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Carving out Virginia Woolf, James Baldwin and Michael Ondaatje's ancestry and family from their life writing.

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'My father lived and died in intolerable bitterness and it frightened me… to realise that this bitterness now was mine' (Baldwin 90)

This essay aims to modify Lejeune's definition of autobiography to argue that a life writer's existence becomes intrinsically tied to a broader familial, parental, and ancestral experience. This narrative focuses on the life writer's individual life and how the past shapes their present identity. This essay will also distinguish how the following authors harness the formal conventions of the life-writing genre: Virginia Woolf in her memoir, *Sketch of the Past*; James Baldwin in his essay, *Notes of a Native Son;* and Michael Ondaatje in his family memoir, *Running in the Family*.

Throughout Woolf's memoir, the death of her mother, Julia, is a defining moment of her childhood, continuing to influence her adulthood. In her memoir, she states that 'the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all 'play so important a part in every life' (92). Woolf can 'hear', 'see,' and 'imagine' her mother, suggesting Julia's presence is imbued in everything Woolf practices. It is feasible that Julia's death also influences Woolf's relationship with literature. After her mother's death, she claims, 'I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them' (103). Woolf is obsessed with the 'transparent' nature of writing: here, she enters into a metaphysical introspection about the mediums of expression available to the human mind. She beckons readers to consider what words become when they 'cease to be words. In doing so, she suggests that 'words' are a form of sensation, elevating it from a form of expression as the trauma of her mother's death enables her to 'experience them.' This experience cements Woolf's affinity for the written word as she finds solace in written expression. In her text, *Title,* Hermione Lee categorises this text as a 'literary exercise' (xi) as Woolf's interplay between her past and present, situated in her stream-of-consciousness narrative, demonstrates how her memories of the past and present consciousness occur simultaneously. For instance,

when first mentioning her father, Woolf prefaces the paragraph with '*the present*' (116) and discusses the current war affairs: 'Today the dictators dictate their terms to France. Meanwhile on this very hot morning… I…turn to my father' (116). Here, Woolf accesses her present to channel her past as the tragedy of Julia Stephen's early death leaves Leslie Stephen tyrannising a succession of women: Stella, Vanessa and Virginia herself (Lee ix). She refers to the 'dictators' that remind her of her father, whose authority over his children caused them to turn against him (Lee ix). Woolf reminisces how 'it was during the seven years between Stella's death in 1897 and his death in 1904 that Nessa and I were fully exposed without protection to the full blast of that strange character' (116). She refers to him as 'that strange character' and positions distance between her father and herself. She limits his identity to narrative demands, because, for readers, he is essentially a 'character' (116) in the memoir but to Woolf he is also a character in her life and doesn't seek to, consciously that is, humanise him with more personality. Rather, Woolf states he 'lacks picturesqueness, oddity, romance…like a steel engraving, without colour, or warmth or body' (117). This description is strikingly opposite to Woolf's description of her mother, whom she also struggles to describe because it is difficult for the author 'to single her out as she really was' (98). For Woolf, her mother is made of multiple memories, speaking to their intimate relationship, but her father is defined by his tyranny (117). This is ironic considering Woolf spent more time with her father than she did with her mother, yet can attach more emotion and memory to her mother. This suggests that Woolf's mother's presence is tied to her own life. So long as Woolf lingers, so does her mother. Woolf's life breathes existence for her mother to live on, in her memory ('my first memory is of her lap' [93]), her body ('I see her hands… my own are the same size'[(93]), her writing, and her thoughts, which then translates into every lived experience she has.

Similarly, in Baldwin's essay, *Notes of a Native Son*, the writer is also obsessed with the

idea of his father's 'invisible presence' (Woolf 92), as his essay revolves around his death. The essay opens with the line: 'On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born' (87). Immediately, readers are introduced to the idea of an 'inherited' identity, as there is an explicit transference of his father's life to his sibling. The quality of inheritance pervades this essay as Baldwin suggests that his identity is a product of familial and ancestral lineage and the lived experience of this identity is mediated by skin colour. Baldwin shares how 'my father lived and died in intolerable bitterness and it frightened me… to realise that this bitterness now was mine' (90). He notes that he 'discovered the weight of white people in the world' (90) and claims 'this had been for my ancestors and now would be for me an awful thing to live with and the bitterness that had helped to kill my father could also kill me' (90). In this discourse, 'bitterness' is comparable to a fatal disease spread through racism – 'the disease of his mind allowed the disease of his body to destroy him' (91). Baldwin sees 'bitterness' as the real culprit of his father's death because, like a virus, it slowly destroys the body's immunity, until it contracts a measurable disease like 'Tuberculosis' (91) to kill the body. This disease then, is hereditary to black people only and the symptoms are to live in the margins of society.

Baldwin's discourse reveals that to experience whiteness is a black man's burden, and this ancestral experience has passed down his family lineage suggesting he was born with a predestined identity. In one instance, Baldwin recollects when his white friend took him to a diner. The ensuing conversation is as follows: 'The counterman asked what we wanted… "We want a hamburger and a cup of coffee"... "We don't serve Negroes here"...' (97). In this dialogue, the use of the collective pronoun 'we' is ironic because it does not truly encompass both individuals equally. Initially, the counterman's inquiry is directed solely at the white man, dismissing Baldwin's presence, and thus the 'we wanted' is subjectively replaced by "he

wanted," referring to the white man. The second 'we,' articulated by Baldwin, pertains only to himself as the lack of plural speech ('*a* hamburger,' '*a* cup of coffee' [97]) suggests he is ordering for one person. Here Baldwin's 'we want' (97) actually signifies "I want." However, in doing so, his vocalisation visibilises his presence, and by extension, his race, disarming the temporary shield that his friend's white skin provided.

The third instance of 'we' is the only occurrence where the 'we' encompasses the larger systemic forces of racism inhibiting Baldwin from being served as he explicitly identifies the name of the diner, 'American Diner' (97). The 'American[ness]' (97) of the diner becomes evident in its racist operation, prompting Baldwin to comment on the political landscape of the country. Baldwin claims 'when we re-entered the streets, something happened to me…it seemed to me, in that instant, that all of the people were moving toward me, against me, and that everyone was white' (97). Suddenly Baldwin becomes isolated as the collective 'we' shifts to singular and repeated 'me.' He states, 'I wanted to crush these white faces which were crushing me' (97), speaking to the margins he's forced to operate within, evoking the same 'bitterness' that was innate in his father. In his *Autobiographical Notes*, Baldwin expresses concern about the responsibility of (black) representation. He asserts, 'the past is all that makes the present coherent, and further, that the past will remain horribly for exactly as long as we refuse to access it honestly' (6). Here Baldwin is talking to his readers explicitly, drawing our attention to the lessons that lie in our history, suggesting we must 'access it honestly' (6) before we repeat it.

This essay argues that to practise accessing the past is the life-writer's task. The essence of autobiography or 'memoir' (xi) is to look inward (Larson 55) and this inherently involves accessing one's past, which Baldwin is aware of, as he states: 'One writes out of one thing only– one's own experience' (7). By invoking his past and familial experiences then, Baldwin brings an authentic portrayal of growing up in America as a black man into a white literary canon and in

doing so expands the canon to other marginalised communities.

Critic Lauren Rusk states that those that the 'dominant in society defined as "other" than themselves…set out to experience that which has been erased, falsified, and devalued by the construction of otherness' (1). This interpretation suggests that Baldwin's choice to relay his 'experience' in the form of 'memoirs' (xi) allows him to 'access' and subsequently represent his 'otherness' (Rusk 1); for autobiography is set apart as a genre, granting the writer with the choice to make themself the writing subject (Marcus 273). Since the nature of autobiography permits free discourse, Baldwin expresses his criticism of the society he inhabits. He uses the form of the memoir to uphold his responsibility which he hopes will 'last, as Hemingway says, and get my work done. I want to be an honest man and a good writer' (9). His 'work' in question is to add his blackness into white literary canon, to include his identity, which carries with it, the invisible weight of his ancestral line who were subjected to social isolation. Therefore, by situating his racial discourse in the form of the memoir, Baldwin illustrates and evidences how his experiences are prescribed by the broader socially and systemically-induced culture of racist practice that dominated the lives of his father, and past ancestry. Baldwin views his writing as a mode of release, to simultaneously represent and dissolve the 'negro problem' (4) which is concerned with the representation of black people.

After the completion of her novel, *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf admits, 'I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice. I do not see her.' (93). It can therefore be assumed that Woolf, like Baldwin, views her writing as an opportunity to relieve her subconsciousness, which is riddled with her mother's presence. In concurrence with this, one of the first transcribers of Woolf's autobiographical features, Jean Schulkind, titled Woolf's collection '*Moments of Being*' because she understood it to mean an alteration between two levels of being (Lee vii): : the subconscious and conscious. This self-reflexive practice is licensed

by the genre of life-writing, which allows Woolf to free herself from any narrative agenda (Larson 140). Some critical reception has designated Woolf's text as a 'narrative of displacement and fragmentation' where the self is passive, verging on absent (Lee x). However, this essay argues that in Woolf's text, there are two selves: the present, adult Virginia, and the past, adolescent Virginia. This essay argues that to represent her past self, Woolf must employ a passive characterisation to demonstrate how exactly her past self was formed. Rather than viewing her past self as an independent and fully formed person, Woolf paints herself as an amalgamation of familial experiences centred around her mother's death. Lee states 'the repetitive, inconclusive return to the mother's death is at the heart of this remarkable adventure in life writing, where the past can never be solved or tidied away, the subject can never be finished with' (xv). As such, she is not a young writer-to-be; she is a daughter who lost her mother in her prime formative years, left to navigate her trauma whilst also being tasked to alleviate her family's trauma. Lee states that Woolf's text reads almost 'as a pastiche of a family memoir' (xi) as her identity is informed first, as with most children's, by their familial experience.

In a family memoir, the writing subject 'views and inscribes his or her story from the prism of intersecting lives' (Davis 10). This is exemplified by Ondaatje's novel, *Running in the Family,* where the author carves, and traces, his existence out of his turbulent family history. Although recounting the plethora of relations in his extended family line, this book presents itself as a return to Ondaatje's father, Merwyn Ondaatje, whose death compels Ondaatje to reimagine the life his dad had led. He states, 'my loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult' (201), so 'I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words' (202). Ondaatje, like Woolf and Baldwin, comments on his capacity to relay a book about his father, and by extension, his familial and ancestral experience. He says 'I am least sure about such words' (202) because they are a product of 'cups of tea, coffee, [and] public conversations' (48). This suggests

Ondaatje's framed narrative is passed down through stories, rumours and gossip. Ondaatje acknowledges how his narrative style then can be challenged for its authenticity or reliability as he claims, 'truth disappears with history and gossip tells us nothing of personal relationships' (48), after all, 'a literary work is a communal act' (231). In this quote, Ondaatje identifies different modes of expression, that is spoken ('gossip' [231]), and written ('literary' [231]) and suggests they are intrinsically tied to one another: what we write is a product of what is spoken around us. For Ondaatje, family history is, ironically, rooted in our memories. This is exemplified by the author's devotion to a whole chapter called '*Dialogues,*' which comprises the dialogues of anonymous family members about his father at, what is likely to be, his funeral. Due to the nature of memory, these stories are always accompanied by a degree of forgetfulness, ('if people suffer from memory they also suffer from forgetting' (Haughton [23]), or perhaps alteration, but this is ultimately inconsequential as the speaker of the dialogues are licensed to speak freely on their family as they are *part of* the family. For this reason, Ondaatje does not disclose the names of the dialogue speakers because their identity is irrelevant compared to their status as family members, where their familial tie alone validates not the claims but the choice to speak. Ondaatje ends his book with the claim: 'I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait of a "gesture"... I…can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts' (232). So, to Ondaatje, his family memoir is not meant to be an accurate depiction of history, as the different textual forms (verse, dialogue, prose) and elastic time frame of his book reveal that family histories can never be accessed truthfully.

By drawing our attention to the various forms of written and verbal expression, Ondaatje embraces the impressionable nature of a memoir to create a rich collection of family legacies. The elastic time frame allows him to revisit and reimagine stories, writing them into existence: 'I would be travelling back to the family that I had grown from – those relations from my parents'

generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words' (6). Ondaatje claims his family 'stood' in his memory, which is ironic considering the book is titled '*Running*' *in the Family*. The action 'running' conveys a constant state of movement as Chelva Kanaganayakam states that the 'running' in this book is as much about 'running 'in' as it is about 'to,' 'from,' or 'against' (Spinks and Thieme 112). In addition to this, this essay seeks to add another preposition to the list: "with."

The Ondaatje family history is itself formed out of a broader, ambivalent, colonial identity and culture (Spinks and Thieme 108) as Ondaatje states '[the island] Ceylon seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English' (60). This ambivalence appears to have fueled the entire Ondaatje family to displace and relocate as the author recalls how his mother once 'predicted that while she would continue to see each of her children often for the rest of her life, she would never see them all together again. This turned out to be true' (190). Here Ondaatje is not running 'in, to, from' or 'against' (Spinks and Thieme 112) his family, but rather *with* them as they seek out permanence away from Ceylon. This is because Ceylon is a country designed for transience due to its colonial tradition, which marks the land with multiple, conflicting cultural and colonial inflexions. Ondaatje claims that 'magnetic fields would go crazy in the presence of more than three Ondaatjes' (191), suggesting that his family identity cannot be limited to one geographical space, as they are embedded within the same colonial and cultural multiplicity that claims Ceylon. Therefore, this essay argues that this book is Ondaatje's attempt to explore his identity in all its multiplicity, harnessing his familial and ancestral ties to address the broader cultural landscape they originate from.

In conclusion, this essay underscores how Woolf, Baldwin, and Ondaatje engage with their interconnected personal and family histories, using the memoir as a medium to navigate, express and make sense of their complex identities, shaped by the past. Whilst Baldwin writes to

a certain end, such as the inclusion and authentic representation of black writers in the literary canon, Ondaatje and Woolf take a more introspective stance, exploring what the memoir can do for them as Woolf engages with the broader forms of the genre and Ondaatje embraces its elasticity. In showing how the different authors leverage the form of the memoir to different ends, this essay has demonstrated the adaptability of the life-writing genre, so it has manifested as a time capsule, borrowing and in turn distributing a range of literary traditions to its new writers.

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