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**"THE DARKNESS AT OUR BACK DOOR": MAPS OF  
IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF  
DAVID MALOUF AND CHRISTOPHER KOCH**

by

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## ABSTRACT

The intention of this thesis is to examine the novels of David Malouf and Christopher Koch from both a post-colonial and a psychoanalytic perspective. My argument is that the sense of displacement and preoccupation with "other" worlds which characterise these novels reflect a national tradition which positions Australian life at the "edge" of a culturally and politically dominant "centre." Such a perspective is not so much geographical as discursive; Australia was first defined, after all, through a European discourse which assumed its own centrality.

Any discourse is codified in language, and in this respect post-colonial themes are related to wider, less politically-specific concerns of alienation and quest for identity. These concerns are readable in Lacanian terms, whereby human desire for a sense of identifying "unity" is recognised as being inextricable from the function of language. Language is the vehicle by which we gain access to the world of the "real," yet because of its role as mediator and its arbitrary and relational nature, language also stands between the speaking subject and the transcendental fulfilment of desire.

In an Australian context, then, environment and society carry the burden of "otherness" which is imposed by a Eurocentric discourse; and in a broader context, a preoccupation with "otherness" marks the lack or absence which is intrinsic to all social discourse. The novels of both Christopher Koch and David Malouf describe a world of fragmentation and shifting signification, but offer this world view in different lights. In Koch's novels, shifts in the construction of identity, both personal and national, only illuminate an irresolvable tension between the desire for unity and the actuality of division. In Malouf's novels, on the other hand, a world view of fragmentation and ambiguity opens human consciousness to imaginative possibility: life is at the "edge."