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“All of our lives have been terribly shaped by what went on before us”:
History and (Post)Memory in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*
and *Anil’s Ghost*

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Michael Ondaatje’s fictionalized memoir *Running in the Family* (1982) and his novel *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) are thematically concerned with a return to the country of birth and a confrontation with the past, both individual and collective. In both the memoir and the novel, the history of the author’s native Sri Lanka is not only consciously recorded, but also inscribed on material traces and on the human body, “terribly” and insidiously shaping subsequent generations. The article argues that this unconscious, hidden past involves gradual changes and developments that occur imperceptibly over the long term, including events whose effects are transmitted unconsciously through intergenerational (epigenetic) transfer and imprinted on individuals and communities. In both works, Ondaatje adopts a long-term perspective reminiscent of Fernand Braudel’s *longue durée* to rethink the Sri Lankan past in a way that dismisses a deterministic idea of historical inevitability. As argued by Walter Benjamin and contemporary interpreters of the *longue durée*, the future is not predetermined. The past holds unrealized potentialities, which may inspire and shape alternative futures. What sustains this way of thinking is a belief in the power of counterfactual thinking to subvert the inevitability of the current order or values.

Keywords: Michael Ondaatje; history; postmemory; the *longue durée*; Fernand Braudel; Walter Benjamin

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“All of our lives have been terribly shaped by what went on before us”: Historia y posmemoria en *Running in the Family* y *Anil's Ghost* de Michael Ondaatje

La ficción autobiográfica de Michael Ondaatje *Running in the Family* (1982) y su novela *Anil's Ghost* (2000) se ocupan temáticamente de un regreso al país de nacimiento y una confrontación con el pasado, tanto individual como colectivo. Tanto en la ficción autobiográfica como en la novela, la historia de Sri Lanka, la tierra natal del autor, no solo queda registrada conscientemente, sino también grabada en fuentes materiales y en el propio cuerpo humano, moldeando “terriblemente” e insidiosamente a las generaciones posteriores. El artículo sostiene que este pasado inconsciente y oculto implica cambios y desarrollos graduales que ocurren de manera imperceptible a largo plazo, incluyendo eventos cuyos efectos se transmiten inconscientemente a través de transferencias intergeneracionales (epigenéticas) y que quedan grabadas en los individuos y las comunidades. En ambas obras, Ondaatje adopta una perspectiva a largo plazo que recuerda a la *longue durée* de Fernand Braudel para repensar el pasado de Sri Lanka y para descartar una idea determinista de la inevitabilidad histórica. Como sostienen Walter Benjamin y los intérpretes contemporáneos de la *longue durée*, el futuro no está predeterminado. El pasado encierra potencialidades no consumadas que pueden inspirar y dar forma a futuros alternativos. Lo que sustenta a esta forma de pensar es la creencia en el poder del pensamiento contrafáctico para subvertir la inevitabilidad del orden actual o sus valores.

Palabras clave: Michael Ondaatje; historia; posmemoria; *longue durée*; Fernand Braudel; Walter Benjamin

INTRODUCTION

Michael Ondaatje's 1982 memoir *Running in the Family* and his 2000 novel *Anil's Ghost* have frequently been discussed in connection with the question of the diasporic subject. Both texts explore the theme of a return (the former actual, the latter imaginary) to Sri Lanka—the country of origin for the autobiographical narrator of the memoir and the novel's main character.¹ By foregrounding confrontations with the past occasioned by such visits, the memoir and the novel are also emblematic of the current preoccupation

¹ Both works explore the theme of an actual or fictional return to Sri Lanka and the confrontation with the past occasioned by the visit. While the novel can be classified as belonging to the category of “fictions of return,” as it presents an imaginary return, the partly fictionalized memoir inspired by Michael Ondaatje's actual visits to Sri Lanka in 1978 and 1980 has variously been labeled a “semi-fictional biography,” an “experimental autobiography in prose,” a “fictionalized memoir,” a “travel memoir,” a “non-fiction novel,” a “biotext,” and a “return memoir.” These categorizations of *Running in the Family* are quoted by Marta Bladec, who suggests that the work “belongs to the growing genre of return memoirs, or autobiographical narratives organised around the authors' journeys to places from their ancestral or personal past” (2012, 391).

with history, memory and the impact of the past on the present. As Robert Eaglestone (2018) observes, “the resurgent past” has become a “distinctive and dominant theme of much contemporary fiction” and its “grip on the present has been shown as becoming increasingly stronger” (2018, 311). From the body of contemporary literary fiction Eaglestone teases out several examples of the “diverse and contradictory array of modes by which the past is represented,” such as fable, memory, forms of contrapuntal past, haunting, possession and trauma (312). These modes differ in the type of access to the past they provide, which in turn entails the various forms of impact that the past may have on the present. For instance, in fictions which represent the past as memory, what is remembered is often shown as constructed in accordance with the current politics of remembrance, which has a direct impact on the way individuals and communities engage with the challenges of the present. Rather than the politicization of memory, Ondaatje is mostly concerned with its pervasive presence, with memories of the past not only being deliberately recorded in individual and collective narratives, but also inscribed on material traces and on the human body. By evading consciousness, this type of memory “terribly” and insidiously shapes subsequent generations. This unconscious, hidden past may involve gradual changes and developments that occur imperceptibly over the long term—a perspective reminiscent of Fernand Braudel’s conception of the *longue durée*—including events whose effects are transmitted unconsciously through intergenerational—epigenetic—transfer and imprinted on individuals and communities.

As will be shown in this article, the long-term historical perspective need not be incompatible with attention being paid to recent events or concern about the present and the future. In fact, Fernand Braudel’s approach, which provides a theoretical framework for my discussion of the significance of the extended temporal perspective in Ondaatje’s texts, involves a plurality of mutually illuminating temporal scales. While the study of long-term “human interactions with the physical environment and the structural cycles of economics and politics” (Guldi and Armitage 2014, 10) occupies a privileged place in Braudel’s conception of multiple temporalities, the system also includes the structure of intermediate duration constituted by cyclical time as well as the very short-term structure of the event (Tomich 2011, 56). In the historian’s tripartite scheme, theorized in the late 1950s, the *longue durée* is set against the short-term history of events; the latter, when unaccompanied by a longer perspective, engenders a “myopic form of historical understanding, tethered to power and focused on the present” (Guldi and Armitage 2014, 17). Braudel believed that focusing exclusively on short-term temporal scales and on the “homogeneous, linear, and empty time of event history” (Tomich 2011, 56) obscured the “deeper regularities and continuities underlying the historical processes. And it was, therefore, essential to move to a different temporal horizon, to a history measured in centuries or millennia,” while the study of long-term processes offered a more refined understanding of the past (Guldi and Armitage 2014, 16). In the subsequent sections of this article, I will show that by adopting a long-term

temporal perspective Ondaatje evades a “myopic” focus on the recent past and instead emphasizes the slow process of formation and development of persistent social traits and tendencies. The writer has been criticized for allegedly failing to engage with Sri Lankan colonial and postcolonial history; Arun Mukherjee, for instance, argues that the memoir lacks “perspective” and does not situate the author’s family “in a network of social relationships” (quoted in Barbour 1993, 229). However, Ondaatje’s interest in the island’s distant past complements, rather than downplays, the role of the colonial period. In fact, balancing recent factors with the *longue durée* approach to the study of history offers an illuminating and nuanced perspective on the formation of Burgher identity in *Running in the Family* and on the complex sources of the Sri Lankan civil war in *Anil’s Ghost*. This article also explores a suggestion implicit in the novel that employing a long-term temporal horizon may disable fixed narratives focused on the short-term and the perceived inevitability of connections between past and present that they construct. Rather than affirming the power of destiny, the distant past may reveal potentiality and hope for the future, as implied in the writings of contemporary followers of Braudel as well as in Walter Benjamin’s philosophical conceptions.

2. RUNNING IN THE FAMILY, RUNNING IN THE NATION — FAMILY AND SRI LANKAN PAST IN *RUNNING IN THE FAMILY*

Ondaatje’s search for his family’s past was his primary motivation for writing the memoir. As the writer left the island at the age of eleven, very few memories in the book are his own and his quest for his roots becomes an exploration of unfamiliar ground: the history of the Ondaatjes, of Sri Lanka, and of his own childhood, which he “had ignored and not understood” (Ondaatje 1993, 22). A substantial part of the memoir involves “a search for the father he has never known,” Ondaatje’s parents having divorced when he was three years old (Howells 7). The narrative combines historical information, family photographs and stories gathered during the writer’s 1978 and 1980 visits to Sri Lanka and the writer’s imaginative fictions, all of which are intended to complete relatives’ stories and penetrate the mystery of his parents’ marriage and divorce, as well as his father’s later life and death. Numerous relatives and friends who, Ondaatje says, “helped me in my inquisitiveness” are listed and thanked in the Acknowledgements (Ondaatje 1993, 205). Among them is Aunt Phyllis, a purveyor of stories about the family and therefore referred to as the “minotaur of the long journey back,” the metaphor emphasizing the aim of the return and the labyrinth-like complexity of the familial past that the autobiographical narrator is navigating (25). The stories and anecdotes in the book are expected to fill in the gaps in the past and illuminate the motifs and traits that seem to “run” in the family, but resist understanding. The familial idiosyncrasies, eccentricities, or quirks instead emerge as being related to a wider context—to the history of the island.

These links between familial and public history are implied by way of vignettes of the island’s past situated alongside stories about the family. The history invoked

in the memoir thus does not form a coherent, conventional narrative, but is loosely incorporated in the text in the form of random intrusions, a practice that mimics the non-linear work of memory and the textual nature of history. Additionally, the fragments that the narrator brings together, “archival, anecdotal, fictional,” represent different genres and conventions, namely life writing, travel writing and poetry as well as historiographical and fictional narrative. By combining genres and mixing fact and fiction, the narrative remains inconclusive, leaving unstated the connections between the private and public histories and evading one single version of history and its role in the present. Although it is not explicitly articulated in the narrative, the Ondaatjes’ mixed origin intersects with Sri Lanka’s history—a palimpsest of Buddhist past and of Portuguese, Dutch and British colonial invasions—with the family’s Burgher status combining the legacy of the invaders and that of the indigenous inhabitants of the island. By invoking his family’s complex heritage, Ondaatje interrogates predictable oppositions and antagonisms between the colonizers and the natives.

In his search for correspondences between the familial past and the history of the island as well as for the impact they have on the present, Ondaatje adopts a perspective reminiscent of Braudel’s conception of the *longue durée*, particularly his subversive privileging of the distant past, rather than ephemeral events, and his tendency to transcend the constraints of traditional periodizations (Guldi and Armitage 2014, 17). As such, Ondaatje looks at the history of Sri Lanka, known as Ceylon before 1972, from a long-term perspective, without emphasizing unique events or conventional periods. Thus, the colonial phase in the history of Sri Lanka is viewed over the long-term instead of being split up into consecutive invasions: the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, followed by the Dutch and finally the British. This unfolding of the past over the long term is analogous to the slowly changing outline of the island. The cartographic images of Sri Lanka described in the chapter “Tabula Asiae,” which evolved over the centuries “from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy,” represent the continuously shifting perception of the island and reveal the travelers’ “routes for invasion and trade” (Ondaatje 1993, 63, 64). Analogously, the island’s changing name² reflects the colonizers’ power to name and describe the land, frequently as a threatening other and, at the same time, a repressed aspect of the self. The memoirs and travel writings of said visitors reveal a self-centered ignorance: D. H. Lawrence wrote that Ceylon, like other places he had visited, was “only the negation of what we ourselves stand for and are”; Leonard Woolf in his novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), which is based on his stay on the island, pronounced that “all jungles are evil” (Ondaatje 1993, 78).

Like the cartographic representation and the name of the island, the mentality and attitudes of the island’s inhabitants have been shaped in the course of its slowly unfolding history. Ondaatje’s focus on the slow-moving history, rather than on discrete

² Ondaatje lists it as “Serendip, Ratnapida (‘island of gems’), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon,” (1993, 64) noting that each one given by invaders and visitors who “stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the ‘inquisitive natives’ and left” (80).

events and their consequences, emphasizes the difficulty of attributing to one single cause the gradual, incremental changes that occur at the level of culture or mentality. The Ondaatjes' past is inscribed in the history of Sri Lanka, where they have lived since the seventeenth century and consequently have "Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations" (Ondaatje 1993, 41). Due to their ties with the colonizers, the Burghers enjoyed high social status in Sri Lanka—on both sides, the writer's relatives have come from "the best known and wealthiest families in Ceylon" (172). At the same time, they have always considered themselves native, in contrast to the English and other foreigners, who "were seen as transients, snobs and racist and were quite separate from those who had intermarried and who lived here permanently" (Ondaatje 1993, 41). The habits, behaviors and idiosyncrasies of the writer's forebears appear to be products of a gradual intermingling of the local reality and external influences, which is emblemized in the figure of a Tamil ancestor—a doctor from South India—who arrived in Ceylon in 1600, cured the Dutch governor's daughter, and was "rewarded with land, a foreign wife, and a name which was a Dutch spelling of his own" (64). When his Dutch wife died, the ancestor married a Sinhalese woman. By returning to Sri Lanka, Ondaatje returns to a past marked by the duality of his Burgher lineage. Thus, when he confesses: "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner," he alludes not only to the condition of being divided between Canada, the writer's adopted home country, and Sri Lanka and between two designations—the foreigner and the son—, but also to his family's complex legacy, as the Burgher identity combines the foreign and the local as well as subverting the conventional notions of race and ethnicity (79).

In the memoir, the writer's eccentric ancestors, particularly their exploits in the 1920s, are not, however, attributed solely to their privileged status under British rule, but are rather positioned against the background of centuries during which the Burgher identity was shaped out of local and foreign elements. The Ondaatjes' double legacy means that they may at one and the same time be seen as the descendants of the colonizers and as objects of the subsequent invaders' manipulations. The manner in which the writer signals the connection between the colonial exploitation and the history of his family is consistent with his overall textual strategy, where links between the public and the private past are implicitly suggested rather than explicitly stated. The description of certain motifs recurring in the familial past, such as recklessness and irresponsibility, is placed side by side with the mention of a strategy the British colonizers used to subjugate the local population. Gambling was encouraged by the British as they "genuinely believed that betting eliminated strikes [...] [and] men had to work in order to gamble" (48). What immediately follows is a passage about the narrator's carefree parents and grandparents that suggests a link between the colonial history of the island and the attitudes of its people: "from the twenties until the war nobody really had to grow up. They remained wild and spoiled. It was only during the second half of my parents' generation that they suddenly turned to the real world"

(53). From his relatives' stories, the writer recreates scenes of wild parties, elopements, family feuds, heavy drinking and compulsive horse race betting. He fills the inevitable gaps with imaginative details, eventually concluding that the reckless years represent "[t]he waste of youth. Burned purposeless" (47). Elsewhere, while recounting his maternal grandmother's passion for a particular card game—which takes at least eight hours to play—Ondaatje mentions in passing its name and origin. "Ajoutha [...] was a game the Portuguese had taught the Sinhalese in the fifteenth century to keep them quiet and preoccupied while they invaded the country" (126), this short aside offering a commentary on the impact of Portuguese colonization on the people of Sri Lanka.

The history of the island, intertwined, as has been shown, with the history of the family, remains linked with the present, its deposits lodged in the unconscious or inscribed in the body. In the figure of his father, Mervyn, the writer shows the impact on an individual of both the long-term past and of recent events. The father who Ondaatje searches for emerges initially as a product of the environment and his upbringing, his pre-war exploits consistent with the legendary frivolity of the young Burghers in the 1920s. However, with privilege comes responsibility. The outbreak of World War II put an end to Mervyn Ondaatje's carefree lifestyle: he served as an officer in the Ceylon Light Infantry and was traumatized by the Japanese air attack on Colombo in 1942. Mervyn's erratic behavior during the war, particularly his heavy drinking, suicide attempts and notorious train stopping, appears to have been related to his war experiences. In the 1920s he would stop trains for frivolous reasons, for instance, to cause it to wait for his friend who had missed it: "he pulled out his army pistol [...] and threatened to kill the driver unless he stopped the train" (148); in wartime, however, he acted out of fear. During his last and most dramatic train ride, Mervyn, drunk again, stopped the train because he was "absolutely certain the Japanese had mined the train with bombs" (155). Even though he was right and the bombs were eventually found, he was banned from the Ceylon Railways in 1943 for disrupting train schedules; three years later his marriage to Michael Ondaatje's mother ended in divorce. The writer recognizes the impact of the familial past when he observes that "we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed [...]. I think all of our lives have been terribly shaped by what went on before us" (179). Ondaatje here gestures towards the inevitability of his father's legacy, whereby his personality, along with his war-related traumatic experiences, were transmitted to his children. The writer, who was born in 1943 during the period of the most intense stress in his father's life, identifies in himself and his siblings "the anger and argument" which seems to be "running in the family" (168) but which his father's younger children by his second wife lack. They, instead, have "this calmness and quietness," suggesting a different transmission of familial traits (168). Through this mention of the difference between two "sets of children" the writer plays down the role of traditionally understood genetic heredity, at the same time suggesting postmemory as another way of transmitting traits across generations.

The concept of “postmemory” illuminates the motif of the transgenerational transmission of trauma, fear and anger in the narrative. In its most basic sense, as defined by Marianne Hirsch, “postmemory” refers to

the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. [...] Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness [...] is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. (Hirsch, n.p.)

As Hirsch explains, postmemory involves, but is not limited to, the impact of the parents’ memories transmitted via stories to their children (or even grandchildren). Additionally, experiences and emotions may be passed on to children through the parents’ behaviors or silences, which are expressions of their unconscious. These channels of transmission are probably also at play here—Ondaatje describes his mother as emerging seriously traumatized from her marriage, which manifested itself in an alteration in her handwriting, which latterly “looks wild, drunk, the letters much larger and billow[ing] over the pages, almost as if she had changed hands [...] as if at the age of thirty or so she had been blasted, forgotten how to write” (150). Recent discoveries in biology and medicine make it possible to conceptualize still another route of transmission—a transgenerational transfer occurring at the epigenetic level. A growing number of studies support the idea that the effects of trauma can reverberate down the generations through epigenetic changes in the expression of genes that do not result from alterations in the DNA sequence; it turns out that life events can change the readability, or expression, of genes without modifying the DNA code itself. The findings derived from animal studies have been confirmed in studies of children of trauma survivors, who were found to exhibit behaviors associated with events they did not experience and never heard about (Henriques, n.p.). The epigenetic transfer begins in the original survivors of painful events, causing chemical tags to be “added to or removed from [their] DNA in response to changes in the environment [...]. These tags turn genes on or off, offering a way of adapting to altered conditions without inflicting a more permanent shift in [their] genomes” (Henriques, n.p.). What emerges from scientific studies is that the resulting changes in the way our DNA is expressed can be passed on to the next generation (Henriques, n.p.). To this end, some of the traits Ondaatje finds “running in the family” may have been passed down through such epigenetic transfer.

Other than “the anger and argument” mentioned earlier, the text does not specify other inherited qualities or suggest ways to resist the determining power of the past.

However, in the final chapter, “Last morning,” the narrator expresses a wish to preserve the memory of the island and to imprint it on his body: “My body must remember everything, this brief insect bite, smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light, rain, rain [...]. There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old, that might not have been there when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven” (202). The narrator hopes to preserve the sounds and smells of the torrential, cleansing rain in the body. The timeless quality of the surroundings momentarily suspends the passage of time, disrupts the linear sequence of events and offers hope that different memories might be consciously implanted, perhaps displacing earlier memories. In the memoir, it is the family which is the space of “inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (Hirsch 2008, 106). However, the acts of transfer, frequently “non-verbal and non-cognitive,” do not take place exclusively within the familial space (106, 112). Ondaatje suggests that the phenomenon of intergenerational transfer may indeed occur at the level of a community or whole society in his novel *Anil's Ghost*.

3. IN THRALL OF “UNLEARNED VENGEANCE”—THE SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR IN *ANIL'S GHOST*

While *Running in the Family* is mostly focused on the familial past, its connection to the history of Sri Lanka, and the impact of both these historical narratives on the present, *Anil's Ghost* deals with the political situation on the island at the time the novel was written. Like the memoir though, the novel is concerned with the persistence of history and memory in the present. As *Anil's Ghost* was published in 2000, it is set against the background of the first half of 1983–2009 Sri Lankan civil war. Although he uses the war as the setting, Ondaatje carefully avoids entering into the (then) ongoing political debate, which was polarized along clear ethnic and ideological lines. The writer's refusal to take sides and endorse one or the other political position has elicited contradictory responses. Ondaatje has been accused of “circumventing the historical realities” of the Sri Lankan war, and the novel “dismissed for its ‘irresponsible’ apoliticism” (Burrows 2008, 162). In the writer's defense against these charges, Chelva Kanaganayakam (2006) praises Ondaatje's authorial reticence, considering that it allows *Anil's Ghost* to establish a “careful balance between political engagement and aesthetic distance” and to offer “political engagement without taking sides” (2006, 6). Ondaatje's reticence is not, however, appreciated by Quadri Ismail, who takes issue with his lack of “engagement with the Tamil claim to being oppressed” (quoted in Goldman 2004, 2), and accuses the writer of adopting a Sinhalese perspective, as if the fact that the novel's characters have Sinhalese names and Buddhism is referenced in the novel were an expression of Ondaatje's sympathies (3). As Marlene Goldman (2004) argues, frequent references to Buddhism in the novel are meant to highlight its role—rooted in the past—in forging and solidifying Sinhala identity (3). Goldman states that “rather than offer a sanitized, apolitical and ahistorical account that ignores Buddhism's enmeshment in politics,

Ondaatje addresses in his novel the complex relationship between religion, politics, and violence in Sri Lanka” (4). I will argue that Ondaatje, in addition to invoking Buddhism’s recent role in Sri Lankan politics, reflects on its long-term presence on the island and its potential role in the future.

Smaro Kamboureli (2009) locates the writer’s refusal to promote a particular version of cultural memory and his resistance to reductive determinations of the sources of the civil war within a wider tendency among diasporic authors to evade being enlisted in political conflicts in their homelands. For Kamboureli, *Anil’s Ghost* can be read as Michael Ondaatje’s response to the mobilization of literature to serve the purpose of constructing collective memory, which plays a vital role in the creation of the nation. The critic employs the term “writing back home” to refer to Ondaatje’s and other diasporic authors’ opposition to the instrumental treatment of literature and its involvement in the “technologies of the nation-state” (2009, 30). As a writer who comes from a background with colonial and postcolonial history, Ondaatje is expected, by literary critics in and outside of Sri Lanka, to recognize and accept his political responsibility by taking a clear political stance as regards the Sri Lankan conflict. In *Anil’s Ghost*, which can be situated within the “writing back home” mode, the writer resists those pressures, calling into question the national master narratives that have been constructed and employed as foundational in the nation-building enterprise. At the same time, Ondaatje attempts to restore cultural memories that have been marginalized or repressed (Kamboureli 2009, 30).

Like other authors from postcolonial backgrounds, Ondaatje refuses to attribute conflict in the present exclusively to the fairly recent colonial past. While colonial domination indisputably contributed to the intensification of local tensions, situating the contemporary conflict against the background of the *longue durée* offers a more nuanced vision of the past. Historians generally agree that Portuguese, Dutch and British colonizers took advantage of inter-ethnic conflicts as well as inter- and intra-religious tensions that were deeply rooted in the ancient history of the island. The fact that the British used “divide and rule” tactics, favoring members of the Tamil community against the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, further antagonized both groups. A reversal of the distribution of power occurred in postcolonial Sri Lanka after the British departure in 1948 when in 1956 Sinhalese was established as the official language and Buddhism became the state religion, a move which the late-nineteenth-century revival of Buddhism with its nationalist overtones had paved the way for (Tambiah 1992, 2). The fact that the Tamil and Hindu minorities felt marginalized by these decisions of the Sri Lankan government further exacerbated the Sinhalese-Tamil conflict. The tension culminated in the civil war (1983-2009) between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, who violently opposed what they perceived as their oppression by the Sinhalese majority, and government forces (Burrows 2008, 167).

Ondaatje’s refusal to take sides is repeated in his main character’s position and attitude to her native country. Anil Tissera—a forensic anthropologist born in Sri Lanka

but educated in the West, who now no longer uses her mother tongue fluently—left the island as a teenager and returns during the civil war as a Westernized professional, an employee of a human-rights organization based in Geneva. Anil's mission is to identify victims of murder, some of which, it later transpires, were orchestrated by the Sri Lankan government. Together with a local government employee, Sarath, they discover a skeleton of a recently murdered man among bones excavated from an ancient burial site, to which only the country's military has access. "Sailor"—which is what Anil names the skeleton—becomes her obsession; it is hoped that the identity and circumstances of the man's death, if determined, will serve as compelling evidence of the government's role in the war. The skeleton is also seen to be a representative of all the murdered and the disappeared; therefore "to give him a name would name the rest" (Ondaatje 2001, 56). Neither Anil nor the narrative are concerned with establishing the immediate causes of the war; it is the hidden, obscure and ever-present motives of human behavior that are configured in the images of archeological sites, excavated bones, reconstructed bodies and identities, and in the motif of ancient rock inscriptions.

The *longue durée* approach to history, apparent in the text in its references to ancient ruins, inscriptions on rocks and stories, is embedded in the narrative concerning recent political events. The correspondences between the distant and the recent past established in this way emphasize the obscure origins and long duration of certain social and political phenomena. The effort to determine the identity of the skeleton is analogous to the uncovering of the history of objects excavated at ancient archaeological sites, deciphering bodies aligned here with deciphering ancient rock inscriptions. This is implied in Anil and Sarath's attempt to enlist the help of Palipana, a famous archaeologist and expert in translating ancient inscriptions on rocks, in identifying "Sailor". They find Palipana in the ruins of a forest monastery, where he has been living after having to leave his successful academic career due to a scandal. Accused of inventing the runes he claimed to have found, the scholar probably had overinterpreted the lines in his search for secret messages, hidden stories that the ancient writers could not officially write. In one such story that Palipana tells his visitors, a rebellion in the country was incited by a massacre of a group of monks. The monks had hidden from the wrath of the ruler at the time in the forest, but had been followed by his henchmen and beheaded. This event from the tenth century predates the colonial invasions and, therefore, belies the theories that attribute the inter- or intra-religious conflicts exclusively to the presence and manipulations of the colonizers. The story also shows that monks in Sri Lanka have never been able to resist being drawn into politics and that violence has been always present in the history of the island. Palipana's "interlinear" stories (105) reveal elements that are missing from official history: "He had deciphered the shallowly incised lines [...], coming across an illegal story, one banned by kings and state and priests, in the interlinear texts. These verses contained the darker proof" (105). The motif of darker truths discovered in ancient inscriptions corresponds to the bodies buried and then excavated or to memories repressed in human minds. Similar to memories buried in the

psyche or in the body which influence people's conscious thoughts and actions, historical acts of violence concealed below the surface of contemporary life inform contemporary outbreaks of violence. Palipana's search for secret truths thus resonates with Anil and Sarath's mission to disclose the extent of the government's actual involvement in the war and in the book's attempt "to study history as if it were a body"—to access the past congealed and concealed in the body (193).

The reasons for the present conflict remain indeterminate in the novel; however, one reason the novel hints at is the long history of conflicts and violence in Sri Lanka, which involves a transgenerational transmission of powerful emotions such as fear. Anil realizes that in the absence of logic or meaning in terms of human violence, which could "allow a person a door to escape grief and fear," fear and desire for revenge remain the only emotions people can feel (55-56). Apparently randomly placed, a chapter on the amygdala acquires a special significance when considered alongside the section about Palipana's insight into the powerful emotions driving the conflict. In this chapter, Anil recalls information about the function of a small cluster of nerve cells located near the brain stem: "It's the dark aspect of the brain [...]. A place to house fearful memories. [...] Anger too, we think, but it specializes in fear" (134). The fear that resides in the amygdala may be an inherited ancestral fear or the emotion created by our own histories. Whatever the nature of the fear it stores, contemporary medical science has confirmed the role of the amygdala in irrational, violent and destructive reactions. This ancient locus of emotions is capable, as Daniel Goleman (1996) explains, of overriding the thinking part of the brain. In the face of a threat, when the sensory information received by the amygdala from the thalamus before it is processed by the cortex matches its memory of fearful stimuli, the amygdala hijacks the rational brain, prompting people to act before any possible direction from the neocortex can be received (1996, 17-18). The amygdala passage in *Anil's Ghost* suggests that the continued domination of fear and fear-driven reactions in a community becomes a destructive force in human interactions, particularly when the emotions and behavioral patterns are transmitted from one generation to the next.

It is possible to theorize various transmission channels through which fear is passed down to future generations: from the obvious inheritance of trauma and fear through a discursive transfer of memories to unconscious types of transmission, including epigenetic transfer, of the painful past. As argued earlier in the article, many recent studies have demonstrated that the effects of stressful situations experienced by parents may be transmitted not just to their children but also to subsequent generations, through epigenetic transfer (Lacal and Ventura 2018). Since the epigenetic imprint from traumatic experiences carries on through generations, this type of transmission is not incompatible with ideas of deep history and the long-term formation and endurance of particular traits. Sarath's relationship with his brother Gamini illustrates the individual aspect of the inheritance—the "secret war" between them has been going on for decades. After his brother's death, Gamini realizes his "unlearned vengeance"

(223), a trait that also underlies inter-ethnic relationships in the country. Likewise, Anil's apparent neutrality and detachment, the fact that she remains unaligned with either side of the conflict, does not prevent her from manifesting the legacy of violence. Anil's motivation for stabbing her American lover, Cullis, which she recalls doing while on her mission in Sri Lanka, is not sufficiently explained in the novel, which might indicate an unconscious association with the Sri Lankan past she herself would have doubtlessly scoffed at. For Smaro Kamboureli the incident "signals the spectrality of Anil's repressed cultural memory—memories that are forbidden, memories denied, morbidly blocked, memories forgotten" (2009, 35). Memories passed down from previous generations or one's own repressed memories remain lodged, as it were, in the body, "a container of secrets" (Ondaatje 2001, 225).

Even though Ondaatje does not identify the sources of the conflict, nor point to an easy resolution to the continuous cycle of violence, the writer appears to suggest that the inspiration for a different future resides in the distant past. The way in which the text presents the centuries-old conflicts and tensions, reignited now and again, does not signal a single political cause located in the colonial past or derived from the postcolonial hegemonic collective memory. By refraining from narrating history as a sequence of unavoidable events, Ondaatje rejects the past as solidified into a single story. The episodic, non-linear character of the text, performs a rejection of a rigid vision of history, and of there being one single version of its influence. Instead of preserving and perpetuating the same, this stance holds the future open to other visions and other stories. The possibility of a different future hinted at in the novel is emblemized by two statues of the Buddha, one recently erected and the other being repaired by a small community, after being blown up during the conflict. It is possible to read the final scene, in which an artist, Ananda, and the villagers participate in the ceremony of *Nētra Mangala*—the painting of the Buddha's eyes—as signaling an eventual coming to terms with past atrocities. In this reading, the pieces of rock from which the head of the old statue is being reconstructed symbolize the fragments of the broken past, which are collected to enable life in the future. However, it is not just the fact of the fragments being stuck back together, but how the statue itself gestures towards a particular past that offers hope for a different future. The statue is shown as broken, its head, which "had never felt a human shadow," now lying on the ground, placed for the first time on the level of humans instead of towering over them (304).

The original detached position of the old statue harks back to a time when Buddhism was not enlisted to play a role in human conflicts. The statue, and the set of beliefs and practices it represented, offered stability, "brought permanence to brief lives" (299) and, instead of being affiliated with a political cause, "had seen the wars and offered peace or irony to those dying under it" (304). Eventually, however, Buddhism in Sri Lanka became bound-up with the discourse of national identity, its values meeting "the harsh political events of the twentieth century," although the figure of the reconstructed Buddha in the novel is emblematic of the possibility of reverting to the traditional

role of Buddhism, which might effect a change in the conflict-torn country (300). It is not that Ondaatje essentializes Buddhism here, reifying it in some “pristine” form abstracted from contemporary reality; the writer simply shows the consequences of its teachings becoming enmeshed in politics and power (Tambiah 1992, 3). Stanley J. Tambiah (1992), who warns against decontextualizing Buddhism and insists that the religion be considered in its “local contexts” and as “situated in history,” has still attempted to “probe the extent to which [...] Buddhism, as a ‘religion’ espoused by Sri Lankans of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, has contributed to the late-twentieth-century ethnic conflict and collective violence in Sri Lanka” (Tambiah 1992, 2). Thus, even though Ondaatje does not enter the political debate in the novel, he nevertheless does not ignore, as his critics claim, “the possibility that Sinhala Buddhism may bear some responsibility for Sri Lanka’s misery” (Goldman 2004, 25).

Walter Benjamin’s idea of searching in the past for a possibility of a different future is particularly relevant here. Benjamin believed in “the possibility of the future redemption of missed opportunities for making the world a better place” (Hutton 2016, 30). In his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940), Benjamin rejected the conception of history as a story of ongoing progress; instead, he saw the past and the present as discontinuous, separated by stretches of empty time. In order to understand a present dilemma, it is necessary to go back to the moments in the past which “might provide guidance for facing the problems of the ‘now time’ of history” (31). Benjamin advocated performing leaps across the “empty time” of history to those inspiring moments as “hopes for the future are embedded in the secrets of the past” (31). Dismissing the deterministic idea of historical inevitability, Benjamin located redemptive power in the memories of lost opportunities in the past, which might be retrieved in the present (Hutton 32). Therefore, we need to remember those moments of the past that do not belong to the official history, and have been forgotten, which requires that we “blot out everything [we] know about the later course of history” (Benjamin 2007, 256). Only by dissociating ourselves from the version of history written by the victors can we “brush history against the grain,” retrieving its redeeming potential (257). As Benjamin’s essay was written during the philosopher’s flight from the Nazis, he invokes the contemporary political situation, arguing that “one reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm” (257). This habit of viewing history as a chain of inevitable events is emblematic of the linear, teleological conception of history. As this vision relies on establishing a causal connection between historical events, it is necessary to stop “telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. [...] Instead, [the historian] grasps the constellation which his [*sic*] own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he [*sic*] establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time,” promising redemption in the future (263).

Benjamin’s idea of searching in the past for direction and insight into the possibilities for future redemption anticipates a revisionist aspect of the *longue durée* school of

historiography. An affinity between those approaches is apparent in the current revival of the *longue durée*, where interest in the distant past is frequently combined with an exploration of the past's relevance to our present moment.³ For historians who embrace the long-term perspective whilst paying attention to the present, history is not simply a "collection of narratives or a source of affirmation for the present, but a tool of reform and a means of shaping alternative futures" (Guldi and Armitage 2014, 15). This new critical form of presentism resists the deterministic view of the impact of the past in favor of identifying unrealized potentialities and alternative scenarios in history that may inspire a different future. The redeeming power of memory lies in the perception of a "constellation" which the present time has formed with a moment in the past, which, incidentally, is the term Benjamin also uses.

In *Anil's Ghost*, the statues of the Buddha, by gesturing toward a distant past, signal the possibility of renegotiating the collective memory. A reversion to Buddhism as the original spiritual practice and devotion, free from its associations with politics, is vaguely hinted at, even if such a shift in the collective consciousness appears unlikely at the particular moment of the story. The novel suggests an individual liberation from a traumatic past, which could precede a change in the collective consciousness (Guldi and Armitage, 23). An individual release from suffering is represented by Ananda's epiphany, which is not a religious awakening or a desire to "celebrate the greatness of faith" (Ondaatje 2001, 304). During the Nētra Mangala ceremony, the artist involved in the rebuilding of the Buddha's damaged face briefly grasps the eternal angle of the world, which the statue would now see forever "even without the human element" (306). Ananda's awareness of "all the fibres of natural history around him" might indicate a depersonalized consciousness that is adopting a long-term perspective where present struggles and personal traumas become dissolved in some escapist timelessness (307). However, the fact that he recalls his wife, Sirissa, who disappeared during the war, suggests that his art does not provide an escape but rather an individual way of letting go of his desire for revenge. Ananda realizes that "if he did not remain an artificer he would become a demon. The war around him was to do with demons, spectres of retaliation" (304). The ending thus points toward a personal effort to release the burden of rehearsing a fixed identity and a fixed version of history.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This article has argued that Ondaatje's memoir *Running in the Family* and his novel *Anil's*

³ This presentist disposition obviously differs from the much-criticized presentism of some contemporary historical studies, the latter manifested in the shift of interest to the near present, away from the more distant past, or in the inclination to apply current categories to past phenomena. New, critical forms of presentism are skeptical about the teleological bent of the earlier presentist approaches, whose claim that "the past effectively and causally produces the present" is supported by privileging and selecting the elements of the past which "most closely connect to features of the present" (Armitage 2023, 16).

Ghost demonstrate that employing a long-term temporal perspective reveals the present reality to be a result of complex long-term processes and developments. Reverting to the long history of Sri Lanka, and to the individual history of his family, allows the writer to perceive the country and his autobiographical narrator's self as shaped by centuries, or even millennia, rather than determined by recent events arranged into fixed, causal, and thus deterministic, sequences. Consistent with Walter Benjamin's insights, Ondaatje's texts analyzed in this article show that, instead of affirming the power of destiny, the distant past may be a source of hope and inspiration for the future. What sustains this way of thinking is the belief in free will, in the possibility that destiny is not predetermined and in the power of "counterfactual thinking to destabilize the seeming inevitability" of the current order or values (Guldi and Armitage 2014, 30). While Ondaatje does not openly subvert the hegemonic discourses which construct collective memory, his novel points towards revisiting the long tradition of Buddhism in Sri Lanka as a chance to rethink the national past and renegotiate the collective memory. This awareness of the constructed character and instability, rather than inevitability, of collective memory has the "potential to alter the present state of affairs and hence the course of history" (Kamboureli 2009, 31). Also, the two texts confirm the role of individuals' free will in subverting the determinism of the past. The memoir's narrator chooses to look at himself, his family and his native country as products of past centuries and generations, but not as irrevocably determined by the past. Towards the end of *Running in the Family*, rather than looking at himself as a victim of painful legacies, the narrator decides to implant in his own mind the conscious memory of the island's beauty, which persists and thrives in spite of all the human conflict, and to replace the violent memories lodged in his body. Likewise, the artist Ananda in *Anil's Ghost*, inspired by a similar sense of the continuity of natural history, chooses art and service over vengeance and retaliation. In this way, the perspective of the *longue durée* neutralizes the seeming inevitability of the past's impact on the present, subverts destiny and provides inspiration for a different future.

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