Empowering the Identity: Postcolonial Autobiographical Writing

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Over the past half-century, Postcolonial literatures and postcolonial studies have gained the attention of more and more readers and scholars throughout the world. Writers as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka from Nigeria, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy from India, Derek Walcott from the Caribbean, Seamus Heaney from Ireland, Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje from Canada, Peter Carey and Patrick White from Australia, and J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer from South Africa have been prominent when major literary awards such as the Booker Prize or the Nobel Prize have been announced, and their works now appear on numerous school and university syllabus. Concurrently, their writing has provided the nourishment for a variety of postcolonial theories concerning the nature of such works, approaches to reading them, and their significance for reading and understanding other literary, philosophical and historical works. Indeed, the production of introductions to postcolonial theories has become a major industry.

However, in this research paper I will seek to focus on the literary texts rather than the theories, and to give a general sense of the issues and choices which inform the writing and reading of those texts. I will discuss the ways in which these issues have changed over the decades, involving questions of genre, form and language, as well as social and political concerns; it will also discuss how these texts may be read and responded to in different contexts.

Another strategy frequently found in postcolonial writing sidesteps entering into dialogue on the colonizer’s terms by grounding the text in autobiography, starting from the self as the central point of reference. Thus, as Chaucer’s Wife of Bath challenged the dogma of male clerks and scholars by asserting ‘the authority of experience’, many
postcolonial writers have drawn on their childhood experience sometimes as a means of conveying precolonial culture, a relatively innocent world preceding the impact of foreign educational systems, sometimes conveying the vulnerability of a child to the dictates of colonial power, and at the same time offering a perspective which challenges the premises and beliefs that are taken for granted in the hegemonic culture accepted by adult readers. In these ways postcolonial autobiography is often read differently from autobiographies produced in metropolitan context. For whereas metropolitan autobiographies are more typically works which seek to explore and assert the writer’s individualism, postcolonial autobiographies are often written to portray the author as a representative of his cultural group, as in the case of Camara Laye’s *Enfant Noir* (Dark Child) (1953) or as the embodiment of a new nation’s struggle to come into being and its establishment of a cultural and ideological identity, as in the autobiographies of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Jawaharlal Nehru and Kwame Nkrumah.

James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922) both draw attention to their status as autobiographical fiction, while at the same time problematizing the issue of physical and mental colonization. Like Yeats, Joyce reveals in *A Portrait* the developing consciousness of his protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, as a divided self, who must steer his way past the institutional dogmas of religion, family and nation in order to become a writer who can ‘forge in the smithy of [his] soul the uncreated conscience of [his] race’. Stephen - like Nehru, Nkrumah and Indira Gandhi, like Maud Gonne, Yeats and Padraic Pearse (one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising) - conceives of his country as feminine. Thus in thinking of Emma Cleary, the woman he would like to woo, and who seems not to respond to him, he merges her image with that of Ireland:

And yet he felt that, however he might revile and mock her image, his anger was also a form of homage. He had left the classroom in disdain that was not wholly sincere, feeling that perhaps the secret of her race lay behind those dark eyes upon which her long lashes flung a quick shadow. He had told himself bitterly, as he walked through the streets, that she was a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness, and secrecy, and loneliness. 12

Although *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is based closely on Joyce’s own experience—his family, the school and university he attended, the culture of Dublin in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century—we should be careful not to merge the author completely with Stephen. The critic James Olney maintains that ‘any autobiography constitutes a psychological-philosophical imitation of the autobiographer's personality’. 13 In autobiographical fiction the act of imitation of the author's personality in certain periods and in specific contexts is made more evident by the adoption of a pseudonym for the central protagonist, and perhaps the use of indirect free speech, or the sense of an
interior monologue, rather than first person narrative to convey the consciousness of its subject. Joyce's subsequent novel, *Ulysses*, portrays a slightly older Stephen, who is much more self-conscious and sceptical about the identification of Ireland with Cathleen ni Houlihan or with other female figures. He also parodies and criticizes forms of Irish nationalism which hark back to a nostalgic precolonial or rural utopia, and which promulgate a singular racial identity. Hence the other major protagonists in *Ulysses* are Leopold and Molly Bloom, who are respectively of Hungarian Jewish and English-Spanish descent. Nevertheless, Joyce's opposition to Britain's colonial rule, as well as to the hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church, was clearly recognized by his contemporaries. Thus the pro-British provost of Trinity College, J. P Mahaffy, declared: "it was a mistake to establish a separate university for the aborigines of the island, for the corner-boys who spit into the Liffey:"

Mahaffy's comment illustrates clearly the racial and class distinctions established and maintained by Ireland's ruling elite in this period, and their similarity to the distinctions made by ruling elites in other colonized countries. In both novels, the issue of nationalism and the writer's responsibility to his nation is debated explicitly and implicitly.

Robert Fraser comments on the significance of first person narrative in the postcolonial context as a response to colonial texts which in anthropological mode "invariably describe the colonised human as "other"; and just as invariably in the third person plural." In this context the 'first person singular, may also become 'the representative I' as Fraser terms it, 'in novels in which the first person singular is explicitly construed as identical, and coterminous, with the nation itself.' But it is also significant that many of the key colonial texts to which postcolonial writers have 'written back' are narrated in the first person - for example, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Each of these novels, like many colonial travel books and anthropological texts, constructs the white European male or female observer/narrator as normative. One function of postcolonial autobiographies is to resituate the central perspective, the seeing 'eye' or 'I; and at the same time dramatize the process of the indigenous speaker's reconstruction or reassertion of his or her identity.

Writing about European autobiographies, Olney has commented that for most readers the particular interest is 'the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience:''' With regard to African writing, however, he argues that community is more important than the individual, the life much more socially oriented, so that he considers 'autobiography from Africa less an individual phenomenon than a social one''' The generalization Olney makes about African writing, whether fictional or explicitly autobiographical, might be disputed,
but arguably postcolonial writers are as much concerned with the social context, the political and cultural forces which impinge on their community, as with the individuality of the protagonist. Nevertheless, the individuality, or perhaps the independence of the protagonist is at stake, alongside the independence of the nation to which he claims allegiance. Much early postcolonial writing addresses itself to the dual task of giving both the community and the individual expression, writing ‘from the inside’ in opposition to the colonial outsider’s dismissal of either cultural value or individual subjectivity within that community. But there is also a tension, an ambivalence, inherent in that dual task. In both A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and Ulysses, Joyce vividly, one might claim lovingly, recreates the Dublin he felt he could no longer live in if he were to become a writer. Yeats’s autobiographical poetry and prose dramatizes his commitment to Ireland, as he strives to change it and to be true to his own divided and conflicting selves.

In the West Indes C.L.R James’s Beyond a boundary (1963) and his early semi-autobiographical novel Minty Alley (1963) depict the protagonist’s growing awareness of the ways in which colour and class may circumscribe the expansion of the self. George Lamming’s influential autobiographical novel In the Castle of My Skin, portraying a childhood and adolescence in Barbados, was published in 1953. In later decades, Kamau Brathwite and Derek Walcott produced poetic autobiographies in X?Self (1987) and Another Life (1973) respectively, while V. S. Naipaul drew on his father’s life to write A House for Mr Biswas (1961), and made fiction and autobiography inextricable in The Enigma of Arrival (1987). Autobiography and autobiographical fiction and poetry have also been important genres for Caribbean women writers, including Michelle Cliff, Zee Edgell, Lorna Goodison, Jamaica Kincaid, Paule Marshall, Jean Rhys and Olive Senior. Challenging the concept of autobiography as centering on one individual, Sistren, the Jamaican women’s collective, has produced a collective autobiography, IonhenrtGal (1986), which transfers the oral narratives of working-class women to a single written-text.

Lamming’s In the Castle of My Skin, like A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, explores a history of mental colonization which the protagonist seeks to escape through exile. In his Introduction to the novel, written thirty years after its first publication, Lamming wrote of the impact of British colonialism on the psychology of Barbadians during the 1930s and 1940s, a community which on the one hand took pride in its relationship to the ‘Mother Country; identifying itself as ‘Little England', and on the other hand was aware of the need for an independent economic and cultural existence:

It was not a physical cruelty. Indeed, the colonial experience of my generation was almost wholly without violence. No torture, no concentration camp, no mysterious disappearance of hostile natives, no army encamped with orders to kill. The Caribbean
endured a different kind of subjugation. *It was a terror of the mind; a daily exercise in self-mutilation. Black versus Black in a battle for self-improvement."

This mental colonization, linked to a rigid class structure, created in Lamming's view `a fractured consciousness, a deep split in its sensibility which now raised difficult problems of language and values; the whole issue of cultural allegiance between imposed norms of White Power, represented by a small numerical minority, and the fragmented memory of the African masses: between white instruction and Black imagination'. Although Lamming differs from Joyce in adopting for some episodes a first person narrator, and in marking a relationship between author and protagonist through identifying him simply with the first initial of the author's first name (G.), he takes a similar trajectory and structure to Joyce by enacting the development of his protagonist, G., in successive contexts: family, school, community, adolescent awareness. Thus both authors depict the consciousness of an entire community to which the protagonist is attached, but from which he also seeks detachment. In both novels an ambivalent parting is achieved at the end, as the protagonist rejects a particular call to nationalism based on racial identification, and looks towards departure from the island home. Some readers would argue that at this point Lamming is more distanced from his protagonist than Joyce was from his: Ngugi wa Thiong'o, for example, sees Lamming as endorsing Trumper's support for Black Power and diasporic racial awareness for those of African descent as a means of casting off the cultural and economic `nets' of British colonialism.

In autobiographical writings by women in Africa, India, and the West Indies, the search for identity and self-fulfilment is even more problematical. One collection of critical and creative writing on colonial and postcolonial women's texts is entitled *A Double Colonisation* referring to the oppression of `native' women by both the colonial and the patriarchal local cultures which confine women to domestic and childbearing duties, and discriminate in terms of both gender and ethnicity or colour. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Jean Rhys portrayed the traumatic effects of such double colonization in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966); she also revealed the sense of disorientation and loss of identity experienced by her protagonist in her more autobiographical novel, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). Indeed, many autobiographical works by postcolonial women narrate a descent into disorientation and madness in the face of the impossible demands and denial of worth that they face. These works include Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1973), Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* (1984), Janet Frame's *An Angel at My Table* (1984) and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. In the novels by Head, Hulme and Dangarembga, the women protagonists are assaulted physically and psychologically by men who feel their own fragile status in emerging or newly independent nations threatened, and by conflicting expectations regarding their role and sexual attractiveness, an attractiveness based on Western norms of appearance and behaviour.
Other women writers have avoided the issue of sexuality by focusing on childhood and early adolescence, as do male writers such as Michael Antony, Christopher Drayton and Lamming. Indeed, Alison Donnell argues that although the dominant focus on childhood in canonical Caribbean writing has effectively used the child's vision to expose ‘the complex power structures of colonial institutions and power structures ... through the child's encounter with the school, the church, the cinema and the people of the communities in which they live; this emphasis on childhood experience 'has nevertheless limited the critical response to Caribbean literature in one important way: it has arrested the discussion of sexuality'.

Thus Merle Hodge's *Crick-Crack Monkey* (1970), Zee Edelstyn's *Beka Lamb* (1982) and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1986) all portray their protagonists' growing awareness of discrimination in terms of gender, class and colour, but end their narratives before the discovery of sexual identity.

One can see a similar pattern in Australian autobiography and autobiographical fiction, though the emphasis on childhood is less prevalent there. One of Australia's best-known autobiographical novels, Miles Franklin's *My Beautiful Career* (1901) focuses mainly on the narrator's early, almost Edenic childhood on a remote bush farm, contrasted with her teenage years in a harsher and poorer environment on a dairy farm, where she feels culturally deprived and oppressed by the expectation that she should forget her ambition to be a writer and marry. Published in 1901, the year the Australian states became united under a federal government, and thus formed a new nation, Franklin's novel both endorses the ardent nationalism that led up to federation and critiques the masculine ethos of that nationalism. Early reviewers of the novel praised its 'Australianness' but were made uneasy by its feminism and romanticism. Thus Henry Lawson, Australia's leading writer in this period, wrote in his *Preface to the first edition*, 'I don't know about the girlishly emotional parts of the book- I leave that to girl readers to judge; but as far as they are concerned, the book is true to Australia, the truest I ever read.'

Another early and influential reviewer, P. R. Stephensen, voices the critical assumption that has informed discussions of women's writing for centuries, that women simply transpose their lives on to the page, writing 'diaries' - seen as a female genre - rather than creative literature. Stephensen considered that, "Miles Franklin" has simply turned her girlish diary into a book; she has made literature out of the little things that lay around her-and this is what gives the book its value.' However, he also endorsed the book strongly as 'the very first Australian novel', and in an interesting merging of the woman and the country, reminiscent of other nationalist autobiographies discussed above, claimed, '[T]he author has the Australian mind, she speaks Australian language, utters Australian thoughts, and looks at things from an Australian point of view absolutely ... her book is a warm embodiment of Australian life, as tonic as bush air, as aromatic as bush trees, and as clear and honest as bush sunlight.
*My Brilliant Career* has reemerged as a canonical text in various guises - as a nationalist fiction, as an autobiographical document about country life in the 1890s, and in the second half of the twentieth century as a feminist statement. It is in this role that it was endorsed and republished in 1980 by Virago Press with a Preface by Virago's Australian editor, Carmen Callil. More recently, critics such as Ian Henderson have addressed the apparent inconsistencies in this autobiographical novel and the problem of reconciling Franklin's apparent disdain for 'peasantdom' with her dedication of the book to 'the honest bush folk who toil for their future', or her romantic aspiration for an ideal partner and her 'feminist' refusal of marriage. Henderson argues that earlier readings of her text relate to the gendering of genres and modes, in which realism is seen as masculine, romance as feminine, autobiography where 'a woman finds her forewarns the voice' as feminist. Instead, he analyses *My Brilliant Career* as a 'performative' text in which Franklin consciously adopts a variety of gendered genres: 'Within *My Brilliant Career* sometimes realism is dominant, sometimes the romance mode, but neither mode is consistent for long, and even while "dominant"; each mode's "other" irrupts into the narrative. In the process, then Sybylla delivers a self-conscious performance of her displacement in either gendered mode, preferring to roleplay.

The performance of gender, and in this case the questioning of notions of a stable sexual identity, are crucial motifs in another Australian semi-autobiographical fiction, Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair* (1979). Here the protagonist shifts between identities as Eudoxia, Eddie and Eadith. As Eudoxia, [wyborn is a transvestite and 'wife' to his Greek lover Angelo; as Eddie he works, as White himself did, as a 'jackeroo', an apprentice farmer amid an aggressively masculine society; as Eadith Trist, s/he becomes the madam of a sophisticated brothel catering to the English aristocracy in London (this part is not autobiographical). In this novel the struggle for national independence and self-validation is paralleled by the quest for acceptance as a homosexual. White's autobiography *Flaws in the Glass* (1981) is explicit about his life as a writer, and his complex identity as an Australian and a homosexual in what was then a homophobic culture.

Robert Fraser sees Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* as typical of many settler colony autobiographical works in its narcissism, and its use of 'the colonial first person singular'. It is also comparable with many other settler autobiographies in its attention to place, its assertion of belonging to a particular locale rather than a particular society, and its refusal to acknowledge the ownership of that locale by indigenous people.

Postcolonial autobiographical writing often plays a significant role in establishing the subject's sense of location and belonging. However, the desire to establish location and belonging may perform differently for settler authors, for indigenous authors, and for writers of mixed race and cultures. Examples of these different functions in

`I had a farm, in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong hills': thus Karen Blixen establishes her ownership, stating that the land once belonged to her and asserting her presence and being in that 'colonial singular first person.' Moreover, we are told a few lines on that this was not just a random piece of land; `it was Africa distilled up through six thousand feet, like the strong and refined essence of a continent. Nevertheless, the title of this autobiographical work, *Out of Africa*, forewarns the reader that the author no longer belongs. One might read this text as a contest between Blixen and Africa in terms of asserting then rejecting her right to belong, and this perhaps is the narrative entrenched in much settler writing during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition to *My Brilliant Career*, one could include here such works as Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in The Bush* (1852), and more recently, Judith Drake-Brockman's *Wongi Wongi* (2001), written in response to Morgan's *My Place*.

All these works share a lack of interest in the prehistory of the location and the author's family; it is the author who gives the place meaning, and who takes meaning from her presence in that place. Moreover, its significance is contained within the period of the writer's residence. For Blixen, as Gillian Whitlock points out, Africa is represented as the place where a European woman can become herself, powerful and independent. Beyond that period it has no past and no future.

In contrast, Morgan's autobiography begins with a scene in which the author is conspicuously out of place and disempowered, while the affirmative title, *My Place*, suggests a future belonging. This is the opening paragraph:

The hospital again, and the echo of my reluctant feet through the long, empty corridors. I hated hospitals and hospital smells. I hated the bare boards that gleamed with newly applied polish, the dust-free window-sills, and the flashes of shiny chrome that snatched my distorted shape as we hurried past. I was a grubby five-year-old in an alien environment.

Dust-free, sterile and distorting, the hospital is a place where the self is threatened and dissolved, full of wounded or shell-shocked white males, victims of World War II, all of them incomplete. Here the child Sally is called upon to perform the role of daughter to her white father, of compliant little girl, but cannot. The older Sally writes, `I felt if I said anything at all, I'd just fall apart. There'd be me, in pieces on the floor. I was full of secret fears. The alien unnaturalness of the hospital is then juxtaposed with Sally's memories of her grandmother's closeness to nature, another bedside scene where she is woken to hear the sound of a bullfrog and the call of a special bird. The opening contrast, between a self
distorted and threatened in a sterile white male world, and a self remembered and sustained in connection with her grandmother and nature, sets up the scheme of the autobiography, and the later scenes where Sally becomes an intermediary between her father and her mother, and between the state and the private worlds of her mother's family. *Like the hospital, school, with its rigid* and 'unnatural' regulations, presents another public realm in which Sally feels completely alien, whereas her *grandmother provides a sympathetic retreat from* that world. The autobiography reiterates a contrast between the new, white imposed and unnatural world, and the older 'natural' world associated with her grandmother, a world which draws its sustenance from close attention to birds, animals and the natural environment, a world rooted both in the land and the past.

But the truth about the past and her grandmother remains mysterious, concealed by a 'white lie; as Sally's mother admits when finally confronted about her aboriginal identity. "'All those years, Mum"; I said, "how could you have lied to us all those years?" "It was only a little white lie," she replied sadly." Thus, while Blixen begins her memoir with the affirmation of her 'self in connection' to the land and ends with the dissolution of that fantasy of belonging, Morgan is concerned with the quest for selfhood, and for an identity which locates her biologically, culturally and geographically. And while Kenya allows Blixen to establish herself as an *exceptional* European woman (and indeed also nourishes exceptional European men such as Denys Finch-Hatton), Morgan seeks to construct a communal identity, dissolved into a common strand of aboriginality and connected to a particular place of origin through the voices of 'ordinary' Aborigines. And whereas Blixen's narrative begins with a clearly focused autobiographical 'I' and then disintegrates at the end into a series of fragments as Finch-Hatton dies and she and her community of servants move away into an unknown future, Nlorgan's work builds to a climax through a series of connected narratives moving back into the past. For Blixen, her presence in Africa must be self-contained, in terms of both time and place, cut off from past or future; for Morgan, her presence and self-realization in Australia, her future, can be achieved only through a series of historical and geographical journeys, which allow a suppressed past and sense of belonging to come to the surface.

While for Blixen a European identity is taken for granted, and there is plenty of reference to all those artifacts which signal her European culture - the fine china, the silverware, the piano, the books, the furniture, the wine - Morgan's text involves the gradual discovery and recognition of aboriginality. In so doing, she constructs a generalized aboriginal identity for the reader. This moves from racial identity, the recognition of the significance of her darker skin, and her grandmother's non-European features, towards cultural identity, *through the narration of the experiences of her*
great-uncle, her mother and finally her grandmother. Through these stories Morgan also moves away from the confines of an urban location in the suburbs of Perth to the former freedom and sense of belonging in Corunna Downs. Thus her great-uncle Arthur remembers Lorunna Downs:

There was some wonderful wildlife on Corunna Downs. There was one little bird, he was a jay or a squeaker, he'd sing out three times and then the rains would come. He was never wrong. While he was there, there was always good feed, but when he was gone, drought! When the little frogs sang out, we knew it was going to rain. They were lovely colours, white and brown with black spots. They were all different, there wasn't one the same. They used to get into the cooler and we'd have to clean it out. They was all natural animals. Wonderful creatures.

There were no insecticides to kill the birds. That's why the blackfellas want their own land, with no white man messin' about destroyin' it.

All the people round there, we all belonged to each other. We were the tribe that made the station. The Drake-Brockmans didn't make it on their own. There were only a few white men there, ones that fixed the pumps and sank wells by contract. The blackfellas did the rest.

I remember seein' native people all chained up around the neck and hands, walkin' behind a policeman. They often passed the station that way.

In this reminiscence Arthur Corunna juxtaposes both the claim to the land and the denial of that claim; the ability to know and read a specific natural world articulated in detail, as is sense of community and mutual belonging; 'All the people round there, we all belonged to each other. We were the tribe that made the station.' Against this claim is set the dismissed claim of the Drake-Brockmans, and a history of dispossession and captivity - 'native people all chained up around the neck and hands, walkin' behind a policeman'. As Ngugi wa Thiongo's novels dispute Blixen's claim to ownership through their recounting of historical, legendary ties to the land and the experience of dispossession and imprisonment, so Morgan disputes the claims of the Drake-Brockmans and other white settlers. Moreover, Morgan establishes this aboriginal closeness to nature and communal responsibility as a biological inheritance, figured through the recurring reference to a special bird call, heard by her grandmother, her great-uncle, her sister Jill and herself. Morgan's quest, with her mother and sister, leads her to that place of origin, Corunna, and to being claimed as part of the community by the people who live there. In Morgan's words, 'What had begun as a tentative search for knowledge had grown into a spiritual and emotional pilgrimage. We had an Aboriginal consciousness now, and were proud of it.' She also declares, 'How deprived we would have been if we had been willing to let
things stay as they were. We would have survived, but not as whole people. We would never have known our place.

Sally Morgan’s quest stems in part from her hidden identity as a mixed-race Australian, whose whiteness is foregrounded to begin with in that white men’s hospital, and whose nonwhite identity is a mystery. Bernardine Evaristo, in her autobiographical verse novel Lara, 31 begins with an awareness of her racial mixture (Irish and Nigerian), but like Morgan her narrator must experience a geographical and historical journey of discovery before she can fully acknowledge her Nigerian heritage, and so locate herself back in England. Despite significant differences in the contexts and contents of these two works, there are also interesting similarities. In each case their colour is connected with their sense of unbelonging, of being out of place. Both urban Australia and urban England are seen as the worlds of white people, where black people are perceived as belonging elsewhere. Paradoxically, it is only by going elsewhere, by leaving the city, that the authors can claim their place in the city. Thus Lara travels first to Lagos and encounters the world of her father and his relatives, and then to Brazil, where her great-grandfather had been taken as a slave, in order to locate herself in history through its associations with specific places, and then returns to ‘London/, [where] Across international time zones / I step out of Heathrow and into my future.’ Like Morgan, the artist, she resolves ‘to paint slavery out of me, (the Daddy people onto canvas with colour rich strokes; and to ‘think of my island, the ‘Great’ Tippexed out of it- ! Tiny amid massive floating continents, the African one / An embryo within me’.

Both these autobiographies by Morgan and Evaristo share certain scenes or tropes with Ondaatje’s autobiographical Running in the Family. Neluka Silva has commented on the ways in which the emphasis on hybridity and multiculturalism in this text functions as a counter to the discourse of ethnic nationalism which was becoming so virulent in Sri Lanka in the 1970s and early 1980s. Thus the marriage of Ondaatje’s partly Tamil father and Burgher mother, the friction between them and their subsequent divorce, has a particular resonance in the context of the ethnic and class tensions in Sri Lanka. As a returnee of mixed race who seeks to retrieve his identity in a Sri Lankan context, Ondaatje must restage those tensions and conflicts, and seek some reconciliation between the attachments to mother and father. There are interesting similarities between the scenes in My Place and Running in the Family where the child must act as intermediary between a violent alcoholic father and the mother who is the victim of his outbursts. ondaatje tells how his mother makes her children act out this intermediary role:

Whenever my father would lapse into one of his alcoholic states she would send the three older children...into my father’s room where by now he could hardly talk, let alone argue. The three of them, well coached, would perform with tears streaming. “Daddy, don’t drink, daddy if you love us, don’t drink,” while my mother witted outside and
listened... These moments embarrassed my older brother and sister terribly; for days after they felt guilty and miserable.

likewise, Sally is sent to negotiate with her father whenever the family has had to flee at night from one of his alcoholic rages. It is described as a recurring ritual drama:

he always knew when I had come, quietly opening his bedroom door when he heard the creak on the back verandah.

I took up my usual position on the end of his bed and dangled my feet back and forth...

‘Dad, we’ll all come back if you’ll good’ I stated ...[H]e responded with his usual brief, wry smile, and then gave his usual answer, ‘I’ll let you all come back as long as your grandmother doesn’t’. he had a thing about Nanna.

the scene continues with the father’s attempt to bribe Sally into staying with him, and a demand that she make clear whether her love and loyalty lie with her mother or her father. as in the Ondaatje scenes, the demand for an allegiance to one side rather than another, the standing of the child as negotiator on behalf of the ‘wronged’ party, is imbued with racial significance (the mother must leave behind her aboriginal parent) and reverberates in the context of the racial politics of the country as whole. in evaristo’s work also, Lara acts as an intermediary between her white grandmother and her Nigerian father, and also learns to act the penitent in face of her father’s harsh beatings; in all three works the father’s presence and the tensions between the parents bring fear, pain and guilt for the children.

All three are also hybrid texts in their use of a mixture of genres. in contrast to Blixen’s univocal text, told entirely from her perspective and in her authoritative voice, Morgan, Evaristo and Ondaatje deploy a mixture of voices, perspective and genres.

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Imagined often become blurred, as in the vivid account of his grandmother floating away in the floods or of his father's last train ride. Indeed, the text ends with the poignant admission that the past cannot be truly known, and that he will never 'find' his father, so is unable to see himself in terms of a patriarchal origin and descent. Even the photographs add to this sense of unknowability; rather than confirming the ‘reality’ of those photographed, and allowing us to ‘see’ them as they were, the groups in fancy dress, the parents making ape faces, the streets awash with water, all suggest transient or performed identities, moments of instability. Like Franklin and White, and like Naipaul's characters in The Mimic Men (1967), Ondaatje's use of a mixture of genres
denies the notion of a fixed or stable identity, and suggests rather the performance of identities.

Thinking about these autobiographical works, one is struck by how often travel, the move away from a starting place, becomes in postcolonial autobiography a means of locating oneself back in that land. One can think back to The Interesting Narrative of Otnndah Equiano (1789), which, after the African prologue, describes a series of journeys to and from England before Equiano finally settles there as an Englishman. Similarly Mary Seacole's The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacoie in Man; Lands (1857), after her Jamaican starting point, describe two journeys to England, where she is rejected before her triumphant return as 'Mother Seacole'. Naipaul's The Enigma of Arrival also begins with his persistent mapping of the Wiltshire countryside, before then describing his journey from the Caribbean, his disorientation in London, and then his sense of belonging in Wiltshire again. Like Naipaul, Ondaatje mingles autobiography and travel writing in his Running in the Family. For both Naipaul and Ondaatje, England and Sri Lanka are made familiar and at the same time strange by a tradition of writing about them. They come to these countries with a kind of double vision, recognizing the scenes portrayed in books or advertisements yet finding the written or picture book images slightly out of kilter. Thus Naipaul's image of England is both confirmed and amended by the sight of the black-and-white cows on the Wiltshire hillside, a reminder of the images on the tins of condensed milk he remembered from his childhood. But as Tobias Doring points out, Naipaul also revises the English landscape in terms of his Trinidadian world: the patterns of snowdrifts remind him of the whoels of sand on the beaches he walked on as a child." In Ondaatje's case, however, the recognition of scenes in Sri Lanka is influenced both by his childhood memories and by the reaction of his Canadian-born children to a world which is for them completely new.

The title of Naipaul's autobiographical `novel; The Enigma of Arrival, encapsulates one aspect of many postcolonial autobiographies. Whereas European autobiographies traditionally map a journey through life to a point of completion or arrival, many postcolonial autobiographies, as Linda Anderson points out, accept a concept of identity which embraces 'contingency, indeterminacy, and conflict: 4 For Naipaul, the 'arrival' is always uncertain, enigmatic, possibly yet another departure. However, autobiographies by diasporic writers such as Evaristo, Naipaul or Ondaatje differ from those of writers like Morgan, who assert their recovery of self and place in their 'home' country, or Wole Soyinka, whose trilogy beginning with Ake (1981) affirms his origins and belonging in Yoruba culture.

Notes
For distinctions made between the hyphenated term ‘post – colonial’ and the unhyphenated ‘postcolonial’. Both the terms are not always used consistently, but in general the unhyphenated ‘postcolonial’ refers to the consequences of colonialism from the time of its first impact – culturally, politically, and economically. Thus ‘Postcolonial Studies’ takes in colonial literature and history, as well as the literature and art produced after independence has been achieved. ‘Post – colonial’ with a hyphen tends to refer to the historical period after a nation has been officially recognized as independence and is no longer governed as a colony.


Bibliography


1 For distinctions made between the hyphenated term ‘post - colonial’ and the unhyphenated ‘post – colonial’ see the glossary.


4 This conference convened by Bismark in Berlin was attended by fourteen European nations, including Belgium, Britan, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain, to determine and share control over Africa. A series of geometric lines, which paid little attention to the boundaries, established by the hundreds of indigenous cultures and regions within the continent, divided Africa
into fifty regions, each allocated to one of the European powers. As H.J. de Blij and Peter O. Muller remark ‘The Berlin Conference was Africa’s undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African continent. By the time independence returned to Africa in 1950, the realm had acquired a legacy of political fragmentation that could neither be eliminated noe made to operate satisfactory.’ See de Blij and Muller, *Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1997) p. 340.