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**Women's Movement:
The Politics of Migration in Contemporary
Women's Writing**

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**April 2004
DPhil Thesis, University of Sussex**

University of Sussex

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Summary

This thesis focuses on fiction and poetry written by women who have migrated from former British colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia, to Britain or North America; it explores how issues of race, gender, sexuality, belonging and power are raised through the writings' accounts of migration, displacement and changing identity. The thesis stresses the importance of these writings in addressing key issues in feminist politics and in women's lives, and in making significant contributions to these debates. It argues that women's migration, and literary accounts of migration, are important to feminism, as is feminism to understanding migration.

Key texts include *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga; *The Unbelonging*, by Joan Riley; *Lucy*, by Jamaica Kincaid; and *No Language is Neutral*, by Dionne Brand. I also draw on a number of other novels, poems and anthologies of migrant women's writings. The diversity of the texts by migrant women that form the basis of the thesis has shaped my understanding of the issues they raise; the breadth and variety of the writing calls for a wide range of critical approaches in order that the writing is, as far as possible, illuminated rather than constrained by any one critical model.

I am committed throughout the thesis to a feminist approach which incorporates an attention to women's activism along with 'the theoretical'; and which takes seriously the personal/emotional implications both of the kinds of imbalances of power which many migrant women explore and resist in their writings, and of feminist theorising and practice.

The thesis consists of six chapters, the middle four of which are organised into two pairs. I begin the thesis with a chapter looking at accounts of women's decisions and journeys of migration, and the personal, political and historical contexts in which their migration takes place. Chapters Two and Three, which are paired under the title "Women and Place", examine the impact of migrant women's changing relationships with place, before and after migration, on their sense of home, belonging and identity.

In Chapters Four and Five, I move on to address the significance of these writings in terms of feminist politics and contemporary debates about identity, difference and racism. I have paired the chapters under the common title "Literary Activism" in order to highlight connections between reading, writing and political activism.

In conclusion, the thesis looks at representations of women's emotional and bodily experiences of the liberatory and/or oppressive aspects of their migrations. It addresses the possibilities –or impossibilities—of migrant women living with, coming to terms with, and resisting their oppressions, both personally and politically. This final chapter brings together, and takes further, various issues addressed throughout the thesis, in terms of writers' portrayals of both the effects of migration on women's sense of themselves, and of their explorations and responses to the impact of migration.

Women's Movement: The Politics of Migration in Contemporary Women's Writing

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Introduction

Women's Movement:

The Politics of Migration in Contemporary Women's Writing¹

Introduction

This thesis focuses on fiction and poetry written by women who have migrated from former British colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia, to Britain or North America; it explores how issues of race, gender, sexuality, belonging and power are raised through the writings' accounts of migration, displacement and changing identity. In doing so the thesis makes an intervention into discussions of migration which fail to pay attention to the specificities of the gendered experience of migration. The thesis stresses the importance of these writings in addressing key issues in feminist politics and in women's lives, and in making significant contributions to contemporary debates. These include the nature of identity, oppression, race and racism, the role of theory and activism in feminism, the role of community, sense of place, the politics of location, and reading. The thesis argues that women's migration, and literary accounts of migration, are important to feminism, as is a feminist analysis to understanding migration.

I begin this Introduction with an account of the emergence of migration as a key aspect of global social and political change in the post-war era, pointing to how the terms in which debates about migration have been carried out have been deeply gendered, in their privileging of the categories of employment, marriage and 'the family' as the central determinants of migration. I move on to provide a reflection on my use of the contested category 'Black and Third World Women'. I provide a short overview of the thesis before engaging in an extensive account of the intersections of postcolonial theory and reading migrant women's writings. Here I point to the current dominance of postcolonial theory in the academy, and the concomitant danger that diverse approaches to migrant literature may be neglected as a result. I go on to explain the feminist angle I take to migrant women's literature in this thesis; briefly examine issues of feminism and racism as they apply to migrant women's writing; and consider some questions relating to diversity and commonality as they relate to the reading process. I end with an account of the migrations in my own personal history, and relate these to some of the issues I address in this thesis.

¹The first part of my title is borrowed from the book *Women's Movement: Women under Immigration, Nationality and Refugee Law*, by Jacqueline Bhabha and Sue Shutter (Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books, 1994).

Migration and Gender

While migration is not a new or recent phenomenon, but one with a long history, international migration has grown in volume and significance since 1945, in the post-Second World War and the post-Cold War eras.² Stephen Castles and Mark Miller predicted (in 1993) that “the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first will be the age of migration”.³ However, even if the growing impacts of migration are felt world-wide, migrations arise out of particular social, economic, political and historical contexts. My focus here is on migrations to the U.K. and North America; I am interested in the implications of migration from former British colonies to these white-dominated Northern societies which continue to have neo-colonial relationships with formerly colonised countries.

Although Black and Asian people have been present in Britain for centuries, migration to Britain from its former colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia has been especially significant since 1945. Economic deprivation in Britain’s colonies resulted from the war in Europe; Britain’s loss of many workers during the war created a demand for plentiful and cheap labour in the U.K. These factors combined to lead thousands of migrants to come from the colonies to Britain in this period, beginning a trend which lasted into the 1970s. However, immigrants continue to enter the country from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as, more recently, the former Soviet bloc. Many migrants, particularly from former British colonies, also came and continue to come to the U.K. to study, a decision made attractive in large part by the orientation towards British history and culture of educational systems in their countries of origin.

In the United States and Canada, classical countries of immigration, the majority of the current populations are descendants of European immigrants. Indigenous peoples there were largely, though not entirely, wiped out in the early waves of immigration, which were also waves of genocide. While formerly most immigrants to North America were either from Europe, or forced to leave Africa as slaves, now immigrants come from all parts of the world, including Asia, Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean, still attracted by the “land of opportunity” North America is seen to be.

Migration to Britain and North America occurs in the context of Britain having been a colonial power which dominated much of the world, and of Western countries generally but particularly North America being the agents of neo-colonial power now. My own usage of the term

² Castles and Miller 1998 (1993), p. 4.

³ Ibid., p. 3.

colonialism (though I do not use the term imperialism in this thesis) agrees with Elleke Boehmer's definition:

[I]mperialism can be taken to refer to the authority assumed by a state over another territory – authority expressed in pageantry and symbolism, as well as in military power... Colonialism involves the consolidation of imperial power, and is manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands.⁴

Boehmer goes on to give a very useful explanation of neo-colonialism:

A term from economic theory, neo-colonialism signifies the continuing economic control by the West of the once-colonized world, under the guise of political independence. Though they may differ in ascribing causes, many theorists broadly agree that the decline of one sort of colonialism in the 1950s led to the rise of another, less overt, some might say more insidious form – what has also been called a super or new imperialism. Though the betrayal of the ideals of postcolonial liberation began some time before, neo-colonial formations grew particularly pronounced in the 1970s and 1980s as recession and the burgeoning of Third World debt tightened the grip of rich Northern countries on the South.⁵

The political and economic power which Northern countries continue to exert over the South makes for a particular relationship and a particular dynamic, when migrants from the South settle in the North. Many come to pursue opportunities which, in large part because of the impoverishing results of colonialism, followed by neo-colonialism, do not exist in their countries of origin; in the words of what has become an anti-racist slogan: “We are here because you were there”.⁶ The legacies and continuing impacts of these power relationships mean, too, that these migrants frequently face racist attitudes and structures deeply embedded in these white-dominated Northern societies in which they settle. This means, I feel, that particular responsibilities are placed on feminists (and other politically progressive people) in the U.K. and North America. The presence of migrants from the South in these countries means that we can –and must-- learn from the increasingly diverse make-up of society.

The settlement of migrants has significant consequences for “host” countries. The presence of (particularly non-white) migrants in Britain and North America calls into question the nature of these nations, and creates debates about identity, nationhood and pluralism –within society in general, as well as within academia. The recent statement by British Home Secretary David Blunkett that immigrants should speak English at home in order to facilitate their assimilation into British society (something he assumed to be both desirable, and the responsibility of immigrants themselves), and the controversy sparked off by that statement, is one example of the currency and relevance of these debates, and the urgency of challenging and counteracting the dangerous assumptions implicit in such statements. Despite the centrality of the “absorption

⁴ Boehmer 1995, p. 2.

⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶ These were originally the words of A. Sivanandan, Director of the Institute of Race Relations. “As I told an interviewer about 40 years ago, ‘We are here, because you are there’”. ‘Our Common Values are Brought About By A Clash of Cultures’, A. Sivanandan, *The Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2004.

of immigrants” to the national mythologies of the U.S. and Canada, similar debates perennially arise in those countries: strong feelings on all sides are raised about monolingual or bilingual education, and the “dangers” of the white population being, eventually, outnumbered by people of other, non-white, ethnicities.

There has been an erroneous tendency to regard the “typical” migrant to the West as a young, single male in search of work, or a married one who sends for his dependants to follow him. Both immigration legislation and many refugee and migrants organisations have often been guilty of perpetuating this image. In fact, “thousands of women have come to Britain as independent workers from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Southern Europe and elsewhere, in contradiction to the prevailing view that women have generally immigrated as the dependants of men”.⁷ In addition, there is a growing “feminisation of migration”. Women are playing an increasingly important role in all geographical areas and all types of migration.⁸ As is pointed out in the volume *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, there has in recent years been a great increase in the migration of women from the south to the north, and from poorer countries to richer ones, to work as domestics, nannies, and sex workers; and the re-emergence of a serving class, with immigrant women the main actors. This is happening, according to the volume’s editors and some of the contributors, due partly to more women in the West taking up paid work; men’s failure to share the housework with their female partners; and, importantly, as “the female underside of globalization”.⁹ The growing poverty of southern countries leads to “the migration and trafficking of women as a strategy for survival”; meanwhile, there are growing numbers of highly-paid professionals in the north, managing and coordinating global economic processes, whose lifestyles demand large numbers of low-paid service workers.¹⁰ There is increasing recognition, in both academic and NGO spheres, that the gendered dimensions of migration demand attention; but public discourses of migration, and immigration legislation, remain unduly slanted towards men. In the U.K. context “[a]ssumptions about family relationships and the primacy of male work and male decision-making still influence policy and the exercise of discretion”.¹¹ As Pragna Patel, points out, too, “immigration law can combine with the institution of the family to construct the woman as an appendage to her husband, economically and socially dependent on him, and a potential prisoner of violence and abuse within the home”.¹² Under the “one-year rule”, for example, women whose

⁷ Bhabha and Shutter 1994, p. 7.

⁸ Castles and Miller 1998 (1993), p. 8.

⁹ Ehrenreich and Hochschild, eds., 2003, p. 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 273.

¹¹ Bhabha and Shutter 1994, p. 2.

¹² Pragna Patel in Safia Mirza, ed., 1997, p. 261.

immigration status is dependent upon their marriages cannot leave even violent or abusive relationships, or they risk deportation.

As Jacqueline Bhabha and Sue Shutter point out:

The view of immigrant and black women, as wives and mothers responding to life choices by men, rather than as initiators of families in their own right, has pervaded official thinking and moulded the relevant immigration rules. Black and immigrant women have had severely curtailed rights to create the family of their choice in their own home country, the assumption being that this is a male prerogative. This has been true for women (particularly those of Asian origin) whose home has always been in Britain but who have chosen husbands from abroad, as well as for women who have taken the initiative of travelling to Britain for work or study and have then wanted to be united here with preexisting families. Indeed there has been persistent denial of the fact that immigrant women could have this dual role, as workers or students, when they are at the same time wives or mothers... resident domestic workers recruited from abroad only qualified for the necessary work permits to come if they were unmarried and without children.¹³

As the above passage demonstrates, many feminist accounts of migration also, perhaps unwittingly, reproduce the centrality of the (heterosexual, patriarchal, nuclear) family in accounts of the meanings of migration. Immigrant women who are lesbians are subject to even greater discrimination, of course; they are invisible even in studies of immigrant women such as the one from which the above passage is taken. In my attention to relationships between women, mothers and daughters, cousins, friends, as well as to explicitly lesbian relationships, and to women's various efforts to escape the confines of 'the family', or to reconfigure their own family, I seek to develop a feminist analysis of migration which decentres the heterosexual family and opens consideration of women's lives up to more diverse understandings of migration, and its impacts.

In scholarship, too, there has been over-emphasis on male migration and a clear neglect of women. Here too there has, until fairly recently, been a tendency to assume women are the dependants of men and only marginal, if present at all, in the labour market (whereas in fact women have during some periods, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, been specifically recruited for work in the hotel industry, the National Health Service and the clothing trade).¹⁴ But even with increasing numbers of studies focusing on women migrants, as Mirjana Morokvasic points out, the "existing literature has had little impact on policy making, on mass media presentation of migrant women, but also on the main body of migration literature, where male bias has continued to persist".¹⁵

As well as changing the culture of the "host" country, migrant women are themselves deeply affected by the process of migration and resettlement. For this reason, too, feminists need to

¹³ Bhabha and Shutter 1994, pp. 6-7.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵ Morokvasic 1984, p. 899.

take account of migration. Movement from one location to another can reveal particularly clearly how issues of sexism intersect with issues of racism and (neo) colonialism. Migration can highlight the conflicts, contradictions and necessary re-negotiations of racial and gender identity that arise when women move across cultural contexts inflected with colonial and neo-colonial relationships. A thematic thread running through this thesis, and emerging particularly in Chapters 3 and 6, is my attention to writers' explorations of the ways in which migration and its aftermath can be intensely painful for migrant women, as they confront profound change, and sometimes experience much intensified forms of oppression and violence. Writers also portray migration as being an empowering experience for women, as they leave 'home' and settle far from families and communities by which they felt constrained. Often the writings explore the coexistence of elements of pain and empowerment in women's experiences of migration, and the nuances and complexities of women's emotional responses to the changes that migration can bring. In the thesis I look at the literature's explorations of how migration highlights intertwining oppressions of racism, sexism and homophobia in women's lives; processes by which migrant women may find ways of living, thriving, and affirming their own individual and collective power and dignity in the face of the pain and oppression they experience; and their coming to terms with experiences of migration and their evolving sense of self or identity through the building of community, activism, changing relationships with both places of origin and settlement, and writing.

Given the neglect of women's migration in scholarship, and continuing gender as well as race discrimination in immigration law; and given the significant impact of migration on thousands of women's lives, feminist attention to migration is crucial. I argue that the diversity, in part due to migration, of women living in Britain, heightens yet further the responsibility of white women, in particular, to address race and racism. It is even less legitimate than it would otherwise be for white feminists to assume (whether implicitly or explicitly) that "All the women are white [and] all the Blacks are men".¹⁶ Not only world-wide, but also within Britain, the presence of Black and migrant women challenges (or should challenge) white women to develop feminist analyses—in many different fields—that both recognise the importance of migration to individual women and to society in general, and seriously grapple with issues of racism and xenophobia as well as gender. My argument in this thesis is that reading migrant women's writing provides important insights as we endeavour to understand women's migration.

¹⁶ This is part of the title of a book edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith: *All the women are white, all the Blacks are men, but Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1981).

‘Black and Third World Women’: A Contested Category

While many scholars use quotation marks around the word “race”, in order to underline their conviction that racial differences are not based in biological fact, I prefer not to do this. I concur with these theorists’ refutation of race as a biological category, but feel that the central importance of race in people’s lives means that race is not *lived* in quotation marks. It is therefore not (yet) appropriate to relegate it to the provisional status implied by this practice.

Because ‘races’, ‘ethnicities’ and ‘cultures’ are not easily-defined, separate categories into which people can unproblematically be slotted, the issue of what terminology to use to refer to racial or ethnic identity is a fraught one. At the same time, as I point out above, the reality of racism means that race is far from being an obsolete concept. To grapple with this issue, it is useful to look at anthologies of Black or migrant women’s writing; in their introductions, their agendas, and the definitions of whose writings are included, are often spelled out or implicitly indicated. Below I consider some of these issues as addressed in just one anthology, *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*.

The editors of *Charting the Journey* write:

The collection of pieces does not speak with a unitary voice, since Black women do not possess such a voice. The anthology therefore contains seemingly contradictory statements... differences... reflective of the divisions among the various constituencies of Black women. Indeed, though our starting point has been to stress the historical link between us of colonialism and imperialism, we have also been concerned to reflect the divisions and contradictions amongst us.¹⁷

Thus the editors’ primary intentions did not include presenting the anthologised writings as representative of essential unity among Black women writers; any unity that does exist, in their view, is based on the “historical link” among them, and the shared political goals that may result from this link.

The editors suggest that: “Writing, in all its forms, can be a weapon in this process of collectivization and harmonization”.¹⁸ And yet the ultimate goal is seen to be “a situation in which ‘blackness’ as commonly understood has no social meaning”.¹⁹ They seem to be saying that “blackness” must be imbued with meaning and unity, as a form of political resistance against racism, in order that ultimately it may lose this meaning, when justice has been achieved. In a just society, there will be no need for a search for unity among the people at present called “black”.

¹⁷ Grewal et al, eds., 1988, pp. 5-6.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

The writers thus classified as “Black and Third World” (and the editors use the two terms more or less interchangeably, but do seem to prefer “black” as a political term) stem from a very diverse geographical area: Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Asia. They are linked primarily, if not exclusively, by historical and political factors of colonisation and imperialism. Similarly, the word “women” in the title is used politically, referring not merely to people of the female sex but to females questioning the meaning of that identity in a sexist and racist context-- women who are part of a movement for justice, part of “the collectivity ‘Black feminists’”²⁰ which is neither acquiescent to the sexism of white patriarchal society nor any “longer prepared to wholeheartedly and uncritically accept all and sundry from our ‘cultures’ as good”.

“Black and Third World women”, then, are defined as people linked by political factors of racism, sexism and imperialism, but also as people conscious and critical of the oppressions that link them and seeking to redefine their identities as a form of resistance.

The term Black has particular resonances, different in the North American and British contexts. In North America it tends to refer to African-Americans, to the descendants of African slaves rather than to first-or second-generation migrants from Africa, the Caribbean or elsewhere. The term has a history of defiant use, with its connections with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s. For a migrant to use the term in this context is perhaps, then, to assert a connection with the history and struggles of African-Americans; some migrant women and men, however, prefer to stress the particularities of their identities by using other terms. In the U.K. context, using the term “Black British” is also a form of defiance, but, unlike in North America, this defiance stems from the reality that, as Heidi Safia Mirza puts it,

[t]o be black and British is to be unnamed in official discourse. The construction of a national British identity is built upon a notion of a racial belonging, upon a hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presence. We are told that you can be either one or the other, black or British, but not both.

Mirza continues by arguing that being ‘black’ in the U.K. is about political coalition making, in the face of external, racist, definition.²¹

During the 1980s in particular, the term Black was used politically by “postcolonial migrants of different languages, cultures and classes [who] consciously constructed a political identity shaped by the shared experience of racialization and its consequences”; there were extensive struggles over who could fit into the term, and whether “cultural” rather than “racial” differences should be privileged in the use of terminology. In terms of feminism more

²⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

²¹ Safia Mirza, ed., 1997, p. 3.

particularly, Mirza says that it was particularly important for black women to name themselves as such in order that, “as racialized, gendered subjects” they could claim “a ‘valid’ identity of our own, a space to ‘name’ ourselves”.²²

Since the 1980s the need to present a ‘united front’ in struggles against racism, both in the wider society and within white-dominated feminist circles, has to a large extent given way to a call to recognise the specificity of the lives of women from widely divergent backgrounds, communities, classes, and sexualities, which is hidden by the term “black woman”. In response, however, some argue that an over-emphasis on difference undermines connections among black women and, potentially at least, depoliticises black feminism.

As this discussion suggests, terms such as ‘Black woman’ are slippery; one needs to be cautious about how they are used. Like the editors of *Charting the Journey*, I am conscious of the potential problems of settling on any particular terminology to speak of race; however, I adopt terms such as “Black”, “white”, “South Asian” or “Third World”, where the texts and writers under consideration self-consciously evoke the term, in acknowledgement of the historical and contemporary realities of racism and (neo-) colonialism and their very real effects on people’s lives. I use the term “Black” to refer to African and African diasporic as well as Asian people; at times I use the phrase “Black and Asian”, when I wish to particularly emphasise that I am referring to Asian as well as African and Afro-Caribbean people.

The term “white” is perhaps problematic, too, because of the diversity of ethnicities covered by that term; because it is, like other racial categories, permeable and changeable (European Jews, for example, have at various times and in different places been classified as white or as a separate race); and also because its very use is sometimes taken to indicate belief in the superiority of whiteness to other racial identities. I use the term, however, in recognition of the necessity of acknowledging the privilege white people benefit from of not *having* to think about race, because of, as Ruth Frankenberg puts it, the “unmarked, unnamed status [of whiteness] that is in itself an effect of its dominance”.²³ (I look in more detail at issues surrounding the position of white women in my section on ‘Feminism, Racism and Reflexivity’, below).

Audre Lorde defines racism as: “The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied”.²⁴ Frankenberg’s distinction between and elaboration of various “repertoires” of racism drawn on by white women, which she makes

²² Ibid., p. 4.

²³ Frankenberg 1993, p. 6.

²⁴ Lorde 1984, p. 124.

largely through analysis of her interviews with white women, is also useful. She argues that the repertoire of “essentialist racism”, the belief in inherent, biologically based, racial difference and white superiority, is, though no longer the dominant form of racism in US public discourse, still available to all white people in that country. Her terms “color-” and “power-evasiveness” describe a set of attitudes white people may have to people of colour, characterised by a denial that “race makes a difference in people’s lives”²⁵ and by such beliefs as that “we are all the same under the skin”.²⁶ Frankenberg shows how many of the women she interviewed moved between the “repertoires” of attitudes towards race available to them.

“Institutional racism”, long a concept used by anti-racist scholars and activists, has become a more familiar term in the U.K., in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence murder and investigation. In the public arena the usage of this term often still fails to acknowledge the full extent of officially sanctioned racism. It is, nevertheless, a concept vital to the recognition that racism is not limited to individual attitudes but remains deeply embedded in social and political structures of racial exclusion and discrimination. When I speak of racism in this thesis, I am sometimes referring to these structures, sometimes to overt or covert individual attitudes; however, my assumption is that the latter are supported by historical and contemporary forces which remain strong.

The Thesis

I have chosen to look at migration as portrayed in novels and poetry, in order to ground my discussions in individual, concrete stories of decisions to migrate, of journeys, and of coming to terms with the changes brought by migration; stories which also evoke the personal and political contexts in which these individual stories take place. As I will argue further later in this Introduction, and throughout the thesis, I believe the literature has important things to say, and to contribute to theoretical work done in related fields, about women’s experiences of migration and of living as migrants in Britain and North America.

Key texts in the thesis include *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga; *The Unbelonging*, by Joan Riley; *Lucy*, by Jamaica Kincaid; and *No Language is Neutral*, by Dionne Brand. I also draw on *life isn’t all ha ha hee hee* by Meera Syal, *A Wicked Old Woman* by Ravinder Randhawa, and a number of other novels, poems and anthologies of migrant women’s writings.²⁷ I chose these particular texts in part in order to represent a geographical diversity in

²⁵ Frankenberg 1993, p. 157.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁷ I will refer the reader to the appendix at the end of this thesis, which contains brief summaries of the main novels I examine in the thesis, the first time I introduce a particular work of fiction.

my study, in terms both of the locations of the narrative or poetry, and of the countries of origin of authors and/or characters and speakers. Some of the novels are set in the U.K., others in North America; Dangarembga's novel is set in pre-independence Rhodesia. The authors, and the migrant girls and women they depict, come from countries in the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia.

My choice of texts does not, by any means, exhaust the literature currently available, but choosing relatively well-known texts over more recently published ones allows me to revisit moments in the literary history of migrant writing which have been crucial in determining the contours of more recent migrant writing.

The writings depict varying experiences of migration, diverse relationships with places of origin and of settlement. The characters and speakers grapple in very different ways with the changes in their lives, providing me with ample material for exploring different angles on the various issues raised. In most of the works, too, the author portrays more than one character who has migrated; she presents various scenarios for how women are affected by migration, different trajectories that the characters go through.

Many of the works look at migration in terms of one or more characters struggling to coming to terms with a different and alien environment. While this is depicted in very different ways, this could be seen as a similarity between some of the texts: that they present a different view of self from that associated with the contemporary tendency to represent migration as a cause for celebration. Many of them involve a character trying to reach some kind of resolution, wholeness, or peace with herself in the face of difficult experiences. As I explain later in this Introduction, in the section 'Neglected aspects of migrant women's writing', I aim in this thesis to bring out different aspects of migrant women's literature from those often focussed on by post-colonial critics. Because of the theoretical emphases that predominate in poststructuralist-oriented contemporary postcolonial scholarship, writings in which characters struggle to *overcome* a painful sense of fragmentation, for example, and come to a more individuated sense of self, tend to be neglected.

The diversity of the texts by migrant women that form the basis of the thesis has shaped my understanding of the issues they raise; the breadth and variety of the writing calls for a wide range of critical approaches in order that the writing is, as far as possible, illuminated rather than constrained by any one critical model. I therefore draw, in the thesis, on migration studies, postcolonial theory, and reader-response criticism, among other fields, as well as feminist theory and feminist contributions to each of these areas.

I am committed throughout the thesis to a feminist approach which incorporates an attention to women's activism along with 'the theoretical'; and which takes seriously the personal and emotional implications both of the kinds of imbalances of power which many migrant women explore and resist in their writings, and of feminist theorising and practice.

The thesis consists of six chapters, the middle four of which are organised into two pairs. I begin the thesis with a chapter looking at accounts of women's decisions and journeys of migration, and the personal, political and historical contexts in which their migration takes place. Reviewing and critiquing the field of migration studies, I address what a focus on migrant women's writing can contribute to the field and to our understanding of migration. Theories that look at "push-pull" factors in decisions to migrate, for example, tend to over-simplify what is often a very complex decision making process. Other studies take "households" as units of decision making, without paying attention to conflicts, power differences, and/or gender relations within households. Much of the literary writing does, on the other hand, portray the complexity and power relations around migrant women's decisions.

Chapters 2 and 3, which are paired under the title "Women and Place", examine the impact of migrant women's changing relationships with place, before and after migration, on their sense of home, belonging and identity. In Chapter 2 I go from looking at women's decisions and journeys of migration, to look more deeply at their relationships with place, as influenced by colonialism, before migration takes place. I look at writers' evocations of their women characters' or speakers' relationships both to Britain and to their places of origin, before migration; I focus on the ways in which experiences of colonialism and of pervasive continuing post-colonial awe of the "mother country" affect women's whole "image" of, or outlook on, the world around them, in particular their relationships with places of origin and with Britain. I conclude the chapter with an examination of how the writers evoke women's relationships with nature in their places of origin; in their portrayals they are often implicitly questioning colonial and neo-colonial assumptions and teachings about the relative value of places.

In Chapter 3 I go on to look at depictions of what changes about feelings and connections with place with the experience of leaving home and resettling in the West. I explore the shifts which authors portray as occurring in migrant women's relationships to Britain and North America, and their experiences of displacement and "unbelonging" upon arrival there. I also look at changes in migrant women's relationships to their places of origin, both as they remember and think of them from the new place, and when they return. I look at the changing meanings of

place, self and home for women migrants in literature; and at how experiences of migration are related to changes in the politics of location in their lives.

I have paired the two chapters firstly in order to highlight the ways in which writers explore the impacts of colonialism, and migration in the context of a history of colonialism, on women's relationships with place. Secondly, the two chapters viewed together illustrate how migrant women writers create representations of women's identities and relationships to place that very often resist mainstream and oppressive prescriptions for what these should be.

In Chapters Four and Five, I move on to address the significance of these writings in terms of feminist politics and contemporary debates about identity, difference and racism. I have paired the chapters under the common title "Literary Activism" in order to highlight connections between reading, writing and political activism. In them, I point to the role of this literature in creating political community among migrant women writers and readers, and address the relationship between writing and political activism. In Chapter 4, I point to the role of this literature in creating political community among migrant women writers and readers, drawing on reader-response criticism and feminist, including Black feminist, contributions to reader-response criticism, looking mainly at anthologies of migrant women's writings (such as *Charting the Journey*). Anthologies such as this one make especially explicit the role of the reader and are often explicitly political in their agendas. In Chapter 5 I go on to address the relationship between writing and political activism; in the first part of the chapter I look at a number of poems (by Lillian Allen, Merle Collins, Valerie Bloom, and Dionne Brand) which I argue are activist in themselves, because of their use of language ("nation language" or patois). In the second I look at the portrayal of activism in several novels (*A wicked old woman* by Ravinder Randhawa, *life is not all haha heehee* by Meera Syal, and *The Unbelonging* by Joan Riley). While they are rarely a focus of feminist literary criticism, I argue that such portrayals ought to be understood as an important contribution to feminist theory and politics.

In the concluding chapter, the thesis looks at representations of women's emotional and bodily experiences of the liberatory and/or oppressive aspects of their migrations. In the first part of the chapter I explore ways in which various characters, who are migrant women or girls, experience the intertwining oppressions in their lives. I then go on to look at a number of novels' representations of writing as a way that characters try to work through the changes brought about by their migrations. Finally, by looking at the issue of how novels end, I address the possibilities –or impossibilities– of migrant women living with, coming to terms with, and resisting their oppressions, both personally and politically. This final chapter brings together, and takes further, various issues addressed throughout the thesis, in terms of writers' portrayals

of both the effects of migration on women's sense of themselves, and of their explorations and responses to the impact of migration.

The remainder of this introduction outlines some of the important concerns which frame --sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly-- my approach to the literature throughout the thesis. These are the relevance and limitations of postcolonial theory; the political importance of literature, and the importance of attending to the political contexts in which this literature emerges; literature and activism; literature and feminism; feminism, racism and reflexivity; diversity and connection among women and the politics of reading. I conclude with an account of some of my personal migrations, and some reflections on the influence of these on the politics of my own locations, my thinking and my readings.

Post-colonialism and Migrant Women's Writing

The body of scholarship, mostly in literary and cultural studies, which is collectively referred to as post-colonial theory encompasses numerous and varied attempts to rethink ways of viewing the world that are rooted in colonialism and racism. It involves challenging such world-views and modes of representation which define "the West" as superior or central, and "the rest" as peripheral and primitive. Williams and Chrisman summarise postcolonialism thus:

Colonial discourse analysis and post-colonial theory are thus critiques of the process of production of knowledge about the Other. As such, they produce forms of knowledge themselves, but other knowledge, better knowledge it is hoped, responsive to Said's central question: 'How can we know and respect the Other?'²⁸

Also useful is Sally McWilliams' definition: "post-colonialist theories are trying to unweave the complex structures put in place by colonialist rule... revealing the complex interactions of colonizer and colonized... to discuss how subjects are constituted now that the colonial powers no longer have overt, political control".²⁹ Much of this theory is of use, then, in its various attempts to challenge or "unweave" ingrained and still prevalent assumptions about race, identity, and different parts of the world.

Explorations of literature play a central part in post-colonial theory in large part because of the emphasis on the textuality both of Empire and of movements against colonialism. Canonical texts of the colonial period are seen as reflecting colonialist assumptions and actually taking part in the colonial endeavour, while the challenges to these assumptions embedded in literary texts by writers from formerly colonised countries are very often the subject of postcolonial theorising as well. Furthermore, writings by *migrants* from such countries are of particular interest to many theorists because of how central the experience of migration has become in the

²⁸ Williams and Chrisman 1994, p. 8.

²⁹ Cited in Boyce Davies 1994, pp. 81-81.

postcolonial era, and of how this is seen to have questioned formerly undisputed and ingrained ideas –ideas central to Western, colonialist thinking-- of home, nation, belonging, rootedness and identity. “The cosmopolitan rootlessness of urban pockets at the time of early twentieth-century modernism has ‘gone global’”, according to Elleke Boehmer, with “creolization” resulting, on individual levels as well as in terms of cities and nations, and in the usage of the English language –or, rather, of “englishes”–in written and oral arenas. Boehmer points out that “in the Western academy and liberal literary establishments, polycultural ‘translated writing’, in Rushdie’s phrase, is now widely accepted as one of *the* oppositional, anti-authoritarian literatures or textual strategies of our time”.³⁰

Relevance and Usefulness of Post-Colonial Theory

Chapter 2 looks at the literature’s representation of how colonialism affected and continues to affect women’s relationships with their places of origin and with Britain, before migration. Central to the chapter is *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*, a collection of stories, poems and autobiographical essays by women from various countries of the Commonwealth which deal with personal experiences of being part of the British Empire. I draw on the idea of “seeing double”, an expression used by one of the contributors, Dorothy Jones, to address the ways in which colonialism affected and continues to affect these women’s relationships with place. While colonial education and particularly the teaching of English literature conveyed a familiarity with English landscapes, the students were living in very different kinds of places; a split view of the world or a sense of two landscapes superimposed on each other often resulted. One, as yet unseen landscape was deemed superior to the ones lived in daily. My discussion draws on ideas in postcolonial theory about how colonialism affected ways of seeing the world, and the importance of “decolonising the mind”.

My exploration in Chapter 3 of relationships with place as affected by migration is written against the background of an extensive body of postcolonial writing and theory, much of which focuses on experiences of migrancy and living in a diaspora. Some of this material is relevant and useful in thinking about the relationship between migration and identity. My approach differs from that of many of these theorists, however, in that I stress the importance of particular places, while some writings on postcolonialism convey a sense, almost, of *transcending* place through states of “hybridity”.

There are some assumptions behind what I write that are in common with postcolonial theory. One of these is that migration is more than simply physical movement from one place to

³⁰ Boehmer 1995, pp. 232; 236.

another; it involves, often, wide-ranging re-assessments of migrants' own sense of themselves, of place, belonging and identity. And such effects of migration can be long-lasting in terms both of an individual's life and of a community's identity. As King, Connell and White put it, "[f]or some groups, migration is not a mere interval between fixed points of departure and arrival, but a mode of being in the world—'migrancy'".³¹

Some theorists, however --most notably perhaps Homi Bhabha-- tie this "mode of being in the world" to a generalised "postcolonial" state where previous certainties about identity and culture are called into question by contemporary realities of migration and diaspora. Bhabha argues that migration involves the crossing of both literal borders, and of boundaries in conventional thought; and that migrants, because of this "crossing", are effectively representatives of a contemporary condition. In this thesis however, I link the ways in which writers evoke the changed sense of identity and outlook that can result from migration, to the *particular* migrations in individual characters' and lives that are portrayed, rather than to the more universal kind of state which Bhabha appears to describe. In focusing in detail on the literary constructions of migration in particular texts, I seek to respond to the more troubled account of migration that these texts invoke.

Bhabha and other theorists tend towards a rather one-sided celebration of this crossing of boundaries and the fluidity, ambivalence and creativity they see it as engendering. Some critics charge him, as a result, with a rather unrealistic and utopian outlook on the experiences of migrants or, as does for example David Dabydeen, stress aspects of such experience that are at very much at odds with Bhabha's ideas. Dabydeen emphasises the confinement, to a large extent, of different cultural groups within British society, to their own "cells" in the "beehive", with little communication or exchange of any real substance between them taking place³² -- something that would seem to contradict quite sharply Bhabha's ideas about hybridity and the crossing of boundaries. Other scholars acknowledge to a greater extent than does Bhabha the difficulties and pain which migrants' "in-between" existence and attendant uncertainties and rootlessness generate. Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy are two prominent examples of theorists who emphasise the persistence of racism and other oppressive systems of thought and social control, which mean that living as migrants in the contemporary West is not always as consistently liberating as some other theorists appear to imply. Gilroy, according to John McLeod, "worries that the eager embracing of 'new ethnicities' which emphasise the constructed, hybrid nature or all identities tends to forget the ways that racism still operates in the present. There is still the

³¹ King, Connell and White 1995, p. xv. Quoted by McLeod 2000, p. 210.

³² Cited in McLeod 2000, p. 228. Dabydeen's essay "On Cultural Diversity" in *Whose Cities?* Ed. Mark Fisher and Ursula Owen, Penguin, 1991, p. 104.

necessity for a black politics of resistance”,³³ because there is still the reality of racist oppression operating in society today (as seen in many of the portrayals of the writers I examine in the thesis, such as Joan Riley’s portrayal of Hycanith’s life on arrival in Britain).

In my own work I look at the ways in which migration is written about as a source of both empowerment and of pain. I concur to some extent with the view that “living in-between” can be a source of creativity and empowerment, a place from which dominant modes of thought can be questioned. Migrant women writers, indeed, are among those who engage in this kind of critical creativity. Yet it is equally important to acknowledge the ways in which migration can involve facing even greater violence and pain than many women migrants have experienced prior to migrating. Additionally, I seek to draw together explorations of some of these creative writings, bringing a comparative perspective to a field which often deals with such literature in a more scattered way, through regional studies or examinations of no more one or two writers.

While I look at similar themes to those addressed in much postcolonial theory, and to some extent draw on this body of work, I take these themes in very different directions. As I explain in detail later in this section, my focus is on what some migrant women’s fiction and poetry says about migration and about migrant women’s experiences of change in their sense of identity, self, community and place. In order to explore this I draw on other theory, not usually associated with this writing, to see what in the creative writing can come to light when viewed through lenses besides that of post-colonial theory alone.

Problems of post-colonial theory

My focus in this thesis is not on developing a sustained critique of postcolonialism. However, I gesture below towards some of the potential problems and limitations of the field, which have been subject to critique.

I concur with Susheila Nasta, who writes:

I do not wish to add my voice to the cacophony of criticism surrounding the politics of postcolonial literary studies and its discontents. My argument in this study has in many ways benefited directly from the interventions that many contemporary theorists have made in shifting the ‘margins’ to the supposed ‘centre’ and reconfiguring the polarized politics of ethnicity and cultural identity in Britain. Yet... I have been disturbed by the ways in which the institutional acceptance of the radical politics of postmodernist and postcolonial theory has tended to inadvertently restage some of the very political and cultural inequalities it claims to be addressing.³⁴

While Nasta does not, here, discuss in detail the ways in which she considers this is done, she may be referring to the jargon and inaccessibility of much of the theory, which reinforce

³³ McLeod 2000, p. 230.

³⁴ Nasta 2002, pp. 4-5.

“inequalities” between academic elites and those outside academia, and/or the failure of much postcolonial theory to incorporate feminist analyses, thus reinforcing gender-based hierarchies. Susan Bordo has suggested, speaking of many contemporary feminists’ tendency to retreat from political analysis for fear of falling into “essentialism”, that: “we need to consider the degree to which this serves, not the empowerment of diverse cultural voices and styles, but the academic hegemony (particularly in philosophy and literary studies) of detached, metatheoretical discourse”.³⁵

In her introduction to a paper on Jamaica Kincaid, Alison Donnell writes:

In this paper, I wish to shift the critical axis away from the application of theory to Kincaid’s writing, in order to explore the way in which her writing itself could be seen as an alternative theory, a ‘literary’ theory which questions the assumptions within orthodox modes of interpretation, including feminist and psychoanalytic models. In other words, my interest lies with the ways in which post-colonial literature may help us to understand the limitations of certain theories, rather than with the ways in which theory can help us to understand post-colonial literature.³⁶

Although I am not primarily concerned in this thesis with pointing out the deficiencies of theoretical models, like Donnell I try to avoid an imposition of theory on the literature, preferring to address the ways in which literature can contribute to understanding of issues such as migration, feminism, and identity. As I explore further in this Introduction’s sections on “Literature, Theory and Politics” and “Literature and Feminism”, one of the most important ways in which literary writings can do this is by portraying multiple and often contradictory perspectives on, and experiences of, migration. Theory tends, on the other hand, to argue one particular viewpoint, thus almost inevitably sacrificing some of the complexity and diversity of migrant experience.

Language and postcolonial theory

Much migrant women’s creative writing engages with issues of personal and political significance while using language in creative and innovative ways. I aim in this thesis to stay close to the spirit of this literature in order to remain in dialogue with it; one way in which I try to do this is to write in a manner which is as accessible as possible to people who may be interested in this area of study but may not necessarily be familiar with the elitist and often exclusionary language of a narrowly defined field.

Barbara Christian writes of what she calls the “takeover” she perceives as having taken place within the literary world, so that literary critical language has been changed to meet the agendas of scholars of abstract philosophy. She continues:

³⁵Bordo 1990, p.142.

³⁶ Donnell 1992, p. 45.

Perhaps because those who have effected the takeover have the power (although they deny it) first of all to be published, and thereby to determine the ideas which are deemed valuable, some of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean black, women, third world) have been influenced, even coopted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation. At least so far, the creative writers I study have resisted this language.³⁷

Later in this essay, Christian writes of the way in which the language of literary criticism “mystifies rather than clarifies” the lives and literatures of black women and other people of colour. In addition she writes of how she

raced from philosophy to literature, since the latter seemed to me to have the possibilities of rendering the world as large and as complicated as I experienced it, as sensual as I knew it was. In literature I sensed the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged.

She continues: “I am appalled by the sheer ugliness of the language [of literary theory], its lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence structures, its lack of pleasurable quality, its alienating quality”. And as well as this, she charges the theory with, despite critiquing Western traditions and assumptions, using “the same forms, styles, language of that tradition, forms which necessarily embody its values”.³⁸ This includes a tendency towards the monolithic:

Constructs like the *center* and the *periphery* reveal that tendency to want to make the world less complex by organizing it according to one principle, to fix it through an idea which is really an ideal. Many of us are particularly sensitive to monolithism since one major element of ideologies of dominance, such as sexism and racism, is to dehumanize people by stereotyping them, by denying them their variousness and complexity. Inevitably, monolithism becomes a metasystem, in which there is a controlling ideal, especially in relation to pleasure. Language as one form of pleasure is immediately restricted, and becomes heavy, abstract, prescriptive, monotonous.³⁹

And she writes that both literature and literary criticism, for her, should be to do with the empowerment of people from marginalised groups: there is a need to use language directed “to those who write what I read and to those who read what I read –put concretely—to Toni Morrison and to people who read Toni Morrison”, rather than primarily to other academics and literary critics.⁴⁰

Christian’s critique of the language of much literary theory is an important one. Her points are directly applicable to post-colonial theory in particular as well as to literary theory more generally. It is true that Christian’s use of the phrase “our creative writers” is somewhat problematic because, while conveying a sense of the community that can exist between “black, women, third world” writers and readers, it could also be taken as implying that Christian claims to speak on behalf of such writers. Her phrase appears to homogenise a very diverse group. In addition, her use of the word “our” is limiting, since it seems to imply that Black or third world women writers “belong” only to other Black or third world women. I seek in this

³⁷ Christian 1997, p. 149.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 151-2.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 154.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

thesis, rather, to open up conversations across difference—something, I argue, to which much of the literature I examine is conducive, and that is crucial to feminist theory and practice.

But Christian's points raise crucial questions about the role of theory in understanding postcolonial literature and in addressing the issues raised therein. Far from being simply a question of *how* the debates are engaged in, the issue of the language in which theory is couched goes to the very heart of questions of power that postcolonial criticism is attempting to address. While I have drawn from some of the most relevant and useful aspects of postcolonial theory, I have also consciously sought out other theoretical contributions whose insights are phrased in language more closely reflecting their political goals than is the case with much postcolonial criticism. In doing so, I hope to offer a way of reading these women's texts which is responsive to the realities of migration which the texts foreground, without losing sight of the discursive formations through which these 'realities' are mediated.

Universalism and Fragmentation

Another problematic aspect of much postcolonial theory is that, despite its attempt to pay attention to specifics of context and location, it sometimes displays a worrying universalising tendency. Ireland and India, for example, though vastly different historically and today, are both considered "postcolonial" contexts. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge's point about the book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*⁴¹ can be made about other contributions to the field as well: "particularities are homogenised... into a more or less unproblematic theory of the Other".⁴² Elleke Boehmer argues that there is a tendency in postcolonial criticism to stress similarities of texts written in very different former colonies.⁴³ Parry suggests that "projects deconstructing colonialist knowledge... have stimulated studies which by extending 'colonization' as an explanatory notion to all situations of structural domination, are directed at formulating a grand theory valid for each and every discursive system of discrimination and oppression".⁴⁴

Benita Parry criticises colonial discourse analysis for failing to produce its own account of colonialism, despite its deconstruction of colonialist writings and its refusal of the accounts of resistance movements. She writes that when this criticism of the writing of colonialism

does not produce its own account of change, discontinuity, differential periods and particular social conflicts, there is a danger of distinctive moments being homogenised. Thus colonialism as a specific, and the most spectacular, mode of imperialism's many and mutable states, one which preceded the

⁴¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1990.

⁴² Mishra and Hodge 1993, p. 278.

⁴³ Boehmer 1995, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Parry 1987, p. 52.

rule of international finance capitalism and whose formal ending imperialism has survived, is treated as identical with all the variable forms.⁴⁵

Thus, not only are varying “postcolonial” contexts spoken of as if identical, so too are manifestations of imperialism across different time periods. Hence complexities are elided into an over-riding theory which fails to take into account either geographical variation or historical change.

On the other hand, theorists who are critical of this universalising tendency sometimes, in focussing exclusively on specific locations, sacrifice any benefits that might come from a comparative approach, or an exploration of commonalities between different contexts. There is an over-emphasis on difference, on specific contexts and “moments”.⁴⁶ While sometimes there is a homogenising tendency, and at other times a focus on particularity, what is often lacking is an exploration of both difference *and* the possibilities of connections among diverse experiences. There is a failure to “get the balance right” between emphasising similarities on the one hand, and differences on the other, among postcolonial contexts and experiences. Boehmer writes that her volume, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, “goes somewhat against the grain” in looking at developments across time, at transformations as well as historical connections. I, too, acknowledge both difference and connection between contexts and writings and emphasise the need to negotiate a reading of migrant women’s texts which takes into account both the global and the local circumstances in which their texts are produced. While it is not always possible to bring both out simultaneously, I aim in this way to bring to the study of the writings a greater complexity than exclusive focus on either ‘difference’ or ‘connection’ could do.

Misleading oppositions

There are continuities between the “colonial” and “postcolonial” eras, which the opposition between them tends to overlook: many societies are still colonial; many women under both colonial and post-colonial regimes are greatly disadvantaged. Boehmer puts this in terms of the “excessive optimism” of post-colonialism.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Anne McClintock argues that the term “postcolonial” seems to set up the kind of “binary opposition” that much postcolonial *theory* seeks to challenge: colonial-postcolonial, an opposition set up on an axis of time and one that “makes colonialism the marker of historical difference”.⁴⁸ Sara Ahmed’s analysis begins

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 34-5.

⁴⁶ Boehmer 1995, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁸ Ahmed 2000 (on Anne McClintock), p. 10.

with an analysis of post-colonialism as based on an over-simplified notion of history: she says that the

complexity of the relationship between past and present, between the histories of European colonisation and contemporary forms of globalisation... cannot be reduced by either a notion that the present has broken from the past (a narrative that assumes that decolonisation meant the end of colonialism) or that the present is simply continuous with the past (a narrative that assumes colonialism is a trans-historical phenomenon that is not affected by local contexts or other forms of social change.⁴⁹

A related point is put by Carole Boyce Davies, who points out that many people are still living in a state of colonisation, either by another state or within certain nations (as with Native Americans, African-Americans, Palestinians and Aboriginal Australians, for example). It is, therefore, inaccurate to assume we live in a 'postcolonial' world.⁵⁰

The continuity of the "colonial" and "postcolonial" eras is also reflected in the power relations involved in recent and current events in international politics. Williams and Chrisman, referring to Anne McClintock's arguments on this point, write (referring to the first US military intervention in the Gulf in 1991), that

The fact that the major imperialist nation, the United States, can intervene militarily in the Gulf against a country which it continued to arm and encourage up to the point of hostilities, or under the guise of humanitarianism in Somalia, a country to which it had previously happily denied aid; the fact that it can do so while claiming the highest moral authority ('doing God's work', as President Bush put it in the case of Somalia); the fact that articles and editorials in respectable newspapers such as the Sunday Telegraph can call for the West to go back to Africa and sort out the mess into which their incompetent national governments have led them—all of these indicate how many of the attitudes, the strategies and even how much of the room for manoeuvre of the colonial period remain in place.⁵¹

Much the same argument, indeed, can be made regarding the more recent invasion of Iraq by the United States and its "coalition partners", the United Kingdom being, of course, foremost among them. Colonialism may be less overt than in the past but many of its structures and attitudes—and the violence resulting from these—remain in place.

The opposition between the "colonial" and the "post-colonial" also does not distinguish between the "beneficiaries" and the "casualties" of colonialism, even while it remains Eurocentric: what is most important in numerous and diverse societies' histories is seen, universally, to be their relationship to their former colonisers.

Boyce Davies also points out the continuities of the theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism, both of which retain an essential Eurocentrism.⁵² Chrisman and Williams point to the problematic assumption of contemporary postcolonial theory: "that anti- and post-colonial

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁰ Boyce-Davies 1994, p. 83.

⁵¹ Williams and Chrisman 1994, p. 3.

⁵² Boyce-Davies 1994, p. 86.

discourses only emerge as a response to, and in (friendly or antagonistic) dialogue with, Western knowledge/power... Viewed historically, emergent anti- and post-colonial cultural and theoretical discourse was formed as much through transnational dialogue with other Third World discourses and movements as it was through dialogue with the West". They cite in this connection early twentieth century Black scholars from the United States, South and Western Africa and the Caribbean, involved in pan-Africanism. Florence Stratton reinforces this point when she writes that "the primary engagement" of African women's writing is not so much with Africa's former colonisers, although race and coloniality are also themes in this literature, but "with the African male literary tradition, as women writers have responded to the reactionary gender ideology embedded there".⁵³ Stratton points, here, not only to much post-colonial theory's neglect of the role of gender; she also critiques the theory's assumption that post-colonial writers are primarily interested in challenging Western discourse.

These global manifestations of colonial and postcolonial shifts are manifested in the literature through the everyday mundane lives of the characters. That colonial and post-colonial eras cannot productively be viewed as completely separate periods is illustrated through the impacts on characters –in Jamaica Kincaid's novels, for example-- of both colonial and neo-colonial power relations. Many of the writings, including those of Kincaid and of Dionne Brand, reflect their authors' keen awareness of the profound and enduring impact of colonial history in contemporary times.

"Hybridity" and the politics of postcolonial theory

Concepts like "hybridity" and "migrancy", while to some extent useful, as I have discussed in the previous section, tend to celebrate the state of being in-between, or to conflate very different kinds of migration (such as illegal immigration in the back of a lorry, and the more privileged migrations of relatively well-off academics). Unlike some postcolonial critics who use these terms, many migrant women writers portray the great difficulties and pain of migration and of being uprooted. Regardless of their own class status, many of the writers I discuss are attentive to class differentials between women, as well as to gender differences. Literary discourse offers the middle-class migrant woman writer a space in which to imaginatively affiliate herself with some of the realities of migration which she herself may not have experienced. In this sense, literary writings are perhaps more accommodating than 'theory' because they allow for a greater degree of speculation and empathy.

Sara Ahmed points to critics of post-colonial theory who argue that this body of theory fails to "account for the structural conditions in which 'local encounters' with hybridity and difference

⁵³ Stratton 1994, p. 11.

take place”. Through its celebration of “play, hybridity and inbetweenness” some critics even say, post-colonial theory is complicit with global capitalism’s emphasis on the freedom of the marketplace. Dirlik argues that post-colonial theory is a symptom of global capitalism because it emphasises hybridity at the expense of “power, ideology and structure”. While disagreeing with some aspects of these critics’ arguments, Ahmed shares some of their concerns, particularly with work on how hybridity involves the “transgression and destabilisation of identity”, because she feels it can reconstitute dominant identities: hybrid migrant subjects versus native subjects.⁵⁴ I would add that not all migrants challenge traditional gendered views of identity; these in some cases become all the more entrenched as some migrants seek to reinforce their links with “home”. In such cases, women often become crucial signifiers of ‘the home left behind’ and may well be deployed in highly conservative ways. The theory’s emphasis on “transgression and destabilisation” also –as pointed out by Dirlik-- tends to ignore factors such as economic need and racial discrimination, which affect migrants’ sense of themselves as surely as does their crossing of cultural boundaries.

Postcolonial theory sometimes also, in its complex analyses, fails to take a strong and clear political stance. In a different context (speaking of Alice Walker’s examination of “the complicated interactions or racism and sexism” in her novel *Meridian*), Patricia Duncker notes that

The courage to confront complexity, to reject the secure simplicity of slogans, is the basis for all fine political writing. But the real achievement, both in politics and in art, comes in the refusal to be confused or compromised by complexity, to decide on political priorities, to act and to write on the basis of that decision.⁵⁵

Postcolonial theory, as Nasta points out, does confront complexity and attempt to dismantle simplistic and fixed notions of identity; however as Ann Russo writes (see below), many theorists “retreat” from feminist analyses in the face of this complexity. I would say, to use Duncker’s phrase, that in doing so they are “compromised by complexity”.

Ella Shohat points out the difference, within US universities, between the prestige accorded to “the postcolonial” and the field of “ethnic studies”, which she says may be felt to be too militant and therefore more “threatening to university administrations”.⁵⁶ While she emphasises that “postcolonials” may also face prejudice, and may also be activists, her point does raise the question as to *why* postcolonial theory is perceived to be less radical than some other fields. I would argue that the emphasis, in such theory, on the complexity of identities that sometimes can lead towards what Shohat calls “political immobility”, as well as the often dense language

⁵⁴ Ahmed 2000, p. 12-13.

⁵⁵ Duncker 1992, p. 251.

⁵⁶ Shohat 1998, p. 41.

which can seem to be the domain of a select privileged few. It may also stem from a frequent tendency towards both “erasure of ‘race’ as an analytical category” and an elision of gender in its concentration on the central category of “the postcolonial”.⁵⁷ I concur with those critics who point to the paradoxical –and regrettable-- loss of radical analysis engendered by the particular kinds of approach and language of much postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theorists do not always demonstrate sufficient awareness both of the complexity of identities and of the ways in which oppressions and imbalances of power continue to operate in society. I argue that it is vital to develop an analysis which takes account of both of these things simultaneously.

Benita Parry problematises post-colonial critics’ deconstruction of oppositions such as coloniser/colonised when she asks:

How then do these deconstructions of colonialism’s signifying system act more radically to disrupt the hegemonic discourse than does Fanon’s method of exposing, through defamiliarization, the taxonomy of colonialist knowledge in order to break its hold over the oppressed? And what are the politics of projects which dissolve the binary opposition colonial self/colonized other, encoded in colonialist language as a dichotomy necessary to domination, but also differently inscribed in the discourse of liberation as a dialectic of conflict and a call to arms?⁵⁸

The emphasis on analysing the complexity of relations between colonised and coloniser, on deconstructing the opposition between them and the privileging of the discursive, can sometimes function almost to de-politicise that relationship. It can obscure the power imbalance that, despite the critics’ justified resistance to monolithic categories, unquestionably inhered in the colonial relationship.

I argue that there is a fundamental problem when theory gets in the way of or contradicts ethical stances with whose goals the scholar is otherwise in agreement. The very purpose of this theory is called into question. One area where this contradiction is evident is the issue of how to define identity. Shohat, for example, comments on what she sees as the “paradoxical” nature of being in favour of affirmative action:

While poststructuralist feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories entail the rejection of essentialist articulations of identity and biologicistic and transhistorical determinations of gender, race and sexual identity, we theorists as political agents have at the same time supported “affirmative action,” implicitly premised on the very categories elsewhere rejected as essentialist, leading to a paradoxical situation in which theory deconstructs totalizing myths while activism nourishes them.⁵⁹

I feel this sets up an unnecessary paradox. Support for affirmative action policies does assume some notion of identity. However, I argue that such support is one example of analysis, policy or activism that is based on an acknowledgement of the importance of the impact of hierarchies and injustices on people’s lives. Rather than nourishing essentialist myths as

⁵⁷ Boyce Davies 1994, p. 85.

⁵⁸ Parry 1987, p. 29.

⁵⁹ Shohat 1998, p. 6.

Shohat charges, this kind of political stance makes central a recognition of the real effects of those social structures that favour some people over others based on essentialist criteria of gender, race and so on. What is needed is scholarship that supports such activist concerns, rather than contradicting them.

Shohat does end this paragraph by acknowledging political inequities.

Given these complexities, an anti-essentialist multicultural feminist project is obliged to formulate identities as situated in geographical space and “riding” historical moment, to work through a politics whereby the decentering of identities, and the celebration of hybridities does not also mean that it is no longer possible to draw boundaries between privilege and disenfranchisement.⁶⁰

Her last sentence implies a criticism that I echo: the danger, in this kind of view of identity, that power imbalances are obscured. For “an anti-essentialist multicultural feminist project”, it is vital that these real and persistent inequities be absolutely central to analysis.

What Shohat refers to as the “decentering of identities, and the celebration of hybridities” can be rather too utopian at times, playing down the extent to which this view is not reflected in social structures and in the ways in which people suffer from these. I share the view that in order for racism, sexism and other oppressions to be dismantled, new and “decolonised” ways of seeing need to be developed. However, my own work starts from a different point: with explorations of how writers portray the emotional impacts of these injustices, rather than with “the celebration of hybridities”. The fact that political inequities persist, in my view, needs to be the ground from which analysis grows. This seems to be all too often forgotten in theoretical writings, despite their stated goals.

Sometimes, too, there is an over-emphasis in postcolonial theory on the “fluidity” of identities; on the variation of people’s identities in different contexts. Such an emphasis is important, but so too is the recognition that in many ways there are continuities across contexts. While racism takes many different forms, it is also an extremely intractable and widespread problem.

Shohat writes: “Multicultural feminism is thus less concerned with identities as something one has than in identification as something one does. While rejecting fixed, essentialist and reductionist formulations of identity, it fosters a mutually enriching politics of intercommunity representation”.⁶¹ On one level, this chimes with some of what I write in Chapter 4, and in the section below, on reading and identification across differences; the importance of white women coming to greater understandings of black women’s experiences; the potential importance to this process of white women reading black and/or migrant women’s writing.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 9.

But again, like the emphasis on “hybridity” in much post-colonial theory, it is a little utopian. “Identities” remain important: I cannot somehow transcend my whiteness, even if I achieve an anti-racist, “pro-womanist” way of reading and identifying, and throw in my lot with black women in an activist sense. And black women (or at least black women who are not so light-skinned as to be able to “pass”) are very often seen and treated first and foremost as black, no matter who they identify with.

A stance emphasising a politics of location is important here. While much migrant writing calls into question the meaning of location –certainly fixed location-- as traditionally understood, I argue that a reader-response approach, which works to locate the reader in relation to migrant women’s writings, is appropriate and important in reading migrant women’s writing. As I say in Chapter 3, a politics of location has to take into account the *plurality* of places and (literal) locations that may be part of one’s identity and history, but it is still important to do this. I am choosing to ‘read against the grain’ of much interpretation of migrant women’s writing, in this way, in order to work towards identifying a “a multicultural feminist politics of identification, affiliation, and social transformation”.⁶²

Given some of the above limitations of post-colonial theory, along with its partial usefulness, I suggest that Shohat (although this is not her stated intention) provides ideas for some useful “tests” to put to post-colonial theory. For example, she writes of the diversity within categories such as “women of color” and continues: “Multicultural feminism acknowledges the palimpsestic complexity of these categories without erasing the stratifications within the imagined community of feminism”.⁶³ Some post-colonial theory appears to, precisely, come dangerously close to “erasing stratifications” in its emphasis on the complexity of identities. So one could use her statement here as a query to put to a given theoretical contribution: is it acknowledging both complexity and political inequity?

Another crucial query to put to a contribution is whether or not it gives acknowledgement to the difficulties faced by Black and/or migrant women, alongside its “celebration of hybridity” and of in-betweenness. Shohat points out, for example, as many others do not, that in a hierarchically organised system of economic power and labour flow, “Only those at the low end of the hierarchy are penalized for border-crossing... National, racial, class and gender

⁶² Ibid., p. 9.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 32.

hierarchies determine who can cross, in which direction, and on what terms”.⁶⁴ Large American corporations and their executives are not penalised for crossing borders in the same way as those on the lower end of the scale. Shohat does tend here towards a somewhat problematic collapsing of the distinction between literal and more metaphorical crossing of borders—categorising as “border-crossing” both the crossing of national borders by migrants and the search for justice by “people of color, women, and gays/lesbians demanding their share of power”. However, her point about hierarchy and the penalizing of those on the lower end of the political scale, is an important one to remember when engaging in the theoretical discussions of hybridity.

Furthermore, Shohat writes: “Articulating the contradictions among multicultural feminists does not imply political immobility; rather, it suggests a more lucid and variegated coalition”. She continues: “Nor does the existence of tensions [among multicultural feminists] mean that we should draw detached chains of atomized communities and subaltern histories”.⁶⁵ This seems to me to be a further danger of some post-colonial theory: that difference is emphasised to such a degree that the possibility of making connections is rendered impossible. One could ask where a particular piece of theory leads, in political terms: does it give a useful analysis that could fuel activism, or, conversely, does it lead to a sense of paralysis and isolation?

Can the subaltern speak?

As well as power imbalances between coloniser and colonised, the agency of the latter is sometimes (perhaps paradoxically) obscured by the theory. Parry writes that the focus on colonialist writing in much postcolonial theory can in effect

either erase the voice of the native or limit native resistance to devices circumventing and interrogating colonial authority. Positions against the nostalgia for lost origins as a basis for counter-hegemonic ideological production (Spivak) or the self-righteous rhetoric of resistance (Bhabha), have been extended to a downgrading of the anti-imperialist texts written by national liberation movements; while the notion of epistemic violence and the occluding of reverse discourses have obliterated the role of the native as historical subject and combatant, possessor of an-other knowledge and producer of alternative traditions.⁶⁶

In her well-known piece “Can the subaltern speak?”, Gayatri Spivak uses the practise of *sati* in colonial India as an example of a subaltern practise which compromised Indian women. She writes that there is no position from which subaltern Indian women could speak, as they were caught between different opposing discourses: that of British colonialism, which saw the women as victimised by a primitive culture, and that of indigenous forces maintaining practices such as *sati*. The ‘voices’ of these women are not retrievable, despite attempts by “subaltern

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

⁶⁶ Parry 1987, p. 34.

studies” and feminist scholars to excavate these and other buried voices. Since, the argument maintains, human consciousness is an effect of discourse, not somehow distinct from it, to Spivak it is a highly problematic enterprise to try to find voices that are independent of the discourses that construct them.

McLeod summarises Spivak’s position as follows: “To retrieve the unruly voice of a ‘subaltern subject’ from the colonial archives is to risk complicity in an essentialist, specifically Western model of centred subjectivity in which ‘concrete experience’ is (mistakenly) preserved”.⁶⁷

And yet, surely, it is possible to reflect on the discourses that “construct” one’s own identity; it is not the sole prerogative of the postcolonial critic to do this. Spivak’s conclusion that the subaltern cannot speak, clearly, enacts what Parry sees as a negation of the role of the “native” as subject. Spivak’s

refrain, ‘One never encounters the testimony of the women’s voice-consciousness’, ‘There is no space from which the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak’, ‘The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read’, ‘The subaltern cannot speak’, iterates a theoretical dictum derived from studying the discourse of *Sati*, in which the Hindu patriarchal code converged with colonialism’s narrativization of Indian culture to efface all traces of woman’s voice.⁶⁸

Parry critiques this position by saying

From the discourse of *Sati*, Spivak derives large, general statements on woman’s subject constitution/object formation in which the subaltern woman is conceived as a homogenous and coherent category, and which culminate in a declaration on the success of her planned disarticulation... Spivak in her project gives no speaking part to the colonized, effectively writing out the evidence of native agency.⁶⁹

Parry also points out that Spivak is speaking of conflicting discourses which silence the subaltern woman, yet does not admit of the possibility of the agency of real women. “[I]t should be possible”, writes Parry, “to locate traces and testimony of women’s voice on those sites where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists, and by this to modify Spivak’s model of the silent subaltern”.⁷⁰ Parry writes, concluding a critique of Spivak’s analysis of Jean Rhys’ novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* in which she criticises Spivak for ignoring the voice of Christophine, Black servant to the white Creole character Antoinette, of “Spivak’s deliberate deafness to the native voice where it is to be heard”. She charges Spivak with “severely restrict[ing] (eliminat[ing?]) the space in which the colonized can be written back into history”.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 192-3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 34-5.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 39.

While Spivak is correct to point out that victims of *sati* cannot speak for themselves but are caught between conflicting accounts, she does not consider the experiences of others who may not have been as fully silenced as they by colonialism. As Ben Okri says in an interview,

[W]hile it is true that everybody in a [colonised] place like that could be affected by the colonial presence, isn't it just possible that within it there may be people who are living their lives almost completely unaware that it was happening?... [T]here's been too much attribution of power to the effect of colonialism on our consciousness... Even though that was there and took place and invaded the social structure, it's quite possible that it didn't invade our spiritual and aesthetic and mythic internal structures, the way in which we perceive the world.⁷²

Okri's words speak to the experiences of some colonised people, who either had little contact with the colonisers or who, despite such contact, managed to retain a sense of the world and themselves that refused subjugation and external definition. His emphasis here is in direct contrast to the overwhelming sense of silencing that Spivak conveys. I argue that it is necessary to keep the coexistence of differing and contradictory experiences in view: the ways in which the exercise of colonial power both silenced many of those conquered, and did not always entirely succeed in its attempts at erasing or over-writing indigenous people's agency, resistance, and consciousness. Tsitsi Dangarembga, in *Nervous Conditions*, gives one illustration of the widely differing effects of the experience of colonialism that were possible, through the contrasting experiences of her characters Nyasha and Tambu.

Equally, if the subaltern does not speak with the voice Western critics may assume, i.e. a unified and individualised one, this does not necessarily mean she does not speak with *any* voice at all. Perhaps it is a voice that is more collective, more grounded in community than that assumed by Western critics; perhaps it draws and builds on collective traditions of which these Western critics are not aware, but it is still a voice. This raises the issue of how the subaltern's voice might be *recognised*. Critics might need to be open to a voice which does not fit into conventional definitions or understandings of what that means; and to guard against denying the voice and, hence, the agency of the subaltern.

Another problem with Spivak's conclusion is how to define who is 'subaltern' and, therefore, who it is that cannot speak. Spivak has made use of "her own status as a 'native'" in order to claim validity for her point of view.⁷³ And yet published theorists and creative writers—Spivak herself and Devi respectively, to take two instances—whatever their identity or location, presumably *do* speak. On the other hand, migrant women, Black and 'Third World' women, lesbian women who are published writers, do not automatically become unproblematically privileged, as Spivak seems to imply. Bart Moore-Gilbert comments that

⁷² Okri in Wilkinson, ed., 1992, p. 86.

⁷³ Moore-Gilbert 1997, p. 110.

it is surely too simple to imply, as Spivak does, that by the very process of finding a voice, such figures have automatically become part of the hegemonic order... Spivak's contention that "If the subaltern can speak then, thank God, the subaltern is not a subaltern any more" does not sufficiently recognize that there may be a number of intermediate positions between 'full' subalternity and hegemony.⁷⁴

To word this slightly differently, Spivak's assertion does not recognise the many ways that many people, including women such as feminists from the 'third world', may occupy positions of privilege and disadvantage *simultaneously*. In addition, it would appear rather elitist to assert that only writers and scholars can speak, and those without education are entirely silent. The writers I focus on in this study often demonstrate this in their writing, in the anxieties and tensions they explore about the question of woman's *voice*.

Homi Bhabha, unlike Spivak, concentrates on the ways in which "the native" used and subverted colonialist discourse in order to resist the dominant ideology. His view of colonialist power is that it was far less powerful, far less absolute, than is often assumed, and than it appears from Spivak's portrayal. (Spivak's theory, according to Benita Parry, "assign[s] an absolute power to the hegemonic discourse in constituting and disarticulating the native").⁷⁵ There is room in neither Spivak nor Bhabha, however, for looking, say, at Caribbean writers' reclaiming of patois (see discussion of Collins, Allen and Bloom in this thesis, for example) or at other writings of resistance.

In attending to the ways in which our critical practices render the subaltern as female unable to speak, Spivak's work perhaps comes too close on occasions to denying women the possibility of changing the dominant modes of interpretation.⁷⁶

According to Parry, whatever the significant differences between the work of Spivak and Bhabha, such theories "discount or write out the counter-discourses" of liberation movements. While Bhabha analyses the "strategems and subterfuges" engaged in by the colonised, neither he nor Spivak allows for the possibility of the colonised writing "an alternative text"⁷⁷.

In a related point, Chrisman and Williams also say that debates about the extent to which the "subaltern presence may carry a transgressive or oppositional weight" within colonial discourses still give supremacy to the latter. "[N]ative or subaltern subjects feature as secondary 'subject-effects' allowed, according to the critic, greater or lesser degrees of oppositional power within the discourse of empire".⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 107-108.

⁷⁵ Parry 1987, p. 34.

⁷⁶ McLeod 2000, pp. 197-8.

⁷⁷ Parry 1987, p. 43.

⁷⁸ Williams and Chrisman 1994, p. 16.

The theories of both Spivak and Bhabha fail to convey the wide range of effects created by colonial power in different contexts, and within a given context. Some colonised people were utterly silenced, which is what Spivak conveys most vividly; others resist or resisted by “mimicking”—something brought out by Bhabha. Some responded with servile behaviour; others resisted in overtly oppositional ways. Literature can show a variety of these things simultaneously, something that theory at times has difficulty doing, perhaps because it is in danger of losing its status as a viable theory, if such variation is taken into account. I discuss this further in later sections of this Introduction.

Slippage in the terminology of post-colonialism

Definitions of post-colonialism, a “much debated, even strongly contested” concept⁷⁹, vary greatly among theorists. The “post” in the term is sometimes used to mean “after”, in a temporal sense. At other times it can mean a stance critical of or resistant to colonialism—confusingly, even prior to decolonisation. Williams and Chrisman critique this kind of usage in Adam and Tiffin’s volume *Past the Last Post*, saying that “This idea... of an unbroken history of automatic, effortless resistance by the colonised... ignores both the variety of cultural responses to European incursions and the material difficulties of co-ordinating and sustaining resistance”.⁸⁰ Boehmer, despite her awareness of some of the problems and assumptions of the terminology, uses the hyphenated word post-colonial to refer to an era following colonialism; and the (unhyphenated) term “postcolonial literature” to refer to “that which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship”.⁸¹ (Sara Ahmed too uses the term post-colonial in this way). Given these differences even in the usage of the term, it is difficult to perceive the body of scholarship known as post-colonial theory as a coherent field.

Even within the body of work of a particular theorist, the term can be slippery and contested. Spivak, considered one of the most influential critics within postcolonialism, has also distanced herself from it. Sara Ahmed points to Spivak’s most recent book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, as making problematic her designation as a post-colonial critic; this is because the book “describes her transition from post-colonial theory to transnational cultural studies, and ... provides a strong critique of how post-colonialism has appropriated the Native Informant’s position”. As Ahmed interprets Spivak’s critique in this volume, she is saying that postcolonialism “does tend to invoke too easily the category of ‘the other’”.⁸² Williams and Chrisman describe Spivak as “very much a post-colonial critic”; yet they also quote her—even

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁸¹ Boehmer 1995, pp. 3; 5.

⁸² Ahmed 2000, p. 183.

though they are referring to earlier work than is Ahmed—as attacking post-colonialism as “just totally bogus”.⁸³

Similarly, it is a little difficult from Ella Shohat’s Introduction to know how to position her in relation to postcolonial theory. She calls herself a “multicultural feminist”, rather than a “postcolonial feminist”; critiques aspects of postcolonial theory; and presents herself and the volume of which she is editor as drawing connections among various fields, of which postcolonial theory is only one. On the other hand, she is clearly much influenced by it, as shown among other things by her discussion of “hyphenated identities”, which as she explains are often over-simplistic, since

In the U.S., many communities and individuals fit only awkwardly into the single-hyphen boxes, yet bureaucratic pluralism does not allow for the polysemy in the politics of color. The usual ways of talking about “minority” identities leave little room for the complexities of these categories or the porous borders between them.⁸⁴

The distinction she makes, then, between “multicultural” and “postcolonial” feminists, is far from clear-cut; at the same time, it speaks to an uneasiness with postcolonial discourse and a desire to retrieve something from the category “multicultural”—one which has come to be seen as rather naïve and which, to some extent, “postcolonial” has come to replace.

While it is not my intention to define or choose between these contested and unbounded categories, I point out the slipperiness and lack of clarity in their use, by many critics, in order to show some of the problems, simply of definition, within the field. And while the shifting and contested definitions within the field do inform my approach, I have made a choice to make feminist approaches the focal critical perspective through which to read the texts I have chosen.

The constant internal critique within postcolonialism has made it a very unstable category. This instability has given rise to pertinent and worthwhile debates, and signals postcolonial critics’ concern to resist complacency about the possible definitions and delineations of their project. However, I argue for the benefits of settling on a feminist approach to the texts I have chosen, in order to be able to attend to the realities they evoke --even while accepting that the conclusions of such an approach might be provisional and partial. Rather than continually questioning the category itself, in other words, I argue that it is useful to keep some reservations on hold in order to enable productive and insightful readings of the literary texts.

⁸³ Williams and Chrisman 1994, pp. 5-6.

⁸⁴ Shohat 1998, p. 7.

Postcolonial theory as neocolonial appropriation?

Boehmer writes that “in the Western academy and liberal literary establishments, polycultural ‘translated writing’, in Rushdie’s phrase, is now widely accepted as one of *the* oppositional, anti-authoritarian literatures or textual strategies of our time”.⁸⁵ But there are problems with promoting this literature in this way:

The promotion of postcolonial migrant writing may offer another instance of the appropriation by Europe and America of resources in the Third World... This is perhaps with the intention of exhibiting cultural openness—but it is an openness which is withheld in other respects (such as in restrictions on immigration or economic aid). The promotion or appropriation of the literature keeps in place a cultural map of the world as divided between the richly divided metropolis and the meagrely endowed margin.⁸⁶

Thus “cultural artefacts” of the East are appropriated in order to shore up Western discourses, and the patterns of colonial relationship fail to be challenged.

In this process of appropriation for Western interests, Boehmer argues, the theory can become very removed from the material realities and experiences of marginalised, ‘third world’ people.

Boehmer writes that

Postmodern notions of meaning as arbitrary, or identity as provisional, are hardly relevant to the lives of those –women, indigenous peoples, marginalized ethnic, class and religious groups—for whom self-determination remains a political imperative. For them, the signifiers of home, self, past, far from representing instances of discursive contingency, stand for live and pressing issues.⁸⁷

Similarly, Parry argues that much post-colonial theory concentrates on an analysis of colonialist discourse while ignoring social and political institutions.⁸⁸ Local and specific realities are ignored, or passed over, so that theoretical points –very often about “discourse” rather than the daily realities of the people concerned—can be made.

Linking the experiences of women

Another dimension of my equivocation with regard to much postcolonial theory is that it emphasises the importance of colonialism over that of gender, and fails to integrate feminist critiques sufficiently into its analyses. Boyce Davies argues that postcolonial theorists tend to subsume the specific experiences of women with an assumption of a singular and unitary condition, ignoring the consistently lower status of women relative to men, both prior to and after decolonisation.⁸⁹ As Anne McClintock writes,

⁸⁵ Boehmer 1995, p. 236.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 238.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 239, 248.

⁸⁸ Parry 1987, pp. 43–45. Parry’s recently published book emphasises a return to a materialist approach in its title: *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*, Benita Parry, London: Routledge, 2004.

⁸⁹ Boyce-Davies 1994, p. 86.

The continuing weight of male-economic self-interest and the varied undertows of patriarchal Christianity, Confucianism and Islamic fundamentalism continue to legitimise women's barred access to the corridors of political and economic power, their persistent educational advantage. ... The history of these male policies, while deeply implicated in colonialism, are not reducible to colonialism and cannot be understood without distinct theories of gender power.⁹⁰

Not all theorists are sufficiently conscious of the often significant differences between the ways in which colonial discourses affect women and men in colonised (or formerly colonised) locations.

Increasingly, however, there is a trend among theorists to combine feminist and post-colonial approaches, and interrogate post-colonial literature with attention to issues of gender. Much of this material warns against the homogenising of diverse experiences, something of which both post-colonial theory and white Western feminist theory have been guilty.

But there are limitations to some of this newer material as well. Chrisman and Williams make a critique which, while predating the work of a growing number of postcolonial feminists, still holds to some extent. They argue that "the precise relations between gender power and other forms of power can be obscured" and point out, for example, that white colonial women are assumed to have occupied either "an automatically oppositional position vis-à-vis dominant colonial powers, or alternatively, an inescapable collusion with those same powers"⁹¹.

Theorising about white women in post-colonial contexts is limited by a similar oversimplification, and the complexities of the ways in which varying degrees of privilege and disadvantage interact still remain insufficiently explored. The literature I am looking at contributes important insights on such questions, in ways which post-colonial theory in the main has not managed to greatly illuminate.

There is also a danger in some of this theory which does combine post-colonial and feminist approaches of approaching the position, if not of actually asserting, that because such diversity exists, and because of the dangers of eliding these differences, the "Other woman" is not knowable at all. Marnia Lazreg, for example, spends much of her chapter in *Going Global* critiquing Western feminism for its tendency to "reinscribe" positions of power among women and perpetuate assumptions about 'Third World' women that are unfounded and oppressive. Some of her arguments have a degree of validity, even though they are very generalised, and based on examples taken from undergraduate students' assertions (which while of interest cannot, surely, be taken as the sum total of all Western feminist assumptions). But Lazreg ends her piece with a query whose full implications she fails to pursue: "Given the politics of reception of Other women's work and speech, it is crucial to ask whether 'Western audiences,

⁹⁰ McClintock 1991/92, p. 92.

⁹¹ Williams and Chrisman, p. 18.

feminist or otherwise, should insist on the knowability of these women”. Because Western scholarship, she argues, has not produced a sufficiently profound understanding of these women’s lives, but rather perpetuated “[g]eneralizations and stereotypes”, “[w]hat we need is the expression of reality by those who live it and on their terms”.⁹²

While “the expression of reality by those who live it” is clearly important, Lazreg’s assertion leads us to a position where understanding across difference—certainly across differences of power, privilege, and “location”—is impossible, and should not even be attempted. In my view this solves nothing; it certainly does not advance the feminist and anti-racist project of dismantling oppressive social structures or the attitudes that are engendered by and that reflect these. Indeed, as Sally McWilliams writes, speaking of her students’ wariness of interpreting writings by “Other” women because they felt their interpretation would be “a form of imperialist speech”, that such silence in fact would end up reinforcing racism:

Critical analysis and discussion that speaks for someone else does, in certain circumstances, obscure, erase, and silence the voice within the text, but as Audre Lorde asserts, racism looms behind a view that suggests people are so different from one another that there are no points of commonality.⁹³

McWilliams goes on to describe the way in which her students came to view themselves as, “[r]ather than seeing the texts as representing either a universal sameness or an unbridgeable otherness”, occupying a position “nearby” the texts. She advocates and has tried to instil in her students, in other words, a reading strategy that combines awareness of difference—not reducible to opposition or otherness—with identification. I explore similar ideas further in this Introduction’s section on reading, and in my chapter 4.

As with Marnia Lazreg, so too, potentially, with Spivak’s work: scholars may be led to a position of assuming the unknowability of the “Other woman”. As John McLeod points out,

after reading ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, critics might be discouraged from pursuing subalterns if their voices are forever lost inside colonial discourses. Why bother?... What is the point in trying to engage with oppressed voices if these voices are eternally doomed to perish due to the methods and concepts we use?⁹⁴

⁹² Lazreg in Amireh and Majaj, eds., 2000, pp. 37-38.

⁹³ McWilliams in *ibid.*, p. 255.

⁹⁴ McLeod 2000, pp. 194, 196. To pre-empt this potential criticism, Spivak advances her ideas about “strategic essentialism”, as a justification for continuing to use the concept of a subaltern subject as part of a wider political project. I critique Ella Shohat’s similar notion (with regard to affirmative action policies) elsewhere in this Introduction, arguing that a politics fundamentally based on a premise one does not accept, remains unconvincing.

In one interview, Spivak indicates her sense that her use of the term “speak” in the title of her essay has been misunderstood; she says that rather than meaning to convey the lack of expression by colonised women, “‘the subaltern cannot speak’ means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act”.⁹⁵ Spivak’s intention, as summarised by John McLeod, was to

consider the inability for their words to enable transactions between speakers and listeners. Their muteness is created by the fact that even when women uttered words, they were still interpreted through conceptual and methodological procedures which were unable to understand their interventions with accuracy. It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener.... Hence the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of a failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation.⁹⁶

I argue that it is crucial to create conversation across difference, not be stymied by that difference and end up saying nothing. The emphasis on impossibility by many of these critics, including Spivak, moves the critic no further forward; in effect it preserves the status quo.⁹⁷ It can also contradict or at least be very different from the literary articulations of some of the writers. Jennifer Wenzel quotes Mahasweta Devi, for example, who writes that part of the reader’s challenge is to: “to learn to love”. Spivak, in interpreting this, puts it “in terms more sympathetic to deconstruction: ‘ethical responsibility-in-singularity...in view of the impossibility of communication’”.⁹⁸ Spivak’s emphasis on this impossibility seems at odds with Devi’s message, rather than illuminating it. It also, in the end, does little to further the task of dismantling destructive and power-laden relationships among “different” women.

An approach is needed that goes further than analysing the limitations of (neo)-colonialist discourse, toward enabling this conversation to take place. Chandra Mohanty advocates the forging of “strategic coalitions” between First and Third World women tackling different forms of oppression.⁹⁹ Susheila Nasta also writes, in her Introduction to *Motherlands*, of the “creative dialogue” possible among Third World women writers and western feminist readers:

Western feminist theories current in ‘First World’ audiences need not simply appropriate these writings to elucidate their biases but... can ‘illuminate the texts’... Thus women readers in the ‘First World’ are able to re-evaluate the cultural assumptions which inform their own readings.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Landry and MacLean, eds., 1996, p. 292.

⁹⁶ McLeod 2000, p. 195.

⁹⁷ Bart Moore-Gilbert argues that Spivak’s essay leaves the non-subaltern critic in an impossible position: He or she “Must either maximally respect the Other’s radical alterity, thus leaving the status quo intact, or attempt the impossible feat of ‘opening up’ to the Other without in any way ‘assimilating’ that Other to his/her own subject position, perspectives or identity”. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁹⁸ Wenzel in Amireh and Majaj, eds., 2000, p. 244.

⁹⁹ Mohanty 1991, p. 69.

¹⁰⁰ Nasta 1991, pp. xvi-xvii.

According to John McLeod, the relationship between First and Third World women can then be “mobile, dialogic and *mutually* transformative”.¹⁰¹ Susheila Nasta’s words about the possibility and desirability of dialogue, he argues,

act as a corrective to the potential denial of agency for women’s speech in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’. Nasta reminds us that we must attend to the ways in which women from once-colonised countries are transforming English to enable *new* kinds of representation through which they *can* speak. Similarly, critical approaches are being negotiated which bear better witness to the specificities of this speech.¹⁰²

This thesis is part of a conversation among women, based upon an emphasis on the importance to this conversation of Western feminists reading literature by migrant women from formerly colonised countries. It is a dialogue I am committed to engaging in as a contribution to the dismantling of what Audre Lorde calls the “master’s house”,¹⁰³ and the rebuilding of a different and more equitable structure.

A different focus

Given the limitations of much postcolonial theory, as I have outlined above, this thesis could have been an attempt to show how migrant women’s writing can contribute to and improve upon the theory. However, I have chosen a very different focus.

The thesis explores the extent to which feminist theory—in various incarnations, such as feminist reader-response theory, and feminist contributions to migration studies—can be used and re-shaped to better enable the dismantling of hierarchies, which much (white) feminist theory has been guilty of bolstering, and promote greater understanding across difference. I argue that migrant women’s writings, and feminist criticism of them, have a crucial part to play in this endeavour; I have hence chosen to make feminist approaches the focal critical perspective through which to read. My project seeks to make strategic links between women, based upon an understanding of racism as the concern of *all* women, and to contribute to redefining feminism in the light of Black and Third World women’s charges that Western feminism retains and perpetuates Western colonialist and racist assumptions and inequities of power.

This, rather than an overt emphasis on postcolonial theory, is my focus. In terms of the usefulness to my project of the latter, however, Carole Boyce Davies’ notion of “going a piece of the way” with various theoretical positions is a useful one. She advocates drawing on existing

¹⁰¹McLeod 2000, p. 197.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 197-8.

¹⁰³ In her essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, Lorde 1984.

schools of thought while recognising their limitations and potential to marginalise Black women; interrogating theoretical models for their relevance and usefulness to Black women, challenging them where these are lacking; and producing alternative frameworks of understanding that are more enabling.¹⁰⁴

Like Boyce Davies, I “go a piece of the way” with various theoretical positions, including those of some postcolonial critics. But while there is a place for readings of migrant women’s literature which take an approach more thoroughly or explicitly based on post-colonial theory than mine is, my emphasis is different. I bring a range of approaches to the literature, to explore the kinds of insights that approaches not usually associated with these writings, can bring to bear. My view is similar to that of Barbara Christian, who writes that

my ‘method’, to use a new ‘lit. crit.’ word, is not fixed but related to what I read and to the historical context of the writers I read... my language is very much based on what I read and how it affects me.
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Bringing other approaches to light

Various benefits arise from drawing on a range of theoretical positions to illuminate issues such as those I address in the thesis. One is that other progressive or radical perspectives, often left out of analyses stemming from postcolonialism, can be brought to bear. Benita Parry cites Edward Said’s “policy of letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend” and says that doing so “can act as a caution against the tendency to disown work done within radical traditions other than the most recently enunciated heterodoxies, as necessarily less subversive of the established order”.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Ella Shohat points out that, within US universities, “the enthusiastic consumption of the theoretical aura of the ‘postcolonial’ threatens to eclipse the less prestigious ‘ethnic studies’ field”.¹⁰⁷

Barbara Christian, too, argues that in part because of the kind of language in which postcolonial theory tends to be couched, and because this approach has become “hegemonic” in the field, approaches that do not fit the pattern are either coopted or obscured. Christian points out that the “reigning theory of the day... claims many of the ideas that we, its ‘historical’ other, have known and spoken about for so long. For many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as somebody’s *other*”.¹⁰⁸ Black American feminists such as Christian, Audre Lorde, and Barbara Smith, and ‘third world’ women writers such as those I focus on in this thesis would not name

¹⁰⁴ Boyce Davies 1994, chapter 2 (“Negotiating Theories or ‘Going A Piece of the Way With Them’”); esp. pp. 46-48.

¹⁰⁵ Christian 1997, p. 156.

¹⁰⁶ Parry 1987, p. 27.

¹⁰⁷ Shohat 1998, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ Christian 1997, p. 150.

themselves “post-colonialists”. All however address some intersecting issues of race, gender and sexuality, power and empowerment, in alternative forms of language. Often they are either named post-colonial, despite this not being their own description of themselves, or ignored. Alternatively, some theorists do name their scholarship “post-colonial”, despite, as Carole Boyce Davies puts it, “actually doing something else”. Boyce Davies cites Zakia Pathak’s article, “A Pedagogy for Postcolonial Feminists”, which addresses feminist teaching and reading practices, and observes: “Clearly in all the formulations of post-colonial there is the automatic attempt to subsume a variety of emergent discourses of ‘Third World’ and ‘minority’ ‘resistance’ and certain ‘feminisms’ or women’s discourses”.¹⁰⁹

By drawing on theoretical positions other than the postcolonial alone, I hope to go some way towards remedying the relative lack of focus given to other progressive viewpoints in contemporary scholarship on migrant women’s writing; in so doing I hope to bring out aspects of the literature that the use of a postcolonial ‘lens’ alone would not capture.

Through my broad focus I also try to make connections that are not always made in various fields normally dealt with separately. Ella Shohat explores how in the US context post-colonial studies often overlooks race within the US, while “ethnic studies” focuses on US “minorities” while ignoring more global issues, and area studies “are seen as located ‘elsewhere’”, overlooking the ways in which “elsewhere” and “here” are interrelated. Women’s, gender, and sexuality studies often, she says, “reproduce such divisions”.¹¹⁰ This is a good illustration of the point that exclusive focus on one particular approach can obscure important connections between fields. Shohat extends her argument by saying that

the institutional privileging of one discourse and field of inquiry at any particular historical moment might mean the blocking of other discourses and fields of inquiry, along with the sabotaging of possible alliances between discursive fields and the communities mediated by them.¹¹¹

I am looking, in this thesis, to see what insights other approaches besides the postcolonial – approaches that are often sidelined or “blocked” by the heavy emphasis within academia on postcolonial theory-- can bring to migrant women’s writing.

Neglected aspects of migrant women’s writing

It is not only the potential insights of certain theoretical approaches to postcolonial literature, but also important aspects of the literature itself, that can be overlooked by an over-emphasis on postcolonial theory. Elleke Boehmer argues that on the one hand post-structuralist strands of

¹⁰⁹ Boyce Davies 1994, p. 85.

¹¹⁰ Shohat 1998, pp. 39-40.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 42.

postcolonial theory make “audible, or organized for discussion, what were arguably the distinctive features of the writing” –of postcolonial literatures. She says that “the multivoiced migrant novel gave vivid expression to theories of the ‘open’, indeterminate text, or of transgressive, non-authoritative reading”. On the other hand, however, this kind of theory “champions in particular those aspects of the postcolonial narrative which particularly appeal to the theory: its interest in the provisional and fragmentary aspects of signification; its concern with the constructed nature of identity”. But the writing, she continues, is about more than “slippage and disintegration”; the details and specificity of the writing may be more than can be accounted for by postcolonial criticism. Boehmer argues that what is most truly “hybrid”, and most celebrated, is the writing that has bridged the gap and is most accessible to the West. What is also much celebrated is the “weightlessness” of migrant writing, leaving out writing which is specific, which emphasises “weight”, or location and rootedness, or indeed suffering associated with post-colonial or neo-colonial realities, and/or migration to the West. “The discourse takes what it needs for its own theoretical purposes, and disregards what is seen as ‘incomprehensible’ ” (or what does not fit).¹¹² As my own approach is informed by but not permeated by postcolonial theory, I am able to focus on aspects of the literature other than those commonly selected to correspond with a postcolonial angle. The fact that I draw on a variety of theoretical contributions enables features of the literature to be made visible which are too often neglected in studies using dominant postcolonial modes of analysis.

Barbara Christian points out the prescriptiveness of much contemporary theory and emphasises that “we need to read the works of our writers in our various ways” rather than “invent[ing] a theory of how we *ought* to read”.¹¹³ She also points out that what often happens is that it is no longer Black and ‘third world’ women’s literature that is discussed, but rather the theory itself; so that critical attention is focussed on an ongoing conversation about theory rather than about literature.¹¹⁴ Thus what creative writers are saying, and equally importantly the ways in which they say it, can be obscured. What Boyce Davies calls “pieces in a growing collage of uprising textualities” –the writings of Black feminists “speaking outside of the post-colonial” in voices of radical creativity and resistance¹¹⁵—can be misnamed, misunderstood, or simply not heard.

Some critics, as Boehmer points out, argue that “the rhetorical and linguistic structures of a text may offer readers their own analytic guidelines. That is to say, a way of reading or a ‘theory’ is

¹¹² Boehmer 1995, pp. 238-244.

¹¹³ Christian 1997, p. 150.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 152.

¹¹⁵ Boyce Davies 1994, pp. 86; 88; 108.

suggested in the form of the story”.¹¹⁶ She mentions Henry Louis Gates and Carolyn Cooper as arguing this; Alison Donnell also attempts to show this about Jamaica Kincaid’s novel *Lucy*.¹¹⁷ I too, rather than attempting to fit the literature into one particular approach, aim through my range of approaches to illuminate the writing rather than impose a framework upon it. Ultimately I advocate a mode of reading which is as responsive as possible to the ways in which the literary writings present themselves to be read.

Theoretical agendas: ‘doorkeepers’ to the texts

In her article “Tribal Stories, Scribal Worlds: Mahasweta Devi and the Unreliable Translator”, Minoli Salgado discusses the way in which Spivak’s translations of Devi’s stories are used to further Spivak’s own theoretical agenda. Salgado writes:

Indeed Spivak and her co-translator Samik Bandopadhyay seem to be alone among translators in their tendency to defamiliarize Mahasweta’s work –a move which serves to legitimize Spivak’s own claim that Mahasweta’s work creates an alternative, subaltern discourse that undermines the authority of nationalist constructions of a unified, democratic India abroad. Is Mahasweta indeed such a radical writer, altering the shape of current discursive and theoretical practice as Spivak claims, or is Spivak using her work as literary fodder to boost her anti-essentialist enterprise?¹¹⁸

Specifically, Salgado points out the “gap between Mahasweta’s own claims for her work and Spivak’s assertions”: in particular the contrast between the former’s description of the typicality of the experiences of the tribal people in her stories, as compared to Spivak’s stress on the specificity in Devi’s representations.

Salgado reminds us of the fact that many translations of a given work are possible and that the “current tendency” to see Spivak as Devi’s “doorkeeper” needs to be guarded against. Comparing translations of Devi, as Salgado does in her article, “reminds us that there are many doors to a text and that door-keepers can also be prison-warders, *barring us entry to aspects of a text that resist their hegemonic control*” (emphasis mine).¹¹⁹

While Salgado is speaking of translations, which is a theme I do not discuss in this thesis, what she says also applies to other forms of literary interpretation. Theoretical approaches to a text, like translations, can render invisible those “aspects of a text that resist their hegemonic control”; and this is one of my concerns about the predominance of postcolonial theory in interpreting ‘Third World’ and migrant women’s writing. I aim in this thesis to open other doors to this writing (to continue Salgado’s metaphor), hence seeing aspects of it that may not otherwise be brought to light.

¹¹⁶ Boehmer 1995, p. 249.

¹¹⁷ Donnell 1992.

¹¹⁸ Salgado 2000, p. 134.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 142.

Feminist approaches

Boehmer suggests that postcolonial criticism concentrates on “hybrid” texts because of an underlying belief in the possibility of cultural interaction.¹²⁰ However, postcolonial theory is not the only way of exploring this. A feminist angle can bring this to bear as well, as well as the all-important attention to difference for which recent feminist theory has highlighted the need.

I start from a position that the subaltern *can* speak and that Western feminists have a responsibility to hear those voices. Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj write in their introduction to *Going Global*:

It is our hope that this collection will contribute to a transnational feminist practice bringing women together through real cross-cultural dialogue. By exploring the reception contexts of Third World women’s writing, and by drawing attention to the power relations governing the production and reception of both writers and texts, we hope to bring new insight to the relationship between First and Third World women. Our focus on the reception context is part of a larger project being enacted within feminist discourse at the present time, that of historicizing Third World women’s cultural production as a way of counteracting the homogenizing tendencies of both global feminism and postcolonialism. We believe in the value and significance of transnational exchange: we want cultural and national borders to remain open[.]

even while they recognise, they go on to say, the difficulties and complexities of such exchange.¹²¹

My project is different from theirs; I do not look in detail at the “reception contexts” of Third world women’s writing. But like Amireh and Majaj, I am hoping to contribute to dialogue among “First and Third World women” by looking at texts by migrant women, the power dynamics that unfold as First World women read these writings, and the insights which the literature can contribute to feminism. This is not something that postcolonial criticism has done to any great extent; such a focus on dialogue, then, is necessary and timely. My own project is a contribution to a larger one within contemporary feminist discourse: exploring the possibilities of building transnational dialogue among women which is both cognisant of the politics of difference and power, and committed to radical social change in this regard.

In a sense, engaging in such a dialogue is the only responsible choice. As Sara Ahmed points out, foregrounding in particular the international gendered division of labour, global relationships and connections among women already exist, whether or not we are aware of them or are conscious of shaping them. These relationships, for the most part, “involve differentiation and antagonism”. In sharp contrast to Lazreg, who implies that Western women should choose

¹²⁰ Boehmer 1995, p. 248.

¹²¹ Amireh and Majaj, eds., 2000, pp. 20-21.

to say nothing at all about ‘the Other Woman’, Ahmed writes that “we need to find ways of re-encountering these encounters so that they no longer hold other others in place”. Alliances among women are far from guaranteed but are formed “through the *very work that has to be done* in order to get closer to other others” (emphasis Ahmed’s).¹²²

Ahmed argues that such face-to-face encounters are “forms of (and not supplements to) collective activism” in part they because they are what enable both other encounters, and other forms of activism to take place. This

getting closer... accepts the distance [between self and other] and puts it to work... Thinking about how we might work with, and speak to, others, or how we may inhabit the world with others, involves imagining a different form of political community, one that moves beyond the opposition between common and uncommon, between friends and strangers or between sameness and difference.¹²³

In this thesis I look not at face to face encounters but encounters between Western feminists and migrant women via the latter’s writings: this too is a form of Western feminists ‘getting closer’ to ‘third world women’ and re-imagining encounters that necessarily pre-exist our readings. As I argue below, and in Chapter 4, reading, too, if done responsibly, can be a form of activism and a force for change.

Ahmed addresses the silence with which some scholars respond to critiques of the racism and neo-colonialism of Western feminism. She writes:

I would argue that the perversion of remaining silent about those who do not inhabit the West, or even those who do not inhabit the West in the same way as privileged middle-class, white and heterosexual women... can be associated with the universalism that inspired the very response of silence in the first place. It remains a form of speech based on taking ‘me’ or ‘us’ as the referent; it confirms the other’s status as the stranger who is always and already marked by difference, and who hence cannot speak (my language).

This kind of response, she goes on to argue,

assumes distance and difference in order precisely not to take *responsibility* for that distance and difference. By assuming the [sic] one already knows the difference, the self and other relation is held in place. Such a politics whereby Western feminists simply refuse an encounter with those who inhabit places other than the West, does not move Western feminists into unlearning (beyond the unlearning of the right to speak), nor does it move others from their position as always ‘the strangers’.

Given the global relationships among women that already exist, from which

we do not *withdraw* by refusing the privilege of speech... Women in different nation spaces, within a globalised economy of difference, cannot not encounter each other, what is at stake is *how*, rather than *whether*, the encounters take place.¹²⁴

Ahmed’s rejection of silence as an appropriate response to problems of racism and neo-colonialism within Western feminism is central to my own approach. I concur with her argument that such a response ultimately serves merely to perpetuate those problems, and that what is needed is active engagement based on a commitment to altering the terms of the

¹²² Ahmed 2000, p. 17.

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 166-167.

relationships among “differently located” women that already exist—both globally and within Western countries such as Britain, the United States and Canada.

Indeed, two of Ahmed’s concluding assertions are central to the assumptions upon which my project are based.

The differences between us necessitate the dialogue, rather than disallow it—a dialogue must take place, precisely *because* we don’t speak the same language. ..

The ‘we’ of such a collective politics is what must be worked for, rather than being the foundation of our collective work.¹²⁵

While I have stressed here my reservations about postcolonial theories, and have preferred instead to foreground feminist perspectives, some of the wider concerns of postcolonial theory have informed the spirit in which this project has been pursued. Through exploring various approaches to the writings of migrant women, grounded primarily in feminist analysis, this thesis aims to be a contribution to developing a dialogue, that “we” of collective feminist politics to which Ahmed refers.

Literature, Theory, and Politics

It would have been possible, given the kinds of concerns and themes I pursue in this project, to take as my focus sociological or anthropological studies of migrant women’s lives, or memoir or autobiographical accounts of the experience of migration. However, my choice has been to focus on portrayals of migration in novels and poetry, and to ground my discussions in concrete stories of migration and its impacts which, unlike studies from the social sciences, evoke the personal and political contexts of individual migrations. I argue that the literature has important things to say, and to contribute to theoretical work done in related fields, about women’s experiences of migration.

Novels, in their development of various characters individually and in relationship to one another, are able to explore multiple and even contradictory perspectives, possibilities and outcomes in ways which neither social science nor literary or cultural theory such as postcolonialism can. This multiplicity of perspectives also distinguishes fiction from memoir and autobiography, which normally take one central point of view. While there is a growing body of work on postcolonial autobiography, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to engage with this body of work, although I consider some autobiographical writings in Chapter 2. Poetry, with its often dense and emotional language, also often explores areas of experience in ways not available to theory or social science. Works of these genres represent subjective and emotional aspects of experience without needing to fit them into a model or to come to conclusions or

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 180.

resolutions. They often invite empathy and identification on the part of the reader and, as such, are able to contribute ways of understanding women's experiences of migration that are different from such arguments and conclusions that are offered by postcolonial theory or social science.

Because I believe that the literature reflects, responds to and can influence political realities, in particular as they are experienced in individual lives, a focus on politics is central to my examination of the literature and of the formal choices authors make in exploring these themes. A number of times, I highlight the political reasons for and implications of the formal and linguistic choices the authors make.

Because of my decision to focus on comparative readings of the literary texts and on what they have to say in relation to a variety of experiences of migration and various key issues linked to it, I have focused on thematic considerations rather than on a detailed examination of literary questions of form and language—or *how* things are said in the novels and poems. Clearly a novel or poem is not a direct rendition of the lives of real people; and conclusions about women's experiences of migration which stem from literary interpretation cannot be directly transferred or applied to 'real life'. It is not my intention to imply this. But my readings are based on the ideas about literature and politics that I detail in this section, and elsewhere in this Introduction, and my emphasis on the political aspects of the literature has been to some extent at the expense of more formal kinds of analysis.

My thesis is intended as a critique of theory that tries to divorce Black women's literature from its political context, addressing, to quote Gayatri Spivak, many theorists' "preoccupation with being in the library rather than being in the street", which she sees as symptomatic of the theory/practice split prevalent in academic institutions.¹²⁶ I read the literature, as well as relevant critical and theoretical texts, as emerging from anti-racist/Black feminist politics. I read, too, with an awareness that the literature itself is written and read in a specific political context. It is written by individuals whose experiences and identities are deeply influenced by their positions in society as well as by their personal responses to oppression and the political movements which may influence them and in which they themselves may be involved. Equally, the literature is published and read in a political context; publishers and readers, reviewers, academics and activists all occupy particular political and social positions and hold --whether implicitly or explicitly-- particular political views which influence their responses to the literature.

¹²⁶ Spivak 1990, p.1.

While I base my approach on the assumption that the literature I am studying is political in terms of its content and form, as well as of the contexts from which it arises and into which it is received, I will also be addressing the question of whether literature itself can be activist, in the sense of being an active force for political and social change. I will be asking whether the literature can function as an inspiration to activism, as well as what role it can play as an aspect, among others, of wider political activity. I explore the ways in which it participates in community and political life, and more specifically the extent to which it can contribute to the creation of political solidarity and activist community. These concerns are central in Chapters 4 and 5.

I base my exploration of literature in its political context on at least two assumptions about the nature of the literature. On the one hand, I see literature as an individual, creative way of exploring emotions and political issues. Narratives and poems are ways authors choose to explore or enact their personal concerns as migrants, as women, as people of a particular racial group. On the other hand, published literature links an author and her readership, even if for political or other reasons this readership is limited, and, as such, necessarily plays a larger role in society. I base my approach on the belief that literary and political approaches to literature need not, and indeed should not, be mutually exclusive, despite many critics' tendency to assume the contrary.

Using this combined literary and political approach, I look on the one hand at how the literary texts work on an emotional, inter-personal level, exploring in particular authors' use of imagery and characterisation to convey their concerns to their readers. On the other hand I point, at times, to how the writers' literary choices --for example their use of patois-- function politically.

Literature and Feminism

I ground this combined literary and political approach in a feminist theoretical framework, taking seriously the basic feminist insight that "the personal is political" and extending it to the literary sphere as well.

This emphasis means, I believe, that a feminist approach bears enormous positive potential, in terms both of resisting political oppression and of providing a framework from which to understand literature such as that focussed on in this thesis. Feminist theoretical emphases on the personal and the political are reflected in the literature. Based on personal concerns and thus often implicitly or explicitly acknowledging differences within "groups" such as Black women, the literature also highlights the personal impacts of macro political processes.

I concur here with Francoise Lionnet, who writes,

my point is neither to suggest that the particular (that is, personal and local) experience of a given writer should be taken as an exemplar of the general (that is sociopolitical and global) situation of a collectivity, ... Nor am I suggesting that individual and personal voices are the only legitimate locus for analyzing global political issues, or, to put it another way, that the personal is political in a static way. My focus is on the *processes* that produce the personal and make it historically and politically unique.¹²⁷

I also, in my analysis of the literature, strongly emphasise the importance of the relationship of gender to political power and powerlessness in a patriarchal society. I will be drawing on the writings of feminists who continue to do, as Carol Anne Douglas writes, “the most passionate, the most daring, most outrageous work we can”.¹²⁸ Patricia Duncker writes of her book *Sisters and Strangers: An Introduction to Contemporary Feminist Fiction*:

I am very aware that this book is out of step with the times... I have written about women and men, not femininity and masculinity, about sexual politics, not gender theory, about male privilege, not sexual difference. And I have questioned actual sexual practice, not celebrated an abstract desire. When I have written about power I have not described a nebulous fog floating in the air, which might descend upon anyone. *Fiction usually reveals in whose hands it lies*... I have tried to write as if we lived in kitchens, bedrooms, factories and the open fields, not in seminars. I do not take the view that the more we have suffered the purer our ideas will be, but I do believe that the liberation of women is about trying both to think differently and to live differently... The point of the struggle is not simply to understand our oppression as women, but to end it; and that can only be achieved by a strong, autonomous women’s movement. (emphasis mine)¹²⁹

Duncker’s particular feminist approach, grounded in women’s material experiences, seems to me a useful one to bear in mind when looking at migrant women’s writing. The lives of the characters and speakers created by these women, unfold in places such as the “kitchens, bedrooms, factories and the open fields” referred to by Duncker. We need, therefore, a feminist approach to the politics of women’s lives that is rooted in the everyday.

If feminist theory is important to the study of this literature, so too, I will be trying to show, is the literature important to feminism. Fictional explorations of themes such as the influence of race, culture and gender on identity, provide a vital contribution to developing an understanding of these issues. Such narratives represent an explicitly subjective, artistic rendering of their authors’ perceptions and experiences, and, because they illustrate how larger issues affect individual lives, complement theoretical, anthropological or historical texts and make key contributions to debates. As Francoise Lionnet writes,

Literature allows us to enter into the subjective processes of writers and their characters and thus to understand better the unique perspectives of subjects who are agents of transformation ... in their own narratives as opposed to being the objects of knowledge, as in the discourse of social science.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Lionnet 1995, p. 4.

¹²⁸ Douglas 1996, p. 418.

¹²⁹ Duncker 1992, p. 260.

¹³⁰ Lionnet 1995, p. 8.

In this way literature generates its own kind of theory. Barbara Christian argues that the “theorising” of literature by Black women takes a distinctive and creative form:

For people of colour have always theorised - but in forms quite different from the western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorising (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?¹³¹

I aim to look to the literature, while also being conscious of my own role as reader, as a source of insights on issues surrounding migration, identity, and politics.

Feminism, Racism and Reflexivity

Many Black feminists, both Western and Third World, have forcefully challenged the feminism developed by white Western women, criticising its claims to universality and implicit (or explicit) racism. They charge that in failing, all too frequently, to grapple with racist structures and attitudes, white-dominated feminist theory and activism has often helped to perpetuate these.

Central to my work is an attempt to accept and respond to such challenges. At its foundation, too, is the conviction that Western feminism will inevitably lack the strength it needs to combat the oppression of women unless and until race is seriously grappled with and an analysis of the roles it plays in the personal and political lives of *all* women fully integrated into feminist theory and activism across the board.

My approach also stems from the recognition that racism and sexism, far from being discrete forms of oppression as many white male and female theorists have assumed, interact and reinforce each other, though in different ways and with very different effects, in both Black and white women’s lives. While my recognition that Black women experience a simultaneity and near inseparability of oppressions comes --necessarily, as I am not Black--second-hand, my understanding of the complex intertwinings of the effects of race, sexuality and gender in an oppressive society stems most powerfully from my own experience: as a woman having throughout my life suffered from sexism, as a lesbian having suffered from homophobia, as a white woman having the privilege of belonging to a dominant class, even in situations where this privilege has been qualified somewhat by my immigration status.

My approach arises from the belief that the oppressions and pain of women of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds and identities (including women who self-define as Black, as white, as

¹³¹ Christian 1996, p. 312.

mixed race or as Asian), though often widely diverging, stem from the same roots: racism, sexism and homophobia are so intertwined as hardly to be extricable. While Black women who justifiably often choose to organise separately from white feminists, I believe that we need each other's support, ultimately, to resist and rebuild oppressive structures and relationships. Such feminist solidarity is impossible as long as white women ignore, deal inadequately with, or respond conditioned by feelings of guilt rather than by recognition of our accountability to issues of race and racism.¹³²

I argue that white as well as Black feminism can benefit from an approach to Black women's literature grounded in personally and politically based readings. While this is also true, for example, in the case of white feminists in both the U.K. and North America reading Black American women's writing, I am here concerned with the writings of Black and Asian migrant women to these countries, more particularly. Such readings can contribute to the increased practice of reflexivity among white feminists and, thus, a growing understanding of the role of differential access to power among Black and white, migrant and non-migrant feminist women. Carol Anne Douglas refers to feminists "who care deeply about developing a theory that takes into account the situations of all women, or that at least is aware of its limitations when it does not do that".¹³³ The writings can, if read responsibly, help enable white feminists to address issues of race and diversity more effectively.

Julia Sudbury suggests that

[b]eyond white denial lies the possibility of acknowledging that white feminists, as individuals often silence, ignore or otherwise oppress black women and as a group, benefit from racism and imperialism... When white feminists cease to respond to challenges from black women with counter-attack and defensiveness, black women may take a more positive view of feminism. When white feminists support black women's struggles on a range of issues, rather than only those which highlight sexism; when they value black women's writing which challenges their theory and praxis, not just those publications which focus on what they have defined as 'feminist issues', more black women may see a value in building coalitions against racialised sexism...

It is only when white feminists shake off their essentialist belief in sisterhood between all women that the real task of identifying what commonalities may exist can begin...¹³⁴

Sudbury points here to a number of factors that could lead to white and Black women working together more effectively (and she goes on to describe instances where this has happened more or less successfully). Awareness of racism; responding without defensiveness; supporting Black women's struggles; valuing their writings; and ceasing to paint over differences are all aspects of the challenge to white women which she poses.

¹³² Rich 1978, pp. 306-307.

¹³³ Douglas 1996, p. 418.

¹³⁴ Sudbury 1998, pp. 214-220.

I argue that both reflexivity and listening are vital components of the responses that are needed from white women. Ann Russo points to the necessity of white women addressing the intersections of privilege and oppression in their lives, which she says many have failed to do. She speaks of the need to not abandon feminism in the face of racial difference; and to retain a gender-based analysis. Russo writes: "... it seems that some white feminists have decided that to deal with racism... they must deny their own oppression as women and/or abandon feminist analyses of the conditions of women's lives (particularly radical feminist analyses which analyze male power and domination) and instead focus on issues which seemingly affect women and men equally (working-class, poor, people of color)".¹³⁵

Ruth Frankenberg's theory of whiteness, discussed briefly earlier in this Introduction, is one instance of such a retreat from feminism. Her focus on her interviewees' whiteness omits, for the most part, an analysis of how their racial identities interact with their gender. This is somewhat surprising, given that it was a feminist context --that of Black women's critiques of the racism embedded within much of the white women's movement, and the perceived inadequacy of white women's responses -- which provided the "points of origin" of her study.¹³⁶ Further areas of feminist work also contribute to the context of the study: in particular the development of an understanding of "the 'simultaneity' of race, class and gender in shaping the lives of women of color (and I would add white women too)".¹³⁷ Frankenberg points out that such analysis has been done, for the most part, by women of color; her study is committed to deepening that examination of white women and race.

And yet, Frankenberg, in focusing on the role of race and racism in white women's lives and in feminist theory, fails in the end to sufficiently examine the role played by gender in her interviewees' lives and identities as white women. She writes that "the study looks beyond feminism" in looking at the diversity of white women's experiences.¹³⁸ I question the validity of going "beyond" feminism, of not only seeking to help remedy feminism's failure to take the diversity of women's experiences into account, but of concluding that feminism in general, and all commitment to a gender-based analysis, is inadequate to the task of examining difference.

Ann Russo believes that:

Before we can truthfully and authentically work against racism and simultaneously make alliances with women of color, ...we must acknowledge our own pain and suffering, so that our connection with women of color is one of mutual desire and need, not pity or arrogance. I do my best work in

¹³⁵ Russo 1991, p. 303.

¹³⁶ Frankenberg 1993, pp. 2-3.

¹³⁷ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 21.

confronting racism within myself, within the white lesbian and feminist community, and in society generally when I do not lose sight of sexism, misogyny, and homophobia, particularly that which has borne itself out on my mind, heart and body... By facing the ways in which I have been oppressed -- through sexual abuse and violence, male domination, and homophobia-- in my family, in the educational community, and in the larger society, I am more able to empathize with the oppression of women of color, in both its similarities and differences. When I have denied the abuse I have suffered, primarily through men's sexual violence in my family and interpersonal relationships, and when I've seen myself as only privileged, I have been less able to connect with women of color because I see myself as too different, and as only an oppressor. The more I have come face to face with the reality of my life and of how skin and class privilege have not always 'protected' me (though clearly I have reaped many benefits as well), the more I have come to understand how my survival is intricately linked with the survival of women of color and that real freedom can be a reality only when all of us are free.¹³⁹

Seeing literature as conversation, as interchange, I too emphasise the importance of reflexivity in understanding the interpretations I make. It is important for a reader to recognise and understand her own participation in the interchange that is literature. These interpretations are necessarily influenced by my personal history, my experience of gender and race, by cultural factors and my historical location.

As important in a conversation as the knowledge of one's own location with regard to the matter at hand, is the need to listen to one's interlocutor. Susan Bordo argues, critiquing some of the responses to challenges made to white-dominated feminism, that,

the agents of critical insight into the biases of gender theory were those excluded and marginalised: women of colour, lesbians, and others who found their history and culture ignored in the prevailing discussions of gender. What I wish to emphasise here is that these challenges, arising out of concrete experiences of exclusion were neither grounded in a conception of adequate "theory", nor did they demand a theoretical response. Rather, as new narratives began to be produced, telling the story of the diversity of women's experiences, the chief imperative was to *listen*, to become aware of one's biases, prejudices and ignorance...¹⁴⁰

What Bordo calls the "imperative to listen" can also be interpreted as an imperative to read. Many of the "narratives... telling the story of the diversity of women's experiences" are fictional and poetic; it is important to read these, and it is important *how* we read them. How readers respond to them will be dependent on the many factors affecting their own locations in relation to the texts; on the authors' locations; and on the literary choices made by these writers about the content and form of the stories told. How we "listen" to poetry will differ from how we "listen" to a novel; it is important, wherever possible, to attend to both the formal and thematic particularities of the writings in our analyses.

Diversity and Connection: The Importance of Reading

This thesis explores a great diversity of texts, of issues, of women writers and of the characters and voices they create. Such diversity calls, in turn, for a wide range of critical approaches.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 308.

¹⁴⁰ Bordo 1990, p. 138.

There are also themes that crosscut the literature, images that echo across writings from women of very different backgrounds. I argue that it is important to stress not only difference, but acknowledge points of connection where they occur: both from writer to writer, and between text and reader.

Overemphasising difference, as well as overemphasising commonality, can be destructive and reductive. Because of the causes to which “humanistic” kinds of assertions about the oneness of humankind have been put, as well as feminist assertions about the experiences of women in general which ignore important differences and end up perpetuating oppressive assumptions about women of colour, it is important to guard against the erasure of difference, and therefore of experiences and identities of those who are most marginalised. But overemphasising difference leads to a politics of fragmentation in which communication across difference becomes an impossibility. My thesis is an attempt to explore rather than retreat from difference, and to contribute to such communication.

Patricia Duncker writes, “All reading, my own included, is a sequence of encounters: with a text, with another mind, with a new way of seeing”. She observes of these “encounters” that some of them “result in a rueful sense of recognition; some in fear, shock, alarm, anger or the acknowledgement of an Otherness which I have never touched before and from which I can only learn”. She writes:

I read as a white woman looking inwards on a knowledge and an experience which I can struggle to imagine but can never know in my own flesh: that of being Black... I read in different ways from the ways in which I read fiction by white feminists or white women... it is a question of reading within different traditions: traditions which are not white, which have different priorities, different literary foremothers, different male echoes, different rhythms-- and above all, a different relationship to oral story-telling...¹⁴¹

In reading any literature but particularly Black women’s literature, much of the time I experience difference and connection simultaneously, or alternately. The recognition of both, I argue, is important to feminism.

Both unity and difference have been weapons deployed in the cause of colonialism and racially-based domination. The colonial power sought to unify its Empire, bringing one “civilisation” to all its corners; Edward Said cites Albert Sarraut who “states no less a goal for colonialism than the biological unity of mankind, ‘*la solidarite humaine*’”.¹⁴² On the other hand, Shabnam Grewal et al refer, in the Preface to their anthology of Black women’s writings, to “State-created fissures of ethnicity” which divide and prevent solidarity among the various Black

¹⁴¹ Duncker 1992, pp. 210-211.

¹⁴² Said 1990, p. 95.

communities in Britain. They argue for a “unity of action” as a form of resistance against these divisions, and assert that “[w]riting, in all its forms, can be a weapon in this process of collectivization and harmonization”.¹⁴³ I aim to strike a balance in my emphases on diversity and connection, so that I underpin neither a false universality nor a politically paralysing fragmentation.

Audre Lorde writes:

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed on us and which so often we accept as our own... For it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence.¹⁴⁴

The authors whose works I look at have written and published their works, so that others may read them and approach an understanding of their messages. It is imperative to read and engage with them; they demand a response. Indeed, I stress that the “creative dialogue” which Susheila Nasta argues can exist between “Third World” creative writers and Western feminist readers,¹⁴⁵ is not only possible, but necessary. In addition, my readings are based on the sense that the writings are best read interdependently, in a way that allows them to illuminate each other. Hence my emphasis, in the thesis (most explicitly in Chapter 4) on the importance of the process of reading.

I said above that literature engenders theory; it is perhaps more precise to say that literature combined with particular readings of it generate theory. Duncker points out that although there is no one right way of reading, there are better and worse ways. The way we read has political implications. Similarly, Arun Mukherjee argues that in literary studies,

[n]ow that we have emancipated ourselves from the stultifying vocabularies of universalist humanism, we have moved towards a free-for-all pluralism in which all readings have equal value, supposedly. We have not developed criteria that would help us discriminate between readings.¹⁴⁶

She argues for “placing literature in the overall feminist project: that of demanding and working for a better world... [This] would mean that feminist critics interpret and evaluate writing in terms of its values”, including its stance on issues to do with race.¹⁴⁷

The fact that my encounter with most of the writings I look at in this thesis is that of a white woman reader with a Black woman writer gives a particular political meaning to my readings. No reading is neutral; to pretend otherwise in the case of a white reader would be to reinforce

¹⁴³ Grewal et al, eds., 1988, p.1; p. 4.

¹⁴⁴ Lorde 1984, pp. 43-44.

¹⁴⁵ Nasta, ed., 1991, p. xvi.

¹⁴⁶ Mukherjee 1995, p. 129.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

the “unmarked, unnamed status [of whiteness] that is in itself an effect of its dominance”.¹⁴⁸ Like Patricia Duncker, throughout this thesis I am “committed to an antiracist politics of reading”.¹⁴⁹ This commitment calls for awareness of my own as well as of the writers’ political positioning. It calls, too, for ongoing attention to the ways in which the writings address issues of injustice, of interpersonal power relations, of disadvantage and privilege based on race, on nationality, on gender, class, and sexuality.

Personal Journeys

My readings of migrant women’s writings are informed by my own experiences of migration. Each of my many migrations has been particular in its reasons and meanings and at the same time has the texture of its overall context and history. Each journey is another chapter in my own migration history and evokes earlier migrations; each also occurs in the context of a longer, family history of uprootings and re-settlement. Migration in my life raises and addresses questions about self, identity, belonging; the transitions themselves as well as resulting questions of immigration status are intertwined in various ways with issues of race, gender, and sexuality, privilege and disadvantage.

I grew up in a family which had already undertaken many migrations: my maternal grandparents and my paternal great-grandparents had migrated from Norway and Germany, respectively, to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My parents had left the US for Beirut, where my father worked with UNICEF, then UNRWA,¹⁵⁰ several years before I was born; I was born in Beirut and travelled, aged five months, to Geneva with my family in 1965. I felt a strong attachment to the area we lived in throughout my childhood, but never felt a part of Swiss society as we moved in “international,” mainly English-speaking circles. It was always assumed, almost without question, that I, like my older siblings, would leave Switzerland to attend university either in the US or in Britain; indeed, I travelled to the US to study in 1982, and back and forth several times during my four years as an undergraduate; thereafter I migrated back to Switzerland, to Britain, to the US again, then to Germany, and finally (as I write this) to Britain once more, in 1995, to begin my PhD.

Thus I left Switzerland for the first time when I was eighteen and then again, having returned for a year, aged twenty-three; both times I felt the need to leave the sense of restrictiveness – which coexisted with great warmth-- within my family, and knew that there was little other

¹⁴⁸ Frankenberg p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Duncker 1992, p. 211.

¹⁵⁰ UNICEF is the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund; UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

place in Swiss society where I could feel at home. Yet my sense of myself was strongly connected to the place I grew up in, its mountains, lake, forests and fields. Questions, perennially, arise for me about self, belonging, and place: where do I, where can I belong? I long felt rooted, deeply so, in the area around Genolier, the village where I grew up: but I no longer, as an adult, as the woman who has travelled on, belong there. Neither am I ever quite at home in the other places I settle.

And yet, because of my whiteness I have also clearly been more a part of society, or more able to “pass” as being a part of society, in the places I have lived, than migrants who are of colour. I did not realise until adulthood, for example, that the international school I attended in Geneva was British- and American-dominated and that in this important respect, as a white American, I was part of a privileged group within the international “set”. I was not aware on a daily basis, either, of the other kinds of “international” people in the area where I lived, people far less privileged in racial and in economic terms, as well as in terms of their immigration status, than my family: migrant workers, domestic “maids” (although I have a memory of passing the barracks where some of the migrant workers lived, as a child, and my father explaining to me who lived there).

My immigration status, however, apart from during my time in the US, has often been uncertain and sometimes problematic: here in Britain for example my “leave to remain”, tied to my being a student, has meant that my access to employment was strictly limited. In Germany, as I realised during some of the many hours spent waiting in the immigration building where I needed to go every year to renew my visa, my status was characterised by a mix of privilege and discrimination: I did not have the privileges I would have had were I of German or other European citizenship, but as an American I was more privileged, and treated a good deal better, than those from African or Asian countries. However, the fact that I had a partner who was female meant that I was not able to gain access to a more secure immigration status through marriage, as could women and men in heterosexual partnerships, even those with less privilege based on race and/or citizenship than I have.

Because of my history of “outsiderdom,” because also of economic privilege, migration is always a possibility. It has also been, for me, a way of looking for possibility, a means of and an attempt to escape the impossibility that being an outsider has sometimes meant-- the impossibility of belonging. It dovetails, in different ways at different times, with other themes in my life, themes connected with gender and with sexuality: I went to Boston in 1988 looking to support myself for the first time, looking for autonomy, something important and difficult to achieve in large part because of my gendered socialisation; but easiest to achieve in the US, for

reasons to do with citizenship, work and residence permits. I went to Germany in 1990 because of a relationship with a German woman in which I felt rooted: something that as a frequent migrant I rarely feel in relation to place or community.

My history of migration has also meant lack of possibility: when this relationship ended there was nothing else, no other history, no other reason to be or *way* of being in Germany. I had to leave. There is never a sense of real rootedness, except in a place in Switzerland where I can no longer live. At the same time, in living in a place I become attached to aspects of it, come to define myself in relation to my surroundings. So each migration is an uprooting, as well as a search for something new.

The writings I explore in this thesis help me to think about issues that are powerfully raised in them, and that are important in my own life as well: oppression and privilege; belonging and identity; race, gender, sexuality; and how all of these are affected by migration. The writings emphasise to me, as well, the necessity of reflecting on and trying to understand across difference, if “the overall feminist project” of striving for justice is to have any chance of success.

Chapter One

Migration and Change in Women's lives

In this chapter I explore some of the ways that migrant women writers have portrayed women's journeys of migration and the varied and complex choices women make around migration. I highlight the colonial/ post-colonial, gender, racial and sexual power relations which form the contexts of these choices and journeys. Focussing on works by Dionne Brand, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Jamaica Kincaid, I also touch on Joan Riley, Grace Nichols, and Bharati Mukherjee. I draw on various writings on gender and migration from the field of migration studies, in places where these studies can shed light on my readings of the literature. However, there are ways in which the literature, in its rich portrayals of political and emotional contexts, illuminates the complexities of migration in ways that the studies can only point to.

Journeys of migration often come to symbolise or crystallise important changes in women's lives --whether fictional or actual-- both at the time and in retrospect; they are turning points. They also, however, form a part of *ongoing* processes of change. In focussing on choices about migration, in this chapter, I am looking at changes that lead to the outcome of migration (as in Chapter 3, I explore the changes that begin with a migratory journey). In some of the writings the telling of the journeys mingles past and present, beginning and end, through a character's retrospect. There is an accumulation of meaning around the changes represented by migration rather than migration simply being the cause and/or effect of change. Still, migration, the result either of a woman's decision and sometimes a battle to leave, or of a decision made for her by others more powerful than she, takes place when something has changed for a woman, and/or for the people around her, enabling this decision to be made. I am looking at such change in a broad, full sense, taking into account the subtleties, complexities and paradoxes of the reasons for women's migration, as well as the political meanings of their decisions. Migrant women's literature is especially valuable in this endeavour since, unlike many studies from fields of social science, it seeks not to posit theories for various phenomena but to illuminate the multi-faceted ways that structures and dynamics of power influence and shape the lives of individuals (as well as vice versa).

The migrations undertaken by the three writers whose works I focus on in this chapter --Brand, Dangarembga and Kincaid-- have greatly influenced, though in very different ways, each of their lives and writings. Brand grew up in Trinidad, which she left for

Canada in 1970 when she was seventeen; she views her migration as an escape from the limitations of “femininity” and the legacies of colonialism and slavery in her place of origin. She attended the University of Toronto and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, has taught poetry and creative writing, and is active in black and feminist politics in Toronto. She has also travelled to Grenada and Cuba to engage in political solidarity work there, and returns to Trinidad periodically. She has written and given interviews about her migration and journeying, and deals with it poetically in the work I examine in this chapter.

Kincaid, born on the Caribbean island of Antigua, migrated to the United States in 1965 at the age of sixteen. She first worked as an *au pair* in New York, then studied photography in New York and New Hampshire, went on to work in publishing, and now lives and writes in Vermont. She views her migration as having been vital to her self-definition and ability, through writing, to come to terms with her past; she would not have been able to be herself, she says, had she remained in Antigua. She has written extensively about her own migration history, and relates it explicitly to her fictional explorations of the theme.

Dangarembga makes her own autobiography and migration history less publicly available than do either Kincaid or Brand, although she has responded to questions about it by some interviewers. Born in (then-) Rhodesia in 1959, she has spent time both in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and the U.K., as well as in Germany. She spent four of her very early years (age two to six) in Britain; returned to Rhodesia where she attended a mission school followed by an American convent, and again travelled to Britain in 1977 where she began reading medicine at Cambridge. She returned to Zimbabwe in 1980, just before independence, where she studied psychology and drama, and where, she says, exposure to radical political ideas “conscientized” her and contributed to her creative development as well.¹⁵¹ She later travelled to Germany to study filming.

In the course of my readings of their works, in this chapter, I devote some space to a consideration of the ways in which these authors’ own migrations relate to the writings.

Journeys, Markers of Change

I begin this chapter’s readings by looking at the ways journeys of migration themselves are evoked in the following writings by migrant women: *No Language is Neutral* by Dionne Brand, *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, and *Annie John* by Jamaica Kincaid. The ways

¹⁵¹ from “‘Women Write About the Things that Move Them’. A Conversation with Tsitsi Dangarembga”, in Boyce Davies, ed., 1995, p. 29.

these journeys are described echo the reasons for, the meanings of, the journeys for a character or speaker. As well as beginning a new life for the traveller, such journeys mark the endpoint of an old one, and point to a process of change that has led to the journeys being undertaken: who a character is at the time of her journey is the outcome of her becoming so far. As such the ways in which a journey is experienced crystallise a great deal about the recent and perhaps more distant past of the character or speaker.

Dionne Brand, in her poetry collection *No Language is Neutral*, mentions the speaker's journey to Canada just once, very briefly, in a poem following one that looks back to Liney, the speaker's great-grandmother:

...I in the
middle of a plane ride now a good century from their
living or imagination, around me is a people I will
only understand as full of ugliness that make me
weep full past my own tears and before hers.¹⁵²

Despite the years separating the speaker from Liney and her family, emphasised by the setting in a plane; despite the fact that the speaker can travel by plane as her forebears could not (not only because air travel was invented well after Liney's time but also because of differences in the political realities of the two eras); the speaker is linked to Liney by tears at the ugliness of racism. She cannot speak of her own migration without evoking the impossibility of escape for her foremothers. The speaker is weeping back through time, through history to before even the tears of Liney, in a journey that seems to parallel the plane journey to Canada. At the same time there is a hint of the future being travelled towards: the speaker "*will* only understand" (emphasis mine) the ugliness within white people at some point still to come, though she weeps now. She is in the middle of her journey.

In *Nervous Conditions*,¹⁵³ Tambu journeys to her uncle Babamukuru's place, the mission where she will attend school, in his car:

How can I describe the sensations that swamped me when Babamukuru started his car, with me in the front seat beside him, on the day I left my home? It was relief, but more than that. It was more than excitement and anticipation. What I experienced that day was a short cut, a rerouting of everything I had ever defined as me into fast lanes that would speedily lead me to my destination. My horizons were saturated with me, my leaving, my going. There was no room for what I left behind.¹⁵⁴

Tambu's feelings are entirely focussed on her destination and the radical implications she believes this journey has for her future and her identity. She feels she is leaving behind the

¹⁵² Brand 1990, p. 24.

¹⁵³ See the Appendix for a brief summary of this novel.

¹⁵⁴ Dangarembga 1988, p. 58.

“peasant” self that has defined her up until the time she steps into the car, and at Babamukuru’s will

find another self, a clean, well-groomed self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead. At Babamukuru’s I would have the leisure, be encouraged to consider questions that had to do with survival of the spirit, rather than mere sustenance of the body.¹⁵⁵

Her certainty mingles with fear and regret, however, both of which she plays down in order to be able to cope with the experience. During the journey, which she says she would have enjoyed “[w]ithout so much going on inside me”, she tackles the enormity of the newness she is experiencing by thinking through the “many practical issues about my transplantation..., all of them mixed up with each other and needing to be sorted out into discrete, manageable portions”-- issues such as where she is to sleep, how she is to keep herself clean and care for her schoolbooks. As arrival nears, her feelings grow more complicated and difficult to manage: “I packed a lot of living into the few minutes that it took to creep up the drive to the garage”. She feels first elation as they approach their destination, then disappointment as she sees the garage and takes it for the house; this is followed by confusion and the sense of not deserving what she experiences as the extreme luxury of the grounds. This later turns into self-pity, then into attempts to discipline herself and “improve my state of mind”.¹⁵⁶

In retrospect the older Tambu, who is telling the story, can allow herself to see the degree of fear she had felt at the time of her journey; she recognises that she had been “much more frightened by the strangeness and awesomeness of my new position than I knew”.¹⁵⁷ The narrator has had experience, has learned something (and the reader learns of this gradually, through the course of the story) about how different those “limitless horizons” were from what she had been so sure they would be. Her journey represents change in her life on several levels; at the time she expects it to change her from a peasant into someone clean and well-groomed and sophisticated, but the journey turns out to be the beginning of a slower and more complex change than anticipated. The older Tambu looks back on the journey, as she narrates it, as illustrating something about who she had been and how she has changed, about how much more her experience has encompassed than what she anticipated at the time.

Change resulting from migration mingles, here, with the changes that preceded it, as the narrator looks back on her journey from a point far beyond it. Even though Tambu is looking ahead, to the exclusion of all reflection on what she is leaving behind (except to emphasise the homestead’s inadequacy), her journey reflects the roots of her decision and of her struggle to

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 64-5.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 65.

migrate. The feelings she experiences, the eager anticipation, the fear which she cannot allow herself to feel at the time, the enormity and significance of the change represented and brought by the journey, all reflect or echo the extent to which she values and believes in the education which is the purpose of her migration. This education, she believes, will lift her out of poverty -- both of the body and of the spirit-- and into a state of blessedness and liberation; the intensity with which she experiences the journey are influenced by this belief and the struggle she has had to go through to actualise her dream.

At the end of Kincaid's *Annie John*,¹⁵⁸ Annie's walk to the jetty with her parents begins her journey by ship from Antigua to England. This walk and the very beginning of the sea journey are described in detail, but the novel ends at this point; the journey itself, and the arrival in England, are not described. "Starting out, as if for old time's sake and without giving it a thought, we lined up in the old way: I walking between my mother and my father... It was all of half an hour's walk from our house to the jetty, but I was passing through most of the years of my life".¹⁵⁹ Walking past familiar landmarks becomes a revisiting of Annie's memories. The walk is familiar, even down to the way the three are "lined up", but it acquires a new significance because it marks the last time they will embark on it together.

The book's final chapter, "A Walk to the Jetty", had opened with a description of Annie's feelings as she lies in bed on the morning she is to leave; she is adamantly and apparently unequivocally relieved that she is seeing for the last time all the things that are so familiar to her and that at one time or another had meant so much to her: "...as I was lying there my heart could have burst open with joy at the thought of never having to see it again".¹⁶⁰

Everything I would do that morning until I got on the ship that would take me to England I would be doing for the last time, for I had made up my mind that, come what may, the road for me went only in one direction: away from my home, away from my mother, away from my father, away from the everlasting blue sky, away from the everlasting hot sun, away from the people who said to me, 'This happened during the time your mother was carrying you'... this feeling was the strongest thing in my life.¹⁶¹

Like Tambu, Annie is focussing here mostly on her departure, without apparent regret at what she is leaving behind.

During the walk to the jetty, however, there is more ambiguity in the way she sees and describes the things that they pass and that evoke memories of the past. When they pass her house, Annie relegates "to the dustheap of my life" a seamstress to whom Annie had been apprenticed and who had been critical and scornful of her; but a road they later come to evokes fond memories

¹⁵⁸ See the Appendix for a brief summary of this novel.

¹⁵⁹ Kincaid 1983, p. 138.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 133-4.

of going on an errand alone for the first time, as a young child, and being received back home by her mother with love and pride. Other places they pass seem more neutral, evoking without Annie's comment, for example, memories of how at one time or another there had been various things which she felt she could not live without --such as a pair of glasses she had wanted though she had no problems with her eyesight-- and which she had later outgrown.

As I passed by all these places, it was as if I were in a dream, for I didn't notice the people coming and going in and out of them, I didn't feel my feet touch ground, I didn't even feel my own body-- I just saw these places as if they were hanging in the air, not having top or bottom, and as if I had gone in and out of them all in the same moment.¹⁶²

As they approach the jetty Annie's feelings intensify. She feels "[m]y old fear of slipping between the boards of the jetty and falling into the dark-green water where the dark-green eels lived" and experiences other, new terrors as well.

Now, too, I had nothing to take my mind off what was happening to me. My mother and my father-- I was leaving them forever. My home on an island-- I was leaving it forever. What to make of everything? I felt a familiar hollow space inside. I felt I was being held down against my will. I felt I was burning up from head to toe. I felt that someone was tearing me up into little pieces and soon I would be able to see all the little pieces as they floated out into nothing in the deep blue sea.... I could see that it would be better not to think too clearly about any one thing... The launch was being made ready to take me, along with some other passengers, out to the ship that was anchored in the sea... suddenly a wave of strong feeling came over me, and my heart swelled with great gladness as the words "I shall never see this again" spilled out inside me. But then, just as quickly, my heart shrivelled up and the words "I shall never see this again" stabbed at me. I don't know what stopped me from falling in a heap at my parents' feet.¹⁶³

The launch makes its way out to the ship, with Annie and her parents on board, and again Annie sees everything that is so familiar to her and "the ever-present 'I shall never see this again' bobbed up and down inside me".¹⁶⁴ The goodbyes she says to her parents, on the ship, are at first tearful then (characteristically) Annie distances herself from her mother by thinking to herself 'What does she want now?' And suddenly her parents are gone; Annie waves to them from the deck of the ship until they can no longer be seen. The novel ends with these words:

I went back to my cabin and lay down on my berth. Everything trembled as if it had a spring at its very center. I could hear the small waves lap-lapping around the ship. They made an unexpected sound, as if a vessel filled with liquid had been placed on its side and now was slowly emptying out.¹⁶⁵

Annie's feelings as she begins her journey of migration echo the reasons she is leaving, the meanings of her migration. The passages quoted above evoke both the desperation of Annie's need to free herself from a family and island life which she finds restrictive and oppressive in the extreme, and the enormous emotional difficulty of doing so.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁶³ Ibid., pp. 143-5.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 148.

The experiences of migration portrayed in the literature differ greatly from each other, shaped by a multitude of factors related to the speakers' or characters' personalities, responses to their politically-shaped circumstances, and lives lived so far. Their means of coping with the changes brought by migration, for one, vary enormously. One way that Annie, for instance, tries to cope with the immediate prospect of leaving her island is to try not to think of any one thing in particular; Tambu's efforts to think everything through in a systematic way provide a sharp contrast to Annie's approach, even though for both characters the feelings associated with their particular journey are overwhelming.

The historical and political circumstances, as well as the geographies, of the migrations portrayed are also quite different. Tambu and Annie both migrate while their countries are still under colonial rule, and their migrations are both very much influenced by colonial power relations and attitudes, but the extent of their migrations differs. Tambu leaves the rural, impoverished "homestead" of her childhood to a mission and later a convent school with environments entirely different from what she has been used to; however, the fact that she does not leave her country of origin means the changes she faces are less drastic than they would otherwise be. Her leave-taking, however much she does not want to look back, is not as final as Annie's migration from Antigua to Britain feels; the changes are not as extreme.

Brand's speaker leaves Trinidad for Canada; like Annie, she leaves a small Caribbean island for a Northern, more powerful, and white-dominated country. Both leave with the intention of pursuing opportunities not available in their countries of origin, although in both cases (as will become clear in the following section) the need to leave appears stronger than the "pull" factor of Canada/the U.K. Trinidad is no longer under colonial rule and Canada not the (ex-)colonial power, however; it may be that the idea of Canada as a destination feels less oppressive, more potentially liberating, to the young migrant than Britain would have done.

There is also a variance of focus in the authors' descriptions of migration journeys. Kincaid's character concentrates much more on what she is leaving behind than on the journey itself or on what lies ahead. Indeed, Kincaid has written very little about arrival or life after migration; her novel *Lucy*¹⁶⁶ and some of her essays published in *The New Yorker*, and later in *My Garden(book)*;, are exceptions in this respect. One gets the sense that most of Kincaid's writing, including *Annie John*, reflects her efforts to come to terms with a time and place of childhood, before migration. *Nervous Conditions*, on the other hand, is a story of change and growth initiated by migration; accordingly Tambu, who like Annie is escaping a life she finds limiting,

¹⁶⁶ See the Appendix for a brief summary of this novel.

evokes her feelings about what she is anticipating, through her description of her journey to the mission, rather than what she is leaving behind.

I said above that the depictions of the journeys echo the reasons for and meanings of the characters' / speakers' migrations. Conversely, too, of course, the ways in which the characters experience their migrations are affected by the journeys themselves. Tambu's feelings as her uncle starts the car, and Annie's mental image as her sea journey is beginning are both described in terms of the kind of journey undertaken. Tambu experiences "a short cut, a rerouting of everything I had ever defined as me into fast lanes that would speedily lead me to my destination"¹⁶⁷-- a description evocative of the speed of the car journey itself. The waves that remind Annie of the sound of liquid emptying out of a bottle, simultaneously influence and echo the way that she experiences the emotional emptying out involved in leaving her home.¹⁶⁸

As I go on to discuss further in the following section, the migration stories of these fictional women and girls are their authors' subjective and creative explorations of the many individual and complex reasons that women migrate.

Roots, Meanings, Reasons: Why Women Migrate

The feelings described in the course of these fictional women's journeys point back from the journeys (as well as forwards, towards the destination) towards the many and complex roots and reasons of women's migration, the starting points of their leavetaking. How has a woman come to this point of leaving-- what path, so to speak, has she taken to lead her to the car, the ship, the aeroplane that will transport her to another place? How has the decision for her migration been made, and why? Is it the woman herself who has decided to leave, independently, in conjunction with, or opposed by relatives; is she leaving to escape family domination; or has the decision been made for her, with little choice left open, by more powerful, most probably male, family members? How does the decision, however it is made, reflect the power structures within her family and society?

Women's decisions around migration need to be seen both in their larger political, international context, and in the context of power relations within families. A discussion of the "reasons" women migrate needs to take into account to what extent women have control over their lives generally, including decisions about leaving or staying in their place of origin. At the same time their decisions are not reducible to these forces, which influence but do not wholly determine

¹⁶⁷ Dangarembga 1988, p. 58.

¹⁶⁸ Gillian Tindall explores the meanings of various forms of transport in English literature, including their changing meanings across historical periods. (Tindall 1991, pp. 58-9, p. 62). She also points to the symbolic role of train stations as gateways to the unknown (p. 67), a formulation perhaps appropriate to Kincaid's jetty as well.

women's choices. As Annie Phizacklea argues, critiquing two of the main strands of migration theory, neither the orthodox strand, which emphasises the rational choice-making of individuals, nor the structuralist strand which explains migration through economic determinism is sufficiently complex. A feminist understanding of women's migration needs to take into account both individual circumstances, and decision-making which sometimes explicitly *challenges* the status quo of political and economic structures, and the larger context in which these choices are made.¹⁶⁹ As Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo puts it, "political and economic transformations may set the stage for migration, but they do not write the script".¹⁷⁰

Gunilla Bjerén points out that in many cases "international relations of long or short duration have preceded contemporary South to North migration"-- whether these relations are founded on slavery, colonisation, or migration itself.¹⁷¹ Colonialism and its legacies leave the societies and economies of many ex-colonies oriented towards the "mother country" and/or the US and mean that migration or "escape" to the West are part of the "societal make-up": significant streams of out-migration already exist when a woman decides to leave her place of origin.¹⁷² Internal political persecution, economic need or aspiration, experienced in gender- and context-specific ways, may also be factors that lead women to decide to migrate. At the same time, other women living in similar circumstances may not decide, or may not be able, to leave: macro-forces alone are not enough to explain their leaving or their remaining.¹⁷³

Particularly for those women who have greater choice to migrate, or those who fight in order to leave, it makes sense to look at the changes that *precede* and *lead to* their migration.¹⁷⁴ To speak of "reasons" is to use a shorthand for attempting to understand the changes that migration represents. How do we understand migration as an aspect, or outcome, of change in a woman's life (even if this change is initiated by someone else)? In some respects we need to look at continuity, as well as change: migration to Britain may, for example, seem the logical outcome of a British-oriented education.

¹⁶⁹ Phizackela 1998, pp. 24-27.

¹⁷⁰ Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, p.187.

¹⁷¹ Bjerén 1997, p. 244.

¹⁷² Views of Britain or North America, too, are heavily influenced by the history of colonialism and by today's global power relations; I explore this further in Chapter 2. These views in turn help shape migration decisions. To give one example, Yasmine Gooneratne, in the collection *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*, writes of what she calls the "doggy devotion" to Britain, among other factors, leading to the massive response by people in the colonies to Britain's call for labour after the Second World War. (Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 95).

¹⁷³ I am not seeking to explain this difference, but rather to understand the experiences of women who do leave home.

¹⁷⁴ Some of my ideas about migration and change were inspired by Victor M.P. Da Rosa's review of *We have already cried many tears: Portuguese Women and Migration* by Caroline B. Bretell, in which he writes that "the author attempts to ascertain, from the informants' point of view, the reasons for the changes in their lives and how these changes were related to the migratory process". (DaRosa 1984, p. 1317).

Dionne Brand's evocation in *No Language is Neutral* of the background to her emigration is not a delineation of the specific *reasons* that led her to decide to leave Trinidad for Canada. Rather, Brand gives a strong sense of the historical and geographical *context* of her migration; of how it was embedded in an acute consciousness of the impossibility of her foremothers' migration, as well as their longing to leave.

Both the longing and the impossibility were present in her own childhood and were to be seen reflected, and heard echoed, everywhere around her:

...I used to haunt the beach at
 Guaya, two rivers sentinel the country sand, not
 backra white but nigger brown sand, one river dead
 and teeming from waste and alligators, the other
 rumbling to the ocean in a tumult, the swift undertow
 blocking the crossing of little girls except on the tied
 up dress hips of big women, then, the taste of leaving
 was already on my tongue.....
 ... Here was beauty
 and here was nowhere.
 ...there was *history which had taught my eyes to*
look for escape...
 ...It was as if a signal burning like a fer de lance's
 sting turned my eyes against the water even as love
 for this nigger beach became resolute.¹⁷⁵
 (emphasis mine)

The sense of simultaneous love for the place and the need to leave it are powerfully evoked in this poem extract. "Here was beauty and here was nowhere". The two rivers preventing "the crossing of little girls" present two forms of impossibility: the one river too dangerous, the other simply impossible, to cross. Teresa Zackodnik, in her article "'I am Blackening in My Way,': Identity and Place in Dionne Brand's *No Language is Neutral*" interprets the two rivers as representing standard English and nation language, respectively. She writes that Brand

is blocked by standard English's 'swift undertow,' indicating that it is both the insidious presence of subtle yet powerful racialized, genderized and sexualized signifiers (which denigrate and negate her as an individual), and the way in which standard English voices only white heterosexual male experience that prevent her navigation of its waters.

Nation language, represented by the other river, is "'deadened' in a historical and ongoing attempt by the colonizer to subjugate and neutralize the colonized".¹⁷⁶

While there may be some validity to this highly metaphorical reading, and language is certainly a strong presence in this poem and the collection as a whole, I would argue for a more literal interpretation of the rivers, or at least a figurative one that is more grounded. Rivers and sea, seen from a beach that is "not/backra white" --not the kind of dream beach of white tourists, for whom departure is not only possible but an inevitability-- "but niggerbrown", prevent escape for

¹⁷⁵ Brand 1990, p. 22.

¹⁷⁶ Zackodnik 1995, pp. 195-6.

very concrete reasons. Perhaps there is no money to fly over and beyond them, and no means of making a living abroad even if money were available. The rivers in the poem, however, do point beyond themselves as well, representing oppressions that keep the speaker immobile: a colonised language prevents escape because it prevents conceptualisation of escape; oppressions based on gender, race, sexuality reinforce the barriers to flight or liberation.

Another poem describes the speaker's mother standing on the banks of a river, which "gushed past her feet blocked her flight"--from a life defined by "the message, female/ and black" spat at her by people who were "the only place to return to"-- "and this gushing river had already swallowed most of/ her".¹⁷⁷ The futility of trying to escape, the *impossibility* of escape (which are the river's "brutal green meaning"), become so ordinary that they become a "constant veil over the eyes, the/ blood-stained blind of race and sex". All sense of possibility is obscured and destroyed by oppression.

Interspersed with poems concerned with the speaker's mother are poems that reach back further, to the experience of the slaves and the impossibility of *their* escape. One poem speaks of the cruelty of the slaves' experience, their hopes for escape, and of "the ocean, a/ way out and not anything of beauty".¹⁷⁸ But "return II" speaks of attempts to escape to Venezuela by slaves in the past, only to have to return; the land visible from the island is not Venezuela but "Pointe Galeote/ right around the corner". The illusion of escape becomes the despair of inevitable return.¹⁷⁹

Within this context, we get hints of the speaker "running" to escape the painful history of impossibility she has inherited and feels acutely. Again, in the poem about her mother Brand writes: "Pilate was/ that river I ran from leaving that woman, my mother,/ standing over its brutal green meaning". She ran from the impossibility -the reference to Pontius Pilate suggests even the death sentence- her legacy represented.

The poem which follows the one about her mother just quoted begins:

Leaving this standing, heart and eyes fixed to a
skyscraper and a concrete eternity *not knowing then*
only running away from something that breaks the
*heart open and nowhere to live.*¹⁸⁰
(emphasis mine)

¹⁷⁷ Brand 1990, p. 27.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

The phrase “[l]eaving this standing” may refer to the last line of the poem before: “that constant veil over the eyes, the/ blood-stained blind of race and sex” -- the speaker *leaves* “this veil”, but also leaves it *intact*. The line also suggests that, having left the “constant veil over the eyes,” the speaker is still standing, undefeated. At first glance the last phrase of the stanza, “nowhere to live,” appears to mean a lack, a homelessness, from which the speaker has run away, but there is in fact ambiguity in the line; it could also refer to the present situation in this “concrete eternity”. There is no room, here, for warmth, for feeling, for being who she is without constriction or fear. Brand in fact uses similar imagery when she writes in her essay “On Poetry” that in contrast to the guardedness with which she must habitually live, “it’s been relief to write poetry, it’s been just room to live”. There is so little other room, she implies, within the place she now exists.¹⁸¹

In an interview, Brand confirms the sense conveyed by these poems, of her migration to Canada being a running from impossibility. She speaks of the lack of job opportunities in Trinidad, especially for girls, combined with the fact that many jobs “were based on the nexus of race and class, and I wasn’t fair-skinned enough to get a job in a bank, or connected enough....”. Adding that “when I talk about ‘escaping’ I also mean escaping the history right around me, even family history”, she continues:

And I have to say that when I left I was also running away from femininity. I can’t say I did that consciously, but I know I felt something on my shoulder: the possibility that staying there meant finding some boy to get pregnant for... That scared me shitless... It was not conscious. It was just being scared --being young and very scared of that-- and it’s not without foundation. I have seen all the women in my family have children and have a rough time raising those children. I was the product of a rough time. So when I saw all the women in my family having trouble I didn’t wanna have trouble like them. And they didn’t want me to have trouble like them either, which is why they helped me to collect the money together for me to go.

I remember my aunt waiting by the electricity company for the man who was the father of her children, and it would hurt my aunt to stand there with one child on her dress and one on her hip and one in her arms....the desperation on my aunt’s face, it scared the shit out of me.¹⁸²

Her fear, based on her first-hand knowledge of the lives of other women in her family, was of the inability to avoid living a life like theirs: circumscribed by “femininity” in a situation of poverty and racism, devoid of hope for change.

A few studies point to the migration of women seeking to escape patriarchal strictures of their home society. Mirjana Morokvasic writes that women who are marginalised in society may not be subject to the same constraints against other women’s migration that may exist in their societies, and may indeed be pressured to leave. Reasons for women’s emigration may include

transgressing the limits of sometimes rigidly defined sex-role behavior (like having out of wedlock children, for instance)... ; marital discord and physical violence; unhappy and broken marriages; impossibility of divorce so migration becomes a substitute; discrimination against specific groups of

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 181-2. Brand’s sense of constriction in Canada contrasts with that country’s self-image as full of space and expansive natural beauty. See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this.

¹⁸² Silvera, ed., 1995, pp. 362-4.

women, and the weak and insecure status of others; disadvantages in terms of property rights; and little opportunities for women in spite of their considerable role in production. These factors, often tightly related to lack of economic opportunities suggest the subordinate position of women and the oppressive and discriminatory nature of the emigration societies.

Morokvasic goes on to emphasise that while some scholars have dismissed such factors as private and individual, “[s]exist oppression and subordination experienced by women in different parts of the world are not an individual matter, not a matter of specific personal relationships that concern some individuals exceptionally. Nor is women’s escape..”.¹⁸³

Phizacklea takes this point a step further, pointing out the serious implications of this kind of view for women refugees. While the persecution women face “often occurs in the private sphere,” refugees are defined, in the Geneva Convention, as people who have fled the kind of persecution that “relates very much to the public, particularly the political, sphere”.¹⁸⁴

A study of the migration of British working- and middle-class women to South Africa between 1860 and 1914, as domestic servants, points out that this migration fed into and promoted a colonial policy of settlement, but also occurred because of the women’s need to escape either “traumatic events” (or the traumatic social consequences of events) such as the birth of an illegitimate child, or in the case of the middle-class women, unexpected economic distress, which they were ill-equipped to deal with, and the stigma which would have been attached to their accepting positions “beneath” them at home.¹⁸⁵ Robin Cohen, too, points out that “[e]mpire settlement also provided an outlet for ‘distressed gentlewomen’, often left penniless by the common pattern of inheritance to the eldest son”.¹⁸⁶ Annie Phizacklea argues, more generally, that migration can be “an escape route for women who find themselves locked into what they consider to be oppressive patriarchal social structures with rigid notions of what constitutes ‘proper’ behaviour for women”¹⁸⁷ and indeed states in the introduction to her piece (although she does not explore this as thoroughly as she could have done) that some cases of women’s labour migration are instances of “transformative politics”, representing the women’s search for “a change in the balance of power and a measure of justice”.¹⁸⁸

These few studies, or examples within studies, represent an exception even within the category of work done specifically on the migration of women. They take into account economic factors

¹⁸³ Morokvasic 1984, pp. 898-899. Robin Cohen briefly addresses gender issues in communities of Indian labourers in British, Dutch and French tropical plantations, from the 1830s to about 1920. He cites B. Parekh, who writes that many of the women in these communities were “beggars, divorcees from lower castes, girls who had run away from homes, widows with low social status and even prostitutes” (Cohen 1997, p. 63). Thus he implicitly supports Morokvasic’s point about many women migrating as a result of their low social status or position as “outcasts”.

¹⁸⁴ Phizacklea 1998, p. 30.

¹⁸⁵ Swaisland 1993.

¹⁸⁶ Cohen 1997, p. 72.

¹⁸⁷ Phizacklea 1998, p. 28.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 23. See also Caroline B. Brettell’s *We Have Already Cried Many Tears: The Stories of Three Portuguese Migrant Women*, Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1982.

and international relations but also go beyond examining women as, for example, players in forces such as gender-specific labour recruitment, to take seriously and focus on women's own search for empowerment through physical escape from situations that constrain or endanger them. This understanding of migration as escape from intolerable situations of oppression corresponds to some extent with Brand's evocation of her speaker's urgent need to leave Trinidad.

But the racial aspect of this oppression is not explored in studies of women migrating to the West. Perhaps researchers assume that Black women only encounter the pain of racism in the West, or that it is at any rate more pronounced there. It does not seem to make sense to posit that Black women might be escaping racism in coming to a Western country. Brand on the other hand conveys the pain of a specifically female legacy of slavery and race oppression, one so excruciating and so connected to the place of her origin as to have almost required her to leave.

"History" taught Brand's speaker to look for escape and she escaped the pain of that history because, unlike the women of earlier generations, she was able to. There is the sense that she left without knowing why, knowing only, feeling acutely, that she had to leave. This urgent, visceral need to leave, not fully understood on the rational level but strongly felt and known, makes theories about decisions regarding migration being made on the basis of "rational choice" alone appear especially inadequate: such theories ignore not only emotional aspects of decision-making but also histories and present realities of injustice, which call into question how free individual choices about South-North migration can be.

Brand's strong sense of the impossibility of her foremothers' migration contrasts sharply with much academic material on the Caribbean's "culture of migration". What is meant by this term is not only the slaves' forced migration to the Caribbean, but also earlier migrations between islands and to South and North America, by indigenous peoples, and later "voluntary" migrations by former slaves and their descendants, away from the islands. Migration, it is argued, is central to Caribbean history and culture. Mary Chamberlain writes that "[a]nother site, another world, is never far from view within the Caribbean. By definition, islands look out as well as are looked in at..". Echoing Brand's poem which evokes slaves looking across the sea toward what they thought was the coast of Venezuela, and freedom, Chamberlain continues: "For all the diversity which eventually emerged in the histories and cultures of those islands, there was a commonality in the potential of the far horizon".¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Chamberlain 1998, p. 4.

Furthermore,

migration to, from and within the [Caribbean] region has been central to its political creation, its economic sustenance and its cultural core. The first Europeans migrated freely within the region, the Americas and Europe... After Emancipation, exercising freedom for the former slaves more often than not assumed the form of migration -- either off the plantations, or off the island altogether..... [M]igration ... from all the islands in the Caribbean... continued throughout the nineteenth century and was a well-established feature by the twentieth.¹⁹⁰

Such formulations, however accurate, skip over the impossibility of migration of the slaves and also, as Brand makes clear, of many of their descendants, women in particular.¹⁹¹ Brand's migration to Canada, in this sense, represents and reflects a break with the legacy of impossibility inherited from her foremothers rather than the continuation of a tradition.

On the other hand, other aspects of history, including perhaps the accumulated presence of people from the Caribbean in Canada, enable Brand's speaker, unlike women before her, to leave Trinidad. Brand writes, too, in an essay from her collection *Bread out of Stone*, that while white settlers of Canada had wanted to escape the past by settling an "empty" country, Black people, in Canada or the US or the Caribbean

had and have the task of the necessary retrieval of our stolen history. We do not wish to run from our history but to recover it; our history is to us redemptive and restorative; in as much as it binds us in a common pain it binds us in common quest for a balm for that pain.¹⁹²

In retrospect, and viewing the history of slavery from a greater distance than remaining in Trinidad would have allowed her, Brand comes to an understanding of her --and her people's-- need to reclaim that history: something only made possible, paradoxically, by her escape to Canada.

The reasons behind the migration of Tambu, the narrator of *Nervous Conditions*, seem --at least superficially, and at least to the character herself at the time--somewhat more straightforward than those of Brand and her speaker in *No Language is Neutral*. Tambu fights fiercely in order to be able to continue her education, eventually leaving the "homestead" where she has spent her childhood for the mission school headed by her uncle Babamukuru. When one year the family's crops fail and there is no longer enough money for Tambu's or her brother Nhamo's school fees, their mother manages to raise enough money to keep the boy in school. There is still not enough, however, to cover Tambu's fees; her father tries to comfort her by telling her that she cannot "cook books and feed them to your husband[.] Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables".¹⁹³ But Tambu is determined, and thinks through a

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁹¹ See Hammar et al, *International Migration, Immobility and Development*, Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1997

¹⁹² "Bathurst," from Brand 1994, pp. 79-80.

¹⁹³ Dangarembga 1988, p. 15.

plan to grow her own maize and earn her fees. This she does, despite her mother's discouragement of her, her brother's opinion that her efforts will come to nothing because she is a girl,¹⁹⁴ and his malicious theft of some of her precious "mealies". With the help of a teacher, Mr. Matimba, Tambu manages to go to town to sell some of her mealies, and eventually goes back to school.

It is Nhamo who first leaves home to go to the mission school. But after Nhamo's death, Babamukuru, who is seen as the family's great patriarch and benefactor, "again raised the question of the emancipation of my father's branch of the family".¹⁹⁵ He proposes that Tambu should go to the mission school because "I will not feel that I have done my duty if I neglect the family" simply because Tambu's education will in the end, because of her inevitable marriage (according to her father), "benefit strangers". So, in the end, she goes.

Tambu loves going to school, and is diligent and successful in her school-work. She has a growing sense of outrage at the unreasonableness of what her father defines as "natural" and "unnatural" for a girl, so she "set[s] about pleasing myself" despite all opposition from family members.¹⁹⁶ Observing that there seem to be a set of general but arbitrary rules that dictate what girls can and cannot do, and that crop up ubiquitously, she determines not to allow the course of her life to be "predicted by such improper relations".¹⁹⁷

The young Tambu experiences, astutely reflects on and resists gender oppression in her family context, in particular around this issue of education. This resistance is expressed, however, through an ardent acceptance of another aspect of her family's belief system: the idea that "Englishness," particularly mastery of the English language and ascent through the various stages of a colonialist education, is the path to progress and "emancipation" from the poverty and misery of life on the homestead. Indeed, it is her embracing of this view as much as her questioning of what is "natural" and "decent" for girls and women to do, that fuel her struggle for her education.

Clearly this view represents not just the outlook of Tambu's family (with the notable exception of Tambu's mother, who feels that "white ways and ideas" divide her from her family and are the root of many of the family's problems.¹⁹⁸) Babamukuru, as a "promising young African" had been taken under the wing of white missionaries and given a sponsorship to study in

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 184.

England; their patronage --in both senses of the word-- along with Babamukuru's grateful subservience to them is illustrative of the role of colonialism in orienting Rhodesian society towards an English education-- whether in England, the more prestigious option, or within Rhodesia. This was intended not only to inculcate in the population as a whole the inherent superiority of all things English to all things indigenous, but also to create an indigenous elite that would participate in perpetuating this belief system. As Gunilla Bjerén writes: "... the creation of a core of indigenous professionals in the colonies, potential national leaders but in all other aspects beholden to the metropolitan country, was part of the colonial strategy". To illustrate, she cites in a footnote Lord Macaulay, who wrote, regarding education and the nineteenth century Raj:

We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect.¹⁹⁹

Tambu's migration to the mission shows her, and readers, how migration has affected other women's lives as well, in particular Tambu's aunt Maiguru, and cousin Nyasha. Education was a vital force in shaping their migrations, too, but these are instances of family migration in which the women had, or seemed to have, little control. Nyasha, who is a teenager during the timespan of the novel, has returned to Rhodesia with her family from England, where they had migrated so that Babamukuru could pursue an advanced education there. Nyasha herself was clearly powerless to decide either about the family's migration to Britain or their return to Rhodesia. She tells Tambu:

We shouldn't have gone... The parents ought to have packed us home. They should have, you know.... Maybe that would have been best. For them at least, because now they're stuck with hybrids for children. And they don't like it. They don't like it at all. It offends them. They think we do it on purpose, so it offends them. And I don't know what to do about it, Tambu, really I don't. I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there.²⁰⁰

The lack of control she experiences in her migrations leads to the desperation that characterises her eating disorder and emotional breakdown (something I explore further in Chapter 6).

Maiguru, Nyasha's mother, at first also appears to have simply followed Babamukuru to England and back. However, Tambu finds out by accident, and is much surprised, that Maiguru too has earned a Master's degree. It emerges that both Babamukuru and Maiguru had studied, first in South Africa for their Bachelor's degrees and then in England for their Master's. The common perception of those who know the family, says Maiguru, is that she had gone to England simply to look after Babamukuru:

¹⁹⁹ Bjerén 1997, p. 239.

²⁰⁰ Dangarembga 1988, p. 78.

‘That’s what they like to think I did.... Whatever they thought,’ she said, ‘much good did it do them! I still studied for that degree and got it in spite of all of them-- your uncle, your grandparents and the rest of your family. Can you tell me now that they aren’t pleased that I did, even if they don’t admit it? No! Your uncle wouldn’t be able to do half the things he does if I didn’t work as well!’

She goes on to talk about the sacrifices she has made, and that no-one realises she has made: “‘What it is,’ she sighed, ‘to have to choose between self and security’ ”; but she says, rather unconvincingly: “ ‘When you have a good man and lovely children, it makes it all worthwhile’ ”.²⁰¹ There is more agency in Maiguru’s story than meets the eye; there was hidden resistance, a struggle to study “in spite of all of them”, even in the context of her overall subservience to Babamukuru.

Despite the centrality of the single factor of education to the migration stories of the various characters in this novel, the narrative illustrates just how complex the ways in which gender, family, and colonial relationships play out in their lives. These factors shape in different ways the layers of motivation at work in each character, and the ways in which each experiences her migration and its aftermath.

Dangarembga’s own migration history in some ways parallels those of her characters. Like Nyasha, she spent some of her early years in England; like Tambu she attended a mission school and later a convent school within Rhodesia. While she has not explicitly related her own migrations to those undertaken in her novel, she speaks of her experiences in both England and in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe --particularly around the time independence was gained— as having politicised her. Her feeling that people in Cambridge, where she was studying, were “narrow-minded” and politically insular had a great influence upon her, as did the radical atmosphere and discussions on colonialism, history and socialism she was exposed to in the university environment back in Zimbabwe.²⁰² It seems that these experiences, the contrast between them, and her reflection on them may have influenced her in her creation of Nyasha and Tambu in particular, and in her writing of the novel more generally.

Like Tambu, the protagonist of *Annie John* migrates in order to be able to study. Here however this purpose is superficial; Annie travels to England ostensibly to take up nursing, something arranged for her by her mother, but other motivations underlie her decision.²⁰³ While she does not want to go to England or become a nurse, she has decided that the separation from her parents and from Antigua is to be permanent. She turns her migration into a willed and

²⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 101-102.

²⁰² from “‘Women Write About the Things that Move Them.’ A Conversation with Tsitsi Dangarembga”, in Boyce Davies, ed., 1995, pp. 28-29.

²⁰³ Kincaid 1983, p. 130.

determined separation from her parents and place of origin. On the morning of her departure, she is acutely aware of how she will never see her home and its surroundings again because of her determination never to return. She says of this determination:

If I had been given years to reflect and come up with the words of why I felt this way, I would not have been able to come up with so much as the letter 'A'. I only knew that I felt the way I did, and that this feeling was the strongest thing in my life.²⁰⁴

The novel up to this point has vividly evoked the protagonist's childhood in Antigua and in particular her relationship with her mother: one that is initially tender and intimate but increasingly fraught, and eventually experienced as tyrannical and oppressive. It portrays Annie's confusion and pain at her mother's sudden and incomprehensible distancing, as Annie reaches puberty, which leads the child, too, to pull away. As in much of her work, Kincaid makes, in *Annie John*, connections between personal and political experiences of domination: the protagonist struggles to experience and express herself in resistance both to colonial attempts to overwrite indigenous identities with Britishness, and to the domination of her mother. She experiences the latter as a kind of colonisation on a scale that is personal and therefore not smaller, but from the point of view of the child, all the huger and more significant.

It is these experiences of domination, betrayal and erasure which lead Annie to need so desperately to leave her family and the island where she grew up. Her migration is vital if she is to begin to define and express herself, free of the intensely suffocating oppression at the hands of colonial and family domination.

Kincaid has said about *Annie John* that it strongly echoes her own experience, but that recording events exactly would have had "a limited power for me", would have been "less than what I knew happened".²⁰⁵ She deliberately weaves explicitly autobiographical details about her own childhood and migration into the novel, most clearly in her evocation of Annie's feelings about her mother and place of origin, and her intense need to leave Antigua. The most obvious difference, however, is that while Annie is headed for Britain at the conclusion of the novel, Kincaid migrated to the U.S. In an interview, Kincaid explained this choice for her protagonist in these terms:

Because that is what people where she came from did. The girl's whole life was very much connected to Europe, and Europe was England; so it would make no sense to suddenly have her go to America. It would be inexplicable unless I meant to explain a lot more than I wanted. The book is true in some way to my own life. But it's also true to other things—to a path that my own life did not take. The path my own life took would require another book.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 133-134.

²⁰⁵ Perry 1990, p. 494.

²⁰⁶ Birbalsingh 1996, p. 138.

The colonial relationship and context of Annie's life which Kincaid wanted to foreground in the novel led her to have Annie migrate to England, whereas Kincaid herself had refused that cultural dependence in her own life by settling in the United States. Kincaid made this choice for the novel even though she attributes her personal and creative development not just to her departure from Antigua but to the fact that it was the U.S. to which she migrated (something I discuss further in Chapter 6). She attributes this partly to "luck", but also says that "and yet that luck must have had behind it, some kind of consciousness, or choice, because people aren't just lucky. You make your luck, as they say".²⁰⁷ Perhaps ironically, then, it was Kincaid's move to the U.S. which enabled her to deal autobiographically and fictionally with her childhood and with her migration—including, very importantly, the role of Britain's colonial relationship to Antigua.

Other works by migrant women portray the lack of choice about migration available to women. Below I point briefly to three of these in order to highlight some of the different circumstances evoked in the literature under which women, left with few or no other choices, are forced to migrate.

At the beginning of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife*,²⁰⁸ the character Dimple romanticises marriage and looks forward to her father finding her a husband, feeling that "premarital life [is] a dress rehearsal for actual living".²⁰⁹ But one of the main advantages of the man her father eventually finds for her, according to the father, is that this potential husband has already applied to immigrate to Canada or the USA and his application seems to have good chances of acceptance. When Dimple and this man marry, and his application is in fact accepted, Dimple herself has little or no choice regarding immigration. While her friend Pixie is jealous of their leaving, Dimple is "terrified" at the thought of living in North America; when her husband asks her for her thoughts on the last night they are spending in Calcutta before departure, she can only ask: "It won't be forever, will it?"²¹⁰

The protagonist of Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging*,²¹¹ Hyacinth, is forced at the age of eleven to leave Jamaica where she lives with her beloved Aunt Joyce, for England. Her father, whom she has never known, had "insisted on sending for her".²¹² In England Hyacinth experiences blatant and excruciating racism at the hands both of fellow pupils at school and of white figures of

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁰⁸ See the Appendix for a brief summary of this novel.

²⁰⁹ Mukherjee 1975, pp. 3-4.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

²¹¹ See the Appendix for a brief summary of this novel.

²¹² Riley 1985, p. 13.

authority; she also suffers extreme cruelty at the hands of her father, whose beatings and sexual violence make her feel “trapped, sandwiched between the hate and spite of the white world and the dark dingy evil that was the house of her father”.²¹³

Grace Nichols’ volume of poetry *i is a long-memored woman* evokes the chains, forced labour, sexual violence and brutality of slavery. The poem “Taint” mourns the “treachery” of having been “traded by men/ the colour of my own skin” to the white slavers, who forcibly transported the Africans to the Americas.²¹⁴ Nichols evokes the everyday humiliations and extreme violence of the slave-owners, as well; “Waterpot” speaks of the “sneering” of the overseer as he hurries the slaves to and from the fields.²¹⁵ “Ala” describes how a slave woman is tortured to death in front of the other slaves for killing her own child in order to send “send the little-new-born/soul winging its way back/ to Africa –free”.²¹⁶

These examples demonstrate the pervasive and varied forms taken by oppressive relationships and institutions that deprive women of the freedom to make their own decisions around migration. Both *Wife* and *The Unbelonging* show this in the context of relationships within families, while the Nichols volume depicts the very different violence of slavery. All three works also point, as well as to the violence of white racism, to betrayals and complicity by some Black men in the context of colonialism, slavery and present-day racism (an issue I examine further in Chapters 3 and 6). These works evoke some of the ways in which the racism and sexism which permeate women’s familial and social relationships leave many women with virtually no power to make their own choices about when, where, and whether or not to migrate.

Form, Meaning, and Migration

Having examined the ways journeys of migration themselves are evoked, and then explored choices around migration as depicted in the literature, in this section I go on to explore how form affects meanings in the three main works by migrant women I chose to focus on in this chapter. The language and form used to talk about migration in each work are both distinct and essential to the meanings conveyed. In the case of Brand’s volume of poetry, the density of the language enables thoughts and emotions to be expressed in paradoxical ways, as well as the coexistence or even coalescence of time periods. Vivid imagery is used to convey the complexity and sensual textures of place and emotion, also enabling contrasts between the place left behind and the place travelled to, to be powerfully evoked.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 51.

²¹⁴ Nichols 1990 (1983), p. 18.

²¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

²¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 23-4.

As I explore further in Chapter 5, Brand uses both Trinidadian and “standard” English, often simultaneously, in ways that express and reflect her experience of migration to, and as an immigrant in, Canada. Rinaldo Walcott writes that through her use of language “she brings new sounds and tonality to what Canadian is”.²¹⁷ She interweaves the two kinds of language extremely skilfully, reclaiming the “talk” she grew up with without falling into the kind of exoticising of Caribbean “dialect” that, she says, in her experience white Canadians expect;²¹⁸ but also blending it with standard English in different ways at different points in the volume, in a way that is both fluid and organic.

The poems in the volume build on each other, creating thematic threads that are picked up at intervals, without constituting a linear narrative. There are three sections to the book; a ten-part poem, “hard against the soul”, “wraps itself around” two middle sections,²¹⁹ “Return” and “No language is neutral”. The two poems with which the book opens –the first section of “hard against the soul” and “return”, evoke the speaker’s return to Trinidad after leaving the island. Thereafter, there is an accumulation of threads, some of which are to do with the history both of slavery on the island, and of women of previous generations in the speaker’s family, including the speaker’s mother. There is a juxtaposition of the despair and need to leave felt by unknown slaves who once inhabited the island, and by the mother, creating a historical context filled with a sense of the impossibility of migration. About halfway through the volume, begins a sequence of poems dealing with the speaker’s migration to Canada, the racism encountered there, the harshness of the urban environment, as well as with migrants’ attempts to recreate or evoke a sense of ‘home’. The final part of the volume contains love poems addressed to the speaker’s first woman lover, intertwined with themes of political struggle and travel back and forth between Canada and the Caribbean—both Trinidad, the island of origin, and Grenada, to which the speaker travelled to join the struggle for justice there. Both Canada and Trinidad are vividly depicted, with the beauty of the place of origin as well as the pain of its history and the limitations placed on women’s lives there, evoked with great feeling. The physical environment and the silencing effects of the racism experienced in Canada are equally powerfully conveyed.

The progression of poems, the sensuality of the language used and the layering of the imagery, as well as the way in which thematic threads are interwoven through the poems, are all ways in which the accumulation of meaning in the volume is effected. Brand is thus able to evoke the

²¹⁷ Walcott 1997, p. 44.

²¹⁸ from “An Interview with Dionne Brand, In the Company of My Work”, in Silvera, ed., 1995, pp. 366-368.

²¹⁹ Sanders 1990, p. 31. This description of the sections in Brand’s volume recalls the opening line from the second section of “hard against the soul”: “I want to wrap myself around you here in this line” (Brand 1990, p. 36).

historical and family contexts in which the migrations she deals with take place, and powerfully convey a sense of the presence of the past in the landscapes and migrations of which she writes. The formal qualities she employs also enable her to evoke the speaker's multiple migrations, back and forth between Canada and Trinidad, and the meaning which gathers around them. The non-linear ordering of the poems which enables accumulation of imagery and meaning, also helps express Brand's sense of migration not so much as a one-off journey from one place to another, but as "a constant state" as she puts it in her collection of essays, *Bread Out of Stone*,²²⁰ with both places and the travelling between them an essential part of her present identity. Trinidad is revisited, with memory and history re-evoked, and the journey back to Canada undertaken yet again.

In Kincaid's novel *Annie John*, too, various formal qualities work together to characterise the role in the novel of the protagonist's eventual migration, which occurs at the book's conclusion. Kincaid's linkage of various themes, the imagery she employs, as well as the structure of the novel and the style of the writing all play a role in evoking the importance of Annie's migration from Antigua to England. The protagonist's transition from childhood into adulthood, for one, is linked with the build-up to the migratory journey, as well as with the journey itself. The work is one that is often described as a "coming-of-age" novel or *Bildungsroman*; like much of Kincaid's work it is fictional, with strong autobiographical elements. When considered alongside others of Kincaid's works, across which themes, individual images and moments echo, the novel can be said to represent one facet of a larger, more complex and fuller fictionalised picture of her life, made up of numerous discrete but complementary narratives. Moira Ferguson writes that collectively, "Jamaica Kincaid's texts constitute a continuous and evolving narrative—what I have loosely called a *bildungsroman*—of a plural, multi-vocal, precolonial, colonial and postcolonial female subjectivity by a postcolonial writer". Within this cross-textual *bildungsroman* narrative, Ferguson goes on to say, *Annie John* is the adolescent section.²²¹

As Ike Onwordi writes, the development of the novel is the development of Annie herself.²²² As well as being a novel about "coming-of-age", some of its central concerns are with loss, Annie's separation from her mother—with whom she initially has a very caring and close relationship, but one which becomes increasingly fraught—and the daughter's sense of betrayal as her mother pulls away. The theme of "the relationship of the powerful to the powerless",²²³ as in all

²²⁰ "Just Rain, Bacolet", in Brand 1994, p. 58. I discuss this point further in chapter 3.

²²¹ Ferguson b) 1994, p. 162.

²²² Onwordi 1985.

²²³ Simmons 1994, p. 17.

Kincaid's work, is also present with, as is often the case, "the powerful" represented both by the mother figure and by the colonial power. At the same time, the trajectory of the novel builds towards the migration which is embarked upon at the end. The imagery of these major themes – growing up, loss, power, and migration—intertwine.

This intertwining is seen particularly clearly in the imagery of Milton's *Paradise Lost* which pervades the narrative, and which mirrors all of these themes. Craig Tapping writes that Annie "describes the Paradise she has lost (p. 25), prefiguring the shame, isolation and abandonment which the novel pursues".²²⁴ The passage in the novel to which Tapping refers is a description by Annie of intimate moments which she has shared with her mother; the description ends with the assertion that "It was in such a paradise that I lived". Kincaid has emphasised the strong influence on her work of both *Paradise Lost* and the Biblical books of Genesis and Revelation – with the latter's "idea of a 'paradise lost' never to be regained". She identifies this paradise as "the paradise of mother in every way",²²⁵ but also relates her pervasive theme of the relationship of the powerful and the powerless to her sense of having been "cast out of my own paradise" by those with greater power, as was Lucifer.²²⁶ The mother in *Annie John* is also identified with Antigua itself, in the novel, so that Annie's departure at the novel's closing is a culmination of the leaving behind of the paradise of childhood and mother, as well as a literal journey of migration away from Antigua.

The novel is written in eight chapters, each originally published separately in *The New Yorker* magazine. The structure of the text, then, is episodic, with each chapter standing on its own but, when read together (in a way perhaps analogous to Kincaid's various narratives), painting a composite picture of the protagonist's childhood and adolescence in Antigua. Together, the chapters fill in details of the place and people among which Annie grows up, and which she eventually leaves at the end of the novel.

The writing is accessible and, as Muriel Lynn Rubin puts it, "both poetic and concrete and almost deceptively simple". Rubin writes about this in the context of examining her young (pre-adolescent) students' conviction that "they were reading a book about Annie John by Annie John. Or that if Jamaica Kincaid does exist she is really Annie John with a pseudonym".²²⁷ This example illustrates the degree to which the vividness of Kincaid's writing and the presence of a central, first-person protagonist in the novel invite identification and sympathy from the reader.

²²⁴ Tapping 1989, p. 52.

²²⁵ Birbalsingh 1996, p. 147.

²²⁶ Simmons 1994, p. 17.

²²⁷ Rubin 1988, p. 11.

The nature of the language employed in the novel leads the reader to participate in its descriptions of the emotions of childhood, of Annie's loss and growth, and of her embarkation on her migratory journey at the conclusion of the novel. It enables the involvement of the reader, too, in Kincaid's linking of these themes through the novel's imagery and progression.

In Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions*, one of the formal qualities most essential to the way the story of the character Tambu's migration is told, is the use of retrospective narration. Tambu's migration is a turning point in retrospect; the older protagonist looks back at her younger self and reflects on the meanings of her migration away from the homestead of her childhood, first to her uncle Babamukuru's home in order to attend his mission school there, and then later to a convent school. She also reflects on the experience of her cousin and friend Nyasha, who has been to England with her parents and faces great difficulties on her return to Rhodesia. Through Tambu's retrospective narration, and the combination of perspectives of her older self and the evocation of her emotions on experiencing the events of which she tells, the migrations in her own and her family members' lives gather meaning. Readers identify both with the older and the younger Tambu --with the character who is looking back and reflecting, as well as with the one experiencing events and emotions without that hindsight.

This dual perspective enables various things to be achieved. One is that the older Tambu can admit or understand feelings the younger one was unable to comprehend at the time. Dangarembga evokes one way in which memory can work, especially around rapid change, as in a journey of migration; she shows the layering or coexistence of various emotions, not all of which are fully experienced at the same time. This technique also enables Dangarembga to show how the migrations *gather* meaning over time. Tambu's childhood experiences of migration are given both the vividness of the journeys as she experiences them, and a deeper understanding of their meaning that has come with the time that has passed, and the events she has lived through and grappled with since she migrated. Tambu notes, at various points in the novel, how she sees events differently in retrospect than at the time; her description of her feelings of awe at the relative luxuriousness of her uncle's home, when she first arrived there from the 'homestead', is one example of this.

[H]ad I been writing these things at the time they happened, there would have been many references to 'palace' and 'mansion' and 'castle' in this section. Their absence is not to say that I have forgotten what it was like... [but] I can now refer to my uncle's house as no more than that—a house.²²⁸

At other times the mature narrator identifies points, in her own narration, in the process of coming to question received colonial and patriarchal assumptions, as for example when she describes the effect on her of Nyasha's view of history, politics and contemporary colonial

²²⁸ Dangarembga 1988, p. 62.

relations.²²⁹ These examples show how Dangarembga uses Tambu's two perspectives, and the difference between them, to portray the degree to which the character's understanding of the events in her life and in particular of her migration has developed. Thus the reader, too, is able to understand the effects of Tambu's migration and reflection upon both her own and Nyasha's migrations.

Heidi Creamer makes a number of further points about Dangarembga's use of retrospective narration in this novel. She writes that it enables Tambu to tell "a story of 'escape', of a way to live with the contradictions in her life without being trapped by them".²³⁰ The novel makes clear that Tambu's growth in understanding is key to her survival and ability to negotiate the kinds of contradictions and paradoxes which Nyasha was unable to accommodate; the dual perspective used enables the reader to see both the colonial values instilled and the understanding Tambu comes to after years of experience and reflection. But as Creamer writes, the narration in African and Caribbean 'coming of age' narratives generally,

can heighten or complicate oppositions between understandings of 'traditional culture' and its 'modern adaptations' to colonialism and postcolonialism. In *Nervous Conditions* the multiplicity of voices of the narrator precludes a single 'authentic' voice, which could be appropriated... The development of these narrative voices also helps create a framework for representing political complexity, psychological depth, and inner struggle.²³¹

The older, informed narrator sees for example that the opposition between "primitive" homestead and her uncle's mission as place of physical and spiritual liberation – in which she had believed before her migration—is simplistic and inaccurate.²³² Dangarembga's technique gives Tambu's struggles to come to terms with colonial and patriarchal power great complexity and subtlety.

The fact that Tambu is telling the story of an earlier period of her life is in itself, like the events and emotions of her younger self, a part of the story Dangarembga tells. This use of a character as storyteller, of a story told within a story, has several functions. Dangarembga has Tambu use the space of the novel not only to tell her story but also, in the course of the narration, to come to terms with the events, particularly the migration, on which she reflects. The book is framed by references to the reasons for and effects of Tambu's narration: its first paragraph contains the line, "Therefore I shall... begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account",²³³ in other words by telling the story –in more or less chronological order, but following the process of her

²²⁹ Ibid., pp. 159-160.

²³⁰ Creamer 1994, p. 351.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 351.

²³² Ibid., pp. 352-353.

²³³ Dangarembga 1988, p.1.

remembering-- of how she obtained the education that enabled her to write it, and the physical and emotional journeys and struggles that accompanied this. The novel ends with Tambu's description of the process of which the reader has become aware over the course of the narrative—a "process of expansion", a gradual questioning of received assumptions, and a journey towards self-assertion which has led to her growing understanding of the events she has described, and her consequent ability to write the account just finished. She says that

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story.... It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here.... this story is how it all began.²³⁴

This ending, as well as echoing the opening paragraph and providing a coherent frame for the novel, points beyond the book's ending, towards "another volume" not yet written. It also points towards the more mature self that Tambu has become and with whom the reader is acquainted, through her narration of the events covered in the novel. Dangarembga's framing of the novel in this way very skilfully shows how the author has had Tambu use the course of her own narration, "recalling the facts as I remember them", to work through those events and present the story of how she has become the character and narrator of the present time.

The form used by Tambu also reflects and draws on different kinds of knowledge to which she has had access as a result of her experience both on the 'homestead' and at the colonial schools. As Creamer puts it,

[w]hile Nyasha rebels against both English and African sets of meaning, Tambu works within both. Even her telling this story works within both systems: she uses the English language and the form of a novel to tell a story about her family, just as her grandmother used an oral tradition when she told stories of her family's past.²³⁵

At times, Tambu addresses the reader in the second person in the way an oral storyteller might do, or in some other way assumes the presence of this reader. In the novel's first paragraph, for example, she explains why she is not apologising to us for her "callousness, as you may define it", at having said that she was not sorry when her brother died. However, the narrative is, of course, also a written story, in the form of a novel; something she can only produce as a result of her education. Thus Dangarembga has Tambu draw on and combine varying narrative traditions in a way that reflects what the character is trying to do in coming to terms with her experiences in several sharply differing environments. Miki Flockemann emphasises the role of Tambu's education in enabling her to understand the very limitations of the colonial system of

²³⁴ Ibid., p.204.

²³⁵ Creamer 1994, p. 358.

which it is a part. “[T]he older narrating Tambu”, she writes, “reveals not only the injustices of the patriarchal system, but also how her education enables her to expose it”.²³⁶

The novel not only contains the voices of the younger and the older Tambu, but also portrays, through Tambu’s narration, the experiences of various other characters. It depicts, in particular, differing outcomes of migrations undertaken by various girls and women in the novel: not only Tambu, but Nyasha and Maiguru (Nyasha’s mother) as well. Speaking of the relationship between Tambu and her cousin (as well as relationships in two other novels), Miki Flockemann writes,

The dual focus used in these novels is interesting because of the way it presents alternative scenarios, the implication being that the price of succumbing to or being assimilated by the dominant (patriarchal, colonial) social and educational structures is the destruction of ‘selfhood’ as constituted within dominant culture.²³⁷

Nyasha, in the case of *Nervous Conditions*, experiences a “destruction of selfhood” as a result of the pressures she undergoes in the wake of her migration back to Rhodesia from England; Tambu has access to resources that enable her to accommodate and come to terms with similar pressures more successfully. Maiguru’s migration story differs, again, from those of both her daughter and her niece. These “alternative scenarios” in the lives of fictional characters are a further way that Dangarembga explores some of the complexities and contradictions in women’s varying experiences of migration.

More generally, the fact that Dangarembga deliberately invites readers’ identification with her characters, drawing them into her narrative, helps her convey these complex experiences. In an interview, she says that while she has not much experience with “the oral tradition”, she speaks of the places, in folktales, “where the audience has to reply and you are actually drawn into it. And I feel that that’s a very successful way of telling a story... So when I was writing *Nervous Conditions* that was very intentional: I did my best to draw the reader into the story as well”.²³⁸

She also says that

... that I think of as the mark of good literature, that anybody who picks it up is going to find something to identify with. So for me, when I am trying to produce that kind of literature, this is a very conscious process: If I want to make this point, what kind of character can I use? And what might be happening to this character? And then, in order to make that real, of course I have to look into myself to see where I can get that emotion from, that representation.²³⁹

²³⁶ Flockeman 1992, p. 42.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

²³⁸ Wilkinson 1992, p. 192.

²³⁹ Boyce Davies, ed., 1995, p. 27.

Her use of complex characterisation is central in this “drawing in” of the reader and hence in her portrayals of the role of migration in the lives of the women in her novel.

Conclusion: Women’s Journeys, Women’s Lives

In coming to understand women’s journeys of migration and the emotional and political paths they take towards deciding to migrate, it is vital to remember the context of both colonial/post-colonial relations and intra-family gender relations in which women’s decisions around migration are made. Further, as both Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Gunilla Bjerén point out, in no sense can a “family unit” or a unitary “household” be spoken of in terms of decisions around migration, as certain strands within migration studies now do, having shifted emphasis away from the individual as isolated decision-maker.²⁴⁰ Such notions mask the power relations that can influence or even lead to women’s decisions to migrate; they obscure instances where women have little control over whether or not to migrate, as well as the times they resist more powerful family members in order to leave (or stay behind).²⁴¹ They neglect the particular meanings migration has for women, subsuming these within over-generalised categories.

Some of the women and girls in the novels and poems discussed in this chapter migrate explicitly in search of justice, escaping oppressive circumstances and engaging in what Annie Phizacklea calls a form of “transformative politics”. Brand’s speaker “runs” from an unbearably painful environment, saturated with the legacy of slavery and the continuing oppressions suffered by Black women on the island where she grew up. Annie John, too, is escaping domination through her migration from her island, but experiences this oppressiveness in a different way from Brand; Kincaid links Annie John’s relationship with her mother with colonialism, while Brand conveys a sense of having inherited the ongoing suffering of her foremothers. Dangarembga’s character Tambu sees her struggle to continue her education, including her migration to the mission school, as a search to overcome the injustice of her family’s favouritism for boys’ education over girls’, and an attempt to prevent those “general laws” which regulate the lives of girls and women from completely governing her own.

Sometimes these struggles for justice take the form of women fighting family in order to leave: while it is her uncle Babamukuru who suggests that Tambu attend the mission school, for example, he later opposes her acceptance of the scholarship to go to convent school which Tambu wins. Throughout, it is Tambu’s own determination to achieve her own “emancipation” through education, often defying the wishes of her parents and/or uncle, which enables her academic success. Other instances in the writings show a combination, in the characters, of a

²⁴⁰ Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, p. 187, Bjerén 1997, p. 233.

²⁴¹ see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, pp.188-192.

certain conformity to colonial values with a defiance of gender restrictions or discriminatory attitudes. Tambu and her aunt Maiguru, for example, both (at times, or consistently) question sexism, but --until Tambu has learned, largely from the experience of her cousin Nyasha, to question “Englishness” and the “sunrise on my horizon” that the convent school once represented for her²⁴²-- accept the values of a colonialist education.

Sometimes women characters use an accepted route of migration to pursue their own goals and meanings. Something that has one meaning on the surface might have quite another for the individual woman. Annie John, for example, ostensibly migrates in order to study to become a nurse, but this is not really what she aims for by leaving Antigua for England. Unlike Tambu, who sees education as a vehicle for liberation, Annie uses it to gain the distance from family and home that she needs in order to be able to, as she sees it, survive .

Still other migrations portrayed in the writings are involuntary, more or less forced. Family reunification, or the family ties of men considered to be legitimate immigrants, are often officially seen as legitimate grounds for women’s immigration; yet it is these very family relationships which are so often oppressive to women, and which can make of women’s migration a trauma and an expression of their powerlessness. As Annie Phizacklea writes, “[f]or women who enter under family reunion regulations, immigration laws act to reproduce a very traditional notion of women’s dependency within a male-regulated sphere”.²⁴³ In this respect, because of the assumptions about family that underlie immigration laws, such laws conspire with Hyacinth’s father, in *The Unbelonging*, when he summons her to join him, to rob Hyacinth of control in her life. Because Dimple, in *Wife*, is married to a man who has been accepted for immigration to the US, she is also considered a legitimate immigrant. Yet she has no voice in the migration process; though she clearly does not wish to leave India, she does leave, simply because her situation leaves her no other choice. For women such as her, migration is often seen as inevitable because they are expected to move into their spouses’ home; legal factors join with this expectation to leave many women with little say in the decisions made for them about migration.

There is no category within immigration law to deal with such migrations, as they are neither “voluntary”, nor “forced” in the sense that refugees fleeing because of a “well-founded fear of persecution” undergo forced migration. These literary portrayals seem to suggest that the distinction between “forced” and “voluntary” migration upon which most countries’ --and

²⁴² Dangarembga 1988, p. 204.

²⁴³ Phizacklea 1998, p. 29.

international bodies' -- immigration policies or guidelines are based, might have even less validity for women than they do for men.

Yet even in the case of forced migrations of this kind, women characters actively grapple with their experiences. Although they do not migrate under their own steam, or for their own *reasons*, to some extent some of them manage to come to terms with migration, integrate it into their changing identities, find their own meanings. Even the slave woman in Nichols' *i is a long-remembered woman*, having endured the Middle Passage taking her from Africa to the "New World", and in the midst of the agonies of slavery, struggles to "[gather]/ my life together like scattered beads".²⁴⁴ She battles to retain her dignity and resist the violence of the masters; and to find

the power to be what I am/ a woman
charting my own futures/ a woman
holding my beads in my hand²⁴⁵

However, there is not always meaning to be found in situations of powerlessness: for Nyasha, who breaks down under the pressures of a migration and return migration over which she has little control, little is resolved (though Tambu learns a great deal from her cousin's experience). In Hyacinth's misery, too, there is no relief from the powerlessness and despair brought by her migration to England. (I will examine these issues further in Chapter 6).

The retrospective perspective with which some of the literature is written, and/or readings of earlier and later writings of the same author together, shows that often a woman's decision to migrate gathers meaning, with time. Brand's statement about Black people's need to reclaim their history, for example, is one made long after the fact of her migration but, as I argued earlier, enabled by her move from Trinidad to Canada. Dangarembga's Tambu narrates her story retrospectively, both giving it the vividness of immediate experience and imbuing it with the knowledge and insight she has accumulated in the time since her migration took place.

Migration can crystallise change in women's lives, come to symbolise it, or be an expression of something that may be much more far-reaching than is known at the time. It marks both the beginnings of change that cannot be foreseen, even when a decision is actively made, as with the case of Tambu, and the endpoint of a process begun perhaps years before the journey actually takes place. Migration is both one aspect, among many, of change, *and* a vital turning point, a marker of change.

²⁴⁴ Nichols 1990 (1983), p. 19.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

The writings I have examined in this chapter portray with great evocativeness and complexity their characters' or speakers' choices about migration, and the many meanings migration can take on. Some scholarly contributions from the field of migration studies can help shed light on these things. But the literature, in large part because of its formal qualities, explores personal circumstances and power relations both within families and on a more macro level, and how these affect decisions about migration, in particularly vivid and powerful ways. Brand's dense and textured poetry; Dangarembga's retrospective narrative incorporating various perspectives; Kincaid's 'coming-of-age' novel that builds up to the migratory journey at the book's conclusion, each bring unique perspectives on women's decisions about, and journeys of, migration. The narratives and poems explore the complexities of how gender, colonial, and racial politics can be played out on individual and family levels and of how imbalances of power based on these factors affect choices about migration.

Chapter Two

Women and Place I: The Impact of Colonialism

In this chapter I turn from looking at women's decisions and journeys of migration, and take a step back to focus more particularly at their relationships with place, as influenced by colonialism, before migration takes place. The chapter addresses writers' evocations of their women characters' or speakers' relationships both to Britain and to their places of origin, before migration. I concentrate on writers' depictions of the ways in which experiences of colonialism and of pervasive continuing post-colonial awe of the "mother country" affect women's whole "image" of, or outlook on, the world around them, in particular their relationships with places of origin and with Britain.

The decision to migrate and the experience of migration to Britain, which I looked at in Chapter 1, are often affected by relationships with Britain resulting from colonialism. The structural orientation of a society towards Britain can often be present in women's decision-making around migration, be part of the context of their migration. And their looking to what lies ahead on their journey, influenced by this orientation towards Britain, affects their experience of migration, as evoked by, to give one example, Dangarembga's character Tambu. In this chapter I examine the impact of colonialism on women's relationships with their places of origin. In Chapter 3, with which this one is paired, I go on to focus on migration, belonging and identity, by examining depictions of changes in women's feelings and connections with place, related to the experience of leaving home and resettling in the West.

The current chapter draws on a number of diverse texts. The collection *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* is a central focus. This is an anthology of short stories, poems and autobiographical essays by women from various countries of the Commonwealth which deal with personal experiences of being part of the British Empire. The contributors to the collection—who come from substantially different contexts, though they share experiences of being from colonised or formerly colonised spaces—are loosely grouped according to the continents where they grew up. The writers speak from places which have had distinct experiences of being colonised, and which broke away from 'the centre' at different times and in different ways. Some of the contributors are from white settler countries—Australia, New Zealand, Canada—and are descendants of Europeans who settled in these places, with large numbers of indigenous people displaced or killed as their lands were colonised. These countries first gained a degree of autonomy when

they became “dominions” of the British Empire, then full independence from Britain by 1931. Others of the contributors to the collection come from non-settler colonies, in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. These, which were settled and ruled by small British colonial elites, achieved independence in the decades following the Second World War, often following anti-colonial nationalism and military struggle. Alongside differences in the contexts from which the contributors write, are differences in their race and class locations, which also clearly emerge in their pieces.

Contributors also responded to the editors’ call for pieces on experiences of Empire, with different formal decisions: some of the pieces are autobiographical prose, some are fictional, some poetry. Both the diversity of forms and stories in the collection, and the threads and themes that run through the volume, around experiences of colonialism in various locations, are useful for exploring the impact of colonialism on relationships with place. I also draw on Kincaid’s novel *Annie John* and her essay “On Seeing England For the First Time”; Dionne Brand’s novel *In Another Place, Not Here*; and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*. These texts also provide rich accounts of colonialism and individual women’s or girls’ relationships with place.

There are ways in which these different forms –autobiographical writing, short stories, novels and poetry— overlap, as well as important distinctions between them. While it might be said that the writing of autobiography draws on memory, the writing of fiction on imagination, in fact the distinctions are not always so clear. Indeed, while there has been a long-standing interest in the autobiographical among feminist scholars, there is now a growing body of scholarship which focuses on the very creative ways in which ‘autobiographical material’ is produced. These developments show how permeable are the boundaries between the categories ‘fiction’ and ‘autobiography’.²⁴⁶ Kincaid’s work, as we have seen in Chapter 1, blurs the distinction between fiction and autobiography in various ways, often fictionalising aspects of her own life in order to better convey what she sees as important truths about her experience. Dangarembga has said in an interview that while she would find it “boring” to write her own autobiography, the fiction she writes “uses the medium of very real individual people to make

²⁴⁶ One example is a collection of essays, *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, Tess Coslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, eds., Routledge, London, 2000. The volume opens with a poem which speaks eloquently of the instability of the genre:

Autobiography

I have forgotten more than I remember:
 Reinvent myself with strange stories of a fragmented past.
 A life blurred with dislocation, power misused, unbelonging.
 Forty-five years later I emerge
 Out of the shadow into the sun.

(A poem sent by Catherine Williams to the editors; no page ref.)

points that are beyond the individual.” She searches for the kind of character she can use to make a particular point, “[a]nd then, in order to make that real, of course I have to look into myself to see where I can get that emotion from, that representation”. As the author she does not identify with any particular character, since “all of it has to have some internal representation somewhere”.²⁴⁷ In a sense, then, *all* her characters and hence her entire narrative are partially based on her own life.

Mary Warnock has written of the intersections between memory and imagination. “The value we attach to recollection is understandable at precisely the point where memory and imagination intersect... One of the most familiar –and highly valued–kinds of memory is the way in which we remember places or people when we are absent from them”. In this respect –thinking about places or people in their absence—memory is similar to imagination.²⁴⁸ There are clearly areas of intersection between them in the writing of both fiction and autobiography. The writing of fiction can involve the author drawing on memory and on present emotion as well as imagining what she has not herself experienced. Particularly when autobiographical writing includes imagining or speculating on the feelings or experiences of others, it uses the resource of imagination as well as memory. Migration, in particular, may increase an author’s need to write ‘the self’ into being, in her text, because it can bring women into such embattled locations. The writing process can be a way of coming to terms with the profound shifts, uncertainties and questioning that often accompany processes of migration; both fiction and autobiography are genres where this can take place.

But clearly there are also important distinctions between the genres. The writer of autobiography, while often, like the fiction-writer, writing in order to explore particular ideas, reflects on her life from the perspective of the present. The writer is the written, the explicit focus of the text; her use of her own emotions and experiences are more direct than in fiction. In novels or short stories, the reader is not invited to read the writer into the text in the same way. In addition, while in fiction there are often various characters and scenarios, sometimes a shifting focus and voice, in autobiography this is less often the case, with the writer looking back on her own life and writing it from that central point of view. I am mindful of these issues in this chapter, in particular, as I examine some autobiographical writing here, alongside other genres; but a detailed examination of the similarities and differences between the genres is unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁴⁷ Flora Veit-Wild in Boyce Davies 1995, pp. 27-28

²⁴⁸ Mary Warnock, *Memory*, Faber, 1987, quoted in Oldfield 1995, p. 4

I begin this chapter by introducing Kenneth Boulding's idea of "image". This concept, which refers to people's particular outlooks on the world around them, is to some extent useful in my exploration of colonialism's effects on women's experiences of place. I draw on Boulding and others who have developed his ideas, to examine what some of the contributors to *Unbecoming* say about the sense of erasure brought about by the colonial system, and in particular by colonial education. As colonial education rendered English geographies and landscapes familiar through literature, the lack of representation of indigenous landscapes led to a sense of their "nowhereness"; this had profound effects on these writers' sense of themselves and their environments.

I go on to introduce Adrienne Rich's concept of the "politics of location". This overlaps to some extent with Boulding's idea of "image", in that she too is interested in how standpoint affects one's particular knowledge and experience of the world. However, Boulding does not incorporate an attention to his own positioning and privilege into his discussion of "image". Rich's politics of location is a much more nuanced attempt to think through the relationship between knowledge and location, by which she means both the physical place one occupies *and* one's political positioning. For Rich these locations include that of "a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist",²⁴⁹ and the confluence of all of these with her identity as a white person living in North America. While for most of this chapter I look at experiences of British colonialism, I draw on these North American authors who are writing from what is now the politically dominant world power, in exploring ideas about "seeing from the centre" and from countries that were formerly colonised.

I draw on Rich's writings along with the idea of "seeing double", an expression used by one of the contributors to *Unbecoming*, Dorothy Jones, to address the ways in which colonialism affected and continues to affect these women's relationships with place. The collection highlights the role of "colonial education" in the promulgation of the importance of the British Empire. In particular these writers highlight the role of geography and English literature in shaping their understanding of the world in which they lived. Geography lessons were dominated by the map of the world, with the British Empire coloured in red, a particular way of viewing the world represented as the only way of viewing the world. The significance of the map of the world is also taken up by Jamaica Kincaid, in her essay, "On Seeing England for the First Time". The teaching of English literature conveyed a familiarity with English landscapes, while the students were living in very different kinds of places; a split view of the world or a sense of two landscapes superimposed on each other often resulted. One, as yet unseen

²⁴⁹ Rich 1986, p. 212.

landscape was deemed superior to the ones lived in daily. I discuss these issues against a background of ideas in postcolonial theory about how colonialism affected ways of seeing the world, and the importance of “decolonising the mind”.

The writings show experiences of colonialism intersecting in various ways with family politics, further influencing women’s experiences of place. Kincaid’s intense awareness of both colonial and family domination is a major influence on her experience of Antigua, Britain and the United States. For some writers in *Unbecoming*, ideas of Empire and of England provided a much needed possible escape route from family life which was experienced as restrictive and oppressive. Nonetheless regret on leaving places of origin often revolves around the meaning of particular places, and indigenous flora and fauna, suggesting a persistence of attachment to native places, and alternative visions of the world, despite the impact of colonialism. Taken together then, these accounts point both to common experiences of colonialism through education --the map of the world and the daffodils of Wordsworth’s poem “I wandered lonely as a cloud” are persistent images through many writers’ accounts of colonial childhoods-- as well as to the specific and individual meanings which women and girls made of colonialism, in different parts of the world, and in different family circumstances. These narratives underline the importance of gender in attending to experiences of colonialism, to the meanings of places of origin, and of migrations away from these places.

Colonialism and the Image: Introduction

The colonial system many of the writers grew up with, and/or depict in their writings, as well as the political legacies of this system in terms of continuing international imbalances of power, deeply influence their relationships to both places of origin and to the West, and Britain in particular. As a result of the power and pervasiveness of the colonial “symbolic order” (see Helen Callaway quotation, below), it was the whole worlds of many indigenous people that were coloured by colonialism, which in many ways infiltrated and shaped thinking processes, outlooks, and people’s relationships with themselves and their environments. In the post-colonial era, this continues to a greater or lesser extent.

As has been pointed out, colonialism for many colonised people meant not so much experiences of overt violence as a system of knowledge, imparted and reinforced both through formal teachings in such fora as school and church, and through countless details of everyday life

which together constituted the “relations of ruling” between colonisers and colonised.²⁵⁰ As Helen Callaway writes, of Nigeria:

The case might be argued that imperial culture exercised its power not so much through physical coercion, which was relatively minimal though always a threat, but through its cognitive dimension: its comprehensive symbolic order which constituted permissible thinking and action and prevented other worlds from emerging.²⁵¹

It is perhaps something of a distortion to diminish the role of violence to this extent: at key moments, when and where the need arose, violence *was* used by the colonial powers. The threat of violence, and the presence of the troops and machinery of warfare necessary to carry out such violence, were what made cultural domination possible. Nevertheless, Callaway’s point about the “cognitive dimension” of colonial power is an important one, and this is the dimension I focus on here.

In order to look at how people’s outlooks were shaped by colonialism, I draw upon the idea of the “image”, developed by Kenneth Boulding in his 1956 book *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*, subsequently taken up by various geographers and psychologists in their research and theoretical writings, and more recently drawn upon by Elizabeth Thomas-Hope and Ruth M. Krulfeld in their studies of, respectively, Caribbean migration and Laotian refugee communities. Thomas-Hope writes that the image is individuals’ perception of their “total environment, including natural and non-natural, visible and non-visible, experienced and simply heard of, near and far, past, present and future. It represents the culmination of knowledge against a background of values, beliefs, aspirations and goals which are tinted or modified by emotions and personality”.²⁵² One dimension of the image, among several identified by Boulding, is the “spatial image”: how people perceive themselves in relation to their physical environments. Researchers have conducted studies involving drawing and analysing people’s “cognitive maps” -- defined by Downs and Stea as “cross-section[s], at one point in time, of the environment as people believe it to be”²⁵³ -- of the neighbourhoods or cities in which they live. People’s sense of relative distances and locations as well as of the qualities of particular places within an environment together make up such subjective “maps”; these are highly idiosyncratic, and often contain discontinuities, omissions, and added features as well as inaccuracies in terms

²⁵⁰ Chandra Mohanty draws on the concept of “relations of ruling”, a term coined by Dorothy Smith, to discuss “the relations between the organization and experience of sexual politics and the concrete historical and political forms of colonialism, imperialism, racism and capitalism”. She writes: “Rather than posit any simple relation of colonizer and colonized, or capitalist and worker, the concept ‘relations of ruling’ posits multiple intersections of structures of power and emphasizes the process or form of ruling, not the frozen embodiment of it... as a focus for feminist analysis”. Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991, p. 14.

²⁵¹ Helen Callaway, *Gender, Culture and Empire: European Women in Colonial Nigeria*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 57; cited in Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991, p. 15.

²⁵² Thomas-Hope 1992, p. 25.

²⁵³ Downs and Stea 1973, p. xiv.

of distance and direction.²⁵⁴ Cognitive maps, Downs and Stea point out, do not necessarily look like (even inaccurate) cartographic maps; they may have some characteristics of these while also including “linguistic signatures” and “visual imagery ... derived from eye-level viewpoints”; at the same time, other senses besides sight are often involved.²⁵⁵ One researcher compares internal “maps” to holograms, such as projections of chessboards enabling crowds to watch chess tournaments-- models within which one can imagine walking around, which are three dimensional and dynamic, constantly changing as new experiences are assimilated.²⁵⁶

Studies of “cognitive maps” have found both individual variation and cross-cultural differences and similarities within groups. Differences in “habits of location and techniques of orientation” across cultures have been identified--with for example Eskimo maps showing accurately the number and shape of turns in a river but not lineal distances, or people from the small island of Tikopia referring to “inward” and “seaward” directions where Westerners would refer to “left” and “right”. And there are differences in perception of other aspects of the environment, including shape (Ghanaians reportedly have difficulty following a straight line, in contrast to Westerners’ difficulty in drawing a perfect circle freehand); territoriality, ownership and division of land; perception and valuation of colours; and categorisation of various aspects of experience and environment.²⁵⁷

While there is some validity in the identification of cross-cultural differences, some culturally-defined categorisations (such as that concerning Ghanaians and straight lines, above) are rather too general to be of use. Other researchers have worked on a more individual level, finding differences in cognitive maps to depend among other things on the ways in which people “use” or interact with an environment. Donald Appleyard speaks of the prominence of details of traffic circles and intersections in city dwellers’ subjective maps because of the “operational” importance of these things in their daily “use” of the city; and notes that “[c]hildren know the doorsteps of the houses where they sit, and recall the floor materials, street furniture, and pavements on which they play”.²⁵⁸ Modes of transport also make a difference to spatial image: one researcher found that using “active” modes of transportation such as walking or bicycling led to greater environmental knowledge than using “passive” ones such as buses.²⁵⁹ And varying depths of familiarity with a given landscape also give rise to vastly differing understandings of it. As one researcher writes:

²⁵⁴ Downs and Stea, “Cognitive Maps and Spatial Behavior: Process and Products” in *ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12; p. 22.

²⁵⁶ Stea and James M. Blaut, “Notes Toward a Developmental Theory of Spatial Learning”, in Downs and Stea 1973, p. 56 and Terence R. Lee, “Psychology and Living Space” in *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁵⁷ Lowenthal 1961, pp. 252-4.

²⁵⁸ Donald Appleyard, “Notes on Urban Perception and Knowledge” in Downs and Stea 1973, pp. 109-110.

²⁵⁹ Stea and Blaut in Downs and Stea 1973, p. 58.

the Atlantic coast swamp with all those attributes is a complex, the nature of which is clearly known to the local people who are parties to a tacit understanding about the usage of the term. We who were not parties to the basic regional understanding had been trying to categorise this kind of entity in terms of a single kind of attribute rather than in terms of a multi-attribute feature for which we had no pigeon hole, no term, no concept.²⁶⁰

Paul Roddaway points out that “[p]erception is a social, or shared experience, as well as an individual one”.²⁶¹ Thus perception is shaped by cultural context. Some theorists have also considered the gender-specific issues in the socialisation of perception, exploring the differences in men and women’s perceptions of themselves and their environments.²⁶²

Why is this relevant? I am interested in how colonial and neocolonial power relations and migration in that context help shape the “spatial images” or “cognitive maps” of women who migrate. Researchers have identified individual and cross-cultural differences among people’s “cognitive maps”. And yet, as the writers I look at show so clearly, people’s sense of themselves, their immediate environments, and the larger world, are not formed in a political vacuum. Under colonial rule a very alien “map” was imposed on people, with sometimes more and sometimes less success; and varying degrees of damage resulting. The idea of internal maps, if used in this context, is I think potentially a useful way of understanding the depth to which colonialism infiltrated people’s lives, the *immediacy* of the domination: people’s very sense of themselves and the environments they lived in and moved through was intimately affected, in a basic, even sensory way. Migration, too, in the context of colonial and post-colonial power relations, --as we shall see in Chapter 3-- clearly also affects people’s relation to their environments of origin as well as to the Western society they migrate to; alters yet again their internal maps, their sense of themselves in the world.

Colonial rule not only affected colonised people’s perceptions of their own environments but also of the world “out there,” particularly Britain. Downs and Stea talk about the importance of terms and symbols around place, such as the phrase “The Dark Continent” to describe Africa or, in a very different context, the word “slum” used by middle-class American whites to describe inner-city areas. These terms themselves evoke a whole range of emotions and associations -- mainly negative ones-- based far less on direct experience of these places than on hearsay, mythology, and/or media images. Conversely, the authors describe poor Americans’ belief in the promise of Northeastern US cities for whom there is painful gap between image and reality.²⁶³ In something similar to what Terence R. Lee calls the “elsewhere schema”,²⁶⁴

²⁶⁰ Downs 1970, pp. 95-6.

²⁶¹ Roddaway 1994, p.22.

²⁶² Rose 1986; Pollock 1988.

²⁶³ Downs and Stea 1973, pp. 19-23.

England too was a powerful symbol for many in the colonies/ex-colonies. I will be looking, below, at how this symbol came to be and its effects on people's perceptions of the world.

Many of the contributors to the collection *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*, as well as Jamaica Kincaid in her essay "On Seeing England For the First Time" and in her novel *Annie John*, powerfully evoke relationships to place through their writing. They depict pre-migration relationships to Britain, taught and continually reinforced by the colonial system, in particular through education; and also relationships to places of origin which, though ignored and under-valued by this same educational system, were nevertheless also influenced by colonial and post-colonial power relations. There is both variation among these relationships, according to the individual women's lives and responses to what they were taught, and according to their places of origin and circumstances; and, to a surprising degree, commonalities among them. Indeed, *Unbecoming* arose out of an initial conversation between the editors --one a white woman from Australia, the other the daughter of Chinese immigrants to Singapore-- and others attending a conference on postcolonial literature, in which they were "surprised and amused" to find that there was much in their experiences of growing up as "colonials" that they held in common. They also found that there had been "divisive factors at work" which were not as immediately obvious:

The narrative of Empire was constructed in terms of sameness (we could all recite Wordsworth's poem about daffodils and most of us celebrated Empire Day in our schools). It was always careful to conceal the tremendous differences among the colonies. What prompted the book was our desire to investigate further the common ground we shared and, more importantly, to uncover the differences.²⁶⁵

Erasure and "nowhereness"

A central way in which "[t]he narrative of Empire" sought to conceal the differences among the colonies was to devalue, or ignore altogether, indigenous experiences in its education of the "natives". It sought to convey that not only was British best, the very embodiment of progressiveness, modernity and civilisation (in contrast to the "native" cultures which were considered "traditional" and therefore regressive), but also the only viable alternative right across the board: in the fields of politics and government; economics; religion and morality; and culture. Many of the contributors to *Unbecoming* speak of the sense of erasure resulting from such assumptions; of how they were taught to see their own lives as unimportant, irrelevant, and inferior in all respects. Olive Senior writes in her poem "Colonial Girls' School":

Borrowed images
willed our skins pale
muffled our laughter

²⁶⁴ Terence R. Lee in *ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁶⁵ Chew and Rutherford eds., 1993, preface (no page reference).

lowered our voices
 let out our hems
 dekinked our hair
 denied our sex in gym tunics and bloomers
 harnessed our voices to madrigals
 and genteel airs
 yoked our minds to declensions in Latin
 and the language of Shakespeare
 Told us nothing about ourselves
 There was nothing about us at all
 How those pale northern eyes and
 aristocratic whispers once erased us
 How our loudness, our laughter
 debased us
 There was nothing left of ourselves
 Nothing about us at all
 Studying: History Ancient and Modern
 Kings and Queens of England
 Steppes of Russia
 Wheatfields of Canada
 There was nothing of our landscape there
 Nothing about us at all ²⁶⁶

Senior conveys in this poem the ways in which lack of representation of the pupils' lives went hand in hand with erasure of themselves and of their environment. In terms of race, gender and class simultaneously, "colonial girls" were encouraged to identify with impossibly inappropriate, and ultimately unattainable, ideals. There is a toning down of their laughter and voices, a modesty taught and enforced that, in both racial and sexual terms ("dekinked our hair/ denied our sex in gym tunics and bloomers") amounts to an erasure of identity, with the attempt to replace it with "genteel", imitated Englishness. Senior's repetition of the refrain with variations --"Told us nothing about ourselves" in the first refrain becomes "There was nothing left of ourselves" in the second, and "There was nothing of our landscape there" in the third-- links together with great clarity the lack of reflection of self, of landscape, and the sense of annihilation engendered by the girls' colonial schooling.

One could say that there was no "map" of these girls' place, or of their lives; or, perhaps more accurately, there was no *representation* of their internal maps or images of the worlds in which they lived. There was no reflection of themselves in literature, in the history, geography or music they studied; there was therefore no validation or acknowledgement of themselves. This would clearly have had a significant impact on the internal maps of children growing up as "colonials", on their concepts of themselves in relation to the world. Because they and their place were not seen as important, they lived to a great extent with reference to a small country -- rendered enormous and all-encompassing-- thousands of miles away. Cognitive maps formed out of familiarity and interaction with immediate environments were rendered irrelevant, over-ruled by those imposed by Britain.

²⁶⁶ Olive Senior in *ibid.*, p. 161.

Two examples, one from an essay, another from a novel, depict women in very different situations --both from those of the contributors to *Unbecoming*, who grew up under colonialism, and from each other. However, they illustrate with particular poignancy a sense of “nowhereness” similar to that I have been discussing and arising, like the contexts represented in *Unbecoming*, from situations of (vastly differing) colonial disempowerment. Both are stories told by the descendants of migrants, and evoke in addition to their own experience that of their forebears who left --in one case, with some degree of choice, in the other as a slave-- their homes for another country.

Aritha van Herk, in her essay “Space and Landscape: A Personal Mapping”, recounts how, as a child of Dutch immigrants growing up in central Canada, she had the sense that she lived “nowhere”. Canada to her seemed “shadowy and indistinct”; because family stories and legends revolved around Holland and she had a strong sense of inherited memory of that country, because English-language books, magazines and radio programmes were US-centred, and because Canadians performed such rituals as singing “God Save the Queen” and saluting the Union Jack, she lived constantly with reference to somewhere else. Finding no reflection of herself or her place, she became “obsessed” with finding a “vocabulary” or “map” of her life, eventually finding it in Canadian literature that was firmly located in places she knew intimately. She remains convinced that it is “writing about a place,” or reading about it, that “makes it somewhere”.²⁶⁷

Dionne Brand’s character Elizete, in her novel *In Another Place, Not Here*, is the descendant of a woman who had been forcibly wrenched from her African home and brought as a slave to the Caribbean.

When she come here she was grieving bad for where she come from. And when she done calculate the heart of this place, that it could not yield to her grief, she decide that this place was not nowhere and is so she call it. Nowhere. She say nothing here have no name. She never name none of her children, nor the man she had was to sleep with and she never answer to the name that they give she which was Adela.

Elizete knows intimately the plants in her garden and in the wild, their properties and medicinal uses, but because “Adela” had not passed them down, she does not know their names.

Yet like van Herk, the child Elizete searches for the words that will enable her to form a relationship to her place; she does this by giving the plants and birds around her names:

pull and throw bush, make haste weed, jump up and kiss me flowers, waste of time plant, red berry poison, beach tree poison, draw blood leaf, stinging leaf bush, Jack Spaniard tree, wait in the road come night time bird.

²⁶⁷ van Herk in Olinder, ed., 1984, pp. 64-71.

“In my smallness,” she says, “all I could think was how the names of things would make this place beautiful”. She does this in part for “Adela”’s sake, in part for her own: Having heard that “Adela” had in time forgotten her original name and language, Elizete feels that perhaps “if I say these names for Adela it might bring back she memory of herself and she true name. And perhaps I also would not feel lonely for something I don’t remember”.²⁶⁸

There are important differences between the contexts out of which the women (fictional and actual) I discuss here migrated, between the nature of their own or their forebears’ migrations. The representations, too, differ widely, as van Herk’s essay is a reflection on her own experience while Brand’s novel centres around two fictional characters, neither of them identical with herself. Still, comparing them brings some interesting conclusions; one echo between the narratives lies in the resistance with which van Herk, “Adela”, and Elizete respond to the “nowhereness” of their situations. “Adela”’s refusal to develop an emotional relationship to the place she has been forcibly brought to is her way of refusing to accept what has been done to her. Both van Herk and Elizete respond differently, trying to turn “nowhere” into “somewhere” by giving words and thus a sense of reality to the places where they live their lives. Elizete refuses the erasure of “Adela”’s identity and memory, and “Adela”’s disconnection from her environment because of her forcible uprooting from Africa. Elizete resists the legacy of this uprooting in her own sense of being “lonely for something I don’t remember”, through the process of naming and coming to know her own environment. Van Herk resists the orientation, in Canada, towards the United States and Britain, by rooting herself as firmly as she can in the specificity and immediacy of the places she knows.

The contributors to *Unbecoming*, as children, internalised and/or questioned to various extents and in various ways the value-judgements, biases and erasures inherent in British colonialist teaching and social structures. Influencing their responses, as well as the particular impacts of colonial structures in various locations, were specific aspects of their experiences such as race, family background, the degree to which the adults around them accepted or resisted the colonial order, and/or emphasised indigenous spiritual practices, stories, music. Some of the contributors did as children, like Lauretta Ngcobo in South Africa, see Britain as “the epitome of all that was beautiful, powerful, just and perfect”,²⁶⁹ and felt keenly the inferiority of their own lives. Others felt ambivalent, sometimes confused, about Britain; their feelings were paradoxical mixtures of awe and affection for all things British, and anger at the Empire’s devaluation of indigenous realities.

²⁶⁸ Brand 1996, pp. 18-25.

²⁶⁹ Lauretta Ngcobo in Chew and Rutherford eds., 1993, p. 49.

Still others --particularly those with family members who questioned the justice of British rule-- seem to have had a strong sense, from early childhood, that the image of Britain as norm, as superior, was skewed and oppressive. Nayantara Sahgal, for example, who grew up in North India, writes that “[a]t home I was nourished on revolt. My elders were committed to rooting out foreign rule and had made a personal beginning by giving up their scholarship and their careers at the Bar to devote their lives and all their resources to the struggle for freedom”.

Sahgal continues:

In a childhood filled with the sights, sounds and folklore, and sometimes the furore, of the national movement, nothing estranged me from school more than the way history was taught. Its content and perspective were so different from what I was taught at home that I soon put school history in the same category as Kipling’s ‘Gunga Din’—a rousing, rollicking white man’s fable that had everything to do with the conqueror’s image of the bullied, beaten Indian, loyal to his last gasp, and nothing to do with India. In short I didn’t believe a word of it. I was also surprised to learn that ancient times began with Greece, that the world had been created in six days, and that all of religion was down in one little book... I knew I inhabited a huger, older universe of which school taught me only a meagre slice, yet paradoxically this little scrap filled the textbooks and ruled the world.²⁷⁰

Women such as Sahgal were in the main able, as children, to be in touch with and to value their own and their families’ and communities’ experiences in a way which gave the lie to the British version of the world. Yet for many of them, too, there was pain at the attempted erasure of their lives.

Seeing from the centre; seeing double

Boulding begins his book on *The Image* with these words:

As I sit at my desk, I know where I am. I see before me a window;
beyond that some trees; beyond that the red roofs of the campus of
Stanford University; beyond them the trees and the rooftops which mark
the town of Palo Alto; beyond them the bare golden hills of the
Hamilton Range. I know, however, more than I see.

He goes on to describe what he knows about the world “beyond... my present horizon”, and beyond even that, about the solar system and universe, in order to explain what he means by one’s “image” of the world, one’s subjective knowledge.²⁷¹ His understanding of the subjectiveness of knowledge, which appears to imply a critique of assumptions about objectivity, is on the one hand impressive, given that he was writing well before these ideas began to be addressed in the context of the women’s and Black Civil Rights movements. He does not address in depth, however, the extent to which the subjective knowledge he speaks about is politically influenced. Also, the relative simplicity of his description --although, granted, it is simplified for the sake of the admirable accessibility and evocativeness of his introduction-- is, I would argue, also possible because of his position of privilege, particularly his North Americanness. Beyond his “present horizon” lies the rest of the United States, and beyond that the rest of the world: he is physically located in a country which is, politically too, foremost globally, and which sees itself and its “values” as unassailably superior (though he

²⁷⁰ Nayantara Shagal in *ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

²⁷¹ Boulding 1956, pp. 3-6.

does not examine this, he was writing at a time --his book was published in 1956-- of extreme suspicion, and persecution, of all things deemed “Un-American”). There is no contradiction between his political and his physical location, no difficulty to resolve.

In contrast to Boulding, Adrienne Rich is acutely aware of what she calls, in her essay of that name, “The Politics of Location”-- the political roots and implications of her own positioning and outlook on or (to use Boulding’s term once again) “image” of the world. In one passage, Rich remembers:

When I was ten or eleven, early in World War II, a girlfriend and I used to write each other letters which we addressed like this:

Adrienne Rich
14 Edgevale Road
Baltimore, Maryland
The United States of America
The Continent of North America
The Western Hemisphere
The Earth
The Solar System
The Universe

She continues: “You could see your own house as a tiny fleck on an ever-widening landscape, or as the center of it all from which the circles expanded into the infinite unknown”. While Rich’s “address” is reminiscent of Boulding’s self-locating, she uses it as a starting point to examine the political dangers, which Boulding seems unaware of, of seeing herself --as a white North American-- at the “center”. At the same time she recognises the impossibility of ignoring, merely because she rejects them, the aspects of her positioning which privilege her. Beginning with her own body, and emphasising the need to continually connect theory with concrete and physical experience, she unflinchingly probes the meaning of all the various components of her identity:

As a woman I have a country; as a woman I cannot divest myself of that country merely by condemning its government or by saying three times ‘As a woman my country is the whole world’... I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create.²⁷²

She is “a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist” -- all aspects of her identity which marginalise and disadvantage her; but she also writes of beginning (primarily through the writings and activism of US people of colour and Cuban women) “to experience the meaning of my whiteness” and of North America as “locations” which had shaped her “ways of seeing” and values and for which she needs to take responsibility. The discourse of Cold War rhetoric in the US, in which those in the West were presented as the “guardians of freedom” against the horrors of communism, was, in her analysis, “frozen”; and “the legacy of fear lingering after the witch

²⁷² Rich 1986, pp. 211-212.

hunts of the fifties hangs on like the aftersmell of a burning”.²⁷³ Throughout her essay, Rich is looking to undo the assumption, intrinsic to the Cold War mentality, that “the white eye” --and the North American eye-- “sees from the center”²⁷⁴ -- as did British eyes during the reign of the Empire.

In a colonial or post-colonial situation, “eyes” see differently: images of the world are formed from a different political location. While some internalised a sense of Britain as the “centre”, several of the contributors to *Unbecoming* describe the sense of dual reality, of “seeing double”, as Dorothy Jones puts it,²⁷⁵ arising from their experiences as “daughters of the Empire”. Jones, who grew up in New Zealand, describes the disjunction between unquestioned assumptions about the environment promulgated by English literature (such as those surrounding the seasons), and experiences of the local environment, which though contradictory coexisted with these assumptions. Lauretta Ngcobo, a South African, writes:

I remember clearly the absurdities of that earlier period [under the British Empire, before Apartheid,] which left me with a strangely bifocal view of life... There was something strangely incongruous about belonging to two countries, having two kings, two languages and a racial barrier down the middle.²⁷⁶

Both Jones’ expression and Ngcobo’s use of the word “bifocal” suggest something very immediate about how they, and their whole “image” of the world, were affected by experiencing colonialist society and education, and another very different reality simultaneously. Jones’ phrase evokes a kind of faulty vision in which she saw things duplicated; Ngcobo’s suggests that colonialism was a pair of lenses through which one could see the same thing in two distinct and divided ways, one’s way of seeing changing back and forth. Both writers evoke a kind of twoness both physical and pervasive, inflecting their vision of, as well as -- less literally (but clearly affected by physical vision)-- their whole “image” of the world around them.

Shashi Deshpande also uses visual images to describe the effect of colonialism on her community’s self-perception, and in doing so evokes the “twoness” of the resulting vision, the pervasiveness of all the English represented, and the many paradoxes of life under the Empire:

Perhaps it was the enormous colonial blinkers we wore that blanked out the rest of the world. There was only England and India. Them and Us. And though there were pockets, even in India, where the British did not rule --the Native States-- it seemed that They were everywhere. They, of course, were white, while We were all shades of colour, mainly brown. Actually, there were scarcely any English sahibs or memsahibs in the small town in which we lived.... ‘the English’ were a remote entity. Yet

²⁷³ Ibid., pp. 219-221.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 226.

²⁷⁵ Dorothy Jones in Chew and Rutherford eds., 1993, p. 82.

²⁷⁶ Lauretta Ngcobo in ibid., p. 49.

the idea of Empire somehow seeped into us, colouring our lives, giving them a distinctive tinge.²⁷⁷

Later, she writes: “It was as if we saw ourselves with the vision of that ‘Other’, the outsider. Therefore, we were not the norm; they were”.²⁷⁸

“Colonial blinkers” led to a sense of narrow, and (again) dual reality --England and India, Them and Us. Yet life was pervaded by the English, who were both “everywhere” and at the same time, paradoxically, rather remote. Deshpande experienced this pervasiveness in terms of life having been “coloured” by the English, even though “They” were white, while “We” were many colours.

Like Ngcobo, Deshpande describes the two distinct realities she experienced as a child: the world as seen and structured and taught by the colonists, experienced mainly at school; and another (and particularly local) version of reality lived at home: a version which included mangoes and guavas, little girls wearing pretend grown-up saris, adult discussion of Swaraj, Sanskrit and traditional dance lessons. She writes that the two worlds in many ways overlapped, in ways that did not feel at all odd; the bookshelves at home were filled with Ibsen and Shaw while her father would also frequently recite Hindu verse. But there was also dissonance, at times, where the two worlds met: in political discussions Churchill was portrayed as an enemy of the “heroes” Gandhi and Nehru; yet was also talked about as, if not exactly a friend, at least an enemy of the real enemy, Hitler. So Deshpande’s sense of split reality came not merely from the fact that the two versions of reality seemed separate and dissonant; they were also sometimes contradictory. Living with these splits and contradictions was a matter, she writes, of “defly juggling different coloured balls”.²⁷⁹

Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Ngcobo also speak of the contradictions between what was taught them and what was happening politically at the time they were growing up. Ngcobo writes that the Empire was “a crumbling system of cultural values, social structure and economic wellbeing under the stress of the Colour Bar, the precursor of Apartheid”.²⁸⁰ Geok-lin Lim in retrospect sees the split between what was happening “outside our convent walls” in terms of the Empire falling apart into independent nations on the one hand; and on the other what the curriculum

²⁷⁷ Shashi Deshpande in *ibid.*, pp. 103-4.

²⁷⁸ See W.E.B. Dubois’ book *The Souls of Black Folk* (London: Constable, 1905) for his concept of the “double consciousness” experienced by Black people in North America.

²⁷⁹ Shashi Deshpande in Chew and Rutherford eds., 1993, pp. 104-5.

²⁸⁰ Lauretta Ngcobo in *ibid.*, p. 49.

was teaching, bolstered by the fact that children from all over the world were studying the same English-centred curriculum, about the Empire's unity.²⁸¹

Despite considerable differences of race, class, and the specifics of their experiences of colonialism, the contributors share a sense of their gendered oppression; this informs the sense of "seeing double" which many of the entries describe. The writers' experiences of split reality followed, in effect, from the way in which British colonial power worked. Mohanty discusses how the colonial state reinforced its rule through its emphasis on distance and difference between the white male rulers (white women may often have bolstered colonial rule but colonial institutions of political power were overwhelmingly masculine") and "native" men and women. She points out that: "White men in colonial service *embodied* rule by literally and symbolically representing the power of the Empire"; along with their distance from the population, this meant that they could be, to use Deshpande's word, quite "remote" even while making their influence everywhere felt. Mohanty writes:

...in drawing racial, sexual and class boundaries in terms of social, spatial and symbolic distance, and actually formulating these as integral to the maintenance of colonial rule, the British defined authority and legitimacy through the difference rather than commonality of rulers and 'natives'.

.....

[I]nstitutionally, colonial rule operated by setting up visible, rigid, and hierarchical distinctions between the colonizers and the colonized. The physical and symbolic separation of the races was deemed necessary to maintain social distance and authority over subject peoples. In effect, the physical details (eg racial and sexual separation) of colonial settings were transmuted to a moral plane: the ideal imperial agent embodied authority, discipline, fidelity, devotion, fortitude, and self-sacrifice. This definition of white men as 'naturally' born to rule is grounded in a discourse of race and sexuality which necessarily defined colonized peoples, men and women, as incapable of self-government. The maintenance of strong sexual and racial boundaries was thus essential to the distinctions which were made between 'legitimate rulers' and 'childlike subjects'. These boundaries were evident in the explicit and implicit regulations against the intermingling of the races in colonized countries....²⁸²

Like the division between public and private spheres --with women confined to the private domain-- critiqued by Western feminists, this strict definition of boundaries between rulers and ruled clearly had deep implications both for colonised people's experience of power and powerlessness, and for how this experience structured their relationships to their environments. There were places --both literally and metaphorically speaking-- where they could not go, in their own lands. One of the photographs on the cover of *Unbecoming* shows the special, roped-off enclosure for "European ladies" at the 1932 wedding of the Maharajah's daughter in India. This is a small but symbolic example of the often physical exclusions of "native" men and women from spaces defined as white (and in this case white and female) --only. Colonised

²⁸¹ Geok-Lin Ling in *ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁸² Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991, pp. 16-17.

people lived in their own environments but were taught points of reference which erased them and their lives' landscapes.

Yet they were not, of course, entirely erased; at least, not all were successfully erased, all of the time. There were degrees of erasure, as there are for women (mainly white Western, middle-class women) defined in terms of their restrictions to "domestic" or private space. Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose, in their volume *Writing Women and Space: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies*, cite Marilyn Frye, who writes of the "geography of gender", or the way gendered roles and activities define certain spaces as "feminine" and others as "masculine".²⁸³ In the colonial context, too, boundaries were constructed --whether in actuality or in the colonialist imagination-- which relegated colonised women to particular limited spaces (such as the harem) which "haunt the imagination of the master subject, and are both desired and feared for their difference".²⁸⁴ And as we have seen, women "colonials" could be and express themselves more in one place than in another, were "erased" more in one place than in another. They lived within environments of contradiction; many moved from places where they learned (or resisted learning) to strive towards "Englishness" to places where another language, another religion, another set of values --to whatever extent these were "coloured" by the reality of Empire-- held sway.

The double vision described by Ngcobo, Jones, Deshpande and others could come about because the place that was largest in their own experience, in whose midst they lived every day, was also made small, made invisible. Seeing double was, at least in part, the result of getting the message that somehow "colonials" and their reality did not exist, or existed only so far as they could live *via*, or be transparent to, colonial values and reference points; yet at the same time they continued to exist and (depending on the resources available to them) to do so on their own terms. In so doing they resisted the official story of what constituted reality.

Maps of the world

The role of school, and in particular geography lessons, in developing this sense of double reality, contradiction, and erasure, is an important thread running through many of the contributions in *Unbecoming* as well as several of Kincaid's and many other migrant women's writings. It is striking how often images of maps --particularly the world map, but also maps of England--come up in the writers' reminiscences. For many of these women, seeing the red (sometimes described as pink) parts that represented what "belonged" to the British Empire covering so much of the world map, during school lessons, seems to have made a lasting

²⁸³ Blunt and Rose, eds., 1994, pp. 1-2.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

impression. If there was no map of their own places, lives, experiences, what there were were maps of England and its Empire-- maps which significantly contributed to the ways in which they saw both Britain and their own physical environments. The “invisible topological surface,” or “geodesic space” of mental maps²⁸⁵ were strongly influenced, along with other factors such as stories sent back by previous emigrants to England, by these maps learned about at school.

A map can be seen as a symbol; it is an expression of the way the world is seen, rendered dramatically visible.²⁸⁶ It also acts as a guide, a shaper of how one is to see the world, and is often in this sense highly politically charged.²⁸⁷ Unlike individuals’ internal maps which vary according to the specific location where people live and the details of how they interact with and move through their environments, maps of the world are shown to children at school, as objective indisputable fact. These influence how those children see the world, negating, contradicting or perhaps confirming and cementing (depending on what they have previously learned about the world in which they see, how influenced they have already been by dominant views of the world) the internal maps they already have. Boulding writes that “[t]he map itself... has a profound effect on our spatial image”.²⁸⁸ While asserting that the “extraordinary authority” of maps derives from their high degree of accuracy --the kind of argument deconstructed by feminist and post-colonial scholars critical of notions of objectivity-- he concedes that “[e]ven the map, which is apparently the most ‘factual’ of all transcripts, may have strong elements involving other parts of the image”: especially, he adds, political maps which make implicit assertions about territoriality and the relative importance of nations.

Downs and Stea, speaking of “generating maps” (as opposed to internal maps, “generated” by experience and behaviour in a certain environment) which “cause people to view the environment in certain ways”, cite the Mercator projection which centres on the Western hemisphere and which causes difficulty in, for instance, imagining Greenland as smaller than South America; similarly the convention of representing North at the top of the map causes difficulty recognising a map seen from any other angle. They go on to say that the map functions as a powerful national symbol; “[m]aps indicate much more than cartographic truth... they serve as powerful indicators of nationalism, self-image, attitudes, and aspirations”. The weight of lines drawn between countries; the colours used; ways in which multinational

²⁸⁵ Thomas-Hope 1992, p.7.

²⁸⁶ Boulding calls maps “transcript[s]” of a public or collective image (Boulding 1956, pp.64-5).

²⁸⁷ Aritha van Herk, though not speaking of literal maps, writes in her essay “Still, I looked for maps, a guide”. van Herk in Olinder, ed., 1984, p. 67.

²⁸⁸ Boulding 1956, pp. 64-5.

groupings are represented all may have strong political implications. Differences among Israeli and Egyptian, Syrian or Jordanian maps of the Middle East are powerful illustrations of this.²⁸⁹

Boulding goes so far as to say that “[o]ne of the main purposes of national education is to distort the image of time and space in the interests of the nation”, citing as an example that school atlases “have one’s own nation large and others small”. He does neglect, however, to consider situations of colonialism or of other imbalance of power between nations: the British Empire was what was “large”, and the nations of the colonised were rendered --even and especially in atlases and maps used *in* the colonies-- small and insignificant.²⁹⁰

Joanna Kadi, in her introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers*, speaks of the maps she learned about as a schoolgirl, which present the nations of the world as discrete, clearcut, almost natural entities:

I sat in a wooden desk, its top scarred by the pens and knives of students who had gone before me, and stared at the map of the world hanging over the blackboard. “This represents the earth,” Mrs. Gallagher said emphatically as my feet swung a few inches above the floor. “North is at the top, south is at the bottom. You need to know how to read maps, so that you know where you are”.

I could not challenge my teacher, but I didn’t know what to make of all this. For one thing, the way I perceived towns and cities, countries and continents did not match the neat, concise way they appeared on maps. For another, even when I learned Mrs. Gallagher’s basic map-reading formula, I often did not know where I was. Her formula did not answer my questions. My grandmother told me that Syria and Lebanon hadn’t been separate countries when she was growing up, but Mrs. Gallagher spoke adamantly about clear boundaries between them, past and present.

Confused, I dangled my feet in silence.²⁹¹

Unlike Boulding, who in describing his “image” of the world states “I know where I am,” Kadi says she often did not know where she was, even when she could read the map. It did not provide any help in orienting her in the world. Her passage questions the idea of maps’ accuracy and objectivity, stressing how divorced the world map was from her own experience, which was not acknowledged or validated. Such experiences could help to consolidate those feelings of erasure and/or of “double vision” which I have been discussing, because of the powerful so-called “facticity” of maps.

A number of feminist geographers and post-colonial scholars have looked at the importance of maps in the context of colonialism. Blunt and Rose, for example, write:

Maps are central to colonial and postcolonial projects. Mapping operates in hegemonic discourses as a form of mimetic representation --it textually represents the gaze through transparent space-- but this

²⁸⁹ Downs and Stea 1973, pp. 82-3.

²⁹⁰ Boulding 1956, pp. 67-8.

²⁹¹ Kadi 1994, p. xiii.

form of mapping is contested in discourses of resistance. Mapping thus appears to be a spatial image that directly addresses the politics of representation as they are bound into the politics of location.²⁹²

In essence they are saying here that colonial and postcolonial maps claim the authority to represent the world objectively and absolutely, and are based on the false assumption of “transparent space”—i.e. the assumption “that there can be unmediated access to the truth of objects”.²⁹³ They are saying that maps embody both the “politics of representation” --they claim to objectively represent conquered land-- and the “politics of location”: they erase the importance of specific identities and locations, universalising and abstracting the representation of place. Joanna Kadi’s passage reflects some of these ideas in more personal and evocative terms: Mrs Gallagher’s “emphatic” tone as she states that the map represents the earth --and clearly the teacher means that the map is a direct and unchallengeable representation-- strongly conveys the supposed objectivity and authoritativeness with which the map is endowed.

Dorothy Smith says of ruling apparatuses that their “special capacity is the organization of particular places, persons and events into generalized and abstracted modes vested in categorial systems, rules, laws, and conceptual practices. The former thereby become subject to an abstracted and universalized system of ruling mediated by texts” -- including, I would add, maps.²⁹⁴ Mohanty comments: “Smith is referring to a capitalist ruling apparatus, but the idea of abstracting particular places, people and events into generalized categories, laws and policies is fundamental to any form of ruling. It is in this very process of abstraction that the colonial state legislates racial, sexual, and class/caste ideologies”. Extremely small scale maps such as colonial maps of the world were abstractions which unified what is various, glossing over landscape details, rendering people’s individual and communal experiences of land irrelevant, and categorising land into what “belonged” to the Empire and what did not. The maps themselves emphasised the power of imperial Britain.

Maps not only impose authority by claiming objectivity and thereby precluding or excluding other ways of perceiving or representing the world; some critics also claim that they impose both order and hence, discipline. Blunt and Rose write that colonial maps were themselves “graphic tools of colonization, themselves colonizing spaces perceived as empty and uninscribed... The supposedly scientific ‘space discipline’ imposed by mapping legitimized colonization, enhanced the possibilities for surveillance, and facilitated imperial rule by helping to distance those exercising power from its consequences... Imperialist maps not only describe colonies; they also discipline them through the discursive grids of Western

²⁹² Blunt and Rose, eds., 1994, p. 8.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 5.

²⁹⁴ Cited in Mohanty, Russo and Torres 1991, p. 16.

power/knowledge”.²⁹⁵ Kadi describes how the “neat, concise way” in which places were represented on the map did not match her experience of those places; they imposed an order on what was in her experience and that of her grandmother complex and changing. And, like the colonialist hierarchical ordering of places according to their progress in time toward “civilization”, in spatial terms “all places can be mapped in terms of their relationality to Europe”.²⁹⁶ Maps of the Empire encoded, visually and dramatically, what “belonged” to Britain, establishing that relationship beyond a doubt, with the colour red.

As Blunt and Rose also point out, colonised landscapes were widely associated, by the colonisers, with indigenous women’s bodies; and the mapping of these landscapes –contributing to their transformation into “territories” to be possessed—with sexual domination.²⁹⁷ Supposedly objective accounts of the conquering and governing of these territories, along with the literal mapping process, worked to codify and bring under control “virgin” and previously uncontrolled, uncivilised, wild country. Conversely, women were often seen as metaphors for land to be conquered and possessed. Maps, then, were powerful visual symbols, signalling colonial control over *both* land *and* people of colonised spaces; indigenous women were seen as the symbols and embodiments of both kinds of control.

In contrast to the uniformity of the maps shown to colonial children all over the world, they took on different meanings in different contexts and to various individuals. Kincaid’s essay, “On Seeing England For the First Time”, indicates that for her the map of England seems to have symbolised --was presented as symbolising-- something quite central to the whole imperial message about what, and who, was of value and what was not. England was meant to be, for the colonised, the source of all myth and meaning; they had none of their own. Her piece makes explicit the connections between colonial maps and the sense of erasure, of having been entirely conquered, which I have been discussing:

When I saw England for the first time, I was a child in school sitting at a desk. The England I was looking at was laid out on a map gently, beautifully, delicately, a very special jewel; it lay on a bed of sky blue --the background of the map-- its yellow form mysterious... England was a special jewel all right, and only special people got to wear it. The people who got to wear England were English people. They wore it well and they wore it everywhere: in jungles, in deserts, on plains, on top of the highest mountains, on all the oceans, on all the seas, in places where they were not welcome, in places they should not have been. When my teacher had pinned this map up on the blackboard, she said, “This is England” -- and she said it with authority, seriousness, and adoration, and we all sat up. It was as if she had said, “This is Jerusalem, the place you will go to when you die but only if you have been good”. We understood then -- we were meant to understand then-- that England was to be our source of myth and the source from which we got our sense of reality, our sense of what was meaningful, our sense of

²⁹⁵ Blunt and Rose, eds., 1994, pp. 9-15.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

what was meaningless -- and much about our own lives and much about the very idea of us headed that last list.

[...]

I did not know then that the statement, "Draw a map of England" was something far worse than a declaration of war, for in fact a flat-out declaration of war would have put me on alert, and again in fact, there was no need for war --I had long ago been conquered. I did not know then that this statement was part of a process that would result in my erasure, not my physical erasure, but my erasure just the same. I did not know then that this statement was meant to make me feel in awe and small whenever I heard the word England: awe at its existence, small because I was not from it.²⁹⁸

In the first lines of this passage, Kincaid combines her description of looking at the map of England with a reference to John of Gaunt's speech from Shakespeare's *Richard II* about "this precious stone set in the silver sea". The map and Shakespeare's words become inseparable. But Kincaid goes on to use the idea of England as a "jewel" which (only) English people can *wear*: They wear England's privilege, ostentatiously. This "jewel" is something visible, something valuable and expensive, that shows their difference and superiority to those who cannot wear it. And they wear it in landscapes -- jungles, deserts, mountains, seas-- far away from England; it seems that they import it and impose it on the world. Given the Empire's exploitation of its colonies' natural resources, one could also interpret the "jewel" as having been mined in, and stolen from, the colonies themselves. It would represent, in this interpretation, not just England's privilege but wealth stolen, land destroyed, to create and bolster that privilege.

In this piece the yellow colouring of the map of England is reminiscent of the recurring image of yellow in Kincaid's novel *Lucy*. As in the novel, the yellow referred to here might be interpreted to represent not only the glitter of jewels but also whiteness, angelic-ness, purity; and indeed, Kincaid compares England with Jerusalem-- not, of course, the earthly city but heaven itself. Her reference to heaven conjures up further words from *Richard II*, which Kincaid, like Dorothy Jones²⁹⁹ may have learnt by heart at school:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden -- demi-paradise--

The connection made by colonialist teachers between England and heaven served, as Kincaid clearly shows, to reinforce both the lack of value placed upon the places and people England had conquered, and their sense of powerlessness.

The map of the Empire made strong impressions on several contributors to *Unbecoming*, too. The marking of the British Empire with the colour red --dramatic (as Shirley Geok-Lin Lim says), emphatic, perhaps implicitly bloody and threatening-- was a very visual and obviously

²⁹⁸ Kincaid 1991, p. 32; p. 34.

²⁹⁹ Dorothy Jones in Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 82.

memorable way of impressing on these children how they were ruled, and also “united”, by Britain. However, the map meant somewhat different things for each of them. Yasmine Gooneratne quotes from her novel, *A Change of Skies*:

The word ‘Australia’ summoned up in my mind a single picture, one which I instantly recognised as having come straight out of the *Philip’s Atlas* I had used as a schoolboy at Royal. On Philip’s map of the world, huge areas of the world had broken out in the rash of washed-out pink patches which denoted British ownership. To the east of India and the island of Ceylon (also pink), south of Borneo and Sarawak, there Australia had been, a blank pink space shaped like the head of a Scotch terrier with its ears pricked up and its square nose permanently pointed westwards towards Britain.

That doggy devotion to Britain is something that I, familiar with the colonial traditions of my own family, fully understand the reasons for, even though I do not, of course, personally subscribe to it.³⁰⁰

For this narrator the world map has clearly created his “image” of Australia; it is also powerful enough to symbolise the whole attitude of colonial devotion and servitude. In addition, Australia is remembered as “blank” as well as pink: it is both “owned” by Britain, and empty of significance or feature in itself.

The responses of three of *Unbecoming*’s contributors to the world map are shaped in significant but varying ways by their whiteness and corresponding colonial positionings. Jane Bryce’s contribution is, significantly, entitled “White Child—Black Nation”. Born in what was then the British Protectorate of Tanganyika (though her mother was English and her father Australian by birth), Bryce grew up with a sense of the “romance” of her parents’ colonial past and with her parents’ sense of “benevolent paternalism” towards Black Africans. As a child, she clearly loved the area where she grew up and where she was free to roam; however, “the people in whose world I was an ignorant interloper were nothing more to me than a backdrop to my own happy existence”. At school, Britain and its cartographic representations did not seem overbearing the way they did to Kincaid and other women of colour from colonised countries; she writes: “Geography taught us to be proud of the red parts of the atlas because they were British, but Britain itself was a tiny island far away and I could never see the connection”.³⁰¹ Her colonialist background and position of privilege meant that she was in no danger of “erasure” by imperial “relations of ruling” as expressed through geography lessons. Together with this, her misery at the boarding school to which she was sent, aged 8, in another region of the country and her intense sense of attachment to the land she had had to leave may have been what made Britain seem, in comparison to her real physical environment, and despite its political power, so small and irrelevant. What was really important was the place she loved, and that felt like “hers” -- not rainy, faraway Britain.

³⁰⁰ Yasmine Gooneratne in *ibid.*, p. 95.

³⁰¹ Jane Bryce in *ibid.*, p. 68.

Anna Rutherford went to an Australian Catholic school where the Irish nuns had an awareness of the oppressiveness of the British, and therefore rather rebelliously followed the agenda of the Church rather than that of the British Empire (Rutherford's piece, entitled "Another Empire", evokes the power of the Church and the relatively minor influence of the British on her childhood.) Rutherford remembers the visits of the school inspector who would hand out red pencils to the children and make them "fill in the Empire"; for weeks beforehand the nuns would have them practice this, and the reply to the question of what this meant -- "It means we belong to the Great British Empire, sir"; this was done, however, merely so that the school would escape the inspector's censure, rather than out of any sense of conviction on the nuns' or pupils' part. There was a sense that Catholicism was on the side of good and the Empire of evil; rigid divisions reigned in which "natives" rarely figured, except as "black babies" to be helped by the fruits of Collections at Church.³⁰²

Lauris Edmond, the third of the three white contributors to *Unbecoming* who write of the map of the Empire, describes her childhood pride in her school textbooks' praise for "the average New Zealander": she knew that, as a descendent of white British immigrants she was included in this description (while the indigenous population was clearly "counted out"). Her pride was mirrored in her response to the world map. She writes:

The map was satisfyingly patched with red, 'our' colour. 'We' covered thirteen million square miles of the globe, 'they' (i.e. the Germans, who had 'strenuously but vainly attempted to gain the mastery of the world') had only two hundred and eight thousand square miles and a paltry seventy million people. Ours was glorious in its scope --four hundred and thirty-five millions (though a footnote did explain in very small print that most of these were 'natives of various races'). The British Empire was the 'greatest and strongest World Power ever known in history'. Even better, this vast territory was 'so scantily populated that there is room in it for her continually expanding population to live prosperously on for perhaps hundreds of years to come if she can only hold it against her enemies'. I expect I was a smug child. Smugness indeed was my inheritance. New Zealand is a tiny country, a squiggly fragment on the world map, but I knew with perfect confidence that I was part of the biggest, strongest, noblest, *reddest* company known to man. Everyone else was, like the 'natives of various races' (if not British), merely a footnote.³⁰³

For Edmond the map bolstered the colonial "smugness" which, indeed, colonial education was intended to perpetuate in white children. This was the other side of the coin to what Kincaid describes as the intended response of the colonised: she and children like her were meant to "feel in awe and small whenever I heard the word England: awe at its existence, small because I was not from it". Edmond's "image" of the world was also shaped by the world map; her sense

³⁰² Anna Rutherford in *ibid.*, p. 24. There are many ways, of course, in which the Catholic Church --despite its refusal to collude with a particular European power--was exploitative of "native" populations in various colonial locations, even while presenting itself as morally superior to more secular forms of imperialism.

³⁰³ Lauris Edmond in *ibid.*, p. 76.

of the scale of England's dominance and also of her own identity as part of the "strongest" and "noblest" people on earth, was clarified and reinforced by it. Furthermore, it helped establish a "them" and "us" division as clear as, but different from, that experienced by Deshpande: "native" peoples being reduced to a footnote to matters and people of real importance, the division was less between colonised and coloniser than between the competing German and English conquerors. The map's red colouring for Edmond was, because of her "membership of the club", not intimidating, but rather a clear sign of her own superiority -- not only in relation to indigenous people but also to other white Europeans.

These three women's relationships to Britain, as seen via their responses to the world map, appear at first glance to be rather similar because of their whiteness and their similar positioning under colonialism. In fact, however, there are fairly significant differences between them. Despite Bryce's colonial family situation, Britain and its representation on the map seemed faraway and irrelevant to her. Rutherford's Catholic schooling, while clearly colonialist, was an environment of rebellion against "the other Empire"; her memory of colouring in the world map for the benefit of the school inspector is an illustration of this. Only Edmond really identified herself with the British Empire and the scope of its red colouration on the map, and felt herself to be a member of the superior "club" it represented.

Clearly, maps of the Empire had a strong impact on many children growing up under colonialism, and had profound and varying meanings for them. Moreover, it may be that maps and mapping figure so prominently in these migrant women's representations in part because of the importance of travel to their lives as migrants. Memories of the world map, the representation of the world purely in terms of its relationship to the British Empire, powerfully coexist with their later experiences of travel to 'the centre'. Some perhaps see that map as embodying how they themselves experienced that colonial control or its legacy, both in their countries of origin and where they later settled; others perhaps see it as contradicting how they experienced the particularities of places, which the world map in no way acknowledged.

Despite this impact, however, sometimes people's own "maps" or "images" of places persisted, particularly through the use of idiomatic local names, as Shirley Chew, who grew up as the daughter of Chinese immigrants in Singapore, describes. Chew writes of the complications and confusions in her sense of herself, as a child, resulting from being the daughter of Chinese immigrants to Singapore as well as a pupil at an English colonial convent school. While home and school life conflicted on some levels, she writes that in some respects "the colonial and migrant worlds were complicitous...They instilled the habit of looking away from Singapore towards other countries and places. In the maps we were given, the island was a mere dot above

the equator or a fragment broken from the tip of the Malayan Peninsula. In the books we read, it was a wilderness, an impenetrable jungle, and at best an insignificant fishing village which was transformed by Sir Stamford Raffles into a great port and settlement". However, this version of the world and of the place of Singapore within it was only one version among others experienced by the young Chew. She writes that there were stories and ways of speaking about the colony that

made up a version of Singapore which existed... at a tangent to the colony. This Singapore, which was mine in my Chinese dialect, had its own focal points and sprawling spaces, its large business firms and congestions of shops, rich suburbs and tenement houses and shacks. It resisted the municipal names that tried to pin it down to some alien notion of order, and favoured instead a digressive mode in speaking of itself.... The native Chinese person inhabited real places, such as 'the back of the temple of the ancient mother goddess' or 'the mouth of the gambling houses' or 'the street of crockery shops'. Even imperial landmarks were apt to succumb to this circumlocutory approach so that the Esplanade was more familiarly known as 'under the five trees', Victoria Memorial Hall 'the building with the big clock', and Raffles Place 'the street of department stores'.³⁰⁴

One striking aspect of the above passage is the sense of resistance in this re-naming of places by the Chinese community, and the persistence of an "image" of Singapore, of reference points and landmarks, --of, perhaps, a "map" of the place-- quite different from those imposed by the colonisers.

Kadi writes in her anthology's introduction: "My dictionary tells me a map is a representation of the earth's surface showing both physical and political features. This definition fits with what I now believe about maps: They exist in many forms, some are complicated and contradictory, and north is not always at the top". And she writes of wanting to "create maps that chart new ground", maps that are "alive, many-layered, multi-dimensional, open-ended, and braided", and that thus reflect experience more truly than conventional ones; this is her hope for her anthology, that it "offers landmarks, signposts, names, and directions".³⁰⁵ As we shall see, both later in this Chapter and in Chapter Three, writings by many migrant women question the assumptions behind colonial maps, and create radical and alternative representations of their own relationships both to landscapes of origin and to Britain and North America. While existing "at a tangent" to mainstream ways of seeing the world -- "from the centre"-- these literary "maps" also have the potential to disrupt mainstream, "objective", deeply oppressive views that persist in the West, far beyond the official end of colonial relations with countries in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

³⁰⁴ Shirley Chew in *ibid.*, pp. 133-4.

³⁰⁵ Kadi 1994, pp. xiii-xvii.

Literature and English landscape

While the red which covered so much of the world map dramatically conveyed a sense of England's power, what the Englishness thus represented *meant* came through, for many, most powerfully through literature. The relationship between them could be put in terms of the idea that both maps and literary works are different kinds of texts, conveying in different ways similar and mutually reinforcing colonialist assumptions. Indeed, some of the women writers I discuss here are acutely aware of this relationship; maps can be read as a kind of visual "shorthand" for the political, historical, and literary contexts which have informed their experiences and views of the world. Marion Halligan writes: "Our England was a country of the mind, a construct put together from history and films and paintings and ceremonies and wonderful jamborees... and above all books".³⁰⁶ According to Dorothy Jones, "England ...was a literary creation, a work of fiction; part of the storybook world. Nevertheless, it was a fiction endowed with considerable authority".³⁰⁷ And one reason why the England of literature was so peculiarly powerful was that along with the sense of erasure, double vision, and learned inferiority it brought with it, many "colonials" also loved the language of English literature, and felt that the works in some way belonged to them, and opened up for them imaginative worlds of possibility.

Much of this literature evoked English landscapes, vividly and powerfully. Writers' portrayals of England's woods, downs, meadows and moors --all very much removed from the colonies' own environments-- became just as or, for some, even more familiar to many colonial children than the places where they lived their everyday lives. Gooneratne's narrator, like Kincaid who first "saw" England in her Antiguan classroom, knew England before going there:

Long before I saw Britain for the second time (as a postgraduate student), I knew London, its Dickensian fogs and its murky river, the Shakespearean Tower in which Richard III had had his nephews murdered, Brooke's church clock at Grantchester which stood for ever more at precisely ten to three. I knew, long before I ever ate one, what muffins tasted like. Where Wordsworth's inward eye had been polished by memory, imagination had burnished mine: upon it flashed like images in a video on fast-forward, not just the skittish daffodils of his description but all the meadow flowers of Chaucer, Spencer, Shakespeare and Keats.³⁰⁸

Since other, non-English landscapes were rarely evoked in the literature read -- no "New literatures in English" (a category which, in any case, post-dates this period) figured on the colonial curriculum and few schoolchildren had the opportunity to read writings in indigenous languages -- and since English literature in any case was the only one considered authoritative

³⁰⁶ Marion Halligan in Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 7.

³⁰⁷ Dorothy Jones in *ibid.*, p. 82.

³⁰⁸ Yasmine Gooneratne, *A Change of Skies*, p. 12, cited in *ibid.*, p. 96.

and “great”, English landscapes became the norm, the only valid environment. England was set up as a construct against which to measure other places. And landscapes of the colonies seemed to pale in comparison: The very difference of English landscapes, along with the authority given to the literature which evoked them, gave them an appeal that the girls’ own environments seemed to them to lack. As Jones writes, “In contrast to the fictional world of England, my own country lacked glamour. How could stories happen there?”³⁰⁹

According to Marion Halligan, “[t]he books available to an Australian child in the forties and fifties told you more about the streets and monuments of London or Bath than about Sydney or Melbourne; the geography and scenery of woods and downs were more read about than the trees and coasts of the countryside I lived in”.³¹⁰ Lauris Edmond writes:

All my reading was of English families, English schoolgirls playing hockey for the Upper Fourth or Lower Fifth at St Cuthbert’s or St Joan’s. Or, later, the provincial Victorian drawing rooms of George Eliot, the blasted heath of Hardy’s rustic heroes and heroines, the Yorkshire moors and farmhouse kitchens of the Brontës, the Exeter valley where the Doone outlaws terrorized John Ridd and his neighbours in *Lorna Doone*. In all these magical worlds my imagination lived and flourished, and I did not wonder at all that none of their scenes were visible, that in fact outside my window the sun shone on paddocks, not meadows or fields, that the dark green New Zealand bush, *pohutukawa* and *rimu* mixed with pine and *macrocarpa*, all evergreen, was not at all like the copses and dingles of the English woodland.³¹¹

This situation led to contradictions that seem, in retrospect and from a distance, rather ludicrous. Edmond describes how Christmas trees were made to look like snow-covered firs, during blazing hot New Zealand summers. And contradictions between written and experienced environments led, again, to “double vision”; immediate environments were superimposed or inflected with realities and myths of England. Dorothy Jones writes that “A fictional England... governed my perspectives on the seasons. Although, where I lived, April signified the approach of winter, in the books I read, it was a spring month, while November, with its bleak literary associations, actually heralded summer. I didn’t realize I was seeing double, merely accepting the world as it had been constructed for me. In choral verse speaking at school, we chanted ‘Go down to Kew in lilac time,/ It isn’t far from London’, without questioning Alfred Noyes’ assumption that we could easily drop in to visit a place on the other side of the world”.³¹² While Jones knew that April heralded winter where she lived, and that Australia was very far indeed from Kew, at the same time these realities were superimposed with other, contradictory, messages. That these were not questioned was because the assumption was that April must be

³⁰⁹ Jones in *ibid.*, p. 82.

³¹⁰ Halligan, *ibid.*, p. 7.

³¹¹ Edmond in *ibid.*, p. 73.

³¹² Jones in *ibid.*, p. 82.

spring and Kew easily accessible in all *valid* experience; it was this value judgment, bolstered by so many other messages of colonial education, that was so difficult to question.

Wordsworth's poem about the "host of golden daffodils" seen "fluttering and dancing in the breeze" is probably the most widely referred to among writers dealing with the huge impact of English literature within the context of colonial education's conquest of 'hearts and minds'. Indeed, the poem is so ubiquitous that it has become something of a symbol of that conquest. The editors of *Unbecoming*, having pointed out that all those involved in the conversation which led eventually to the publication of their book could recite this poem (as an illustration of the point that "[t]he narrative of Empire was constructed in terms of sameness") go on to cite the poem in its entirety as an epigraph to the book. They do not comment on it further at this point; although several contributors later refer to it, it seems to need little elaboration because it has become such a widely understood symbol of colonial rule and education. One contributor uses the term "daffodilized" to compare herself, coming from a fairly bicultural background, with other pupils at the colonial missionary school she attended;³¹³ the meaning is clear without further explanation. It is also clear from her use of this word that degrees of "daffodilization" were possible, even among pupils of a single school. Colonial cultural values were disseminated, absorbed and resisted in different ways and to different extents in the varied and various colonies, and among populations of particular colonies.

A conference I attended on women and poetry, and the book associated with it,³¹⁴ were entitled "Kicking Daffodils". While not exclusively covering post-colonial women's poetry, but in fact mainly that of white European and white American women, the idea of rebellion against a European- and male-defined ideal of poetry and culture was implicit in this title. (Also implicit is the assault against women which that ideal is felt to be: the daffodils, in the phrase, could be interpreted as being what does the kicking).³¹⁵ Jamaica Kincaid's character Lucy responds with bitterness and anger to the daffodils her white employer Mariah takes her to see; she says that "at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen", and as a result of this, where Mariah sees only spring flowers in bloom, Lucy sees "sorrow and bitterness", "conquered and conquests". For her as for many other "colonials", daffodils epitomise England's domination of its colonies, and though Lucy

³¹³ Meenakshi Mukherjee in *ibid.*, p. 112.

³¹⁴ The conference was "Kicking Daffodils II: A Celebration of Women and Poetry" at Oxford Brookes University, 12-14 September 1997. The book is Vicki Bertram, ed., *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth Century Women Poets*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. The conference and volume title comes from a poem entitled "Spring" by Grace Nichols in which she describes bundling up against the cold outside, "only to have that daffodil baby/ kick me in the eye". (Grace Nichols, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, London: Virago Press, 1984).

³¹⁵ In fact, as we shall see in chapter 3, while some migrant women's writings could be seen as akin to kicking daffodils, others might be seen as re-contextualising and perhaps planting daffodils alongside bougainvillea or jasmine or mango.

wishes she could see things the way Mariah does, with greater simplicity, the flowers powerfully evoke for her hundreds of years of oppressive history.³¹⁶

Kincaid, in her essay “On Seeing England for the First Time”, from writing about the details of England’s history she learned at school, which the reader understands were quite irrelevant to her own life in Antigua, continues:

This view though-- the naming of the kings, their deeds, their disappointments-- was the vivid view, the forceful view. There were other views, subtler ones, softer, almost not there-- but these were the ones that made the most lasting impression on me, these were the ones that made me really feel like nothing. “When morning touched the sky” was one phrase, for no morning touched the sky where I lived. The mornings where I lived came on abruptly, with a shock of heat and loud noises. “Evening approaches” was another, but the evenings where I lived did not approach; in fact, I had no evening-- I had night and I had day and they came and went in a mechanical way: on, off; on, off. And then there were gentle mountains and low blue skies and moors over which people took walks for nothing but pleasure, when where I lived a walk was an act of labor, a burden, something only death or the automobile could relieve.³¹⁷

Kincaid is here referring to literary phrases which described a specifically English reality but which, because universalised, subtly resulted in the erasure of her own experience. These are phrases about nature which did not correspond to Kincaid’s own environment, and thus conveyed that, somehow, her environment was ‘wrong’. Her own place and its characteristics, such as the way in which morning and evening came on in her part of the world, were clearly not important, as they were not what appeared in “great” literature (or any literature read by schoolchildren in Antigua).

In Kincaid’s essay there is a strong sense of the intersections of English landscape with class. The people taking walks over the moors to whom she refers, are people of leisure and privilege. Kincaid also writes of “flowers with those names: delphiniums, foxgloves, tulips, daffodils, floribunda, peonies; in bloom, a striking display”. The beauty conjured up by the names of these flowers becomes inseparable from details such as the flowers’ arrangement in large glass or crystal bowls, “decorating rooms so large twenty families the size of mine could fit in comfortably but used only for passing through”. Kincaid also links climate, as well as flowers and places such as moors, to class.

[T]he weather was so remarkable because the rain fell gently always, only occasionally in deep gusts, and it colored the air various shades of grey, each an appealing shade for a dress to be worn when a portrait was being painted; and when it rained at twilight, wonderful things happened: people bumped into each other unexpectedly and that would lead to all sorts of turns of events-- a plot, the mere weather caused plots. I saw that people rushed: they rushed to catch trains, they rushed toward each other and away from each other, they rushed and rushed and

³¹⁶ Kincaid 1991, pp. 30-1.

³¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 32-3.

rushed. Rushed! I did not know what it was to do that. It was too hot to do that, and so I came to envy people who would rush, even though it had no meaning to me to do such a thing.³¹⁸

The weather seems romantic and genteel; it too becomes inseparable from class privilege. And in turn, landscape and class intersect with race: Kincaid writes of “people whose eyes were blue and who had fair skins and who smelled of only of lavender, or sometimes sweet pea or primrose” and whose clothes swished and rustled. All these things made evident to the young Kincaid, through the literature she read, how special these people --English people-- were. “The world was theirs, not mine; everything told me so”.

But reading English literature also opened up imaginative, magical worlds for many of these writers, as children. Cherry Clayton speaks of the magic and possibility of literature, discovered at an early age:

[T]he real discovery of those years, and the real link with England, was through reading. Enid Blyton's *Magic Faraway Tree* and *The Wishing Chair* were read to us at school by a Miss Noakes. They offered several levels of magic which I have never outgrown the need for: a transport into another world, an imagined world of infinite possibilities and constant change. To go down the garden and enter that secret and fascinating world: to go up the tree and meet the Saucepan Man and other oddities, to reach the top where the land could magically change! Later I enjoyed the Famous Five books too; people had unlikely names, and the weather was a bit confusing, but I wasn't aware of being patronized, colonized or preached at. I loved school because I loved books, even exercise books; any form of paper, pens, reading and writing materials excited me. And reading seemed to give me license to dream, to share the dreams of others, to forget my daily reality...³¹⁹

Thus not all writers categorically condemn English literature, because of the wonder which they experienced even while feeling excluded or erased by writings based on lives and places so different from their own. English literature opened up not just magic and imagination, but also the sometimes very necessary possibilities of escape. Buchi Emecheta writes “My greatest escape was into literature”. The first English stories she read were Hansel and Gretel -- she used to imagine herself lost like them in the bush, so that her family would love her more and be kinder to her afterwards-- and Snow White (she does not comment on the latter's racist implications); while during school holidays she “drank in all the old ladies' stories in the village”.³²⁰ While these kinds of ‘escapes’ into literature were also clearly enjoyed by (white) children in Britain, the experience of colonialism, and the associated impact on families, point to a particular resonance with the imaginative possibilities offered by literature, and to particular needs for escape.

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

³¹⁹ Clayton in Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 59.

³²⁰ Emecheta in *ibid.*, p. 42.

The experience of Meenakshi Mukherjee illustrates an effect of teaching even some indigenous literature in addition to the English curriculum. She felt at home with much of what she read, and seems not to have particularly differentiated between English and Bengali literature. This was, perhaps, in part because Bengali culture was powerful, established and recognised by the British. In addition, her school was a “non-elite” one in contrast to missionary schools and expensive private schools which, she says, still continue to emphasise English language and culture. Her experience can also be explained by the fact that British rule in India came to an end while Mukherjee was still at school. As she writes,

[t]races of the old regime remained in our curriculum for a while (we must have been among the last batches to study British history in as much detail as Indian history...) but we studied Mathematics, Geography and History (including the history of England) in Bengali unlike, say, my father, who had studied everything in English...

She was taught Bengali literature alongside the Romantic poets and Shakespeare; in addition, much of the English literature she read as a child -- such as *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Ivanhoe*-- was in Bengali translation. She writes: “Instead of feeling alienated from my own culture by these books, as now I realize I ought to have been, I felt very much at home with them and did not think of them as in any way ‘foreign’. Books were read indiscriminately and avidly...”³²¹ English literature was not set up, in her school, as the only valid literature; as a result, despite some, rather removed experiences of colonial rule, her own experience of Bengali culture and landscape did not become subordinate to those of Britain as represented in literature.

Family Politics, Colonialism, and Relationships to Place

The writings of various women novelists and essayists show experiences of colonialism intersecting in different ways with relationships and politics within families, and further influencing their relationships with Britain and places of origin. The work of Jamaica Kincaid is especially useful in looking at relationships between family dynamics and colonialism. Much of Kincaid’s fiction deals with the emotional effects of domination in her childhood: both colonial attempts to overwrite indigenous identities with Britishness, and the domination of Kincaid’s mother, which she sees as a kind of colonisation on a personal and therefore not smaller, but from the point of view of the child, all the huger and more significant scale. And in turn Kincaid’s relationships to Britain, to Antigua and also to the US before she left the island --as well as, as we shall see in Chapter 3, after her migration to the US-- were deeply affected by the oppressive relationships, both within the family and on a more “macro” level, of her childhood.

³²¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee in *ibid.*, pp. 109-110.

Her intense love/hate relationship with her mother is evoked in *At the Bottom of the River*, a short story collection which conveys, through dreamlike sequences and imagery, her struggle to experience and express herself in resistance to forces threatening to dominate and silence her. This relationship is also present in *Lucy*, and, most fully, in *Annie John*. The latter portrays the protagonist's confusion and pain at her mother's sudden and incomprehensible distancing which leads the child, too, to pull away. The three volumes together paint a picture of the initially tender but increasingly fraught relationship between Kincaid and her mother. They are permeated by a legacy of betrayal, the characters' sense of erasure, and of longing for a lost intimacy.

Kincaid is concerned throughout her work with "the relationship between the powerful and the powerless" and makes important connections between personal and political experiences of domination.³²² But she never fully addresses either the politics of identifying another black Antiguan woman with the European colonisers, or how this identification might deflect from both colonisers' and male family members' responsibility.

It is significant that Kincaid migrated to the US rather than to Britain; her relationship with Britain, before she had ever been there, was an angry one, whereas her attitude to the US is that it is a place that can bring her the freedom to be herself. She occasionally acknowledges the negative role the US so often plays in the world and does speak of herself as having "crossed a line" in terms of having moved from Antigua to such a powerful country; but she is surprisingly uncritical, in general, of the US. This is perhaps only explicable if one considers the extent to which she sees herself as having escaped from both family and colonial domination, by moving to the US; and that she sees this move as having enabled her very survival.³²³

Two of the contributions in *Unbecoming*, the autobiographical piece by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, who grew up in Malaysia, and the short story by Isabel Huggan, a white Canadian woman, explore how the idea of England and its Empire provided a much needed route of escape from family life for the respective girl-children who figure in these accounts. While England usually presented itself as "mother" to its colonies, Geok-Lin Lim saw it as a substitute father. Unlike Kincaid, who links experiences of family and colonial domination and needed to escape from both, Geok-Lin Lim looked to England to somehow "save" her from her birth father. She rebelled against him for being "too Chinese," and too servile to colonial authorities; at a deeper level she fled from him in fear after her stepmother accused him of having "an unnatural

³²² Ferguson 1994, p. 184.

³²³ I explore Kincaid's relationship to the U.S. further in Chapters 3 and 6.

relationship” with his daughter. And she took refuge in all that was taught at her English missionary school. She writes:

The books I studied... opened a series of doors into fictional English halls and living rooms in which men completely unlike my father ... ruled and conversed. They opened a future into the West he could never enter. Adopting a British culture, learning English as my *father*-tongue, I deliberately allied myself with masters, not servants... I felt myself marooned in an alien world with only the safety line of English literature to reel me out someday. [emphasis mine]³²⁴

She felt safe behind the walls of her convent school; felt she could be more than was possible within her family. She turned from what she saw as her father’s debasement out of economic necessity; “cringed at [her father’s] ease with vegetable hawkers, coffin makers, bicycle repairmen, trishaw pullers, all those Straits Chinese from the lowest social tier to whom English was impossible and the Empire a warren of hostile immigration offices in the red-coloured *Staad House*” (her father was self-employed as a “petition writer, filling in British forms and translating British regulations for hundreds of Hokkien immigrants who were in transit from China to the British Empire”.) Her fear and repulsion in relation to her father led her to seek refuge both from him and from the “Chinese-ness” he represented-- in Englishness. This provided her with an alternative physical environment, however mythical, as her use of words like “doors”, “halls” and “living rooms” in the above extract suggests. But in the end, she writes, she was “marooned” in “two distances”: having run from her father and his environment, the literature of her classes --the Romantic poets, Shakespeare, Jane Austen-- did not give her a solid sense of contemporary England either. “Nothing the Cambridge Senior Examination curriculum offered has taught me how to live in this fractured world”.³²⁵

Huggan’s adult narrator, Hannah Louise Clement, turned as a child to England and in particular to King George the Sixth to escape her family and school, where she felt misunderstood, taunted and weighted down. She felt she was in love with the King; felt that they were soul-mates separated by false hierarchies of social status. She had elaborate fantasies of being adopted by him (the difference in their ages meant that “the way in which we would fit would be father and daughter, but that was merely a matter of convenience and fate”) and being raised at Buckingham Palace. She says: “I was a thin, unadventurous child who preferred fantasy because less than a decade in this world had convinced me that reality was a punishing and difficult affair”. She writes of the stutter she acquired, “perhaps as a result of a determined teacher insisting I use my right hand instead of my left,” and the fears spawned in her by the “horrors” in magazines and newsreels immediately following the Second World War. “It was impossible,” she says, “to grasp the levels of hate and fear in the world and translate it all properly so that

³²⁴ Shirley Geok-lin Lim Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, pp. 142-3.

³²⁵ Ibid., p. 143.

none of it applied to you". There were a number of "DPs", or displaced persons in her town after the war: people who had escaped Central Europe and were deeply discriminated against in Canada. Hannah felt she understood how the children felt when teased at school; she too was "teased for my stutter or for being a beanpole or a smartypants", but rather than befriending any of these children she "turned instead for companionship and solace to the King of England". Here was liberation: "I had longed for that name change with my whole being --I had heard in the King's last name the *win* and *wind* and *soar* of Windsor-- and it made me feel strong and free, an eagle, a lark, lifted high off the ground where my unimaginative family congealed around me, dull and hard as cement. Clement, cement, stuck in my name forever. I felt so weighted with sadness I could not bear to think of it".

A mixture of connection with her physical environment and utter separation from it, as often happens in dream and fantasy, characterises Hannah's waking dreams of adoption by the King. For one thing, she lives in London, Ontario: the name of her town but little in its character, connects her to England. Then too, in her fantasy, before being taken to see the King, Hannah is found by his daughter Margaret Rose in a park, which is both like and unlike one near Hannah's home.

The park in my mind's eye bore a rather strong resemblance to Victoria Park a few blocks from where I lived in London, Ontario. A small and very ordinary city park crisscrossed with asphalt paths, it extended in my imagination far beyond its normal boundaries, became larger and greener, full of rose beds and statues and round ponds and decorative glass-globe lamps shining dimly in the fog. The weather was always English in this sequence, there was never sunshine, never snow. I knew perfectly well the climatic demands of my private mythology.³²⁶

It is escape from her real physical environment she seeks; she half- or unconsciously uses aspects of this environment, however, to make her imagined life of liberation seem more real to her.

It is interesting that after King George's death, which devastated Hannah, she eventually found solace in fantasies of being a "sassy cowgirl", tough and brave, in the Wild West. "I crossed the border into the land of the free and the Empire dissolved behind me". While in this latter fantasy is detectable some form of feminist impulse --she notes being the only girl at showings of films of the Wild West and her chosen image of herself is far from a demure, royal one-- the two fantasies have one aspect in common. In her search for liberation, Hannah latched onto myths of things both distant and glamorous, that glamour being linked in some way with either British imperialism or American expansionism. These fantasies were very distant indeed from her miserable childhood reality; but it could be argued that it was her whiteness that enabled her to make the leap.

³²⁶ Isabel Huggan in *ibid.*, p. 174.

Relationships to Nature in Places of Origin

At the time I was a child sitting at my desk seeing England for the first time, I was already very familiar with the greatness of it. Each morning before I left for school, I ate a breakfast of half a grapefruit, an egg, bread and butter and a slice of cheese, and a cup of cocoa..... No one I knew liked eating so much food so early in the day; it made us feel sleepy, tired. *But this breakfast business was Made in England like almost everything else that surrounded us, the exceptions being the sea, the sky, and the air we breathed.* [emphasis mine]³²⁷

Under colonial education systems, colonised people were, almost by default, taught relationships to their places of origin. This was usually not an explicit subject of lessons; it was by omission --through the aggrandisement of England and all that England was supposed to mean-- that the sense of the unimportance and even, in a sense, the non-existence of colonised places, was conveyed. Education entailed sums involving apples, literature describing daffodils and the English countryside; it was filled with details that denied and devalued lived experience.

But real relationships to places of origin varied; the colonial strategy did not work completely. There is often strong feeling about places of origin expressed in the literature I am considering. Kincaid, with all the ambivalence and sense of restriction she expresses about Antigua, is able to evoke a place, in her fiction, that contains (in both senses) all her protagonist has known and all she, so far, is. Dangarembga, in *Nervous Conditions*, creates in her character Tambu a sense of strong attachment to aspects of her place of origin, alongside her desire to escape the homestead for a place of greater “civilisation” and Englishness. However little room there is for the place where she has spent her childhood so far, as Tambu heads for her new life at Babamukuru’s house, there is sadness about the river Nyamarira that she loves dearly and is now leaving behind. As she thinks about the “peasant”, the person of thick-skinned feet and calloused knees she feels she has so far been, and about the toil and grime of life on the homestead she is leaving for a life spent “consider[ing] questions that had to do with the survival of the spirit, ...rather than the mere sustenance of the body” , she also says:

Nor would there be trips to Nyamarira, Nyamarira which I loved to bathe in and watch cascade through the narrow outlet of the fall where we drew our water. Leaving this Nyamarira, my flowing, tumbling, musical playground, was difficult. But I could not pretend to be sorry to be leaving the water-drums whose weight compressed your neck into your spine... and were constantly in need of refilling. I was not sorry to be leaving the tedious task of coaxing Nyamarira’s little tributary in and out of the vegetable beds.³²⁸

³²⁷ Kincaid 1991, pp. 32-33.

³²⁸ Dangarembga 1988, p. 59.

Tambu loves some aspects of her place of origin, aspects embodied by the river. She describes the river, its beauties, and the activities of the children and women in and around it with enormous affection, and deeply regrets its loss when she leaves the homestead for the mission school.

Earlier in the novel, while describing her brother's dislike of walking home from the bus terminal after the end of term spent at his uncle's mission school (where Tambu too will later go), Tambu says she "could not understand why my brother disliked walking so much". She continues:

Besides the relief of being able to stretch your legs after such a long journey, the walk home from the bus terminus was not a long walk when you had nowhere to hurry to. The road wound down by the fields where there were always some people with whom to pass ten minutes of the day... And although the stretch of road between the fields and the terminus was exposed to the sun and was, from September to April, except when it rained, harsh and scorching so that the glare from the sun scratched at your eyes, there was always shade by the fields where clumps of trees were deliberately left standing to shelter us when we ate our meals or rested between cultivating strips of the land.

From the fields the road grew shadier with shrubs and trees. Acacia, lantana, msasa and mopani, clustered about on either side. If you had time you could run off the road into more wooded areas to look for matamba and matunduru. Sweet and sour. Delicious. From this woody section the road rolled down into a shallow ravine, a river valley thoughtfully appointed along its floor with smooth, flat-topped boulders which made exciting equipment for all sorts of our childhood games. Across and around the lowest of these boulders, the river flowed sparsely in a dry season, but deeply enough in places when the rains were heavy to cover a child's head and to engulf me to my nipples. We learnt to avoid these places when the river flowed violently, but in most seasons it flowed placidly enough to permit bathing along most of its length. As children we were not restricted. We could play where we pleased. But the women had their own spot for bathing and the men their own too... [W]e were apprehensive about growing so big that we would have to wash there with the women and no longer be able to swim in the deeper, cooler, more interesting pools.

Even later, after council houses were built quite close to the river, grocery shops and a bus terminus sprang up in their wake, and the bathing places became "throughfares", Tambu would sometimes "listen from the top of the ravine and, when I was sure I had felt no one coming, run down to the river, slip off my frock..., and swim blissfully for as long as I dared in the old deep places".³²⁹

The overall feeling for the river expressed in these passages, I think, is one of coolness, refreshment, relief from the hot sun and hard work that otherwise predominate in Tambu's environment. And it is one of strong love for the places described. As a non-Shona speaker I do not recognise the names of the trees and fruits Tambu refers to and as a result certainly miss some of the texture of these descriptions; these very names, however, are evocative in their

³²⁹ Ibid., pp.2-4.

specificity, even for someone not familiar with them. And that coolness, the river's stones and its varying depths and speeds, most of all Tambu's love for these places, echo for me streams and rivers I explored and returned to, again and again, as a child. I think Dangarembga intended to convey the importance of this particular river for Tambu --and perhaps to evoke it particularly strongly for Zimbabwean readers; and to appeal to a wider audience through her descriptions. In addition, she is suggesting here a firm alternative source of sustenance and power which, despite colonialism's attempts to erase local meanings, roots Tambu in her home environment.

The ways in which writers write about plants is sometimes illustrative of what they are saying about relationships to land and landscape more generally. I referred above to *Unbecoming* contributor Shashi Deshpande's account of moving between the two very different environments of home and school. Here are some of her words on this theme:

It was a long way back from school, and at the end of the narrow dusty road bordered by tamarind trees, along which we dawdled, was home. Here we kicked off our socks and shoes, shed our school uniforms and entered a different world altogether. There were neither apples nor daisies here; instead we ate mangoes and guavas and plucked jasmine buds off fragrant bushes to plait into our hair.³³⁰

While "apples [and] daisies" had an appeal or power difficult for many "colonials" to resist, because of the politics of how they were presented, other experiences of nature persisted, with an immediacy and sensuality -- experiences of taste and fragrance are intertwined in the above passage with impressions of colour and vision-- probably lacking, for most, in their vicarious experiences of Englishness. The double vision with which some saw the world suggests this persistence of alternative experience: vision was not singular; experience was not, after all, entirely conquered.

In what *way* are landscapes in migrant women writers' places of origin important? Ian Maitley, in his article "Literary Geography and the Writer's Country", summarises the work of some of the critics of the early twentieth century who argued that writers' environments --particularly early environments, and particularly natural environments-- have a strong influence on their later lives and writings. This is clearly true for many writers, including migrant women; and there may well be great trauma associated with the uprooting that happens when these places are left behind. But as Maitley points out, "[n]ot all people are drawn to the scenes or places of their childhood, and for some their old home may not be a place of stability". For women, I would add, there may be particularly conflicting feelings. Their homes, or places of origin, may be loved *and* hated, they may be places of rootedness but also of great restriction --as with both Jamaica Kincaid and Dionne Brand-- and even violence. Along with the pain of uprooting there

³³⁰ Deshpande in Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 104.

is often, in their decision to leave, a sense of sheer necessity for migrant women. They may sense that escape is what is necessary for their very survival. Migration --*away* from “the scenes or places of their childhood”-- is seen and hoped for as liberatory and empowering.

One critic’s suggestion that home is a “symbol of assurance and reassurance” also suggests that home is a place not only of safety but also of prosperity, or at least sufficiency. This is clearly not the case even for everyone in Britain, let alone the places Britain colonised. There is clearly bias in terms of gender, class and race/colonial position in the concept of “the writer’s country” as developed by these turn-of the century critics. Writers’ relationships with the land where they grew up are a great deal more complicated than is suggested by the idea that writers are “formed” by their early environments.

In addition, in the light of what I have been saying about relationships to Britain, the question arises of exactly *what* early landscapes might be meant. Colonised people’s experiences of an African, or Caribbean or South Asian environment were often, as we have seen, inflected with England’s landscape and culture, resulting in “bifocal” views of the world.

At the same time, as I have been saying in this section, many of the writers I am looking at express strong feeling about the landscapes they have left; even when this is mixed with otherwise negative feelings about the place in general. There is great attachment to this land; the sense is conveyed that --along with all the other experiences of childhood in the place of origin, of migration away from it, and of subsequent life in a new and very different country-- the rivers, seas, flowers, plants, farms, landscapes, that they grew up with continue to form an important part of who they are as women, as migrants, and as writers.

It was not just colonialism, but continuing legacies of it as well, that have contributed in important ways to forming people’s relationships to land: both to their places of origin and to Britain. As Elizabeth M. Thomas-Hope writes of the relationship of people in the Caribbean to Britain and North America, ideas about the West have developed and strengthened across generations, and are frequently little changed by new information. Britain, for example, no longer offers the job opportunities to prospective migrants that it did in the 1950s and 1960s, and no longer plays the role of “mother country” to the former colonies. But “views are still tempered by impressions of the past and there is a lingering sense that conditions could not be as bad as they are reported to be. The former positive image of Britain is neither easily nor totally changed by new information”.³³¹ As she points out elsewhere, however, the information

³³¹ Thomas-Hope 1992, p. 6.

sent home by migrants is not always negative: “persons abroad prefer to transmit information which demonstrates that their migration has been successful”³³² so that originally colonial myths about the glories of Britain are often further bolstered by the reports of migrants themselves.

Women’s understandings of their own locale, their maps and images of the places where they grew up, were thoroughly affected by their myriad experiences of colonialism. The “double vision” often resulting from colonial education and indigenous knowledges could be confusing, disconcerting and at times violent in the distorted images of self this produced; the various personal accounts in the *Unbecoming* anthology show this particularly vividly. Sometimes, however, imaginative possibilities of new worlds and new ways of being were offered; or alternative and perhaps subversive “maps” of the world persisted. Women’s decisions to migrate were made in the context, profoundly influenced by both colonial and gender politics, of the “images” they formed of both their own places of origin and of the West. The following chapter turns to explore women’s changing relationships with place following migration and resettlement.

³³² Ibid., p. 32.

Chapter Three

Women and Place II: Migration, Belonging and Identity

Much work on literature and place that has been done in recent and not so recent years asks what role place plays in various literary works' overall messages or meanings. Looking particularly at nineteenth-century English authors such as Emily Brontë, William Wordsworth or Thomas Hardy, scholars have asked how place is made central to the fiction or poetry concerned. They have discussed the centrality, in authors like these, of their evocation of particular places to their narratives or poems' meanings. They ask whether places are vividly evoked, and why, and what are the effects of that vividness. This emphasis on the meaning of place is important and provides my starting point in this chapter. Although there are links with my work in terms of the centrality and importance of place in the writings, I differ from these critiques in several respects. I choose, not canonical English authors, but migrant women writers from former British colonies. I focus on meanings of place, but rather than focussing on rootedness in one particular place, I discuss migration, and its impact on how places are experienced and represented. Finally, I also differ from some of these critics in my interpretations of the meaning of place in the literature I am looking at. Rather than seeing an author's evocation of place as a symbol or metaphor for something else --a psychological state of mind; or life itself-- as do some critics,³³³ I take it as meaningful and important in itself. Within such evocations are some of the central emotions and political insights migrant women writers try to convey.

With women's experiences of migration, resettlement in the West and sometimes numerous subsequent re-journeyings back and forth, their feelings around place, sense of connection and disconnection with their environments and of the texture and locations of "home" and "belonging", very often undergo profound change. The writers I am looking at evoke the importance of both place and migration; in this chapter I try to bring out what meanings they give, in their fiction and poetry, to specific places, and the movement between them. I examine depictions of women's feelings of uprootedness and dislocation following migration; their struggles to re-connect, to somehow recreate belonging, to put down roots and re-define home, in the context of the racism endemic in the "host" societies of Britain and North America and of varying feelings about places of origin; and the sense of liberation from a limiting environment they sometimes experience in an entirely new place. I look at the themes of pain and empowerment, or healing, in relation

³³³ eg Tindall 1991.

to places of origin and to the colonial “motherland”. The new meanings which places acquire as women who have migrated redefine themselves in relation to their environments, is a theme central to many of these writings. As Carole Boyce Davies writes: “The re-negotiating of identities is fundamental to migration as it is fundamental to Black women’s writing in cross-cultural contexts. It is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that re-negotiates the terms of Black women’s experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities”.³³⁴

In looking at how experiences of migration change women’s relationships with Britain or North America, and with places of origin, I draw on --as well as work on literature and place-- some of the work done in geography on “space” and “place”. Humanistic geography, in the 1970s, responded to work previously done on “absolute” or “relative space” by starting to address the emotional significance of particular places to people living in or otherwise connected with them. Since then, some strands of inquiry in contemporary geography have begun to examine “the ways in which many of the meanings through which places are made are bound into social identities and struggles”.³³⁵ In this chapter I combine this kind of idea about place --the emotional significance and social or political meanings of place-- with feminist work on the politics of location. I use the phrase in a way close, I think, to the way Adrienne Rich intended when she coined it: the politics of where a person is, geographically, *as well as* the meanings of this for “where” s/he is --her/his “positionality”-- in terms of race, gender, sexuality and class.³³⁶ In terms of migration I ask the question: how does the politics of location change when one’s --literal, physical--location changes? What are the connections between a particular woman’s interactions with the particular location she has moved to, her changed relationship with the place she has left, and her sense of self and political positioning?

I also draw on two further areas of research. Scholars drawing on the concept in literary geography of a “writer’s country”, which first arose in the early years of the twentieth century, are concerned with the influence of writers’ environments on their works. While early theorists who looked at this were, at least according to Ian Maitley, rather deterministic in their approach, later studies have been more complex and looked at the many facets of the ways in which places can influence the writing of poetry and prose.³³⁷

Much work on migration in contemporary criticism and post-colonial theory, on the other hand, seems to emphasise not place but something somehow “beyond” place: states of “migrancy” and “hybridity” where relationships with particular places, certainly a sense of rootedness in

³³⁴ Boyce Davies 1994, p. 3.

³³⁵ Women and Geography Study Group 1997, pp. 8-9.

³³⁶ “Notes toward a Politics of Location” in Rich 1986, pp. 210-231.

³³⁷ Maitley 1987.

place, seem almost redundant. (Because of its current saliency, I address this in more detail below). I want to go beyond both these schools of thought, which I consider less than adequate. In my view, migration changes people's relationships with place so that a "writer's country" becomes both the place of origin and the place of settlement --or sometimes many places-- and the movement between them; each place becomes inflected with experiences of elsewhere and with a deeply changed sense of self. But a migrant woman "writer's country" is not, I argue, *no* place.

My interest in multiple perspectives on place is not what Iain Chambers means by "migrancy". Chambers argues that migrancy "calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation",³³⁸ but he does not mention place. While Chambers correctly points to how migration often leads to the need to find new ways of inhabiting the world, and of dealing with identities which are constantly changing, he fails to recognise many of the difficulties which migration poses for people. Robin Cohen in his section summarising "postmodern views of diaspora" quotes Salman Rushdie: "*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization... It is the great possibility that mass migration gives to the world, and I have tried to embrace it".³³⁹ But Cohen also points out Clifford Geertz's warning "against the naive assumption that a reduction in distance automatically means that the gaps between cultures have been overcome. Group identity may remain strong and even strengthen in response to the shrinking of the space between peoples".³⁴⁰

I take Chambers' work here as exemplary of certain trends in post-colonial theorising which celebrate migration, hybridity and nomadism, and which can be quite problematic from a feminist point of view.³⁴¹ He not only conflates different kinds of migration, as I pointed out in my introduction often happens in post-colonial theory, into an over-arching celebration which plays down the difficulties faced by many migrants. In so doing he also blurs differentials, in terms of political positioning, between different groups. He reflects, for example, that: "In the recognition of the other, of radical alterity, lies the acknowledgement that we are no longer at the centre of the world". He argues that when "our" sense of centre and being is displaced, "we"

³³⁸ Chambers 1994, p. 5.

³³⁹ cited in Cohen 1997, p. 130.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 134.

³⁴¹ Some feminists do assert a feminist postmodern stance. Caren Kaplan, for example, argues for what she calls "feminist nomadism" in her chapter "Postmodern Geographies: Feminist Politics of Location", Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1996/2000.

are uprooted and forced to reply in terms of movement and metamorphosis.³⁴² Chambers continues: “We imagine ourselves to be whole, to be complete, to have a full identity and certainly not to be open and fragmented; we imagine ourselves to be the author, rather than the object, of the narratives that constitute our lives”.

Chambers’ assertions raise the question of who is the “we” to whom he refers. Heterosexual, wealthy, white, Western men may well be the only people who correspond to his description. While he acknowledges the existence of an “other” for whom this is clearly not the case, this “other” is “a cultural and historical elsewhere”. White women remain absent -- not “elsewhere”, but also not included in his “we”. His anecdotal examples of the “emblems” he has encountered are male. For Chamber strangers are “emblems” who can teach us that reality is not immutable.³⁴³ He draws on these strangers --an angry Native American man in the men’s toilets of a Greyhound station; a Moroccan hotel waiter-- for what they can offer Westerners, he does not treat them as individuals with their own lives, problems and questions. He wants at the same time, in what Robin Cohen refers to as Chambers’ “sometimes bewildering display of ‘me-too-ism’”,³⁴⁴ to add himself to the experience of migrants, even while ostensibly differentiating himself from them. Incredibly, he tries to add the “increasing nomadism of modern thought”³⁴⁵ to a list that includes forced, slave and illegal migrations.

While Chambers’ attempt to displace himself from the centre is laudable, the shift from displacement to appropriation of the experiences of “the other” in order to try to do this, is what is problematic here (Cohen refers to postmodernists writing about migration as “space invaders”).³⁴⁶ In my introduction I suggested that the work of Ella Shohat could be used to put “tests” to given contributions within post-colonial theory. Two of these were whether such contributions acknowledge both the complexity of identities *and* political inequity; and whether they take into account the difficulties faced by many migrant women, alongside their celebrations of hybridity and in-betweenness. Chambers’ concept of migrancy, I argue, does neither.

Another problem with the kind of theory of which Chambers’ book is an example, is that it overstates the “fluidity” and fragmentation of migrant identities. An individual --whether a migrant or not-- is not a homogenous unchanging whole, but neither, I argue, is she or he a totally discontinuous set of unconnected fragments. There is both constancy and change; for

³⁴² Chambers 1994, p. 24.

³⁴³ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

³⁴⁴ Cohen 1997, p. 133.

³⁴⁵ Chambers 1994, p. 18.

³⁴⁶ Cohen 1997, p. 127.

those who feel fragmented, who feel close to the “schizophrenia, self-destruction and madness” he refers to as the alternative to believing in the “fiction” of the “I”,³⁴⁷ there is perhaps a need to emphasise the constancy as well as the “fluidity”. A person, like a river, both is and is not the same entity from one moment to the next.³⁴⁸ The writers I draw on in this chapter all struggle, in varying ways, to explore and make meaning of the experience of migration; how this experience affects, and is affected by, their relationships with place; and the impact of migration and changing relationships with place on women’s identities.

I begin this chapter by looking at accounts of migrants’ arrival in the UK and North America. I focus on three particular aspects of arrival: initial experiences of disillusionment which often revolve around dealing with the weather and the change in climate; then experiences of the built environment; and finally how the “reality” of arrival compares with the “book memories” many women have of these places. Then I move on to explore the experiences of “displacement” and “unbelonging” in places of settlement, addressing both how initial responses to new places of settlement change over time and how these experiences affect migrant women’s sense of self and both racial and gender identity. Migration also often changes and affects migrant women’s relationships with places of origin. I address a variety of ways in which relationships with “back home” are affected. Finally I turn to explore the changing meanings of place, self and home, and the relationship between these, in women’s writing.

This chapter focuses on the work of Jamaica Kincaid and Dionne Brand, as well as drawing on the writings of Joan Riley (*The Unbelonging*), Bharati Mukherjee (*Wife*) and contributors to the collection *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*. These chosen texts all address the arrival of migrant women in new countries. Kincaid and Brand, by exploring these themes through a variety of works (Brand: *No Language is Neutral*, *Winter Epigrams*, *Bread out of Stone*, *In Another Place Not Here*; Kincaid: *Lucy*, essays in *The New Yorker*) including different genres (Brand – poetry and prose essays; Kincaid, novel, essays and an interview), provide a sustained engagement with the meanings of migration, of their places of origin and settlement, and of the changing nature of these relationships over time.

Arrival: Shifts in Migrants’ Relationships to Britain and North America

As we waited to embark, there were people weaving among us, people in brightly coloured African head-dresses and gowns, singing, clapping their hands, ululating, dancing: rejoicing that the journey over the water to England was about to start. Once on board the boat, some anxiety was expressed; but reassurances quickly came from others of

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁴⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa also uses the image of a river to speak of identity: She writes: “Identity is a river, a process. Contained within the river is its identity, and it needs to flow, to change to stay a river”. cited in *Adrienne Rich: Passion, Politics and the Body* by Liz Yorke, Sage, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1997, p. 131.

the passengers: were we not headed at long last for that promised land, that source of hope, knowledge, success, enlightenment, and the financial means with which to help our families and home communities? Were we not our families' chosen ones, with the clear potential needed to become talented scholars, engineers, artists, and doctors?

On the grey, concrete angular rooftop of the South Bank Centre's Queen Elizabeth Hall, with the Thames, bright red double decker-buses intermittently crossing its Westminster bridge, and Big Ben visible in the background, the performers explore the "coldness, isolation [and] alienation"³⁴⁹ which they have found upon arriving in England. The dance of each individual, so different from the music and movement of rejoicing at the boat jetty, is solitary, closed in on itself, despairing. The trunk on which one woman sits, freezing and despondent, the brooms and mops which the dancers use to symbolise the work of drudgery they have to do to survive, emphasise the feelings of acute disappointment, loss, frustration and defeat which their initial, and often continuing, experience in Britain embodies.

The performance of Badejo Arts, which I describe above, and many writings which deal with arrival in Britain or North America, place migrant characters' feelings in a context of a harsh and soulless physical environment and cold, unwelcoming weather. Rather than being merely metaphors for internal states, vehicles for saying something more important, these details of the places encountered after migration and the meanings they embody, are themselves central to the experiences the narratives or poems convey. The sense of displacement or dislocation --words which incorporate terms and which describe emotions very much bound up with place-- many migrants feel, particularly in the time shortly after arrival but sometimes for long periods and repeatedly, after subsequent journeys, is intimately linked with experiences of place. So too is the shock of disillusionment, often combined with experiences of much intensified racism and feelings of "unbelonging". Also linked are more positive feelings of excitement at the confirmation of previous expectations of Britain or North America. In turn, these feelings have profound impacts on personal and political identities and strong implications in terms of the politics of location.

Disillusionment: cold weather

Among the first negative experiences described in many accounts of initial arrival in Britain or North America is the weather: for many migrant writers cold, wet or snowy weather seems to have particular meaning, to be a part of the whole of the experience of the miserable North. I would not, however, give to these writers' evocations of the intense unpleasantnesses of weather, Elizabeth Bowen's term "psychological weather".³⁵⁰ Freezing temperatures and constant drizzle, or everlasting snow, certainly affect the emotional landscape of the characters and speakers in the poems and novels I refer to, but the weather is not merely an external analogue or metaphor for internal states. It is itself an important component of the whole experience being evoked, and intrinsically linked to the emotions and shifts in identity being experienced. While warmer weather would certainly not guarantee a happier arrival for migrants to Britain, their experiences --of isolation, racism, and so on-- would have a different texture, and hence would be described very differently. The weather becomes another hostile element in

³⁴⁹ from Badejo Arts' "emi ijo" performance programme.

³⁵⁰ cited in Tindall 1991, p. 84.

a scene of arrival where external factors determine much of the newly arrived migrants' sense not only of the place but also of themselves.

In the Badejo Arts performance described above, the performers' physical shivering with cold is important: it literally embodies something about the characters' whole experience of isolation and both physical and emotional discomfort, which they feel immediately and bodily. The 'visualness' of the performance, combining as it did dance with both music and spoken word, made this especially clear. The cold evoked made the characters fold their bodies inwards in an effort to conserve their bodies' warmth; I imagined, watching the performance, the tension in their muscles, responding to the cold. The isolation of being a migrant in an unwelcoming society is not just symbolised but *reinforced* by the cold; both body and emotional landscape are turned inwards, cut off from the human and physical environments, from which comes no comfort.

The Badejo Arts performance dramatises some of the key themes that recur in migrants' accounts of arrival in Britain and provides a snapshot of some salient experiences of arrival. Dionne Brand's poetry collection *Winter Epigrams* offers a powerful elaboration of the nuances of some of these themes and a more intimate and sustained engagement with her changing relationship with Canada over time. Through her engagement with space and place, and her emphasis on bodily experiences of Canadian winters, Brand's collection addresses violence, racism, depression and death through the speaker's experience of icy cold winters in Canada. The speaker's depression is intimately linked with the weather: her experience, her sense of self is embodied and expressed through it.

I can buy books
which i do not read and cannot afford
and make plans for them to
carry me through my depression,
winter solstice/flesh buckling,
I attempt various standing and sitting positions
until
sadistic february brings me to my knees,
then, i re-examine my life,
in a maudlin fashion,
conclude that i'm worthless
and spend march and april
in a wretched heap
beside the radiator.(19)³⁵¹

This poem combines references to poverty --the books the speaker cannot really afford, along with, less explicitly, the lack of funds to pay for adequate heating-- with a sense of the depression being described. This depression is expressed (as with the Badejo Arts performance)

³⁵¹ Brand 1983, p. 7.

through physical positions: attempts at “standing and sitting positions” that might bring some degree of comfort, and the final succumbing to being “a wretched heap/ beside the radiator”. Again the weather has an immediate and bodily effect, deepening the emotional effects of poverty and of being a migrant woman in a cold Northern country.

Feelings of depression are also expressed in several of Brand’s *Epigrams* through a sense of identification with the winter landscape. After describing how, without fail, every September, the superintendent digs up the plants while they are still fully in bloom, one poem continues: “this business of dying so often/ and so soon/ is getting to me”.³⁵² There are several other poems about the death of plants and trees which convey a sense that the speaker feels this death emotionally. One (4) implies the callousness of people thinking the falling of autumn leaves is “pretty”: the poem finishes with the line “something is dying!”³⁵³ Another poem points out that no-one notices the death of a tree:

no one notices
the tree in the front yard
of the next apartment building
is dead, again (2)³⁵⁴

Both tree and speaker are isolated in their sense of lifelessness.

One poem describes what the speaker sees as winter’s sense of contradiction and ends by subtly drawing a parallel with her own feelings about being “here,” in Canada.

season of ambiguity
blinding sun, cold air
days imitating night
me, here. (50)³⁵⁵

Like the contradictions or ambiguities of sun and cold, day merging with night in a season that is dark as well as cold, the speaker feels her very presence in Canada is a contradiction. The weather seems to express this sense of disjunction or “unbelonging,” perhaps making it all the more acute.

There is also a sense of identification with the landscape conveyed through images of violence.

snow is raping the landscape
Cote de Neige is screaming
writhing under
winter’s heavy body
any poem about Montreal in the winter is pornography. (17)³⁵⁶

³⁵² Ibid., p. 8.

³⁵³ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

Here Brand and the city of Montreal are equally embattled against the severity of the weather, graphically depicted as “raping” the landscape.

One poem, late in the collection, describes an incident of racist abuse experienced in a train station. It begins with an account of how the speaker had always planned that she would respond assertively to such situations --she had “rehearsed my ‘fuck offs’ ” and “practised my knee to the groin/ decided to use violence”-- and goes on to describe how “now, leaving the train at Montreal,” all these firm resolutions are simply “gone”. Instead, what happens is this:

iron teeth of the escalator
snickering like all of ‘them’,
my legs stiff as the cold outside,
my eyes seeing everything in blood,
a piece of cloth,
a white mound of flesh atop
like a cow’s slaughtered head,
emitting,
‘whore, nigger whore’. (51)³⁵⁷

There is here a reflection of the speaker’s fear in the environment. Everything seems to threaten or jeer: the person hurling the insult at her, everyone else in the station and even the escalator itself. This isolation freezes her up. There are echoes of the winter landscape outside: her legs are “stiff as the cold” and, because of this reference, the whiteness in the grotesque description of the hurler of abuse recalls snow. This, along with the comparison of the aggressor to a “cow’s slaughtered head”, and the speaker’s “eyes seeing everything in blood”, conjures up a striking and sickening contrast of the red of blood and the whiteness of the aggressor’s skin. His (or her?) whiteness is further emphasised in the poem by the presence of the image of snow and by the fact that s/he is reduced by his (or her) actions to just plain *white*; just as s/he tries to reduce the speaker to her blackness.

Interestingly, the gender of the racist aggressor is unclear, whereas the speaker is abused for her black femaleness. Her racial and gender identity is both displayed and distorted --black becomes *nigger*, woman becomes *whore*-- by the racism directed at her. The poem creates the feeling that the cold and the snow of Montreal’s weather are implicated in this: rather than being able to resist, the speaker is frozen, like “the cold outside”, and her blackness is emphasised by the terrible whiteness of the physical and human world around her.

But there is also humour in some of the *Epigrams*; in one, for example, she laughs at the picture she imagines her desperate search for spring must present to her neighbours.

the neighbours don’t know what to make
of this crazy Black woman

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

rooting in their gardens
 looking for green leaves;
 in only march at that. (33)³⁵⁸

And winter itself also has its positive aspects. Despite herself, the speaker --very occasionally-- finds gentleness and softness in this snow that otherwise seems to her to be filled with such death and threat and violence and nothingness.

Just to sabotage my epigrams,
 the snow fell,
 these three days,
 softly.
 ...
 Everyone is covered by this silence,
 no one can be thinking of how to oppress anyone else
 they will have to think of how silent it is
 and how to shovel this quiet snow,
 no one can make a telephone call
 or press a button
 or utter a racist slur in this gentleness
 ... (41)³⁵⁹

There seems here to be a comfort in the snow; it “cover[s]” all the evils that at other times it seems to exacerbate and bring out. This poem expresses the feeling that the snow is not always cold, harsh and violent; sometimes it creates a sense of gentleness. She distinguishes between different kinds of snowfall and even expresses a sense of some of the positive effects of snow, on herself, and on those around her. This poem provides a very different account of snow than that provided elsewhere in her collection: as enveloping comforter, rather than as rapist.

The presence of snow in this collection expresses one aspect of the contradictory nature of Brand’s experience of migration. In it, winter weather has both peaceful and violent connotations. Sometimes the speaker identifies with the landscape, embattled against the weather; yet here she almost welcomes the snow for its peaceful effect on those who might otherwise do her violence.

In Jamaica Kincaid’s novel *Lucy*, the character arrives in the United States to work as an *au pair* for a white family: Mariah, Lewis and their children. Lucy’s experience of winter weather in North America in the following passage forces an unexpected questioning of fundamental assumptions about the world that she had previously held.

That morning, the morning of my first day... was a sunny morning. It was not the sort of bright sun-yellow making everything curl at the edges, almost in fright, that I was used to, but a pale-yellow sun, as if the sun had grown weak from trying too hard to shine; but still it was sunny, and that was nice and made me miss my home less. And so, seeing the sun, I got up and put on a dress, a gay dress made out of madras cloth -- the same sort of dress that I would wear if I were at home and setting out for a day in the country. It was all wrong. The sun was shining but the air was cold. It was the middle of January, after all. But I did not know that the sun could shine and the air remain cold; no one had ever told

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

me. What a feeling that was! How can I explain? Something I had always known... something I took completely for granted, “the sun is shining, the air is warm,” was not so. I was no longer in a tropical zone, and this realization now entered my life like a flow of water dividing formerly dry and solid ground, creating two banks, one of which was my past --so familiar and predictable...-- the other my future, a gray blank, an overcast seascape on which rain was falling and no boats were in sight. I was no longer in a tropical zone and I felt cold inside and out, the first time such a sensation had come over me.³⁶⁰

This passage clearly illustrates the centrality of the weather to Lucy’s experience of arrival in the United States. Like the speaker of Brand’s *Epigram* beginning “season of ambiguity”, Lucy finds it strange that the sun shines while the air is cold. There is something about this situation that does not fit, that, she says, is “all wrong”.

But more than simply being influenced by the weather in her feelings as a newcomer, Lucy feels her whole sense of reality, and of self, threatened. Something she has taken for granted is questioned for the first time. The solid ground under her feet is no longer so solid; her life seems irredeemably split between before and after. Something has been taken away from her and she experiences that loss as “cold”, in a way that mirrors the physical environment and weather. She “[feels] cold inside and out”: the chill in this passage is felt bodily, but it also deeply influences Lucy’s inner experience because of the uncertainty and insecurity it represents.

Later I look at how Lucy’s feelings about snow and place change as time passes.

Arrival and the built environment

As well as the weather, the built environment is portrayed in some writings as having a strong effect on migrants’ sense both of the place they are migrating to, and of themselves, upon their arrival in Britain or North America. Lucy describes her disappointment on seeing in reality the landmarks in the U.S. that had been “lifeboats” for her when she had imagined them back home. Describing the journey from the airport, she says:

As we drove along, someone would single out to me a famous building, an important street, a park, a bridge that when built was thought to be a spectacle. In a daydream I used to have, all these places were points of happiness to me; all these places were lifeboats to my small drowning soul, for I would imagine myself entering and leaving them, and just that --entering and leaving over and over again-- would see me through a bad feeling I did not have a name for... Now that I saw these places, they looked ordinary, dirty, worn down by so many people entering and leaving them in real life, and it occurred to me that I could not be the only person in the world for whom they were a fixture of fantasy.³⁶¹

³⁶⁰ Kincaid 1991, pp. 5-6.

³⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

Lucy's thoughts here reflect the romance of places and landmarks mythologised in colonial education, and her disappointment when reality does not live up to her expectations.

The contrast between environments, the overwhelming impression of concrete and glass contrasting with the vivid colours and aliveness of the place left behind, come through in Dionne Brand's poems dealing with arrival in Canada, in *No Language is Neutral*. This contrast, the way in which the speaker experiences Canada, is significant because it is closely bound up with her sense of herself in the place and time being evoked. She speaks, towards the beginning of the first of these poems, of "heart and eyes fixed to a/ skyscraper and a concrete eternity" and continues:

...Five hundred dollars
and a passport full of sand and winking water, is how
I reach here, a girl's face shimmering from a little
photograph, her hair between hot comb and afro, feet
posing in high heel shoes, never to pass her eyes on
the red-green threads of a humming bird's twitching
back, the blood warm quickened water colours of a
sea bed, not the rain forest tangled in smoke-wet,
well there it was. I did read a book once about a
prairie in Alberta since my waving canefield wasn't
enough, too much cutlass and too much cut foot, but
romance only happen in romance novel, the concrete
building just overpower me, block my eyesight and
send the sky back, back where it more redolent.³⁶²

This poem evokes, in vivid imagery, the place left; the new place, characterised overwhelmingly by concrete and sharply contrasting with the speaker's former image of Canada; and the journey between the two places. The "passport full of sand and winking water", something the speaker has brought with her of her own place and suggesting as well her journey from there to Canada, begins the poem's contrasting of 'there' and 'here'. The passport might literally contain sand; in any case, "full of" an island landscape, it is a reminder of that place. The vivid and sensual terms in which that landscape is described suggest the speaker's yearning and regret for what she can no longer see around her: "never to pass her eyes on/ the red green threads of a humming bird's/ back, the blood warm quickened water colours of a/ sea-bed, not the rain forest tangled in smoke-wet". Instead, not even the "romance" of a Canadian prairie, as encountered in a novel, greets her, but a "concrete/ building"" that is overwhelming in its size, its dwarfing of the speaker, and in its lifeless contrast to hummingbird, rain-forest, and sea bed.

At the same time, the poem explores the speaker's sense of self and the ways in which it is bound up with the places, the journey and the emotions arising in response that make up her migration experience. While the passport evokes both the journey and the place left behind, the

³⁶² Brand 1990, p. 28.

“shimmer[ing]” photo within it echoes the water back home and also becomes, in the poem, indistinguishable from the girl herself: “I reach here, a girl’s face shimmering from a little/ photograph, her hair between hot comb and afro, feet/ posing in high heel shoes...”. The girl who has a memory of this water, this landscape also --because of Brand’s use of the word “shimmering” to describe the photo and the speaker’s own face-- in a sense *is* that memory, is defined by it. This memory is what will sustain her in this foreign landscape.

Where she is emotionally, her sense of self in terms of her relation to particular physical places in Trinidad and Canada and the migration between them, is also bound up with “where” she is politically. Her position in Canada as a new immigrant, overwhelmed and intimidated by her new vastly different urban environment means that, as she posed when her passport photo was taken, she now poses in relation to the world: “feet posing in high heel shoes” (because they are presumably not visible in the photograph, we can assume these feet are those belonging to the girl in the here and now) she faces the world. The phrase “never to pass her eyes on” (which as explained above refers to her sense of loss, to the fact that she will not see hummingbirds, sea bed, or forest) also suggests that she will never give herself away. To belong, to be accepted, may be the implication, she must not reveal the depth of her sense of loss around the place left behind.

The line describing the speaker’s hair --“her hair between hot comb and afro” -- suggests too that she is a girl between selves, between attempts on the one hand to control her hair, making it more acceptable to white people, and on the other to let it grow as it will. The word “between” here may also suggest that the girl is between these two states in terms of chronology: perhaps she is on her way, as a newly arrived immigrant, to the radicalism of Black politics symbolised by the afro.

The poem that follows this³⁶³ contains no reference to the island left behind; it is a poem that both looks back to the moment of arrival and, I think, forward to a time when the speaker, having been in Canada for a little while, is less acutely aware of what she has just left and more keenly aware of her present environment. There is less explicit comparison than in the previous poem, reflecting, I think, this shift in the speaker’s awareness of place.

The poem is, accordingly, extremely harsh in its imagery and experience, unsoftened by descriptions of natural beauty and by the feeling of poignant yearning present in the previous poem. Experiences of racism and the sense of being an outsider come together with an acute

³⁶³ Ibid., p. 29.

sense of the comfortlessness --to the point almost of violence-- of the place, each of these facets of the experience of Canada reinforcing the intensity with which the other is felt. The poem begins by describing the speaker's "steady trembling" on being asked her name, apparently by customs officials who then "say I too black for it". It then relates how she pronounced "Spadina *Spadeena* until I listen good for what white people call it," and how she told the immigration officer she was in Canada on holiday "when me and the son-of-a-bitch know I have labourer mark all over my face". It continues:

It don't have nothing call beauty
here but this is a place, a gasp of water from a
hundred lakes, fierce bright windows screaming with
goods, a constant drizzle of brown brick cutting
dolorous prisons into every green uprising of bush
No wilderness self, is shards, shards, shards,
shards of raw glass, a debris of people you pick your way
through returning to your worse self, you the thin
mixture of just come and don't exist.

Beginning with details suggesting experiences of racism, of feeling different because of a "wrong" pronunciation, and of trying to fit in by correcting it, the poem goes on to describe the harshness of the place where she has arrived. And "this *is* a place" [emphasis mine], not a dream or an expectation anymore; it is reality, and a harsh one. The water doesn't "wink," it "gasp[s]"; windows "scream", there are "shards" everywhere, and even the people are "debris" to "pick your way/ through". Like shards of glass, the people cause sharp pain and are obstacles in the path of the speaker's effort, in this cruel environment, to make contact with herself.

Connections between self and environment are present in this poem, as in the last. That the poem begins with the simple, direct statement: "It don't have nothing call beauty/ here" emphasises the importance of this lack. The feeling that it elicits is expressed through the later line "No wilderness self", which brings the lack in close to the speaker's sense of self: there is no wilderness, and, closely intertwined with this, no way of being herself. Brand's formulation about wilderness is ironic, given Canada's carefully constructed image and self-image as a country of wilderness and natural beauty (her use of the word "wilderness" in this poem may even refer to this image, since she does not use it to refer to natural environments in Trinidad). However, the destruction of wilderness, along with the genocide of indigenous peoples, was part and parcel of the colonisation process and continues --through clear-cut logging, as a prime example-- today.³⁶⁴ Further, the cuts made into "every green uprising of bush" by "dolorous prisons" of buildings feel painful in the poem, as painful as the shards of glass. Rebellion by persistent plants in the city, and, I sense --because of the connection made between nature and self in the poem-- by the speaker herself, would be futile, defeated by the omnipresent sharpness

³⁶⁴ See Armstrong 1993, p .6.

and hostility of the environment. The urban landscape is presented as obliterating both nature and self.

The last line is a subtle echo and rewriting of the line in the previous poem which describes the girl's hair; this time rather than being between selves the speaker --or "you", a self distanced from itself-- is a "thin/ mixture of just come and don't exist". She is defined by her status as new arrival --with the freshness of memories of the place left behind, and the bewilderment of the new-- and by her sense of invisibility to the point of non-existence. The place she is in erases her --its shards cut her out of the picture.

Brand's speaker observes, having read before her migration of a prairie in Alberta, that "romance only happen in romance novel"; what is real is the harshness and hostility of the Canadian city evoked in the poem. Other writers too convey how myths about the greatness of the Western countries to which their characters migrate are dashed. Often there is disillusionment when Britain, in particular, is experienced as a tangible reality rather than read and taught about as the "construct"³⁶⁵ or "institution"³⁶⁶ presented by colonial education. Just as the myth of "the mother country" was, as I showed in Chapter 2, constructed as a political instrument or weapon of the colonial power, there are deeply political implications to many migrants' painful recognition of the degree to which they have been "conned". There are similar implications in the degree to which they have internalised hierarchies of value explicitly and implicitly taught by colonial and neo-colonial institutions in order to bolster political and economic power.

"Book-memories" of England

Gillian Tindall writes, in a chapter entitled "London Mythology", about Charles Dickens' influence on present-day perceptions of London, particularly those of non-Londoners and non-native Britons. She quotes from a novel by J.K. Hagsman (who, she says, probably never went to London) in which the central character, while planning a visit to the city, "enjoyed a pleasurable shudder at the thought of descending into this terrible world of commerce, isolated in fog".³⁶⁷ This is clearly a Dickensian image of London. It is true that such images can be extraordinarily powerful: many people's perceptions of places represented in the English literary "canon" -- such as, to take another example, the Yorkshire moors so central to Emily Brontë's works-- are deeply influenced by them, whether or not they actually ever see these places. There is no reason why migrants to Britain from its former colonies should be an

³⁶⁵ Marion Halligan in Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 7.

³⁶⁶ Lauris Edmond in *ibid.*, p. 73.

³⁶⁷ Tindall 1991, p. 140.

exception to this, particularly given the enormous influence of English literature on many “colonials” view of the world, that I explored in chapter 2.

However, when Tindall writes, disparagingly, that “it is useless to tell a southern European, Indian or Russian that Dickensian fog is extinct; he knows differently”,³⁶⁸ she fails to examine the reasons, clearly bound up with colonial education and the mystique that it created around both English literature and England itself (as well as, with her use of the male pronoun, to acknowledge the existence of *women* visiting, migrating to, or thinking about London). She also neglects to acknowledge the complexity and multiplicity of literature’s influences on “foreigners”’ perceptions of places in England, implying merely that their perceptions of London are unexamined and based on fiction, rather than “real”.

The collection *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* is of interest here because several contributors speak of their first experiences of England in terms of books. This is probably because of the extent to which they received the myth of England through literature. But they write of varying forms of this literary influence; they did not, as new migrants or visitors, merely unthinkingly adopt and reproduce Dickens’ or Brontë’s or Hardy’s view of particular parts of England.

Marion Halligan, for one, writes of the disillusionment of travel to England:

The result of all this [the receiving of the myth of England through colonial education] was that when you got to England it could be a disappointment. Not the way you imagined it. Like coming across the picture book of a much-loved story you knew only in words: the illustrations weren’t the way you’d seen them in your head. And of course, looking back, that British Empire patriotism: it was basically words.³⁶⁹

Dorothy Jones writes of her experience in a similar vein to Halligan, but what she says also shows a great deal about the politics of her change of perception about Britain:

Having grown up an unwitting daughter of the Empire, I went to study at Oxford, its imperial heart, to discover there that I had been constructed as a colonial subject...An image of Oxford had glowed brightly in the storybook England of my childhood imagination and it seemed that to live there would be to take up a yearned for residence within the world of books. But, having reached the centre, and Oxford had no doubts about its own centrality, I could only define myself as a complete outsider, loathing the place which had formerly appeared so enticing...

It becomes clear to her, with her migration to Britain, that she is not to be allowed to join the magic circle of “centrality” simply because of her physical location at the “heart” of the Empire. While she had tasted this magic from afar, through literature in particular, she is clearly made to

³⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 140.

³⁶⁹ Marion Halligan, in Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 7.

feel an outsider, and an inferior one at that, once living at close quarters to what she cites Louis MacNeice as calling “the sneering spires” of Oxford.

But Jones writes that, despite feeling defined as an outsider,

I [did not] feel that Oxford rejected me...[It] would take you to herself, with regular reminders of your outsider origins, provided you adopted its own perspective... But I utterly refused to adopt a vision of the world that would have involved dismissing as irrelevant and insignificant the antipodean life which formed me [...]
...it was that first overall experience of Britain, and Oxford in particular, which both prompted conscious awareness of my post-colonial identity (though that term was then unknown to me) and led me to take active pride in it. It is not, perhaps, possible to ‘unbecome’ a daughter of Empire, for part of my life has been shaped by the experience of growing up in a country which once belonged to the British Empire. But, though I have now lived for many years in Australia as an expatriate New Zealander, my view of the world is still thoroughly antipodean with my feet firmly planted opposite to what was once the imperial centre.³⁷⁰

So the change in location involved a change in Jones’ sense of politics. Before her migration from New Zealand there had been the sense of “double vision,” two realities coexisting. As a result of her migration she develops, through her sense of being an outsider, a sense of the need to resist that “vision of the world” that would erase all others it considers inferior. Furthermore, awareness of this resistance is central to her identity.

Other writers describe responses quite different to this disillusionment of encountering in real life places previously read about in books. Some describe the recognition of such places as a source of great excitement and pleasure. Velma Pollard writes of her feelings on visiting London, which contrasted with those of some of her friends, who had felt “hesitation” and “uncertainty” when seeing Buckingham Palace and Trafalgar Square for the first time.

I was thirty by the time I visited. I had seen Canada and the USA. I had exorcised some of the ghosts of Empire. I enjoyed Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly. I was ecstatic about Stratford-on-Avon and the production I saw there. Oxford, Cambridge, venerable halls, if not of marble; rivers, the sites of the regattas mentioned in so many university stories. All these excited me. I had book-memories of everything... Only the British Museum offended.³⁷¹

She is excited to recognise the things she has read about; they fit her “book-memories,” the previous knowledge of England she has gained through reading. The British Museum offends because it is there that the colonial relationship is made so clear. Pollard “felt a great loss on behalf of the real wonders of the artefacts. As if too much had been stolen for too long. I felt that things from the hot desert were cold and miserable in the British Museum”. Pollard

³⁷⁰ Dorothy Jones, “The Antipodes of Empire”, in *ibid.*, pp. 83-4.

³⁷¹ Velma Pollard in *ibid.*, p. 156.

personifies these artefacts and identifies with them through what she imagines is their experience of the alien, and alienating, cold weather.

Ishrat Lindblad writes of her longing to go to boarding school in England being fulfilled:

It was Coronation Year and I was thirteen: 'Earth has not anything to show more fair.' The streets of London were coloured red and decorated with monumental arches. Breakfasts consisted of strawberries and cream (I had only seen pictures of this luscious fruit before). One of my father's friends even lived like a lord in a grand manor house, with a gleaming mahogany table, elaborate flower arrangements, and a butler straight out of Wodehouse. This gentleman kindly put his Daimler and chauffeur at our disposal, so that we could make a tour up to the Lake District, which proved to be everything that Wordsworth's poetry had made me imagine it to be. I felt like Maggie Tulliver in reverse: for the first time the world outside corresponded to the world I had been reading about! The only really unprepared-for moment came when I visited the home of one of the 'grandest ladies in the colonies.' It was the tiniest house I had ever stepped into.³⁷²

Again, there is excitement at the feeling that the outside world corresponds and meets expectations created by colonial schooling and reading of English literature. Gone is the sense of disjunction between what is seen and what is read about; suddenly there is a correspondence between environment and literary representation. The excitement of this recalls --although in a way it is diametrically opposed to-- the feeling described by Aritha van Herk on finding her Canadian environment described in literature for the first time (see Chapter 2). The latter is a kind of liberation; what has been erased is now validated and given a kind of reality it was previously denied. Lindblad's feeling, on the other hand, is a response to being able to experience for the first time what has *always been* most validated. Yet both responses are concerned with a kind of overcoming of the disjunction between lived experience and what is read about. There is in both a sense of exhilaration at the recognition of lived experience in read, or remembered, texts.

How these women were, before migration, differently located -- in Adrienne Rich's sense of the politics of location-- may help to explain their different responses of disillusionment or excitement, upon arrival in Britain.

Displacement and Unbelonging

Stripped of their belonging(s) and denied their history, all migrants occupy a vulnerable position. But when the migrant is a member of a formerly colonised people and the border s/he crosses marks the land of the former coloniser --as is the case of migrants of South Asian origin in Britain--the narrative of immigration comes to include not only the loss of 'continuity' and the search for 'belonging' but also the experience and negotiation of racism and colonialism.³⁷³

³⁷² Ishrat Lindblad in *ibid.*, p. 126.

³⁷³ Suresht Renjen Bald, "Negotiating Identity in the Metropolis: Generational Differences in South Asian British Fiction", in King, Connell and White, eds., 1995, p. 70.

In this section I look at migrant women writers' portrayals of the nature of feelings of "unbelonging". I do this in part by looking at imagery used in the literature to express such experiences, imagery that emphasises both relationship with --or disconnection from-- place and the sense of fragmentation of self. And I argue that disconnection from the environment can have profound implications for migrant women's sense of self.

I look at various different aspects of experiences of displacement and unbelonging in the country of settlement. Firstly I look at the sense of newness, unfamiliarity, and isolation on arrival. Then I turn to explicit experiences of being *made* to "unbelong", to racism and (other) violence, including violent or disempowering relationships with male relatives following migration (in the cases of Riley's character Hyacinth in *The Unbelonging*, and of Dimple in Mukherjee's novel *Wife*). I acknowledge that not belonging is not always experienced as alienating, but sometimes rather as liberating. Finally I turn to look at the role of pre-existing community, and whether or not this softens the experience of arrival.

For many new migrant women, feelings of "unbelonging" initially stem, at the most obvious level, from the new environment's sheer difference from the place left behind (as well as, as we saw above, its failure to live up to expectations created by colonial and neo-colonial institutions in migrants' places of origin). It is in part the newness of the place --both physical environment and people inhabiting it-- which emphasises to many migrants how little they are a part of their new communities, how little they "belong" there. This is manifest in their unfamiliarity with common reference points and with everyday "givens" such as shopping, banking or merely finding one's way around.

The feelings of being isolated, unwanted and unheard that can result from this unfamiliarity have profound implications for many migrant women's sense of self, as the literature shows. The isolation and sense of disconnection lead to feelings of being somehow "wrong" in relation to the physical and human environment. In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife*, Dimple, the protagonist, has newly arrived in New York, from India, and is thinking of writing to her friend Pixie to tell her that she misses Calcutta.

But *wish* and *miss* were wrong. She was not missing Calcutta really, though it would have been nice to wear new saris and go to the Skyroom and order iced coffee. It was something else, like knowing that if she were to go out the front door, down the elevator (she was frightened of self-service elevators with their red Emergency buttons and wished there were a liftman on a stool to press the right buttons for her), if she were to stand in the lobby and say to the first ten people she saw, "Do you know it's almost October and Durga Pujah is coming?" they would think

she was mad. She could not live with people who didn't understand about *Durga Pujah*.³⁷⁴

Dimple's unfamiliarity with self-service elevators leads to fear; there is also a sense of loneliness expressed in this passage, in Dimple's knowledge that what is familiar to her is unknown and completely unimportant to those around her. Dimple's isolation is still further emphasised, by Mukherjee, by the likelihood that non-Asian Western readers, like Dimple's neighbours in New York, might not "understand about *Durga Pujah*".

It is clear to her, however, that she is expected to emulate American women (within limits, as we shall see in the section below): to assimilate, to blend in. When her husband tells her she should eat chicken legs, rather than wings, as he claims "American wives" do, Dimple thinks: "She had no idea what American wives did and had no way of finding out... How could she live in a country where she could not predict these basic patterns, where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator?"³⁷⁵ When her alarm clock goes off two minutes later than she had wanted it to, she is upset at not being able to master this: "She was a pitiful immigrant among demanding appliances".³⁷⁶ She judges herself harshly, as she feels herself judged from without, for not being able to meet the requirements her unfamiliar environment seems to place on her.

The unfamiliarity of the environment is compounded by racism; this comes through very clearly in a bewildering and humiliating incident that occurs a few days after Dimple has arrived in New York. At the insistence of her (Indian-born) hostess, Dimple enters a Jewish-owned deli to buy cheesecake; the man in the shop aggressively tells her that it would be against "God's law" for him to sell cheesecake. When another man in the shop points out that a "greener" like her can not be expected to know any better, the shopkeeper tries to be kind, saying "Okay, okay. Little lady in the nice pretty clothes, get this straight. Nothing against you, nothing against your people. But you see, the meat I sell means I can't sell milk, cheese, sour cream --nothing like that". It is an extremely humiliating experience for Dimple, and she

...ran from the store, eyes closed, hands covering her mouth and nostrils. On the stroll home with Meena she thought of Lake Market, where twenty hawkers would be grabbing at her for any small change she had... What was wrong with her money? In Calcutta she'd buy from Muslims, Biharis, Christians, Nepalis. She was used to many races; she'd never been a communalist. And so long as she had money to spend no one would ask her what community she belonged to. She was caught in the crossfire of an American communalism she couldn't understand.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴ Mukherjee 1975, pp. 114-5.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

The mortification and shame Dimple feels at this incident stem partly from the fact that she does not understand what has happened; Dimple believes her custom is being rejected because of her race, as there is no way she can comprehend the Jewish laws about food behind the deli-owner's behaviour. But the incident also hits her so hard because of the aggressiveness with which the men respond to her, and the patronising tone of the deli-owner ("Little lady in the nice pretty clothes... Nothing against you, nothing against your people...") which seem to belie that he has "nothing against" Dimple as an immigrant Indian woman. The men's aggressiveness may come partly from their own experiences of society's ignorance and anti-Semitism, but in turn it is translated, combined with sexism, into patronage of a foreigner.

As the quote with which I opened this section makes clear, it is not only the unfamiliarity of place, and the loss of a place left behind, which creates such acute "unbelonging" for so many migrant women. Indeed, if they encountered a society more welcoming both on the level of individual, everyday interactions and in legal, institutional terms, migrant women would certainly find adjusting to life in Britain and North America a great deal less difficult. Overt and subtle racism, however, often (if not always) coloured by sexism, have profound implications for migrant women's experiences of the new places and of trying to create new "homes" in the places where they settle. So too do the gender-specific ways women experience their lives as migrants, in relation both to white-majority British and North American societies and to members of their own families and communities. In turn, their sense of themselves can be deeply affected.

In Mukherjee's novel, Dimple's deep unhappiness in New York is shown to be a result of her bewilderment and fear as an immigrant in a strange place, reinforced by her isolation as a housewife and by the misery of her relationship to her husband, Amit. The way Amit tries to console her makes clear his lack of understanding of her experience and the way in which it is gender-related as well as arising from her status as an immigrant. He asks her at one point why she had not told him she was so unhappy:

she should have unburdened her worries to him and he would have explained that it was culture shock and that culture shock happened all the time to Indian wives; it wasn't a serious thing and it certainly wasn't one of those "breakdowns" that American wives were fond of having.³⁷⁸

It is clear that his explanation of "culture shock" is simplistic, although for himself this may be an adequate term. He is productively employed; his employment is the basis of their fairly secure immigration status; he does not suffer either the isolation or the profound crises of confidence and identity that Dimple does. In the light of these, her fears --of unfamiliar technology, of social interactions-- gain huge proportions, explicable neither by a term like

³⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

“culture shock” nor purely by reference to American women’s “breakdowns” (however little these may deserve Amit’s trivialising). Despite Amit’s attempts at reassurance, his reference to both Indian and American married women only as “wives” gives them importance only in relation to men. He also, in effect, further cuts her off and isolates her by so sharply distinguishing her “culture shock” from American women’s “breakdowns”.

Joan Riley’s novel *The Unbelonging* also addresses questions of belonging and “unbelonging,” of identity as affected by migration, and the personal, internal damage wrought by ideological, social and political forces of racial and gender oppression, which it portrays as interlinking and mutually reinforcing. The character Hyacinth leaves Jamaica at the age of eleven for Britain, having been summoned there by her father. Her “unbelonging” is inextricably linked to race and gender; her migration from Jamaica to Britain puts her into a situation of profound loneliness and pain, arising from apparently unending traumas of both racial and sexual oppression, experiences of which are greatly magnified by her migration.

Hyacinth experiences blatant and excruciating racism at the hands both of fellow pupils at school and of white figures of authority. On her primary school playground, she is subjected to the fear and pain of being surrounded by white children shouting “Kill the wog!”, the teacher on duty looking on with “amused tolerance”.³⁷⁹ She later ends up in a children’s home run by a woman known as Auntie Susan and, in one incident, is taunted by Sylvia, a resident of the home known for her bullying behaviour. Auntie Susan hears what is happening, but refrains from acting until Hyacinth, filled with memories of the earlier playground incidents and with powerful intermingling emotions of hatred, fear and envy of “these white people”, lunges at the other girl. Auntie Susan belatedly appears, and, sending Sylvia away, berates Hyacinth with the blatantly racist words “I will not allow you to come here and establish jungle law”.³⁸⁰

Hyacinth’s experience of racism is directly related to her migration from Jamaica to Britain. There is no indication that she had been the victim of racism before the move; she strongly disputes the view of Perlene, a friend she eventually finds at college who is also Jamaican, that racism exists in the Caribbean as well as in the U.K. For the first time, surrounded as she is most of the time by white people, she knows the shame of being made to feel “different”; in Jamaica “her colour didn't matter, for everyone else was the same”.³⁸¹ Several times during the course of the novel she longs to be with black people, to be rid of the racial shame which causes her such misery.

³⁷⁹ Riley 1985, p. 16.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., pp.74-6.

³⁸¹ Ibid., p. 68.

Hyacinth also suffers extreme cruelty at the hands of her father. He frequently beats her viciously, mostly as punishment for wetting her bed, and on one occasion delivers her a vicious kick that sends her flying down the stairs. Always his violence is foreshadowed and accompanied by the threatening “lump of his anger” in his trousers.³⁸² The sexual nature of his violence becomes most violently explicit when, in the final brutal scene before Hyacinth manages to leave his house, he tries to rape his daughter. The trauma and pain of her father’s sexual violence remains with Hyacinth throughout the novel, long after she manages to leave.

So her suffering as a result of sexism, as well as racism, is increased when Hyacinth comes to Britain. Her life in Jamaica seems to have been quite women-centred; in her waking and sleeping dreams, it is her beloved Aunt Joyce and her friends Cynthia and Florence who figure most prominently. As Isabel Carrera Suarez points out, in Britain Hyacinth is deprived of physical warmth and female community; her bonds with women in Jamaica are severed. The complete absence of “the physical mother,” whom readers know nothing about, can be seen as representing this lack of nurturing and intimacy in Hyacinth’s life.³⁸³ Furthermore, because of her father’s abuse of her, in her experience “bodily contact is related only to violence”,³⁸⁴ and even where the opportunity for companionship with other Black women and men exists, she all too often shuts herself off from them out of shame and internalised hatred of her blackness. Her “unbelonging” is intimately tied both to the lack of nurturing community, especially the lack of female nurturing, in her life in England, and to the violence she endures from her father. Thus her migration forces a shift in her gendered experience, in terms of her sense of herself, as well as in her relationship both to women and to men.

The two factors of racial and sexual oppression make Hyacinth feel “trapped, sandwiched between the hate and spite of the white world and the dark dingy evil that was the house of her father”.³⁸⁵ But far from being discrete expressions of the public and private domains respectively, the two oppressions intersect at many points in the novel. Several instances show that the racism of British society bolsters the sexist violence Hyacinth experiences at home. Obliquely warned by her stepmother of the danger that her father’s violence may turn explicitly sexual, and threatened by her father that he will “show you some of the things not to let men do”,³⁸⁶ Hyacinth begins to seek out books on the subject of incest. Because she finds no reference to black men in these books, she is able to put her fear of incest aside by telling

³⁸² Ibid., p. 14.

³⁸³ Isabel Carrera Suarez, “Absent Mother(Land)s: Joan Riley’s Fiction”, in Nasta, ed., 1991, p.295.

³⁸⁴ Carrera Suarez 1991, p. 301.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

“herself that black men did not do things like that”.³⁸⁷ The books she reads fail to address her particular situation, thus rendering her experience invisible; they do not acknowledge, let alone validate, the experiences of black girls and women. Instead of arming her with the understanding and strength she needs, they indirectly increase the destructive power of her father’s violence.

Hyacinth’s father plays upon her fear of racism --a fear that her own experience tells her is well founded-- to prevent her from revealing the secret of his violence. When a kindly teacher, suspecting that Hyacinth has a “far from satisfactory home life,” approaches her and offers her help, Hyacinth remembers her father’s words: “You think you get bad treatment here?... Well let me tell you, if you run go tell the white teacher them going to take you away... They don’t like neaga in this country. All them white people smile up them face with them plastic smile, and then when you trust them, them kill you”.³⁸⁸ She does not confide in the teacher; her fear of racism protects her father from the consequences of his violence.

There is some indication, moreover, that the sexual violence Hyacinth’s father perpetrates against her is intertwined within the racism of British society which he too experiences. This then is another way that migration (both her father’s and her own) leads to greater experience of oppression for Hyacinth— her father’s experience of racism in Britain is linked with his violence towards her. When her father takes her to the doctor because of her persistent bed-wetting, Hyacinth is surprised when “her father took off his cap, looked servile”, and speaks in respectful tones to the doctor, who is white.³⁸⁹ While Riley does not explicitly spell this out, readers can surmise how Hyacinth’s father might be responding to humiliations experienced, with violence towards his daughter. Thus her migration leads to greater pain for her not only because of the racism she herself must endure, but also because her father responds to racism by reasserting a violent and victimising masculinity. Carrera Suarez writes of the “chain” of oppressions portrayed in several of Riley’s novels, whereby Black women experience racism both directly and through their treatment at the hands of Black men: “The frustration or sheer hatred of whites is discharged on black men, who then discharge their own on black women”. She also points out how several of Riley’s female characters state explicitly “[t]hat the understanding of the chain does not imply justifying this transmission of oppression”.³⁹⁰ While her image of the “chain” is perhaps somewhat simplistic, not really shedding any light on how constructions of masculinity, whiteness and blackness intersect in a racist and patriarchal society, it does go some what towards explaining experiences such as Hyacinth’s.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁸⁹ Riley 1985, p. 29.

³⁹⁰ Carrera Suarez 1991, p. 293.

While she can conceal neither her race nor her gender, Hyacinth's shame at her father's violence remains hidden deep within her so that she is completely unable to speak of it. At the same time it pervades both her inner and outer life. She feels, sometimes, that she deserves the "punishment" of injustice and unpleasant circumstances because of the way her father has treated her. Her shame leads her to adopt a new identity when she moves away to college; she pretends to have left Jamaica far more recently than is the case, thus trying to ally herself more strongly with Jamaica and to deny the extent of the suffering she has undergone in Britain. Thus she removes herself even more from her immediate surroundings in Britain, "belongs" there even less. The racial and gender oppression she suffers, and the shame that results, alienate her from her environment and create in her acute and lasting "unbelonging".

Riley's and Dangarembga's depictions of various characters' differing experiences of oppression, in *The Unbelonging* and *Nervous Conditions*, suggest that there is a link between such experiences and the type of migration-- internal or international, away or back to the original "home"-- undertaken. In addition, the degree of choice or lack of choice in characters' migrations is an important element in influencing whether or not their migrations result in intensified experiences of race- and gender-related oppression.

As in *The Unbelonging*, the central character in *Nervous Conditions* is a young black girl who leaves her home for a context where she is forced to confront the institutions and racism of the politically dominant, white British culture. Tambu is sent first to a mission school twenty miles away from her homestead in pre-independence Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), where she lives with her uncle, aunt and cousin, then to a convent school somewhat further away. Tambu's friendship with Nyasha, her rebellious cousin who has spent much of her childhood in Britain, and who then returns to Rhodesia, is a central focus of the novel.

Both Hyacinth and the young Tambu seek through their dreams of migration away from or back "home" a liberation from their present victimisation. Their migrations are to be moves away from the pain or limitations of their present environments. But while Hyacinth idealises her past, Tambu idealises her future. Like Hyacinth, Tambu loves some aspects of her place of origin (see Chapter 2). But her emotions as she leaves --as we saw in Chapter 1-- are dominated by "excitement and anticipation". She feels she is leaving behind her "peasant self" to embark upon a new life that will lead her to "emancipation" from the limitations that her origins

represent.³⁹¹ This sense of a golden future stays with her, despite Nyasha's influence on her, for years.

The fact that Tambu leaves her village but remains within Rhodesia, combined with the ideology of racial separateness that characterised the country at the time, affects the kind of racism that she confronts at the mission school. Her experience of colonial and racial oppression there is characterised, as I explore further in Chapter 6, mostly by internalised cultural imperialism among her family members, rather than, as in Hyacinth's case, through direct racism at the hands of whites.

But her largely positive experience of the "multiracial" convent school --where a huge majority of the pupils are white-- is more difficult to explain; although she experiences several instances of racism by the nuns when she first arrives, she intensely enjoys her time there and all the opportunities and challenges the school offers her. Certainly she endures nothing on the scale of the racist violence Riley evokes, through Hyacinth's experience in England. Tambu's time at the convent school illustrates, perhaps, that colonial education was often simultaneously a space of denigration and of empowerment; like some of the contributors to the collection *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire*, which I examined in Chapter 2, Dangarembga creates through her character a sense that what was experienced in institutions like this one was not always unambiguously negative.

Although Nyasha has commented sarcastically that attending the convent school will be "a marvellous opportunity... to forget who you were",³⁹² Tambu, unlike Hyacinth and Nyasha, who both struggle with what seem to be almost insurmountable difficulties in returning to their original "homes", moves back and forth between convent school, mission and homestead with comparative (though not complete) ease. This ease may partly be due to the fact that there are lesser differences among the various contexts than those between Rhodesia or Jamaica and England. However, I think, the relative lack of problems in her migrations is also due to Tambu's own strength, growing ability to confront the realities of her life, and the lessons she learns from Nyasha's difficult experience. Furthermore, Tambu's experience suggests the difference that is made by being involved in the decision to migrate and by having some control over the process of migration. The events Tambu describes, along with her own thinking processes, lead her towards real self-discovery despite the dangers the convent school represents.

³⁹¹ Dangarembga 1988, p.58.

³⁹² Ibid., p.178.

It is Nyasha's return to Rhodesia that is the most difficult instance of migration portrayed in the novel. Having been brought up both in Rhodesia and, as a result of her parents' academic ambitions, in the U.K., she seems to have benefited from her stay in England, which provided her with increased political understanding and exposed her to alternative roles and identities. But she comments to Tambu that her parents should have sent her home. Her dual acculturation, a result of colonialism, has left her rootless, not knowing where she belongs and unable, when she returns to Rhodesia, to re-adjust to the patriarchal structures and interactions in her family. The fact that she was powerless to influence the choices around migration made by her parents adds to her difficulties. And her suffering is deepened still further by her fellow pupils at the mission school, who shun her as a "snob" and accuse her of thinking she is "white". Now, she says, her parents "are stuck with hybrids for children. And ... it offends them". She is at a loss as to what to "do" about this identity: "I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there".³⁹³ Her difficulties re-adjusting to life in Rhodesia, and balancing the contradictory expectations of her father, are acute.³⁹⁴

Nyasha's use of the word "hybrid" contrasts with that of theorists like Homi Bhabha. As I discussed in my Introduction, such theorists tend to celebrate "hybrid subjectivities" for their fluidity, their perpetual motion, their transgression of fixed and binary notions of identity. Bhabha's work in particular has been very influential in suggesting that migrant experience generates positive potential for creative forms of identity, a subversive, hybrid "third space" that goes beyond the limitations of binary thinking. But both Nyasha's and Hyacinth's experiences show that for many girls and women, there are great difficulties in coming to terms with the changes and disruptions of migration; their experiences of racism and sexism are often painfully heightened by their migrations. Their sense of rootlessness causes more suffering than tends to be included in the largely positive pictures painted by Bhabha, Chambers and others.

Like *The Unbelonging, Nervous Conditions* explores the effects of racial, colonial and gender oppression on its characters' lives, and the ways in which these forms of oppression, in the context of migration, interact and reinforce each other. Both novels address the personal, internal damage wrought by the ideological, social and political forces of racial, cultural and gender oppression. In both novels, racism is portrayed as bolstering sexism (and sometimes the other way around).

³⁹³ Ibid., p.78.

³⁹⁴ She also, having grown very close to her cousin Tambu, suffers from the latter's move --again, a move attributable to colonialist educational structures-- to the convent school. Though beyond the scope of this thesis, this is another aspect of migration's impact on women's lives that would be worth pursuing: the migration of others *away* from the women and girls who are close to them.

Tambu experiences gender oppression primarily through her family context: through the arrogance of its male members, through patriarchal family hierarchies, and through the devaluation of female family members' needs and lives. Both her father and Babamukuru, the uncle with whom she lives at the mission, have rigid and limiting conceptions of what is and is not "natural" and "decent" for a girl to do. Tambu's mother, grandmother and aunt teach through words and example that it is a woman's duty to "endure and obey",³⁹⁵ to choose "sacrifice" over "self". And Tambu comes to realise that Babamukuru's treatment of his daughter Nyasha, "making her a victim of her femaleness," is deeply connected to her own victimisation at the homestead.

The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition... Men took it everywhere with them... What I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed to and inferior to maleness.³⁹⁶

Tambu's experience is that this sexism is also not dependent on location: her migration to her uncle's place serves to reinforce rather than alter her experience of the devaluing of "femaleness".

The narrator Tambu comments ironically on the patronising attitude of the missionaries at the school she attends, but these "holy" people remain distant, and, like the sexism she experiences, racist and colonialist oppression is played out mostly through ideas and interactions within the Shona family itself. With the notable exception of Tambu's mother, who feels that "white ways and ideas" divide her from her children and are the root of many of the family's problems,³⁹⁷ most of the members of Tambu's family view "Englishness", particularly mastery of the English language and ascent through the various stages of a colonialist education, as the path to progress and "emancipation" from the poverty and misery of life on the homestead. Indigenous ways of life are seen to be in every way inferior to white European culture; migration away from the homestead—though initially denied to Tambu because of her gender—seems also to be the logical conclusion of acceptance of these ideas.

As in *The Unbelonging*, gender and racial oppression intersect and intertwine at many points in the novel. Babamukuru's and his wife Maiguru's differing views on Tambu's winning a scholarship to go to convent school provide one illustration of this intertwining. Babamukuru, who has earlier stressed to Tambu the importance of being both intelligent and "a good woman" --not, as Tambu notes, "seeing any contradiction in this"³⁹⁸ -- now fears that Tambu will mix too much with whites at the convent school and become an "indecent" woman. His questioning

³⁹⁵ Dangarembga 1988, p. 19.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 115-6.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 184.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

of some aspects of white culture, i.e. in the realm of women and sexuality, reinforces his sexist ideas. Conversely, Maiguru, who is herself highly educated, feels that views such as her husband's reflect unfounded prejudice against educated women. In reality, she feels, there is no danger in Tambu's going to convent school. Maiguru questions sexism, but defends colonialist education, denying its potential negative effects.

As in *The Unbelonging*, too, colonialist ideas serve to actually bolster the sexism of the men in Tambu's family. Tambu's brother Nhamo, who is the first in the family to be given the privilege of receiving a colonialist education, views his Shona family's lifestyle with increasing arrogance. He becomes embarrassed and offended by the poverty of the homestead which he and Tambu had both previously seen as "brutal", but at least "uncompromisingly ours".³⁹⁹ And his arrogance is played out in terms of gender relations as well; he returns from school even more arrogant towards his sister than he had been before, speaking of his education as if he inherently deserves it and his sister, being a girl, deserves nothing of the kind. Similarly, the patriarchal authority of Tambu's uncle, Babamukuru, who is headmaster of the mission school, is bolstered by colonialism. As Sue Thomas writes, "The colonial ideology of separate racial 'development' in Rhodesia guarantees minimal interference with his power as Shona patriarch". His power within the family, combined with his membership in the "black colonial elite," also masks "a truer awareness of his subservience to his missionary masters",⁴⁰⁰ thus providing him with a vested interest in colluding with the racist colonial system.

Thus for Tambu and Nyasha, forces of racism and sexism collude in different ways to affect their experiences of migration, their sense of themselves and their relationships to place. At the same time, Dangaremba's portrayal of the two characters shows that migration can provide a place from which the culture of 'home' can—sometimes very painfully—be re-assessed, at the same time as it involves a negotiation with the place of settlement. The changes thus brought about can be both painful and profound.

Lucy's "unbelonging", in Kincaid's novel, is quite different from that of either Riley's or Dangaremba's characters. Her awareness and perspective on colonialism and racism lead her to be on her guard, distant and unable to connect. At the same time, while her anger partly makes her want to remain an outsider, there is also a longing to connect with the people and places among whom she now lives.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴⁰⁰ Thomas 1992, p. 28.

Lucy's feelings about place in the North American context in which she finds herself are illuminated by the clear contrast between Lucy's and Mariah's relationships with nature. Lucy has a distant, much more ambivalent and complex relationship with the land than does Mariah, her white employer. This ambivalence is intimately connected to Lucy's painful experiences, which clearly Mariah does not share, of racism and the colonisation of her homeland, despite the fact that Mariah does attempt to claim an oppressed identity via her "Indian blood".⁴⁰¹ Lucy's critiques of Mariah, while in large part stemming from her acute awareness of race issues, also reflect her simultaneous longing for and rejection of the possibility of an emotional connection to nature. She appears at times to envy the other woman, whose lack of awareness of racism and colonialism enables her to enjoy a much more unproblematic attachment to the land.

Lucy's experience of colonialism brings pain to her relationship with, and a desire for distance from, the North American landscape. Her acute awareness of "hundreds of years" of painful and oppressive history in all that surrounds her sometimes means she feels pushed away by the land. When the family is travelling to the country house where they spend each summer, Lucy thinks: "The land did not say, 'Welcome. So glad you could come.' It was more, 'I dare you to stay here'".⁴⁰² Sometimes it is Lucy who desires distance from her environment. When she and Mariah's family leave the country house at the end of the summer Lucy *decides* not to miss the land: "I said goodbye to everything one month before we left. I would not miss the lake; it stank anyway, and the fish that lived in it were dying from living in it. I would not miss the long hot days, I would not miss the cool shaded woods, I would not miss the strange birds, I would not miss animals that came out at dusk looking for food -- I would not miss anything, for I long ago had decided not to miss anything".⁴⁰³

Some of the complexity of her feelings about place can be seen in her feelings about snow. As we saw earlier, her experience of snow and the cold of North American January weather, soon after her arrival in the U.S., is a significant part of her sense of uncertainty and insecurity. Her relationship to snow changes, over time, as does her sense of self: her reflection on and experiences of snow are ongoing. The development of Lucy's feelings about snow illustrate that its significance goes beyond being background "scenery" or merely a symbol for her real emotions.

When snow falls again in the spring, Lucy feels differently. The snow seems to represent for her the beginning of her own new history and self, away from her island and mother: she writes "So

⁴⁰¹ Kincaid 1990, p. 40.

⁴⁰² Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., pp. 81-2.

this must be living, this must be the beginning of the time people later refer to as ‘years ago, when I was young.’”⁴⁰⁴

At one point, having just written of how during the winter months the snow had been little more than an “annoyance” to her, she says that:

this time when the snow fell, even I could see that there was something to it - it had a certain kind of beauty... The days were longer now, the sun set later, the evening sky seemed lower than usual, and the snow was the color of a half-cooked egg-white, making the world seem soft and lovely and -- unexpectedly, to me-- nourishing. That the world I was in could be soft, lovely and nourishing was more than I could bear, and so I stood there and wept, for I didn’t want to love one more thing in my life, didn’t want one more thing that could make my heart break into a million little pieces at my feet.⁴⁰⁵

Lucy at one level desires, but does not always achieve distance from her new environment. And yet at the same time Lucy does want to connect with her surroundings. Her account of deciding not to miss the countryside around Mariah’s summer home is one that suggests, as well as the distance she has decided on, a certain affection. This affection is present in spite of the fact that she sees the kinds of connections Mariah does not see, between colonialism and the affluence made apparent by the American family’s ownership of this house and piece of land.

Lucy’s desire for connection to places and people, along with her great difficulty finding that sense of connection given her status as an outsider in a white country, are evoked towards the end of the novel. She speaks of feeling that she has achieved something of what she had wanted on leaving Antigua: distance from family, independence, life in a place where no-one knows much about her. However, “the feeling of bliss, the feeling of happiness, the feeling of longing fulfilled that I had thought would come with this situation was nowhere to be found inside me”.⁴⁰⁶ When looking out the window of her flat she sadly describes her sense that “Everything I could see looked unreal to me; everything I could see made me feel I would never be a part of it, never penetrate to the inside, never be taken in”.⁴⁰⁷

This separation from the human and physical environment could be termed, like Hyacinth’s, a form of “unbelonging”, though Lucy’s experience differs in several respects. Like Hyacinth’s it stems in large part from forces of racism and colonialism, but Lucy’s response on an emotional level is more complex than is Hyacinth’s. Lucy keeps her distance from those around her and from her environment because of her acute awareness of historical and contemporary oppression.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 22-3.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 158.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 153-4.

For Lucy, the experience of unbelonging is, in part, liberating. For her the freedom and distance from a restrictive life at home is felt as necessary and empowering. I examine this in greater detail, along with Jamaica Kincaid's own experiences in this area, in Chapter 6.

The extent to which there is a pre-existing community of people originating from the same place as a particular migrant woman or girl --or indeed the presence of other immigrant communities, or people of colour-- in the place of destination, can affect her relationship to and feelings about the place. Sometimes, as is often assumed, the presence of family or community members may ease the transition. This is by no means always the case, however: migrant women's lives are not always made easier by their proximity to family. This is due, in part, to gender relations and other tensions within communities --and particularly within families-- such as attitudes towards the advocated relationship to the larger society and conflicting means of coping with racial politics in the larger society.

Dionne Brand's essay "Bathurst" gives a clear sense of the difference made to her by the presence of Bathurst, the geographical locus of the Black community in Toronto; in the essay she evokes the sustaining vitality of it. In the following paragraphs she speaks of this place both as containing echoes of "home" and as opening up exciting and joyful new possibilities.

Bathurst Subway. I say it like home. It's an uneasy saying, as uneasy as the blue-grey walls, rattling trains, late-laden buses and shrieking streetcars. But when I first came to this country, this city, at seventeen, it was a sign of home.

.... Maybe home is an uneasy place so Bathurst felt like it, not the trains or the grey walls but the people who passed through it that year, the feeling of common purpose, the intensity of new Black pride, the possibilities for justice and the joy in these...

Bathurst Street was the centre of the Black community in Toronto. As soon as you got here, if you were an immigrant, you made the pilgrimage to Bathurst Street. Wherever they took you after the airport, whether it was an apartment on Westlodge or Palmerston or Dupont or in St James Town, the next morning they took you to Bathurst Street...

They first took you to Bathurst and Bloor to locate you, your place, the point from which you would meet this country. And your relationship to it was clear since this was the only oasis of Blacks in the miles and miles to be learned of in the white desert that was the city.⁴⁰⁸

Here Brand points to the ways in which the harshness of migration results in the creation of new kinds of communities.

Migrant women's close connections with other migrants from "back home", in the new place, can be suffocating and destructive; particularly when they have close connections to family members there. Brand's character Verlia, in *In Another Place, Not Here*, suffers greatly when she is staying with her uncle and aunt in the white-majority northern Canadian town of Sudbury,

⁴⁰⁸ "Bathurst", in Brand 1994, pp. 67-9.

where she goes in order to be as “far away from where she is from” as she can.⁴⁰⁹ But the way in which Verlia’s relatives negotiate white society, their willingness to accept their position in society and not question or demand any more than what they already have, make Verlia feel constrained and miserable. Her aunt and uncle, she senses, feel that

[i]n Sudbury, if they conform to some part of the puzzle, they are convinced that they will be rewarded with acceptance. Ordinarity. Man, woman, husband, wife, couple, parents, Black. They are counting on the first six words. They think that her addition will fill out some of the rest somehow, she sense, make them white in this white town... She senses a bargain here... she is supposed to... lie every morning when she wakes up, dresses, pretends that they are going out into this town peaceably and unafraid. Preparing to take nods at their unspoken Blackness, smile deferentially and disprove every day, by their quietness, the town’s judgement on their blackened souls.⁴¹⁰

And Verlia feels acutely the “smallness” of their lives of resignation and acquiescence; she feels she cannot “live with them quietly dying in acceptance, asking permission and begging pardon, cutting herself off from any growing, solidifying when she wants to liquify, to make fluid, grow into her Black self”. So after she has “crie[d] for three weeks” in her bedroom, she takes a Greyhound bus to Toronto.⁴¹¹ For Verlia, the presence of her relatives in Sudbury only serves to accentuate her sense of isolation and unbelonging.

Clearly, as we have seen, the presence of Hyacinth’s father in Riley’s *The Unbelonging* not only does not guarantee her support in confronting the racism of British society; his violence causes her profound pain and trauma. This violence also interacts with the violence of racism to create Hyacinth’s shame in her identity.

Hyacinth’s migration also results in her coming into contact with people of colour of various different backgrounds; the effects of this are less clear. Her attitudes to the people of colour she meets are complex and deeply ambivalent. She experiences the racism of Margaret White, the mixed-race pupil at her secondary school who, no doubt filled with self-hatred and ambivalence similar to Hyacinth’s own, “seemed to hate the black kids even more than the whites did”.⁴¹² At college Hyacinth finds herself “gravitating” to the Indian girls, who because “they were not white, but they had long hair, and their noses were straight, their lips nice and thin” both offer her a connection to white-defined beauty and share her deviation from the white norm.⁴¹³ At the same time, she is contemptuous of Africans, whom she considers backward and inferior to West Indians, and avoids them whenever possible. An incident in which a black student is blatantly

⁴⁰⁹ Brand 1996, p. 135.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., p. 141.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., pp. 148-151.

⁴¹² Riley 1985, p. 18.

⁴¹³ Ibid., p. 81.

racist towards an Indian friend of Hyacinth's only serves to reinforce the latter's wish to identify as somehow different from other blacks.

However, she does make friends with Perlene. And when she is introduced to Charles, a Rhodesian student who has been forced to leave his country because of his political activities there, "she felt a fellowship, a sympathy for him... She knew what it was like to be an exile".⁴¹⁴ As their friendship grows she is both thankful that he is not "aggressive and disgusting" like Jamaican men and "secure in the knowledge that she was West Indian, he a mere African".⁴¹⁵

Many of these confused attitudes can be traced to the abuse she suffers from her father. Her sexual shame, which combines with the shame at her blackness, leads her to reject people with too clear a similarity to herself; her fear of her father leads her to hate West Indian, and sometimes African, men in particular. It also leads to the reinforcing of colonially inscribed hierarchies of racial difference. The racial and gender oppressions that she experiences for the first time in Britain instil a shame in her which is a kind of reinforced exile from herself.

"Back home": Shifts in Migrant Women's Relationships to Places of Origin

Being an [Irish] emigrant isn't just an address... it's actually a way of thinking about Ireland.⁴¹⁶

Shifts in relationships to places of origin are linked to changed relationships to Britain, just as relationships to Britain and to place of origin are linked before migration. Migrants' homesickness, return migration, and relationships to "home" are all relationships to their places of origin influenced by their migration to, and relationships to, the UK or North America.

This section addresses changing relationships with places of origins, touching on "homesickness", home as a source of sustenance, the idealisation of places of origin, attempts to cut ties with places of origin and the entrenchment of traditions among diasporic communities, and their gendered impacts. I turn, next, to focus on complicated experiences of return migration, through Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging* and a more detailed exploration of Dionne Brand's poetry and prose accounts of her movements back and forth between Trinidad and Canada.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 118.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

⁴¹⁶ "Literary Reflections on Irish Migration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" in King, Connell and White, eds., 1995, p. 35.

Robin Cohen refers to Basch et al's ideas of diasporas being "nations unbound" that "reinscribe" space in a new way. As Cohen says, "[d]iasporas... imply multiple attachments".⁴¹⁷ Migrants are situated within a web of transnational ties, maintaining attachments to their countries of origin despite not physically living there.⁴¹⁸ One feature of such attachments is often the "collective memory and myth about the homeland"⁴¹⁹ which many diasporic communities sustain. Cohen quotes from a London Caribbean newspaper to show the extent to which migrants still see the Caribbean as "home". He writes, after his "reality check" on work done on migration in the field of cultural studies:

[T]hrough their roots and branches, or to be precise through their rooting and branching, the people themselves make their diaspora. The frontiers of the region are beyond the Caribbean -- not only in the consciousness of Caribbean people to be sure, but also in their social conduct, migration patterns and achievements in their places of settlement and sojourn".⁴²⁰

Homesickness is a common emotion in migrant women's writing. Helene Moussa in her study of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugee women in North America, *Storm and Sanctuary*, describes homesickness as a kind of deep mourning but also a way of connecting with a lost place. She writes of connections with home as providing a source of sustenance, even though "home" in many cases was a place that could no longer be lived in. She argues that the idea of "home", and a connection with and memories and stories of home can provide a source of sustenance in difficult circumstances, and can help survival in a hostile place.⁴²¹ But homesickness is not always experienced as a conscious emotion. Kincaid, for example, writes in an essay about still waking up at the time she did in Antigua, even though this is a great deal earlier than anyone does in New York (from where she wrote the article).⁴²² Thus homesickness can take the form of a bodily memory of rhythms in the place left behind.

In keeping with my insistence on the importance of attending to the meanings of real, geographical places in women's lives, my use of the word 'homesickness' differs from that of Rosemary Marangoly George, for example, in her book *The Politics of Home*. While pointing out the how complex meanings of "home" are, she argues that "the basic organizing principle around which the notion of the 'home' is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions". She also says that home "is usually represented as fixed, rooted, stable --the very antithesis of travel".⁴²³ On the whole she presents "home" as a negative, exclusionary and conservative construct, and attachment to it closely allied with patriotic feeling. Homesickness, accordingly,

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., p. 136.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 180 and 184.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., p. 150; p. 153.

⁴²¹ Moussa 1993.

⁴²² Kincaid 1977, pp. 37-38.

⁴²³ Marangoly George 1996, p. 2.

comes across as based on false and reactionary nostalgia. Speaking specifically of migrant writing, George concludes the epilogue to her book by arguing that

Immigration and the fictions it engenders teach a certain detachment about “home”. In these texts identity is linked only hypothetically (and through hyphenation) to a specific geographical place on the map... Home in the immigrant genre is a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will. The association between an adequate self and a place to call home is held up to scrutiny and then let go. As postmodern and postcolonial subjects, we surprise ourselves with our detachment with the things we were taught to be attached to.

Perhaps the stance to take, while writing and reading fiction as much as in living, is to acknowledge the seductive pleasure of belonging in homes and in communities and in nations—while working toward changing the governing principles of exclusions and inclusions.⁴²⁴

George’s analysis does accurately describe some migrant women’s writings. But, I argue, others do something quite different from writing with “detachment” about home and linking identity only “hypothetically” to place. These writers recognise the limitations of the places from which they come, particularly in terms of restrictions on them as women from (formerly) colonised countries. In fact in many cases the writers and/or the characters they represent have left “home” precisely because of such limitations. But many also portray “homesickness” or other, often complicated, emotional links with places left behind as well as with more recently formed relationships to places of settlement. Identity, I argue, is represented as quite intimately linked with location, *as well as* with movement between locations. Relationships with the places left behind—which are not so much associated with nation or country as with particular communities and natural environments—are important factors in looking at migrant women’s emotional and political experiences and their representations in fiction and poetry.

One motif, among many, characterising migrant women writers’ representation of relationships with places of origin is idealisation of these places; this too is one of the ways that George suggests that “home” is conservatively constructed. *The Unbelonging* refers to uncritical, nostalgic ideas of home through Hyacinth’s dreams of “back home”; the novel also, though, exposes this perspective as a distortion when Hyacinth returns to Jamaica. Hyacinth seeks through these dreams, which are idealised memories of “home”, a liberation from her present victimisation. The novel begins with a description of a pleasant dream of back home; the dream ends as Hyacinth is woken by her stepmother, furious that Hyacinth has “wet the bed again”. The narrative goes on to describe her father’s treatment of her and her suffering at school. Thus the difficulties of Hyacinth’s new life in Britain contribute to her need to idealise back “home”, as a way of coping with the torment she is experiencing. At the novel’s conclusion, Hyacinth returns to Jamaica to find a reality shockingly different from the one she had partly remembered, partly imagined; she is confronted with the fact that what had sustained her was largely fantasy.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., p. 200.

Dionne Brand offers an even sharper critique of this kind of nostalgia for “home” in a poem from *No Language is Neutral*: “Our/ singing parched, drying in the silence after the/ chicken and ham and sweet bread effort to taste like/ home.... Well, even/ our nostalgia was a lie...”. Here Brand describes the efforts which many migrants make to reproduce feelings, or tastes, of “home”. The poem also refers to the difficult circumstances in which the migrants, gathered “upstairs a store one/christmas where we pretend nothing change,” were living. Brand thus implicitly recognises that the effort being made, and the feelings attached to the place of origin, are perhaps sometimes necessary fictions.⁴²⁵

On the other hand, sometimes there is a more or less complete divorcing from the place of origin, a cutting of ties, or an attempt to do this, because of the pain associated with that place. For some migrant women, the knowledge --which led, literally, to escape--of the limitations of “back home”, and the intense recognition that they can no longer live with those limitations, are particularly powerful. This is clearly seen in the writings and reflections of Jamaica Kincaid. Kincaid’s character Lucy says:

I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which that letter [from her mother] came, and if I could put enough events between me and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face?⁴²⁶

--a freedom, she is implying, that Mariah, her white employer, has. Lucy struggles to separate herself from her original home so that she may be free of the weight of hundreds of years of colonialism, and the weight of her mother’s impact on her.

Migrants often bring “traditions” from home to their places of resettlement. Homesickness or nostalgia on the part of more powerful community members (especially men of relative privilege and power) can lead to an entrenching of “traditional” ways; thus migration and homesickness can worsen gender relations. Cohen discusses gender issues in communities of Indian labourers abroad, commenting that “gender imbalance led to many breakdowns of normal family life”⁴²⁷ (though he does not elaborate on or question what “normal family life” might be). “Women were passed around among several men, while there were endless opportunities for sexual jealousy and abuse. Wife-beatings, even wife-murders, were common”. In his account of the movement --led by the Brahmins-- “to reimpose a conventional ritualistic set of beliefs”, Cohen says in a footnote that they “persuade[d] women, apparently with some

⁴²⁵ Brand 1990, p. 30.

⁴²⁶ Kincaid 1990, p. 31.

⁴²⁷ Cohen 1997, p. 63.

success, to return to their conventional roles, to become ‘pure like Sita.’” Commonly, orthodox forms of Hinduism became dominant in diasporic communities of Indian labourers and were the central connection with India. The *Ramayana* was adopted as central to the religion, for several reasons including the fact that it lays down laws requiring women to be “demure and obedient” to their husbands.⁴²⁸

Thus “home” is sometimes mapped onto women so that they are forced to embody the values of what is left behind (in, often, exaggerated form). Some of these values and practices are the very ones which writers such as Kincaid and Brand suggest are reasons for abandoning their homes in the first place.

Return migration brings very complicated engagements with the meanings of attachment to place. Sometimes migrants seek to escape the problems in places of settlement countries by returning to the place of origin, but this is rarely possible in any simple way, as graphically recounted in Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging*. Hyacinth’s “unbelonging” is in no way resolved when she returns to Jamaica. Her dreams and memories of “home,” which come to her at night and at points during the day when her suffering and loneliness become most unbearable, are her only source of comfort. They provide her with a psychological escape from the reality of oppression, isolation and “unbelonging” she faces in England. They have, however, been idealised beyond recognition. Though her friend Charles gently tries to show her this when he speaks of his feelings on first coming to England from Rhodesia -- “It was easy in my loneliness to get dreams and reality mixed up”⁴²⁹-- it is only when Hyacinth returns to Jamaica, at the end of the novel, that she comes face to face with reality. Her old friend Florence, whom she meets near her old home, accuses her of not having written to her aunt, who is now ill, and, responding as well to Hyacinth’s “press hair,” Western clothing and what she must interpret as superior ways, tells her “Go back whe yu come fram. We noh like farigners ina J.A.”⁴³⁰ Hyacinth’s return migration shows her how total her “unbelonging” is and completes her despair.

Dionne Brand’s writings offer a sustained engagement with the meanings and effects of return migration. The politics of Brand’s writings and the themes she explores in *No Language is Neutral* and *Bread out of Stone* -- language and politics, the pain of legacies and ongoing realities of oppression, and struggles towards dignity and empowerment in the face of those oppressions-- are continuously informed by her evocations of migration and return migration between Canada and Trinidad. Her focus on experiences of return migration in the poems and

⁴²⁸ Ibid., p. 63-64; footnote, p. 201.

⁴²⁹ Riley 1985, p. 125.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., p. 142.

essay I examine in this section is imbued with themes that I have named pain and empowerment: themes I return to in what follows. My readings of the poems and essay are based, too, on the sense that they are best read interdependently, in a way that allows them to illuminate each other.

In “Just rain, Bacolet,” an essay from *Bread out of Stone*, Brand evokes an emotional and spiritual connection to Trinidad, experienced on a return visit there, which is strongly affected by her experiences of Canada following her migration. On one level, it is the contrast between the two places in terms of everyday racial experience and politics that she immediately becomes aware of in Trinidad. The relief at not having to be constantly aware of her “difference” is tangible. She writes of feeling, as she and her partner get off the airplane, that they are “slip[ping] into our skin” as “the gravity of racial difference disappears”.

As well as this, though, it is “a knowledge we slip into, a kind of understanding of the world that will get us through”.⁴³¹ One event illustrates this especially powerfully. Brand writes of being called by a friend to witness a leather-back turtle laying her eggs on a beach:

So I was called to a great thing. The leather-back turtle came up on the beach like this that night. Every May they come up on Turtle Beach to lay hundreds of eggs. I had forgotten. And when the eggs hatch after six weeks, tiny turtles scramble to the sea under the predaceous swooping of pelicans and frigates. The hotel, its light and customers, intrude on this beach, but this part of the sea is inscribed on all the generations of leather-backs, so they come even as investment and real-estate brokers gobble up the sand and water.⁴³²

She describes the turtle, “ancient, her head larger than a human’s but somehow human-like and her eyes full of silver tears, her skin, black with tiny white spots, wrinkled”, digging her nest and then giving a “sigh, a sound like an old woman working a field, a sound more human than human, and old, like so much life or so much trouble and needing so much rest”. The turtle then covers the nest and carefully, painstakingly camouflages it to protect it before heading back into the sea.⁴³³

The great significance and meaning of this event, for Brand, lies partly in her sense of awe at the beauty and miracle of what she witnesses, and partly at the survival of the turtles despite the great odds against them and their offspring. The odds exist in the natural world, because of predators, but are much exacerbated by human activity. The turtle’s hard work to lay and protect the eggs even in the face of the threats against them is a source of great admiration for Brand. She writes of feeling that the turtle is “more than” us, “beyond all surmising or calculation,

⁴³¹ “Just Rain, Bacolet”, in Brand 1994, p. 59.

⁴³² Ibid., p. 60.

⁴³³ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

nothing that we could experience, greater than us not because we had said so but because she was".⁴³⁴ The turtle's existence and value are autonomous, not dependent on human validation; they also cannot be totally comprehended.

The turtle is herself, not a metaphor for anything else. But she also embodies the kind of knowledge that Brand feels she "slips into" as she returns to Trinidad. There is a strong sense, in this passage, that Brand shares this direct experience/ knowledge of tremendous odds against survival, and of how deadly is the other kind of "knowledge", represented by the hotel and the real-estate brokers. The way the turtle is described --her ancientness, her tiredness, Brand's sense of the turtle's having "so much life or so much trouble or needing so much rest", as well as the detail of the turtle's black skin-- suggests Brand feels an affinity and understanding for the turtle. There is also a sense of respect that arises from the turtle having seen *more* than Brand herself; she writes "This is how old I'd like to be, so old I'll cry silver, sigh human". The description hints at echoes of a slave woman, "working a field".

Brand's experience as an immigrant in Canada has created a need for the meaningfulness of this experience. She writes: "We were born thinking of travelling back. It is our singular preoccupation, we think of nothing else".⁴³⁵ And because of this, because "We are so eager to return, our powers of recognition isolate only the evidence in support of a place".⁴³⁶ So in writing about the turtle, she says, she did not mention the "unnecessary clutter" of the tourists. But

I took it as a gift, this intimacy I intruded on at Turtle Beach, with the tourists, the ones we had to shush, and the lights and the hotel and the cigarette-smoking man Vi told to 'have a little respect.' I measured only the space that the leather-back and I occupied. I took it as part if not all the answer to going back.⁴³⁷

Knowing how her perception of Trinidad is affected by having migrated, and by wanting Trinidad to fulfil its potential meaning, she can "measure" the deepest significance Trinidad has for her, without false nostalgia, recognising the rest but leaving it at the margins.

There is also significance in this incident because Brand remembers having seen such turtles as a child; she remembers, with her grandfather, "digging for the eggs of this now-endangered species" and eating one of them. The meaningfulness of this memory is added to in the present by Brand's adult understanding of the rarity of her experience, because the turtle is one of an endangered species. As well as the literal meaning of the turtle being endangered, I suggest a

⁴³⁴ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., p. 62.

wider danger is also implied. The “knowledge” of the turtle is endangered; spiritual knowledge and dignity are threatened in the face of economic exploitation of land and people. Given the connection Brand feels with the turtle, and the fact that the values represented by the brokers threaten the health and survival of both animals such as the turtle and, more generally, of human and physical environments, I believe she is hinting at the threats to herself, to Black people, to human and spiritual existence as well as to the animals themselves.

The incident of the turtle represents a coming together, an experience of meaning that is highlighted by its great contrast with Brand’s life in Canada, which feels comparatively empty of connection and significance. Brand writes: “I felt called as I do for every event here. Surrounded so by spirits, history, ancestors... I realise that I live differently in Canada. I live without connection to this world with its obligations, homage, significances, with how you are in the soul”. She feels a greater sense of connection with this particular place, in Trinidad, both because of its history of significance for her (because it is the place from which she came and a place of greater political belonging) and because of her sense of the different form of knowledge she finds in Trinidad. Here she experiences the world differently, because of that greater sense of connectedness and openness, because of not having “to live so small” the way she feels she does in Canada.⁴³⁸

Like the experience of travelling, which Brand describes as “a constant state”,⁴³⁹ experiences of pain and empowerment constantly ebb and flow, or coexist simultaneously, rather than being states consecutive to each other. Brand writes of the pain as well as the meaningfulness of her reconnecting with her place of origin, of encountering the agonies of slavery which she experiences as an acutely tangible legacy and continuing presence in Trinidad: “You cannot simply go to a place, to visit friends, to pick mangoes on your way to the beach and count on that being all,” she says (in the same essay). “You cannot meet yourself without being shaken, taken apart”.⁴⁴⁰ She is recounting here the experience of visiting an old windmill, which, their guide tells them, was a sugar mill on a plantation in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The mill’s owner talks in terms of “carving it up and selling it in American dollars”; the caretaker, on the other hand,

feels more like home, more like people. He knows the kind of talk we need, talk about the rich and the poor, talk about why you can weep when looking at this place, talk that sounds quiet in the trembling and the razor grass, as if he understands that there are spirits here, listening, and we must wait our turn to speak, or perhaps what they are saying is so unspeakable that our own voices cut back in the throat to quietness. This is where it happened and all we can do is weep when our turn comes, when we meet. Most likely that is

⁴³⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 54-55.

the task of our generation: to look and to weep, to be taken hold of by them, to be used in our flesh to encounter their silence. All over there are sugar mills even older, filled with earth and grass. Now everything underfoot is something broken.⁴⁴¹

Again, there is a contrast in ways of knowing, here. On the one hand there is the erasure from history, the distorting and silencing by the owner of what Brand feels very immediately to be still there, in the land; his violation of it, too, by his desire to profit from the land. On the other, the caretaker's knowledge is of the spirits he feels are there; of the grieving and the immediate presence of history in the place; of the need to feel, recognise, and listen with respect to what is silenced. To be in "this place" is, for Brand, to confront slavery with quiet, intense immediacy.

I want to turn now to the first two poems of *No Language is Neutral*, which I look at in conjunction with each other and with the essay, "Just Rain, Bacolet". The poems, I suggest, address something very similar to what Brand means in her essay when she writes that you cannot just go to a place, pick mangoes "and count on that being all", because of the deep meaning and pain that the place holds. Like the essay, the poems, the first of which is from the ten-part section entitled "hard against the soul" --a title which in itself evokes both poignancy and pain-- evoke the meaningfulness but also the pain of reconnecting with Trinidad.

Especially when read with the second poem, "return", the first can be read as a profound reclamation and reconnecting with land which on the one hand colonisation, and, on the other hand migration have wrested from the speaker. The speaker reclaims land associated with slavery and colonisation, and with the impossibility of escape Brand evokes in other poems (see my Chapter 1); she connects it instead with herself, her lover and with the writing of poetry. The poem begins:

this is you girl, this cut of road up
to blanchicheuse, this every turn a piece
of blue and earth carrying on, beating, rock and
ocean this wearing away, smoothing the insides
pearl of shell and coral

It continues, repeating the phrase "this is you girl" at the beginning of each stanza: a phrase that at once suggests identification of the land and the speaker, the land and her lover, the land and the poem itself.

The speaker implicitly discovers or rediscovers land her lover has not seen; she sees her lover in the land and sea of the island. The third stanza begins "this is you girl, even though you never see it", a line which suggests that despite distance, the land is a source and place of not only her

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 55-6.

own but her lover's belonging and being. And the speaker feels her love and passion for this woman in her sense of the power of the land: "this is you girl, this is the poem no woman/ ever write for a woman because she 'fraid to touch/ this river boiling like a woman in she sleep". The poem evokes the land "where you make sense": both poem and land give meaning to the speaker herself and to her feeling for her lover.

The land is described in terms that evoke a woman's body: the image of the ocean "smoothing the insides" suggests the insides of both rock, "pearl of shell and coral", and of the speaker's body and emotions. There is mention of "that pulse of the heart/ that stretches up to maracas": the heart's "pulse" is located in a particular environment. The poem also connects *itself* to the land: the fifth stanza begins: "this is you girl, this is the poem no woman/ ever write for a woman". In the final stanza, the line "this is where you make sense" can be read to refer both to the place --it is a place of meaning and a source of being, where the speaker herself "makes sense"-- and to the poem itself, which is making sense of the connection between speaker, land and lover.

The second poem, "return", describes a Caribbean island with both apparent nostalgia and underlying violence. The poem opens with the line: "So the street is still there, still melting with sun", suggesting that the speaker has returned to the place of her origin and finds little has changed. There is here a sense of wistfulness, as if whatever was experienced here in the past is being recalled. On the other hand the description, as it unfolds, reveals an underlying ominousness, harshness and violence. Repetition, throughout the poem, of the word "still" suggests immobility, in terms of both the continuing presence of the past, and of the absence of movement in the scene itself: there is perhaps no wind, no human or animal movement indicating life.

The line "[s]till razor grass burnt and/ cropped", halfway through the poem, suggests the land's destruction for the planting of more profitable crops. When the poem is read together with the essay "Just rain" the phrase "razor grass" resonates: Brand uses it in her description of her visit to the old sugar plantation, which I quote above. This echo reinforces the ominousness of the poem's wording here. The menacing words "still/ the butcher's blood staining the walls of the market" could refer either to a butcher selling meat in a food market, or to the butchery of slavery, as evidenced in a slave market. This ambiguity subtly establishes a connection between animals' and Black people's suffering, in a way somewhat different to the passage about the

leather-back turtles from “Just Rain”: slaves were treated the way animals are, and both forms of cruelty are “butchery”.⁴⁴²

The poem ends with an evocation of the violence the islands have seen that shocks, despite the unfolding violence of the poem, because of the surface nostalgia: “still the hard, distinct, brittle smell of/ slavery”. The speaker’s experience of the place evoked in the poem suggests that the memory of slavery’s agonies and violence is embodied in the land itself, as real, present and tangible as its colours, smells and heat.

Brand writes in “Just Rain, Bacolet” that “travelling is a constant state. You do not leave things behind or take them with you, everything is always moving... We were born thinking of travelling back... This must be the code written on the lining on my brain, go back, go back, like a fever, a pandemic scourging the diaspora”.⁴⁴³ Return, for Brand, is almost an obsession; and it represents a different knowledge, a confronting of individual and communal history. Her life in Canada is constantly inflected by a past and continuing relationship to Trinidad, and by this sense of constant travelling.

Women and Migration: Changing Meanings of Place, Self and Home

The relationships between people and their contextual societies and places are intimate ones which are transformed by movement.⁴⁴⁴

Where does one culture begin and another end when they are housed in the same person?⁴⁴⁵

Migration is an experience that offers multiple perspectives on place. A “writer’s country” encompasses both places and the journey between them: identity comes to encompass both. This is particularly clear in the work of Dionne Brand, given her movements back and forth between Trinidad and Canada. While for Brand many of her emotions are embedded in the land, in Trinidad, there is some sense of home in Canada as well, as the passage about Bathurst, quoted earlier, makes clear. Brand gravitated towards the sense of home which Bathurst represented and evoked; she writes: “Funny how home is the first place you look for even if you are running from it, you are nevertheless always running towards it, not the same spot but a spot you’re sure that you’ll know”. And the following passage from the same essay makes explicit connections between home and new, evolving identities.

⁴⁴² See Armstrong 1993 for reflections on the connections between violence towards people of colour, and towards animals.

⁴⁴³ Brand 1994, pp. 58-59.

⁴⁴⁴ Paul White, “Geography, Literature and Migration” in King, Connell and White, eds., 1995, p. 15.

⁴⁴⁵ Nayantara Sahgal, “The Schizophrenic Imagination” in Chew and Rutherford, eds., 1993, p. 119.

...They first took you to Bathurst and Bloor [when you got here] to locate you, your place, the point from which you would meet this country. .. They took you here for you to get a sense of your new identity, the re-definitions you knew were coming but could never have anticipated though you had some sense when you gave yourself up to the journey that you'd emptied a place for them. Bathurst was the site of new definitions.⁴⁴⁶

However, my attention to the multiplicity of selves, identities and places that migration reflects is not intended to mirror the attention to “hybridity” and “migrancy” that is so celebrated by some post-colonial theorists, as I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter. Rather I stress that the bodily and emotional alienation that migrants experience on arrival in cold northern countries, for example, and the emphasis on nature --on weather, on plants, on particular landscapes-- are important pointers to the very materiality of migrant women's lives.

The importance of nature in migrant women's lives, and the role of nature in particular places, is especially clear and strong in the essays of Jamaica Kincaid. Much of Kincaid's work emphasises her need to distance herself from Antigua, and from her mother who continued (she has now died) to live there; migration is thus seen as essential to her coming into her own life. In her essay “Homemaking”, Kincaid writes about the house in Vermont where she now lives with her husband and two children. She reflects on the previous inhabitants, and about what the house may have meant to them, and writes of her sense of the continuing presence of that history within the house.⁴⁴⁷ I sense from this piece that she finds meaning in this connecting with a place, that here, away from Antigua and her mother, she can safely root herself.

Kincaid's reflections on her passion for gardening bring together questions of self, identity, and relationships with place in the context of migration. In an interview with Suzie MacKenzie, Kincaid says that gardening is about memory: it is “ ‘memory [that] is a gardener's real palette’ ”. MacKenzie writes that Kincaid says that her own mother “was one of those gardeners whose very touch created growth. ‘She'd eat a fruit, plant the seed, and from that more fruit would come’ ”. MacKenzie comments, “She laughs, not necessarily because this memory is pleasant --her relationship with her mother was always fraught-- but perhaps because, as she knows, we can only take our passions where we find them”.⁴⁴⁸ Perhaps also Kincaid laughs because of the unexpected effects of her own turn to gardening, and the irony of gardening drawing her close to memories of her mother, from whom distance has been so necessary.

When Kincaid started to make her garden, she had no plan, yet, thirteen years on, looking at her garden, she realises that “ ‘I have made it look like a certain memory I have. It's like a map of

⁴⁴⁶ “Bathurst”, in Brand 1994, pp. 67-9.

⁴⁴⁷ Kincaid 1995 b).

⁴⁴⁸ Mackenzie 1999, p. 82.

the Caribbean. The beds are lots of little islands all over the place and the lawn is the sea.' She calls the beds after islands, the biggest is Cuba. 'And a particularly shady one I call Haiti.' "

Kincaid tells MacKenzie that in the beginning, before the shape became clear, she planted mainly flowers from the reading of her youth: from novels by the Brontës and Jane Austen, which made her long for the perennials of the English country garden such as delphiniums and foxgloves. But she has abandoned flowers now for shrubs and trees: " 'I have moved on. I like big. I am very tall and I grew up with lush-leaved things.' " ⁴⁴⁹ Thus gardening provides Kincaid with a connection with her mother, and with Antigua, a connection which is rooted in the soil, but which is only possible –or admissible-- thousands of miles from her original home. In this garden, she began by reproducing the English gardens she first knew through reading; as time passed, however, she moved on, recognising the Caribbean in her garden and beginning, consciously, to plant trees and shrubs which might evoke Antigua more. Through her garden Kincaid both roots herself in her place in Vermont, and can better come to terms with her childhood, her memories, her island of origin, and her mother.

Migration, then, can give rise to feelings of loss and liberation, in complicated relation. Migration can give rise to the pain of grief on leaving a loved and/or familiar place and people; it can give rise to a striving for a sense of wholeness and empowerment. Migration brings great change, often, to migrant women's sense of self, to feelings of where "home" is, and where the migrant women belong. Central to this new sense of self and identity is changed relationship to place, often represented through reflections on the differences between places, through references to climate, to landscape and to nature. Greater sense of connection with the place of resettlement, and accommodation of, or appreciation of, the very different weather conditions, and different animals and plants, can signal women coming to terms with and creating a new way of belonging. In this process migrant women resist the erasure of self, and the confusions of "double vision" which were the result of much colonial education, as discussed in Chapter 2. These writings point to the very importance of material places in women's lives in their experiences of migration, in direct contrast to the celebration of rootlessness and movement in much contemporary postcolonial criticism.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

Chapter Four

Literary Activism I: Reading Migrant Women's Writing

We cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as praxis. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers.⁴⁵⁰

Introduction: The Politics of Reading

This chapter represents a shift in focus, from the texts to a focus on the *process of reading* the texts. If Schweickart is right in what she writes above, a consideration of the politics of migrant women's writing must take into account the role of readers of that writing. This chapter looks at how politics "happens" when women --Black women, white women, lesbian and heterosexual women-- read migrant women's writing, and how this reading process relates to women's activism. I draw on the field of reader-response theory, and particularly feminist critiques of reader-response theory, which focus on the gendered politics of reading. In contrast to forms of literary criticism which focus on textual analysis alone, reader-response theory emphasises that literature consists not only of texts but also of the activity and contribution of readers.

According to Louise Rosenblatt (who, in 1978, was writing in a theoretical climate very different from that of today):

One can understand and appreciate the great interest in textual analysis in recent years, since the author has selected these words and no others as the cues that will guide the reader's performance. Perhaps because of the preoccupation with the tie between the author and his creation, or the fixation on the text itself, there has been resistance to, and suspicion of, the idea of the reader's creativity. Yet we must remember that once the creative activity of the author has ended, what remains for others -- for even the author himself-- is a text. To again bring a poem into being requires always a reader, if only the author himself.⁴⁵¹

As Wolfgang Iser wrote, it is "[t]he convergence of text and reader [that] brings the literary work into existence".⁴⁵² Or as Schweickart and Flynn, feminist scholars of reader response, later put it, "[r]eader-response criticism... has promoted readers from their previous role as 'extra' to that of 'co-star' with the text in a new script".⁴⁵³

It is because of the evocativeness of much fiction and poetry, and the ways in which readers' imaginations and emotional responses are brought into play, that I think migrant women's literature has such potential in political terms. Any particular work leads to widely varying reader responses, depending on what experiences and emotions from their own lives that readers bring to reading and that are animated by the text. Responses vary, too, according to which parts of the readership are implicitly or explicitly addressed by the text—something I explore further

⁴⁵⁰ Schweickart in Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, p. 39.

⁴⁵¹ Rosenblatt 1978, p. 15.

⁴⁵² Iser 1974, p. 275.

⁴⁵³ Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, p. ix.

later in this chapter. The same text could lead to a reader's sense of being "spoken to" and inspired; to another's indifference; to yet another's response of depression and disempowerment. The potential to inspire, however, of much of the literature, makes the relationships between such writings and Black and migrant women readers an essential part of Black and migrant women's movements for change. In a relationship that is not so much cause-and-effect, but much more complex, involving sometimes identification that can at times lead to a greater sense of connection with others; sometimes other kinds of emotional and/or intellectual response; reading and activism are often, though by no means always, linked.

The active role of readers in the "praxis" of literature also means, I feel, that there is the potential for getting white feminists to think about and work through issues of racism, and the ways in which Black and migrant women experience intersections of racism, sexism and homophobia in their lives, by drawing on these works. There are also clearly pitfalls to beware of when white feminists read Black and migrant women's literature, sometimes precisely because of the relationships with texts that reading involves. I look at this in more detail below. But the "praxis" of literature involves a kind of intimate conversation, a variety of differing and evolving connections between readers and texts, which occur within readers' own minds as they read. Because it is at once their imaginations and what is written on the page which creates readers' mental and emotional responses to any particular reading process, because in this sense literature is a collaborative effort, white women's reading of Black and migrant women's writing could -- if sufficiently sensitive, (self-) reflexive and politicised -- be one important way forward in tackling problems of racism within feminism.

This chapter centres on anthologies of Black and migrant women's writings; these, I argue, aim to create communities of activism among their contributors and readers, a process in which the role of readers is crucial. I have chosen to focus on these anthologies here because of how they make particularly clear the relationships between readers and text, and among readers, editors, and contributors, which they seek to forge. Often addressing readers explicitly, many of these anthologies also set out an explicit agenda for the creation of community and of political unity among Black and migrant women writers, readers and activists. My examination of anthologies here forms the basis for going on to look at the relationship between writing and political activism in selected poems and novels in Chapter 5, with which this chapter is paired.

The pieces in the anthologies do not always uniformly endorse the views of the editors. The contributors and editors do not all necessarily share the same activist agenda. There are tensions, in other words, in the definition of 'feminist activism' that is put forward by any particular anthology. Some critical approaches might emphasise these tensions and conclude

from them that political activism is practically impossible, because of the tenuous nature of identity and identifications. But while space does not permit me to examine in detail the ways in which the anthologies as a whole are structured, and the relationships between individual pieces, I would argue that despite or even because of the presence of multiple viewpoints within a collection, it may have particular power to inspire readers and create political community with them.

My approach is a very different one from current trends in literary criticism, many of which emphasise the crossing and blurring of boundaries, and celebrate the rootlessness, in evidence in migrant literature. My own emphasis is based on a recognition of the importance of readers' and writers' 'locations'. As I pointed out in Chapter 3, by these locations I mean not rootedness in just one place but rather the role of both 'roots' *and* 'routes' in migrants' lives: their relationships to more than one place, and the importance in their lives of their past and continued movement between places. In addition, while both migrant writers and their critics often not only demarcate but also re-write difference, I argue that it is important to retain a recognition of the difference made in writers' and readers' lives by race, gender, sexuality and other such factors. Through my emphasis on the politics of reading, I am asserting that sometimes complicated interactions of power, privilege and disadvantage profoundly affect the reading process and the impacts which literature has on its various readers.

The anthologies of Black and/or migrant women's writings I focus on are: *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women*, edited by Shabnam Grewal et al (1988); *Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain*, edited by Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins (1987); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981); *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna Kadi (1994); and *Piece of my Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology*, edited by Makeda Silvera (1991).

This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, and first published in 1981, has become a classic. It is part of the history that has made the other anthologies possible. Though originally mainly US-centred, later editions of the collection were "much more international in perspective".⁴⁵⁴ The other collections, published later, specify particular communities of women which could be encompassed by the original "radical women of color": Black Women in Britain; lesbians of colour; Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists. These later anthologies often emerged

⁴⁵⁴ Moraga, "Refugees of a World on Fire: Foreword to the Second Edition", in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, no page reference.

from specific communities of women, sometimes geographically defined: the collection by Cobham and Collins anthologises writings by Black women in Britain; Kadi has collected writings from Arab-Canadian and Arab-American feminists; Silvera's book encompasses writings by lesbians of color. The anthologies also specify different political locations, and different relationships with feminism, such as "Radical Women of Color" and "Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists". However while the collections specify different communities, these communities sometimes overlap, or address each other. While Makeda Silvera's collection specifies lesbians of colour in its title, Moraga and Anzaldúa, and Kadi, are also lesbians, and their collections include the works of (other) lesbians; Kadi is a contributor to the collection edited by Silvera.

These collections, both individually and together, testify to the centrality of migration in the lives of Black women, and the importance of "home" and "community" in this experience. Notions of home and community acquire intensely political meanings for migrant women of colour in the contexts of colonialism, sexism, racism, and homophobia. At the same time, in their diverse constituencies, and forms, the anthologies resist any move to homogenise either Black women or women of colour, or the nature of their experiences of migration, of home, and of community building. Further, the anthologies point to the importance of writing and reading in the process of dealing with migration.

In this chapter I first address the role of anthologies in creating "home" and "community" among their readers; I then turn to explore this in detail, drawing on reader-response theory and feminist criticisms of this theory. I use concepts such as texts' direct and indirect address of readers and the idea of the "implied" or "ideal" reader, to examine how the writings "imagine" their readers and how the presence of this hypothetical reader, inscribed within the text, might affect actual readers. I also stress the importance of reading contexts in exploring the process of making meaning of texts. I draw on the work of Black feminist critics, on studies of real women readers --by Jacqueline Bobo, Gina Wisker, along with contributors to collections edited by Elizabeth Flynn and Patrocino Schweickart, and by Sara Mills-- as well as my own responses to Black and migrant women's writings, my experiences of teaching such writing, and of my students' responses to them. I conclude by arguing for understanding reading as a process of feminist conversation, and stress the need for "pro-womanist" readings of Black and migrant women's texts by white readers.

Anthologies of Black and Migrant Women's Writing: Forging Community

Many anthologies of Black and migrant women's writing aim to create a sense of community among both contributing writers and readers. They explicitly try to form relationships with readers, offering them support and sustenance. Additionally, their non-unitary authorship contributes to that sense of community; they include a range of voices, experiences and views and in so doing either explicitly or implicitly invite readers --of a more or less clearly defined group-- to participate, contribute their own voices, find commonality with the experiences portrayed. Sometimes these relationships are conceived in terms of home: editors at times speak about the anthologies, in their introductions, in terms of *places* of support, sustenance and community. Moreover, it is not community alone or for its own sake that is sought; often there is an explicitly activist agenda. The anthologies aim to support, to inspire and to radicalise.

Joanna Kadi, in her introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers*, uses the image of maps to explore her understanding of community and home, and what she hopes the anthology will offer its readers. She speaks of the maps she learned about as a schoolgirl, which present the nations of the world as discrete, clearcut, almost natural entities (see chapter 2). She writes of wanting "to create maps that chart new ground",⁴⁵⁵ maps that are "alive, many-layered, multi-dimensional, open-ended, and braided",⁴⁵⁶ and that thus reflect experience more truly than conventional ones. She continues, "I hope this collection of essays and poems offers landmarks, signposts, names, and directions...". Other comparable anthologies

help record a community's history and spirit. They are valuable maps in our struggle for liberation, offering the hope and information, sustenance and analysis, education and challenges that we need so desperately. This book is a new map.⁴⁵⁷

Kadi's formulation of a new kind of map-making is clearly a metaphorical description of the writing in the anthology: new ground is charted, the maps, or writings, are alive and many-layered. But it also implies something about the *reading* of the anthology. Like literal ones, the "landmarks, signposts, names and directions" offered by the collection are meant to be read and used by others, to prevent them losing their way and to reassure them that others have been this way before.

Joanna Kadi writes personally, to a reader she explicitly addresses and renders present, in her contribution to *Piece of my Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology*.

This is the letter I wish someone had written for me when I was a young woman.
Dear Sister,

⁴⁵⁵ Kadi 1994, p. xvii.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., p. xiv.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., p. xvii.

There are stories I must tell you. Stories with knowledge and words and feelings that must be passed on. Because so many times, our stories to each other have not been shared as they were meant to be but rather they have been cut short, interrupted in the flow of one generation to another. What does it mean to be a lesbian of colour? what are the stories around this improbable/probable happening? Improbable because in a sexist, racist and heterosexist society, it is not likely we would find our way through the maze of external and internal oppression to come home to this. Probable because it is oh so likely we would love each other/ourselves so much. I hold the improbability and the probability together as I reflect on these stories. As I reflect on the lack of stories offered to me as I grew up. And so I want to write this letter to a young woman of colour and to reach backward in time to offer it to myself. Because this is the letter I wish someone had written for me when I was a young woman.⁴⁵⁸

She goes on to say that she “can only pass on what I know as an Arab-Canadian, working-class lesbian feminist. And while my personal stories intersect with a larger framework, it is crucial to remember I speak only for myself”. She writes about the lesbians of colour she knows, emphasising the simple fact that “Lesbians of colour exist” (something she herself did not know as a young woman); and to tell the story of her own coming out. She speaks of the process by which “I began to share words. First with my abusive husband (who did not notice when I went for days without speaking), but mostly with other women”; the joy and excitement with which she discovered lesbianism; the pain of discovering that the racism and classism rampant in society existed among lesbian feminists as well. Thus Kadi evokes the importance of stories, and sharing stories, in her own life.

In this letter she is offering sustenance and support for someone else, a younger woman; her desire to do this stems from her memory of the lack of such support in her own earlier life. She is trying to convey to her that she is not alone but has a community of support. Kadi is trying to ease the way for this young woman, and to establish an intimate conversation; reassure her that, if the woman is feeling afraid or uncertain or alone, there is also joy ahead. Through the letter she is offering the kind of “hope” and “sustenance” that, according to the introduction to *Food for Our Grandmothers*, that anthology also aims to provide its readers.

This Bridge Called My Back, first published in 1981, is an early and very influential anthology of writings by “radical women of color”; it has provided inspiration for the compilation of many later anthologies of Black women’s writings both in the US and elsewhere, including Britain. Part of the impact of the anthology is already made clear in the second edition of 1983. Cherríe Moraga, one of the co-editors, opens the foreword to this edition by invoking past and future readers and by quoting a young reader’s letter of response to the anthology:

Three years later, I try to imagine the newcomer to Bridge. What do you need to know? I have heard from people through letters and travel that the book has helped changed some minds (and hopefully hearts as well), but it has

⁴⁵⁸ Kadi in Silvera, ed., 1991, p. 100.

changed no one more than the women who contributed to its existence. It has changed my life so fundamentally that today I feel almost the worst person to introduce you to Bridge, to see it through fresh eyes. Rather your introduction or even re-introduction should come from the voices of the women of color who first discovered the book:

The women writers seemed to be speaking to me, and they actually understood what I was going through. Many of you put into words feelings I have had that I had no way of expressing... The writings justified my thoughts telling me I had a right to feel as I did. It is remarkable to me that one book could have such an impact. So many feelings were brought alive inside me.⁴⁵⁹

This response to the anthology seems to embody what Kadi is aiming for in her *Piece of My Heart* letter; indeed it could almost be a reply to that letter. The fact that it is a younger woman of colour who was so touched by the volume; the understanding its contributors seemed to show for her personally; the reassurance, seeming to come from the anthology's pages, that this young woman's thoughts and feelings were "justified": all these are what Kadi is hoping for and what many anthologies aim for-- to reach out to readers in order to overcome readers' isolation, to provide them with hope, reassurance, and understanding.

Moreover, many anthologies aim to create a sense of home and community, to communicate on a *collective* as well as an interpersonal level. This is in a context, sometimes referred to in anthology contributions or introductions, of a widespread sense of homelessness among Black and migrant women and the necessity of working to create new homes and communities.

Rhonda Cobham writes in her introduction to the anthology *Watchers and Seekers: Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain*,

...each time I read through the collection, I have the illusion of being 'back home' for that family reunion of sisters and cousins we've been promising ourselves for years: where we'll cook home food, laugh raucously at the most inane jokes, share political obsessions and spiritual insights, rap about relationships and generally heal each other of all the scars of all those years of achieving and surviving like the strong Black women we cannot always be.⁴⁶⁰

In a similar vein, Cherrie Moraga writes in *This Bridge*:

This book is written for all the women in it and all whose lives our lives will touch. We are a family who first knew each other in our dreams, who have come together on these pages to make faith a reality and to bring all of our selves to bear down hard on that reality.⁴⁶¹

These anthologies are an attempt to redefine home, family and community. They are trying to create for contributors and readers a sense of rootedness while at the same time a basis for resistance and radicalism. As I discussed in chapter 3, migrant women often forge greatly changed "meanings of place, self and home" out of their experiences of migration, resettlement, and changed relationships to society. Anthologies are a "place" where such changes are

⁴⁵⁹ Moraga, "Refugees of a World on Fire: Foreword to the Second Edition" in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983; Alma Ayala, "a nineteen year old Puerto Rican, from a letter to Gloria Anzaldúa", no page reference.

⁴⁶⁰ Cobham in Cobham and Collins, eds., 1987, p. 11.

⁴⁶¹ Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p. xix.

reflected, and reflected *upon*. They recreate themselves as homes and families by trying to express the kind of support family can, but clearly does not always provide, and at the same time creating a liberatory, feminist/womanist community without the oppressiveness of many families. As well as to support its members, this community exists to challenge and resist the oppressions Black and migrant women face both within Black families and in relation to white-dominated society.⁴⁶²

This is perhaps particularly the case with anthologies of Black and migrant lesbian writings. In her introduction to *Piece of My Heart*, Makeda Silvera writes of the initial difficulty of eliciting contributions for the anthology, and of the fear that may have prevented many lesbians from responding to the call for submissions.

Fear of the loss of family, fear of obliteration from a whole community, a whole culture. For often times it is not just the loss of blood family we fear but that entire cultural community, where we go for comfort, for music, for food; where we go to when our daughters and sons get jerked around by a system that is plain racist. A system that tells us we are nothing but a bunch of criminals—that we have no voice. A culture that tells us that gay/lesbian, women who love women of any colour are to be scorned and ridiculed. Our community, our family, are no exception, they are often embarrassed, scandalized, ashamed and fearful of us—lesbians—oddities. This is frequently what silences us, because without that home, without family, we often have only that racist white world.⁴⁶³

This passage expresses the complexity of the relationships many lesbians of colour have with their families and other members of their cultural/racial/ethnic communities. There is, often, warmth and comfort to be found there, and refuge from the racism of the larger society. And yet this same source of sustenance is no stranger to the homophobia of that larger white society; and many lesbians fear being denied that sense of community –and sometimes even being physically victimised-- were they to be open about their sexuality “at home”.

Silvera continues by saying that the anthology “stands as a testimony to the ongoing process of breaking our silences, being mute no longer” in the face of these fears. She writes of the “conscious decision” to juxtapose the contributions of new writers with those of “the established sisters that we all love and respect”, which came from the feeling “that anthologies are one of the few places where new writers can get support and validity”. She continues:

The contributions in this anthology present a range of lesbian experience from coming out stories; the joys of being lesbian; the pain, the passion and the power... The book tells of our similarities as women of colour and also our diversity, which is often obscured by the term ‘of colour’; a term that is politically useful, but often problematic in defining who we are.... We are also mothers daughters, sisters, cousins, aunts, lovers, workers, victims, fighters, warriors, feminists, artists, visionaries. We are lesbian people. We carry with us always our cultural hearts and fighting spirit. The work within these pages represent [*sic*] a diversity of voices, often reflecting the lives we lead, our reality, and the

⁴⁶² Black feminists have sometimes countered white feminists’ critique of patriarchal families by pointing out that Black families are often sources of support, “oases” in a hostile racist society; they also expose and critique male violence against women within Black families. It is against this background that these anthologies are working.

⁴⁶³ Silvera, ed., 1991, pp. xiv-xv.

places we have been as lesbians and as women of colour, living and struggling in a racist, woman hating world.⁴⁶⁴

There is a strong sense created in these words that the anthology, as well as challenging homophobia, sexism and racism by its very existence, also offers itself as a source of community and support to lesbians of colour in the face of their fears and experiences of discrimination. The first two sections of the volume, “Coming Out, Finding Home” and “Memories/Exile”, are explicit about the loss of “home” faced both as a result of coming out and of immigration to North America and about the creation of new homes among women. While this is not explicitly stated, the anthology appears to present itself as one place where such a home is to be found.

The dual function which the anthology seeks to play –as a challenge to oppression and as source of support-- in some ways parallels that of the other anthologies I examine in this chapter. Silvera in fact pays tribute in her Introduction to the “women who paved the way”, the editors and contributors to *This Bridge* as well as another anthology, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. But *Piece of My Heart* has the added dimension of being a lesbian anthology; one of the things this means is that the sense of community and solidarity offered comes across as being all the more urgent, and all the more powerful, because of the rejection faced by many lesbians of colour, on the part of their own communities and families, as well as, often, of other feminists.

In *This Bridge*, Cherrie Moraga, as well as describing the anthology in terms of “home” and “family” also writes that a Black women’s political movement must go beyond creating a home for its adherents. She is implying, I think, that the same goes for the anthology *This Bridge*, which is part and parcel of that political activism.

[T]he making of a political movement has never been about safety or feeling “at home”. (Not in the long run, anyway). Cultural identity --our right to it-- is a legitimate and basic concern for all women of color... But to stop there only results in the most limiting of identity politics: “If I suffer it, it’s real. If I don’t feel it, it doesn’t exist”. If politics is about feeling --which feminism has rightfully politicized-- then we need to expand our capacity to feel clear through and out of our own experience as well.⁴⁶⁵

This point is echoed by Bernice Johnson Reagon in her essay, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century”.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. xv-xvi.

⁴⁶⁵ Moraga, “Refugees of a World on Fire: Foreword to the Second Edition” in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, no page reference.

⁴⁶⁶ in Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, New York, Kitchen Table Press, 1984.

Toni Cade Bambara makes the link between the anthology and the wider movement explicit, emphasising that in this movement communication about difference is as vital as that other function of community, support.

We have got to know each other better and teach each other our ways, our views, if we're to remove the scales ("seeing radical differences where they don't exist and not seeing them when they are critical"--*Quintanales*) and get the work done.

This Bridge can get us there. Can coax us into the habit of listening to each other and learning each other's ways of seeing and being.⁴⁶⁷

In the introduction to *Charting the Journey*, the creation of connections among Black people and particularly among Black women is seen as form of political resistance to destructive divisions. The introduction states that "[t]he collection of pieces does not speak with one voice, since Black women do not possess such a voice"; the forms of writing represented, therefore, are diverse. The editors see any commonality among Black women as the result of "the historical link between us of colonialism and imperialism" rather than any kind of essential unity; divisions among Black communities are however imposed by the State, which attempts to prevent solidarity and common cause among them. Writing, compiling the anthology, is a tool in the endeavour to unify and hence resist the forces that divide Black women from each other.

To offer up our experiences to others, to draw out the politics of that experience, is as dangerous as it is potentially liberating. A potential that only comes to fruition when the experiences are collectivized and thus enhance the chances for the harmonization of diverse struggles. Writing, in all its forms, can be a weapon in this process of collectivization and harmonization.⁴⁶⁸

Toni Cade Bambara writes in her foreword to *This Bridge* that the anthology

... lays down the planks to cross over on to a new place where stooped labor cramped quartered down pressed and caged up combatants can straighten the spine and expand the lungs and make the vision manifest.⁴⁶⁹

This image and that of the anthology's title suggests that it is the anthology that will take the weight usually borne by Black women; in so doing it offers a sense of freedom that is physically, viscerally felt. The last sentence quoted above also suggests that the sense of overcoming the bodily restrictions that are suggested (and that are reminiscent of those depicted by Badejo Arts, see chapter 3), --being able to stretch to one's full height and fill the lungs-- goes together with "mak[ing] the vision manifest": working for change. Cade Bambara goes on to say that "Quite frankly, This Bridge needs no Foreword. It is the Afterward that'll count".⁴⁷⁰ Moraga and Anzaldúa explicitly state the activist agenda of the anthology: "Just as we have been radicalized in the process of compiling this book, we hope it will radicalize others into

⁴⁶⁷ Cade Bambara, "Foreword" in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p. vii.

⁴⁶⁸ Grewal et al, eds., 1988, p. 4.

⁴⁶⁹ Cade Bambara, "Foreword" in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, pp. vi-vii.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., p. viii.

action”.⁴⁷¹ In sum, this anthology and many others published in its wake can be said to be about both intimacy between contributors and readers, and, relatedly, struggle for social and political change. As Moraga writes:

[This book] is about physical and psychic struggle. It is about intimacy, a desire for life between all of us, not settling for less than freedom even in the most private aspects of our lives. A total vision.⁴⁷²

The Role of the Reader

I want to move on to address *how* the anthologies approach this creating of community. In order to do this I first provide an extended account of debates about the role of the reader in the field of reader-response theory. I review some of the literature on reader-response theory, and then feminist criticisms of this literature, before returning to the question of the anthologies, in which the role of the reader is both crucial and much more explicit than is usually the case in novels or poetry. I will draw on theories of reader-response to explore the question of “the implied reader” of the anthologies. To look at just how the reader is “implied” in the collections, I will draw on Sara Mills’ ideas about direct and indirect address, and Jacqueline Bobo’s revision of Althusser’s concept of interpellation.

Reader-Response Theory: An Overview

The early reader-response theorists were writing at a time, in the 1970s, when the scholarly climate was very different from the one in the ascendant now. They were responding to the notion, then prevalent in the study of literature, that texts are objects to be studied and interpreted, and a primary aim of literary criticism should be to discern authors’ intentions from the words they had chosen. Reader-response theorists countered this assumption with their emphasis on the role of the reader in co-creating texts. Later critics have complicated the issues initially raised, but the emphasis remains quite different from that of much contemporary postcolonial and other criticism. Many postcolonial critics see reading as a strategy for questioning colonialist assumptions; they read against the grain of texts such as *The Tempest* or *Jane Eyre*. Others, reading postcolonial writing, celebrate the ways in which it appears to destabilise and subvert such assumptions through the ‘in-betweenness’ it represents and creates. Much contemporary literary criticism emphasises the multiplicity of voices in a text, and multiple reader subjectivities: a complexity not always fully recognised by reader-response critics (particularly those writing earlier on).

I am choosing, as part of my political project, to go along with, rather than resist (as would also be possible) the call of many migrant women’s texts for a kind of reading that is both attentive

⁴⁷¹ Moraga and Anzaldúa in Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p. xxvi.

⁴⁷² Moraga in *ibid.*, p. xix.

and responsive to their emphasis on activism. I take on board the self-professed goals of the anthologies; and to do this I have chosen to draw upon reader-response theory because, like the anthologies, the theory emphasises the importance of the role of the reader as well as of the text. Critics who have taken ideas about reader-response in feminist directions, in particular, can usefully shed light upon how the anthologies aim to fulfil their goals and create activist community between contributors and readers.

Wolfgang Iser (speaking of novels) addresses the way in which reader and text together create a response to reading:

[t]he manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror, but at the same time, the reality which this process helps to create is one that will be *different* from his own.⁴⁷³

Georges Poulet argues that while books contain ideas thought and written by someone else, “in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking”. Thus “the subject-object division” disappears, putting “reading in an apparently unique position as regards the possible absorption of new experiences”.⁴⁷⁴ In reading one hears in one’s head voices other than one’s own -- voices of the text. But according to Iser, “when reading we operate on different levels. For although we may be thinking thoughts of someone else, what we are will not disappear completely... Thus, in reading there are these two levels -- the alien ‘me’ and the real, virtual ‘me’ -- which are never completely cut off from each other”. And: “[T]he relationship [between these two levels] ... is what makes it possible for the unfamiliar to be understood”.⁴⁷⁵ Elsewhere he describes the act of reading as constituting an “interaction” between “old” and “new” experience:

The new experience emerges from the restructuring of the one we have stored, and this restructuring is what gives the new experience its form. But what actually happens during this process can again only be experienced when past feelings, views, and values have been evoked and then made to merge with the new experience. The old conditions the form of the new, and the new selectively restructures the old. The reader’s reception of the text is not based on identifying two different experiences (old versus new), but on the interaction between the two.⁴⁷⁶

So, according to Iser, there is communication between the voice of the text and the voice of the reader during the process of reading. And this communication can lead to change taking place in the reader’s sense of the world; something is learned, new experience acquired.

⁴⁷³ Iser 1974, p. 281.

⁴⁷⁴ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 292.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁴⁷⁶ cited by Flynn in Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, p. 270. Flynn uses this passage to support her argument that “productive interaction” between text and reader necessitates a simultaneously “detached” and “empathetic” stance by the reader. I argue below that this view is both prescriptive and over-simplistic.

Louise Rosenblatt, like Iser, emphasises the relationship between reader and text which evolves during the reading process. She implies more awareness than he does, however, of the complexity of readers' consciousness, and of the multitude of possible approaches and experiences which readers bring to a given text. (And as shown by feminist reader-response critics' exploration of women's relationships to androcentric literature –which I examine in a later section of this chapter-- different levels or facets of consciousness can sometimes operate at the same time, in complex and contradictory ways). Using the word "poem" to refer to this active and changing relationship, and to distinguish it from a "text" which is simply the printed words on a page, Rosenblatt says: "A specific reader and a specific text at a specific time and place: change any of these, and there occurs a different circuit, a different event -- a different poem".⁴⁷⁷ Particularly in the kind of full experiencing of texts which she calls "aesthetic reading", distinguishing it from more utilitarian or "efferent" kinds of reading, "the resources of [the reader's] own fund of experience and sensibility" are drawn on in responding to the "verbal stimuli" of the text.⁴⁷⁸ So the same reader might respond very differently to, and thus have a different relationship to, the same text at different times and/or places. Different aspects or voices within a given text will also "speak to" her differently at different times. While Rosenblatt does not explore the ways in which "location", gender, race and sexuality influence readers' responses, she does acknowledge to some extent the complexity of factors influencing reader response, and the variety of ways in which different readers will interact with any given text.

The idea of 'relationship' seems an apt one to characterise reading processes. Sometimes these are almost literally conceived of in these terms: as comparable to relationships between individual people. Lynne Pearce in her essay "Reading as Autobiography" speaks of reading in terms of sexual intimacy; in exploring the complex and evolving gender allegiances of her past reading practices, she refers to them as "transvestite", "bisexual" or "lesbian". She also coins the term "reader-jealousy" to describe her "own (painful) feelings of 'rejection' by certain feminist texts" which seemed to privilege as readers women other than herself.⁴⁷⁹ Alberto Manguel writes that many of his reading encounters have been "a matter of chance, like meeting those who in the fifteenth circle of Dante's Hell... suddenly find in an appearance, a glance, a word, an irresistible attraction".⁴⁸⁰ Such comparisons, of reading relationships with romantic or sexual ones, evoke the *intimacy* of reading, and the sense created by much writing that it creates relationships between people rather than between a reader and a printed text.

⁴⁷⁷ Rosenblatt 1978, p. 14.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁴⁷⁹ Pearce 1994, pp. 160-162.

⁴⁸⁰ Manguel 1997, p. 20.

The way in which these relationships work is looked at by some reader-response critics in terms of the idea of “the implied reader”, a term coined by Wolfgang Iser. The term refers to the way in which the idea of the reader is embedded within texts themselves. Critics have looked both at how this reader is defined, through “a range of direct and indirect methods”, and at how the role of actual readers is structured by the implied presence of an addressee within the text.⁴⁸¹ Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation has been influential with critics looking at the way in which texts “address” their readers. Althusser used this term to describe the way readers or audiences are “hailed” by a text and “called upon to recognise [themselves] as the imaginary self that the text constructs”⁴⁸² and how, in turn, they internalise ideologies and social norms. Martin Montgomery complicated this process somewhat; he used the term “deixis” to refer to the ways in which a text creates a context for itself, for example through the use of pronouns such as “I” and “you”. But it can do this in various ways; a text can either address a generalised audience or readership, or specify particular sub-sections of that audience, which other listeners/readers nevertheless “overhear”.⁴⁸³ Critics applying the theory of dialogics, discussed below, to reader-response criticism also look at relationships between text and reader. As this theory is based on the idea that all language necessarily involves the presence of an addressee, it lends itself well to being used by reader-response critics.⁴⁸⁴

Later in this chapter I draw on these concepts of ideal and implied readers, and dialogics, on the importance of communication, relationship and context, in exploring the role of anthologies in creating community. First I continue with an account of feminist commentary and critiques of reader-response theory.

Feminism and Reader-Response Criticism

Schweickart and Flynn argue that reader-response theory is compatible with feminist criticism because of its emphasis on “the way perspective conditions comprehension and interpretation”.⁴⁸⁵ But feminist critics also address questions of how gender --of both reader and writer--influences the reading process. Schweickart writes that “[f]or feminists, the question of *how* we read is inextricably linked with the question of *what* we read”. She is referring here, specifically, to feminist critiques of the androcentric literary “canon”, which she says “has a profoundly damaging effect on women readers”.⁴⁸⁶ Initial feminist contributions to reader-

⁴⁸¹ Kowalski-Wallace, ed., 1997, p. 338.

⁴⁸² Mills in Mills, ed., 1994, p. 25.

⁴⁸³ Mills in *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴⁸⁴ Although Bakhtin, who initiated the field, did not himself look at relationships between reader and text, concentrating rather on relationships between fictional characters.

⁴⁸⁵ Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, p. xxi.

⁴⁸⁶ Schweickart in *ibid.*, p. 40. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (Millett 1969) was a groundbreaking work in terms of feminist critique of the androcentric canon. Though concerned with analysing male writers’ texts rather than women

response theory looked at the nature of this negative impact. Judith Fetterley, in *The Resisting Reader*,⁴⁸⁷ wrote of the destructiveness and alienation involved in the process of what she called women's "immasculation" through reading. Women (and especially educated women), she argued, are invited to identify with male characters or a male perspective in literature, learning to read from an androcentric perspective just as male readers do, and as a result become --over time, and over repeated exposure to countless androcentric texts-- divided against themselves. There is a great cost to women in this process, because of the way their consciousness becomes split against itself; women readers identify both with the male perspective of the text and with the women characters who are objectified or marginalised by it.

Later, Patrocio Schweickart complicated the issue of women reading male texts by examining the ways in which some "recalcitrant" texts, even when identified as androcentric, remain appealing and compelling. Schweickart reflects on the way in which the perspective of the text and her own desire for both autonomy --strongly linked to her feminist politics-- and love, lead her to identify with the character Birkin in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. At the same time she realises, "I am drawn into complicity with the reduction of Ursula, and therefore of myself, to the role of the other". She writes, "the male text draws its power over the female reader from authentic desires, which it rouses and then harnesses to the process of immasculation".⁴⁸⁸

Schweickart's is an important analysis. But there is little other attention paid to women's *enjoyment* of reading androcentric texts. Feminist readings of androcentric texts that allow for enjoyment and pleasure are also important. Similarly, attention to texts which don't feel "gendered" at all, which might feel liberatory, "despite" being androcentric, may constitute an important area for feminist research. While Schweickart's self-critical reflections are useful, it may also be important, not just to castigate oneself for investment in any given text, but to attend to questions of pleasure and enjoyment, even if simultaneously engaged in critique. It is important not to "trash" everything, but to recognise what gives women a sense of pleasure and of worlds "opening up". Lynne Pearce dismisses the sense of "transcending" gender as "an illusion", arguing that this can lead to a false universalism that denies the importance of difference. While I would also be critical of notions of "transcending" gender, a straightforward dismissal of this appears too facile, and ignores what may be an important experience. If there is

readers' responses to them, it forms a background to some early feminist reader response critics' work, including that of Judith Fetterley (see for example her introduction, "On the Politics of Literature", Fetterley 1978, pp.xiii-xxvi). Millett's volume was also important, I might add, in its coining of the phrase, commonplace enough now, constituting its title; there was a clear need, at the time of her writing, to show that the two words were not mutually exclusive or a contradiction in terms. Her critiques of the misogyny of much male writing showed this link graphically and clearly.

⁴⁸⁷ Fetterley 1978.

⁴⁸⁸ Schweickart in Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, pp. 43-3.

this sense of “transcending” gender, where does it come from? Rather than necessarily coming from an underlying sameness, a tapping into an essential common humanity, it may come from finding, possibly surprising, points of connection, despite differences of gender and/or race. The conclusion of essential sameness ignores important differences. However, the claims could be modified to say: there is a potential for connectedness –communication-- between people, across difference, even though this potential may be greatly compromised by factors of racial, gender, sexual, class, national, age, ability etc. power differences; and by these being left unexamined. This potential cannot be realised without hard work, and is not always desirable or possible between any two given individuals, but may still exist.

Early feminists also addressed the meanings of women reading women’s writing in terms of identification and positive role models. The idea of “identification” has however been problematised, both by Iser⁴⁸⁹ and by some later feminists. Sara Mills argues that this emphasis is too simple:

Identification is a problematic concept in reading: the notion that we somehow align ourselves with a textual representation and form our notion of self with respect to it seems simplistic... Selves and textual representations are infinitely more complex and there can never be a simple mapping of one onto the other; the self is not a unitary entity and text representations always exceed their limits.⁴⁹⁰

I argue later in the chapter, however, that if suitably complicated by the awareness that Mills points to --that both reader and character or speaker in a text are too multifaceted and complex to allow a simple overlaying of one by the other-- the concept of identification can still be a useful one.

Some feminists have shifted from looking at identification to a focus on differences among women in terms of reading experiences. Mills argues that there needs to be room for a concept of women’s “resisting readings” not only of male texts, but of women’s writing as well. Varying readings are possible even within the category of feminists reading feminist texts; something earlier feminist critics did not allow for. Mills studied the widely differing responses to a feminist poem, which both celebrates menstruation and expresses unease about the speaker’s ability to conceive and give birth, among feminist (and non-feminist) university students and teachers, including herself. She did this by taking further and specifying more clearly the functioning of Althusserian “interpellation”, through her own ideas of direct and indirect address. With texts using direct address, readers are directly invoked (perhaps the most famous example in English literature, being the way that Jane informs us that “Reader, I married him” in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*). Mills’ concept of indirect address, on the other hand, refers to

⁴⁸⁹ Iser 1974, p. 291.

⁴⁹⁰ Mills in Mills, ed., 1994, pp. 30-31.

the way in which a text takes a certain body of knowledge or collection of ideas for granted, presents them as common sense, or assumes they are shared by the reader.⁴⁹¹ Mills examined her chosen poem's "indirect address", and explored her respondents' acceptance of or resistance to it. This attention to questions of differences is useful for thinking through the implications of white women reading texts by Black women, and vice versa, as I explore later in the chapter.

Debates in the field of reader-response criticism often become quite polarised, as some feminist critiques of reader-response (and its counterpart in film studies) criticism point out: *Either* the text *or* the reader is dominant; *either* texts determine reader response *or* there are an unlimited number of possible readings of any given text. Readers are *either* passive recipients of texts' ideologies *or* active resisters of those messages. *Either* there are communities of readers who agree on interpretations of texts *or* each reader interprets differently; readers are *either* stable recipients of meaning or destabilised, shifting subjectivities. And in turn, studies *either* concentrate on real readers and audiences and criticise scholars who merely theorise about the text, *or* look only at texts and criticise the "empiricists" for paying too little attention to the hidden assumptions and agendas of the texts concerned.⁴⁹²

The debate about the power of the text or the reader in determining meaning is a central one, and important in addressing the politics of reading with respect to migrant women's writing. Louise Rosenblatt, although hers is not an explicitly feminist study of reading, emphasised the mutual and circular nature of the relationship between text and reader. Though writing at a time when literary critics were still predominantly emphasising the importance of ascertaining authors' intentions in interpreting texts, Rosenblatt argued:

The usual phrasing makes it difficult to attempt to do justice to the nature of the actual reading event. The reader, we can say, interprets the text. (The reader acts on the text.) Or we can say, the text produces a response in the reader. (The text acts on the reader.) Each of these phrasings, because it implies a single line of action by one separate element, distorts the actual reading process. The relation between reader and text is not linear. It is a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other.⁴⁹³

While readings that emphasise the power of the text over readers render the reader passive and powerless to question or participate in the text, some feminists argue that over-emphasising the role of the reader --as do many scholars writing more recently than Rosenblatt-- underestimates the power that texts, and particularly canonical, androcentric texts, can have on women. Lynne Pearce, in recounting her "autobiography" of reading and of theorising about reading, writes of the attraction for her, while she was writing her PhD. on the poems of John Clare, of "the contemporary critical vogue for 'reader-power' (the author is 'dead'/the meaning of the text is

⁴⁹¹ Mills in *ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

⁴⁹² See introduction to *ibid.*, especially pp. 11-12.

⁴⁹³ Rosenblatt 1978, p. 16.

the property of the reader) [which] made me feel supremely in control of my material". Yet she says in focusing on the "polyphony" of the poems, she (despite her parallel interest in feminism and women's writing) "failed to observe the gendered power-play between speakers and addressees within the text, or even how the text was excluding me as a female reader". Her focus "completely ignored the gendered power the text had *over me* as a female reader".⁴⁹⁴

I concur with such critiques; my position is that rather than discounting either reader or text entirely it is important to see reading as a kind of conversation, an idea also used by Schweickart and Flynn. In the case of women reading literature by women, they argue that seeing either the text or the reader as dominant to the exclusion of the other, involves the silencing of one woman's voice. As they write in the introduction to their essay collection, speaking of Schweickart's essay:

... mainstream reader-response theory is torn between text-dominant and reader-dominant constructions of the reading process. Schweickart points out that neither alternative is consonant with feminist concerns. Text-dominant models leave women readers at the mercy of androcentric texts, and reader-dominant models obscure the oppressive action of such texts. Similarly, neither model can form the basis for a feminist theory of women reading women's writings. They both confer authority on one woman at the cost of silencing another. What is needed, whether one is considering male or female writing, is a dialectical construction of the interaction between reader and text. In the case of the woman reading male texts, Schweickart proposes a story that is informed primarily by the dialectic of emancipatory struggle; in the case of the woman reading women's writing, by the dialectic of conversation.⁴⁹⁵

The idea of reading as conversation, or dialogue, would seem to be particularly consonant with dialogism, the body of theory that has grown up around the writings of Bakhtin and his associates. Lynne Pearce summarises:

[C]entral to the dialogic philosophy of the Bakhtin group, and present in their discussions of language, literature and human subjectivity, is a recognition of the impossibility of saying, meaning or, indeed, *being*, without the reciprocating presence of an addressee.⁴⁹⁶

However, the Bakhtin group did not look in detail at reading; their literary criticism focussed on "dialogic" relationships between fictional characters within novels and what these said about the nature of language and thought, rather than on relationships between readers and texts. And Pearce points out that surprisingly few reader-response critics have applied Bakhtin's ideas to reading. Many feminists have found dialogism useful, despite what Pearce calls dialogic theorists' "blind spot" around issues of gender, and have drawn on it to look at gender and gendered relationships in various ways. Some feminist literary scholars, too, have used dialogism either to look at the ways in which women's writing has taken on and sought to "talk

⁴⁹⁴ Pearce 1994 a), p. 161.

⁴⁹⁵ Schweickart and Flynn ,eds., 1986, p. xiv.

⁴⁹⁶ Pearce 1994 b), p. 2 .

back” to patriarchal discourses; or to “look at the way [women writers’] texts dialogize with a female or feminist addressee”.⁴⁹⁷

Contexts of Reading

Reading contexts are also key to the process of making meaning of given texts. Here I focus on a variety of different aspects of reading contexts which affect readers’ responses to texts, and which I draw on later to explore with respect to the anthologies.

Barbara Christian, referring to the difficulties of doing research on Black women’s writing in the 1970s, writes:

Particularly difficult, I felt, was the dearth of historical material on Afro-American women, that is, on the contexts within which the literature had evolved --*contexts I increasingly saw as a necessary foundation for the development of a contemporary black feminist perspective*. (emphasis mine).⁴⁹⁸

But at the same time, Christian points out, there is

more of an inclination in the academic and publishing worlds (and we might ask why) to accept sociological/political analyses of black writers --female, male-- ... than to conceive of them as artists with their own ideas, imagination, forms.⁴⁹⁹

What is needed, therefore, is both “contextual and textual analysis”.⁵⁰⁰ I argue that it is important, and perhaps particularly so for white women readers, to read migrant women’s writing with some awareness of political context so that as little as possible is missed, our interpretations are as full as possible, and so that we have a more complex and complete awareness of the text. We need to try to approach the text, even if arrival can never be guaranteed, or may even be a questionable concept. Equally we need, as Mills says, “to insist on the social and historical specificity of the reading process”,⁵⁰¹ to recognise that our readings, like the texts we read, are dependent on our personal and political “locations”. While this may at times be a liability, especially if this dependence is not acknowledged, it is not *necessarily* so. Rich and productive conversations may result. Drawing on our own experiences and responses, while developing a self-reflexive awareness of the sources and emotional expressions of some of our unwitting assumptions about race and racial difference, can I think help interpretation. It is when such assumptions affect the reading process unacknowledged that unconstructive or downright oppressive readings can result.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 101-108.

⁴⁹⁸ Christian 1989, p. 63.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵⁰⁰ McDowell, cited in Christian 1989, p. 67.

⁵⁰¹ Mills 1994, p. 7.

Jacqueline Bobo writes that Black women's personal histories and past viewing experiences influence how they make meaning out of seeing films in general and *The Color Purple* in particular. The political context of their viewing means that they are "interpellated" when certain issues are present.⁵⁰² Gina Wisker speaks of the "contextual ignorance" which might lead white readers to find problematic, for example, the "documentary realism" with which "the visitation of Beloved" in Toni Morrison's novel is presented. Wisker quotes Morrison as saying that she sought

the tone in which I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world... It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people look at the world. We are a very practical people, very down to earth, even shrewd, people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things

This kind of knowledge, she goes on to say, is "discredited" because it is Black people who hold it.⁵⁰³

Patricia Duncker, as a white reader, provides an account of how she reads works by white and Black British women differently:

[I]t is a question of reading within different traditions: traditions which are not white, which have different priorities, different literary foremothers, different male echoes, different rhythms – and above all, a different relationship to oral story-telling. Sometimes white western writing is answered back by Blackwomen, from their own perspective: for a Blackwoman's connections or confrontations with the white woman's or the white man's words will be different from those of a white woman. The most important thing for me to do, as a reader, is to listen for those differences.⁵⁰⁴

Cora Kaplan, another white feminist reader and academic, argues the need to read *The Color Purple* in the *intertextual* context in which it was written: as a "radical intervention", created "in resistance to existing fictions and politics", in particular older 'southern' Black male writers' portrayals of Black women and Black families.⁵⁰⁵

Other things about the context of reading, too, affect the "conversation". Reading a novel or poem for academic reasons will usually differ from reading it for pleasure or inspiration; this may overlap with Rosenblatt's distinction between "aesthetic" and "efferent" reading. The style and speed of reading will also affect one's interpretation.⁵⁰⁶ Alberto Manguel describes different ways in which he read, as a child: fast and breathlessly, or slower and in a more exploratory way, finding pleasure in the words as well as meaning of a text. Reading something for the first time often differs from a second or third reading. In my own experience a first reading of a

⁵⁰² Bobo 1995, p. 89.

⁵⁰³ Toni Morrison, cited in Wisker, ed., 1993, p. 88.

⁵⁰⁴ Duncker 1992, p. 210.

⁵⁰⁵ Kaplan 1986, pp. 183-6.

⁵⁰⁶ Mills, 1994.

novel is often the one where I am most emotionally involved; later readings, especially if it is a novel I am reading “academically”, might be more detached. In any case, I will probably notice details about plot or form I missed the first time; while in later readings some of the emotional impact of the first reading may be lost. When presenting her finding that the women students in her study had a “better” balance of detachment and empathy than the men, when they read a selection of short stories, Flynn implies that great involvement in a text is necessarily negative.⁵⁰⁷ Her categorisation of possible responses to a text is limited and simplistic. There are basically three possibilities: dominant and detached; submissive and overly involved; or achieving “productive” balance between the two extremes of detachment and involvement. I argue that there are more than these three possibilities and that, while there are more and less productive ways of reading, many different approaches can have both benefits and drawbacks.

The process of finding or making meaning in reading is deeply affected by how solitary or communal a particular reading is.

[P]art of the magic --and indeed of the essence-- of language is the fact that it must be internalized by each individual human being, with all the special overtones that each unique person and unique situation entail. Hence language is at once basically social and intensely individual.⁵⁰⁸

Reading can be a solitary escape into another world or a way of reflecting, alone, on one’s own life through another person’s text: thus it can be a combination of solitude and communication with one or more “people” --a text, a narrator, and/or a novel’s characters. Or it can be literally a social, a communal, activity. The “conversation” that is reading then acquires further layers and comes to incorporate conversation with other readers as well as with the voices of the text. This is particularly important in considering anthologies, as these are already collective endeavours of a number of authors. As I argue later, the anthologies are specifically intended to construct dialogue and community among their readers, as for example demonstrated by the responses to readers in the various editions of *This Bridge*, and thus the continual re-writing, and re-creation, of this community.

Manguel points out that one does not simply read, say *Crime and Punishment*; one reads a particular edition and a particular copy of it. A coffee stain or a slight tear on a particular page are important; implicit in the book are its previous readers.⁵⁰⁹ I would add that one’s own history of reading a book might also be present, in these ways, in a particular copy; and also that through one’s own and others’ notes in a book’s margins readers can carry on an ongoing dialogue with themselves and/or each other about their readings. There is sometimes a kind of

⁵⁰⁷ Schweickart and Flynn eds., 1986, p. xxvii, and chapter by Flynn, pp. 267-288.

⁵⁰⁸ Rosenblatt 1978, p. 20.

⁵⁰⁹ Manguel 1997, p. 16.

written (and not always harmonious) community established, among people who may or may not have met, around university library books in particular; one can sometimes tell if a book is required --and resisted-- reading on a course by the tenor of the comments in the margins!

Manguel's description of his experience of reading aloud to Borges, which I cite below, conveys the richness of the mutually --though differently-- meaningful reading relationship between the two men. It is an instance of how the sharing of reading can affect "conversations" with, or overall experiences of literature. In this case, the conversations were ongoing: the memory of previous reading experiences affected and "enriched," for Manguel, the shared readings of particular works, and in particular Borges' commentary on them. In turn, later readings with Borges affected Manguel's memories of earlier, solitary experiences of the same texts:

...the discovery of one story made me look forward to another, which in turn became enriched by the memory of both Borges' reactions and my own. The progression of my reading never followed the conventional sequence of time. For instance, reading out loud to him texts that I had read before on my own modified those earlier solitary readings, widened and suffused my memory of them, made me perceive what I had not perceived at the time but seemed to recall now, triggered by his response.⁵¹⁰

Manguel also seems to find and take pleasure in a wider sense of community of readers; after describing photos of diverse readers included in his book he writes that their activity and enjoyment of reading are in common with his own: "I am not alone".⁵¹¹

The importance of community or of shared viewing in relation to film, too, comes through in some of Jacqueline Bobo's quotes from her interviewees. The kind of audience with whom these women saw *The Color Purple*, the context of the viewing, was extremely important to their overall experience of the film. One woman reports that she first saw the film in a cinema with a mainly white audience; she describes rushing home afterwards because she did not want to have to "explain" anything to people among them whom she knew. She did not want to be seen as "this week's representative for all black America".⁵¹² Another woman says that it was difficult for her to see the character Sofia being hit by the white mayor, with white men around her in the cinema;⁵¹³ my guess is that this difficulty had to do with the painfulness for her of the scene's portrayal of the victimisation of a Black woman, and the likelihood that white male viewers would fail to understand the impact of the scene and perhaps even sympathise or identify with the mayor. On the other hand, one interviewee describes seeing another film, *School Daze*, among an overwhelmingly Black cinema audience. She describes the film as

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵¹² Bobo 1995, p. 124.

⁵¹³ Ibid., p. 117.

“really extremely silly..., but it’s the kind of thing that does great things for the morale of young black people”. She goes on to say that

It was like the difference between going to a white Catholic mass and going to a black Baptist church. You know how you go into a theater, and folks just sit there quietly --well this theater was live. Everyone was just yelling and screaming and laughing and dancing in their chairs. But it just does great things for our morale.

JB: To see us in films?

Marilyn: Yes, it’s just fun. ⁵¹⁴

Collective reading or hearing, as for example in performance poetry, or in the context of a political meeting or rally, affects the reading experience. Reading groups involve, usually, combinations of individual and collective reading, as participants read the book before meeting, then discuss it and perhaps read passages together. There can be a kind of community involved in simply passing a book around. Barbara Christian writes of more informal, and passionate, contexts of women discussing Black women’s novels:

[I]t was “ordinary” black women, women in the churches, private reading groups, women like my hairdresser and her clients, secondary school teachers, typists, my women friends, many of whom were single mothers, who discussed *The Bluest Eye* (1970) or *In Love and Trouble* (1973) with an intensity unheard of in the academic world. In fact most of my colleagues did not even know these books existed when women I knew were calling these writers by their first name --Alice, Paule, Toni, June-- indicating their sense of an intimacy with them. ⁵¹⁵

This citation indicates a sense of intimacy and community readers may feel with the writers as well as among readers. Bobo describes a public reading by Terry McMillan, in which passionate readers of McMillan’s works participated. According to Bobo, the reading had “almost a call-and-response feel” to it; there was direct communication between the author and the audience’s responses as she read.⁵¹⁶ Christian’s and Bobo’s descriptions of Black women’s feelings and experiences around not just Black women’s texts, but the authors as well, give the lie to Hazel Carby’s view that the notion of shared experience and relationship between Black women writers and readers is “essentialist and ahistorical”.⁵¹⁷

As I argue above, individual and collective reading contexts are an intimate part of the meaning that is derived from reading. In addition, the explicit or implicit address of a piece of writing affects different readers’ experience of reading a particular text. Texts invite different levels of involvement for different groups of readers; they address --whether directly or indirectly-- and thus include their readers selectively.⁵¹⁸ Readers will experience varying levels of accessibility,

⁵¹⁴ Ibid., p. 128.

⁵¹⁵ Christian 1989, p. 64.

⁵¹⁶ Bobo 1995, p. 14.

⁵¹⁷ Christian 1989, p. 71.

⁵¹⁸ As Martin Montgomery’s study of radio DJs has shown, there may also be shifting address within a particular text: “for a portion of a text/address a certain addressee will be acknowledged (e.g. ‘anyone listening in Edinburgh’) before being replaced by others (e.g. ‘anyone listening in Glasgow’).” Cited in Pearce 1994, p. 21.

between texts and at different points in a given text --partly because of how they are addressed, partly because of the nature of experiences or feelings evoked, and partly because of the way in which these are structured and portrayed.

Christian's words, quoted above, about Black women she knew referring to Black woman authors by their first names, suggest something about the way reading helped shape the relationships and sense of community of these readers, both with each other and with the writers of the books which they discussed so passionately. We can look at these relationships from the point of view of the texts as well, many of which address Black women readers with a view to building the kind of intimacy Christian's friends felt with the books and their authors. And they do this in various ways. Jacqueline Bobo summarises Toni Morrison's description of some of her aims, in terms of reaching her Black women readers:

When she uses the phrase "quiet as it's kept" to begin her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) she sees these as coded words used within a language she associates with black women conversing with one another about matters that are usually kept within their circle. The act of writing the book was to expose this private confidence. There was a shared familiarity Morrison was aiming at, an "instant intimacy" between the reader and the novel through a secret that is about to be shared. The reader knows that the one who is imparting the information is speaking from the inside and knows something that others don't; the reader also knows that the one who is speaking is being generous with privileged information.⁵¹⁹

Elsewhere, Bobo also cites the critic Deborah McDowell, who argues that Alice Walker's use of "the epistolary mode", in *The Color Purple*, indicates that Walker "deliberately and consciously wrote to an audience of black women". McDowell suggests that the structure of Walker's novel, much of which consists of two Black sisters' letters to each other, addresses and involves Black women readers in particular, even though Walker was aware that most of her readers would probably be white.⁵²⁰

I argue later that the "implied reader" of many of the anthologies I look at, while varying from collection to collection and among the various contributions, is usually a Black or migrant woman who identifies with the group defined in its title or introduction.

This raises the question of readers who are not "ideal" or "implied". What happens when a reader is not a part of that (more or less explicit) definition; when she "overhears" what does not explicitly address her? Specifically, here, I am interested in the nature of white women's experiences of reading Black and migrant women's writings and anthologies. Clearly, such

⁵¹⁹ Bobo 1995, pp. 58-9.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., pp. 88-9.

experiences will vary with the reader and with the text in question, as well as from reading to reading by any particular reader.

Cora Kaplan points out that U.S. Black women's writing is often seen in Britain as emerging from the American women's movement, rather than out of the "post-war Black cultural renaissance", the civil rights movement and Black Power activism and that this misunderstanding affects the reading and interpretation of these writings. She describes how Black American writing developed "a community of writers" and a multi-faceted tradition over several generations:

This writing in turn constructed and addressed an audience in which there was an implicit hierarchy of preferred readers. If these writers spoke to both Black and white Americans their 'ideal' reader was always Black.⁵²¹

While awareness of a white readership may be implied in some Black and migrant women's writing, Patricia Duncker points out that, as a white woman reader of the writings of Black and Asian women in Britain she is

part of the wider audience for Black writing, an incidental reader. Most of these books were not written for me, but for other Blackwomen; and this would remain true, even if the majority of the readership were white.⁵²²

I turn next to a consideration of these ideas for understanding Black and migrant women's writing. I draw on these concepts from reader-response theory, and feminist criticisms, in my discussion below of anthologies of Black and migrant women's writing, asking how thinking through the meanings of "implied readers", contexts of reading, implicit and explicit address, reading as conversation, dialogics, identification and difference, enables the explication of the political implications of migrant women's writings, and in particular the implications of the process of *reading* migrant women's writings.

The Implied Reader and Community in Anthologies of Black and Migrant Women's Writing

So, who is *addressed* by the anthologies? Is this the same group, necessarily, as the group that defines whose writings are included? The first few pages of *Charting the Journey's* Preface uses the first person plural to speak of "we --the collectivity 'Black feminists' ",⁵²³ but this "we" is nonetheless ambiguous. Its use in passages that sketch something of the history of the Black women's movement in Britain could be read as including the reader, and assuming that the

⁵²¹ Kaplan 1986, p. 180.

⁵²² Duncker 1992, p. 211.

⁵²³ Grewal et al, eds., 1988, p. 2.

reader too is a Black feminist; or on the other hand it could be that the editors are describing this “collectivity” to a reader who is an outsider to it.

Once there was a plethora of local Black women’s groups up and down the country; groups which had mushroomed in a hey day of Black political activity attempting to force a change in the status quo of our lives. As women and as feminists we militantly campaigned on a whole range of issues from health and fertility rights to anti-deportation campaigns; from housing and education issues to policing and anti-Sus laws... Yet not all was good and as a movement we often lacked the political insight and courage to deal with some issues of fundamental importance to us --most blatantly, lesbianism.

Passages reflecting on the present state of the Black women’s movement seem on the other hand to address the reader as an insider:

For where are we at present? Instead of at least the semblance of a Black women’s movement, the futile ‘politics’ of victim and guilt tripping runs rampant and is used to justify actions that any self respect would deem impossible.⁵²⁴

The tone here is self-reflexive, inviting the reader to ask herself the same question with which this passage begins. In addition, the thought quoted above seems to “indirectly address” a reader active in Black women’s politics. What is meant by “the futile ‘politics’ of victim and guilt tripping” is not immediately self-evident to an outsider; however, the assumption seems to be that the reader --here implied, I think, to be a Black feminist-- would recognise this description without needing further explanation.

By the end of this preface, it is the Black feminist reader who is being directly addressed. In one clear, simple statement on the final page this reader (the “ideal reader”?) is invoked and invited “into” the anthology: “Come then into our house for a reflection of yourself”.⁵²⁵ The anthology is the “house” --and a kind of home-- of the editors and contributors; despite earlier ambivalence about this, the reader likely to find herself “reflected” therein --the Black feminist reader-- is the guest who is invited in and welcomed.

The editors of *This Bridge* are extremely clear about their wishes for how the anthology is to be read and used. They wish it to be a “catalyst” for helping other “books and projects” by and about women of color and their activism to come into being. Moreover, they go on to say:

We see the book as a revolutionary tool falling into the hands of people of all colors. Just as we have been radicalized in the process of compiling this book, we hope it will radicalize others into action. We envision the book being used as a *required* text in most women’s studies courses. And we don’t mean just “special” courses on Third World Women or Racism, but also courses dealing with sexual politics, feminist thought, women’s spirituality, etc. Similarly, we want to see this book on the shelf of, and used in the classroom by, every ethnic studies teacher in this country, male and female alike. Off campus, we expect the book to function as a consciousness-raiser for white women meeting together or working alone on the issues of racism.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

And, we want to see our colored sisters using the book as an educator and agitator around issues specific to our oppression as women.

We want the book in libraries, bookstores, at conferences, and union meetings in every major city and hole-in-the-wall in this country. And, of course, we hope to eventually see this book translated and leave this country, making tangible the link between Third World women in the U.S. and throughout the world.

Finally, *tenemos la esperanza que This Bridge Called My Back* will find its way back into our families' lives.

The revolution begins at home.⁵²⁶

For Moraga and Anzaldúa, the ideal reader is everyone, but this inclusiveness also involves responsibility. The editors are very clear about the ways they feel the anthology should be read and used by its many different kinds of readers.

It is not just the introductions to anthologies which, through their use of first and second person pronouns explicitly address the reader, invite her participation and in so doing formulate an implicit or explicit sense of who that reader might be. Many of the contributions to *Charting the Journey* do the same thing, although the introductions, of course, on the whole aim to convey a more overarching sense of the collections and their readers than do the individual pieces they contain. An essay on "Women and Communalism", by Rahila Gupta examines divisions among Asian women in the UK and the various factors, including, though not limited to, communalism, that contribute to these. Through most of the essay, Gupta speaks of the women who are the topic of her essay in the third person plural; in the last few paragraphs she uses the pronoun "we" for the first time. As in the anthology's introduction, Gupta's use of "we" can be read either as including the reader, or presenting the group in question to an "outsider": "We still tend to prioritize our struggles in that some of us see racism as the central oppression...". The essay concludes with the sentence "I hope women will take up some of these issues to help consolidate the movement".⁵²⁷ While the word "women" here is apparently not directly addressing the reader, since it is part of a third person construction, in effect the sentence does do this. Gupta is expressing the hope that those among her readers who are Asian women will work through the issues she identifies. An absent "you" implies an Asian woman reader, whom Gupta hopes will be inspired, by her piece, to act.

The preface to the section of the anthology called "Frontiers" begins with a direct address to the reader, with a question inviting the reader's mental response: "What does the word border make you think of?" and goes on to give a few possible responses, which invite the reader's own additions: "A hem at the bottom of a skirt, the divide between Scotland and England, the thick

⁵²⁶ Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.xxvi.

⁵²⁷ Rahila Gupta in Grewal et al, eds., 1988, pp. 28-9.

line between rich and poor, living on the border line, the tenuous line between young and old”.⁵²⁸

Even contributions that do not directly address the reader in the second person do involve her when they use the first person, mainly or exclusively. Olivette Cole-Wilson’s piece, “I am a Black Woman” begins, “I am a Black woman, born and brought up in Britain. I do not consider myself as Black British, but rather as an African...”.⁵²⁹ This has the feel of introducing herself, as if she were actually present, as in a meeting where all present do this. It is as if the reader, who will be next to introduce herself, is invited to listen --it feels like an oral introduction, perhaps in part because of the simplicity and directness of the wording. The interview with Mo Ross, conducted by Jackie Kay and Pratibha Parmar, shows direct awareness of the reader --by Ross or her interviewers-- only twice: at the beginning when Parmar adds to Kay’s suggestion that Ross give “a short biography” by saying “As a way of introducing yourself so people know who you are”.⁵³⁰ The other instance is when Ross, who is a lesbian feminist, admits to “stumbling over coming out of the closet as a vicar’s wife! ‘I was a vicar’s wife.’ Sounds like a great title for a book or a soap opera!” Kay responds, “We won’t call the piece ‘I was a vicar’s wife’...!”, Parmar adding, “ ‘now I’m a lesbian!’ ”.⁵³¹ The humour in this exchange comes from the mixture of Ross’ intimate knowledge of her own complicated life history combined with her embarrassment and anxiety over how this particular piece of information might be received by readers with more distance. Ross may fear that other Black lesbian feminists might judge her for having been so much a part of the establishment. Part of the fear also seems to be of readers “scandalising” and thereby trivialising or missing the complexities of Ross’ life. However, the interview format invites the reader to identify herself with the interviewers, in this case Kay and Parmar, and thus to come into conversation with the interviewee. Kay’s and Parmar’s questions are ones a reader might equally wish to ask. In the literal conversation, a kind of proxy dialogue, in which the reader participates, unfolds simultaneously.

The Politics of Identification

We took up *Jane Eyre* one winter’s evening, somewhat piqued at the extravagant commendations we had heard and sternly resolved to be as critical as Croker. But as we read on we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning.⁵³²

⁵²⁸ Grewal et al, eds., 1988, p. 117.

⁵²⁹ Olivette Cole-Wilson in *ibid.*, p. 157.

⁵³⁰ Mo Ross with Jackie Kay and Pratibha Parmar in *ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵³² William George Clark, *Fraser’s* (December 1849), cited in Iser 1974, pp. 291-2.

Iser is citing, above, a nineteenth-century critic, William George Clark. I refer to this citation here, primarily because I find the last phrase so interesting: the critic identified with Jane so much that he says *he* (or rather “we”), along with Jane, married Mr. Rochester. Clearly Jane did not marry at four in the morning; it was four a.m. William George Clark time. Two realities coexisted, as Clark read *Jane Eyre*. What is also interesting here is the role of gender: Mr. Clark, identifying with Jane, marries Mr. Rochester. I want to look at the process of “identification” in terms of race: readers reading across racial difference, and reading texts written by authors with common, similar or comparable racial identity or racialised experience.

Critics have problematised the idea of identification. However, I think it is a concept worth salvaging. Rather than “a simple mapping” of character onto reader, identification can be understood as a much more complex process whereby a text --particularly a novel-- may evoke a character’s consciousness in vivid terms, so that “in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking”, “the subject-object division” disappears,⁵³³ and in this process communication between levels in the reader is established.⁵³⁴ Experiences and feelings in the reader’s previous/ongoing life may be evoked, made conscious and present; points of connection may be found. There will always be difference as well; clearly a concept of identification which assumes a text can exactly replicate or reflect any reader’s experience is flawed. But in reading the kinds of novels and poems that invite the reader “into” the text, inviting identification with a given character or characters, the reader may view differences between her own and a character’s experience from the outside and from the inside simultaneously. In other words, while a reader will at one level know that she and the character are not “the same”, on another level, for the brief period of the act of reading, the reader *becomes* that particular character.

And this simultaneity, this communication between new and old experience through the enabling of identification and the awakening of imagination by literature and particularly by fiction, is what I think has such potential in political terms. Early white feminist critics spoke of identification so eagerly, I think, because of a sense of liberation, in a context where reading had excluded women for so long, of “finding oneself in” a text. This sense is not invalidated by a recognition that such reflection can never be total. Gina Wisker cites Barbara Burford as saying that “Black British women readers wish to see in their reading a life they can recognise”.⁵³⁵ Jacqueline Bobo explains Black American women’s overwhelming acclaim for Steven Spielberg’s film version of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* --despite the film’s many

⁵³³ Georges Poulet, cited in Iser 1974, p. 292.

⁵³⁴ Iser 1974, p. 294.

⁵³⁵ Wisker 1993, p. 10.

problems-- as in part stemming from the rarity of seeing Black women as central characters on screen, as well as resulting from a process whereby Black women are “interpellated” when issues relevant to their lives are raised, even if problematically.⁵³⁶

While Althusser has been criticised for the way he represents audiences as passive recipients of ideology, through the process of “interpellation,” Bobo uses the term to explain Black women’s positive, and active, responses to the film. It was because, she says, of the relevance to their own lives of the issues raised by the film --they way they were “interpellated” by it-- that they defended it against attacks by other progressive audiences and critics.⁵³⁷ This works at least in part through some sense of identification, often strong. One woman interviewed by Bobo said the scene in the film in which Fonso, Celie’s mother’s husband, calls Celie’s smile “ugly”, and Celie responds by covering her mouth, made her realise her own feelings about herself were shared by others. She felt she was “looking in a mirror”.⁵³⁸ Several of Bobo’s interviewees liked the fact that the film showed a Black woman learning to deal with adversities assertively and courageously, in a way similar to how they felt they themselves did.⁵³⁹ There was a discussion between one viewer (Phyllis) who felt strongly while watching the film that she had “been there”; she understood the total lack of self-esteem that meant Celie was at first not able to resist the violence she suffered. Another woman pointed out, “[w]ell, none of us have been *there*”; but Phyllis insisted she had. Both women are right: Phyllis is not Celie, and whatever Phyllis’ life story, there will be some differences between them. But her strong identification with Celie cannot be discounted; it is in fact extremely important to understanding how emotional responses to literature --and in this case film-- can work.

But Bobo’s study also points to, though without examining in detail, the emotional difficulty and pain of strong identification, for some Black women. The mother of one of Bobo’s interviewees resisted seeing the film, at first, because she did not want to “relive” her own experiences.⁵⁴⁰ One woman, speaking of a book by Terry McMillan, said she did not want books to be too true to life, too “depressing”. She said: “I don’t need to read it. I’ve lived it”.⁵⁴¹

Clearly not all Black women readers identify with all Black women novelists’ Black characters. But Black readers, even those from different backgrounds from the author or characters, may find more points of connection with experiences evoked --especially around racism-- than will

⁵³⁶ Bobo 1995, p. 89.

⁵³⁷ Ibid., p. 89.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

⁵³⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 122.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p. 19.

white readers. Still, though white readers will not connect experientially with portrayals of being victimised through racism –and I look in more detail at reading across difference below-- they may well connect with some aspects of the text, seeing aspects of themselves in white characters, or indeed in Black characters. Patricia Duncker, who is white, writes of a conversation she had with a “Blackwoman” friend about their respective responses to a story by Becky Birtha, a Black American lesbian writer. The story, which takes place in a multi-racial lesbian setting, tells of the relationship between two Black women, Shirley and Ernestine, and between Ernestine and her ex-lover Lisa, who is white. Shirley, in talking to Ernestine, makes a point about

cultural imperialism, and the way in which Lisa had imposed her values upon Ernestine. And I recognised myself in Lisa; the white woman who studies Black history, reads Black writing, anxious to educate herself.

Duncker’s friend on the other hand focused on “the silence at the centre of the story, Ernestine”.

⁵⁴² While Duncker does not discuss further her own response to the story, or the implications of the differing responses of herself and her friend, what she says does suggest that white women may be able to learn something from Black women writers’ portrayals of white characters.

Identification can also be dangerous, in political terms, particularly in the case of white readers of Black women’s novels. There is a danger that white readers, in feeling they identify with Black characters, will over-simplify this process, and fail to be sufficiently reflexive about difference or power relations. Their sense of emotional connection or identification with one or more Black characters may lead them to believe that they understand all Black people; or to conclude that there are no differences between Black and white women’s, or people’s, lives; or that because they identify with Black characters they are in no way racist. In effect what can happen is a kind of manipulation or appropriation of Black women’s experiences, and a perpetuation of oppressive power relations.

Some comments on Walker’s *The Color Purple* by white women students in an undergraduate class I taught on “Black Women’s Writing and Feminist Criticism” were illustrative of these kinds of dangers. Some felt, because they themselves identified with the character Celie, that the novel was more about gender than racial oppression; when asked whether they thought Black and white women might respond differently to the novel one or two students felt that yes, everyone “brings different experiences to” reading. But they failed to recognise that experiences of racism might be a significant factor dividing Black women’s response to, and possible identification with, the novel from their own. Cora Kaplan confirms some of the dangers of this kind of reading. She writes of the difficulty of resisting “those dominant forms of cultural

⁵⁴² Duncker 1992, pp. 228-9.

interpretation that find and prefer universal, transhistorical and essentialist meanings in the literary text, rendering them all, in the end, expressive of a single ‘human condition’”. There is, she says, a particular difficulty with regard to “foreign” texts, especially “texts that address racial difference”. She goes on to look in particular at the difficulties of teaching *The Color Purple* to white British students, many of whom she says do not see racism as a particularly complex issue, and who hold “the individual belief that they themselves are not racist, and that in any case eradicating racism is a matter of changing individual prejudice”.⁵⁴³

Steven Spielberg was apparently motivated by sentiments similar to those critiqued by Kaplan. Like some of the students she refers to, and some of those in my own class, Spielberg

felt that the novel [*The Color Purple*] was not about race exclusively: “This is a human story, and the novel is about human beings. It’s about men and women. This is a movie about the triumph of the spirit-- and spirit and soul never had any racial boundaries”. In an earlier interview Spielberg talked about aspects of his background that gave him an understanding of the novel, an emotional connection to it: “It’s because *people* are not radically different. All of us are part of some minority. I was Jewish and wimpy when I grew up... So I made a lot of connections. I never looked at *Color Purple* as just a black movie. I looked at it as a story for everybody”.⁵⁴⁴

A letter to Alice Walker, which Walker cites in her compilation *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* exemplifies a related but somewhat different danger of white women reading Black women’s writing. Rather than eliding difference into some universal human experience, the correspondent in her identification of her own life with those of the novel’s characters, is hyper-aware of race and racial difference. She writes:

How this lovely work [*The Color Purple*] has touched my heart and walked around my soul... [M]y sorrow and compassion quietly transformed into a sense of protective love and admiration [of] your heroine.... I loved this book as a woman and my Child within loved being a part of the Black world where her friend Lena came from. Lena was our housekeeper when I was young. It wasn’t until I went thru therapy in the past several years that I uncovered a heartbroken part of myself, who had felt abandoned when Lena left our family after a car accident. She had been my special friend, a mother to me more than my own mother. I apparently split off from the memory of that loss at the age of nine, but kept “Lena” alive subconsciously by taking on the sufferings and drudgery which she had experienced as a Black servant... Our secret times, in the corner of the basement where she slept, were my only safe times in a childhood of fear and loneliness... I always made her go to the town’s only drugstore with me so she could see the only other Negro in town --the Cook. My matchmaking was not far off, but no big romance developed. Too soon after that Lena had to quit working for our family, and last I heard she died within that year. I quietly put away my affairs of the heart, locked the door to my memory, and went on my way... with only the heart pangs of seeing other Black people to remind me I had once felt something for someone very special.

Now with your books I can leap back into my long-ago world of dark faces, Lena’s tales of mystery and romance, and a reunion with a soul-mate who protected and loved me.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴³ Kaplan 1986, pp. 177-9.

⁵⁴⁴ Cited in Bobo 1995, pp. 74-76.

⁵⁴⁵ Walker 1996, pp. 240-241.

While this correspondent felt “touched” by Walker’s novel, she is identifying Lena rather than herself with the characters. This is not because of any experiences she perceives the housekeeper and the characters to have had in common, but rather because the letter-writer appears to group all Black people together simply because they are Black. As a child she had expected Lena to fall in love with the Cook –when she “made” Lena go to meet this (presumably male) person-- just because he too was Black; the novel reminds her, as an adult, of Lena simply because Walker’s characters are also Black. While she feels the novel has enabled her to become “part of the black world where her friend Lena came from”, she sees this world as exotic and mysterious rather than, for example, the “mirror” that some of Bobo’s interviewees felt the novel to be. The letter-writer arguably, as a result of her identification of Lena with the characters Walker portrays, sees all of the characters as her servants whose role it is to care for the “Child within” who had “felt abandoned” because of Lena’s accident and departure.

The letter shows no reflection on what the family meant to Lena or whether Lena saw *her*, the letter-writer, as a “friend” and “soulmate”. There is no attempt to understand the complicated power relations of a Black woman caring for a white child; the child may well have suffered from a patriarchal or oppressive family --she says she was afraid and lonely--but even as an adult, the woman does not wonder about Lena’s own life or perspective. (Did she have children of her own, whom Lena couldn’t care for as a result of working for this family? What suffering for Lena resulted from the very situation that benefited the letter-writer so much?) She neither questions whether or not “being a part of the Black world” is a real possibility, nor seems to realise how deeply offensive the implications of her assumptions might be. Moreover, the letter, couched as it is in the popularised language of therapy so widespread in some sectors of the US population, is, while blatantly racist, also self-centred and self-justificatory.

Resistance

While the phrase “the resisting reader” was first coined by Judith Fetterley to speak of women reading androcentric texts which marginalise or objectify them, Sara Mills uses the concept to examine how feminists resist feminist texts. However, neither of these critics takes into account contexts of race or sexuality or class, differences in “location” with regard to privilege or power. The idea of “the resisting reader” is, however, useful in looking at Black women reading white women’s or men’s texts. Jacqueline Bobo argues that Black women readers’ and viewers’ resistance to stereotypical or otherwise oppressive images of Black women (and men) in literature and film has deep political implications and in fact is activist at its root:

Black women’s challenge to cultural domination is part of an activist movement that works to improve the conditions of their lives. Included in the movement are black female cultural producers, critics and scholars, and

cultural consumers. As a group, the women make up what I have termed an interpretative community, which is strategically placed in relation to cultural works that either are created by black women or feature them in significant ways. Working together the women utilize representations of black women that they deem valuable, in productive and politically useful ways.⁵⁴⁶

She goes on to say that Black women have “opposed cultural as well as social domination and have contested detrimental images in a specific text, either as audience members or as cultural producers who created alternative and more viable images”. She cites Patricia Hill Collins, drawing on James Scott’s work on “everyday forms of peasant resistance”, to argue that Black women’s individual, as well as group, actions aiming to change the conditions of their lives “can be considered part of an ongoing resistance movement”. Bobo includes “Black women within an interpretive community” in this movement, because “they bring an oppositional stance to their interaction with mainstream media”.⁵⁴⁷ Bobo also cites Stuart Hall, who writes that resisting embedded mainstream images and stereotypes can lead to cultural transformation, which in turn can “transform a people’s consciousness”. Such resistance is not necessarily in itself a social movement but can be, when linked to one.⁵⁴⁸ Rosalind Brunt also argues that social movements can “work in and through texts” and that there is no need to separate audience responses from “real politics”.⁵⁴⁹

But resistance in reading can also happen for reasons that are not so much activist as anti-activist. Some (white) feminist reader-response critics have described men responding to women’s texts in terms of resistance. According to Fetterley, men often resist women’s texts, in part because they as readers might have to confront characters who are “‘good’ men who gravely mistreat their wives” or other women. “For men, reading women’s stories means confronting themselves reflected in the eyes of women-- they must endure the gaze of the other”; they may also fear having to give up “the control of textuality,” and the experience of seeing their own personal experiences as universal and the norm.⁵⁵⁰ As Schweickart puts it, for men, the androcentric text

serves as the meeting ground of the personal and the universal. Whether or not the text approximates the particularities of his own experience, he is invited to validate the equation of maleness with humanity. The male reader feels his affinity with the universal, with the paradigmatic human being, precisely because he is male.⁵⁵¹

⁵⁴⁶ Bobo 1995, p. 22. Stanley Fish coined the term “interpretive community” in his work *Is There A Text in this Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). His argument is that readers’ interpretations of texts are always made within the context of, and therefore filtered through, norms and conventions prevalent in a particular “interpretive community”.

⁵⁴⁷ Bobo 1995, pp. 26-27.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵⁵⁰ Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, pp. xviii-xix.

⁵⁵¹ Schweickart in *ibid.*, p. 41.

While white women are clearly not the norm in mainstream androcentric literature, the idea of a kind of anti-activist resistance might also be applicable to white women reading Black women's writing, particularly writing in which anger at racism is forcefully expressed. Such resistance can come out of a sense of defensiveness, out of feeling threatened, or "excluded or attacked" (as Mills describes a mainstream male response to writing by women).⁵⁵² Barbara Christian writes that Black men, white men, and white women all may resist Black women's writing because it threatens their view of themselves.⁵⁵³

But in addition to the sense of privilege being threatened, white women may also, simultaneously, read from a position of low self-esteem and *lack* of privilege in a male-dominated society. Feeling threatened may work to reinforce that disadvantaged position, rather than undermining racial privilege. However, a legitimate urge to shore up a threatened sense of self-worth, in the face of feeling undermined, is sometimes, instead, expressed in terms of reasserting racial privilege. The challenge is, as Mab Segrest puts it, "to find a way to be Somebody that does not make other people into Nobody".⁵⁵⁴ Their position of simultaneous privilege and disadvantage is something that greatly complicates the issue of white women's responses to Black women's writing.

Portrayals of lesbianism can also lead to resisting readings, by Black or white, lesbian or heterosexual women, in activist or anti-activist ways. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo's portrayal of Marija's sexual advances towards Sissy seems to suggest that Aidoo sees lesbianism as a result of white Western women's loneliness and sexual frustration; I interpret and resist this as a lesbophobic attitude. Some of my students' interpretations of the relationship between Shug and Celie, in *The Color Purple*, as not being lesbian but about women supporting and loving each other, suggested a resistance to lesbianism.

Although Bobo herself does not bring this point out or comment on it, some of her (Black) interviewees, too, seemed to read "around" the lesbianism in *The Color Purple*. One woman, Danielle, said she was offended "[w]hen people started talking about homosexuality and lesbianism" in relation to the film. "As I read it and as I felt it, the woman [Shug] was actually showing her how to love and how it feels to be loved". As with my students' remarks, this comment seems to make little sense unless one somehow views lesbianism as something other than about women loving each other. Another of Bobo's interviewees, Morgan, was more open about the sources of her discomfort around the relationship between Shug and Celie.

⁵⁵² Mills in Mills, ed., 1994, p. 33.

⁵⁵³ Christian 1989, pp. 62-3.

⁵⁵⁴ Segrest 1985, p. 156.

Whitney: I think the little bit they did bring [about the relationship, as compared to in the film] was pretty hard for a lot of people to accept.

Morgan: Shoot, it was hard for me.

At various other parts in the group interview Morgan says, “I’m just not real comfortable with that;” and “I just wasn’t prepared for it, and it was not *my* thing. And it’s so different from *my* thing that it was hard for me to relate to it”. Later she also says that “[t]he only reason that I don’t find it uncomfortable with men and women is that I’ve seen it so much”.⁵⁵⁵

There might be any number of other reasons for a white woman reader’s “resisting” of a Black or migrant woman’s text; they might occur together and be extremely difficult to sort out. When reading writings by Kincaid, for example, I often find myself resisting her use of invulnerable or manipulative personae. This is surely a political as well as personal writing tactic on her part, a response to her experiences of family and colonial relationships of domination. But is my resistance to it racist? Some white women might have difficulty resisting a given Black woman’s text, or Black women’s writing in general, because of a fear of being racist. They might want to defer to Black women’s greater knowledge about racism, something that might at times be helpful, but also might sometimes amount to needlessly handling the writing with kid gloves. What I have been calling activist resistance may be mixed with other things. Mills’ insights about the ways in which recalcitrant, androcentric texts can still be appealing to women are in some ways reminiscent of the “double vision” resulting from colonialist education written about by some of the contributors to *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* (see chapter 2). These women learnt to identify with a dominant reality that was alien to their own contexts; but also felt attachment to English literary texts, some of which they felt “opened up worlds” for them. Resisting responses to texts which are limiting or oppressive to women, to Black women or Black people generally, or to lesbians may also be mixed with great appreciation of other aspects or attributes of the writing. Thus for example I see my resistance to aspects of Kincaid’s narrative voices as contributing to a critical discourse about the meanings and significance of her work which is engaged and respectful, but not acquiescent.

Conclusion: Reading as Feminist Conversation

Reading as Feminist Conversation

Schweickart and Flynn’s formulation of reading as emancipatory struggle in the case of women reading men’s texts, and as conversation when women read women’s texts, ignores all differences apart from gender and sees this difference, too, in fairly simple terms. However, in

⁵⁵⁵ Bobo 1995, pp. 115-117.

considering the reading of Black women's writing by both Black and white women, I argue that it is still important, while developing a more complex and nuanced analysis, to retain and explore ideas about reading as conversation in some form.

Lynne Pearce refers to several feminist critics who use dialogic theory to explore how women's writing challenges dominant or patriarchal frameworks. Pearce points out that dialogism is not necessarily a utopian exchange between people of equal power or access to voice; according to Pearce, Patricia Yaegar (one of these critics) "conceives dialogue as a category of struggle and resistance, evocative of women's constant efforts to claim a space in androcentric language and culture". Yaegar writes that "the novel is a form women choose because its multivoicedness allows the interruption and interrogation of the dominant culture".⁵⁵⁶ And as I am suggesting here, anthologies are also an important site where dominant cultures are challenged. As explored above, such resistance—what I term activist resistance-- is also possible in reading; in such cases too, I suggest, it can be considered as one kind of conversation. Anti-activist resistance on the other hand is, perhaps, the refusal to engage or to converse with a text. Out of defensiveness or a sense of the text as threat, readers may erect barriers that serve as a rejection of the voices of the text, often before these are even listened to.

Conversation—whether in a context of reading or oral interchange with another person—can also be less a matter of resistance than of a play between connection and difference; between identification with and feeling more "outside" the text or the words of one's interlocutor. Lynne Pearce rightly points out that "Bakhtin insist[ed] that some sense of difference between parties is necessary to engender a fully dialogic relationship".⁵⁵⁷ Clearly, for communication to take place, there must also be points of connection: either a sense of identification with the speaker's words or experience, or a process of becoming able, through listening or reading, to imagine what is *not* similar to one's own experience. It is probably the case that most readers reading most texts, to varying degrees, encounter differences and similarities, points of connection and places of greater distance between themselves and the writings as they read. But of course even here this process is politicised: what meanings this "play" of connection and difference has is very much linked to the politics of the "location" of both reader and text. While conceiving of reading as conversation is, I think, an apt and useful image, there is also the need to recognise that there is an imbalance: a text is not quite the same as a living person with whom one can converse, as the reader is. Reading, then, both is and is not a mutual conversation. The author

⁵⁵⁶ Pearce 1994b), pp. 104-5.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

has written the text, but has now “dropped out” of the conversation. The text may be what the author has “said”, but she is no longer there.⁵⁵⁸

Schweickart describes, in the section of her chapter which focuses on Adrienne Rich’s essay on reading Emily Dickinson, “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”, how Rich tries to “connect” with Dickinson; Rich uses not the metaphor of conversation but that of trying to “visit the poet on her own premises”⁵⁵⁹. Rich also uses an image of futility, an insect buzzing against the window frame to try to get in, in order to portray her endeavour to understand Dickinson’s life and poetry. These two images convey Rich’s effort to imagine across difference --in this case differences mainly of time period, social context, and individual artistic needs rather than of race or gender-- to find points of connection and learn from places where there seem to be none. According to Schweickart, the fact that the author is absent and therefore cannot interrupt, correct or elaborate on the meanings made of the text by the reader, means that there are no “safeguards”, as there are in oral conversation, “against the appropriation of the text by the reader”. In order for reading to not become wholly subjective, there needs to be an awareness of the “double context” of writing and reading. Schweickart shows how Rich does this through her “visiting”, her conversation with Dickinson. She describes Rich’s “weaving -- not blending—of the context of writing and the context of reading, the perspective of the author and that of the reader”. Furthermore, she points out that “Rich reaches out to Dickinson not by identifying with her, but by establishing their affinity... By playing this affinity against the differences, she produces a context that incorporates both reader and writer. In turn, this common ground becomes the basis for drawing the connections that, in her view constitute the proper goal of reading”.⁵⁶⁰

The two images of visiting and conversation are quite similar; the former usually involves the latter as well. But “visiting” also implies that the reader goes to meet the author, via the text, on the author’s home turf. (One could also conceive of reading the other way around: a piece of writing comes into a *reader’s* life, or house, for a time. Sometimes, perhaps, when a novel or poem is especially significant for a particular reader, it could be said to move in.) The idea of visiting the author, or the text, conveys the idea that the reader is going somewhere unfamiliar, in order to listen and understand this other context. Schweickart writes, regarding Rich “visiting” Emily Dickinson, that

On the one hand, reading is necessarily subjective. On the other hand, it must not be wholly so. One must respect the autonomy of the text. The reader is a visitor and, as such, must observe the necessary courtesies. She must avoid

⁵⁵⁸ (To have a conversation with the author, of course, would be something entirely different from reading and “conversing with” her text).

⁵⁵⁹ Schweickart in Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, p. 46.

⁵⁶⁰ Schweickart in *ibid.*, pp. 53-4.

unwarranted intrusions-- she must be careful not to appropriate what belongs to her host, not to impose herself on the other woman. Furthermore, reading is at once an intersubjective encounter and something less than that. In reading Dickinson, Rich seeks to enter her mind, to feel her presence. But the text is a screen, an inanimate object. Its subjectivity is only a projection of the subjectivity of the reader.

She continues:

Rich suggests the central motivation, the regulative ideal, that shapes the feminist reader's approach to these issues. If feminist readings of male texts are motivated by the need to disrupt the process of immasculation, feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need "to connect", to recuperate, or to formulate-- they come to the same thing-- the context, the tradition, that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics, and to the larger community of women.⁵⁶¹

I suggest that this "need 'to connect' "—to visit, or to converse with the text-- is important both in the case of Black women reading other Black women's writing, and when white women read Black women's writing. Many Black women have a history of reading which is a history of effacement; to read other Black women's writing, for many, is an experience of entering a conversation, of finding one's voice and engaging with that of another rather than of being continually silenced. And this is, or can be, a profoundly political experience, one where Black women find their lives and sense of themselves validated. The split perspective on reality conveyed by the phrase "double vision" may begin to erode as a result.

And it is important when we consider white women reading women's writing across racial difference and/or across difference of sexuality. There is an urgent political need, I believe, to have this conversation; what I have called anti-activist resistance in reading gets in the way of understanding and acts to perpetuate existing racialised power relations. There needs to be an effort on the part of white women to go beyond this resistance, to accept or examine challenge and begin to try to unlearn racism. There is I think a potential to establish such a conversation initially, at least, through reading, because of the internalisation, which happens in reading, of the voice of the migrant woman's text. The text "happens" or unfolds in the reader's head, however unfamiliar the experience described.

Much contemporary feminist theory emphasises the importance of recognising difference among women, in order to avoid making the mistake of universalising the experiences of women (white, heterosexual, middle-class and/or able-bodied) who are relatively privileged, in the name of an over-arching feminism. This emphasis, of course, is vital; but it is so omnipresent that in some circles it has become almost taboo to speak of the possibility of communication among women separated by racial, or other, difference. I argue that it is

⁵⁶¹ Schweickart in *ibid.*, p. 48.

important –as well as necessary for feminism-- to counter this huge emphasis by re-claiming the possibility of women’s conversation across difference as a goal, if not yet a reality, of feminism. And one major precondition for such conversation to occur, is greater awareness of issues of race among white women. Schweickart finishes her essay with:

..I think it behooves us to *choose* the dialectical over the deconstructive plot. It is dangerous for feminists to be overly enamored with the theme of impossibility. Instead, we should try to redeem the claim that it is possible for a woman, reading as a woman, to read literature written by women, for this is essential if we are to make the literary enterprise into a means for building and maintaining connections among women.⁵⁶²

White Women and Activist Resistance: Reading as a pro-womanist?

Debates about identity and difference within feminism arise in part, in reader-response criticism, in terms of whether it is in fact possible to “read as a woman”; to “read like a woman”, or “as” or “like a feminist”, and if so what these phrases might mean. Clearly not all women, indeed not all feminists, read alike, and a choice to use any of these phrases must take care not to imply that we do. On the other hand, I disagree with Jonathan Culler’s conclusion, on deconstructing the category of “woman”, that men as well as women can “read as women”. I would also dispute that men can read “as feminists”; although there is potential for them to read as “pro-feminists”. Mills makes a similar argument:

I do not feel that men as such can be feminists for reasons which are very specific to the history of the development of the Women’s Movement in Britain and America (the importance of women-only spaces, etc.) but I do feel that they can be pro-feminist, meaning that they support many of the aims of feminists, but are very aware of their problematic status within the movement and within discussion groups, publication circles and so on.⁵⁶³

Mills also argues that what influences reading is not just a reader’s gender identity, seen in simple terms; it is also her or his *relation* to femininity or masculinity⁵⁶⁴. I would also add one’s relation to Blackness and whiteness, and to sexuality. “Conversations” with writings by Black or migrant women will also vary according to what readers see as the relation to, or assumptions about, femininity/masculinity, race, and sexuality within the *text*.

White women reading Black women’s writing may be able to identify with some aspects of the text; I believe this possibility should not be ruled out even while one recognises the deep differences that often divide Black and white women’s lives. I agree with Schweickart and Flynn, speaking of men and women readers, that *too* much emphasis on difference could be “reductive” and end up “reifying” difference.⁵⁶⁵ However, in recognition of power differentials and of the dangers of appropriation by those with racial privilege, I argue that learning to “read

⁵⁶² Schweickart in *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁵⁶³ Mills in Mills, ed., 1994, p. 43.

⁵⁶⁴ Mills in *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁶⁵ Schweickart and Flynn, eds., 1986, p. xxix.

as a pro-womanist” (certainly not reading “as” or even “like” a Black woman) should be white women readers’ goal. This would mean not only trying to understand Black and migrant women’s writing, but also to recognise responsibility, to come into conversation about racism, in particular, while reading from a more constructive “place” than mere defensiveness and guilt. Wisker quotes a white woman student who said, of reading Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*:

Toni Morrison’s book went some way towards helping me to understand black anger. Ok, so it hurt, but I value highly the brave, vital spirit of survival that forced me to think through these issues... It is not enough to be passively ‘unprejudiced’, we must find ways of acting individually to undo our inherited collective wrongs.⁵⁶⁶

It is also important, I think, for readers reading “across difference” to be aware that we will probably not understand everything about a given text. One element of appropriation is concluding that one’s understanding is complete. Awareness of one’s own non-comprehension of parts of a text --combined with some understanding of why that might be, i.e. an interpretation of one’s own interpretation and its limitations-- is perhaps not as serious as a more arrogant and unreflexive kind of non-comprehension.

There are at least two issues here: the privileging of readers who are women of colour by Black or migrant women’s texts; and critiques or accounts of experiences of racism. How white women respond to the latter, in particular, depends I think on “our” relationship to whiteness and to Blackness, as well as our racial identities per se. That relationship includes our own answers to questions such as how wedded we are to our whiteness, how willing to give up privileges associated with it; how much as white women we need our whiteness as a source of validation when as women we are under-valued by society. How much can we acknowledge the existence of racism in the white women’s movement and examine the possibility of our own contributions to it, without feeling “attacked upon white women’s very essence”?⁵⁶⁷ How willing and able are we to reflect, try to make changes in our attitudes or assumptions, and work against the racism that demeans Black and ultimately white women as well? Can we “refuse to be white” (to misquote the book *Refusing to be a Man*⁵⁶⁸)-- or rather try and be white in a different way, which involves shifting the focus of our solidarity, which in turn requires real listening.

In terms of the second issue: how should white women read these works, when “we” are not the point, not the “implied” or “ideal” readers? I believe a constructive, “pro-womanist” response would be first to acknowledge that white women are not always the point; that there is another point, which is community among Black women, and the fostering of Black women’s activism.

⁵⁶⁶ Wisker, ed., 1993, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁶⁷ Interview with Audre Lorde in Grewal et al, eds., 1988, p. 124.

⁵⁶⁸ John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to be a Man*, London: Fontana, 1990.

This aim needs to be supported, or if support is not solicited, white feminists should at least not demand to be included or insist that the experience described is “ours” as well. I would argue that the sense of being drawn in by a piece of Black women’s writing, along with the acknowledgement that it may not be explicitly addressing us, is key: such writing —especially literature—can inform and enable the imagining of different lives, *if* white feminists take on board that here “we” are not central, as well as reflecting on our own accountability in terms of perpetuating, or failing to challenge, racist power structures in society in general and in our own movements or institutions in particular.

More positively, and in terms of both issues, I think the answer has to do with conversation. While in these works Black women are not, or not always, directly addressing or engaging white women, as white women they (or “we”) still need to have conversations with the texts: understand where they are coming from, understand where we ourselves are coming from, try to imagine across difference without letting jealousy or defensiveness get in the way; use points of connection not to conclude that all women are the same or to absolve ourselves of our racist “sins”, but as bridges to help understand differences, and accountability as well.

I want to use one small example from *Charting the Journey*. The anthology’s Preface begins by examining the political, and contradictory, “idea of ‘Blackness’ in contemporary Britain”. It goes on to give an account of the migrations of “three to four million people and their descendants from former British colonies or ‘spheres of influence’ during the last three to four decades”, and notes that “[t]hus began the business of transforming transplanted ways of being, seeing and living --ways of life both determined by, and opposed to, colonial domination-- into a ‘Black British’ way of being”. This in turn was shaped by the new environment, and involved resistance; “refusal”; and redefinitions of self --of ‘blackness’ and of ‘black womanhood’.

Ours then is a journey -- a geographical, social and political journey from the present to the past, from the past to the future-- shifting in space and time as required-- in the hope that the material reality which is the substance of the ‘idea’ may be preserved and transcended for, and by, our future development. It is a migrants’ journey not simply in the commonly accepted sense, but also in the sense of migrations from past to future lives. It includes that other form of migration-- movement across the frontiers of life into new, uncharted territories of the self.⁵⁶⁹

As I read the first page or so of this Preface, there is for me a play of coexisting, or alternating, closeness and distance to what is described. I find myself in fairly close proximity to the text in some parts of some sentences, when journeys and migration are spoken of, when redefinitions and reorientations of self in the light of a changed environment are the theme. Some of this rings true in terms of my own experiences of migration. This sense interacts, though --

⁵⁶⁹ Grewal et al, eds., 1988, pp 1-2.

sometimes within the same sentence-- with a sense of greater distance from the text, a sense of "looking into" rather than "being in" the text --because of who is being spoken about, because of to whom the text is addressed. The kind of migration being spoken about, and the experience of racism in Britain being what forces processes of self-redefinition --fundamental aspects of what is being said-- are not experiences I recognise from my own life.

When I first read Kadi's "letter I wish someone had written for me when I was a young woman", I found myself drawn in to what I found a personal and very moving letter: I did not *identify* with but felt I could hear, and imagine, Kadi's story. In addition I found myself sympathising with the intended reader, listening alongside a young woman of colour, a reader who was not me.

Lynne Pearce writes of feeling a sense of "rejection" by some feminist texts, having begun to reflect on differences among women readers following her earlier, elated discovery of writings that privileged women readers. Pearce coins the term "reader-jealousy" to describe this emotional response to her theoretical realisation.⁵⁷⁰ While she does not look in depth at the role of race here, her term could well be useful in looking at white women's sense of exclusion from --and, often, resulting defensiveness and resistance to-- Black women's writing. So, even though white women may sometimes be excluded from the implied readership of some Black women's writing, I argue that it remains necessary to try and create conversations across difference rather than allowing jealousy to get in the way of productive, even if sometimes painful, dialogue.

There are many, many different potential and actual responses to any text. However, not all interpretations are equally valid. Differences will depend on all kinds of factors, including the "location" of the reader. White women may not interpret a Black woman's text the same way a Black woman might; as well as differences among different white and Black women., women of different racial backgrounds will bring different assumptions and experiences to reading a particular text. In contrast to some of the theory that empties texts of all meaning except in relation to the reader, I would argue that the text does provide some direction, that there are not totally limitless possibilities for interpretation. The text does say something, gives "cues" for the reader to make her own interpretation; it is a "trace", left by an author, of her world-view, and these cues may provide white feminists with ideas about how to address issues of race and racism, if, and only if, they are attended to.⁵⁷¹

⁵⁷⁰ Pearce 1994, p. 162.

⁵⁷¹ Norman Fairclough, see Mills, ed., 1994, p. 28.

I suggest that recognising points of connection and difference is important in white women's readings of these anthologies, and perhaps of Black and migrant women's writing more generally; acknowledgment of difference, as has been widely written about, is crucial but so too is combining this with whatever sense of connection emerges from readings (in accordance with the view that both over-emphasising difference, as well as over-emphasising similarity, is not constructive). Awareness of difference can temper feelings of connection, preventing the kind of appropriation I examined earlier in this chapter; while the latter can, I think, help illuminate the sense of inevitable difference and distance -- if "reader-jealousy" is not allowed to get in the way.

Moraga and Anzaldúa spelled out, as I quoted above, some of the ways they wanted the anthology *This Bridge* to be used. While mainly intended, as I have explored, as a source of inspiration, support and radical community for women of color, they also

see the book as a revolutionary tool falling into the hands of people of all colors.... we expect the book to function as a consciousness-raiser for white women meeting together or working alone on the issues of racism.⁵⁷²

I suggest that developing greater awareness during the process of reading is necessary in order for white women's reading of Black and migrant women's writings/anthologies to begin to "function as a consciousness-raiser". Self-reflexive readings of these works, readings that are attentive both to the text and to one's subjective responses, could foster awareness of specific places of connection, of the limits of connection, and of difference. Greater understanding of how forces of sexism, racism and homophobia inter-relate in Black and in white women's lives and of the ways white women might unwittingly help perpetuate racism is certainly needed among white women; reading anthologies of Black and migrant women's writings is one way to work on developing that deepened insight.

⁵⁷² Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., 1983, p.xxvi.

Chapter Five

Literary Activism II: Women Together, Women Divided: Migration, Writing and Feminist Activism

Writing and Politics

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.... Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundation for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.⁵⁷³

It is probably not even necessary to say 'poetry and politics' as if those words are distinct, but I've become so used to explaining their dependency on each other to Canadian reviewers and audiences that I've forgotten that it is unnecessary here. One thing you do not have to do at a Caribbean writers' conference outside Canada is explain that writers mean to change the world. But I've been in Canada so long I forget...⁵⁷⁴

The writing I am looking at is political at its core. The process of creating this literature is seen by its writers in various ways as political. Its form, its content, the feelings, experiences and craft that go into writing it, and where and how it is published, performed and read, are to do with challenging oppressions, expressing as stories and poems the concerns of the writers and in so doing resisting the silences and negative images of Black and migrant women dominant in society. So it is important to approach this literature politically, to recognise it as embedded in its own contexts and the concerns and struggles of those contexts.

There are a number of different ways in which the literature can be seen as political. Like Audre Lorde, Dionne Brand sees writing as being about making something lifegiving. Brand writes in an essay of the same name from *Bread out of Stone*, "There is only writing that is significant, honest, necessary-- making bread out of stone... There is an unburdening, uncovering the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, uncovering beauty, possibility".⁵⁷⁵ The title of her essay collection, *Bread out of Stone*, which is a phrase Brand's mother used to describe her inability to produce nourishment out of lack and poverty, in this context evokes the power of language to make something sustaining out of lifelessness. For Brand as for Lorde, bread and beauty, politics and poetry, are intertwined and hardly extricable.

⁵⁷³"Poetry is not a Luxury," in Lorde 1984, pp. 37-38.

⁵⁷⁴"This Body for Itself," in Brand 1994, p. 25.

⁵⁷⁵"Bread out of Stone," in *ibid.*, p. 23.

Brand also describes poetry as “room to live”.⁵⁷⁶ Both for her and for Lorde, poetry is a matter of survival; it is necessary. It has the potential to reach beyond limitations, the lack of “room”, that society imposes. As its title indicates, as a whole, Brand’s volume of poetry entitled *No Language is Neutral* makes explicit the necessarily political nature of Brand’s --as of all-- language. Both Brand’s poems and her essays evoke the pain of living as a Black migrant lesbian woman in an oppressive, white-dominated society, of confronting acutely-felt legacies of slavery and colonialism, and of the crippling and disempowering silences society imposes on those it oppresses. This is literature with overtly political content, that recognises and speaks out about political realities of oppression, breaks silence.

Merle Hodge, a writer based in the Caribbean, writes of the role of fiction in political domination and in resistance to domination:

From the colonial era to the present time, one of the weapons used to subjugate us has been fiction. The proper role of fiction in human societies includes allowing a people to ‘read’ itself --to decipher its own reality. The story teller offers a vision of the world which is more coherent, more ‘readable’ than the mass of unconnected detail of everyday experience....

Speaking of “the process by which fiction validates reality” and of how “people steeped in imported fiction are not likely to develop a healthy relationship with themselves or their environment” (see also my chapter 2), Hodge continues:

...In this situation creative writing becomes, for me, a guerrilla activity. We are occupied by foreign fiction. Fiction which affirms and validates our world is therefore an important weapon of resistance...⁵⁷⁷

Brand also suggests that a measure of healing and empowerment in the face of pain may be found in an honest recognition, claiming, and speaking out about political realities; a moving toward wholeness and belonging in the face of pain. As well as “naming” oppression, literature is political in that it enables empowerment, both for the writer, and for the reader as well. It sometimes aims to create political empowerment by creating community in the face of society’s fragmentation, through the affirmation of shared or connecting experiences and identities. And it may enable others to speak out and break silence.

How the literature can function, too, is a part of its political nature. In chapter 4 I examined how anthologies of Black and migrant women’s writings work politically. Lillian Allen writes about the political events at which she has performed her poetry: at first “it wasn’t always easy” because she was “scheduled to perform during the break, when everyone was reaching for coffee, or at the very end” as a kind of after-thought, after the collection of donations. Later, however, “the audience came to love and expect the poetry and demanded it when it wasn’t

⁵⁷⁶“On Poetry,” in *ibid.*, p. 182.

⁵⁷⁷Hodge 1996, pp. 495-6.

there. Even today, political events in Toronto's Black community include poetic and other cultural offerings as an integral part of articulating issues, forging collective energy and making essential connections". Poetry in this context, then, is part of a larger activist whole.

From the mid-seventies, dub poets were activists working in Toronto's Black community on many issues affecting our community... The work of the poets extends beyond merely creating art; we take our poetry and our convictions into the community. We organize, we network, we participate, we protest, we celebrate, we build community.⁵⁷⁸

The poetry may seek to directly inspire to political activism through "an artistic call to arms";⁵⁷⁹ or may be "an integral part" of the explorations of issues, the expression of anger and solidarity, and the strategising and organising at community meetings and political events.

Women's literary and autobiographical writings are also used in activist organisations' publications, as for example in the Southall Black Sisters publication *Against the Grain: A Celebration of Survival and Struggle*, which reproduces part of an account of a woman's experiences organising with that group from the anthology *Charting the Journey*; as well as an extract from a short story.

Migration, Writing, and Politics

Literature can have very specific importance and significance in and for migrant communities. Both poets such as Brand and Lorde, cited above, and some of their readers and audiences are from migrant communities. Their writing works, sometimes, to forge solidarity in a hostile society through evoking themes relevant to migrants' lives, while drawing on and combining language and forms both current in societies left behind and in communities in Britain and North America. The poetry simultaneously works in a specifically feminist sense, challenging traditionally male forms and drawing women of migrant communities together with overtly feminist content, as for example with Lillian Allen.

The introduction of the Asian Women Writers' Workshop anthology, *Right of Way*, speaks of the politics of the groups' collective process of writing and responding to each others' work. Writing is for many writers, though, a more or less solitary activity; this is important (despite the emphasis in dialogic and reader-response theory on the significance of the addressee or reader, on the nature of language as implying an addressee). Many writers speak of the need for solitude in order to make sense of things for themselves (I focus on this function of writing in more detail in chapter 6). But this writing does try to make connections with others, with readers. And this is a large part of how it is political: breaking silence, making connections with

⁵⁷⁸ Allen 1993, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

others where the powers that be would prefer this not to be. So in this chapter I am looking at the politics, the feminist or womanist politics, of writing in part in terms of relationships, especially relationships between women: hence the title of my chapter, “Women together, women divided”.

In this chapter I elaborate an understanding of politics in migrant women’s lives and writings through an analysis that brings together literature, theory and activism, so that all three illuminate each other. I assert the importance of understanding the literature in the context of feminist activism and of recognising the centrality of migrant women’s literature to feminist politics and activism. While activism, protest and resistance are inter-related concepts, I see protest as a mainly verbal activity dissenting with, speaking strongly against, or denying consent to a perceived injustice; resistance can be a verbalised or unverballed --as happens in reading, for example—refusal to cooperate with or submit to something. I define activism as the taking of positive, direct action to achieve a political aim. While feminist and/or anti-racist or anti-colonial writing is more obviously literature of protest than activism *per se*, my argument is that literature can be activist under this definition. It can be a form not only of verbalised protest and dissent, but of political action.

While there are many ways in which writing is political this chapter focuses on two particular dimensions of the politics of migrant women’s writing. Firstly I address language as political engagement and resistance, through a number of poems by Caribbean migrant writers Merle Collins, Valerie Bloom, and Lillian Allen. The use of “patois” or “dialect” in the context of the Caribbean, and of migration from there, brings into sharp relief the political dimensions of language. I conclude this section with a more extended discussion of Dionne Brand’s poetry from her volume *No Language is Neutral*, focusing on her more complex poetics and politics. The second half of this chapter addresses writers’ portrayals of political activism, which has had surprisingly little attention from feminist critics. I introduce this focus by drawing on other poems by Dionne Brand, in which political activism is explicitly present. Then I turn to explore the representation of political activism in novels by Meera Syal, Ravinder Randhawa, and Joan Riley. This discussion centres on exploring these writers’ depictions of relationships between women activists.

Language and Resistance

In this section I look at four poems, by Merle Collins, Valerie Bloom and Lillian Allen, before moving on to my exploration of poetry by Dionne Brand. I address the politics of language through my readings of these particular poems. In Collins’ poem “No Dialects Please” and

Allen's "The Subversives", language is both the subject of the poem and, through the use of "dialect", a means of resistance. I look at Valerie Bloom's poem "Yuh Hear 'Bout" and Allen's "Revolutionary Tea Party" in terms of the importance of interpersonal relationships of solidarity to oppositional politics. Before looking at these poems in detail, I first introduce some of the key debates about "patois" and "standard English" in the context of the Caribbean. I focus on the importance of orality in Caribbean "dialect", and the emergence of a strong tradition of performance poetry, including dub poetry, and briefly discuss debates about gender and dub poetry, topics which inform my reading of the poems which follows.

A key issue common to these poets is their necessary engagement with the colonisation of language. Under colonial rule, the enforced use and veneration of "standard" British English in the Caribbean, which went hand in hand with the kind of privileging of all things English (see my chapter 2), entailed denigrating and attempting even to destroy indigenous languages and cultures. Lillian Allen writes,

Growing up in Spanish Town, Jamaica, in a British-style school system, I was conscious of the tension between how you expressed yourself in a natural, joyous and feisty way outside the school context and how you were supposed to express yourself at school. It was assumed that if you wanted to make something of yourself and get ahead, you had to leave your culture and "bad talk" behind. Very early I knew this was not an attack on "bad" culture or "bad" language. Such an orchestrated strategy to "keep these people in their place" and to stigmatize something so fundamental to a people's identity and sense of self, was a deliberate attempt to degrade and destroy the very essence of who we are.⁵⁸⁰

Susanne Mühleisen argues that this is also a "literate-oral divide [which] demarcates the lines of power relationships" and points out the historically important role of written language in bolstering empire and suppressing oral forms, which often constitute "sites of resistance". "The language structure of the Caribbean has thus, for a long time in history, constituted a hierarchical situation: at least one European language of power trying to maintain control over the other language groups".⁵⁸¹ And as various writers point out, after the end of colonialism many of the same attitudes towards "standard" English and patois are still current, "not only... by outsiders but also by the speakers themselves".⁵⁸²

As has been pointed out by Edward Kamau Brathwaite⁵⁸³ and others, the word "dialect" is itself a derogatory term. "Standard" English is seen to be a "language", while deviations from it are deemed "dialects". Many poets from the Caribbean (whether living there or abroad) place great emphasis on oral traditions of the Caribbean as resources for the content and form of their poetry. They endeavour to reclaim the English language, making of it a tool of resistance by affirming and validating not only what Brathwaite has termed "nation language", and what

⁵⁸⁰Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁸¹Mühleisen in Anim-Addo 1996, pp. 169-170.

⁵⁸²Ibid., p. 172. See also Katrak 1989, p. 175.

⁵⁸³Brathwaite 1984.

Valerie Bloom prefers to call “patois”,⁵⁸⁴ but also the very identities of the people who speak it. Grace Nichols calls such reclamation “an act of spiritual survival on our part”.⁵⁸⁵ Ketu H. Katrak, too, in considering the work of the Sistren Collective, a group of working-class Jamaican women who have worked with drama, fictional forms and personal testimony using their own everyday language, speaks of how “empoweringly subversive” their use of this language has been, in a context where, “[i]n postcolonial Jamaica, a neocolonialist legacy of denigrating ‘patwah’ continues”.⁵⁸⁶

Arguments about the radicalism of using “patois” forms are tempered somewhat by a recognition that poetry which does this can all too easily be appropriated to serve male-defined nationalist agendas, as Denise deCaires Narain points out. These agendas can serve to reinforce rather than to question associations of women with “traditional”, oral and domestic practices and spheres and hence perpetuate problematic and/or oppressive views of women.⁵⁸⁷ However, deCaires Narain also argues that the work of Louise Bennett (one of the earliest woman poets who used “patois” forms in her art, and someone who is seen as a “foremother” by many Caribbean woman poets today) is perhaps more easily appropriated than, say, Jamaica Kincaid’s essay *A Small Place*, which is sharply critical of politics in Antigua.⁵⁸⁸ It is difficult to imagine the work of Dionne Brand, in particular, being appropriated for nationalist agendas, given its complex explorations and questionings of politics, power and identity.

Some claim that patois forms are not only denigrated but also, because indigenous, better suited to describe Caribbean lives. Brathwaite writes that “we haven’t got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall“. Nation language, which has been “submerged” but is increasingly coming to the surface,

may be in English, but it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time... the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise... then you lose part of the meaning.

In part because of the importance of the “noise” made by nation language, oral tradition requires audience as well as performer. “[A]t last”, continues Brathwaite, “our poets, today, are recognizing that it is essential that they use the resources which have been denied to them –and which they have sometimes themselves denied”.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁴in Ngcobo, ed., 1987, p. 87.

⁵⁸⁵in *ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁸⁶Katrak 1989, p. 175.

⁵⁸⁷deCaires Narain 2002, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵⁸⁹Brathwaite 1984, pp. 310-313.

There is a link between poetic form and the themes of resistance and empowerment evoked in performance poetry. Gabrielle Griffin's analysis of Nichols' volume of poetry, *i is a long-memoried woman*, which also draws strongly on oral tradition, is also relevant here. Griffin points to a direct connection between Nichols' "formal non-conformity" and "the self-affirmation and ...affirmation of revolutionary potential" in the text.⁵⁹⁰

Mühleisen argues that Caribbean women writers break down linguistic divides; "Caribbean women who write Creole voices, rooted in oral culture but breaking out of its confines, engage in a process of empowerment and change the social order". Mühleisen also points out that writers' linguistic choices should be seen in a wider political context; that increased interest in Creole grew with political independence movements.⁵⁹¹

Some of this poetry is written for performance as well as publication; the character of a given poem can change greatly according to how it is read or heard. I look at some of the differences in specific cases. Various women poets have differing relationships to the genre known as dub poetry: Lillian Allen is a dub poet, and writes positively of it in her introduction to *Women Do This Every Day*. In an interview she says that the name is important because

...the form is a crystallization. And having named it, then you can actually develop it. I believe if it wasn't named, it would have been diffused... I am still proud of it... I think it speaks to a lot of people, it speaks to three sixty degrees Africa in terms of the sheer sensuality of it, the sheer beauty, the sheer rhythm of it.⁵⁹²

Valerie Bloom defines herself differently, saying that she diverges from dub poetry in terms of both rhythm and approach. Jean Binta Breeze, though she definitely comes out of this tradition, has perhaps, she says, begun to move beyond its constraints. In her article "Can a Dub Poet be a Woman?" she pays tribute to dub poetry as something that once "satisfied my personal political concerns" but also critiques it as becoming "as constraining in its rhythms as the iambic pentameter". She writes of three responses to her work which made her "stop and think" about what it meant to be a woman dub poet. One instance was people thinking, when a male poet re-recorded some of her work in his voice, that a male voice suited it better; another was a criticism of her for presenting a "sexual image rather than a radical one" —she responds by challenging this implicit split between radicalism and sensuality. The third was a rejection of her work by an American record company on the grounds that it was "becoming far too

⁵⁹⁰ Griffin in Wisker 1993, p. 39.

⁵⁹¹ Mühleisen in Anim-Addo 1996, p. 171; p. 177.

⁵⁹² Dawes 1997, p. 80.

personal”; she responds to this by pointing out how “My politics were shaped by my personal experiences”.⁵⁹³

The engagement of writers with “patois” can take on particular meanings when this kind of language is used by migrants. I discuss Dionne Brand’s engagement with this theme in the section on *No Language is Neutral*, below. Lillian Allen talks about the “wake-up call” of realising she no longer understood Jamaican, pointing to the importance of language, and “patois” in particular, in the context of migration. This gave her the push to “start figuring out who I am... That was the point at which I made a specific effort to reconnect with Jamaica, with my grammar, with my roots. And of course, once you do that, then somehow your life becomes infinitely richer, better”.⁵⁹⁴ Here Allen reflects on the value of what she gets from her re-engagement with “patois”, pointing to how the language provides a form of knowledge and sustenance to her, which she implies is not available to her in “standard English”. Thus the use of “patois” can act as a particular way of sustaining individual migrants and diasporic communities.

The following poems, Merle Collins’ “No Dialects Please”, Lillian Allen’s “The Subversives” and “Revolutionary Tea Party”, Valerie Bloom’s “Yuh Hear ‘Bout?”, and Dionne Brand’s sequence of poems, “No Language is Neutral”, all engage differently with questions of “dialect”, patois and standard English.

Merle Collins: “No Dialects Please”

Merle Collins’ poem “No Dialects Please”⁵⁹⁵ is defiantly written in dialect, in direct contravention of the admonition already suggested in the title. Rather than describing or inviting its readers’ political activism, it is *in itself* a form of resistance and activism. The poem begins as a protest against a poetry competition which specifies that because “poetry of worth” is being sought, “No Dialects” are to be used –only ‘real’ English, is the implication. Collins continues by pointing out that English itself is formulated out of

de dialect of de Normans and de Saxons
dat combine an reformulate
to create a language-elect

thereby pointing out how ludicrous it is to even distinguish between dialect and non-dialect forms of a language.⁵⁹⁶ The poem goes on to link the competition rule to the way in which,

⁵⁹³Breeze 1996, pp.498-499.

⁵⁹⁴Dawes 1997, p. 83.

⁵⁹⁵Cobham and Collins, eds., 1987, pp. 118-9.

⁵⁹⁶Collins’ poem recalls Louise Bennett, whose poem “Bans O’ Killing” contains a verse which points out that to get rid of “dialect”

Yuh wi haffe get de Oxford book

under slavery, African languages were banned, leading people to “start up a language o me own”. However, according to the poem, as soon as slaves and their descendants began to assert independent identities and languages, the British “an de others dey leave to control us” demanded that they behave as “British” subjects and stop expressing themselves in these alternative –and subversive-- ways.

The poem uses Caribbean “dialect”⁵⁹⁷ as a means of defiance, of pointing out the politics of language: its use in the past as a weapon to control slaves, and its continued use as a tool of controlling and denigrating and denying people

..a culture o we own
a language o we own
a identity o we own.

Collins’ poem uses the forbidden dialect itself to deliberately defy the proscriptions both of the poetry competition and of the broader context of political domination, and to refuse the attempts to control and define a people through enforcement of a particular and dominant language, culture and identity. Mühleisen’s comment is relevant here: “when it comes to the negotiation between English and Creole, form is content”.⁵⁹⁸ Susanne Mühleisen writes that

Given that, on the one hand the language use and in particular the use of Creole forms in literature is subject to the acceptance of the wider society and, on the other hand, the prestigious ‘institution’ literature can provide a forum to further the acceptance of previously stigmatised language forms, then this has important implications for the study of language attitudes towards Creole languages. It means that literary texts can serve both as an indicator of language attitudes and as a catalyst of attitude change. It is in this way that texts function interactively and have an effect on socio-semantic change.⁵⁹⁹

Mühleisen here points to a dialectical relationship between language and cultural change. While prejudice against Creole may work against the publication of this language form, and hence its widespread dissemination, on the other hand, when such work is published, it can lead to further acceptance of these language forms. Thus the publication of texts in “patois” is an important focus of study, with such texts acting as indicators of, and catalysts of “socio-semantic change”. The publication of Collins’ poem, then, and its form as well as its content, dramatise such social change.

Lillian Allen: “The Subversives”

Like “No Dialects Please”, Lillian Allen’s poem “The Subversives” is, in itself, a form of resistance. A commentary on categorisation, it simultaneously defies it. From an interview with

O’ English verse, an tear
Out Chaucer, Burns, Lady Grizelle
An plenty o’ Shakespeare!

Cited in Mühleisen, in Anim-Addo 1996, p. 173.

⁵⁹⁷ Collins uses French patois, specific to certain parts of the Caribbean including Grenada, St. Lucia and Dominica, in this poem. I am using the term “Caribbean dialect” as shorthand here.

⁵⁹⁸ Mühleisen, in Anim-Addo 1996, p. 174.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 177-8.

her, it appears that Allen is referring both to the categorisation “for marketing purposes” of “dub poetry”, “performance poetry” and “general” poetry, and to academic analysis that seeks to label and pigeonhole poems, and poets, for its own purposes.⁶⁰⁰ The poem critiques self-justificatory attempts to label her art, attempts which serve to “legitimize *your* understanding” (emphasis mine) rather than in any way helping to further or even understand the values and messages of the poetry.⁶⁰¹

You made me a uniform
a place in line
stick me in the dictionary
legitimize your understanding

The poem makes itself into a resistance to this categorisation, refusing to be pinned down and hence controlled:

I break from your sentence
write a paragraph of my own
create new forms

space

Unlike “No Dialects Please”, Allen’s poem is not written in “dialect”, perhaps because it is addressed to academia and seeks to subvert academia on its own terms. It is also addressed *to* those criticised, unlike “Yuh Hear Bout” and “No Dialects Please”. The poem could be interpreted as echoing and thus parodying academic language (“create new forms/ space”) in its critique of post-structuralist academics’ play with space, form and language.

But in the recorded version,⁶⁰² there is also a sense of resistance stemming from orality that is perhaps comparable to the use of “patois” in other poems (by Collins and others, and by Allen herself). The recorded version is catchy and rhythmical. Humour comes through in a way not evident in the printed version; it is Allen’s tone of voice, her intonation, which conveys both irony and mockery of those who categorise. For example, the third (in particular) of the poem’s opening lines

You have abstracted from me
an abstraction of your likeness
piled bouquets of approval at my feet

⁶⁰⁰Habekost in Glaser and Pausch 1994, p. 49.

⁶⁰¹This recalls some other critiques of post-colonial theory in particular: Ketu H. Katrak for example writes of “the increasing phenomenon of using post-colonial texts as raw material for the theory producers and consumers of Western academia” in “an endeavor that ironically ends up validating the dominant power structure”. Katrak 1989, pp. 158-9.

⁶⁰²Allen, *Revolutionary Tea Party*, 1986.

is spoken in an exaggerated tone which mocks “you” and manages to paint a picture of a simultaneously grovelling and patronising academic who admires the “abstraction” which s/he her/himself has created in place of the speaker herself.

Valerie Bloom: “Yuh Hear ‘Bout?”

Valerie Bloom’s poem “Yuh Hear ‘Bout?” addresses the reader or listener directly in conversational mode and establishes solidarity with her.

Yuh hear bout di people dem arres
 Fi bun dung di Asian people dem house?
 Yuh hear bout di policeman dem lock up
 Fi beat up di black bwoy widout a cause?
 Yuh hear bout di MP dem sack because im
 refuse fi help
 Im coloured constituents in a dem fight
 ‘gainst deportation?
 Yuh no hear bout dem?
 Me neida.⁶⁰³

Bloom writes that in this poem “a conversational style, extreme brevity and an apparently throwaway last line were necessary to create the bitter effect I wanted”.⁶⁰⁴ The bitterness and irony are created because of the expectation roused by the phrasing of the poem’s questions – “Yuh hear bout...?”, suggesting that “a juicy bit of gossip is imminent”.⁶⁰⁵ Such questions would normally be taken to refer to events heard about by the speaker on the news or from a third party and would lead to an exchange about the events referred to; my own response as I read the first lines of the poem for the first time was a curiosity to learn more about the unusual events to which the poem refers, and which I assumed had actually occurred. But the poem’s ending indicates that the reason I had not heard about these things is because they are things that would have been just, and that (hence) simply have not happened. As Denise deCaires Narain notes, the speaker “poses a series of questions which anticipate just responses to racism before cryptically commenting on the lack of such justice”.⁶⁰⁶ The effect of the poem is to point out just how unlikely such events are. It is to emphasise the absence of accountability for racist acts such as arson against Asian people’s homes; racially motivated police violence; or inaction, indifference and sometimes hostility from politicians towards immigrants facing the threat of deportation.

There is also sort of a gossip tone in this poem, belying the seriousness of what is being said. Mühleisen says of Louise Bennett that

⁶⁰³in Ngcobo, ed., 1987, p. 90.

⁶⁰⁴in *ibid.*, 1987, p. 85.

⁶⁰⁵deCaires Narain 2002, p. 104.

⁶⁰⁶*Ibid.*, p. 104.

The poetic personae she created, and above all the legendary 'Miss Lou', are mostly lower-class urban women who, in dramatic monologue or dialogue, comment on political and social issues and events. The social position her personae occupy are clearly constructed in the language choices... Bennett's option is therefore used to create what is perceived as an authentic voice of the people... Be it a train strike, war-time politics, the New Constitution or Independence Day, the physical (post-war) migration to Britain and the rhetorical migration 'Back to Africa', all of that is subject to Miss Lou's involved and yet detached observations and comments.⁶⁰⁷

Valerie Bloom says that her "debt to Louise Bennett is obvious" in most of her early poems; concerning "Yuh Hear Bout" she both says that like Bennett she uses humour as well as social commentary; and that she has in this poem departed from "the form regularly used by Miss Lou".⁶⁰⁸ She does not mention the persona but it could be argued that this too is a parallel with "Miss Lou". The poem sounds like someone striking up a conversation at a bus-stop; what at first sounds like gossip turns out to be biting political commentary. This fact in itself is a piece of political commentary: the things migrant women talk (or 'gossip') about are the things that affect them most intimately; political injustice is part and parcel of their everyday lives.

Bloom writes that all her poems are written for performance; "only fifty per cent of the poems actually are on the page, the other fifty per cent being in the performance". She says that this means "giv[ing] the poems an "immediacy which is easy to assimilate". Explaining that she writes "within the old oral tradition that goes back to Africa, rather than the newer one of reggae and dub poetry", she goes on to explain that the differences are partly of rhythm --she draws on the rhythms of ordinary speech rather than musical rhythms-- and partly of directness of approach. Bloom prefers the use of irony to the more direct confrontation of dub poetry.⁶⁰⁹

Denise deCaires Narain contrasts Bloom's approach with the "combative" and "gritty aesthetics" represented by most of the contributors to the 1984 anthology *News for Babylon: The Chatto Book of Westindian- British Poetry*. "Bloom is one of only four women, out of a total of forty poets, to be included in the anthology, and this imbalance can be read as a clear indication of the ways in which the notion of 'black British' writing tended to cohere around male writers (particularly poets) and a more 'robust' and 'gritty' voice".⁶¹⁰

So Bloom's emphasis --and this can be seen especially clearly in "Yuh hear bout"-- is on relationship, reciprocity and dialogue with readers and listeners. This particular poem engages its addressee directly, and in so doing, by the end of the poem, establishes a sense of solidarity. Readers/listeners are invited to agree with the speaker that no, they have not heard about such

⁶⁰⁷ Mühleisen, in Anim-Addo 1996, p. 174.

⁶⁰⁸ in Ngcobo, ed., 1987, pp. 84-5.

⁶⁰⁹ in *ibid.*, p. 86.

⁶¹⁰ deCaires Narain 2002, p. 106.

events, and from there to agree with the implicit conclusion: there is little justice for Black, Asian and immigrant people in the U.K.

Lillian Allen: “Revolutionary Tea Party”

Lillian Allen’s poem “Revolutionary Tea Party” explicitly and compellingly invites the reader/listener: “come mek wi give yu little nurturing/ come sit awhile/ a mek wi drink tea/ a mek wi talk/ a mek we strategize”. While it is not explicitly written for women there is an intimacy to the poem which suggests (to me, at any rate) that what is being invoked is a women’s gathering, and tea parties are perhaps particularly a women’s way of socialising. It feels like an inclusive and generous poem: it invites into itself

You who know what the past has been
you who work in the present tense
you who see through to the future
come mek wi work together

It addresses “you” who have in the past experienced oppression; who live in the present because of the need to survive; who have a vision of a different future. To these people, it offers “nurturing”; it offers a place for talk, for sharing of pain and the ways the reader/listener, the person being invited, has been hurt or, as the poem puts it, “burned”. As well as this, and simultaneously, it offers a place for analysis and strategizing. It is an intimate context which includes both, without separating them. It invites:

let’s talk, let’s make art, let’s love, dance
revel in the streets if that’s the beat
protest demonstrate chant

Both the context offered by the poem, and its address, are inclusive and wide-ranging. What is offered is “little nurturing”; conversation about experiences of pain; as well as a sharing of analysis and strategizing, of art-making, and of protest. And at the same time as a poem it is those things; it is inclusive and generous to the reader, including her in its “we”. It includes acknowledgement of pain and identification of the sources of that pain – “vanguardism”, “the system”, “them in control”. It is both art and protest. Like Collins, Allen offers a poem where form and content are strongly implicated in each other.

It is interesting to consider the two latter poems, “Yuh Hear Bout” and “Revolutionary Tea Party”, in terms of the implied reader, since both address the reader or listener directly, in the second person. One might conclude, on the basis of various factors, that the implied reader is, like the speaker in each poem, a Black Afro-Caribbean migrant woman. Both are written in patois, suggesting, perhaps, that the person addressed is at least familiar with that language. The “gossipy” tone in Bloom’s poem implies a familiarity based on similar circumstances in the lives of speaker and reader or listener. There is reference in “Revolutionary Tea Party” to

dancing and making music (by which is very probably meant Afro-Caribbean forms) together. And as I have shown, both poems invite and seek to create solidarity with the reader on the basis of a shared politics.

If one reads these two poems in terms of Sara Mills' ideas about "indirect address" (see Chapter 4) it is also possible to come up with a different interpretation. Mills' phrase refers to ideas or values that a given text appears to assume are shared by the reader. It is possible to read the shared politics assumed by the poems, and the sense of solidarity created on that basis, as inclusive of white as well as Black readers, particularly in the case of Allen's poem. Under this interpretation, it is a common political outlook that is assumed rather than a particular racial, ethnic or national background.

Both these interpretations are possible; the ambiguity about the identity of the reader creates at least the potential for solidarity based on shared political views and engagement. My own conclusion is that "Yuh Hear Bout", because of its "gossipy" tone, is addressed to a woman of similar background to the speaker, although the poem also enables readers/ listeners who do not share that identity to 'listen in' to the conversation. "Revolutionary Tea Party", too, is spoken in the speaker's terms, in her "patois" language. However, a reader who does not speak the same language is not necessarily excluded; if she shares the political commitment evoked, she too is invited to join the speaker: "come sit awhile/ a mek wi drink tea/ a mek wi talk/ a mek we strategize".

Dionne Brand: *No Language is Neutral*

Dionne Brand provides important reflections on some of the meanings that the use of patois can acquire in the context of migration, through her reflections on how her position as an immigrant in Canada influences her feelings about "standard" English, and Trinidadian language, and her own speech and writing. She points out another way that language can function as a means of oppression: when they are not treated as inferior, Caribbean "dialects" may be "exoticized", she says, by white Canadians.

You spend a lot of time learning that language [Canadian English]... and feeling defensive about your own talk. Language becomes either degraded or exoticized. Either they tell you "now talk English" or "come now, say that thing for me". So in some senses the society does not allow the room to experience your language.

Because of this,

I never wanted to write in so-called dialect—certainly not without first appreciating what I was doing...

I didn't want to be party to white Canadian titillation at the exoticism of a Trinidadian language. And I knew that would also limit me in what I would say in that language, given that when we arrive

on these shores we are pushed aside by the way white Canadian life permeates the life. Then, it seems to me, our language too is chopped into the most exotic bits. I felt pushed to speak in that way, pushed to exoticize the language as opposed to really living in it...

And I didn't want to do the limited things that it was assumed I could do with it. I would never make the mistake of exoticizing it or degrading it. I would write it....

Brand says that in her volume of poetry, *No Language is Neutral*, she was able

... finally to find a way of writing in the language that I grew up in –not only in terms of its cadences but in terms of its syntax. Before, when I wrote I wrote in a kind of English that had Trinidadian cadences but was spelled as Received Standard English...

... What I'm saying is when I began to write *No Language* lots of things had happened, and I had also become more easy with language as a whole, more easy with literature... I'd also come to understand that I could write anything now. So when Received Standard was adequate for whatever thought I fell into, then I wrote in it. And when it didn't, then I simply went into Trinidadian language.⁶¹¹

According to Teresa Zackodnik, "Brand's creation of a heteroglossia in the intersection of nation language and standard English is an appropriation of both languages"; Brand does not however "locate this new language outside, nor as a negotiation between, nation language and standard English: the contact of the two languages best approximates her experience". This is true, but Zackodnik contradicts herself, in passages such as this one:

Brand does write poems that... speak in both standard English and nation language simultaneously and resist attempts to distinguish between languages and voices. And because nation language, as a transformative, polyvocal, and constantly shifting language, challenges the hegemony of standard English, I would argue that in Brand's poetry we see the insistence of nation language into standard English as a contestational dialogue.⁶¹²

Here Zackodnik is privileging standard English: ("the insistence of nation language *into* standard English" --emphasis mine), despite her argument that Brand writes in both languages simultaneously. Also Zakodnik's use of the phrase "contestational dialogue" contradicts her earlier statement that Brand's use of both languages is based not on a "negotiation" but on "contact" between them.

Zackodnik on the one hand overemphasises the limitations not only of standard English but also of nation language when she speaks of Brand's "exile" from both languages --as a Black person and as a lesbian respectively--, both of which "have rendered her so invisible as to be nonexistent".⁶¹³ Brand herself speaks of having become able "to find a way of writing in the language that I grew up in" – not of going somehow beyond it. That is not what the struggle is about. She has resources from both languages: the cruel legacies left in standard English, and

⁶¹¹from "An Interview with Dionne Brand, In the Company of My Work," in Silvera, ed., 1995, pp. 366-8.

⁶¹²Zackodnik 1995, p. 205.

⁶¹³Ibid., p. 201.

the ways in which Trinidadian language is “degraded or exoticized” have greatly limited her; but what she has become able to do is to use the resources of the two languages.

On the other hand Zackodnik’s (nominal) apparent celebration, at just one point in her article, of the “transformative” and “polyvocal” nature of nation language risks ignoring the difficulties, struggles, and great skill involved in Brand’s evolving use of language. It is neither easy nor inevitable. Both of Zackodnik’s approaches I think fail to convey adequately what Brand is doing.

I argue that Brand is not just “reconciling” the two languages.⁶¹⁴ As Zackodnik points out, she does use both at once, in ways that are hard to separate out; even when she uses what looks like standard English, the cadences and syntax may be Trinidadian. What she is doing with, or through, language is being creative, asserting her own coming to terms with self and language, asserting what she needs to say and the way that she wants to say it, not any longer limited by how people might “exoticize” her language. She waited until she had the skills necessary not to play into that tendency and until she could *claim* “the room to experience your language” which society denies her.

The theme of language and its intertwining with oppression, violence and the search for justice and empowerment is threaded through *No Language is Neutral*. In the poem beginning “There it was anyway”⁶¹⁵ Brand creates the sense that language –like the land itself, as seen in chapter 3 in my analysis of “hard against the soul”, a poem grimly echoed here with the mention of river, road, and sea, and “return”-- has the history of slavery’s cruelty and violence still embedded within it: “a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong/ now shape this twang”. Land and language reflect each other in the way they contain history: “This road/ could match that”; the wind and the sea reminds of this cruel past, the wind took the slaves’ sounds away, the ocean was present only as the sole “way out” of this place of suffering:

...they must have been
 dragged through the Manzanilla spitting out the last
 spun syllables for cruelty, new sound forming,
 pushing toward lips made to bubble blood. This road
 could match that. Hard-bitten on mangrove and wild
 bush, the sea wind heaving any remnants of
 consonant curses into choking aspirate. No
 language is neutral seared in the spine’s unravelling.
 Here is history too. A backbone bending and
 unbending without a word, heat, bellowing these
 lungs spongy, exhaled in humming, the ocean, a
 way out and not anything of beauty, tipping turquoise
 and scandalous.

⁶¹⁴Ibid., p. 201.

⁶¹⁵Brand 1990, p. 23.

Brand conveys the physical agony of the silence enforced on the slaves by the colonisers: “new sound” pushes fruitlessly “toward lips made to bubble blood”. As Zackodnik writes, “Brand writes the colonizer’s theft of language as a bodily experience, as an asphyxiating loss of the body’s and psyche’s sustenance”.⁶¹⁶

Yet the slaves found ways of communicating: “the malicious horizon” which was always receding, constantly --even while suggesting the ocean as “a way out”-- reinforced the message of the impossibility of escape. It

...made us the
essential thinkers of technology. How to fly gravity,
how to balance basket and prose reaching for
murder. Silence done curse god and beauty here,
people does hear things in this heliconia peace
a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong
now shape this twang, falsettos of whip and air
rudiment this grammar. Take what I tell you. When
these barracks held slaves between their stone
halters, talking was left for night and hush was idiom
and hot core.

Necessity made the slaves “balance basket and prose reaching for/ murder”: balance hard labour and the verbalising of plans for rebellion. Zackodnik argues that Brand “envision[s] the beginnings of nation language as an underground language of subversion... and from it [slaves] created a new language in which ‘hush was idiom’ ”.⁶¹⁷ Zackodnik cites Brathwaite in her discussion of how, despite the submergence of African languages, remnants of them remained, and influenced the way standard English was spoken (by the colonisers) and how it developed; but also, how the European languages influenced “nation language”. And as Zackodnik says, “it is this trace of the colonizer’s English in nation language that Brand foregrounds” in this poem (“a morphology of rolling chain and copper gong now shape this twang”).

Language and the experience of being an immigrant in Canada The silencing expressed in the poem that begins “But wait, this must come out then”⁶¹⁸ is in some ways reminiscent, though perhaps less overt, than the silencing of the slaves conveyed in the earlier poem. After her migration from Trinidad the speaker is “dumbfounded,” “struck in disbelief,” as she wanders through the city of Toronto. “Not a single/ word drops from my lips for twenty years about living here”. Her response to the racism of “the race/ conscious landlords and their jim crow flats” is to retreat inwards, “horde” memories of Trinidad, and be silent. But at the same time this silence is a kind of resistance: ““This city,/ mourning the smell of flowers and dirt, cannot/ tell me what to say even if it chokes me”. Her “hush,” like that of the slaves, is a kind of

⁶¹⁶Zackodnik 1995, p. 196.

⁶¹⁷Ibid., p. 197.

⁶¹⁸Brand 1990, p. 31.

“idiom” conveying that she will say nothing rather than obey or fit into the constrictions of a racist environment. Again, as in the poem about slaves and their silencing, in a way the environment seems to echo what is happening with language: the city silently mourns what it has lost, as she does; she “package[s]” and “horde[s]” the smell of flowers and the taste of fruit from home. The poem finishes with “...I became more secretive, language/ seemed to split in two, one branch fell silent, the other/ argued hotly for going home”. There is no language for being in Toronto, there is only silencing as a response to the racism facing her, and a “hording” of and longing for “home”. There is no way, for twenty years, that she can find words to express (or even understand) the disbelief, alienation and pain of being in Toronto.

Brand also suggests that a measure of healing and empowerment in the face of pain may be found in an honest recognition, claiming, and speaking out about political realities; a moving toward wholeness and belonging in the face of pain. She moves in *No Language is Neutral*, Teresa Zackodnik suggests, towards “a notion of the exiled self as place and belonging...”⁶¹⁹ Through a crafting of language, she defines herself. The poem beginning “In another place, not here”⁶²⁰ gives the sense of a poem of imagining, of saying what she has tried to do; of both longing and a kind of manifesto, as if saying: ‘this is who I am’.

In another place, not here, a woman might touch
something between beauty and nowhere, back there
and here, might pass hand over hand her own
trembling life, but I have tried to imagine a sea not
bleeding, a girl’s glance full as a verse, a woman
not crying to a radio hissing of a
black boy’s murder. I have tried to keep my throat
gurgling like a bird’s.

She has tried to imagine beyond racism; “a sea not/ bleeding” suggests the slave trade and the earlier poem in which escape was impossible. She has tried to imagine women not grieving. And she is imagining finding a way of belonging: “something between beauty and nowhere, back there/ and here”. The reference to the bird suggests that she has tried to keep singing, making beauty. The mention of her “throat” recalls the slaves in the earlier poem, whose lips were “made to bubble blood”. Later in the poem she writes:

... I have come to know
something simple. Each sentence realised or
dreamed jumps like a pulse with history and takes a
side.

No language is neutral. “What I say in any language” is rooted in race and gender and is told

...not in
words and in words and in words learned by heart,
told in secret and not in secret, and listen, does not

⁶¹⁹Zackodnik 1995, p. 194.

⁶²⁰Brand 1990, p. 34.

burn out or waste and is plenty and pitiless and loves.

For Brand what is told in words, and what is told in other ways; what is told intimately, “in secret”, and what is said publicly; “does not burn out or waste and is plenty and pitiless and loves”: there is a depth of meaning that does not run out. What she says is pitiless because of anger; what she says in any way, comes from love. This poem is very far from the sense of silence and alienation in the one I quoted earlier, the sense of vacancy and emptiness and isolation evoked there. This one conveys meaning, conveys that she is claiming herself: claiming her race and her gender, committing herself to that identity and to her politics.

Brand explicitly and lyrically relates the politics of language to lesbianism in a poem which forms part of a series of sensual poems evoking the memory of her first lover and the intensity of their intimacy, and how that too was political. The tender, revolutionary politics of the lesbian relationship evoked are intertwined, in this sequence of poems, with various themes of politics and struggles for justice and empowerment.

She writes of

these warm
watery syllables, a woman’s tongue so like a culture
plunging toward stones not yet formed into flesh,
language not yet made... I want to kiss you deeply,
smell, taste the warm water of your mouth... (36)

Brand’s reference to “language not yet made” recalls for me the poem that begins “In another place, not here”. As in that poem, there might be a possibility of belonging, of being perhaps whole. But at the same time even though that world does not yet exist, that language does not yet exist, it is “tasted” now, in this love between these women; in the previous poem, that world is touched through imagination, through keeping her throat “gurgling”...and through commitment to the politics she espouses, and a claiming of herself.

According to Teresa Zackodnik,

Brand’s poetry speaks of the necessity to challenge the ability of a language infused with heterosexist ideology to articulate a lesbian presence and experience. Her love poetry frequently calls for a new language... Brand conceives of this new language that will voice lesbian existence and experience as an erotic grammar of woman’s desire for woman... This is a language that she and her lover create together with touching tongues in their mouths, not a unitary language of a single utterance but a dialogue of voices in a common tongue. This [language] must articulate lesbian experience, recovering it from silence and giving bodily shape to the invisibility of lesbians in society and language.⁶²¹

⁶²¹Zackodnik 1995, pp. 199-200.

Zackodnik's emphasis here is exclusively on the lesbian politics of language. Though elsewhere in the same article she writes of Brand's concern with decolonising language, and with racism, she separates this aspect of Brand's politics from what Brand writes about lesbianism and language, or adds the two aspects together rather than looking at them simultaneously, something Brand emphatically does not do. Zackodnik argues that both standard English and nation language render Brand invisible; while the latter "may create a place for her to articulate and affirm her blackness, it exiles her as a woman and a lesbian".⁶²² Her search for a new language, according to Zackodnik, is motivated by her being a lesbian of colour. But this echoes arguments about "triple oppression" (and indeed she refers to Brand's "triple muting" as a lesbian of colour; Brand is "triply aware of language as a powerful sign that creates and regulates racial, gender and sexual identities".⁶²³) The poem quoted above seems to me not to be about the limitations of language or of a particular language --Trinidadian English-- but about possibility and creativity; about language coming into being; about what Brand is doing in her poetry in terms of finding ways of expressing depth of feeling, the complexity of different aspects of self, love, politics, all at the same time. This poem also suggests the importance of wordless language (or language "not in/ words *and* in words"): communication created bodily, and based on all the facets of a complex self, simultaneously.

Brand speaks of Trinidadian language, or of particular mixtures of Trinidadian and "standard" English, as her own "talk"; something society does not allow her to fully inhabit. While it, like standard English, bears the traces of the history of slavery, it is still her language, and a language which she shapes to speak of her experiences as a lesbian Caribbean migrant living in Canada. Thus Brand's writing offers a more sustained reflection of the meanings and complexities of Caribbean dialect in the context of migration, than do the poems of Allen, Bloom and Collins. This thorough interrogation of the politics and poetics of dialect in Brand's work can perhaps be understood as a development of the concerns which initially animated Allen, Bloom, Collins, and other Caribbean women writers, and as an effort to work through the implications of their work in greater detail.

Portrayals of activism

In this section, I turn to look at how some of the literature responds to society's fragmentation not only of individual Black women but also of Black women from each other, to dislocating

⁶²²Ibid., p. 201.

⁶²³Ibid., p. 199, p. 194.

effects of migration, and to oppressive relationships within migrant communities in exile by attempting to create cultures or communities of activism. I hope to suggest the importance both of understanding the literature in the context of feminist activism and of recognising the centrality of migrant women's literature to feminism as a whole.

Dionne Brand's *No Language is Neutral*

Dionne Brand's poetry offers explicit reflections on the relationships between poetry and politics, love and activism, demonstrating the embeddedness of politics in her everyday life. After some of the poems of the sequence most directly dealing with the relationship between the two women, comes a poem which begins by addressing the reader: "listen, just because I've spent these/few verses fingering this register of the heart... do not think that things escape me...". She is warning the reader not to assume she is ignoring or has forgotten the politics of racist oppression, of "the police bullet glistening/ through a black woman's spine in November, against red pools of democracy bursting the hemisphere's seams...". And in the sequence of poems I am talking about, race, gender, sexuality, politics, language are all intertwined, addressed simultaneously. Leslie Sanders remarks that Brand "achieves through this work read as a whole what Audrey [sic] Lorde calls 'the erotic as power'"; it is perhaps this intertwining that she is referring to.⁶²⁴

Present in the poems after this are references to the history of slavery, to the revolution in Cuba and the struggle for justice in Grenada, where Brand went to take part in the revolution before it was crushed by the United States; the long-term effects of that experience – Brand writes of "When I came back from Grenada and went crazy for two years, that/ time when I could hear anything and my skin was/ flaming like a nerve and the walls were like paper/ and my eyes could not close"-- are intermingled with the love the poems also describe.

The volume's final poem invokes the lover once more and speaks of becoming herself—through the intimacy and explosiveness of the relationship. In an echo of the old woman whom the speaker saw as "darkening" in another poem,⁶²⁵ this poem says that in this relationship "I am blackening in my way"—becoming blacker, more herself. In the poem about the old woman, the speaker had said she saw and "envied" her, later realising it was the freedom she perceived in the woman that she longed for: a "longing to leave the prisoned gaze of men".⁶²⁶ In this final

⁶²⁴Sanders 1990, p. 30.

⁶²⁵Brand 1990, p. 48.

⁶²⁶Ibid., p. 48.

poem, like the old woman the speaker is becoming more herself, less defined by others, and living and loving with intensity and passion.

... You ripped the
world raw. It was as if another life exploded in my face, brightening, so easily the brow of a wing
touching the surf, so easily I saw my own body, that
is, my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
as a place, another life, terra.⁶²⁷

Brand's work then offers an indication of her sense of the interrelationship between politics and daily life, the very inextricability of activism from love, and indeed the importance of love in sustaining self in the face of the destructive effects of her time in Grenada, and the effacement of self resulting from being a black lesbian in Canada.

The following discussion looks at portrayals of activism in three novels written by migrant women. These portrayals address the activism which emerges from women's experiences of being migrants in Britain. Like Brand's work, these novels also point to an important, and sustaining relationship between activism, community, self and identity.

Meera Syal's *Life isn't all ha ha hee hee*

Syal writes in the context of Britain in the 1990s, where a key issue that has animated and defined Black women's activism is the question of domestic violence and its intersections with issues of race and migration. Southall Black Sisters, for example, one of the main Black women's organisations in England, was founded in 1979 and is still very active on immigration and race issues affecting Black women – such as opposing the “one year rule” under which non-British women married to British or other men with legal status must remain married for at least one year in order to qualify for independent leave to remain. This rule traps women victimised by their husbands into a choice between living with domestic violence or facing deportation if they leave their husbands. Southall Black Sisters has formed numerous campaigns to secure the release of individual women – such as Kiranjit Ahluwalia, in 1992-- convicted and jailed for murdering violent husbands or ex-husbands, or to convict men who have killed their wives, other female relatives, or children. (Campaigns around Krishna Sharma, Balwant Kaur, Gurdip Kaur and others).⁶²⁸

Syal's novel portrays a campaign similar to some of these; within the novel, the story is told of Jasbinder Singh, who having separated from her husband had custody of their two children. A campaigner tells the story, at a benefit evening for Singh:

⁶²⁷Ibid., p. 51.

⁶²⁸See Southall Black Sisters 1990, especially pp. 7, 16-24; Sudbury 1998 pp. 251, 254.

‘On December the twelfth, after a weekend visit, Gurpreet Singh [Jasbinder’s husband] refused to hand the children back to Jasbinder, claiming that his sons should live with him and his parents. When Jasbinder refused, and threatened to call the police, her husband took matters into his own hands...’ Suki paused for a second, tightly gripping the microphone. Chila became aware of the silence around her, unnerving after so much noise.

‘Gurpreet Singh told his wife if he could not have the children, no-one could, and that this was her punishment for destroying their family. He then locked himself in his car with his sons, doused himself and his children with petrol, and in front of Jasbinder, who was watching from a window, waiting for the police to arrive, burnt himself and his own sons to death.’⁶²⁹

The activism in this novel is apparently –from the point of view of space devoted to the story-- in the background to the main material or plot, which focuses on the relationships among three women, Sunita, Chila and Tania. But at the same time, the story and campaign of Jasbinder Singh, as well as clearly being significant to both Singh herself and her committed supporters, also contain parallels and contrasts with elements in those relationships. (Suki prefaces her account of Jasbinder’s ordeal by speaking of Singh as “ ‘a woman who has been through a hell few of us can imagine, but which is closer to us than we all think’ ”.⁶³⁰ Singh’s story and campaign affects the three main characters in various ways. The role of the campaign in the novel thus conveys something about the many different ways in which activism can affect the lives of women both involved in it and –as is the case with the novel’s main characters— peripherally touched by it. It demonstrates that this activism is part of the fabric of these women’s lives, even though they are not activists themselves, simply because of the context in which they live. They attend the benefit not because they are intimately involved in the campaign but because of whom they know, the circles they move in, their “community” and the issues that arise in that context.

The novel gives a glimpse of the solidarity among women involved in or supportive of the campaign in its portrayal of the benefit event for Jasbinder Singh’s campaign. As Singh speaks from the stage to the audience, readers are told, “[a]n almost tangible aura of energy, red-hot, ready, passed from the watching women to the stage, holding Jasbinder erect, urging her on”. Solidarity, then, seems to flow almost tangibly from audience to speaker. Singh herself also shows solidarity with other women in similar circumstances:

‘This court ruling must be overturned, for all the other women out there, like me. For Leila Khan, who was stabbed to death when collecting her children from a custody visit. For Priya Kumar, whose ex-husband kidnapped her son and has been missing for five years. For Jyoti Patel, who let her ex-husband take her children on holiday and when he returned...’⁶³¹

While on the surface the story of Singh appears in the background of the characters’ lives, nonetheless it has a profound impact on them, their relationships to others, and to each other. Below I examine the nature of this impact on two of the main characters, Chila and Tania.

⁶²⁹Syal 1999, p. 217.

⁶³⁰Ibid., p. 217.

⁶³¹Ibid., p. 218.

Over the course of the novel, there is a sense in which Chila's life has taken on some of what the campaign represents --an understanding of men's accountability for their actions, and the importance of women's friendship-- although not in as violent or dramatic form as the experiences of Singh and the other women referred to at the benefit. The extreme situation which is presented through the character of Singh has its reflection in the everyday experiences of Chila, and perhaps implicitly, of many Black and Asian women in Britain.

Before events change her, Chila believes --or wants to believe-- in love and understanding between men and women. Some time before the passage where Singh is speaking, quoted above, Chila has witnessed her husband, Deepak, and her friend, Tania, embracing; this betrayal makes her all the more desperate to hold on to her belief. During Singh's speech she rushes from the room, unable to bear what she is hearing, as it threatens what she is clinging to.

Later in the story, Deepak --whom Chila refuses to let see the baby she has just borne-- snatches him, in a parallel to the stories of Singh and the other women she is campaigning for (although Deepak eventually brings the child back, claiming he had merely wanted to see him). At the end of the novel, it appears that Chila is splitting up with Deepak,⁶³² certainly the stability and comfort she wants from her marriage is gone.

Chila also changes in terms of the importance she places on friendship among women. She is uneasy at the women-only environment of the benefit event and would prefer to have male company. This is perhaps symbolic of her overall feelings, at this stage, towards men and towards women. By the end of the novel, while it is unclear whether Chila will be in touch with Tania again, all three main characters attend Tania's father's funeral together, and there is a possible, tentative move toward solidarity among the women.

Hence, over the course of the narrative, Chila has come to recognise the limitations of her marriage. While she has lost some of her ideas and hopes of harmony between men and women, however, there is (in the case of Tania both tentative and problematic) a reinforcement of the importance to her of female friendship. The Jasbinder Singh campaign has played a role in bringing this about; and the changes in Chila's outlook parallel some of the values of that campaign.

Tania, too, is affected and changed over the course of the novel by Singh's story and the campaign around her. This is in spite of the fact that the kind of solidarity portrayed at the

⁶³²Ibid., p. 328, p. 333.

benefit event seems to convey a marked contrast to much of Tania's behaviour: in particular her affair with Chila's husband, Deepak, and her betrayal of her friends through her work as a film-maker. It is also unclear what her motives are when she eventually (having at first refused her agent's request, saying she does not want to make any more "Asian stories" and that she wants no more to do with "grubbing in the ghetto, I'm mainstream now"⁶³³) agrees to make a film on Jasbinder Singh.

On the one hand she tells Suki, who introduces her to Singh when Tania goes to see her, "I think her story deserves to be told. I'm not sure how at the moment. But I know I could give her the kind of platform she needs. I mean, I'd take my cue from her.'" On the other hand, Suki is shocked by a film Tania had made about relationships among Asian women because Tania had used her friends Chila and Sunita in the film, making Chila appear ridiculous and filming Sunita without the latter's knowledge; Suki feels Tania is also being exploitative in her attempts to make a film about Singh.⁶³⁴ We are told that "In her [Suki's] world, populated by unthinkable betrayals and violent revenge, loyalty was all";⁶³⁵ she angrily reproaches Tania for trying to "make your name on Jasbinder's back". These indications about Tania's motives and behaviour, and about Suki's perception of her, suggest how opposed many of Tania's attitudes are to the values embodied by the campaign.

But Tania undergoes significant changes during the course of the novel: she is forced to think through her relationship with Deepak; she confronts her father's illness; she changes her attitudes to, and her behaviour towards, her female friends. While it is not possible to attribute all of these changes directly to the Jasbinder Singh campaign, the presence of this campaign in the background of Tania's life does have an indirect and significant impact on her.

The changes in Tania's relationship with Deepak are not directly related to the campaign; it is her discovery, when Chila goes into labour, that Deepak has lied to her about not sleeping with his wife, that leads, ultimately, to the ending of their affair. Tania has something of a breakdown as a result of this series of events; her emotional response leads her to an entirely new sensitivity, both to others around her and to the ways in which she has behaved towards others. In the wake of her breakdown, she visits her father, who is in a coma, and is far more sensitive to his needs than she had been previously. She becomes aware of how she has used "convenient cinematic tags" both to distance herself from painful events and emotions, and to manipulate others into meeting her own needs. She no longer visualises "Dad on freeze frame until I cut

⁶³³Ibid., p. 258.

⁶³⁴Ibid., pp. 263-8.

⁶³⁵Ibid., p. 266.

this altogether to make sense...Before I would have comforted myself with the certainty that, some day in the future, this would inspire a wonderful film, a seminal scene, a dramatic anecdote”. Now, she says,

I crave anonymity, privacy. I guard my grief jealously, like a pearl. I flinch at the news, I avoid tragic headlines, I follow babies and small dogs in the street with moist, protective eyes. I now yearn for goodness, for resolution. My mum once told me that was what karma truly meant, to experience at some point all you have inflicted.⁶³⁶

Tania’s new sensitivity and sense that she is experiencing what she has inflicted -- grief and betrayal-- where previously she had distanced herself from such emotions in herself and others, leads her to change in her behaviour with her friends; and it is here that the links with Jasbinder Singh are made more explicit. When Deepak snatches the baby, because Chila is refusing to let him see his son, Tania helps out. She phones Suki, who started the Singh campaign, for help (since Suki has dealt with situations of snatched children). Suki, who almost “slam[s] the phone down”, “gabble[s] advice and lists and numbers at me” once she realises what the situation is.⁶³⁷ Later Tania reports that she and Suki now “hang out together”, suggesting a transformed friendship.

However, the extent of Tania’s transformation is uncertain. The future of her friendships with both Chila and Sunita is uncertain; Chila phones Tania “[t]o thank me, for Christ’s sake”⁶³⁸ but is noncommittal about whether she will phone again; Sunita phones to obtain Suki’s phone number. The three attend Tania’s father’s funeral together, but it is unclear whether this means reconciliation. Through Suki Tania has “met Jasbinder Singh a couple of times. Amazing woman. Haven’t mentioned anything about a film. Yet”.

So Tania becomes friends with Suki, admires Jasbinder, but at the end of the novel has not given up the idea of the film. It is unclear whether she has changed enough to make a non-exploitative film, if indeed this is possible. The word “yet” in what Tania says makes the reader wonder. The changes brought about, in Tania, by Jasbinder Singh’s suffering and subsequent campaign are tentative, but real.

Thus Syal’s novel of three characters who, on the surface, are more intent on having a good time, and enjoying the possibilities of life in the east end of London, than in transforming the world, demonstrates that their lives are nonetheless inextricably bound up with the politics of

⁶³⁶Ibid., p. 318.

⁶³⁷Ibid., p. 323.

⁶³⁸Ibid., p. 328.

being Black women in Britain in the 1990s, and that the struggles and campaigns of those who would more readily define themselves as activists touch in profound ways on their daily lives.

Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman*

Randhawa's novel offers a more explicit account of the links between political activism and relationships between women. *A Wicked Old Woman* focuses particularly on the healing potential of political solidarity, particularly among women. In the novel relationships among women are crucial, and healing and activism intimately related. Activism is a central theme in the novel; it is central to the characters' lives. In a very different, apparently opposite, way to Syal in *Life is not all ha ha hee hee*, Randhawa shows politics and activism as central to the lives of her characters and to the lives of Asian women in Britain. She weaves it into her characters' everyday lives as well as the language she has them use. As in Syal's novel, most of the activism portrayed begins with defending or trying to help particular individuals, usually known personally to the characters, and rippling outwards to encompass wide-ranging issues.

There are many examples of activism in the novel. I focus on three of these to illustrate these arguments. In one instance, some of the women characters become involved in supporting the women at Greenham Common. In another important strand, the activism centres around supporting and defending the character Rani, who is for most of the novel in a coma after having killed the man who tried to rape her. Both of these contrast quite markedly in several respects, as I show below, with the Labour Party activism depicted: the central character, Kulwant, was once involved with the Party, but left it following conflicts which left her feeling isolated and misunderstood.

In two other cases, (which I cannot go into in more detail here), a character known as Big Sis becomes involved in factory union activism after a woman suffers a horrific accident; and Soni helps organise a demonstration to defend a group of young Asian men accused of attacking the police, where, it seems, quite the opposite has happened. There are many characters in the novel, with intertwined, complex and not always explicitly clear relationships with each other, and many instances of activism, suggesting the interrelationships of these issues as well as of the individuals. This also illustrates the everyday importance to Asian women in Britain of issues including sexual violence, the threat posed by nuclear weapons, unsafe and unjust labour conditions under which many Asian women must work, and the racism and state-sponsored violence of the police.

Ammi and the Greenham Women The example of characters' involvement in supporting the Greenham women, is one which shows particularly clearly the centrality of women's

relationships to activism, as well as the interrelationship of healing and activism. It is also an instance of a campaign or movement that begins with trying to help one individual survive devastating circumstances. The character Ammi suffers nightmares which closely resemble scenes of nuclear holocaust; in order to try to make them stop, her daughters (Shazia and Big Sis) organise the cooking and delivery of food-- which Ammi participates in -- to the women at Greenham Common. In the end this stops the nightmares only temporarily, but Ammi participates enthusiastically, "contentment in her hands and face" as she fills and folds dozens of samosas.⁶³⁹ According to Shazia (we do not hear directly from Ammi; she speaks no English and we hear her translated words via her daughters), Ammi has told the women that they can have "two each, when they're all cooked... If we have more it's like snatching samosas out of the mouths of freedom fighters... that's what Ammi reckons the Greenham women are".⁶⁴⁰ Angie, a friend of Shazia's, reports on the progress of the organising she has been doing: the samosas and stuffed parathas that have been promised by other women, the collection of clothes and quilts, the attempts by Angie's mother to persuade her (mostly male) church group to get involved. As she works, and interspersed with comments and instructions relating to the food preparation, Shazia tells the story of how Ammi's dreams have led to this campaign. In response to the dreams

...we explained, to Ammi about Hiroshima, and what happened, and that it was long ago. Ammi said she understood, but such a terrible thing wouldn't happen again would it? she asked us. We couldn't lie. We tried not to answer at all. The dreams carried on. We hadn't told her about nuclear bombs and everything. We thought it would only upset her... Do you know what it's like explaining nuclear power to someone who's never heard about it before. Ammi doesn't speak English, so how is she to know? And you hardly get Radio Karachi here to tell you all about it. Newspapers? Her parents never sent her to school. Never did like those grandparents. Big Sis and I put in a joint effort but Ammi just couldn't understand, I mean she couldn't accept it, didn't want to understand it. She said it was madness. We agreed. Who wouldn't, right? I mean those who're sane. Right. So Big Sis told her about the Greenham women. Once she heard, Ammi wanted to go and see them. Once she got there she wanted to stay with them. Well Big Sis and I would have been worried sick, we persuaded her to come back. We wondered why she was so quiet on the way back. Saving her talking for when she got back, wasn't she. She saturated the local Asian women with her propaganda. The dreams stopped.

They all thought she was bonkers. They think that anyway. No one was listening to her. And she was getting harassed and worried again, and we thought oh oh here we go, back to square one. So I took her off to the doctor. Wonderful, Dr Gupta is... She and Ammi chatted away like they were long lost sisters. Forgetting about everybody else waiting in the surgery. That's how they cooked up... this idea of taking food to the Greenham women. With Dr G's support the wheels started turning. As everyone said, she's got degrees, this Dr Gupta, that proves she ain't bonkers... The gurudwara women's lot even invited two of the speakers from the Greenham women to come down and talk to them... Everywhere you went, women, Asian women were talking about the Greenham women, about nuclear bombs, about mad politicians... I'm just glad Ammi's dreams haven't come back.⁶⁴¹

I quote this at length to show how in the instance of this campaign, many of my points about activism, relationships among women, and the healing potential of these arise simultaneously. In this campaign to help the Greenham women, relationships between women are central. Furthermore, the intimate interrelationship of the activism and their lives and relationships is

⁶³⁹Randhawa 1987, p. 74.

⁶⁴⁰Ibid., 1987, p. 75.

⁶⁴¹Ibid., pp. 77-78.

reflected in the ‘gossipy’ tone with which these issues are discussed, for example in the passage quoted above. As with the campaign in Syal’s novel, this one begins with women trying to help one woman survive something very difficult for her to deal with; the campaign then ripples out to include and involve more and more women. In this case, Shazia and Big Sis begin by trying to help their mother overcome her nightmares; gradually other women --Dr Gupta, women in the wider Asian community as well as Angie and her mother—become involved as well. At one point Shazia says: “You see, she’s got to do something about them [the nightmares] to make them go away. ‘Ere, what d’you think would happen if everyone had Ammi’s dreams and had to do something about them?” She is making the point that if everybody started with individual fears and did something about them, substantial positive change might be achieved; that addressing the needs of this one woman is both important in itself and a vital beginning for a broader movement for change. One individual’s emotional, apparently irrational, experience is taken seriously as a starting point for an activist campaign.

Angie comments at one point that “Given half a chance half the women I’ve met would camp out at Greenham. Anything to get away from their families”.⁶⁴² Her observation highlights the point that families are problematic for many women; and perhaps that the bonding among women fundamental to politics at Greenham was an attractive alternative for them. Here the campaign begins within a family –Ammi is being cared for by her daughters—but also goes beyond immediate family to encompass a wide community of women both within networks of family and friendship, and beyond them.

The novel depicts, according to one critic, “the making whole of damaged psyches through involvement with others in the community, through recognising and seeking to heal the pain of others”.⁶⁴³ The Greenham instance is one of the examples showing this interrelationship of activism and healing. The role of Dr. Gupta is interesting in this regard: rather than medicalising Ammi’s distress, she reinforces Shazia’s and Big Sis’ efforts by politicising it. By suggesting a particular way Ammi can help the Greenham women –something that she has expertise in, i.e. preparing Indian food—she helps to empower the woman and at least temporarily stop Ammi’s nightmares, which centre on death and destruction and fundamentally, silence and powerlessness.

The novel centres on Asian women characters and their interrelationships. But there are also some unexpected alliances: Angie, Shazia’s friend who helps out with the campaign, is black (Afro-Caribbean, presumably, not Asian) –a fact that surprises Maya, who is visiting during the

⁶⁴²Ibid., pp. 74-78.

⁶⁴³Innes 1988, p. 33.

preparing of the samosas. And of course Greenham was mostly a movement of white women, and has been criticised for this.

But the campaign engaged in in the novel is a particular contribution, by Asian women, to Greenham. My intention here is not to refute, or to suggest that Randhawa is refuting, charges of racism within the Greenham Common movement. I mean to show, rather, how Randhawa has her characters bring a perspective that is particular to their identities as British-Asian women to the issues confronted by that campaign. In terms of what it is that is done to support the movement -- the preparing of the food and collecting of clothes and quilts, something that is domestic and a traditional women's activity, the characters make a contribution that is a particularly Asian women's one. The campaign to support the Greenham activists arises from Ammi's particular situation, as an Asian woman in Britain, able neither to speak English nor to read, and suffering nightmares which come from her particular experiences and anxieties (though these are not explored extensively in the novel). Greenham, "nuclear bombs... [and] mad politicians" become an Asian women's issue; the characters make it into one.

Rani and Sexual Violence against Women The text several times juxtaposes accounts of Ammi and of Rani, who for most of the novel is in hospital in a state of complete withdrawal from the world. It is not clear whether or if so, exactly how, Ammi and Rani are related but these juxtapositions suggest a connection between the women's suffering. So too does the fact that Ammi's nightmares stop when she begins to take part, along with a network of other women, in a campaign of support for Rani, keeping vigil with her, and trying to bring her back to life. Additionally, they appear to mirror each other: while Ammi has nightmares of violence, Rani "cannot close her eyes, for fear of being overwhelmed by nightmare visions of the violence with which she has had to defend herself": she killed her flatmate Rosco, when he tried to rape her.

The figure of Rani acts as an important framing device throughout, and brings many of the other women's narratives together at the close of the novel. More importantly however, her healing, which results from the literal 'massaging' of stories 'into her body' by the collective efforts of the whole community, who individually recite parallel narratives to her as she slowly regathers her consciousness, can be seen to be a significant political act.⁶⁴⁴

Nasta is, when she speaks of this "significant political act", referring more to the effects on those who are "nurs[ing] Rani back from the edge of madness" than on Rani herself but I would also say it is --like the campaign to help Ammi and support the Greenham women--both a political campaign for an individual woman and, as Nasta points out, something that benefits the wider community.

⁶⁴⁴Nasta 2002, pp. 209-10.

For it is through the collective vigil engendered by the telling of these stories that Kulwant abandons her persona as a crippled old woman and, with Caroline, Ammi, Angie and Maya, nurses Rani back from the edge of madness. Significantly too, as the accretion of stories – the individual histories of the different characters’ lives—begin to infiltrate into Rani’s consciousness, the community itself begins to visualize the possibility of growth and the creation of an alternative space to represent the contradictory realities of their existence.⁶⁴⁵

After Rani has returned to consciousness, there is a new campaign of solidarity begun around her: a campaign organised to defend her against charges of murder. Started by Shanti, Rani’s mother, it too (like the Greenham campaign) develops, as more and more people are persuaded to get involved.⁶⁴⁶ The novel ends with a growing sense of solidarity with Rani, among characters fragmented by their internal and interpersonal conflicts over racial, cultural and gender identities.

Kulwant and Labour Party Activism These instances of activism contrast with one other example, an example of more traditional politics in the form of party political activism. Kulwant is earlier involved in the Labour party. She leaves the Party at the same time she leaves Karm, the man she is having an affair with, and who is also in the Labour Party. There has been a conflict over Kulwant’s support for an Asian man running for MP, when Karm (who is white) is also running; after Kulwant “rocked the boat” a group of white women begin to campaign for a white woman candidate.

Consistent with the form of their relationship their last private struggle was also replicated in a public struggle. She was supporting and wanted the party to support the application of an Asian man to be endorsed as parliamentary candidate. At a time when all were calm waiting for Karm to be rubber stamped.⁶⁴⁷

There is also ongoing conflict because the other party activists wanted to have their meetings in a pub; for Kulwant this is difficult because of attitudes within parts of the Asian community regarding women going to public places such as pubs. The other activists feel that by not going she is accepting her oppression, whereas Kulwant feels there are so many battles to fight, and this is not necessarily the most important one. She has to decide where to put her energy. They later relent and meet in private homes but it is a case of her energy being sapped over time because of lack of understanding of her particular “location” as an Asian woman. This contrasts with the activism of the kitchen, which builds up the energy of those involved. This ‘kitchen activism’ is based on something familiar –though Maya has never learned to make samosas and earns Shazia’s comment that “these samosas aren’t meant to be lobbed at the bombs, you’ve got to roll the dough thinner”⁶⁴⁸ –and which they build upon and use for activist means.

⁶⁴⁵Ibid., p. 210.

⁶⁴⁶Randhawa 1987, pp. 203-205.

⁶⁴⁷Ibid., p. 143.

⁶⁴⁸Ibid., p. 76.

A Wicked Old Woman also portrays conflict among activist Asian British women, in particular around the issue of whether and how, through art and the media, to portray problems and conflicts within Asian communities in a respectful and non-exploitative way. Similar conflicts arise within Black feminist organisations in Britain. Southall Black Sisters, for example, describe a conflict within the organisation over whether or not to cooperate with a film crew researching domestic violence in the Asian community.

Thus Randhawa's novel demonstrates a variety of complex involvements in various kinds of political activism in the UK, ranging from conventional party politics, to contributions to women's activism at Greenham, a campaign dominated by white feminists, to activism around sexual violence. Randhawa thus effectively demonstrates how these issues affect Asian women in particular, while also suggesting that Asian women are central to, and are implicated in, all kinds of political activity in contemporary Britain.

Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging*

Unlike *A Wicked Old Woman*, *The Unbelonging* is not primarily a story of activism. Hyacinth, the main character, is not able to understand her experiences of racism and sexism in any depth, or to show any resistance to these oppressions. She does fight back when attacked by Margaret White, a fellow pupil.⁶⁴⁹ She is determined to succeed academically even though external forces try to thwart her; she arranges, completely independently, to go to college to repeat the O'levels she has failed and finds a part-time job to enable her to pay the fees. But on the whole her story is one of victimisation and despair. The abuse she suffers, and the pain and self-hatred that pervade her existence, are unrelenting.

But in a "pairing" of characters with differing relationships to racism and sexism, Riley does have Hyacinth befriend one Black Jamaican woman at college, who provides a strong contrast to Hyacinth in her political awareness and activism.⁶⁵⁰ Although part of Hyacinth is attracted to her friend Perlene's ideas, she is never able to fully embrace her friend's radicalism and celebration of Black history and solidarity. As Patricia Duncker writes,

Hyacinth's college friends, Perlene and her comrades, are radical, articulate Blacks, engaged in political activism. Their painful failure to reach Hyacinth in her isolation and 'unbelonging' never puts either their radical intelligence or their committed protest in question.⁶⁵¹

However, there is more to the story than their "radical intelligence" on the one hand and their "failure to reach Hyacinth" on the other. Perlene and her activist involvement do affect Hyacinth; the relationship between the two girls *is* significant, even though Hyacinth cannot,

⁶⁴⁹Riley 1985, p. 18.

⁶⁵⁰Carrera Suarez in Nasta, ed., 1991, pp. 303-304.

⁶⁵¹Duncker 1992, p. 221.

because of the depth of her pain and self-hatred, experience it as transformative or liberatory. While in Syal's and Randhawa's novels the portrayal of activism is associated with solidarity, with "loyalty" among women, in *The Unbelonging* perhaps the key aspect is confidence and self-esteem. Riley also demonstrates the differing relationships of these two characters, Hyacinth and Perlene, with Britain and particularly with Jamaica, their country of origin, and how these play out in their understandings of and commitment to activism.

Hyacinth envies Perlene's confidence and vivaciousness, "the way she was so unguarded and full of life, tumbling unheedingly into every new experience".⁶⁵² But in addition, the ease and well-being she feels with Perlene in part arises from a somewhat increased sense of self-esteem, as well as some degree of lessening of her sense of isolation that results from their friendship. Hyacinth likes what the two girls have in common: fond memories of Jamaica, experiences of racism in Britain. She likes the respect and attention Perlene gives her, and being able to feel that she really has a friend.

Perlene's activism has complicated and at times contradictory meanings for Hyacinth. After a conversation—really an argument—with Perlene about Jamaican politics, the narrator notes that

Hyacinth hated conversations like these, where she was left feeling exposed and small. Yet she courted them, learning more and more about black people, in a way liking her friend's pride and courage. There was so much she did not know, and one of her fears was that one day the other girl would find out.⁶⁵³

Here Hyacinth feels many things at once: While elsewhere she "envies" Perlene her confidence, here she seems to enjoy it. And while on the one hand Hyacinth "feel[s] exposed and small" and fears the uncovering of her ignorance—sometimes she simply does not understand what Perlene or the books the girl urges her to read are getting at—on the other hand Hyacinth seems to feel a kind of hunger for more knowledge about black people, perhaps experiencing it as validating. When she reluctantly, pressured by Perlene, attends a lecture by a black historian who, according to Perlene, "is giving back African history to African people, radicalising the way it is written and creating a tool, a potential force for liberation",⁶⁵⁴ Hyacinth is unexpectedly spellbound by the lecture. She recognises her own experience in his account of racism in Britain. But here too her emotional response is mixed; she "found herself sitting forward" with, presumably great interest and even excitement at what he says, but also is reminded of the painful wounds of the "abuse and assaults" she has suffered, and the "fear and frustration" of her treatment at school, a children's home and a hostel for young offenders.⁶⁵⁵

⁶⁵²Riley 1985, p. 109.

⁶⁵³Ibid., p. 112.

⁶⁵⁴Ibid., p. 115.

⁶⁵⁵Ibid., p. 116.

Perlène's activism seems to be to do with valuing Black histories and identities; she speaks of herself and other Black Jamaicans as "Africans", something which Hyacinth finds hard to take. For alongside her self-hatred, and hatred –because of her experience of her father's violence— of Jamaican men, she also feels that Africans are inferior to the people she prefers to call West Indians.

She had thought she was unique among black people, that her education set her apart. Yet these people [the black student activists she encounters] seemed more interested in going back to the primitiveness they had come from. Everyone seemed to be in the business of reclaiming their history, and she found the idea of Africans having civilisations too far-fetched to believe. But every time she raised objections, Perlène would find another book for her to read, more pictures to convince her and slowly, reluctantly, she was forced to rethink. They were strange, these black people, but grudgingly she learnt to respect them and, to her surprise, even seek them out. She still could not bring herself to consider people from Africa her equals, but was prepared to compromise by accepting that her people came originally from that continent.⁶⁵⁶

Her attitude to the students from Southern Africa she meets, (one in particular, Charles, who is in exile from Rhodesia because of his political activities) reflects on a more individual level her contradictory feelings about Africans and Jamaicans more generally. At first she is contemptuous of them, feeling superior that Jamaicans had managed to force the British to end slavery while in Rhodesia and South Africa black people were still "in bondage". At the same time Hyacinth feels "a fellowship, a sympathy" for Charles, because she too "knew what it was like to be an exile".⁶⁵⁷ And gradually, both in individual terms and on a larger scale, there is a change in her perception: she learns to respect the courage of the students who have fought against racist rule in Southern Africa, and she is "forced to rethink" her attitudes to Africans by the books shown her by Perlène.

Hyacinth clings to her pleasant and comforting childhood memories about Jamaica, and tries to construct an alternative identity for herself: in order to cover up the shame she feels at what has happened to her in Britain, and to emphasise her ties with Jamaica she pretends (though Perlène is not fooled) that she came to Britain from Jamaica much more recently than is the case. She is defensive about her country; their divergent perceptions of Jamaica are a source of conflict between herself and Perlène, who is critical of the racism she sees in Jamaican as well as British society, and of Manley, the Prime Minister. Hyacinth can see nothing wrong with Jamaica, admires Manley with his "pass for white" colouring,⁶⁵⁸ and feels that any criticism of her country is akin to support for white racism. She feels –needs to feel—a clear separation between Jamaica and Britain, whereas Perlène sees similar forces of racism working in both countries. Perlène has the Jamaican daily papers sent to her, and seems to have some fond memories of Jamaica, but is not uncritically attached to the country as is Hyacinth. And her activism, though

⁶⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 112-113.

⁶⁵⁷Ibid., p. 118.

⁶⁵⁸Ibid., p. 111.

encompassing knowledge of Jamaican politics, is based where she is, in raising awareness of Black history and contemporary realities.

Perlene does seem more confident and empowered than Hyacinth, though her character is not explored enough in the novel to enable us to know if this is a result or source (or both) of her political engagement. Hyacinth's self-esteem is in different ways both boosted and undermined by Perlene's ideas and activities. But she does not have the confidence needed to engage in activism herself. Perlene may illustrate that activism empowers, but Hyacinth's experience makes it clear that you need to have some confidence to begin with. As bell hooks has noted, "You can't effectively resist domination when you are all messed up".⁶⁵⁹

Riley thus provides a compelling portrayal of the some of the reason why some Black women do not and cannot engage in activism.

This chapter has focused on two particular dimensions of writing and politics. Firstly I focussed on the politics of language through a discussion of the use of dialect and patois in the poetry of a number of Caribbean women writers. Secondly I addressed the representation of activism in the writings of migrant women living in Britain, showing the complex involvement of Black and Asian women in Britain in diverse forms of political activism. Brand's poetry evokes an activism that is both intertwined with the lesbian relationship the poems portray, and committed to wider struggles of liberation both in Canada and in the Caribbean. Syal's and Randhawa's novels deal with the presence of activist campaigns in the context of Asian communities in Britain, and the impact of the issues dealt with on personal lives and interpersonal networks among women. Romantic or (hetero)sexual relationships, however, are not portrayed as places of political commitment in the same way as in Brand's work. Riley's novel, lastly, portrays the impact of activism, or of the inability to engage in activism, on two contrasting but paired characters, in particular, and on the relationship between them. In all instances, from Syal's characters on the borders of activist communities, to Randhawa's communities of committed activists, to Riley's character Hyacinth, who is unable to bring herself to political involvement, activism has an impact on women's lives, and changes relationships with other women; it sometimes provides sustenance and sanity in a world where nightmares, madness and imprisonment are all too frequent threats in the lives of migrant women in Britain.

⁶⁵⁹ hooks 1991, p. 218.

Chapter Six

Migration, Pain and Empowerment

In this final chapter, I address the overall question of whether migration as depicted in the writings I have looked at leads to greater pain for women, a greater sense of liberation, or both at once in different ways. I begin by examining the relationship in two novels, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Joan Riley's *The Unbelonging*, between migration and experiences of intensified gender, racial and colonial oppression, and of pain stemming from these. I look at the question of pain in terms of intertwining oppressions of racism, sexism, and homophobia and how these are experienced bodily. I go on to focus specifically on the theme of madness, experiences of which demonstrate with particular clarity the links between oppressions.

Migration can also lead to experiences of empowerment. While in previous chapters I have explored women's experiences of this through themes such as the building of community, activism, growing relationships with the place of settlement, and an evolving sense of self or identity, here I focus on depictions of writing as a process of coming to terms with the changes migration brings.

Although portrayed in very different ways in the various works, the kind of pain I focus on can be defined as emotional response to oppression. As Frantz Fanon has argued, this response may be experienced bodily as "nervous conditions" or illnesses;⁶⁶⁰ this bodily experience of pain is what I am discussing here. I see empowerment as involving processes by which sufferers of oppression may find ways of living, thriving, and affirming their own individual and collective power and dignity in the face of the pain and oppression they experience. I look at the following works: *Nervous Conditions*; *The Unbelonging*; *A Wicked Old Woman*; and *Lucy*. I also touch on the poem "Some Say it's Madness" by Yasmin Issacs.

Finally, I return to the earlier chapters of the thesis, drawing and building on the themes of these chapters and the implications of my readings.

⁶⁶⁰Fanon 1967, pp.16-17.

Migration, Pain and Empowerment

Migration and pain: Intertwining oppressions and the bodily experience of oppression

She had expected pain when she came to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness.⁶⁶¹

In the above passage Mukherjee portrays the intensity of her character's pain following migration to North America; the quote evokes how Dimple experiences this pain mentally and bodily simultaneously. She feels her mind "strained... beyond endurance"; inertia and exhaustion are both physical and mental manifestations of this.

In Chapter 3, I explored several authors' representations of the effects of racial, colonial and gender oppression on their characters' lives, and the ways in which these forms of oppression, in the context of migration, interact and reinforce each other. Both *The Unbelonging* and *Nervous Conditions*, novels I revisit from a somewhat different angle here, address the personal, internal damage wrought by the ideological, social and political forces of racial, cultural and gender oppression. I suggested that in both novels, racism is portrayed as bolstering sexism (and sometimes the other way around). In this section I argue that the intersections of oppressions are experienced most potently through the characters' experience of their own bodies.

I looked in Chapter 3 at some of the ways in which *The Unbelonging's* character Hyacinth experiences racial oppression, the sexual violence of her father, and the ways in which these oppressions intersect with, and reinforce each other, in the novel. The intertwining of racial and sexual oppressions is made clear in the novel. The books about incest which Hyacinth reads, which make no mention of Black people and thus deny and silence her own experience; and the way in which Hyacinth's father plays upon her fear of the very real racism of the outside world in order to prevent his daughter from seeking help, are two ways that the novel shows the racism of British society bolstering the violence Hyacinth experiences at home.

But it is in Hyacinth's experience of her own body that her experiences of racism and sexism come together most powerfully. Her "body constitutes the site of oppression and becomes the source of ...permanent anxiety".⁶⁶² Hyacinth's "brittle hair," of which she is deeply ashamed, represents not only "a visible racial difference, but also a powerful sexual symbol" in the novel. She is afraid to use hair oil for fear of being thought "primitive;" though unable, of course, to have the "blonde and flowing" hair she dreams of, at one point she straightens her hair and

⁶⁶¹Mukherjee 1975, p. 115.

⁶⁶²Griffin 1993, p. 21.

awaits the positive response of a particular young black man.⁶⁶³ And two instances of bathing illustrate the intertwining of oppressions in the realm of her own body. Hyacinth hates the communal showers after PE class at school, because she is forced to be “naked and defenceless, her blackness exposed for all to see, to snigger about behind her back”.⁶⁶⁴ As she reaches puberty, her father begins to watch her bathe, causing her acute embarrassment and shame at her femaleness. Her suffering is instilled by racism in one case and by sexism in the other, but in both cases she feels the same shame at the exposure of her black, female body.

An especially powerful reflection of the ways in which colonialism and sexual oppression play out through women’s bodies and work together to undermine identity is provided, in *Nervous Conditions*, by Nyasha’s dieting and the anorexia she later develops. Nyasha’s wish to become “svelte, sensuous”⁶⁶⁵ is a form of protest against her father’s standards of decency and modesty for women. Furthermore, her “refusal of food at the family table or her self-induced vomiting after having to eat there is a response to the sexual and cultural politics enacted there”.⁶⁶⁶ In one instance, she resists the ritual of having to wait to eat until her father has been served the best food, and helps herself to food out of turn; later, having been reprimanded, she refuses to eat at all. Babamukuru is perceptive in his angry observation that by refusing to eat Nyasha is “turn[ing] up her nose at what we offer” and “challenging” his patriarchal authority.⁶⁶⁷

Nyasha writes in a letter to Tambu, earlier in the novel, that she has begun a diet in order to “discipline my body and occupy my mind”.⁶⁶⁸ From her expression, elsewhere, of frustration at herself for not being able to “take it” when her father “puts on his God act”⁶⁶⁹ (despite her clear political perceptions about the reasons for his behaviour), I conclude that, as well as a form of resistance, her dieting and later disease are a form of self-punishment for her obstinacy. Her dieting is also a way of distracting herself from the suffering caused by her rejection at school and torment at the hands of her father.

Her disease is a response mostly to gender oppression but is brought about by her suffering under colonialism as well. She suffers from the contradictory pressures of having to be both “decent” in patriarchal Shona terms and successful in western ones. Her pain is articulated through a specifically female disease, but her disease, as both Thomas and Bahri show, is one instance of the “nervous conditions” which people oppressed by colonialism may develop. Both

⁶⁶³Riley 1985, p. 78.

⁶⁶⁴Ibid., p. 45.

⁶⁶⁵Dangarembga 1988, p. 197.

⁶⁶⁶Thomas 1992, p. 31.

⁶⁶⁷Dangarembga 1988, p. 189.

⁶⁶⁸Ibid., p. 197.

⁶⁶⁹Ibid., p. 190.

critics draw on Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, from which Dangarembga's epigraph – "The condition of native is a nervous condition" -- is taken, and in which he writes that colonised peoples "bury" their unacceptable rage at domination before the stage of undertaking struggles for independence. "[I]f this suppressed fury fails to find an outlet," Sartre writes in his preface, it is turned inward "and devastates the oppressed themselves". "Nervous conditions" such as Nyasha's anorexia may result.⁶⁷⁰

In a disturbing and powerful scene near the end of the novel, Nyasha, having grown dangerously thin and weak from her disease, has a breakdown which illustrates the degree of her suffering from both sexist and colonialist oppression. She wakes Tambu in the middle of the night, "agitated and nervous," and begins to whisper:

'They've done it to me... It's not their fault. They did it to them too. You know they did.... To both of them, but especially to him... But it's not his fault, he's good.' Her voice took on a Rhodesian accent. 'He's a good boy, a good munt. A bloody good kaffir,' she informed in sneering sarcastic tones. Then she was whispering again, 'Why do they do it, Tambu,' she hissed bitterly, her face contorting with rage, 'to me and to you and to him? Do you see what they've done? They've taken us away... All of us. They've deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. We're grovelling... Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him.' She began to rock, her body quivering tensely. 'I won't grovel. Oh no, I won't. I'm not a good girl. I'm evil. I'm not a good girl.' I touched her to comfort her and that was the trigger. 'I won't grovel, I won't die,' she raged and crouched like a cat ready to spring.

The noise brought Babamukuru and Maiguru running. They could do nothing, could only watch. Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between her teeth ('Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.'), breaking mirrors, her clay pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot. 'They've trapped us. They've trapped us. But I won't be trapped. I'm not a good girl. I won't be trapped.' Then as suddenly as it came, the rage passed.⁶⁷¹

In the midst of her extreme pain and anger, Nyasha articulates her perception that "they" --the whites who rule Rhodesia-- bear the ultimate responsibility for her suffering. She understands the linkage of oppressions in which Babamukuru is a "good kaffir" in relation to the whites and expects his wife, daughter and niece to submit, in turn, to his authority. She rages at the lies colonialism tells about history, and, perhaps most of all, at the deep and painful divisions it creates: it divides people both from themselves and from each other. It takes Tambu away from her roots, and from Nyasha, to convent school in search of "emancipation". And its effects nearly destroy Nyasha herself.

⁶⁷⁰Thomas 1992, pp. 26-7; Bahri 1994, par. 2; Fanon 1967, p. 16.

⁶⁷¹Dangarembga 1988, pp. 200-1.

Nyasha has long been keenly aware of the dynamics of oppression in her life, and has resisted her father's domination at every opportunity. But she also understands how all-pervasive the oppression is, and how little recourse for effective resistance is available. In the end, the only site of resistance available to her, the only aspect of her life she is able to control, is her body.⁶⁷² And she must resist somehow; when Tambu asks her why she cannot wait to wage her struggle, she answers that unless she keeps moving she will forget what the struggle was about, and get stuck in the rut of accepting "the way things are".⁶⁷³

Nyasha's anorexic behaviour is often accompanied by an almost manic cramming for exams. This over-studiousness, I suggest, comes from motives similar to those for her anorexia. She is denying her own needs, searching for a distraction from her suffering and for one small area of her life she can control. She echoes her description of the need to keep moving for fear of getting stuck when she says of her need to work so hard, that it is "as if there's everything to learn and I'll never know it all. So I have to keep reading and memorising all the time... To make sure I get it all in". Despite being attracted to the idea of failing her exams to put her father in a difficult position (because of his authority he would probably be able to lighten the consequences for her but in that case would be compromising his moral authority), "everyone except Nyasha knew that fail was one thing she could not do".⁶⁷⁴ The characters of Nyasha and Hyacinth offer a potent illustration of the gendered "nervous conditions" that colonialism and racism can lead to, particularly when compounded with difficult experiences of migration.

Migration and madness

At the same time as it shows the intertwining of oppressions, and the ways in which women experience these bodily, some literature by migrant women links such experiences to 'madness', giving the lie to a view of madness as purely 'mental illness'. The writings also pre-empt and critique reductionistic, simplistic or patronising theories about madness. In what follows I look at the novels *Nervous Conditions* and Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman*, and refer briefly to Yasmin Issacs' poem "Some Say It's Madness". I draw on the writings of various theorists on madness, to address to what extent on the one hand theories (including those of Frantz Fanon, Guus Van der Veer and Manuel Ramirez) about the relation of madness to colonialism, racism and the experiences of "Third World" migrants and on the other hand feminist theories trying to explain the phenomenon of women's madness under patriarchy (as do Susan Bordo, Jane Ussher, Phyllis Chesler and others) are relevant to the novelists' and poet's explorations of the madness of black migrant women. I suggest that some of the theory tackling

⁶⁷²Bahri 1994, par. 8.

⁶⁷³Dangarembga 1988, p. 117.

⁶⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 107-8.

the relationship of madness to oppression, whether of black people or of women, is helpful in understanding the novelists' and poet's own explorations; but that the majority of the theory ignores *black women's* experiences of madness. The novels, on the other hand, make central precisely these experiences, and make clear the need to look at society's racism, sexism and marginalisation of migrants *together* in order to understand how these can combine to lead migrant women to experience extreme pain, and even madness.

Feminists, including Jane Ussher, Elaine Showalter, Phyllis Chesler and Susan Bordo, have long pointed to a relationship between patriarchy and madness. Two main strands of argument can be identified in feminist analyses of women's madness -- sometimes one is present in a given theorist's writings, sometimes both are. One strand is the observation that women are *labelled* mad if they deviate from the norms imposed by a sexist society: women's anger, women's rejection of the roles and personalities prescribed to them are unacceptable and therefore stigmatised and pathologised.

The other strand is the argument that sexism, misogyny, and men's oppressive and violent treatment of women can *cause* women to go mad. Overt violence as well as more covert forms of oppression, and internalised sexism, lead women to feel alienated, depressed and powerless. Women's madness can be, according to this kind of theory, a response to powerlessness in the face of misogyny; it can be a way of expressing emotions which can find no other outlet, given patriarchy's silencing of women's voices.

Jane Ussher goes further than many critics in arguing for a complex and multifaceted understanding of, and response to, women's madness. She is critical of both the anti-psychiatry movement's and feminists' critiques of mainstream models of madness for being too one-sided; she concludes that neither a view of madness as "a misogynistic construct", nor as "mental illness" caused by the pain of living in a sexist society, is sufficient. "As women, we are regulated by the discourse of madness"; -- but the pain is real.⁶⁷⁵ As a result, a combination of the many theoretical approaches and of various concrete responses to women's madness is necessary to go beyond the limitations inherent in each one.

Yasmin Issacs' poem "Some Say it's Madness" portrays a woman who has been named mad: one of her sons imprisoned, another one dead, the woman has been abandoned by her husband and is struggling to pay the bills after losing her job. "The pressure sent her down". "She bang her belly," cries all night and, walking the London pavements, "tread the ground/ talking

⁶⁷⁵Ussher 1991, p. 306.

shadows all around...” The poem’s refrain brings the point home: “Some say it’s madness/ I...?/ I say it’s sadness.... I say it’s pain”.⁶⁷⁶

Spoken by a third party, perhaps a friend or a neighbour, the poem provides a subjective, personal illustration of Ussher’s observation about how women are labelled and their experiences dismissed by “the discourse of madness”, but that their pain, far from being merely a label, is real. The alliteration in the phrase “She bang her belly” powerfully evokes this self-destructive expression of pain. The poem also illustrates Ussher’s identification of poverty as a major factor in many women’s stress and sense of powerlessness and as one of the “routes to madness”. The language of the poem suggests that the speaker, like Issacs, may be of Jamaican origin. Although it is unclear whether the “mad” woman is also Jamaican, her possible experience of migration and/or racism would compound the difficulties experienced when abandoned, bereaved, and in poverty.

Both Ussher and Elaine Showalter recognise the need to heed the voices of “mad” women themselves, in coming to any understanding of their pain. Both partially agree with the feminist analysis of women’s madness as an “unconscious form of feminist protest”⁶⁷⁷ while pointing out the dangers of romanticising the mad and viewing them as heroic, suffering revolutionaries. Showalter calls madness a “desperate communication of the powerless”.⁶⁷⁸

Many feminist theorists see one form of such protest against gender oppression in anorexia. Citing Susie Orbach as “the most articulate and forceful” of these, Susan Bordo paraphrases Orbach’s argument that the “the action of food refusal and dramatic transformation of body size” by the anorexic woman is an “unconscious feminist protest”: it is an “indictment of a culture that disdains and suppresses female hunger, [and] makes women ashamed of their appetites and needs”. This indictment is effected “precisely by pursuing them to the point at which their destructive potential is revealed for all to see”. Bordo also stresses

the counterproductive, tragically self-defeating... nature of that protest. Functionally, the symptoms of these disorders isolate, weaken and undermine the sufferers.... [T]he protest collapses into its opposite... The pathologies of female protest function, paradoxically, as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce them, reproducing rather than transforming that which is being protested.⁶⁷⁹

Despite the sense of control and defiance that anorexic women often feel in their use of food and food refusal, rather than being empowering their illness undermines and can come close to

⁶⁷⁶Issacs in Riley and Wood, eds., 1996, pp. 178-180.

⁶⁷⁷Showalter 1987, p. 5.

⁶⁷⁸Ibid., p.5.

⁶⁷⁹Bordo 1993, pp. 176-7.

destroying them. It is in this undermining that anorexia, according to Bordo and others, ultimately functions in “collusion” with oppressive social forces.⁶⁸⁰

As I showed in the previous section, Nyasha rebels against her father’s authority through her dieting and anorexia. Patriarchal control of girls and women is played out (among other things) in women’s experiences of their bodies; Nyasha’s response, her attempt to control her own body, “makes sense” in feminist terms. Moreover, the fact that her disease is simultaneously a rejection of patriarchal control and a form of self-punishment can be understood through feminist analyses of women’s internalisation of sexist ideology.

Both her anorexia and her cramming for exams are contradictions, because despite her rejection of colonial oppressions she succeeds academically in a colonialist school; and despite her rejection of sexism punishes her own body to fit a (Western) ideal of femininity. Bahri goes so far as to say that she becomes complicit in her own oppression,⁶⁸¹ but as Thomas writes, drawing on the writings of Elizabeth Grosz, her anorexia represents “‘a defiance through *overcompliance*’ with domination, which ‘(psychically) mutilates’ the self to prevent ‘brutalisation at the hands of others’” (emphasis Thomas’).⁶⁸² It is a reflection of her absolute refusal “to be anyone’s underdog”.⁶⁸³

Phyllis Chesler proposes a model of madness based on the sex roles imposed on women (and men) by patriarchy. It is a model which combines the strands identified above. She writes: “What we consider ‘madness’ ... is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype”.⁶⁸⁴ Many of the “illnesses” for which women are hospitalised, she argues, consist of exaggerated but essentially approved female behaviours, such as passivity and self-destructiveness. Symptoms of other “diseases” are manifestations of women’s *rejection* of their sex-roles; female schizophrenics, for example, may be “overacting [and] dominating,” and, because their behaviour is a “cultural anomaly,” they are considered mad and hospitalised.

But anorexia is often addressed, whether explicitly or simply through the omission of any discussion of race, as a white woman’s disease. Susan Bordo’s discussion of race and anorexia

⁶⁸⁰Morag MacSween talks about anorexia as “an attempt to resolve at the level of the individual body the irreconcilability of individuality and femininity in a bourgeois patriarchal culture”. (MacSween 1993, p. 252). This is reminiscent of Tambu’s comment, which I cite in Chapter 3, that Babamukuru sees no contradiction between being intelligent and “a good woman”: he puts pressure on both Nyasha and Tambu to achieve these irreconcilable goals.

⁶⁸¹Bahri 1994, par. 7.

⁶⁸²Thomas 1992, p. 27.

⁶⁸³Dangarembga 1988, p. 117.

⁶⁸⁴Chesler 1972, p. 75.

(despite her attention to whiteness, blackness and ideas of beauty elsewhere in her volume) is confined to a footnote, in which she notes that while “[i]nitially, anorexia was found to predominate among upper-class white families” there is “widespread evidence that this is now rapidly changing” and affecting people of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels.⁶⁸⁵ However, she does not address the implications of this in any depth.

Many feminists leave important factors out in their analyses of madness. Chesler includes a chapter on “Third World Women,” to some extent taking race into account in her examination of women and madness and recognising the “staggering problems of being black and female in a racist society”,⁶⁸⁶ but her analysis is seriously flawed. Apologising for not having a theory applicable to Black American women because she feels unqualified, as a white woman, to construct one, she goes on to say: “as a psychologist and feminist, I’m really more interested in exploring the laws of female psychology than in exploring their various exceptions and variations”.⁶⁸⁷ She thus treats Black women as deviations from a self-defined female norm that is, explicitly, white.

Ussher acknowledges that people from “other cultures” living in Western societies are frequently labelled mad for not fitting in. She also criticises feminist critiques of dominant models of madness for appearing to assume that women are a homogenous group, united in spite of differences of race and class. But she does not include an analysis of the role of race in women’s madness that is anywhere near pervasive enough; she does not even include racism in her list of “routes to madness” (which includes such factors as degrading images of women in advertising, poverty, and sexual violence).

Rani, in *A Wicked Old Woman*, becomes involved with a man named Michael, who, “expecting her to do everything for him,... inveigled her into obligation and she didn’t recognise the pattern until it was too far set”. And yet she tries hard to protect herself from male domination. She observes:

Even in England’s ‘liberal’ land a woman is still nothing except her spot of blood, her vaginal passage. Judged by who she’s with rather than what she is.... [But] Never giving herself over to another, neither in emotional or sexual bondage, she had kept her inner self protected and secure. That’s where her strength, her determination to carry on had come from.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁵Bordo 1993, p. 320.

⁶⁸⁶Chesler 1972, p. 224.

⁶⁸⁷Ibid., p. 216.

⁶⁸⁸Randhawa 1987, p.123.

But after an acquaintance, Rosco, tries to rape her and she hits him with an iron bar, killing him, Rani withdraws from the world, able to do nothing but stare at the ceiling, unseeing, unspeaking, and unresponsive to all around her.⁶⁸⁹ Her attempt to keep “her inner self protected” has been seriously shaken by the attempted rape, and she can cope only by withdrawing from all contact with the people around her.

Nyasha and Rani are both characters who suffer from domination or violence by men who are close to them: a father in Nyasha’s case, a boyfriend in Rani’s. The ways in which their pain is expressed can to some extent be understood by reference to feminist theories on madness which understand such “symptoms” as responses to women’s powerlessness under patriarchy. The two characters could even be said to illustrate Chesler’s distinction (see earlier in this chapter) between forms of madness in which women reject the roles and behaviours demanded of them by society, and those in which women give exaggerated expression to these behaviours. Nyasha’s anorexia, as we saw above, can be seen as a kind of protest against her father’s authority; Rani, in her withdrawal from the world, could be said to be adopting exaggeratedly passive female behaviour. However, as Bordo points out, “the protest [of anorexia] collapses into its opposite” and becomes “tragically self-defeating”, thus reinforcing the destructiveness of societal misogyny. And Rani’s withdrawal could also be understood as a rejection of the violence she has experienced. Thus the two characters’ experiences blur the rather simple, clear-cut distinction which Chesler formulates.

And a feminist understanding of experiences such as Rani’s, one which centres solely around the misogyny she suffers, is not enough to explain her madness. As central as the gender-based oppression in her life is, her experience cannot be understood without consideration of the conflicts she faces over her cultural identity. She tries to deny her Indian background, calling herself Rosalind rather than Rani and thinking, for example, as she goes to see an Indian woman doctor: “Don’t you give me your Indian greeting, I was born on English soil you know. So what if my colour’s different? It’s an even sun-tan. Who wants that mumbo-jumbo of languages, identity... You play your good Indian wife role. I tore my way through the net”.⁶⁹⁰ While working at a textiles factory she keeps herself separate from her Asian colleagues, denying her own identity; when the employees go on strike against oppressive conditions she earns the owners’ approval, and her colleagues’ hatred, by continuing to work.⁶⁹¹

⁶⁸⁹Ibid., pp. 85-6; 122.

⁶⁹⁰Ibid., p. 82.

⁶⁹¹Ibid., p. 140.

Yet her attempt to adopt a white English identity is clearly not unproblematic. Much of the narrative refers to her as Rani/Rosalind, in a linguistic strategy Randhawa employs as a way of representing the complex conflicts and effects of oppression experienced by her character. Such effects remain unexplored by most contemporary discourses of madness; the role of racism and the conflicts it leads to in women's madness, utterly neglected by Chesler and many others, is shown up by Randhawa's portrayal and naming of her character. Rani/Rosalind, as reflected in this dual name, seems to experience herself as having two almost separate identities. When Michael entertains a group of friends by "spouting poetry" filled with racist references to Asian women, "Rani... sent a message from the limbo-land where Rosalind has banished her to tell Rosalind to get out".⁶⁹² And she leaves him. Rosalind may have torn her "way through the net" of an Asian identity in Britain, but cannot protect herself from racism. It is Rani who enables her to leave her destructive relationship with Michael.

Another character in *A Wicked Old Woman*, Kulwant's white English friend Caroline, becomes deeply depressed when, having been left by her boyfriend, she gives birth to their baby girl. "I went bonkers," she says, "or I decided to go bonkers. Can't remember. If I'd had a son... maybe I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have been horrified that I'd brought another woman into this world. To do for me what I couldn't do for myself. To grow up and fall in love with one of those bastards...".⁶⁹³ Her depression, like Rani's withdrawal, is a response to gender-related experiences; she is "horrified" by the thought of what her daughter will suffer in the world. She shows, too, that it is not only Asian women characters who suffer mental distress. But the differences between Caroline's pain and that of characters such as Kulwant and Rani/Rosalind can perhaps be summed up by a conversation Kulwant and Caroline have: Caroline speaks of "the bottom falling out of [her] world"; Kuli says "perhaps my world never had a bottom".⁶⁹⁴ While both are devastated by their experiences, and ranking their relative levels of pain is not productive, the differences are still revealing. Kuli's life and identity have never had even the measure of stability that Caroline, as a white woman, has known. Such differences are vital to understanding the madness of the Asian characters in the novel.

While many feminist theorists leave out any substantial attention to race in their analyses of madness, Fanon's conception of "nervous conditions," on the other hand, neglects issues of gender, implicitly taking male experience as the norm. Qadri Ismail points out that "the colonised subject/agent Fanon constructs, is gendered", i.e. male.⁶⁹⁵ Gwen Bergner writes that

⁶⁹²Ibid., p. 84.

⁶⁹³Ibid., pp. 45-46.

⁶⁹⁴Ibid., p. 44.

⁶⁹⁵Ismail 1992, p. 1677.

“Fanon does not ignore sexual difference altogether, but he explores sexuality’s role in constructing race only through rigid categories of gender... it is necessary not only to posit alternative representations of femininity but also to consider how his account of normative raced masculinity *depends* on the production or exclusion of femininities” (emphasis mine).⁶⁹⁶ These critics are not primarily analysing Fanon’s theories of psychological illness among the colonised. Yet clearly these too are deficient from a feminist point of view.

I argue that one of the many things *Nervous Conditions* does is to provide such a critique. As Joan Riley put it in a comment to me, Dangarembga is “writing back” in response to the limitations of theorists like Fanon.⁶⁹⁷ (The novel could also be interpreted as providing a critique of white feminist analyses of anorexia, though it does so less explicitly, given the novel’s direct reference to Fanon’s work in its title and epigraph.) For while Nyasha’s disease can be read as fitting into Fanon’s theory of frustrated rage, her rage is clearly directed not only against racism and colonialism but also against her father’s patriarchal authority, and the limitations it places on her and the other female members of her family. Nyasha uses food to protest against her father’s standards of decency and modesty for women. It is her suffering from the combination of gender and colonial oppression that is at the root of her rage and distress -- and of her anorexia.

As with Nyasha, Tambu’s mother Mainini’s depression is a response to the intersection of oppressions in her life. She suffers a depression and decline in health after learning that Babamukuru has decided to send her daughter to a convent school. Mainini says, “Tell me, my daughter, what will I, your mother say to you when you come home a stranger full of white ways and ideas? It will be English, English all the time...” Her response is to eat and do less and less, until she is completely inactive. She is reacting to her powerlessness in the face of Babamukuru’s decision and of the apparently inevitable outcome of “losing” her daughter to “white ways and ideas”.⁶⁹⁸ She is acutely aware of colonialism’s great destructiveness and its potential to take her daughter from her, both physically and emotionally. Her gendered position in the family, however, renders her powerless to change the patriarch Babamukuru’s decision. But despite her understanding of these dynamics of power and powerlessness, Mainini can find no outlet for her pain, and it is directed inwards against Mainini herself.

As with Nyasha and Rani, it might be possible to apply one or another theory on madness which I have cited to Mainini’s situation. Her lethargy could be interpreted as an instance, such as

⁶⁹⁶Bergner 1995, p. 77.

⁶⁹⁷Personal communication at Gender Forum on “African and Caribbean Women: Migration, Displacement, Diaspora”, University of Stirling, 20-21 April 1996.

⁶⁹⁸Dangarembga 1988, p. 184.

Phyllis Chesler identifies, of exaggerated compliance with women's approved role as passive followers of men's decisions. On the other hand, her depression could be seen as one of the "nervous conditions" pointed to by Fanon, wherein anger at colonialism is frustrated and can find expression only in self-destructive ways. But again, as with Nyasha and Rani, neither of these theories is sufficient to explain Mainini's ailment; neither one takes her location in terms of both gender and colonised subject into account. Dangarembga's representation of her, on the other hand, explores how these factors intersect in the life circumstances of one specific character. This is an example, I argue, of how literary discourse can evoke and explore the kinds of contradictions and subtleties which theoretical contributions --in this case on madness-- are unable to fully account for.

A Wicked Old Woman, too, pre-empt the application of theories of madness by providing its own critique of theories that base themselves on race, racism and (implicit or explicit) assumptions about culture and ethnicity. One character, Maya, an Asian woman, becomes involved in researching a television programme on "Madness in the Asian Community". She is ambivalent about the project, angry at the racism behind its innocuous facade but at the same time partly convinced she can subvert it from within; besides, she argues with her colleagues at the Asian Centre, who view her involvement with the project as a form of collaboration with those wishing to ridicule Asians and "line their pockets" with the profits:

Surely someone... should be looking at the hidden agony. No-one can deny mental problems, illnesses exist in our community, any community. Is it right to let people carry on suffering. How long can we draw a veil, sweep everything under the carpet. There are many who'd rather that we didn't exist...⁶⁹⁹

The writings of some theorists --like Fanon, for example--are partially useful in looking at this "hidden agony". We have seen how he links "nervous conditions" with oppression and colonialism. Other theories positing a relationship between racism and madness or mental illness are also relevant. Many studies have shown a correlation between race and schizophrenia or depression; one suggests that the rate of mental illness among blacks and whites in Britain is about equal but that the rate of psychosomatic illness is proportionately higher among blacks. A few argue that racism and xenophobia can lead to "stress reactions" and to madness in members of racial minority groups in Britain.⁷⁰⁰

The psychology of the experience of culture shock has been examined by some theorists. Van der Veer suggests that culture shock can best be characterised by the word "loss": it can involve the loss of family context, warmth and respect; of familiarity and the "mutual obligations and

⁶⁹⁹Randhawa 1987, p. 105.

⁷⁰⁰Runnymede Trust 1983, pp. 8, 10-11.

dependencies that give meaning to life”. “Because it is... a form of loss, culture shock and cultural uprooting can be compared to the way in which people cope with bereavement”.⁷⁰¹

Another theorist, Manuel Ramirez, while failing to adequately take into account racially-based power structures, does recognise the destructive potential of society’s idealised, and exclusionary, images of acceptability. He identifies what he calls the “marginality syndrome” which results from many different kinds of people’s --including but not limited to racial minorities’-- experience of being “different” from such images and as a result subject to prejudice and pressures to conform; this “syndrome” is characterised by feelings of loneliness, alienation, low self-esteem and depression. He proposes a model for psychotherapy aiming to lead to self-acceptance and empowerment to act for the benefit of society.⁷⁰² Apart from the use of the word “syndrome”, which applies a damaging label to emotional responses to discrimination and oppression, medicalising rather than politicising them, this could potentially be a useful model.

Ramirez’ ideas could at one level be seen as relevant to Kulwant, the central character in *A Wicked old Woman*, who as a child is brought over from India to Britain by her father. The loneliness and alienation of being “different” from the norm are emotions that she experiences from an early age. As a teenager, Kulwant attends a party where she is the only Asian, and looks on at the other guests dancing, drinking and interacting with each other in a way totally foreign to her. She observes how sure they seem of themselves and of “their stake in the future”; how

they moved with an ease of belonging that acted like floodlights on her internal landscape of broken desolation, where no one scene fitted into another; where fragments of scenes faced each other in alienation.... her inner world floated in space without history to anchor the location or a future to give it a guiding assurance.⁷⁰³

And it is at least partly this loneliness that leads the adult Kulwant to adopt the persona of an eccentric old woman, shuffling along the streets in old clothes and with a walking stick she does not need. Her son at one point observes how she walks away, “her oversized coat swaying around her, buffering the loneliness knocking at its threadbare fabric”.⁷⁰⁴

But while both Maya and her colleagues have defensible points about the usefulness or otherwise of her television programme, the novel ends up being critical of apparently progressive theoretical approaches to “the Asian community” as sources of academic material or therapeutic models. The project is presented satirically; the very names of the TV programme’s directors, Martin Andreas Davidson, or M.A.D., and Maddison Angel Dupont,

⁷⁰¹ van der Veer 1992, p. 103.

⁷⁰² Ramirez 1994, pp. ix-x; p. 2.

⁷⁰³ Randhawa 1987, p. 17.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 97.

“Madd for short,” make this clear. And M.A.D. and Madd’s response to the character Rani’s escape from the pain of her circumstances into a coma-like state, both ignores her trauma and recalls Bordo’s and Showalter’s concern about romanticising women’s pain and powerlessness. In addition, it is extremely pompous and arrogant: “What an amazing, multi-faceted conjunction of rebellion, protest, anger”.⁷⁰⁵

I take the novel’s critique seriously. Many theories of madness are inherently reductionistic; in constructing simplistic models of mental illness they fail to represent the many facets of people’s experience. Often, too, by veiling their reductionism behind progressive facades they end up perpetuating stereotypes of “minorities”. Furthermore, as one critic writes,

the dominant approach in considering black people and psychiatry has been that of developing a ‘transcultural approach’. This... generally involves the consideration of the patient’s culture and background in making a diagnosis and suggesting treatment. But some manifestations of such... approaches ... have themselves been criticised as concentrating on ‘culture’ to the point where the problem is located in the individual or his or her culture and the racism of the wider society is ignored.⁷⁰⁶

The literary works I am considering, however, explore what none of the theories manage to address. They portray madness as a complex response to combinations of racism, sexism and experiences of exile. Nyasha’s anorexia and Rani’s withdrawal from contact with the outside world are best understood as responses to the alienation they experience as black women living as migrants or descendants of migrants. It is only by considering all these facets of black migrant women’s experiences that these responses can be understood.

Furthermore, the language with which these experiences are explored in the novels expresses aspects of them missed by theoretical analyses of madness. The passage by Randhawa cited above, describing Kulwant’s feelings of alienation at a teenage party, draws on imagery of stage and screen to highlight her intense sense of desolation. The “ease of belonging” she perceives in those around her serves to highlight, like floodlights on a stage, her own feelings of fragmentation and dislocation. This imagery works, as well, to illuminate Kulwant’s adoption of the persona she takes on later in her life, in which her inner sense of loneliness and “unbelonging” are acted out in the persona of the old woman wandering the streets.

The loneliness of being a “hybrid,” as Nyasha terms herself, or the conflicts arising from apparently contradictory facets of one’s identity, such as Rani faces, can not be understood in terms of theories based exclusively on race, gender or migration. The theories are partially helpful --though with the qualifications I have shown--in illuminating the literature’s

⁷⁰⁵Ibid., p. 176.

⁷⁰⁶Runnymede Trust 1983, p. 11.

exploration of the relationship of oppression to emotional distress. But while much of the theory ends up being one-sided, not only in terms of excluding considerations of race or gender but also focusing on one explanation of madness to the exclusion of others -- as does Ramirez' analysis of the "marginality syndrome"-- the literature explores layers and subtleties to this relationship missed entirely by most of the theory. Both complex characterisation and the use of rich metaphorical language in the novels serve to express aspects of the multifaceted experience of madness which neither theoretical studies nor case studies drawn from 'real life' can evoke. Again, literary writings are able to accommodate a more compelling and complex account of 'madness' than is possible in theoretical discourses.

Migration, Writing, and Empowerment

Grace Nichols' volume *i is a long-remembered woman* reflects an attempt to work through the intense pain of oppression over the course of the series of poems. The writing of the sequence can be said to mirror one poem's image of a woman, having endured the agonies of the Middle Passage to slavery in the New World, stooping "in green canefields/ piecing the life she would lead"; both the slave woman and the poet address the pain of seeking wholeness in the face of suffering. So too, the poem which celebrates "women making/ something from this/ ache and pain-a-me/back-o-hardness" itself creates beauty out of the experience of pain. And the poems evoke the suffering of women who have suffered and died in the past, thereby in themselves resisting the drowning of these women's voices and the sweeping aside of their deaths "as easy as dead leaves".⁷⁰⁷

In an interview, Grace Nichols agreed with her interviewer that the poems are "a kind of psychic history of the whole of Caribbean womanhood". She says that the book was inspired by a dream she had, of a "young African girl, who swam from Africa to the Caribbean, and there she was on the shore with a garland of flowers around her. When I woke up I interpreted the dream to mean that she was trying to cleanse the ocean of the pain and suffering that she knew her ancestors... had gone through".⁷⁰⁸ The volume draws on the history of Black women, "piecing" together the experiences of oppressed and violated women of the past in an attempt to "cleanse" and heal. And it ends with an image of new growth in the wake of agonising loss; of a new-found ability to express: "I have crossed an ocean/ I have lost my tongue/ from the root of the old/ one/ a new one has sprung".⁷⁰⁹

⁷⁰⁷Nichols 1990 (1983), p. 12.

⁷⁰⁸Butcher 1988, p. 18.

⁷⁰⁹Nichols 1990 (1983), p. 87.

Here Grace Nichols points to the struggle to forge meaning from experiences of extreme suffering and resist erasure and defeat. Nichols echoes the slave woman's struggle to survive and retain a sense of dignity through the process of her writing this series of poems. In previous chapters I looked at the roles of communities of solidarity, involvement in political activism, and changing relationships with place as ways of dealing with pain; in chapters 2 and 3 I also looked briefly at writers' perceptions of the relationship between writing, belonging, and location. In what follows I focus on other authors' *depictions* of writing as a tool for working through painful experiences of migration and struggling towards a sense of empowerment or liberation.

For some writers writing plays an important role in rooting them in a place; for migrant women made to feel they are "the unbelonging", this can be a profoundly political act. Gillian Tindall writes about the relationship to creativity of rootlessness; writing, she says, is a powerful response to the isolation and voicelessness that migration can bring.⁷¹⁰ In chapter 2, I cited Aritha van Herk, who is convinced that it is "writing about a place," or reading about it, that "makes it somewhere".⁷¹¹ This is a suggestion about the writer herself as well as about the place she inhabits: writing is a means of locating herself. It is a way of reflecting on and working through the effects of migration on her identity and politics in terms of race, gender, sexuality, *and* her relationships with places left and arrived in; the effects of migration on her writing and on her identity as a writer.

In this section I look at the portrayals of writing, in *Nervous Conditions* and *Lucy*, as characters' way of trying to come to terms with difficult or painful experiences around migration, and arriving at a greater resolution through this process.⁷¹² Migration, while often portrayed as painful and difficult, can also provide the opportunity for their clearer understanding of these forces; it is through writing that this process takes place. And, in particular in the case of Tambu, that understanding can lead to resistance against oppression. In exploring the role of writing in this way, I draw on Joan Anim-Addo's discussion of the "audacity" of African Caribbean women fiction writers, writing and publishing their work in the face of difficult material conditions and restricted access to publication.

During the course of her examination of "audacity", Anim-Addo discusses some "feminist metafiction": –" 'self conscious' fiction which points to women writers' relation to the [literary] tradition". She focuses on fiction which portrays black women characters who are writers and

⁷¹⁰Tindall 1991, p. 164.

⁷¹¹van Herk in Olinder 1984, pp. 64-71.

⁷¹² While Kincaid's latest novel, *Mr. Potter* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002) would be relevant to this discussion, space does not permit me to comment on it here.

evokes the circumstances of their writing.⁷¹³ She says of a character in a story by Maryse Condé, that “[f]or Claude, as for many similarly placed black women, the creative (literary) act... is an audacious, daring one, because of who she is, the black woman as sign simultaneously of gender, race and class oppression”.⁷¹⁴ “Education, reading and writing are perceived in the literature as a potential source of empowerment”; the audacity of writing leads to “a revisioning and self-definition of African Caribbean womanhood”.⁷¹⁵

This idea of audacity is useful for looking at a number of migrant women’s novels, which portray girl or adult women characters looking back and reflecting on their girlhoods and migrations, in part through the process of writing.

Portrayals of writing in *Nervous Conditions* and *Lucy*

The narrative of *Nervous Conditions* functions as Tambu’s way of working through and coming to a greater understanding of her own and her cousin Nyasha’s pain. As such, it is a healing process for Tambu, who becomes able to write “my own story, the story of four women whom I loved” as a culmination of a “process of expansion” begun in the wake of Nyasha’s illness.

Tambu’s circumstances are perhaps somewhat less problematic than those of Nyasha, who is subjected to almost insurmountable difficulties on her return from England to Rhodesia. But that Tambu manages to negotiate the various aspects of her life as a black girl in colonial Rhodesia –particularly her migration from the homestead to Babamukuru’s place, and from there to the convent school-- is partly due to the strength she gains from the thinking through and writing of her story in the form of the novel.

Before Tambu leaves the homestead for the mission school she, like Nyasha, has a questioning, delving mind and resists many of the limitations placed upon her. She grows her own maize to raise money so that she can go to school, despite her father’s objections; early on, she decides not to let her life be determined by the “laws” of female victimisation. Yet she also frequently curbs her own mental questioning for fear of having to “confront unfrontable issues”.⁷¹⁶ And at the mission, she notes that “my reverence for my uncle... had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position”.⁷¹⁷ But in the wake of Nyasha’s sickness, and reflecting on her mother’s view that the

⁷¹³ Anim-Addo 1996, p. 211.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., p. 214.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., p. 217; p. 221.

⁷¹⁶ Dangarembga 1988, p. 39.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid., p. 164.

sickness results from too much “Englishness”, Tambu describes the process of how she came to question her previous faith in the superiority of white Western culture. She begins

to have a suspicion, no more than the seed of a suspicion, that I had been too eager to leave the homestead and embrace... ‘Englishness’... I banished the suspicion... but seeds do grow. Although I was not aware of it then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, *bringing me to this time when I can set down this story*. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion, (emphasis mine)

but it enables her to come to a far more acute understanding of her life and to write her own life story and the stories of the women around her.

Nervous Conditions ends on a note of optimism; Tambu speaks of the “process of expansion” on which she embarks in the wake of the events she has described. She has been disillusioned with the “Englishness” she once accepted as the “sunrise on my horizon”, but the reader has already been made aware, through the critical, humourous, highly insightful nature of the older Tambu’s narration, of the strong identity she will develop beyond the novel’s conclusion. She has come to this strong sense of self through the telling and writing of her story, and the stories of those around her.

At the end of Kincaid’s novel *Lucy*, Lucy writes her name in the journal Mariah has given her; and tears come when she writes she wishes she could love.

I picked up both [the book and her fountain pen], and I opened the book. At the top of the page I wrote my full name: Lucy Josephine Potter. At the sight of it, many thoughts rushed through me, but I could write down only this: “I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it.” And then as I looked at this sentence a great wave of shame came over me and I wept and wept so much that the tears fell on the page and caused all the words to become one great big blur.⁷¹⁸

The writing of the narrative, this may be implying, is Lucy’s way of trying to connect with herself, with people and the world around her. Her feelings about Mariah, too, are inextricably bound up with her writing in the journal. The imagery used to describe the journal evokes femaleness (its cover is “blood red” and its pages “white and smooth like milk”⁷¹⁹)-- suggesting that both the journal and what it evokes connect the two women. The “beautiful blue” ink with which Lucy writes is, furthermore, reminiscent of the beautiful blue eyes of Mariah; since blue eyes are clearly associated with whiteness and oppressive standards of beauty, this imagery further evokes the complexity of their relationship.⁷²⁰ The words Lucy writes are blurred by tears; the pain of her relationship with Mariah continues to be present.

⁷¹⁸Kincaid 1990, pp. 163-4.

⁷¹⁹Ibid., p. 162.

⁷²⁰Ibid., pp. 162-4.

Like the ending of *Nervous Conditions*, which suggests the role that Tambu's narrative plays in her growth and development, even beyond the conclusion of the events it describes, the words Lucy writes in her journal seem to represent the beginning of a process which will also continue after the ending of the novel. The journal's blank pages suggest Lucy's future; indeed, Lucy had commented to Mariah, as Lucy was leaving the family, that "my life stretched out ahead of me like a book of blank pages" and Mariah reminds the younger woman of this when she gives Lucy the book.⁷²¹ There will, the novel's ending suggests, be a process of beginning to feel, to connect—with herself as well as with the world around her-- and to write her own story; perhaps she has the distance she needs, both from Mariah and family and from her mother and Antigua, to start this process.

It has been the sense of domination by her mother and by forces of colonialism and racism which have led to Lucy's need for distance, for an invulnerable and tough persona. Others' definitions of her have constrained and oppressed her; her journal, however, will be about self-definition. It is significant that the first thing she writes in it is her full name, Lucy Josephine Potter; she is claiming her name for herself. A little earlier in the novel, Lucy talks about her name, saying

I used to hate all three of those names. I was named Josephine after my mother's uncle Mr. Joseph, because he was rich, from money he had made in sugar in Cuba, and it was thought that he would remember the honor and leave something for me in his will... The Potter must have come from the Englishman who owned my ancestors when they were slaves; no one really knew, and I could hardly blame them for not wanting to find out. The Lucy was the only part of my name that I would have cared to hold on to[.]⁷²²

even though at first she dislikes this name too, preferring the names of some of her favourite "authoresses", Charlotte, Emily and Jane. Later, however, she asks her mother why she had named her Lucy. Her mother replies, " 'I named you after Satan himself. Lucy, short for Lucifer. What a botheration from the moment you were conceived.' " Lucy is astounded, and

I went from feeling burdened and old and tired to feeling light, new, clean. I was transformed from failure to triumph. It was the moment I knew who I was... I did not grow to like the name Lucy – I would have much preferred to be called Lucifer outright—but whenever I saw my name I always reached out to give it a strong embrace.⁷²³

She likes, I think, the rebelliousness and subversion implied by the connection with Lucifer; something that contrasts sharply with the colonialist connotations of her other two names: one in all probability a slave-owner's name, the other the feminised name of a male relative who had to be pleased for financial reasons, and who made his money from an industry strongly associated with slavery.

⁷²¹Ibid., p. 163.

⁷²²Ibid., p. 149.

⁷²³Ibid., pp. 152-3.

In her journal however, Lucy writes her full name, claiming it and, perhaps, beginning to give it her own meanings, rather than those of her mother or of her ancestors' "owners". Kincaid's own need to redefine her life, because of identities stolen and imposed by those with power, led her to change her birth name-- Elaine Potter Richardson-- in an act of separation and liberation from her family, and of "recreation" of her origins in the Caribbean. While saying that the name she chose was not in itself meaningful or political, she says that

It was a kind of invention: I wouldn't go home to visit that part of the world, so I decided to recreate it. 'Jamaica' was symbolic of that place. I didn't come from Jamaica. I changed my name before Jamaica became fashionable—at least, before I was aware of it. If I had been aware, I would probably have changed my name to 'Scandinavia' or something.⁷²⁴

Much later, however, as Diane Simmons points out,

Kincaid put the act of renaming into a deeper context, seeing the 'naming of things' as 'crucial to possession... It is not surprising that when people have felt themselves prey to [conquest], among the first acts of liberation is to change their names'.⁷²⁵

However, the full quote is "The naming of things is so crucial to possession —*a spiritual padlock with the key thrown irretrievably away—that it is a murder, an erasing*, and it is not surprising that when people have felt prey to it (conquest) among their first acts of liberation is to change their names (Rhodesia to Zimbabwe, LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka)" (emphasis mine).⁷²⁶

Simmons edits the strongest language out, the very language that suggests Kincaid feels strongly about this issue and that it might apply to her as well.

While Lucy does not change her name, but claims it the way it is, Kincaid's thoughts on the significance of naming are relevant here because of the link, for both author and character, between naming and domination. Lucy's writing of her name in her journal is symbolic of her embarking on a process of defining —and redefining—herself, just as Kincaid's renaming of herself was.

In the novel prior to the episode of writing in her journal, Lucy has struggled to deal with issues of closeness and distance —both in relation to her mother and her life in Antigua, and to the world around her in North America. The letters that she and her mother write each other, and her interest in visual art (photography and painting) are two places where this struggle happens. The letters are an area of great difficulty for her. Because of her urgent need for distance from her mother —by whom she feels dominated and suffocated—letters from her mother are extremely threatening: after receiving one letter from her mother, with news about the lack of rain in Antigua, Lucy says,

⁷²⁴Cudjoe 1990, p. 220.

⁷²⁵Simmons 1994, p. 12.

⁷²⁶Kincaid 1992, p. 159; Kincaid 2000, p. 91.

I did not care about that any longer. The object of my life now was to put as much distance between myself and the events mentioned in her letter as I could manage. For I felt that if I could put enough miles between me and the place from which that letter came, and if I could put enough events between me and the events mentioned in the letter, would I not be free to take everything just as it came and not see hundreds of years in every gesture, every word spoken, every face? ⁷²⁷

Often she does not even read the letters, though she carries them inside her bra: a way of dealing with her contradictory urges for closeness and distance, her “love and hate [that] exist side by side”.⁷²⁸ At one point she has nineteen unread letters from her mother in her room; she says “I could not trust myself to go too near them. I knew that if I read only one, I would die from longing for her”.⁷²⁹

The way she deals with writing and not writing to her mother, too, reflect this struggle. Once, fearing she is pregnant, she thinks of her mother’s knowledge of local herbs that would enable an abortion; however, to obtain them she would have to write to her mother to ask for them. This would make her, Lucy feels, unbearably vulnerable to her mother: “I had always thought I would rather die than let her see me in such a vulnerable position—unmarried and with child”.⁷³⁰

When she does write to her mother, she has various ways of dealing with her strong and contradictory urges for closeness and distance. Following her father’s death, which she is devastated by, she writes a cold letter --which “matched my heart”-- to her mother, telling her that she (her mother) had betrayed herself by marrying Lucy’s father, betrayed Lucy as well and failed in her upbringing of her daughter.⁷³¹ (Her mother’s reply, that she would always love her daughter and welcome her home, prompts Lucy to burn all her letters from her mother).

In another example, after reading all the letters she has kept unread in her room, and finding that they contain her mother’s descriptions of “how quickly the quality of her life had deteriorated since I had left her”, Lucy writes a kinder letter to her mother, telling her “that I would come home soon, and how sorry I was for everything that had happened to her”.⁷³² However, in this letter she tells her mother that she is moving with Mariah’s and Lewis’ family to a different location, and gives an invented address. In so doing, she is effectively cutting off all contact.

These two examples illustrate different ways that Lucy deals with her contradictory feelings towards her mother --of longing on the one hand and need for distance on the other. She

⁷²⁷Kincaid 1990, p. 31.

⁷²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁷³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷³¹*Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁷³²*Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

responds to her strong feelings following her father's death with coldness towards her mother; when she does write with more kindness she is also simultaneously, and covertly, putting even more distance between them.

Lucy's relationship to photography and painting also expresses something about her attempts to deal with such issues in her life. She has a "passion" for going to the art museum, and finds herself identifying with the life of a painter who, though not named, appears to be Gauguin. She recognises the differences between them—he had lived in comfort and privilege before leaving his home to travel "halfway around the world" and paint, and says that

Of course his life could be found in the pages of a book; I had just begun to notice that the lives of men always are... I was not a man; I was a young woman from the fringes of the world, and when I left my home I had wrapped around my shoulders the mantle of a servant.

But she also says that

immediately I identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place you are born in an unbearable prison and wanting something different from what you are familiar with, knowing it represents a haven.⁷³³

So her desire for distance from her place of origin is reflected in Gauguin's life. Though this is not spelled out—perhaps it is too painful for her to admit—there might also be another side of the coin here. The landscapes that Gauguin painted were both geographically distant (in the South Pacific) from his place of origin (France) and vastly different from it; because he painted lush, tropical island scenes his paintings may, however, (despite the great distances between Antigua and the South Pacific) remind Lucy of landscapes that are familiar to her. While they may as a result be emotionally charged for her, she can allow these feelings because of Gauguin's need for distance from the familiar, with which she identifies.

On one occasion she says that she is

inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist. I could not count on precision or calculation; I could only count on intuition. I did not have anything exactly in mind, but when the picture was complete I would know. I did not have position, I did not have money at my disposal. I had memory, I had anger, I had despair.⁷³⁴

She becomes interested in photography and buys a camera after being given a book of photos by Mariah; this interest too is part of her attempt to deal with issues of closeness and of distance to the world. Part of what she is doing when taking photos, I think, is to try to make the world around her feel real; to enter a world she feels separate from. She says once while looking out of the window that "[e]verything I could see looked unreal to me; everything I could see made me

⁷³³Ibid., p. 95.

⁷³⁴Ibid., p. 134.

feel I would never be a part of it, never penetrate to the inside, never be taken in”.⁷³⁵ She goes on to describe in strikingly simple language the tower she sees across the way, whose clock has stopped. This image lends a still vividness—very similar to that of a photograph—to her feelings of apartness from her environment. She reflects later on her taking photos, mainly of ordinary scenes of people in the street: “I would try to make a print that made more beautiful the thing I thought I had seen, that would reveal to me some of the things I had not seen, but I did not succeed”.⁷³⁶

Jamaica Kincaid says in an interview, in answer to a question about the “inspiration and starting point” of her first writing experiences, that

I was in college and thought I would be a photographer, and I used to write out my photographs... And I began to write poems. I began to write of my photographs –what I would take and [how] I would set them up... *I would write down what I thought the picture should feel like.* And I would try to take a picture of what I had written down. (emphasis mine)⁷³⁷

Kincaid’s comments shed some light, perhaps, on Lucy’s photographic endeavours (and vice versa). The sentence I have emphasised, above, suggests an attempt –similar to Lucy’s-- to *feel*, through both writing and photography, a connection with her environment. Kincaid’s explicit linking of the two mediums clarifies Lucy’s attempts to connect with the world through photography; so too does the visual but detached feel of Kincaid’s writing in the novel.

The journal Lucy begins to write in at the end of the novel represents something that neither her letters to her mother, nor her appreciation of painting or her photographs can provide for her. The journal is something for herself; while there is imagery of femaleness, perhaps suggesting connection both to Mariah and to her mother, what she writes in it is not addressed to her mother, to Mariah, or anyone else. The journal is in a way a coming home to herself. And in contrast to the photos, which do not enable her to see the “inside” of things, the journal enables her to feel what is “inside” herself, separate from the threat represented by her mother and outside forces of domination. Her life “stretch[es] out ahead of [her] like a book of blank pages”; she is beginning to be able to write –or live—in that book in her own way.

Like Tambu, whose narrative is a culmination of a process of questioning and increasing understanding of the forces at work in her own and her loved ones’ lives, Lucy, as Moira Ferguson puts it, “has begun to decolonize herself” by the end of the novel.⁷³⁸ She is cutting off

⁷³⁵Ibid., p. 154.

⁷³⁶Ibid., p. 160.

⁷³⁷Ferguson 1994 a), p. 163.

⁷³⁸Ferguson 1993, p.256.

ties that oppress her, striking out on her own, defining herself on her own terms rather than either according to, or purely in opposition to, the terms of her family and her colonisers.

Kincaid is one writer who is particularly explicit about how her migration to the US has been vital to her self-redefinition and ability to write about her past. She is very clear about the importance of writing in her life, often putting it in terms of needing to write in order to survive. “I don’t know how else to live”, she says in one interview. “For me it is a matter of saving my life”. She also says that “[i]t’s the way I feel connected”.⁷³⁹ And she says that she could not have written had she stayed in Antigua. In her autobiographical volume *My Brother*, which is the story of her brother’s dying from AIDS, she identifies with what his experience as a homosexual in Antigua must have been through her own understanding of what it was like for her not to be able to be herself, to express who she was, while living there.

A great sadness overcame me, and the source of the sadness was the deep feeling I had always had about him: that he had died without ever understanding or knowing, or being able to let the world in which he lived know, who he really was—not a single sense of identity but all the complexities of who he was—he could not express fully: his fear of being laughed at, his fear of meeting with the scorn of the people he knew best were overwhelming and he could not live with all of it openly. His homosexuality is one thing, and my becoming a writer is another altogether, but this truth is not lost to me: I could not have become a writer while living among the people I knew best, I could not have become myself while living among the people I knew best...⁷⁴⁰

In the Ferguson interview, again, she says that leaving her family “was self-preservation. That I would have thought I could be a writer was laughable to my family”. This sense of the mockery of her family, of who she really was, is a connection to her gay brother, and is what renders her leaving so necessary.

And in America, she feels, she was able to re-invent herself. “I couldn’t have lost one self and found another and still pass for a nonlunatic in any other place but New York”, she writes in an article published in the magazine *Rolling Stone*.⁷⁴¹ In another (*New Yorker*) article she writes that “I did not know then that I had embarked on something called self-invention, the making of a type of person that did not exist in the place where I was born”.⁷⁴² And in another interview she says:

When you are in America you can invent yourself. I was able to figure out a voice for myself that had nothing to do with... where I came from. That I came from a colony was of no interest to Americans. That I came from people who were peasants, poor people, was of no interest to anyone: only what I had to say.⁷⁴³

⁷³⁹Ferguson 1994 a), pp. 169-170.

⁷⁴⁰Kincaid 1998, p 162.

⁷⁴¹Kincaid 1977, p. 73.

⁷⁴²Kincaid 1995, p. 95.

⁷⁴³Birbalsingh 1996, p. 139.

At times this attitude makes Kincaid seem somewhat uncritical of the United States; her attitude towards it reflects its own self-image as a place of liberation from oppressive histories in other countries, a place where personal histories are made irrelevant and the playing field made level for all to “invent” themselves as they wish. The reality is surely more complicated than this; it is a country of great oppression for many, both within and outside its borders. Kincaid’s relatively uncritical stance on this point is highly paradoxical, given Kincaid’s pervasive interest in “how the powerful and the powerless relate”.⁷⁴⁴ She does acknowledge that the United States is hardly a benign force in the world, as well as the fact that in some way she contributes to this. “I live in a nice house in a country that does pretty horrendous things”;⁷⁴⁵ she says that she has “crossed a line” in terms of having lived in Antigua and now living in a place of privilege, and belonging to “the conquering class”. She asks “at whose expense” this is; and “what if it is someone I know?”⁷⁴⁶ But her own experience of migration to the United States, her experience of the urgent need to leave Antigua for the U.S. and what this has meant to her in terms of writing, self-expression, and becoming, does I think give her some bias in favour of the United States. In speaking about writing *A Small Place*, a long essay about colonial and post-independence Antigua, she says “I’ve really come to love anger... I realized in writing that book that the first step to claiming yourself is anger”.⁷⁴⁷ The essay is a biting critique of politics in Antigua and of colonialism and its ‘modern’ manifestation in tourism, but it is illuminating that this critical edge is less evident in her writing on the U.S.

The characters Lucy and Tambu exemplify Joan Anim-Addo’s concept of the audacity of Black women’s self-definition through writing. Migrant women writers are also engaged in audacious acts of “revisioning and self-definition of African Caribbean [and other Black] womanhood”, at the collective as well as individual and personal level—as I discussed in Chapter 4 around anthologies and the creation of community; and in Chapter 5 in looking at issues of activism of literature. Dionne Brand’s essay “This Body for Itself” breaks taboos around sensuality and sexuality, and lesbianism in particular. Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* speaks out about Black men’s violence, despite anxiety about exposing conflicts within the Black community and about reinforcing dominant stereotypes about Black masculinity.

In Brand’s essay “This Body for Itself”,⁷⁴⁸ she talks about a conference of Caribbean women writers which she attended. She felt that the writers who read and spoke there were avoiding talking about sensuality and sexuality, and that this was a “strategy”, adopted --understandably

⁷⁴⁴Ferguson 1994 a), p. 171.

⁷⁴⁵Ibid., p. 183.

⁷⁴⁶Kincaid 1992, p. 159.

⁷⁴⁷Perry 1990, p. 498.

⁷⁴⁸Brand 1994, pp. 25-49.

but very wrongly, she feels-- because of the over-sexualisation of black women in mainstream culture. This avoidance, she feels, is a “trap”, because it involves denying vital aspects of Caribbean women’s experience and relationships with each other. She writes:

Often when we talk about the wonderful Black women in our lives, their valour, their emotional strength, their psychic endurance overwhelm our texts so much that we forget that apart from learning the elegant art of survival from them, we also learn in their gestures the fine art of sensuality, the fleshy art of pleasure and desire... Didn’t we take in their sweetness, their skinniness, their voluptuousness, their ample arms, their bone-sharp adroitness, their incandescent darkness, the texture of their skin... Didn’t we take in their meaning?⁷⁴⁹

As a result of the avoidance she perceives, she decides to read a story in which “girls in an all-girls school love the French mistress’ breasts”. There is an outcry at this; many of the conference-goers, including friends of Brand’s, shun her afterwards.

She has a conversation with Joan Riley, who reassures her that “you have to write the truth”, and tells her about the outcry around the publication of her own novel *The Unbelonging*. Brand says of Riley’s character Hyacinth that “Her character moulds into self-hatred, fear around her race and sex. Not only does she not belong to England and white people, she does not belong to her body, her growing womanness”. She observes that “Riley’s book had violated the law of silence set down for Black womanhood. She had said that far from being there for the sensuality of men or the ravaging like land by the colonist, it was injured and recoverable only by itself, if at all”.⁷⁵⁰

In her essay Brand critiques Carole Boyce Davies for “ignor[ing] the ‘female self’ in anything other than the mother-daughter relation”.⁷⁵¹ The “great big mother, whether she is a grandmother, auntie or elder” is according to Brand pervasive in Caribbean women’s writings; but Boyce Davies, according to Brand tries to fit them into Eurocentric, psychoanalytic frameworks. This, as well as the widespread insistence on the absence of a Caribbean lesbian history—despite references, “rumours”, “fragments in the language”—feels to Brand like “pulling the Black female body into line”.⁷⁵² Brand writes, “To write this body for itself feels like grappling for it, like trying to take it away from some force”.

Both Brand and Riley have the audacity to, as Brand puts it, “write the body for itself”; and this is in relation not only to white-dominated society, which has its own restrictive and oppressive views of what Black women are and should be, but also in relation to what is expected within Black, even Black women’s, “community”. They have the audacity to write things that cause

⁷⁴⁹Ibid., p. 28.

⁷⁵⁰Ibid., p. 39-40.

⁷⁵¹Ibid., p. 45.

⁷⁵²Ibid., p. 48.

friction among Black people/Black women, despite some anti-racist activists' insistence that these communities must remain "united" against the enemy of white racism. They also challenge the conventional and oppressive images of Black and migrant women that still persist in the mainstream, telling their truths, however uncomfortable. It is for this very reason that these writings are so important for feminism; and why they have to be seen in political context. They do not toe a party line –anti-racist; heterosexist or anti-sexual; post-colonial. Their feminism, their womanism, their politics, are self-defined, and audacious.

The Politics of Endings

The writings looked at in this thesis vary widely in terms of how they portray migration in general and, as I have been looking at in this chapter, in terms of its oppressive and liberatory effects (as defined in my Introduction, and at the opening of this chapter) in particular. I turn now to address what the endings of novels in particular can be interpreted as saying about the impact of migration. While migration is a process, and the novels' endings are not a *conclusion* to characters' lives or to migration's effects on them, the ways in which novels end do provide useful insights into how writers see the various impacts of migration on girls and women. Endings very often stay with readers beyond the time taken to read the book; their imaginations, influenced by the unfolding of the story, take over where the narrative concludes. The ways in which dilemmas, difficulties, or conflicts resulting from migration are resolved, suspended or left inconclusive at the end of a narrative indicates something of what the writer is trying to convey about her characters' futures, how she intends her readers to imagine her migrant characters' ongoing lives.

Both *Nervous Conditions* and *Lucy* end with a sense of opening up, of a process that continues beyond the final words of the novel. Migration has in both novels led to great difficulty and pain. In both cases writing plays an important role in coming to terms with the emotional upheaval which (in very different ways) takes place in the novels, and in assimilating the changes brought about.

The Unbelonging, in contrast, ends on a note of profound despair. Hyacinth has returned to Jamaica, dreams and memories of which have provided her with her only source of hope throughout the novel. She is forced to confront a sordidness and deep poverty vastly different from the lush landscape and warm community life which have sustained her in her imagination; we see no alternative way forward for her. Riley indicates very little hope that the "authentic

female self” and the “authentic black self,” which racism and gender oppression have buried so deep in Hyacinth that her self-perception “amounts to self-hatred,” will ever find expression.⁷⁵³

In a discussion at a reading in Leicester, Joan Riley commented that she “had deliberately avoided any possibility of a happy ending” to *The Unbelonging* in order to point out “the persistence of sexism and racism” in society and to demand that her readers “confront” and engage with them. A happy ending, she felt, would have implied that these issues “could and would be overcome”.⁷⁵⁴ Maud Sulter, in a discussion with Alice Walker, however, worries that the bleak picture the novel paints is too one-sided and contains precisely the characterisation of black men and women “that white publishers want.” She fears that such a “depressing” novel, though perhaps true to life, is not particularly “strengthening for Black women themselves to read”, and is especially worried because there are so few alternative pictures of Black women available. Alice Walker’s response is that black women should represent all kinds of experiences in order that the fullest possible total picture be painted.⁷⁵⁵

Riley does achieve her intended effect. But Dangarembga’s more hopeful ending in no way discourages us from engaging with the issues she explores. Her extremely sensitive and complex writing leads readers to engage with her characters, and therefore to grapple with the issues raised. So it is not necessarily the case that a “happier” ending leads to less grappling with the issues than a bleaker one.

But despite the unrelenting pain in *The Unbelonging*, the ending could be interpreted as ending with possibility and recognition, as with Tambu; Hyacinth does recognise “reality” and might possibly emerge, in the distant future, more empowered and able to cope with her life than she is as the novel concludes. That there are different interpretations of what lies in Hyacinth’s future, beyond the ending of the novel, is perhaps in itself a picture of the diversity of Black women’s lives.

Within *Nervous Conditions* there are different endings for different characters, specifically for Tambu and for Nyasha. In contrast to Tambu, Nyasha’s future is uncertain and seems less likely to be a hopeful one. She is in a clinic at the end of the novel, possibly recovering from her illness, but her recovery is far from guaranteed. Different characters, and their varying positionings at the end of a narrative, enable authors to explore diverse outcomes of migration for different women.

⁷⁵³Carrera Suarez 1991, p. 295.

⁷⁵⁴Griffin 1993, p. 24.

⁷⁵⁵Walker and Sulter 1988, p. 105.

The discussion between Sulter and Walker, referred to above, also suggests that an author's intended audience—or “implied reader”—influences the kind of ending a novel has. Riley wrote in part, at least, to compel “readers”—apparently including white readers—to confront issues of sexism and racism. Sulter's concern was for the effects of Riley's narrative specifically on Black women readers. Walker's response indicates that she is thinking about audiences both of Black women and a wider readership; a full picture of Black women's lives is important both so that Black women have a reflection of themselves and so that other readers get a view that is not distorted or partial. It is part of my project to suggest that attending to the diversity of these literary representations, and to the contestation surrounding the *reception* of these texts, is necessary to help create a fully responsive context for migrant writers and the texts they produce.

In this section I have been arguing that the endings of narratives are important, in part because they reflect writers' choices of how to represent various possible effects of migration on women's lives. The discussion cited above, between Sulter and Walker, confirms the importance of endings in broader political terms as well. Taken collectively, the writings I have examined do paint a very diverse picture of the impact of migration on women's lives; this is seen, as I have explored, through various writers' representations of pain, of madness, and of empowerment in their characters. I chose to focus on a wide range of writing, in this thesis, in order to reflect some of that diversity.

The Politics of Migration in Contemporary Women's Writing: Conclusion

In the first chapter of this thesis I focused on how women's writing portrays women characters' and speakers' decisions about migration, and the personal, political and historical contexts in which their migration takes place. I asserted that unlike many studies of migration, this literature seeks not to posit theories which impose an explanatory framework on people's lives, thereby reducing the complexities of experiences and decisions around migration; but rather to illuminate the multifaceted ways that power shapes individuals' experiences. My readings of the literature point to the importance of the context of colonial/post-colonial relations, and the power dynamics of intra-family gender relations, in understanding women's decisions around migration.

Chapters 2 and 3 explored the impact of migrant women's changing relationships with place on their sense of home, belonging and identity. Chapter 2 demonstrated the impact of colonialism on women's relationships with place, both places of origin and England, before migration. The

texts reveal the extent of the reach of colonialism and how it shaped women's understanding of the world. Despite the wide range of texts and places certain themes and images emerge: maps and daffodils, a sense of erasure and "nowhereness" and "double vision" are among the recurring tropes in this literature. These writings are also important in showing that colonialism was not always totally successful in obliterating people's attachment to their own lands, and their own ways of making meaning of their lives. Both the ways in which colonialism "worked" in oppressing female colonial subjects and the ways it did not are aspects of these women's identities that need to be recognised.

In Chapter 3 I focussed on the varying relationships with place that writers portray as following on from migration. As well as, often, leading to painful experiences of displacement and increased exposure to racism, the rootlessness experienced feels liberating to some women. In this chapter I showed how migration leads to changing meanings of place, self and home as well as to changes in politics of location. I stressed that evocations of place in the writings are important in themselves, not merely metaphors for something else; central emotions and important political insights are contained within these evocations.

In Chapters 4 and 5 I moved on to explore the relevance and importance of these writings to feminist politics and contemporary debates about identity, difference and racism. These two chapters addressed the role of this literature in creating political community among migrant women writers and readers, and the relationship between writing and political activism. In Chapter 4 I stressed the importance of looking at the process of reading and the role of different readers of migrant women's writings, especially anthologies in which reflecting, reflecting on, and creating political community is often an explicit agenda. I also argued that reading needs to be understood as feminist conversation, and that white feminists reading Black migrant women's writing is a crucial part of this conversation, if feminism is to pursue its project of social transformation. Politically responsible readings could be an important part of a process of interrupting and dismantling racist assumptions and structures. Chapter 5 explored the explicitly political dimensions of migrant women's writing through the defiant use of language and through the actual portrayals of activism in the writings.

This final chapter has explored the complexities of women's experiences of migration and how migration can lead to heightened experiences of oppression; how for some women it is necessary and enabling; and how writing is an important way of working through and coming to terms with the meanings of these changes. I take the lead from many of the migrant writers I discuss in this thesis and privilege *writing* as an important act of intervention which can both

interrupt the continued hegemony of Western cultural discourses and contribute to the construction of a more complex understanding of cultural diversity.

A feminist approach There is, I have affirmed in this thesis, a clear need for a feminist --or a “pro-womanist”-- approach to reading migrant women’s writing, despite the ways in which feminism as a universal concept has been called into question in the recent past. I have argued for readings that emphasise both the material conditions of migrant women’s lives, and political activism in the context of the literature. While recognising that the texts are creative fictional or poetic constructs, I argue that there is a need to emphasise both the personal and the political in reading them, and to pay attention to how writers explore the impacts of politics and power on the material and the everyday in individual migrant women’s lives. This thesis is a timely intervention at a juncture when migration has become so fashionable a ‘trope’ in scholarly debate that we are in danger of losing sight of the material conditions experienced by migrant women in the U.K. and North America. My contribution has been to pay close attention to these texts, as a strategy which refuses (while not denying the usefulness of postcolonial theory to some endeavours) the glibness of some postcolonial celebrations of migration and “hybridity”.

There have been significant shifts, in the past couple of decades, both in the focus of feminist academic works and in trends in the publishing of literary texts by Black women writers. Around the 1980s, long having been ignored by white feminist as well as mainstream publishers, the works of Black American women writers such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou began to become marketable; they even began to become part of the ‘canon’ and to be taught as essential literary texts, both in North America and in Britain. Also around the 1980s, Black and Third World women’s (often justified) challenges to white feminists that they were unwittingly assuming white women’s experience was the norm and thus perpetuating racist assumptions, came to a head.

More recently, there has been something of a shift, initiated perhaps by some of Toni Morrison’s novels, away from the publishing of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works by Black American women such as Angelou. Concurrently, challenges to Western feminism by Black and Third World women have led some, particularly white feminists (as I discussed in my Introduction), to retreat into silence rather than grappling in depth with the implications of those critiques. This, along with the turn towards post-structuralist and postmodern approaches within the academy, has led to a shift away from the specific focus on the material realities facing Black, Third World and migrant women. ‘Post-colonial’ and ‘post-feminist’ discourses also risk losing sight of these material realities.

As Winifred Woodhull, among others, points out, contemporary feminism remains, paradoxically, focussed on Western cultures. She writes: “If anything can be said with certainty about third wave feminism, it is that it is mainly a first world phenomenon generated by women who, like their second wave counterparts, have limited interest in women’s struggles elsewhere on the planet”.⁷⁵⁶ The texts I have focussed on in this thesis, most of them published in the late 1980s or 1990s, emerged at about the time when these trends were taking place. I argue that attention to them could help overcome some of these limitations; and that migrant women’s writing is a useful category that could facilitate a return to consideration of questions about race, gender and sexual identity. This return, however, needs to be undertaken in a way that goes beyond both the limitations of much white feminist theory of the 1980s and before, and the emphasis on the impossibility of communication in some contemporary feminist postcolonial treatments of ‘difference’.

Communicating across difference: the role of reading It is vital, as I argued in my Introduction, to go beyond stances such as that of Marnia Lazreg. Lazreg suggests that it is fruitless to even attempt to understand ‘the Other Woman’, because of the dangers, inherent in such attempts, of perpetuating colonialist assumptions.⁷⁵⁷ A sense of this kind of impossibility is also implicit (or explicit) in the arguments of some other post-colonial critics, including some of Gayatri Spivak’s work. The analysis and critique of colonialist assumptions embedded in texts engaged in by much postcolonial criticism is important but not sufficient; one of my central contentions in this thesis has been that the endeavour to forge connections among women, across and taking account of ‘difference’, is not only meaningful but necessary as well.

As Sara Ahmed points out, Western and ‘third world’ women encounter each other in any case; the question is not *whether* encounters between ‘different’ women are to take place, but *how* these can best be re-shaped in order to effect positive change. We must, she argues, “think of feminist transnational activism as a way of *(re)encountering what is already encountered*” (emphasis Ahmed’s)⁷⁵⁸ in order to confront rather than retreat from difference. We need to work to build relationships among women that are no longer based on the kind of colonial and neo-colonial assumptions and power differentials that have continued to be perpetuated by much Western feminist thought.

Ahmed argues that encounters among ‘different’ women are “forms of (and not supplements to) collective activism” because they can both enable other encounters to take place, and lead to

⁷⁵⁶Woodhull 2003, p. 1.

⁷⁵⁷Lazreg in Amireh and Majaj, eds., 2000, pp. 37-38.

⁷⁵⁸Ahmed 2000, p. 178.

the initiating of other forms of activism. Rather than either denying difference or allowing it to silence all attempts at communication, Ahmed argues for an engagement with the differences, including (crucially) power differences, that divide women, and a movement beyond the oppositions implicitly accepted when difference silences us.

I extend her argument from person-to-person encounters among women, to the interaction that occurs during reading, as well. Much of the literature I have focussed on in this thesis highlights the impact of larger political forces, and migration in this context, on individual lives. The literature can act as inspiration, as seen in Chapter 4 in the case of the anthologies I examined there. It can be activist in the sense of defying proscriptions, for example in the use of patois in poetry by Caribbean migrant women. It is often “audacious” in Joan Anim-Addo’s sense (see above). It is in the act of reading this literature that literary activism can be most fully realised, because it can form part of a process of forging connections across difference, and hence contribute to a larger feminist project of social change. This has been one of the main aims and contributions of this thesis: to show how migrant women’s writing can help Western, and in particular white Western, feminists engage with questions of the politics of power, difference and connection too crucial to ignore. Connection among women is not a given, but something to be worked for; this thesis is a contribution to, as Ahmed puts it, “the *very work that has to be done* in order to get closer to other others” (emphasis Ahmed’s).⁷⁵⁹

Sara Ahmed’s argument about the need to re-shape already existing relationships among women holds even more true, perhaps –or is at least more obviously true-- in the case of migrant women geographically closer to women born in Britain and North America than for Third World women who have not migrated to the West. We share cities and neighbourhoods, and literally meet each other in common physical space. Crucially, too, statistics and other facts show that there continue to be inequities and injustices perpetuated and experienced daily by migrant women in our Northern societies. These realities demand increased awareness, and an activist response.

Migrant women and material disadvantage As I pointed out in my Introduction, there has been a great increase in women’s migration from Southern to Northern countries in recent years, in large part due to processes related to globalization. The great majority of migrant women in the West work as maids or domestics,⁷⁶⁰ and face conditions that are frequently very poor indeed. Pay, length of hours worked, job security, health and retirement provisions often leave

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁷⁶⁰ Ehrenreich and Hochschild, eds., 2003, p. 6.

much to be desired;⁷⁶¹ sometimes, in addition to this, domestic workers face abuse, violence and/or slavery-like conditions. Many women's isolation and lack of papers or legal protection makes them even more vulnerable to abuse. In figures kept by a British organisation supporting domestic workers, "In 1996-1997, 84 percent reported psychological abuse, 34 percent physical abuse, and 10 percent sexual abuse. Additionally, 54 percent were locked in, 55 percent did not have their own beds, and 38 percent were not fed regularly". These workers also face the widespread stigma attached to people who clean for a living; and racial stereotyping plays a significant role "both in the abuse of domestic workers and in the selection of migrant workers over local citizens in the first place".⁷⁶²

With this trend of growing numbers of migrant women working as maids and nannies in affluent northern countries, Bridget Anderson argues that "[w]hat we risk as domestic work is taken over by immigrant workers is reproducing, within our own homes, the global inequities that so painfully divide the world".⁷⁶³ And whether the relationships in that domestic workplace are overtly abusive or relatively benign, there are still power dynamics at work that mean that "career-oriented upper-middle-class woman of an affluent nation and the striving woman from a crumbling Third World or postcommunist economy... come together as mistress and maid, employer and employee, across a great divide of privilege and opportunity".⁷⁶⁴ As Anderson puts it,

Because both the workers and the employers in this sector tend to be women, it is tempting to draw on notions of sisterhood in order to reform the relationships between employers and employees. But the power relations among these women are very complex, to the point where even acts of kindness work to reproduce an employer's status and self-image, and they do not always, in the end, benefit the worker... Real sisterhood, then, should take concerned women beyond their own homes: it means campaigning and organizing around issues of migration and domestic labor...⁷⁶⁵

The editors and contributors to the volume in which Anderson's piece appears "hope to make the invisible visible again"⁷⁶⁶ by highlighting these hidden trends and the realities of these real women's existences.

Not all the writers and texts that I have focussed on in this thesis reflect the realities of the domestic workers I have referred to here; clearly class is an issue which dictates the conditions of migration for specific women. Nevertheless, some of the writers, such as Kincaid, have had direct experience as domestic workers and/or choose to foreground issues and experiences such as these in their texts. I have argued in this thesis that attending to migrant women's writings

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁷⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

⁷⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

helps us take steps towards first becoming aware of, then eventually reversing, worrying and painful trends such as those I outline above.

Feminist conversation I have argued not only for a feminist approach to reading migrant women's writing, but for viewing that reading as a form of feminist conversation. My view, furthermore, is that this conversation is, or can be, a powerful mode of activism. Katie King writes, distinguishing her view of 'conversations' from 'debates' in feminist theory:

Conversations overlap several debates or are layered over each other within particular debates; they overlap more than written theory –including public speech and action, private oralities, group products and processes –or varieties and versions of informal writing or circulating manuscripts. I'm using the term conversation as a unit of political agency in theoretical discourse.⁷⁶⁷

She emphasises, in her book, "the local aspects of discourse, very much historically –at times almost "momentarily"—located, continually rewritten or reinscribed with new meanings by feminist practitioners"; and the continual shifting and travelling of feminists' "terms, constituencies, and strategies". She also points out that these conversations are not devoid of power differential, and that some feminists have more say than others; but argues that many conversations may happen at once, and overlap several debates simultaneously.⁷⁶⁸ According to King, then, the "conversations" of all feminists, not just those whose thoughts are published, are what comprise feminism; they make of feminism an even more dynamic and organic body of thought than is evidenced by the "debates" that happen within the academy.

It is useful, I think, to place King's ideas about conversations alongside my own about reading. Reading too is about local and interpersonal 'theorising', about collaborative, combative or resistant conversations that, while not necessarily recorded, are a part of ongoing and evolving feminist thought just as much as are more public interchanges or treatises. This thesis is a written part of a larger –written, oral *and* unspoken-- conversation among feminists, in which I argue that migrant women's writing is crucial to that larger conversation. It is crucial to feminist theory and practice, I argue, for Western feminists to read that writing; the interchange that is reading has the potential to contribute to the ongoing project of interrupting and dismantling destructive assumptions and structures of inequity based on race, gender, sexuality and other aspects of identity, as manifested both in larger society and within feminist circles.

Through the 'conversation' that is reading, readers can experience an interplay of connection and distance from texts; this can lead to greater understanding of issues raised by the writings' portrayals of race, gender, migration and related themes. Literature in this sense is both a collaborative effort and a relationship; it involves creativity by the author and also requires, as

⁷⁶⁷King 1994, p. 87.

⁷⁶⁸Ibid., p. xi.

reader-response critics argue, readers' activity in order to be fully realised. In the case of white women reading the writings by migrant women, which I argue is a crucial part of this feminist conversation, if feminism is to pursue its project of social transformation, reading has the potential to be a form of collective work, of work across racial and other differences, and across differentials of privilege and disadvantage. This reading, of course, needs to be politically responsible, in order that racist or colonialist assumptions are not simply perpetuated, or the text is not appropriated for readers' own agendas.

The feminist conversation that reading can comprise could, perhaps, be seen as analogous to the "Revolutionary Tea Party" evoked by Lillian Allen in her poem of that name (which I discussed in Chapter 5). That poem was about the creation of political solidarity. While the identity of the poem's 'implied reader' --of the person whom the poem invites into that bond of solidarity-- is ambiguous, it could, I concluded, be anyone who shares the political goals of the poem's speaker.

Why literature? Much of the literature I have looked at is particularly conducive to these conversations across, and engaging with, difference. Both because of the issues with which they engage, and because of the ways that they, as literary texts, can engage readers' imaginations and emotions, migrant women's writings have an especially important role to play in getting white women to imagine across difference and to engage in unlearning racism. By looking at and explicating my chosen texts' portrayals of migrant women's decisions around migration, their relationships to place, and their experiences of migration's complex effects on their sense of themselves, I have aimed in this thesis to demonstrate the importance of this literature to feminist theory. Because of the ways in which their authors use language, develop their characters, and structure their novels and poems, they can communicate nuances and texture of emotion that other kinds of writing rarely address; thus the texts can complement theoretical writings in ways very important for feminist scholarship to take on board.

I have looked at writings of different genres in the thesis because of my wish to bring out themes that I feel have been neglected and that are important for feminist theory and practice. This breadth of scope has led to interesting comparisons but also to problems because of the difficulties of comparing poetry with fiction, anthologies with novels, autobiographical prose with either poetry or fiction. Because of my thematic and political aims in the thesis, it has also not always been possible to concentrate on formal considerations to the extent called for by the range of texts chosen. Still, my comparisons have been productive because I have been able to draw together texts which deal with comparable themes but which are rarely considered together.

Migration and women's identities The literature is important for feminism, in that it addresses some of the many possible effects of migration on women. One of the implications of attending to such a diverse range of texts is that few generalisations can be made, as to the consequences of women's migration to "the West". It can lead to, for example, Dionne Brand finding greater freedom to express her sexuality, (at the same time as experiencing other limitations or oppressions, in particular racism). Kincaid's migration led to her being able to work as a writer: she has time and again emphasised that this would not have been possible had she stayed in Antigua. In terms of experiences and perceptions of race and positioning in the world --as well as in terms of gender and sexuality, and potential for self-expression-- migration can change women's sense of themselves and their identities. It can lead to a profound re-assessment of the cultures of places of origin and of settlement, as well as of self, gender, race, sexuality, and relationships to 'home' and community. The politics of location shifts when migrants' literal, physical locations change; as members of 'minorities' in white-dominated countries their experiences of racism may either be more intense than or, simply different from, what was known in their countries of origin. Despite a great deal of attention to race in recent feminist and post-colonial theoretical work, there has not yet been sufficient exploration of issues of race as it relates to *migration*, in an explicitly feminist way.

Also, how *migrant* women are seen and treated does not always correspond with how *Black* women are seen. Issues of nationality and immigration status contribute to how 'belonging' is experienced (while I have not looked at this in detail in this thesis, such issues could be an area for further research). Migrants challenge the idea of a homogenous nation; the vexed question of assimilation brings that idea into sharp relief.

Migration has a great impact upon women's identities, politics, their sense of themselves in terms of race, gender and sexuality; on their relationships to femininity, masculinity, whiteness, blackness, race (see Chapter 4); on their relationships with place, with other women and with men, and with themselves. Migration then is an important factor in looking at identity, I argue, and is for this reason important for feminists to take into account: migration changes women and is a central experience in many of our lives. Whether it leads to more intense experiences of oppression, or a sense of empowerment, or both simultaneously in different ways, it often transforms relationships with self, community and place in ways which can have a strong impact on identity. Migration shifts terms of reference and frameworks of experience, and calls certainties into question. It can enable some women to wrestle a space for themselves and explore its meaning; writing is a tool in this process (whether writers show migration leading to that greater space, depict characters who are more defeated by migration and oppressive forces

encountered as a result of it, or sometimes, as I showed earlier in this chapter, create characters who themselves write in order to make sense of their migrations). And I am responding to this; though my contribution is not the final word my aim has been to return the debate to some ideas that have in recent years been underplayed or neglected; and combine this with newer insights into the dangers of homogenising, or of emphasising one facet of identity (gender, or race) to the exclusion of another.

Future research Migrant women's writing needs further attention. One particularly important approach to it would be to place such writing published in this country, in the contexts of Black British politics, and the daily life experiences of Black women in Britain. This would enable the exploration of links between migration and involvement in activism, as well as between migration and the possibility of alliances between Black and Asian women and white women. Interviews with readers, writers and activists could complement readings of the texts to provide a rich and fuller picture of the politics of migrant women's writing in contemporary Britain.

Political demonstrations in Britain after September 11 have been an important manifestation of multi-racial organising; neither peace demonstrations nor anti-racism actions have previously been so diverse. This opens up questions: how do women's histories of migration and (neo)colonialism affect their involvement in political activism at this juncture; what kinds of activism are women engaged in; what are their motivations; what is the relationship between women's domestic and community circumstances and their involvement in activism; and finally, how is women's writing affecting and affected by this particular political moment? Men too have been very much involved in the anti-war demonstrations; attention to the experience and writings of male authors, while not the subject of this thesis, would also be a fruitful way of extending the work done here on gender, race, migration and activism.

This thesis is a step towards putting issues of migration, identity, women's writing and activism on feminist agendas. Given the continuing centrality of migration and of 'globalized identities' in today's world, consideration of these issues is vital to ensure that attention to gender is recognised as crucial to addressing issues raised by contemporary migration.

Appendix: Short summaries of novels

Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*

The protagonist, a young girl, Tambu, grows up in rural pre-independence Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia). She struggles to gain an education, but this only comes about after her brother's death, when she is allowed to take his place at the mission school run by her uncle, Babamukuru. She leaves her poor home and her family, and moves in with her uncle and aunt, Maiguru, when she starts school. Struggling to come to terms with her new life, she becomes close to her cousin, Nyasha, who has spent her early childhood in Britain, before returning to Rhodesia. Later she wins a scholarship to a convent school. Tambu becomes increasingly critical of colonial education, and of gender relations in her cousin's family, as she watches Babamukuru wield authority over the other members of his family, and as she watches Nyasha's increasingly desperate struggles with her father, struggles which eventually take the form of Nyasha's anorexia. The novel is the adult Tambu's reflections on these times and her attempt to come to terms with, and make sense of, these changes in her life.

Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*

Annie John is a first person narrative of a childhood in Antigua. The novel explores the fraught relationship between Annie John and her mother, Annie's attempts to understand how her initially tender and caring mother pulls away from her as she grows older, and the legacies of this sense of betrayal, which eventually results in Annie John's decision to leave Antigua. Her mother wants her to become a nurse, and although Annie John is not interested in nursing, or in going to England, she seizes this excuse to leave Antigua. The novel ends with Annie leaving the island, with mixed emotions, leaving behind everything that she knows for a new life in Britain.

Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy*

The novel opens with Lucy's first day in the US, having left her island home of Antigua to become an *au pair*. The book traces Lucy's struggles to come to terms with her new family and country as she tries to distance herself from Antigua and from her oppressive, love/hate relationship with her mother. While Lucy is relieved to leave Antigua, her relationship with the white couple she works for, Mariah and Lewis, and their children, is sometimes fraught. Her relationship with Mariah is given particular attention. There is both closeness and affection and

distance between the two women, reflecting aspects of Lucy's relationship with her mother. This relationship is fraught with Lucy's endeavours to make sense of Mariah's behaviour, her happiness and her privilege, and her (unconscious) racism. Lucy's relationships with others around her are also always pervaded with her anger about racism generally, and in particular her anger in relation to the colonisation of Antigua, feelings which often leave her feeling distant and alienated. The novel ends a year after Lucy's arrival in the US, as she is preparing to move on again. She leaves her job as an *au pair*, and finds a new job, ultimately leaving Mariah, who has also been left by her husband, Lewis, who she discovers was having an affair. She also leaves her mother behind, sending her a fictional new address. Thus her new life will be one without any direct ties to her past in Antigua or to her time with Mariah's family.

Bharati Mukherjee, *Wife*

This novel revolves around the character, Dimple Dasgupta, who, following an arranged marriage with Amit Basu, an engineer, comes to the US from India. While Dimple had idealised a glamorous life in New York, the reality is more difficult. She struggles to come to terms with her new environment, but increasingly retreats from the world around her. Her husband, Amit, out at work all day long, leaves her isolated in her new apartment, and she is scared to go out. She grows increasingly depressed and takes refuge in television programmes and soap operas. However the line between reality and fantasy blurs. She begins an affair with a white man, and as her alienation from her husband increases, and his lack of understanding continues, the novel ends as her murderous emotions for her husband come to the fore in a chilling moment when reality and scenes from the TV blur.

Joan Riley, *The Unbelonging*

Eleven-year-old Hyacinth is called to England from Jamaica by a father she does not remember. Arriving in England she finds life with her father and step-mother cold and harsh after the warmth and companionship of her life in Kingston with her aunt. Feeling alienated from all in her new life, Hyacinth is victimised by the racism of some of her school mates and teachers, and feels unable to reach out to those around her. Hyacinth is further threatened by her father's increasing physical violence and eventual sexual assault, and eventually runs away from home. She finds a job and returns to college to take her failed O Levels. She makes some friends at college, who are involved in radical Black politics. Hyacinth remains unable to make sense of this. She clings to idealised dreams of her home in Jamaica. At the end of the novel, Hyacinth returns to Kingston, and her illusions are cruelly shattered, as she finds her home alien and

threatening, and she is accused of not caring for her aunt whom she has rarely contacted. She has changed in her time away, and those who knew her when she was a child find her “foreign” and stuck-up. While she did not fit in England, she no longer fits in in Kingston either.

Ravinder Randhawa, *A Wicked Old Woman*

A Wicked Old Woman explores the lives of an urban British Asian community. The novel centres on the character, Kulwant, who is the wicked old woman of the title. When Kulwant’s arranged marriage to a doctor from India disintegrates, her children blame her for not being a perfect wife and mother. She takes to dressing in shabby clothes from Oxfam, and shuffles through the streets, leaning on a stick for support, and masquerading as a much older woman. Three other characters form the centre of this novel, Ammi, Shanti and Rani. Shanti’s daughter has run away from her, and from any association with Asian-ness, and Shanti can only deal with this by closing her eyes and refusing to see until her daughter returns. Ammi has nightmares of fire raining down on defenceless bodies, nightmares which are only appeased when her daughters tell her about Hiroshima and about the women at Greenham Common, and they become involved in sending food and bedding to the camp. Rani is in a coma for most of the novel, having killed the man who tried to rape her. Her friends rally around to support her, both to try and restore her health, and to defend her legally. The novel explores the lives of different generations of migrants, and the differing effects of racism on these generations, pointing to the role of political activism in healing the various wounds of racism, and of frictions and differences within Asian communities.

Meera Syal, *Life isn’t all ha ha hee hee*

This novel centres on three friends in their thirties living in London. Tania, Sunita and Chila have been close and somewhat unlikely friends since they met at school. Sunita is married to her boyfriend from university, Akash, and is living a very settled, if dissatisfied life, feeling overweight, and burdened by motherhood, with her days as a law student and activist far behind her. Tania, beautiful and sophisticated, has rejected marriage and all things traditionally Asian, for a high-flying TV career and a compliant Indophile boyfriend called Martin. The third character, Chila, is presented as kind and innocent and not very capable, but she has managed to marry Deepak, one of the richest, and most eligible men in their circle. The novel documents the strengths and weakness of female friendship, through infidelity, TV documentaries and betrayal, and against a background of Asian community politics and activism.

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