblages. Rosi Braidotti's post humanist framework critiques the traditional humanist subject as anthropocentric. She champions a relational ontology in which humans are interconnected with biological, technological, and environmental forces. Her "nomadic subject" continually becomes through encounters with diverse materiality. These thinkers reassert the primacy of matter as an active participant in world-making.

Entangled Ecologies: Dynamic Assemblages and Co-Constitution

New materialism views ecology as a dynamic, complex assemblage in which human and nonhuman entities are inextricably interwoven. This goes beyond conceiving the "environment" as external. An entangled ecology is a vital, self-organizing system which are distinctions are permeable. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, the "assemblage" describes heterogeneous collections of diverse elements forming a functioning whole without a fixed hierarchy. Agencies are distributed across components, making causation multiple and collaborative in nature. Humans are always part of the ecological assemblage, interacting with their nonhuman components. This framework explores how human lives are shaped by and shape material processes, emphasizing the continuous co-constitution of life forms and environment.

Hybrid Selves: Permeable Becomings in Material Entanglements

The concept of the "hybrid self" redefines the human subject as a permeable, relational entity, always "becoming" through entanglements with diverse materialities. This self is a dynamic nexus co-constituted by biological processes, technological interfaces, environmental forces, affective flows and cultural practices. Our bodies are active sites of material exchange and not mere containers for consciousness. Braidotti argues that the posthuman subject is a "complex system of self-organizing and internally differentiated relationships." This perspective reveals subjectivity shaped by encounters with vibrant matter, nonhuman animals, landscapes, and ancestral materialities, giving rise to identities transcending traditional boundaries. The "hybrid self" reflects radical openness to transformation and deep embeddedness within a more-than-human world.

New Materialism in Literary Studies: Unveiling Material Agencies and Entanglements

New materialism reshapes literary analysis by moving beyond solely linguistic interpretations to explore the active role of matter in narrative worlds. This allows for a new appreciation of literature's engagement with nonhuman agency, revealing how objects, animals, landscapes, and forces affect characters and plots. Critics analyze the "thing-power" of elements and their capacity to exert force or evoke affect. New materialism also examines the materiality of texts—their physical forms and production—as active material practices. More broadly, it uncovers complex entanglements within narrative worlds, showing how human destinies are bound to biological processes, technological infrastructures, and ecological conditions. By focusing on material processes and co-constitution, it challenges anthropocentric biases in reading, allowing for an inclusive and ecologically attentive interpretation of how literary works reflect the vibrant and entangled realities of the world.

Michael Ondaatje: Material Entanglements and the Porous Body

Ondaatje's work blurs human and nonhuman realms, creating intricate material tapestries. His novels reveal distributed agency, porous bodies, and identities shaped by interactions with vibrant and volatile material environments.

Vibrant Matter and Nonhuman Agency

Ondaatje's narratives depict nonhuman elements with distinct vibrancy and agency in the following ways. In *The English Patient*, the desert is a powerful, sentient entity, a "country of dunes and sand" that consumes and reveals. Its extreme conditions dictate survival, forge character, and archive history, acting as protagonists. Almásy's obsession with the desert acknowledges its inherent "thing-power". In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Toronto's urban environment and industrial machinery exert palpable agency. Bridges and factories are monumental entities with their own strengths. The Bloor Street Viaduct is built by men whose bodies are "shaped by hammer and rivet." Animals also hold potent agency, from the iconic lion. Ondaatje's landscapes are vital, sentient, and continually interacting with human lives.

The Porous Body and Environmental Exchange

Ondaatje's porous body concept highlights constant material exchange shaping identities. In *The English Patient*, Almásy's burned body is a "figure of ash," his "skin... an ancient map of burns," indistinguishable from desert dust and fire, embodying identity as a distributed phenomenon. Hana experiences the war's trauma through bodily responses, overwhelmed by the "smell of human fatigue, a smell of ash, a smell of fear." In *In the Skin of a Lion*, immigrant labourers' bodies are susceptible to harsh conditions. Patrick Lewis is "made by the landscape of Canada," absorbing its elements. Bridge builders' bodies are marked by "dust and grit." Caravaggio's body is "porous to every sound," dissolving into the surroundings.

Assemblages of Human and Machine/Environment

Ondaatje's novels are replete with assemblages which human lives are entangled with technologies and environments. These are dynamic constellations of heterogeneous elements that distribute agency. In *In the Skin of a Lion's* Bloor Street Viaduct is an assemblage of "steel, concrete, and the sweat of a thousand men," workers enmeshed with machines and materials. Tunnels, explosives, and city architecture contribute to shaping the characters' fates. Patrick's activities are tied to the city's material hiddenness. In *The English Patient*, the villa serves as a fragile assemblage for Hana, Kip, Caravaggio, and Almásy, converging with the building and the war's presence. Kip, as a sapper, exemplifies human-machine entanglement with unexploded bombs. The characters' shared experiences within this material setting forge bonds and reveal their histories. Ondaatje foregrounds human existence as part of a larger, vibrant, shifting material arrangement.

Goto's and the Fluid Self work blends magical realism and Japanese folklore, exploring identity, diaspora, and gender through a multispecies lens. Her new materialist reading portrays "hybrid selves" whose identities are fluid and co-constituted by a vibrant material world.

More-than-Human Relationalities: Active Nonhuman Agencies

Goto's novels depict nonhuman entities with palpable, transformative agency. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, mushrooms transcend botanical classification, becoming figures of connection and memory. Naoe's deep understanding of them hints at their active role in guiding characters, acting as living archives. The idea that "the mushrooms began to grow on her skin" is a literal depiction of material entanglement, blurring human and fungal boundaries. *The Kappa Child* foregrounds human-nonhuman entanglements through the mythical kappa. The narrator's kappa pregnancy is a transformative multispecies encounter, compelling a re-evaluation of her identity. The kappa's presence exerts an active influence, pushing her beyond conventional understanding. These nonhuman entities are vital, agentic participants in shaping human lives.

Hybridity and Transformation: Challenging Species Boundaries

Goto consistently explores hybridity and transformation, challenging fixed notions of identity and species boundaries. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, cultural assimilation is embodied, resulting in characters as hybrids of Japanese tradition and Canadian modernity. Murasaki reconciles her fragmented identity through embodied engagement with food and the nonhuman world. Diasporic life is an ongoing transformation, a "becoming-other". *The Kappa Child* literally establishes biological hybridity through the kappa offspring. The narrator's body becomes a site of material negotiation, forcing her to confront human category limitations. Her changing body and cravings portray a fluid, adaptable self, remade through multispecies encounters. This transformation extends beyond the physical, shifting her understanding of love and self. Goto's characters are dynamic processes, reconfigured by material entanglements, embodying Braidotti's posthuman subject as "in process of becoming with".

Embodied Knowledge and Materialized Memory

Goto's narratives weave embodied knowledge and materialized memory, showing how trauma, heritage, and history are embedded in bodies, food, and the material environment. This aligns with new materialist ideas of affect and intra-action, where memory is a vibrant force. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Naoe's memories are materialized through cooking, gardening, and her relationship with the land. Traditional food serves as a site for cultural memory, connecting generations. The trauma of assimilation is embodied as physical alienation. *The Kappa Child* demonstrates how inherited trauma and folklore materialize in the present. The narrator's childhood experiences linger as visceral sensations. The mythical kappa becomes a tangible presence, suggesting ancestral knowledge has a material force that intra-acts with bodies. Memory is a material force resurfacing through bodily sensations, dreams, and nonhuman encounters, influencing the self's becoming. Goto's

work shows matter as a vibrant archive of memory and knowledge.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

A new materialist comparative reading reveals both profound convergences and distinct divergences in Ondaatje and Goto's literary engagement with entangled ecologies and hybrid selves.

Shared New Materialist Concerns

Both authors consistently challenge anthropocentric individualism, depicting humans as deeply intertwined with and co-constituted by the material world. They demonstrate how identity is formed through constant intra-action with nonhuman vitalities. They share a profound appreciation for the vitality of matter, illustrating how inanimate objects, landscapes, animals, and abstract forces possess agency and shape the characters' lives. Whether it is Ondaatje's desert or Goto's mushrooms, matter is never passive. For both, the bodies are permeable and perpetually becoming. The boundaries between flesh and earth, human and nonhuman, and past and present are blurred, reflecting new materialism's rejection of rigid dualisms. Their narratives often use fragmented or non-linear forms, mirroring the intra-active nature of reality. Ultimately, both present a literary vision in which humans are part of a vibrant material assemblage, constantly shaped by and shaping their more-than-human world.

Distinct Approaches to Materiality

Ondaatje often focuses on historical materiality and its inscription on bodies and landscapes. His narratives trace how trauma leaves physical marks. Almásy's burned body and scarred landscapes are prime examples. Ondaatje's characters are defined by fragmented bodies and memories reassembled through encounters with geographies and structures. His entanglements emphasize violent physical traces and the grim beauty of survival. Technologies such as trains are formidable forces that mediate human existence.

In contrast, Hiromi Goto explores biological and folkloric entanglements, often through grotesque or fantastic lenses. Her narratives foreground profound connections with living nonhuman organisms and materialization of myth. Goto's approach to hybridity is more literal and visceral, pushing human form boundaries through transformations or multispecies pregnancies. Identity fluidity often extends across species and generations, suggesting overt merging with the nonhuman, emphasizing embodiment and biological processes.

Cultural Contexts and New Materialism

Cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping the new materialist themes found in both authors' works. Ondaatje's Sri Lankan roots bring a postcolonial critique to his new materialism, where fragmented bodies and landscapes serve as reflections of colonial violence and its lasting impacts. His characters grapple with identity issues that challenge the dominance of Western rationality over resilient material realities. On the other hand, Goto's Japanese-Canadian heritage informs her approach to diasporic materialism, highlighting the importance of multispecies relationships and ancestral ties. Through the lens of food, myth, and storytelling, she actively reclaims cultural memory and pushes back against assimilation, embodying what can be described as "folklore materialism." Their unique cultural backgrounds distinctly influence how they delve into themes of matter, ecology, and hybrid identities.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that Michael Ondaatje and Hiromi Goto, through a new materialist lens, offer profound literary insights into the co-constitution of the human and nonhuman in entangled ecologies and hybrid selves. Challenging anthropocentric individualism, both authors foreground the vitality of matter, depicting permeable bodies, fluid identities, and distributed agency across human-nonhuman assemblages. Ondaatje's work grapples with historical materialities, fragmented bodies, and human lives entangled with urban structures. Goto explores biological and folkloric entanglements using fantastic elements to emphasize multispecies becomings and embodied memory. Their distinct yet convergent approaches, informed by diasporic contexts, illuminate literature's engagement with philosophical inquiry into material existence.

Broader Implications

Ondaatje and Goto's literary contributions significantly impact a more-than-human understanding of existence in their works. Their narratives urge us to move beyond anthropocentric biases and foster an ethical imperative to acknowledge the agency of the material world. By depicting humans embedded within environments, their work encourages a relational worldview that is vital for navigating ecological and social crises. They link human destinies to planetary well-being, challenging us to cultivate respect for all life and sustain material processes. Their literature serves as both a reflection and a guide for a more ecologically conscious, post humanist sensibility.

Future Research

The conceptual grounds explored by Ondaatje and Goto suggest promising avenues for future research. Further studies could

analyze other Canadian authors through a new materialist lens, exploring how diverse backgrounds shape their engagement with material agency. Investigating the pedagogical implications of these "entangled" narratives in the classroom could foster ecologically aware readers. Deepening the comparative study with specific new materialist sub-branches (e.g., feminist, critical race, and queer new materialism) could reveal more nuanced understandings of power, identity, and entanglement. Finally, exploring how these authors' materialist approaches intersect with representations of climate change and technological futures would provide timely insights.

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