

Elisabeth Corradi Carvalho

(RE)MAPPING THE JOURNEY BACK TO A LOST FATHER:  
TRAVELING BACK IN TIME AND PLACE IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S  
*RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*

Faculdade de Letras  
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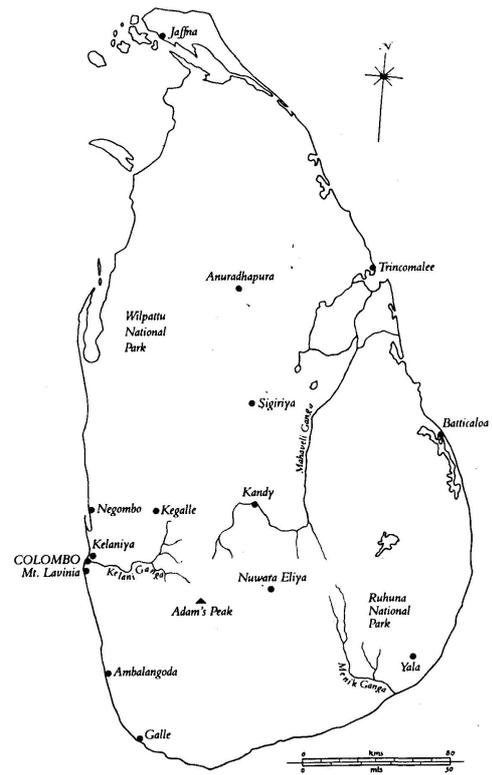
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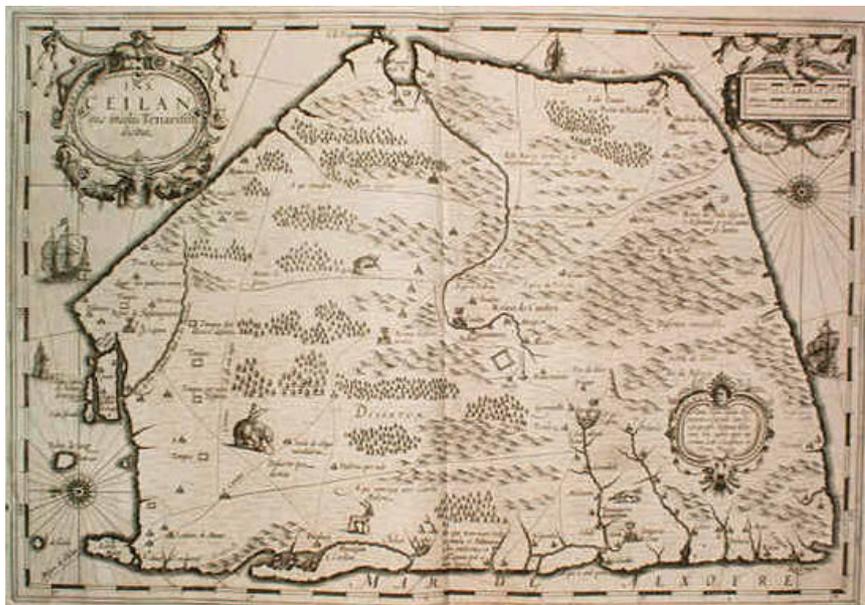
Thesis submitted to  
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Thesis Advisor  
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Ondaatje's version of the map of Sri Lanka



Ceylon, G. Mercator / H. Hondius, c.1620 - CEILAN QVAE INCOLIS TENARISIN DICTUR

An early engraved map of the the country orientated with east at the top. Embellished with three decorative cartouches. Animals on the land area. Two compass roses and four ships on the sea.

As a writer I don't think I'm concerned with art and aesthetic issues, any more than I would want to be just concerned with making the subject of being a Sri Lankan in Canada my one and only subject. I go to writing to discover as many aspects of myself and the world around me as I can. I go to discover, to explore, not to state the case I already know.

Michael Ondaatje

To my beloved children, Sarah, Savio, Camila,  
without whom there would have been no journey.  
Thank you for helping me keep the priorities straight  
and to maintain the proper perspective  
through your endless support and patience.

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to discuss the journey Michael Ondaatje takes to Sri Lanka as a journey to the past, as a restorative process either to come to terms with a father he barely knew or to restore his origins through traveling back home. The journey back to his homeland therefore implies another deeper and more personal journey. Ondaatje's accounts are organized as a collage of fragmentary narratives, which juxtapose the narrator's past and the search for a father whom he lost in childhood. The study discusses the connection between the visit to his country, the emotional journey to his past, and the search for his father, intertwining stories and histories. It also analyses the images present in the text (photographs and maps, among others) and the varied forms of narratives that inform the narrator's and his family's past life through writing.

### Resumo

Este estudo tem como objetivo discutir a viagem que Michael Ondaatje perfaz ao voltar ao Sri Lanka, como uma viagem de volta ao passado, como um processo restaurador tanto para reconstruir uma relação conflituosa com um pai que ele mal conheceu como para resgatar sua origem e identidade. A viagem de volta a sua terra natal implica, portanto, uma outra, mais profunda e pessoal. A série de relatos, colhidos por Ondaatje, são organizados como uma colagem de narrativas fragmentadas que justapõem o passado do narrador e a busca ao pai perdido na infância. Este estudo busca discutir a conexão entre a visita ao país, a viagem emocional ao passado e a busca ao pai, bem como analisar as imagens presentes no texto (fotos e mapas, entre outros) e as várias formas de narrativas que informam a escrita de vida do autor.

## Introduction

Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other...Living on borders and in margins keeping intact one's shifting multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element...not comfortable but home.

Gloria Anzaldúa

Travel writing, seen as an important element of the ideological apparatus of European domination, has acquired new forms in contemporary writing and imagination. Whether as a travelogue of the adventures in new lands or as a narrative of experiences in imaginary places, travel writing has been recreated and expanded by modern writers. The adventures of conquest in former times have been replaced by the experience of living everywhere by immigrant writers. Searching for a new home elsewhere has not prevented immigrants from dreaming of returning to their homeland. In order to associate the dream of returning with the effort to make it possible, modern migrant writers have transformed their journey back home into narratives of a search for the lost past through the reconstruction of old memories, associating fact and fantasy to create a personal saga of self-discovery. The double vision present in the migrant writer's way of seeing his own story and that of his country results in stories told from a double perspective — both as outsider and as insider — and marked by their fragmentary and incomplete character, as they rely on pieces of stories and scraps of memories.

*Running in the Family* is the object of this study, which proposes to analyze the circumstances in which Michael Ondaatje reconstructs both his family saga and the history of his country by intertwining stories and history. The personal and the public clash and give life to the narrator's imagination. The double perspective of being an outsider/insider in his own story — Ondaatje left his country very young and lived most of his life in the west— is the core of this study, which analyses not only the geographical return home but also the

emotional return to the past. This study argues that, by mapping his journey back home, Ondaatje is in fact remapping his journey back to a lost father, a journey he takes in time and place. The goal of this study is, in short, to analyze how the discourse of autobiography and travel writing, based on memory, maps, photographs, and historical events constructed the narrative of the work. Also, it proposes to investigate how those elements influence and mirror the narrator's perspectives while traveling back to Sri Lanka in search of recovering his father. Finally, this study also investigates the reliability of the story-telling supported by the elements mentioned above.

Chapter One analyzes the historical facts and family stories used in the narrative, aiming at reconstructing the narrator's home country and family through a blend of memory and history, as well as self-writing and travel narrative. The chapter investigates how Ondaatje connects Sri Lankan history with his family's, thus intertwining family and national issues. He revisits places and old histories of the country. Ondaatje's memories are triggered by the monsoons, the island's scents and the people, generating a contrast with the colonizers' reports of the sufferings they endured while in the land. The chapter also questions the relationship between colonizers and colonized, especially from the perspective of hybridity and mimicry. The story is constructed in the spaces in-between the real and fantasy, between the pieces of evidence that Ondaatje finds in his research and the hearsay of family versions. The reliability of the stories is analyzed in terms of modern theorists and investigated in some relevant aspects of the narrative.

Chapter Two studies the elements present in the (re) mapping of the journey back to the narrator's father and the symbolic relation it has with the spatial journey. The use of the spatial element is discussed as a provocative device in the triggering of past issues. The chapter analyses the autobiographical character of the book and discusses its genre — whether it is an autobiography, a memoir, or a self-portrait. The construction and the presentation of

the narrator's memories are analyzed concerning the duality of their meaning and the highly personal vision of the narrator. The reliability of the reports and the emotional journey in the work are also questioned in this chapter. The passages selected to discuss the personal journey of the narrator are the ones he uses to describe his father in the second half of the book, thus reinforcing the discussion over the remapping of his personal journey, departing from a general and spatial level to a more intimate and personal one.

Chapter Three discusses the pictures used in the narrative by Ondaatje and their interplay. The images will be analyzed according to theories of cartography, photography, and intertextuality, which I consider important for discussing the insertion of non-verbal texts in the narrative as well as texts by other authors. These texts include not only photographs and maps but also epigraphs, poems, and historical records. My goal is to check the reliability of such images and their relation to the telling of the story. The way the narrator uses the several images points to the importance of the reader's participation in the construction of the narrative. The chapter also alludes to the possibilities of the insertion of other kinds of texts as a way of criticizing the issue of power either exercised upon the islanders by the colonizers or upon the narrator by his father.

The representational aspect, in every step of Ondaatje's journey, is analyzed in all the chapters in this study, which proposes to discuss the challenges to the boundaries of genre, history, memories, and images by crisscrossing the elements in the narrative and the theories chosen to support the study.

## Chapter I

### Running back Home: Revisiting Homeland, Past and History

I wanted to establish a kind of map; I wanted to make clear that it [the map] was just part of a long tradition of invasions and so forth.

Michael Ondaatje — interview to Linda Hutcheon

Aside from the touristy drive that compels people to become familiar with other peoples and places, they leave home for multiple reasons. Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when European countries in the wake of the great discoveries launched ideas of exploration and adventure everywhere, traveling has been expanding images of the world and broadening the boundaries of new identities.

When confronting the different theories and definitions of home after the several waves of emigration in the twentieth century, one is struck by the complexity of the subject. The several reasons that make someone leave their homeland, and the expectations emigrants take with them to the new "home" outside their homelands make one think of the different aspects this issue can take on. No matter what the circumstances leaving home implies — political, racial, economic or personal — the dream of a lost home is constantly in the minds of emigrants. The image of the ideal homeland, romanticized after the departure, can give emigrants, exiles, nomads, as Rushdie puts it, the eternal hope for a "glorious return" (qtd. in Naficy 3). The constant sense of not belonging or the void left by the lack of something precious — lost in the past — together with the feeling of incompleteness, drives the fragmented self of the drifter, the emigrant, or the exile to always dream and search.

However, the search and the dream may take different forms. It can be either the search for the lost home, past, and memories — the good old times when the emigrant felt whole and happy — or a way to come to terms with a past history that was left in a lost country, that makes him feel miserable and haunted by memories of violence and suffering. The need to keep

up old traditions, such as native food, peculiar scents, and old pictures, as well as different forms of ritual, makes the travelers reconstruct, outside their homeland, the atmosphere of the lost object, opening a bridge that connects them to their past and memories and perpetuates that part of the self they fear to let go.

The aftermath of the great discoveries and the scars left by colonialism have permanently altered peoples and cultures. With the burst of independence, many countries faced the hard work of reconstruction and search for their own identity. Driven either by dissatisfaction with the political persecution by authoritarian regimes or for personal reasons, hordes of people have left and still leave their countries in search of a better life. In a strange identification with their former oppressor, however, most search for protection and refuge in the countries of their previous colonizers. Therefore, a new form of homesickness begins, created by the double perspective of a home twice lost (lost in the past, and lost again in the present), which torments contemporary human beings outside their homeland. The dream of adapting to the new home and of going back home someday shapes the profile of many contemporary populations.

Although *Running in the Family* deals with the issue of coming back home, and with feelings of loss and alienation from the past, it does not fit the traditional concept of postcolonial emigrant writing. The book is based on the memories of the author, Michael Ondaatje, who leaves his homeland — at the time still under the power of the British — rather for personal purposes than for political, social, or economic reasons. Ondaatje lends his name and all his family history to characters with the same name, to perform — in the stream of his memories — the return home and the reconstruction of a lost past. The book does not stand as an autobiography, as it has no intention of focusing only on facts, but it is considered by many critics as a memoir — a concept that I will analyze and question later in Chapter II. The author/narrator alerts the reader that the narrative is not only inaccurate but also consciously twisted and reinvented. The topics mentioned above, such as genre, nationality, and the emotional journey back to the past and a

lost father will be further explored in the following chapters. My intention in this chapter is to focus on the journey back home as the first step of a more complex journey.

### **1.1-Colonial Ceylon: The Stained Mirror of History**

Imperialism, power, economic expansionism, scientific research — these are some of the common terms widely used since the eighteenth century, although their meaning has been accumulating layers of new interpretations. Travelogues, scientific reports, adventures in the new lands, the inland exploration, have all been reviewed and reinterpreted through the eyes of the new times.

Although European expansionism began in the 1500s — when European countries such as Portugal, Spain and England decided to increase their possessions and wealth by conquering and exploiting distant lands — it had its peak between the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century. The European countries' urge to extend their authority by the acquisition of new territories and by establishing economic and political hegemony over other nations created a new scenario in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the opening page of her study *Imperial Eyes :Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt attests that “studies in colonial and exploration discourse have highlighted the great significance of travel writing as one of the ideological apparatuses of empire... and how travel writing produced ‘the rest of the world’ for European readerships...” (x). Travel writing became a frenzy among writers and scientists who believed that by writing about their experiences and adventures in the expeditions and exploration of distant lands they were certainly reshaping and remapping the rest of the world. Traveling back home with their new impressions would bring not only reports on the expanding territories, attest the power exercised upon them and scientific superiority, but also reading through their eyes would give the support and credibility to imperial thought, thus creating a European way of seeing the world. European travel reports and experiences written for

European readers stimulated the imagination of Europeans about the lives and histories of peoples and places in different parts of the world.

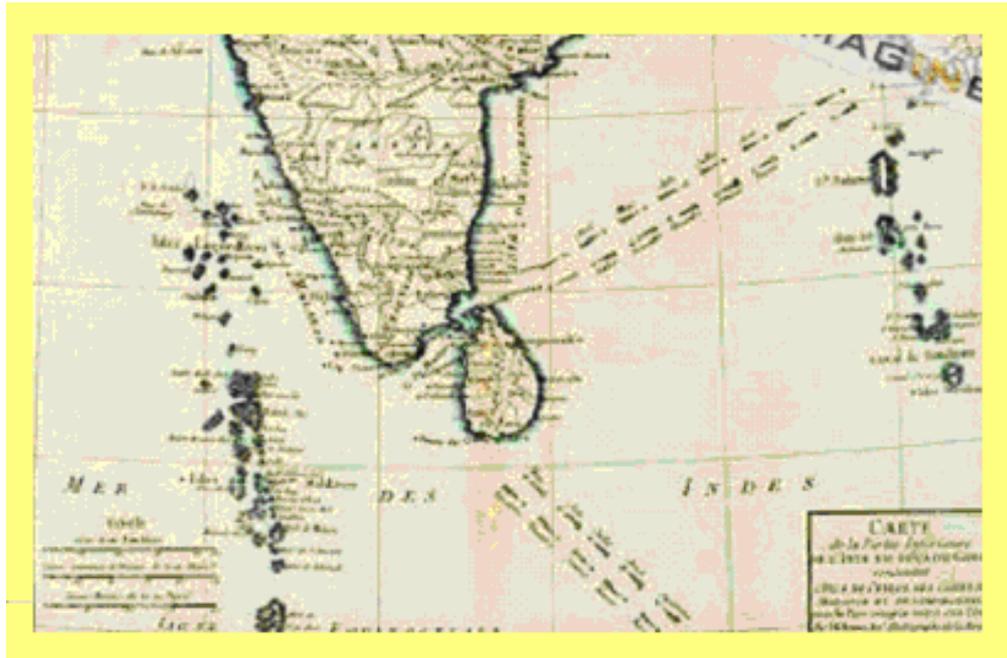
Michael Ondaatje was born in 1943, in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he lived until he was 12 years old, when he emigrated to England; in 1962, he moved to Canada, where he still lives. Michael Ondaatje first published *Running in the Family* in 1982, after two trips back to Sri Lanka. The book remains a controversial work, as critics find it difficult to categorize as an autobiography, memoir, or self portrait, an issue that will be discussed later in the chapter. This work shows the strong desire of Ondaatje to go back to Sri Lanka (old Ceylon) and rescue old stories and memories from his childhood. The strong influence of his mysterious father and the mysterious past surrounding his family drive Ondaatje to travel back in time and memory. In spite of the importance of *Running in the Family*, of the discussions over Sri Lanka, and the favorable reception by readers and critics, his novel *The English Patient* (1992) remains the most discussed and famous of his works. Despite being based on his real life and on real people of his family, *Running in the Family* is a fictional report of facts recreated and distorted by the writer. As it is discussed later in this chapter, although the author uses the names of real people, the characters and the narrator are not real persons but are recreated by the narrator. Thus, whenever the name Ondaatje is used in this analysis, it refers to the narrator and not to the author himself.

In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje, reports part of Ceylon's history, mixed with his family's. He intertwines his personal history with epigraphs of famous visitors to show the way Europeans have seen the island. Although he was born in Ceylon and lived there for part of his childhood, it is the west that shaped his view of his past life now as an adult. Therefore, he looks back at Ceylon from a double perspective, which is mostly western.

Ceylon is described as an island that "falls on a map and its outline is the shape of a tear. After the spaces of India and Canada, it is so small: "A miniature" (65). It can be

compared to “a pendant off the ear of India. Around it, a blue-combed ocean ...Ceylon floats on the Indian Ocean.” ( 63)

[The map below is an 18<sup>th</sup> century map of South India and Ceylon. Ceylon here fits the description made by Ondaatje above as a pendant off the ear of India, floating in the Indian Ocean]



Moreover, it is the island that

seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape — Serendip. Ratnapida (island of gems). Taprobane. Zeloan, Zeilans, Seyllan, Ceilon and Ceylon — the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language. (64)

Even before the Europeans were seduced by Ceylon, other peoples occupied the island. First the Veda people originating from the Malayans came, then the Sinhalese coming from the north of

India, and finally the Tamils coming from the south of India. After a long conflicting period under the rule of a Tamil prince, the conflicts between the Tamils and the Sinhalese were followed by the unification of the whole island. In the fifteenth century the Chinese attacked the island and stayed there until the Europeans started their period of domination, alternating between the Portuguese, the English, and the Dutch, all mentioned in the passage from Ondaatje's text.

As a result of the Dutch invasion, descendants of the Sinhalese and the Dutch gave origin to the "burghers", a very privileged social class. (Ondaatje's family descends from the "burghers" and their life style is described by Ondaatje in a number of passages). The introduction of tea, coffee, and rubber plantations brought them fortune and privileges. The 'burghers' were favored by the English and occupied positions in the government and in the history of the country. Ondaatje mentions some of his ancestors who took part in Ceylon's history: Dr. William Charles Ondaatje, the Ceylonese Director of the Botanical Gardens, who wrote about poisons; on the other hand, "finance or military talk was Mathew Ondaatje's area" (67). His father, Mervyn Philip Ondaatje, took part in the Ceylon Light Infantry and was a member of the Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society (145) in his later days. Many other Ondaatjes, mostly priests and lawyers, are mentioned by Ondaatje as occupying important positions in Ceylonese history.

Ondaatje uses the term "a wife of many marriages" (64) to emphasize that Ceylon's many male invaders transformed the motherland (an allusion to the feminine denomination of land) into the scenery of successive waves of domination: even before the Europeans came, Ceylon was already a land desired by other invaders. With the changing of many nationalities, Ceylon's name, shape, religion, and language also changed.

According to Pratt, the writing of the empire represented, in most circumstances, the European version of the rest of the world, a mix of fact and fantasy, the construction of the "domestic subject" (4). Ondaatje selects and reports some of the versions of European writers and visitors to the island. He probably wants to show how his homeland's history was affected and

twisted by the European powers. By incorporating the voices of writers and important visitors, Ondaatje suggests that the credibility of the text and the versions of important writers may be deceiving. Furthermore, when Ondaatje presents other voices besides his own, he gives a broader approach to the subject. Thus, he does not confine the text to his own version of the facts, nor is he the first writer to create versions of the island's history. Empowered by his ambivalent position of being both an insider and an outsider, Ondaatje feels he can use the right to create his own versions. He suggests that the Europeans attempted to justify the colonization of such a "savage" island through the texts from other writers and visitors, which give fantasized views of Ceylon. Although Ondaatje's way of presenting the facts and fantasies of his life and the country's in the text may sound real and detached from personal judgment, Ondaatje's irony towards renowned writers and important visitors can be perceived. Empowered by their European vision of the world, writers like D.H.Lawrence and Leonard Woolf distort stories and incorporate fantasy into their travel narratives and make them credible to their readers. By presenting the facts and fantasies the way he does, he shows that he is part of a political, historical, and social context, as is the reader. Ondaatje may have incorporated writers' views, voices, and texts in an attempt to mobilize the reader's personal historical contexts and concepts to relate to those of his text and narrator, appealing to the readers' sense and making him/her perceive the representational construction of history.

The book starts with two epigraphs that show opposite ideas about Ceylon. The first one is from a 14<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan Friar who says "I saw in this island fowls as big as our country geese having two heads... and the other miraculous things which I will not here write of"(15). This epigraph shows how the island was perceived by European travelers, who transformed the reality of the "exotic" Eastern country into a mythical paradise. The other epigraph is from 1978, a modern view of the country, by a journalist from Ceylon, Douglas Amarasekera, who writes about the ignorance and paralysis inflicted on the Ceylonese as a consequence of centuries of colonization.

Ondaatje shows in some passages how the creation of a fantacised view of Ceylon was constructed since the beginning. The narrator tells, in the chapter “The Karapothis” that “captains would spill cinnamon onto the deck and invite passengers on board to smell *Ceylon* before the island even came onto view” (81) and mentions legends such as “From Seyllan to Paradise is forty miles”(81), where “the sound of the fountains of Paradise is heard there” (81).

Ondaatje presents Ceylon through fantasized and stereotypical writings and versions from different sources, such as: family, invaders, and writers who lived in Ceylon, and from his fallible memory from childhood. In some parts, Ondaatje’s usage of the sources has an ironic tone, but in others Ondaatje takes advantage of this mythical version of Ceylon, for it allows him to fantasize the facts of his private story as well as to emphasize the way myths are created, stretching the boundaries of fact and invading the domain of fantasy. This fantastic view of Ceylon can be shown differently in some reports when Ondaatje writes about the heat in Ceylon. He says that “the most comfortable hours are 4 a.m. until about nine in the morning; the rest of the day heat walks the house as an animal hugging everybody” (79).

In the introduction to the chapter “The Karapothis” (a Sri Lankan word for foreigner), Ondaatje selected three epigraphs exposing the negative aspects of “paradise.” The first is the report from the Journals of Edward Lear, dated from 1875, in which he affirms:

This Ceylon part of the journey goes wearily, wearily! Tired out by being constantly disturbed all night — noisy sea, and noisier soda-bottle-popping planters, and the early dawn with crows and cocks.

The brown people of this island seem to me odiously inquisitive and bothery-idiotic. All the while the savages go on grinning and chattering to each other.

...The roads are intensely picturesque. Animals, apes, porcupine, hornbill, squirrel, pigeons and figurative dirt! (78)

The second is D.H. Lawrence's testimony of his experience:

After all, Taormina, Ceylon, Africa, America — as far as *we* go, they are only the negation of what we ourselves stand for and are; and we're rather like jonahs running away from the place we belong.

...Ceylon is an experience — but heavens, not a permanence.(78)

Finally, a line by Leonard Woolf: "All jungles are evil" (78). The three writers show their disdain for the idealized paradise, the mythical idea that may have driven them there in the first place. Ondaatje describes here how the English colonizers distort the experiences and realities of the colonized people and expose their "inferiority". As colonizers often believed, whereas the west was seen as rational, masculine, good, and ordered, the east was considered to be the opposite, that is, chaotic, irrational, feminine, and evil, thus reflecting the western conception of opposites and the belief that the world works according to dichotomies (good/evil, black/white, heaven/hell). The narrator alternately introduces images of Ceylon that present it sometimes as a paradise and at other times as a hell, reinforcing the notion that Ceylon may not be as paradisiacal as the European first thought. At the same time that the narrator emphasizes the writing of the Empire as stereotypical and twisted, Ondaatje also posits his writing as a way of writing back, a way of reconstructing his identity, revisiting his past, and realizing it in a fragmented way. The issue of otherness is often present in the narrative, since it was an issue that haunted his father's rank. In spite of belonging to a privileged class in Ceylon, Ondaatje's family was also excluded due to the colonial inscription

of difference. To go even farther, writing probably helps the narrator keep his perspective of not being deceived by the tricky memories of a lost home, which migrants tend to romanticize.

Although Mary Louise Pratt points out that travel writing is the product of “exploration writing about European economic and political expansion” (4), the focus of her study is “how travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went about creating the ‘domestic subject’ of Euroimperialism” (4). By writing their travel adventures, the way they perceived the subjugated peoples of their colonized lands, and writing about the detailed conclusions of their scientific research, they ended up creating the European version of the world.

The charm, natural exuberance, and the edenic air of Ceylon — described by visitors and invaders — is discredited by many other visitors and reinforced by the narrator when he describes the land and the heat that “disgraces the foreigner,” referring, for example, to the discomfort suffered by D.H. Lawrence during his visit to the island. The narrator also comments that this is “the heat which drove Englishmen crazy” (78). Robert Knox was held captive on the island in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and he remembered his time this way: “Thus was I left Desolate, Sick and in Captivity, having no earthly comforter, none but only He who looks down from Heaven to hear the groaning of the prisoners” (81). Not only did foreigners feel uncomfortable with the heat and the miseries of living in Ceylon; Ondaatje’s description of the heat, cited previously (“an animal hugging everybody”) indicate that it also affected him as an insider/outsider; in other words, the same heat that disgraced the foreigner may displease the western portion of himself as well.

The narrator concludes that rather than a place of permanence “the island was a paradise to be sacked” (81) and that the invaders clearly plundered everything good the island had to offer.

Every conceivable thing was collected and shipped back to Europe: cardamoms, pepper, silk, ginger, sandalwood, mustard, oil, palmyrah root, tamarind, wild indigo, deers' horns, elephant tusks, hog lard, calamander, coral, seven kinds of cinnamon, pearl and cochineal. A perfumed sea. (81)

The expression “perfumed sea” used by Ondaatje in this passage refers to the spices pillaged by Europeans and transported to Europe. Ceylon was a colony for exploitation purposes and not for settlement, which is clearly recognized by Ondaatje when he tells about the many foreigners who faced the adventure of traveling to Ceylon as an experience and not permanence. The narrator states that “Ceylon always did have too many foreigners... who never grew ancient here ...they came originally and overpowered the land obsessive for something as delicate as the smell of cinnamon. Becoming wealthy with spices”(80). The pursuit of wealth was the main objective of Europeans, thus Ceylon was never considered as “home” by foreigners. Ondaatje’s family may have embodied this idea of not remaining in Ceylon. Ondaatje’s family, belonging to a privileged rank of the Ceylonese society, may have taken the idea of being English too far and like many other European foreigners departed to live their ideal life outside Ceylon.

Many other foreigners are mentioned, such as Pablo Neruda, who lived there for two years in the thirties and wrote poems about “this landscape governed by a crowded surrealism — full of vegetable oppressiveness" (81). However, not only Europeans reported the mysteries of Ceylon: an ancestor of the writer says that "if this was a paradise, it had a darker side" (81). William Charles Ondaatje corroborated his view by commenting on the existence of "fifty-five species of poisons easily available to his countrymen, none of it, it seems, used against invaders" (81) — ironically, poisons were not used against foreigners by the Ceylonese. Colonized and

colonizers are in permanently opposite sides of the country's history. Ondaatje mentions sayings from William Charles, his ancestor's journals on Botany, "delighted in the beauty and the poisons" (82) and listed "the possible weapons around him" (82). The foreigners who never "grew ancient" (80) there, "crawled over them and admired their beauty" (82). This passage may imply that foreigners actually never knew the "arts and customs and religious ceremonies" (82) of the island, therefore they may have never been considered a threaten by the islanders. In fact, foreigners did not suspect the threat hidden under nature. Ondaatje mentions that Robert Knox was the only foreigner who really wrote well of the island, "learning its traditions" (82), and that "very few foreigners truly knew where they were" (82). As Ondaatje says, "the island hid its knowledge" (82); therefore, even if beauty hid poisons, the foreigners were delighted by it.

In the same way that foreigners were not aware of the Ceylonese culture to the point of understanding and interfering in it, the Ceylonese may have never felt threatened by them. Ironically the image of a paradise, constructed by Europeans to attract the readers of travel narratives and to justify their domination, created a false image of the island to the inhabitants themselves. By living on the island, the colonizers could see the other side of the paradise, the heat, the poisonous plants, and the apparent passivity of its inhabitants. The invaders plundered the island in all ways possible, with no concern about understanding its history or even being part of it. As Ondaatje puts it, "we own the country we grow up in, or we are aliens and invaders" (81).

The Ceylonese embodied the other for the invader. They stood for difference, for those to be dominated and changed. For the countrymen, the invaders were those who came to plunder and teach. The island and its inhabitants represented the ambivalence of the relationship between colonizers and colonized. Island and people embodied the dualism lived by the colonizers: the island is both paradise and hell. The colonizers' images of Ceylon exemplify the way writers, clergymen, and colonizers produced the rest of the world, creating fictions to stimulate the imagination of Europeans. However, the island attempts to resist and fight back the invader.

The heat and the monsoons, the wildlife and vegetable oppressiveness represent some of the darker sides of the island. The images created by Ondaatje to describe nature, such as the jungle encroaching on the village; nature advances, tea bushes becoming jungle, branches putting their arms into windows, makes the reader see the island as an untamed exotic place that challenges the power of explorers and make them retreat and avoid permanence.

As it was mentioned above, Ondaatje believes that Ceylon was seduced by many invaders and claimed power by force, religion, or language. Nevertheless, once

the pendant [the island] stood still, it became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried — my own ancestor arriving in 1600, a doctor who cured the residing governor's daughter with a strange herb and was rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a new name which was a Dutch spelling of his own. Ondaatje. A parody of the ruling language. (64)

Ondaatje uses the image of a mirror to suggest that the island pretended to reflect each “European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities” (64) on the island again. In other words, the Ceylonese mimicked the series of invaders, mirroring their behavior. In Bill Ashcroft's *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, the term mimicry is given according to Homi Bhabha, who views it as an important concept in post-colonial theory because it describes the “ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized” (139). As Bhabha argues in “*Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*”, “the discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that is forked, not false” (85), implying the ambivalence of Europeans, who, on one hand, imposes discipline and tries to reform the native's behavior and knowledge, and yet, on the other hand, refuses to accept their resemblance to the Europeans. If the colonial power is taken “in the name of history,” it leads to a discourse of “irony,

mimicry and repetition” (85). Mimicry emerges from the discrepancy of the “high ideals of colonialism” and its “low mimetic literary effects” (85). Colonial mimicry, then, stands as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite*” (86). Bhabha also argues that mimicry is “constructed around an *ambivalence*” (86) and that for mimicry to be effective, it “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (86). Therefore, it is a “sign of a double articulation” (86): on one hand a “complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (86); on the other, “a sign of the inappropriate” (86), which Bhabha defines as a “difference” (86) that threatens the “‘normalized’ knowledge and disciplinary powers” (86). Mimicry becomes a powerful tool to reinforce colonial power but it also becomes a threat. Mimicry praises difference; the threat remains in-between the distance of “almost the same but not quite” (86), which is to say the colonized may be “almost” the same but not “quite”; they may be a repetition of their colonial subject but not its representation. Bhabha affirms that this is the difference between “being English and being Anglicized, the identity between stereotypes, which, through repetition, also becomes different” (90), thus turning the colonial subject into a “partial presence” (88) and the colonial object into a “partial imitator” (88)

The articulation of the burghers’ imitation of the English, presented by Ondaatje, shows them as “almost the same but not quite” (86): they are Anglicized, not English; they imitate the English in their life styles and language, and even occupy positions of power in the history of the country, but they never lived among the English (in fact they considered the English as snobbish and unfriendly). The burghers were, in the author’s words, “almost the same but not white” (89) a paraphrase of Bhabha’s motto for mimicry as the ideological power in postcolonial countries. In this way, skin color and race are the menace implied in the mimicry that the burghers perpetuate in imitating the English.

Colonialism made Ceylon a wife of many marriages that pretended to reflect the many invaders' cultures. In fact, the island was a contact zone, where "the cultures met, clashed and grappled with each other...in a highly asymmetrical relation of domination and subordination" (Pratt 4). Ondaatje refers to invaders "who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language" (64). One of the consequences was the many names Ceylon acquired in each of the invasions, as if pretending to adjust to the new invader's power. The same thing happened to people: mostly as a product of intermarriage they acquired new blood, and new names were added to the existing ones. The name Ondaatje itself is "a parody", an "imperfect" copy, because it was a "new name which was a Dutch spelling of his [narrator's] own" (64), an imitation of his own name, which is "almost the same but not quite" (86). This name mirrors and possibly mocks the original, the encounter of the other's language with the ruling one. Language and culture surrender to the "enemy" — the dominant culture that rules till a newer one comes along. The narrator mentions the origin of the family name, crediting it to an intermarriage of the Dutch governor's daughter with a doctor, a foreigner, who after curing the young girl received her as wife, thus being "rewarded with land and a new name" (64), Ondaatje. After his wife's death, his ancestor married a Sinhalese and remained there.

Language is the most powerful device for domination. Ondaatje refers to the Sinhalese alphabet he learned at five and that he described as "the most beautiful alphabet" (83), "the bones of a lover's spine" (83), "the self-portrait of language", a work of art. Ondaatje also mentions that it was "the only time his handwriting was meticulous" (83). Although still a colony, Ceylon's resistance to oppression may be implied in the permanent teaching of the old language, but Ondaatje suggests that this same alphabet was used many years later against him, as a punishment at St Thomas' College Boy School. The school was the place where the language of the Empire was taught. Nevertheless, by being punished to write in the Sinhalese language, due to his first "socialist protest" — writing on walls and urinating on Father Barnabus' tires—made the narrator think "for years ... that literature was

punishment”(84). It seems that the native language here is shown by the narrator as a language of protest, from the graffiti poem scratched onto the rock of Sigiriya in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, to hundreds of protest poems written within the University of Ceylon at the time of the 1971 Insurgency. The native language, Sinhalese, is the primary resource, used here as a symbol of both the resistance against oppression and beauty.

### **1.2-Dutch Ondaatjes: The still pendant parodying history**

Twenty-five years is the distance that separates the narrator from his past and homeland, when he suddenly feels compelled to go back. The narrator, however, takes off even before boarding the plane that will take him to his destination. The expression "running in the family" used as the title of the memoir is already a motion towards his goal—his family. Although the expression is traditionally used in the present as "it runs in the family," the use of the verb in the gerund — "running" — in Ondaatje's text may imply (e) motion and a certain degree of hurry and excitement, together with inherited traits that continuously travel back and forth in the family. Besides, the narrator confesses that, back in Canada during a party, drunk and relaxed, he "knew" he was "already running" (22), and "during quiet afternoons" he "spread maps onto the floor and searched out possible routes to Ceylon" (22). The narrator starts the book with the map of Sri Lanka with the possible routes inside the island. The narrator draws a map with the great majority of places he actually visits and mentions along the book, and that is printed on the opening pages of the book. The visual routes for the journey are traced; they contain the necessary elements to trigger the narrator's imagination with familiar and relevant places to accomplish his purpose. The personal version of the map created as a possible itinerary has the necessary aura of truthfulness; the journey is actually about to happen and it is real. Even though it ends up being an excuse for an emotional journey to a lost father, known places from childhood demand a fresh new look.

According to Patrick Holland, in *Tourists with Typewriters: Travel Writing Today*, contemporary writers intend to "reexplore regions of the world that, although discovered, 'remain unfamiliar'" (xvii), which seems to be one of Ondaatje's purposes in his journey back to Sri Lanka.

Ceylon's history is one aspect. Together with the narrative of the country's history the narrator searches for his family's roots and is excited when he finds family names registered in old documents and carved on church stones.

To kneel on the floor of a church and see your name chiseled in large letters so that it stretches from your fingertips to your elbow in some strange way removes vanity, eliminates the personal. It makes your own story a lyric. So the sound which came immediately out of my mouth as I half-gasped and called my sister spoke all that excitement of smallness, of being overpowered by stone. (65-66)

The name chiseled on the stone floor of the church shows the ambivalence of Ondaatje's family existence as it shows the remains of some ancestor, and the perpetuation of the Ondaatjes' name. It embodies at the same time life and death: the earthly death of an important relative and also a sort of divine perpetuation of the family name in stone carving. Important families were often buried and kept in privileged places inside churches. Finding the remains of an Ondaatje in a church of the 1650s makes him realize the importance of his family name. The feeling of such an excitement overcomes the boundaries of ordinary feelings of wealth and tradition. It becomes part of the country's history and culture; it goes beyond personal family pride, making his own story "a lyric." It removes the family idea of greatness centered in power and wealth by replacing it with smallness before time and history. The fact of kneeling down on the floor to see the carved names on the floor has a symbolic representation of humility. Whatever the social level, death is the same for all. The term "overpowered by stone" gives an idea of being defeated, subjugated by the burden of carrying

the family name. The perpetuation of his family name carved “in large letters” in the old church may have made him realize the power his name acquired and his responsibility in carrying it.

His feelings towards his family had been of shame for many years in his life back in London. He writes that he had some friends who played tennis and once they came back to London after participating in a tournament in Ceylon, he [the narrator] confesses he never returned their calls, for he believes his friends had found out “what a disgraceful family I had come from” (177). After his mother’s experiences there, he “had this image that Ondaatjes were absolute pariahs” (177).

Michael Ondaatje’s family belonged to the Dutch burgher’s class, which used to have all the privileges, as mentioned above. The burghers were a mixed native upper-class that lived a separate life from the rest of the population, even spatially when they retreated to the mountains to escape from the heat. This makes the relationship of colonizer/colonized even more complex. The burghers were not exactly English but behaved like them; they were partial natives but did not behave like natives. The English were the dominant class; the burghers were the second in the rank, followed by the rest of the population. It could be argued that the burghers were the ‘hybrid’ portion of the society. Maybe Ondaatje sees hybridity, specifically in the case of the burghers, as somehow negative. The burghers are described in the book as uncontrollable, drunk, and irresponsible. All through the book, the narrator leads the reader to perceive that being “hybrid” made their lives miserable and empty. By showing their extravagant life style, Ondaatje highlights the dark side of being in-between: the unconscious unhappiness of his parents, the lack of identity that led his father to death through drunkenness, the ambivalence of being at the same time powerful and powerless, native and foreigner, Anglicized Ceylonese.

The hybrid traits in the population are not emphasized by the narrator in the text. It seems the aim of the narrative is not to focus on the population as a whole but to point out the consequences of the colonial period on the narrator’s family and the portion of society they represent. However, the hybridization is a two-way process, as it has an impact on both cultures. The narrator draws attention to

the impact on the colonizer, for instance, in the description of the difficulties they had in dealing with the island's natural phenomena and the different culture of the population. Hybridity, then, is associated with what Bhabha calls "cross-cultural 'exchange'" in "Signs taken for Wonder", where he states that "the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its presence as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference" (119).

The narrator's trip to Sri Lanka shows the life led by his relatives since his grandparents' time. The family is presented as part of a privileged class, which, unaware of the oppression suffered by most of the population of the country, live their lives in a very eccentric way. They dress like the English, they speak like the English, they live like the English, but they do not live among the English. In "Historical Relations," the journey goes back to the twenties when his parents led a prodigal life. Supported by the richness provided by tea plantations, the narrator's grandparents could afford a very expensive kind of life. The excessive heat in the hot months of April and May would drive the rich people from Colombo to Nuwara Eliya, the "up-country," which was viewed as a "a different world" (39): at an elevation of 6000 feet, "one did not sweat there". They "looked forward to parties, horse racing, All Ceylon Tennis Tournament and serious golf" (41). The narrator says,

Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and quite separated from those who had intermarried and who lived here permanently. (41)

The hybridization of the island's inhabitants and the colonial subject (the English) gives them an ambivalent position: by mimicking each other they construct a new identity. This place where the other/the colonized/colonizer becomes someone else, which Bhabha calls the "third space of enunciation," is the same called by Mary Louse Pratt as "contact zones". This space is a place of

transformation; it is where the colonized, referred to in the passage above, acquires his double vision, his ambivalent view of the whole. It becomes the space where the colonized, by mimicking the colonizer, is transformed into a hybridized subject “pretending to reflect the European power” (64). The narrator himself is related both to the East and to the West, to Ceylon and to Canada, to the colonial invaders and to the Tamil and Sinhalese workers. His origin provided him with the position of being both the subject of colonialism and the victim of the same colonization process.

Drinking and dancing take the rest of their spare time on the mountains. Stories of heavy drinking and love affairs keep coming, and travel takes its course alternating with places, people from old generations, gambling, and old stories. Traveling through other people’s versions of family stories corroborates the narrator's own story and gives a new perspective to his memories. Thus he can make of this journey, “the greatest door to freedom” (4) and through writing his memories “celebrates this freedom” (Patrick citing Cocker 4)

In the first chapter, the narrator tries to justify to the reader and probably to himself the reasons for his trip as well as the process that triggers “the perverse and solitary desire” (22) to run back home. In the chapter “Jaffna Afternoons,” the narrator takes the first step by trying to document the trip as a journal. He provides the exact time and the exact location where he spends his first days in Sri Lanka. He describes in details the living-room of the old governor's home, the paint on the ceiling and walls, the height of the doors, the fan that hangs from the ceiling, and the “noisy solitude of the afternoon” (25). The house, built in 1700, an inheritance of the Dutch, is now the first spectator of the narrator's solitary return. The narrator poetically narrates the encounter with his siblings, the report of the extenuating trip, and the admiration for his aunt Phyllis. Moreover, in the “noisy solitude” of the “new stories in [his] mind” (27), the reality of the journey takes on the character of fact, and he realizes he is part of the “human pyramid” (27). We may say then that he is finally aware that he is home. Traveling and writing about being home enhances his perception of

belonging and his perspective of the past, In *"Getting there ": Travel, Time and Narrative*, Barry Curtis and Claire Pajackowska state that

The search for a place in which happiness may be found is always a metaphor for the search to recover a memory of happiness. The journey is a symbol of narrative. Narrative... is conceived as a physical process of movement of disruption, negotiation and return. (199)

Travel writing or memoir writing in *Running in the Family* "leads to a place where time 'stands still' or is reversed into a utopian space of freedom, abundance and transparency" (Curtis 199). The past becomes a parallel universe whose borders the writer crosses to create the possibility, through narrative, of an open door he may always trespass and step back and forth in to access the real and fictional territory created by the narrative.

In the chapter "Kegalle (i)" the narrator goes back to the past to find his grandfather's reputation. "Bampa" as he was called, like many other Ondaatjes, carried the reputation of being a "snob" and despite his dark color "had a weakness for pretending to be English." In mimicry of the English, he dressed "in his starched collars and grey suits" (56). Only in the afternoons "when dressed in sarong and vest, he went out for walks over his property...he seemed to become a real part of the landscape around him" (56). Every two years "he would visit England, buy crystal and learn the latest dances" (56). However, he was "determined to be a good father and patriarch spreading a protective wing over his...brother Aelian and living in his empire — acres of choice land in the heart of Kegalle" (56). As it was mentioned earlier, the burghers were a representative second dominant class in Ceylon; thus the term empire employed by the narrator alludes to the power the Ondaatjes had on the island. The hierarchy of power provided the burghers with a second position in the national scenario. The English exercised power over the burghers, while the burghers did the same over the rest of the population. The "choice land in the heart" of Kegalle may also suggest an association with Canaan, the

Promised Land to the privileged people chosen by God to perpetuate God's land and words. The Ondaatjes' powerful position may represent the class chosen by the English to represent them and perpetuate their power on the island.

The narrator also includes some poems in this section about "how everything that is important occurs in shadow" (88): history, family affairs, his own memories, and his father's image. This is also true concerning Lalla, the narrator's grandmother, whose "bloodline was considered eccentric" (113) and about whose youth there is no information. Lalla is a key character in the book, as she epitomizes the eccentricities of the whole family. She seems to be proud that "she was the first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy" (123). As the story progresses, Lalla is presented as a lyrical socialist, or an Asian version of Robin Hood, as she used to take from the rich to provide the poor. The narrator explains that she would give parties and hand out gifts to all the poor children of the neighborhood. When she became poor, she continued to organize the parties; however, she would steal toys and goods from the market to distribute them, as she thought that "property was there to be taken and given away" (122). Despite her drives of genuine generosity, her controversial behavior was also an important trait. In her times of poverty, she would only play cards for money and even among friends she would cheat; when faced with defeat she would take her hand and the others and "proclaim the rest are mine" (123). She is also presented as a heavy drinker, and a woman who was always throwing herself "into new causes" (123). After her "death she had donated her body to six different hospitals" (123) viewed ironically by the narrator as an excess of generosity. Lalla "loved the thunder; it spoke to her" (125) and it tells her when "someone was going to die" (127). Lalla finds her own death during a storm: she is carried off by the flood and crashes into a blue jacaranda tree. Therefore, the description of Lalla's traits shows her ambivalent behavior ranging from divine generosity to unreasonable small-mindedness. The narrator turns Lalla into a myth, though in a very ironic way. In fact, the narrator tells

everyone that she died of natural causes. Considering the way the narrator describes her death, it may sound natural that crashing against a tree during a storm would mean dying of natural causes.

truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end that nothing of personal relationships... nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other's presence. (53-54)

Time blurs reality, as the reports rely on fragments of memory. Infidelity blurs rightness and truth seems to be unreliable; thus, in Ondaatje's words, history may resemble personal relationships, turning into mere gossip that lasts forever. The stories told along the years and their many versions grow in the shade of each other. People's affairs and the country's history are constructed, based on gossip and hearsay, travel experiences, and the texts of foreigners, as well as reports from generation to generation. "Truth disappears with history" (53) and reality becomes fantasy. Ondaatje comments on how the women in his family blossomed after the patriarchs died: growing in the shade of their husbands' presence made them realize how different they were. Lalla's myth, constructed after Bampa died, remained forever in the family memories. I mentioned Lalla's myth because the text says nothing of the deeper conflict of being a woman living in the shade of a dominating husband; instead, it tells of a hilarious, wild woman, who behaves both like a man— drinking, gambling, working as a farmer — and as a modern woman, ahead of her time, who wanted to experience the new advances of medicine— she submits to an apparently unnecessary mastectomy in the name of progress. The creation of a strong figure of a grandmother who defies society and the rules may be viewed as an attempt to demystify the role of weak, submissive women in his family and his country by turning them into myths of strength and power.

In many sections of the book, the narrator discusses the unusual personality of many members of his family and of their eccentric friends; however, he always keeps the air of nostalgic glamour even in the weirdest situations, which can be noted when he talks about his father's friend, Francis de Saram, who "had the most extreme case of alcoholism"(44), and whose last words, as he was dying on the road, were "A man *must* have clothes for every occasion" (47). As a matter of fact, the narrator transforms his trip not only into an account of the places he visits, but also into a personal trip into peoples' worlds. The story constitutes an attempt to minimize the effects of the traumas generated by the misunderstanding between father and son. The narrator also seems to minimize the wild behavior of his parents' generation by providing them with an aura of unexplainable charisma and by telling their stories in a humorous tone. He tries to recreate the way of life of a "lost generation": "The waste of youth. Burned purposeless... There had been good times" (47). Maybe the whole idea of traveling to the island and writing about these weird characters and their inconsequential times is used by the narrator as an attempt to understand and come to terms with his own behavior, stated in the beginning of the memoir, when he recognizes family features in his drinking and wildness, therefore identifying himself as a product of this inheritance.

The way Ondaatje presents his unusual family and their peculiar memories seems to placate part of his guilt for being away from his family and country for twenty-five years. The guilt for never coming back to his father, for not giving his father and himself a chance to really know each other makes his behavior comprehensible. Traveling back as an outsider, but looking for the moments and places that will transform him again into an insider, the narrator comes into contact with his family, this time empowered by distance and adulthood. The fact of growing up as a western subject also gives him a new perspective of who he is and this way he repossesses his past. The narrator can finally justify why he never returned to his father and to his homeland: the only way to stay sane and free from the weirdness of his family was

by leaving and not looking back. The journey to the past restores his history and private memories, helps him come to terms with an eccentric family, and transforms this adventure into a process of restoration and repossession of his history and his past.

In her study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt uses the term “seeing-man” to define the anti-conquest figure that “is an unfriendly label for the European male subject of European landscape discourse ...whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess.”(7) The “seeing-man” attempted to embody the detached spirit of science to observe the land of the colonized. The narrator becomes the “seeing-man” of his own expedition in his attempt to employ a certain detachment in the telling of the story. He sees everything and presents his family stories and the exotic nature as an outsider/insider. The hybrid character of generations of intermarriage, the position the family occupied during the years of colonization, and the experience of living most of his life in the western society gives the narrator a double perspective when narrating his own story. Consequently, he knows how to explore and call attention to exotic places and animals in an ambivalent way. He is back home, this time in the name of restoring peace and control over the past and his own feelings.

In the skin of the post-imperial subject, Ondaatje writes his story, and his text is what Pratt calls “autoethnographic,” that is, a text in which “the colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms” (7). Autoethnographic texts are generally heterogeneous as they involve

partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms [and customs] of the conqueror ...the idioms appropriated and transformed are those of travel and exploration writing, merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous modes ... addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of

the speaker's own group, bound to be received very differently by each. (7)

The narrator is the product of the interaction between generations of mixed nationalities, who resided in in-between cultures and constructed their voices in the margins of the colonizers' terms and yet validated their own interpretation. As is it was argued above, Ondaatje writes from a double perspective. He may act as a colonial subject to create a fictional image of his country as if he were a foreigner, visiting and discovering the island's beauty and miseries, or as a victim of colonization who uses writing to try to articulate his identity and to reclaim a past he misses. He takes a journey into language, images, and tradition to accomplish his task. By appropriating the English language to write to English readers (a language that is now also Ceylonese) and Ceylonese traditions and images to please western readers, the narrator, then, reclaims his past. This past can never be reconstituted, but partially rebuilt in a process that resembles the organization of the text, constructed in fragments of reality and fiction. This way Pratt's theory of autoethnography applies to Ondaatje's text, as he addresses both the "metropolitan readers" (7) and his "own group" (7) and is received "very differently by each" (7).

In the chapter "St. Thomas Church," the narrator discovers an unexpected number of Ondaatjes, many of them prominent citizens in their own field, in the documents in the Colombo church, when "lifting the ancient pages and turning over the skeletal leaves" (66), the narrator uncovers "the destruction caused by silverfish, scars among the immaculate recordings of local history and formal signatures" (66). The history of his family is intertwined with three hundred years of local history as they witnessed "seasonal droughts and invasions from other countries" (69). History becomes a site in the narrators' discovery as a locale of discovery and self-recognition, and the narrator then drives back home and transcribes names and dates, after which he remarks "I wash my hands and see very clearly the deep grey color of the old paper dust going down the drain" (68). By

washing his hands in the same way Pilate did, the narrator detaches himself from any responsibility or attachment to put himself as mere spectator and narrator of the facts. Whereas emotion and proximity can blur his judgment, language can restore the past by writing his family history mixed with the history of his homeland with the necessary detachment.

Rushdie compares this process of perception to "the metaphor of a cinema screen"

Suppose yourself in a large cinema, sitting at first in the back row, and gradually moving up... until your nose is almost pressed against the screen. Gradually the stars' faces dissolve into dancing grains: tiny details assume grotesque proportions; ... it becomes clear that the illusion itself is reality. The movement through the cinema screen is a metaphor for the narrative's movement through time towards the present, and the book itself, as it nears contemporary events, quite deliberately loses deep perspective, becomes more 'partial'. (13)

It is then necessary to have a deeper perspective of reality and, with "the mercy of distance" (179) write the stories. In the interview with Linda Hutcheon, Ondaatje remarks that, "I hadn't been back for a number of years and that gap allowed me a certain objectivity" (201). In the expression "certain objectivity," Ondaatje may be referring to the distance he took from his homeland, as "the metaphor of the cinema screen", where the "certain objectivity" turns to be the new perspective in which he sees his past and home. Therefore, writing may accomplish the task of stitching the fragments together and of giving the seemingly chaotic tales and events some sort of order and credibility.

As Curtis points out, "travel is conceived as a restorative process and restoration involves necessary regressions and returns" (203). By restoring the image of a lost past and lost grandparents, Ondaatje also restores the chain that links him to a lost father as it "produces new insights and forge new connections" (204) between past scenes and experiences of old family

members and the present, thus restoring and making possible the rebirth of the narrator. Nevertheless, the aura of fictionality suggests a constructed exoticism around family and country images, as the narrator gives excessive attention and emphasis to the weird behavior of his antecessors. The enjoyable way of presenting both the country and Ondaatje's family members restores not only the past but also the way the past should be represented, as the narrator wants to reconstruct it in his own terms. As Curtis observes, "traveling, like speaking, is undertaken to restore something that is lacking; because of this, it often acquires a fetishistic structure" (204). According to Curtis, traveling "may reprise a time of early childhood, when the temporal and spatial were still integrated" (204); however, "outside the world of predictable exchanges certain experiences and objects become supervalidated" (204). When Ondaatje takes his journey back to Sri Lanka, it is Ceylon and all the memories of the past he wants to restore. By emphasizing some memories more than others and by selecting which stories he wants to tell about his family, he is in fact supervalidating some of them, giving to those childhood experiences an aura of almost dreamlike fetish. Moreover, recreating these painful experiences through the lenses of exaggeration and humor may make it easier for him to come to terms with his past and the memory of his ancestors.

The narrator intertwines the geographical travel map with the emotional one and, as the search for the past and for the reconstruction of his family history progress; Ondaatje revisits certain places in an attempt to recollect past experiences, thus triggering imagination in the construction of emotional and imaginary space. In the chapter "The Courtship," the narrator travels back in time and grabs the thread of his story "frozen" in the past to connect to the one that holds him in the present. He recaptures his father's "technique of trying to solve one problem by creating another" (35), his father's romantic involvement with his mother, and finally his father's engagement in the Light Infantry, which the narrator views as "almost a hobby" (34). In the chapter "April 11, 1932," despite

the accuracy of the date, the narrator travels to Kegalle and Colombo through his aunt's accounts of his parents' wedding day.

It seems important for the journey planned by the narrator not to go straight to his goal. The process of (re)cognition of his imaginary homeland is a process of metamorphosis and gradual transformation; it is important for the narrator to take one step at a time in the way to self-identification with the place and family traces. His memories are restored through visual, olfactory, and auditory perceptions and he can recognize family traits embodied in several generations. According to Curtis, "traveling implies a journey of metamorphosis and transformation, in which the self is changed by experience of alterity encountered in dialectic of difference" (206). Even though Ondaatje's journey is not the same as that of a regular tourist, as he already knows the places he visits and in a certain way belongs to them. He reconstructs his own experience by making reports and memories more important than the facts themselves. As Curtis puts it, "Language mediates reality" (207), and Ondaatje's trip mediates his way back by "the retrospective reconstruction of (past) experiences" (207), helping him to recover aspects of childhood and experiences that were not lived but heard of.

Ondaatje tries to picture the relevant aspects of Sri Lanka to make the reader follow his route and understand the peculiarities of his homeland. The chaos provoked by the monsoons may show the reader that it is not only Ondaatje's family that is chaotic. In the chapter "Monsoon Notebook (i)" (69), the narrator mentions the monsoons (a very peculiar aspect of the South Asian climate) that "flood the streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate" (69). Most importantly, he stitches together this image of fluidity with historical pieces of information -- "tough as plastic dolls" enclosed in a hundred-year newspaper, whose pages "come apart in your hands like wet sand" (69)-- and the fractured perceptions he collects by traveling from place to place. This perception can be explained through Rushdie's idea that "human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked

lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions" (12). Moreover, when an emigrant writer who writes from outside his homeland "reflects that world" (11), "he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (10-11).

The narrator says that he "witnessed everything": "One morning I would wake up and just smell things for the whole day" (70-71). He would also observe things moving slowly, or even look at trivial things like a ceiling fan or the Jaffna train. It is impossible to separate the physical aspect of the trip from the symbolic significance of the emotional rediscovery of familiar places and aspects of the land. The natural progression of intimate contact with the emotional aspect is made possible by the progressive contact with places that undoubtedly evoke well hidden memories. The trip takes its course, and in the chapter "Tongue" the contact with peculiar animals evokes some myths. One of the weirdest is that "if a child is given thalagoya [a creature similar to a crocodile, common in Ceylon, seldom found anywhere else in the world] tongue to eat he will become brilliantly articulate" (73). The child will speak beautifully and will be able to "catch" — as the thalagoya catches objects — and "collect wonderful, humorous information" (73). However, there is the right way to eat it: the tongue must be sliced and eaten immediately after the animal is killed. It must also be swallowed in between two banana skins and never be chewed. The effects of this experience will be felt many years later. Ondaatje's uncle "spat half of it out" (74) and nearly died, which makes the reader recall the way Ondaatje mentions the beauties and the poisons of the island. Every side of his and the country's history has a bright and a dark side and he tries to make the reader aware of this fact. Ondaatje also says that the thalagoya flesh can be administered to a "pregnant woman for morning sickness" (74). Apparently, Ondaatje does not mention whether his mother made use of it, but he mentions that six months before he was born she saw a pair of thalagoyas "in copula" — a fact published in *A Coloured Atlas of Some Vertebrates from Ceylon* — and "it is [his] first memory" (75). The reference to this fact

gives the idea that the thalagoya itself, and not only its tongue, has magic effects on people. Ondaatje may not have been transformed into someone brilliantly articulate, but the effects of the thalagoya flesh on his pregnant mother may have given him the brilliancy in writing.

Ondaatje uses his skill to write of his life and that of his home country. Besides describing Sri Lanka to westerners as an exotic island with exotic creatures like the thalagoyas, he also gives emphasis to how nature grows wild in the island. The issue of mobility and constant movement is present in how fast nature "invades" the island and compares "the way memories invade the present in those who are old" (112) to "the way gardens invade houses here" (112). This can also be noticed in the invasion of bats, ants, snakes, which "move in permanently...if you stood still you were invaded" (189), as "birds nested above the fans, the silverfish slid into steamer trunks and photograph albums..." (136).

This sense of mobility and constant change can be observed in maps as well:

This pendant [the map of Ceylon], once its shape stood still, became a mirror. It pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities, some of whom stayed and intermarried (64).

The use of the word "pretend" may suggest not only impermanence in the history of Ceylon but also its resistance to each invader by means of mimicry. Like many other aspects of the story, Ondaatje shows that nothing is what it seems but what it pretends to be. The Ceylonese pretended to be Portuguese, as later they pretended to be English and then Dutch. The map of Ceylon pretended to be still so did its name. When the temporary becomes permanent, it is time to change, and in a continual process of change maps are reshaped, names are changed, identities and ethnicities are intertwined, and historical events are replaced and rewritten. Besides, roles undergo permanent change in the story: the narrator

conducts the narrative most of the time, but he sometimes plays the role of the protagonist, and also act as an observer in his own story. In short, the author wants to tell his family's story, first, by taking the trip back to Sri Lanka, but by selecting the stories he wants to tell, the narrator also becomes part of the plot, and his performance ranges between subject of his own stories or object of his mission: to come to terms with the past.

The narrator also refers to the 1971 Insurgency, which turns "the Vidyalankara campus of the University of Ceylon into a prison camp" (84). When the university reopened for the return of the students, hundreds of poems on the walls, ceilings, and "hidden comers of the campus" portrayed the violence of the struggle, the stories of torture and of lost friends. The history that was about to be covered by censorship in layers of "whitewash and lye" (84) fits the same pattern of the old Ceylonese history: one nationality erasing the other, one race replacing the other, one nation becoming hundreds of others. Ceylon's ancient or recent history, like the narrator's memories, represents the voices the narrator did not know, "the visions which are anonymous. And secret" (85).

In "Home Countries: Narratives across Disciplines", Rosemary Marangoly George argues that "Home is also the imagined location that can be more readily fixed in a mental landscape than actual geography" (11). One sees that in *Running in the Family*, first under the perspective of a trip back home, which makes it clear that "home" goes beyond the boundaries of a mere private aspect. The trip becomes an intricate weave of geographical as well as emotional dislocation, from place to time, from the public to the private, from motherland to fatherland, from fact to fantasy, and from autobiography to memory.

Although Ondaatje makes an effort to show how weird and different his past world looks like and to decide in which terms this life history is going to be told, he seems to be entrapped in his own history. His father, who is shown to be a complete mystery to him, is nothing but the image of a man searching to find his place in the country and family history

like the narrator himself. Drunkenness, alienation, and instability make son and father look like each other. The narrator states that only when he was drunk did he know exactly what he wanted, and he knew he wanted to come back. Not even about Ceylon's colonial history does he take the position of someone outraged about exploitation and oppression. As part of an influential and privileged family, the pressure of colonization and its aftermath may not have been felt strongly by him or any of his relatives.

Perhaps he feels that even when controlling the events, as well as their selection and the way they are presented to the reader, he may not feel right to judge and establish boundaries. He travels geographically and emotionally by dragging the whole scene to his own territory, thus being the director of his own drama and releasing himself from guilt and frustration. He tells his story and the country's history mirroring of each other. I believe that he pretends to be emotionally and psychologically detached from the facts and from his family's stories to better understand them. The historical facts as well as his personal stories come in waves like nationalities and languages did in the past. One comes to replace the other, but at the same time they interact with each other.

## Chapter II

### **(Re)writing (Hi)stories: Self-discovery and the discovery of the Father(land)**

I realized I would be traveling back to the family I had grown from — those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words.

Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family*

The part always has a tendency to reunite with its whole in order to escape from its imperfections.

Leonardo da Vinci

Salman Rushdie argues that those who write from outside their home countries — exiles, expatriates or emigrants — are “haunted by some sense of loss” (10); some need to reclaim, to look back at the risk of being transformed into “pillars of salt” (10). The ambivalence of their position gives them a double perspective of what they want to claim. Distance keeps them apart from home; moreover, the new home changes their way of seeing themselves. Being both outsiders and insiders provides them with the capacity to write, creating an imaginary homeland, a fictive land to which they can belong and expect to come back to.

Michael Ondaatje, an immigrant writer from Sri Lanka, is haunted by the loss of his roots. Unresolved issues from the past haunt his dreams and demand his attention. His native country, Ceylon, at the time of his departure was still a country under the power of England. Although his departure did not result from political problems, as it was motivated by personal reasons and family issues, the sense of loss is present and insidious. Nevertheless, it is not only his homeland he misses; his father is the central piece of this search, who becomes the fictive land the narrator tries to recreate. When he decides to go back, Ceylon is not Ceylon any more, but Sri Lanka; it is independent, and like the country, Ondaatje tries to restore his history. Ondaatje belongs to two worlds, and he is at the same time an insider and an outsider in Sri Lanka. Besides, his long absence has enabled him to see his past and his father

differently. He sees things from a double perspective and tries to make peace with his past. His loss is explained by the fact that he “never spoke to him [his father] as an adult” (179).

The title *Running in the Family* offers multiple readings with prepositional changes, for the text is not only about running away from the family, but also running to, after, or against the family. The narrative claims country and family, father and son, public and private history, east and west.

Although writing his own life seems to be the focus, the genre chosen by Ondaatje to perform the task is hard to specify. In this chapter, I will discuss the generic boundaries and distinctions of the text. My intention is to analyze the text to discuss whether it is an autobiography, a self-portrait, or a memoir. In other words, it is to analyze the return to the past in a “story about [a] father [he] cannot come to terms with” (181), a story of a son searching and trying to grasp a dead father through the imaginary fatherland of his mind.

## **2.1 - Narrating the self: definitions and distortions**

Linda Anderson introduces her critical work on autobiography citing Lang (6), who points out that “if a writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it” (1). Recognized as a literary genre since the late eighteenth century, autobiography includes ideas such as “authorship, selfhood and the division between fact and fiction” (2). The controversy over the topic has made literary critics “contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries,” and by defining it they assumed the authority over this “unruly and slightly disruptive field” (2). Anderson cites Beaujour, who argues that an autobiography implies “a continuous narrative and ‘systematic’ history of the personality” (2), following a logical sequence, by means of elements orderly disposed in a chronological order.

Obviously, one cannot say what the intention of the writer was when he started his autobiographical narrative. Even if the writer is in a way implicated in the work by writing about his past experiences, by telling who he is, this is not grounds for categorizing the text as autobiography. Considering the structure of the text, it may be viewed as autobiographical, though it does not follow the chronological order usually required by this genre or the rhetorical discourse, without transgressions and distortions, peculiar to the self-portrait.

Besides the lack of the chronological order that usually defines an autobiography, *Running in the Family* presents almost no reference to dates or chronological time, as the narrative goes back and forth, being only apparently organized as a travel narrative. As the reader starts the book, s/he may feel that it will follow a sequence that makes sense and that will follow the narrator's itinerary; however, as the narrator presents the motive for travel in the first chapter, and then presents his own version of the map of Ceylon on the following page, the whole narrative seems to deviate. Most of the text becomes a patchwork of events and history; the narrator tells the story as an eye-witness of the process, following the flow of his thoughts. The narration of the story by means of the pronoun "I", the first person singular, indicates a direct communication between the narrator and the reader. The involvement of the narrator/character or the implied writer in the facts of the text only makes the reader aware of who is conducting the sequence of facts or causing their scrambling.

In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth comments that the importance of the narrative depends on "whether the narrator is dramatized in his own right and on whether his beliefs and characteristics are shared by the author" (151). The implied author, or as he puts it, "the author's second self," stands for an implicit picture of "author who stands behind the scenes...who is always distinct from the 'real man'" (151).

In her study *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan cites Booth, who affirms that "the implied author is the governing consciousness of the work as a

whole, the source of the norms embodied in the work” (86). Later in the study, while analyzing Booth’s position towards implied authors and the author himself, Rimmon-Kenan says that the author and the implied author do not have to be identical.

An author may embody in a work ideas, beliefs, emotions other than or even quite opposed to those he has in real life... and in different works.

...While the flesh-and-blood author is subject to the vicissitudes of real life, the implied author of a particular work is conceived as a stable entity, ideally consistent with itself within the work. (87)

Thus the narrator, the “second self” of the writer, created by him to fit his purposes, is a mediator between the writer and the reader. Moreover, he is not only an observer, but also a narrator/character that both narrates and takes part in the plot. The purpose of Ondaatje in this text seems to be to create a narrator who is, on the one hand, close enough to the “real facts” he intends to present, but, on the other hand, distant enough not to interfere in his judgment of the emotional facts that link his father and him.

Ondaatje’s text is almost entirely narrated in the first person singular; the pronoun “I” in the text stands for the narrator, who uses the name and surname of the writer — Michael Ondaatje — to achieve the goal of rebuilding the coming back home. The characters in this book are members of Ondaatje’s real family: his father Mervyn, his mother Doris, his grandmother Lalla, his aunts Phyllis and Dolly, his brother and sister, Gilliam and Susan, among others.

Even if the writer’s aim is to write about his life, experiences and memories, it is not necessary to consider the account truthful or real, or to believe the narrator and the author are the same person. Fictionality overcomes reality and, whether the book is an autobiography or

not, fiction is present in all the possible readings of the many approaches in Ondaatje's life writing. One can discuss the fictional character of the book in all instances, when one analyzes photography, cartography, the genre of the book, the versions of Ondaatje's family tales, Ceylon's history, the texts by famous writers, all inserted in the book, and, finally, Ondaatje's imaginary journey to his father.

## **2-2. Self-portrait: Playing with image**

Texts on the writing of one's life have always been a subject for debate. The attempt to categorize all self-writing as autobiographic, though with some crucial distinctions, makes the issue even more complex. According to Philippe Lejeune, instead of trying to "realign the whole history as autobiography...it seems more economical to postulate the existence of another genre — or at least of another type of discourse" (qtd. in Beaujour 2).

According to Michel Beaujour, while autobiography has "long been a topic for debates, self-portrait has no continuous theoretical reflection, except the texts themselves" (2-3). He also argues that this genre offers no "horizon of expectation" (3) and that each text is produced as one of its kind. Furthermore, Beaujour affirms that Self-portrait is still an "outsider" as designated restrictively or negatively by historians and theorists: "a text that is not quite an autobiography...it is almost a literary genre by itself" (3). Thus, whatever the designation or term used, it depends on how the writers define their own genre; nevertheless, in most cases the writers "do not know how to designate themselves" (2).

Ondaatje does not mention the term autobiography throughout his entire narrative, which he tends to view as "portrait" and "gesture." When he tries to define the genre of the text in the "Acknowledgements", he states: "I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture'" (206). The term "gesture" may imply an act that shows good intentions,

an attitude towards expressing himself. Douglas Barbour explains the significance of this term,

‘Gesture’ is a key word here, for gesture can either signify something else, or it can merely signify itself, the act of gesturing, of pointing toward that which cannot be named. In a book full of naming, full of stories, full of both the writer’s family and his own life as a writer, great mysteries remain, and all the text can do is point them out. (124)

Ondaatje’s usage of “gesture” may point to vagueness. In a story full of vague references, gossip, and rumours, the story may be just a gesture towards his father, a miniaturization of a “real story,” an unnamed element to be questioned, and the gesture that changed his father into someone else. Finally, this “gesture” is what Peircean semiotics views as an “index,” i.e., “a sign connected or associated with its object — an indicator” (Watson and Hill 210). Ondaatje’s narrative thus points to an image of his father and country, rather than presenting a realistic picture. Besides, “gesture” may refer to a repetition of the act of writing one’s story. As a trend in modern times, writing one’s own story may lead to the unconscious act of repeating the “gestures” of many other writers.

The structure of the narrative in *Running in the Family* follows is not linear; it has no chronological order and thematic headings do not match the content that follows. The book fits the structure discussed by Beaujour, as it is constructed around pieces of evidence, memories, historical facts, family versions based on real facts, and fragments of a past life. It constitutes a patchwork of scrambled pieces to be stitched together by the reader. The movement back and forth may give the idea that the narrator does not know what he is doing or where he is going, but such suspicion disappears at the end of the text, as the writer reaches

his target and confirms his mission of rewriting his history by remapping his route to his father, and by traveling back to Sri Lanka, of remapping the history of the country.

The story begins with a personal version of the map of Sri Lanka, with few directions and information: the map is not complete, and it reminds one of treasure maps revealing only the spots leading to the treasure. It seems to intentionally disregard the other possible routes of the country; instead, it reveals the routes intended by the narrator. The narrative does not start with a regular map of Sri Lanka, found in any atlas, but with one from the inside of the narrator's mind, a personal and private map to guide a personal and private journey. The map offers the first hint to the journey: as the story evolves, Sri Lanka is visited and showed according to the narrator's desire and view. The narration is personal and evocative of the narrator's ancestors. The way the narrator organizes the chapters also leads to the way he draws the map: the stories and the sequence in which they are told obey no chronology or order. They follow the needs of the narrator, ranging from public to private, from touristy to personal, from historical to emotional, from motherland to fatherland. By the end of the narrative, in the "Acknowledgements", the writer explains his intention of telling the story his way; with the scattered pieces of information chosen and disposed in one direction. He then weaves the threads of his journey and life, departing from a previously selected, carefully scrambled and varied route to a fictional journey, towards the ultimate encounter with his father. It is evident that the narrator, despite writing about himself in a fictional way, needs the approval of those involved in the plot, as he apologizes for a possible disapproval of his method. Aware of the fictional tone of the narrative, Ondaatje's brother says "You must get this book right... you can only write it once" (201).

Ondaatje's story may sound like an autobiography, but throughout the text, instead of telling the readers what he has done, the narrator tells who he is — even though he indirectly pretends to tell about his family, father and country, which, according to Beaujour, is the

“operational formula for the self-portrait”(3). A self-portrait is the writer’s attempt to “paint himself” (4) not the way a painter would represent the “face and the body he perceives in the mirror” (4), but forced into a detour where the self-portraitist reveals his mind in the course of the elaboration of his self-writing project. Thus, the writer, following the rules, rearranges the plethora of information in headings not only to follow a personal taxonomy, but also to give sense to it. *Running in the Family* is a portrait of both the country and the writer, revealing the contours of both, and intertwining their history.

Beaujour points out that the discussion over self-portrait stagnated and, unlike the discussion upon other genres, which evolved throughout the modern period, the attempt to restrain it into boundaries also fell apart. Thus it becomes harder to differentiate one self-portrait from another, transforming it into a marginal genre, as similarities and differences are hard to classify. Because of this marginality, the self-portrait becomes a “dump for our culture’s refuse” (7). The marginality of the text, the mere scribbling, produces a guilty writer, a writer without any useful public purpose; however, writing is considered useful and efficacious in persuading, blaming, dissuading or praising a subject. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje apparently feels guilty of producing such a marginal text. The narrator’s awareness of such guilt is present in the words of his “Acknowledgements”:

While all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or “gesture”. And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can say that in Sri Lanka a well-told story is worth a thousand facts. (206)

The narrator confesses that he is well aware of the marginality of the text, which reinforces my theory that the text is not an autobiography or a memoir. It is a portrait, a self-portrait, a gesture, an “authentic” fiction. Ondaatje may ironically justify the fictional

character of the narrative, which is at least “a well-told story,” which, in the Sri Lanka of his mind, is “worth a thousand facts”. Actually, confession is another keyword here, and it may give some credibility to the text, or give, as Beaujour says, a “touch of virtue” (8) to it. The term “must,” used by Ondaatje, may imply the duty to tell the readers his intention when writing the text, whereas “confess” suggests certain guilt for the text not being quite “an autobiography,” or it may be an apology for its marginal character. Subsequently he apologizes for the imagined disapproval of the collaborators, for “the fictional air” implied in the kind of text he has produced.

Beaujour argues that writers, in the beginning, are not quite sure of where they are heading or what they are doing; thus the text is nothing but a series of fragments of discourse, a collection of memories and fantasies: “Even if the ‘self-portraitist’ has only started to write — he sees what at first was *nothing* becoming a plethora” (4). And it is the plethora of fragmented narratives in Ondaatje’s text that gives form to the portrait he tries to shape. Beaujour considers the word self-portrait “essentially metaphorical” (1), as it evokes painters rather than writers. Since they are writers, they “paint themselves” (1) through words to create the desired image. This metaphor cannot be extended indefinitely as a definition of the writer’s text, since it “at most allows the definition — and distortion — of some intentions, certain definite limits” (1). Beaujour believes this definition can “prejudice the specificity of both arts and works” (1). Ondaatje’s text relies on distortions and on different ways of seeing certain aspects of “reality”, which is presented as fragmented and incomplete. The text is composed of a collage of pieces of information about the author himself that gradually acquire a new sense in a broad view of the text.

Self-portraits, different from autobiographies, are actually discontinuous narratives, without any subordination of the narration to a “logical deployment”; they are “a collation or patching together, of elements under headings that are called thematic” (2). Lejeune calls it

“the secret project of every autobiography” (qtd. in Beaujour 2), an idea based on Leiris’ theory, in which the thematic order takes first place, followed by the traditional chronological order.

As Beaujour points out,

This genre tries to create coherence through a system of cross-references, anaphoras, superimpositions, or correspondences among homologous and substitutable elements in a way so as to give the appearance of discontinuity, of anachronistic juxtaposition, or montage ... no matter how scrambled, since the scrambling of a narrative always tempts the reader to ‘reconstruct’ its chronology. (3)

In Ondaatje’s text, the coherence of the narrative is created through the fragments of the travel adventure: places visited, family meetings, with versions of old stories recycled each time and historical facts from Sri Lanka’s colonial past. Ondaatje also includes passages narrating the consequences of colonialism to the island, his family connections with the main historical events of the country, as well as family pictures and maps. The story was triggered by a “bright bone of a dream ...with maps spread onto the floor... to search out possible routes [or roots?] to Ceylon” (22). From there it moved towards actual visits to Jaffna and to a travel in time. However, the fragments are not presented in a coherent sense, as they are juxtaposed in an apparent montage, which forces the reader to reconstruct the chronological sense of the text.

According to Beaujour, “the totalization of the self-portrait is not given beforehand. New homologous elements can be added to the paradigm” (3). The total sense of the text in Ondaatje’s narrative is finally understood in the end. New and fictional elements are inserted

progressively in the narrative, as the reader is guided to an unknown and unpredictable end, but the intimate character of the text prepares the reader for it. Ondaatje writes his verbal self-portrait based on his memories; consequently, the reader has to unveil the events with him, maybe with a touch of surprise, as if knowing the facts and seeing the places for the very first time.

However, the author's own experience, fictionalized in the life of the narrator, makes one wonder whose story he is telling. The narrator takes turns in the narrative as he sometimes plays the role not only of the object but also of the subject of his own story. Must we consider that – as Lejeune says – there is an “identity” between the three of them? Is it possible to say that there is an “intention” of the author behind the text that is controlling it? These are intrinsic questions whose answer may be suggested in Anderson's analysis of Ondaatje's memoir, when she states that the work offers “problematic accounts of [his] ‘origin’ in terms of shifting and unstable memories, fragments of discourse and stories that are not anchored in ‘fact’” (116). She continues arguing that the work is also a travel book “which (puts) the author's ‘I’ into movement, not allowing any settled perspective and considering ‘home’ in the eyes of a stranger” (117). When Anderson refers to the title (*Running in the Family*), she also points towards the mobility of the traveler-subject moving across “spatial and historical differences, assembling a narrative and a self from fragments of ‘rumour’, gossip and observation” (117), and that “shared family traits” (117) such as “drinking and telling stories — are precisely the characteristics that destabilize the relation to ‘truth’ producing fantasy and excess” (117-118). Whether *Running in the Family* is a travel book, an autobiography or a memoir, a fictional or true narrative, employing a narrator as the subject of such life narrative, the writer is certainly determined and capable of self-reflection.

In the chapter “Final Days/ Father Tongue” the narrator states:

Courtesy. A modesty. In spite of the excess of the gestures earlier in his life [his father] was in the end a miniaturist pleased by small things, the decent gestures among a small circle of family and friends. (201)

The narrator comments on his father's gestures — in fact, on the excess of gestures in his early age. He also points out how this trait runs in the family, as if comparing the narrator's own excess of gestures, especially when drunk, with his father's. Beaten by distance and the need for self-knowledge, the son surrenders to the small gestures implied in his return to his family and homeland. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, "gesture" may be connected to repetition or mimicry. Mervyn's excess of "gestures" is indeed an inherited trait, repeating the behavior of generations before his own, present in the rank of the burghers, who were an imitation of the English and copied their way of life, dress, and language. The excess is present in the repeated and outrageous behavior of "Bampa", Lalla, and many other members of the family called "the prodigals," who spend their time in gambling and drinking. Ondaatje seems to be no exception as he admits showing traces of his father's behavior: in Canada, thousands of miles away from Sri Lanka, he finds himself connected to past memories when he is drunk and dancing, thus repeating a pattern of behavior that he insists on presenting as his father's personal traits.

In his study "*DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation*," Homi Bhabha argues that "the object of loss is written across the bodies of the people, as it repeats in the silence that speaks the foreignness of language" (315). Likewise, "gesture" can be seen as a definition of the genre of the book as a mimicry of others of the same kind, and it can also be seen as mimicry of family traits, opaque, a chain of mechanical repetition, defined and compared to the narrator's father, described as "courtesy, a modesty, pleased by small things" (201). Although one may sense a certain dismissal of this attempt to

write his life, it may, in fact, suggest that even being just a “gesture”, a “miniature”, a “courtesy” or “modesty”, the narrative constitutes a significant repetition of old behavior-- after all, the “gestures” are still running in the family. According to Homi Bhabha, gesture is connected to the opaqueness of the words that were once learned and repeated by the migrant — in the voice of a Turkish migrant, “the meaning is changed as he spoke them” (316). Ondaatje’s opaque work may acquire another meaning as he writes his self-portrait.

Although the book covers most of the aspects of the story, many things remain unsaid. The reliability of the story is constantly checked, as the narrator points out

Nothing is said of the closeness between two people: how they grew in the shade of each other’s presence. No one speaks of that exchange of gift and character — the way a person took on and recognized in himself the smile of a lover. Individuals are seen only in the context of these swirling social tides. It was almost impossible for a couple to do anything without rumour leaving their shoulders like a flock of messenger pigeons (54).

The narrator confesses the difficulty of narrating the interrelation of people of such a close society as Sri Lanka, for it is hard to communicate the personal feelings involving two persons or the influence they exercise upon one another. Ondaatje has to rely on gossip and rumour involving people and, going from one piece of gossip to another, to try to construct the profile of close friends, lovers, and relatives.

In the chapter “Tropical Gossip,” he writes: “Truth disappears with history and gossip tells us in the end nothing of personal relationships” (53). Gossip is the main source of the narrative, together with rumors and “false” maps, suggesting untruthfulness and unreliability, as well as the role of the imagination. The private and the public narrative threads stitch

parallel stories; writing about Sri Lanka's history is also writing about Ondaatje's family history. Likewise, writing about the author's personal story is talking about his father's. The memories implied in such an emotional project make the text's genre harder to define. As an autobiography, a biography, fiction, self-portrait, history or memoir, the text crosses the boundaries of any of those forms; nevertheless, it presents all the elements mentioned above.

Despite the marginality attested by critics to self-portrait, their insistence on categorizing life-writing into a specific genre may be an attempt to give more credibility to this kind of text. By trying to define and control the text through rules and boundaries, readers like myself wonder if categorizing it can bring any benefit or make it more valuable as a personal narrative. During an interview with Michael Ondaatje about *Running in the Family*, Linda Hutcheon points out that as the public interferes in the private, and vice versa, the book was more than a memoir. When she asks if the book was a memoir, fiction, history, autobiography or biography, Ondaatje states: "I'm not quite sure what form that book is. I think all those things are there" (201).

However, the readers learn very little of the narrator's self. The text exposes the other characters far more than the author himself. The exposure of family eccentricities (Lalla's and Mervyn's, for instance), the odd way his narrator's parents related, and the weird behavior that seems to run in the family may all be a metaphorical device to help accomplish the narrator's goal. By showing the weirdness of his family, he is gradually showing his own. However, the narrator hopes that by mirroring his family's behavior he is, on one hand, exposing himself and, on the other, evading any possible responsibility for being that way. The narrator takes the journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance along with the reader; therefore, the construction of the narrator's new identity is in fact new both for the narrator and for the reader. By going back and rediscovering his family and his historical origins, the author is able to understand himself. I may say that, if we think of an autobiography as a

personal construct or creation, that is the way Ondaatje chose to understand himself better. However, as it is suggested in the title, the author is a social being, and telling his family and his country's history is telling his own. Thus, the collective context of his personal life and origin gives grounds for self-identification and growth.

According to Beaujour, when writers “do not know how to designate themselves, thus self-portrait it is” (2). Analyzing *Running in the Family* under Beaujour's ideas it is clearly recognizable that the narrative is not enclosed into a specific genre; therefore the narrative is a mixture of autobiography, memoir, and self-portrait. Beaujour cites Michel Riffaterre, who says that “memoirs can follow the chronology, or the logic, of events; they are narrative” (3) and that “anti-memoirs rest on analogy; therefore they are poetry” (3). I see *Running in the Family* as a self-portrait and not as an autobiography or a memoir. Despite being autobiographical and being constructed based on Ondaatje's and his family's memories, the text is highly poetic and metaphorical, its confessional tone follows a very intimate and personal chronology, in which the themes are presented from the historical to the personal, and from the geographical to the temporal, to narrate the facts and memories of Ondaatje's journey. The controversy over the definitions of autobiography, self-portrait, or memoir, in my view, takes the text to a higher level. Despite the theorists' negative designations of self-portrait, I see the self-portrait in Ondaatje's text as a relevant and positive aspect of life-writing. In my view, instead of diminishing the text's value, the intimate character constructed by Ondaatje makes the text more attractive and more moving to the readers. Helene Cixous' epigraph, used by Linda Anderson, says: “All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another” (1). Similarly, in *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje is always telling one story in place of another.

### **2-3. Sri Lanka of the mind: Memory remapping the father's tracks.**

“The past is a foreign country,” ponders Rushdie over J. P. Hartleys’ words when looking at an old photograph on the wall. Rushdie tells of the black and white photograph, matching his “mind’s eye” as being deprived of the colors of his history. Returning home told him a different story. His other two eyes, the real ones, “were assaulted by colors” and the photograph image and his past were restored in “Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor” (10). The old photograph tells him otherwise, that “his present is foreign and his past is home” (9).

Born in Bombay—a city built by foreigners and in process of restoration – Rushdie comments that, by being away for a long time, he feels almost like an outsider and, like Bombay, he believes he too has a city and a history to restore. But to look back after being physically alienated from India or other places of origin will not be enough for writers with the sufficient knowledge and awareness to write properly. They will in fact “create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10).

As Ondaatje was adapted to the life in the west, silence over his past was prolonged for twenty-five years. He may have thought that his “past is a foreign country”, but a “bright bone of a dream” of his father “chaotic, surrounded by dogs and all of them [were] screaming and barking into the tropical landscape” (21), tells him otherwise. Like Rushdie, he feels that “his present is foreign and his past is home.” The dream he had one night while sleeping on the couch of a friend’s house makes Ondaatje see that “his mind’s eye,” deprived of the colors of his history, had to see home again so that his mind’s eyes could be “assaulted by colors” (9) and have the dream of meeting his father, his origin and his past restored in “Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor” (10).

Like Rushdie, Ondaatje, away for long years, must have felt like an outsider and felt too that he had a city and a history to restore, like many other writers, exiles, emigrants, or expatriates, away from their home countries, Ondaatje may have been “haunted by some kind of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back” and he too may not be fit to reclaim properly but to create fictions and invisible cities, an imaginary homeland, a Sri Lanka of his mind. Nevertheless, more than reclaiming his country’s history, a political stand over his country’s colonization and the scars left by it, Ondaatje’s main focus lies on the private realm, the Sri Lanka of “his mind” brings back the unsolved issues with his father. Sri Lanka, now courted by one of his own, is about “to be touched into words” (22), its past claimed not “by the power of the sword or bible” (64), but by the power of language. Like Rushdie, Ondaatje feels that he “was running to Asia and everything would change” (22).

As Rushdie puts it, “redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it” (14). He also argues that the combination of an old culture and a newer one, the building of a “modern” world out of an old one, becomes possible through the writers’ works by means of “fantasy, or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism” (19). Wherever they write from, they will be able to write from a “double perspective” (19), for they are both “insiders and outsiders” (19), lacking “whole sight” (19) but endowed with what Rushdie calls a “stereoscopic vision” (19), i.e., seeing with depth and distance, rather than a flat picture.

Ondaatje’s belief in the changing of his past by confronting his guilt of never going back and never really trying to understand his father makes him aware that only through fantasy or the mingling of fantasy and realism can his task be made possible or tangible. The fictionalization of his family and history, whether by suppressing facts or deliberately choosing parts and versions of private and public histories, may not give a whole view of the story, but it can provide the reader with a broader dimension of it.

The ambivalent position of being an outsider and an insider is discussed in the chapter “Karapothas”, when the narrator states, “I am a foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner” (79) someone unable to see the island as an alien, but also unable to feel at home. In spite of belonging to a past in the island, he belongs to a different soil now. The new western perspective shapes the way he writes his story. Based on a western way of self-writing he, in fact, employs the western way of searching for his origin.

According to Rushdie, many are the issues Indian writers have to cope with when living outside India, but writing about it may be the first and most important step to come to terms with them. To deal with the problems and making concessions to western “enemies” and to define their own identity makes Indian writers live in both worlds, translating themselves, redefining their new selves, gaining and losing, releasing old beliefs and embracing new ones. Even though Rushdie refers to public issues that writers who live outside their homelands have the political need to address, it is mostly in the private sense that this urge appears in *Running in the Family*. The narrator’s sparse contact with his father for many years, as well as his inability to understand him as a child, built up an image he pretended to accept. The urge to find his place in the world drives him to the past. To make concessions to the past would be Ondaatje’s concession to the enemy. He needs to see the past not with the eyes of a child, but this time as an adult, making concessions and running the risk of being wrong or mistaken about his father and his past life. Rewriting his childhood now as an adult is like changing places with his parents. Back in the past he was the child in the parents’ control; now he makes himself his parents’ parent and takes control over the way they should be seen and the way he wants the reader to see them. By fictionalizing facts of his life, the narrator can finally rewrite his story. This time he is the director of his own life story; consequently, he is responsible for the aftermath of his life narrative. Traveling back is the second and the last opportunity the narrator gives them both, his father and himself. To deal

with his problems he has to go back and, in the “enemy’s” land, to redefine his own self, to translate himself over and over again, to revisit old habits and retell old stories, for in Ceylon “no story is ever told just once”(26).

According to Rushdie, geographical and temporal distance makes narration suspect, due to fallible memory, producing fragmented images. The writer is then forced to deal in “broken mirrors whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (11). Once the writer tries to remember important and unimportant events from the past, he knows he cannot have total recall, but the actual “partial nature of these memories, their fragmentation” (11), make images even more evocative to him. Those memories “get greater status, greater resonance” for they are *remains*: “fragmentation made trivial things seems like symbols” (12).

In *Running in the Family*, as it was already mentioned, the narrator’s goal in writing his life is far from corresponding to reality, though the story may be based on real people, real places, and real situations. The narrative is distorted because the narrator selected, as he did the itinerary on the map at the beginning of the text, poems, versions, interviews, dialogues, photographs of his preference to write his version. Besides, as he does not remember much of his past and his father, and had to rely on others’ memories, thus producing a fragmented vision. Whether writing from outside or inside Sri Lanka, the view remains that of an outsider/insider. Like “broken mirrors” he introduces pieces of information and feelings that match the “partial nature of these memories” (Rushdie 11), trivial fragments turned into symbols of his father and his wild behavior. The recurrent dream of his chaotic father, together with his parents’ dramatic fights and his father’s drunkenness leading to violent and uncontrollable behavior helped in the construction of an image of a difficult father in the narrator’s mind. Actually the father is a product of a prodigal and futile family and society, responsible for the bad consequences of his life and behavior, which led to his banishment from Ceylon railways after 1943.

About his father, the narrator says,

...people usually knew when Mervyn Ondaatje boarded the train, with or without his army revolver... if the trip coincided with his days of dipsomania the train could be delayed for hours... when my father removed all his clothes and leapt from the train, rushing into the Kadugannawa tunnel ... my mother was sent for ... to talk him over for an hour and a half.

(149)

By portraying his father this way, emphasizing his strange behavior, his moments of total reclusion, the narrator can make the reader excuse and understand the narrator for not returning home in these twenty five years. Dealing with such a father is not an easy task for a nine-year-old boy.

Although the text is fragmented, the narrative makes sense as the story progresses, and by the end of the text he finally meets his father. Thus, from a more public view of facts he moves forward to a more intimate and emotional contact with the memory of his father. The mapping of the narrator's becomes the remapping of his father's tracks as well. Therefore, beneath the geographical journey for roots and national history lies the search for the dead father, who is the central character of the story and someone he barely knew and understood. Ondaatje defies the concept of the ideal father figure characterized by rightness and honor, to build out of the scraps and pieces of memories a picture of a paranoid, eccentric, and delusive father.

The narrator confesses his surprise that his half sister Susan, "almost utterly humble", is younger than him and yet shows "this calmness and quietness opposed to the anger and argument" which he sees in himself and in his other siblings (168). He ponders that

if she has Ondaatje blood and no Gratiaen [his mother's family] blood, then it is obvious it is from my mother's side that we got a sense of the dramatic, the tall stories, the determination to now and then hold the floor. The ham in us. While from my father, in spite of his temporary manic public behavior, we got our sense of secrecy, the desire to be reclusive. (168)

Could they be fragments of the same mirror? The presence of his half-sister is telling him a different story. The memories of his father, told and retold by his mother, are nothing but fragments of a fallible and tendentious mind. It also tells that not only the fragments of memories sound suspicious to the reader but to himself as well. The narrator recognizes that his

mother instilled theater in us ... whenever my father would lapse into one his alcoholic states, she would send the three older children ... into my father's room ... [they] would perform with tears streaming, 'daddy, don't drink, daddy, if you love us, don't drink' while my mother waited outside and listened ... These moments embarrassed my older brother and sister terribly; for days they felt guilty and miserable. (170)

I have been arguing that Ondaatje's main purpose in *Running in the Family*, implied in the variety of narratives employed, is in fact the telling of one story in the place of another. The travel back to Sri Lanka is in a way to travel back to the past. The (re)mapping of a personal journey back to the country is the (re)mapping of a travel back to the past. The attempt to write his travel journal is actually the writing of his self-portrait, also based on real photographs and maps, resulting in a fictional narrative of his life. By remapping his journey

back to Sri Lanka, he is in fact remapping his own father's tracks, his own way to get to him. According to Rushdie's ideas, one can say that Ondaatje has a cracked image of his father and of a past life that he tries to reach and reconstruct. Scattered photographs of the family album, poems, and dialogues connect to his father's more vivid presence in the text; nevertheless his image remains incomplete. The proximity of the narrator's access to him changes with the tone of the narrative when he becomes more emotional, more personal. The narrative flows from the public realm to become gradually more private and emotional. The narrative of Ondaatje's life becomes the narrative of his father's, for the narrative of his father is his own. Michael Philip Ondaatje meets Mervyn Philip Ondaatje on page 189 of the book, when the narrator writes:

The bottle was half empty beside him. He arose and lit the kerosene lamp. He wanted to look at his face, though the mirror was stained as if brown water and rust hung, captive in the glass. He stepped towards the bathroom ... in the bathroom ants attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode. A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a tablet away from him. He knelt down on the red title, slowly, not wishing to disturb their work. It was page 189. He had not got that far in the book yet but he surrendered it to them. He sat down forgetting the mirror he had been moving towards. Scared of the company of the mirror. He sat down with his back against the wall and waited. The white rectangle moved with the busy arduous ants. Duty, he thought. But that was

just a fragment gazed at the bottom of his eye. He drank.

There. He saw the midnight rat. (189)

This passage is of great significance in the book as the narrator confronts father and son. Although the father is not prepared to look at himself in the mirror and see his image reflected on it, he is aware that their story has been told by his son. The book to which the narrator alludes on this page is *Running in the Family*, which describes the father witnessing his chaotic ruin. The mirror the narrator refers to shows a corrupted image of his father as it is “stained...as if brown water and rust” (189), reflecting his decay. Being scared by the mirror and the page, Ondaatje’s father watches the ants taking the pages away from him. Looking at himself would, at the same time, be facing his son’s face and himself, utterly vulnerable. The father surrenders to decadence and death.

According to the narrator, “midnight, noon and dawn and dusk are the hours of danger, susceptibility to the ‘grahayas’—planetary spirits of malignant characters” (190). In popular culture, rats play important roles in legend and symbolism and can be connected to the “grahayas”, as rats are symbols of evil, decadence and dust. As “grahayas,” rats also allude to spirits of evil. In this specific part of the story, Mervyn’s drunkenness, loneliness, and decadence seem to match the darkness that surrounds him. Ondaatje’s father vulnerable figure may, at this point, be susceptible to evil spirits. When the narrator alludes to the midnight rat that his father sees, he may be witnessing his father’s impotence the face of his addiction to alcohol and his inability to fulfill his family’s expectations. He may be anticipating his end, overcome by solitude and expecting death.

On the following page, in “Monsoon Notebook (iii)”, the narrator is shown in the process of writing the previous page and he tells of his effort in the writing of the previous page. As a witness, he sees the calmness before the storm. In the heat of a monsoon night, he says:

Sweat down my back. The fan pauses then begins again. At midnight this hand is the only thing moving. As discreetly and carefully as whatever animals in the garden fold brown leaves into their mouths, visit the drain for water, or scale the broken glass that browns the walls. Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something to stumble casually on perception, the shape of the unknown thing. The garden a few feet away is suddenly under the fist of a downpour. .. I actually saw it, looking out into the blackness, saw the white downpour ...falling like an object past the window. (190 – 191)

At midnight he, writes, framing the scene in his mind as he watches the rain through the window, waiting for something new to happen; he too is helpless, he can do nothing but wait and let his hand do its duty and carry away the white rectangle. Father and son are both entrapped in their own impotence. Silence is broken; on one side, alcohol seems to wash out any consciousness from his father's mind; on the other side, the rain washes old fears. Life takes its course, but changed this time.

As the narrator had written before,

During certain hours, at certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with the enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with “the mercy of distance” write the histories...Words such as *love*, *passion*, *duty*, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning —except as

coins or weapons. Hard language softens. I never knew what my father felt of these “things.” (179)

The narrator is aware of the importance of writing his life, since only through writing he can eliminate chaos and make peace with the enemy, which, embodied in his father’s image, is in fact his past, or at least the past that haunts him and with which he needs to come to terms. Language is a powerful device. Words can acquire new meanings, and words like love, passion, duty can become valuable weapons to rewrite his own story, even when they have been emptied of meaning.

In the chapter “Last Morning”, the narrator says that his “body must remember everything” (202) and, with “the mercy of distance” (179), write stories. And mirroring his life in Edgar, from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the narrator makes Edgar’s words, his own:

I am the son who has grown up. I am the son you have made hazardous, who (after twenty five years) still loves you. I am now part of an adult’s ceremony, but I want to say I am writing this book about you at a time I am least sure about such words (love, passion, duty)...Give your arm, let go my hand. (180)

Ondaatje tells his story and comes to terms with his father — at least within the narrative. The mission is accomplished at least in metaphorical terms. As it was argued that a self-portrait is metaphorical, so it is Ondaatje’s journey to his lost father. Ondaatje confesses his love to his father despite the “hazards” he caused him. He is the son who has grown up and taken part in the ceremony of being an adult, but terms such as “love, passion, duty are so continuously used they grow to have no meaning — except as coins or weapons” (180). Actually, those words are also used in metaphorical terms. Ondaatje does not know yet what they mean, or if they mean anything whatsoever. Maybe the love he confesses he feels for his

father is as metaphorical as the one his father feels for him; they can be used as coins or weapons in the ceremony of the adult world, exchanging one meaningless love for another. Ondaatje may not know what love, passion, and duty mean, but they can finally put father and son in the same position. Mervyn can finally give Ondaatje his arm and let go of his hand, implying that Mervyn himself never knew what those words meant.

### Chapter III

#### **Maps, Snapshots and Facts: Images and Intertextuality.**

In order to represent himself completely, the son must represent his mother, his other, without omitting a word.

Nancy K. Miller

Memory brings forth not reality itself, which is gone forever, but the words elicited by the representation of reality, which as it disappeared impressed traces upon the mind via the agency of the senses.

Augustine

First, I would like to define the terms image and imagery to make it easier for the reader to understand the use of these terms in this study. The definitions are based on the *Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* by Harry Shaw, which defines image as “the mental impression or visualized likeness summoned up by a word, phrase, or sentence” (142). He also refers to the usage of “figurative language, such as metaphors and similes to create images as vivid as the physical presence of objects and ideas (142). On the other hand, imagery is described as “the forming of mental images, figures, or likeness of things; the use of language to represent actions, persons, objects, and ideas descriptively” (142). The term image is used, in this study, to refer to maps, photographs, and metaphorical description of people and places. Imagery is related to all of the narrative devices employed by the narrator in the construction of the text. Whatever the literary genre one chooses to use, images have always been a powerful device to take the reader into the narrator’s world. The evocation of images or mental pictures triggered by words in a text can help readers establish a connection between their personal experiences and memories and those presented by the writer. The identification of the readers’ experiences with those of the writer or the narrator makes imagery one of the strongest literary devices, enhancing character, setting, meaning and themes, and adding emotional power to writing. Images show readers by concrete details

rather than telling them something. Images can act as powerful mnemonic devices — used as an aid in remembering — and take the reader to the routes chosen by the narrator.

It is also important to define the techniques of collage and montage, which are relevant for my discussion of Ondaatje's work. Collage and montage have become largely used by contemporary artists and have acquired more relevance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a device to show the complexity of contemporary life. According to the definition in *The Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, collage is “the technique of composing a work of art by pasting together on a single surface, materials not normally associated with one another” (58). It refers to “allusions, foreign expressions, and quotations from other writers into their essays and poems” (58). Collage assembles different objects in the same work and stitches them together to create a new whole. Thus, boundaries become blurred, as the techniques permit the juxtaposition of images, texts, and words in the same space. This interaction between texts broadens the interaction between artist and audience as well. As the readers react to the text, they can like, dislike, or even not understand; in any of these circumstances, the reader's or the audience's responses become part of the work. Rather than diminishing the value of the text, collage intensifies its ambiguity and diversity. The dictionary also defines montage in literature as “a device to establish a theme or create an atmosphere through a series of rapidly presented impressions or observations (178).

In *Running in the Family*, Michael Ondaatje explores images and uses the technique of collage as the basis of the narrative; however the text is also a montage, considering that he intends to create a theme or an atmosphere with the narrator's trip to his country and to recreate his father's figure from the past. The book is a collage of several types of texts: visual (photos, maps), travelogues, poems, and historical facts; however, fictionality is a constant in all of the texts mentioned.

In this chapter, I will discuss the way Ondaatje uses collage in the organization of the book: first, because it is composed of the juxtaposition of texts belonging to different genres (narratives, anecdotes, poems, journal entries, quotations from several authors, among others); second, because it incorporates visual texts, such as photographs and maps. The different texts interact with each other, thus conferring on the fragmented texts an overall unity. The boundaries of the texts, which may seem diffuse, are stitched together by the narrator, making the texts anticipate or complement the ideas presented, sometimes commenting on the places and people who appear in the photographs. There is no logical sequence in the presentation of the images. A map introduces the narrative, and maps are mentioned again a few chapters later, when the narrator refers to the maps of Sri Lanka on his brother's wall in Canada. The family photographs are scattered throughout the narrative, intertwining texts, stitching historical events, family talks, and the narrator's feelings and impressions of his own story. It seems that Ondaatje needs to use all images he can dispose of to portray and describe every moment of the journey.

### **3.1- "Factive" images: intertwining fact and fiction in Ondaatje's life writing**

I have been arguing that Michael Ondaatje (re)mapped his emotional journey back to his father by mapping his geographical journey back to Sri Lanka. His fictional autobiographical journey is supported by images of descriptive and visual forms giving the text a character of lightness and emotional depth. By disguising the seriousness of the issue with photos, real names and ironic remarks he may be making the journey easier to confront.

The first type of collage to be analyzed is the series of texts inserted in the book. In the introduction, Ondaatje presents epigraphs of a friar from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and a journalist's report from 1978 in the local newspaper, which represent a historical and political image of Ceylon. The epigraph refers to the Friar's impressions of Ceylon: "I saw in this island fowls

as big as our country geese having two heads... and other miraculous things which I will not here write of" (15). In this epigraph, Ondaatje may want to emphasize how a stereotypical image was created to show Ceylon to Europeans during the voyages of discovery. The eagerness to travel to distant places has its origin in the Middle Ages, when travellers first thought the world was only Europe; however, the imagination about distant lands drove Europeans to explore beyond their horizons. This impulse of knowing what was outside their home had a great impact on the eighteenth and nineteenth century adventure travels.

Europeans had the idea that the west was the other half of the east, which was the Middle Age's idea of defining the west in terms of this 'other'. The east was seen for a long time as exotic, a fantasy land of monsters, unicorns, people with no heads, a place with imaginative ideas based on Greek Mythology, but overlaid with a dominant Christian ideology. Modern travel writing inherited from medieval travel accounts the vivid reports of adventures and the relationship with the exotic beings found in the lands conquered. The creation of such images had a great influence on the imagination of travelers in more recent travel narratives of Europeans in many parts of the world. Ondaatje's quotation of the friar's words point to the medieval perspective and view of the world—including religious ideas that about the duality of good and evil, the east and the west, humans and monsters. Who would doubt the words of a friar in his accounts of the "real island"? On the other hand, the journalist's image of Ceylon may represent how the English language empowers nations who have it as a leading language. Consequently, the use of Tamil and Sinhalese languages seem to be synonymous with ignorance and lack of power. It is important to mention that in spite of the journalist being a native he ironically accepted the mistaken idea the Europeans had of the country.

In the opening of the chapter "The Babylon Stakes" (48), an anonymous epigraph is introduced. It seems to be a passage taken from one of the many interviews given to the

author. The epigraph mentions that “The Wall Street had a terrible effect on us. Many of the horses had to be taken over by the military” (48). The epigraph alludes to the consequences of the Wall Street crash in the lives of the prodigal burghers. The image of the Wall Street crash envisions the burghers’ own decadence, the end of a time of gambling, horse racing, and good living. The epigraph, however, shows no complaint about the consequences of this crash for the country’s economy or any other more serious issue. The worries about having fun and the futile life they led turn the focus of a relevant and catastrophic matter into superficial consequences for their lives. The term “terrible effect” can point to the irony present in the epigraph, as it can make the reader expect the worse while the consequence will be of a lesser importance.

Later, in the introduction to the chapter “Tropical gossip” (53), Ondaatje gives a dialogue suggesting the betrayals and infidelities of a relative. He describes in this chapter how spoiled and inconsequential his relatives were during the twenties — infidelity is narrated as a normal practice during those times—and that “marriage was the greater infidelity” (53), as “love affairs rainbowed over marriages and lasted forever” (53). Maybe Ondaatje mirrors his own blurred vision of the past in those narrated and inserted in the text. Like the writers, he also confronts fact and fantasy, as he already offers a second-hand image of his past created by others; however, unlike the writers, he will finally confront his past and discover, as Rushdie puts it, that his image of the past is also “foreign” and a fantasy, and that the present image is in fact “home” and real.

Ondaatje inserts five poems and a stanza of another poem in his narrative, two of them by native poets and the others by himself. A stanza of the poem “Don’t Talk to me about Matisse” (85), by the Ceylonese poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, is quoted by the end of the chapter, “The Karapothas” in which the angry poet Wikkramasinha presents images repudiating the 1900s European style of picturing women reclined on what he views as “a

sheet of blood” (85). The poet’s view of domination and power suggests that the luxury of the bloodlike red velvet covering Eastern women’s beds also implies the blood and the beauty “robbed of savages” (85). The poet is interested in his culture and the other side of history written by “the murderers” sustained by the gunfire of the European power. Although this poem has a significant importance in the telling of Sri Lanka’s recent history, its publication was not permitted in the country. It belongs to the section of Sri Lankan writings that has to be published “in other countries in order to keep the facts straight” (85). By incorporating part of the poem in his text, Ondaatje gives voice to the Insurgency, and in a way takes a stand against oppression. The poem “Women like You” (92-94) is presented as “the communal poem — Sirigi Graffiti, dated from the 5<sup>th</sup> century”, composed of “hundreds of small verses by different hands” (93), but it sounds like a recreation by Ondaatje of a sign of the unbroken spirit of both women and the country.

Although Ondaatje describes women as strong figures throughout the text, he certainly shows them also as objects of desire. Ondaatje comments on this poem in the chapter “The Karapothas,” that was written in the Sinhalese alphabet and describes love “in all its confusion and brokenness” (84) as it was addressed to “mythological women who consumed and overcame mundane lives” (85). The poem describes the women’s breasts and eyes in repeated metaphors that for Ondaatje sound as “beautiful *false compare*” (84), alluding to Shakespeare sonnet 130, in which Shakespeare himself demystifies his mistress’ eyes and herself as a *false compare* to the perfection of natural elements. Ondaatje mainly presents as remarkable women the ones who belong to his family. The figure of untamed and strong women also runs in the family, his grandmothers, who blossomed after their husbands’ death, as well as his aunts and his mother, are the women who surround him throughout the narrative. In this poem, the poet shows women as very strong beings, who “make men pour out their hearts” (92).

The poem “Sweet like a Crow” comes in a separate chapter and may have been used to anticipate not only the next chapter but also Ondaatje’s decision to change the form of the narrative two sections later. The epigraph that introduces this poem is by Paul Bowles and refers to the inability of the Sinhalese to sing. According to Bowles, “the Sinhalese are beyond a doubt one of the least musical people in the world” (76); the poem acts as response to Bowles and seems to reinforce this idea. Irony is implied in the term “sweet like a crow,” and in images that “sound like a scorpion being pushed through a glass tube” or a “wind howling in a coconut” and a “typewriter on fire”, among many others. However, the poem created images connected to the native sounds of the island. Maybe for Bowles what is dissonant is the idea of facing the “other, of not following the patterns of European style and looking as displaced as the “frog singing in the Carnegie Hall” (76).

The inserted epigraphs and texts show the personal, intimate relation of the narrator with his origins and his political concern with Sri Lanka history and literature. The next section of poems begins with “High Flowers.” This poem may be an answer to the one written by Wikkramasinha. The interactivity of the poems suggests the two poets are talking to each other through their texts, linking past and present. Ondaatje’s poem implies a cultural and political message; however, it shows the light and the shadows of the worlds-between. The poet shows the laborious woman, a traditional view of gender that puts women in an inferior condition. They are the ones “my ancestors ignored” (87), their invisibility the sign of an unthreatening presence, supported by the “hard shell of foot” (87). The persona describes her husband also barefoot moving in the shadows “from tree to tree without ropes” (88), drinking “the first sweet mouthful from the cut flower” (88), maybe alluding to the males’ superiority over their wives; “Kings. Fortress. Traffic in the open sun” (89), contrast with the shadows of the simple life of the country. The poetic voice also states that it is not “vanity which allows him this freedom but skill and habit, the curved knife his father gave him” referring to the

importance of keeping up tradition by repeating the gestures of the ancestors as “everything that is important occurs in the shadows” (88). The poet also suggests that this is a common practice all over “the small roads of Wattala, Kalutara” (88), where “within a doorway the woman turns in the old pleasure of darkness...and in the high trees above her, shadows eliminate the path he [her husband] moves along” (89).

In the following poem, “To Colombo” (90), Ondaatje seems to describe, from inside a jeep in motion, everything he sees on the way back from a visit to Sirigya hills, along the road to Colombo. The poet gives snapshots, as it were, from the geographic and social landscape he sees while in motion, in the “sunlight, sunlight” (90). They “stop for the cool *kurumba*” and “remove/ the tarpaulin walls of the jeep/ to receive the lowland air” (91). However, “on a bench behind sunlight/ the woman the coconut the knife” (91) seems to bring the poet back to reality and to the presence of violence lurking behind the beautiful landscape.

The poem “The Cinnamon Peeler” first appeared in this book, but it was included later in Ondaatje’s collection of poems called “Secular Love.” It is introduced by a hypothetical idea (“if I were a Cinnamon peeler...”) and it is a portrayal of erotic love for a woman implied in the word “Your bed” in the second line. The desire declared by the husband towards his wife is hypothetically described in what he would do to his beloved, linking their passion to the scent of cinnamon. The eroticization of the desire is overpowered by the spice; in addition, with the use of cinnamon, a typical spice from Sri Lanka, the narrator establishes a clear connection to his own origin and the perfume of his land. Cinnamon is one of the many spices that seduced the foreigners and it is used here as a device of seduction of the beloved wife also.

In the beginning of the book — after Ondaatje shows his personal map of Ceylon — he writes, in Italics, his first impressions back to the island after being away for twenty five

years. Although Ondaatje presents the dream that will trigger this journey only in the subsequent chapter, he introduces the story by making the reader guess who is really writing in the first place. He uses the third person to refer to himself as another, feeling at the same time native and foreign. The introduction seems to casually report a newly arrived guest, resting in a hotel room and merging into the everyday life of the Ceylonese during the annual drought. Ondaatje uses a strong image of a nightmare of “thorn trees in the garden [that] send their hard roots underground towards the house climbing through the windows so they can drink sweat off his body, steal the last of the saliva off his tongue” (17). Although what started it all was a dream of returning, the actual travel may make him fear for the devastating consequences of this journey to his old life. Dream and nightmare, home and foreign, fact and fantasy, indicate the duality the narrator faces throughout the whole narrative.

In the chapter “Honeymoon,” instead of referring to his parents as newly-married, the narrator refers to the general happenings — maybe the headlines of a newspaper at the time of the honeymoon — of national and international nature, some of major importance, such as the finding of the corpse of Lindberg’s baby and the shooting of the French president by a Russian, or the irrelevant marriage of Fred Astaire’s sister, juxtaposed to the news on the continuation of the hunger strike of lepers in Colombo. The usage of collage may be a way of putting the private and the public side by side, Ondaatje’s parents are writing their personal history as a couple while national and international history follow their course. The films mentioned in the chapter such as *Love Birds*, *Caught Cheating*, and *Forbidden Love*, despite their general character, allude to a more personal character. All the titles refer to some situation experienced by the couple. Ondaatje intertwines the public and the private, narrating his story and history in a private and public sense, which points to the idea that behind the evident narrative another is being told.

When Ondaatje decides he will be travelling back home he realizes that in his mid-thirties he “slipped past a childhood [he] had ignored and not understood” (22). He associates the experience to *Persuasion*, in which Jane Austen’s character, like himself, “had been forced into prudence in her youth — she learned romance as she grew older — the natural sequence of an unnatural beginning” (22).

In the chapter “Lunch conversation” Ondaatje brings actual pieces of conversation, real dialogue into the text. However, in the chapter “Dialogues,” instead of dialogues he introduces parts of sayings in quotation marks, transcribing them detached from their original context, without the dynamics of a real conversation. They act like flashes and, by pretending to tell a sequential history, the presents instead a collection of small talk.

Believing that humans are remains of the destruction of previous generations, Ondaatje suggests that the task of the future generations is to eliminate the chaos left by writing their own story. The collage of Shakespeare’s works, in the chapter “Blind Faith,” in which Ondaatje longs for the moment — that never happens — when Edgar would talk to his father, creates the image of the narrator identifying himself with the image of a hero immortalized in Shakespeare’s work. Thus, Ondaatje suggests that by creating the illusion of a solution in Edgar’s story he succeeds in writing his own. Consequently, by making the reader believe that at some point of Edgar’s story he would finally come to terms with his father makes the narrator create the illusion that he can do so too. He believes his brother, sisters, and himself were “terribly shaped by what went on before [them]” (179). Ondaatje believes that Shakespeare’s characters and his brother, his sisters and himself are the victims of the old generations’ mistakes, and it is the narrator’s task to write out their lives. He makes another reference to Shakespeare when he refers to Desdemona as the outsider who never understood Othello’s talent and “military exploits” (81), he implies that imagination presents a double perspective: the side of the invader and the side of the invaded; Desdemona was just

charmed by his decorated sleeves, the same way invaders were charmed by Ceylon's goods but disliked the "inquisitive natives" (80) and left the island, imagining it as a "paradise to be sacked" (81).

Before introducing the photographs and texts by other writers, Ondaatje starts his book with the map of Ceylon, where he vaguely describes the routes and places. The reader imagines in advance that this is going to be a personal narrative, and he/she will discover later that the position of the map of Ceylon in the global map will be explained some chapters further on. The map is, as the maps on his brother's wall, only a "rumour of topography" (64), and Ondaatje provides only the names of the places he intends to visit. However, it is a real map of the real Ceylon, ironically shown to provide truthfulness to the narrative. The word "rumour" is mentioned in the opening of the next section "Asian Rumours," where the narrator implies that the narrative may mix fact and fiction.

In the chapter "Tabula Asiae," although the narrator does not present actual pictures of maps, he offers a verbal description of Ceylon's "false maps" on his brother's walls of his Toronto apartment. About those maps, he points out that they are:

The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations ... growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy... The maps reveal rumours of topography, routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad mind of travellers' tales appears throughout Arab and Chinese medieval records. (63-4)

The narrator maps his geographical travel to the homeland by (re)presenting the map of Sri Lanka at the beginning of the book. In a version of his own, he maps the reader's path to take the trip with him. He also questions the reliability of such maps, called "rumours of topography". The appropriation of the land, represented by maps, matches the appropriation of

the history and story of the narrator's life and past. By fictionalizing the maps, he also does the same with the writing of his stories. Reality, either distorted or not, becomes a powerful way of recreating fantasy and through maps and writing gives it an atmosphere of "reality," of authenticity.

In "Mapping Cultural Spaces," Christina Ljungberg discusses Ondaatje's usage of maps and she points out that:

He compares the "false maps" of Ceylon that his brother keeps on the wall in his Toronto apartment, which were produced by famous and respected cartographers such as Ptolemy, Mercator, Francois Valentyn, and Mortier and Heydt, noting that "The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations"(63). Sri Lanka, whose history is reflected in the many names given to the island by its various masters — Arab, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, or English — functioned as the mirror that "pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities." (64)

Ljungberg is probably questioning the reliability of maps, even the ones produced by "respectable cartographers," for they may also be used as representations of the many faces and names Ceylon acquired during those times. The word "translations" alluded to in the citation may address the idea of imitations, imperfect copies, maps as fictionalized images resembling and mirroring the many names given to the island by invaders, names that resemble each other, as translations of the same name: Seyllan, Ceilon, Ceylon. Inasmuch as the (re) mapping of his search for his father mirrors the mapping of the nation's historical profile and travel narratives, in the same way it may be said that the questioned reliability and truth in the maps' versions

mirrors the unreliability of his father's stories as well as of the photographs, gestures, and his own self-portrait.

Ljungberg points out:

Topography, mapping and fiction-writing have always been closely connected: both forms of representation involve explorations of space and distortions of reality, which, for instance, Mark Monmonier suggests when he says that "Not only is it easy to lie about maps, it's essential...because to avoid hiding critical information in a fog of detail, the map must offer a selective, incomplete view of reality. (158)

Analyzing maps as a way of representation as well as fiction writing is to argue that the visual text has the power of stimulating the reader's imagination in the creation of the imaginary story, even if it is a distorted reality. Although the maps are distorted, "false" representations on the wall, they are powerful devices in postcolonial and postmodern practices. Ljungberg also suggests that:

The use of maps [by Ondaatje] bring to mind the statement by Arthur Robinson and Barbara Bartz Petchenik that the cartographer has a "critical role equivalent to that of an author" 19) ...this point has been taken by postmodern, in particular, postcolonial writers who fully exploit the insight that spaces are socially constituted through language and other sign systems, and all are often imaginary. (166)

Using maps in autobiographical texts may open spaces to recreate history. Maps act as a significant form of shaping the land about to be visited, and are used in *Running in the Family* as a figurative device for (re)shaping the travel to the narrator's father. In brief, by

writing through verbal description or any other sign system — like maps or photographs — the narrator intertwines the tales told about his family and homeland, and turns them into the emotional (re)mapping of his past so as to rebuild his father’s tracks and himself.

### **3.1.1- Image-Nation: Metamorphotos in *Running in the Family***

Susan Sontag points out in her study *On Photography* that although “humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato’s cave, still revelling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth,” (3) it is not like “being educated by photographs” (3), for there are many “more images around, claiming our attention” (3). According to Sontag “to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed, it means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like...power” (4). Among other modern demands, “through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness” (8) in order to “memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperilled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life” (9). As photographs “give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (9). Thus, providing an irrefutable proof the travel was really made.

Michael Ondaatje’s usage of photographs in his book may be an attempt to appropriate the past he does not remember and connect to a father he never understood. It may restate symbolically the “imperilled continuity” (Sontag 9) and connectedness of life in a family. By stepping on an almost unknown territory, Ondaatje may feel more secure by relying not only in conversations with members of his extended family but also on his personal family and country’s “kit of images” (8). Photographs may provide the narrator with indisputable evidence that his travel was made, his parents really existed; moreover, they make the reader partially believe that things may have happened that way. In a way Ondaatje immortalizes the experience of returning and the act of writing his family life. Besides, by using photographs, Ondaatje takes the power into his own hands, the power of controlling the way his parents

should look and the way readers should see them. The photographs empower him to recreate a past that is gone, transforming his imaginary past into a more palpable one.

In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsh points out that:

Contemporary writers ... have used family photographs in their work, going beyond their conventional and opaque surfaces to expose the complicated stories of familial relation – the passion, the rivalries, the tension, anxieties and problems that have, for the most part, remained on the edges or outside the family album. (7)

Readers may not be aware of the narrator's intentions in the choice of the old photographs of Ceylon and the photographs of his parents separated and together. Although photography is supposed to provide a literal image of objects, contemporary writers usually interpret it in a broader sense, searching for a figurative meaning to show more than what the images say. As Barthes suggests, a photograph implies an interpretation beyond the images it presents. It goes beyond what the human eye can see. Photograph plays only a fragmentary part of the story the past and history tries to tell. Thus, "photography is as essentially constructed as any other representational form [like maps], that every part of the image can be manipulated and even fabricated, especially with ever more sophisticated digital technologies" (qtd in Hirsch 6).

Ondaatje selected only six photographs from his family album, out of many he could have had access to, in the text. Photographs, in Ondaatje's work, will be crucial to expose what stayed in the margins of the family albums, the untold stories behind the camera, used as an aid to rewrite the complicated stories involving his parents. It may also expose the passions

involving both the narrator and his family's prodigal life, to portray the tensions at home during his childhood, and the consequences brought to his life.

The Ceylon Ondaatje knew does not exist in the present; his parents are dead and the image he has from them at the time they were together is a construction based on other people's versions. Thus, he has to base his life writing on the old photographs— as a fragmentary part of this story-telling —and go beyond it.

In her study, *On Photograph*, Sontag points out that

A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token absence.

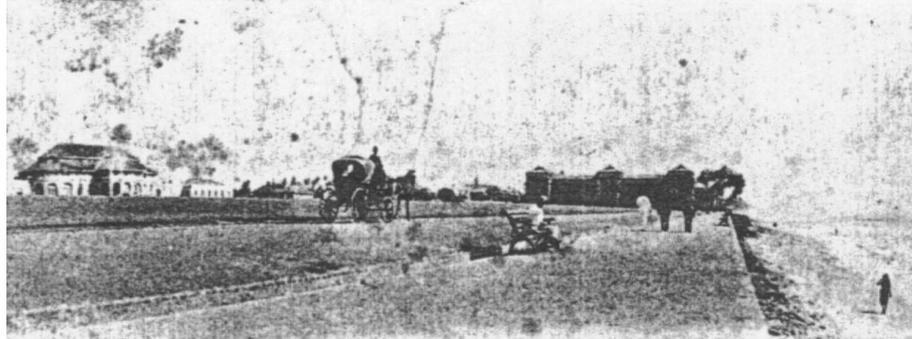
Photograph, like a wood fire in a room— especially those of people, of distant landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past — are incitements to reverie...they are attempts to contact or lay claim to another reality” (16)

Therefore, Ondaatje uses the pseudo-presence of his absent parents through photographs to bring to life the evanescent moments in the present and construct another reality. The narrator forges the reality in which he can touch his past and family in words and images.

Ondaatje's usage of photographs implies a close relation to the written text. The photographs are not used at random but described and analyzed in a previous chapter, or within the chapter it introduces. He chose private photographs from the family album, as well as some by anonymous photographers, such as those of Ceylon's landscape and monsoons. The narrative encloses six pictures, each of which opens one of the seven sections in the book.

The first picture of the book opens the section “Asian Rumours” (19), which shows an old photograph of Ceylon when the cart used to be the main means of transportation. The photograph portrays scattered houses by the beach and an air of calmness and order. The subsequent chapter is “Asia” and it reports the circumstances that lead the narrator to travel back home. The photograph of old Ceylon interacts with the old image the narrator has of his

homeland, the image he has of his memory as a child is replaced by the old pictures he uses to represent it.



Ondaatje presents his parent's first photograph in the opening of the section named "A Fine Romance." The photographs are individual pictures of each of them, put side by side, probably taken before they were married. Aware of the controversial and opposite personalities his parents had, the narrator presents them the way he remembers them – separate. His father's picture – a studio picture – although a shady, dark look, shows a fine, well-dressed man. It does not resemble his chaotic father, an image created by the stories surrounding his bizarre behaviour, printed in the narrator's mind in his childhood. On the other hand, his mother's photograph – an outdoor daylight picture of his mother in light clothes — shows her as an extroverted figure, not the dramatic force showed in the description of his mother's behaviour throughout the text. An attentive reader may perceive the irony, hidden in the evidence, as in the distance that separates the couple even before they knew it, the dramatic incompatibility of the two individuals, the different worlds they seem to live in.

Despite the closeness of the two photographs, the distance between them is an insurmountable bridge. The photographs portray their real life together and demonstrate they were never able to cross the bridge that separated them.



Although their divorce seems certain in the future, it is already present in the gap that separates the two individuals and indicates what will happen in the future: “*This will be,*” in Barthes’s words, quoted by Marianne Hirsh in *Family Frames* (5). The irony implied in the title, “A Fine Romance,” shows that the romance can be anything but fine. The anticipation of the narrator’s future concerning his never “fine” relationship with his father is already inscribed in their picture, as his father has never fit the father image portrayed in the pictures, or the image of a nice husband the readers may feel he was. The evidence showed in the pictures map the territory the narrator knows well in the present. The discrepancies in his parents’ behaviour seem strongly evident. The rewriting of the narrator’s story based on his parents’ behaviour as evidenced in the pictures only shows the representational character of the photographs. It seems the narrator is asking what fine romance they are talking about. Besides, the descriptive character of the narrative in some passages of the text offers visual narratives replacing real images effectively.

In her study “Rituals of Remembrance: Photography and Autobiography in Postmodern Texts,” Christina Ljungberg analyses the interplay of photographs and other forms of text in *Running in the Family*. She points out that as photographs have been largely

used in autobiographical fiction they became a powerful instrument for writers to “explore the relationship between the seeming and the seen in various dualistic concepts such as ‘reality’ and ‘appearance’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘manipulations’ or ‘original’ and ‘copy’” (1). The use of photographs in fictional autobiographies has the capacity to challenge these concepts “by thematizing the dilemma faced by both autobiography and photograph.” (1): “photography has been considered the perfect medium for a faithful representation of the world” (1).

In the chapter “What We Think of Married Life,” Ondaatje describes his parents; indeed, he provides a descriptive picture, in details, of each trace of their personality. He may be trying to show the margins of their relationship, the story behind the camera, the mild side of the repeated version he heard about them, of their incompatibility. Ondaatje describes his father this way,

My father’s dramatic nature pleased only himself and sometimes the four of us... my mother loved, *always* loved, even in her last years long, after their divorce, his secretive and slightly crooked humour. It bound them together (17).

The apparently controversial relationship between them is contradicted in Ondaatje’s description of his parents in this chapter. He shows them very similar to each other, and scrutinizes the presence of traces of their personality in himself, their dramatic nature, their “tall stories” (168), and possibly the force that impels the narrator to perpetuate their drama in words and images.

The photograph of Ondaatje’s parents, this time both in the same picture, opens the chapter “What We Think of Married Life,” and it not only reinforces the way the narrator presents his parents as incompatible but also shows their strong similarities. It seems that as long as he searches more deeply the narrator sees or wants to show things quite differently. In the picture, his mother and father make funny faces, acting like apes, as if saying what they

think or feel about married life. The narrator describes the picture in a previous page, in a chapter named “Photograph” as if anticipating the reader’s reaction by creating a visual narrative of what the reader is about to see. The picture dates May 1932, during their honeymoon.



The narrator describes the photograph this way:

...the two of them, very soberly dressed...My father sits facing the camera, my mother stands beside him and bends over so that her face is in profile on a level with his. Then they both begin to make hideous faces. My father’s pupils droop to the south-west corner of his sockets. His jaw falls and resettles into a groan that is half idiot, half shock...My mother in white

has twisted her lovely features and stuck out her jaw and upper lip so that her profile is in the posture of a monkey. (161)

What the photograph shows is the inconstant character of Ondaatje's parents' relationship, leading the narrator to a constant shift between reality and appearance. Whatever the photograph shows, whether it seems or it is really seen, the narrator finally attests that he obtained "the evidence [he] wanted, that they were perfect for each other" (162), a photograph he has "been waiting for all [his] life" (161). Being the "only photograph [he] found of the two of them together" (162) – maybe the only one existing – makes the photograph even more significant. As the narrator clearly points the contrasts between them – in their previous photograph– he found at least a common aspect to make them perfect for each other: their disregard for conventional married life. As a product of these controversial and opposite personalities, he finds out that he is also a "ham(s) of a very superior sort" (162).

In the introduction of the chapter "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent society," there is a photograph of Ondaatje's family in Ceylon, where he, his mother, his brother and sister are still young. They wear bathing suits and seem happy; there is no resemblance of the disruptive and confusing family relationships narrated throughout the text. The four of them look at the camera and smile.



The picture anticipates his father's absence in their family relationship. Whether the narrator's father is behind the camera is hard to tell. However, if he was in fact behind the camera that day, the eyewitness of a family that was his but did not take part in his world.

According to Marianne Hirsh,

Photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life. Since looking operates through projection and since photographic image is the positive development of negative, the plenitude that constitutes the fulfilment of desire, photographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not. (8)

Family and father were always on opposite sides of the story; they always belonged to different realities. The four look straight at him, smiling, contemplating through the threshold of the camera the eyes of the hidden father. It may also reveal what in fact happens, the father's control of the family's emotions, who are there, exposed to him, always waiting, expecting a bit of his attention. On the other side, the father behind the camera never reveals himself, always secretive, always out of site and grasp. His father's eyes might have always been upon them and the fact is that they never felt it. The photograph portrays the myth of the ideal family; therefore, the narrator shows the distortion of this image. The photograph tries to show a normal picnic in family, a fiction not a fact.

In the introduction to the section "Don't Talk to Me about Matisse," an old photograph of Ceylon, Nuwara Eliya, chaotic, shows people on the streets caught by the flood of 1947, mentioned by the author in the final part of the book *Credits*.



The picture grasps a current monsoon day in Ceylon, which is tormented by the heat and its natural sequence, the rain, when the streets are flooded by the storm for an hour and then “suddenly evaporates” (69).

The people that are captured by the camera do not seem worried about the flood. The water reaches their knees. There are men and women all over the street and some of them pose for the camera as if ignoring the water and the storm. They do not seem to be caught by surprise either; they have just learned how to deal with adversities in a good-humoured way. This picture introduces the section that treats parts of historical events in Ceylon and the narrator’s contact with historical documents. The discovery of the existence of many Ondaatjes mentioned in the files of Ceylon history seems to please the narrator. He feels himself as part of history too.

In the opening of the section “Eclipse Plumage” a group of young people, dressed up in costumes as if prepared for a party, is the target of the camera. The members of the group look straight at the camera, some of them are sitting on the floor, others standing behind. A man dressed in costume stands in a higher position than the others on a rock. Life is a permanent party, and it may not be taken seriously, at least not among the Ceylonese burghers. Behind them, the exuberant landscape almost invades the picture.



It is a daylight picture, but it is hard to tell the time of the day, since the shadows beneath the trees protect the subjects from the sun. Despite the festive appearance of the photograph, the members do not show any signs of happiness. They look serious and seem to take the photograph very seriously.

It looks as if posing for the picture is a part of the ritual appropriate for their social level, perpetuating the moment for future generations.

The photograph of the mountains, showing a train crossing the landscape, introduces the section “The Prodigal”. The narrator presents himself as the prodigal son who comes back after being away for many years. Despite confessing his preference for ships – which remind him of his past and of more glamorous times – he confesses that instead he took a plane, but here offers a picture of a train crossing the Ceylon mountains. The picture shows a different kind of image of the island. At the front are the solitary mountains – probably the ones his family used to see on their way to Nuwara Eliya during the monsoons to get rid of the heat – apparently watching life below them. The landscape there does not invade the picture wildly. The train crosses the mountain through tracks on the edge of a cliff with an unclear view of its depth.



The reader may have the idea that the train is coming from nowhere and going nowhere. It seems to be static, posing for the picture. The inconclusiveness of the picture may allude to the return of the prodigal son coming from nowhere, unaware of what is expecting him.

For sure, it is a solitary journey and by posing for the scrutinizing eyes of nature, he carefully observes the cliff, the gap that separates him, and his past. Although the narrator presents six photographs throughout the text, he recreates, in words, a photograph of his father's last days in Ceylon, on page 189. It seems the narrator wants to suggest they finally meet on page 189. He surprises the readers by imagining his father reading his book. In this passage, the narrator's eyes are upon his father; however, his father avoids confrontation and, as he "had not got that far in the book" (189), he anticipated the consequences of this confrontation and surrenders it to the ants. The narrator connects his father's reaction to the page mentioned, maybe by comparing it to a mirror. The father, chaotic, turning his back to the mirror/page

attests to his unavoidable nature and once again drinks to see himself personified in the midnight rat, a disgusting creature.

The use of photographs and word images created in the book emphasizes that the resources used by Ondaatje—his parents relationship, his connection with them, the wild and exuberant landscape of his homeland, the monsoons, his country’s history—reveal that beyond the apparatus of traveling back home another story is told. This other side gives the story, the photographs and images a new perspective for his past. Ljungberg argues that Ondaatje creates his journey in the spaces in-between the verbal and visual apparatus. However, she points out that Ondaatje gives the same emphasis to the verbal narrative as to the photographic act, thus denying the view of photographs as more “authentic” (5). According to her, Ondaatje uses some strategies in the use of photographs in his autobiographical work, first by focusing on the referential dilemma by relying on “true” and “false” memories taken from a larger constructed context, to imply that the verbal language metaphor is a more efficient medium than photography for representing a “true” version of the past. On the other hand, she believes Ondaatje disempowers photographs by presenting them out of context and by only discussing them chapters ahead, providing a detailed verbal description. Ondaatje uses another strategy to recover the “private and public memories” (5) by replacing traditional ritual photographs — such as wedding and honeymoon pictures— by means of other indexical representations. He provides fragmentary pieces of information, apparently unrelated to the rituals, but that actually have some kind of influence on their lives.

As Hirsh puts it,

Because the photograph gives the illusion of being a simple transcription of the real, a trace touched directly by the event it records, it has the effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and cooled characteristics. As

photography immobilizes the flow of family life into a series of snapshots, it perpetuates familial myth seeming merely to record actual moments in family history. (7)

Although the photographs used by Ondaatje are real, they may imply a personal way of questioning reality and to tell a different story than the one he imagines or wants it to be, in the same way the stories are told, since the people involved in the pictures are aware of the representation process behind the cameras:

Writers have thus attempted to use the very instruments of ideology, the camera, the album, and the familial gaze, as modes of questioning, hesitancy, and contestation. They have interrogated not only the family itself, but its traditions of representation. They have shown that in disrupting their own documentary authority and their use as evidence... photographs become powerful weapons of social and attitudinal change. (Hirsh 7-8)

The narrator moves between his “created” family and the “real” one, he criss-crosses the boundaries of the real and the imaginary, transforming the only picture he has from his parents, as well as all the pictures carefully chosen in the book, into a reliable source of a distant time in the past.

The ideas evoked by the images in this chapter may vary from nostalgic to hilarious, but the air of fictionality and multiplicity of interpretation is the same for any of them. One of the purposes of this chapter is also to show the interplay between images and text. The relationship, whether internal or external, among the texts present in this study is also a subject of discussion, its intertextuality, the relationship established in a specific text with others in the same text or with texts from other authors.

The semiotic term intertextuality was introduced by the poststructuralist theorist Julia Kristeva with the argument that a text cannot be a closed entity; contrary to what structuralists thought, a text crosses the boundaries of internal structure, establishing connections with other texts. The notion that the texts are always a rewriting of other texts questions its authorship, as they become a version of the texts they originated from — which actually originated from others. Texts are never original, but a blending of writings transformed into other writings, thus with many voices, not only the writer himself but the mixing of the other writers' voices his text originated from.

Intertextuality is not restricted to the influences of one writer on another but goes beyond it. Saussure emphasized that language is a system which pre-exists the individual speaker and that the subject is positioned by language. The contemporary theorists say that the subject is *spoken* by language, which Barthes reinforces by saying that language speaks in the place of the author; thus, writing, according to Barthes, is the point where the language performs not only the author, but also those with whom he engages a dialogue. When writers write they are also written by language, for the writer uses concepts and conventions already established. Therefore, to poststructuralists, the writer is the orchestrator of the text, not its originator.

*Running in the Family* is organized as an autobiographical narrative, which I categorized as self-portrait, and one has to take into consideration that the term and genre were not created by Ondaatje: the genre pre-existed and was utilized by many writers before him. In spite of writing about his eastern origin and country, the narrative is based on western concepts and conventions of life-writing, the occidental search for origin and identity. In addition, Ondaatje also uses the universal language of Ceylon's colonizers to reach not only his siblings and the inhabitants of his home country but mainly cosmopolitan readers like himself.

By following the poststructuralist intertextual interpretation of the text, the interplay between the texts establishes either the dynamics of the relations between the texts or the alternate dominance of one over the other, generating the meaning desired by the narrator, even though it may appear ambiguous, incoherent, and contradictory all over the novel.

It seems that Ondaatje offers a wide range of interpretations and utilizations of one or another dominant structure of the text. The chain of texts linked together employing a variety of narrative forms and images leads to the initial idea of telling one story in the place of another. The same way that Ondaatje's father used the "technique of trying to solve one problem by creating another" (33), so he narrator employs all the techniques available to create an aura of chaos so as to achieve an order. The narrator's childhood story of violence, sadness and instability is then transformed into a saga of extravagant, hilarious, unusual family; the story of an immigrant from east to west is then turned into the journal to origin and identity. The story of a son ignored by a father is then transformed into a story of recognition and love.

This study has been discussing and defending the representational character of all the tools and strategies Ondaatje has used to perform his journey back home and towards the past. Ondaatje used real photographs of his family, of his homeland, and a map of Sri Lanka, as well as real names and stories. The usage of these strategies may provide a certain degree of credibility to the narrative; however, the representational nature of the instruments used by Ondaatje indicates their fictional aspects.

I have also argued that the story is told in the virtual space in-between the many images Ondaatje inserted in the text. However, Ljungberg's analysis based on the idea that the autobiographical act works in a similar pattern of the photographic process of representation makes me think that although she claims that this act disempowers photography as a more authentic means of telling the story, she is in fact defending that the autobiography and

photograph as distinct media and that Ondaatje actually uses photograph to write his autobiographical journey, in which Barthes observes,

a photograph can be the object of three practices (or of three emotions, or of three intentions): to do, to undergo, to look. The *Operator* is the Photographer. The *Spectator* is ourselves, all of us who glance through collections of photographs – in magazines and newspapers, in books, albums, archives [...] And the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to ‘spectacle’ and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead. (qtd in Ljungberg 9)

I want to use Barthes’ idea of the three practices to argue that what Ondaatje really tries in his book is to tell his narrative as if he were the *Operator*, providing verbal or visual narrative in the form of snapshots. The spectators / readers and sometimes he— as if evaluating the impact of his work — work as mediators between the operator and the spectrum. The spectrum, the photographed things/persons are all of the objects and persons involved in the construction of the auto-bio-photographical history. The fragmentary character of the text, if viewed as a whole, would look like a family album, a scrapbook, assembling black-white photographs among colored and more vivid ones. As a photographer documenting his story, Ondaatje disposes the pictures apparently at random, making the spectator reorganize the chronological sequence of the photographs so as to make sense to

himself. Furthermore, based on Barthes's ideas of the "studium," the field of cultural interest that the photograph represents, and the "punctum, 'that unexpected flash' that 'pricks' (qtd in Ljungberg 7) the spectator, I may conclude that the text works as a "punctum" and "studium," since it apparently presents a disturbing autobiographical work inserted within a varied sort of image. It may otherwise present a photograph album filled not with "real" visual pictures but with rich verbal scraps framed by the iconic name *Running in the Family*, the image of a story that runs behind another one.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to (re)map Ondaatje's story through the return to his country after twenty five years away. The first attitude of mapping his geographical journey implied a remapping of his personal return in time as the narrative progressed. It culminated in the encounter with his father reconstructed by a fictional narrative.

In the first chapter, historical facts and Ondaatje's family stories were presented as intertwined. The geographical journey was presented as analyzing the dislocation of the narrator in some parts of Sri Lanka. The elements that characterized Sri Lanka were present in the monsoons and the historical evidence of the many invaders of the island. The aftermath of the European presence on the island highlighted issues around the power exercised upon Sri Lanka, leading to a relative disempowerment of the European present in their mimicry of each other. The hybrid subject emerging from this contact, instead of enhancing the European power, provoked the opposite consequence: the spaces in-between gave rise not only to new subject positions but also to new narratives, which are neither entirely real nor utterly made of fantasy.

In the second chapter, the personal travel was presented and analyzed from the pieces of information collected from the narrator's interviews and memories. The discussion over the genre of the book questioned the need to restrain the narrative into one specific genre. The discussion on the genre of the book led to ambivalence, since it may be viewed as a memoir, or described as a verbal self-portrait — though it is difficult to establish the boundaries between these subgenres. Ondaatje's text permits interpretations but at the same time destabilizes them. The author relied on memories and on interviews, on fact and fantasy, reality and imagination, but the fictional character of the narrative is evident. Despite the fragmentary disposition of the collection of texts — visual and verbal — chosen by Ondaatje,

the narrative was an ordered and a progressive travel from the public to the private, from the general to the more intimate, reaching its closure in the final encounter between Ondaatje and his father, the one he reconstructed along the narrative.

In the third chapter, the images presented in the text, such as maps — Ondaatje's personal version or the old ones described from his brothers walls — photographs, poems and epigraphs were analyzed concerning their reliability and the importance of their use to corroborate his life writing. The interplay among the images was seen as additional evidence to challenge the veracity of the text. The use of the variety of images pushes the reader to take a more active participation in the organization of the fragments of the narrative, since the writer uses a mixture of narrative formats and the association of true elements put together with fictional ones.

This study on *Running in the Family* may contribute to a broader knowledge of Michael Ondaatje's work in Brazil. Despite his long writing career and the list of works he already published, only his novel *The English Patient* is relatively well-known in Brazil. Despite the value of his literary production—both poetry and fiction-- he does not have the importance he deserves in the field of literary studies in our country. Besides, Brazil also being a post-colonial country (in a broader sense of the term) it would be very enriching to make a connection between the colonial issues in Sri Lanka and those in Brazil, since Sri Lanka also had the Portuguese as one of their colonizers. *Running in the Family*, due to its diversity of narratives and approaches, provides a wide range of research contributing to larger theoretical discussions. I hope these analyses of *Running in the Family* may stimulate other researchers to delve into the several layers of other themes to be discussed, such as the issue of gender and the interplay between the representation of women and the country's

history. As women are strong characters in Ondaatje's book, it would be interesting to establish a comparative study of the women, the men and the land.

In fact, the women, as presented in many parts of the story, represent the driving force of the family. They endure weak husbands pretending to be strong and they see to the raising of the family; they bear the hard work when hard times come, and they become the fiercest gamblers in society. They also show traces of "male" behavior, as in the cases of infidelity suggested by the narrator. Men are presented as weak characters entrapped in the need to be as English as possible. Men are never described as brilliant characters, despite the importance of some Ondaatjes in history who might have been outstanding husbands or hard-working men. The land resembles the women, always resisting dominance and violence. Although women and [mother]land lived in the shades of man and history, they represent the feminine force against domination and power.

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