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*DOES RUNNING IN THE FAMILY LEAVE DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD?*

A Traveler's Guide to Inscribing Subjective Ethnicity

par

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**COMPOSITION DU JURY**

***DOES RUNNING IN THE FAMILY LEAVE DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD?***

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**Ce mémoire a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:**

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from Marie Louise Pratt's, Françoise Lionnet's and Salome Chasnoff's studies of autoethnography, I re-configure autoethnography as an autobiographical performance that is created from the dialogue between the cultural references of different collectivities. From this perspective, I compare Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* with Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Although *Running in the Family* inscribes and is inscribed by a very different (social, cultural, economic, racial, and gender) context than *Dust Tracks on a Road*, both narratives combine autobiographical and ethnographical voices to articulate the "double-consciousness" of an intra-cultural subject position. Their attempt to articulate a marginalised collectivity or an intermediary subjectivity within the idiom of the dominant culture encounters the double-bind of representation. While participation in a dialogue assures the inscribed subject an existence within the space of discourse, it also defines and therefore confines the subject within the terms of representation. Both narratives negotiate the double-bind and the binary structures of representation (insider/outsider, observer/observed, or subject/subjugated) by evoking the self and the community in the process of writing and telling. Contrary to the conventional autobiography that attempts to memorialise the subject in a document, *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, functioning as autoethnographic texts, create through the performance of mediating ethnicity, a self-representation that voices the community while suggesting an intermediary but continually shifting subject position.

## RÉSUMÉ

En combinant les différentes visions de « l'autoethnographie » de Marie Louise Pratt, Françoise Lionnet et Salome Chasnoff, mon mémoire crée une nouvelle perspective pour comparer *Running in the Family* de Michael Ondaatje et *Dust Tracks on a Road* de Zora Neale Hurston. Malgré leurs contextes très différents (social, culturel, racial et sexuel), je vois ces textes comme étant multilingues et multiculturels. Ainsi, je revois l'autoethnographie comme une performance autobiographique créée par le dialogue entre les références culturelles de collectivités différentes. La voix autobiographique de *Running in the Family* et celle de *Dust Tracks on a Road* inscrivent un discours de résistance en s'appropriant et en adaptant les formes de représentations d'une culture dominante pour exprimer les traditions d'une autre culture marginalisée. En même temps, ces voix articulent une *double-consciousness* c'est-à-dire, une subjectivité située par deux collectivités. Cependant, leurs discours narratifs font face à des problématiques de représentation qui risquent de cristalliser le sujet ou la collectivité évoqués par une caractérisation. En d'autres mots, si la participation à un dialogue assure que le sujet a un espace de discours, elle peut aussi définir et ainsi confiner le sujet dans une structure de représentation. Les performances autobiographiques de *Running in the Family* et *Dust Tracks on a Road* négocient le double-jeu de la représentation aussi bien que la structure binaire (membre-non-membre, observateur-observé, sujet-subalterne) dans l'évocation de la collectivité et de l'individu par le processus d'écrire ou de raconter. Contrairement à l'autobiographie traditionnelle qui essaie de construire une texte commémoratif du sujet-

interlocuteur, *Running in the Family* et *Dust Tracks on a Road* sont des textes « autoethnographiques » qui créent à travers la médiation d'une identification ethnique un autoportrait qui articule la voix d'une collectivité en même temps qu'il suggère la position intermédiaire d'une subjectivité qui est toujours changeante.

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I have learned more than I anticipated from writing my thesis. Each stage of its production, whether it was the development of my thesis statement, the reading of secondary sources, or the process of writing and rewriting, challenged my understanding, knowledge and writing skills. Now that the product of my work will be placed among others on a shelf in the backroom of the library, I wish to express my appreciation for the support and contribution given to me by members of my jury. With guidance from Winfried Siemerling, I learned to tread carefully through the field of literary study and appreciate the complexities and nuances of issues central to my study. While Greg Reid's commentary promoted attentiveness to structure, Claire Grogan's fruitful suggestions pointed to the context of the works I examined.

As I contemplate the community of texts from which my thesis is constituted, I am impressed by the thought that during the time of this study, I have spent more time with these texts than with family or friends. Yet, these persons have contributed unmeasurably to the completion of my work. Friends, fellow students, teachers and family encouraged and supported me by providing a necessary plurality in my life. I wish to show my gratitude by signalling their presence: Verna Marie Rembold, Mylon H. Rembold, Eric Rembold, Jean François Proulx, Claire Tousignant, Jacinthe Boisvert, Stefan Gillian, Maria van Sundent, Joanne Norman, Christian Boyer, Danièle Charest, Fernande Beauchemin, Dany Allard, Andrée « Dame Belette ».Allard, Jacques Allard, Roger Roy, Francine Bolduc, Katerine and Simon Roy.

Last but not least, I wish to thank *La Fondation de l'Université de Sherbrooke* and the *Département des lettres et communications* for according me a grant. It provided not only the necessary funds for finishing the final chapters but also a sign of recognition and encouragement. Unfortunately, literary study appears to the public as well as to members of business and government as a marginal activity when compared to engineering, administration, medicine or law. However, the current globalisation of information, communication and economy impels each of us to read carefully our complex and changing world. The negative consequences of holding a single and unique "reading" or perception can not be minimised. Many critics consider the efforts to open the doors of universities to a broad range of students or include programs promoting cross discipline studies has lowered standards and burdened the education system. During this period of budgetary cuts, the university's mandate to stimulate social reflection, dialogue and critical study appears to be a luxury that is too expensive for society to maintain. To these claims, I would argue that if we recognise our interdependence with others and value living in a democratic society, how can we afford not to invest in such luxuries?



## ABBREVIATIONS

AV .....	<i>Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture</i>
DT.....	<i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i>
RF.....	<i>Running in the Family</i>
NA.....	<i>The Norton Anthology of African American Literature</i>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the seminal study, "Autoethnography: The An-Archaic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*," Françoise Lionnet characterises Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography as an autoethnography, which she understands as "the defining of one's subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history and ethnographical analysis" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 99). Her definition focuses attention on the constructed nature of ethnicity and the interrelationship between concepts of self and collectivity. By comparing *Running in the Family* (1982) to Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), I will explore autoethnography more extensively while examining how each text mediates subjective ethnicity. If, indeed, autoethnography is the defining of one's subjective ethnicity, to what degree does it also voice a collective's ethnicity? What is its status as ethnic writing?

In regards to these inquiries, Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* poses several problems when considered as autoethnographic expression. A major problem is the uncertain degree to which *Running in the Family* voices a collective ethnicity. In the search for voices of ethnicity, some critical approaches have created specific expectations as to what ethnic writing is "supposed to do" in a mainstream culture, namely, subvert the standing conventions and articulate the silenced voices of a marginalized collective. Criticism of Ondaatje's text by Arun Mukherjee, who claims that it panders to a mainstream culture's expectations, is especially helpful in enunciating some of these concerns and adds a productive tension to this comparative study. While Françoise Lionnet's study of

Hurston's text provides a working basis for my examination, I will also compare her definition of "autoethnography" to the one Mary Louise Pratt develops in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), in an attempt to "grapple" with the terms and issues that are confronted and challenged in Ondaatje's text. The term "autoethnography" has been employed by Lionnet to characterise certain texts written by post-colonial and women subjects. Mary Louise Pratt has used the term to designate specific texts by colonized subjects of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. More recently, the term serves as a reference for an increasing number of dissertations and studies that examine the self-representations created by individuals from subgroups traditionally excluded from the public forum.<sup>1</sup>

While suggesting that autoethnography provides a new and productive critical approach to Ondaatje's and Hurston's autobiographies, I also propose a repositioning of the term. My concept of autoethnography, formed from Pratt's and Lionnet's definitions, will be used to examine Ondaatje's and Hurston's texts. Specifically, the aspects that will be examined in each text are (1) the representation of self and collectivity, (2) the narrative strategy, (3) the role of the inscribed geographical sites of origin and (4) the role of the collective's or the other's voice in articulating a subjective ethnicity.

By now, it may be rather evident that the title of my analysis "*Does Running in the Family leave Dust Tracks on a Road ?*" plays upon the titles of Michael Ondaatje's and Zora Neale Hurston's autobiographies. Chosen during a whimsical moment, my title suggests a relationship between the two novels that was not immediately apparent during the initial stages of my study. Although *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family* are autobiographies by ethnic writers, their contextual differences, that is, the differences between their times of publication, between their authors' classes, genders,

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<sup>1</sup>One of the recent studies of major importance in my work is Salome Chasnoff's "Performing Teen Motherhood on Video: Autoethnography as Counterdiscourse"(1995) which will be discussed in more detail.

nationalities, races, between their social, linguistic and cultural references, and between their implied readerships seem to indicate a challenging if not problematic comparison.

Despite these dissimilarities, however, *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family* use similar narrative strategies. Both of these texts are published as autobiographies yet they do "things" that traditional autobiographies are not expected to do. That is to say, both narratives create and maintain a significant ambiguity between their "factual" and the imaginary aspects. Rather than simply attempting to reconstruct the author's life by inscribing biographical events, both of the autobiographies represent the process of collecting fragments of stories and combining historical with fictional narratives, oral with written traditions, and realism with folk-lore or family-lore. If the oral-like quality of these stories tends to "blur" precise "facts" and stretch the limits of credibility, they also imbue the narrative with a another sense of reality. As a result, Ondaatje's and Hurston's texts appear to subvert reader's expectations of a confessional or self-revelatory narrative by using and abusing the conventions of autobiography, travel writing, and/or ethnography. What or whose interests are served by these narrative subversions? This question focuses attention on the extent to which Ondaatje's and Hurston's texts "serve" the interests of an ethnic group and the group's ethnicity "serves" the specific interests of the texts and their writers.

The initially only playful title soon began to suggest a central issue of my study. On further reflection, the serendipitous juxtaposition of two titles appeared to generate a new comparative line of thought. The phrase "running in the family" used for Ondaatje's title denotes an inherited quality or trait that is passed on among members of a collective or a family and implies a sense of self and collective identification that is innately "rooted" in a specific origin or cultural tradition of a "family" or an ethnic group. With reference to Ondaatje's text, "running in the family" also suggests a reconstructive process in which the running subject searches for "lost" family "roots" by running through the traces and voices of the past. This interpretation evokes a sense of belonging and identification that is as

much subjective and constituted from memory and stories as from biological connections. In the absence of the family or the collective, the disunited member confronts the silence that lies between the inscribed lines of history, the well told lies, and the stillness of photographs and attempts to create "a family" in the collective of narratives that will serve as the matrix for his or her "personal" story. *Running in the Family* portrays the subject running back to the site of childhood in search of family members who have since then been dispersed and left their traces that are like the "dust tracks on a road." This echo of Hurston's title suggests that the connection implied by the juxtaposition of Ondaatje's and Hurston's titles is supported by comparing their narratives.

So, the question, "Does running in the family leave dust tracks on a road?" asks us many things: In the absence of people, family and community, how do their traces effect the remaining individuals and provide them a cultural foundation for creating self-narratives? How is our sense of self and of belonging to a collective constructed and mediated? Is our self-identity a single and unique phenomenon rooted in an exclusive racial, biological or historical origin? How does a past, created from fragments of memory, a past that is obscured, marginalised or obliterated by time or by intention, affect the living? How does one construct one's sense of family and self when the origins are obscured? To these many inquiries is added another dimension suggested in the title of this study that ponders the possible difference between the two texts. If both *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* can be considered as self-portraits that represent the process of positioning the self in relationship to families and collectives, does Ondaatje's narrative inscribe a subjective position that "leaves" or moves away from the subjective position that is represented in Hurston's narrative?

These are the inquiries that frame my study of *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* as autoethnographic texts. However, to position autoethnography in relation to a larger context and gauge the relevancy of the issues examined, I would like to point to a passage in Lionnet's, "The Politics and Aesthetics of *Métissage* ," in which she

proposes that "language creates reality" (AV 14). By engaging with the representations of collectivity and self-identity, autoethnography is directly concerned with the way language determines how a person and a people are perceived and treated. The texts that are brought together in my study re-introduce and re-examine issues and concerns of post-colonial and women subjects wishing to articulate their difference and diversity. As Édouard Glissant points out, these questions touch upon an issue of global concern.

I also agree with Françoise Lionnet when she states that the challenge confronting us at the end of the twentieth century, as we contemplate the new millennium, is the ability to develop new ways for living with our neighbours that respect cultural differences (AV 5). If indeed, we are living in a world that is a "global village," as heralded by social, cultural and economic critics and commentators or demonstrated as a *fait accompli* by global affairs and mass media, then the violent shocks between cultures that are broadcasted daily suggest that the ability of living harmoniously with our neighbours is urgently needed yet increasingly problematic. CNN is only one example of a news media that reinforces our perception of a world-wide network while simultaneously sounding in our ears a doomsday litany: "ethnic cleansing in Bosnia," "Tamils fighting in Sri Lanka," "Chinese citizens are set afire in Indonesia," "Continued conflict in Palestine," "Pakistan and India on the brink of nuclear war." The news media continually shifts our attention from one conflict to another more "recent" one.

If the news media translates conflict into dialectical terms of nationality, race, ethnicity or religion it also broadcasts the contentious nature of "fences" which serve to define people's places. There is a saying that goes, "Good fences make good neighbours," with the implication that by keeping people, things and animals in their proper place, harmony and peaceful coexistence will be maintained. In a similar sense, the conventional forms of understanding assume that the disruptive confusion of ambiguity is alleviated by defining self and community within clearly defined, fenced-in terms. However, the aforementioned examples of conflict also indicate the destructive effects of rigid

categorisations and intolerance of differences. The fences used to keep the world in a recognisable and manageable form do not satisfy every one and the people subjected to the limitations of established categorisations are now challenging the fence lines. In interviews and writings, Marie Louise Pratt, Françoise Lionnet and Édouard Glissant have indicated that we are witnessing a shifting of the traditional boundaries. The fences that have closed off history to postcolonial subjects and women are being transgressed.

In her address at the 1993 ACLA session, Mary Louise Pratt states, "fences take a lot of monitoring and maintenance" (Bernheimer 58). This is particularly true with regards to literary study. Pratt suggests that three historical processes are currently challenging the position of the fences and transforming the way literature and culture are conceived and studied in the academy. (I would add that they are also transforming the world's economies, ecosystems and cultural diversity). Globalisation and "the increasingly rapid flows of people, information, money, commodities, and cultural productions," (59) are producing changes of consciousness. In addition, a process of democratisation is opening up institutions to groups traditionally excluded, "especially women and people of color"(59). Democratisation promotes the "diversification of both personal and intellectual agendas and the challenge to structures of exclusion formerly taken as natural"(59). Finally, a process of decolonization is indicated by the "entry of the Third World into dialogue with the First, and the latter's recognition of itself as constituted by relations of contact beyond its borders"(59). From the perspective of the postcolonial subject, decolonization also signifies a movement of cultural redefinition and the articulation of difference and diversity. To this end, autoethnography appears to be one of the ways in which postcolonial writers have been able to mediate fencing: by transgressing the old fences that would have kept them in their traditionally silent and marginalised "places," by shifting the fence posts to indicate new positions, and by creating more spaces for the expression of their differences. Thus, inquiries about fences and categories such as, "How



are they made?, Who makes them? What do they intend to keep out or in?" are changing the topography of culture as well as literary studies.

However, the usual optimism that accompanies the promotions of globalisation also generates a list of suspicions. The celebration of a "world village" is also challenged as a reductive move to form the world into a commercial market that profits the interests of an elite group, promotes a "world beat" culture that is driven by consumerism, and celebrates diversity with theme parks and festivals. Cultural phenomena such as CNN that help create a perception of the world as an interrelated community can also distract attention from local issues and diminish the sense of one's agency within a world-wide structure (why do I seem to know more about East Timur than about the east end of town? And what can I do about it?). Although oversimplified, my brief summary of the conflict between global and local visions underlines the issues connected with globalisation: Why should we be concerned with what is happening half way around the globe? Although not directly addressed, the question relates to the thesis at hand. A sequel might very well be, Why should we, the reader, be concerned and to what extent can we 'understand' the autobiography of a black Afro-American woman or of a Canadian immigrant originally from Sri Lanka if we do not share the same gender, racial, cultural, or ethnic references? By understanding the other are we evoking a process of universalization? Can we comprehend the articulations of different cultural references without conflation?

The challenge of globalisation brings with it the problematic of articulating differences which Édouard Glissant considers as part of a changing mental landscape of human thought. Thus, if we, as a collective, are to survive the twenty-first century, our awareness of the delimited nature of the world and its interdependence is necessary for our survival. However, Glissant is careful to avoid inscribing globalisation within a reformulation of humanism's project of universality that absorbs difference into an all-inclusive oneness. Instead, to be concerned and imbued with the world around us or in the words of Édouard Glissant, to be "*impregné de tout*" is to echo Lionnet's demand for an

appreciation of diversity and difference and a reevaluation of coalitions. Easy to say but how is it done? Glissant reformulates the question by asking two very fundamental questions concerning the dynamics of ethnic identity and self-identity: How can we remain ourselves without closing ourselves off from others and how to open ourselves to others without losing our sense of self? (Glissant *Introduction* 20)

Autoethnography, as an autobiography and as an ethnography, engages with the concerns raised by Glissant, and is therefore of particular interest to post-colonial subjects. However, the dilemmas of those who live and write at the confluence of two or more cultures and languages are also the concern and interest of all persons sensitive to postmodern conditions. With the rapid changes and the increased intercultural contacts confronting communities, the sense of self and community is under extreme pressure. We are, in a variety of different ways, each living at the confluence of different cultures and their references: we are potentially the "other" for someone else. With reference to current world events, the issues and problems with which autoethnography engages appear to me of special pertinence.

Despite the news of conflicts and great human sufferings, Glissant declares that the signs of a changing consciousness have already begun. His perception of cultural creolisation implies an evolutionary process of amelioration that invites critical analysis. Are these changes "improvements" or simply the readjustments to new conditions? It is of particular interest to note that optimistic signs of new and unpredictable potentials and possibilities of coexistence are being signalled by members from "marginalised" cultures existing at the periphery of a Eurocentric vision: Glissant from the Caribbean island of Martinique, Lionnet from the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius. Inscribed within issues of cultural *métissage* and *créolisation*, "autoethnography" is a theoretical spin-off from the efforts of post-colonial theorists and writers such as Lionnet, Pratt and Glissant who are attempting to map out a new route towards the next millennium in which we are asked to think "otherwise" and imagine new ways of being.

## 2. NAMING THE BEAST

As we travel through the theoretical landscape of contemporary literary study, we are sometimes confronted with strange but vaguely familiar terms such as "autoethnography." A hybridised term, autoethnography looks and sounds like autobiography but also functions as ethnography. In order to explore the term's implied relationships between self and collective identities, my study will examine two of its definitions in detail. Françoise Lionnet's understanding of the term, cited in my introduction, emphasizes the subjective nature of ethnicity which suggests possibilities of extending the term to a variety of texts and forms of expression. Not only is Lionnet's concept of autoethnography successfully applied to the study of Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* in *Autobiographical Voices* (1989) but it also appears to be, with some adaptation, applicable to Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. However, the advantages of defining ethnicity in terms of perception and subjectivity which lend a degree of flexibility also risks overlooking cultural differences. Marie Louise Pratt's corpus of writing in which she composes her understanding of "autoethnography" articulates a perception that reflects to a greater degree the conflictive nature that characterises the contact and transculturation of heterogeneous cultures. Although her configuration of autoethnography is clearly defined in terms of form, content and context, the term's delimitation risks constraining its field of inquiry. The differences between Pratt's and Lionnet's definitions suggest that the term is still in flux. By examining Pratt's configuration of autoethnography and then comparing it to Lionnet's definition, I propose to examine different aspects of

autoethnography in order to delineate new perimeters. Thus, one of the intentions of my study is to create new ways for comparing Ondaatje's and Hurston's autobiographies.

*Pratt: Writing From the Contact Zone*

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), Mary Louise Pratt offers a definition of autoethnography that applies to a corpus of texts written by colonial subjects of eighteenth and nineteenth century European imperialism in Latin America. For Pratt, "autoethnography" or the "autoethnographic expression" refers to,

instances in which colonised subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the coloniser's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations.(7)

Pratt sets her term within the context of the European conquest of the New World in which autoethnography is written by a colonized subject situated at the point of conjuncture between two cultures inscribed within an unbalanced relationship of power. However, the ability to use the European idiom to respond to the colonising culture's representations implies that the autoethnographer is ambivalently positioned between two cultures. The ability to use two fields of representations distinguishes the writer from either community while providing access to both cultural fields of representations:

Autoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as "authentic" or autochthonous forms of self-representation... Rather autoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror.(7)

Pratt's definition implies that, as a writing of a counternarrative, the autoethnographic expression is positioned at one end of a binary relationship between colonizer and colonized. However, autoethnography is situated in-between the two terms by addressing a readership (the coloniser), which is outside the writer's ethnic group, while re-presenting the indigenous population (the colonized) in terms that echo the two communities of reference but are specific to a second, bicultural, bilingual readership.

Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's manuscript *The New Chronicle and Good Government and Justice* (1613) "constitutes a canonical instance of autoethnographic representation"(7). Forty years after the final fall of the Inca empire, Guaman Poma, an Amerindian writer, reviews Inca history and customs while appropriating the Spanish chronicle form in a bilingual text. Contemporary with European "discovery" and "exploration" of the New World, *The New Chronicle* is suggested by Pratt as inscribing a cultural contact between two disparate cultures, separated by history and geography until the moment of their encounter. Within this context, autoethnography is clearly delineated:

Often . . . the idioms appropriated and transformed are those of travel and exploration writing, merged and infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous modes. Often . . . they are bilingual and dialogic.

Autoethnographic texts are typically heterogeneous on the reception end as well, usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker's own social group, and bound to be received very differently by each. Often such texts constitute a group's point of entry into metropolitan culture.(7)

Pratt constructs a helpful guide to what constitutes an autoethnographic text and a reference point for examining *Dust Tracks on a Road*. However, *Running in the Family's*

appearance as a mono-lingual text as well as its "mainstream" voice and readership challenges the terms and limitations of Pratt's understanding of autoethnography.

Pratt not only situates autoethnography by the position of its writer as the "other" of a predominant colonializing culture, but also in terms of the text's site of occurrence: at the juncture of heterogeneous cultures. With respect to her studied corpus, autoethnography refers to writings that originate from the colonial frontier. The site for autoethnographic expressions is

the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (6)

With regards to reading *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family* as autoethnographic expressions, I will focus attention on the representation of the writer-narrator's community, and how the original home site is a frontier space for writing cultural encounters.

Borrowing the linguistic term "contact language" to describe an improvised "language" that emerges from the continual trading and encounter between different cultures, Pratt refers to the spaces of colonial encounters as "contact zones," that is,

[T]he social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination--like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermath as they are lived out across the globe today. (4)

The emphasis on the improvised nature of language in the contact zone suggests other forms of expression can be considered as languages. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, the

indigenous or vernacular language is English but the specific usage and performance of that language, along with certain word inventions and modifications, signify the Afro-American community. By accepting a less categorical definition of bilingualism which would consider photographs, poetry and graffiti as "bilingual" elements of expression to the degree that they articulate another culture's mode of expression, the problems of categorising *Running in the Family* as an autoethnography could be partly circumvented. The aforementioned heterogeneous elements of expression that are incorporated into Ondaatje's text could be compared to the woodcuts in *The New Chronicle*. Thus, the role that poetry and photographic images play in *Running in the Family* suggests that these forms of expressions create a bilingual dimension to the text.

By defining the "contact zone" as a social space in which heterogeneous cultures "meet, clash and grapple" in the aftermath of colonialism and slavery, the restriction of a geographic and historical disjuncture attributed to the first New World and European encounters is already to some extent dislodged. Although Pratt defines autoethnography in terms of "first" encounters, the changing conditions consequential to a "first" contact and described by Pratt as transculturation, challenge the conflictive terms of "colonizer-colonised" and compel a language that is more descriptive to different formations of community and types of mediated encounters. In Pratt's words,

A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and "travelees," not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.(7)

The binary terms of colonizer and colonized are convenient for representation and signal the asymmetric quality of relationship. However, the "contact" between two cultures and their engagement within an interactive relationship also suggest a "transculturation." In terms of Pratt's postcolonial frame of discourse, to think in terms of "transculturation" is also to recognise the interactive and reciprocal relationship between coloniser and colonised. Transculturation not only acknowledges the influence of the conqueror's culture on the indigenous cultures of the colonised territories but also acknowledges the influence of the periphery on the social and cultural structures of the metropolis, particularly the institutions that structure its perceptions.

### *Scientific and Travel Writing*

Travel writing and ethnography, used in Ondaatje's and Hurston's autobiographies respectively as framing narratives, are linked historically to the social and cultural structures of the metropolis and the institutions that structure its perceptions. During the period of eighteenth and nineteenth century colonialism, Europe perceived itself as the imperial metropolis determining the periphery while ignoring the ways in which the periphery determined the metropolis. It was the source of "the emanating glow of the civilizing mission or the cash flow of development" (6). European history, travel writings, ethnographies and narratives about scientific expeditions were organized as self-affirmative narratives that served the interests of colonialization by continually presenting and re-presenting the peripheries and the other within a Eurocentric perspective.

By acknowledging that Europe's institutions were constructed from the fruits of imperialism, we are also acknowledging the dependency of the metropolis on the periphery. Colonial expansion shaped metropolitan society by generating new wealth,



stimulating business and mobilising capital for exploration and exploitation.<sup>1</sup> Linked with the increase of the metropolis's enrichment were the anxieties of dependency which Eurocentric narratives attempted to sublimate. European hegemony was dependent on the ability to control the participation of its subjects within its self-affirming cultural narratives. The domestic subjects living in the metropolis were engaged within the ideology of imperialism by the history and travel narratives that represented the periphery and the other in the terms and conventions of the metropolis. These narratives positioned the readership at the centre of an expanding world, as passive participants, shielding them from realities of exploitation and colonialism while positioning them within the structure of colonization as consumers.<sup>2</sup>

During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the scientific expeditions accompanying the European colonial expansion produced texts that Pratt refers to as "anti-conquest" narratives or narratives of innocence. These texts include "strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment that they assert [by legitimising the Euro-centric discourse, "progress" and

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion of European Imperialism in *The Western Experience* (1991), ed. Mortimer Chambers *et al.* In a brief overview, the aforementioned reference emphasizes the major determinant historical and social factors of European imperialism. Firstly, the ancient Roman empire is evoked as a persistent and influential dream in European culture and history that served as a model of reference up until 1918. However, by the late nineteenth century, most Europeans were convinced that the dream of empire as a form of governing was not realisable or that it was on the wane: "Imperialism came to mean European rule overseas, and nowadays the term commonly includes economic and cultural domination that may or may not involve direct political control" (1061). Understood in this sense, European imperialism can be considered in ways other than as the geographic expansion of a nation's periphery. European trade and commerce introduced European investments and technology in addition to European techniques of management to the colonies. Tied to foreign markets, European enterprises influenced local economies by their labour policies, purchases of goods and services and investments in communication and transportation systems. The role of steamships, telegraph and railroads were determinant factors that increased reliance on European investments and technology. By the turn of the twentieth century, the automobile began to generate a demand not only for more roads and bridges but also for the increased production and distribution of petroleum, thus creating a new economic basis for international corporations. Many of these conditions and factors are referred to in *Running in the Family*: modern transportation and communication such as railroads, cars and radio link members of the Ondaatje family and the burgher class to the European culture and economy.

<sup>2</sup> Pratt's analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth century colonialism and their supportive narratives also provides a historical and cultural context for examining twentieth century globalisation of the economy and its narratives of globalisation.

consumerism] European hegemony" (7). They offered an ethical position for European readers from which they could participate vicariously, as a third-party observer, in colonialism's exploitation. As noted by Pratt, the scientific expeditions that accompanied European colonial expansion attained public attention by reporting the heroic endeavours of scientists encountering hardships and adversities in a strange "new" world. As scientific narratives, these reports assumed the authority of objective writing. Written with European protagonists, they captivate the imagination of bourgeois readers while implicating them within a Eurocentric perception of the world. The travel narrative's scientific nature secures its reader's innocence by attributing to the journey a noble goal of participating in the quest for knowledge and truth. The actual conditions of colonization and the underlying commercial reasons of exploration were either covered over or subjectively distanced from the reader. Identification with the narrative's "seeing man" traveler engages the reader as a passive consumer of imperialism's narratives.<sup>3</sup> Travel narratives from this period serve imperialism's interest by mediating the "clash and grapple" of cultural encounters with a discursive distance created by the scientific "objective" discourse. The mediation of the "other" occurs at the safe distance of the periphery within the metropolis's system of representation. Whether a biologist classifies the plant life within a generic system of classification, or an explorer describes the "crude" methods natives use for making cheese or an anthropologist describes in detail native women's genitalia and physiognomy, the representation of the other and the periphery is portrayed from the European male perspective. While travel narratives attract the European reader to the foreignness of the other, the familiarity and centrality of the metropolis is also inscribed and represented as the place of return. The inscribed strangeness of the periphery affirms the familiarity of the metropolis and the sense of commonality among European readers, while the repeated

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<sup>3</sup> See Pratt's discussion of anti-conquest narratives (*Imperial Eyes* 7, 38-68). By inscribing the European traveler as the "seeing -man," Pratt not only makes references to the male subject's position in European eighteenth and nineteenth century travel narratives and autobiographies but also to the voice of the "imperial" first person who inscribes the world within a male objectifying gaze.

representations of the encounter with the other confer a sense of "normalcy" and cohesiveness to the metropolis's hegemony. In these narratives, the other's voice is covered over with the traveler's observations and commentary.

### *The Double-Bind of Colonialism*

*Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* represent the dynamics of colonialism and slavery, respectively, and stress in varying degrees and complex ways their "asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" referred to in Pratt's description of autoethnography. In Hurston's text, for example, the racial line of demarcation that separates Afro-American from Euro-American communities is challenged by the complexities of community formation. For the present discussion, I prefer to examine the double-bind of colonization in Ondaatje's text in which I will argue that the narrator-writer of *Running in the Family* parodies the fetishism of the "other," as inscribed in eighteenth and nineteenth century travel narratives, by "going native."<sup>4</sup> While imperialism's interests are sustained by a discourse of "Orientalism," that is, the fetishism of the "other," the fetishized "other" is simultaneously distanced from the observer. This double-bind of attraction and repulsion maintains periphery and metropolis within a dialectical relationship that arguably continues the metropolis's hegemony while covering from the public sphere the actualities of colonization and exploitation. However, from the perspective of the metropolis, the desired fruits of the empire are often poisoned. With the material advantages and novelty that come from the periphery there are anxieties and fears that are associated with exchanging with the others.<sup>5</sup> The metropolis perceives its sphere of influence and "way of life" threatened by elements and persons of the other culture

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<sup>4</sup> Since *Running in the Family* is the problematic case for study, I will explore the double-bind of colonialism, here. However, the constructions of "race" and the complexities of representing the Afro-American community are discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Lionnet discussion of the unconscious fear of conquest by the other in which she refers to the display of "Orientalism" as it appears in the Théophile Gautier' newspaper columns of 1845 (AV 11-12).

infiltrating and changing the home culture. The mixed reaction of fear and desire by the metropolis citizen is articulated by Théophile Gautier in his 1845 newspaper column: "If this continues, France will soon become Mohamedan and we shall see the white domes of mosques swell up in our cities. . . . We would willingly live until that day, for quite frankly, we prefer Oriental fashions to English ones." (qtd. by Lionnet in *AV*, 11). In an attempt to conserve its hegemony and protect its culture and tradition, the imperial metropolis creates political, social and ideological walls to keep the 'others' out and in their place. Part of that walling-off effort included eighteenth and nineteenth century European travel narratives in which notions of purity, order and Eurocentrism retrace the boundaries of "home" for their readers.

Themes of the double-bind of colonialism are referred to and parodied in *Running in the Family*. For instance, the "fatal attraction" of the "other" is signalled by references to the multitude of poisonous plants growing in Ceylon and to the coconut flowers that are cultivated for the fabrication of an alcoholic beverage. Ondaatje's text plays with the nineteenth century colonial perception of the periphery as the exotic paradise that also inscribes, in Joseph Conrad's words, the "heart of darkness." The simile is extended to the tear-shaped garden paradise of Ceylon in which it is represented in *Running in the Family*, as the "heart of drunkenness" (*RF* 47). References to the walls constructed by monarchs and colonizers (the Sigiriya fortress walls, the University of Ceylon, St. Thomas' Boy School,) are appropriated by the narrative to create a self-reflexive text. By representing several different walls as the surface for inscribing graffiti, *Running in the Family* also seems to imply the double-bind between writing and the social structures of which it is a part. Writing, as the means of personal expression, is dependent on the institutions that create its forum. Conversely, the social structures are dependant on writing as part of its institutionalisation. Although, the institutional walls are portrayed in Ondaatje's text as the sites for supporting personal and collective expression, they are also part of the cultural and social structures for the confinement of expression. Ondaatje's

representation of graffiti on the wall's of colonialism's institutions adds to the double-bind of colonialism the echoes of the two-sidedness of writing in which one writes "against" the structure of which one is a part.

Despite the echoing of closed binary structures, *Running in the Family* points to a position outside the walls of a double-bind. The narrator describes his dream in which the Ondaatje family is portrayed as a moving human pyramid, magically traversing the doorway and the wall. By ignoring the conventions and restrictions of the doorway, they are depicted as transgressing the old colonial walls that have maintained and contained their family's status. However, that status is two-sided. As Burghers, they are both subjects of British colonization and the "elite class" of a Celine society. Therefore, are they leaving a colonized or the colonial position? Do they move outside of the structure? Although undetermined, the dream manifests the desire to move outside the conventions of either colonizer or colonized to a third cultural position.

*Running in the Family* also depicts the possible scenarios of a marginalized culture that is caught within the double-bind of a binary relationship of colonization. Philip Ondaatje, as a subject from the periphery, looks for his self-reflection in the cultural mirror of the metropolis. By adopting the British cultural forms, however, he is confronted with an image that is a distorted, negative or darkened self-image. Mervyn's attachment to his Tamil ancestry is suggested as a rejection and possibly a rebellion against his father and his father's cultural strategy of identification. On the other hand, as underlined in Baker's examination of Black Nationalism, Mervyn's attraction to his Tamil ancestry suggests a "romanticization" of origin that tends to create an exclusive cultural tradition mired in the dynamics of preservation and essentialism. Although this option for a peripheral culture's self-recognition risks being ossified, fixed within its own categorisations, either by the metropolis' inscription (such as ethnography) or by a nationalistic discourse, it does articulate a voice for the periphery. As in Guaman Poma de Ayala's autoethnographic expression, Euroimperialism's subjugating gaze is subverted by the narrator "speaking

back." Although employing the colonizer's idiom, the narrator is identified and positioned by his ability to engage with Europeans and Andeans.

By considering autoethnographic expressions as "instances in which colonised subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the coloniser's own terms," Pratt defines autoethnography as counternarrative that attempts to create a more symmetric relationship by "unravelling the histories of imperial subjugation and resistance as seen from the site of their occurrence" (*Imperial Eyes* 9). Her formulation suggests that postcolonial writers and their readers are involved in a dialogue that is articulated in the dominant mode of expression. This would imply that the illiterate, inarticulate subjects are therefore, ignorant of the counternarrative and its proscribed "unravellings." In *The New Chronicle*, the writer's chosen mode of expression excludes the illiterate subjects of the colonised culture. Gaumon Poma's text engages a dialogue between the European reader and the literate members of the writer's own social group. Although Gaumon Poma is able to articulate the position of the colonized subject because of his intimate knowledge of Andean oral traditions and conventions, he also speaks for a literate, bicultural and bilingual social group to which he belongs. While addressing the dominant Spanish culture in the colonizer's language and idiom, the writer combines Spanish and Andean cultural references in new ways to address the third cultural position of the writer's own Andean-Hispanic group. *The New Chronicle* articulates from a mixed field of cultural references, a polyvocal third cultural position and gestures to the narrative strategies employed in *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will argue that each narrator, while inscribed in a process of collecting narratives, similarly uses the polyphony of dialogues to articulate a third cultural position.

### *Lionnet: Autoethnography as Mediating Subjective Ethnicity*

Pratt's configuration of autoethnography underlines the dynamics of transculturation and echoes many of Lionnet's theoretical tenets. Although neither writer

acknowledges the other in publication, their idiosyncratic uses of autoethnography are complementary, each one with a specific focus. Both of them acknowledge that autoethnography inscribes the mediations of heterogeneous cultural fields of references. In relation to writings from the New World, Pratt assumes a binary encounter between cultures and describes the interrelation in terms of colonialization. For Pratt, the earliest instances of the New World and European encounters create conditions that allow her to offer a clearly defined definition of autoethnography which will serve as a point of reference for my study. However, her definition describes "first contact" encounters in which cultural encounters occur between separate heterogeneous cultures that are defined as monolithic and fixed identities. Determining a "first" contact situation is challenged by recognising the continual process of transformation and mutation that occurs in cultures before and after contacts. For example, forty years after the fall of the Inca Empire, colonial subjects such as Guaman Poma de Ayala have already changed their field of cultural representation and distinguished themselves from other colonized subjects by their bicultural status. Thus, the binary terms are already challenged in *The New Chronicles*, a text which expresses the colonized voice of a subject who remembers a collective past but is also a member of a social group that is bilingual and bicultural.

Pratt's formulation of autoethnography, which employs dialectical terms that refer to colonised and colonizing subjects, needs to be modified to describe cultural encounters that occur in the aftermath of colonization and slavery. Although Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography appears to fit within Pratt's configuration, her text challenges the facile demarcations of "black and white" cultural encounters and engagements by signalling the diversity of the "black community." Segments of the Afro-American population are represented as moving away from a "common" cultural experience: black intellectuals and the bourgeoisie have distanced themselves from the experiences of the rural, illiterate, Afro-American and the black oral tradition. The narrator of *Dust Tracks on a Road* claims that she is three generations removed from slavery. The narrator, as a member of a "new"

generation of Afro-Americans, is depicted as having different experiences of living in America than the "older" generations of her parents and her grandparents. Although one of the ways the dual readership of *Dust Tracks on a Road* is designated is by "race," Hurston's text challenges of the dichotomy of racism by examining the terms by which the "black community" is defined. The voice of *Dust Tracks on a Road* articulates a divergence from the black intelligentsia's views for which Hurston and her text were severely criticised by several Afro-American writers and critics.

In *Running in the Family*, the lines between colonizer and colonized are also confounded by a complex inversion of the writer's position. Although writing at the site of colonialism, the narrator-writer is a member of a family that is part of the elite class of Ceylon society. Rather than experiencing subjugation, they were part of the middle brokers for British imperialism. In both texts, the details about a "first" encounter and the origins of the burghers' or Afro-Americans' ancestry are loosely left in the obscurity of history. The communities of both texts are represented as co-existing side by side with other communities, not separated by disparate histories and great distances but rather by kinship, language, generations, race and class.

In "Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*," Lionnet understands autoethnography as "the defining of one's subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history, and ethnographical analysis" (*Autobiographical Voices* 99). Lionnet's definition focuses attention on the constructed nature of identity and the subjective nature of ethnicity. Not only does Lionnet's definition suggest that ethnicity is a mediated subjective position but it also includes writing as part of the process of defining and constructing one's ethnic identity. Thus, she appears to foreground the interrelation of autoethnography's three constitutive terms (auto-ethno-graphy) by focusing attention on how the voice of the self (auto) echoes and is echoed by the community's collective identity(ethno) and how modes of expression are used to represent self and collective. Lionnet underlines a positive if not utopian perception of writing by stating that it is



an enabling force in the creation of a plural self, one that thrives on ambiguities and multiplicity, on affirmation of differences, not on polarized and polarizing notions of identity, culture, race, or gender.

*(Autobiographical Voices 16).*

In this sense, Lionnet implies that autoethnography is a performance "from" a new and unpredictable space of reference in which the subject "weaves" a self-representation from a new cultural fabric.

### *Métissage and Transculturation*

Lionnet's project of autoethnography is underwritten by her concept of *métissage*. While signalling "the unconscious linguistic roots of racial prejudice" by playing against the word's racial connotation (in which *métis* signals a racially mixed origin), Lionnet underlines the non-racial aspect of the word's Latin origins. The Latin word *mixtus* refers to a tissue or fabric that is woven from two different materials in which cotton is usually used for the warp and flax is used for the woof. Thus, the dual reference of *métissage* serves to disrupt the dichotomy of discourse that has structured colonial relationships by recognizing another way of imagining relationships and identities outside (or inside) the categories of hegemonic language. It is an enabling metaphor of transculturation that recognizes cultural exchange as a weaving or braiding of heterogeneous cultural forms into a new weave of culture (AV 4). For Lionnet, *métissage* is

an aesthetic concept to illustrate the relationship between historical context and individual circumstances, the sociocultural construction of race and gender and traditional genre theory, the cross-linguistic mechanisms that

allow a writer to generate polysemic meanings from deceptively simple or seemingly linear narrative techniques. (29)

Converging with other efforts by Third World members engaged with economic and political survival, Lionnet's work inscribes autoethnography within a historical project in which "the oral trace of the past" is "the instrument for giving us access to our histories" (AV 5). The indeterminacy of language and the obscurity and opacity of history are no longer barriers but rather provide a space for the post-colonial writer to create a collective identity from the traces of his or her ethnic history. By perceiving *métissage* as a braiding of heterogeneous cultural components into a new cultural component, Lionnet is also recognising the improvised nature of culture in which the cultural strands "at hand" are continually being interwoven into a cultural fabric.

A collective memory and an identity that is created from the fragmented and undetermined nature of oral traces confronts a Western tradition that is informed by a philosophical movement of enlightenment in which "reason" and "clarity" are prioritised. Perceiving "indeterminacy," "obscurity," and "opacity" as the aspects of a chaotic "frontier" that must be "settled" and "civilised," western culture has historically acted by joining to its economic expansions, a scientific and cultural mission. To see the world as a *métissage*, therefore, is a political act that opposes hegemonic structures and their colonizations:

we have to articulate new visions of ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility of thought, of "clarity," in all of Western philosophy. *Métissage* is such a concept and a practice: it is the site of undecidability and indeterminacy, where solidarity

becomes the fundamental principle action against hegemonic languages. (AV  
6)

The nuance between transculturation and métissage might be considered respectively in relation to cultural interaction and braiding. Transculturation is a term employed by anthropologists "to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (*Imperial Eyes* 6). The term's reference to a process of selection and invention, suggests a conscious, predetermined aspect to transculturation. However, the interactive relationship that is suggested by autoethnography's appropriation and collaboration also implies that transculturation can be interpreted as a fusion between heterogeneous cultural elements, which can create new variations. Métissage, however, suggests that the juxtaposition of cultural strands and fragments from diverse and indeterminable provenance creates new social and cultural patterns and forms. Rather than "fuse" together, these cultural strands remain discrete, as they are interwoven into new combinations and juxtapositions that produce unpredictable and changing cultural patterns and forms.

### *History as Re-Membering*

In "Of Mangoes and Maroons: Language, History, and the Multicultural Subject of Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*," Lionnet defines "autoethnography" as,

a new genre of autobiographical text by writers whose interest and focus are not so much the retrieval of a repressed dimension of the *private* self, but the rewriting of their ethnic history, the re-creation of a *collective* identity through the performance of language. (Smith and Watson, ed.

*De/Colonizing the Subject* 334)

Lionnet distinguishes autoethnography from the traditional genre of autobiography by the emphasis on the relationship between the self and the collective. Its autobiographic voice is perceived as voicing the repressed voices of others: "the private experience echoes collective ones" (Lionnet AV 113). The post-colonial writer who is confronted by the absence of a recorded history or who is conscious of the distortions, must re-appropriate his or her ethnic history by recomposing from the oral traces of the past. In this sense, *métissage*, as a braiding of cultural forms, has led to the recovery of occulted histories by evoking a re-valorisation of the oral tradition as well as a re-evaluation of Western concepts (5).

As Lionnet points out, the re-appropriation of the past can transform a collective's understanding of its self and empower the subject with an ability to "think otherwise," that is, to envision his or her ethnic identity outside Western culture's categories of recognition. However, reappropriation can not be bounded to reiterating the negative mythic identifications of the past. A completely new interpretation of history is necessary for creating a positive ethnic identity. New interpretations create new possibilities for imagining the self and the collectivity. Speaking in the name of post-colonial subjects of the Third World, Lionnet qualifies the history project of *métissage* by stating that the "renewed connections to the past can emancipate us provided that they are used to elaborate empowering myths for living in the present and for affirming our belief in the future"(AV 7). Thus, *métissage* is a re-creation of a collective identity through the performance of language.

The disruption of the authoritative position of Western history and its hierarchical social and cultural structures of identities allows a "looseness" in the cultural strands for the post-colonial subject to weave in the oral traces of a collective. While ethnic histories and identities are composed from memory and the traces of the past, the openings written into the overarching histories allow for new interpretations and new performances. Rather than

being a barrier, history's opacity and obscurity are incubators for new interpretative life and provide a noisy wilderness of voices for pioneering collective identities. From the zone of undecidability and indeterminacy, a third space is opened that is particularly fecund for new forms of culture:

Within the conceptual apparatus that has governed our labeling of ourselves and others, a space is thus opened where multiplicity and diversity are affirmed. This space is not staked out by exclusionary practices. Rather, it functions as a sheltering site, one that nurtures our differences without encouraging us to withdraw into dead ends, without enclosing us within facile oppositional practices or sterile denunciations and disavowals.  
(Lionnet AV 5)

### *The Noisy Text*

The space that is opened within western culture's conceptual apparatus is described by Lionnet as a sheltering site that nurtures cultural difference.

The other characteristic that is ascribed to these open spaces is the noisy quality of its diversity and multiplicity. For the implied reader positioned within Western culture's field of reference, the autoethnography is a "noisy" text full of ambiguities and contradictions that are created from the mixing of heterogeneous cultural fields. Western culture's antagonism to noise and ambiguity is suggested by its valorisation of clarity and its aggressive quest for an absolute knowledge, truth or meaning. As Lionnet points out, western history consists of one long dialogue between interlocutors united in a "hunt" for the "truth" (Lionnet, AV 22). Thus, western discourse inscribes two communities (the "I" and "the Other") in a dialogue with a common goal to communicate (each one claiming, "but, you don't understand"). Since meaning and truth appear to depend on successful

communication, both participants are united in a common effort to exclude noise, that is, the extraneous elements that would impede the production and communication of meaning. Thus, the binary dialectics that are associated with western discourse work to evacuate or expel all interference of noise that comes from the space "outside" its duality, between the two dialogic positions.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the discourse privileged by Western culture's history, autoethnographic texts exist because of the "noise" from the interference between different cultural frames of reference (23). For the implied reader, situated within Western culture, the distortions or alterations of cultural components familiar to the reader's frame of reference are perceived as "noise" and thus signal the engagement of elements outside the reader's reference system. At these instances, the reader might be aware of a superimposition of different frames of cultural references, or of a convergence, in which the resulting perception of strangeness or "noise" marks a shift in the connotative content of a verbal sign.

Autoethnography is therefore a noisy place for the implied reader familiar with only one of the text's reference fields. However, noise can serve to indicate the co-presence of an underlying structure that is obscured from the reader's perception. Thus, Lionnet valorises noise and offers the reader of autoethnographic text a rule of thumb: "When a verbal sign hides another, to find the underlying structure of a given work, the most useful procedure is not to "look" for it but rather to "listen" for it, since speech acts are a matter of *parole* and not of static visual signs" (23). Confronted by voices outside one's frame of reference, the reader's points of reference appear to be shifted or dislodged when cultural components once familiar and taken for granted are perceived and represented differently.

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<sup>6</sup> I attempt to adapt Michel Serres's definition of discourse which is discussed by Lionnet. Michel Serres suggests that the space that is not included in a dichotomous discourse is personified by, or associated with, a figure that risks disrupting the communication and is constructed as the noisy "Third World," the "third man," or "woman"(AV 22-23).

This disruption provokes a loosening of cultural constructions and perceptions while creating a space for voices positioned off-center.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, autoethnography is the site of expression for readers who function in two cultural fields but often have closer affiliations with the community that is circumscribed than to the inscribing culture. For *The New Chronicle*, the manuscript addresses King Philip III of Spain but also the group of readers from the writer's social and ethnic group who have Andean ancestry and read Spanish. A dual readership is clearly signalled in *Dust Tracks on a Road* which addresses a white liberal readership and a black intelligentsia and bourgeoisie. The determination of *Running in the Family's* implied readership does not seem as apparent. However, I will argue that Ondaatje's text addresses a "metropolitan" English Canadian literary community, an intelligentsia that is constituted by readers with personal memories of their own immigration and a third readership that has remained in Sri Lanka. As Lionnet points out, the interference between two cultural frames of reference "complicate[s] both the writer's and the implied reader's relations in (and to) [Ondaatje's and Hurston's] text" (22). Autoethnography is structured by a pattern of address that allows the "subject to speak in the language of the implied reader of the dominant cultural form of expression without risk of abandoning a privileged position within the semiotic field of the mother tongue" (22). Thus, the writer is attributed the double agenda of speaking through the dominant cultural forms in order to express different and sometimes contrary cultural references. The writer lets into the Western culture's "conversation room" of talking books, the heteroglossia of another cultural frame of reference. The interface between two different cultural reference systems, each one (as Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us) filled with disparate voices of its own representational field, creates a site of "polyglossia" that Édouard Glissant characterises as "creolization." For

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<sup>7</sup> In *Running in the Family*, an example of listening for the noise of different worlds encountering each other, is signalled by the narrator who listens to the noise of the jungle sounds in the context of his Canadian kitchen (RF 113). The narrator's consciousness is also depicted as the site of encounter for the music of Beethoven in the other room and sound of rain from outside his bedroom(174).

the uninitiated, unicultural reader confronted with the autoethnographic field of interfacing language systems, a certain degree of noise may be detected from multi-layers of cultural elements. The reader is either ignorant of the interpretative life below the surface of the text or is made aware, at periodic instances, of 'something strange going on.'

Noise may be recognized as potentially meaningful but, unless guided by an initiated critic or reader, the reader risks not perceiving its signification. As a critic, Lionnet defines her role as attempting "to read the textual layers while occupying the interval where this otherness speaks" and expose the strata that would otherwise go unnoticed, masked by the "epidemic structures of address" (23). For the reader attempting to go beyond the surface structures, inspired by the distortion of the structures that are familiar, listening to noise is to recognise the polysemantic levels of autoethnography. From this perspective, noise is suggested as "full" of signification. For the multicultural, bilingual reader, the noise from the contact and engagement of heterogeneous fields of expression constitutes a coherent expression of collectivity. By juxtaposing the representations of communities and cultures in unpredictable and improvised ways, autoethnographies create new dialogue and create new forms of expression: *The New Chronicles* combines the epistolary form to represent the Adam and Eve myth cycle in Andean terms, *Dust Tracks on a Road* signifies the black oral tradition by combining autobiography with ethnography and *Running in the Family* uses the travel writing idiom to inscribe the traveler as the other.

#### *So What is Autoethnography, Anyway?*

Rather than choosing between Lionnet's or Pratt's configuration of autoethnography, I propose a composite definition for comparing *Running in the Family* with *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Pratt's definition of autoethnography delineates a corpus that is bilingual, bicultural, and written for a heterogeneous readership from a social space that is a cultural contact zone. The writing subject engages with the dominant culture's representations of his or her group by using its idioms of expression. However,



autoethnography's field of inquiry is increased by broadening the terms of bilingualism, the perimeters of culture and community, and the social spaces of contact. If language is a code of communication, then the inclusion of different modes of expression such as woodcuts, photographs, graffiti, poetry, in addition to vernacular forms and appropriations of language, creates a bilingual text. By considering the borders that define and form groups as constructed, we are also acknowledging that they are subjective. Thus, ethnicity is a subjective perception of one's position in relation to a collective which is referred to as subjective ethnicity. Lionnet's understanding of autoethnography provides an added dimension to the term by underlining the role that language plays in determining perceptions and constructing collective identities.

Salome Chasnoff's study, "Performing Teen Motherhood on Video: Autoethnography as Counterdiscourse" (1996), underlines the performance of language in the creation of identity and perception. Chasnoff describes the production of a video created and produced by six pregnant teenage mothers in 1990 at the Transitional Learning Center of Family Focus-Our Place, Evanston, Illinois. Entitled *Looking at Teen Motherhood: The Fantastic Moms Video*, their video engages with their contemporary culture's perceptions and stereotypes of teenage pregnancy. Chasnoff uses Pratt's term of autoethnography rather than autobiography to emphasize the video's focus on a group of people rather than on independent individuals (Chasnoff 110). Although she echoes Pratt's words by describing autoethnographic expressions as "counternarratives to dominant ethnographies," Chasnoff also adds that autoethnographies are

"not 'authentic,' isolated, and self-driven expressions, as autobiographies might be construed, but are purposefully contingent upon and in appropriation of the dominant language and its construction(s) for their own subversive purposes. Thus, they are essentially "bilingual" sites of resistance. (110)

Not only does Chasnoff's understanding of autoethnography include other forms of expression such as videos but she also considers the appropriation of the dominant language and its constructions as a bilingual form of expression. In addition, her study defines community and culture in relation to age and motherhood. Chasnoff's modifications open up the perimeters of autoethnography, suggest new situations and conditions and focus attention on the subjective nature of ethnicity, the performance of language in its construction, and on the position of the subject in relation to a collective identity.

Autoethnography is an autobiographical performance in which self-representation is highly self-conscious and communicated and therefore a paramount moment of identity construction(110). With regards to Lionnet's emphasis on the role of language in the perception of reality, the autobiographical performance "has the power to alter how people see themselves and how they see and are seen by others"(110). Thus, autoethnography is not intended to be a "complete revelation of personhood" but rather a "metonymic and specifically directed" expression in which the autoethnographer, as a performer, "retains agency to select and inflect her or his representation appropriate to its aim"(110). While autoethnography engages with the idioms and expectations of the dominant culture, it also performs in a manner that generates a subjective as well as a social transformation by enacting a "social process through which subjects are continually constituted as they constitute it"(109).

Through their video expression, the teenage mothers producing the video are described as engaging with their surrounding culture's stereotypes and prejudices by creating their own self-representations. However, I differ from Chasnoff's position by suggesting that they are also engaged with memories of themselves and their self-perception that positioned them before creating the video. If Chasnoff is correct in saying that the autoethnographic expression is a performance that is transformational, as I think it

is, then the subject positions of the young women working on the film are theoretically being re-positioned as they are performing their self-representation. They are, therefore, moving away from the subject positions they occupied before the video, or in other words, they are subjectively transformed as they transform their social space. Moreover, they are performing between two positions defined by language. The dialogue between their surrounding culture's perceptions of teenage mothers and the young women's memories of themselves and their experience of pregnancy serve to position and voice their new subject position.

Although Chasnoff's use of autoethnography as an autobiographical performance shifts attention to the thematic representation of collective identity and the dialogic nature of the text, she joins Pratt in considering autoethnography as the appropriation of the dominant language to create a subversive text. Contrary to this view, I propose that the autoethnographic expression appropriates the dialogue created from the representations of both heterogeneous cultures.<sup>8</sup> This would explain, in part, the thematic representation of the narrator's return trip in Ondaatje's and Hurston's text. Instead of a text engaged in a dialogue, I am proposing that autoethnography is a text that uses the voices of dialogue for the articulation of its own voice.

With regards to Ondaatje's and Hurston's text, the change of focus from the authenticity of their ethnic representations to their performance provides a means for comparing the two texts. Although *Dust Tracks on a Road* includes examples, demonstrations, explications of the black oral tradition, the black community remains infinitely porous and tacitly undefined. By considering *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an autoethnographic performance, I emphasize the fact that Hurston's text uses the "Negro ways of saying," the idioms and narratives from the black oral tradition to construct a representation of the black community. The representations in language of the black

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<sup>8</sup>In the case of the teenage mothers, the two world references would be the dominant culture's stereotype of teen mothers and their own self-perception from the time they learned that they were pregnant to the making of the video.

community are juxtaposed with representations of the dominant white culture's idiom to create the dialogue and interaction of language that define the narrator's position. The intermediary position assigned to the narrator in *Dust Tracks on a Road* is characterised by a "noisy" interference and interaction between different heterogeneous voices. Positioned within a multicultural and multilingual representational field, the narrator is represented as a performer with an increased agency compared to subjects inscribed within a single field. In *Running in the Family*, the voices of the foreigner and native, of family and other create the dialogue and interaction that also serve to define the narrator-writer's position within a multi-voiced field. As a performer searching for the missing voices of the past, the narrator is searching in a field of cultural representations that combines heterogeneous cultural elements for the terms to inscribe self and its relation to a collective or "family." However, the inscribed search is also simultaneously situating the subject position of the narrator.

Autoethnography inscribes the instances in which subjects writing at the conjuncture of two cultural fields, undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the dominant culture's representations and stereotypes. At the same time, they are also engaged with their own collective's representations. The engagement with the writing subject's ethnic group is referred to in Ondaatje's and Hurston's text by the inscription of a journey in search of a collective or personal past. The representation of a return trip to the place of origin in both texts suggests that the narrators no longer occupy the same position within their collectivity as before they left. Each narrator's journey frames the narrative in a manner that promotes the encounter and engagement with elements from two cultural fields. For both narrators, travelling is part of their autobiographical performance that transforms them as they transform it. Their performances represent self-conscious attempts to open up their fields of cultural representation as well as their cultural scripts.

As sites of encounter between different cultural fields, *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* inscribe noise and ambiguity as part of their narrator's field of

identification. By juxtaposing themes from black oral traditions and European literary traditions, Hurston's text promotes a dialogic interaction that creates a new field from which the narrator can select and inflect her self-representations. In *Running in the Family*, the representations of colonizer and colonised, are engaged in dialogue by the juxtaposition of idioms from European colonialization (travel writing) with vernacular forms of expression (graffiti-poems). Both texts create a reverberation between their heterogeneous cultural elements from which they articulate the migrating subject position of their narrator.

### 3. DUST TRACKS IN THE CONTEXT

For Elisabeth Fox-Genovese, "the classification of black women's autobiography forces careful consideration of extratextual conditions" ("My Statue, My Self" 68). The narrator of *Dust Tracks on a Road* echoes Fox-Genovese's statement while addressing an implied reader: "You will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life" (DT 1). As these two declarations suggest, Hurston's text must also be considered in relation to "extratextual" conditions. While reading Hurston's autobiography in the light of her literary career, we, the present day readers, are confronted with an enigma: "How could the recipient of two Guggenheims and the author of four novels, a dozen short stories, two musicals, two books on black mythology, dozens of essays, and a prize-winning autobiography virtually "disappear" from her readership for three full decades?" (Gates, "Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying,'" 288). While encapsulating Hurston's career, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s rhetorical question points to the changed context from which the present day reader is reading Hurston's texts. The delineation of the Afro-American women's literary tradition is one example of change. By studying the impact of Eatonville and Harlem as well as the editorial and readers' expectations on *Dust Tracks on a Road*, the necessary grounds will be provided for hearing some of the voices articulated in Hurston's text.

*From Eatonville to Harlem*

Robert Hemenway emphasizes the omnipresence of her Eatonville experience in her writings. Besides being the place of birth as described in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Eatonville is also the locus of her short stories such as "The Eatonville Anthology" (1926), *Mules and Men* (1935), and the basis for the representation of Janie Crawford's home town in Hurston's autobiographical *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). As the first incorporated all-black American municipality, Eatonville provided her with a privileged contact with the black oral tradition and a cultural reference point. Born fourteen years after the end of Reconstruction, Hurston is one of the new generation who, like the narrator of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, does not have any personal memories of slavery or of Reconstruction. Distanced from these potentially stigmatising experiences, her intimate knowledge of the forms and content of black idioms gained from her experience in Eatonville not only helped her in her later research of black folklore but also provided a creative matrix for her fictions.<sup>1</sup>

Hurston encounters another all-black community when she arrives in New York in 1925 at the height of an unprecedented period of cultural and literary productivity by Afro-Americans. Her residency at the geographical centre of a "Black Renaissance" also marks an important stage in Hurston's literary and academic careers.<sup>2</sup> As the "capital of the Negro world," New York was the cosmopolitan site for cultural encounters not only between black and white Americans but also between black Americans from different social classes and economic regions of the U.S. In addition, New York was the *carrefour* for

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<sup>1</sup> Although Hurston once claimed that she was born in 1901, most sources situate her actual birth date in 1891. The Reconstruction Period from 1865 to 1877 was over (NA 463).

<sup>2</sup> Black intellectuals at the time referred to this period as the "Negro Renaissance" or the "New Negro Renaissance." Later it would be called the "Harlem Renaissance," thus emphasizing New York as the metropolis for a national and international movement. Whether or not this period can be specified as a single discrete movement with a designated centre, the Harlem Renaissance inscribes a period of unusual cultural activity. More books by black authors were published in the United States in the decade following armistice up until the depression than in any other decade before the 1960s (Hemenway 36).

blacks from the West Indies, the Caribbean and Africa. At the same time, French-speaking Africans and Caribbean students in Paris were reading Afro-American writers and taking the first steps in the Negritude movement that "emphasised distinctly African aesthetics" while West Indian artists and writers were developing their own cultural specific literary tradition (NA 929).<sup>3</sup> To many intellectuals and artists, the eyes of the world appeared to be turned to Harlem and to the emerging Afro-American culture that drew public attention and produced new cultural forms in music (jazz, blues) and dance.

Hurston's arrival in New York coincides with the end of a massive demographic shift. In the preceding decade, one million blacks from the rural south migrated to northern cities. At the turn of the century, the industrialisation of the north increased significantly and thus created a large-scale demand for labour. For blacks from the rural south, the northern city promised employment, opportunity, and economic wealth. It also appeared to offer a reprieve from the oppressive Jim Crow laws that were legislated in the southern states after the Reconstruction era, from the repressive activities of the white supremacy group, the KKK, from the effects of a fragile agricultural economy, and from a future that seemed to offer little hope for economic advancement. On arrival in the north, however, blacks encountered other forms of bigotry and discovered the existence of the "invisible" color line. Within the context of this northern migration, Eatonville constitutes a mirror image in which black migrants moving south to a rural setting discovered the frontier conditions for economic improvement and a refuge from racism.<sup>4</sup>

If the recognition of a "black renaissance" underlines the degree of cultural activity in the Afro-American community, the period was also a formative one for Hurston's career

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<sup>3</sup> NA will be used to refer to *The Norton Anthology of Afro-American Literature* (Gates, ed.).

<sup>4</sup> *Dust Tracks on a Road* inscribes Eatonville as an all-black community with minimal interferences from the neighboring white community of Maitland. Hurston claimed that Jim Crow laws work. However, her provocative remarks suggest that instead of praising segregation, she is preferring a clear acknowledgement of the color line to the hypocritical position of northern liberalism. *Dust Tracks on a Road's* representation of Eatonville and Maitland suggests that segregation normalises racial relationships and provides a temporary safe house for each community (see footnote 6 in this chapter).



and ideology. Although, as Hemenway points out, only two paragraphs in *Dust Tracks on a Road* are consecrated to Hurston's life in New York and Harlem, the occasion of living in an all-black community that reflected a distinctive and dynamic cultural scene appeared to offer Hurston a second but larger version of the Eatonville experience of community. Her experience "up north" was instrumental in developing herself as an artist, in promoting her career as a writer, in creating connections within a patronage system, and in developing her personal aesthetics and ideological references. Her study of anthropology under the auspices of professor Franz Boas at Barnard University also influenced her literary career. As the foremost scholar of Afro-American folklore and as a well-known Afro-American writer, Hurston combined her two careers by using her research to provide material for her fiction.

Although the Harlem Renaissance was a very tangible phenomenon for a group of intellectuals, artists and writers, most Afro-Americans were not even aware such a movement existed. The increased social and geographical mobilisation diversified the Afro-American experience. The increased cultural and social distance between the black bourgeoisie and the black proletariat also corresponds to the increasing distance between the young black authors and their black bourgeois readers. In reaction to the black bourgeoisie's attempt to blend into mainstream society, young black artists and writers of the New Negro movement valorised the folklore of the poor and illiterate in their narratives. Yet, they were also conscious of their ambiguous position. Those who were the subject of their texts would not be their readers nor the ones who would buy their books. Education provided young black artists and writers access to mainstream social and cultural references but also distanced them from the Afro-American oral tradition and rural experience. Hemenway points out that of the young promising black writers, Hurston was probably the closest to the black folk heritage. Her contemporaries such as Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps were already a generation removed from the oral tradition that was part of the southern black experience.

### *Mediating Ideological Differences*

In his introduction to *The New Negro* (1925), Alain Locke emphasizes that the economic and social changes at the time of the Harlem Renaissance signified the spiritual awakening and the emergence of a racial self-affirmation. The "New Negro" was emerging from the "Old Negro" who was "a creature of moral debate and historical controversy .... perpetuated as an historical fiction [and who] .... had long become more a myth than a man" (NA 961). Thus, Hurston was considered by Locke as among the generation of young blacks claiming their place in American society. This voice of self-affirmation manifested by an outpouring of artistic creativity signified a departure from the stigmatisation of history and the "old Negro" self-image. According to Locke, not only was the world a witness to the transformation of the Negro but it was also being transformed. Humanity was to be the beneficiary of the spiritual gifts and collective wisdom of an inarticulate people that the New Negro artist would articulate.

As a "New Negro," Hurston's position as a young artist is characterised by a continual tension between "artistic" and "political" concerns. Both W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke promoted an aesthetic dimension to the Harlem Renaissance. Yet, their positions, at least in theory, were diametrically opposed poles which the New Negro artist and writer had to negotiate. In Du Bois's view, all art is propaganda and the role of the New Negro artist is to use art to advance the Negro cause (Hemenway, 39). This position was viewed by young black artists and intellectuals as stifling their creativity. Locke, on the other hand, seemed to unchain artists from racial politics by claiming that the "new motive" for young black writers "in being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art" (qtd by Hemenway, 39-40). Although an attractive alternative, this apparent declaration of artistic freedom came with a price. The New Negro artists were to be the chosen

spokespersons of the race, the "thinking few"<sup>5</sup> or the "talented tenth" who could "articulate for the inarticulate" (Hemenway, 42)). Their talents would allow them to communicate the spiritual richness of the Negro and cast their role as the conscious interpreters of the unconscious. From Locke's position, folk culture was to be the material for a "higher," more conscious art expression. What started out as a declaration of artistic liberty turned out to be an echo of W.E.B. Du Bois's position. As Hemenway points out, Locke's editorial considerations were as much political as aesthetic. His policies promoted literature that could be used to advance the Negro cause (Hemenway, 40).

A generational shift is clearly articulated between ideological positions held by W.E.B. Du Bois and the New Negro generation of Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman who insisted that to depict blacks only in terms of white oppression was in itself exploitative. However, they were also at odds with Locke's compromise. Thus, they rebelled against both patriarchal leaders of the black intelligentsia by opposing Du Bois's proposition of "art as propaganda" and by attempting to carry Locke's "art for art's sake" to its logical conclusion. As enunciated in the literary magazine, *Fire!!*, Zora Neale Hurston's, Langston Hughes's, and Wallace Thurman's aesthetic positions maintained that the artist was only responsible to his art and therefore created without regards to ideology or politics.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Locke's "The New Negro," in which he states: "The multitude perhaps feels as yet only a strange relief and a new vague urge, but the thinking few know that in the reaction the vital inner grip of prejudice has been broken" (NA 962).

<sup>6</sup> It would appear that Hurston, Hughes, Thurman and other young artists took Locke's propositions more seriously than the author of the critical essay, "The New Negro," himself. Hemenway points out that in creating the literary avant-garde magazine *Fire!!* they sought to create a true outlet for writing and attempted to distinguish their literary review from Locke's *The New Negro* while engaging in a dialogue with the patriarchal voice of *Crisis* edited by Du Bois. The declared mission of *Fire!!* in Langston Hughes words was to "burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-White ideas of the past. *épater le bourgeois* into a realisation of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists" (48). Although confronted with financial problems from the outset, they declined Locke's offers of financial assistance as a matter of principle. Ironically, the remaining stored copies of the first and only issue of *Fire!!* went up in flames.

Although the Harlem Renaissance provided Hurston with a public forum for her short stories, she was increasingly at odds with the aesthetic dimension of the Harlem Renaissance and resisted situating herself within the boundaries set out by Locke and Du Bois. Hurston's knowledge of black folklore and idiom had taught her that the popular culture did not need to be interpreted into a "higher" art form that adopted western culture's standards. She considered black folk art more than the unconscious expression by the "inarticulate." It was really a complex communication code that could protest subjection without being overt. Her desire to recover folklore and to valorise it as evidence of a healthy and rich culture challenged the black bourgeoisie's tendency to validate their position by achievement that used the dominant culture's standards. Hurston's position as a southern black woman also set her at odds with a black movement whose voice was characterised as northern, black and patriarchal. Hurston's black female protagonist in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and her narrative imagery conflicted with the male-centric urban-social realism that was deemed as socially responsible writing by black male writers and critics such as Wright and Ellison (Hemenway, 240-242). *Dust Tracks on a Road* was received by black critics as pandering to a white mainstream readership (Hemenway, 289).

### *Mediating a Dual Readership*

*Dust Tracks on a Road's* mediation of a dual readership and its editorial modifications indicate the degree of contextual complexity that Hurston confronted. By the time of *Dust Tracks on a Road's* publication, Hurston was already the author of five books that had received favourable reviews and commercial success. But at mid-career, Hurston was still dependent on patronage, grants, teaching contracts and lectures. She had not achieved economic security nor could she hope to live solely from the revenues

generated from her writing (Hemenway 275).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Hurston was acutely aware that her ability to be published relied on commercial success which depended on appealing to a white "mainstream" readership. Asked by her publishers to write her autobiography, Hurston at first refused claiming that her career was not yet over. However, she might have also anticipated the mitigated success of mediating a mainstream white readership with a readership from the Afro-American intelligentsia. Although receiving critical acclaim from the first group, black critics accused Hurston's text of being insignificant, pandering to white American expectations, and betraying the "cause" of racial equality.<sup>8</sup>

After finally agreeing to write her autobiography, Hurston's first draft of *Dust Tracks on a Road* was produced from late spring to mid-July 1941 but the revision took a year (Hemenway 275). The length of time was uncharacteristic for Hurston and may be indicative of Hurston's uneasiness with the autobiographical form and personal disclosure. Hurston is quoted in Darwin Turner's *In a Minor Key* as admitting, "I did not want to write it at all, because it is too hard to reveal one's inner self" (quoted by Hemenway 278). The delay may also suggest the degree of difficulty met by Hurston in negotiating editorial preferences. After comparing Hurston's manuscript with the published edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Robert Hemenway and Claudine Raynaud have each found that the printed version is a collaborative work that is the product of Hurston's accommodation to her publisher's demands, her self-imposed limits of self-disclosure, and her own presumptions about the reading expectations of her white publishers. The transition from

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<sup>7</sup> Although her writing was considered commercially successful, Hurston never received more than \$943.75 in royalties from any one of her books and none sold more than five thousand copies before going out of print (Hemenway 5-6).

<sup>8</sup> See Hemenway's "Ambiguities of Self, Politics of Race" in *ZNH* (273-318). Hurston's comments after the publication of *Dust Tracks on a Road* appeared to echo the non-racial position that was perceived by black critics: "I don't see life through the eyes of a Negro, but through the eyes of a person." She also addressed the patronising northern white liberals by stating that "the lot of the Negro is much better in the South than in the North" and asserted that "the Jim Crow system works." With respect to Hurston's provocative comments, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP responded that "Now is not the time for Negro writers like Zora Hurston to come out with publicity wisecracks about the South being better for the Negro than the North . . . The race is fighting a battle that may determine its status for fifty years. Those who are not for us, are against us." (quoted by Hemenway 289).

the written manuscript to the typed text to the 1942 edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road*' documents "a gradual slippage from [the writer's] original intent to the final acceptance of a public self/text mediated by editorial pressures" (Raynaud, "Muted Voices" 56).<sup>9</sup>

However, the editor-author dialogue between Hurston and her publisher also echoes the eighteenth and nineteenth century struggles between author and authenticator (editor, publisher, guarantor, patron) of Afro-American fictions, usually a narrative represented as the author's life story.<sup>10</sup>

*Dust Tracks on a Road's* manuscript is more explicit than the published text in suggesting that Hurston knew she would be read by two groups of readers. Both texts suggest a narrative strategy that intended to gain commercial success by playing to a white readership's expectations. The excised chapter "The Inside Light--Being a Salute to Friendship," lists the people, black and white, who were most susceptible to being her implied readers. The narrative addresses a white bourgeois readership by explaining the "Negro way of saying," entertaining while educating them about black Americans. Presumed to be white and liberal, they were the most susceptible to being interested in the cultural material she had gathered as an anthropologist and folklorist. A second group of readers is addressed in Hurston's comment, "Howard University's education was in the

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<sup>9</sup>See Raynaud, "Rubbing a Paragraph with a Soft Cloth? Muted Voices and Editorial Constraints in *Dust Tracks on a Road*." Raynaud's research is especially helpful in establishing that the text read by Hurston's contemporaries is not the one that she intended. The excised passages that articulate the negative effects of sexism, racism and class distinctions introduce a resistance in Hurston's text that was overlooked in 1942. Fox-Genovese considers Hurston's narrating persona as an idealised self, a statue that attempts to free itself from the stigmatisation of the socially constructed etiquette of gender, race and class. Raynaud's research suggests that Hurston's "public statue" is a collaborative rather than a private construction. The excised passages may reveal "the cracks in this mirror of self finally presented to the Other(s)," but to what extent do they reveal a persona closer to the referent?(35). In either case, the text and the manuscript both reveal a self-consciousness that is mediating a variety of self-enclosures. Contrary to Raynaud's consideration that Hurston's irony, denunciations and political opinions challenge a reading of *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an autoethnography, Hurston's manuscript reveals a more balanced representation of the two cultural references by inscribing a more critical analysis of Euro-American culture. I would argue that the recovery of the manuscript confirms *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an autoethnography: it articulates a scepticism with regards to both cultural references.

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Stepto, *From behind the Veil*. Stepto considers the textual additions to Slave Narratives that authenticate the former slave's account and legitimise it for an outside readership as also functioning as "something close to a dialogue" between author and authenticator (3-4). This battle for authorial control is especially apparent in black autobiography (45).

style and manner of how the tea was poured" (DT 129). They are represented as the educated Afro-Americans and the "thinking few" who are able to speak for an inarticulate black population. The manuscript's unpublished chapter lists members of the "black" bourgeoisie and intelligentsia such as James Hubert and Charles S. Johnson.<sup>11</sup>

### *Readership and Reception*

Despite editorial restraints or perhaps because of them, *Dust Tracks on a Road* was a commercial success and won the *Saturday Review*'s \$1000 Anisfield-Wolf Award for its contribution to the amelioration of race relationships.<sup>12</sup> But if *Dust Tracks on a Road* won Hurston critical acclaim within the mainstream press, it also earned the contempt of black critics who criticised the novel as pandering to a white readership. Hemenway refers to several critical commentaries on *Dust Tracks on a Road* of which Arna Bontemps's remark is characteristic: "Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America- she ignores them" (quoted by Hemenway 289). Harold Pearce called the book "the tragedy of a gifted, sensitive mind, eaten up by an egocentrism fed on the

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<sup>11</sup>A profile of a liberal white readership that patronised Afro-American artistic productions is listed in Hurston's manuscript under the chapter of "The Inside Light-Being a Salute to Friendship" that include "white" patrons such as Fanny Hurst, Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, Katherine Mershon and Carl Van Vechten, "Colonel" Bert Lippinscott. However, the editorial decision not to publish Hurston's list of acknowledgements suggests that the ingratiating tone of the chapter might also cover an offending message. For example, Fanny Hurst is represented as self-indulgent, emotionally unstable, "curious mixture of little girl and very sophisticated woman," who parades Hurston around in swanky hotels (DT 269). Although Carl Van Vechten and Mrs. Mason are distinguished from "those white 'friends of the Negro,'" Hurston's relationship to her patrons appears to be defined by her role as personal secretary or as an artist dependent on patronage.

Hurston also wrote for a black readership that includes W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. To James Hubert of Urban League fame, she offers "something precious from the best of my treasures" (Hurston DT 269). That something precious could be the "spiritual gift" that Alain Locke thought young black artists such as Hurston were to articulate for the world. Hurston's usage perhaps implies a second meaning intended for a black Bourgeois class. Hurston's statement, "I am a precious gift, as the unlettered Negro would say it. Stripped to my skin, that is just what I am" not only inscribes the writer as a commodity but also as the reminder of a cultural heritage that the black bourgeois class appears to have forgotten (DT 268).

<sup>12</sup>See Raynaud. The excised passages that exposed Western and European hypocrisies in international affairs in addition to reference to personal experiences of social, racial and sexual discriminations in both white and black communities would have certainly challenged the pristine image of racial and social harmonisation.

patronising admiration of the dominant white world" (qtd by Hemenway 289). Thus, the contrast between *Dust Tracks on a Road's* reception by two different communities exemplifies the challenge of addressing a dual readership. The series of magazine articles that Hurston wrote after *Dust Tracks on a Road* provided Hurston with the occasion to address her two readerships separately. Thus, Hurston's journalism during the war years indicates her dual voices more distinctly than in her autobiography. One voice promotes an integrated society and interprets the black subject to a white audience. Race issues are dealt with indirectly, with humour and wit (Hemenway 293-294). The other voice addresses a black audience and is more critical and direct about racism. The titles of two articles appearing in the *Negro Digest* suggest the tone of her second voice: "My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience" (1944) describes her personal experience of a doctor's racism. In "Crazy for this Democracy" (1945), she sceptically examines democracy.

By addressing a dual readership, the message of *Dust Tracks on a Road* appears to be mixed and contradictory. When addressing the majority of readers, Hurston's discourse articulates the demands of equality: to be judged on individual merit and not on the basis of skin colour, class or gender. But as a member of the black community, Hurston's discourse attributes special traits to a culture that has survived slavery. Although appearing to demand a universal and non-racial perspective, Hurston valorises the black oral tradition while assuming a privileged position as an inside informant. The narrator plays a dual role: she is the explicator/translator for one culture and the folklorist-collective memory for another.

The conflicting messages indicate a mediated position between cultural references and generational perceptions. Hurston's declared decision to leave in the past the memories of slavery suggests her own distanced position to that period of time. Her own experience of an autonomous all-black community contrasts with the ethos of a pathological black psyche that is operative in the novel of manners produced during the Harlem Renaissance, the social realism of the 1930s, and the cultural nationalism of the Black Arts movement



(Gates, "ZNH" *Complete Works* 288). From the perspective articulated by race leaders, black Americans are perceived as stigmatised by slavery and racism. The social conditions and injustices of the past prevent them from developing a vital self-sufficient culture and deprive them of their rightful place in U.S. society. Hurston rejects the notion that black culture was a pathological reaction to racism by refusing to be a part of a victimisation process that she called "the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a dirty deal" (Hurston, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," *NA* 1009). In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston's narrative strategy corresponds with her ideological position by not focusing on the effects of racism and sexism which risked perpetuating a self-distorting image. Instead, Hurston chose to underline the self-reliance and individuality of the black community that had survived hardships and continues to thrive with the same cultural vitality (Gates and Appiah *ZNH* 289). Folklore, "lies," gospels, blues indicate the black culture's creative and regenerative strengths. Not surprisingly, Hurston's ideological position as expressed in her writings was not appreciated by her black critics who favoured writings of "social realism." In addition, Hurston was critical of the tendency of the "articulate few" to adapt Negro cultural expressions into Euro-American idiom and standards. She considered the interpretations of traditional Afro-American music by celebrated artists such as Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes or the Fisk Jubilee singers as remarkable, but for her, these interpretations did not articulate the "real voice of my people" (*DT* 280). The "renovated spirituals" that she refers to as "holler singing," showcased a singer's technical training (*DT* 279).<sup>13</sup> However, these arranged songs did not represent the ethos of the black culture as experienced by Hurston as much as the songs

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<sup>13</sup> See also "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals." *Negro: An Anthology*, edited by Nancy Cunard (London: Wishart, 1934), 359-61. Hurston defines neo-spirituals as songs "sung by the concert artists and glee clubs" dressed up in tuxedos. The "genuine" spirituals are "Negro religious songs, sung by a group, and a group bent on expression of feelings and not sound effects. There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere."

sung in the jooks, and in the turpentine camps, or the gospels heard at Macedonia Baptist Church (DT 172).<sup>14</sup>

### *The Afro- American Women's Literary Tradition*

The early rise of Hurston's literary career, followed by the marginalization of her texts within a cultural memory and then the rediscovery in the 1970s and subsequent canonisation of her texts, have been seen by Gates as unprecedented symbols for the Afro-American women's literary tradition. As pointed out by Mary Helen Washington, Hurston's erstwhile "disappearance" from the literary scene exposes the nature of traditions as constructions that protect vested interests (Washington 32-34). However, the rediscovery of black women writers and the weaving of a new literary tradition began when black feminist critics of the 1970s began to search the fragmented past for the silenced voices of women in Afro-American literature. Their efforts to construct a literary tradition echo Hurston's anthropological search for the black oral tradition. The result has been the development of a community of black women in which writers such as Gayle Jones, Gloria Naylor and Toni Cade Bambara have linked their works to Hurston's, claiming her literary maternity. For Alice Walker, Hurston figures as a prime symbol of "racial health-- a sense of black people as complete, complex, *undiminished* human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature" (quoted by Gates "ZNH" 289).

### *The Autobiographical Statement*

The autobiographical form for *Dust Tracks on a Road* gestures to two cultural idioms of expression: the self-indulgent confessional literary tradition of the Western autobiography and the mediated public discourse of the Slave narrative. Despite her

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<sup>14</sup> See also Hemenway 53-56.

declared reticence to write her autobiography, Hurston finally chose to write in what Cudjoe considers as the quintessential literary form for signifying the Afro-American experience.<sup>15</sup> However, Cudjoe also points out that the black Afro-American women's experience differs from Afro-American men's experience in that they are subject to the double burden of sexism and racism. Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) articulates clearly this duality of experience in the 1840's when she writes in her autobiography: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, sufferings, and mortification peculiarly their own" (quoted by Cudjoe 273).

Women's voices were absent from the Afro-American autobiographical tradition until other black American women from the latter part of the twentieth century focused attention on the "lost" corpus of Afro-American women's texts (274). Hortense Spillers writes:

With the exception of a few autobiographical narratives from the nineteenth-century, the black women's realities are virtually suppressed until the period of the Harlem Renaissance and later. Essentially, the black woman as artist, as intellectual spokesperson for her own cultural apprenticeship, has not existed before, for anyone. At the source of her own symbol-making task, this community of writers confronts, therefore, a tradition of work that is quite recent, its continuities, broken and sporadic. (quoted by Washington 34)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Cudjoe. "The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American literary pursuits" and traces its heritage to the thousands of narratives written by Afro-Americans in the eighteenth century "to express their opposition to the evils of slavery and to effect their liberation" (272). In her words, the autobiographical statement "remains the quintessential (certainly the most predominant) literary genre for capturing the deep cadences of the Afro-American being, in which deepest aspirations are revealed and evolution and development under the impact of slavery and modern-day United States capitalism is traced" (272-273).

<sup>16</sup> See also Washington 32. "What we recognise is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that power has always been in the hands of men--mostly white but some black.

The absence of Afro-American women's writings from Hurston's field of reference underlines the change of context between the reception of the first publication of *Dust Tracks on a Road* and its recovery from the margins of collective memory, thirty years later. Although Alice Walker's recovery of Hurston's texts coincides with a movement to focus public attention on Afro-American women writers and an attempt to establish the literary grounds for creating a literary tradition for their texts, it also suggests that Hurston's texts are read differently by a different readership. However, as Fox-Genovese points out, Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* is closely linked to later Afro-American women's texts which mediate self-representation and the articulation of specific social conditions experienced by Afro-American women. If Afro-American men writers inscribe themselves in a culture that is only partially their own, "for black women autobiographers, the gap between the self and the language in which it is inscribed looms especially large and remains fraught with struggle" (Fox-Genovese 83).

The coherence of Afro-American women's autobiographical discourse is derived from the shared experience of a condition of "interlocking structures of gender, class and race," and through the adoption of narrative strategies for engaging with an imagined reader (Fox-Genovese 65).<sup>17</sup> Although black Afro-American women's autobiographies articulate personal and unique experience, they are grounded in the experience of slavery

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Women are the disinherited. Our 'ritual journeys,' our 'articulate voices' our 'symbolic spaces' are rarely the same as men's. Those differences and the assumption that those differences make women inherently inferior, plus the appropriation by men of power to define tradition, account for women's absence from our records."

<sup>17</sup> Fox-Genovese considers that "A literary tradition, even an autobiographical tradition, constitutes something more than a running, unmediated account of the experience of a particular group. The coherence of such a tradition consists as much in the unfolding strategies of representation as in experience itself" (65). Her delineation of the Afro-American women's autobiographical tradition mediates between a coherence that is determined by the strategy of self-representation (in which the self is a textual construct) and one that is formed by the shared experience (in which black women's writing is a "personal testimony to oppression"). She emphasizes that "it is the tension between discourse and condition, from the changing ways in which black women writers have attempted to represent a personal experience of condition through available discourses and in interaction with imagined readers" (65). Fox-Genovese's focus of attention on the ways writers represent themselves corresponds with the textual performance inscribed in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

and the literary tradition of slave narratives: "Their common denominator, which establishes their integrity as a subgenre, derives not from the general categories of race or sex, but from the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society at a specific moment over succeeding generations"(65).

In addition to the coherence of condition and representation, Fox-Genovese underlines the changing ways in which Afro-American women represent personal experience (see footnote 16). If the Afro-American autobiography can be partially characterised as a "report from the war zone," the war and the zone vary from generation to generation. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* inscribe a state of war against the conditions of slavery and assume a mission to change the social conditions and the perceptions of their implied reader. If Jacobs's and Wilson's war is against slavery, Hurston's war is against the dominant bourgeoisie culture in which she sought acceptance as an equal (Fox-Genovese 82). Others who came afterwards such as Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni and Gwendolyn Brooks found new names for the war while benefiting from an increasing readership of black women readers (82). Writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are perhaps among the first generation of black women writers to address a domestic readership of black women. Yet they are connected by a continual resistance to the racial, gender and class restrictions imposed by society.

Along with the impact of social conditions, the Afro-American literary tradition is also shaped by a changing readership. *Dust Tracks on a Road's* mediation of two potentially hostile readerships and the collaborative relationship between writer, reader and editor link Hurston's text to a body of Afro-American women's texts. All autobiographies, according to Fox-Genovese, confront the problems of writing for an implied reader. However, black women's writings are especially affected. Although apparently addressing white middle class women, neither Harriet Jacobs nor Harriet Wilson identified with their most likely reader. They explicitly stated that their reason for writing was for the edification

of a readership yet their harboured bitterness was often articulated in their rhetoric (Fox-Genovese 71). Thus, the implied reader, as conceived by the writer or represented by the editor, shapes the ways in which black writers construct the narrative of their lives (Fox-Genovese 74). A coherent literary tradition is derived from the dialogue between writer, imagined readers, and language. In the case of an insensitive, hostile or outside readership, the play between the private and public references becomes a means for the writer to control the "narrative trade" in which the reader's attention is bought with the promise of revealing the writer's racial self. However, the private domain is secured from the prying observations of the outsider either by assuming another name (as in the case of Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent) or by using hyperbole, invention, and the selective use of collective material to construct a self-representation (as in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*.)

*Dust Tracks on a Road*, as part of a tradition of Afro-American women's autobiographies, is "a cultural act of self-reading [that] is meant to reflect a public concern rather than a private act of self-indulgence"(Cudjoe 275). Both Cudjoe and Fox-Genovese go to great lengths to demonstrate that the black autobiography goes beyond the narrow considerations of the singular and personal life of the writer.<sup>18</sup> Hurston's autobiography is not an exclusive creation of a single person but voices the dialogue between the writer, the implied reader and the editor. *Dust Tracks on a Road* typifies the Afro-American women's autobiographical tradition by voicing the tensions of a collaborative text, by using the narrative self-representation for mediating public and private interests, and by sharing other formal qualities. As Cudjoe points out, three factors characterise the Afro-American autobiography: a concern for the personal statement, the importance of "parole," and the

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<sup>18</sup> See Fox-Genovese 82-83. "The account of the black woman's self cannot be divorced from the history of that self or the history of the people among whom it took shape. It also cannot be divorced from the language through which it is represented, or from the readers of other classes and races who not only lay claim to it but who have helped to shape it." Cudjoe underlines Fox-Genovese's suggestion, "The Afro-American autobiography must be seen as constructed, constituted, and formed by the specific practices and discourses of a specific people and their response to their time and place. It is not so much a unique statement of a particular individual but part of the signifying practices of an entire people" (Cudjoe 277).

emphasis on the public rather private gesture (273).<sup>19</sup> In addition, Fox-Genovese indicates the important characteristics that mark the tradition of autobiographies by Afro-American women: The myth or metaphor of the journey to selfhood (77); the special challenge of writing to an implied reader(71); the rise of racial consciousness at six or seven years old (75); the use and the abuse of literary conventions, and the subversion of the autobiographical pact that promises the reader a confessional candour (78).<sup>20</sup> *Dust Tracks on a Road* references the writing tradition of the Slave narrative, and combines and modifies some of its aspects. Not only does the narrator seem to be on a journey of self-liberation, authenticated by the inclusion of important and public personalities, but by playing a variety of roles she also writes from the peephole of her narrative hiding place, and therefore creates a self-representation that echoes Harriet Jacobs' experience of writing from the attic.

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<sup>19</sup> Cudjoe delineates a tradition that includes works such as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* (1845), *The Life of Josiah Henson* (1849), Harriet Jacobs's (Linda Brent's), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1900), Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1940), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), *The Autobiography of W.E. B. Du Bois* (1968), and George Jackson's *Soledad Brother's* (1970).

<sup>20</sup> From Jacobs's and Wilson's narrative strategies and discourse adopted in response to the social conditions of their time, Fox-Genovese derives the important characteristics of autobiographies by Afro-American women. In Fox-Genovese words, "Both use the metaphor of the journey. Both betray mixed emotions towards their probable and intended (white, female)readers. Both embrace some of the rhetoric and conventions of literary domesticity even as they challenge the reigning pieties of its discourse. Both subvert the promised candour towards those readers" ("My Statue, My Self" 78).

#### 4. RUNNING IN THE CONTEXT

In his autobiography, Michael Ondaatje refers to his place of origin as Ceylon. By using a word that conjures up a colonial past of Sri Lanka, Ondaatje is running back through time, transgressing geography, political, cultural and social contexts to the world of his parents, Philip Mervyn Ondaatje and Enid Doris Gratiaen. The world of his parents seems to hold the key to his own world yet it remains outside the reach of his knowing. *Running in the Family* inscribes the narrator's attempt to re-stage the events and "atmosphere" or social ethos of the twenties and thirties in Ceylon when his parents and their families were members of the Burgher class. He attempts to reconstruct "in words" the lost world of his childhood and of his family by gathering together fragments of documents, anecdotes, and "hearsay."

The impetus for *Running in the Family* derives from Ondaatje's declared lack of knowledge of his family and father. Ed Jewinski's biography of Ondaatje suggests that this lack is due to the separation of his parents in 1945, which limited Michael Ondaatje's contact with his father. From the age of two years old, his relation with his father was based on his father's intermittent visits and letters, and on the anecdotes about him. In addition to not knowing his father personally, Ondaatje's migration to England to rejoin his mother in 1952 at the age of nine and his subsequent migration to Canada ten years later also limit his experience of Sri Lanka as his "home" land.



The picture that is drawn in Ondaatje's autobiography of the Burgher class is one of contradictions, detachment, affluence and self-indulgence.<sup>1</sup> Its members were prodigals, in the sense of the word that refers to persons who spend money or use resources with extravagance.<sup>2</sup> As a select social circle of Ceylon society, they were aloof from other ethnic communities, but could trace their ancestry to Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch and Portuguese origins. The Burgher class, as depicted in *Running in the Family*, considered the British imperialists as snobs and racists, yet they also emulated British culture and served as middle brokers for imperial interests. Their education system was modelled after the English system, with some members of the class such as Doris Ondaatje or Mervyn Ondaatje's father behaving in ways "more British than the British." Burgher children were traditionally sent to England to "finish" their education. Their special cultural knowledge and European ancestry secured privileged social and cultural positions such as legal negotiators and administrators. By describing Philip Ondaatje's means to wealth, *Running in the Family* indicates land speculation as one of the ways Burghers profited from the plantation economy and their special knowledge of the local legal system.

*Running in the Family*, like *Dust Tracks on a Road*, selects and arranges the events and circumstances of the narrator's life and thus not only suggests a close relationship between the narrator's performance and the author's life but also reflects, in a limited and suggested manner, Sri Lanka's social and political realities. Ondaatje's autobiography implies that the dissolution of his parent's marriage was a declaration of independence on the part of Doris. *Running in the Family* not only signals their divorce as not simply one woman's separation and independence from a destructive patriarchal relationship, but also as a preface to the separation of Sri Lanka from the patriarchy of colonial imperialism. In

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<sup>1</sup>See Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri's "'Sri Lankan' Canadian Poets: The Bourgeoisie That Fled The Revolution," as well as footnote 5.

<sup>2</sup>See *Webster's College Dictionary*. The Christian frame of reference of Ondaatje's implied reader allows "prodigal" which entitles a section in *Running in the Family* to refer not only to the Burger class and the family but also to the narrator as a prodigal son.

the context of the narrative, the mother's move to divorce, like Hurston's mother's death, provokes the disruption and dispersion of the family while also echoing the disruption and dispersion of a social and ethnic class.<sup>3</sup> The period of uncertainty and destabilization of Ondaatje's family reflects the Burgher class's situation during Sri Lanka's period of social transition that followed in the wake of total independence from British support. Doris Ondaatje's move to England can be read as part of a demographic movement in which members of the Burghers class began migrating to Australia and England after the independence of Sri Lanka.<sup>4</sup> Ondaatje's narrative underlines that due to his parents' prodigality, the family wealth had dwindled in the fourteen years of marriage, forcing the Ondaatje family, like the Burgher class, to confront the changing economic conditions of their world. Jewinski's biography adds that the political and economic instability coupled with the devaluation of Sri Lanka's currency, the rise of a Sinhalese popular front, Doris's identification with English culture and tradition and the invitation and promise of support of family members established in England must have factored strongly in her decision to move her family to England in 1949. (Jewinsky 17-18 and *Running in the Family* 145).

*Running in the Family* represents Sri Lanka's complex history in which British imperialism is represented as only the most recent of a series of invasions of the island by

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<sup>3</sup>One of the principle tasks of my examination is to establish similarities between the autobiographical voice of *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family*. Hurston's persona recalls the Isis and Persephone figures from Egyptian and Greek mythology and underlines the role of the writer in carrying out her dying mother's wish. Her role as daughter and as writer is to reassemble "in word if not in flesh" the members of her immediate family and the collective memory of the Afro-American experience (see Lionnet AV 111-112). Ondaatje's return to Ceylon appears to have a similar mission of re-membering the family, although the impulse of the journey is due to the search for the "lost" father figure.

<sup>4</sup> The possible parallelism that could be constructed from the move from one patriarchy to another that includes a movement from the periphery to the centre can also be read as a move from a patriarchal structure to a community of women. Based on Jewinski's account, the move to England corresponds in part to economic advantages and cultural preferences. But Doris is also invited to immigrate to England with the assurance of support from her former husbands sisters Stephy and Enid Ondaatje. It is also interesting to note that the narrator of *Running in the Family* returns to Sri Lanka to a community of women story tellers. The voyage to the metropolis that is suggested by Doris's move to London is later reversed by Christopher's and Michael's trip "outwards" to another ex-colony of the British empire, Canada. The second migration might be considered as a journey mirroring another travel to an "other" land that echoes of the "fatherland." The "periphery" is perceived as offering new possibilities of being that are no longer available at home.

Europeans. In the early sixteenth century, the first Portuguese traders arrived who were subsequently displaced by the Dutch who were in turn supplanted by the British. British control was assumed in 1815 and a plantation economy was soon instituted. After a hundred years of rule, the British granted Ceylon self-rule and universal franchise, in 1931. *Running in the Family's* portrayal of the three generations of Ondaatjes also echoes the historical period of Sri Lanka's transition from a colony to a state.

Ondaatje's text portrays Sri Lanka as a complex religious and ethnic mosaic of communities.<sup>5</sup> Members of each community are depicted as leading highly segregated lives within their own communities. *Running in the Family* pieces together a narrative portrait of a family, class and society from fragments of history, texts and contingent references to the traces left by colonialism: the Sinhalese language, St. Thomas Boys School, the fifth century B.C. Sigiriya Graffiti, the University of Ceylon's student rising, Tamil plantation workers, British and Dutch colonial buildings, a commission on ethnic tensions.

*Running in the Family*, we are reminded by the writer's acknowledgements, is a composite of two journeys to Sri Lanka, in 1978 and 1980. The period of these journeys occurred when political tensions were about to erupt in massive violence.<sup>6</sup> Tamil separatists

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<sup>5</sup>Of a population of approximately 17 million, the Sinhalese occupy the more densely populated south-west region of the island and make up more than 74% of the population while the Ceylon Tamils represent 11-12% and live in the northern and eastern parts of the island. In addition, Indian Tamils, a distinct ethnic group representing 6-7% of the population, live in the south-central part of Sri Lanka. Other minorities include Veddas, Muslims and Burghers. Not only is Sri Lanka inhabited by several ethnic communities, it is also the site of four major religions. Most of the Sinhalese practice Buddhism, most of the Tamils practice Hinduism, while most of the Muslims practice Sunni Islam. To this religious and ethnic mosaic, Christianity was introduced by European settlers. Members of each community "tend to lead highly-segregated lives and live within their own communities, apart from in the capital, Colombo" (BBC News, "How ethnic tensions grew.").

<sup>6</sup>Recent analyses of Sri Lanka (BBC News, Online Network) attribute part of the build-up of ethnic tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese to the British colonial method of occupation which employed a "divide and rule" strategy and accorded a disproportionate number of top jobs in the civil service to Tamils. Once a Sinhalese majority was in power, politicians sought to redress the balance with discriminatory policies that were unfavourable to Tamils. By mid-70s, Tamils were calling for separation and in 1977 the Separatists won all seats in the Tamil districts. Tamil militants (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelem) began using armed violence. In 1983, full-scale violence erupted after the killing of 13 Government soldiers. Hundreds of Tamils were killed in Colombo and 100,000 fled to India. Tamil separatists were ejected from parliament and the Sri Lankan army was sent to the northern and eastern parts of the island to drive out militant groups.

were elected to parliament and the Tamil Tigers were beginning their campaign of violence. Thus, the oblique references to these ethnic tensions such as the poems of Lakdasa Wikramasinha articulate an important aspect of Ondaatje's text.<sup>7</sup> In the 1971 review of the "coffee-table book" *Island Ceylon*, Ondaatje focuses attention on the photographer's role. The review's political position suggests that Ondaatje is quite aware of the political conflicts and power struggles that were taking place in Ceylon/Sri Lanka before his two return journeys. Ondaatje criticises Rolaff Beny's photographs for ignoring political realities in favour of aesthetic concerns. If Ondaatje's book review inscribes his political awareness in more explicit terms than his autobiography, his accusation of *Island Ceylon* as pandering to a Canadian mainstream's exoticism strangely echoes Arun Mukherjee's criticism of *Running in the Family*, articulated fourteen years later (1985).<sup>8</sup>

### *Life in Canada*

Ondaatje's arrival in Canada coincides with a period in which the Canadian government took extraordinary steps to create a national identity. Ondaatje's declaration to Linda Hutcheon that he "came here [to Canada] at the age of nineteen when everyone changes, when everyone wants to remake themselves" indicates not only that his geographical displacement corresponded to a specific psychological state of mind but also that his "inner" landscape was reflected in a collective's cultural landscape (*Other Solitudes*

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<sup>7</sup> The political analysis, historical summary and chronology of events are based on BBC Online articles posted at web site, news.bbc.co.uk. The articles are, "Chronology of the Tamil conflict." (Jan. 28, 1998), "Sri Lanka: How ethnic tensions grew." (Jan. 28, 1998) and "Sri Lanka's unwinnable war." (Sept. 30, 1998). Jewinski's biography of Michael Ondaatje provides information about the Burgers and Sri Lanka as well as biographical information on the Ondaatjes offered by Kim Ondaatje. Ernest MacIntyre provides some insight about the Burgher class but gives no sources. Although the heightened tensions and signs of conflict would have been difficult not to perceive on the two trips to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980, Ondaatje's visits were prior to an all-out armed aggression although violence had begun to escalate. Overall, the armed conflict has resulted in the loss of 50,000 lives. In addition, the war costs Sri Lanka \$850 million dollars annually and mobilises 100,000 government troops. How these tensions are voiced in *Running in the Family* will be a focus of attention.

<sup>8</sup> See Ondaatje, "Every Prospect Pleases." Ondaatje demands, "Shouldn't Beny have a responsibility to anything other than beauty and technical perfection when presenting us with 'Ceylon' as he presented others with 'Canada'?... But 20th century man cannot, must not, believe just the beautiful" (18).

197). Like Hurston's experience in Harlem during the "Harlem Renaissance," the Canadian literary movement in the sixties that is perceived by Hutcheon as "the flowering of Canadian fiction" appears to offer a propitious occasion for the development of Ondaatje's literary career in addition to providing a public platform.<sup>9</sup>

Linda Hutcheon attributes the emergence of this literary renaissance to a rise of nationalist sentiment, to government support of publishers and artists, and to a general impression (presumably articulated by the "usual suspects" of national culture watchers) that Canadian culture had matured and could take its place in the international cultural arena (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 1). Despite the continued influence of realism, Canadian fiction during the seventies and the eighties increasingly reflected the international movement of postmodernism but adapted it to a distinctly "Canadian" perspective (1). Attempts to define that perspective has generated much contention. However, from Hutcheon's perspective, the characteristics ascribed to postmodernism seemed to be well suited for inscribing the ambiguities, transitions and transgressions of a national literature interested in exploring boundaries, and for articulating the voices from the cultural and political periphery.<sup>10</sup> Defined by Hutcheon as a discursive means for questioning the prevailing assumptions and axioms that keep aesthetic and cultural hierarchies in place, postmodernism "both sets up and subverts the powers and conventions of art. It uses and abuses them in order to ... question both the modernist autonomy and any realist notion of transparent reference" (2). These considerations within aesthetic perimeters were quickly extended to cultural and political realities in which the postmodern discursive challenge serves to disrupt the standing structures. Accepting an ex-centric position, postmodern writers act as "'agents provocateurs' - taking pot-shots at the culture of which they know

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<sup>9</sup> See Linda Hutcheon's "Introduction," *The Canadian Postmodern*, 1-25.

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon suggests that the conjuncture of specific cultural and social conditions made Canada particularly "ripe for the paradoxes of postmodernism . (...) Since the periphery or the margin might also describe Canada's perceived position in international terms, perhaps the postmodern ex-centric is very much a part of the identity of the nation" (*Canadian Postmodernism* 3).

they are unavoidably a part but they still wish to criticize"(3). By linking aesthetic concerns with cultural values and by considering self and collective identities as cultural constructs, postmodernism can be perceived as providing a discursive structure for positing ex-centric subjective positions, such as national, ethnic, class or gender differences within existing narrative conventions and structures. Despite certain criticisms that tend to see postmodernism as part of an expansion and consolidation of capitalism (which is the view of Frederick Jameson) or as part of a fetishism of the past in which the autonomy and self-identity of the postmodern artefact integrates it within a form of commodification (as argued by Terry Eagleton), postmodern discourse can also be viewed positively as a means of circumscribing the confrontational dialogues that can steer Post-colonial positions into dead-end foreclosures (which is a position Linda Hutcheon takes).<sup>11</sup> The reduction of discourse into binary positions is resisted by destabilizing the presumptions of the dominant discourse and by borrowing and appropriating existing conventions to form new ones. Thus, the valorisation of the margin as a frontier and a place of possibilities by postmodern writers and critics such as Robert Kroetsch, is a means of inserting the marginalised voice within the discourse of a dominant culture.

### *Reading* Running in the Family

Pointing out Ondaatje's fascination with borders and his propensity to cross them, Hutcheon recognizes in *Running in the Family* all of the markings of the Canadian postmodern novel:

*Running in the Family* is, perhaps, the culmination of Ondaatje's challenge to boundaries, at least thus far [1985]: its fragmented collection of memories, research, poems, and photographs works to reconstruct a more

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<sup>11</sup> See Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson's discussion of postmodernism and Marxism in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* 3rd edition, especially pages 186-187.

immediate and personal history--the writer's own. But to write of anyone's history is to order, to give form to disparate facts: in short, to fictionalize. Ondaatje's self-consciousness about this process is part of the very subject of the postmodernist work. (Hutcheon, "Running in the Family," 302)

For Smaro Kamboureli, *Running in the Family* is not even a "bona fide book." If reading is determined in part by the text's prescribed generic references, Ondaatje's text defies readings within a single response by stylistically running from one genre to another ("The Alphabet of the Self" 79). The challenge of positioning Ondaatje's text within a genre is reflected by a plethora of different critical receptions attempting to categorise *Running in the Family* as either an autobiography, a travel account, an ethnic writing or a memoir. In her words, *Running in the Family* fits neither and all of these generic categories. From out of this generic confusion, Kamboureli identifies a narrative strategy that attempts to defer meaning by the slippage between the terms of generic definition. The indeterminacy of the text maintains a separation between the author and writer: the "author and writer in *Running in the Family* do not merge with each other, do not lead to a textual apotheosis of thematic and structural wholeness" (80-81). Kamboureli argues that *Running in the Family* is not an autobiography but uses autobiography as a rhetorical trope to reveal "the subject's double desire to see the self verified by writing and to imitate writing" (81). I would add that the separation of author and narrator-writer may also increase the textual space for articulating a collective's voice. Confirmation of this hypothesis will be a key factor in determining *Running in the Family* as an autoethnography.

As a poet turning to fiction, Ondaatje transgressed the generic borders of history, biography, and fiction in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970) and *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976). The narrative transgressions that extend the literary genre to include history and biography are recognized by Hutcheon as culminating in *Running in*

*the Family* (302). If writing history is to narrate, then the postmodernist writer inscribes history by self-consciously selecting and interpreting the chaos of events and by imposing meaning and order (302). The straddling of the borders between the conventions of history and those of fiction results in what Hutcheon labels as "historiographic metafiction," in which

the fictionality of the referents is repeatedly stressed by the text's self-reflexivity, while their historical nature is also constantly being implied. (...) In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje adds one further element to this linguistic tension between art and life by making the history a personal one, subject to his own fictionalizing memory as well as that of others. (Hutcheon, "Running in the Family," 305-306)

As Hutcheon points out, *Running in the Family* thematizes the textuality of the past which is inscribed in books, records, and memories. It is therefore written within a poststructural as well as postmodern context (303). However, the total separation of art from life and the suspicion of all word-world references that has incited poststructuralism to consider everything as text is abandoned in *Running in the Family*. In the words of Hutcheon, *Running in the Family* "seek[s] to represent a reality outside literature, and one of the connections between life and art is the performing narrator, whose act of searching and ordering forms part of the narrative itself" (303). The other link is the reader who follows the narrator's self-reflexive inscription of historical and fictional fragments and participates in the productive process of interpreting.

Ed Jewinsky's biography of Michael Ondaatje, like Robert Hemenway's biography of Zora Neale Hurston life, inscribes a writer's life in a historicized narrative and attempts to identify the events and conditions that were most influential to the writer's career. Both biographies are written within the convention of historiography. Although Ondaatje's



autobiography also refers to biographic information and echoes a social and political context, the narrative also mediates the conventions of fiction. *Running in the Family* constructs a self-portrait that gestures to a subjective reality as well as a reality outside the text. The narrator's performance of searching and interpreting is part of the narrative that duplicates the reader's own efforts and thus connects the inside of the text to the outside. (See Hutcheon, "*Running in the Family*" 303). By re-organising fragments of documents and hearsay, by combining fiction with fact, it creates an imagined and empathetic understanding of what might have been. Ondaatje's text attempts to speak for (or speak of) the one(s) that is (are) absent. In the absence of the object, a historiographic metafiction is constructed from the fragments and traces in memory. The reader participates along with the narrator in its construction.

Thus, *Running in the Family* can be considered as Lionnet considers Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*, not as an autobiography but as self-portrait (Lionnet, AV 98). It inscribes Ondaatje's search to discover a world and a father he had never known, to recover a childhood that had "slipped past" and to satisfy a "perverse and solitary desire ... to touch in words" his family who are "frozen in opera" (RF 16). Ondaatje's autobiography is a textual construct that also points outside the text to the productive process of history making. Although father and son cannot meet any more except in the text, the narrative's attempt to enunciate the unheard, to know the unknowable, and to "touch" that which will always be out of reach, substitutes the impossible meeting in body with the meeting in words. By echoing the voices of a collective in the narrator's performance, *Running in the Family* performs in a manner similar to *Dust Tracks on a Road*, as an autoethnography.

### *Comparing Texts*

In comparing *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* as autoethnographic texts, the productive process of each text must be considered in order to

respond to questions such as, what ethnic group is the writer speaking from? who is the implied reader? how were the social and cultural conditions mediated? As mentioned before, there are numerous problems confronting such a comparison. Four decades separate the publication of *Running in the Family* from *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In addition, contextual differences such as the conditions of publication and readership are evident. Hurston's and Ondaatje's gender, social, cultural, national, ethnic and racial backgrounds are also major differences. However, decisive similarities between *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* do exist in the narrative form and style. Hurston and Ondaatje use and abuse the conventions of autobiography to inscribe the subjective position of a writer returning to the past to discover or recover connections with his or her origins. Both authors employ the performance of a narrating persona who constructs a reading from past fragments. Both texts explore the multiple communities of belonging: family, class, ethnicity, gender. The two texts transgress the reader's expectations created by the genre of autobiography. They play with and betray the tacit agreement between author and reader that assumes either a transparency between the author and the narrating subject or at least a sincere effort to create a historically accurate textual reference to the author. In other words, the autobiography may be subjective but it is expected to inscribe the author's intimate knowledge and reveal subjective truths. In the texts by Hurston and Ondaatje, each autobiography is constituted as a collection of narratives in which the lines separating fiction and non-fiction, myth and historical fact are ambiguous. The historical and the biographical facts that are traditionally associated with the autobiographical genre are posited in an unauthorizing manner as "hearsay." The subjective "truths" embedded in the texts seem to be as much concerned with the problems of writing a history (in the case of *Running in the Family*) or the validation of black oral culture (in the case of *Dust Tracks on a Road*) as with the portraying of a single personality. From the fragments remembered and the absences of the forgotten, from the process of searching and writing, both texts construct a portrait of self and a collective.

But unlike the fictive historical narratives that use the authority of history to lend credibility to an imagined possibility, the fictional aspects of *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* fill in voids and silences of history and ultimately provide a subjective reality and understanding of history.

Rather than establishing a transparency between text and author, Françoise Lionnet's reading of *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an autoethnographic text underscores the relationship between the voice of the narrator and a collective heteroglossia: "The self-portrait Hurston draws in *Dust Tracks* is an anamnesis: not self-contemplation but a painstaking effort to be the voice of that occluded past, to fill the void of collective memory" (118). Thus, to fill in the collective amnesia, to be the voice of an occluded past is to speak for a silent or ignored collective, represent its ethnicity and give its ethnography to an outside community. While creating an autobiographical performance, the narrator's voice in *Dust Tracks on a Road* also articulates the diversity of the Afro-American experience. Is a similar reading of Ondaatje's text possible?

Arun Mukherjee's criticism (1985) accuses Ondaatje of pandering to mainstream culture's expectations and assumptions while ignoring the social and political context of Sri Lanka and denying his own immigrant experience as a Sri Lankan-Canadian writer.<sup>12</sup> Her criticism challenges the reading of Ondaatje's text as autoethnography by questioning its authenticity as ethnic writing. Ondaatje's employment and manipulation of several literary

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<sup>12</sup> Mukherjee writes, "Ondaatje's success has been won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada ... Ondaatje's work [*Running in the Family*] gives few indications of his Sri Lankan background. Ondaatje, coming from a Third World country with a colonial past, does not write about his otherness. Nor does he write about the otherness of the Canadian society for him. Intriguingly enough, there is no trauma of uprooting evident in his poetry; nor is there a need for redefinition in a new context; the subjects that pre-occupy so many immigrant writers. One scours his poetry in vain for any cultural baggage he might have brought with him when he came to Canada. Also absent are memories of familiar places, people and things" ( See Mukherjee, 50-51).

Mukherjee's article has generated responses by many critics. Michael Thorpe, for instance, criticizes her narrow vision as "a sterile anti-racist racism" ("Turned Inside Out: South Asian Writing in Canada." *ARIEL* 16). Although referring to western critics such as Roland Barthe and Raymond Williams, her response to the universalising tendencies of western criticism do raise important questions about employing exoticism and commodifying otherness that must be addressed when examining *Running in the Family*. Her concerns are echoed by Sangeeta Ray who underlines the problematics of "naming of the father" by using women subalterns (see Ray, 38-58).

genres that are associated with Western tradition and colonisation are suggested as signs of betrayal. *Running in the Family* is accused of being a hybridisation of genres that plays a chameleon's game of hiding political truths within stylised conventions. Arun Mukherjee's criticism of *Running in the Family* implies that ethnic writing must be confrontational as well as didactic and thus remain "marginal" until the desired rectification of conditions is attained. For Mukherjee, *Running in the Family* exploits ethnicity as a form of exoticism, mutes the contextual social and political realities and receives favourable reception by "passing" as ethnic or as "marginal" writing while satisfying the expectations of "mainstream" reading public. Her qualms about *Running in the Family* articulate some of the conflicting issues between postmodern and post-colonial ideologies but they also signal the problems of determining ethnic authenticity and autoethnographic writing. Is autoethnography ethnic writing? Does the term "autoethnography" only apply to texts voicing an oppressed class of an ethnic group? Or, can it articulate the voices of a very small but rich ethnic group such as the Burgher class?

Mukherjee's criticism interestingly duplicates the criticism of Hurston's texts by her contemporary black male Afro-American critics, suggesting a common reaction shared by members of different groups. In both cases, the success of the writer with an "outside," "mainstream" or "dominant" readership suggests a betrayal and challenges the writer's position as spokesperson. *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* represent experiences and realities to a readership that is outside the inscribed community. Thus, Ondaatje and Hurston are perceived by outside readers as having the intimate and authentic knowledge necessary for translating ethnic experience and its cultural codes into the reader's frame of reference. For the inside members, Hurston's and Ondaatje's success is attributed to satisfying the voyeuristic demands of realism and truth of the outside reader, by exploiting the exoticism of their subject. These negative criticisms signal an improper representation, a betrayal that transgresses the expectations of the "in group" critic.

Moreover, the voices of dissension also demonstrate a diversity that is ignored by "outside" observers or erased by their labels of categorisation.

The contentions of authenticity by members of each writer's ethnic group, and both writers' adoption of a narrative strategy that attempts to insert the texts within a dominating discourse, indicate that the writers of *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, each in their own way, appear to articulate a third, "other" position. In both texts, the narrator's position articulates a dual-consciousness that was first articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois as the feeling of "one's twoness"<sup>13</sup> but which can be expanded to include a multi-consciousness with reference to the many communities that inscribe self-identity such as those of gender, class, region, profession, generation. An examination of the contextual aspects of *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* reveals that these texts do more than articulate an "inside" experience to an "outside" reader. I propose to consider both texts as using the codes and references of both groups to articulate a new and composite position: the writer in transit between multiple cultural references.

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<sup>13</sup> In *The Soul of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois characterises the Negro experience in terms of a "double-consciousness" in which one lives with a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. *One ever feels his twoness* [my italics],- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world.(5)."

## 5. THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC VOICE OF *DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD*

*Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family* appear to be narratives of self-discovery in which both narrators are depicted as searching their origins by remembering or returning to the place of their origin. Both narratives describe the performance of individuals attempting to re-present their family and community of origin. Although the entities for self-enclosure, family and community, are represented as defined and discrete groups, the narrators signal the imagined aspect of collectivity, the porosity of a community's enclosures and the mobile nature of subjectivity. My study to examine the autoethnographic relationship between self-identity and a collective identity will begin with a study of *Dust Tracks on a Road's* representation of Eatonville as an ethnic community. The narrative's representation of the Afro-American collectivity in history, language and structures of perception (which includes ethnography) will be examined as an autobiographical performance in which the narrative is not so much a self-discovery as a self-representation.

Mary Louise Pratt's and Françoise Lionnet's definitions of autoethnography are both retained for my study. They provide a dual perspective, and therefore, a dialogue, for examining the dynamics of ethnic group formation and the mediation of a subjective ethnicity. From the perspective offered by Pratt's definition, *Dust Tracks on a Road* is a writing from the contact zone between Afro-American and Euro-American cultural frames of reference. Thus, attention is focused on the cultural context and the narrative form. With reference to Lionnet's definition, *Dust Tracks on a Road* is considered as a text mediating

(one's) subjective ethnicity through language, history, and ethnographic analysis.

Attention is centered on the inscribed performance of the narrator's self-representation. My study proposes to represent *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an autoethnography in which the dialogue (and reverberation) between two cultural fields of reference creates and maintains the performance of the narrator's subject position. Dependant on maintaining a dialogue between cultural and ethnic differences, the narrative promotes a reading that is, like the inscribed subject position, situated within a *métissage* of references and thus attempts to circumvent the structure of a binary counter-discourse.

### *Imagining the Community*

As Werner Sollors points out, the word "ethnicity" is of modern origin and first served as a substitute for "race" after the rise of fascism (Sollors, *Theories* x). Since then, the relationship between race and ethnicity has stimulated much discussion and study. Few contemporary scholars have, in Sollors opinion, been able to sustain a completely dualistic perspective or abstain from considering the interactive relationship between racial and ethnic groups (Sollors, xxxiv). By considering "race" as an aspect of ethnicity, we acknowledge a complex relationship between the perception of phenotypal traits and culturally constructed categories and thus recognize that in some societies "race" becomes a factor in group formation.

Described as a "pure Negro town" (Hurstons, *DT* 6), Eatonville resembles an "ethnic island" in which "race" proves to be "a sorting device" (Devereux 391) that encloses people within a fixed and delimited field of communication and interaction. The text differentiates Eatonville from other "Negro" communities in terms of "originality" and "racial purity" by describing the town as the first incorporated, self-governing all-Negro community in America (*DT* 1).

In anthropological literature, the term "ethnic group" conventionally designates a population that (1) is largely biologically self-perpetuating, (2) shares cultural values, (3)

makes up a field of communication and interaction,(4) and is distinguishable from another population (Barth 296). Although resembling anthropology's conventional "ethnicity as an island" definition, R.A. Schermerhorn's definition of an ethnic group emphasizes the subjective aspect of group formation. Schermerhorn defines an ethnic group as,

a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic events defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypal features, or any combination of these. A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the group. (cited by Sollors, *Theories* , xii)

Eatonville's inhabitants are portrayed as sharing a commonality of experience that includes being "black," living in the South during and after the Reconstruction period, participating in a movement of relocation to a frontier setting, and inhabiting the same municipality. In addition, people of Eatonville are represented as sharing a tradition of cultural practices and an oral tradition. However, along with a commonality of experience, the community's identification is also dependent on a dissociative relationship with other groups of people. The cultural, racial and social boundaries that enclose Eatonville and are coterminous with its municipal demarcations are represented as inextricably linked with the neighboring all-white community of Maitland.

As Winfried Siemerling points out, a fundamental aspect of ethnicity is constituted from a "longing for the maintenance of identities and cultural boundaries circumscribed by traditions of the past" (Siemerling, *Writing Ethnicity* 2). However, "ethnicity is also a relational identification that requires more than one identity in order to exist"(2). Thus, the



tendency for populations to create "islands" of peoplehood, autonomous and isolated, is coupled with the phenomenon of ethnic groups not existing alone but always in relation to an "other," either perceived at the territorial limits of the community or imagined otherwise. Although Eatonville is separated from Maitland by race, history, class and traditions, their relationship implies an interdependence between the two communities.

The double-face of ethnicity that is marked by "conflicting desires and investments"(2) also reflects the visage of nationalism. With reference to ethnicity, nationalism also articulates a desire to create and maintain "identities and cultural boundaries circumscribed by traditions of the past" and inscribes a movement towards autonomy, separatism and exclusion of others (*Writing Ethnicity* 2). History has inscribed numerous reminders of the destructive consequences that result from a collective's co-alignment of national and ethnic affiliations that tend towards an autonomous, separate and exclusive state. However, "a reference in self-identification to another culture (of which it is nonetheless a part) distinguishes the perspective of ethnicity from projects that have moved toward autonomy or forms of separatism and nationalism" (Siemerling 2). However, in Benedict Anderson's definition, the nation is seen as "an imagined political community.... [in which] the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (Anderson 7). In considering the similarities between the dynamics of nationalism and ethnicity, Anderson's definition of the nation as "an imagined political community" appears relevant to the discussion of ethnicity, particularly by the role imagination plays in constructing concepts of self and community. Ethnicity and nationalism may be differentiated by the degree of their proclaimed sovereignty but they

both appear to be imagined concepts of community conceived as a "horizontal comradeship" for which people have been willing to die (Anderson 7).<sup>1</sup>

By appropriating Anderson's definition of the nation, ethnicity can be defined as an "imagined community" because "the members ... will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). By perceiving communities as imagined, the boundaries defining groups of people appear less stable. The awareness of the invented or constructed aspect of ethnicity (and nationalism) challenges assumptions of descent and originality and accommodates changes and diversity. As Siemerling notes, the recognition of ethnicity as constituted from cross-cultural references also recognises a continual process of emergence:

every notion of ethnicity implies an act of "ethnogenesis," a communal identification whose emergence is marked, at least for those who wish to be thus affiliated, precisely as different from the previous, seemingly unmitigated cultural identity to which it refers--yet which it cannot but name, remember, and construct from its new perspective. Because such acts of ethnogenesis imply simultaneous identification by both contrast and cross-cultural implication, they are marked by hybridity and invention. (*Writing Ethnicity 2*)

Eatonville is described in *Dust Tracks on a Road* as a community with "a sense of peoplehood" that shares a common experience of the de-stabilised conditions that occurred during the period of reconstruction in the Southern United States. The narrator's parents, along with the other co-founders of Eatonville, are described as settling in a frontier

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<sup>1</sup>See Anderson's discussion of the nation as an imagined political community that is also imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (*Imagined Communities*, p. 6-7).

wilderness, seeking to better their economic condition, some with memories of slavery, all with the experience of the Reconstruction period. The narrator articulates the voice of a generation that lives outside the experience of slavery and the Reconstruction period. In relating the history of Eatonville, the narrator re-members an Afro-American community that is traced to the obscured period of slavery and the times anterior. She inscribes a new subjective position that "cannot but name, remember, and construct from its new perspective."

Eatonville's delimited space and racial enclosure creates an island-like condition that fosters a sense of community based on actual encounters with all of the community. It is represented as an extended family in which a common field of communication, knowing everyone and being recognised by everyone in the community is still possible. By being born into the community, the narrator is automatically a member and learns the codes and traditions of her cultural group. However, the narrative also describes the narrator's movement away from her known world toward the horizon of the unknown.<sup>2</sup> With each step, the narrator gradually pieces together a map of the world that extends beyond the known limits to an imagined community.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The narrator claims to have learned how to walk due to an unexpected encounter with a sow that had crossed the threshold of the family house. After moving vertically from a sitting to a standing position, the narrator gains horizontal mobility. The moment is described as the beginning of her wanderings (*DT* 22). The original moment is one of many listed in the text that occurs at the frontier of two worlds. Thus, as Toni Morrison states, the most interesting things happen "at the property line, at the edge, just at the fence" (Morrison 69). The narrator historicizes her life by identifying a series of beginning moments. The walking episode is an example of self-knowledge reported by others about herself indicating the role of the community in creating self-identity. The incident also inscribes the moment of her first wandering in terms of a geographical displacement. After ascribing the moment to unusual circumstances, the narrator summarises the many attempts to naturalise her tendency to wander. Her wanderlust is attributed to curiosity, to "travel dust," to an inherited trait, or to learned behaviour. The narrator's learning to walk echoes another beginning that is initiated after the death of her mother which begins a geographical, temporal and spiritual displacement. The narrator states "that hour [her mother's death] began my wanderings. Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit" (*DT* 67). The displacement appears to be the result of a paradigm shift, provoked by the disruption of the narrator's known world.

<sup>3</sup> A map is a representation of the world's form and corresponds figuratively with the narrator's statement: "I find that I know a great deal about form, but little or nothing about the mysteries I sought as a child" (*DT* 226).

*Racial Consciousness: Creating and Maintaining Boundaries.*

Although, the Eatonville's boundaries are inscribed as legally and physically defined, the subjective boundaries of community are suggested as being learned and maintained in subtle ways: "Nobody didn't tell 'em, but they heard"(25). The narrator's education about her place in the community is promptly indicated by her father and grandmother. The community's patriarchal laws are depicted as being enforced by a combination of sanctions that include threats of violence and of internalisation of duty. John Hurston threatens to beat his wife should she decide to leave the home boundary. She is also confined to home grounds by the internalisation of her parental role. The narrator's inclusion of these verbal threats indicate the system of coercion that supports Eatonville's social structure as well as the conditions of her childhood(10).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the perpetuation of the community's boundaries is suggested by the mother's edict that confines the narrator and her siblings within the familial borders, commanding them to play with other children only on home grounds within the confines of the family fences.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* traces the development of the narrator's racial consciousness in a series of "hintings." Her father, who is angered by Zora's desire to have a white riding horse, tells her, "you ain't white," as if to say that to have ambitions is to be white(29). An old white man tells Zora, "don't be a nigger" and signals not only that lying is bad but lying and being a "nigger" are linked qualities of character(30). Zora's grandmother predicts that the narrator's brazen behaviour among whites will result in a lynching (34) and thus indicates the risks incurred by individuals who do not stay in their

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<sup>4</sup>*Dust Tracks on a Road* constructs and deconstructs the patriarchal structures of Eatonville. With the exception of Uncle Jim's attempts to beat Aunt Caroline, the violence by men against women in Eatonville is inscribed as mostly verbal threats which in most cases appear ineffective or negated by the counter-measures employed by women. Lucy Potts takes the intellectual high end of any argument with her husband and verbally whips him. Aunt Caroline is reputed to give as much as she receives in fights with her husband. *Dust Tracks on a Road* attributes an active role to women and a passive role to men. In addition, the violence by women against women is inscribed with particular cruelty. For example, the narrator confesses to attacking her stepmother with the intent to "kill dead;" Aunt Caroline violently runs her rivals out of town; and Big Sweet's physical and verbal prowess echoes the reputed force of the Dahomen women warriors, by wielding the word as well as the knife with cutting and often fatal results.

socially designated place. Zora also risks a whipping from her mother if she should be caught riding with white travelers passing on the road outside the family grounds. These messages underline the social interdiction of inter-cultural mixing. The narrative's didactic self-revelation includes an awakening to the negative aspects of her racial identity that occurs after her mother's death. While staying in Jacksonville, the narrator confronts the black (w)hole of a community that reflects a non-personal image of the narrator. The narrator leaves Eatonville as the community's "Zora" and came back from Jacksonville as a "colored girl"(70).

If *Dust Tracks on a Road* appears to describe the boundaries of Eatonville and its all-Negro community, the text also deconstructs the terms of enclosure. Although the narrator professes that the purpose of her story is to dwell neither on the past crimes and terrible conditions of slavery nor on the difficulties and injustices of the Reconstruction period (229), the history of Eatonville draws attention to "race" as a social construction. The reference to the wars between Indians and white southern planters provides an occasion for the text to challenge the determinacy of ethnic and racial groups. The slaves carried off by Indians were considered tribal members if they spoke the tribe's language. The Indian's open policy of inclusion is represented as a contentious issue for white plantation owners who claim that "one drop of black blood" determined a person as "Negro." Whereas linguistic criteria aided Indian interests in resisting the encroachment by white planters, the exclusivity of a "pure white" racial classification supported the aristocratic hierarchy of plantation society by ensuring a large "non-white" labour force. Significantly, the historical example that highlights the politics of inclusion and/or exclusion reflects each group's specific interests while the slave's community interests are not voiced.

In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, the term "Negro" that is used to identify the residents of Eatonville is suggested as a category without a center or an absolute referent. In a chapter left out of the first edition ("My People, My People") the inquiry by the narrator, "who are

**My People?"(237) is answered by a string of signifiers that endlessly defer the referent: "Negroes, Colored folks, Aunt Hagar's chillun, the Brother in Black, Race men and women and My people." The multitude of names referring to a category constituted by a variety of skin colours, ranging from "Walter White" to "damn black," prompts the narrator to declare that "you can't just point out my people by the skin color"(237). The identification of "My People" is also complicated by the text's inscription of individuals "passing" racial barriers. The text inscribes a situation in which the defining physical traits necessary for classification are no longer perceivable. With "quasi"-logical reasoning, the narrator theorises that if you can't tell who are "My People" by skin color, then the determining factor must be a code of behaviour. However, in a strategic narrative twist of perspective, the mechanism of "passing" is reversed by referring to James Weldon Johnson, the author of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and leader of the NAACP, as a "white" person trying to pass for "black." Feigning the authoritative presence of a self-appointed "race" specialist, the narrator "astutely" remarks that despite his physical appearance, Johnson does not qualify as "colored" because he does not exhibit the essentialized cultural traits and behaviours: he proceeds instead of parades when he walks; he smiles instead of grins; and although he has been trying, "he can't even Uncle Tom" (*DT* 238). After cataloguing the characteristic traits and behaviours necessary for identifying "My People," the text shifts the grounds of perception by concluding with a counter-proposition that suggests, "the Negro doesn't really exist ... what we have been talking about ... could be the shade patterns of something else thrown on the ground-- other folks, seen in shadow" (244).**

### *Crossing the Boundaries*

Along with the deconstruction of some of the community boundaries, *Dust Tracks on a Road* also challenges the barriers of demarcation, categorisation and enclosure by describing the narrator's displacement from her home and family. As a child, the narrator

did not question the limits that defined her community. However, the narrator's attraction towards the limits of community is portrayed as part of her character. From her parents, she "inherits" personality traits such as wanderlust and ambition. However, her self-representations are also depicted as a unique, unpredictable mix of inherited traits: as an anthropologist, she travels "horizontally" within the Afro-American oral culture as did her father within the black community as a carpenter and a preacher. She moves "vertically" as a writer and researcher and thus realises her mother's encouragement to "jump at the sun." Her mobility is continued by her autobiographical self-representation that are created from the different roles that she enacts.

The narrator's development of a critical distance is joined with a new sense of scepticism about the fixed boundaries of self-enclosure and an increased awareness of the collective's contradictory messages. For example, members of her community would proclaim race pride and solidarity on some occasions but in other instances tell stories about the "Monkey" or refer to blacks in derogatory terms (181). In addition to the contradictions of the community's discourse, an unofficial process of education is referred to in *Dust Tracks on a Road* in which the narrator begins to learn about herself and her social identity by comparing herself with others and by over-hearing the stories that the community tells itself. From her encounters with the world outside, with people and books, and from the stories told on Joe Clark's porch, the narrator is provided a variety of narratives from which to create her own self-representation.

The capacity of the narrator to attain a critical distance from her world is linked to an ability to detect and compare differences between different worlds. The encounter between two worlds is represented in *Dust Tracks on a Road* as occurring at the gatepost that separates the home from white travellers. At this liminal position, the narrator observes them passing by the front of her home, and occasionally invites herself into their world. Other incidents of contact between different cultures occur when people or books from the outside world pass into the community's enclosure. The unexpected befriending by an old

white man and the patronage of two white women visiting the Eatonville school suggest the rumours of an another world. These intra-community contacts and engagements are described as shifting the narrator's perception of her world and her position in it.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* emphasizes the capacity of reading to create new affiliations with an imagined community as well as its ability to cross community lines.<sup>5</sup> The appearance of the Bible and a medical reference book, inside the Hurston's household and exemplifies the permeability of the community's borders to "print-capitalism." However, the mobility and pervasiveness of printed material does not necessarily insure that the intended results will be produced. Reading is also represented as an unpredictable process in which the personal interpretation and use of narratives can not be completely controlled. Books of Norse and Greek mythology (39), the Bible, and the family's Doctor Book (40) are all appropriate used by the narrator in ways that deviate from their intended usage and meaning. Reading's subversiveness is suggested by its ability to transgress community lines and create a sense of double-consciousness. The "mis-reading" as a counternarrative is suggested by the narrator's declaration, "the early reading gave me great anguish . . . . My soul was with the gods and my body in the village"(41).

#### *Dual Readerships and Dual Voices*

A comparison between *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and Hurston's manuscripts emphasizes the text as a site mediating between the voices of the writer, the editor and two readerships. Claudine Raynaud suggests that the more self-reflexive and polemical voices of the excised passages challenge the reading of *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an autoethnography ("Rubbing a Paragraph" 35). Although the excised texts may create the appearance of a more "personalised" and self-affirmative text as Raynaud suggests, they do not disrupt the echoing between the voices of the individual and the collective which she

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<sup>5</sup>See Benedict Anderson discussion of the influence of books, newspaper and print-capitalism on the construction of imagined communities (*Imagined Communities* 36).



identifies as an essential quality of "auto-ethno-graphy." I would argue, instead, that the inclusion of the texts creates a more balanced "echoing" between the collectives by addressing each with equal amounts of scepticism, therefore, articulating an intermediary position.

For example, the chapter "Seeing the World as It Is" would have ended *Dust Tracks on a Road* with a polemic that clearly addresses a dual readership. However, it was removed from the published text for reasons I presume to be editorial and related to the text's controversial content. The excised text's iconoclastic discourse attempts to disrupt the grounds supporting national and racial pride. While the narrator describes "the world as a family of Hurstons," and therefore, declares herself as "human and part of humanity," she also employs the Afro-American trope of "signifying" to describe the inconsistencies between humanity's ideals and practices (*DT* 254). Her invective "reading" of humanity's family tree addresses both white and black readers and begins by describing the universal community as a group of individuals, each one with self-interests. Religion, democracy, and capitalism support the institutions that create and maintain exploitation, slavery and imperialism: "Democracy, like religion, never was designed to make our profits less"(259). On one hand, Western culture's self-perception as the bastion of Christianity is undercut by its history of violence: "The Occident has never been christianized and never will be . . . Instead of being proud to turn the other cheek, our boast is beating the other fellow to the punch." (256). On the other hand, the narrator also portrays Afro-Africans as worshipping violence with as much fervour, and suggests that, "Joe Louis rates a Cardinal's hat."(256).

By pointing to the world's history of conquest, the narrator describes "justice" and "democracy" as relative values that depend on the position from which they are perceived. Although the Dahomans conquered and massacred other African tribes, they were subsequently conquered by French troops who, in turn, were invaded by the Germans (257). Although most aggressions seem to be perpetrated by western nations, "the darker races . . . have acted in the same way when they had a chance and will act that way again,

comes the break" (261). While attacking the foundation of Black Pride, which "instead of . . . being a virtue, it is a sapping vice" (249), the narrator also underlines the notions of white supremacy that underpins American and European imperialism and colonialism. Like the southern planter's bride who thought kissing was "too good for niggers," Nations are described as aggressively defending their exclusive commercial advantages (260). Thus, in its critical view of American foreign policy, the narrator claims that, "We . . . consider machine gun bullets good laxatives for heathens who get constipated with toxic ideas about a country of their own"(259).

However, in another excised chapter, "Concert," the narrator describes the theatrical production *The Great Day* as part of a project to reveal the "real voice of my people," (280) to "present Negro singing in a natural way" (283), to show theatre critics "the natural Negro" and to "point Negro expression back towards the saner ground of our own unbelievable originality" (285). The narrator's attempt to essentialize and valorise Negro expression contradicts her previously stated criticism of ethnic pride and consciousness as well as her praise of universality and individualism.

*Dust Tracks on a Road's* discourse of race construction also uses the context of its contemporary world to address a "bilingual" message to two different readers. The text sets the discourses of racial pride and Jim Crowism against Hitler's discourse of Aryan superiority, which suggests the implications of valorising, to the exclusion of others, one's race, black or white. "Race Pride and Race Consciousness ... [are] not only fallacious , but a thing to be abhorred" (250). The Pan-African discourse is countered by the text's disclosure of African history in which Africans massacred and enslaved Africans for trade: "that did away with the folklore that I had been brought up on" (165).

*Dust Tracks on a Road* describes the impact of Jim Crowism in terms that address simultaneously her two readerships. The narrative does not denounce the segregational legislation which prevents Afro-Americans from sharing the same train coach car with "whites" but instead describes the embarrassing experience of an educated Negro

bourgeoisie forced to sit with poor rural "black brothers" (see *DT* 178). The narrative strategy has the multiple advantage of addressing a white American readership without alienating it with a confrontational and familiar discourse while signalling the heterogeneity of the Afro-American community. Simultaneously, the narrative addresses efforts of an Afro-American bourgeoisie to integrate into a white community. The center of perspective is deftly moved from a white American mainstream to an Afro-American perspective.

The confrontational aspects of "Seeing the World As It Is" may be the reason for the editorial decision to remove the chapter from the printed edition. Compared to its manuscript, the expurgated edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road* addresses the Euro-American readership about issues of racism in more oblique and muted terms. They are distanced from the writer's radical views by a text that is constructed with editorial collaboration.<sup>6</sup> However, elsewhere in the text, the narrative circumvents the editorial restrictions by inverting the terms of discourse and thus formulating the phenomenon of racism through a critique of the Black supremacy perspective. With a didactic message stating that "skins [are] no measure of what was inside people" and claiming no "special blessings on the basis of race," a counter-discourse is articulated that can address either community. The narrative strategy effectively uses the implied reader's own belief system that includes "equality," "individualism" and "freedom" to underline *Dust Tracks on a Road's* ideological position(191-192).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The implied reader, as designated by the editors, would be the liberal white reader presumably sympathetic to and familiar with the issues of racial prejudice. Lippincott, as Hurston's editor, suggested that she profit from her reputation and write her autobiography. The suggestion indicates that he counted on readers with a liberal and humanistic viewpoint. However, the exclusion of the chapter "Seeing the World as It Is," which was intended by Hurston to conclude *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Hemenway), suggests that Hurston's critique of racism and nationalism might have been too controversial for a readership immersed in a wartime nationalistic fervour and rhetoric.

<sup>7</sup> Although in themselves a subject, the concepts of individualism, liberty and freedom are loaded with conflicting interests. While challenging the valorisation of a person's skin pigmentation, *Dust Tracks on a Road* does valorise a person's natural talent or abilities: "If you haven't got it, you can't show it. If you got it, you can't hide it" (192). The narrator's statement precludes considering contextual factors that can hinder a person's chance of self-actualisation, a decision that may reflect the narrative's stated intention not to contribute to a psychology of victimisation by discussing the problems of slavery. Despite the narrative's declared turning the back on history, references to race constructions, slavery and an African history are

*Shifting the Borders: Defining Community by Style of Discourse*

In large measure, Hurston's narrative strategy performs what Benedict Anderson theorises: "communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined"(6). Thus, Eatonville's representation as a community is created by attributing to it a style of discourse and a narrative tradition. Although the town is described as a family-like village apparently defined by stabilised boundaries and codified relationships, Eatonville is also "discovered" by the narrator to share an oral tradition and cultural practices with other Afro-American communities. By re-membering and re-creating in discourse the village-like sense of community, *Dust Tracks on a Road* attempts to "touch" the past with words:

I drove back to New Orleans to my work in a glowing aura. I felt the warm embrace of kin and kind for the first time since the night after my mother's funeral. . . . But now, that was all over. We could touch each other in the spirit if not in the flesh. (DT 142)

Lionnet signals the resonance between the narrator's memory of her mother's death and the dispersion of her family and "the collective memory of her people's separation from Africa-as-mother and their ineluctable diaspora" (AV 112). The narrative's "passage" in the middle of *Dust Tracks on a Road* echoes the historic "middle passage" journey travelled by displaced African families from the "Motherland" (in Africa) to the "Otherland" (of the New World). By assuming her role as anthropologist and returning back to Eatonville, the narrator appears to mark an end to her personal wanderings. However, the re-unification of her family is described in terms of a subjective communion in which the role of language is emphasised. A spiritual unification replaces an actual return to another time when the

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omnipresent in the text. The renunciation appears to be a narrative strategy for circumventing a vast subject that had already been elaborated in other texts.

family was together and her mother was alive. Instead of obtaining a resting place, the narrator is kept in continual movement as she continues to search for fragments of the past and the disparate islands of Black oral traditions. If the "spirit" is a metaphor for "memory," and words re-member the past, then *Dust Tracks on a Road* is a site of encounter between the present and past, between representations of self and community. However, the narrator's narrative performance in *Dust Tracks on a Road* also points to the way words construct and re-construct self-identities in new and different ways.

Thus, the restrictive enclosures of "race" that have been used to represent the Afro-American community are disrupted by the narrative's shift of terms used for self and collective inscription. While working in a Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire company, the narrator is depicted as creating a new "space" to perform her self-representation. She is portrayed as shifting the terms of self-representation from "race" to the "style" of her discourse. Although she is represented as the only Negro maid in the theatre company, the narrator emphasizes that her special status is due to her vernacular language. In the company of northerners (not capitalised in the text), the narrator identifies herself as a Southerner (capitalised in the text) "with the map of Dixie" on her tongue (104). Her racial difference is downplayed.<sup>8</sup>

The shifting of community descriptors is not without some intriguing paradoxes. The narrator identifies herself with a South, conventionally perceived as a socially hostile "home" for black women. Perhaps even more puzzling, the narrator seems to ignore the distinction between southern whites with southern blacks by referring to a "southern" language. The narrator confounds the racial boundaries by attributing the art of "specifying" and compounded name calling ("Mullet-headed, mule-eared") as a common feature among southerners, black or white, "raised on simile and invective" (104). These language characteristics are shared by "the stratum of the southern population," that is "not

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<sup>8</sup> Also suggested but not mentioned is the dubious side to the narrator's special treatment. As the company's pet mascot, she also serves as the butt of racial and sexual gags.

given to book-reading" but instead "take their comparisons right out of the barn yard and the woods"(104-105). Southerners "can tell you in a simile exactly how you walk and smell. They furnish a picture gallery of your ancestors, and a notion of what your children will be like"(104). The narrator's distinctive language corresponds to the rhetorical trope of "specifying" which is attributed to a southern, poor, rural, and illiterate speaker. Thus, she defines her language as a vernacular in which it is "native and indigenous (as opposed to *literary or learned* )," native of a place and distinctive of a class and serves as self-identification (Webster's dictionary).<sup>9</sup> Reference to a "racial" form of expression, that is, as a "Negro expression" is conspicuously not mentioned by the narrator.

However, the Afro-American community's position appears to be echoed by the South's position, which politically and linguistically lives in the house of the Union after the Civil War. Southern English is transformed into a vernacular which appears attractively "foreign" to the theatre company's "standardised" English.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the narrative points to the class prejudices that are associated with it within the Negro community. The educated Negro bourgeoisie identifies the performance of "specifying" and "broadcasting" with the poor, illiterate, Negro living in the southern rural areas of the United States.

The vernacular, like ethnicity and race, therefore, is represented in Hurston's text as a grouping device that differentiates as well as identifies certain communities. However, the text also implies that the vernacular, used in this manner, can be reduced to a symbol of

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<sup>9</sup> The "bookless and underprivileged" black speaker is accredited with the rhetorical skills of specifying that can "outclass" the educated Negro in public and "[has] no equal in America"(DT 178). Specifying, also described as "giving a 'reading'," "putting your foot up' on a person" "playing in the family" or "playing the dozens" is defined by the text as a discourse used to "low-rate your enemy's ancestors down to the present moment for reference, and then go into his [or her] future as far as your imagination leads you." In addition, the oral performance of specifying establishes the speaker's presence, courage and confidence (153).

<sup>10</sup>See Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* p.2-3. Although the vernacular refers to the "arts native or peculiar to a particular country or locale,"(2). the term also refers to a relational quality that is suggested by the Latin word "verna," "slave born in the master's household."(Webster's Collegiate Dictionary).

ethnicity that essentializes a collective identity. The Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire company suggests a reference to a "melting pot" community in which "thirty-odd people made up of all classes and races" are described as living together, sharing the same conditions and being united as a family in a common project (117).<sup>11</sup> The narrator's position within the company is marked by numerous gender and race "gags" that characterise much of the dialogue among members. As a part of the interpersonal dialogue, racial and sexual gags and jokes are instrumental in grouping members into a cohesive "family." Although they have purportedly taught the narrator to be less sensitive to racial or sexual slurs, they also efface personalities and individual differences. Idiosyncrasies are replaced with broad ethnic characterisations. The ritualised exchange among members casts each one into a stereotypical ethnic role or gender model.<sup>12</sup> For the northern audience, the black

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<sup>11</sup>See *DT* 116-118. The travelling opera company is portrayed as a representation of an "idealised" American society, or "American Dream," by its regroupment of persons representing ethnic groups and classes. The company's link with train travel also refers to the American history of migration and the promise of social mobility for individuals. The railway system served to expand and consolidate an American society during the nineteenth century, ushering in the era of industrialisation and modernisation. Also significant is its role in nationalising culture by increasing communications. However, the opera company's Gilbert and Sullivan repertory, seems to signal the continued influence of British culture and suggests a continued cultural colonisation in which the cultural references of another culture are re-produced. The singers in the opera are described as "not originators, but followers of originators" (*DT* 117). The narrative also suggests that under the opera company's cohesive and egalitarian appearance suggesting an American "Melting Pot" is a social class structure in which "cast" members are classified by voice and gender rather than by race: baritone, tenor (male), soprano and contralto (female) (104, 116). A position in the hierarchy of a star system that ranged from lead roles to bit performers and chorus was not only a reflection of the individual's natural abilities but also their level of formal education. In addition, members of the "family" are inscribed as motivated by self-interests. Personal ambitions of singing lead one day (106) suggests a competitive, individualistic system. Positions within the company are temporary, occupied by hopeful singers awaiting their chance to perform on Broadway. The stage company appears to mix a hierarchal social system with forms of democratisation, creating a social system in which a singer can aspire to attain the level of his or her ability.

<sup>12</sup>Miss M\_ and other members of the cast reveal details of their private lives to the narrator in a context that suggests that the narrator's personal differences are effaced by her role and ethnic identity. The confidence which other characters accord the narrator suggests that her marginalised social position creates an "invisible" and non-offensive position. When the narrator worked as a manicurist, politicians confided stories to her because she was considered a "safe" listener: no one would accord credence to a black woman should she talk. However, while working with the repertoire company, the narrator is herself playing the role of a young, naive and virgin maid suggesting that her private self is concealed behind a mask. The narrator's mask is also used by the other members to voice their opinions on the stage company's call board (107).

vernacular, identified as "Southern," has been emptied of any cultural specificity and transformed into part of the narrator's role as the other for the northern cast members.

Although valorising an Afro-American oral-tradition, *Dust Tracks on a Road* also challenges the use of the vernacular as a means of ethnic representation. As an anthropologist, the narrator's role appears to be that of an informant for a white academic world, acting as a spy inside the Afro-American community.<sup>13</sup> Her function, in relation to an academic institution, is to transcribe the oral traditions and folklore that risk being forgotten or lost in the progressive assimilation of Western civilisation's narratives and idioms of expressions. As a member of the examined community, however, the narrator's position would be to resist transposing her community into a "pretty plaything"<sup>14</sup> in the service of another culture's interests. From this perspective, the inscription of her community's tales, the compilation of its idioms, the study of its vernacular grammar and its semantic structure are represented as part of the process of cataloguing and representing the Afro-American oral-tradition within the Western culture's idiom. By reducing a community to its vernacular, cultural stereotypes are created which impact on the relationship between groups and eventually the ethnic group's own self-definition. The narrative potentially mirrors and reproduces a situation in which a black audience attending a minstrel show is presented with a representation of the Afro-American culture that is created by others outside the black community or by members pandering to a Euro-American audience's expectations: "the shadow becomes the man"(DT 280). For similar reasons, *Dust Tracks on a Road* criticises the Negro spiritual on the concert stage or

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<sup>13</sup>See Franz Boas preface to *Mules and Men*. In introducing Hurston's anthology of "Negro folk-lore," Boas describes the "great merit" of Hurston's research as adding to "our knowledge of the Negro." By entering into "the homely life of the southern Negro as one of them" she is "able to penetrate through the affected demeanour by which the Negro excludes the White observer effectively from participating in his true inner life." In *Running in the Family*, the narrator is also described as entering within a group but using his relatives as informants as an outside ethnographer would try to do.

<sup>14</sup>See DT 104 and 107. The narrator qualifies her reception within the repertoire company as a "new play-pretty." The special status is not refused, and the narrator plays to the "petting" by assuming the role expected of her, the young, naive, and easy to shock virgin.



shows that represent Negro life through characterisations created by and serving another culture's interests. These representations are not, in her words, a "real Negro expression" (since they do not correspond to her experience).

*Dust Tracks on a Road* appears to create a characterisation of the Afro-American community in which attention is focused on the oral tradition that has emerged from the black experience in the Americas. However, the narrative's transcription of folklore and the vernacular must be examined in terms other than as part of an ethnographic documentation. The narrator inscribes Big Sweet's "signifying" performance in the manner and style of an ethnography by explaining the conventions of specifying (DT 153). She does not reproduce Big Sweet's performance but records the commentary of a witness (who is her landlady). However, the most important aspect of specifying as identified by the narrator is a subjective quality which is related to the "faith in your personal courage and confidence in your arsenal"(153). Defying ethnography's textual representation, "specifying" engages the improvisational skill of the performer and can only be evaluated by an observer who is present at the moment of performance and who has intimate knowledge of the material used in the performance. Although the words, the circumstances, the sentence structure and idioms can be transcribed, the essential element of specifying, according to the narrator's description, is its performance quality as a speech act that expresses the speaker's subjective presence. Rather than an authentic representation of an Afro-American community, *Dust Tracks on a Road* provides a representation of the writer by a discursive performance that appropriates aspects from the Afro-American oral tradition.

The narrator's emphasis on the improvisational quality of the oral performance challenges the authority of the ethnographer to represent an oral-tradition based culture. The most important qualification for the ethnographer is listed by the narrator as knowing the material so well that he or she can determine whether the informant is improvising. However, the requirement appears to be a self-authenticating reference to the narrator's

position as an Afro-American: to know the material intimately, one must be a member. However, she also warns the future ethnographer that the Negroes are the most unreliable of subjects because they are the subjects most prone to improvise. In another self-reflexive reference, the narrator undermines the foundation of her reliability as informant: as a Negro informant she is not to be trusted (164). The narrative exposes in its elaborate strategy the incompleteness of the ethnography by pointing out that the narrator's ethnography "misses" the essential feature of the Afro-American oral tradition, that is, the improvisational ability of the speakers to use cultural materials in new ways. At the same time, the narrator is inscribed in a performance of self-representation that improvises on cultural materials.

The problem of defining "My People" and the potential traps of categorising its identity within the ethnographic conventions is circumvented by a narrative that emphasizes the performance of language rather than the specific content of the oral tradition. The connection between style of discourse and self-representation is suggested in the narrative's description of church revival meetings in which new converts are called to testify to their Christian experience and spiritual awakening by telling their visions. Although the visions are known to all, the new members are judged by the manner in which they improvise and invent upon traditional forms (220). In another self-reflexive reference, the text inscribes the encounter of Big Sweet, the master of "specifying" and the "lying session," with the anthropologist who collects "lies" in the tradition of ethnography. Big Sweet's description of the narrator, "You ain't like me," suggests a reversal of positions in which the subject describes the ethnographer. The text, however, signals its own narrative performance. *Dust Tracks on a Road* inscribes the Afro-American oral tradition not to preserve or document it although Hurston includes and adapts stories she gathered as an ethnographer. Instead, it creates a presence of a community and a self-representation that is suggested by the use of language.

*Re-Inscribing Community in History*

*Dust Tracks on a Road's* autobiographical performance inscribes the historical project to trace the narrator's origins that begins with "My Birthplace." The narrator positions herself in relation to a distant past by comparing herself to the "dead-seeming cold rocks" (*DT* 1). The suggested traces of the beginnings of a material world are juxtaposed with the implied existence of a narrative life that must be interpreted from traces. Thus, like the rocks, her history must be interpreted from the time and place of her origins.<sup>15</sup> As the narrator traces her origin to a series of origins, we, the readers, are included in a performance that articulates a variety of voices of the past, from Precambrian rocks, to Maitland, to Eatonville. History is constructed not only in a linear sense of time but is expanded in breadth to include and connect disparate events such as the traces of Seminoles, Spanish, French, Africans, Americans.

For instance, the circumstances of the narrator's own birth are echoed by the unexpected emergence of Eatonville which "was not in the original plan. It is a by-product of something else" (*DT* 1). The narrator is represented not only as not in the original plans of her father but also as unexpectedly "grannied" by an old white man. The narrator states that "to interpret the incidents and directions of my life" one must know "something about the time and place where I came from" (*DT* 1). So, with reference to a vague "something else," the narrative begins tracing the events contributing to the creation of Eatonville, by beginning with the history of Maitland and eventually linking Eatonville's history to an Afro-American history. Significantly, the narrator does not suggest that one can interpret who she is since to try would be an attempt to fix her as a character or a type of person.

The history of Eatonville begins with a construction and subversion of Maitland's history. Maitland is described as appearing out of the "original hush" of time, from the emptied Florida forests. The construction of Maitland corresponds to the construction of a

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<sup>15</sup> The metaphor implying a similarity with the narrator suggests that appearance covers memories and histories. Like the rock, the narrator and Afro-Americans have a history that appears silent, inaccessible and therefore must be interpreted.

historical narrative that for clarity, empties time and place to inscribe a self-originating narrative. However, *Dust Tracks on a Road* breaks the "silence" of the "original hush" and undercuts the "founding myth" that begins, "It all started with three white men ..." (DT 1-3). Hurston's text signals the existence of other people before the arrival to the three founding fathers of Maitland. By pointing to the remains of the old forts built against the Indians and the connection of the town's name with Colonel Maitland, who commanded the forts, the narrative exposes the silence of the forest (and of history) as filled with the voices and traces.

History is suggested as part myth and part hearsay, interpreted from the traces of the past, a site where a subversion is created from mis-readings. Although the narrative appears to depict a harmonious relationship between Eatonville and Maitland, an attentive reading of the text suggests another history in which the Afro-American population is represented as the necessary cheap labour force for clearing the land (DT 3). They settled as a community away from the "white" population of Maitland in the poorer section and less desirable site: "hastily built shacks around St. John's Hole" (4). A "mis-reading" suggests that the incorporation of Eatonville occurred for less than charitable reasons. Maitland's ready assistance for displacing the town's black population appears self-interested in light of the white citizens' surprise of having a black mayor and sheriff after the municipal election. With a subtle selection of details, the text suggest that Eatonville was invented as a racial island in an attempt to segregate blacks and whites. However, the incorporation of Eatonville also provides the occasion for creating a "safe house" for its inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to a "melting pot" model of cultural integration, Eatonville's segregated status is represented as contributing to the development of an autonomous community. The enclosure of Eatonville as a Negro town creates the dynamics of "island

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<sup>16</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt's "Art of the Contact Zone," p.40. Pratt points out that the "safe house" of one's own community provides self-affirming reflections and underlines the challenge of mediating a position in the contact zone. Before risking contact with the other, one must be sure to cast one's own shadow.

ethnicity" that creates a delimited field of social and cultural contact and increases the frequency of exchanges among members, which promotes a sense of community and develops a self-affirming environment.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* relativises the "official history" by parodying the European discovery of the New World. Maitland's foundational history suggests references to the Colombian discovery of the New World or the Pilgrim's landing at Plymouth rock. The text evokes associations of the three white founders of Maitland with the "founding fathers" of the United States: Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. The reference to founding fathers is enhanced by the narrator's comment that she is the only Negro not claiming to be a descendent of "Washington, Jefferson or any governor of a Southern state" (DT 191). Thus, *Dust Tracks on a Road* inscribes Eatonville as an inverted image of the Euro-American history. The "rugged white pioneer" and the "Far-West" frontier town, images intrinsic to the American cultural myth, are inverted by the narrative's description of black Afro-American characters in a "Far-South" location. Eatonville is represented at the convergence of historical, social, and economic circumstances, rather than as a supportive element in Maitland's history. However, in the inversion, *Dust Tracks on a Road* also inscribes Eatonville as a mirror reflecting Maitland, as community informing and enclosing the narrator within the boundaries of a single set of references. Outside references suggested by periodic encounters with white travellers, Norse myths, books, are represented as infrequent transgressions.

Eatonville appears to develop as a mono-historical community in which its citizens not only share common experiences in remembering certain stories but also share in forgetting other stories and experiences.<sup>17</sup> A sense of communality is achieved by the inhabitants of Eatonville by "forgetting" certain aspects of their past. Zora's parents

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<sup>17</sup>Benedict Anderson cites Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?," "Or l'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses" (qtd. by Anderson, 6). The essential element of a nation is not only that all the people have much in common but that they have also forgotten much (my translation).

"forget" their social and cultural differences before arriving in Eatonville. By insisting that her children stay on home grounds, Lucy Potts "forgets" her own migrancy that brought her to Eatonville. Eatonville's women "forget" the unfaithfulness of their husbands or the beatings that they had received. The men of Eatonville are able to "forget" the conditions of slavery and the brutal consequences of racism until one of them is threaten by outside aggressions (*DT* 187). Although they are able to speak of their fellow citizens as "niggers," Eatonville's men group together after assuming that Jim Watson was being whipped by white men. The imagined circumstances and vivid details with which the Eatonville men describe the whipping suggest that the "forgotten" is not distant in the collective memory.

### *The Ethnographic Project*

After including Eatonville within Maitland's history, then shifting attention from Maitland to Eatonville, the narrator has "set the stage" for her own entrance. But the narrator has been performing all along, as the weaver of narratives who connects people and places together. Her role is echoed in her anthropological project. In regards to Eatonville's collective amnesia and her own distance from the time of slavery, the narrator's ethnographic project challenges the town's basis of communality and her own self-representation by re-tracing Eatonville's connections to the past. The process involves searching the strands of an oral tradition from the community's field of representation in an attempt to re-imagine the self and community. Through the process of re-remembering, dialogue is created between present and past, or more specifically, between the present and its concept of the past. The traditions from different sites of the South and the Caribbean are woven into an imagined community that the narrator can touch in words. Yet, re-integration, in the sense of being associated to one community, is deferred. Like the narrative's structure which is constituted in a process of re-weaving and re-construction, the narrator's self-representation retains a mobile subject position that is suggested by her performance as a travelling anthropologist, musical director, apprentice priestess.

By adopting the conventions of ethnography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* engages with the Euro-American cultural forms of knowing by inscribing the Afro-American collectivity within the conventions and idioms of the dominant culture's field of reference. The titles listed in the table of content indicate that ethnographic tropes are used to structure the narrative. The text's ethnographic structure promotes the mobility of the narrator's position and provides the frame for describing the encounter and engagement between different fields of representation, such as those used by black workers in saw mill camps and those used by anthropology. *Dust Tracks on a Road*, as the site of encounter juxtaposes heterogeneous forms of expression and elements in new combinations to provide a new ground for interpretation. Conventions and references from anthropology and black oral tradition serve to position the narrator simultaneously as ethnographer and subject. Yet the narrator's affiliation with the Afro-American oral-based community does not imply that she is fixed within it. As her refusal to remain as a Hoodoo priestess suggests, she self-consciously decides to remain mobile. However, the elements that she employs are used in contexts and ways for which they were not originally intended. They are the elements that make her performance possible while being transformed by that performance. At the same time, the narrator's subject position is within a field of performance that is composed of dialogue. The audition and acknowledgement of the voices as noise or as intelligible voices depends on the narrator's familiarity with the voices and her position in relation to them. Familiar with both positions, the narrator of *Dust Tracks on a Road* is a performer and a "free" auditor positioned in relation to the black oral tradition and the academic literate community, a narrator who re-presents herself in the act of appropriation.

Just as anthropology provides the narrator with a "spy-glass" for viewing herself and her community, *Dust Tracks on a Road's* ethnographic structure provides the narrative with a dual perspective for inscribing community and self.<sup>18</sup> The ethnographic project is

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<sup>18</sup>In Hurston's anthology of Afro-American folklore, *Mules and Men*, "Negroism" and the associated folklore and cultural narratives are inscribed as restricting the writer's perception of herself. "it fitted like a tight chemise" (*MM* 3). The "spy-glass of Anthropology" provided a subjective distance and a different

represented not only as a means to stand off and look at one's cultural garments as others see them but actually to put them on in new ways. By her autobiographic performance as ethnographer, the narrator loosens the "tight chemise" and combines it with other cultural references to fit the narrator's interwoven subjective ethnicity. The ethnographic aspect of the narrative is not only part of an inscribed process to re-collect the dispersed fragments of a collective memory gathered from the "cultural islands" of oral traditions but provides the narrative space for representing the narrator's subject position. By creating a variety of roles for the narrator to play such as a maid, a secretary, a gangster's mistress and an acolyte hoodoo priestess, the narrative articulates the narrator's and her community's presence.

In addition to articulating the voices of the Afro-American past, *Dust Tracks on a Road* also engages with Euro-American culture's interpretation of other cultures. Conventionally, anthropology assumed ethnography to be neutral and objective inscription. In the belief that the "redemptive" otherness of "primitive" cultures must be salvaged from the invasion and assimilation by a modern Western world, ethnography provided the textual representations that could prevent the loss of "otherness."<sup>19</sup> Situated at the point of contact between two cultures, the field worker and, by extension, ethnography, were granted an authoritative voice.

*Dust Tracks on a Road* challenges the ability of anthropology to inscribe culture as well as the pretensions of autobiography to be a transparent self-representation.<sup>20</sup> Although the narrator is trained as an objective observer, she is also a member of the culture that she studies. From her liminal position, the narrator has a close-up view of the distorting effects of transcribing an oral-aural based culture and experience into textual

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perspective for perceiving Eatonville's culture and its narratives. "I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment"(3).

<sup>19</sup>See James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) pp. 98-121(112).

<sup>20</sup>See Lionnet's discussion, *Autobiographical Voices* 99-100.



representations. *Dust Tracks on a Road* undercuts the text's appearance of autobiographical and ethnographical transparency with a duplicitous discourse that continually places in doubt the absoluteness of any declaration or affirmation. Despite repeated definitions of "my people," a final determination remains unfixed. Although the narrator distances herself from professions of racial pride and communal identity, claiming not to have the "herding instinct" and demanding to be judged as an individual and not as a Negro, her ethnographic project valorizes a Afro-American oral tradition.

By suggesting that *Dust Tracks on a Road* is an allegory of an ethnographical project (AV 100) Françoise Lionnet underlines the dual role of Hurston's autobiography which does not "gesture toward a coherent tradition of introspective self-examination with soul-baring displays of emotion"(101). Instead, *Dust Tracks on a Road* transcends the expected notions of transparent references that immobilise culture and the concept of self within texts and artefacts. As a text/performance, *Dust Tracks on a Road* attempts to transmit "cultural forms that are not static and inviolable but dynamically involved in the creation of culture itself"(102). Although Lionnet describes the narrator's self-portrait as an anamnesis, that is, "a painstaking effort to be the voice of that occluded past, to fill the void of collective memory"(118), reading *Dust Tracks on a Road* as an autobiographical performance suggests that the relationship between self and the collective is part of a self-representation in which the voices of several collectives position the narrator's subjective ethnicity.

### *Summary*

Considering autoethnography as an autobiographical performance suggests that *Dust Tracks on a Road* articulates, from the dialogue between two heterogeneous fields of representation, a new field for representing both self and community. As the agent weaving this new field together, the narrator is represented by her performance as a narrating observer and observed subject. Therefore, the narrator's subject position is sustained by

maintaining a dialogue between heterogeneous cultural representations in which the narrator remains outside the dialogue's binary structure. Instead, the narrator is represented as the collector of narratives, the interested listener of the other's cultural reference.

*Dust Tracks on a Road's* dual readership, a white liberal readership and a black intelligentsia, each one with a radically different perspective for reading, are concurrently addressed by a dual discourse. With two readerships, each one potentially hostile and apt to misread the text as a betrayal of its expectations, the narrative obscures personal details and avoids classifying the black Afro-American experience. While "specifying" or "broadcasting" to a black bourgeoisie that has distanced itself from the Afro-American oral tradition, the narrative also "featherbeds" the white outside reader with the resemblance of an autobiography that is a cathartic confession and offers intimate revelations about the black community. Rather than validate one discourse and reject the other, the narrative keeps both discourses "alive" to maintain a subjective mobility and a "double vision." The mobility of the narrator's subject position is signalled by a capacity to move from one field of reference to another, from one community to another in a narrative that forestalls a definitive objectification and categorisation. The narrator's opting for an intermediary position appears to be part of a narrative strategy to keep her options open for imagining self and community. Whereas Du Bois articulates in *The Souls of Black Folks* the desire of the "American Negro...to merge into a better and truer self"(5), Hurston creates in *Dust Tracks on a Road* a narrative performance that refers to a subject position in continual flux. From the dialogue generated by the narrative's engagement and appropriation of two different fields of reference, a third subject position is mediated in which the narrator is represented as stepping outside the closure of a dialectical relationship.

Expression of the narrator's subjective position appears to be dependant on the "island-communities" or the "safe houses" of ethnicity that she discovers during her anthropological search for the origins of Afro-American culture. Not only does the search for ethnic differences inform the narrative's content and structure, but ethnicity provides

the narrator the means and the occasion for defining herself and her collectivity. The alternate ways of expression attributed to the "island communities"--such as the saw mill camps--provide the narrator with different narratives and styles to mediate self and collectivity in relation to the Euro-American cultural expressions. The narrator's role as a trader in ethnic differences, as a translator of cultural forms, and as a writer who combines different forms of expression is dependent on representing and maintaining boundaries. By extension, the interpretative life of *Dust Tracks on a Road* is dependent on maintaining a dual perspective and deferring the narrative's foreclosure. Although the narrative's discourse in the 1942 edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road* requests a final regroupment of the two different readerships on the grounds of a common humanity by concluding with the request that we all be "kissing friends," the narrator's expressed desire appears to voice a convenient editorial closure within the accepted mono-perspective discourse of the dominant readership.

## 6. READING *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY* AS AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Reading *Running in the Family* as an autoethnography implies searching for signs of multiple readership, heterogeneous forms and expressions, textual multilingualism, and voices of anamnesis. As pointed out by Smaro Kamboureli, Ondaatje's text is a métissage of different conventions, traditions and forms of expression. The narrative includes elements of oral expression within its textuality and combines autobiography with travel writing, as well as fiction with history. However, as an autoethnography, Ondaatje's text must also be the site of contact and engagement between cultural fields of reference. The determination of *Running in the Family's* implied readership and identification of its multilingualism, that is, the forms of expressions that act as sub-codes to the text, would indicate the text's multicultural field of reference. If *Running in the Family* is an autoethnography, it is also, by my definition, an autobiographical performance in which self-representation is constructed from the elements of heterogeneous expressions. Thus, the narrator's many roles such as foreigner, father, and son will be examined as part of a self-representation that simultaneously articulates a collective experience. My study will therefore be attentive to the representations of communities, the role they play in the mediation of subjective ethnicity, and the text's narrative performance of self-representation.

### *Multiple Readership*

In the previous chapter, my study suggested that the mediation between two readerships is a major factor determining the form and structure of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Hurston's text does not address the Afro-American oral-tradition based community but instead describes it for an American white liberal "mainstream" readership and a black bourgeoisie that has distanced itself from its oral tradition. In the present chapter, I am suggesting that the narrative strategy and form of *Running in the Family* also addresses a multiple readership suggesting a "multilingual" text.

In fact, *Running in the Family* appears to be written for three readerships. First, it speaks to a "family" readership that would include Sri Lankan Burghers, Ceylon elite and bourgeois members. Second, the text also addresses a segment of the Canadian readership that have memories of immigration. Thirdly, the text addresses in addition, an elusive but influential segment of the Canadian readership identified as "mainstream." Arun Mukherjee describes the "mainstream" in the Canadian literary scene as informed by "a literary tradition that had been predominantly concerned with the two founding races of Canada" (Mukherjee 49). (The problematic of Mukherjee's point of view is not at issue at this moment. Rather, Mukherjee's discourse serves to articulate several perceptions that have marked the cultural context of *Running in the Family*.) While identifying a perception of the Canadian "mainstream," she underlines the increase of immigrant texts from writers of the Third World on the Canadian literary scene. Mukherjee's description of the Canadian literary scene suggests that by the time of *Running in the Family's* publication (1982), the imagined community responsible for "Canlit" had apparently opened a space for voicing ethnic cultures and communities, recognizing "a number of immigrant writers from the Third World ... active on the Canadian literary scene" (Mukherjee 49).<sup>1</sup> Although pointing

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the large number of Third World immigrant writers in Canada, Mukherjee states that their numbers are not adequately represented by the large publishing houses nor given sufficient critical attention by Canadian academics. By indicating that Ondaatje is one of the few South Asian poets heard by the white audience she creates a racial line of distinction (Mukherjee 49).

to the limited number of immigrant texts and writers included in the Canadian literary scene, her acknowledgement suggests that the implied Canadian readership of *Running in the Family* is complex and includes a multiple positioned readership not only familiar with the British Canadian literary tradition and its cultural reference but also connected to other cultural references.

*Running in the Family's* inclusion of North American, British and European tropes of exoticism, adoption of the travel memoir to frame its narrative, and its intertextual references to W.B. Yeats, Kipling, Lawrence Durrell, and Shakespeare attest to a post-colonial context in which the implied readership is familiar with a British literary tradition. The text's self-reflexivity and historical grounding also indicate a readership that is familiar with post-modern texts.<sup>2</sup> In addition to addressing a multicultural Canadian "mainstream" readership, *Running in the Family* appears to be an autobiographical narrative that also addresses a "family" readership. The inter-personal ground that the narrative treads is signalled by the inscription of his brother's request, "You must get this book right. You can only write it once" (172). Reference to family members and friends suggests a veiled transparency even though the narrative assumes the representational liberty of fiction. Although the narrative of *Running in the Family* inscribes the divorce of the writer's parents and the dispersion of his family in terms of a subjective and personal perspective, Ondaatje withholds private details about his own familial predicament. Except for an oblique reference in which the writer confesses to no longer being sure about "love, passion, and duty"(152), the circumstances of Ondaatje's own divorce and eventual family "disruption" remain silent within the folds of the text. Both Hurston and Ondaatje have closed off areas of personal matters from public view although they include oblique references in their texts.

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<sup>2</sup> See "Postmodernism" in *Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* .

Mukherjee's criticism of *Running in the Family* signals a third readership of Ondaatje's text. As part of the Canadian ethnic intelligentsia,<sup>3</sup> she enunciates in her criticism some of the ideological concerns that should underwrite the role of the ethnic writer.<sup>4</sup> However, her definition of the appropriate subject for ethnic writers also announces a dialectical discourse that implies a potential closure for the writer and reader. Although she argues for greater inclusion of marginal writers, her discourse paradoxically positions immigrant writing as being in the service of a Canadian cultural "mainstream." In other words, ethnic writing is validated by activating the Canadian literary scene with "refreshing diversity" of subject-matter and style and by serving as an indicator against which 'Canadian' writing could be measured in order to isolate the factors that make up its 'Canadianness' (51). Significantly, her criticism of Ondaatje's text echoes the black intelligentsia's criticism of *Dust Tracks on a Road*: both writers are accused of pandering to a mainstream's expectations and thus betraying their ethnic or racial community's interests. Intriguingly, Hurston's refusal to be limited by the conventions of social realism corresponds with Ondaatje's choice not to weigh political interests against aesthetic concerns.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Using the Vernacular to Create a Multilingual Text*

To consider *Running in the Family* as a multilingual text implies regarding the function of poetry and the photographic image within the text as a sub-code. As a sub-code, they are engaged in a dialogue with other forms of expression. Both *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family* inscribe the vernacular and employ the poetics of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Linda Hutcheon's interview with Michael Ondaatje in *Other Solitudes*, p.197. Hutcheon refers to criticism of Ondaatje's work that has been voiced by the ethnic community intelligentsia, notably in *The Toronto South Asian Review*.

<sup>4</sup> See page 72, footnote 12.

<sup>5</sup> See *Other Solitudes*, p.198. Ondaatje states in an interview with Hutcheon that, "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."

vernacular to disrupt authority's discourse and circumvent the abrogation of history. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, the vernacular not only structures the narrative and represents the Afro-American community but it also creates a dialogue between the black oral "vernacular" and other vernaculars such the academic "Barnardese," the Southern dialects, or the narrator's "conversational" English. *Running in the Family* represents graffiti as a vernacular expression that articulates a native community's sense of solidarity and a collective memory on the walls of its institutions. Confronted with a limited social or cultural space for voicing their community's narratives, graffiti writers use the space allotted to diversify the discourse. Supported by references to similar usage of poetry and the images, *Running in the Family* uses poetry and printed imagery as a vernacular form of expression in relation to the narrative's prose. The narrative refers to the fifth century B.C. Sigiriya graffiti as "the first folk poems of the country" inscribed by anonymous poets who addressed the images of women painted in fresco. As native expressions written on the face of a rock fortress by "average folk" (Sugunasiri, 74), the graffiti-image echoes the vernacular definition as a language or form of expression of the native or common people. However, with reference to the graffiti on the "'Mirror Wall' of the Sigiriya Rock Fortress" (Sugunasiri, 74), *Running in the Family* also suggests a relationship between sub-codes and the textual architecture that supports it. The rock surface of the walls creates the material support but also represents the cultural support against which the graffiti writings are inscribed. In a similar sense, the vernacular expression is constituted in its relationship with another form of expression in which it is engaged.

For instance, the narrative uses the graphic and semantic qualities of language as a vernacular form of expression by including Sinhala writing in the text. In "The Karapothas," the Sinhala writing appears as graffiti inscribed on the material surface of a page of English text in the middle of the book. After declaring that writing is the portrait of language, the narrator's description proposes an erotic and exotic veiled portrait of the Sinhalese language. The articulated desires for beauty inscribed on the Sigiriya walls are



echoed by the narrator's own expressed admiration for the Sinhala alphabet. The narrator, as foreigner, describes Sinhalese writing as "the bones of a lover's spine" (*RF* 69). However, the narrator, as native, entraps the reader within a reading that exoticises or "mis-reads" otherness. The implied reader who is unfamiliar with Sinhalese might anticipate a continued reverberation of an exotic aestheticism. The gap between form and signification is abruptly signalled by the narrator's translation of the Sinhalese writing: "We must not urinate again on Father Barnabus' tire" (69-70). The translator betrays and subverts the reader's expectations.

The gap between the photographs in *Running in the Family* and the text creates a space for clandestine meaning and initiates a dialogue between image and text. For instance, on the front cover of the McClelland and Stewart New Canadian Library Edition (1993), the photograph of an unfamiliar subject creates an exotic image appropriate for a travel narrative. The photograph is identified on the back cover as the "Toddy Tapper," but without other information from the text, the photograph remains enigmatic.<sup>6</sup> By midpoint of the narrative, connecting lines of relationship are extended between the dark figure in the photograph who appears suspended over an endless field of signification and the native figure represented in the poem "High Flowers" (72-73). *Running in the Family's* intercalated photographs similarly appear to float silently above the text until lines of relationships are connected.

The photograph printed beneath the caption "Asian Rumours" depicts a beach scene with a horse-drawn carriage and figures on a promenade. The straight lines of the road, the promenade, the beach and the distant row of buildings coincide with the lines of perspective that converge at a point on the horizon. The photograph appears to be from the Victorian era with little reference to an Asian setting. Without the narrative's references to the colonial history of Ceylon and the tropical heat and foliage, the photograph remains

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Ondaatje is the accredited photographer.

silent and "frozen." Once the narrative begins, a dialogue is articulated between the photograph and the narrative, each echoing the other and reflecting the writer's "running in the family" out to the horizon in search of a single point of origin among the rumours.

In the case of the photograph with the caption "What We Think of Married Life," the narrative emphasizes the relationship between text and image by reversing the sequence of inscribing (*RF* 137, 142). Before the printed image appears in the text, the narrative describes the photograph. The narrator explains that it is the photograph that he has been waiting for all his life (135). The printed image is the one piece of evidence that proves "that they [his parents] are absolutely perfect for each other"(135-136). The text describes the actions leading up to the photograph's creation and the events following it. The narrator's description of the photograph and his assurance that "everything is there, of course" (135) prepares the revelation of the image on the next page. The narrative seems to lead to an instance in which the signified and the signifier will actually meet. However, not only does the image remain a page away from the narrator's description but the image itself signifies a couple "signifying" marriage life.

Underneath the caption, the posing couple hamming together in a "theatre of their own making"(*RF* 136), creates a humorous effect. But is everything there as promised? By constructing a more complex portrait, the chapter "What we think of Married Life" suggests that the photo and its preceding description do not by themselves or together constitute a complete representation (142-146). The chapter, preceding description and the photograph create a dialogue in which their combined fields of reference weave a web for interpreting the characteristics of each parent, their love and appreciation of each other, as well as the reasons for their divorce. Like the maps of Ceylon, the photograph of the writer's parents becomes traced with lines of signification as more lines of "sightings" are extended from the text for the narrator and his reader to "travel on."

The narrative traces the writer's progressive awakening to the double-ness of language and the social structures by which language is inscribed. As a child learning

Sinhalese at the British-modelled St. Thomas College for Boys, the writer/narrator is represented as being inscribed within a political process that attempts to re-install Sinhalese linguistic connection. The insertion of Sinhala writing within the curriculum of an institution structured by a British tradition suggests a colonial past and the ambivalent role of an institution in promoting a language and a culture. Within the walls of the institution, the narrator is represented as first perceiving literature as "a punishment, a parade ground" in which the only freedom of expression is procured by writing rude expressions on the walls and desks of the school(70). Writing is represented as an instrument of confinement and institutionalisation as well as a means of freedom and personal expression. If the school is portrayed as part of the system of cultural codification and structure it is also depicted as part of the confinements and limits against which, or about which, self-expression can write and thus identify itself. Writing on walls versus writing on the black board underlines the role of the surface chosen and implies that the context and form are as important as the content of the message.

The poems on the walls of the Vidyalankara campus of the University of Ceylon (70) are inscribed within a community of texts and in a vernacular tradition to which the Sigiriya graffiti and the graffiti on the walls of St. Thomas are also related. The imprisoned students, confined to the enclosure of the university's courtyard, adopt the vernacular of the oppressed, the native, the "other," to express in words their solidarity, resistance and sufferance, their love and friendship, their desire for truth and beauty. The student's desire for beauty echoes the Sigiriya graffiti, and their belief in the freedom and power of language is also heard in the graffiti written on the walls of St. Thomas. Absent from the text are the actual inscriptions from the notebooks and the walls. Also missing from the narrative is a historical summary of the events leading to the Insurgency of 1971. Not present during the insurrection, the writer fills the absence in his memory of personal experiences, by referring to the students inscribing the poems left by other students as a means to abrogate the whitewash and lye (as well as the political lies) that have removed

their traces from the walls. The writer, echoing a community of writers, is also represented as participating in a continual process of collective remembering by signalling the traces of others.

By grouping the different graffiti-texts together, the narrative creates a space for hearing the sounds in the backgrounds of the texts. The Sigiriya graffiti-poems' declaration of desire for the sensual beauty that "consumes and overcomes the mundane lives" articulate the common folk's experience and desires from within the structures of culture and society that is represented by the monarch's fortress (70). Audible in the reverberation of other texts, the rebel students' writings articulate the desire for beauty and the belief in the power of language. The narrative's juxtaposition of the Sigiriya graffiti and the writings by the insurgents with Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's poetry repositions the relationship between aesthetics and ideology (71).

The painted images of women referred to in the Sigiriya graffiti and Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's poem suggest that beauty and aestheticism can serve to cover the walls of social institutions. The poet's exclamation, "Don't talk to me about Matisse..." demands that the listener's attention be shifted from art to social issues: "talk to me instead of the culture generally-"(71). Matisse, an icon of European culture, symbolises the imposition of European cultural values, subject matters, styles and criteria on Third World countries. The poet adds to the narrator's description of the poetry as the "beautiful *false compare* " of metaphors by implicating art as a political instrument that not only covers the Third World's exploitation but maintains colonial mentalities by articulating colonialism's supportive narratives (70). Soldiers, artists and government are implicated in a system that is sustained by the robbed riches of "savages." Thus, soldiers, like the French artist, are inscribed as government officials, supporting and reproducing the government's cultural and economic policies on white walls. The distinction between the two groups is signalled by the difference of the instruments they use: the government's troops use guns not brushes, their "works" are on the walls of mud-splattered huts not in bourgeois bungalows

(71). Wikkramasinha's poem's sombre portrait of language and the role of the artist are reversed, however, by the poem's own existence, which suggests that the poet is potentially a guerrilla warrior who also uses the colonizer's culture and the "beautiful *false compare*" of metaphors to fight against colonisation.

*Running in the Family* inscribes lines of relationship between the poetry on the university wall and the tennis-shoed young Tamil rebels who play cricket on the front lawn of Mervyn Ondaatje's Rock Hill farm (82). The rapid change of roles from student to rebel and the rebels' rapid transition from the business of guerrilla warfare to playing cricket suggest the similar characteristics of the vernacular expression. The vernacular is also represented as playing *in* the field of different cultural references while playing *on* them. For instance, Sir John apparently lost his elections because of "the grandness of [his] house and his parties--pictures of which appeared in the newspapers" (134). The photographs used in the newspapers, a vernacular form of expression, entrapped Sir John by "playing" in the gaps of signification between text and image as well as "playing" on the cultural references (134). The photographed lifting of a native's sari is an example of a vernacular "pornographic" text/image that is also a "political" text/image due to the context in which it is inscribed and represented: the photographed "act" is scandalous because of the onlooking Sir John and the surrounding British scenery. The photographic image, like the poetry on the walls of Sigiriya, brings together disparate elements and makes metaphorical associations that can be turned against the established order of meaning and the authority of the text: as the narrator points out, written or spoken explication did not undo the influence of the photographs. The narrative also uses photographs and poetry, as a vernacular form of expression, to engage with the overarching structure of the travel memoir, the prose text, and the North American, European, and British exotic images of the other.

"Sweet like a Crow" is an example of *Running in the Family* using the poetics of the vernacular. Against Paul Bowles' criticism, cited as an epigraph, that "the Sinhalese are

beyond a doubt one of the less musical people in the world," a list of metaphors apparently used to describe the sound of an unmusical voice transforms Bowles' curse into a poetic expression. The unknown voice is described in a list of metaphors *false compares* that inscribes the sounds and activities of a community in a parody of the Sigiriya graffiti. Vernacular words and native references are included within the foreigner's familiar field of reference. Although the words are not translated, the poet creates a context for the reader to imagine their sounds and signification: "vattacka being fried," "pappadans being crunched," "brinjals" hitting the fan, "sarongs" tearing. Pandering to the foreigner's desires and expectations, the poet creates an aesthetic expression from secular references and like the students with their notebooks, records the presence of the other.

By referring to the anonymous writings of "others" on the walls and the citations from visiting Europeans such as Paul Bowles and Lawrence Durrell, *Running in the Family* creates a site of encounter between the foreigner and the native that echoes Ceylon's history. While the narrative's prose inscribes the writer as a foreigner, the poetry inscribes the writer imagining himself as the native. The writer's poems create a mirrored version of the text, in which the poet is the alter ego of the prose writer, whose progressive movement to the "other" parallels the prose writer's movement to the encounter of his father. Placed in the middle of the text, the formal aspect of the poems appears as an exotic "other" in a text of prose, reproducing a similar effect created by the narrative's inclusion of the Sinhalese sentences within the latinized letters of the English text. By representing poetry as the "other" of prose, the narrative appears to use the poetic expression as a vernacular expression.

### *The Soap Of Colonization*

Despite a difference of time and place of publication, historical events connect *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family*. Although forty years separate the first publications of Hurston's and Ondaatje's text and their inscribed "home" communities are

represented with different social, geographical and cultural references, both texts echo the traces of a British cultural connection. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, British cultural influence is signalled by the reference to a train-traveling repertory opera company that brings Gilbert and Sullivan musical productions to American towns. Another almost imperceptible representation of British cultural importation is the text's reference to a bar of Pear's soap reserved for visitors to the Hurston home. Intriguingly, the train and the bar of soap also appear in *Running in the Family* as symbols of British colonialism. The train on the way to Colombo transports the sleeping British officers, and the bar of her majesty's finest soap is described as a prophylactic for the filth of Third World hotels. The inhabitants of Eatonville and the members of the Burgher class are represented as ethnic groups who are confronted in many different ways with another community's cultural references.

If *Dust Tracks on a Road's* manuscript overtly criticises the United State's international policies as biased by colonial affiliations with Britain, the reference to the Gilbert and Sullivan Opera company suggests that U.S. theatre and literature are still influenced by English culture. By describing the opera singers on the train as "not originators, but followers of originators", the text also implies that "mainstream" American culture is a reproduction of English and European traditions: followers of originators (*DT* 117). Thus, the narrator protests against the transposing of Negro Spirituals into European standards and conventions in order to become part of "American" culture. In contrast, *Running in the Family* inscribes a perspective of colonisation articulated from the elite position of the Burghers who appear to have adopted English culture to a greater degree. An explanation may be found in the social position of each community. Whereas Hurston's ancestors are historically represented as the labour force needed to support the plantation economy, the Burghers were the middle brokers who oversaw the tea plantations and served British capital interests.

The soap and the train are symbols of the imported products and technologies that assisted in the implantation of British colonialism. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Pear's

Transparent Soap is inscribed as the expensive imported product that is valorised over the home brand, "Octagon" (DT 55). The relationship between home and imported brands of soap also suggests a comparison with the narratives taught in the Eatonville public school and the stories told on Joe Clark's porch. If the imported variety of narratives are taught to standardise and sanitise the children's education, they are also mixed up with the home variety by the narrator. The insertion of one culture into the domesticity of another culture is represented by the text's localisation of the bar of Pear's soap within the Hurston's domicile. The bar of soap is one among other imported artefacts such as the Bible and a medical book. Thus, the soap bar is a symbol of transculturation in which colonialism's narratives replace local history, narratives and mythologies with a "cleaned" version that washes the colonised subject with a European fragrance.

The four poems centred in the middle of *Running in the Family* and juxtaposed with Lakdasa Wikkramasinha's outcry against colonialism appear to support Arun Mukherjee's criticism of Ondaatje's writing as pandering to mainstream culture while setting Wikkramasinha's poem as an example of what ethnic writing "should" be. However, despite the "washed" poetic surface, Ondaatje's poems include reflexive references to colonialism. "High Flowers" recognises the cultural blindness of Burghers by recognising "the woman that my ancestors ignored"(72). In "The Cinnamon Peeler," the native's "unwashed smells" are valorised as exotic fragrance. *Running in the Family* not only inscribes the bar of Pear's soap as a symbol of aristocracy and British imperialism but underlines its signification as part of a cultural system of values and perceptions. The imported soap, as the purported object of desire for servants and a symbol of collective identity for the writer, suggests the European civilisation as a model, to be coveted and imitated in all its fragrances.

Although *Running in the Family* signals the presence of the other by the inclusion of four poems, an ambiguity is created by the poetic voice that objectifies women as the mythologized, exotic and erotic other, apparently "washed" in the poet's own cultural



soap. By eulogizing the unwashed "cinnamon smell" of "native-ness," *Running in the Family* appears to be adding a fragrance of exoticism to cultural differences. The narrative maintains an ambivalent ideological ground by inscribing the 1971 insurgency and including Wikkramasinha's poem while using the themes and tropes of imperialism's writing. The text appears to use the "soap" of colonialism to slip away from the enclosures that would position the narrator as either coloniser or colonised, foreigner or native.

With reference to the soap of European culture, both *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* are represented as mediating a subjective ethnicity that arises out of colonialism's transculturation. *Dust Tracks on a Road* includes references to narrative strategies for mediating colonialism by describing the family "front" that is created by Hurston's parents. By offering the Pear's soap and new towels for visiting outsiders and keeping Octagon laundry soap for family use, the fences between the "inside" private life of the family and the "outside" visitors are maintained. However, *Dust Tracks on a Road* also suggests a sign of transculturation in which expressions and elements of the outside's culture are appropriated into a personalised expression. The narrator's clandestine theatre performed under the porch uses the foreign bar of Pears soap as an element in her personalised psycho-drama (DT 54-58).

*Running in the Family* also appropriates different cultural idioms and modes of expression to articulate the narrator's mixed ethnic and cultural affiliations. Told that his soap was stolen by a wild pig, the narrator turns the servant's presumed lie into an aesthetic construction. However, while fabricating his own "well told lie", the writer also mocks himself as the imperialist who claims personal possession of soap and pig. The narrator's performance as an aristocrat and imperialist is combined with the native's strategy of "creative" lying. While subverting the native's strategy that attempts to position him as an "outside" imperialist, the narrator also deconstructs the imperialist mindset. The narrator's performance of self-representation includes elements from both cultural references but signals a self-perception that is simultaneously positioned inside and outside

both communities. Thus, *Running in the Family* subverts the implied binary relationship that is associated with the bar of soap's affiliation with colonialism. Ondaatje's text incites a slippage of cultural signification in which not only the foreigner's symbols and signs are appropriated for articulating a subjective ethnicity but also the vernacular use of the "well told lie."

### *Voices of the Other*

The inclusion of poetry at the heart of *Running in the Family* serves as a privileged site for enunciating the voices of the foreigner and the "other." In relation to the narrator's self-representation as a "foreigner" who has come to Ceylon in search of his father and other, Wikkramasinha, the poet of "Don't talk to me about Matisse..." is the native "other" speaker addressing foreigners. Juxtaposed with Wikkramasinha's poetry are the four poems responding indirectly to the request to "talk ... of the culture generally"(71). Although the poet's voice in the four subsequent poems does not talk directly of "how the murders were sustained," the four poems enunciate a foreigner's voice. However, when considered together, the poems inscribe a progressive movement towards the encounter and engagement between foreigner and native, as well as between poet and subject. In "High Flowers," the poet observes "the woman that my ancestor's ignored"(72). She is the liminal figure of the other sitting in the shadows of a doorway chopping coconuts and cleaning rice, remaining nameless and silent. Returning from Sigiriya, on the way "To Colombo," the poet describes the countryside and its inhabitants as quickly passing impressions, observed from the position of a distant and mobilised self. Stepping out of his jeep, immobilised, he watches a woman in the shadow. In these two poems, the woman is the observed, gazed upon, subject. In "Women Like You," the poet inscribes a plurality of women, addressing a silent, mythologized "they." Midway in the poem, the poet addresses the other as "you" and attempts to break the silence by asking the other to speak of the human conditions associated with a lover's "used heart." Finally, in "The

Cinnamon Peeler," an inversion of roles is created between foreigner and the other: The poet as foreigner imagines himself as the cinnamon peeler who is married to a native woman. Although the poem is in the poet's voice, his communication with the woman is represented by mute gestures. Instead, the poet gives the cinnamon peeler's wife a voice to speak back to him as part of the poet's (as well as the narrator's) imagined re-creation of two worlds touching. Disrupting a history of silence, the cinnamon peeler's wife is portrayed as inviting her "husband," the imagined alter ego of the poet, to smell and touch her belly.<sup>7</sup>

The Native woman addresses the poet by identifying herself in terms of the poet's imagined alter ego, "I am the cinnamon peeler's wife"(79). However, her self identification also positions the poet as a stranger or a foreigner, "You will be known among strangers as the cinnamon peeler's wife"(78). The ambiguity of her identification corresponds with the degree of uncertainty that surrounds the poet's identification with the native other, "If I were a cinnamon peeler"(78). Who's wife is the woman? How does the poet (and the narrator) position himself? Is he the cinnamon peeler? an outsider? or both? In the poet's imagined encounter, she offers the poet not only a connection between himself and the perceived otherness of the native but also with the otherness of himself. By asking her husband who is the imagined alter ego of the poet to smell her, she, as the imagined "other" of the poet, seems to be asking the poet to recognise not only her smell but also his traces in her. Considered as a sequence of poetic images, these four poems suggest the narrator's move towards the other who is also a part of himself.

### *Inscribing a Community*

The "Ondaatje Family" is inscribed within demarcations that resemble an enclosed island collective, similar to Schermerhorn's definition of an ethnic group. *Running in the*

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<sup>7</sup> See discussion of the four poems on page 137.

*Family* also inscribes the writer's family within Ceylon's elite class while attributing to that class the characteristics of a "family" in which "everyone one was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British, and Burgher blood going back many generations"(32). The narrative not only conflates the class and family lines but also signals a collective amnesia that appears to be necessary for group formation. Although the Burghers have emerged from people who previously had different ethnicity, nationality and race, their subjective affiliations are vaguely remembered and the historical connections are no longer known: "God alone knows" (32). A reference to the Burgher's ethnogenesis and transculturation is signalled by Philip Ondaatje's social garments. Patriarch of the Ondaatje family during the twenties, the writer's grandfather is described as wearing a combination of sarong and vest during his evening walks on the plantation, an action that appears to contradict his ardent efforts to imitate the "English"(45). Another example of transculturation is embedded in the family's name of "Ondaatje." As a Dutch spelling of the arriving ancestor's (Tamil?) name, "Ondaatje" is described as "a parody of the ruling language"(54). *Running in the Family* inscribes the Ondaatje family and its Burgher class as an ethnic group that is a métissage of culturally and racially different origins but appears as an enclosed community.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to an "outside" foreign community such as India, *Running in the Family* represents the Ceylonese community as a single collective. In comparing Ceylon to India's stratified society in which only the aristocracy gambled, the narrative portrays horse racing as one of Ceylon's national sporting events that appears to promote a social integrity and democratisation. From Banker to lime-burner and fish-monger, the Ceylonese society is portrayed as united by the common compulsion of betting(37). However, the questionable merits of gambling and the appearance of unity are undercut by narrator's description of the track event that also includes a portrayal of Ceylon's social-economical class

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<sup>8</sup> See Édouard Glissant's *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, p.19. Glissant suggests that composite societies tend to become atavistic, that is, they assume a permanence and honorableness of origin.

stratification in which the rich sit in the grandstands, the middle class in the two-rupee enclosures and the poor stand on the field grounds in the "gandhi enclosure"(37). The narrative's pre-war portrait of Ceylon depicts a society in which "the social gap between. . . two broad classes was such that the composite elite and the masses literally lived their contiguous but non-contactual lives"(Sugunasiri 62). The Eurasians, as a community, were the least in contact with the rest of the population (Sugunasiri, 77 fn 7). Social events such as betting are described as a complementary part of a social system's plan for keeping a peaceful co-existence among heterogeneous groups. The other part of the social plan for harmonisation appears to be the maintenance of social barriers between each community. The narrative's description of the concerted effort by the Ceylonese to insulate the sleeping British officers from the anarchic events occurring on the train to Colombo refers to a pre-war government policy of maintaining cultural harmony and stability by the isolation of different communities. However, the representation of the Ceylonese as a multi-cultural society co-existing peacefully during the period of the writer's parents is disrupted by the narrator's reference to his Uncle Ned's commission on race-riots underway during the period of his visit (19).

Not only is the writer's community of origin defined by kinship, family ties and intercultural marriages, it is also a part of an elite composite community in which English is the prioritised language. Although the writer's parents and Lalla are depicted as speaking Sinhala to servants or townspeople at specific times, they are represented as speaking English in diglossic situations and in family interactions. As pointed out by Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri, the vernacular, for those who could speak either Sinhala or Tamil, was reserved for informal interactions or used to communicate with domestics. Not only are Burghers identified by the near exclusive use of English but also by a colonised mindset that prefers European over local things, ideas and culture (Sugunasiri 60-63). Although the Burghers are a minority (less than 1% of the population<sup>9</sup>) they occupy an influential

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<sup>9</sup> BBC News, Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka: Country profile. Jan. 28,1998.

position as part of the socio-economic elite of Ceylonese society, a social standing that is attributed to a mixed ancestry that includes Europeans (Sugunasiri 61). *Running in the Family* portrays the "Ondaatje family" as members of an influential minority class speaking the prioritised language. Despite the Burghers' influence and wealth, the community appears to be confronted with similar issues of colonisation, assimilation and group formation as other ethnic groups. Similarities between the Burghers' collectivity and Shermershom's definition of ethnic group shifts the perception of ethnicity as designating a group that is an oppressed, subjugated minority.

In considering *Running in the Family* as an autoethnography, we are reminded that the histories of the community and narrator can be expected to overlap and that the narrative will echo the collective voice in the enunciation of a self-representation. (Lionnet attributes to the narrative voice of *Dust Tracks on a Road* the function of anamnesis.) The historical connections are supported by Sugunasiri who suggests that the narrative's representation of Ondaatje's family living on a tea plantation, first as owners and then as managers, reflects the actual social, cultural and economic conditions of many Burghers. *Running in the Family's* reference to the "other side" of Ceylon society is signalled by the presence of tea workers, cinnamon peelers, toddy tapers, and domestics. The writer's voice articulating a foreigner's perception also articulates the voice of a Burgher community.

Attempting to fill in the void of childhood memories, the narrator is represented as a writer in the process of searching, travelling and collecting the fragments of his family's history. In the process of reconstructing the portrait of his father, his family and his childhood, the narrator articulates the voices of a Ceylonese Burgher class at the end of an era of British colonialism. Three generations are portrayed. The generation of Philip Ondaatje is inscribed as imitating British tradition, which included sending their children to England for "finishing" education. In the following generation, the family members are described as living a prolonged adolescence: "from the twenties to the war nobody really

had to grow up"(42). Remaining "wild and spoiled," the generation of the writer's parents is portrayed as restlessly turning around in an enclosed cultural and social circle. In the absence of encounters and engagements with others outside their family or their social and economic community, this generation appears to be in a self-absorbed environment with "nowhere really to go." Eventually, they are "burned purposeless" (36). The narrator's generation appears to be a period of transition and migration. Although some members remained in Sri Lanka, others migrated to Canada, England, or Australia. *Running in the Family's* reference to the divorce of the narrator's parents, the dispersion of his family and the narrator's return in search for his origins suggest similarities with the narrative structure of *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Like the narrator of Hurston's text, the writer/narrator in *Running in the Family* attempts to recollect his dispersed family.

By inscribing the stories told by a community of story tellers, *Running in the Family* articulates the voices of a family, a class, and a collective memory that risk being lost or occluded by history.<sup>10</sup> However, *Running in the Family* also opens the narrative to include the articulations of the other, the voices in the background that the generation before did not recognise. Travel writing, like the ethnographic frame, creates a narrative structure that promotes the narrator's mobility. Although the narrator's subject position is constituted from heterogeneous cultural references (Sri Lanka and Canada) that are vaguely remembered (from childhood or by others) or share common expressions and conventions (from the English literary tradition and Ceylon culture), it is represented as mobile and positioned between two communities.

### *Travel and Memoir Writing*

As noted previously, the narrative structures framing *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* provide a mobility for their narrators. In *Dust Tracks on a Road*,

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<sup>10</sup> See Lionnet AV 118. Hurston's self-portrait in *Dust Tracks on a Road* is described as "an anamnesis, not a self-contemplation but a painstaking effort to be the voice of [the Afro-American] occluded past, to fill the void of collective memory."

the ethnographic project and structure frames the narrative and promotes a dual position between observer and observed, anthropologist and her subject. Not only can the narrator's "cultural chemise" be examined as others see it, but the cultural garments of others can also be observed and worn. By trying on other cultural garments and performing other scripted roles, the narrator is able to mediate her subjective ethnicity or, figuratively, select her own cultural garments. In *Running in the Family*, the travel memoir provides a similar frame for the narrative for inscribing the encounter and engagement with others. Combined with an autobiographic dimension, the travel memoir frames *Running in the Family* as a journey of displacement towards the unknown other and the otherness of oneself. Ondaatje's text inscribes a postcolonial perspective by incorporating the conventions of the travel memoir and autobiography, genres which are essential to the British literary tradition and nineteenth century colonialism. Described as inhabiting Canada but dreaming of Asia, the narrator-writer personifies a subject position existing between two worlds but not completely at home in either one. Positioned as both the traveler observing the community and as a person affiliated with the subject of his gaze, the writer attempts to hear another voice in the background of the discourse he encounters. Thus, by gathering the fragments of stories, the writer/narrator attempts to hear his father's voice. By imagining an encounter with the other, he attempts to fill in the sounds and visions of a childhood and a family that he barely remembers. If these constructed trysts with the other cannot replace the referred-to occurrences, they do provide the grounds for the narrator's performance of self-representation.

If the narrative frame of *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* structures the text through a narrative mobility that promotes the encounter and engagement with different worlds, the perception and engagement appears to be related to the conditions of the journey. *Running in the Family* articulates two different ways of travelling and ways of perceiving the other. One of the perceptions is related to a kind of touring that assumes an eventual return "home." The other way of travelling is related to



the perception of the immigrant who can no longer has one home, or *un foyer*, to perceive the world.<sup>11</sup> The migrating subject mediates perception between two homes, one of which is situated in the past and the other in the present. The perception of one's twoness<sup>12</sup> is related to a two-home, bifocal vision (*double foyer*). However, both texts suggest that the consciousness of this twoness creates trifocal vision (*triple foyer*).

Both *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family* inscribe the journey of a narrator who returns to the community of his or her origins. Both of the narrators express the desire to re-unite their dispersed family: to touch into words a lost world. However, the narrator in Ondaatje's text describes his quest as motivated by a "perverse and solitary desire" (16). He questions his ulterior motive for knowing the privacy of his parents' lives (43) and his reprehensible exploitation of family members: "how I have used them" (90). His expressed "second" thoughts about the invasion and exploitation of other's privacy for his own self-interests suggest the role of the narrator, as foreigner, who's return to his family for personal "gain" echoes Ceylon's history of foreign invasion, exploitation, and tourism. The narrative's travel memoir articulates and parodies the foreigner's perspective of tourism as a self-interested journey to an "other" place.

The journey begins with an exploration of the ethnic symbols of the community: drinking palmyrah toddy, walking in fifteen cent sandals, and buying sarongs. By wearing, eating and drinking the products of ethnicity, the narrator attempts to reposition and "exoticise" himself. The tourism to the other's subject position suggests a temporary disassociation with one's past position (59). From the narrator's attempt at a reborn ethnicity, the narrative also progressively inscribes an exploration of one's own

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<sup>11</sup> I employ a doubled-sense of the French word *foyer* to underline the relationship between position and perspective. *Foyer* designates a home position, "Lieu servant d'abri, d'asile." It also refers to a focal point by refraction and is used to designate, in French, eyeglasses with single, double or triple focal points.

<sup>12</sup>See Du Bois's description of double-consciousness, 76n13.

"otherness."<sup>13</sup> In the narrator's displacement towards the "other," the narrative appears to parody the foreigner and the self in search of exoticism. The narrator's attempt to "go native" results in blistered feet and drunken naps at noon(59).

In another situation of parody, the narrator's voice assumes an authoritative position by explaining that "a well told lie is worth a thousand facts"(176). The narrator plays the role of the inside informant instructing a foreigner in the customs of the native culture. The irony of the situation is underlined by considering the narrator's self-confessed description as foreigner. He is supposedly instructing his relatives, friends, and colleagues about Sri Lankan storytelling after acknowledging the importance of their "inside" information. The narrative also parodies the foreigner's position by portraying the narrator as adopting an imperialistic "I" that is associated with English and European travel memoirs and autobiographies of the nineteenth century. After a declaration that he is willing to be gored to death by a wild pig because he is cool, clean, and in perfect company, the narrator postures with "imperial" indignation his astonishment about the disappearance of his bar of soap. After being told the identity of the perpetrator, the narrator pretends dismay that the disappearance should be attributed to a garbage eating, "repulsively exotic creature," and exclaims, "My wild pig? ... with my bar of Pear's Transparent Soap?" (118). The narrator's performance recalls the narrative's own posturing which adopts and adapts the conventions of travel writing and autobiography to inscribe both a personal and family history.

The four poems situated at the heart of the text suggest a mirroring of the narrator's journey in prose in which the desire of encounter and engagement with an imagined other is expressed. The narrator, speaking in the voice of the poet, not only imagines himself among the Ceylonese Natives but in "The Cinnamon Peeler," the poet/narrator imagines himself in the place of the Native and addressed by his imagined "other." However, the

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<sup>13</sup> See Wernor Sollors's *Beyond Ethnicity*, p31. "If we are all other... then we may also explore the otherness in ourselves, which is the theme of many American autobiographical conversions stories."

inscribed "subjectification" of otherness appears to be inverted by the subject's demand that she be smelled. The other is represented as "speaking back" to the objectifying persona of the poet/narrator. In a reversal of subject roles, the inscribed male observer is described as using the mute's language of touch, gesture and smell whereas the woman as native is endowed with voice. The last lines suggests that the invitation to smell the woman's native-ness is also an offer to the poet to smell the traces of himself in the other and recognise his own otherness. In which case, the narrative creates a reversal in which the poet/writer is depicted as changing positions with the reader, touching his otherness in the body of the text. However, the presumed consummation between the self and the other is deferred by the woman's self-identification. "Known to strangers as the cinnamon peeler's wife," she identifies herself to her husband, the imagined alter ego of the poet, in the terms that reinstate the poet's position as stranger. Although the poet is accorded intimate knowledge, he remains "outside" never to take completely the place of the "cinnamon peeler."

By "going native," the narrator attempts to forget his previous outside position. Thus, his elliptical journey between the self and the other evokes a temporary change of roles. Two subject positions are thus assumed by the writer, but not at the same time. Similarly, Mervyn's dipsomania produces two states of being in which the character alternates between a sober and a drunken self. Each subject position appears to be isolated from the other, with only a vague memory of the other state of being. The thin line connecting the two selves, however, is suggested by Mervyn's prodigious efforts at memory. When sober, Mervyn remembers to hide bottles of gin for his inebriated self. When inebriated, he is able to remember the locations chosen by his sober self (*RF* 47). If Memory provides the connection between two separate states of Mervyn's being, it is also joined by a similar code of conduct. Although appearing chaotic to an outside world, his wife is forced to removed the children during his bouts with dipsomania, Mervyn's drunken actions continue to be informed by the same, albeit altered, code of "love,

passion, duty" that he respected when sober. After drinking seven bottles of gin with the engineer of the Trinco-Colombo train, he "saved" the train and Colombo from an explosion by setting non-army personal off the train, by searching luggage for hidden bombs and smashing all lights that might set-off their detonation, and then by tossing twenty five pots of curd, perceived as bombs, off a bridge (129-130). In later years, when Mervyn's dialectical world changes from dipsomania to that of a manic depressive, he is represented as still acting within the same code of conduct by shattering eggs because they are presumed poisoned or by remaining in a catatonic silence to save his friends(171).

Mervyn's twoness of being also seems to echo his bicultural position. Mervyn is represented as resisting Philip Ondaatje's attempts of cultural imitation. Mervyn's aversion to his father's anglophilia and colonialism is suggested by his reaction to the "absurd English clothes" that he was expected to wear (*RF* 160), his successful elimination of the academic element from his education at Cambridge (23), and his proclaimed affiliation with Tamil ancestry. Mervyn's singing of Baila folk songs (Ceylonese) and songs by Rodgers and Hart (American) suggests the bicultural mix that serve as his cultural field of reference (48). The father's removal of his English uniform before running into a tunnel (124), and his inscribed perception of friends and family as separate from the Europeans(157), suggest a rejection of his father's cultural affiliation and his inherent social role, in addition to a profound psychological bipolarization.

Both *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Running in the Family* inscribe the moment of self-reflection in a mirror as being associated with an awareness of one's "twoness." The traumatic experience of two worlds colliding in self-consciousness is suggested by Doris's encounter with her husband. In the "heart of darkness," her husband does not immediately recognise her nor her motives for entering the tunnel and forces her to explain, "I followed you because no one else would follow you"(125). Realising that her husband had gone down a path unknown to her (124), the narrator's mother is suggested as perceiving a glimpse of her husband's chaotic "other" world. The description of the encounter suggests

a rise of self-awareness that did not appear in Doris's other dealings with her husband's drunkenness. After the encounter, the narrative describes her handwriting as being irremediably altered, appearing "wild" and "drunk" as if the writer is trying to cope with a "new dark unknown alphabet"(125).

*Running in the Family* prologues a double-encounter between the writer and his father by inscribing the father's meeting on a road with the narrator's objectified alter-ego, a cinnamon peeler. The writer is also described as encountering the alter-ego of his father: a drunken Tamil lying in the road. The narrative builds to an anticipated encounter in which the father is at home, alone, having already begun to read the writer's book. By the text's self-reflexive reference to page 189, the narrative identifies the book that the father is described searching as *Running in the Family*. The page number corresponds to the page in the first edition of Ondaatje's text that describes the incident. This textual reference creates a series of mirrors that provoke the mental gymnastics of imagining the self imagining the other imagining the self. The text represents the narrator imagining the father reading the narrator's book. However, the anticipated encounter of father and son appears to be deferred. The father's reading of the book and therefore encounter with his son's writing will never be completed because the page is carried off by ants. The magical realism of ants abducting pages of the text, like the "silverfish eating their way through portraits and wedding pictures"(112), suggests that the imagined encounter of present and past is forever deferred by the passage of time that carries away each moment into memory.

The imagined moment of convergence between the father and his self-reflection in the mirror and the writer's encounter with himself appears as a superimposition of two narratives. Prior to the climatic scene, the father begins to articulate words of self-consciousness that appear to pierce the alcoholic fog of forgetfulness. Inebriated, the father begins a Hamlet-like soliloquy ("to be or not to be") addressed to an absent school friend (another projection of the writer?), "Tooby, Tooby, you should see your friend now" (159). However, the father is described as abandoning his movement towards his

otherness: he is "scared of the company of the mirror." The text also signals the movement of the narrator towards his own moment of encounter by a change of personal pronouns. The narrative inscribes the father's actions and thoughts in the third person. Suddenly, the narrative shifts to the first person, "The bottle top in my mouth as I sit on the bed like a lost ship on a white sea"(160). The narrator's voice is added to the father's voice at a moment when the writer imagines himself in the position of his father, his "other." The ambiguity of who has the bottle top in his mouth suggests an imagined convergence between the writer and his otherness that is underlined by the narrative's silence.

Both the father's dipsomania and the son's "going native" inscribe dual subject positions in which each side is represented as mono-perspective. They live their twoness as alternating positions that are separated in the subject's consciousness by forgetfulness. The father's alternating positions are separated by a partial amnesia of the preceding state of being. As stated by a friend, the son only knows what he wanted only when he is drunk (15). He also attempts to evade his foreigner status by wearing the cloths and eating the foods of the native. After leaving for Ceylon, memories of Canada seem to be buried beneath the narrative with only a brief rupture which occurs when the narrative is shifted in time and place back to the narrator's position in Toronto writing while listening to the tapes of the Ceylon night (113). Although the convergence of the narrator and his father seems to be deferred at the last moment, as the father stops reading his son's book and turns away from the mirror, the narrator seems to gain a new awareness of his family and time. On the final day before returning to Canada, the heightened awareness of the co-presence of past and present and of his own twoness is acknowledged by the narrator as he looks out from his room and imagines the lives of his parents, his sister and his childhood: "there is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old" (173). He appears to signal a third position of self awareness.

Prior to his imagined encounter, the narrator enunciates the twoness of his subjective ethnicity by describing his position in dialectical terms: "I am the foreigner. I am

the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (65). However, the writer's voice also appears to articulate the position of his father, a Burgher who claims he is Tamil. The definition of "prodigal" as a person who spends money or uses resources with wasteful extravagance," aptly describes the father, Mervyn, who is the prodigal son of his father.<sup>14</sup> Mervyn's antagonistic relationship with the foreigner, who his father imitated, also conveys another dimension to the narrator's self-description that simultaneously refers to his father and narrator's conflictory state of twoness. However, the narrator's self-description as a foreigner and as a prodigal is also a recognition of his own twoness: as the prodigal's son who has returned home in search of his lost father, as an outsider who is also an insider, as a father's son and a father with a son.<sup>15</sup>

Seeing one's self simultaneously as a prodigal and as the foreigner indicates the perspective of a third point of view, which is distanced outside the two inscribed positions but included in each one. To maintain the duality of vision without slipping into the single perspective of one position suggests a sustained awareness of one's twoness. The migrant's subject position promotes a sense of multiple home-ness that affects the attachment to a single point of reference: the migrant journey never seems terminated. *Running in the Family* depicts the migrant position as a state of continual transition, watchfulness and waiting. The narrator, in the position of the writer, is represented as following the writing hand, "[watching] the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble on perception, the shape of an unknown thing"(162). By contrast, the foreigner's visit to an exotic elsewhere is characterised as an outward bound voyage that will presumably end on return to the home site.

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<sup>14</sup> See Webster's College Dictionary.

<sup>15</sup> See Luke 15:11-32. *Running in the Family* refers to the biblical passage that inscribes a prodigal son who returns to encounter his father and is forgiven. However, the narrative makes several inversions. *Running in the Family* inscribes a son who returns home in the hopes of discovering his prodigal father. The writer-son is portrayed as mediating the absence of his father with the intention of finally coming to terms with his father.

In "Last Morning," the narrator is represented as writing his last journal entry in the early hours of the day. As the last chapter of a journal, the text appears to join the last morning to the first morning that began the narrative, and therefore to complete the narrative's circular loop or "tour-ism". However, this time the electric light is left off and the darkness of the empty room is preferred suggesting that a new perspective is gained. The contrast between the bareness of the room inscribed at the beginning of *Running in the Family* and the empty room from which the narrator prepares to leave at the end of the narrative is emphasised by the narrator's ability to imagine his father, his mother and himself as a child. Whereas the first room was a site of self-absorbed dreams, the latter is the site for imagining the past. The narrator had attempted to filled the map of the past with details but history remains elusive. Despite his efforts to accumulate of stories and details, his father is "still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut" (171).

The emptiness of the dark room is analogous to the text's use of ambiguity for imagining otherwise impossible encounters: "there is nothing in this view that can not be a hundred years old, that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven" (173). The narrator is portrayed as constructing an encounter between himself and his father, between his past memories and present experience, from fragments of narratives and histories that combine in that obscurity outside the known, to create a history that re-positions him in the world. What saves the writer is "the lack of clarity" and the opening it offers to the imagination(55).

Any attempt to position the narrator within either one of the narrative's binary references, Sri-Lanka or Canada, North or South, East or West, Foreigner or Native, father or son is circumvented by the subject's transience. Neither a foreigner nor a prodigal, the writer is also part of a collective of communities such as story tellers, poets, artists and readers. By keeping alive the memory of his twoness through writing, the narrator's subjectivity remains mobile. The writer's attempt to remember the traces of his otherness before turning back to another community is suggested by the narrative's registry



of sensations, perceptions, and sounds associated with the "last morning." *Running in the Family* inscribes the writer's consciousness that migrates from the body bitten by ants to the ants' consciousness of rising on the swelling body. His consciousness of the movement reflects the mobility of consciousness that perceives the voices in the noise between two "certainties."

## 7. CONCLUSION

At the outset of my study, I proposed to determine if *Running in the Family* is an autoethnography. My answer is a mitigated one and depends on the broadness with which the term is defined. If Pratt's definition of the term provides clearly delineated reference points, it is also a restrictive one which limits autoethnography to texts written from the site of a "first" contact scenario between groups of people who, until their meeting, had been separated by geographical distance and historical events. For describing the mediated encounters occurring in the aftermath of colonization and slavery and the intra-cultural encounters as suggested by Chasnoff's study, autoethnography's definition must be modified. A latitude is created for comparing disparate texts such as *Running in the Family* with *Dust Tracks on a Road* by considering the subjectivity of group formation, by recognizing the performance of language in representations of self and collective, and by acknowledging different forms of expression as languages.

I also hypothesised that the narrator's position in *Running in the Family* signals a movement away from the position articulated in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. In both texts, the narrative frame inscribes a mobile narrator who negotiates different cultural references. Both narrators are represented as moving within a mixed representational field created from cultural encounters and multiple engagements. *Dust Tracks on a Road* mediates a subject position that is not victimised by the continual conflict and potential stigmatisation that double-consciousness seems to suggest.<sup>1</sup> The narrator is portrayed as not waiting for

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<sup>1</sup> See Du Bois's description of double-consciousness, 76n13.

W.E.B Du Bois's "dream" to come true, that is, to be "a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by [her] fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in [her] face" (Du Bois 5). To be accepted and integrated within the American community and no longer feel one's twoness, seems to imply in Du Bois's perception that self-realisation must be deferred and the conditions for achieving one's selfhood are dependent on an oppressive American society. *Dust Tracks on a Road*, however, seems to reject Du Bois's dream by suggesting in its subtext that double-consciousness is an advantage, not a curse, which liberates the subject from the constraints of categorisations. Although the narrator is represented as always conscious of "the eyes of the others," *Dust Tracks on a Road* uses the two cultural modes of expression to mediate a subject position between two antagonistic readerships (5). For the narrator, the categorisation of "Negro," "American" or "Negro-American" are pigeon-holes that enclose her self-identity. Defined only in these terms, the narrator's self-identity as a woman, as a writer, as an artist, as an anthropologist would be ignored. If the inter-cultural mobility of the narrator signals the enclosure that is created by racial, gender, national labels, it also articulates a self-declared emancipation. While the performance of Hurston's text voices the Afro-American oral tradition using the Euro-American idioms and forms of expressions, it also gestures to a position that is beyond the twoness described by Du Bois. The narrator's representation points to the subject position enunciated by *Running in the Family*. By declaring her individualism, the narrator is represented as adopting a migrant status. She is in continual transit without a definite home site.

In *Running in the Family*, the mobility of the subject need not be proclaimed nor defended. The circumstances of his life have placed the narrator in a context of perennial mobility. As an immigrant, the narrator is portrayed as continually travelling between countries, homes and memories mediating the world with a dual perspective. His memory of another homeland and of his dispersed family disrupts the "comfort and order" of a single home site. By tape-recording the jungle sounds of Ceylon, the narrator emphasises

his attentiveness to background "noises," and suggests a self-conscious effort to recover the past. Neither completely at home in Sri Lanka nor in Canada, the narrator mediates a double-consciousness by travelling between different worlds, places and times. However, the narrator's performance as writer signals a position that observes and inscribes his double-consciousness. To be conscious of one's twoness is to be outside of either of its binary positions. The narrator's immigrant experience is characterised by a dual perspective and attention to the background noises and voices that are from different worlds. The portrayal of the narrator, as writer, represents writing as a self-conscious attempt to maintain the consciousness of a mobile subject position. While in the performance of writing, momentarily detached from desire, tragedy, or judgement, the narrator is represented as attentive to the music in the other room--attentive to the areas of his field of reference that are in contact with other fields and forms.

Ondaatje and Hurston have been both accused of pandering to mainstream culture by critics from their respective ethnic groups. Their critics' reactions suggest that *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* have been read as representations of their authors' ethnic groups, and that these writers have been perceived as spokespersons of their collectivity. With these expectations and assumptions, the critics' reactions are not surprising when we consider, as Pratt does, that autoethnographic texts are not authentic texts but collaborations (Pratt 7). Although both writers have been accused of "betrayals," the social and economic consequences for each author have been different. Without delving into an extensive study of cultural differences between Canadian and American readerships, some factors have been suggested from my study. In the past forty years, the social and cultural landscapes of both countries have been transformed by discourses of civil rights, feminism, nationalism, Black Consciousness, postcolonialism, postmodernism, multiculturalism and globalisation. Hurston's temporary disappearance from the American literary scene suggests the dilemma and consequence of living and writing in the interval between different cultures and languages. Her fate, as suggested by

Hemenway, appears to be determined by a series of factors related to her social context, that is, being a black Afro-American woman writing from the Depression until the Cold War. The response of her two readerships, addressed simultaneously in *Dust Tracks on a Road* articulated an intolerance to positions outside of their reading expectations. The recent resuscitation of Hurston's literary corpus from the margins of memory, and its current center-stage position in the canon of Afro-American women texts, indicates a radical shift in readership horizons of expectation and acceptance. Within a postmodern context, Ondaatje's reception suggests a Canadian readership familiar with the issues voiced in ethnic and immigrant writings.

In my study of *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, I consider autoethnographies as autobiographical performances that collaborate with, and appropriate elements from, the cultural references at hand. They create the representational field from which to construct self-representation that is outside the limits of a binary construction. The criticism of pandering to mainstream audiences leveled against *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* suggests the double agenda inscribed in their collaborative appropriations. Both texts create collective representations by inscribing processes of collective boundary construction, by inscribing "myths of origins and fusions, cultural markers," and ethnic symbols (Sollors, *Beyond* 39). They also build representations of community by re-membering history, articulating muted voices, and incorporating vernacular forms of expression. However, the thematic representation of communities also creates a dialogic field of representation for the narrator's performance, which goes beyond any such restrictions. Therefore, the relationship between the single voice and the collective voices, between identity and culture, and the articulation of their differences play an important role in autoethnography. Both of Ondaatje's and Hurston's texts use a narrative voice that articulates the reverberation between the subject and the collective but also maintains the differences between them. The dialogical production of *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* goes beyond "the artful production of 'actual'

encounters" (Clifford 15). It "locates cultural interpretations in many sorts of reciprocal contexts" and is employed by the writer to "[render] negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent"(15). Both Ondaatje's and Hurston's texts point outside the binary frame of dialogue to a field of cultural interpretations that is created from the movement through dialogue and articulates the mobility of the subject position.

In comparing *Running in the Family* to *Dust Tracks on a Road*, I emphasize the dual semantic potentials of "ethnicity" and underline the role of language in self-perception, in the construction of collective identities and in the performance of self-representation. After examining the role of ethnicity and language in group formation and identification, my study extends the term of "vernacular" to encompass different modes of expression, which are used in relation to other systems of signification to differentiate communities and their discourse. By adopting these shifts of perspective, I argue that Hurston's and Ondaatje's multilingual and multicultural texts are autoethnographies which generate a space for voicing an autobiographical performance. Although this perspective implies that to participate in a dialogue is to exist in the space of discourse, it also understands that enunciation risks defining and thus confining the interlocutor to one side of a dialogue, which is structured as an engagement between insider/outsider or between observer/observed. The narrative strategies in Hurston's and Ondaatje's texts attempt to circumvent the binary structure of identification by evoking self and community in the process rather than in the product of a speech act. In this manner, their narratives create from the encounter and engagement between collectivities the voice of an intra-cultural subjectivity. Thus, the autobiographical performances created in Ondaatje's and Hurston's texts point to a subject position that is created from dialogue but is not fixed within a binary structure of representation nor by a position of dialectical discourse. Rather than memorialise the writing subject by documenting his or her existence in an autobiography, *Running in the Family* and *Dust Tracks on a Road* centres attention to the process of writing that creates

and sustains through performance the movement of subjectivity, which is continually mediating its position.

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