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Women Writing Home: The Migrant Short Story in North America, 1980-2020

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Submitted for the examination of Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of Sussex

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: Laura Gallon

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WOMEN WRITING HOME: THE MIGRANT SHORT STORY IN NORTH AMERICA, 1980-2020

Thesis Summary

This thesis explores contemporary short fiction by first- and second-generation migrant women writers in North America from 1980 to 2020, including Jhumpa Lahiri, Edwidge Danticat, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Jamaica Kincaid, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Shani Mootoo amongst others. To date, scholarly attention has concentrated on the novel as the default migrant fictional genre and has often read migrant writing as a sociological mirror to our contemporary 'Age of Migration'. This thesis contends that only by expanding our definitions of the short story, citizenry and the nation, by stretching the parameters of short story theory, and by emphasizing form alongside theme, can we fully appreciate migrant women's consequential contributions to the contemporary short story in North America.

To respond fully to the polyphony that is characteristic of this writing, I deploy the lens of "habitability". Interweaving short story theory and feminist postcolonial studies, my research investigates how stories by migrant women problematize migration through domestic spaces and objects, through what I call the "poetics of home". Through chapters scrutinizing the roles and representations of language, food and clothes in these texts, I argue that the concern with home and belonging is evident both in the thematic focus and in the formal choices that migrant women make. The selected writers accommodate the hybridity and fragmentation of their experiences of diaspora and, in so doing, they 'domesticate' the short story genre and make it a literary home of their own; they make the short story a 'habitable' genre. This study thus contributes to a reappraisal of women's writing the quotidian and of short fiction in the contemporary canon of migrant literature. In the process, it presents the short story as an international and migrant genre which transcends national borders and is easily disseminated via the globalised publishing industry and the online space.

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Disclaimer

Please note that given the contemporary focus of this study, many of the sources come from Kindle E-books, live interviews, conference presentations, and online articles, and may therefore not have page numbers to refer to. For more details, please consult the "Works Cited" page.

Introduction

Genre, Gender and Migration: The Migrant Short Story

In July 2020, at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, the *New York Times Magazine* published a special all-fiction issue inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1353). Boccaccio's collected tales, often described as a literary ancestor to the contemporary short story (March-Russell 2), are narrated by a group of characters taking shelter in a secluded villa outside Florence for ten days during the Black Plague. Six centuries

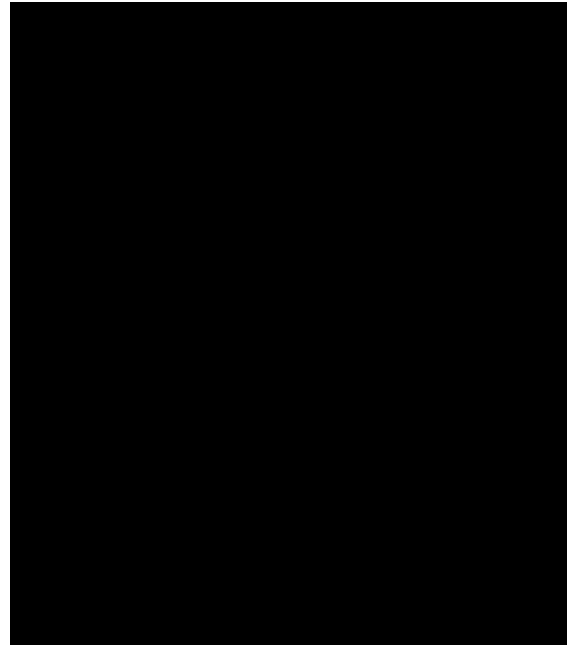


Fig. 1. Cover of the *New York Times Magazine*, 12 Jul.

later, the editors of the so-called “Decameron Project” reached out to some of today’s most acclaimed writers to make sense of, and memorialise, the new pandemic; “to entertain people and provide some palliative fictional diversion from what is happening in the world while still being rooted in the current moment” (Roper qtd. in McCarthy). While some of the stories, like those in Boccaccio’s collection, strive for escapism by avoiding direct reference to the crisis, many capture the instability of the times and confront the pandemic head-on. In “The Cellar”, for instance, Dina Nayeri explores the parallels between her Iranian-American characters’ hiding in a cellar during airstrikes in Tehran in the 1980s and their lockdown in their Parisian flat. In “That Time at My Brother’s Wedding”, Laila Lalami’s protagonist, a Moroccan American lecturer at Berkeley, finds herself stranded in Morocco

after it closes its borders. In “The Walk”, Kamila Shamsie depicts the newfound bizarreness of taking a stroll in public spaces in Karachi, while in “One Thing” Edwidge Danticat describes heart-wrenching phone calls between a Haitian American woman who is confined to her flat and her husband who is dying in hospital.

The Decameron Project is strikingly global in its scope. Aside from English-language writers of global esteem such as Margaret Atwood, Colm Tóibín and David Mitchell, it contains stories in translation by South American, African, Middle Eastern and European writers, and almost half of its writers (fourteen of them, to be precise) are migrants or children of migrants.¹ While it could be argued that the diversity of writers reflects the *New York Times*’ progressive leanings and cosmopolitanism, it is worth stressing that the final selection was not completely under the editors’ control as they received much more enthusiasm than they had anticipated. In fact, they did not have enough room in the print magazine to feature all the stories they were sent and were constrained to publish seven of them on the online version only, in order to print them all (McCarthy). If the Decameron Project, then, can be considered as representative of the contemporary literary scene, it portrays the short story as a vibrant, international and longstanding genre.

Heavily biased towards North American writing (with nineteen out of the twenty-nine stories written by American and Canadian citizens and/or residents), the Decameron Project offers a valuable starting point for the consideration of the contemporary North American migrant short story. The prominence of stories by women and by first- and second-generation migrants in the special issue (with both categories representing twelve of the nineteen North American stories) reflects the important contemporary literary contributions

¹ These are Laila Lalami (Morocco/U.S.), Edwidge Danticat (Haiti/US), Charles Yu (Taiwan/U.S.), Uzodinwa Iweala (Nigeria/U.S.), Mona Awad (Egypt/Canada), Leila Slimani (Morocco/France), Kamila Shamsie (Pakistan/U.K.), Dinaw Mengestu (Ethiopia/U.S.), Yiyun Li (China/U.S.), Victor Lavalley (Uganda/U.S.), Tea Obrecht (Serbia/U.S.), Dina Nuyeri (Iran/U.S.), Esi Edugyan (Ghana/Canada), and John Wray (Austria/U.S.).

of women and migrants to the genre. Since the early 2000s, the input of women writers has increasingly been documented by several major academic publications.² In 2018, Emma Young asserted in *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories* that "[t]he contemporary moment appears to be *the moment* [sic] for women short story writers who have received increased critical attention and popular acclaim" (1). Her claim was further corroborated in 2019 when the BBC National Short Story Award had an all-woman shortlist for the sixth time in thirteen years, and when all the regional winners of the Commonwealth Short Story Prize were women for the third time since its creation in 2012.

By contrast, the contribution of *migrant* women writers has received very little attention, despite their significant presence on the literary scene. In 2020, the U.S.-based Story Prize was awarded to Danticat for the second time since 2004, out of a shortlist fully comprised of women of migrant backgrounds, including Zadie Smith and Kali Fajardo-Anstine. Similarly, the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Short Story Collection was delivered to Mimi Lok and four out of the five finalists were migrant women. That same year, the overall Commonwealth Short Story Prize went to Kritika Pandey, an Indian writer based in the U.S. for her studies, and the Caine Prize was awarded to Nigerian-British writer Irenosen Okojie, succeeding Lesley Nneka Arimah (who was born in England, grew up in Nigeria and now resides in the U.S.) who had won the previous year. In 2018, Amina Gautier, a writer of Puerto Rican heritage, achieved the prestigious PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, following Jhumpa Lahiri's 2017 win. These are but a few recent examples which indicate that the short story in English is proving to be a particularly habitable genre for migrant women writers. If, in recent years, scholars *have* addressed

² See *Scribbling Women & the Short Story Form: Approaches by American & British Women Writers* edited by Ellen Burton Harrington (2008), *British Women Writers and the Short Story, 1850-1930: Reclaiming Social Space* by Kate Krueger (2014), *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now* edited by Emma Young and James Bailey (2015), *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* by Elke D'hoker (2016), *Gender and Short Fiction: Women's Tales in Contemporary Britain* edited by Jorge Sacido-Romero and Laura Lojo-Rodríguez (2018), *Contemporary Feminism and Women's Short Stories* by Emma Young (2018).

particular collections or stories, they have often done so as part of wider discussions on the literature of a specific region, ethnic group or writer. They have largely been reluctant to take an intercultural approach assembling the writings of migrant women short story writers of different cultural backgrounds, presumably to avoid glossing over historical and cultural particularities. The recent publications of *The Postcolonial Short Story* (2013) edited by Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell, *Critical Insights: Contemporary Immigrant Short Fiction* (2015) compiled by Robert C. Evans and Sam Naidu's "Diaspora and the Short Story" (2019), certainly indicate an increased interest in the genre's relationship to migration. However, no scholar has, to my knowledge, attempted to capture the full scope of the contemporary migrant short story in a single-authored volume.

This thesis sets out to expand scholarly and popular awareness of the genre of migrant women's short story writing since the 1980s, by exploring stories by migrant writers from across the world, by addressing the writings of now "canonical" authors alongside more recent or lesser-known works, and by including a bibliographic guide to contemporary short story collections by migrant women (see Appendix 1). It aims to pave the way to more much-needed discussions as regards the formidable yet relatively unexplored contribution of migrant women to the short story form in recent years. As this study will demonstrate, migrant women writers use the short story to dramatize, both through theme and form, the precarity of belonging, of being and/or feeling at home. To respond fully to the diversity of stories, voices and styles that characterise this genre, I deploy the lens of "habitability," which I expand on below, following a discussion on the unwelcomeness of migrant literary theory to the short story.

The Place of Women and Short Fiction in 'Migrant Literature' Scholarship

Migrant and diasporic literatures have been topics of growing interest in literary studies since the 1980s and the concomitant increase of international mass migrations. Though migrant writing has existed for as long as literature has, this contemporary period has also been defined by gender politics, with women representing a significant proportion of the migrant literature being produced. Katherine Payant's claim in 1999, that "more female than male writers are writing on the immigrant experience", and that "gender issues and writing by women immigrants is very popular now" (xxii), was reiterated the following year by Roger Bromley who stated that these migrant "narratives are mostly produced by women" (4). This "feminisation of migrant writing" accompanies the recent "feminisation of migration" that has taken place since the turn of the century, with the shift in migration patterns and the dramatic increase of the number of women migrating (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 4). The second and third waves of feminism, the Civil Rights movement, and the relaxation of immigration laws which I discuss in more detail below all contributed to fostering a more welcoming literary climate for migrant women too. And yet, despite this, Silvia Pellicer-Ortín and Julia Tofantšuk found that in 2019 "many of the contemporary studies on diaspora writings still focus on canonical authors and male writers" (8).

The 1980s and 1990s also saw the emergence of the North American migrant short story giving voice and visibility to a wider diversity of writers than the genre previously had with Bharati Mukherjee, Lahiri, Junot Díaz, Danticat, Jamaica Kincaid, Sandra Cisneros, Abraham Rodríguez, Gish Jen, Ha Jin and Amy Tan to name but a few. Strikingly, several of these collections, including Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1983) and Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004) have been marketed and approached as novels. This is both a marketing strategy that recognizes that novels sell more, and a critical oversight which signals a more generalised tendency to label books of fiction as

novels. Ultimately, this underscores the assumption that migrant writing is novelistic by definition, a presumption that scholarly criticism embraces perhaps too easily. A telling example can be found in the introduction to *Women on the Move* (2019). Though this recent collection of essays on gender and migration literature contains several chapters that discuss short stories, its introduction refers to all the texts considered across the book as novels through claims such as: “analyses of the novels and theoretical angles are expected to largely engage with the forms of empathy that the reading of these novels stimulate” (Pellicer-Ortín and Tofantšuk 7). The reference to the novel as an umbrella term for all fictional genres is far from unusual. The assumption that all fiction is written in the novelistic form is a contemporary trend from which migrant writing is not exempt. This manifests in the literary award system where short story collections are much less likely to receive literary prizes for “general fiction” than novels. In this regard, Lahiri’s award of the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for her debut collection was highly unusual. Ever since the prize opened up to other fictional genres than the novel in 1948, it has only been awarded to story collections nine times. Similarly, when Souvankham Thammavongsa won the Canada-based, and visibly more diverse, Scotiabank Giller Prize for her short story collection *How to Pronounce Knife* in 2020, hers was only the fifth story collection to win the award in its twenty-six-year history.

When academic articles and books *do* recognize the existence of other forms of migrant writing, they tend to nonetheless situate the novel at the top of a literary hierarchy. The editors of *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration* thus describe “an evolutionary series of forms of migrant writing” which starts with what they call “pre-literature”, ie. “ethnic newsletters or community newspapers [...] “diaries, letters, songs and other oral narratives” (xi). This stage is followed by another with “poems, short stories and reportage written and often published in the mother tongue, usually in newspapers and magazines produced from within the ethnic community” (xi). This evolution, they argue, reaches its final stage with the “emergence of fully-fledged creative literatures using a variety

of more sophisticated narratives, including complex novels, plays, films and poetry” written in English by professional writers (xii). Strikingly, the short story genre is excluded from the latter category and associated with “inferior”, “less developed” literary forms in this narrative of literary and linguistic progress which espouses cultural assimilation. The short story here assumes the position of a training genre, a steppingstone to the most coveted and prestigious fictional genre – the novel.

Much of established short story theory has focused on the asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between the short story and the novel, contesting the fact that the novel is the genre against which all other prose and fictional forms are gauged. The relative shortness of the genre, and the assumption that it is consequently less demanding and constraining to work with has contributed to its being perceived as a “training genre” (Pratt 1994: 97). Certainly, the fact that it is the privileged genre in literary workshops and creative writing modules is also responsible for this. Further, as a younger and shorter form, the story is often described as the novel’s “little sister” (Hanson 1989b: 23) or “baby brother” (Scofield 237), an infantilizing vocabulary which situates it as a less mature form, and one that is “dependent” too, as it is rarely printed by itself, a fact which Mary-Louise Pratt believes may have contributed to its lower status (1994: 97). The conclusion of a positive review for Lahiri’s Pulitzer-prize-winning *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), featuring on the first page, illustrates how strongly-grounded this presumption is: “[s]o far she has written only short stories [...] she has enough twists in her plots, confrontations and comic possibilities to sustain a longer form” (*TLS*). Unsurprisingly, many migrant women writers begin their career by publishing a collection of stories before moving on to the novel, and only very few then proceed to return to the genre (see Appendix 2).

In his introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 2016*, Díaz suggests that the genre’s inferior status initially puts off many minority writers such as himself: “when you’re

a kid who grew up trapped on the margins, the last place you want to be is on the margins” (xv). This same rationale has guided much of postcolonial theory which has tended to focus on the novel, deemed the best genre in which to “write back” or gain attention, at the risk of overshadowing other genres and sometimes even misrepresenting less novel-focused literary traditions (Munos & Ledent 1). Even though this oversight prompted the *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* to bring out a special issue entitled “‘Minor’ Genres in Postcolonial Literatures” in 2018, contemporary discussions on diversity in literature continue to concentrate on infiltrating the novel. In her 2020 Goldsmiths Prize Lecture for instance, Bernardine Evaristo called for a more inclusive literary landscape by confronting the “longform patriarchy and their accomplices”, after having opened up her speech with the following statement: “[t]his essay is about the novel for the novel by a novelist”. As this study will demonstrate, the short story too has been a useful tool for writing oneself into the canon. It has a strong appeal for migrant women writers, several of whom (including Danticat, Gautier and Cecilia Manguerra Brainard) remain committed to the genre throughout their career, for reasons which this thesis will uncover.

It is not my intention to contribute any further to the debate on the problematic relationship between the short story and the novel in Western culture. Short story theory has elaborated on it sufficiently and besides, I am sympathetic with Ashutosh Bhardwaj’s claim that to define the short story against the novel is to view it as an existential Other and deny it an individual history, thus contributing further to its cultural marginalisation. That said, it is important to be aware of this context to gain an understanding of the extent to which the novel has become the norm and to understand the context in which short story collections by migrant women flourish. This thesis is driven by an interest in form and a belief that all genres – not just the short story, but the novel too – need to be considered when analysing contemporary migrant writing.

In *Migration and Literature*, Søren Frank engages with theory of the novel to bluntly declare that the novel is “‘the most buoyantly migratory genre’ – that is, the genre most adept at incorporating migratory elements into its form (but also the genre that most easily crosses national borders)” (10) and he characterizes it as “migratory and homeless” (27). While the novel has indeed been the home to much migrant writing, it is necessary to consider how other literary genres such as poetry, drama, short fiction, and the less culturally regarded forms of oral storytelling, recipes, and instapoetry that this thesis will engage with, have too. Rather than creating hierarchies or arguing, like Frank, that such or such genre is better suited by essence to depicting the migrant experience, I explore how migrant women approach the short story to represent gendered experiences of migration and how they draw on, and experiment with, the possibilities offered by the genre’s distinctive features and history. As such I join with Frank’s claim that “migration relates to both theme and form” (5) to go against a tradition of reading migrant writing primarily for its content by exploring the short story’s more widely habitable potential.

Attending to the formal qualities as well as the thematic focus of migrant writing remains important if scholarly work is to avoid viewing this writing as a mirror to social changes taking place at the turn of the 21st century. As Elieen Declercq has pointed out, the “migrant writing” category is highly problematic as it is defined by the author’s identity as a migrant and relies on the assumption that they will express their “authentic”, “first-hand” experience of migration in their literature.³ Despite calls for new terminology such as “literature of migration” (an arguably more inclusive term which accounts for all writing

³ As Graham Huggan rightfully notes in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, migrant writers are often “seen, in spite of themselves, as First World informants for their native Third World cultures” (85). “Authenticity” is expected of “ethnic” writers as, he argues, “a compensatory or redemptive strategy – the invocation of Native spirituality, for example, as a necessary antidote to a Western culture rendered inauthentic by its attachment to material excess” (158). While I fully agree with Timothy Brennan’s declaration that “[a]uthentic cultures do not exist: internally cohesive and autonomous cultures are a fiction” (56), it is nonetheless apparent from the reviews and packaging of books that “authenticity” is a commodity and a marketing tool which cements clichéd representations of cultures.

which deals with migration regardless of the writer's identity), authorial biography overwhelmingly continues to be the main criteria according to which migration literature is defined and read. As Rocío Davis claims in her study of Asian American and Asian Canadian story cycles, scholarship on migrant writing reveals "a disproportionately high concern with identity politics and nationalism, with ethnic differences and similarities, while formal and generic aspects of the literature tend to be ignored or relegated to a secondary place, if considered at all" (2). A similar critique has also been addressed to the field of postcolonial studies which, according to Elleke Boehmer, "has tended to overlook or side-step questions of poetics as the 'real world' issues it has sought to confront have appeared by contrast so urgent" (2018: 1). Yet, as Dorothy Wang has powerfully argued, by subordinating form to sociological and historical issues, scholars of "ethnic" and postcolonial literature both reflect and perpetuate the pervasive assumption that "[f]orm, whether that of a traditional lyric or avant-garde poems, is [...] the provenance of a literary acumen and culture that is unmarked but assumed to be white" (20). In *Thinking Its Presence*, she identifies a critical double standard in the way contemporary poetry by "ethnic" and white Americans is reviewed, noting that minority poets are often left out of the questions of form, poetic tone and syntax that are discussed by "hard-core" or "real" literary critics (17). Wang's study insightfully illustrates how migrant and "ethnic" writing across genres tends to not be considered as "universal", and therefore "literary" as literature produced by white authors, revealing in the process how the critical reception of literature relies largely on the identity of the author rather than on actual generic or formal features.

It is therefore crucial also to acknowledge how the labels "ethnic" and "migrant" writer (as opposed to what Wang describes as "unmarked" white writers) participate in the critical hierarchy demonstrated by Wang. As Werner Sollors rightly notes in *Beyond Ethnicity*, successful migrant white writers known internationally for their formal accomplishments (such as Nathanael West, Eugene O'Neill and Vladimir Nabokov) tend to be "categorically

excluded from the realm of ethnic writing” (242). They are, in fact, rarely described as “migrant writers” either. Dominant groups do not consider themselves as “ethnic”, and the attribute itself therefore rests on the subjective interpretation of the dominant group which imposes it on “minorities”, regardless of how they themselves identify (Guibernau and Rex 5). In this thesis, I deliberately distinguish the “ethnic” and “migrant” categories, despite their intersections.⁴ In the absence of a better vocabulary, I use the term “ethnic literature”, believing, like Sollors, that it is “still superior to and more inclusive than any other existing term” (39), such as BIPOC or BAME. I deploy the term to designate the literature of other marginalised communities that share, with the first- and second-generation migrants I discuss, a history of economic, political, racial and cultural exclusion in North America.

To avoid contributing any further to the “othering” of ethnic and migrant writing, I abide by Wang’s argument that literary critics ought to read both “minority” and canonical writers “with attention to formal concerns *and* the social, cultural, historical, and literary contexts that have shaped the[ir] work” (xxi). Throughout the thesis, my aim is to attend to genre, form, content and context as intrinsically entangled, and to consider short fiction as a social and aesthetic product. As such, I will frequently draw on other literary writings, essays and interviews by the authors to further my interpretations and readings of genre and aesthetics, and will make use of a wide range of stories to thicken the gendered contexts of migrant women’s writing. In exploring how migrant women writers appropriate the short story genre and exploit its resources for ideological means, I bring attention to their

⁴ These categories often intersect, with first- and second-generation migrant writers such as Cisneros and Maxine Hong Kingston being qualified as both. As Kathleen Neils Conzen and David A. Gerber suggest in “The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.”, groups are marked as ‘ethnic’ primarily based on their cultural and linguistic affiliations. But where the ‘ethnic’ category, as delineated by anthologies and critical works, usually includes a much wider group (which consists of the publications of first-, second-, third- and fourth-generation migrants from Asian, African, South American and European countries alongside that of African Americans, Latinx, Indigenous populations and religious groups), the ‘migrant writing’ category as I use it is restricted to the writings of first- and second-generation migrants.

sophisticated manipulation of form and technique, to their generic experimentations and innovations.

The Contemporary Short Story by Migrant Women Writers: Defining Terms

This thesis attempts to take up Declercq's provocative challenge of discovering if there is "a link between the styles, the forms, the languages and the literary themes on the one hand, and the ethnic origin of the writer, on the other" (308, my translation). It does so through a nonessentialist exploration of the links between female experiences of migration and literary form that attends to the depiction of shared female experiences and to shared postcolonial cultural references while attempting to avoid the "universalist trap". By linking the works of authors from different geographical and historical contexts, I suggest that there is a gendered diaspora sensibility that emerges through similarities in theme, style and aesthetic experimentations.

My selection of these diasporic texts and authors is based upon a number of criteria. All the stories and authors studied in this thesis are framed by the shared experience of migration to North America, write in English, and were published between 1980 and 2020. The texts' overt engagement with home as setting or fantasy, homeland or house, belonging and in-betweenness problematizes the stable configurations of homeland, belonging and diasporic identity (see chapter 1). A further connection between these writers and texts is a striking interest and engagement with the formal properties of the short story. Across the chapters I discuss a body of post-1980 North American migrant women's short story writing including Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Nigeria/U.S.), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana/U.S.), NoViolet Bulawayo (Zimbabwe/U.S.), Danticat (Haiti/U.S.), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (India/U.S.), Kincaid (Antigua/U.S.), Lahiri (India/U.S.), Vijay Lakshmi (India/U.S.), Shani Mootoo (Trinidad/Canada), Mukherjee (India/Canada/U.S.), Téa Mutoji (Congo/Canada), Achy Obejas (Cuba/U.S.), Chinelo Okparanta (Nigeria/U.S.), Zalika Reid-Benta (Jamaica/Canada),

Tan (China/U.S.), Madeleine Thien (Malaysia/Canada), Kathleen Tyau (China/Hawaii/U.S.) and Jenny Zhang (China/U.S.) alongside frequent references to other texts. Most of these writers are better known for their accomplishments as novelists or poets, but all of them have contributed to the field of short story writing in recent years by publishing short story collections, having been published in the canonical *New Yorker* magazine or *Best American Short Stories* anthologies, and/or nominated for influential short story prizes. Their experiences of migration are very diverse; most are part of visible minorities; most were born abroad while others (such as Lahiri and Reid-Benta) are second-generation migrants; some live in North America yet publish in their homeland (as Lakshmi); and some live between two countries and are more typically categorised as “postcolonial writers” (in the case of Aidoo and Adichie). Many (Adichie, Bulawayo, Danticat, Lahiri, Obejas, Reid-Benta and Thien) started their career with a Master of Fine Arts, and several (including Mukherjee, Okparanta, and Zhang) are graduates of the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop. This thesis thus offers a generous sweep of the contemporary scene and includes works that have different literary ambitions and readerships in mind. The 2019 publications of Reid-Benta's and Mutonji's collections, for instance, reveal how the dynamic context of our contemporary moment is putting pressure on publishers to document the upsurge of black female talent since the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 (see chapter 1). This is by no means an exhaustive selection, and it is constrained by practicalities such as the length of this thesis and a desire to follow up the oeuvres of particular writers (Adichie, Danticat, Kincaid, Lahiri and Mootoo) throughout. But this sample of texts reveals the diversity of experiences, literary styles and concerns of the contemporary literary scene and the shared, cross-cultural, and ongoing concerns with home, belonging and domesticity that characterise this genre.

Despite its limitations, I use the expression “migrant woman writer” throughout the thesis as it conveys the dynamic movements between home and host-country, and because

the texts I have selected foreground processes and experiences of navigating between “home” and “away”. As Sophia Weiner demonstrates in *American Migrant Fictions: Space, Narrative, Identity*, the words “migration” and “migrant” offer more expandable options than “immigration” and “immigrant” which imply a sense of long-term mono-directionality and accentuate the idea of arrival in the new land (2). In other words, as Dohra Ahmad notes in her introduction to *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*, labels such as “immigrant literature” and “literature of immigration” “elide[...] migrants’ prior histories, suggesting lives that begin anew in a host country” (xvi). In this thesis, I include stories that take place in the homeland, such as “Girl” by Kincaid (1983), “The Headstrong Historian” by Adichie (2009), and “Hitting Budapest” by Bulawayo (2010) to incorporate the histories and stories which are sometimes neglected in scholarship on North American migrant literature. As Susan Stanford Friedman reminds us in “The ‘New Migration’: Clashes, Connections and Diasporic Women’s Writing”, texts by migrant women “suggest that the displacement of diaspora begins *before* the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living” (23).

The “migrant writing” category is more inclusive and incorporates stability as well as a wider variety of mobilities that may be multi-directional, temporary, fragmented, and so on, and significantly, accentuates the idea of movement over that of origin or citizenship, thus challenging ideas of home and self as fixed. As such, it also accounts for writers who come to North America for professional reasons and for a limited time before going back to their country, as many do. As stories and cultures frequently cross more geographical and linguistic borders than the writers themselves, there is also a case for considering the short story form itself as a mobile, global and migrant form. Rebecca Walkowitz has pointed out that the contemporary globalisation of publishing “generates [...] immigrant books as well as immigrant writers” as successful writers are frequently required to go on international book

tours (533), a claim further corroborated by the dissemination and publication of literature online, a phenomenon I explore in the conclusion. If the novel's primary publishing medium is the book, by contrast the short story is unfixed and transgresses print, literary and national borders. It can reside simultaneously in different formats and have multiple homes. Stories are often published in magazines and/or anthologies before featuring in a single-authored collection. Stories can be found in novels too, where they are sometimes expanded, as is the case with Mukherjee's "Jasmine" (1988) which inspired her 1989 novel of the same title, and Bulawayo's prize-winning "Hitting Budapest" which became *We Need New Names* (2013). With each publication, the narrative is encountered in a different context; the text may change to adapt itself to the new medium. Adichie's "A Private Experience" for example, collected in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), started off as "The Scarf" published in *Wasafiri* (2002) before being revised and printed again two years later in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* under the title "A Private Experience" and revised yet again for *The Observer* in 2008 under the same name. In his conceptualisation of "écriture migrante" in Quebec, Pierre Nepveu refers to the writer's identity, to publishing conditions, and to migration as thematic interest, but more importantly, he points to the aesthetic possibilities of a type of writing that is migrant, that is *on the move*. This thesis draws on Nepveu's claim to explore the migrant aesthetics of the contemporary migrant short story as a genre that is in motion. As a cultural inbetweenner, the migrant writer incorporates in her writing multiple literary, cultural and linguistic traditions as well as diverse characters, locations and perspectives. Through code-switching or linguistic interference, the language of the English text is transformed, as I will illustrate below. The short story genre is, as I argue in chapter 1, a hybrid genre, a "diaspora space" (Brah 208) where the movement and crossovers of migration are part of the textual fabric of the form.

Like "migration", the term "diaspora" has become, to quote Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, "a catch-all phrase to speak of and for all movements, however privileged,

and for all dislocations, even symbolic ones" (3). A highly favoured term among scholars of postcolonial literature, migration and diaspora are frequently discussed as synonyms, a trend I participate in by occasionally using the terms interchangeably, as they intersect on many levels, and as I draw from feminist diaspora theories which do so, namely Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora* (see chapter 1). That said, it is imperative to acknowledge the terminological distinction between diaspora and migration as it plays into my decision to label the stories I discuss as "migrant" rather than "diasporic". Diaspora theorists tend to envision the diaspora as a community, a group that has been dispersed from an original homeland to other foreign locations and which attempts to maintain group solidarity and a connection to home, either as the geographical homeland or the fantasy of a shared, "authentic" homeland (Safran, Cohen 2008, Braziel and Mannur). Originally, the word "diaspora" refers to the historical mass-expulsion of Jews from Palestine and their subsequent relocations across countries. But over time, as Rogers Brubaker has playfully noted, the term itself has known a diaspora and been expanded to other emigrant communities, such as the black African diaspora, forcibly exported to North America, South America and the Caribbean as part of the slave trade. Diaspora, then, is a term which attends to elements and identities less directly connected to the experience of migration such as race and ethnicity across generations. Robin Cohen has claimed that "time has to pass" before the migration of individuals can be categorised as a diaspora (185). The writers I discuss in this thesis can be regrouped under the "postcolonial diasporas" category, as termed by Michelle Keown et al. in *Comparing Postcolonial Diasporas*, which typically incorporates the recent migrations and writings of postcolonial authors living in the West since the end of World War II, indicating once more how the terms "migration" and "diaspora" converge in this context. As stated above, by comparing the works of migrant women who hail primarily from former colonies, then, I am suggesting that there is a migrant postcolonial female diasporic sensibility that emerges from the short stories. The consistency of the colonial

experience, and of contemporary Western cultural and linguistic imperialism across countries mean that certain shared concerns reappear across borders, especially as writers are likely to be exposed to similar literature, given the global nature of the literary market.

While my approach is comparative and cross-cultural, the writers I discuss nonetheless trail distinct histories that manifest in a variety of ways. Firstly, it is essential to acknowledge that the umbrella of migrancy shelters a whole panoply of different experiences, with the refugee obviously in a different universe to the free-willed migrant. Ahmad proposes to envision the variable reasons for migration through a continuum that ranges from involuntary to voluntary. This continuum starts with unambiguously “[f]orced migrations – enslavement, ‘transport’ (i.e., deportation to an overseas prison), trafficking, political or religious persecution, exile, expatriation” (xvi). It moves to what she calls a “grey area between involuntary and voluntary”, which is to say “indentureship; war; persecution based on political activity, religion, sexuality, and other factors; lack of economic possibility” (xvi). On the other end of the continuum, she locates “those who have the luxury of choosing not to emigrate” (xvii). It is crucial to recognise these gradations as, for instance, a wealthy middle- or upper-class educated person who arrives to the new country already fluent in its language will no doubt settle in more easily, than, for instance, boat people fleeing Vietnam after the war, from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. Thus, the migrant writer is frequently considered to be embodied in the figures of Salman Rushdie or V.S Naipaul, writers who benefited from being part of a colonial elite, studied in top establishments and were “members of the commercial or professional bourgeoisie [which] typically ha[s] little to do with the working-class inside or outside of [their respective homelands]” (Krishnaswamy 125, 132). This is an important reminder that literacy, education and particular histories of migration have a significant influence on the stories that get told and the voices that get heard. The writers I discuss in this thesis come from a variety of backgrounds. Like Rushdie, Adichie voluntarily moved to North America for her studies. By contrast, Danticat’s parents

lived undocumented in the U.S. for about eight years, overstaying their tourist visa to escape the Duvalier dictatorship. Obejas and Mutonji arrived in North America as refugees from their respective countries, while Mootoo grew up in Trinidad, the descendent of indentured Indians, before moving to Canada for her short-lived marriage and remaining there to freely live her homosexuality.

Second, as well as having distinct experiences of migration, these individual writers are also part of more localised diasporas. Where Mukherjee and Lahiri, for example, are frequently discussed as “writers of the South Asian diaspora”, writers such as Kincaid and Danticat are considered both “writers of the African diaspora” and “diasporic Caribbean writers”. This indicates the terminological difficulty of pinning down hybrid identities while also serving as a useful reminder that all literature is the product of specific cultural contexts. My concentration on the works of four writers located in the U.S. in chapter 2 enables me to reveal the extent to which national frameworks and individual experiences influence the literary interests and writing process of each. Throughout the thesis, I engage with cultural representations and the ways that western stereotypes specific to Asian and African cultures continue to prevail. I expose the feast/famine distinction according to which black cultures in Africa and the Caribbean are constantly associated with cultural, material and economic lack, and contrast the exotic status of the sari with the “primitive underdressing” associated with Africa. Just as the cultural specificities of these writers’ homelands need to be articulated, so do those of their hostlands. Despite their cultural, linguistic and historical specificities, I group Canada and the U.S. under the “North American” category as they share a complex postcolonial, imperial and racial history and are both widely known as multicultural immigrant countries. Though the U.S. famously markets itself as *the* “Nation of Immigrants”, Canada is in fact the country which takes in the largest number of migrants yearly: since 2001 it has welcomed an average 220,000 to 260,000 migrants per year and, as a result, more than one person in five is foreign-born (Troper). Critics have also argued that

because of its history, Canada, with its two founding languages and cultures, has proved to be more tolerant of non-English cultures and languages than many other multicultural countries (Huggan 136). In this respect, as Garth Stevenson reports in *Building Nations from Diversity*, the two countries have very different responses to the ethnic diversity that results from migration. These are encapsulated in the contrasting metaphors of the American melting pot (with migrants being pressured into conforming) and the Canadian mosaic which, as stated in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988, encourages migrants to “preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage” (qtd. in Hutcheon and Richmond 371). I return to both throughout this thesis. As suggested above, these different approaches take their roots in these nations’ formative experiences: the treatment of Aboriginal North Americans in both, institutional slavery in the U.S. and the conquest of a French-speaking colony by the British during the Seven Years’ War in Canada (Stevenson 8).

Third, my focus on the North American short story does not preclude me from addressing the fact that each culture has its own unique relationship to the short story, as I show in chapter 1 and throughout by addressing non-Western forms of storytelling. Given my focus on North America, it is crucial to recognize that Canada has a distinct relationship to the form from the U.S. where the short story’s historical importance has been heavily documented and is now internationally recognised. As Reingard Nischik, one of the few experts on Canadian short fiction, explains, it emerged about seventy years after the American short story, and only became a more predominant genre in the 1960s following the implementation of cultural policies which created a stronger national literary infrastructure (2007: 1). It is, nonetheless, an equally vibrant scene for the short story, with several contemporary Canadian writers, including Atwood, Mavis Gallant, and Alice Munro, ranking among the world’s most famous authors of short fiction. Munro’s winning the 2013 Nobel Prize, after a career dedicated to the short form, cemented the country’s unique

relationship to the genre and challenged the assumption that it is an essentially American genre.

Carving Out a Conceptual Home for Short Fiction by Migrant Women

Though both the American and Canadian short story have benefitted from the literary inputs of ethnic, migrant and female practitioners in the contemporary period, short story theory continues to concentrate primarily on white, “unmarked” figures. So, for example, Nischik’s introduction to Canadian short fiction dedicates one page only (out of thirty-nine) to multicultural writing towards the end, including one sentence on Native Canadian short fiction and half a paragraph on Caribbean writing, before paying more focused attention to European migrant writing (2007: 35-36). Nischik’s footnoting of the important contributions of migrant, ethnic and multicultural writers to the canon of short fiction is but one representative example that illustrates the characteristic lack of inclusivity of short story theory. In an essay entitled “The American Short Story in the Twenty-First Century”, Charles May, a foundational figure in short story theory, offers a review of the contemporary short story scene by exploring the writing of twenty writers, all white American with the single exception of ZZ Packer, placed at the end of a section unflatteringly entitled “MFA short fiction”. The resounding success of ZZ Packer is then implicitly attributed to the political context in which she emerges and to the marketability of her writing rather than to its literary and stylistic quality. Writing in 1995, Julie Brown argued in *American Women Short Story Writers* that “[i]ronically, stories by [...] marginalized groups have been excluded from academic study at the same time the academics were pleading that the genre itself was excluded” (xx). Clearly, her observation still endures, as May ends his article by hoping that the form will “regain its lost respect” (324).

Of course, as my reference to Brown’s collection reveals, there has been a sustained effort among feminist literary critics in the past thirty years to redress the literary imbalance

and to consider more diverse voices (Bostrom, Brown 1997, Dale and Paine, Young). Yet the majority of academic publications on the genre, like Nischik's and May's, have tended to be continuously nation-focused and as such, to frequently rule out writers who are not considered to properly "belong" to, or be settled in, the nation. As Arjun Appadurai insightfully observes in a recent essay, migrants and refugees are "second-class citizens" precisely because their stories "do not fit the narrative requirements of modern nation-states" (558). In other words, they exceed and disturb those national, cultural, ethnocentric and linguistic boundaries that literary traditions are constructed around. In *World Literature in Theory*, David Damrosch presumably builds from the ideas established by Benedict Anderson when explaining that the concept of national literature which has been "the basis for most literary study during the past two centuries" went together with the rise of the nation-state (3). National literatures were supposedly rooted in, or "closely linked to[,] the uniqueness of the 'national language' [...] a widely shared belief that the national language was a privileged bearer of the national spirit" (4); the so-called "monolingual paradigm" (Yildiz) that I return to in chapter 2. This thesis interrogates the national criterion central to short story theory to argue instead that it is an international genre which transcends national borders and is easily disseminated via the globalised publishing industry and the online space. In the process, it brings together the scholarly fields of short story theory and scholarship on migrant literature, which have, until recently, tended to be treated as discrete areas of study. Although practical considerations have inevitably imposed limitations on my research and the range of texts and writers covered, my discussion aims to foreground a shared gendered, diasporic ethos rather than to anchor the selected writers to their places of origin or settlement.

This thesis deploys "habitability" as a productive new paradigm with which to respond to migrant women short story writers' problematising movement, journey and travel through seemingly motionless domestic spaces. In *Dwelling Places*, James Procter has

brought attention to how “[d]iaspora discourse [...] has prioritised travel over, and at the expense of, dwelling” (14). His study provocatively highlights how travel and dwelling “are mutually constitutive” and stresses the importance of not overlooking “the extent to which diaspora is also an issue of settlement and a constant battle over territories: over housing and accommodation, over the right to occupy a neighbourhood, over the right to ‘stay put’” (14). The stories I explore below are concerned with these issues and punctuated with elaborate descriptions of domestic objects and activities invested with feelings and nostalgia. In one of the rare intercultural publications on short fiction by migrant women in the U.S., Corinne Bigot notes how “home-centric” these stories are, and that “it would be easy to dismiss [them] as ‘domestic fiction’” (97-98). As Kristin Jacobson indicates in *Neodomestic Fiction*, “domestic fiction” is a label generally used to trivialise women’s writing and experiences. It reflects literary double standards: it is “connected to the gender of the writer – men’s writing the home is defined as romance never as domestic fiction” (3) and hints to a formulaic style of writing. In what follows, I aim to use the concept of “the habitable” as a way to navigate the challenging discursive field of the domestic. I consider home and habitability in more expansive ways as a metaphor for belonging, identity-making, and imagined homes. My approach takes its lead from feminist work in the 1970s that challenged the idea of the privacy of the home as “feminine”, “personal” and “apolitical”. Rather, home spaces and domestic activities in migrant women’s short stories become the locus of transnational political concerns reflecting the entanglement of the local and the global.

These stories are invested with what I call the “poetics of home”. This fuzzy and seemingly all-encompassing notion has previously been used in relation both to migrant and women’s writing in order to reveal the multifaceted significations and functions of home across a wide body of writing (Buikema, Friedman 2004, Wiley and Barnes). In this thesis, I adopt it to refer more specifically to the reappraisal of female quotidian and domestic activities invited by the stories’ formal and narrative experimentations. To quote Lucinda

Newns, “the space of the writer is typically seen as antithetical to that of the home – to be orientated towards writing is to eschew the domestic activities that would otherwise be a distraction, holding the mind back into a world of ‘ordinariness’ that is not conducive to creative thought” (4). The stories under consideration in this study instead interrogate these easy separations to highlight how art and the everyday feed into each other. They are formally invested in domestic and “feminine” forms such as gossip, “kitchen table talk” and “old women’s tales”, domestic manuals, recipes and cookbooks, quilts and magazines to suggest that there are resources within the quotidian for creativity and wonder. Danticat’s “Women Like Us” (1995) and Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” (1999), for example, deliberately use the vocabulary of art to describe scenes of cooking, by referring to peeling and chopping vegetables as “sculpting”. Removing cooking from the pragmatic demands of the quotidian, this metaphor resonates with Ann Romines’ claim in *The Home Plot* that “housekeeping is not only the unspoken, unvalued routine by which a patriarchal regime is maintained. It is also the center and vehicle of a culture invented by women, a complex and continuing process of female, domestic art” (14). Concentrating on culturally devalued domestic activities in women’s everyday lives enables us to interrogate cultural hierarchies and re-centre women’s experiences, while bearing in mind the associated risks of reducing, maybe even “essentialising”, the “female quotidian” experience.

Habitability resonates, but is certainly not to be confused with, urgent and contemporary discussions of “hospitality”, a buzzword in contemporary social and literary studies. If “hospitality has now absorbed the challenges that immigration is posing all over the world” (Gerke et al. 6), it is nonetheless built on the idea of native inhabitants of a pre-existing land generously, and temporarily, opening their doors to foreign guests. In *Postcolonial Hospitality*, Mireille Rosello proposes that we approach hospitality as “a form of gift”. According to her, “like most forms of gift-giving, the practices that transform two individuals or two communities into, respectively, the host and the guest, are meticulously

prescribed by sets of laws that differ from culture to culture, and vary depending on historical contexts” (viii). The gift metaphor is all the more significant given how popular conceptions tend to obscure the transactional nature of the relationship between host and guest and the economic contributions of migrants to the state. It misrepresents the historical conditions that led to the invitation and recruitment of migrants in Western countries following World War II, an invitation which “ha[s] nothing to do with hospitality” (Rosello 2001: 9). If studies such as Rosello’s reveal that the metaphor of hospitality is more nuanced than implied by public discourse, its pervasiveness nonetheless holds the migrant hostage to what Maria Lauret has called “the gratitude paradigm” (2016: 438): “the notion that immigrants to the United States [...] owe America something, that the country – in allowing them entry and eventually citizenship – bestowed a gift on them which needs repaying with undying love and loyalty” (2016: 439). Drawing on Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*, Lauret describes the “bond of obligation” created by the gift, “which necessitates what Hyde calls a ‘labour of gratitude’ that must prove the recipient worthy of the gift, and only when the gift is finally passed on (to the next generation, in our case) is that labour done, and the debt of gratitude discharged” (2016: 440). Under these terms, migrants and their descendants are emotionally indentured; constantly reminded that they that their presence is intrusive, that it disrupts a vision of “authentic” and ethnically undifferentiated national life, that they do not *really* belong.

Derrida, whose work on hospitality has been channelled by the contemporary refugee crisis, suggests in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* that to offer hospitality is “to insinuate that one is at home here, that one knows what it means to be home, and that at home one receives [...] thus appropriating a space for oneself” (15). Crucial to this study, Rosello expands on Derrida’s thought by arguing that it is precisely one’s ability to be a host that defines them as being home, as belonging to a place:

Being at home is being where you can not only eat and drink but also invite someone to eat, to drink, to chat. Being at home is being where you can be the host, where you can offer hospitality. If Derrida's host is always capable of the perversion that consists of inviting someone in order to appropriate the land, the migrant worker shows that the right to offer hospitality would construct his dwelling place as a home that he could, finally, appropriate. If one cannot offer hospitality, one has an address, not a home. (17-18)

To envision the migrant as guest, then, is to deny them the possibility of becoming host, of ever belonging or being at home in the "host nation". And yet, the hospitality metaphor is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to escape it, as indicated by my self-consciously agonistic use of the term "host land" (by contrast with "homeland") throughout the thesis. As Derrida and Pheng Cheah have noted, however, the Latin origins of the words "host" and "hospitality" are ambiguously linked to their opposite meanings: "Depending on the context, *hospes* can mean 'host,' 'guest,' 'stranger,' or 'foreigner.' *Hospes* is also related to *hostis*, which also means 'enemy'" (Cheah 187). To talk of the "host land", then, is also to acknowledge that the host in question may be both welcoming and hostile.

Habitability, by contrast, suggests the quality of being "suitable for habitation or as a human abode; fit to live in" (*OED*). It does away with the idea of pre-existing ownership and prerogatives pertaining to a space and instead draws attention to its potential and promise. According to the *OED*, the suffix -able and its derivations are employed to form terms "denoting the capacity for or capability of being subjected to [...] performing the action [...] implied by the first element of the compound" (*OED*). The term habitability, then, is grammatically connected to the idea of possibility that drives the act of migration, while it simultaneously evokes the uncertainty, insecurity and precarity that it entails. Besides, where hospitality sees the host as subject and the guest as object, habitability accords more agency to the migrant subject who actively performs the action of rendering a place habitable. To view the migrant as subject enables us to interrogate the idea, inherent in the concept of hospitality, that the migrant is being generously served by their host nation, that it awaits them open handed, ready for them to inhabit it. Instead, it points to the hard-fought

small-scale battles led by migrants to be better treated and gain more rights, to “force themselves” into the fabric of their host land, to make themselves at home in the often hostile host nation. This battle is ongoing, as suggested by Lalami’s contribution to the Decameron Project referred to above; even in times of a pandemic, repatriation flights to the U.S. privilege American citizens over residents, no matter how significant they are to the functioning of society.

To describe the short story as habitable rather than hospitable is to go against the idea of women and migrants illegitimately squatting in the genre. Despite the widespread belief that the short story originated as “a product of the male imagination” and, despite its defining in “masculine terms”, it has had innumerable female practitioners whose work has been overlooked because it challenges the dominant aesthetic associated with men (Brown 1995: xviii). Similarly, despite the popular conception that the short story is “quintessentially American” (Boddy 1), and the Western focus of much of short story theory, the genre is not the exclusive property of any Western nation; it has multiple lineages and cannot therefore be illegitimately seized. The short story in its present form is usually traced back to the 19th century and the industrialised West. In contempt of the ongoing efforts of critics in feminist and ethnic studies to diversify the canon, short story theory continues to anchor its origins in exclusively white male figures such as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe. As Brown reminds us, “[t]he creation of a literary genre is not the work of a single individual; it is an antiphonal and collaborative work” (1995: xxii). Contemporary short fiction by migrant women is, therefore, fully part of an international literary tradition hailing back to Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, Anton Chekhov and Guy de Maupassant. But it is also a genre which has its roots in folk and fairy tales, in songs and creation myths, in oral storytelling which produced epics such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, or the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in South Asia, among others (March-Russell 1-4). Other origins of the North American short story include “Chinese talk/story (which have influenced Maxine Hong

Kingston and Amy Tan), Native American oral histories and chants [...], and African American folk tales and slave narratives [...] old wives' tales women passed on to preserve knowledge" (Brown 1995: xxii).

To describe the short story as habitable rather than hospitable is to argue that the migrant short story is part and parcel of North American literary traditions, that it is, like all ethnic writing, "prototypically American literature" (Sollors 8), that it has a long history,⁵ that it is there to stay. In other words, it is not "second-class writing", an ephemeral trend, or "a box-ticking exercise that reflects the liberal left's political agenda" as suspicious critics have suggested (Evaristo). Of course, it is crucial to acknowledge how market pressures have contributed to making the literary scene more habitable, and how they have created new pitfalls in the process. However, the contemporary habitability of the literary scene is primarily the direct result of migrant and ethnic writers' commitment to have their voices heard, and to write themselves in the American canon, rather than a sign of the benevolence of the host country (see chapters 1 and 3).

Habitability, then, is a capacious term which bridges the formal features of the short story, the domestic nature of contemporary short stories by migrant women, and the concern with belonging that is at the heart of the migrant experience. Domesticating and appropriating the short story, migrant women writers carve a space for themselves both in North American society and in the literary world. Through the lens of habitability, this thesis attempts to respond to Brown's call to consider "how women's histories, cultures and physiologies affect the way women write stories" (1995, xxvi). It explores how women "make themselves at home" in the short story and how they alter the form for it to suit their interests and purposes. It scrutinizes how various postcolonial cultural backgrounds have influenced their stories and examines the publishing, marketing and public reception of their

⁵ See Friedman (2015) and Crumpton-Winter for accounts on North American migrant short fiction before 1980.

stories. In the process, this study will illustrate how the genre continues to negotiate its “uneasy positioning between literature and commerce” (Whitehead 2011: 78). Anne Besnault-Levita has found that “there is still a history to be written on the subject of how material culture has always influenced women writers in their practice of the art of the short story” (27), and that is even truer of short fiction by *migrant* women. The following chapters open up these much-needed conversations while investigating the poetics of home. They focus on questions of belonging in relationship to language, food and dress; three fundamental aspects of culture that are tied up with specific ideas concerning domesticity, femininity and women’s roles across cultures. To quote Lahiri in *The Clothing of Books*, “how we dress, like the language we speak and the food we eat, expresses our identity, our culture, our sense of belonging” (9). Just as dress is embedded in cultural traditions which betray cultural affiliations, “food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance” (Gabaccia 6). These seemingly small and utilitarian things of everyday life, and the “sounds, smells, [...] heat and dust” of a locality constitutively create a sense of home (Brah 192). In what follows then, I approach home as a sensorial space. In so doing, I revisit Sara Ahmed’s invitation to read it as a “*sentimentalised* [...] space of belonging [which] can only be addressed by considering the question of affect: being at home is a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*” (89).

A Habitable Theoretical Context

The editors of *What’s Left of Theory?* claim that “theory is not over, but it is no longer, if it ever was, in one piece” (xi). As titles such as *After Theory* (1990) by Thomas Docherty and “Post-Theory” (1993) by Nicolas Tredell suggest, the so-called “high era of Theory was on its way out by the time we reached the early 90s” (Gallop). The ‘high Theory’ of the deconstructive turn that characterised the 1980s and 1990s has indeed given way to more pluralistic and intersectional approaches. In “The Race for Theory” (1988), Barbara

Christian exposed theory as an elitist, prescriptive and discriminatory language, declaring it had “become a commodity that helps determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions – worse, whether we are heard at all” (67). She accused western academics of treating texts as disembodied fodder to which critical norms built and based on “Western male texts” (73) were counterproductively imposed. The indiscriminate application of such theory on the writings of women and “ethnic” writers reinforced gendered and racialised literary hierarchies. Writing only a few years later, in *American Women Short Story Writers* (1995), Brown echoed Christian’s assertion by noting that thus far, short story theory had been constructed around white and Western male concerns and interests. Consequently, “[a] sad recurrence is the development of theory that denigrates stories by women rather than considering the possibility that women might write differently from men” (xx).

In their reflection on the intersections of contemporary theory and progressive thought published in 2000, Butler, Guillory and Thomas find that conflicting theories have stopped perceiving themselves as “projects of purity which do not recognize their fundamental dependence on the other” (x). Theory, to borrow Bhabha’s image, is now “rather like jigsaw puzzle pieces whose component parts ‘join together’” (Veese 105). It “has become impure as it engages the social and political world through the reading of literature, and thematics have no doubt become more difficult once we avow the modes of representation that permit – or fail to permit – of certain kinds of politically significant insights into our world” (Butler, Guillory and Thomas x). This celebration of “impurity” might be thought of in similar ways to the reverence of hybridity and *métissage* in postcolonial studies. Importantly, it signals the historical, cultural, linguistic, and formal entanglements upon which this thesis relies. In fact, Butler, Guillory and Thomas contend that contemporary theory now “often arrives in tandem with close readings of literary texts” (xi) and has visibly shifted toward the “more active engagement with social issues, with race studies, practices

of gender and sexuality, colonial space and its aftermath, the interstitial cultural spaces of globalization” (xi) that Christian was calling for in the late 1980s. Having moved away from vast, abstract and speculative intellectual claims, theory is now committed to engaging with sources at a more empirical level, one which considers intent, context and the material conditions of textual production. Theory ultimately assumes a more modest position. Though this “signals no contraction of effort or loss of ambition”, in *The Rebirth of American Literary Theory and Criticism* (2020) H. Aram Veesser suggests that theory “has settled down in its sidekick, secondary role” (6). The critic arguably no longer displaces the writer and authors are no longer considered as “dead, irrelevant, mere vessels through which [philosophers’] narratives ooze” (Christian 72). The literary critic, in other words, has seemingly become a more curious and humbler guest, open to the surprise that comes with the discovery of a text and “from reading something that compels you to read differently” (Christian 78).

In their introduction to the 2019 *Edinburgh Companion to the Short Story in English*, Paul Delaney and Adrian Hunter suggest that in the contemporary period, short story theory too has moved from a formalist and cognitivist approach in the 1980s and 1990s (embodied by the work of May) to a more contextual one, with recent titles including *The Postcolonial Short Story*, *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story*, *British Women Short Story Writers*, *The Short Story and First World War*, and *Art and Commerce in the British Short Story*. If “today it is the cultural, historical and ideological functions of the short story that predominate” (1), they note also that this shift away from questions of generic and formal definitions has “occurred out of sync with broader institutional and disciplinary trends” (1). Theoretical focus on women’s relationship to the short story was limited and sporadic until the 2010s. Despite the work of scholars including Brown, Young, and March-Russell and Awadalla, which brings together a reflection on the short story genre alongside specific contexts, the shift to more contextual approaches identified by Delaney and Hunter has

tended to shy away from a reflection on genre. For instance, in her introduction to *Critical Insights: Contemporary Immigrant Short Fiction*, Natalie Friedman attempts to establish the precursors of contemporary migrant short fiction by focusing on early 20th century Jewish American writing and its typical plots and motifs but without attending to genre-specific characteristics. Similarly, the introduction to *Women on the Edge: Ethnicity and Gender in Short Stories by American Women* (1999) shows no engagement with short story theory, despite its title's resonances with O'Connor's famous claims in *The Lonely Voice* that "[a]lways in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society" (18). Instead, the article suggests that issues of genre are only secondary to its urgent political goal of revealing the complexity and multiplicity of ethnic experiences and "break[ing] down categories of Otherness" (xvi). By contrast, this thesis takes an approach that considers the entanglement of form, content and context, to avoid critical double standards according to which short fiction by white authors is considered "universal" while short fiction by ethnic writers is discussed solely for its political and social content.

Since the 1960s, feminist, ethnic and postcolonial critics like Christian have helped reshape theoretical approaches to women's lives and literature. In the process, they have opened the doors of the domestic sphere to the workings of theory and legitimized the academic study of practices associated with women. If the western association of women with home, cooking and clothing has historically participated in the academic discreditation of these elements, the situation has changed. The recent emergence of interdisciplinary and home-focused fields, such as food and fashion studies, have gained "wide appeal" (Shahani 9). Since the 1990s, for instance, interdisciplinary journals have emerged. These include *Food and Foodways* (published since 1985), *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* (since 1997), *Gastronomica* (since 2000), *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* (since 2003), and *Alimentum: The Literature of Food* (since 2005). Writing in 2015, Joanne Entwistle notes that since the publication of *The Fashioned Body* in 2000, "there has been a veritable

explosion of interest in fashion, dress and the body that [she] would never have predicted” and that this development coincided with the rise of academic interest in food studies (16). Similarly, in her 2005 introduction to *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies*, Arlene Voski Avakian remarks that “[i]n the last decade, an avalanche of books on food has appeared, and conferences on food are no longer the sole concern of food professionals” (1). Though food and fashion were already being discussed by anthropologists in the 1960s, their incorporation in other interdisciplinary fields and literary studies is very recent. It testifies to the contemporary habitability of theory, as it is now more inclusive of ethnic and women’s lives and more home-centred than ever before.

Building from this more habitable theoretical context, I position myself as reader and critic; in short, as a guest. It is the critic’s duty to work to appreciate cultural codes and wanderwords (Lauret 2014) that may be foreign to them, and to do away with preestablished interpretative readings. As a migrant myself, the bilingual and bicultural daughter of a British migrant in France and the long-term partner of an Italian migrant in the UK, writing up this thesis during Brexit and a pandemic which disturbed all notions of belonging, habitability and the taken-for-granted associations of home and comfort, I identify on many levels with the texts under study. However, wary of my own privileged middle-class white Western positionality, and wary that “when theory is not rooted in practice, it becomes prescriptive, exclusive, elitish [*sic*]” (Christian 74), my approach is grounded in the contexts and cultures that shaped the short stories in question. The conceptual framework of habitability takes its lead from the thematic, formal and linguistic concerns of this writing.⁶ It represents an attempt to respond to Brown’s call for a more inclusive theory of women’s short fiction by

⁶ While ‘habitability’ as a framework comes out of my close reading of numerous stories, my approach to close reading throughout the thesis is selective, strategic and diverse. Focusing at times on specific words, musicality or rhythm, plot, symbolism or intertextuality, it does not represent an attempt to fully “master” the texts under study, but to pull out some of their originalities in relation to the arguments I develop. In other words, it represents an attempt to practice a generous and habitable form of criticism within the limitations imposed by the thesis’ format, argument, and structure.

“ask[ing] what topics women short story writers choose to write about”, what factors influence their publishing, marketing and public reception, and, more importantly “how women have used and altered the short story form to suit women’s purposes” (1995: xxvi). A capacious concept, habitability reflects the diversity and complexity of the literary scene while simultaneously bringing attention to the centrality of home and belonging in this work. Through the habitable, then, this thesis seeks to make theory more inclusive of migrant women’s short story writing by challenging the Western and male biases found in short story theory.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1. Home Poetics and the Habitable Short Story

Chapter 1 further elucidates habitability in relation to the short story. After demonstrating the genre’s attraction to small things and the quotidian, it provides an overview of contemporary short story writing by migrant women to reveal the vibrancy of the contemporary migrant short story scene and the political context from which it emerges. It then moves on to examining the formal characteristics that make the short story habitable for representing experiences of migration, before analysing the variety of ways in which home is represented in these texts. The final section engages with the habitability of the publishing world, as regards women migrant writers and the short story.

Chapter 2. A Language to Call Home: Linguistic Lineages and Beyond

Chapter 2 explores the intricate connections between language, home and women in a selection of short stories by U.S.-based writers Lahiri, Danticat, Adichie and Kincaid. It investigates their shifting attitudes to their mother tongue(s) and to the English language and navigates through their respective strategies to make language accommodate their migrant experiences. In the process, it offers a reflection on the familial in relation to languages and nationalism, arguing it is time to move away from such imagery in order to

comprehend migrant identity beyond the borders of the nation. As such it furthers the discussion on nationalism, home and belonging initiated in the previous chapter by reflecting more specifically on women's responsibility as custodians of culture and on the centrality of the woman/mother figure in the conceptualisations of nation, culture and land in both nationalist and diasporic discourse.

Chapter 3. Kitchen Poetics and the Short Story

Chapter 3 reveals the subversive potential of food in migrant short fiction and is driven by an interest in form. After having established the significance of food for migrant women writers, I reflect on the short story's status as an easily digestible "literary snack". I connect this with the notion of "food porn", a label frequently applied to ethnic and migrant women's writing, before revealing its limitations through close readings of a selection of stories by Tan, Bulawayo, Lahiri, Adichie and Mootoo. I then turn to analysing the crucial role of food in building communities in Reid-Benta and Mutonji's 2019 short story cycles. In these cycles and in others, food thematically and formally heals disjointed communities, identities and stories, and maintains a sense of community from which women are empowered. I conclude by exploring formal experimentations with the recipe. Discussing the structural similarities between the recipe and the short story exploited by Thien and Aidoo, I expose the shared oral and embodied origins of recipe-transmitting and storytelling.

Chapter 4: Fictions of Fabric and Femininity

This chapter argues that short stories by migrant women deploy descriptions of clothing to express anxieties surrounding identity and identity performance for women who move within and across multiple cultures and therefore must negotiate contrasting and conflicting understandings of femininity. First, I investigate the short story's historical status as fashionable object, its embeddedness in magazines and fashion culture, its role in disseminating a standardized idea of American identity and its formal associations with cloth

and quilt. Having established the genre's suitability for addressing questions relating to the performance of femininity by analysing stories by Okparanta and Kincaid, I discuss the textuality of cloth through a reading of a story by Obejas. Building on Judith Butler and Erving Goffman's theories of identity performativity, I then consider stories by Reid-Benta, Divakaruni, Lakshmi, and Mootoo to reflect on how clothes can be used to question and transgress ready-made identity categories such as gender and ethnicity.

Conclusion: Migrant Women's Stories, At Home in the Contemporary World

The conclusion reflects on the themes and issues that have emerged throughout the chapters and provides an overall analysis of my research. It situates the study within those wider academic fields of literary theory, fashion and food studies, everyday life, and short story theory to argue that contemporary theory is more habitable than ever before. It then reflects on the habitability of the online space, which has proved so influential for the short story and the publishing world. Migrant stories are increasingly being featured online. The new short forms of writing that have developed (including instapoetry and twitter fiction) push genre boundaries and bring to question new ways of considering "home" and the short story in the contemporary moment.

Chapter 1.

The Poetics of Home and the 'Habitable' Short Story

Since the 1960s, short story theorists have frequently made anecdotal reference to the habitable nature of the short story for women and marginalised writers without fully exploring the formal, ideological and cultural implications this may have. Female short story writers often justify their preference pragmatically, professing that the genre demands less time or sustained concentration than the novel, and can therefore fit snugly between domestic activities and childcare. Danticat for instance, speaking at the 2020 Edinburgh International Book Festival, stressed the genre's ability to accommodate motherhood as one of the reasons it is her favourite mode. More famous, perhaps, is the image of Munro described in her daughter's memoir, writing "in a laundry room, [...] her typewriter [...] surrounded by a washer, a dryer and an ironing board" (qtd. in Allardice). This perspective both envisions the short story as a "domestic" or "homely" genre and further interrogates the devaluation of the home sphere as inartistic by suggesting that domesticity and art, home and the short story, materially feed into each other.

Short story critics have often been reluctant to engage with these domestic writing conditions and have instead offered ideological reasons as to why the genre might be accommodating for silenced and marginalised women writers, suggesting that it is intrinsically tied up with unbelonging. In *Re-Reading the Short Story*, Clare Hanson builds on Frank O'Connor's famous yet gender-blind argument that there are affinities between the marginal status of the short story and its marginal protagonists:

Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society [...]. As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic, something we do not often find in the novel – an intense awareness of human loneliness. [...] the short story remains by its very nature

remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent (O'Connor 18-20).

Taking a more ethnically- and gender- inclusive approach and moving the focus from characters to writers, Hanson links authorial identity with genre development. She contends that, unlike the novel, the short story “has been notably a form of the margins, a form which is in some sense ex-centric” and that the “story has lent itself to losers and loners, exiles, women, blacks – writers who for one reason or another have not been part of the [...] epistemological/experiential framework of their society” (2). Hanson’s argument is particularly relevant as it signals an intimate relationship between literary genres, society and belonging. The Western 19th century novel was indeed a site of discourse for nationalist and imperial bourgeois ideology where the home was envisioned as a place of idealised homogeneity and stability (Jacobson 5) and domestic housekeeping was frequently embedded in the imperial project (George 5). O'Connor and Hanson’s claims undoubtedly build on this particular historical relationship between the novel, nationalism and the domestic sphere, but they also make sweeping and generalising claims about the novel and the short story which do not reflect the flexibility and multiple uses of both genres. Though they are both important pioneers of short story theory, their use of the 19th century novel as reference point for evaluating the short story limits their ability to see the formal experimentations initiated by modernist and postmodernist writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Italo Calvino and Thomas Pynchon, to name but a few, who, through form, accentuate the idea of loneliness and social alienation which O'Connor assigns to the short story. Similarly, O'Connor and Hanson’s argument does not take into consideration the crucial role of short stories published in women’s magazines in the 19th and 20th centuries in spreading ideas about American femininity and social cohesion (see chapter 4). The short story genre *can* accommodate marginal experiences, characters and writers to trouble the idea of belonging, by experimenting with formal features such as fragmentation to

destabilise the idea of home, for example. However, rather than taking an ideological approach like Hanson's and O'Connor's and risking essentialising formal, ethnic and gender identities, in this chapter I explore the diversity of ways in which migrant women domesticate the short story to make it their literary home, experiment with its formal features and engage with its literary history to destabilise and interrogate home and cultural belonging.

Since the 1980s, the North American short story has become more densely populated by the "new" voices of migrant women writers who have taken the supposedly female space of the home and engaged with it in diverse ways. Noting the predominance of the home in migrant writing in general, Bromley states that the domestic often "metaphorise[s] the public sphere" and engages with "wider social and political issues" (5). While I agree with him up to a certain point, I am also wary of the tendency, indicated by Newns in her recent study of home in migrant fiction, "to collapse the material into the figurative, in which 'home' must always stand for something grander – often, the nation – in order to be considered interesting" (2). Newns persuasively argues that the relationship between public and private is more complex and that the allegorical reading of the domestic sphere, promoted by Frederic Jameson's controversial essay "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", can only offer a limited and limiting analysis of the home, one that is subservient to the national narrative. Rather than "merely a stand-in for the public", Newns contends that the home reflects the interactions and intersections between the public and the private, "as we are made to read across the 'threshold' dividing public and private, productive and reproductive narrative spaces" (31). In this thesis, I draw on Newns' generative model and read the domestic sphere as an intrinsically political space. To question the allegorical reading is to challenge the cultural inferiority of the domestic and pay it the attention it deserves.

In “The Invention of Everyday Life”, Rita Felski reveals literature’s ability to draw attention to the usually invisible and familiar routines and activities of everyday life: “[l]iterature’s heightened sensitivity to the microscopic detail marks its difference from the casual inattentiveness that defines the everyday experience of everyday life” (90). More than any other genre, the short story is particularly well equipped to illuminate the seemingly small and trivial in ways that challenge the dominance of the public over the private. Its typical focus on mundane events, small things or even details, can turn a seemingly minor incident or object into something of major importance, erasing the conventional distinction between what is humble and what is significant. It is precisely in the ability of the short story to amplify the political implications of the domestic that lies the subversive, and habitable, potential of the genre. In addition, through its focus on a specific episode or moment, the short story evades the idea of narrative progression, which, according to traditional novelistic conventions, is central to the novel. Undermining simple linear narratives, the short story indicates, instead, different types of non-linear development such as circularity and repetition and is thus particularly suited to what Romines has called “the home plot”, a type of narrative which, according to her, needs to be read differently from typical “quest-pattern” fiction: “the story of housekeeping, the ‘home plot’ of domestic ritual, has generated forms and continuities very different from those of the patriarchal American canon and pushes readers to attend to texts that are not inscribed in conventionally literary language” (17). Stories such as Danticat’s “Women Like Us” and Kincaid’s “Girl” (see chapter 2) represent the cyclicity of housework in the narrative which is circular and repetitive.

Though short story theory has been preoccupied with the search for formal and generic definitions since the 19th century, I agree with more recent critics who have argued that the only common denominator to all short fiction is its brevity. As Ann-Marie Einhaus explains, “one size simply does not fit all” and “[a]ny definition based on content, function, formal or aesthetic features is likely to capture only a subsection of short fiction” (4). The

stories I address in the thesis vary impressively in content, style, form and even length; stories like Aidoo's "Recipe for a Stone Meal" (2012) and Kincaid's "Girl" are between one and three pages long, while Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008) is fifty-seven pages long. Ultimately, I argue that it is the brevity and elasticity of the short story which make it a particularly habitable genre for migrant women writers who can take advantage of its malleability to represent the conflicted relationships to home and belonging, and the fragmentation, hybridity and in-betweenness that characterise the migrant experience.

Contemporary Migration Narratives: At Home in 'North American' Short Fiction

The period starting from the 1980s saw the arrival of a plethora of diverse new voices, including writers of East Asian origins (Tan, Jen, Hisayie Yamamoto, Silvia Watanabe, and, somewhat more recently Thien, Julie Otsuka and Yiyun Li), South Asian origins (Mukherjee, Divakaruni, Lahiri and Shauna Singh Baldwin), South American origins (with, most notably, Cisneros), Caribbean writers (including Dionne Brand, Olive Senior, Kincaid, Danticat and Makeda Silvera), and, since the 2000s, African writers (such as Adichie and Okparanta). This was part of a wider demographic and racial shift that had started taking place in North America in the 1960s. In the U.S., the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 abolished the 1924 National Origins Act which had set up a quota system based on national origin and giving precedence to northern European nations, and allowed in a wider diversity, and an unprecedented number, of newcomers. Similarly, Canada introduced several changes in its immigration law in the 1960s in order to end discriminatory policies against non-Western migrants. The new (and, arguably, still ongoing) wave of migrants which followed in the mid-1960s is often referred to, in the social sciences and humanities, as the "new migration" in order to distinguish it from earlier, "whiter", waves of migration (Friedman 2009: 7). Indeed, while previous waves of migration in the 19th and early 20th century had primarily originated from white, Western, and sometimes even English-

speaking, countries, this new wave was predominantly comprised of “mostly non-white, or at least darker skinned people”, economic migrants and people fleeing repressive dictatorships and wars “from what we would call underdeveloped nations”, in a climate of heightened racial prejudice (Payant xx-xxi).⁷ The easing of immigration policies in Canada and the U.S. came after Europe’s importation of labour from its colonies in the late 1940s to rebuild the economy following World War II, and throughout the decolonisation processes in African, Caribbean and Asian countries.

According to Payant and Neil Ten Kortenaar’s respective studies on migrant writing in the U.S. and Canada, migrants to North America preceding the 1960s did not write as extensively about the migrant experience as contemporary migrant writers do. In Canadian literature, first-generation migrants “figured in literature only when the children and grandchildren wrote” about their family’s experiences (Kortenaar 561). Previous migrations tended to be working class and/or illiterate and did not have the same access, education or means to publishing as contemporary writers do. In “Stories of the Uprooted”, Payant claims that with new technologies, modern communication and travel, and the apparent acceptance at discursive levels of multicultural lifestyles in North America, contemporary migrants maintain closer ties with their home countries and cultures than earlier generations. This materialises in their literature “where writers often find fault with certain aspects of American life, and where characters often return home for visits, or reflect on the strengths of their cultural heritage” (xxi) where previous literatures would narrate successful assimilation stories. Though Payant builds her argument around migrant novels, she signals a change in the literary renderings of home which is at the core of contemporary short stories

⁷ Interestingly, Payant’s argument does not account for the large-scale migration of Chinese migrants (primarily male) in the U.S. in the 1850s and 1860s fleeing the British Opium wars before joining the Gold Rush and/or the construction of the transcontinental Central Pacific Railroad. It does not account either for Japanese migration in the 1880s following economic hardship in Japan, nor for that of Filipino agricultural workers after the U.S. annexed the Philippines.

by women. In these, the protagonists are very much in touch with their families in the homeland and regularly travel back and forth between countries, and sometimes even decide to move back to the homeland, as in Adichie's title story "The Thing Around Your Neck" (2009). The act of writing, too, is a way for migrant writers to maintain vital links with home; writers like Senior, to take just one example, have lived in North America for most of their life, and yet primarily write stories that take place in their homeland.

The Civil Rights and second wave feminist movements are of crucial relevance as they created the cultural and political contexts that generated possibilities for writers to explore their racial, migrant and gendered roots as well as recovering ethnic and female literary traditions. It is important to acknowledge, however, the specificities of each migrant group, as from the late 1970s onwards, ethnic and migrant writers have turned to the short story at different historical moments and for distinct reasons (see Appendix 2). Wenying Xu explains that until the early 1990s, "Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American writers and critics dominated Asian American literature and its studies, for they were the most established groups in America at that time" (2010: 436-437), and that stories by migrants from the Middle East and from South and Southeast Asia are a much more recent development that emerged in the mid-1990s. The mid-1980s also saw the emergence of short story collections by Caribbean women writers such as Senior, Kincaid, Merle Collins, Opal Palmer Adisa, Alecia McKenzie and Lorna Goodison, a phenomenon which, according to Kenneth Ramchand, makes it "impossible to disconnect the emergence of Caribbean women's writing in the 1980s from the use of the short-story form" (1453). It is only since the early 2000s that African literature has become an important publishing trend in North America, following Asian-American, Indian and Latino writing. As Felicia Lee explains in a *New York Times* article, this is the result of a combination of factors, including the dramatic increase in the number of African migrants in the U.S., which quadrupled to almost 1.7 million between the mid-1990s and 2014, and educational changes in postcolonial African

nations which resulted in more readers and writers. Importantly, too, the Caine Prize for African Writing brought about the establishment of new creative writing workshops across the continent and propelled African writing on the international literary scene and on social media (Lee, Attree 38, Emenyonu 6).

As well as short stories and short story collections, the post-1980s period also saw the development of short story cycles. The short story cycle (sometimes referred to also as “novel-in-stories”, “composite novel”, “short story composite”, or “short story sequence”)⁸ is a collection of interlinked stories with recurring characters where each story can be published and read independently, but when read together, they generate new meanings. Recent criticism has highlighted the important contribution of contemporary ethnic and migrant women writers to the form. In *The Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, for instance, James Nagel argues that although the form has a long history, it is only in “American fiction of the 1980s and 1990s [that] it became the genre of choice for emerging writers from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds” (17). Davis makes a similar claim in her study of Asian American and Asian Canadian short story cycles, noting that “all the ethnic literatures in North America include cycles in its canon” (7) and naming Gloria Naylor, Louise Erdrich, Julia Alvarez, Díaz, Danticat, Silvera, Dianne Maguire and Judith Kalman. Strikingly, though Davis’s list is almost all-female and though Nagel concentrates primarily on the works of women, they do not address gender as a factor. Clearly ethnic and migrant women are particularly drawn to this format: writing in 1995, Margot Kelley speculated in “Gender and Genre: The Case of the Novel-in-Stories,” that “about 75 percent of the current writers [of the short story cycle] are women, often women who live in positions of double

⁸ There is a good deal of debate about the naming and definitions of this genre. In this thesis I refer to it as the “short story cycle” as coined by Forest Ingram in his 1971 landmark study, as it has emerged as the dominant metaphor to describe the genre. I concur with Jennifer Smith’s claim that “[a]lthough it is an imperfect term [...], short story cycle has become the primary and best descriptor for the genre, because it most accurately captures the recursiveness central to the genre and privileges the short story as its formative element” (4).

marginality as members of visible minorities” (296). Appendix 2 reveals that the cycle continues to be a favourite form for migrant women of all cultures. As Kelley rightfully notes, there are economic and practical reasons for their attraction to the genre: “short story writers realize that novels sell better than do story collections, and this new form allows them to break into the literary market more quickly” (299). In addition, “individual short stories have an even greater chance of being disseminated than either novels or collections” (300), and writers can therefore start building a reputation ahead of publishing their cycle. Throughout the thesis I will demonstrate how the central features of the short story cycle are particularly attractive to migrant writers, for reasons that go beyond economic or practical concerns. The form’s flexibility, hybridity, polyphony, and the tension that is created between the individual and the community accommodate the in-betweenness and fragmentation of the migrant experience and form an integral part of the discourse.

Like the short story, the short story cycle resists definition and is therefore a particularly malleable form. It is often described as a hybrid form, somewhere in between the novel and the conventional collection of stories. Critics such as Davis, Nagel, Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris have evoked its potential for multivocality (as each story may offer a different point of view), its structural resistance to linear narrative and chronology, and the tension it creates between the individual and community that often features thematically, reflecting its form. Despite these recurring similarities, it is impossible to create a ready-made taxonomy that applies to all cycles. Having said that, each cycle, as a collection of interlinked short stories, does have an organising concept or unifying element. This tends towards one, or a combination of, the following elements: a place (such as in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* and Nalini Warriar’s *Blues From the Malabar Coast*), a family (such as in *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* by Susan Muaddi Darraj), a group or community (as in Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*), a single character, either as an exploration of their coming of age in which case the narration tends

to be linear (see, for instance, *Frying Plantain* by Reid-Benta and *Shut Up You're Pretty* by Mutonji which I analyse in chapter 3), or as an investigation of their impact on other people's lives such as in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*. Some collections suggest a very intimate connection between the stories, where others are less finely interwoven; Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) is often considered as a cycle following the coming-of-age of its protagonist but the coherence of it as a cycle is subject to interpretation. In short, the writers I discuss here make use of the short story cycle in very diverse ways, consolidating my argument that the genre is a particularly accommodating and capacious one.

The Short Story: A Habitable Form

Before further examining specific formal characteristics of the short story cycle and the autonomous short story as distinctly habitable forms, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the conventional short story collection in this thesis. The short story cycle is often recognised as a separate genre and has been defined against the short story collection and the novel. However, my approach does not distinguish so decisively between the conventional collection of stories and the cycle and instead considers them as parts of a continuum, as they both build a narrative, produce meaning through recurring patterns, concerns and/or literary style, and are structured and orchestrated constructions.

The charts in Appendix 2 indicate that the short story collection is, in fact, the overall preferred medium over the cycle, suggesting that the form might be even more habitable for the contemporary migrant woman writer, and as such it demands consideration. And yet, despite this, the story collection as literary form has received comparatively little scholarly attention, to the point where critics must rely on the critical vocabulary of the short story cycle to address the form. Noelle Brada-Williams for instance has offered a thought-provoking reading of Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as a cycle bound together by recurring patterns, "including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human

communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect” (451). Her argument, by relying on short story cycle theory despite Lahiri’s collection not containing any recurring characters or other such directly stated links, demonstrates the absence of a critical vocabulary for interpreting the short story *collection*. The focus is typically either on the autonomous short story, or on the short story cycle, possibly because it is assumed that the collection is no more than a compilation of previously published work. However, there is a lot to gain from drawing from short story cycle theory to think about the traditional story collection as resonances, images and themes put the stories in conversation with one another. Readers are inevitably influenced by the context in which the stories are published, whether it is in a magazine among advertisements, in a politically oriented anthology, or in a collection of stories by the same writer. Brada-Williams’s study thus suggests how story collections may appeal to migrant writers because they can “solv[e] the problem of representing an entire community within the necessarily limited confines of a single work by balancing a variety of representations rather than offering the single representation provided by the novel or the individual short story” (453). In a period when representations of migrants in the media focus on acts of terrorism, degradation and crime, by the plurality of stories it offers, the collection can offer a platform to contest and complicate such simplistic narratives. Another case in point would be Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* (1995), winner of a 1996 American Book Award. Somewhat atypically, the title of the collection does not correspond to any of the titles of the individual stories and instead draws attention to the collection’s central theme. According to short story cycle theorists such as Ingram, this collection does not qualify as a cycle because, as Davis argues “there is no consequential internal unity between the stories themselves” in this particular book (16). The title nonetheless invites the reader to gain a wider meaning through the juxtaposed reading of multiple stories, and offers a stark critique of arranged marriage and its negative impact on Indian women’s lives. Divakaruni’s argument

is made more convincing by the multiplicity of stories and characters encountered in the collection as each story adds another perspective on the matter, eventually offering a diverse tableau of unhappy arranged marriages.

Brah's concept of the "diaspora space" is particularly relevant to this study, because it moves away from discourses of migration and diaspora which privilege displacement, movement and transnationalism critiqued above by Procter. Brah conceptualises diaspora space as a geographical location (such as England, which she uses as an example) "where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed" (208) and where migrant and "indigenous" identities affect and influence each other. Brah's exploration of identity in contemporary multicultural societies, and her definition of diaspora space as a physical location can be applied to the North American context, to the culturally hybrid homes depicted in the stories, and to the short story form more generally. Indeed, the short story, the cycle and the collection are culturally and formally hybrid and reflect the meetings of cultures across time. As a genre with multiple lineages, originating in the meeting of oral and scribal cultures (March-Russell 1-4), the short story is a particularly significant place for migrant women writers to address their own multiple heritages and literary influences. Drawing on tales from their homelands, they subvert the patriarchal underpinnings of trickster stories by appropriating, complicating and empowering female characters. In *At The Bottom of the River* (1983), for instance, Kincaid appropriates the Caribbean figure of the "jablesse" while in "Clothes" (1997) Divakaruni echoes the Hindu myth of Draupadi to subvert and question traditional gender roles (see chapter 4). Speculative collections such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Skin Folk* (2001) and Arimah's *What It Means When A Man Falls from The Sky* (2017) link science fiction with traditional Caribbean and Nigerian folk tales. By rewriting the female characters of folk tales, these texts rescue them from extinction while interrogating the patriarchal elements of oral tradition. Through

these combinations of stories and modes of storytelling which reflect their multiple literary inheritance, these writers radically modify and enrich the contemporary short story.

Without openly conceptualising the cycle as a “diaspora space”, various critics including Gerald Kennedy, Rolf Lundén, Gerald Lynch and Davis have suggested that the form mirrors the multicultural nature of North America, a culture made of various states, regions and population groups (Davis 5-7). Migrant women writers too have often built on the form’s potential to formally dramatize the multicultural societies of North America that their stories explore. In the eleven stories contained in *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) (which has now been out of print for over twenty years) for instance, Mukherjee formally replicates a microcosm of America as a land of migrants through its portrayal of diverse protagonists. The title story is narrated by an Iraqi Jewish woman who is a naturalized American citizen, several others focus on Indian women in North America, “Fathering” and “Loose Ends” follow Vietnam veterans, “Jasmine” follows an illegal Trinidadian migrant, “Fighting for Rebound” concentrates on a multilingual Filipina, “Buried Lives” focuses on a Sri Lankan teacher and illegal migrant, and “Orbiting” describes a New Jersey woman of Italian origin inviting her parents and her Afghan boyfriend for thanksgiving. Here, the polyphonic possibilities of the short story collection work well in encapsulating cultural diversity and embodying the borders between cultures and regions, as each story is separated from the others by a blank page and a new title. Clear-cut divisions are deployed to point out the porousness of cultural and ethnic borders: each story individually depicts America as a multicultural diaspora space inhabited by migrant cultures.

In collections where the stories are contrapuntally set in the writer’s homeland and North America, such as in Adichie’s *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the homes in the homeland are full of American magazines, TV shows and books. These signal American cultural imperialism and the power dynamics of globalisation. In the opening story “Cell One” (2009),

for instance, the Nigerian family holds videotapes of American films *Purple Rain* and *Thriller*, and their children “gr[ew] up watching *Sesame Street*, reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast” (5) while teenage boys name themselves after Al Capone and smoke Rothmans (British cigarettes) while also drinking Star, Nigerian beer. In these stories, the home is a platform where the interactions and intersections between public and private, international and national, mobility and stability, are played out. They thus illustrate Joshua Meyrowitz’s argument that “[t]oday’s consciousness of self and place is unusual because of the ways in which the evolutions in communication and travel have placed an interconnected global matrix over local experience” (23). We now live in what he describes as “glocalities”, “each unique in many ways, and yet each is also influenced by global trends and global consciousness” (23). The story collection is particularly well equipped for dramatizing globalisation as, through the boundaries between stories, it dramatizes physical national boundaries in order to interrogate their efficiency in a world where cultural and geographical borders are constantly being crossed.

In the short story cycle especially, characters cross from story to story, narratively and formally mimicking the act of migration, and conceptually expanding the limitations associated with the short story as “a short form”. In a related point, it is striking that most contemporary short stories by migrant women have no closure and remain open-ended as this gestures to a similar sense that individual stories cannot be contained or finished. In Adichie’s “A Private Experience” (2009), two Nigerian women (one working-class Hausa Muslim and the other an Igbo Christian medical student) take cover in a deserted store during a religious riot in Kano. The space of the text reproduces the space of the store: the story opens as they enter it, and closes as Chika (the Igbo narrator) leaves, but is composed of flashbacks and flashforwards which escape the confines of the present moment that is spent in the store. When the text ends, with Chika climbing out of the window, we are already aware that she will never find her sister, but no resolution is offered for the Hausa

woman whose daughter has disappeared too. The characteristic use of ellipses and the inconclusiveness of the narrative suggest that the space attributed to the text is too short to contain the whole story which, as a result, spills out of its imposed borders. In her reflection on home and the short story, Minoli Salgado has proposed that we read endings as “thresholds rather than settled destinations” (30), a claim which resonates particularly well with short story cycles where characters cross from story to story, transcending the implicit textual borders expected in a conventional collection. The idea of the threshold suggests crossing over and into (or out of) a domestic space and connects the brevity of the short story with the enclosed space of the home. But it also brings into question the readers’ position as they are temporarily exposed to the intimacy of the lives and homes of the stories’ protagonists. Danticat used this same metaphor when introducing her latest collection *Everything Inside* (2019), to Reese Witherspoon’s successful book club *Hello Sunshine*, inviting readers to approach the collection “as somewhat akin to entering a great big house inhabited by many different types of people who are eager to tell you their stories”. Through design on book covers, publishers have frequently dramatized the short story collection as a home, and the individual stories as separate rooms that readers can observe through the window in a shared building, or as separate houses in a neighbourhood. The book cover and title pages of each story thus mark a metaphorical threshold for the reader into various snapshots of a life (Fig. 2). With titles such as *House of a Thousand Doors* by Meena Alexander (1988), *The Frangipani Hotel* by Violet Kupersmith (2014), *Drifting House* by Krys Lee (2012), *The Big Green House* by Akthar Naraghi (1994), writers too conceptualise the story collection as an architectural construction with separate rooms and stories that the reader can discretely access for a short time.

Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra. <i>Arranged Marriage</i> . Anchor, 1996.	Leung, Carrienne. <i>That time I Loved You</i> . HarperCollins, 2018.	Brainard, Cecilia Manguerra. <i>Acapulco at Sunset</i> . Anvil, 1995.	Gayle, Wandeka. <i>Motherland and Other Stories</i> . Peepal Tree Press, 2020.
Ismaili, Rashida. <i>Auto-Biography of the Lower East Side</i> . Northampton House Press, 2014.	Vergheze, Namrata. <i>The Juvenile Immigrant</i> . Speaking Tiger Books, 2019.	Leung, Carrienne. <i>That time I Loved You</i> . Liveright, 2019.	Phipps, Marilene. <i>The Company of Heaven</i> . University of Iowa Press, 2010.
McKenzie, Alicia. <i>Satellite City</i> . Longman Caribbean Writers, 1993.	Cisneros, Sandra. <i>The House on Mango Street</i> . Vintage, 2009.	Yalfani, Mehri. <i>The Street of Butterflies</i> . Inanna Publications, 2017.	Menéndez, Ana. <i>In Cuba I was a German Shepherd</i> . Grove Press, 2002.
Mukherjee, Bharati. <i>Darkness</i> . Penguin Books, 1985.	Mosfegh, Ottessa. <i>Homesick for Another World</i> . Vintage, 2018.	Ulysse, Katia D. <i>Drifting</i> . Akashic Books, 2014.	Pflug, Ursula. <i>Harvesting the Moon</i> . PS Publishing, 2014.

Fig. 2. A Selection of Book Covers Representing Houses.

If to be “at home” is to be able to provide hospitality (as suggested by Rosello and Derrida), then under the lens of habitability, the short story reader is a temporary guest, or, in the words of Munro, “a visitor [...] altered by being in this enclosed space” (1997: xvii). In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau argues that reading “makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient” (xxi). De Certeau’s metaphor of the “rented apartment” is particularly evocative for the short story which, despite Poe’s assertion that “[d]uring the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (61), tends to be deemed a less “habitable” genre than the novel. The novel’s commercial success is often attributed to its immersiveness. According to Tzvetan Todorov, “the public prefer novels to tales, long books to short texts”, precisely because “[w]hen we read a short story, ‘there is no time [...] to forget it is only ‘literature’ and not life” (143). In this respect, the novel requires a more intimate and invested relationship from its readers as they dip in and out of it. It accompanies them and interferes in their daily lives for a relatively long period of time. The short story, on the other hand, typically read in “one sitting” (Poe 61), simply does not give its readers the time to settle. It requires them to experience something that suggests the precarity and transience to which its protagonists have grown accustomed. As Sarah Hall notes, “there is no explanatory narrative ramp or roof, there are no stabilisers giving support over scary subject matter [...] and there are no solvent, tonic or consoling endings” (qtd. in Cox 2019: 67). Its focus on the microcosmic things of everyday life invites us also to share the unsettling sense of defamiliarization that is central to migration. As Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei observes in *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, “[i]n ordinary life, the familiarity of things, by its very nature, does not come to our notice” (13); therefore, “to look at the everyday with intensity and scrutiny is already to have stepped outside of it” (2). Readers, like guests, are carried in intimate yet unfamiliar territory as they observe with great detail and inquisitiveness the practice of everyday tasks as carried out by their hosts.

(Un)Settling Home in Contemporary Migrant Short Fiction by Women

Having presented the “habitat” in which the contemporary migrant short story flourishes and the formal characteristics of the short story which make it a habitable space to represent female experiences of migration and multiculturalism, I now turn to another dimension of habitability to explore the variety of ways that home is presented in migrant women’s short fiction. To say that home, and the attendant issues of belonging and identity-forming, is a central motif to migrant writing is now somewhat of a truism. The contemporary short story by migrant women is no different in that it is heavily invested in the notion of home: it is concerned with upkeep or cutting off links with the homeland, making home in the land of residence, and women’s roles in the domestic sphere. The prominence of the word “home” in the titles of numerous collections including *News from Home* by Sefi Atta (2009), *Though I get Home* by Yz Chin (2018), *Coming Home and Other Stories* by Farida Karodia (1988), *Adios, Happy Homeland* by Ana Menéndez (2011), *A Curious Land: Stories from Home* by Susan Muaddi Darraj (2015), *A Way Home* by Nahid Rachlin (2018) and *Home Remedies* by Xuan Juliana Wang (2019) further illustrates how central the concept is to this genre.

“Home” is a complex signifier which refers to geographical locations, fiction and myth, community, rituals, language, food and identity amongst other things. As Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes note in *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, “[t]he concept of home, much like the concept of identity, is a fertile site of contradictions demanding constant renegotiation and reconstruction” (xv). Home immediately connotes the private sphere, shelter and protection, is imbued with emotion and intimacy and is usually represented as rooted and fixed. By contrast, postcolonial critics have tended to characterize the migrant as an essentially mobile figure, transcending ethnic and national boundaries. Rushdie, for instance, has stated that migrants are “the only species

of human being free of the shackles of nationalism”, who “root themselves in ideas rather than places” (124). In *The Politics of Home*, Rosemarie Marangoly George makes similar claims by arguing that in migrant writing, home is something “that one can move beyond”, that in it “[t]he association between an adequate self and a place to call home is held up to scrutiny and then let go” (200). In this type of discourse, the migrant is “made to stand as the resistant figure *par excellence*” (Newns 6) and homelessness is read as intrinsically liberating. Yet, as Revati Krishnaswamy has argued, this terminology contributes to a “mythology of migrancy” that romanticises discourses of exile and “ironically re-invents, in the very process of destabilizing subjectivity, a postmodernist avatar of the free-floating bourgeois subject” (143). Rushdie’s privileged perspective reflects his social class and gender; it “tends to obscure or at least minimize the material and historical contexts of ‘Third World’ immigration” and “fails to account for [...] the distinctly class- and gender-differentiated nature of immigrant experience” (132). The stories I consider below interrogate the notion of homelessness as an emancipated position and situate the home as a potential space of gendered resistance. While these stories trouble the idea of a unique and rooted home, they also reveal an ongoing concern with belonging which indicates a desire for home. As such, I draw on Brah’s more gender inclusive claim that diaspora is categorised by a “critique of discourses of fixed origins” and a strong “homing desire” (194) which is not so much a nostalgic retreat to the homeland, but rather a desire to belong and participate in a shared culture.

To migrate to another land is to leave behind the “original” home in order to settle down in the host land, and, in the process, to redefine the migrant’s sense of self and home. In America, home ownership epitomises the achievement of the American Dream and signals the successful integration of migrants into their new land (Jacobson 1). But this re-homing is rarely as straightforward as the assimilation myth suggests. Stories like Zhang’s “We Love You Crispina” (2017) tackle the issue of homelessness and nomadic living to reflect the

struggle for access to wealth, material possessions and a functioning, stable home. The story, narrated by a nine-year-old girl named Christina, follows a Chinese family attempting to make a home in New York as they move from insalubrious lodging to insalubrious lodging, sharing rooms with other Chinese families, crashing on the floor at other people's homes, renting flats that are falling apart and temporarily residing in places crawling with rats and cockroaches, with broken windows and defective toilets, rarely staying put for more than several months at a time. As well as highlighting housing instability, Zhang deftly subverts the expectations of the short story form to accentuate how the transitory nature of migrant homes stands in dissonant relation with the mythos of the "American Dream". The constant shifts in home spaces the protagonist occupies provide a challenge to early formalist ideas articulated by Brander Matthews in 1901. According to Matthews, the short story often "fulfils the three false unities of French classic drama: it shows one action, in one place, on one day", and "deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation" (73). Indeed, "We Love You Crispina" narrates ten different domestic settings underscoring the itinerancy of the protagonists as they struggle for decent housing. A similar formal strategy is performed in coming-of-age short story cycles such as *Frying Plantain* by Reid-Benta (2019) which dramatize longstanding disparities in housing access and equity in North America by setting each story in a different house or flat.

As texts like these suggest, the new country might not be hospitable to the newcomer who is often not considered to "truly" belong. Newcomers such as Zhang's are allowed to inhabit spaces, but not to unpack and set up permanent homes, their inability to lay down financial roots preventing them from being considered true 'citizens'. Racialised discourses of the nation continue to construct contemporary notions of national belonging and exclude people of African and Asian descent (Brah 3). Nationalist vocabulary metaphorizes citizens as the biological children of a same family, thus perpetuating this

discourse. As Friedman notes in her discussion of home and migration, the country is often described as a “fatherland or motherland to be defended by Homeland Defense and Patriot Acts” with “domestic politics” meaning “national politics” (2004: 193). In this context, the migrant is perceived as a guest whose presence remains unthreatening as long as they assimilate fully to North American culture; to speak with an accent, eat foreign food, or wear unconventional clothes is interpreted as a threat to American culture. The scenes of racism narrated in Adichie’s “The Arrangers of Marriage” (2009) and Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” (see chapter 3), for instance, are precisely reactions to migrants cooking food from their homeland and speaking languages other than English. The hostility that many migrants experience contributes to their feeling that their “real” home is the one they left behind, the one they were born in. Yet even if the conception of land and nation as family home builds on an idea of the home as fixed and stable, as a reliable and secure shelter and place of belonging, for the Haitian refugees in Danticat’s stories, the homeland can also be a place of terror and instability. In *The Dew Breaker* (2004), for instance, men and women suffer at the hands of the Duvalier dictatorship and this trauma is passed on from generation to generation, from Haiti to America where characters continue to live in complete distrust of Haitian refugees who are their fellows in the U.S. but who may have been their torturers in Haiti, crucially disrupting the mythic notion of a “solidarity of the displaced”. Significantly, the protagonist of the opening story is a sculptor who is about to sell a wood sculpture of her father, who she believes was a victim of the Duvalier dictatorship when he was, in fact, not only one of its advocates but a major torturer. To make the sculpture, the character informs us that she

used a piece of mahogany that was naturally flawed, with a few superficial cracks along what was now the back. I’d thought these cracks were beautiful and had made no effort to sand or polish them away, as they seemed like the wood’s own scars, like the one my father had on his face. But I was also worried about the cracks. [...] would the wood come apart from a simple movement with age? (4)

Before she can sell it, her father throws it in a lake where, the narrator worries, it will come apart and break into pieces, as “the cracks have probably taken in so much water that the wood has split into several chunks and plunged to the bottom” (12); a metaphor for the shattering of the daughter’s idealized image of her father and, by extension, of Haitian history. The metaphor of the pre-existing cracks in the wood breaking apart might also be extended to the short story cycle form which is arguably better suited at representing national, physical and psychological trauma through fragmentation rather than the narrative unity that is expected from the conventional novel.⁹ Indeed, as Anne Whitehead writes in *Trauma Fiction*, trauma literature often reflects the “fragmented and broken in form of testimonies, requiring the listener/reader to mak[e] sense of the broken fragments that emerge” (34). The following stories in the cycle then proceed to re-member the violence of Haitian history by piecing together the father’s story through a focus on different characters both in Haiti and the U.S. whose lives were directly impacted by his actions.

For women especially, the homeland can be perceived as a site of female oppression. In “A Conversation” (2010), Egyptian American writer Pauline Kaldas dramatizes a dialogue between a husband and wife who have lived in the U.S. for forty years and are debating moving back to Egypt. While the husband holds very nostalgic memories of his homeland and suffers from the racism he is subjected to, his wife is bent upon staying put in North America, as she feels more emancipated as a working woman than she ever could have been in Egypt: “I found a job here and went in each day to earn our living. No one harassed me, and no one told me I wasn’t smart enough. [...] This life I have built, I will not let it go” (255-256). If the homeland can be an oppressive space for women, the domestic sphere too can be just as confining. First and second-wave feminists including Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir

⁹ See, for instance, Díaz’s *Drown* (1996) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), and Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) which use the form to reflect the “clear connection between national and personal traumas” and the legacy of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic (Ciocia 130).

and Betty Friedan have argued that the traditional association of women with the domestic sphere has meant that women have become oppressively defined by the reproduction, feeding, domestic and caring work they have been attributed as “naturally” theirs. The ideology of the separate spheres maintained and ensured heteronormative and patriarchal hegemony, and “naturalised images of women as guardians of tradition, keepers of home and bearers of Language” (Minh-ha 2011: 33) (see chapter 2). For (post)colonial and ethnic women, domesticity is additionally bound up with the imperial enterprise. As Anne McClintock reveals in *Imperial Leather*, in the 19th century Western domesticity was imposed on colonized women to “domesticate them” and to maintain and reinforce Western cultural superiority, an element which Kincaid confronts in “Girl” (see chapter 2). Similarly, in “Manifest Domesticity”, Amy Kaplan argues that the ideology of separate spheres in America contributed to creating an American empire in a context of slavery, migration and expanding borders which produced anxiety about the introduction of foreign bodies in the union and that as a consequence, narratives of domesticity are inseparable from narratives of nation-building. McClintock and Kaplan’s findings suggest that the cult of domesticity that developed in the West in the 19th century was a direct response to political and demographic changes and a need to stabilise national identity, and expose how ambiguous the home is for postcolonial, ethnic and migrant women. The association of home and comfort in diaspora and migrant theory similarly relies on the devalued work and sacrifices of the housewife, all of which are rendered invisible and naturalised by this normative male discourse. Indeed, up to the late 1970s, migration studies assumed the migrant figure to be male (Hondagneu-Sotelo 6), a significant oversight which positions women in the home/land.

As the editors of *Gendered Journeys: Women, Migration and Feminist Psychology* have observed, the new domestic home in the host land can be a place for men to reinforce the stability of traditional gender roles; “women’s bodies become the site to claim the power denied to immigrant men by the host society” (9). As a result, while migration might upset

traditional gender roles and empower women in the public sphere, it can also significantly “limit[...] women’s private spheres of influence and their moral authority within traditional cultural contexts” (4). Many stories convey the oppressiveness of the home from this feminist perspective by framing the narrative between the inescapable walls of a flat and mobilizing the tight space of the short story form to dramatize this loss of power and sense of claustrophobic confinement in traditional gender roles. In many stories, including Adichie’s “The Arrangers of Marriage” (see chapter 3), young migrant wives are confined in their small flats and traditional roles in North America while their husbands are at work. While the narrative occasionally takes us out of the flat, the characters are ultimately constrained to go back to it, so that the flat is deployed as a narrative frame that embodies the oppressiveness of traditional gender roles.

Similarly, in “A Garden of Her Own” (1993), Mootoo uses the frame of a small claustrophobic Canadian flat to question the comforts of home, to underscore the simultaneous entrapment *and* liberating possibilities of traditional gender roles for women in the West. The story follows Vijai, a twenty-four-year-old Indo-Trinidadian wife who has moved to Canada to be with her husband and feels trapped in her new life. She “pace[s] the twelve strides, back and forth, from the balcony door to the hall door” (12) like an encaged animal; her flat is small, dark, stuffy and north-facing, it has “no window, only a glass sliding door which [...] remained shut [...] from decades of other renters’ black, oily grit and grime which had collected in the grooves of the sliding door’s frame” (11). As she contrasts her flat with her big house and flowery garden in Trinidad, she reluctantly comes to realise that her own childhood contentment relied upon her mother’s sacrifices and overshadowed her unhappiness with her housewife role, cooking duties and her husband’s infidelities: “Sometimes Papa didn’t come home till long after suppertime. Mama would make us eat but she would wait for him. Sometimes he wouldn’t come for days, and she would wait for him then too. [...] Mama, why did you wait to eat?” (14-15). In other words, the fact that in her

parents' home, she was the recipient of her mother's attentions, as her husband now is of hers, is precisely what made her parents' home so "homely", and her new home so oppressive. The Trinidadian house and the Canadian flat both embody the patriarchal structures that characterised her upbringing. And yet, because of their relative poverty in Canada, Vijai, like the wife in Kaldas' story, is forced to be more mobile and independent than in Trinidad and to do the shopping herself while her husband is at work. The story ends, unresolved, with Vijai "sit[ting] on the green-and-yellow shag carpet [...] in front of the snowy black-and-white television watching a French station" (23), a language which might provide an escape route out of her flat, her marriage and her traditional role. The grammatical shift in that final paragraph, from the past tense in which the story is narrated, to the present, implies that Vijai's story continues beyond the text and that she too will escape the confines of her flat and everything it represents.

In this story, the home is both the scene of confinement and liberation; the Trinidadian homeland is associated with gendered oppression while the host country, Canada, offers possibilities to escape conservative patriarchal culture. Mootoo is a self-identifying multiply diasporic and queer writer whose refracted sense of self is reflected in the ambiguity of her narratives (see chapters 3 and 4). As this story reveals, she is particularly suspicious of normative definitions of home and in pledging her "[L]oyalty to th[e] State of Migrancy" (2001: 81) in her poetry, embraces an unfixed, cosmopolitan and deterritorialised subject position. The story invites being read through queer theory as Mootoo presents the home as a site of compulsory heteronormativity from which individuals need to "come out". Yet, as Newns has persuasively argued, "in queer diasporic narratives, such trajectories can also reinforce colonialist binaries that recast the home culture/country as a backward space from which the queer subject must be liberated in favour of a sexually progressive West" (9). Indeed, as transnational feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty have pointed out in "Under Western Eyes", Western feminism has tended to construct the "Third World woman"

as a singular ahistorical, home-oriented and “sexually constrained” (22) subject. Her “Third World” status is firmly connected with her being read as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.” (22). She is, then, the binary opposite of emancipated Western women, who, by contrast, represent themselves as “educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions” (22). Importantly, Mohanty locates the association of “Third World women” with family and domesticity as that which, in the West, is interpreted as the sign of her submission. With “A Garden of Her Own”, Mootoo risks endorsing the binary that Newns and Mohanty point out as she repeatedly opposes her protagonist’s desire for “nature” and the outdoors with her enforced domestic role.

Other stories avoid such binaries and interrogate the Western association of domesticity with submission and voicelessness. Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” (1999), for instance, critiques the imposition of a Western critical framework to all women (see chapter 3). In “Mrs. Sen’s”, an Indian housewife is contrasted to the American mother of Eliot, a child she is looking after. Mrs. Sen is depicted as a traditional housewife who wears saris and spends most of her days cooking and caring for her home, her husband and Eliot. Eliot’s mother on the other hand appears as a more “modern”, independent single mother. She works full time, has “cropped hair” (113), skips lunches and dines on “bread and cheese, sometimes [eating] so much of it that she wasn’t hungry for the pizza they normally ordered for dinner” (118). The story places a great deal of emphasis on Mrs. Sen’s reluctance to learn to drive, a reticence that challenges the car as a western symbol of autonomy, mobility and emancipation. As her husband insists that she practices with him in order to gain more independence, driving becomes an oppressive activity that is associated with forced cultural assimilation. As driving and the attendant ideas of Western female agency and liberation are imposed on her against her will, these lose their emancipating value and are portrayed as even more oppressive than her conservative domestic role, disrupting the reductive

tendency to oppose tradition to modernity. In this story, then, the home is a refuge from the modernity and mobility with which white middle-class women are associated. Traditional homes can thus also take on a positive value for migrant women. Unlike white middle-class feminists, black and minority feminists position the home as a refuge from mainstream racism, a restorative space of community and empowerment where women have authority (see chapter 3). In *Yearning*, for example, bell hooks claims that black women's homes were places "where all Black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world" (42). Stories such as "Mrs. Sen's" or Danticat's "Women Like Us" (see chapter 2) describe domestic spaces as nurturing and show how recreating traditional gender roles in the new land is a way for migrant women to gain a sense of control over the instability of their lives. In "Engendering Migration Studies: The Case of New Immigrants in the United States", Patricia Pessar notes that "it would be patronizing to interpret migrant women's struggles to maintain intact families as acquiescence to traditional patriarchy" (33). Instead, she claims this is a form of resistance in a hostile society, it is, in other words, "more as a form of resistance to racist oppression than as a form of exploitation by men" (Esperitu qtd. in Pessar 34). In this hostile context, the migrant's home often becomes a shelter from American culture, where the customs of the homeland are recreated, where the language spoken, the food cooked, and the clothes worn contrast with those of the host land.

The recreation and performance of homeland cultures in North American homes disconnects the sense of home from a fixed space and signals its portability and the possibility of reattaching it to new environments. Singh Baldwin's "Montreal, 1962" (1996) offers an example of how portability and habitability can intersect as conceptual frames. The story is narrated by a Sikh wife who has recently moved to Canada and addressed to her husband who is having difficulty finding a job because of his turban. The text beautifully

describes her handwashing his colourful turbans in the bathtub, “working each one in a rhythm bone-deep, as [her] mother and hers must have done before [her]” (129) before hanging them to dry on the curtain rod in their small flat “as if [she] was back in Delhi on a flat roof under a hot sun” (129). If the practice of handwashing turbans situates her in an embodied tradition of Sikh housewives, the turban itself as object, hanging from one extremity of the room to the other to dry, symbolises the physical ties between husband and wife, Canada and India, now and then, that she refuses to sever. She promises her husband that she will take up a job if necessary, but she will never let him “cut [his] strong rope of hair and go without a turban into this land of strangers” (131). Like the recipe for cooking rice in Thien’s “Simple Recipes” (2001) and the green sweater carried from Cuba to the U.S. in Obejas’s “We Came All the Way from Cuba so You Could Dress Like This?” (1994) (see chapters 3 and 4), the turban is a cultural expression which anchors the family’s identity and creates continuities between past and present. Felski notes that home “both literally and symbolically [...] contains many of the objects that have helped to shape a life history, and the meanings and memories with which these objects are encrypted” (88). For migrants, displaced from their original homes, the few objects they can carry abroad take on added value as emblems of survival, as Singh stresses in her story as her character proudly imagines her children saying “[m]y father came to this country with very little but his turban” (131). The wife’s tender treatment of her husband’s turban is a representation of the relationship between the quotidian and intimacy that Svetlana Boym has termed “diasporic intimacy”. By definition, intimacy “is connected to home; intimate means ‘inner most,’ ‘pertaining to ... one’s deepest nature,’ ‘very personal,’ ‘sexual’” (499), while diasporic intimacy, by contrast, “is not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but constituted by it” (499). Diasporic intimacy is fully aware of its unfamiliar surroundings, “rooted in the suspicion of a single home” and “does not promise an unmediated emotional fusion but only a precarious affection – no less deep, but aware of its transience” (499). It does not offer a recovery for

identity through nostalgia but instead refers to the preservation of the links with the homeland through homemaking practices in the host land. It evokes “the sense of the fragile coziness of a foreign home” (501). The idea of home transcends the physicality of the homeland and/or the domestic sphere and is to be found also in specific objects and everyday practices and customs that are carried, reproduced and re-membered in the body. In the context of migrant women’s writing, then, home is a shifting and complicated signifier.

Publishing Houses & Literary Lodgings: At Home in the Literary World

So far in this chapter, my consideration of the habitable has centred on the formal and thematic features of contemporary migrant short fiction by women. In considering how the short story and/or collections of stories migrate from the intimacy of the author’s place of writing to the publishing house where it finds a literary home in the world, this final section engages with the culminating stages of short story production and the material conditions of publishing and printing. Though the migrant short story, like other literary forms, relies on the literary market, it thrives in a variety of environments and manages to carve out new homely spaces for itself in seemingly uninhabitable contexts.

The post-1960s marked a turning point as publishing possibilities were expanded for migrant, ethnic and women writers. New publishing opportunities emerged as the publishing world was hit with force by the canon wars of the 1970s and 1980s following the Civil Rights and second-wave feminist movements and the loosening of immigration laws in the 1960s. National policies were implemented to diversify the literary world. In Canada, for instance, the implementation of multiculturalism as a policy in 1971 was accompanied by cultural initiatives influencing the publishing industry. The Writing and Publication Program was set up in 1977 to encourage writing and publishing by migrant minorities in any language and to encourage the literary establishment to consider such writing part of mainstream Canadian literature (Young 2001: 96). In addition, the development of ethnic and feminist studies in

North American universities from the late 1960s onwards contributed to fostering a habitable environment for the rediscovery and emergence of minority voices. The period also saw the flourishing of grassroots initiatives as new publishing outlets were created for, and often by, writers typically marginalised by the white and male commercial publishing industries. Alongside influential cultural magazines and academic journals including *Vice Versa* (1978-present) and the *Toronto South Asian Review* (1981-present) in Canada, and *MELUS* (1973-present) in the U.S., small, independent and specialised presses were created to disseminate the voices of the culturally marginalised. In Canada, Guernica Editions was founded in 1978 to promote the work of ethnic minority writers from Europe, the Middle East and Africa while Tsar Editions (now Mawenzi Press) was established by M.G. Vassanji in 1985 to publish creative and critical writing by and about writers from the Caribbean, Africa and South Asia. In the U.S., Arte Público Press was founded in 1979 to print and recover literature by U.S. Hispanic writers. Though feminist presses that developed from the 1960s onwards such as Press Gang Publishers (1970–2002), Calyx Press (1976–present), the Feminist Press at CUNY (1970–present) and Innana Publications (1972–present) frequently published writings by ethnic and migrant women, they continued to be relatively underrepresented in comparison to white heterosexual middle class women. Challenging the white, heterosexual and male biases of mainstream, feminist and ethnic presses, ethnic and migrant women established more inclusive feminist presses which were influential in diversifying the literary canon. These included Kitchen Table Press which was co-founded by Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde (1982–1989), Third Woman Press (1980-present), Aunt Lute Books (1982–present) in the U.S., and, in Canada, Sister Vision: Black Women & Women of Colour Press co-founded by Silvera (1985-2001) which published women of colour of all heritages, sexual orientations and social classes. As Matilde Martín González explains in “Beyond Mainstream Presses: Publishing Women of Color as Cultural and Political Critique”, by being willing to risk money these presses proved that minority writing was “economically

and socially profitable". They paved the way for minority women writers to publish in commercial and academic presses, something which was unseen at the time (160).

If novels, collections of poetry and of essays were the most represented single-authored forms of publication, the short story nonetheless played a crucial role in the 1970s-1980s' black and Asian feminists' efforts to print new voices and recover silenced and marginalised literary traditions. Their brevity made them particularly well suited for publication in pamphlets, cultural magazines, newspapers and/or academic journals where they could further this political cause. Short stories were also mobilised in the effort to create an awareness of the long-standing engagement of women writers with literature by recuperating and reconsidering forgotten texts in anthologies. Stories now considered as classics, such as Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" (1916) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) for instance, were rediscovered in the 1970s. Stories and collections by ethnic women writers took longer to be retrieved. *Old Indian Legends* and *American Indian Stories* by Native American writer Zitkala-Sa (1876-1938) was reprinted in 1985, *Coyote Stories* by Mourning Dove (1884-1936) in 1990, Zora Neale Hurston's collected stories in 1995 and *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* (1912) by Chinese-American Sui Sin Far, also known as Edith Maude Eaton, in 1995 (Champion).

By selecting "representative" forms and styles, national and education anthologies, are, as Paul March-Russell explains, "necessarily linked to the so-called *canons* of English literature, meaning both the landmarks of prose fiction and the mental maps by which readers make sense of literary history" (56). It is unsurprising then that they have been remobilised since the 1970s as political tools to create alternative literary canons and react against the white male domination of the genre, and of literature more generally. "Women writers were among the first to benefit from this recovery project," Elke D'hoker affirms in

“The Short Story Anthology”.¹⁰ However, an equally interesting development in that same period is the proliferation of anthologies construed around race and ethnicity. In the U.S., ground-breaking anthologies such as *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, and *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* edited by Toni Cade Bambara in 1970 and 1971, and *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* published by Frank Chin, Jeffery Chan, Lawson Inada, and Shawn Wong in 1974 published short stories alongside essays and poetry and created distinct literary traditions centred around shared racial or gendered identities. In Canada too, the 1970s-1980s period saw the publications of anthologies of Asian- and black- Canadian writing, including *Canada in Us Now: The First Anthology of Black Poetry and Prose in Canada* edited by Harold Head in 1976 and *Inalienable Rice: A Chinese and Japanese Canadian Anthology* edited by the Chinese Canadian Writers Workshop in 1979. The 1980s saw a rise of many more black feminist and queer intersectional anthologies including the now seminal *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* edited by Barbara Smith (1983). These anthologies were fundamental in bringing more attention and recognition to ethnic and migrant women’s literary contributions to North American literature. The juxtaposition of so many stories in the shared space of the book meant that the anthology could formally accentuate a multiplicity of voices and experiences that were being ignored by mainstream media and popular culture.

These anthologies and new presses were influential in reshaping the American literary scene. The emergence of specialized imprints within mainstream publishing houses that Cécile Cottenet identifies in the 1990s and 2000s testifies to their role in making ethnic literatures more “mainstream” and opening a market for ethnic and migrant writing (1). This general trend appears too in the publication of short story collections; clearly, commercial publishers and their imprints are more willing to publish collections by migrant women than

¹⁰ See also Young and Bailey for a list of women’s short story anthologies from the late 1970s up to the present.

they were in the 1980s, when most collections were published by independent, and/or feminist and/or multicultural publishers or imprints (see Appendix 2). Though there is still plenty of work to do, the contemporary literary scene is more inclusive than ever before (Brennan, Huggan 2020, Brouillette et al.). Migrant and ethnic writers have been assimilated into the canon and been awarded several of the highest literary prizes. The Pulitzer Prize has been awarded to Oscar Hijuelos for *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* in 1990, Lahiri for *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000, Díaz for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2008 and Viet Thanh Nguyen for *The Sympathizer* in 2016. Tan, Rushdie, Díaz and Roxane Gay have each guest edited issues of the *Best American Short Stories* and many more migrant writers have been included in them than before the 1980s. New literary prizes and awards dedicated to migrant writing have been founded, including the Restless Books Prize for New Immigrant Writing created in 2016 to challenge the historical underrepresentation of migrant writing in mainstream publishing. In 2020, the Prize was awarded to Ethiopian American writer Helon Madero for *Preludes*, a story collection to be published in 2022. Ethnic-specific anthologies have continued to be published by independent and academic presses with many concentrating on the South Asian diaspora in the 1990s,¹¹ and a wider variety of different groups since the 2000s often following migration trends or at the initiative of established migrant writers, with for instance *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States* edited by Danticat (2001) and *Dinazard's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* edited by Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa (2004). Since the 1990s, more multicultural anthologies that bring together writers of diverse backgrounds have appeared, "as part of a larger trend that saw the literary imagination both in the world and within Western nations shift considerably (but far from completely) toward what had

¹¹ See *Our Feet Walk the Sky* published by Aunt Lute Press (1993), *Living in America: Poetry And Fiction By South Asian American Writers* edited by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns for an academic press (Westview Press, 1995) and *Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map North America* published by Temple University Press (1998).

been the margins” (Kortenaar 558).¹² These both attest to, and demonstrate, the short story’s role as a vital vehicle for writers to inscribe themselves in North American literature. To this day, the short story continues to be one of the most influential genres in promoting marginalised voices in the West. Initiatives such as the Caine Prize for African Writing (1999-present), the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2012-present) and the *Guardian* and 4th Estate BAME Short Story Prize (2016-present) were founded to encourage recognition of “marginalised” writers. The Caine Prize especially, as Africa’s leading literary award, has supported publishing and writing on the continent, and raised the profile of all its short-listed writers and launched many careers, including those of now well-established and influential writers such as Helon Habila and Binyavanga Wainaina (Attree 38).

At this juncture, it is critical to include a note of caution when it comes to easy assumptions that the mainstream publishing industry is increasingly accommodating or, indeed, habitable for ethnic and migrant short story writers. First of all, the mainstream publishing scene is generally not very habitable to short story collections, no matter the identity of the writer, and they tend to be published primarily by independent presses which evidently impacts on sales. In his study of the contemporary publishing scene, Lincoln Michel explains that short story collections issued by big publishers receive approximately half the sales of novels published by big publishers; that is, between 1,000 and 20,000. This number goes down significantly by publisher type: “[a]n independent small press is averaging more like 500 to 10,000 for novels and 300 to 2,000 for story collections [, a] micro press is more like 75 to 2,000 regardless of book type”, and debut books cut these numbers in half. This is

¹² See, for instance, *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* edited by Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond (1990), *Making a Difference: Canadian Multicultural Literature* edited by Smaro Kamboureli (1996), *Growing up Ethnic in America* edited by Jennifer Gillan and Maria Mazziotti Gillan (1999), *Becoming Americans* edited by Ilan Stavans (2009), *Immigrant Voices: 21st Century Stories* edited by Achy Obejas and Megan Bayles (2014), *All about Skin: Short Fiction by Women of Color* edited by Jina Ortiz and Rochelle Spencer (2014), *Go Home!* edited by Rowan Hisayo Buchanan (2018), *Strangers in a Strange Land: Immigrant Stories* edited by Chris Rhatigan and Katherine Tomlinson (2019), *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature* edited by Dohra Ahmad (2019).

particularly significant for migrant women writers who often publish a short story collection as their literary debut and are overwhelmingly published by independent presses (see Appendix 2). His study also offers more nuance to the truism that no one buys short story collections as it shows that while fewer collections sell than novels, those that do can be as successful as novels. Collections by Kelly Link, Lydia Davis, Aimee Bender, Jim Shepard, Díaz, Munro and George Saunders, for instance, are in the range of what acclaimed literary novels sell. These successful collections tend to be written by much anticipated debut writers or established older authors and published by mainstream publishers. However, even these never match the millions of copies sold by best-selling novels, and the collections that don't sell well do much worse than novels. Consequently, whether in commercial, academic or independent presses, short story collections get smaller advances and less marketing than novels (March Russell 49), and publishers push authors to write novels instead of stories and much fewer collections are published than novels which might also account for the lack of critical engagement with migrant short fiction as a genre.

Secondly, while black feminist presses such as Kitchen Table Press and Sister Vision, anthologies and short stories in the later 20th century unquestionably contributed to creating a more accommodating environment for ethnic and migrant writing, there is still a lot of work to be done, especially in the context of global shifts, the rise of neo-liberalism and the “fall” of multi-culturalism in the West (Kymlicka 97). This is evident from the fact that story collections and migrant writing continue to be overwhelmingly published by independent and academic presses and that migrant women writers often turn to the online space. As I reveal in the conclusion, the online space offers opportunities for postcolonial, migrant and ethnic writers to bypass the politics of Western literary production and to contribute to the reshaping of the publishing industry. New literary platforms such as such as *Storymoja*, *Kwani?*, and *Saraba*, and new forms of short fiction such as instapoetry have emerged online precisely from the lack of publishing opportunities offered to these writers.

Indeed, the Western publishing world has, since its development in the 18th century, been almost exclusively white (Cottenet 2). A survey released in 2019 by the children's book publisher Lee & Low Books shows that the North American publishing work force is still more than three-quarters white, updating and supporting Sarah Brouillette et al.'s claim in 2017 that "the Anglo-American publishing field has been shown to be and experienced as exceptionally white and exceptionally peopled by those who come from relatively elite backgrounds" (xxvi). This carries implications for minority writers at every stage of the publishing process, in terms of which stories and writers get published, how minority texts are marketed and read, and how well they sell. The recent wave of protests by Black Lives Matter activists across the globe, sparked by the killing of George Floyd, has put a spotlight on institutional racism as it operates in several arenas, including publishing. In June 2020, hundreds of authors highlighted the pay inequality between black and nonblack writers by sharing their book advance payments on Twitter under the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe which was initiated by African American writer L.L. McKinney. #PublishingPaidMe exposed the racial disparity as white authors with no track record reported very high advances with as many as six figures on their debuts, whereas well established black writers revealed that they earned comparatively small advances that slowly grew over time. Strikingly, for instance, Mandy Len Catron tweeted that her advance for her debut, as "an unknown white woman with one viral article", was double what Gay, an established and bestselling queer Haitian migrant novelist and short story writer, received for her highest advance. As Constance Grady explains in an article for *Vox*, this is highly significant as book advances reflect how much publishers believe the book will sell, and decides how much they will invest in its marketing budget; in other words, "an advance becomes something of a self-fulfilling prophecy". Further, while commercial and mainstream publishers can afford high advances, it is important to stress that most writers of colour continue to be published in academic and

independent presses and are therefore likely to receive much smaller advances, less publicity and less high street distribution.

A further example of the way the odds are stacked against ethnic women writers when they seek publication is the debacle around the publication of *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins in January 2020. The novel follows a Mexican woman and her son as they attempt to cross the border into the U.S. to escape a drug cartel and is explicitly addressed to American readers in the author's note where Cummins articulates her intention to remind readers of the humanity of Mexican migrants: "At worst, we perceive them [migrants] as an invading mob of resource-draining criminals, and, at best, a sort of helpless, impoverished, faceless brown mass, clamoring for help at our doorstep. We seldom think of them as our fellow human beings" (qtd. in Shapiro). Cummins, who identifies as white American, landed a seven-figure advance and an exceptionally high print run of 500,000 copies. Her publisher, Flatiron Books (a division of Macmillan), allocated a high publicity budget to the book, by collecting blurbs from Stephen King, John Grisham and Cisneros, printing numerous book reviews ahead of publication, and getting the book selected for the Oprah Book Club; all but guaranteeing it would become a bestseller. Unsurprisingly, according to the Nielsen BookScan, *American Dirt* was the bestselling novel of 2020. The book's aggressive marketing testifies to the recent corporatization of the publishing industry exposed by Brouillette in *Postcolonial Writers and the Global Literary Marketplace*. The "blockbuster phenomenon", a consequence of this institutional change, "means that a dwindling number of 'star' authors receive an increasing percentage of a given firm's available dollars in the form of lucrative advances and royalties" (65). And as the #PublishingPaidMe campaign and Latinx writer Myriam Gurba have pointed out, this system primarily benefits white writers like Cummins. In a powerful essay, Gurba accused the book of capitalising on hurtful stereotypes and called into question the whiteness of the industry which provides institutional support to white writers and narratives which are tainted by, and reinforce, the white gaze:

Jeanine Cummins narco-novel, *American Dirt*, is a literary licuado that tastes like its title. Cummins plops overly-ripe Mexican stereotypes, among them the Latin lover, the suffering mother, and the stoic manchild, into her wannabe realist prose. [...] Cummins positions the United States of America as a magnetic sanctuary, a beacon toward which the story's chronology chugs. [...] Cummins identified the gringo appetite for Mexican pain and found a way to exploit it. With her ambition in place, she shoved the "faceless" out of her way, ran for the microphone and ripped it out of our hands, deciding that her incompetent voice merited amplification.

The cultural insensitivity of Flatiron Books was further exposed when Gurba shared pictures on Twitter of an early book party in Cummins' honour featured barbed wire centrepieces, aestheticizing migrant trauma. While Cummins' choice of subject matter reveals, on one hand, how habitable the literary scene is to migrant narratives, her clumsy cultural representations and the value they were given by the book market reflect the "global commodification of cultural difference" that Graham Huggan identifies in *The Postcolonial Exotic* as one of the ripple effects of the "mainstreaming" of migrant and ethnic writing (vii). Gurba is not so much questioning Cummins' right, as a white American, to tell these stories, but questioning her, and by extension Flatiron Books', problematic instrumentalization of real traumas, and marginalised populations, for economic gain. Her criticism of the book thus demonstrates the ongoing validity of Huggan's assertion that "[t]he exoticist rhetoric of fetishized otherness and sympathetic identification masks the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse could not function" (14).

Despite the contemporary migrant short story's reliance on a publishing industry that is institutionally racist and biased towards the novel, the migrant short story continues to thrive. In recent years, there has been much talk about a "renaissance of the short story". In "Complete Fiction: Why 'the Short Story Renaissance' is a Myth", Chris Power convincingly deconstructs some of the facts on which the argument is built, noting, for instance, that rising sales in 2017 were the direct result of film star Tom Hanks' and bestselling author Jojo Moyes' publishing collections. Citing headlines from newspaper articles since 2012, Power suggests

that this rhetoric is a media strategy to keep the genre in the news and to increase its sales: “if short stories are made to seem like ‘a thing’, maybe a few more people will buy collection X or Y”. I am equally suspicious of the economic concerns of this discourse. However, it seems fair to say that, in the early 21st century, the short story in English is having “a moment”, as demonstrated by the establishing in 2011 of the academic journal *Short Fiction in Theory and Practice*, Munro’s winning the 2013 Nobel Prize after a life-long career of writing short fiction, the increase of reviews of short story collections (Power 2018), and the emergence of new major short story prizes and festivals across the West celebrating the international short story in English (of which the Caine Prize is one example). The U.K. and Ireland, for instance, saw the launching of the Small Wonder Festival dedicated to the short story in 2004, the National Short Story Prize (now known as the BBC National Short Story Award) and the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award in 2005 (2005-2015), the Edge Hill Short Story Prize in 2006, the *Sunday Times* EFG Private Bank Short Story Award in 2010, the Costa Short Story Award and the Pindrop studio short story salon in 2012. Though, in North America, short story prizes celebrating the genre have a much longer history (with the prestigious O. Henry Prize set up in 1919), important prizes have emerged since the 2000s including the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Short Story Collection in 2002 and the Story Prize in 2004. Previously, others such as the Drue Heinz Literature Prize (1981), the Flannery O’Connor Award for Short Fiction (1983), the PEN/Malamud Award (1988), and the Journey Prize (also called the Writers’ Trust of Canada McClelland & Stewart Journey Prize, 1989) were set up in the 1980s. Andrew Levy and Laurie Champion both identify this period as that of the origins of the so-called short story renaissance, a period when creative writing classes and anthologies flourished in North America. It is, as this section has demonstrated, certainly no coincidence that this same period corresponds to that of the “canon wars”.

If these initiatives certainly indicate the vibrancy of the contemporary short story scene, the rising publication and dissemination of stories online and on other digital media

since the 2010s has offered new possibilities and created stimulus for the genre. Laura Dietz ironically points out in “The Digital Short Story”, that “talk of the new era of the short story is striking in its optimism, almost shocking compared to the general e-gloom and digital despair” (126). As well as providing new outlets where writers can bypass white cultural gatekeepers, the online space has stimulated new short forms of experimental writing such as twitter fiction and instapoetry which I explore further in the conclusion. Young concludes *Contemporary Feminism and Women’s Short Stories* by stating that “[w]hile literary publishing has undergone certain changes in the light of digital publishing, there has not been the ground-breaking revolution perhaps anticipated a decade ago, especially in the context of the short story” (151). Instead, the contemporary discussions about diversifying literature, the rise of new forms of short fiction, the popular and economic success of instapoets such as Rupi Kaur, and the literary recognition of contemporary writers such as Uwem Akpan are, in many ways, direct results of the more “democratic” publishing opportunities offered online.

Having established the formal and thematic intersections that comprise the habitability of the migrant short story, I continue to explore the specific ways in which the social, racial, gendered and sexual experiences of migrant women writers shape their portrayal of home in the next chapter. There, I focus more specifically on inhabiting language in the works of Danticat, Kincaid, Lahiri and Adichie to investigate their strategies to find a language through which to best express their voice and multicultural heritage.

Chapter 2.

A Language to Call Home: Linguistic Lineages and Beyond

With many migrant writers writing in a language they were not born into, language is one of the central concerns of migrant literature and the critical theory that surrounds it. More than just a constitutive element of literary texts, language as a motif occupies a pivotal place as words, cultures and experiences are translated to the Western reader. In this chapter, I explore its centrality in migrant short stories by women to suggest that it takes on an even more crucial position both because of the distinctive features of the genre, and the way that language has been conceptualised in terms of gender, family and nation. These stories often engage with the conceptualisation and association of language with home, land, women and mothers to reflect on migrant women's status and responsibility as custodians of culture.

In *The Translingual Imagination*, Steven Kellman suggests that the short story is a particularly significant mode for multilingual writers to reflect on language: "translingualism is a more arduous process for a poet or a short story writer, whose primary unit is the individual, irreducible word, than it is for the novelist or playwright, who can divert us from solecisms with compelling plots and characters and for whom language might be merely instrumental" (11). Kellman's stress on the importance of the word in short fiction resonates with the genre's theory more broadly. Writing in the 19th century, Poe argued that the form was superior to the novel and closer to poetry as its brevity required linguistic discipline and control on the writer's part; a single misplaced word or expression could damage the text. More recently, Hanson suggested that "the short story is a more literary form than the novel in [...] its orientation towards the power words hold, or release and create, over and above

their mimetic or explicatory function" (24). My intention here is not to create hierarchies between literary genres, as language is indeed the constituting element of *all* forms of writing. There is, nonetheless, a point to be made about how the brevity of any form makes individual word choices more apparent and invites more conscious and immediate scrutiny from the reader than longer forms might. Significantly, many short story writers are poets. Goodison, for instance, is renowned as a poet, but has published three short story collections alongside her fourteen volumes of poems and her memoir. The affinities between the two genres can also be observed in the literary criticism surrounding Kincaid's stories in *At the Bottom of the River* (1993), which have interchangeably been read as prose poems and stories. A review by Barbadian-American novelist and short-story writer Paule Marshall, featured in the opening pages of Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* (1995), describes the stories as "spare, luminous stories that read like poems". As these two examples illustrate, critics frequently stress the poetry of short fiction. This serves both to signal a specific text's conscious preoccupation with language and to consequently grant it a higher status through its association with what is often considered the most prestigious literary genre.

Brown has stressed the importance of language in short fiction by ethnic writers, noting its ongoing engagement with orality and with "[t]he challenge of writing in a language that you do not consider to be your own and that may be the language of the oppressor" (1997, xix). This claim can be further substantiated by several stories that put migrant's struggles to communicate across "home" and "host" languages at the centre of the narrative. Examples include "The Funeral Singer" (2004) by Danticat and "Tilapia Fish" (2019) by Mutonji which dramatize migrants' struggles with learning English, and stories such as "A Thousand Years of Good Prayers" (2006) by Yiyun Li which perform the difficulty of communicating across languages. In Li's story, a Chinese father visits his newly divorced daughter in the United States and befriends an elderly Iranian woman whom he converses with daily, though neither understand each other. Even a cursory glance at a selection of

titles of short story collections reveal migrant writers' preoccupation with word choice and naming (*All The Names They Used For God* by Anjali Sachdeva, *The Word Desire* by Rikki Ducornet), pronunciation and diction (*How to Pronounce Knife* by Thammavongsa, *Seventeen Syllables* by Hisaye Yamamoto), linguistic loss (*How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Alvarez, *The Lost Language* by Marianne Villanueva), and second-language acquisition (*English Lessons* by Singh Baldwin, *Useful Phrases for Immigrants* by May-Lee Chai).

In this chapter, I focus on stories and collections by Danticat, Adichie, Kincaid and Lahiri to explore the cultural implications of female authorship and language use, and probe how contemporary migrant women writers situate themselves as daughters and female storytellers within the gendered and familial frameworks that structure diaspora, literary and linguistic relations. Language, its acquisition, transmission, practice or loss, constitutes the core of these writers' stories and writing. Though they come from different ethnic, cultural and linguistic heritages, they share a similarly combative relationship with English as one of the languages of imperialism and an equally energetic commitment to navigating their own linguistic and cultural identities to find a language and literary voice that best suits their own cultural in-betweenness.¹³ In their stories, they dramatize their unique and layered relationship with their first language and with English and their search for a language in which they feel at home. Kincaid and Danticat were born in the Caribbean, in colonial English-speaking Antigua and postcolonial French-speaking Haiti respectively, grew up speaking the local Creole alongside the colonial language, and moved to North America in their teenage years. Adichie lives between the U.S and Nigeria, and is a fluent speaker of Igbo alongside

¹³ As Homi Bhabha has argued in *The Location of Culture*, migrants live "border lives" and are therefore both on the margins of, and in between, different nations. As such, their subjectivity contests received notions of identity as fixed, 'pure', exclusionary and geographically located. It stresses "the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities" (1). See also Stuart Hall on migrant identity and hybridity, as discussed in chapter 4.

English, the official language of Nigeria. Lahiri's Bengali parents migrated to the UK (where she was born), and then to Long Island where she grew up speaking Bengali at home and English in the public world. Navigating between their so-called mother tongues and English, the language of colonisation and/or migration, these writers represent the mother tongue as a tool for cultural survival as well as a source of distress. Lahiri, for instance, has written of the torment of having "to joust between [...] two languages" in her memoir (2017: 153). Linking language, storytelling and motherhood, their stories explore matrilineal language transmission in migrant, diasporic and postcolonial settings in order to challenge or adhere to a specifically female linguistic and cultural lineage. This chapter constitutes a critical evaluation of the different attitudes, approaches and positions that these writers display to language in their stories. In the process, it also signals the variety of ways in which language is written about in migrant literature.

The linguistic concerns of migrant women writers are often explored through generational connections and conflicts. I build on this to construct this chapter around a matrilineal framework; indeed, in the context of migration the familial metaphor has particularly acute resonances as families are broken apart by physical, cultural and/or linguistic distance. It is significant too that second-language acquisition, linguistic and cultural assimilation, and migrant language transmission among diasporic populations is conceptualised, in linguistics, in terms of generational conflict. Linguists have connected the model of Anglicization and migrant-language decline in North America with a three-generation shift, which this chapter will expand to colonial contexts and conceptualise as "grandmother tongue", "mother tongue" and "daughter tongue".¹⁴ Each generation

¹⁴ I borrow the concept of "grandmother tongue" from postcolonial and/or migrant writers Andreï Makine, Josip Novakovich, Thomas Lim, and Gisèle Pineau, who have used the metaphor in a variety of ways to describe their relationship to their ancestors' languages, languages that they were not raised in, but which hold connotations of warmth and familiarity, of displaced roots. The grandmother tongue thus often refers to the language of first-generation migrants, to that of the ancestral homeland, or to an older local language that is being displaced by colonial/empirical practices.

experiences a different level of exposure to the English- and diasporic- languages. Broadly speaking, linguists concur that the first generation of migrants, born outside of North America, learn English as adults and out of necessity but continue to speak their native tongue at home, and raise bilingual children. This second generation, born in North America, tends to favour English over their parents' native language(s) and ultimately, "the language of the host culture [...] is really their first language rather than the language their parents speak" (Espin 48). Exposure to their parents' language does "not translate automatically into either foreign language fluency, literacy or use" (Rumbaut and Massey 152) as they are socialised into English at key developmental stages of their childhood. The third generation is subsequently brought up in a mainly English-speaking environment and the majority is monolingual. This model of generational Anglicisation is framed by a conception of North American society as hegemonically English-speaking and built on the assumption that monolingual English proficiency is necessary for belonging and being considered American. In this narrative, the assumption is that Anglicisation is the desired destination point and that languages associated with the older generations (and, like them, to an inevitable demise) need to be let go of.

This discourse resonates with the dominant colonial narrative of a "naturally evolving" idea of progress which, as McClintock explains in *Imperial Leather*, views physical and historical movement as intertwined, with the movement forward "of humanity from slouching deprivation to erect, enlightened reason" (9) matching the migration from the "Third World" to the West and the subsequent assimilation of its "modern" values. In this narrative, returning to the ancestral homeland or mother tongue would be a "regression backward [...] to degeneracy [...] from erect verbal consciousness [...] down [...] to the shambling, tongueless zone of the precolonial [or in this context, pre-migration], from speech to silence" (9-10). This evolution is, in fact, as Lauret argues in *Wanderwords*, a direct result of "coercive Americanisation programmes up until the 1920s and immigration

restriction between 1924 and 1965, which conspired against the use of languages other than English in literature no less than in the home and street” (25). Gloria Anzaldúa famously described these repeated attacks and censure against non-standard “illegitimate” languages as “linguistic terrorism” to expose the destructive effects of internal and external forms of linguistic colonisation on hybrid identities (38). The removal of all Spanish-language content from the White House official website in January 2017, a few hours after Donald Trump took office following a campaign mired in xenophobia, further illustrates the pervasiveness of the Americanization discourse. In light of the linguistic and demographic shifts since the 1980s (with Spanish becoming the second language of the U.S., migrants from other cultures creating new diaspora communities, and the revivals of Yiddish and Native languages), this ideology betrays a conservative attempt to cement the monolingualism of the nation.

Against this powerful narrative of assimilation and monolingualism, the mother tongue and the migrant mother figure can be mobilised as sites for community history, cultural survival and resistance. In many stories, grandmothers and mothers embody the homeland and the mother tongue, through their connections with home, domesticity, ritual, oral storytelling and non-English languages. While in Danticat’s stories mothers act as links between past and present, Americanised daughters and the Haitian homeland, in other stories the mother marks the rupture from the “grandmother tongue”, symbolising instead the (neo)colonial cultural and linguistic disruption between past and future generations. The colonised Antiguan and Nigerian mothers from Kincaid’s and Adichie’s stories, and the fully assimilated second-generation migrant mother in Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” have parted ways with the “authentic” pre-colonial and/or pre-migration grandmother cultures. Like the third generation in the linguistic model of Americanisation, the (grand)daughters in these stories – and, to a certain extent, the writers too – look back at their female ancestors to firmly establish their own, independent voices.

The English Father Tongue

In a seminal study on language and gender published in the early 1980s, Dale Spender drew attention to the fact that the English language is “man-made” and that, far from being the gender-neutral medium of communication it had generally been considered until then, it is an instrument through which patriarchy finds expression and secures its values. Language, she writes, “helps form the limits of our reality. It is our means of ordering, classifying and manipulating the world” (3). Where French theorists from the 1970s onwards, including Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, famously called for the establishment of a new, antipatriarchal language – *écriture féminine* -, English-speaking postcolonial and ethnic women writers too started to question the language’s ability to reflect their own experience, fully aware of its role in “partak[ing] in the white-male-is-norm ideology” (Minh-Ha 1989: 6). A poem entitled “Discourse on the Logic of Language” (1989) by the Trinidadian-Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip provides an excellent example of the preoccupation with language and its engagement with the intersecting vectors of gender, race and colonial history in postcolonial migrant writing. It allows us to think about the gendered complexity of linguistic and literary genealogies through its portrayal of the English language as a colonial and “rational” father tongue, an imposed, loveless and foreign language of domination:

English is
my father tongue.
A father tongue is
a foreign language,
therefore English is
a foreign language
not a mother tongue (30)

a rationale explained in the previous stanza which claims that,

“A mother tongue is not
a foreign lan lan lang
language
l/anguish

[...]
 – a foreign anguish (30).

The poem explores the relationship between Caribbean creoles and Standard English and views colonisation as a linguistic rape, from which “a dumb-tongued / dub-tongued” (30) child was born, the offspring of two opposing and gendered cultures.¹⁵ The voiceless mother becomes the embodiment of native oral traditions as she silently blows “her words, her mother’s words, those of her mother’s mother, and all the mothers before” into her child’s mouth (30) in a gesture of cultural resistance and survival which creates a bond between generations of women. The poem invokes binaries, confronting the powerful and venerated Western scribal and male tradition, alongside the hidden pre-colonial, female, oral traditions that live outside of colonial language. Yet, not unlike Cixous’ “Laugh of the Medusa”, it then seeks to disrupt these binaries by complicating this linguistic split. By declaring that “English is / my mother tongue / is / my father tongue” (32), it reveals that even the pre-Oedipal connection between mother and child presented in the text resides *within* patriarchal and colonial discourse.

Despite the mother tongue’s ongoing use as an empowering term by feminists and migrant women writers, the concept is steeped in patriarchal and even colonial discourse. The “mother tongue” concept as we currently employ it traces back to late 18th century Europe and the birth of the idea of the modern nation state as homogeneous, monolingual and monocultural. In “La Langue Maternelle, Part Maudite de la Linguistique?” Jean-Didier Urbain significantly speaks of the standardisation of the national mother tongue in terms of “internal and external colonisation” (23, my translation), noting that the idea of the nation

¹⁵ The rape imagery as regards language resonates with claims made by other female postcolonial writers. Arundhati Roy has described English both as “the skin of my thought” and as a language which makes her feel “like [...] the child of a raped mother” (qtd. in Talib 11). More famously, Kincaid has claimed that “the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal’s deed. [It] can explain and express the deed only from the criminal’s point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me” (1988: 31-32).

emerged alongside colonial enterprise. The mother tongue concept, then, is inseparable from the idea of acculturation, its goal being to “eradicate the idioms of savages, whether they be from the colonies or the countryside” (23, my translation). As multilingualism came to be considered a threat to social cohesion, the mother tongue emerged as “the starting point for the acquisition, at home, of the national language [...] the language of vulgarization of the national idiom” (Urbain 20, my translation). The juxtaposition of the domestic sphere of the home and the political formation of the nation Urbain points to is the result of the “context of larger social and political transformations that produced new and interrelated conceptions of family, kinship, motherhood, nation, and state”, as Yasemin Yildiz remarks in *Beyond the Mother Tongue?* (10). Indeed, at a time when bourgeois society increasingly defined the mother as a caring homemaker, the mother was recuperated by the national project as an agent of linguistic socialisation in a role which fixed her in the home. In standing “for a unique, irreplaceable, unchangeable biological origin that situates the individual automatically in a kinship network and by extension in the nation” (Yildiz 9), the mother tongue establishes an organic connection between land, ethnicity, language, culture and women as homemakers. In *Stories of Women*, Boehmer exposes the enduring nature and globalisation of the mother in examining the nationalist discourses of postcolonial nations in the 1960s, where “[t]he image of the mother invites connotations of origins – birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord – and rests upon the frequent, and some might say ‘natural’ identification of the mother with the beloved earth, the national territory and the first-spoken language, the national tongue” (27). With the mother tongue metaphor, the powerful and persistent lure of the mother as a site of origin and authenticity extends to land and language. In many situations, breaking away from colonization meant rejecting everything imported and entailed a return to an ‘authentic’, pre-colonial, mother tongue. Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s famous decision to renounce English and commit himself entirely to his native language Gikuyu is, for instance, articulated in unapologetically gendered terms

according to which using an acquired language means “taking from [one’s] mother tongue to enrich other tongues” (8) and literatures. In other words, using a language that is not that of birth is deemed as ‘unnatural’ as maternal betrayal or even matricide. Thiong’o’s position regarding this is steeped in normative monolingualism, a paradigm that is indissociable from the mother tongue which, according to Yildiz, “cannot abide the notion of blurred boundaries, crossed loyalties, and unrooted languages” (8).

In the context of migration, however, the mother tongue’s assumed “organic” and “authentic” links to a unique culture, ethnicity and land, are challenged by writers who may have grown up multilingual, or who “instinctively” decide to write in a language other than the one they were born in. Remoteness from the homeland and difficulties surrounding integration often encourage a stronger sense of identification and loyalty with the native home, where motherhood and filial imagery are frequently employed to represent the emotional charge of the relationship the migrant entertains with their home country (Safran 83-84). However, the writers I discuss demonstrate that there is no neatly bounded and “authentic” mother tongue. Writers such as Danticat and Lahiri, who grew up with two languages and now write in a third which has no direct colonial or “biological” hold over them, can find it extremely liberating to write in a language that holds no filial claims over them. Thus, Lahiri claims, “I am, in Italian, a tougher, freer writer” (2017: 173).

It is striking that despite awareness of the essentialism that underpins gendered associations of the mother tongue and national culture with women, the maternal metaphor persists in contemporary migrant short fiction by women. As Yi-Lin Yu notes in *Mother, She Wrote*, in recent years diasporic women’s fiction has seen the emergence of themes of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships in an “exploration of the intricate affinities between their female identity and their motherlands or mother cultures” and a renegotiation of the vocabulary of diaspora from a female perspective (127); a phenomenon

that is abundantly reflected in contemporary short fiction. In what follows, I consider the enduring suggestiveness of the maternal and explore how this initially patriarchal metaphor is being challenged or adhered to, repurposed, revitalised and hybridized by postcolonial and migrant women. Through this alternative female genealogy which reinterprets motherhood and one's relationship to land and language, I foreground the ways these stories are embedded in late twentieth century feminist cross-generational thought. In a tradition of "thinking back through our mothers" initiated by Woolf (74) and later extended by Alice Walker, this matrilineal framework enables a gendered analysis of language and cultural transmission in migration narratives.

The Mother Tongue: Re-Membering Female Lineages

In "Women Like Us" (1995), the closing story of her first collection of short stories, Danticat directly promotes generational continuities, invokes the homeland, language and blood as intricately connected and suggests that cultural bonds signify as powerfully as biological ties. The story is narrated by an unnamed migrant teenager who wishes to become a writer, all the while acknowledging the crucial influence of her mother's and female ancestors' voices on her. Despite the narrator's displacement from Haiti, she remains in touch with her Haitian roots via her use of Kreyol, the language she speaks with her mother in the kitchen, and the language she writes of. Storytelling and Kreyol are significantly intertwined in this story as Kreyol heavily relies on imagery, proverbs and metaphors. For the narrator, one does not exist without the other. It is indeed through storytelling that Haitian Kreyol, culture and values are passed on to her by her mother. From the outset, the mother tongue is depicted as life-giving and nurturing, as language and food are simultaneously fed to the child throughout the text. The mother is described as a "kitchen poet" (a term borrowed from Marshall) who "slip[s] phrases into [her] stew and wrap[s] meaning around [her] pork before frying it", "make[s] narrative dumplings and stuff[s][her]

daughter's mouth" and slips her "fables and metaphors, her similes and soliloquies, her diction and *je ne sais quoi* daily [...] into [her] survival soup" (191-192). As well as being fed this language, the narrator hints to the fact that it is passed on to her almost "naturally" by her mother in a gesture that materializes birth: "Your mother, she introduced you to the first echoes of the tongue that you now speak when at the end of the day she would braid your hair while you sat between her legs" (195). In positioning the daughter between her mother's legs as she has her hair braided and is being socialized into Kreyol culture, Danticat evokes parallels between the braid and the umbilical cord, giving this scene a powerful symbolic resonance. Natural hair is an important preoccupation in short fiction by black women and a burgeoning academic field.¹⁶ In this passage, the trope of the braid as umbilical cord recalls Paul Gilroy's assertion in *The Black Atlantic*, that modern black political culture is "[m]arked by its European origins" and has, consequently, "always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (19). The mother's and the Kreyol language's ongoing associations with feeding, domesticity and birth, and their role in perpetuating links with the ancestral homeland, Haiti, encourage the connotations of "natural" origins critiqued by Yildiz and Boehmer. The mother is located in a matrilineal chain of "nine hundred and ninety-nine women" (195) and plays an intermediary role between the family's Haiti-based ancestors and her Americanized child, as

¹⁶ Examples include Aidoo's "Her Hair Politics" (2002), Adichie's "Hair" (2007) and "Imitation" (2009), Reid-Benta's "Snow Day", Petina Gappah's "The News of Her Death", and Arimah's "Who Will Greet You at Home". Cristina Cruz-Gutiérrez explains that the contemporary literary interest in Afro hair goes back to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, but that it has developed a new phase since the late 2000s through social media (67). This new phase is reflected in much contemporary literature, including in the contemporary writings of Smith, Taiye Selasi, Mahtem Shiferraw, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Ayòbámi Adébáyò, and Helen Oyeyemi, to name but a few. Like Danticat, these writers mobilise hair to not only highlight racism and question the Eurocentrism of beauty standards, but to reveal the creativity entailed by braiding and the sense of black female community and insider knowledge. Black natural hair is rarely celebrated in the media and in popular cultures (see Ingrid Banks' *Hair Matters* and Althea Prince's *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*). Literary scholarship on the topic is burgeoning, but still visibly lags behind the volume of hair stories, focusing overwhelmingly on Adichie's *Americanah* and on children's books.

the text's leitmotiv suggests: "You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother. Your mother who looked like your grandmother and her grandmother before her" (191). By passing on the language and looks of her ancestors to her daughter, the mother is continuing a cultural female lineage.

Danticat's casting of Kreyol as the 'authentic' and natural Haitian mother tongue is particularly interesting given that it originated as a mixed language and developed in a particularly 'unnatural' way. As George Lang puts it, "it is impossible to understand the genesis of Kreyol without reference to the dehumanizing conditions of plantation slavery and the multitude of Africans who were inducted into this machine" (130). The mother tongue's assumed natural connection to a specific land and its cultural homogeneity contrasts with the development of Kreyol, a language that emerged by the early 18th century from the cultural and linguistic interactions between African and colonial cultures, as a direct consequence of the importation of slaves from all over the African continent since the 16th century. With no "original" language to go back to, Kreyol grew to be the "indigenous" language of cultural, religious and political resistance in a dichotomous relationship with French, the white, colonial and administrative language. Significantly, Kreyol was mobilised in the Haitian revolution and was the preferred language of the pre-independence heroes of slave revolt, Makandal and Boukman, and of the independence leaders, Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dessalines (Lang 130).¹⁷ Though Kreyol has become the other official language alongside French since 1987, there continues to be a hierarchical relationship where Kreyol is the language of orality, everyday life, the home and the domestic sphere, whereas French is a more public, elitist, scribal and administrative language. This binary curiously reflects and reproduces typical gender roles and reminds us of the father tongue/mother tongue antinomy discussed above. Danticat's defining Kreyol as a mother

¹⁷ See C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938) for a full account of the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804.

tongue complicates the idea of origin by revealing how “inauthentic” languages can gain an attribute of “natural” authenticity over time. In “Women Like Us”, the namelessness of the characters, the lack of contextual detail, the everydayness of the domestic tasks and the repetitiveness of the text create a sense of timelessness in the story and thus positions Haitian matrilineal transmission as cyclical and repetitive, suggesting that the Kreyol words uttered by the mother have been, and will be, transmitted from generation to generation. The idea of origin develops over time through socialisation and repetition in the home.

In the North American context of “Women Like Us”, the Kreyol mother tongue is fundamentally linked with the distant land and the home becomes a site of cultural survival and resistance to linguistic and cultural assimilation. There is indeed a sense of urgency, an “urging [...] to speak through [...] her] pencil” (193), for the narrator in writing *in* and *about* Kreyol that infers that this matrilineal cultural transmission might be under threat. Danticat has explicitly remarked elsewhere that whereas in Haiti, “it was taken for granted that the spirited tales that burst out of my aunts and grandmothers would be carried into the future through us, their children and their children’s children”, that linguistic chain is often broken with migration (qtd. in Munro 2010). My slipping between character and writer here is deliberate. Though this text is not outwardly autobiographical, it does contain a relevant number of autobiographic resonances. These suggest that Danticat’s project to prevent this chain from breaking is similar to the child’s in “Women Like Us” and shapes their shared decision to become writers. Danticat moved to the U.S. when she was twelve to join her parents, who wanted her to become a nurse, just as the narrator’s parents. In the dedications at the end of the collection, Danticat places herself within the same lineage of female storytellers the narrative, and the volume, consider. In the same paragraph, she “dedicate[s] this book to the memory of [her] aunts Josephine and Marie-Rose” after whom some of the characters are named, and “Paule Marshall, the greatest kitchen poet of all” (219). By doing this, she erases the usual hierarchies between published writers and everyday storytellers

and draws them together as a global matrilineal literary family, while also situating herself in a lineage of female Haitian and Caribbean storytellers. Even the title of the cycle refers to storytelling as collaborative and communal. As revealed in “Children of the Sea” (the opening story), “Krik? Krak!” is a call-and-response: “Someone says, Krik? You answer, Krak! And [...] they go on and tell these stories” (12). This is, in fact, the project of Danticat’s short story cycle. *Krik? Krak!* (1995) formally dramatizes the indebtedness of contemporary Haitian female writers to their silenced literary ancestors by reinscribing their experiences in the history of Haiti. Ultimately, it builds a linguistic and literary family where each member’s life is textually entangled with the previous and following generations and with Haitian history. The character of Josephine, for instance, who narrates “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” is a direct descendent of Défilée (a prominent slave-born figure of the Haitian revolution) and the mother of Marie, the protagonist of “Between the Pool and the Gardenias”. In that story, Marie connects the women in the short story cycle together with Haitian history as she enumerates the names she would have called her miscarried children. She refers to her great grandmother Eveline, who died at the Massacre River, the site of the 1937 traumatic massacre of Haitians living on the Dominican border orchestrated by the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo. She also invokes her grandmother Défilée (Josephine’s mother in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven”), her godmother Lili (protagonist of “A Wall of Fire Rising”), the friend of her grandmother Jacqueline (encountered in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven”), Hermine (the mother in “Caroline’s Wedding”), Marie-Magdalene (the dead mother in “The Missing Piece”) and Celianne (the pregnant young woman fleeing Haiti in “Children of the Sea”). These women comprise a small selection of the “nine hundred and ninety-nine women” (195) that came before the child (both formally and historically) in “Women Like Us”, indicating how she, and by extension, Danticat, are descendants of these histories and women.

To write in the Kreyol mother tongue, then, is to reconnect with this cultural heritage. The girl’s writing about, possibly in, Kreyol in her “notebook made out of discarded

fish wrappers, panty-hose cardboard” (192) reinforces her endangered connections with her homeland and results in her merging with her ancestors. In this respect, the second person singular narrator “you” is challenging as it is unclear whether the text is narrated by the child to an implied reader, or whether it is narrated by her Haitian ancestors addressing her. The title “Women Like Us” implies a multi-voiced narrator and incorporates the child into her ancestors, yet simultaneously the narration is constantly shifting, and the daughter’s ancestors are alternatively designated as “we” and “they”. In one passage, the ancestors seem to have taken over the text and to be addressing the young girl: “We are never farther than the sweat on your brows [...] we are always with you”. A couple of lines later, these same women have become the object of writing: “They would wake up [...] They were singing [...]” (194). These shifts in pronouns confuse the reader as to where the ancestors end and where the child begins, something which is further emphasized in the child’s bodily transformation. Like the short story cycle, she metaphorically incorporates all the other women in her family: her ancestors are thus embodied in her braids (“Some of the braids are long, others are short [...] Like the diverse women in your family” 192), alive in her head (“their murmurs [...] sizzling in your head”, 193), beating in her heart (“the pounding of a thousand other hearts that have outlived yours” 195), “liv[ing] in [her] blood” (194), “boiling in [her] blood” (196) – despite the metaphysical distance between the child and her ancestors. This plural voice and return to the biological with the accentuated focus on blood in association with language underlines the collective nature of the mother tongue and its rootedness in Haitian culture. Recalling Boehmer’s critique of the way that language is always naturalized in the figure of the mother, Danticat’s story suggests ways of navigating *across* the supposed either/or of the nature/culture debates surrounding ‘woman’s place’ to offer an idea of language acquisition that is passed on both biologically and culturally.

By contrast, in “The Headstrong Historian” (2009), Adichie suggests that the “natural” link between Igbo land, language and people has been ruptured by colonisation.

The Igbo language is therefore described as a means of resistance to colonial discourse. Like Danticat's "Women Like Us", the three-generation saga depicts women specifically as bearers of culture, and female ancestors as cultural points of reference and linguistic inspirations to their descendants. The story opens in pre-colonial Igbo society, as Nwambga witnesses the arrival of the first European missionaries. Recently widowed, she sends off her only son Anikwenwa to study in a Catholic mission selected specifically for its English-medium education as she associates English – "the white man's language" (207) – with the authority



Fig. 3. Raphael. *Saint Michael Vanquishing Satan*. 1518, Louvre, Paris.

incurred "by the white men's guns" (206) and rapidly foresees the social empowerment her son can gain from a Western education. However, Anikwenwa uncritically assimilates to English practices and eventually becomes a catechist himself, transforming into Michael as his Christian name replaces his name of birth. The name Anikwenwa translates as "earth (God Ani) permit child" and therefore suggests a symbiosis with the earth of Igbo land, which is further heightened by the Igbo ritual burial of a newborn's umbilical cord within the family land (Agabasiere). The name Michael on the contrary brings to mind Western cultural affiliations as a subtle link is drawn between the character, a catechist who rejects everything Igbo as "heathen", and St Michael, who in Catholic imagery is often represented as the dragon slayer, the killer of paganism and the embodiment of the superiority of the human mind over nature (Fig. 3). The replacement of Igbo by English materializes through his own cultural and character metamorphosis from a curious and open-minded Igbo child to an intolerant adult. Anikwenwa's transformation into Michael resonates with Ngugi's description of "colonial alienation", that is, "the disassociation of the sensibility of that

[African colonial] child from his natural and social environment” (17). Adichie’s critique of colonial education thus echoes Ngugi’s claim that the imposition of English resulted in the colonization of the mind as “people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, [...] and ultimately in themselves” is annihilated as they see the world through the language of colonization and are taught to despise their culture (3). Vehemently determined to assimilate to colonial culture and cast off his cultural origins, Michael marries Agnes (formally Mgbeke), a recent convert, and together they embrace their colonial upbringing and ensure their descendants’ departure from Igbo culture, religion and language. In their second child, Grace, Nwambga sees the reincarnation of her late husband, and decides to ignore the Christian name that was given to her. Instead, she calls her Afamufena, which translates as “My Name Will Not Be Lost” (214) and places on her the responsibility of cultural transmission.

For Grace, whose English-language schooling has interrupted the relationship between herself and her land of origin, Igbo becomes a grandmother language. Nwambga thus emerges as a point of cultural authenticity and incarnates the precolonial Igbo culture and language. Nwambga is in full symbiosis with Igbo land. Her life and daily activities are steeped in her natural environment: she is a potter and a poet, a point of origin and cultural authenticity who bathes in a stream protected by the goddess Oyi, and sleeps on a mud bed. Grace retains a deep connection with Igbo culture, demonstrates “solemn interest in her poetry and her stories” (214-15) as a child, and feels a “natural”, bodily, pull to return home when her grandmother is dying: “[she] had been unable to sleep for days, her restless spirit urging her home” (215). Not only are “home” and the grandmother conflated in this passage, but the “restless spirit” Adichie refers to is no doubt a direct reference to Grace’s *chi*, a personal spirit which is central to Igbo religion. In a piece entitled “Chi in Igbo Cosmology”, Chinua Achebe explains that in Igbo belief, each individual has a personal *chi* which has a special hold over them and which creates them: “The Igbo believe that a man receives his

gifts or talents, his character – indeed his portion in life generally – before he comes into the world. It seems there is an element of choice available to him at that point; and that his *chi* presides over bargaining” (1975: 97). The power of Grace’s *chi* hinted at in the above passage, then, suggests that, despite colonization, Grace continues to be *essentially* Igbo. This return to the grandmother (against her parents’ wishes) foreshadows Grace’s future challenging of her colonial education and her scholarly return to the Igbo language and culture, as a researcher of South Nigerian history inspired by her grandmother’s culture. Eventually, Grace reverts to her grandmother tongue by “officially chang[ing] her first name from Grace to Afamufena” (218), a change which mirrors her personal development and, to a certain extent, corrects (or makes up for) her father’s oppositional journey. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have argued, “to name reality is [...] to exert power over it” (261). Grace’s name change is in fact part of a wider postcolonial trend of renaming streets, airports and individual citizens on the African continent in order to reflect political independence and to reappropriate submerged histories.¹⁸ These changes are, nonetheless, once again marked by the “natural” embeddedness of culture, land and language. Grace enacts this change as a result of “feeling an odd rootlessness in the later years of her life” (218), part of it having to do with her move to Lagos and her distance from where she was born, and part of it having to do with the fact that her name, Grace, was attributed to her by the Irish Catholic priest who baptized her, not by her biological ancestors. The name change allows her to symbolically re-root herself into Igbo land and language, to claim her filial relationship to them, and points to the fact that colonization has not managed to entirely cut her off from her grandmother language, land and culture.

¹⁸ Petina Gappah’s short story cycle, *Rotten Row* (2016), offers another example of this, but from a Zimbabwean perspective. The stories all relate to the criminal courts found in Rotten Row, a road in Harare that was given its name by the Cecil John Rhodes’ British South Africa Company which founded Rhodesia. The name of the street is a homage to a road in London called Rotten Row, itself a corruption of “Route du roi” (King’s road), a road established to provide access to Kensington Palace.

The final scene takes place on Nwambga's deathbed, with Afamufena "simply h[olding] her grandmother's hand, the palm thickened from years of making pottery" (218). The intimacy of this gesture evokes the matrilineal act of handing down culture, language and experience through a similar imagery as that used by Minh-Ha in a chapter aptly entitled "Grandma's Story":

The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, from body to body, hand to hand. [...] The speech is seen, heard, and smelled, tasted, and touched. [...] It destroys, brings into life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission" (1989: 121).

Like Minh-Ha, Adichie's depiction of grandmother and granddaughter as, respectively, folkloric and academic storytellers appears to argue that African women are the "keepers and transmitters" (Minh-Ha 1989: 121) of an oral matrilineal tradition of non-Western women storytellers. Like Danticat, Adichie is quite clearly placing herself within this tradition, as the biographical similarities between Afamufena and Adichie imply. In a close reading of this same story, Daria Tunca has convincingly drawn parallels between character and author including their subject reorientations at university, their change of names, their "worldwide advocacy for the respect of African cultures" (2012: 245) and their re-writing of defining books from the perspective of the narratively marginalized. Where Afamufena eventually rewrites colonial history through her academic publications, with "The Headstrong Historian" Adichie offers a female-centered rewriting of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which challenges the "patriarchal inheritance in African writing" (Boyce Davies 2016: 237).¹⁹

¹⁹ It is highly significant that this story, which engages with linguistic and cultural kinship, should be a rewriting of Achebe, as Adichie has repeatedly been described as his literary daughter, due to their shared Igbo roots, the fact that she grew up in a house in the Nigerian university town of Nsukka which Achebe had lived in, and her own acknowledgment of his profound influence on her writing. With this story, Adichie pays homage to the literary influence of the so-called "father of African literature", but also complicates it by contesting Achebe's position as the "origin" of African literature and referencing previous African storytellers whose lives and stories have gone unheard due to colonisation, alphabetism, gender or language. Adichie thus embraces this double heritage.

Additional points worthy of consideration are that both have done archival research into women's lives in precolonial Igboland, and that the character of Nwambga is presumably inspired by Adichie's great-grandmother. In an interview, Adichie describes how her grandmother's husband died young and left her with a son to raise, and, like Nwambga, had to fight her husband's family from claiming all of his property (Cohen 2013).

If the story seems to echo with Ngugi's claims in implying that the return to the indigenous grandmother tongue is a viable and feasible option, the language of the text sends out a different message and insinuates that this return may not be that straightforward, or even that desirable. The fact that Adichie's story is *not* written in Igbo reveals the extent to which British colonization has impacted Nigeria and suggests that the return to Igbo can only be partial at best. Like Afamufena and most Igbo-speakers of her generation, Adichie is fluent in Igbo but cannot write in it as all her schooling was done in English (Igbo being an optional subject), and writing in Igbo would make her even less accessible to Igbo people than writing in English does (Azodo). In most of the stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie carefully distinguishes which language is being used, especially when reported in English. Throughout the collection, Igbo appears as a natural home and is consistently used for interjections ("Ise!" 86, "Chai!" 146), cursing ("Tufia!" 80), and terms of endearment ("nwanne, sister" 116), while at times English is portrayed as formal and inauthentic. In the opening story, "Cell One", for instance, a teenager lies and betrays his family in sophisticated Standard English, and reverts to Igbo, or more humble forms of English, in moments of truth. This dichotomy, which views Igbo as the language of emotions and sincerity and English as that of formality, legality and unnaturalness, is echoed in "The Headstrong Historian" where Igbo is the language of the land while English is the "white man's language" (207). However, the English language is not entirely dismissed as the language of the colonizer. The return to the Igbo grandmother tongue does not imply a complete disavowal of the English language; rather, it takes place *via* English. My contention

is that by writing in Igbo English, a language characterized by Igbo syntax, transliterations and code switching, a language “that to an ear that is not used to it can sometimes sound a bit awkward” (Adichie 2014), Adichie offers a third way.²⁰ This English is detached from its colonial past, has been repossessed and has become part and parcel of the Igbo linguistic landscape. It is, according to Adichie, “rooted in a Nigerian experience” (Azodo), a claim that resonates powerfully with Achebe’s famous declaration that English can be refashioned to carry the Nigerian experience (1997: 347). Therefore, though Adichie seems to be claiming a “natural” connection with Igboland and the Igbo language, she is simultaneously disassociating the English language from an ideological Englishness.

The narrative form of the short story enhances the dialogue between past and future, oral and scribal storytellers that Danticat and Adichie reflect on, as it is “the oldest and newest literary genre” (Baldwin and Quinn 5). As indicated above, the genealogy of the genre is traced back to ancient oral legends and tales, and “nameless, faceless people usually overlooked in [...] literary history [...] those who never owned paper or pencil” (Brown 1997: xvii). These are people like Danticat’s “kitchen poets” and Adichie’s female storytellers. Adichie and Danticat’s stories identify storytelling as a fundamentally collaborative, female and domestic artform which they oppose to male, Western and colonial scribal practices. In *The Postcolonial Short Story*, Awadalla and March-Russell argue that “pauses, hesitations and digressions” and other signs of orality disrupt and challenge the authority of the printed word (3). These, they argue, are “evidence of cultural survival, acting as one of the contrary means by which the onslaught of civilisation and the eradication of indigenous cultures are challenged” (4). This claim is even more relevant for migrant women writing in a generalised context of assimilation. Through Danticat’s use of culinary imagery, leitmotifs and repetition,

²⁰ See also other Nigerian writers such as Gabriel Okara, Amos Tutuola, Buchi Emecheta, and Wole Soyinka who adopt similar approaches by drawing from particular aspects of specific Nigerian cultures and languages.

Adichie's heavy use of anaphoras, and both writers' incorporation of oral languages in the English text, they revitalise languages and cultures that have been silenced over time.

(M)Other Tongue, (S)mother Tongue

While Danticat and Adichie's protagonists turn to their culturally silenced female ancestors as sources of inspiration for cultural survival, actively placing themselves as part of this gendered storytelling lineage, in "Girl" (1983), Kincaid suggests there is no "original" Antiguan language to look back at. The story is placed at the beginning of her debut collection of interlinked stories, *At the Bottom of the River*, and approaches the issue of the mother tongue from an experimental angle, removing it from its conventional primary associations with the land of birth. The story cycle, which is loosely inspired by Kincaid's childhood memories growing up in colonial Antigua in the 1950s, follows the narrator's journey into womanhood on her quest for personal independence and voice, through her conflictual and complex relationship with her mother. Unlike Caribbean migrant writers including Senior, Goodison and Mootoo, who have made persistent use of Creole or various registers of 'dialect', the collection is entirely written in Standard English. "Girl" suggests that this is not so much a choice, but a bitter resignation, a direct consequence of the violent colonization of Antigua by the British.

In exposing the ways in which mothers are complicit with patriarchal discourse and pointing to the impossibility of celebrating – or even retrieving – a mother tongue, Kincaid identifies English as a father tongue. The story consists of only one, three-page-long, sentence; a list of imperatives uttered by a presumably Antiguan mother to her daughter which reveals the mother's indoctrination to the culture of the 'Mother Country', England. The mother's educational discourse is an attempt to shape her daughter around an imported model of femininity: the Victorian Angel in the House, which Elaine Showalter has described as a "Perfect Lady [...] contently submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and

religiosity, queen in her own realm of the Home” (2003: 14). The significance of the story’s opening words – “Wash the white clothes on Monday [...]; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline” (3) – have been overlooked by critics, evoking, as they do, a popular Victorian nursery rhyme based on strict housekeeping routines:

They that wash on Monday
Have all the week to dry;

They that wash on Tuesday
Are not so much awry;

They that wash on Wednesday
Are not so much to blame;

They that wash on Thursday
Wash for shame;

They that wash on Friday
Wash in need;

And they that wash on Saturday,
Oh! they're sluts indeed (Halliwell 43).

The associations made between hygiene, forward planning and feminine virtue are at the heart of the mother’s warnings to her daughter that should she not follow the guidelines and standards set out, she will be “a slut.” This warning becomes a mantra and is repeated three times in the space of three pages. Though the mother’s strict orders signal the high aspirations she has for her daughter and her awareness that by teaching her to be “respectable”, servile and subservient she will gain in upward mobility, she draws on colonial discourse to figure her daughter as naturally ‘savage’, sexually provocative, and incapable of ever resembling a proper British lady. When ordering the child to “try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent upon becoming” (3), the verb “bent” additionally conjures up oppositional images to the lady’s dignified walk, implied to be gracious and straight. Furthermore, the verb “try” (in “try to walk like a lady”) stands in stark contrast with the straightforward imperatives used beforehand regarding housekeeping (“wash”, “eat”, “soak” etc), implying again that while there is no doubt as to the child’s laundry and

housekeeping abilities, she can only clumsily strive to imitate the “innate” manners of such ladies. The lexical field of water and laundry (“wash” repeated four times, and “soak” repeated twice, “spit” twice and “water”) and the importance of the washing, tidying and repairing cycle in the text becomes an allegory for what the mother’s education is doing: culturally, morally and religiously “whitewashing” her daughter, washing away everything about her that is native, just as in the colonial enterprise, with the intent of social advancement.

Crucially, in choosing to write the mother’s instructions in Standard English, Kincaid reveals how the language is intertwined with ideas of ladyhood. The discourse that is being promoted here, and the prescriptive and specifically Victorian image of femininity that is being conveyed by the mother’s speech, added to the shortness of the text and the use of imperatives, reminds the reader of what might be an entry in popular 19th century conduct books and domestic manuals such as *Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management* (1861) read by Victorian women to instruct them on how to keep a good household. With English being the language of the mother, Kincaid suggests that it has imposed itself as the mother tongue. Kincaid’s understanding of the “mother tongue” as a colonizing language that socializes the colonies into British values, thus further empowering the “mother land” or metropole echoes Urbain’s claim that the empirical project recuperates the mother as an agent of linguistic and cultural socialization while it simultaneously cements her in the home (20).

This linguistic decision is crucial as, realistically, a working-class Antiguan mother such as the one described here would have spoken to her daughter in Creole or Antiguan English – or even Dominican patois, as Kincaid’s mother is from Dominica – while Standard English would have been the official language studied at school (Dilger). As the main scribal language an Antiguan writer has at their disposal, the English mother tongue here is

envisioned as an allegory to emphasize the violence of British colonization. In articulating itself as a “mother country” to its colonial subjects, the metropole exerts power over their souls, minds and bodies. To consider England as the mother country is to recognize colonization as the determining marker of history and to consider Caribbean colonial subjects as marked by an essentially infantile, subordinate and indebted relationship to the West; one that is highly recognizable in the mother-daughter relationship in the text.

The English “mother” discourse and the concomitant English “mother tongue” develop a hegemonic culture, propagate their own norms and values, and erase all other languages and cultures. The short story format, the three-page-long sentence and the number of orders issued altogether create a stifling situation where there is literally no space to breathe due to the lack of final stops. It suggests a suffocatingly repressive regime of gendered propriety being passed on from mother to daughter in which the mother is complicit with patriarchal norms. She tries to speak back, but her two short remarks are left unacknowledged, lost among her mother’s flow of words, suffocated in the sentence which textually imprisons her voice.

[...] don’t sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn’t speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don’t eat fruit on the street – flies will follow you; *but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*; this is how to sew a button; this is how to make a button hole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress [...]

In this story, the mother’s and daughter’s voices blend, sharing the space of the text in a pre-Oedipal unity that is both desired and suffocating, that celebrates transmission of knowledge and mother-daughter relationships while simultaneously highlighting their oppressiveness, echoing Kincaid’s own ambivalent relationship with her mother and resonating with other stories in the collection.

In various interviews, Kincaid has described her relationship with her mother as symbiotic until the birth of her brothers when she was nine, which tragically altered their

relationship. She was pulled out of school to help with the housework and to look after her siblings for whom her parents had higher expectations. At age 17, she was sent to the United States to work as an au pair for an American family but once there she cut off all links and changed her name from Elaine Potter Richardson to Jamaica Kincaid. Returning to the water and land imagery we find in "Girl", she notes in an interview that her "life might well have been destroyed [...] if [she] hadn't intervened [...] and pulled [her]self out of the water" (BBC). In another, she points to her mother as the source of her creativity: "[t]he fertile soil of my creative life is my mother" (Cudjoe 400). By interweaving biographical elements in this analysis, I am not striving to simply categorize this story cycle as an autobiography (although, of course, this is something Kincaid self-consciously plays with in much of her writing, most directly in *The Autobiography of My Mother*). Rather, my intention is to foreground the layers of complexity that mark this text and the consistent mother-land imagery implied using such elemental metaphors. Unapologetically linking British values and domesticity, land and water, fertility and creativity with her mother, Kincaid associates her mother with connotations of *inescapable* origin. In so doing, she associates the mother with both motherland and father tongue. The mother in Kincaid's "Girl" becomes a claustrophobic all-encompassing force.

I read the mother tongue in this story as a "smother tongue" that seems to s/mother the girl into a Victorian ideal of domesticity as the daughter is hardly allowed to speak and is not listened to. Of all the advice she is given, the only actions that are tolerated are those that don't involve speech ("wash", "cook", "sew", "iron", "sweep", "smile", "set a table", etc.). However, this does not prevent the daughter from speaking out twice disrupting colonial discourse. She interrupts it literally but also formally: her speech stands out visually, if not grammatically, through the use of italics representing her marginal thought through its slanted and sideways aspect. She also contradicts it ("*but I don't sing benna on Sundays*"), and ultimately questions its whole logic ("*but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?*").

The daughter's remarks and the mother's answer added to the different fonts suggest that mother and daughter are not speaking the same language: they cannot communicate or understand each other. This story becomes the embodiment of a cultural and linguistic generational gap between two eras, like in Adichie's story: the colonized mother and her daughter who tries to liberate herself from colonial discourse. Crucially, the daughter is told off for singing benna: "is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school? [...]; don't sing benna in Sunday school [...]; *but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school*" (3-4). Benna is laden with transgressive potential. It is a type of calypso that is specific to Antigua, developed during slavery and became a means of expression and communication through which slaves disseminated rumors, gossip and political news across the island. Through its bawdiness and its delivery in Creole and/or non-Standard English, benna was a form of cultural resistance, a space to deconstruct colonial language from within, to critique and unite against power (Hughes-Tafen 52). The construction of benna as antithetical to Sunday school in "Girl" points to different forms of linguistic and cultural affiliations. Antiguan Creole and creolized English, the languages of benna, are considered contradictory to the "purity" of Western Christian moral values and Standard English. To sing benna in Sunday school is a highly provocative gesture which would threaten feminine ideals of domesticity by going against the girl's Victorian education and its attendant prioritizing of subservience over expression, but which would also threaten the status of colonial power by creolizing it.

Given that there are less than a dozen occurrences of code-switching, or what Lauret has more poetically identified as "wanderwords" (2014), in the collection, this reference to benna in the story's opening page takes on heightened significance. Its recurring association with Sunday school in the excerpt above links Victorian and Antiguan cultures and languages grammatically within the same clauses, even as the mother is arguing that they are conflicting practices. My contention is that the grammatical/textual link between benna and

Sunday school appears, too, at a formal level, as evidence of the continuing impact of colonial culture. Through form, Kincaid's story claims that the story's resonance with Victorian domestic manuals is not antithetical with the benna form; indeed, as I have already argued, the story starts with the opening words of a nursery rhyme that can be sung. The story's rhythm, repetitiveness, and occasional call-and-response format echo the formal characteristics of benna. Further, the collection's underlying language of obeah, with the jablesse-like mother's empowering her daughter by granting her access to ancestral tricks and obeah magic such as how to make abortion pills in "Girl", or to transform into powerful reptilian creatures in "My Mother" (1983), like benna, pose a threat to the Christian ideals promoted by Sunday school but are not challenged by the mother. In *Narratives of Obeah in West Indian Literature*, Janelle Rodriques describes obeah as an African diasporic religion which "developed across Caribbean plantations as part of enslaved Africans' responses to their capture, bondage and exile", was central to slave revolts in the 18th and 19th century, and "played a significant role in the articulation of West Indian aesthetics" (1). Despite its suppression by the colonizers who described it as no more but a superstition but whose acts betrayed their awareness of the political power it contained, it still endures in Antiguan culture. Kincaid herself has disclosed that "obeah [...]s lodged not only in my memory but in my own unconscious" (Cudjoe 228-229). Thus, the multiple cultural heritages of the Caribbean materialize on the surface of the text, a palimpsest suggesting that the submerged cultures are struggling to survive underneath the surface. To quote Lauret, wanderwords such as benna "suggest the spectral presence of languages that may have been repressed in [...] literature and life, but which resurface at significant moments to [...] signal cultural difference of the lived (and often still living) kind" (2014: 3). The hybridization of the Victorian rhyme serves to challenge colonial culture and to encapsulate the linguistic impasse and ongoing dilemma which comes from Antigua's postcolonial context. Ultimately the story

reveals how Kincaid's linguistic inheritance is complex and how there is no easy choice to be made between mother and father tongues.

Lost Mothers and Tongues: Jhumpa Lahiri's Linguistic Exile

In contrast to Kincaid's combative engagement with language in "Girl", Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008) takes the perspective of a grieving Bengali American woman melancholically coming to terms with the loss of her mother tongue. The story similarly sheds light on the oppressiveness of the gendered and familial model of transmission which expects women to carry the burden of cultural and linguistic reproduction. The opening story of *Unaccustomed Earth* (Lahiri's second collection and the recipient of the 2008 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award) follows Ruma, a second-generation mother pregnant with her second child, and expecting a visit from her recently widowed Bengali father. The third person narrator rapidly informs us that his wife's death seems to have "lightened him" (33). He has retired from his job, sold the family home, begun traveling Europe on package tours, and is secretly involved with an Americanized Bengali professor named Mrs. Bagchi, whom he has met during his travels. Mrs. Bagchi is "adamant about not marrying, about never sharing her home with another man [...], she expect[s] so little" (9), and this is precisely what he finds appealing about their relationship. By contrast, Ruma's father repeatedly associates his wife and family with a sense of "duty" and "responsibility", key words that punctuate the text. When the story opens, Ruma and her husband have recently relocated to Seattle, where she is bringing up her son Akash, grieving her mother, and considering whether or not to invite her father to move in with them as traditional Bengali customs dictate, unaware of Mrs. Bagchi's existence.

In this story, Lahiri conflates the sudden and unexpected death of Ruma's mother following a routine operation with the disappearance of a comforting and traditional way-of-life, and its attendant culture and language. Descriptions of Ruma's mother as a

homebound traditional Bengali wife unchanged by migration abroad. She used to wear “brightly colored saris, [a] dime-sized bindi, [...] jewels” (11) and recreated a Bengali home in which Indian food was served and eaten with hands, shoes were taken off and left at the entrance, and no language other than Bengali could be spoken. Ruma remembers her as an agent of cultural and linguistic transmission who would “sing[...] songs to Akash and teach[...] him Bengali nursery rhymes” (6). Her disappearance exposes Ruma’s reliance on her mother for passing on Bengali traditions to her son, and tragically marks the end of a line of linguistic and cultural transmission. As “the language she had spoken exclusively in the first years of her life” (12), Bengali represents a linguistic origin, yet as the years go by, Ruma notices it “slipping from her” (12). The rare times she speaks with relatives in India “she trip[s] over words” and “mangle[s] sentences” (12), her lack of fluency returning her to a child-like status. The Bengali mother tongue then, is, quite literally, the mother’s tongue, a language in which Ruma is a child, in which she cannot be “authoritative” or “fe[el] like an adult” (12). It is a language which, simply put, is not hers. The unchallenged assumptions that to speak and pass on the mother tongue is “organic” or “natural” are here disputed. The narrative voice asserts that Ruma “lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali” (12) after Akash started speaking in English, highlighting the “unnatural” effort required from her and revealing, in the process, how second-generation migrants experience a more complex and multi-layered relationship with their so-called mother tongue than the “monolingual paradigm” presupposes.

In *Monolingualism and Linguistic Exhibitionism in Fiction*, Anjali Pandey condemns *Unaccustomed Earth* for contrasting “the trajectory of faltering mother-tongue fluency [...] against scenes of flaunted fluency in western languages in diasporic Bengali communities located in the west” (203). Demonstrating Lahiri’s preference for Italianisms rather than Bengali throughout the collection, Pandey eloquently and provocatively points to the “consistent asymmetry in symbolic weight awarded global-south in comparison to global-north languages” (202). Yet her discussion in terms of linguistic substitution, what she calls

“language liquidation versus language appropriation” (202), does not do justice to the hybrid multilingualism of the text and its characters, for whom English, Bengali and Italian can and *do* live alongside each other. Claims such as “[the characters’] distaste for their Indian heritage emerges in their yearnings for Western cuisine” (232), for example, reductively associate an interest for one culture as a sign of distaste for another. They participate in an understanding of identity as homogeneous and monocultural by definition and thereby reproduce unhelpfully binary schemes.

Pandey’s reading of Lahiri’s second-generation characters as “eager” (205) to let go of a “migrant language reminiscent of maternal rigidity” (217) eclipses the reality of the pain and suffering of that loss expressed in the title story. Ruma’s decision to name her biracial son Akash, for instance, denotes her own rootedness in Bengali culture and translates her commitment to keep it alive. Akash is nonetheless very much “an American child” (23) who has forgotten both “the little Bengali Ruma had taught him when he was little” and his dead grandmother (12). The pain of grief and nostalgia subtly transpire through simple sentences and expressions such as these. It is indeed the short story genre’s characteristic to disclose only “minimal information [...] to the reader” (Young 2018: 13), to suggest and imply rather than to offer explicit reference. The brevity of the genre calls for compression, that is, “[t]o pack, to squeeze, to fill to the brim” (Clare), to give more density and emotional force to the sentences. As Olivia Clare states in “Shorter, Faster, Better”, the “negative spaces” – what [the writer] does not include, what the speaker does not tell – defines the story as much as what she decides to include”.

The story reaches its climax towards the end, when Ruma finds a postcard written in Bengali by her father and directed to Mrs. Bagchi, “poking out of the ground” (57) in her son’s garden plot among other discarded objects and toys he planted while his grandfather

attended to the garden. Her grief at her mother's death is increased by her inability to decipher the Bengali sentences:

Her first impulse was to shred it, but she stopped herself, staring at the Bengali letters her mother had once tried and failed to teach Ruma when she was a girl. They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in an instant, sentences that proved with more force than the funeral, more force than all the days since then, that her mother no longer existed. (59)

In this scene, her loss is exacerbated by the conjunction of two replacements running alongside certain "displacements": her mother's substitution at her father's side by his new companion and her mother tongue's replacement by English. Her mother tongue has become a foreign language as she is unable to even distinguish Bengali letters from words. Like Lahiri, Ruma presumably grew up in the 1960s and 1970s (the story is set in the early 2000s and the character is in her late thirties) and only became literate in school and in English. As a result, that language comes much more "naturally" to both. Significantly, Ruma does not leave the card to rot in the ground but puts a stamp on it and sends it off, coming to terms with her mother's death and with the idea that she and Bengali can live on independently. This particular scene draws out a provocative tension between burying and planting as Bengali is penned on a postcard made of organic matter which may dissolve and spread into the earth. It recalls and alludes to the story's title, and to the epigraph, an excerpt from Hawthorne's "The Custom House" which features in the book's opening pages:

Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

In "Re-Rooting Families: The Alter/Natal as the Central Dynamic of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*", Ambreen Hai offers a persuasive analysis of the epigraph:

Lahiri's apparently deferential doff of the cap to her American literary progenitor (establishing by the way her own belonging and credentials as an *American* writer, well-versed in the New England canonical tradition) belies

itself. Her allusion to Hawthorne also calls into question his comfortable assurance with his roots, as her collection refocuses attention on the costs of this process of rerooting, and addresses how it may not be quite so uncomplicatedly beneficial for immigrants of another time, place and race. [...] Lahiri also, like Hawthorne, draws upon a “conceptual tension between the natal, or the family and culture into which one is born, and the non-natal, or the family or culture that one chooses or creates” that is at the heart of the collection (182).

The tension Hai detects in this collection marks much of Lahiri’s more recent publications. Following the publication of her second novel, *The Lowland*, in 2013, she took the radical decision to stop writing in English and to write solely in Italian as an escape route from the presumed opposition between her mother tongue and Standard English, between the “natal” and the “non-natal”. In a language memoir²¹ entitled *In Altre Parole* (2015) and translated by Ann Goldstein as *In Other Words*, she conceptualizes Bengali and English as her mother- and stepmother tongues, two demanding and “incompatible adversaries, intolerant of each other” (149) with nothing in common but her, “the child of those unhappy points” (153). Like in “Unaccustomed Earth”, she describes Bengali as a language under threat of extinction that is personified by her parents: “[w]hen they die, it will no longer be fundamental to [her] life” (157). She associates the language more particularly to her mother “who [...] continued, as far as possible, to dress, behave, eat, think, live as if she had never left India” (169). English, on the other hand, has a much stronger hold over her and “won’t abandon [her]” (157). That said, it “denotes a heavy, burdensome aspect of [her] past” as it represents the break between [her] and [her] parents” (167). In between these two points, Italian emerges as a seductive way out her linguistic dilemma and is purposefully conceptualised as a lover instead of a family member.

²¹ Since the publication, in 1994 of Alice Kaplan’s “On Language Memoir”, language memoirs have come to be known as a genre in their own right. Examples include Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak Memory*, Nathalie Sarraute’s *Enfance*, Andrei Makine’s *Le testament français*, Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, and Richard Rodriguez’ *Hunger for Memory: An Autobiography*. Pavlenko defines it as “a gendered genre” (224), that is “dominated by female authors” (225).

I am particularly interested in Lahiri's use of the "stepmother tongue" metaphor as the idea of linguistic adoption that it underscores disrupts the idea of bloodline and genealogy crucial to the mother tongue paradigm.²² While it does not do away completely with ideas of the "natural" connection between identity, land and language inherent to the mother tongue, it indicates more hybrid possibilities and paves the way to notions of crossed loyalties and multi-rootedness. The coexistence of two linguistic mothers, one biological and the other adoptive subverts the monolingual paradigm identified by Yildiz, as well as the monomaterial one on which the heteronormative family is built (8). Exploring the stepmother tongue's value, not as secondary but *equal and contemporary* to the mother tongue, allows us to discuss new forms of linguistic and cultural kinship no longer based solely on origin, filiation and genetics, but on affiliation and shared social practices. In other words, it invites us to think about diaspora relations through a queer frame that subversively interrogates nationalist discourse. In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath has shown how diaspora is conventionally conceptualised through a heteronormative and patriarchal lens. Even the word's etymological roots – its literary translation being the "scattering of seeds" – metaphorically link diaspora to sperm, biological reproduction, and male kinship. Gopinath suggests that to look at migration through a queer diasporic framework allows us to "challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora" and to explode "the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality" (11). In using the mother and stepmother

²² Though Lahiri does not reference other such texts, she is far from being the first to use this metaphor. It has been used on several occasions to conceptualise postcolonial writers' fraught relationship with the language of the coloniser by John Skinner in *The Stepmother Tongue: An Introduction to New Anglophone Fiction* (1998) and by Assia Djebar in *L'Amour, La Fantasia* (1985). In 2000, Novakovich co-edited an anthology of short stories by migrant writers in North America entitled *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue*. Following its publication, several writers embraced the concept, including Danticat. Interestingly, in their conceptualisation, Djebar, Skinner and Novakovich respond to the evil stepmother trope from Western fairy tales. Though they do not engage with this, it is striking that the stepmother figure, almost systematically depicted as evil in popular culture, is defined by her lack of a biological connection with her child. Her existence itself disrupts the "natural" order of things, and as a result, she is "unnatural", "inauthentic" and "evil".

tongue metaphors, Lahiri is challenging the idea according to which Bengali ought to be her natural language, instead claiming two heritages and even suggesting that for second-generation migrants like her, the hold of the less “authentic” mother tongue can be stronger.

The stepmother tongue metaphor, and the cultural hybridity it denotes, is all the more interesting given Lahiri’s attempt to re-root herself in Italian culture by moving to Rome in 2011, writing in Italian only, and by letting go of her Bengali American subject matter. Her Italian stories “Lo Scambio” (“The Exchange”) and “Penombra” (“Half-Light”), both featured in *In Altre Parole*, are set in unnamed towns and present isolated, displaced, ethnically-unmarked and nameless protagonists. They are shorter than her English ones, and much barer, containing very little detail. “Lo Scambio”, her first Italian story, features an anonymous woman who moves to a town where she does not speak the language. Wandering in the unknown streets, she joins a private sale of home-made clothes where she makes a scene, convinced she has lost her black sweater. The next morning, she realises that she had kept her sweater the entire time. In 2018 Lahiri published *Dove Mi Trovo*, soon to be translated as *Whereabouts* (2021), which is consistently referred to as a novel but composed of short vignettes of one to six pages, fragments of quotidian life. It is narrated by an unnamed woman wandering the streets of a Western city (unnamed also, but reminiscent of Italy) and searching for meaning in the small things and locations that surround her. The following year, she edited and translated the *Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*, cementing her place in Italian culture and literary history. In her memoir, she conceptualises her relationship to Italian by revising Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Daphne’s transformation into a tree as she is running for her life (161). Choosing new *roots* instead of *routes*, to borrow Gilroy’s and James Clifford’s terminology, Lahiri’s writing reveals the pain of being unable to indulge in a sense of belonging fully to a culture and of being devoid of secure roots. The mixed messages found in her work and her life experience depict the reality of the lived experience of migration as much more painful than liberating, as Rushdie may believe. Her

turn to Italian, in other words, can be read as an occurrence of what Kristeva has called “the silence of the polyglot” (15):

Not speaking one’s mother tongue. Living with resonances and reasoning that are cut off from the body’s nocturnal memory, from the bittersweet slumber of childhood. [...] You improve your ability with another instrument [...] You have a feeling that the new language is a resurrection [...] But the illusion bursts when you hear, upon listening to a recording, for instance, that the melody of your voice comes back to you as peculiar sound, out of nowhere, closer to the old spluttering than to today’s code. [...] Thus, between languages, your realm is silence. By dint of saying things in various ways, one just as trite as the other, just as approximate, one ends no longer saying them. (15)

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva “questions the assumption that the mastery of several languages is an asset” (Král 140) and suggests, instead, that it is highly disabling and alienating. The monolingual paradigm is so anchored in Western thought that such dominant narratives of belonging simply cannot accommodate migrant identities. Whether Kristeva truly considers “identity as a unified whole” as Král suggests in *Critical Identities in Contemporary Anglophone Diasporic Literature*, or whether she is simply aware of this wider context, her opinion that multilingualism “prevents the polyglot from being truly at home in any one language” (Král 140) resonates strongly with the tensions between routes and roots, the natal and non-natal, found in Lahiri’s work. Having experienced years of suffering from blank page syndrome due to the success of her debut (Lahiri 2002), Lahiri’s turn to Italian is both an illustration of the “silence of the polyglot” as conceptualised by Kristeva and a challenge to it, as Lahiri finds a new voice in a third language. In other words, the turn to Italian marks a way out of her complex relationship with bilingualism while, arguably, further silencing her in English and Bengali.

Where Pandey, who argues from her reading of *Unaccustomed Earth* that “[f]or Lahiri [...] Bengali is mired in burden” (217), might interpret this linguistic escape as a sign of Lahiri’s western-centric cosmopolitanism, Lahiri’s writing suggests that the burden she is fleeing is not that of her “mother culture” but the pressure put on her, as a Bengali American

writer and as a woman, to pass on her cultural heritage. “Unaccustomed Earth” illustrates the pressure put on Bengali women to be custodians of culture as highly demanding and potentially oppressive for second-generation Americans. Clearly, the men in the story do not carry that weight. Ruma’s brother, we are informed, moved to New Zealand for his career a few years before and maintains only distant links with the family. Similarly, though her father maintains some habits from the homeland, alternating English and Bengali, taking off his shoes at the entrance and eating with his hands, he is visibly liberated by his wife’s death. If Kincaid’s writing focuses on an individuated break away from the mother to survive, Ruma is drifting and appears lost as she longs for “authentically” and fully *belonging* to a family and questions her cultural obligation to the (grand)mother tongue suggested and embraced by Adichie. As such, like the previous three stories I have examined in this chapter, “Unaccustomed Earth” points to a metatextual engagement with existential questions regarding the migrant writer’s positionality and role. Despite the writers’ shifting attitudes to language, the influential role of the autobiographical in each of their stories, placed at crucial locations in their collections, is striking. Autobiography seems to appear more consistently and persistently in the stories most overtly concerned with language and the mother-daughter relationship.²³

As migrant writers living and publishing in the West, they are treated and read as cultural ambassadors for their homeland and expected “to act as interpreters of locations they are connected to through personal biography” (Brouillette 70). Successful, award-

²³ It is, of course, fundamental to acknowledge that women’s writing, and ethnic women’s writing in particular, tends to be mistaken for autobiography and therefore overlook the craft that goes into their writing. Kristen Roupenian’s viral #MeToo story, “Cat Person” (2017), which I discuss further below, was approached by many readers and critics alike as a non-fiction essay, despite the publication of an essay by the writer explaining that her life has little to do with her protagonist’s (Vandervalk). In an interview, Lahiri explains how reviewers of *Unaccustomed Earth* believed her mother died: “I don’t know if other writers face this, but I come up against it again and again, people constantly assuming that everything is for real and everything happened to me” (Leyda 11). Addressing a similar issue, Adichie explains that she doesn’t get offended by such assumptions: “Imagination doesn’t fall from the sky; you have to work with something. My fiction borrows from my life, but even more so from the lives of other people” (Bady).

winning, and widely anthologised writers such as Kincaid, Adichie, Danticat and Lahiri often become the lens through which the Western world encounters “foreign” cultures. They thus carry a potential to confront old, or spreading new, stereotypes about their countries to uninformed readers, as they are often marketed as “representatives of their purported ‘cultures’ [and] transformed into all too singular embodiments of lengthy histories they can hardly hope to encompass” (Brouillette 70). I demonstrate this in more detail in the following chapter, in which I turn to another dimension of habitability to consider how migrant women writers experiment with genre and use the culinary as form by structuring their narratives around food. Danticat was accused by members of the Haitian American community of confirming pre-existing notions that Haiti was a backward country because of her focus on virginity tests in her acclaimed literary debut, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) (Conwell). Lahiri found herself in a similar position after winning the Pulitzer Prize for her debut collection, achieving overnight fame at the same time as she became the third, if not the most famous, Bengali American female writer following Mukherjee and Divakaruni. Despite writing “to escape the pitfalls of being viewed as one thing or the other” (2002), with that fame came great responsibility. Lahiri has written at length about the accusatory tone of Indian and Bengali reviewers according to whom she has a “‘tunnel vision’ of India”, “lack[s] the ambidexterity to write about Indian life and characters in an authentic way”, and “woos Western audiences with exotica” (2002). In an essay entitled “Intimate Alienations”, Lahiri suggests that because of her name and “hereditary connection to India”, Bengali critics frequently approach her writing as a form of betrayal (120). In many ways, Pandey’s book discussed above illustrates and supports that claim. Herself a woman of South Asian descent, her description of the loss of Bengali as a “preference” (216), a “desire” (217), a “choice” (217) or even a “decision” (217) on the part of Lahiri’s second-generation characters alleviates the role of Americanization practices in North America and its impact on migrant writers. Much of her criticism starts from the assumption that Lahiri and her characters are

essentially Bengali and are betraying their culture; she accuses the “Bengalis” in Lahiri’s stories of wearing “other-tongue linguistic skins in a bid to keenly camouflage themselves” (204). This passage resonates powerfully with Lahiri’s analysis of her upbringing: “Growing up I was admonished not to ‘behave’ like an American, or, worse, to ‘think’ myself as one. Actually ‘being’ an American was not an option” (2002). Italian, then, enables Lahiri to escape the cultural pressures originating from the Western publishing industry and the Bengali community alike.

Through this critique of the discourse of fixed origins and belonging, Lahiri reveals how for women especially, who are culturally expected to uphold and reproduce the home culture, language and traditions, to write about home almost constitutes a cultural and moral obligation. But whereas this appears to be a relatively straightforward accomplishment for Danticat and Adichie who live comfortably between multiple cultures, languages, and countries, for Kincaid and Lahiri colonial and assimilation practices and personal histories have significantly complicated their relationship to the idea of finding a home in language. As this chapter has demonstrated, then, first- and second-generation migrants grapple with their parents’ language and culture in different ways. Though Lahiri (born in 1967) is loosely in the same age group as Danticat (born in 1969) and Adichie (born in 1977), she has a relatively distant relationship with her mother tongue, as dramatized in “Unaccustomed Earth”. Danticat, on the other hand, depicts Kreyol as a resilient and buoyantly alive language in “Women Like Us” as she grew up in bilingual Haiti, migrated to the U.S. as a young teenager, currently lives in Little Haiti in Miami with her Haitian husband, and uses Kreyol frequently on her Facebook page. Specific histories and lineages are crucial when considering these writers’ relationship to language.

Chapter 3

Kitchen Poetics and the Short Story

In *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010*, Ruth Maxey writes that “the central cultural role traditionally played by South Asian foodways – and their importance, both public and private, to the development of diasporic communities in Britain and the US – make it difficult for transatlantic South Asian authors *not* to write about them” (163-164). Her claim can be expanded and applied to other diasporic communities and to migrant women in particular. In North America, migrants have long been primarily involved in the production and service of food. Migration legislation historically restricted them to roles connected to the food industry, such as growing and harvesting, cooking and waitering, working in corner shops or ethnic restaurants, and, as Uma Narayan has judiciously pointed out, “at the other end of the food chain [...] cleaning the toilets” (73). This is reflected in short stories such as Jen’s “Who’s Irish?” (1999), Danticat’s “In the Old Days” (2020), and Lakshmi’s “Pomegranate Dreams” (2002), where migrant protagonists earn a living out of food.

Women too have been associated with food and homemaking across cultures, and potentially even more so in the diaspora, where they are often perceived as custodians of cultural heritage and expected to cook traditional food. Food writing has, understandably therefore, become a dominant thematic focus for migrant women, many of whom turn to food as a cultural marker, a metaphor for homesickness or cultural adaptation, a symbol of sensuality and gender relations. As Michela Canepari and Alba Pessini argue in *Food in Postcolonial and Migrant Literatures*, it “often becomes an important factor in the formation/preservation of cultural identity” (19). Like migrants, “women’s imaginations are experientially linked to food as inspiration for mimesis or metaphor” (Blodgett 262). In this

chapter, I argue cooking and consumption can function as a form of subversive voice through which women address challenging societal and existential issues. As such, I revisit Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran's claim, in *Scenes of the Apple*, that voice and gestation are paradoxically connected through the mouth, a site of production and consumption. The various activities associated with food preparation and consumption in the stories I explore below challenge the presumed voicelessness of migrant women by considering cooking as artistic and empowering, and food as a locus for resistance. These stories emerge as a counter language to media and literary representations of migrant women by focusing on the female experience, on the bonds between marginalised women and communities, and on female appetites and pleasures which have long been suppressed to nurture those of others.

This chapter is driven by an interest in food as theme, but also in relation to form. More than framing the realistic conditions of the female migrant experience, I contend that food allows writers to experiment with genre as migrant women shape and organise material around it. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf remarks that many novelists adopt luncheons and dinner parties as the backdrop for critical episodes yet "seldom spare a word for what was eaten" (10). She calls it "the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever" (10). Though Woolf does not mention the people responsible for preparing and serving the food, she suggests that in light of the imposition of male values on what is deemed to be culturally worthy, simply to accord any importance to food in writing is itself a radical – and almost feminist – move. As I argue in this chapter, to write both about food *and* its preparation is to call for a re-evaluation of the art/craft divide and the hierarchical opposition between literature and cooking that remains firmly rooted in the Western world. This cultural assumption stems from the belief that food is mundane, insignificant and unworthy of academic study, and relies firmly on the Western Judeo-Christian and Cartesian separation

of body and soul which elevates the mind, art and intellectual work over the body (associated with pleasure and sin), and by extension, manual labour (Warnes 6). This binary opposition also supports gender and racial inequality, as it is buttressed by a patriarchal opposition between high and lower classes, locals and migrants, and men and women, whereby women, migrants and the lower classes are often designated as “somewhat *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than [Western middle-class] men” (Grosz 14). Therefore, simply by engaging with food at a textual level, the culinary stories I discuss are giving value to devalued activities, female traditions and literary forms.

The kitchen has, historically speaking, offered ethnic women a space to escape from the realities of racist oppression, exercise authority over their lives and express their creativity and political engagements. Black feminist thought diverges here from the dominant feminist narrative, voiced by predominantly white second-wave middle-class 20th-century feminists, who argue that the kitchen is fundamentally antithetical to artistic creation. In the 1980s, many ethnic and migrant women writers saw continuities between writing and other forms of domestic creative expression such as cooking and perceived the kitchen as a textual space where counter-cultural aesthetics and politics developed (Hughes 1997, Wade-Gayles). In “For the Poets in the Kitchen” for instance, Marshall depicts her mother’s noisy kitchen as the devalued equivalent of the literary salon where “kitchen poets” (working-class black migrant women) gather to discuss “the great issues of the time”, and where daughters are simultaneously trained in the arts of cooking and storytelling. Patricia Elena González’s metaphoric call for women to go back to the kitchen and start writing, in her introduction to *La Sarten Por el Mango (The Frying Pan by the Handle)*, the 1984 conference proceedings of an event focusing on Latin American and Latina women writers, draws similar correspondences between writing and cooking. Finally, the implications behind the name of the Kitchen Table Press, set up in 1981 for black and Latina female writers by Smith and Lorde, again suggest the inseparability of voice, agency and food for ethnic

women; “the kitchen is the center of the home, the place where women in particular work and communicate with each other” (Smith 1989: 11). In implicitly emphasizing the importance of the communal kitchen table in contrast to the writing desk in the lonely “room of one’s own”, these writers point to the sense of ethnic community central both to their cooking and writing practices, and draw attention to their culinary and literary working-class ancestors, situating themselves within a history of ethnic women creators.

Despite this context, much of the debate surrounding migrant women’s culinary writing has been hijacked by accusations of pandering to the West by exaggerating the exotic nature of foreign foodways. Such a reductive reading risks eclipsing the subversive, experimental and creative qualities found in food stories, as I demonstrate below. Literary critics have nonetheless paid growing attention to representations of food in women’s literature worldwide and have noted a tendency among writings by ethnic and postcolonial women especially to describe scenes of cooking as an act of empowerment “as a vehicle for artistic expression [...] an opportunity for resistance and even power” (Avakian 2005, 6). Historically speaking, food genres have been considered as markedly unliterary. In *Infiltrating Culture*, Rosello echoes Woolf’s statement above by reflecting on the ways canonical literature references food only so long as it is contained, controlled and tamed by the narrative: “food tends to infiltrate literature as a narrative rather than as a recipe, and only when processed and reinserted into more prestigious literary genres” (129). In other words, conventional literature may use food as theme and content, but in a way that emphasizes the power and superiority of the mind over the body, of art and text over food, of literature over recipe. Despite the fact that the recipe has long been an object of contempt in literature due to its formulaic nature, mainstream writers since the 1980s have started to include recipes in their novels. A *New York Times* article from the 1990s claims that this was a much more common practice among women than among men, who to this day tend to insert food as narrative or context rather than as actual recipes (Caltà). This trend is

significantly continued by the “outpouring of food memoirs” since the early 2000s – a hybrid form at the crossroads between memoir and recipe book – in which migrant women proliferate (Avakian 2014: 279). Despite contemporary discussions on food in migrant writing, culinary memoirs and the novel-in-recipes genre, it is striking how little discussion there has been of short fiction’s extended use of culinary themes and forms. Apart from a handful of chapters and articles on specific texts, very little has been published on food in short fiction, and even less on *migrant* short fiction. Works attending to food in literature tend to concentrate overwhelmingly on the novel (Piatti-Farnell, Shahani, Heller and Moran, Canepari and Pessini). In this chapter, then, I bridge this gap by exploring the formal, rhetorical and imaginative relationships between food and short fiction. As this chapter will demonstrate, the formal qualities and low status of the short story make it a potent discursive space to engage with food in all its sensuality and to re-vindicate food’s cultural importance and that of the people who are culturally expected to cook it.

The Short Story Snack

Comestible metaphors abound in the language surrounding reader-reception theory. Francis Bacon famously declared that “some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested” (qtd. in Shahani 1) in order to distinguish between different types of writing and suggest that not all books require equal intellectual attention. While the novel, no doubt because of its status and length, is comparatively rarely described in culinary terms, the short story has long been “derided as literary fast food”, as Kasia Boddy reveals in *The American Short Story Since 1950* (15). Writing in the late 19th century, Horace Scudder (editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*) criticised the popular consumption of short stories along culinary terms: “a race of modern readers like ours [...] educated upon the scraps into which newspapers are degrading is particularly caught with stories to be taken down with a gulp” (qtd. in Boddy 9). In “Consuming Art:

Katherine Mansfield's *Literary Snack*", Aimee Gasston explains that the short story has, in fact, been thought of as a "fancy but insubstantial cooked dish" since its inception in the late 19th century (167). The early developments of the short story accompanied the emergence of the industrial production of fast food and snacks. The shared fleetingness of the magazine short story and the snack, the rapidity of their consumption, and their common association with mass industrial production and popular audiences all contributed to the short story's consideration as a trivial, unnourishing, form. In light of this history, Sarah Whitehead enjoins us to consider the "inescapable relationship between the short story and commerce [...] which continues today" (74-78), and to envision the "reader as consumer" (71).

To this day, stories are commonly characterized as "bite-sized", "quick and easily shared", and "easily-digestible". Reviews in the 21st century have depicted them as a "palate-cleansing sorbet after reading a novel" (Lane), a "shot of espresso – bitter, sharp, and always leaving you slightly unsatisfied" (Anam qtd. in Power 2020), a "multivitamin pill" (Boyd qtd. in Cox 2019: 67) or "the Skittles of the literary world" (Power 2020), arguing the form provides "small, sharp bursts of literary flavour" (Power 2020). Writers and theorists alike have denounced these assumptions. In a 2008 interview following the publication of *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri expressed her frustration at the devaluation and consequent misreading of her collection in similar terms:

[P]eople don't regard short-story collections as substantial. They think of them as a chocolate box, an assorted thing. You present it and readers can say, I like that one, that was my favorite. I like the orange cream. Whereas with a novel I think they regard it more as a thing of substance, an entree, if you will, they don't pick it apart in terms of the mashed potato part of it and the peas and the meat part, it's all this thing in concert. It's not something I can control. I've written the book and that's it (Hugues W10).

In his exploration of food in migrant short fiction, Jeff Birkenstein takes a similar approach by suggesting that the genre "can be more like a fine meal than a novel [...] because it is best consumed in a shorter period rather than a longer one, and usually in one sitting. As a meal

deteriorates in quality over time [...], so too does a short story artificially extended” (201). Birkenstein’s approach suggests that “slow reading” can prolong the so-called snack experience and raise awareness of the time and investment spent in the story’s writing. His argument thus resonates with the “revival” of deep reading in the digital age identified by David Dowling in 2014. In “the Age of Digital Distraction” especially, as David Mikics argues in *Slow Reading in a Hurried Age* “[w]e are primed to scan and skim, to get the gist of an opinion and move on” (7). This carries particular weight for short stories as they are increasingly being published and consumed online. The common assumption then, used by many to justify the so-called renaissance of the genre, that it supposedly fits well in today’s busy schedules, does not do justice to the fact that “the short story wants to stop time” (Mikics 185).

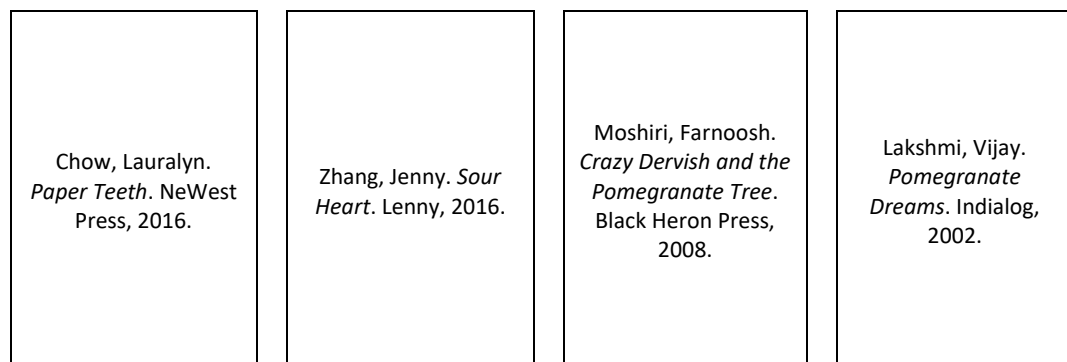


Fig. 4. Stories as snacks on book covers.

The snack metaphor nonetheless persists, and publishers too are complicit in this trend. The design of book covers, which as Gerard Genette rightfully notes is “the direct and principal [...] responsibility of the publisher” (16), tends to subtly connect the individual stories to fruit from a tree or grapes from a vine to emphasise the tension between their formulaic resemblance and their unique taste (Fig. 4). The NeWest Press cover for *Paper Teeth* (2016) by Lauralyn Chow thus features fortune cookies, with, at the centre, a

scrunched-up fortune, implicitly proposing that like the cookies, the stories hold secrets and guidance that will only be accessed when consumed. With the recent distribution of short stories in vending machines for commuters across America, the metaphor of the short story as a literary snack which requires a short attention span has been galvanized. Short Edition, a French community publisher of short-form writing, has installed free story dispensers across the United States and several other countries to deliver fiction from a cylinder-shaped dispenser that offers one-, three-, or five-minute stories in transitional public spaces such as subway stations and cafes (Holson).

Gasston, displacing the focus from the reader/consumer to the woman writer, draws attention to the liberating potential of conceptualising the genre as a snack. Exploring Katherine Mansfield's stories, she reveals how snacks and pre-prepared foods enabled her female characters to express themselves and "transgress[...] convention and expectation in favour of autonomous satisfaction" (178). Through this thematic focus, Mansfield was in fact "celebrating [the story's] difference from the traditional novelistic mode and embracing the liberties afforded by the short format" (178), at a time when the short story was still in its early days. Fast food and short fiction alike thus brought increased opportunities for independent female consumption and pleasure and required less time and space than "were prerequisite to the three-course meal, or triple-decker novel" (171). In what follows, I expand on Gasston's invitation to read contemporary migrant women's formal engagement with food (following her elastic use of the term snack for foods ranging from cake to soup and fruit) as a potentially transgressive and empowering act. Stories such as Danticat's "Women Like Us" (see chapter 2) are indeed less concerned with the role of readers as consumers of culture (which I will examine below) and more interested in revealing how nourishing stories and food alike are for migrant women, and, more importantly, how taking them seriously is to redress the status of both.

Many stories and collections have food in their titles; stories such as Anita Desai's "Pineapple Cake" (1978) and Mutonji's "Tilapia Fish" (2019) thus indirectly classify the short story as food itself. Chinese-Hawaiian writer Tyau has described her short story cycle, *A Little Too Much Is Enough* (1995) as a literary buffet: "the chapters are like dishes at a potluck supper – some small, some pupus; some big, like main dishes. These chapters may be read independently, but together they tell the story of a girl growing up local in a big family with big appetites and big hearts" (qtd. in Sato 282). The majority of the stories describe scenes of food preparation or consumption; as such the reader simultaneously consumes the forty stories alongside the impressive number of dishes they contain; *poi*, *toong mai*, rice, *saimin*, *pupus* (Hawaiian appetizers), papaya, grilled squab, mango bread, chicken, crackseeds, jasmine tea, coconuts, boiled tripe, avocado, pineapple, jai, roast duck, oyster rolls, and more. In other words, comparing the cycle with a potluck buffet, from which the reader/guest can pick and choose and read/consume in whatever order they wish, enables Tyau to conceptualise her thematic and structural culinary concerns. Reviewers have drawn attention to the centrality of food in the collection by describing it as a "banquet of characters and stories" (Stead) or, in Sherman Alexie's words, featuring on the back cover, as "a feast [...] each story a different course, each fragment an appetizer for the next". Tyau's potluck metaphor is somewhat humbler and resonates powerfully with Gasston's contention that women short story writers ought to be comfortable with the brevity of their work and accept that length and quality are not necessarily intricately connected. Letting go of the noble and luxurious associations of the banquet, feast or even chocolate box, Tyau's metaphor carries more working-class, multicultural and "American" values. The potluck reads as a "diaspora space" and recalls a homely buffet or gathering of stories and homemade foods originating from different people and contexts as Hawaiian characters of Chinese, Portuguese and Japanese origins interact in the cycle.

To envision the ethnic short story cycle as a potluck offers a more inclusive alternative to the American and Hawaiian melting pot. The concept was popularised by Israel Zangwill, (a Jewish-British writer with Russian origins) in 1908, at a time when the majority of migrants were from North-Western Europe, in his eponymous play: “‘America is God’s Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming [...] Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians – into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American!’” (qtd. in Muller 25). As Muller notes, this myth of a “Eurocentric Eden” was preserved until World War II and the subsequent changes in immigration laws. Since then, alternative culinary metaphors have been proposed to reflect the multicultural make-up of the country, including, most famously, that of the salad bowl in 1959, in which “although the salad is an entity, the lettuce can still be distinguished from the chicory, the tomatoes from the cabbage” (Degler); a less populist analogy that reflects the growing consumer culture and rise of individualism. Homi Bhabha promotes the menudo chowder, according to which “most of the ingredients do melt, but some stubborn chunks are condemned merely to float” (218-219). The potluck thus emerges as another such metaphor. It is even more significant, however, given its frequent association with “potlatch”, a gift-giving feast practices by Native American groups, and with the myth surrounding the original 1621 Thanksgiving which was attended by Puritans and Native Americans. The potluck, both as event and literary form, thus embraces hybridity and multiplicity as nourishing rather than damaging.

Aside from its snack status, the short story is a genre which, at its best, can “appeal to the senses, taste buds and imagination”, as Elaine Chiew suggests in her introduction to an anthology of food stories (9). Tyau’s, Birkenstein’s and Gasston’s metaphors thus call attention to the sensuality of text and provoke readers into savouring the language of the story but also the tastes, smells, colours, sounds and aromas which emerge from food descriptions. The culinary short stories I explore below invoke and celebrate sensuous

pleasure by paying much attention to the sights, smells, sounds and steam of the kitchen. In the process they illustrate Georg Lukács' claims, in an essay on Theodor Storm's short fiction, that the genre's nature is "its fresh, strong sensuality" as it expresses human life "through the infinitely sensual force of a fateful hour" (92). In Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's", which I analyse further below, the sounds and colourful descriptions of food invite readers into the preparation and consumption of meals. As Hager Ben Driss cleverly points out, even the title's possessive can be interpreted as a reference "to an eating place" as throughout the story Mrs. Sen "transforms her home into a restaurant, a space where culinary activities try to replace a lost home" (75). The reader enters the story as they would a kitchen and takes in the colours, sounds and smells as Mrs. Sen sits on "newspapers on the living-room floor" chopping "vegetables [...] cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash [...] potato" (115) with her *boti* (a Bengali curved blade placed on the floor), surrounded by "peels and seeds and skins" (117) and "by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients" (114), "a confetti of cucumber, eggplant, and onion skins heaped around her" (115). Aside from its visual appeal, the staccato rhythm created by the commas placed between each vegetable and the subtle assonances in [k] phonetically reproduce the sounds of chopping for the reader who thus consumes and experiences the story at a visceral level. Stories such as "Mrs. Sen's" and collections like Tyau's thus invite us to reflect on our simultaneous consumption of text and food and to engage actively with their formal similarities. However, as I will now demonstrate, the perceived affinity between the short story and the snack carries particular significance in the wider context of migrant and ethnic writing, which is marketed as palatable and foody.

Food Porn: Flavours of Exoticism, Feeding the West

Since the 1980s, the literary marketplace has witnessed the burgeoning popularity of culinary-themed ethnic/migrant fiction, memoirs, and cookbooks, which represent one of

the most popular forms of literature in the United States. As Ken Albala and Christine Larson note in “The Evolution of Cookbooks in the Digital Age”, “[a]lthough sales of print nonfiction books in general have dropped twenty percent between 2007 and 2014, print cookbook sales have actually grown an impressive eleven percent” (32). About 1,500 cookbooks continue to be published each year, and figures by NPD Bookscan reveal that sales are constantly on the rise, despite the wide availability of free recipes on websites, blogs and mobile applications, and in spite of the decline of sales in the rest of the publishing industry (White). Food writing is a lucrative business, and the abundance of ethnic restaurants in North America and ethnic cooking TV shows (Heldke, Ray 2016), as well as the commercial success of ethnic cookbook writers such as Madhur Jaffrey, testify to a “nationwide craze for ethnic foods” (Gabaccia 210) which most literary publishers capitalise on.

Publications by postcolonial, ethnic and migrant women often feature exotic-sounding food in their titles²⁴ or on their covers, especially tropical fruit and exotic spices, whether they actually have any significance within the texts themselves or not (Fig. 5). As such, as Huggan notes in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, they “indicate a tension between what the text says and what its various promoters, its ‘legitimizing agents’ would have it do” (165). As the first point of contact between the reader and the text, the titles and design of these book covers predominantly display exotic cultural markers, promising “authenticity” and “spice” to the reader. They are therefore to be located in a wider colonial history of the exploitation of land and labour from the spice trade up to the “practice of multinational food firms moving their growing and production facilities ‘offshore’ [...] produc[ing] real poverty, malnutrition, and starvation in dominated economies” (Heldke xvii).

²⁴ See *Eye of the Coconut* by Jeannie Barroga (1991), *Mangos, Bananas and Coconuts* by Himilce Novas (1997), *Eating Chinese Food Naked* by Mei Ng (1998), *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* by Kiran Desai (1999), *Wild Ginger* by Anchee Min (2002), *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* by Uma Parameswaran (2002), *The Dim Sum of All Things* by Kim Wong Keltner (2004).

Arthurs, Alexia. <i>How to Love a Jamaican</i> . Ballantine, 2018.	Fernandez, Cecilia M. <i>Grieving for Guava</i> . University Press of Kentucky, 2020.	Palmer Adisa, Opa. <i>Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories</i> . Kelsey Street Pr, 1986.	Tyau, Kathleen. <i>A Little Too Much Is Enough</i> . W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.
Jones, Nalini. <i>What You Call Winter</i> . Anchor, 2008.	Chao, Lien. <i>The Chinese Knot</i> . Mawenzie, 2008.	Reid-Benta, Zalika. <i>Frying Plantain</i> . Astoria, 2019.	Gautier, Amina. <i>Now We Will Be Happy</i> . University of Nebraska Press, 2014.
Lin, Julia. <i>Miah</i> . TSAR, 2012.	Lau, Doretta. <i>How Does a Single Blade of Grass Thank the Sun</i> . Nightwood Editions, 2014.	Chiew, Elaine. <i>The Heartsick Diaspora</i> . Myriad, 2020.	Craig, Christine. <i>Mint Tea</i> . Heinemann, 1993.
Ugbabe, Kanchana. <i>Soulmates</i> . Penguin Books, 2011.	Muaddi Darraj, Susan. <i>The Inheritance of Exile</i> . University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.	Habra, Hedy. <i>Flying Carpets</i> . Interlink Books, 2013.	Chang, Lan Samantha. <i>Hunger</i> . W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.

Fig. 5. Food on Book Covers.

Genette has written about how titles carry “[t]he function of tempting, of inciting one to purchase” (91) and stressed the “mouth-watering powers of a certain amount of obscurity and ambiguity” in titles (92). Similarly, as Huggan notes, while cover designs and blurbs serve to sell books, “a further function is the interpellation of a globalised ‘market reader’, who is constructed as a kind of ‘anthropologist tourist’ of the unfamiliar world(s) represented in the text” (165). Relying heavily on a combination of established and recognizable exotic and sexist food clichés, these covers highlight the contradictory nature of Orientalism. According to Edward Said, Orientalism constructs a discourse of radical otherness where the Other is beyond Western comprehension and has an impenetrable exotic appeal. It simultaneously domesticates the Orient by “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling it”, and bringing it into Western understanding (3). It is, in other words, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over” the Other (3). Despite its male focus, Said’s work on cultural representations and the Western construction of East and West as binary opposites since the 18th century is crucial, as these stereotypes visibly continue to play out in contemporary publishing. Writing in 1978, he argued that modern technologies resulted in “a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed” and have intensified the idea of “the mysterious Orient” (66); a claim that resonates powerfully in our post-9/11 context and in the age of internet and social media. The book covers of contemporary migrant, ethnic and postcolonial writing in the West illustrate the ongoing validity of his points while raising the issue of what say, if any, authors have in terms of how their books are marketed.

Invoking Christian iconography of temptation, and featuring ethnic women’s faces, bodies or hands alongside food, these book covers frequently resort to the established analogies between the desirable, the oriental and the feminine erotic. As Lisa Lowe notes in *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms*, “[b]oth depend on a structure that locates the Other – as woman, as oriental scene – as inaccessible, different, beyond” (2). The

Ballantine Book's cover of Amulya Malladi's 2003 novel *The Mango Season* (Fig. 6), for instance, relies on Orientalist fantasies and desires by showing a ripe mango held in a woman's brown hands and turned towards us in a position of offering, framed between her legs on her sari-covered lap. The mango figures as an "exotic" substitute for Eve's apple (placed as it is, between her legs) as the reader is being granted the fruit of (erotic) temptation and (exotic) knowledge, a metaphor for the book and the foreign culture that awaits Western

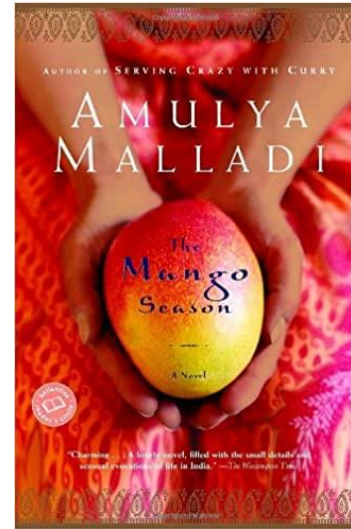


Fig. 6. Malladi, Amulya. *The Mango Season*. Ballantine Books, 2003.

consumption within its pages. This type of marketing replaces the migrant woman in a subordinate position to the Western reader, maintains her sole status as that of feeding and nurturing the West, and implicitly plays with the idea of the West as exemplar of vampiric capitalism.

In this regard, short story collections are no different as they place the observer in front of fresh "exotic" food, "oriental" teacups awaiting consumption, or at the entrance of an ethnic market or corner shop (Fig. 5). This cultural encounter is depicted in more erotic terms on the Hogarth cover of *Home Remedies* by Xuan Juliana Wang (2019), where cherries are interspersed in an Asian woman's hair, who is lying down and framed from the forehead upwards (Fig. 7). The observer/reader is seemingly invited to consume the cherries, which have

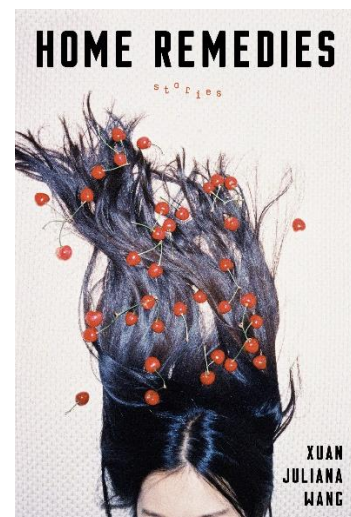


Fig. 7. Wang, Xuan Juliana. *Home Remedies*. Hogarth, 2019.

been associated with female virginity in Western culture since the 19th century (Arnold), the sexually available female body (as implied by the suggestiveness of the woman's reclined

position), and the stories within the collection. The scene here, like that on Malladi's cover, relies on the oriental and colonial tropes discussed by Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather* according to which the East is a feminised space awaiting male penetration. In colonial fantasies, the "world is feminised and spatially spread for male exploration, then reassembled and deployed in the interests of massive imperial power" (23), while women become the embodiment of "the earth that is discovered, entered, named, inseminated and, above all, owned" (31). Other editions of books by Asian writers produced for other non-Western markets tend to take a less orientalist approach, as demonstrated by the 2002 Indialog Publications cover of *Pomegranate Dreams* by Lakshmi (Fig. 4), which was published in India only. Malladi's novel and Wang's collection belong to Western publishers only, a result of them living in the U.S. as well as a potent reminder of the "imbalance and unevenness [that] are characteristic of the history of English-language literary production under capitalism" (Brouillette et al. xxiv). As the editors of *Literature and the Global Contemporary* remind us, "[t]his literature's development has involved industries located in the dominant economies, focused on London and New York" (xxiv), areas "where the greatest possibility for adequate income and access to the limelight is to be found" (xxv).

This type of exotic food marketing tends to be associated with Middle Eastern, South- and East Asian cultures predominantly. Texts written by African and Caribbean writers are marketed differently, and the focus has not so much been on the exotic nature of African and Caribbean dishes, but on their scarcity. This is reflected too in the relative lack of academic works on food in African and African diasporic literature, compared to the abundance of articles and books on Asian and diasporic foodways in literature, which suggests a certain bias among scholars.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, food rarely features on book covers by writers of African descent. Instead, as historian Simon Stevens has shown through a

²⁵The books that do address this matter tend to rely on the hunger and famine tropes – with titles such as *Black Hunger* by Doris Witt, *Hunger Overcome? Food and Resistance in Twentieth-Century*

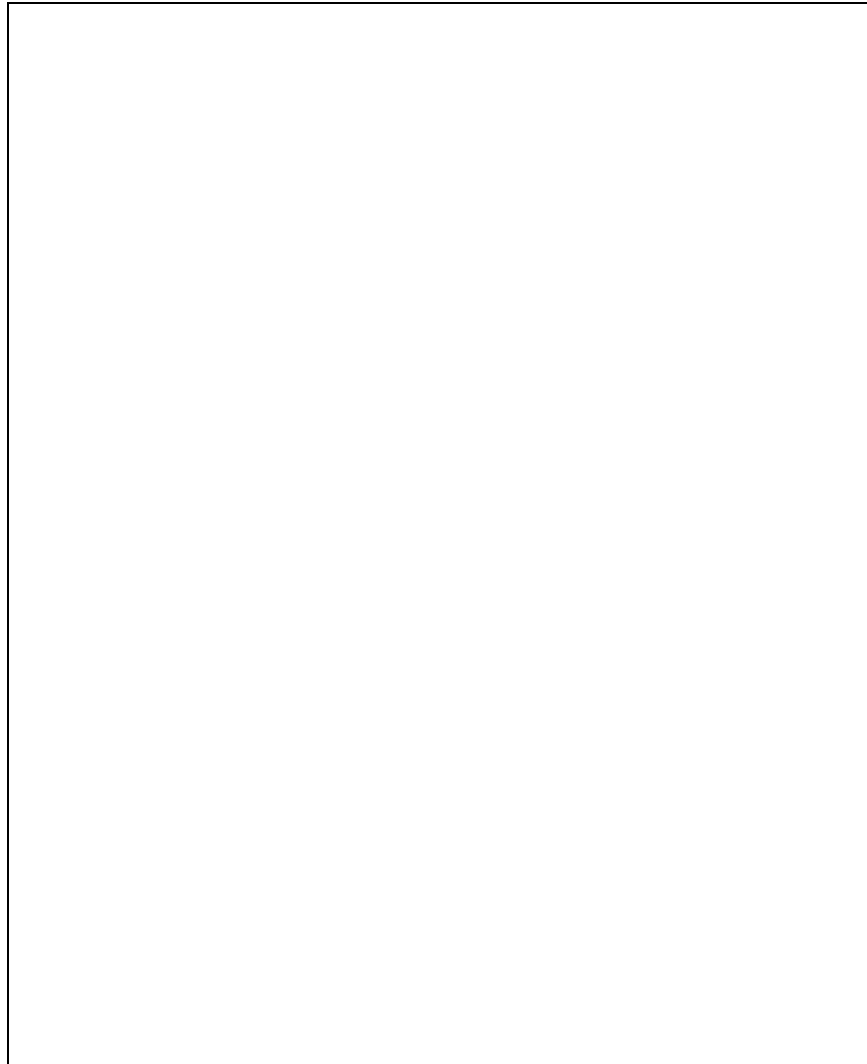


Fig. 8. African Book Cover Montage by Simon Stevens.

@SimonMStevens. "Like so many (widly varying) writers on Africa, Adichie gets the acacia tree sunset treatment... (@AfricasaCountry)." *Twitter*, 7 May 2014, 3:29 pm.

collage of African book covers shared on Twitter (Fig. 8), the acacia tree in the desert at sunset is a common trope. Assembling covers from French, British and American editions of books dealing with Africa but not necessarily written by African writers, this collage brings to light stereotypes in cultural representation. They recall Wainaina's provocative claim, in his

African American Literature by Andrew Warnes, *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean* by Nicole Simek, "Postcolonial Hungers" by Deepika Bahri and even the collection of 2013 winning short stories assembled by Short Story Day Africa goes by *Feast, Famine and Potluck*.

viral satirical essay entitled “How to Write about Africa”, that “[r]eaders will be put off if you don’t mention the light in Africa. And sunsets, the African sunset is a must. It is always big and red. There is always a big sky. Wide empty spaces and game are critical—Africa is the Land of Wide Empty Spaces”. In portraying a tree bearing no fruit, in the middle of an empty desert with the orange tones of the scorching sun and the dry and infertile ground, these covers perpetuate the idea of nutritional lack that is symptomatic of Western representations of Africa. They simultaneously suggest that Africa has much less to offer to the West than Asia, both culturally and economically speaking, showing a distorted perception of a land mined of its resources by Western colonisation. According to Ketu Katrak, during colonisation, “the levels of linguistic and cultural denials in African and Caribbean communities was certainly more devastating than in India” (170). Being print-oriented, the West had much more cultural respect for India, where there was evidence of written languages, than for Africa and the Caribbean, where the lack of a written language was interpreted as “the nonexistence of African culture, history, civilization” (170). As the books covers reveal, these ideas have remained entrenched in the contemporary West. Quite clearly, there is a discrepancy between the reality of what is being written, what with African writers both on the continent and in the diaspora relying heavily on food and revealing its prevalence and symbolic importance in African cultures,²⁶ and how it is being marketed by Western publishers. In *The Tropics Bite Back*, Valerie Loichot argues that the black hunger narrative is a way of presenting “African, Caribbean, or Tropical eaters [...] as less than human through their relationship to food” (xvi), as “doomed victim[s] of starvation” (ix) to conceal and absolve Western responsibility while maintaining colonial ties with “Third World” countries. As Loichot explains,

²⁶ See *Food and Foodways in African Narratives: Community, Culture, and Heritage* by Jonathan Bishop Highfield, “Appetite and Everyday Life” by Delores B. Phillips, “Postcolonial Foodways in Contemporary African Literature” by Jonathan Bishop Highfield.

“[s]lavery, colonization, and neocolonialism have indeed plagued the Caribbean with hunger, from its European-African inception to the present: from the forced starvation of the slave plantation to the impoverishment of the soil due to extensive land exploitation, to political blockades, to a bulldozer global economy armed with tourist resorts and sweatshops, Caribbean subjects have experienced hunger as a lived torment or threat” (xv).

Her summary of the specific Caribbean historical context from which the hunger narrative has emerged signals how specific colonial histories have shaped the difference in treatment that is delivered to Asian and Afro-Caribbean foodways and their representations in Western culture.

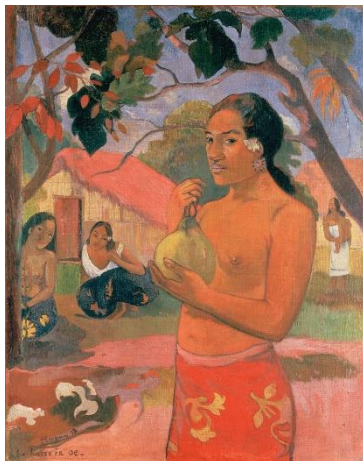
While writers have little to no say in the marketing and cover designing of their books,²⁷ a number of ethnic and migrant writers have been taken to task for pandering to the West by indulging in orientalist stereotypes and exaggerating their Otherness through the lens of food specifically. Chinese American writer Frank Chin was among the first to voice his concerns on the matter, dismissing such literature as “food pornography”, that is to say, “making a living by exploiting the ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s ethnic foodways” (Wong 60). In his 1974 play, *The Year of the Dragon*, he conceptualises “food pornography” as a form of cultural prostitution, culinary tourism, and parodied “authenticity” which complies with Orientalist stereotypes, but which represents one of the only marketable outlets for ethnic writing in a publishing market dominated by white Americans. More recently, Mohsin Hamid, Mohammed Hanif, Daniyal Mueenuddin and Kamila Shamsie have co-written a satirical piece entitled “How to Write About Pakistan” (itself a rewriting of Wainaina’s essay), in which they use a language similar to Chin’s to stress the mango’s role as the quintessential Pakistani and South-Asian stereotype. The text opens up with a ten-item checklist, all of which, but one, include mangoes:

1. Must have mangoes.

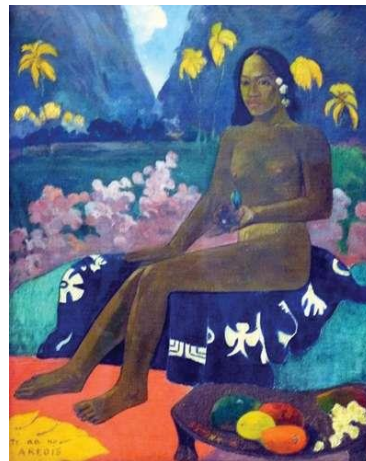
²⁷ Brouillette’s work indicates how, with the corporatization of the publishing industry, writers are “more than ever fundamentally divorced from the processes of their works’ production and dissemination” (65). See also Lahiri 2016.

2. Must have maids who serve mangoes.
3. Maids must have affairs with man servants who should occasionally steal mangoes.

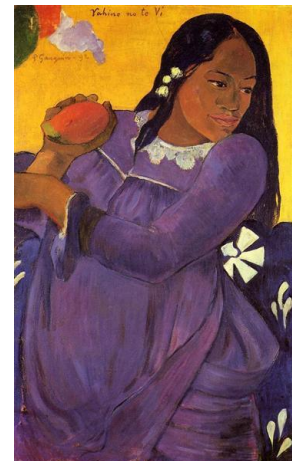
A quick glance at Figure 5 certainly reveals that tropical fruit and mangoes in particular are among the most commonly used exotic foods in book titles by migrant women, not only from Pakistan and South Asia, but also from South America, and the Caribbean. As Malladi's book cover reveals, the mango has always been imbued with sexual and exotic meaning in the West, and one need only think of Paul Gauguin's portraits of young Tahitian women holding mangoes in Eden-like paradises as they gaze back at the observer (Fig. 9). In Hindu mythology too, it is perceived as a symbol of fecundity and fertility (Dahlburg). The hardly veiled analogy between stealing mangoes and having sex in item 3 of the checklist thus not only bridges Western and Eastern mythology, but highlights once more the connection between women, exotic fruit, sex, and cultural commodification across cultures suggested by the term "food pornography".



Gauguin, Paul. *Woman Holding a Fruit*. 1893, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg.



Gauguin, Paul. *The Seed of the Areoi*. 1892, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Gauguin, Paul. *Woman with a Mango*. 1892, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore.

Fig. 9. Mango paintings by Paul Gauguin

In his book *Curry: Eating, Reading and Race*, Naben Ruthnum refers to this type of writing in the South Asian diasporic context as "curry books"; a formulaic genre in which simplistic and

essentialist food metaphors abound and “the poles of pure-if-backward East in opposition to the corrupt-but-free West [...] are drawn so strictly that the books become fairy tales by default” (84-85). Clearly this view on food writing as potential “food pornography”, mango- or “curry books” marks much of contemporary ethnic literary criticism, and writers are particularly aware of the risks involved in writing about food. Much of the criticism I draw on has focused on the novel and short stories do not seem to have been met with the same level of scrutiny as have bestselling novels. It is nonetheless worth noting that they can and sometimes *do* engage with ethnic food in equally problematic ways.

The 2011 Caine Prize winning story, “Hitting Budapest” by Bulawayo, offers an example of how short story writers can conform to racial and cultural stereotypes in their deployment of food. In this story, Bulawayo opposes the sweetness of guavas with the violent world surrounding her protagonists in order to accentuate their starvation and difficult living conditions. The narrative, which takes place in an unnamed African country, is driven by hunger. It follows a group of nine- and ten-year-old children, including Chipso who is pregnant with her grandfather’s child, as they leave their shanty-town (ironically named Paradise) to go on an expedition to Budapest, a rich neighbourhood where they can steal guavas. The basic plot thus recreates what Adichie has called the “single story” of Africa as a one-sided representation of the continent as a land of catastrophe and despair. According to Darling (the narrator), though she is not allowed to go to Budapest, there is simply no other option: “There are guavas to steal in Budapest, and right now I’d die for guavas, or anything for that matter. My stomach feels like somebody just took a shovel and dug everything out” (43). Bulawayo repeatedly contrasts the children’s empty stomachs with the rotundness of the guavas and, more dramatically, with Chipso’s rounded belly to amplify the suffering of the young girl’s body: “I don’t want a baby. I don’t want anything, just guavas” (44). Chipso thus embodies the stereotypical character of the “The Starving African” defined by Wainaina as a figure who “must never say anything about herself in the dialogue except to speak of her

(unspeakable) suffering". In a poignant scene, the children interact with a young and thin black British woman visiting her family in Budapest. Despite their shared national origins, the encounter is a culture shock for both parties: the children watch in disbelief as she wastefully throws half a slice of pizza in the bin, and she cannot fathom that Chipso is pregnant. Later, having collected bags-full of guavas and gorged themselves with food, the children head back to Paradise while spitting pits, vomiting and even throwing guavas at houses in Budapest as small acts of resistance. Following sensual descriptions of guava eating, the children stop to defecate in the bush, suffering from constipation cramps. There, they notice a young woman hanging from a tree, her skin pink under her yellow dress, recalling the inside and outside of a guava. The children steal her shoes, hoping to sell them in exchange for food.

Following its publication and its expansion into the novel *We Need New Names*, the story and the prize were denounced by Habila (among others) who wondered if there might not be a "Caine-prize aesthetic" with writers "'performing Africa' for the world", which is to say "to inundate one's writing with images and symbols and allusions that evoke, to borrow a phrase from Aristotle, pity and fear, but not in a real tragic sense, more in a CNN, western-media-coverage-of-Africa, poverty-porn sense" (Habila 2013). While Bulawayo's story is successful in calling attention to the dehumanising effects of poverty and starvation and to the gap between the rich and poor in postcolonial countries, the symbol of the guava undoubtedly contributes to its labelling as "poverty porn". In "The Caine Prize and Contemporary African Writing", its former director, Lizzy Attree, defends the story by addressing both its autobiographical resonances for the writer (who "identified with that child stealing guavas [and once said] 'I am that Street Kid'") and by drawing attention to its craft, to "the deftness of Bulawayo's language" (44). Attree certainly makes a strong point in stressing that in this debate, as in any regarding postcolonial or ethnic writing, "analysis of the content takes precedence over questions of language, formal experimentation, and the artistry required to craft a successful short story" (44). However, she simultaneously

overlooks the power of plots and stories in contributing to the normalisation of certain stereotypes and creating a “single story” of Africans (Adichie 2009b).

Despite a handful of stories such as Bulawayo’s which engage with problematic and hurtful culinary clichés, I take the position that culinary “poverty porn”, “food porn”, mango- and “curry books” are reductive categories that rely on patriarchal and sexist ideology and risk eclipsing the realities, style and formal qualities of migrant women’s culinary writings. While craft does not completely rescue narratives from lending themselves to be read as “poverty porn” or “food porn”, the complex manipulation of form in the stories I explore below warrants our critical attention. In fact, if “porn” is frequently used as a cheap shorthand for modes of representation which are not thoughtful or detailed, its association with food writing and cookbooks reads not only as a dismissal of these literary genres in opposition to high-brow literature, but as a dismissal of women’s activities and writing. Unsurprisingly perhaps, accusations of food porn (or of food-related self-orientalism or poverty porn) in literature tend to be directed in disproportionate numbers to migrant and/or non-Western women writers (including, to name a few, Kingston, Tan, Mukherjee, Divakaruni, Laura Esquivel and Diana Abu-Jaber), a sign that women write about food more than men,²⁸ or are at higher risk of being critiqued for their representations of food. As Pakistani-American writer Soniah Kamal notes, Mohammed Hanif’s novel, *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, featuring a mango on its American cover, “escaped chastisement” and was not met with the typical criticism that is often directed at women for using orientalist tropes. Given the sexism inherent in the book reviewing world, Kamal powerfully asks: “[w]as it because he is male and his novel a political satire rather than a domestic coming of age?”. I am not suggesting that ethnic women writers are not guilty of exploiting exotic clichés, but

²⁸ My research certainly suggests this might be the case. If a consideration of book titles containing food is representative of textual contents, then it is striking that there are considerably more food-related titles authored by women than by men.

it is nonetheless clear that “food porn” is primarily used to condemn, attack and dismiss non-white women’s writing, to remove their literary legacy, cover up their craft, and prevent their experiences, voices and stories from being heard. In essence, it foregrounds questions of wider structural and systemic inequalities in power in the publishing and critical industries.

Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) has been among the story collections most critiqued for perpetuating oriental stereotypes about Asian Americans. The cycle concentrates on four Chinese American families in San Francisco who are part of a club – the Joy Luck Club – which meets over games of mah-jong and shares food. Chin has argued that the book depicts Chinese culture as backward and misogynistic, attributed the book’s popularity to its use of Western stereotypes, and accused it of food porn (Wong 55). Many contemporary writers struggle with the legacy of this novel, arguing that because it was often the only Asian American book on reading lists in American schools, it contributed to creating further stereotypes against which all Asian American writing is weighed. Much has been written about manifestations of orientalism in the text (Wong). Here, however, I am interested in how Tan confronts such stereotypes through food, hinting to a tradition where migrant bodies and cultures are accepted in the country as long as they serve and please American palates. In “Double Face”, Tan underlines the appalling working conditions Chinese migrant women are faced with in a fortune cookie factory to show how this business is built on the exploitation of foreigners. The story thus reveals the mainstream consumer’s guilt in taking part in an exploitative system by eating a dish which is in fact a Western invention, just like “Italian” Alfredo pasta and “Indian” Chicken Tikka Masala, and without caring to find out about its provenance. Cookies were actually invented by David Jung, “who opened a noodle company in 1916, with the intention of turning San Francisco’s Chinatown from a ghetto into a ‘quaint tourist attraction’” (Xu 2008: 11). The Chinese narrator and factory worker, encountering the fortunes for the first time in the U.S., believes them to be “classical American sayings” and dismisses the wisdom as “bad instructions” (Tan 319) gesturing to the

performance of Chinese authenticity which is being sold for profit. This story deconstructs the idea of the authentic to instead expose it as a purely commercial and corporate invention that takes advantage of the growing Western demand for tradition and earthliness that began in the 1970s (Gabaccia 213). As Donna Gabaccia writes in *We Are What We Eat*, young well-educated baby boomers, New Agers, political activists and young urban professionals turned to ethnic food in an anticorporate gesture to “symbolize[...] both a hedonist and nutritional critique of American eating habits” (213). Ethnic food was envisioned “as healthful and earth-friendly, unlike the preservative-laden, resource-gobbling, wastefully-packaged, homogenous processed foods churned out by impersonal and perhaps immoral giant food corporations” (213). Tan’s story thus underlines the irony of the consumption of ethnic food as authentic and natural, as the big demand for ethnic food necessitated a move towards more corporate styles of business (Gabaccia 213). Simultaneously, by not revealing to Westerners that fortune cookies are not Chinese, the narrator is also complicit in the production of a fictive ethnicity, and thus powerfully resists Western consumption within political discourses, as she strategically recovers her identity from Western appropriation.

Clearly, as this story demonstrates, texts accused of “food porn” merit more careful scholarly and literary attention than they have received so far, to explore their manipulation of form and style and the subversive messages they put across. To reject fortune cookies, mangoes, and tropical fruit at face value leaves little space for thinking about how these can, in effect, be used otherwise. Given that most writers are doomed to work within institutional structures and dominant modes of representation, it is no surprise that their work often reflects what Huggan terms “strategic exoticism: the means by which [...] writers [...] , working from within exoticist codes of representation, either manage to subvert these codes [...], or succeed in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering differential relations of power” (32). Tan’s “Double Face” is a perfect example of such “strategic *palatability*”, whereby the reader is drawn in by the cover’s oriental title and images, the narrative’s exotic

elements and the fluidity of the reading, before being exposed to power inequalities. Likewise, “Hitting Budapest” arguably feeds the reader with pre-existing Western assumptions and stereotypes in order to expose the ongoing effects of colonisation in the globalised world. To read culinary writing as a form of “strategic palatability” rather than “food porn” certainly gives its writers a little more agency and opens up a space to reflect on the history of culinary writing by ethnic women in North America. In *Secret Ingredients*, Sherrie Inness argues that Chinese American and African American women used cooking literature and cookbooks as “a podium to speak against racism” (10) and against the tropes of the black mammy and the sexy “oriental”. From the 1940s onwards, these women capitalised on the interest in and appetite for ethnic foods and relied on exotic tropes to draw the reader in, while slipping cultural and historical lessons into their cookbooks, challenging their readers’ assumptions and asserting their agency in one of the only media available to them. Similarly, a study conducted in 2014 by a research team from Washington and Lee University found that reading a 3,000-word extract of *Saffron Dreams* (2009) by Shaila Abdullah, a novel about a young Pakistani widow living in New York after 9/11, which has also been accused of exoticism, could make its non-Asian readers more empathetic to ethnic and cultural difference. More recently still, responding to the *American Dirt* controversy referred to above, Cisneros declared that, for all its exotic clichés, the story may nonetheless “enter like a Trojan horse and change [the] minds” of its readers (qtd. in Shapiro).

This said, a systematic reading of food in migrant fiction as strategic palatability would be misleading for a number of reasons. It would imply that migrant writers do little else than “writing back”, “writing in” or even “writing for”, and doing so, would perpetuate the cultural hierarchies that this thesis is attempting to question. Like “food porn” then, Huggan’s position, according to which strategic palatability/exoticism is designed to teach the reader, requires the exclusive attention to cosmopolitan white Western audiences.

However, as Brouillette illustrates in *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*, it “does not reveal a single market, but rather a fragmented and proliferating set of niche audiences, which are admittedly united by a set of general rules dictated by the major transnational corporations” (24). Further, with “the existence of transnational media corporations like Bertelsmann and Pearson PLC, for example, which umbrella Random House and Penguin respectively, readers of postcolonial literary fiction are spread across the globe” (25). In addition, strategic palatability supposes that all migrant writing by women is pleasant, digestible and palatable, and thus overlooks the detailed descriptions of constipated defecating in “Hitting Budapest” and of a father eating his daughter’s vomit in Zhang’s “We Love You Crispina”. In fact, Zhang’s *Sour Heart* (2017) opens up with a comprehensive description of protagonists attempting to unblock their toilet with the help of chopsticks to “mash” their excrements (4), provocatively subverting the tools and vocabulary of cooking and eating. As Jia Tolentino writes in her book review for the *New Yorker*, Zhang’s stories are “frequently disgusting” and on occasion even made her “unable to finish [her] own dinner”. This comment points to the idea of easy and exotic consumption expected from migrant women’s short fiction and found, for instance, in a review for Meera Nair’s *Video* (2002), according to which “[t]he writing is juicy; the details lovely, luscious bits of description that waft pungently from the Subcontinent with true Indian-style density” (Budhos). Tolentino’s bodily repugnance to some of the scenes in Zhang’s cycle, then, support Kristeva’s suggestion that what causes abjection is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982: 4). While these examples reveal that the writers respond to, and are aware of, the arguably inescapable exotic codes of representation, they also remind us that to focus on the culinary as strategic palatability would risk firmly re-establishing migrant women writers in their traditional roles as selfless cooks feeding the appetites of others, rather than as creative and subversive writers.

Writing, Cooking and Eating Otherwise

Migrant women writers frequently deploy food as a potent symbol to critique Western discourse, society, cultural representations, and identity categories, without necessarily indulging the reader with exotic and pungent descriptions. In “How Significant Food Can Make a Short Story into a Meal”, Birkenstein offers another reading of the culinary in migrant writing by arguing that food in migrant short fiction is “representative of both conflict and potential integration between old and new worlds,” that it is a “threshold between multiple identities” (198). Discussing food in two collections – *Arranged Marriage* (1995) by Divakaruni and *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* (2008) by Lara Vapnyar – he situates it as “an entry point into a hybridized American culture, a culture on/in liminal space” (198). On the very scant material that exists on food in migrant short fiction, Birkenstein’s arguments are timely and compelling. As the stories analysed below reveal, food often serves to reflect on cultural clash, integration and assimilation. The kitchen can thus be approached as one of the “contact zones” defined by Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (7). Like the diaspora space that is the short story genre, the kitchen as “contact zone” thus “invokes the space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect” (Pratt 8). The notion of liminality revisited by Birkenstein and suggested by Pratt’s “contact zones” resonates with Bhabha’s discussion of in-betweenness and the border (see chapter 2) and carries particular significance for the short story genre. According to the editors of *Liminality and the Short Story*, the short story is “the liminal genre *par excellence*” as it stands in between the essay and the sketch, the poem and the novel, elitist and popular culture (4). In *The English Short Story in Canada*, Nischik rightfully argues that this claim could apply to most genres and risks depriving the short story of its independent standing as a literary genre in its own right. Instead, she proposes that the

short story is “strongly informed by a poetics of liminality”, with respect to theme and structure as stories often illuminate pivotal situations charged with meaning and consequently rely on narrative techniques of transition (episodic and epiphanic structures, flashbacks, and so on) to enhance the liminality of their content (121).

Adichie’s “The Arrangers of Marriage” (2009) supports Birkenstein’s claim by presenting food as the locus through which the characters affirm their allegiance to different cultures. After an arranged marriage, Chinaza, a young Igbo woman, moves to the U.S. to live with her new husband, Ofodile, who has lived in America for eleven years and is on his path to becoming a doctor. Central to this story are the complex relationships and boundaries between cultures, race and food, as from the outset Igbo cooking is defined by Americans as a marker of invasive foreignness while American cooking is perceived as exotic and at times disgusting by the Igbo protagonists.

Soon after her arrival, Chinaza cooks coconut rice for her husband but is told by a neighbour that the smell “[i]s everywhere, all over the building” (178). Implied is the idea that familiar American food is characterized by a symbolic lack of scent while foreign food is odorous, invasive, and does not belong to the building and, to a wider extent, America. This resonates with certain biopolitical, virologic and immune-political debates which shape immigration discourse. The editors of *Aroma* remark that “odors cannot be readily contained, they escape and cross boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes”; moreover, they are “opposed to our modern, linear worldview, with its emphasis on privacy, discrete divisions, and superficial interactions” (5). The concrete divisions so crucial to the Western worldview are, in this story, embodied in the walls of the flats in the building, and in the short story form itself which emphasizes Chinaza’s sense of claustrophobia as a stay-at-home wife who is required throughout the text to keep markers of her ethnicity “private”. Yet her comings and goings throughout the text, and the pungency

of the smell as experienced by the reader show how porous these borders are and threaten the very process of boundary-making. The neighbour's comment manifests her awareness of how little control she has over her physical surroundings and her fear of foreigners as her very selfhood is threatened. By accentuating the smells' invasiveness, she is effectively putting Chinaza and Ofodile "back in their place" and insisting their ethnicity should remain private and not be imposed on, and thus threaten, their American surroundings.

The public/private paradigm is crucial to the story as Ofodile requires that Chinaza camouflage her Igbo identity when in public, by eating American food, speaking American English, taking on an American name, and wearing American clothes. What initially appears to be an attempt to assume an American identity free from discrimination by "fitting in" both culturally and spatially and by removing markers of ethnic otherness – to avoid "be[ing] known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food" (179) for example – gradually becomes a wider concern with actually *becoming* American. This change is marked by Ofodile's importation of his public performance of Americanness to the home, and his acquisition of the *All-American Cookbook* – "a title that indicates there is no room for another culture in the new home" (Bigot 101) – from which Chinaza must cook. As Corinne Bigot has remarked in "'By Way of Their Fingers'", this "battle between American and African food" evokes larger issues: Ofodile's ban on Igbo language and culture is "clearly reminiscent of what colonisers did in Africa" (106). Read alongside the final story of the collection, "The Headstrong Historian" (see chapter 2) which follows the life trajectory of a colonised and converted "mimic man" (to borrow Bhabha's and Naipaul's concept), Ofodile's attitude can indeed be read through this lens. If we consider, too, the simile made between the bible and the *All-American Cookbook* which is described as being "thick as a bible" (179), we are invited to reflect on the bible's role in "colonising the mind", and on the cookbook's ability to do so, via the stomach. The cookbook is also reminiscent of the U.S.'s efforts to Americanise migrants by reforming their eating habits. As Gabaccia writes, between 1870 and 1900,

“educated American women [...] proposed to Americanize the foreigners, by teaching them what, and how, to eat, and by developing a ‘domestic science’ of ‘home economics’ appropriate for American citizens” (125). Through cookbooks and reform movements, they promoted New England food as the national diet with the aim to “limit[...] or even turn[...] back, the tide of cross-over foreign foods and eating customs” (125). Given the cookbook’s history, and its reliance on imperative verbs, Adichie designates Ofodile’s commitment to Westernisation as a result of deep-rooted neo-colonialism. His admiration for all things American and his belief in their intrinsic superiority is indeed firmly rooted in Nigeria’s colonial past – as suggested by the entire collection.

Ofodile’s internalisation of such values leads him to attempt to transform himself both culturally and ontologically, through the adoption of American practices and the consumption of American dishes. His diet relies heavily on frozen and microwaveable pancakes for breakfast, pizza in a food court in the mall for lunch, and hamburgers from McDonalds for dinner. As such, his eating patterns correspond perfectly to those identified by Sidney Mintz in his seminal study of the American diet: “eating out frequently, often choosing fast foods, as well as ordering take-out food to eat at home; eating much prepared and packaged foods, which require only intense heat or nothing at all to be ‘cooked’ (117-118). If we are to understand eating foreign food in accordance with food theorist Claude Fischler, as “incorporating the other” and swallowing and digesting a new “worldview, [...] cosmology”, Ofodile’s complete rejection of non-American foods underscores his desire to literally embody Americanness, to become completely American. Taking the “you are what you eat” aphorism at face value, his appetite for American food is steeped in the belief that by absorbing American foods he will absorb American characteristics, that the food will become part of his body and his self through ingestion and that it will change him at a cellular and genetic level, that it will transform him from the inside. Fischler and others have written extensively about how controlling one’s diet is an “attempt[...] at control over the body, the

mind and therefore over identity”; here Ofodile’s American diet highlights his desire to alienate his Igbo identity and to be born afresh. Yet Ofodile’s desire to become American is never fulfilled. Though he adopts the American Way of Life, he does not budge from his conservative Igbo values as regards marriage and gender roles, values which conflict with the seemingly independent American women in their environment. Ultimately, the story suggests that cultural assimilation is impossible, and reveals the limits of food as a locus for transformation. What appears to be a simple comment on Ofodile’s breath in the morning which “smelled like the rubbish dumps at Ogbete Market” (169) poignantly questions his cultural transformation. It is suggested here that food waste is the same everywhere and that the belief that food can actually change the essence of an individual is no more than a superstition. It is important that the smells coming from inside his body are those of Nigeria specifically as this suggests that no matter what he does he cannot escape his essential origins (a similar argument to that made by Adichie in “The Headstrong Historian”), but the reference to rubbish dumps indirectly accentuates the “rubbish” essence of the character’s discourse.

Throughout the story, Adichie arguably reverses the food porn trope by exoticizing American foods through lengthy descriptions while hardly discussing Nigerian food, which is considered as normal to the narrator and therefore does not warrant the same level of attention. The “anthropological exotic”, which according to Huggan is the main lens through which African literature tends to be approached (37), is in fact the filter through which Adichie mockingly represents American culture. Through the protagonists’ discussions and observations, she offers an ethnographic parody by deploying the anthropological method of participant-observation that both questions the idea of cultural essentialism and the superiority of the West typically inscribed in the orientalist/colonial discourse. Amusingly, Ofodile refers to pizzas, hamburgers, and French fries as “the wonders of America”, viewing them as authentic and unchanging staples of American culture and veiling over their

respective hybrid Italian, German and Belgian origins. His insistence that Chinaza call biscuits “cookies” is, too, rooted in the history of migration to America as the term was imported by the Dutch in the early 1600s (*OED*). Though these foods are now associated with mainstream American culture, they have travelled, been incorporated into the national diet and testify to the U.S.’s status as the fabled “land of immigrants”. Unlike Bulawayo’s “Hitting Budapest”, Adichie’s story actively challenges the assumption that Africa is a place of famine and lack while also questioning the superiority of the West in terms of food access, quality and hygiene. The story is disparaging towards the American diet which it portrays as homogeneous, unfresh, unhealthy, and overly reliant on convenience and processed food. In the course of the story, Chinaza is forced to eat oily and “greasy food” (176) including “beef in oil” (179), “oily-fried potatoes” (182), “batter-covered chicken” (184), “French fries and fried chicken” (182), to consume drinks that contain a great amount of sugar such as coke (173) and lemonade (183), to have take-aways such as pizza (176) and McDonald’s hamburgers (178). Igbo food, by contrast, is described as fresh and homemade. Instead of buying American pre-packed meat, Chinaza is accustomed to buying fresh-cut meat from the market, and most of the Igbo dishes mentioned - “ground *egusi* and dried *onugbu* leaves and *uziza* seeds” (168), “coconut rice” and “pepper soup” (178) – are healthy and plant-based. The story thus maintains a binary opposition between Nigerian and American foods, and by extension, cultures. Taking the narrative perspectives of Igbo migrants, then, enables Adichie to challenge the power structures of food porn, to normalise “ethnic” food, and to “appropriate” American food and culture. However, the narrative simultaneously suggests that no matter how much the characters appropriate or exoticize American foodways, a reversal in power dynamics is simply unimaginable. This narrative attempt to do so only accentuates the existing power imbalance between Americans and migrants, an imbalance rooted in colonial history and the long histories of globalisation as discussed in *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*.

Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" similarly builds a dialectical opposition between Bengali food as healthy, local, natural, and skilfully produced, and American food as global to formulate an ecocritical argument against American global foods. The story takes place in the 1960s and charts the relationship between the newly arrived Bengali wife of a mathematics professor and Eliot, the American child she babysits in the daytime while she cooks. Throughout the text, fish acts as the locus through which Lahiri invites a reflection on anthropocentrism, tradition and modernity, nature and culture, and slow and fast food. "Mrs. Sen's" suggests that North America is disconnected from the environment and sees nature as a never-ending commodity and supplier, as "a resource for consumption and self-assertion" (Clark 2). Moving from Calcutta to a coastal town in New England, the eponymous character nonetheless struggles to access local and seasonal fresh fish, which she is accustomed to eating "first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school" (123). Krishnendu Ray, in *The Migrants Table*, explains that in West Bengal "[w]et rice cultivation in floodplains provides easy access to freshwater fish but does not provide a suitable environment for cattle raising" (25). Numerous Bengali proverbs relate to fish, an element "derived from the material fact that the fish catch in West Bengal is the largest among all Indian states, and most of it is consumed within the state" (27) but which also indicates its cultural importance for Bengalis. Despite the Sens' proximity to the ocean, supermarkets provide only tinned or processed fish, obliging them to go at great lengths and travel to a specialised fish market to find local produce.

Where Eliot's mother, much like Ofodile in Adichie's story, buys ready-made and/or processed global food and subsists on a diet of bread, cheese and take-away pizza, Mrs. Sen conducts the entire preparation of the food, from raw to cooked. In one scene, on the way home from having been to the fish market, "an old woman on the bus kept watching them, her eyes shifting from Mrs. Sen to Eliot to the blood-lined bag between their feet" (132). As she gets up to leave, she whispers something to the driver who turns to Mrs. Sen and says

“[t]he smell seems to be bothering the other passengers” (133). According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, in the West the act of cooking is what separates humans and culture from animals and nature. The raw is generally deemed inferior to the cooked and on the side of animality (37). Exploring colonial and racist discourse, Loichot has exposed how culinary imagery was deployed to place Others on the side of the bestial. Designating the food of the colonised as raw/uncooked, abject, and composed of the inedible and unhygienic (leaves, hair, etc), enabled the colonisers to fix the colonised “in the position of the inassimilable, who need to perish figuratively and literally” (xviii). This particular scene, then, illustrates the claims of literary food critics of Asian American literature who have shown how this discourse continues to play into contemporary reception of so-called ethnic foods in the West (Mannur, Xu 2008).

Importantly, the passage also hints at the negative environmental consequences of industrial modernity. It stresses how American consumer society is deeply anthropocentric and how corporatisation and globalisation have both enabled the U.S. “to bend the global regulatory climate in its favour” (Nixon 36) and severed the relationship between Americans and their immediate environment. In carrying the dead bloody fish on the bus, in a culture where butchering is complicitly surrounded with silence by cloistering slaughterhouses, Mrs. Sen exposes the hypocrisy of Western consumption practices. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams argues that the dead animal that is the meat has become an “absent referent”. This absence is perpetuated through language (by calling dead cow “beef” for instance) and through butchering as the dismemberment takes away the idea of a full body. In other words, it “separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product” (14) to reduce our guilt as eaters. As the majority of foods displayed in supermarkets, including the canned fish Mrs. Sen finds there, has become increasingly cleaned, dismembered, processed, precooked, or ready-made, consumers are absent from the transformation process, and no longer exposed to the bloody and the raw. Eliot’s mother, for example, on the one occasion

where she is described cooking, prepares fish fillets, a section of fish whose bones and scales (the elements hinting to its previous animal life) have been removed. By contrast, after having bought whole fresh seasonal fish (tail, head and eyes included), from the fish market, Mrs. Sen cleans it, wastes nothing and makes three meals out of one. Even the way she handles the fish is delicate and respectful: “[s]he stroked the tails, prodded the bellies, [...] tucked a finger under the gills” (127). The story thus offers a virulent criticism of the food industry and the violence it does to nature, questioning the ethics of technological progress and capitalism. As I suggested above, the modernity associated with Eliot’s mother is complicit in what Val Plumwood calls “hegemonic centrism”, that is to say the exploitation of nature as a dispensable but available Other, supported by racist, sexist and colonial discourses all of which act towards “minimising non-human claims to the earth” (4). Like Adichie then, Lahiri arguably indulges in reverse cultural stereotyping or minor forms of Occidentalism by presenting the American diet as processed and unhealthy, in order to interrogate the environmental cost of Western modernity.

With “Out on Main Street” (1993), Mootoo shifts the focus away from these wider systemic and urgent debates about extractive violence and from the life-affirming connection between women, home and cooking. As in the two previous stories, she associates diets with cultural allegiances, but offers a focus on food that is intertwined with her interest in queer identities. The story is narrated by an Indo-Trinidadian butch lesbian living in Vancouver in the 1990s and visiting an Indian sweets shop and restaurant (named Kush Valley Sweets) in “Punjabi Market” (Little India) on Main Street with her Indo-Trinidadian femme lover, Janet. As Maxey has noted, in stories by South Asian American writers, such as Divakaruni’s “The Blooming Season for Cacti” (from *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*), the Indian restaurant is a place upon which men come to depend in the absence of their wives. These texts nonetheless rarely engage with the “reality that the food in such restaurants is usually cooked by men”, possibly reflecting “the greater emphasis by these

South Asian Atlantic writers on food in the domestic, and thus feminised, sphere" (2011: 170). In this story then, the fact that the narrator is not preparing food at home like Adichie's and Lahiri's protagonists, but, instead, purchasing it in a restaurant where she is served by male waiters, intentionally draws attention to the cultural and gendered queering that takes place with migration. The plot is driven primarily by the lesbian characters' appetite for sweetmeats which temporarily fulfil a longing for reminders of home, rather than sustaining, filling food. Mootoo thus mobilises queer sexuality strategically to complicate the simpler idea of "food porn", and of the implicit connection between food, heteronormative sex, domesticity and the nation.

Through the identification of foods, the story questions and challenges rigid definitions of Indianness to suggest it is multifarious, mobile, deterritorialised and performed. In other words, it complicates the binary divide envisioned by Adichie and Lahiri while interrogating the validity of using food as a national or ethnic marker. The narrator's ancestors, we are told, left India for Trinidad "over a hundred and sixty years ago" (45), presumably as indentured labour to work on British-owned sugar plantations following the abolition of slavery in 1834. Most of the Indians who were indentured or contracted to work for a fixed term in Trinidad remained. Today, their descendants form about 40% of the population and are one of the largest ethnic groups on the island (Birbalsingh 118). The protagonists are portrayed as "kitchen Indians" (45), thus pinpointing food as one of the only remnants of their ancestors' culture that have withstood the tests of displacement and time, and defining the Indian diet as an authentic cultural marker which, added to their brown skin, identifies them as 'Indian' both in Trinidad and Canada. The connection between food and identity evokes gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's famous maxim: "tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are" (3). The narrator seemingly tests the now clichéd aphorism by ironically and self-deprecatingly confessing to the reader that she is a "watered-down" Indian. Mobilising the trope of dilution in regards to ethnicity and food, she explains

that she grew up eating Indian food in Trinidad, but is used to her food being less spicy than 'real' Indians, due to the scarcity of Indian spices such as cardamom in Trinidad (45).

As the story unfolds, food is presented as a means of passport control. In the restaurant, the narrator struggles to remember the names of the sweets she grew up eating. The male waiter questions her linguistic abilities and her Indianness at the counter, which acts as a metaphorical border. After asking for a stick of *meethai*, which in Trinidad is a specific kind of sweet, she is patronizingly told by the grinning waiter that "That is koorma, Miss. [...] These are all meethai, Miss. Meethai is Sweets. Where are you from?" (51). Refusing to gratify him with an answer, the narrator asks him for, and gestures to, sugarcakes, to which he replies, "That is called chum-chum, Miss" (51). Like "The Arrangers of Marriage", the story asks us to reflect on the gender implication regarding who holds the power to determine the names of foods, who has ownership over Indian desserts, and by extension, Indian culture and identity. The internal hierarchy of migrants created by the waiter reveals that diaspora does not necessarily produce solidarity. But by drawing attention to the minor differences in diet between diasporic Indians and Indians from India, Mootoo emphasises the cultural confusion that results inevitably from trying to pin down cultures "authentically".

Despite their appearance, the chum-chum turns out to be very different from the sugarcakes the narrator grew up eating; "de texture was like grind-up coconut but it had no coconut [...] De thing was juicy with sweet rose water oozing out a it. De rose water perfume enter mih nose and get trap in mih cranium" (52). The narrator's disappointment with the chum-chum which, to her, does not match the authentic homely taste of the Indo-Trinidadian sugarcakes she grew up eating, challenges the waiter's assumption that the Indian diaspora is a subordinate and inauthentic imitation of the Indian nation-state. As Mannur writes in *Culinary Fictions*, in this story "Mootoo's narrator imagines a way out of

the trappings of this hierarchical construct of nation and diaspora, inverting the terms to figure the immigrant as authentic, and the 'home nation' as the watered-down version not on par with the original found in diaspora" (42). The narrator provocatively suggests that Indo-Trinidadian sweets are in fact *more* authentic than Indian ones, that they are "overly authentic" (45). On these terms, authenticity is defined as a matter of competing perspectives rather than an objective truth, thus ironically deconstructing the concept itself. Mootoo challenges it further by revealing that the waiter, who has so far posed as an authentic custodian of culture, is in fact from the Fiji Islands. He therefore presumably shares with the narrator the same colonial history of having had his ancestors brought to the islands as indentured servants. For Mootoo, then, Indianness is a performative identity (Butler, Goffman), as I demonstrate below in my reading of "The Upside Downness of the World as It Unfolds" (1993) (see chapter 4). Undermining the notions of "authentic" cultural belonging that are manifested through home cooking in Adichie's "The Arrangers of Marriage" and Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's", Mootoo refuses to define a clear-cut, original, authentic Indianness to instead highlight its confusedness. Having demonstrated how food provides migrant women writers with a complicated and diverse range of literary possibilities that go beyond food porn, I now turn to explore how these writers use food, at a more formal degree, to shape their stories and collections.

Around the Kitchen Table: Short Story Cycles and Culinary Communities

Though short story cycles are typically sewn together by framing devices such as character, community, place or specific objects, the recurrent symbol of food in Tyau's *A Little Too Much Is Enough* and Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* invites further consideration of the formal relationship between the culinary and the ethnic cycle. Much has been written already about the role of food in Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* where, as Lorna Piatti-Farnell correctly notes, "food is presented [...] as a vital additive for selfhood, communication and

community” (117). The stories, characters and communities in these collections gravitate around the kitchen table. Critical scholarship has, however, attended mostly to content and not to the genre’s formal possibilities in expressing food communities more saliently. In this section, I examine the intersections between food, form and community in these works to highlight food’s role in unifying the cycle and bringing together individual characters and communities.

In his pioneering study of the short story cycle, Ingram stresses its formal concern with community: “Central to the dynamics of the short story cycle is the tension between the one and the many [...] Every story cycle displays a double tendency of asserting the individuality of its components on the one hand and of highlighting, on the other the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole” (19). This formal characteristic has lent itself particularly well to the concerns of ethnic writers for whom “the narrated accounts link individual lives to a larger scheme of belonging” and simultaneously set “the individual against the social group to which he or she belongs” (Davis 24). It is no wonder then that Sandra Zagarell renamed the genre “narratives of community”. Given the cycle’s status as a powerful site to reflect on the individual’s place in community, it is a particularly fitting form through which to explore food’s multiply sustaining role.

As the stories considered above demonstrate, migrants often rely on culinary traditions to maintain a link with their homeland. In this context, food acts as a form of cultural and personal sustenance, as a vital link between here and there, now and then. David B. Goldstein suggests that food in literature needs to be read as inherently relational. Food preparation and consumption are acts of “commensality”, a word “derived from the Latin *commensalis*, ‘with the table’” (Goldstein 40). The cyclical rituals of meals thus provide individuals with a sense of continuity and collective identity. Piatti-Farnell makes claims that resonate powerfully with short story cycle theory when arguing that in culinary writing,

“collective culinary memories are inevitably entangled with personal identity, so that the idea of separating the individual from the group is almost impossible” (129). The genre’s formal tension between the individual and the community, and its construction around “dynamic patterns of recurrence and development [which] usually operate concurrently like the motion of a wheel” (Ingram 20) make it particularly habitable for the commensality and repetitiveness of eating and cooking in migrant women’s stories.

Reid-Benta’s debut collection, *Frying Plantain* (longlisted for the 2019 Scotiabank Giller Prize), offers an example of how food can mend disjointed communities and forms. It charts the coming-of-age of Kara, a second-generation Jamaican Canadian growing up in Toronto’s “Little Jamaica”. In defining “narratives of community” in the late 1980s, Zagarell remarked that unlike 19th century cycles, more recent ones “portrayed [...] a much more diverse group of writers”, made use of more “linear plotting”, and tended to have “plots structured around individualized protagonists” (526-527). Recent cycles that concentrate on the maturation of a unifying character such as Reid-Benta’s or Mutonji’s (see below) thus establish community through domestic rituals. If, at first sight, community life appears only as a backdrop for a more conventional type of plot, the disjointed form of the cycle reflects how “communal groupings are paramount in the cycle, suggesting that structures of time, family, and place comprise human identity” (Smith 2018: 6). Writing about ethnic bildungsromane by women, Stella Bolaki observes that “ethnic writers often ‘communalise’ individualistic forms such as the novel of development” (25). By doing this, they “call[...] into question the American myth of self-creation and its logical culmination in ethnic versions of the Bildungsroman, namely Americanisation” (24). That is not to say that protagonists are “indifferent to discourses of individualism, mobility or privacy” but rather that they try to “safeguard aspects of their individuality threatened by new kinds of conformity” originating

both from mainstream American society and their ethnic communities (25).²⁹ Though she does not acknowledge it openly, the majority of texts that she draws her argument from (Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River* and *Lucy*, Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*) are, unsurprisingly, cycles.

The title of Reid-Benta's collection underscores the role of food in the character's identity formation while hinting at how community informs it. Plantain is precisely one of the "recurrent symbolism[s that] unif[y] the cycle at the same time as it individualizes each story" (Ingram 20), bringing together the protagonists and the wider Caribbean diaspora. The title can be read as an analogy for the hybrid form it designates, with the slices of plantain representing the multiple stories in the cycle as the present participle tense foregrounds the perpetual process of becoming that is central to coming-of-age narratives and more broadly to identity (see chapter 4). Reid-Benta has justified her choice of title by hinting at a form of insider knowledge that carries a particular meaning for members of the black Caribbean diaspora, for whom fried plantain is a ritual associated with home, comfort and community: "there's a communal understanding of the title and what it means and why [...] it told the diaspora: This is a book for us, about us" (2019b). By branching out to black diasporic Caribbean readers from the community depicted within the book, Reid-Benta identifies plantain as a racial, communal and cultural identity marker.

Frying Plantain is framed by food: it opens with a story entitled "Pig Head" and closes with the title story. "Pig Head" describes a holiday Kara spends in Jamaica with her family, where she observes her cousins kill a chicken ahead of dinner, before discovering a severed pig head in an icebox in the kitchen. Back in Canada, Kara gets over this formative trauma by telling stories about Jamaica to her schoolmates. Food thus thematically and formally ignites the thread of stories narrated by Kara. The closing story brings together Kara and her

²⁹ For a more focussed discussion on food in ethnic Bildungsromane specifically, see *Consumption and Identity in Asian-American Coming-of-Age Narratives* by Jennifer Ho.

grandmother, Nan, over a dish of fried plantain. The stories in between these witness the fraught relationship between Nan, on the one hand, and Kara and her mother Eloise, on the other. After five months of cohabitation Nan kicks them out of her house in “Fiah Kitty”, the fourth story in the cycle. For the duration of two stories, the characters are estranged for months until Nan breaks the silence and calls them in “Standoff”. That same story reveals that the tension between Eloise and Nan is grounded in Nan’s religious conservatism and her disapproval of Eloise’s life choices. Kara was born when Eloise was only seventeen and since then, as a single mother, she resentfully continues to depend on her own mother’s material support. Yet throughout the cycle, Jamaican food acts as a connector and peace offering between the women in the family. Every time Kara visits her, she gives her old yoghurt cups and “old margarine containers filled with leftovers” for her to share with her mother when she gets home, even when she and Eloise are not on speaking terms. Knowing that Kara is particularly fond of fried plantain, she cooks it on almost every occasion they meet, purposefully but un-orthodoxically adding it to the Christmas meal in “Fiah Kitty” and cooking it upon their reunion in “Frying Plantain”. In other words, food is a currency of love. To quote Sarah Sceats in *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*: “[f]rom infants’ sticky offerings to anniversary chocolates, from shared school lunches to hospital grapes, the giving of food is a way of announcing connection, goodwill, love” (11). Reid-Benta’s short story cycle thus dramatizes conflicted relationships in migrant families through the fragmentation of the central narrative but deploys the culinary as a connector through which the characters and stories bond.

Though the importance of food is somewhat less explicit in Mutonji’s *Shut Up You’re Pretty* (2019), African food takes on a crucial role in the Congolese narrator’s tormented search for self. The cycle here constructs a composite portrait of the protagonist’s process of understanding her identity and acknowledging her place in her community. Its episodic and fragmentary format powerfully reflect Loli’s traumatic experiences as she moves to

Scarborough (also known as Toronto's ghetto) as an illegal six-year-old migrant, thereby following conventional renderings of the relationship between literary representation and trauma (Caruth). There, she witnesses her father's suicide, temporarily works as a prostitute, survives alcohol and drug addictions, and sexual exploitation by a significant number of men. The juxtaposition and accumulation of all these traumatic and somewhat archetypal experiences in one relatively short book, as well as their association with a single character would arguably warrant its being accused of "poverty porn".³⁰ My interest, however, lies in the cycle's culinary and formal qualities.

According to Kelley, the tension between fragmentation and unity in the story cycle reflects ethnic characters' "analogous work to shore up their own fragmented identities" (305). In *Shut Up You're Pretty*, this endeavour is symbolised by food. Discrete references to tilapia fish (freshwater fish that is indigenous to Congo) and African cooking abound in the cycle and are directly associated with community-making, belonging and family. In "If Not Happiness", Loli turns fifteen and for dinner her mother fries "tilapia fish [...] served with rice, lemon, salt and water" (36). In "This Is Only Temporary", Loli's entire neighbourhood comes together over a barbecue to grieve a local youth who was beaten to death and she contributes by grilling tilapia "stuffed with dill and paprika" (48) on the porch of Mrs. Broomfield, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. In "Theresa Is Getting Married", Loli and her mother attend her cousin's traditional Congolese wedding, "filled with members of our community [...] family nonetheless" (67) and bring fish as a gift. If, in these examples, fish is mentioned only in passing, the cycle closes on a story entitled "Tilapia Fish" in which the narrator reconnects with food and with her mother, after years of silence and suffering from

³⁰ To my knowledge, no critical review has accused the book of this. All the reviews come from Canadian media, mainstream magazines and newspapers such as *CBC* and *Toronto Star* or Canadian feminist literary magazines such as *Quill & Quire*, and *Room*. These have been overwhelmingly encouraging and enthusiastic. They stress what the book represents both as one of the few literary representations of Scarborough, and is the inaugural book in transgender migrant writer Vivek Shraya's VS. Books imprint at Arsenal Pulp Press which offers a mentorship program to ethnic writers.

eating disorders.³¹ In the book, the return of Loli's appetite thus converges with her return to African food, as cooked first by her Ethiopian flatmate in the title story and then by her Congolese mother, and to her family. Like "Frying Plantain" and "Women Like Us", this final episode is rather typical of what short story cycle theorists have referred to as the "return story", the closing story of a cycle. In "The One and the Many", Gerald Lynch describes how the return story "present[s] the most serious challenges to readers and critics [and] bring[s] to fulfilment the recurrent patterns of the cycle, frequently reintroducing many of the cycle's major characters and central images, and restating in a refrain-like manner the thematic concerns of the preceding stories" (98). In this very intimate scene, Loli observes her mother in the kitchen as she performs the familiar gestures of preparing tilapia fish. The fish itself, "imported directly from the Congo River" (131), represents the tension between dislocation and continuity experienced by Loli, while hinting to networks of transnational globalisation. By re-enacting these gestures, Loli and her mother embody a collective memory that reinstates stability, reconnects them to their Congolese past, re-establishes familial harmony and reintegrates Loli in Scarborough's African community. Though the story offers no comforting sense of closure and leaves many of Loli's issues unresolved, it does suggest that her return to tilapia fish symbolises that she is, quite literally, pulling herself together. In other words, just as "Tilapia Fish" sews together the vignettes that compose Loli's coming-of-age, tilapia fish heals the character by restoring the link to her mother, her diasporic community and her original homeland. Mutonji thus seems to suggest that her protagonist will only be "whole" if she embraces her Congolese roots, while the cycle form itself plays with and contests the very notion of "wholeness" as illusory. Ultimately, like Reid-Benta, her ideologically oriented and consciousness-raising message about cultural empowerment

³¹ See also stories such as "Mixed Messages" and "Diplomatic Pounds" by Aidoo (2012), "Alchemy" by Thien.

draws on the formal possibilities of the cycle to stress the importance of rituals in sustaining a sense of stability and commensality.

Recipes for Survival

As well as experimenting with the short story cycle to reinforce the communal bonds expressed by food practices, migrant women writers frequently experiment with the genre of the recipe. As stated above, in recent years growing attention has been given to the novel-in-recipes (Calta, Sceats 2003), or what Doris Witt has called “the recipistolary novel” (11). Famous examples of this form include Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), Nora Ephron’s *Heartburn* (1983), Esquivel’s *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (1989) and Calixthe Beyala’s *Comment Cuisiner Son Mari à l’Africaine* (2000). It is, by now, accepted that the recipes in these works are essential at structural, thematical and metaphorical levels. However, this novelistic focus has overshadowed the deployment of such intertextuality in short fiction. The scarce scholarship on stories and collections which incorporate recipes centre primarily on the narrative rather than exploring the fluidity of genres evoked by these hybrid texts.³² “Frying Plantain” by Reid-Benta, “Making Callaloo in Detroit” by Lolita Hernandez (2014), and “How to Cook Rice” by Tyau (1995) thus borrow recipe conventions by entitling their stories after food preparation. The frequent references to cookbooks found in short stories such as Adichie’s “The Arrangers of Marriage”, Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter” (1999), and Divakaruni’s “Affair” (1995) remind us that in the Western world, “all literatures of food are indebted to the form and purpose of cookbooks” as Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa Goldwaithe argue in *Books that Cook* (1). Because of the formal and historical

³² Birkenstein’s work on Vapnyar elides altogether her incorporation of recipes in *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love*, an oversight that reflects the scholarship on the collection. Thien’s *Simple Recipes* has comparatively received very little criticism, none of which is concerned with the formal role of the recipe.

features it shares with the recipe, the short story offers a space to engage creatively with it in a way that other genres cannot, as I demonstrate below.

Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love (2008) by Russian-Jewish émigré Vapnyar offers a strategic theoretical mapping as a text that uses recipe as formal innovation. Though Vapnyar is not, strictly speaking, part of my corpus, it is nonetheless useful to examine her structural experimentations with form as a framework. In this collection, Vapnyar experiments with form by exploring the structural analogies of the cookbook and the story collection to pay homage to food writing, female activities, and migrant women's intimate relationship with food. The book itself is both a cookbook and a short story collection; its final "story" is a roundup of recipes which contains the recipes for the dishes encountered in the previous stories. As such, by building a parallel between the collection of recipes and the roundup of recipes, Vapnyar emphasizes the aesthetic and formal links between short stories and conventional recipes: their brevity, their capacity to stand alone, to be compiled with other texts and read in any order, their poetic vocabulary, and their shared places of publication. These formal experimentations intersect with the collection's sustained and thoughtful engagement with ethnic food and cultural representations; the table of contents introduces the reader's role as consumer as it reads as a menu foretelling a meal to the consumer/reader/cook, as the titles of the stories are after specific food items or culinary activities ("A Bunch of Broccoli on the Third Shelf", "Borscht", "Puffed Rice and Meatballs", "Salad Olivier", "Slicing Sautéed Spinach"). In two of the rare studies of the book, Adrian Wanner and Ioana Luca approach it as a metafiction which self-reflectively stages the role of the migrant writer in North America. This said, their analyses concentrate primarily on the stories and leave the recipes aside. With the inclusion of recipes and the menu-like *table* of contents, Vapnyar appears to be, literally and very ironically, serving up Russian culture on a plate. Yet by placing the recipes at the end, the reader is required to earn the right to cook and consume these dishes by first learning about their significance for Russian-Americans.

While readers may of course skip to the end and borrow the recipes without having read the stories that precede them, the format of the book nonetheless suggests that the uninformed and cliché-ridden consumption of ethnic cultures, books and foods can be challenged and rectified through respectful and informed narratives.

While Vapnyar's structural experimentation with the recipe serves to bring forward the ethics of ethnic culinary transmission and consumption, with "Simple Recipes" (2001) Thien further reflects on the affinities between stories and recipes in order to stress the difficulty of intergenerational cultural transmission. Though the title of the collection it comes from, *Simple Recipes*, refers to the eponymous story, it strikingly does not include the typical "genre indication [...] appendage to the title" (Genette 94) that is common practice with story collections whose title is typically followed by "and other stories" or equivalent. If, according to Genette, the title's "first function, the only one that is obligatory in the practice and institution of literature, is the function of designating, of identifying" (Genette 60), then this title is highly misleading in terms of genre. However, this ambiguity enables Thien to question the cultural devaluation of the recipe by drawing an explicit parallel between the story collection and the cookbook, stories and recipes. As such, she recalls the work of feminist researchers Susan Leonardi, Ann Bower and Inness who, in separate publications have argued that recipes carry stories, are powerful exercises in style and originate from oral forms of knowledge transmission. The recipe has thus grown to be seen, in the words of Colleen Cotter, as "a narrative, a story that can be shared and has been constructed by members of a community" (58).

The title story guides us through the unnamed adult narrator's childhood melancholic memories of her Malaysian father cooking. The allusion to recipes here serves to emphasize the narrator's disconnection from her parents' culture as she expresses her inability at cooking rice as successfully as her father, at speaking her parents' language and

at eating her meals with chopsticks. In relation to this particular story then, the title hints at the complex intertwining of cooking, and cultural and generational transmission. Indeed, as Piatti-Farnell informs us, “the word ‘recipe’ finds its root in the Latin *recipere* meaning simultaneously ‘to give and to receive’” (145). Like Danticat’s “Women Like Us” and Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth”, this story questions the “naturalness” and “simplicity” of cultural inheritance. The repetitive use of the adjective “simple”, which features both in the title and many times within the text with reference to cooking, denotes the narrator’s anxious awareness that although she “receives”, she does not “give” or pass on her parents’ culture. She and her Canadianized brother are living proof of her parents’ struggles at keeping their culture alive and transmitting it in Canada. In a poignant scene, her brother refuses to eat the fish carefully prepared by his father and calls him a “fucking asshole chink” (14), hurling an insult he presumably heard at school. The generational and cultural gap appears here at its widest as the child desperately tries to fit into Canadian culture by rejecting everything Malaysian about his upbringing. While less confrontational, the narrator also has long given up cooking rice as she confides to the reader: “My father bought me a rice cooker when I first moved into my own apartment, but I use it so rarely it stays in the back of the cupboard, the cord wrapped neatly around its belly” (9).

The reference to the recipe does not limit itself to the narrative focus on cultural transmission. Indeed, the recipe form structures the text which opens up as a conventional how-to:

There is a simple recipe for making rice. My father taught it to me when I was a child. [...] Over and over, my father rinsed the rice, drained the water, then filled the pot again.

The instructions are simple. Once the washing is done, you measure the water this way – by resting the tip of your index finger on the surface of the rice. The water should reach the bend of your first knuckle. My father did not need instructions or measuring cups. He closed his eyes and felt for the waterline. (3-4)

These opening lines follow the conventions of the recipe genre outlined by Henry Notaker in *A History of Cookbooks*: the dish is named and contextualized, and the reader is given step-by-step instructions in the chronological order of a preparation. According to Notaker, recipes are recognizable for “the characteristic features of the language” (153). And indeed, the simplicity, directness and clarity of Thien’s prose is typical of recipes; the text is written primarily in the present tense and avoids subordinate clauses and complex sentences and, as in conventional recipes, “[m]ain clauses follow each other, separated by typographic marks (such as commas [...]), the conjunction ‘and’, or temporal adverbs” (Notaker 147). Even the inclusion of a somewhat more evocative language that indicates the subjectivity of the writer is a common feature in most contemporary cookbooks which often have a “personal and chatty style” and embed recipes in stories and anecdotes (Leonardi 345).

Writing about the emergence of ethnic community cookbooks since the 1970s, Gabaccia argues that this phenomenon was the response of second- and third-generation migrants to their assimilation to North American culture. First- and second-generation migrants living in ethnic enclaves passed down recipes by word of mouth for much of the 20th century, and cooking, like storytelling, was a conduit for knowledge of cultural traditions. The ethnic cookbook, then, was written to recover and celebrate the past, to connect countries and generations, and to teach lost culinary skills to descendants of migrants. In the absence of a fixed text to refer to, orally transmitted recipes are flexible and prone to change over time. Like the silenced stories of women collected in Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*, they are therefore also at risk of disappearance, especially in foreign cultures. As Walter Ong claims in *Orality and Literacy*, oral “knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes” (41). Like the female ethnic cookbooks discussed by Gabaccia, Thien’s narrator seems to be writing down her father’s recipe in an attempt to record cultural practices and prevent the disappearance of an oral, communal and embodied culture. Recording and giving permanence to the recipe keeps the chain of transmission alive through words if not through

action, it plays the role of a cultural archive. To write down the recipe may, to a certain extent, mark the end of oral transmission. As Ong has convincingly argued, there is a sense of finality with printed text which “does not accommodate changes (erasures, insertions)” as in oral discourse or manuscript notes (132). If “the text frees the mind [...] of its memory work, and thus enables the mind to turn itself to new speculation” (Ong 41), then, in a way, it grants permission to the individual to forget. By relying on the standard Western recipe form and favouring scribal conservation over oral transmission, the narrator reveals her groundedness in Canadian culture and her separation from the Malaysian community. Indeed, where oral practices and gestures such as cooking are collective activities, “[w]riting and print isolate [...] the one producing the written utterance is also alone” (Ong 74-101).

The story nonetheless suggests that written recipes and oral transmission can coexist. The passage above both places the narrator within a chain of cultural transmission and momentarily reconnects father and daughter. The cooking instructions are indeed directly traced back to the father by the contextual elements, making it somewhat unclear who first uttered them. Both voices merge as the narrator instructs the reader how to prepare rice, recreating her childhood desire to be “like a single unit” with her father (6). Thien’s use of the dash in this passage implies a pause in speech during which the speaker/narrator/instructor places their finger “on the surface of the water”, as directed, teaching the reader/watcher through physical observation rather than textual explanation. The dash here calls attention to the embodied transmission from father to daughter, which is now being passed on by the daughter to the reader. In this cooking ritual, generations merge over the shared gesture, a reminder of the collaborative and embodied nature of cooking. The dash also invites us to consider the recipe as a form which retains a number of characteristics which invoke oral instructions in the kitchen such as its “chatty prose”, the use of verbs in the second person imperative and the vagueness of measures (“a pinch of salt”). Importantly, as with Vapnyar’s collection, the reader is invited to perform the meal

prepared by the protagonists through the cooking instructions provided. In other words, it supports Jennifer Cognard Black argument in “The Embodied Rhetoric of Recipes”, that the recipe’s power to conjure imagery derives from its use of imperatives which tells the reader “how to move through the space and time of this setting (in other words, the plot) to arrive at a successful dish (the denouement)”. The reader, then, becomes protagonist as the text “invites the reader to co-create meaning by participating directly and actively in the unfolding of this narrative”. As a result, “the material world beyond the text is changed – fiction becomes fact” (71-72). Thien’s narrative thus escapes the borders of the text as the reader is invited to take part in an embodied culinary transmission.

In “Recipe for a Stone Meal” (2012), Aidoo draws on the formal similarities and shared oral roots of the recipe and the story like Thien, but does so in order to emphasize the starvation of her characters in an unnamed African refugee camp. After having seen her sister die at the hands of her mother’s clan and having herself been raped by men from her father’s clan, Sibi and her children attempt to escape the civil war. Having walked for four days, they reach a refugee camp where she queues for hours to get a kilo of beans, a pot and some twigs. Despite the beans having been cooked all night and all morning, they remain hard as stone and she and her children faint from hunger. A doctor examines her younger child and admits that “those beans were never meant to be cooked whole. They demand too much water, too much time and a lot of fire” (62). He does not understand why the UN representatives did not bring powdered meals and suggests that “they couldn’t be bothered. Or they sent the bags of powdered meal to their relatives at home” (62).

Aside from the story’s title, its narrative concern with cooking, and its brevity (it covers only one double-sided page), “Recipe for a Stone Meal” has no formal or graphic resemblance with conventional recipes. Its structure does not correspond to that of the recipe delineated by Notaker: though it has a “heading (the name or description of the dish)”,

it does not contain “a list of ingredients (often presented vertically, in one or two columns), and instructions (a text in prose with a description of how to prepare the dish)” (145). This deliberate estrangement enables Aidoo to emphasize the intersections of power, privilege and food. Albala and Larson reveal how, in the age of free-of-access recipes online, “a certain bifurcation of the market into the high end, expensive, glossy colour cookbooks” has occurred (32). Contemporary Western cookbooks and published recipes, then, are now associated with appealing illustrations, culinary excess, festivities and wealth, divertissement, and commodity capitalism. By contrast, Aidoo’s straightforward plot, published by a small press on grey recycled paper, and referring to the most basic ingredients, reveals how an incorrect recipe can, in some contexts, be a matter of life or death. In addition to the recipe form, the story’s allusions to the stone soup folktale serves to sharpen the inequality highlighted by the narrative. The tale in question is often traced back to continental Europe, inspired William Butler Yeats’ play *The Pot of Broth* (1904), and variants of it have been identified in Jamaica, Korea, and the Philippines (Kimmel 2). It is a moral regarding the value of charity and distributive justice, in which hungry strangers (soldiers or beggars, depending on the version) cunningly trick stingy villagers into contributing food and spices to their stone soup, eventually making it a delicious and substantial one-pot meal that feeds the entire village (Silcox). While this reference enhances Aidoo’s critique of corruption among UN representatives and, more widely, the inequalities between postcolonial and Western countries, her combined use of the recipe and folktale brings us back to food’s most essential, basic role: human survival. Where Thien’s protagonist, for instance, located in North America, has the privilege to worry about cultural survival, Aidoo’s is in a much more desperate situation. Indeed, as Loichot notes, “extreme hunger is the most stifling form of experience [...] it erases the human face under the all-consuming face of hunger” (178). It is only when “detached from survival” that hunger “is no longer a matter of ‘being hungry’ [...], but rather of the ability, for the subject, ‘to hunger’

[...] 'to reach out towards the other' [...] 'to aspire' and 'to desire'" (Loichot 178). Thus, Aidoo's text acts as a reminder that food scarcity is "one of the major 'push' factors in migrant history" (Kershen 1).

Having examined how the culinary provides migrant women writers with a complicated and diverse range of literary possibilities that go beyond food porn, and having discussed their formal experimentations to stress the habitability of the short story, I now turn to a consideration of clothing as expressive of identity anxiety. My consideration of home poetics as a language of non-verbal communication in short fiction, and of the genre's ability to emphasize the "small", "trivial" and ordinary things of women's lives continues in the next chapter. There, I expand on the intersections of identity and culture indicated in the previous chapters.

Chapter 4.

Short Fictions of Fabric and Femininity

In *Fashion, Dress and Identity in South Asian Diaspora Narratives*, Noemi Pereira-Ares echoes Gitanjali Shahani's insightful observation that "literary characters do not need to eat to stay 'alive'" (3), remarking that "[t]he reader of fiction is supposed to imagine the literary character as being dressed unless it is explicitly described as being naked – and this makes sartorial allusions inherently significant" (xix). As Margaret Stetz writes, "[f]rom the perspective of the critic, therefore, to ignore the rhetoric of fashion as an important component in [...] novels is, in effect, the equivalent of denying that dialogue matters" (2009: 67). Even more so than in the novel, this chapter suggests that the role of clothing in short fiction is heightened by the genre's brevity, its concern with the small things of everyday life and its historical connections with the world of fashion. More specifically, it offers an exploration of the significance of dress in stories by migrant women and argues that the sartorial serves to express anxieties surrounding identity (its construction and performance) for women who move within and across multiple cultures and have to negotiate contrasting and conflicting understandings of femininity.

Joanne Entwistle's seminal study, *The Fashioned Body*, illustrates how dress "is an intimate aspect of the experience and presentation of the self and is so closely linked to identity that [...] dress, the body and the self [...] are not perceived separately but simultaneously, as a totality" (10). Revisiting Merleau-Ponty's claim that experience is embodied, she persuasively argues that our experience of the world is mediated through

dress, as the human body is a *dressed* body.³³ The itchiness, roughness or softness of the fabric, the tightness and weight of clothes all play a part in, and mediate, our embodied knowledge of the world. Because of dress's closeness to our skin, it acts as a "natural" (or highly unnatural, depending on what is being worn) "extension of the body" (Wilson 3), as a second skin as we experience the world in and through it. Dress, in other words, is the surface on which identity can be articulated, negotiated, fashioned and reinvented as it is the most public and visible aspect of self in the public sphere (Entwistle 112). Unsurprisingly, clothes are frequently deployed in fiction to ground the characters within a specific historical and geographical context. They thus function as a semiotic system which communicates crucial information about its wearer, including social class, wealth, age and gender.

As Shahidha Bari rightfully asserts in *Dressed*, however, "[a]nxieties about authenticity linger under the surface of all forms of dress". Indeed, at the heart of fashion lies an important tension between creativity and conformity, the individual and society, the intimate and the public. In the pioneering *Adorned in Dreams*, fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson observes how fashion can express an identity which "by its very gesture (in copying others) cancels itself out" (12). In this respect, fashion theorists envision dress as "a kind of connective tissue of our cultural organism" (Wilson 12) and maintain that it "marks the space where individual self-production meets broad social construction" (Elahi 4). The stories I discuss below reflect their protagonists' aspirations for individual identity through clothes, while considering the larger social pressures and power relations that determine their wardrobes. Clothes are frequently the "engine of the plot" (Hughes 2006: 11), as in Aidoo's "One or Two Bourgeois Concerns" (2012) in which a couple have a heated argument about how to dress for a party they are throwing at their house in the evening,³⁴ or objects of very

³³ According to Entwistle, "all people 'dress' the body in some way, be it through clothing, tattooing, cosmetics, or other forms of body painting" (6).

³⁴ See also Nalini Jones' "In the Garden" (2007), Farida Karodia's "The Red Velvet Dress" (2013) and Lahiri's "Sexy" (1999), in which an unworn glamorous cocktail dress, hanging in a wardrobe,

important emotional investment as in Singh Baldwin's "Montreal, 1962" (see chapter 1). More importantly, in these stories and the ones I analyse below, anxieties about individual, cultural and national identities play out on the surface of cloth.

In what follows, then, I offer a reading of migrant short fiction through the lens of fashion theory as it allows us to explore the close relationship between the short story genre, dress, identity and self-fashioning. Fashion is indeed a temporal phenomenon that "sets the terms for *all* sartorial behaviour" and dress is a universal phenomenon determined by fashion, as Wilson has established (3). Until now, literary attention to clothing has tended to focus on 19th and 20th century American, British and French novels (Elahi, Cardon, Kuhn and Carlson), and, as Stetz insightfully observes, on "white women authors and their white female fictional characters" despite the importance of clothes in migrant and postcolonial literatures (2019: 124). Like much of fashion theory, its exclusively Western focus has contributed to a colonial discourse which envisions the West as a vibrant cultural centre and former colonies as a periphery marked by tradition and backwardness. Indeed, the main characteristic of fashion is change. As Julia Emberley notes, "embedded in the idea of fashion is a never-ending metamorphosis of time and place" (466). This metamorphosis is, however, antithetical to common representations of former colonies which continue to be understood as spatially and temporally remote from the supposed modernity of the West. In addition, the association of fashion with modernity underlies the assumption that being dressed is a sign of civility, a marker that has historically been used to distinguish between the dressed coloniser and the naked (or scantily dressed) colonised (Fumagalli et al., Rovine, Gaugele and Titton). In this chapter I attempt to question and redress fashion theory's Western focus by looking at how migrant women negotiate "Western" fashion in their short fiction and discuss

symbolises alternative directions the protagonist's life could have taken. Its discovery by the young son of a friend whose husband has left her for another woman is ultimately what prompts Miranda to put an end to her own affair with a married man.

the ideological and cultural conventions that rule systems of dress. Instead of thinking of fashion as a specifically Western system, as does Entwistle, I turn to the more inclusive definition offered by Pereira-Ares: “fashion as any of the multiple systems of dress that exist across the globe; systems that are ruled by social, cultural, religious and sometimes even political and ideological conventions; and systems that are all subject to constant change” (xix).

By addressing the intersections between dress, identity, self-representation and public image, the stories I discuss below respond to an understanding of identity as fluid, changing, socially constructed and ongoing. This conceptualisation of identity is reflected through the protagonists’ change of clothes, changes that interrogate and subvert fixed boundaries and resonate with Stuart Hall’s conceptualisation of identity as “[n]ot an essence but a *positioning*” (237). Before evaluating the anxieties around female identity that surface in stories about clothes, I investigate the short story’s historical status as fashionable object, its overlooked embeddedness in magazines and fashion culture, its role in disseminating a standardized idea of American identity and its formal associations with cloth.

Fabrications of Femininity and the Magazine Short Story

Short fiction theorists have long acknowledged the influence of magazines and periodicals on the development of the Western short story in the 19th and 20th centuries. Relatively little, however, has been written about the connection between women’s magazines, fashion and short fiction. 19th and 20th century women’s magazines like *Mademoiselle* (which launched Sylvia Plath’s career and published stories by Flannery O’Connor), *Vogue* (which printed stories by Kate Chopin), *Seventeen*, *Good Housekeeping* (which featured stories by Pearl S. Buck and J.D. Salinger), *Woman’s Home Companion* (which published Françoise Sagan, Shirley Jackson and Laura Z. Hobson and Sui Sin Far), *McCall’s*, and *Harper’s Bazaar* would print stories alongside fashion advertisements and photographs

of clothing.³⁵ In the words of the editors of *Crossings in Text and Textile*, these magazines “shaped popular society in expression and couture” (xi). Emphasizing instead the role of more high-brow modernist magazines, short story theory has often been reluctant to engage with this less prestigious venue.³⁶ In *The Development of the American Short Story* (1923), for instance, Fred Lewis Pattee atypically dedicates a chapter to periodicals such as *Godey’s* which published women writers. Yet he suggests “that women ‘ruined’ the genre with their ‘sentimental’ stories and [...] gentlemen’s magazines and literary magazines rescued the genre from ‘feminized fiction’” (Brown 1995: xix). More recently, Hanson devotes only one short sentence to the matter in which she dismisses the “phenomenal success of the ‘woman’s short story’ in the weekly magazines” as “comparable to the success of Mills and Boon fiction” (1-2).³⁷ This critical oversight has to do with the fact that short fiction’s culturally “devalued” position is a direct outcome of its association with the popular magazine. Thus, critics consider it detrimental to engage with that history as it may get in the way of their endeavour to elevate the short story genre from its critical marginalisation.

It is, however, important to emphasize the commercial and, I add, *fashionable* nature of the short story in the late 19th and early 20th century, as its material history continues to influence both its form and its reception to this day. In “Reader as Consumer”, Sarah

³⁵ Though not all women’s magazines are “fashion magazines”, so to say, they nonetheless all display fashion throughout their pages, mainly as a result of the overwhelming presence of advertisements that take up a considerable amount of space, sometimes even outnumbering the magazines’ articles.

³⁶ See Hunter and May, whose work privileges the discussion of the British and American avant-garde little magazine (such as *The Yellow Book*, *The Little Review*, *The Dial* and *The Criterion*) devoted to literary writing over women’s magazines. It is telling that the most complete account of short fiction in women’s magazines was to be found in Nancy Walker’s socio-historical analysis of women’s magazines rather than in any of the canonical short story theory.

³⁷ As Stetz has remarked, “[e]ven now, literature that focuses on women’s relationship to fashion is likely to be dismissed as ‘chick lit’—i.e., a lesser genre, in opposition to what is often called ‘literary fiction’” (2009: 63). Popular fiction by women does, indeed, tend to refer to clothing in titles or book covers (see, for instance, *The Devil Wears Prada* by Lauren Weisberger and *In Her Shoes* by Jennifer Weiner) and to be circulated by publishers with names such as Red Dress Ink and Little Black Dress. According to Stetz, the assumption that literature with an interest in fashion is superficial by definition stems from the Western denigration of surfaces and clothes’ “intrinsic relation to the body” (2009: 63). Yet as Jan Ellyn Goggans suggests, “[f]or many years, fashion in fiction has provided a means by which canonically disadvantaged writers create a screen, allowing them to pass into a milieu from which they have been barred” (6).

Whitehead points to the interactions between fiction and advertising in 20th century magazines which “reinforced not only the commercial packaging of the short story, but also its own commodification” (75). At that time, stories sold magazines; readers would often buy magazines based on the quality of their fiction, and the stories published were primarily funded by advertising. As Boddy reminds us, “those magazines provided their targeted readerships with reliable variations on their favourite formulae (romance, crime, courtship, the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches tale, satire)” (60). As objects of fashion, magazine stories were “bang up to date” (Boddy 5) and defined by their ephemerality and disposability: “[a] story’s publication in a magazine suggested that it was not going to be treasured for years in a library, but rather passed around until the pages became tatty and torn, turning from literature to litter” (Whitehead 81). While some of these stories gained critical acclaim and others disappeared, the form’s publication in such venues went against a conventional understanding of literature as something of *lasting* artistic merit.³⁸ In this respect, it is worth noting how the Decameron Project, discussed above, was published in the *New York Times Magazine*, but commissioned illustrations from 18 artists (McCarthy, Fig. 1) and was released in book format in November 2020. By doing so, it joins a tradition of “magazines such as the *New Yorker* or contemporary literary journals such as *Antaeus* [which] resisted their expendability by simulating ‘bookness’ by utilizing expensive paper and artwork” (Levy 22). As Levy reminds us in *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story*, “[t]he magazine’s main strength in contrast to the bound volume was its ability to respond more rapidly to contemporary events, but even that strength only increased its eventual expendability” (22). One need only think of “pandemic publications” such as the Decameron Project and *The Stained-Glass Window: Stories of the Pandemic from Pakistan* edited by Sana

³⁸ This also holds true with the online publication of short stories which I explore in the next chapter. With the so called “information overload” of the online space, newer publications get more traction than older ones which get lost amid the flow of information and have to compete for readers’ attention. As is the case with magazines, texts published online are framed by advertisements, and rarely gain as much critical attention as when they are published in book form.

Munir and Taha Kehar. Both examples illustrate the ongoing relationship between the genre and current events. In fact, in French the short story is designated by the same term as the news; thus where “short story” places the emphasis on brevity, *la nouvelle* (which has been the French term for the genre since the 12th century) highlights its affiliation with the concepts of novelty, immediacy, and current affairs (Dion 523). There is, in other words, a correlation between short fiction and fashion which, according to Ulrich Lehmann, is “transitory, mobile, and fragmented” (xii).

It is important, too, to consider that short stories published in women’s magazines were incorporated within a specific discourse on femininity circulated by the medium. In 1963 Betty Friedan famously claimed in *The Feminine Mystique* that the short stories contained in American women’s magazines affected women’s sense of self-worth and disseminated conservative ideas around women’s role in the household: “Over and over again, stories in women’s magazines insist that woman can know fulfilment only at the moment of giving birth to a child” (45). Though critics have since shown that her argument risked oversimplifying the actual diversity of femininities magazines portray,³⁹ they nonetheless emphasize their role in defining and framing American femininity. In *Fashion and Fiction: Self-Transformation in Twentieth-Century American Literature*, Lauren Cardon suggests that this was particularly significant for migrants in the 19th and 20th centuries who relied on the images circulated in these magazines to assimilate, a point which can presumably be extended to contemporary migrants. Incidentally perhaps, the birth of the

³⁹ After all, as Nancy Walker points out, the magazines frequently celebrated women’s achievements outside the home, and, perhaps more importantly, they “published both fiction and nonfiction by women, many of whom were professional writers. And it is easy to overlook the dozens of female staff writers for the magazines; these women may have been writing sober articles on how to make slipcovers or breathless reports on the latest Paris fashions, but they were being paid salaries to do so.” (9). Women of other cultural and ethnic backgrounds also found themselves represented in magazines. Boddy has stressed how the proliferation of new magazines in the late 19th century onwards “allowed particular groups of American readers to read, for the first time, about people like themselves – for example, the first Yiddish periodical, *The Post*, was founded in 1870, and by 1890, there were more than 150 Afro-American magazines” (4).

American short story as we know it, in the second half of the 19th century, coincides with the transition from the craft of hand-made clothing to the mass-production of ready-made clothes. In *The Fabric of American Literary Realism*, Babak Elahi contends that this industrial shift was accompanied with “a standardization of American national identity and as a radical transformation of how the individual was measured and reproduced” (1). Fashion magazines and clothes were instrumental in contributing to the image of America epitomizing modernity, most visibly in the well-dressed modern housewife reaping the material benefits of her husband’s labour.

Despite the fact that in the early 21st century magazines are no longer the main vehicle for publishing short stories,⁴⁰ they still, on occasion, publish stories by migrant women. Stories from Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* were published in *Seventeen* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* in the 1980s for instance. Strikingly, Mukherjee’s “The Middleman” first featured in a 1986 issue of *Playboy*, following in the steps of eminent writers Atwood, John Steinbeck, and James Baldwin, a sign, according to Whitehead, “that the commercial nature of the short story and the constant compromise demanded of writers is as strong as it was over 100 years ago” (78). More recently, *Harper’s Bazaar* published Adichie’s 2017 story “How Did You Feel About It?”, and *Oprah Magazine* published Te-Ping Chen’s “Hotline Girl” (2020).

If magazines seem to have lost their former intimacy with short fiction, the rise of the glamorisation of postcolonial literary celebrities documented by Huggan (2001) and Brouillette (2007) is amply illustrated by the presence of migrant women writers on the glossy pages of magazines. Where writers such as Danticat and Lahiri feature primarily on the covers of literary magazines including *Writer’s Digest*, *Poets & Writers*, *Book Review* and *World Literature Today* (a nonetheless impressive feat given the supposedly difficult-to-

⁴⁰ Most contemporary short fiction is published in literary journals and quarterly reviews, as many of the magazines renowned for their fiction ceased publication in the 20th century, and newer magazines are reluctant to publish literature.

market status of the short story), Adichie has become an international fashion icon. Her face appears on the covers of numerous fashion magazines worldwide including *New African Woman*, *Marie-Claire*, *Vogue*, *M*, *Ms.*, *Stylist*, and *Elle*. Having gained her reputation first and foremost as a novelist and feminist non-fiction writer, Adichie has written extensively about race, politics and beauty. Since 2017, she has committed to wearing Nigerian-made clothes, “to bring a bit of attention to Nigerian fashion, especially to the smaller names, and [...] support[...] Nigerian-made things” (qtd. in Eleko) and uses her Instagram page (which currently has over 680K followers) to advertise clothes and accessories by Nigerian designers. She has made appearances at several fashion shows including the Dior Paris fashion week in 2016 and 2020, became the face of the Boots’ No7 campaign in 2016, and hosted the “Wear Nigerian Fashion Show” in Lagos in 2019. Before presenting a talk at the 2018 Igbo Conference which I attended, she waltzed across the stage and invited the public to admire her trousers, made by Emmy Kasbit out of akwete, a traditional Igbo woven cloth, and her shirt, made by Popartii, a Nigerian brand. As Matthew Lecznar has insightfully argued, “by using her literary celebrity to demonstrate the power of dress and empower people from diverse contexts to embrace it, Adichie shows that fashion has everything to do with the politics of identity” (169). Lecznar stresses that “little work has been done to consider the significance of sartorial fashion for the phenomenon of the celebrity writer in the digital media age” (167). There is undoubtedly more work to be done also as regards the sartorial personae of somewhat more discreet, but equally glamorous, figures such as Lahiri. Lahiri has posed for numerous fashion photographers including Dan Martensen, Jana Leon and Bikramjit Bose, attended the Giorgio Armani Show as part of Milan Fashion Week in 2014 and has been featured in the pages of *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *Allure* and *Vogue*. More recently, her prose appeared on the special digital-only May 2020 issue of *Vogue India*. While this certainly goes beyond the scope of this present study, it is crucial to keep in mind the visibly ongoing relationship between women’s writing and the world of fashion.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, given this context, references to fashion magazines and fashion reporting continue to crop up frequently in short stories by migrant women, further consolidating the intimate relationship between short fiction, femininity, and fashion. A recent example is Okparanta's "Fairness", a 2014 O. Henry Award-winning story which denounces the neo-colonialism of the beauty industry and takes to task magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour* and *Elle* for spreading Western beauty ideals and representing the female body as a malleable project. The story is narrated by a dark-skinned Nigerian fourteen-year-old whose mother desperately wants her to have skin at least as light as their house girl. The white models featuring on her mother's magazines, the "pale faces and pink lips decorating the cover, women with hair the colour of fresh corn", are positioned as the archetypes of female beauty. It is against these standards that femininity is measured and that the protagonist is judged. Her mother tries a variety of skin-bleaching creams on her, including Esoterica, Skin Success, Ambi, and Movate which leave dark and light patches on her skin. Falling prey to the pressure, and observing her mother's, her friends and her friends' mothers' complexions fade to yellow while hers remains stubbornly dark, the girl concocts a bleach solution. At the last minute, she backs out and makes her servant test it first. Though the effects on the child's face are disastrous, the narrator cannot help but envy her new-found light complexion. Okparanta's story thus resonates with Friedan's claims that magazines operate as agents of socialisation which normalise discourses about gender, shape understandings of femininity, and draw women into consumerism by harvesting insecurities. It illustrates and dramatizes Nadia Sanger's argument that African magazines normalise "the notion of white femininities as the ideal representation of beauty" (138) and constantly locate black women's bodies "as in need of policing, regulating and 'fixing'" (138), as in "need to work excessively to subdue their wild, unattractive hair" (146). Stories such as Adichie's fairy-tale like "Hair" offer more upbeat feminist messages about cultural empowerment through love of "natural" bodies. In "Fairness" on the other hand, itself first

published in *Subtropics* (an American “little magazine”), Okparanta experiments with the genre of the magazine short story to indicate the pervasive role of mainstream media in continuing racist colonial legacies, and the very visceral repercussions they may have on black women’s identities and bodies.

Kincaid’s writing similarly destabilises questions of genre by flirting with magazines and fashion reporting at a formal and thematic level in order to question colonial legacies. She illustrates her autobiographical short story “Biography of a Dress” (1992) with a black-and-white photograph of herself as a two-year-old child wearing a Western dress in Antigua in the early 1950s. The text, which frames the picture, unpacks the colonial history that is encoded in it. Like the “written clothing” in women’s magazines analysed by Roland Barthes in his semiotic analysis of fashion, the text here “institutes [...] a protocol of unveiling” (16) which suggests that clothing cannot “signify without recourse to the speech that describes it, comments upon it, and provides it with signifiers and signified abundant enough to constitute a system of meaning” (xi). Initially published in *Grand Street*, “one of the most revered literary magazines of the postwar era” (Grimes), the story visibly experiments with the literary conventions of the fashion reportage to question the objectification of black women’s bodies and the colonial underpinnings surrounding discourses of beauty. Kincaid was particularly attuned to this genre. Having applied, and been turned down, for a job as a writer at *Mademoiselle*, Kincaid was later hired to work for *Ingenue*, for which she wrote a series of articles. She was then taken on by the *New Yorker*, where she was a staff worker from 1974 to 1996 and published the stories that comprise the coming-of-age cycles *At the Bottom of the River*, *Annie John* (1985), and *Lucy* (1990). Between 1978 and 1983, Kincaid wrote a column called “Talk of the Town”, later collected in *Talk Stories* (2001), which included musings on the city, descriptions of events and parties and interviews. Strikingly, many of these texts, including “A Commercial Party”, “Junior Miss”, “Pippo”, “The Ages of Woman”, “Miss Jamaica”, and “Expense Account”, offer insightful reflections on the fashion

industry. Others, like “Knitting” and “The Apprentice” are fashion reportages with seamstresses, the latter of which may have inspired Danticat’s “The Bridal Seamstress” (2004), a fictional parody of fashion reportage which concentrates on a woman named, as in “The Apprentice”, Beatrice.

In a similar manner to these fashion reportage articles, “Biography of a Dress” indicates the name of the photographer, the dress’s shade of yellow, and the context in which it was made and worn. But this “written clothing” moves beyond objective description by presenting the dress as a symbol of colonial history: “a yellow dress made of cotton poplin (a fabric with a slightly unsmooth texture first manufactured in the French town of Avignon and brought to England by the Huguenots, but I could not have known that at the time)” (200). Kincaid suggests that, like the mother in Okparanta’s story, for her mother the yellow dress was a means to make her daughter resemble the girl wearing a yellow dress, featuring on “a picture on an almanac advertising a particularly fine and scented soap”, and “whose skin was the color of cream in the process of spoiling, whose hair was the texture of silk and the color of flax, [...] whose eyes gleamed like blue jewels in a crown” (203). Here the subtle affiliation between whiteness, soap and the cotton dress reflects McClintock’s claim that under colonisation “African women were subjected to the civilizing mission of cotton and soap” (31), products embedded in slavery and colonial commerce. Like the mothers in “Girl” and in “Fairness”, then, Kincaid’s mother is herself a victim of “the poetics of cleanliness” which, McClintock explains, are “a poetics of social discipline” (226). Indeed, the conceptualisation of “Africans as dirty and undomesticated [...] served to legitimize the imperialists’ violent enforcement of their cultural and economic values, with the intent of purifying and thereby subjugating the unclean African body” (McClintock 226). The yellow dress, then, becomes a means for social advancement, a corrective to the writer’s black skin, an embodiment of Frantz Fanon’s “white masks”, an anxious “*reaction* [to being] appraised in terms of the extent of [their] assimilation” (Fanon 24). Though Kincaid’s story interrogates

Western clothes' ability to project racial equality like Mootoo in "The Upside Downness of the World as It Unfolds" (see below), it also demonstrates the malleability of dress. Unlike the irreversible damage of skin bleaching, clothes can be changed, adopted and adapted more freely.

Textile Texts

Moving beyond American short fiction's connection with women's magazines, Showalter has suggested that fashion is woven into the fabric of women's short form writing by hinting to a more formal relationship between multi-ethnic short fiction and cloth. In "Piecing and Writing", an article that later came to be expanded in *Sister's Choice*, Showalter associates the rise of American women's short fiction in the 19th century to the multicultural American female traditions of piecing, patching and quilting. Offering a selection of close readings, she argues that quilting informs much of 19th and 20th century women's short story writing. Investigating literary patchwork "[b]oth [as] theme and form in women's writing", she builds analogies between text and quilt, arguing that "piecing and patchwork have also become metaphors for a Female Aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for a politics of feminist survival" (1991: 146). The episodic nature of short story writing and quilting alike, she contends, enabled women to squeeze these acts of creativity and self-expression in their fragmented lives: "While the sustained effort of a novel might be impossible for a woman whose day was shattered by constant interruption, the short narrative piece, quickly imagined and written, could be more easily completed" (153).

The quilt is a richly evocative metaphor as an international artform that draws attention to what Showalter describes as the "common threads of American women's culture and writing" (146) and provides a useful starting point in terms of which to reflect on multi-ethnic women's relationship to fashion and literary form. As Corina Anghel Crisu and Jen Macarthur explain in "The Quilt as Text, the Text as Quilt", the practice of quilting "can

be traced back to ancient Oriental cultures”; it was brought to Europe in Medieval times by Crusaders, and later ushered into America by European migrants before being incorporated into American culture (26). In the U.S., “quilt-making crossed racial, regional, and class boundaries, and its immense aesthetic vitality came from its fertilization by other design traditions” (Showalter 1991: 148). Following the second-wave feminist and Civil Rights movements, from the 1960s onwards quilts were revitalised and became “available as cultural metaphors to many different groups” including African Americans, Native Americans and white American women (166). This is reflected in the publication of stories by ethnic and migrant women writers concerned with identity around that period including “Quilt” by Polish-American writer Monica Krawczyk (1950), “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker (1973) and “Anchorage” by Japanese-American writer Sylvia Watanabe (1993).

Showalter’s claims on form are particularly useful in reflecting on the anthology⁴¹ and the short story cycle, a genre she hints at but does not name when discussing women’s “gatherings of disparate pieces [which] evolved in some cases into novels with narrative structures developed out of the piecing technique” (1991: 153). Though apparently unaware of Showalter’s foundational essay, in *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, Morris and Dunn also conceptualise the “patchwork composite”, a type of cycle which “is made up of pieces; and like the cloth-pieces of a quilt, the text-pieces [...] typically reflect an aesthetic emphasizing juxtaposition and repetition with variation” (23). Although they refer to the quilt as a metaphor for collections containing juxtaposed patterns, cycles such as *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by Naylor, *Love Medicine* (1984) by Native-American writer Louise Erdrich, *How to Make an American Quilt* by white American writer Whitney Otto (1990) and *Of Customs and Excise* (1991) by Indo-Canadian writer Rachna Mara, for instance, contain various occurrences of women sewing and quilting, and read as

⁴¹ See *An African Quilt: 24 Modern African Stories* edited by Barbara H. Solomon and W. Reginald Rampone Jr. (2013) and *Quilt Stories* edited by Cecilia Macheski (1994).

metaphorical quilts. Cisneros too has talked of writing *The House on Mango Street* (1984) in quilting terms: “I had no idea how these pieces were going to fit together. I was making all of these little *cuentitos*, like little squares of a patchwork quilt, hoping that they would match, that somehow there wouldn’t be a big hole in the middle” (qtd. in Nagel 106).

In our contemporary globalised world, in an age of synthetic and ready-made clothing where handmade dress is the exception rather than the rule, Western women’s traditional associations with the making of clothes, with sewing, quilting and knitting activities, has largely been displaced by their consumption of clothes, their selecting, wearing and matching. This development is, of course, dependent on the “exploitation of (mostly) poor Third World women workers by global capitalist economic processes” examined in detail by Mohanty (160). Transnational corporations have moved factories away from Western countries “in search of cheap labor” (Mohanty 44). It is worth noting, too that there are still a number of garment sweatshops in the U.S. which “operate illegally to avoid unemployment insurance, child labor laws, and regulations” and primarily employ “women [...] immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia” (Mohanty 73). In view of this context, in what follows I revisit and illustrate Emma Tarlo’s convincing suggestion that for many migrant women living in the West, “buying and wearing a certain type of dress is in fact a creative act” (12). Thus, I extend Showalter’s point on weaving and quilting to wearing clothes, drawing on her call to think of cloth and dress as text, and on the common Latin root of text and textile meaning “to weave” (Hemmings 7).

Text and textile share a material history which is often overlooked. Before being made of bleached and compressed wood, paper used to be woven from natural fibres whether bamboo or papyrus (Plant 330), and “before the 1870s rags were often recycled into paper: what was once a dress or coat could be transformed into the pages of a novel representing a dress or coat” (Wynne). It is perhaps no wonder, then, that “[l]anguage and

textile formation share pliability as well as an inherent capacity to form structural relations between components” (7), as Jessica Hemmings insightfully observes, and as the story I examine below demonstrates. Having demonstrated, with Kincaid’s “Biography of A Dress” that clothes, both as objects and literature, can carry particular (hi)stories woven in their fabric, I decipher clothes as readable text. For this, I build on Cynthia G. Kuhn and Cindy L. Carlson’s point in *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, that fashion and literature are arts of expression which share linguistic connections: “commentators may discuss the ‘lines’ or ‘statement’ of an outfit, designers describe their collections as ‘telling a story’ or ‘having a voice’, and the ubiquitous concept of style underwrites them both” (2).⁴²

In this regard, Obejas’s “We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?” (1994) offers an example of how text and textile can interweave in short fiction. Obejas tells the story of a green sweater around which the text is structured and invites us to read her protagonist’s coming-of-age through the garment’s fabric. The narrative is set in 1963 and in the U.S. at the peak of the Cold War, and is a witness to the “more than one million Cubans [including Obejas’s family] in the United States between the time Castro assumed power in [...] 1959 and 1994” (Muller 13-14). It charts the arrival and identity formation of its narrator, a Cuban refugee, from her family’s reception at the office of Immigration and Naturalization Services as a ten-year-old child, to her adult life as a self-identified lesbian. From the outset, the narrator informs us that she has “been wearing [her green sweater] for two days straight” and “has no plans to take it off right now” (113). Having

⁴² That said, I am also aware that “clothes cannot always be ‘read’, since they do not straightforwardly ‘speak’ and can therefore be open to misinterpretation” (Entwistle 112). The contemporary discussions around the Muslim headscarf in the post-9/11 context are but one example of the simplistic interpretations surrounding dress. As Pereira-Ares notes, and as stories such as Singh Baldwin’s “We Are Not in Pakistan” (2007) suggest, “Muslim clothing has now come to be insidiously connected with suspicion, and its wearer immediately envisioned as a ‘threat within’” (151). Yet as stories such as Djamila Ibrahim’s “Not a Small Thing” (2018) or the essays collected in *It’s Not About the Burqa* edited by Mariam Khan (2019) reveal, there is much more to the relationship between women and their headscarves than mainstream media will admit. For a full account on the matter, see also Daphne Grace’s *The Woman in the Muslim Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature*.

experienced a shipwreck, her family has lost all their belongings apart from the clothes on their backs. The sweater, then, is her sole property, evidence of her traumatic migration, and her only remaining physical contact with her homeland and past. It is presumably dirty and damaged from the shipwreck, and sticky from her wiping off the sweat of her forehead with it in the hot office. It still carries the comforting “smells of salt and Cuban dirt and [her] grandmother’s house” (114-115), smells that root her in Cuban soil but also retrace her journey and point to the possibility of multiple cultural cohabitations in one entity. In “Fabric Frontiers: Thread, Cloth, Body, Self in Latina Literature and Film” Mihaela Harper revisits Wilson’s claims that “dress is the frontier between the self and the non-self” (3) and that “clothing marks an unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us” (2). The “fabric frontiers” (165) marked by the sweater are indeed highly absorbent as they carry the smells and salt of outside environments, and the character’s own excretions.

The tensions of the Cold War and of American assimilationist policies play out on the sweater’s surface as the narrator is repeatedly and insistently summoned by a Catholic volunteer to exchange her sweater for “a little gray flannel gym jacket with a hood and an American flag logo” (114) from a box of donated American clothes. Shortly following the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the story depicts the jacket as an embodiment of the Cold War containment policy that was initiated in 1947 as part of the Truman Doctrine and its attempts to enclose communist bodies and thought behind militarized borders. Yet, as Harper’s definition of “fabric frontiers” reveals, these can only be symbolic at best. The volunteer’s message is crystal clear: for the Cuban family to be granted protection and treated as American citizens, they must fully renounce their former national allegiance and shape themselves into Americans by blending into the melting pot. The requirement for the child to put on the second-hand jacket, grow to fit into it, shape her body to its previous (presumably American) owners’ and, in the process, absorb “other people’s sweat and excretions” (118) contained in the cloth, evokes the naturalization oath of the U.S. Still, to

this day, it requires new Americans to “absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign [...] state” and to “take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion” (qtd. in Mukherjee 2011, 680). The shape of the coming-of-age narrative, with its beginning on American soil, and its use of the shipwreck as a potential religious symbol of baptism and rebirth, seems to suggest that the character’s life only begins in America, therefore joining a long tradition of early European migrant narratives including Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912) which tell successful tales of Americanization. As Bromley puts it, some migrant narratives “associate the homeland itself with puerility. [...] The difference between this world and the next resembles the difference between childhood, with its childish seeing and thinking, and adulthood, with its direct, experiential knowledge of reality” (5). However, as Harper has noted, the character’s refusal to give up her sweater offers “an interesting reversal: the sweater does not shelter her body”, instead it is the protagonist that sustains and protects this frontier between her body and her new land (174). With this preservation, the story questions the possibility of becoming American “without any mental reservation”.

Strikingly, despite its homebound associations, the cherished Cuban sweater is not, technically speaking, a handmade product of Cuba, but a “synthetic” (113) object which is most presumably an American export. In *World Clothing and Fashion*, Mary Ellen Snodgrass connects the rise of the sweater as a global garment from the 1950s onwards, following the American company DuPont’s development and circulation of Orlon, an acrylic polyester “with a soft, wooly fiber that competed with cashmere” (267). The cloth industry represented Cuba’s largest manufacturing site outside of the sugar industry. Notably, the Textilera de Ariguanabo was built in 1931 by an American businessman named Dayton Hedges and produced fabric and clothes (Lieber). Whether imported or originating from the Textilera de Ariguanabo, the fabric of the green sweater, in a manner similar to Kincaid’s yellow dress, bears witness to the U.S.’s ongoing economic and military involvement on the

island following Cuba's independence in 1902. By nonetheless making the green sweater a symbol of the child's Cuban origins, Obejas sets it up as an example of transculturation as defined by Pratt: "While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what the dominant culture visits upon them, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it, and what they make it mean" (7).

Following this formative episode, the story narrates the family's disillusionments in the U.S. and the protagonist's sexual and political awakenings as a lesbian in the 1980s and 1990s. Her clothes mirror her personal trajectory, as she soon replaces, and forgets, the green sweater for suede jackets with fringes and "floor-sweeping bell bottom jeans" with holes (121). The story's title refers to a comment made by her father which betrays his disappointment with his daughter, whose values contrast with his own right-wing anti-communist politics and his unflinching support for President Nixon and later Reagan. Towards the end of the story, in 1990, the adult narrator rediscovers the sweater she had long forgotten, in a box of memorabilia and fragments of her past her mother gives her following her father's death. It is wrapped around her "grade school report cards, family pictures of the three of [them] in Cuba, a love letter to her [mother] from [her] father... Xeroxes of [her] birth certificate, copies of [their] requests for political asylum, and [her] faded blue-ink Cuban passport (expiration date: June 1965)" (129) - documents hidden away by her parents to prevent her from returning to Cuba. The outgrown sweater, like these objects, is depicted as an element of a past life, a ghost that hints at the absent body it no longer covers, the box a symbolic urn of a life gone by. As fashion theorists have claimed, unworn clothes "seem[...] lifeless, inanimate and alienated from the wearer" (Entwistle 10), and act as "congealed memor[y] of the daily life of times past" (Wilson 1). Peter Stallybrass has explored "cloth [as] a kind of memory" (70): "[b]odies come and go; the clothes which have received those bodies will survive" (69). Clothes receive "our smells, our sweat, our shape even" as they stretch over time to adapt to our bodies; they "receive the human

imprint" (69). They carry a history of the wearer's life through their stains which "are a record of what has been near, on, or is of the body" and "taint[...] now with then" (Sorkin 60), through their scratches and marks of discoloration. To cite the editors of *Cloth and Human Experience*, cloth thus "captures the vulnerability of humans, whose every relationship is transient, subject to the degenerative processes of illness, death, and decay" (Weiner and Schneider 2). The sweater in this story survives to retain the memory of the wearer and denote the passage of time.⁴³ Having protected the narrator's body from the shipwreck, it continues to protect the protagonist's Cuban childhood from disappearance and decay. Like "Biography of A Dress", this story, also narrated by the adult protagonist, illustrates Bari's claim that although we may outgrow clothes, "they may stay with us, as though their fibers were imperceptibly threaded into our memory, winding through our experience". Here, then, Obejas creates an interesting formal analogy between the story, the sweater, and the narrator. Like the ten-year-old child in the story and the objects in the box, the story itself is enclosed and protected in the sweater as it is narratively framed by the episode in which she decides to keep it. Past and present are interlaced as the narrative is far from linear; it jumps back and forth between the scene of their arrival in the U.S. and vignettes of her teenage years and adult life. These time frames are experienced and read simultaneously, crisscrossing and embedded in each other, knitted in the fabric of the text and the sweater which acts as connective tissue between now and then. Like the English language of the text, and the short story form, the sweater is the embodiment, archive and relic of the hybrid identities that emerge from the complex histories of colonization and neo-imperialism.

⁴³ In "The Circling Hand" (in *Annie John*), Kincaid uses clothes in a similar way. Annie's mother keeps her daughter's clothes safely in a trunk. The items in the trunk are listed on two pages. Each contains memories of Annie's past and stories that her mother tells her every time she opens the trunk to air the clothes. In the narrator's words, "there was my christening outfit, [...] there was the dress I wore for my first birthday, [...] there was the dress I wore for my second birthday [...] there was the first pair of shoes I grew out of after I knew how to walk; there was the dress I wore when I first went to school" (20-21). As in Obejas's story, there are also "report cards [and] certificates of merit" in the trunk, protected by the clothes (21).

Clothes Make the Woman: Performance and Anxious Projections of Identity

Before further exploring the ways in which clothing can be employed to project identity and even, according to Aileen Ribeiro, “produce fiction” (1), it is necessary to unpack the performative nature of identity. In his influential 1959 study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman conceptualises identity as purely situational and performative and stresses clothes’ role in creating and sustaining a convincing, seemingly “authentic” persona. Taking a sociological approach by analysing social interactions through the imagery of dramaturgy, he argues that people, like actors, perform differently for different social situations and different “audiences”. Through manipulating the “front”, that is to say their setting, appearance, and manner, “actors” attempt to guide the impression others make of them. Self-presentation, then, is a game of impression management and negotiation where performances and personas are either accepted or challenged by the public. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, human beings, as “creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that change from one moment to the next,” project an expression of coherence to create an illusion of stability and contain these “ups and downs” (56). There is, therefore, a “crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves” (56). Goffman contrasts the “front stage”, where people are aware of their audience and perform accordingly, with the “backstage”, where the performer does not feel observed and can therefore “relax [...] drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character” (112). That said, rather than implying an authentic identity is to be found in private, he envisions identity as a social construct and as a performance that simply does not exist outside of social relations. In doing so, Goffman anticipates the work of Judith Butler.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler takes a more philosophical position to echo Goffman’s suggestion that identity is unfixed, situational and relational. Focusing on gender, she claims that gender identity gets fixed onto biology but is determined by the cultural

meanings we give it. It is formed through compulsive repetition and “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (1990: 136). It is thus naturalised over time; identity is indeed “a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (1993: 313), but which nonetheless fosters the illusion of ‘nature’ and continuity. Conventions of appropriate gender dress, as observed in women’s fashion magazines, for instance, reflect anxiety and paranoia around identity and are required “for the purpose of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (1990: 136). Butler’s analysis of crossdressing especially assists in revealing clothes’ role in marking out gender identity and turning culture into nature. The performance created by drag or butch/femme identities “*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*” (1990: 137); that is, “sex and gender [are] denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” (1990: 138). Like clothes, then, according to Goffman and Butler, genders and identities can, in effect, be *worn*.

In “Inspection” (2019), Reid-Benta stresses the instrumental role of clothes in the definition, production and performance of diasporic Jamaican gender identities. The story explores the relationship between dress, femininity and morality to expose, like Kincaid and Okparanta, the ongoing impact of colonization on women’s bodies and minds. As the title suggests, the story foregrounds a concern with scrutiny that resonates with Goffman’s analysis of performance and impression management. The narrative traces Kara’s two-hour-long preparation before leaving her house to visit Toronto’s “Little Jamaica”, the neighbourhood where she grew up. Under her mother’s authoritative instructions, she brushes her teeth, showers and exfoliates twice, “coats her legs three times” in lotion and then applies baby oil all over her body, before selecting an acceptable outfit. The dress in question gives her an “almost prepubescent” look and “reaches her ankles”. She then sprays on texture softener before dumping it all over her head and rubbing it in to comb and shape

her hair. After that, she reapplies a final layer of men's deodorant, sprinkles on some perfume, and applies lip gloss – knowing that her body will be perceived as a reflection of her family's successful social advancement, her "proper" upbringing and her own morality. In Goffman's terms, then, what is described here is a typical "backstage scene", framed by the borders of the short story, where "costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws" (112). It is where, as de Beauvoir writes, a woman can stop play-acting for patriarchal society, where "she is getting her costume together, preparing her make-up, laying out her tactics [...] before making her entrance on the stage" (qtd. in Goffman 113).

Goffman suggests that backstage preparation is driven by the fear of embarrassment. If performers do not project a coherent persona and definition of the situation then "the interaction may come to a confused and embarrassed halt" (12). In this regard, Kara is well aware of the gossip that might emerge from a misstep: "A dry patch on the skin wouldn't attract any stares or whispers [...] but soon it would be known that Kara Davis wasn't raise proper". Goffman's study limits itself to hinting at the psychological and minor social consequences on performers who prove to be unable to successfully conform to the microsocial order a specific space imposes. By contrast, Reid-Benta's story goes one step further by addressing the devastating consequences such a misstep may have on women. The narrator informs us that the last time she visited Little Jamaica, her bra strap (a metonymy of Kara's underwear and, by extension, a sign of her sexuality) showed; "boys spotted a patch of pink lace and followed her for a block and a half", catcalling her as she narrowly escaped sexual assault. Meanwhile, older church women "looked at her with pursed lips, raising their eyebrows like she was having sex right there in the street". As suggested by the story's extreme shortness, its script-like division in time slots and checklists, its focus on "proper" femininity as opposed to sluttiness, and its incorporation of the Caribbean mother's instructions in free indirect speech, this story is partly inspired by

Kincaid's "Girl" (Taylor). Published fifty years after "Girl", "Inspection" signals the enduringness of certain stereotypes in the Caribbean community.

In *The Masque of Femininity*, Efran Tseëlon reveals how, in Judeo-Christian traditions, women are closely associated with the body, sexuality, sin and clothing. By describing the corrective and disciplinary processes Kara carries out on her body, Reid-Benta makes a similar point, as these processes suggest that the female body is fundamentally dirty and impure, that its natural smells need to be covered up by artificial ones, that its shapes need to be contained and flattened, that it is both too dry and yet overly leaky. As Margrit Shildrick writes in *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*, disciplinary practices targeting the female body, such as those carried out by Kara, "speak[...] to a persisting anxiety" (16) in Western culture; the "indeterminacy of body boundaries challenges that most fundamental dichotomy between self and other, unsettling ontological certainty and threatening to undermine the basis on which the knowing self establishes control" (34). To characterise women as more embodied, "as less able to rise above uncontrollable natural processes and passions and therefore disqualified for mature personhood" (26), then, enables society to impose and maintain the stability of categories and ontological theory. Tseëlon suggests as such by emphasizing, like Reid-Benta, the Christian church's instrumental role in giving moral meaning to women's dress and "instilling into the female collective consciousness a permanent awareness of the way she appears, and the impact of her appearance over others" (113). Her study demonstrates how ideas of chastity extended beyond the body and "beyond the subject's own mind" (113), as women were considered responsible not only for their own sexual behaviour but for men's too and held accountable for both. Examining female characters from founding myths such as Eve, Pandora, Lilith and the Virgin Mary, she reveals how women are frequently envisioned as temptresses "disguised behind false decoration" (112). In other words, clothes' association with artificiality, sin and sexuality

explain why women are “more likely to be condemned for their dress on the grounds that it is immodest or sexually alluring” than men (Entwistle 149).

Though Tseëlon’s focus is on Western, and implicitly white, femininity, for Kara the moral implications of dress are accentuated by the black female body’s ongoing associations with sexual promiscuity that date back to slavery and colonisation. In *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, hooks recounts how, in the 19th century, the perception of white women as temptresses changed as Americans moved away from Puritan teachings. White women were then considered as the “nobler half of humanity” whose duty was to elevate” men, as “beings worthy of love, consideration and respect” granted that they possessed no sexual feeling (31). By contrast, black women were depicted as sexually permissive and as the embodiment of sin, “legitimiz[ing institutional] sexual exploitation of black females” (24). In *Working Miracles*, Senior sheds light on how these damaging stereotypes continue to feed the Caribbean imagination. Western models of “right feminine behaviour”, i.e. “of a woman as a being whose purpose is derived from the existence of another, whether husband, father, or extended family, and whose locus is the home or the household”, were imported to the Caribbean and internalised during colonisation (42). The Church, which holds significant power over the everyday lives of women and their socialisation, reinforces the idea that adopting western and white ideas and practices are “a prerequisite for social mobility” (41). Women’s sexual attitudes are carefully monitored as school, church and home, examples of what Louis Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses, “uphold the ideals of virginity, chastity and sex only after marriage and, in former years, used to deny even the existence of sex for women” (71). In this context, “moral” dress is a means for women for social mobility and protection, a weapon for preservation against racist and sexist discourses. Kara’s attention to detail during her preparation encapsulates her need to reiterate a version of gender as a survival strategy in the diasporic environment.

If, as Stetz writes, “control over clothing indicates control over [...] self-definition” (2019: 130), then Kara’s agency in her choice of clothes is undoubtedly limited by cultural pressure, gendered codes of conduct and the fear of retribution. In this sense, the tight frame of the short story reflects the strict codes and boundaries that surround women’s bodies. The text ultimately suggests that the long history of objectification of black women’s bodies has left a strong mark on women who continue to see themselves through the eyes of the other. Strikingly, “Inspection” is one of only two stories not using first person narration in *Frying Plantain*. This change in tone creates a significant distance between the reader and the character. The latter is observed, yet the former is no longer privy to their thoughts and perspective. As the “I” of the narration no longer intersects with the “I” of the reader, Kara is no longer subject but object of our readerly gaze. Inspecting herself throughout the text, framed by the mirror, she is in an objectified state of consciousness: she reifies herself and perceives her body from a third-person perspective. Though the narrator is the character, in theory, this drastic change in narration highlights the disconnect between her calculated performance and her feelings. Importantly, just as the story’s content exposes the theatrics of identity performance by revealing the hard work and time that goes into creating an acceptable, flawless and coherent-looking identity, the form itself disputes the notion of identity as consistent. The story is extracted from *Frying Plantain*, a coming-of-age cycle which is characteristic of the genre in that it formally highlights the incoherent, unfixed, leaky, complex and intersectional nature of identity, as stressed above by Goffman. As Smith notes, the coming-of-age cycle “paints a picture of identity in process” and “such constructions allow stories to assert a momentary, contingent sense of a character’s self without insisting that it remain so across the stories” (2018: 6-7). The quilt-like cycle, then, enables the stitching and suturing of the migrant’s fractured sense of self and formally challenges the idea of coherence required from Kara.

Crossdressing and Transgressing 'Ready-Made' Identities

The stories discussed so far in this chapter have tended to show how women manipulate their physical appearance in order to compose with and abide by predefined gendered and ethnic dress codes. They build on the short story form's historical connection with fashion magazines and its role in disseminating a standardized ideal of femininity. In the process, they have indicated the entanglements between dress, body and identity and illustrated Hall's claim that diasporic individuals are forced to consider identity "as 'a production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). Yet, just as the short story's brevity can be deployed to dramatize the sense of oppression and women's sense of being "walled-in" by stringent codes, the form offers more transgressive possibilities. As demonstrated in chapter 1, contemporary short fiction frequently starts in *media res* and closes on open endings to reflect the permeability of borders and boundaries as the story leaks outside of the space of the text. In other words, the form is particularly well suited for displaying border crossings. As delineated by Reid-Benta's story and her cycle as a whole (see chapter 3), despite the incentives for women to "stay in their place", identity is to be defined as *becoming* rather than *being*. Butler has argued in her discussion of drag that individuals often repurpose and exploit clothes to subversively protest imposed and ready-made identity categories. Thus, as the bra strap episode in "Inspection" reveals, just as clothing constructs gender, racial and cultural differences as well as power relations, it can deconstruct and challenge them too. With this in mind, the final section of this chapter explores stories engaged with cultural crossdressing. It examines how female characters more subversively transgress the categories they have been educated in, in a search to feel more "at home" in their new lands, lives, clothes and bodies.

Divakaruni's "Clothes" (1997) navigates the experience of female migration and articulates her protagonist's gradual coming to terms with her cultural transformation through dress. As Priyanka Sacheti rightfully observes in "Clothing, Gender and Diaspora", the text explores the "significance of the transition from wearing traditional clothes to western ones" and reveals how this transition is "much more important for women who are entrusted with being custodians of tradition and heritage" (143). The Bengali narrator, Sumita, moves to California to live with her husband and his parents who expect her to be a traditional Indian housewife. As suggested by the title, the narrative itself is mediated through clothes and structured around sartorial moments which mark different transitional stages of the character's life and marital status. The text opens with Sumita, naked, being bathed by her friends ahead of her bride viewing. For her meeting with Somesh Sen, her future husband, her father gives her "the most expensive sari [she] had ever seen, and surely the most beautiful", bought specially for the occasion. The sari's "body was a pale pink, like the dawn sky over the women's lake" and embroidered with "tiny stars made of real gold *zari* thread" (19). The passage from nakedness to the sari is a defining moment that marks Sumita's passage into adulthood. For Sumita, it is inseparable from marriage. From the outset, then, the sari is associated with a traditional and conservative understanding of femininity as homebound and family- and husband-dependent.

Sumita's growing affiliation with America is dramatized through her choice of clothes. As the story evolves, Somesh questions his patriarchal position by secretly saving up money to get Sumita a proper education while keeping up his obligations towards his more conservative parents. By contrast with the sari, American clothes take on a more progressive value as Somesh gifts T-shirts and skirts to his wife, smuggling them past his parents, to demonstrate his commitment to her emancipation from their traditional lifestyle. At night, they place a towel at the bottom of the door to prevent any light from filtering out and make as little noise as possible, as she tries them on and models for him, parodying American TV

models on catwalks. Despite the figure-hugging nature of saris, in this story American clothes are markedly associated with Sumita's sexual awakening as she stands "marveling at the curves of [her] hips and thighs, which have always been hidden under the flowing lines of [her] saris" and at how the T-shirt "outlines [her] breasts" (25). In the privacy of their bedroom, Somesh proceeds in westernizing Sumita who abandons her cotton night-sari for a black and lacy nightie that "glides over [her] hips to stop outrageously at mid-thigh" (28), a change of clothes which highlights her own transitioning from one type of femininity to another. According to Cardon, "clothing surfaces as a skeleton key to enter alternate social spheres, allowing the individual to transcend barriers of class, race, ethnicity, and even gender" (4). Here, Sumita appears to be crossing both ethnic and gendered barriers simultaneously as the hiding of her more androgynous Western clothes in Somesh's cupboard suggests. In *Today's Transgender Realities*, Gregory Bolich writes that "crossdressing by women has become so ubiquitous in modern Western culture that it is no longer even seen as crossdressing" (41). Western women's mainstream adoption of clothes such as trousers and styles traditionally associated with masculinity is nonetheless an act of transvestism, "if by crossdressing is meant the wearing of clothes, or fashion styles, typically or traditionally associated with the masculine genre" (41). By subtly implying that Western garb marks gender categories somewhat less distinctly than Indian traditional clothes, the story addresses the instability of gender categories across cultures. Unlike the sari, which appears as an embodiment of Sumita's role as a chaste and dutiful Indian wife, American clothes are interwoven with a more independent, less repressive and more sexually confident type of femininity. If, as Emma Tarlo writes in *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, to dress and undress corresponds to "the building up and casting aside of different identities by means of clothes", then Sumita is engaged in an act of "re-dressing" her self, an act which involves "the choosing of alternative images, with the rediscovery of self that this sometimes implies" (1).

That said, the pull of culture is not as easy to shake off as Sumita's moments of cultural crossdressing may imply. As well as having patriarchal connotations, the sari is "a powerful reminder of home and memories entwined with it" (Sacheti 135). In this story, it carries comforting and homely associations. On her flight to California, Sumita calms her anxiety by "grop[ing] for something to hold on to, something beautiful and talismanic from [her] old life", and thinking of her saris: "[t]hick Kanjeevaram silks in solid purples and golden yellows, the thin hand-woven cottons of the Bengal countryside, green as a young banana plant, gray as the women's lake on a monsoon morning" (24). The saris ground her in her original Indian environment, and remind her of her mother who tucked "little silk sachets, made from *her* old saris" containing sandalwood powder in the folds of Sumita's saris which now carry "the smell of [her] mother's hands" (24). Sumita's gradual transformation into an American comes to a halt when Somesh is murdered during a night shift in his convenience store, requiring her to surrender the secret American self she performed for him and to contend with the more traditional expectations of her parents-in-law. In a poignant scene, with her dead husband lying under a white sheet on their bed, Sumita is left to herself to get changed into a plain white widow sari, white being "the color of endings" (29). In her state of despair, she finds it impossibly difficult to put on, as her body no longer responds to her, as the traditional role she is being assigned no longer fits her. Her attempt to dress is described as a battle between two world views as the sari falls through her fingers in "waves" (29), encircles her as she kicks and rips it and eventually falls to the floor in the material's softness. Here, Divakaruni describes the sari through water imagery to dramatize the character's sense of drowning in sorrow; it "spills through" her fingers and "there are waves and waves of white around [her] feet" (29), she "sink[s]" in it (32) after which her body is "almost too heavy to lift up, as when one climbs out after a long swim" (32). Associating images of drowning in the softness of the white sari and reminiscences of Sumita trying to drown herself in India as a young girl, Divakaruni suggests that the lure of tradition goes hand

in hand with the oppression of women's agency. The white "seductive-soft" (32) sari "draws [her] into its folds" (32), evoking the temptation of letting the current of tradition carry and guide her as it has until then, of moving back to India with her parents-in-law and living there as a widow, as per the script of tradition.

This particular episode reads as a feminist rewriting of the Hindu myth of Draupadi, "perhaps the most celebrated heroine of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*" (Spivak 387), a character which has inspired many postcolonial feminist rewritings including Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). In a famous scene, Draupadi is put at stake by one of her husbands while gambling. She is forcefully brought to Duryodhana's court whose good friend Karna orders his men to undress her while Draupadi prays to Krishna for protection. Her prayers are answered and though she is being disrobed, she remains chastely dressed as the cloth of her sari never lessens and slowly fills up the room. The endless sari protects Draupadi's honor and virtue; it acts, in the words of Zare and Mohammed, as "a shield of purity" (74). In "Clothes" however, Divakaruni (who herself dresses in traditional Indian clothes) interrogates the cost of this protection on women's agency and independence. By comparing the sari to a warm and comforting sea in which Sumita may nonetheless suffocate and drown, the story suggests that the sari is an expression of feminine subservience and that to let go of it is to reject internalized societal constraints imposed on women.

These constraints are further amplified by the form of the short story, framed by, and therefore metaphorically contained within, saris. Opening with Sumita getting prepared to meet her prospective husband and ending with his death, the text formally reflects the limited prospects for traditional Indian housewives whose life stories are embedded in their husbands'. By contrast, the story's open ending marks the beginning of the character's new life. After battling with the white sari, Sumita rises, tucks in the ripped bit of the sari next to her skin and takes the decision to remain in the U.S. and to proceed with her plans "[b]ecause

all over India, at this very moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws" (33). Looking in the mirror, she observes a woman who "holds [her] gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady [who] wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds" (33), the clothes Somesh bought her in anticipation of her first job. The mirror acts as a threshold of change, as a door into a new Western self; indeed "[t]he re-formulation of a wardrobe [...] often marks a rite of passage (or desire to prompt such a transformative event) into a new or uncharted stage in a woman's life" (Clarke and Miller 194). Through this change of clothes Sumita redesigns herself as well as her wardrobe, repudiating internalized tradition and the confined sphere of the home alongside the sari. She takes control over her fate, demonstrating in the process how "dress can make visible the process of achieving individual identity" (Stetz 2019: 123). Ultimately, then, the ending embraces North America as an emancipatory space by connecting Western dress with modernity and female agency. As a result, it partakes in the themes of self-fashioning, reinvention and upward mobility that have been central to American literature since the 19th century. As in these discourses, in "Clothes", dress is used "as a barometer for achieving American ideals of upward mobility and the pursuit of happiness, defined here as the pursuit and expression of individual desire" (Cardon 5).⁴⁴

By contrast, in "Mannequins" (2002) Lakshmi offers a somewhat more nuanced outlook on cultural cross-dressing to question discourses regarding the reinvention of self through the mythic lens of the American Dream and to criticize how struggles for cultural

⁴⁴ Strikingly, this ending resonates with Mukherjee's "A Wife's Story" (1988), a writer whose stories Divakaruni has professed to being heavily influenced by (Zupancic 88). In Mukherjee's story, Panna, a married and middle-aged Indian woman, temporarily moves to the U.S. to study for a doctorate. The story chronicles her husband's short visit in New York City. Panna, who has grown accustomed to wearing Western clothes, welcomes her husband in a sari. Over the following days, she grows increasingly conscious of his conservative values, lack of adaptability to Western ways and occasional racism towards African Americans. The story closes with Panna, naked, looking at herself in the mirror, "free, afloat, watching somebody else" (40), a scene which, as in the ending of "Clothes", suggests a possible rebirth, as Maxey has noted (2019: 42). Like "Clothes", the very often anthologised "A Wife's Story" "reinforce[s] an image of the United States and Canada as the site of possibility and reinvention for Indian-born women" (Maxey 2019: 47).

integration or representation are fought on women's bodies. The text opens with a conversation between the narrator, a middle-aged Indian woman who has been living in the U.S. for three years, and her children who complain about her traditional ways. They ask her not to accompany them to a parents' evening as they are embarrassed by her sari: "you can't live in America and not dress like the Americans" (179). Inviting her to shed her "minority" identity, to assume a new one and access its privileges, they enjoin her to take heed of her cousin, Mira, who has arrived much more recently and yet has already, and apparently seamlessly, adopted an American lifestyle. Mira is a widow who has metamorphosed from a "plain, mousy" silent and dutiful wife "who had taken to wearing white saris" and "hardly ever opened her mouth", to a self-confident, Westernized woman (181). She "found a part-time job in a store", "flaunts all the colors of a peacock's plume", "chatters [...] about movies and basketball, even discusses stock market" and "seems to savor each moment of her life" (181). To endorse a more Western type of femininity enables Mira, like Sumita in "Clothes", to escape her limited prospects as a widow in Bengali culture. However, for the happily married narrator, there is something highly unnatural about swapping the sari for Western clothes or, in her own words, "masquerading in foreign garb" (180).

Whether prompted by jealousy, sheer pressure or simply a newly found cultural affiliation with her new country, the narrator confesses to the reader that she has secretly been to look through the windows of a clothes store on several occasions. She has fantasized about wearing Western clothes and admired the mannequins but has never dared to enter, to cross the threshold that would propel her into a new culture. When she finally works up the courage to enter the shop, she is confronted with her own foreignness: she does not know where to start, has no idea what her size is, and tries to blend in by imitating the women pressing clothes against their bodies in front of mirrors, only to find her movements constrained by her sari. A shop assistant offers to help her and before she knows it, she finds herself in a changing cabin, undressed in public for the first time in her life, trying on dresses

rapidly to get through the ordeal as quickly as possible. The episode is one of sheer agony; she feels her “ears burning” (184), the mirror “becomes smudged with blobs of color” as she rushes through the dresses “as if demons were chasing” her (184). The third-person description of the “the stranger in the mirror” is a far cry from Sumita’s in “Clothes”: “the woman who stands there is small, fragile and scared. Who’s she? [...] Who’s this plain woman, anyway?” (184). The protagonist’s alienation is further emphasized by her realization that her body is nothing like the mannequin’s, that the dresses do not suit her at all, that “everything seems out of place” (185). The shop assistant intercepts her before she leaves, and she buys a Burgundy dress before finding out if she can return it. Once home, she is met with awkwardness as her family politely congratulate her but betray their dislike of her new look. Unable to forge a relationship with the dress, the character nonetheless attempts to perform American femininity: “I cross my legs as I have seen Mira do and I throw back my head and laugh, the way Mira often does” (187). The renewed stress on imitation and performance resonates with Butler’s argument that “gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (138). As the character reflects the image of her cousin, it is no coincidence that the name Mira echoes phonetically with the word “mirror”.

For the narrator, to relinquish the sari is not simply to repudiate a garment associated with patriarchal ideas as in “Clothes”, but it is to let go of her marital privilege over unmarried women and widows such as Mira. More importantly still, it is, as in Obejas’s story, to unwillingly abandon a part of herself and values she adheres to, in order to fit in. Tarlo has noted how, in the West, “the concept of fashion introduces a wide range of constantly changing images to be aspired to” and does not expect people to define themselves “in too permanent or consistent a way” (17). In India, however, “where social, religious and regional stratifications are still strongly expressed and where the fashion industry is still relatively young, a change of clothes is likely to be interpreted as an act of

desertion or a change of affiliation" (17). If clothes are important in the establishment of self, and if they are intimately connected to bodies, then whatever the ideological battles around clothing regarding tradition, modernity, patriarchy and commodification, the wearer is likely to have emotional and psychological connections to these items which cannot simply be "taken off". Unlike the mannequins in the shop window, whose slim and faceless bodies accommodate Western clothes beautifully, the narrator cannot easily "cast off the old wrappings and become a brand new person" as she had hoped (180).

Where Divakaruni in "Clothes" describes American dress as liberating, Lakshmi stresses the constraining power of clothes over women's bodies across cultures. In "'Home' and the Construction of New English Fiction", Pradyumna S. Chauhan convincingly argues that the story "embodies the insensitivity of the harsh new world that could not care less about her feelings while insisting on conformity to its own dress code". In other words, it "mounts a rather radical attack upon the commodification of the woman, whose state, whether in South Asia or the West, can be best symbolized as a mannequin, a dummy meant to display itself in clothes pleasing to others, sans personal likes and feelings" (217). In addition, the story echoes second-wave feminist arguments in stressing how women's clothes across cultures limit movement and make women acutely self-conscious. If de Beauvoir argued that fashion reflects the fact that "society [...] requires woman to make herself an erotic object" (572), Germaine Greer fought for "[f]reedom from the uncomfortable clothes that must be worn to titillate" and "[f]reedom from shoes that make us shorten our steps and push our bottoms out" (10). Crucially, the narrator feels uncomfortable both in Western and Indian dress. She does not feel as "free and uninhibited" (182) as she had hoped in the dress, and has "begun to feel uncomfortable in a sari" (180), complaining that it "cramp[s] every movement" (182). The story illustrates Stetz's observation that "clothing can only exhibit versions of femininity that already exist, and these prove inadequate to the complex demands of actual life, particularly in the case of female

subjects who must move within and across multiple cultures" (2009:67). Rather than the romanticised and liberatingly interstitial position valorised by Bhabha, the character experiences cultural hybridity as a more paralysing "limbo".

Like Lakshmi, in "The Upside Downness of the World as It Unfolds" (1993) Mootoo questions the transgressive and emancipating nature of crossdressing. Placing the practice of crossdressing within the wider history of colonisation, she uses the sari to critique the limits of Canada's multiculturalism policy. In many ways, the story anticipates Indo-Trinidadian novelist Neil Bissoondath's more virulent attack in *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994). In the story, set in Vancouver in the 1990s, cultural crossdressing is deployed in conjunction with gender bending to make wider points against cultural appropriation and power dynamics. According to Bissoondath's controversial essay, multiculturalism ensures that "ethnic groups will preserve their distinctiveness in a gentle and insidious form of cultural apartheid" (89) and turns ethnicity into a commodity, "a thing that can be displayed, performed, admired, bought, sold or forgotten" (83). As such, it "indulges in stereotype [...] in the superficial and exhibitionistic" (2). In stressing her protagonist's inability to measure up to the cultural assumptions that surround her brownness and South Asian origins in Canada, Mootoo similarly draws attention to the superficial theatrics of ethnic identity performance. Instead of being required to conform to the American lifestyle by wearing Western clothes like the narrator in "Mannequins", Mootoo's protagonist is expected to contend with a fixed definition of Indianness that excludes her Caribbean and butch lesbian identities in order to fit neatly into the proverbial mosaic. Like the protagonist of "Out on Main Street" (see chapter 3), the narrator's identity is defined by its hybridity. As well as having inherited the cultural multiplicity of the Caribbean, the character identifies as queer and wears a hybrid "blend of men's and women's scent" (114). Upon her arrival in Canada, people ask her for recipes for Indian meals that she has never heard of, prompting her to buy a copy of *Indian Cookery by Mrs. Balbir*

Singh from which she learns words and recipes, and “save[s] her face more than a few times” (117), a fear of embarrassment that resonates with Goffman’s argument cited above. She feels somewhat inadequate as an Indian as she has never set foot in India, has developed an intolerance to Indian food, prefers cappuccino to chai tea and cannot speak Hindi; an exemplar, as above, of potentially crippling interstices.

The narrator rapidly befriends a white hippie butch lesbian couple, Meghan and Virginia, who are fascinated with Indian culture. They turn out to be the embodiment of what Stanley Fish describes as “boutique multiculturalists”, people who “accord a superficial respect to cultures other than [their] own” (382) but do not “take difference seriously because its mark (quaint clothing, atonal music, curious table manners) are for [them] matters of lifestyle, and as such they should not be allowed to overwhelm the substratum of rationality that makes us all brothers under the skin” (384). In this respect, Meghan and Virginia strive to live an “Indian lifestyle” in Canada by eating and drinking Indian, frequently putting on a thick Indian accent “in the sing-song tone of the fumbling-bumbling Indian stereotype in Peter Sellers’s movies” (115). They can “slide their neck [...] from shoulder to shoulder like the small vibrantly coloured papier-mâché Indian dancer that used to sit on [the narrator’s] windowsill” (115). They often sprinkle their conversations with Hindi words and are spiritually motivated by the “desire to find a point where all division ceases and we unite as one” (121). In a poignant scene, they patronizingly invite the narrator to accompany them to the Hare Krishna temple, to “[c]ome learn a little about [her] culture” (117). The couple arrive dressed in expensive and faultlessly wrapped saris; Virginia wears a “brilliant red sari [with] a navy blue border with discriminating flecks of silver paisleys” and Meghan a forest green silk sari, “with tiny gold paisleys all over and a thick, heavily-embroidered border of silver and gold”, with, underneath, a blue satin blouse (119). The narrator, however, is dressed in ordinary clothes with a plain white T-shirt, blue trousers and Dr Martens’ shoes, and is made to “feel like a party-pooper going to a costume party” (119). The comparison

between the religious ceremony and a costume party is developed further as white women and men appear to impersonate Indianness by wearing rich and glamorous exotic Hindu clothing and by “exhibiting their spiritual jubilation” (120). The South Asians, by contrast, do not seem to be taking part in this performance, being much more subtle both in terms of behaviour and clothing: the men wear “quiet, Western suits” and the women “modest saris” (120); they “clap discreetly” (120). Like the Western museum curators critiqued by Tarlo, Meghan and Virginia “rob clothes of much of their ‘social life’” and reclassify them “as ‘costume’, a word more associated with history and theatre than everyday living” (5-6). Worn by them, the saris lose their “active role in the making of identities, [and] become mere labels which do little more than reveal identities” and, in the process, the “very notion of identity itself becomes fixed and constrained” (Tarlo 6). For the white Canadian couple, Indian womanhood is a costume they can easily acquire, impersonate, or dispose of; it is a pleasurable hobby in which they can temporarily live out a fantasy.

Particularly significant to the Caribbean context is the tradition of carnival, where class, colour and gender relations were subverted, and slaves cross-dressed as powerful colonial figures and slaveholders, undermining social hierarchies. Fumagalli et al. describe the constitutive element of carnival as “the notion of ‘the world turned upside down’” (10), an implicit reference to Bakhtin’s claim that in medieval times carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (10). Importantly, this concept recalls the title of Mootoo’s story, and her character’s amazement at the reversal that has taken place in terms of cultural appreciation. The first part of the story occurs in the late 1960s in postcolonial Trinidad, where the unnamed narrator received private lessons from a retired British tutor, living in a colonial house full of mementos of Queen Elizabeth’s coronation, who tried to “whiten” her and make her despise her Indian heritage (112). By

contrast, twenty-five years later, her white Canadian friends “have embarked on a mission to rub back in the brown that [her tutor] tried so hard to bleach out” (112).

The story therefore offers a powerful critique of the global period of multicultural celebration preceding 9/11. The 1990s was “a time when Asian dress was transformed from ‘an undesirable ‘Other’ into a celebrated cultural commodity” (Pereira-Ares 107) and the sari was appropriated by celebrities such as Princess Diana, Gwen Stefani and Madonna and by haute couture brands. According to Huggan, India at the time was “a favourite destination for spiritual tourists” such as Meghan and Virginia; it carried an “exotic appeal for Westerners disenchanted with their own materially rich but spiritually impoverished cultures” (181). Unsurprisingly, the sari features on many covers of short story collections by migrant women as an indication of the writer’s context. It is one of the most salient and enduring signs of ethnic otherness in the West, at a time when much of the clothing that is worn around the world is based on Western garb (Fig. 10). Mootoo points out that while saris on white bodies are deemed highly fashionable, open-minded and modern, saris on brown bodies are envisioned as an indication of the backwardness and conservatism of the women wearing them, as suggested also by Lakshmi’s “Mannequins”, published about ten years later, in 2002 in a context of heightened distrust of brown bodies. Like the white upper-class women in 18th century *turquerie* paintings analysed by Inge Boer, who “would masquerade as sultanas, not as lower-class Turkish women” (428), Meghan and Virginia do not dress like the discreet and presumably working-class Indian women in the ashram. Through the richness of their clothes, they are to be located within a tradition harking back to the 18th century masquerades when “[t]he exotic costume was the most popular subspecies of the so-called fancy dress, related in particular to those national or ethnic groups evoking romantic associations” (Boer 428). If such crossdressing does, as Butler argues, put into question fixed identities, it nonetheless reinscribes pre-existing power dynamics.

Abdullah, Shaila. <i>Beyond the Cayenne Wall</i> . iUniverse, 2005.	Banerjee Divakaruni, Chitra. <i>Arranged Marriage</i> . Black Swan, 1997.	D'Costa, Jasmime Anita Yvette. <i>Curry is Thicker than Water</i> . BookLand Press, 2009.	Moharanj, Mary Anne. <i>Bodies in Motion</i> . Harper Perennial, 2006.
Rao, Shobha. <i>An Unrestored Woman</i> . Flatiron Books, 2016.	Ghatage, Shree. <i>Awake When All the World Is Asleep</i> . House of Anansi Press, 1997.	Singh Baldwin, Shauna. <i>English Lessons</i> . GLE Library, 1999.	Mukherjee, Bharati. <i>The Middleman and Other Stories</i> . Virago Press, 1990.
Desai, Anita. <i>Diamond Dust</i> . Chatto and Windus, 2000.	Desai, Anita. <i>Diamond Dust</i> . Mariner Books, 2000.	Khan, Tehmina. <i>Things She Could Never Have</i> . Mawenzi, 2017.	Singh Baldwin, Shauna. <i>English Lessons</i> . Goose Lane Editions, 2009.
Singh Baldwin, Shauna. <i>English Lessons</i> . Goose Lane Editions, 2008.	Perera, Padma. <i>Birthday Deathday</i> . Women's Press, 1985.	Rao, Shobha. <i>An Unrestored Woman</i> . Little, Brown Book Group, 2017.	Kamani, Ginu. <i>Jungle Girl</i> . Phoenix, 1997.

Fig. 10. Traditional Indian Dress on Book Covers of Short Story Collections.

The story's inclusion of the protagonist's colonial upbringing serves to question Canadian assumptions that, because of her brown skin, the Indo-Trinidadian migrant protagonist is, in fact, cross dressing in a manner similar to Sumita in "Clothes". Mootoo here critically situates her character's dress within a colonial frame by referring directly to Trinidad's colonial history and suggesting that her comfort in Western clothes is not just a choice but the direct result of a traumatic history which has severed her connections with her family's Indian origins. The editors of *The Cross-Dressed Caribbean: Writing, Politics, Sexualities* remind us that in the colonial Caribbean, "the white masters strove to control and homogenize the politics of clothing, notions of sex and gender, and behavioural codes of their slaves and indentured laborers who came from different cultures and functioned according to different rules" (9). While clothing was used to enforce and standardize Western ideas about identity, race, class and gender, it also became a weapon for the colonised to destabilise colonial discourse. To improve their living conditions and status, they strategically adapted to and mimicked Western ways. Bhabha has demonstrated how this mimicry often forced the colonisers to confront the resemblance between themselves and the colonised, threatening in the process the discourse of colonisation (88). However, in this story, Mootoo demonstrates that her character's wearing Western clothes, like the white women's wearing Indian saris, are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Like under colonialism, multiculturalism denies the hybrid cultures, histories, traditions and feelings of people who have had to adapt to Western culture. With this type of crossdressing, then, the world is not upside down at all, as hierarchies remain firmly fixed in place. In the rapidly changing world of Western fashion, a change of dress, in other words, does not necessarily signify a desire for social change.

Through their sartorial focus, the stories discussed throughout this chapter have highlighted the ongoing pressure on women's bodies to fit neatly into culturally specific understandings of ethnicity and femininity. Clothes are constantly connected with anxieties surrounding their wearers' sense of self and of their place within society as they are required

to negotiate between satisfying social expectations and individual desires. Having navigated the historical ties between the short story genre, femininity and fashion – ties which continue to this day with clothes brands bearing names such as “Short Story” (based in San Francisco), and “& Other Stories” (based in Paris and belonging to the H&M group) – this chapter has demonstrated how the form is particularly suited to the representation of hybrid migrant identities that do not fit into clear cut categories. Like the hybrid characters it depicts, the short story continuously defies definitions and categorisation. As Ellen Burton Harrington notes in *Scribbling Women & the Short Story Form*, this makes it “an enticing genre for writers with a problematic social positioning” and may explain its important, yet still overlooked, contributions by ethnic and postcolonial authors (8). The legacy of women’s magazines on the short story and the genre’s formal hybridity are further explored in the following chapter, where I gesture to the future directions that the form is taking in the digital age. In the deterritorialised space of the online, short stories no longer have to abide by national categories and fixed identities.

Conclusion

Migrant Women's Stories: At Home in the Contemporary World

This thesis has extended the parameters of short story theory to respond to the “shortage of critical studies taking up questions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability and other identity formations” in short story theory identified by Delaney and Hunter in their introduction to the 2019 *Edinburgh Companion to the Short Story in English* (4), while drawing attention to how habitable the genre is for so-called “low-brow”, ordinary, everyday practices. Having itself long been viewed “as a (skill-based) craft rather than a (creativity-based) art” because of its entertainment function in popular magazines (Pratt 1994: 109), the short story is a critical space in which to challenge the false theory/praxis opposition. The “poetics of home,” as I have engaged with throughout, from my own kitchen table with my washing machine comfortingly humming in the background, are forms of what Toni Morrison has described as “discredited knowledge” (342). This knowledge and these crafts were historically devalued because of their association with “discredited” people: women, migrants and people of colour. As this thesis has demonstrated, the brevity of the form lends crucial significance to these “small things” and reveals the interconnectedness and embeddedness of the home and the world. This resonates with a “turn to the quotidian” in theory more generally. As Alison James observes, with literary criticism becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, “‘the everyday,’ ‘the quotidian’ — has emerged as one of the most productive categories in recent literary and cultural studies” (78).

By taking an approach which scrutinizes the interactions and intersections between content and form, this thesis has facilitated a reading which avoids critical double standards according to which texts by white Americans are examined for their craft and “universalism”, while “ethnic” writing is discussed for its political and social content. As I have demonstrated,

in many stories, form enhances and sharpens the message. In “Simple Recipes”, for instance, Thien uses the form of the recipe to dramatize the difficulty of passing on culture across countries and generations, while in “Recipe for a Stone Meal”, Aidoo contrasts the recipe form with a narrative of starvation to underscore the wealth gap between refugees and Western countries. In bringing close attention to the dynamic yet overlooked contributions of migrant women to the short story, then, this thesis has endeavoured to firmly secure the migrant short story in contemporary literary critical discourses. By offering a bibliographic guide of collections published since 1980, which provides a much more comprehensive indication of the sheer breadth and range of short stories being published by migrant women (see Appendix 1), I have sought to expand the existing scholarship on migrant literature and to interrogate the assumption that the novel is the default fictional genre. This study has highlighted the importance of considering both “minority” and “canonical” writers, and short stories and novels, with attention to form and the literary, cultural, historical and gendered contexts that have shaped them.

Though this study is grounded in the North American context, my habitable approach can also be extended to other postcolonial migrant writers living in the West, in other national and/or linguistic traditions. In this respect, stories and collections such as “Dismatria” (2005) by Igiaba Scego (Somalia/Italy), *La Préférence Nationale* (2001) by Fatou Diome (Senegal/France), *Manchester Happened* (2019) by Jennifer Makumbi (Uganda/UK) and *Elsewhere, Home* (2018) by Leila Aboulela (Sudan/UK) are equally invested with belonging and making and unsettling home and could well be read under the lens of habitability. There are exciting possibilities ahead to test this paradigm suggested in Appendix 2.

Looking Forward: Literary Migrations to the Online Space

In December 2017, at the peak of the #MeToo moment, *The New Yorker* published “Cat Person” by Kristen Roupenian, an until then unknown writer. As well as figuring in the print version which has a circulation of just above one million (Boddy 106), it was accessible for free on the magazine’s website, and therefore highly shareable on social media. The story rapidly started trending on Twitter where it sparked heated debates about sex, gender and power, to the point where its cultural impact was even discussed in global news outlets (Khazan). Roupenian’s momentary fame eventually landed her a US\$1.2 million book deal for a collection of stories and a novel, an advance which is spectacularly high for a debutante in the book industry. Part of this had to do with the literary prestige attached to *The New Yorker* since the 1940s. To quote Díaz, “people kill themselves to be in *The New Yorker*” as it is, in the words of Stephen King, “the holy grail of the young fiction writer” (qtd. in Boddy 106, 38). While one must not underestimate the magazine’s fundamental role in offsetting or elevating the literary careers of many writers, no other story published by *The New Yorker* has ever had such a global impact.⁴⁵ In less than a week, the story became the most read and shared short story in *The New Yorker* website’s history. The commotion surrounding “Cat Person”, dubbed “the most talked-about short story ever” by the media, reveals the potential impact the online space has on the dissemination of short fiction, where it can reach a different and more global readership than it may do in print format.

⁴⁵ To a certain extent, the public response to “Cat Person” is comparable to the reaction to Shirley Jackson’s now canonical short story “The Lottery” (1948). This story received a torrent of letters by readers expressing their disgust and threatening to cancel their subscription, “the most mail the magazine had ever received in response to a work of fiction” (Franklin). At the time, the magazine was read primarily by the educated American middle and upper-middle classes. In the digital era, stories online have the potential to gain a much wider readership than *The New Yorker* did in the later 1940s as they more easily and rapidly shareable than on paper. In fact, many of the negative reactions to “Cat Person” emerged precisely from groups which most likely would not have bought a copy of the *New Yorker* themselves, middle- and working-class white men across English-speaking countries.

The proliferation of short stories such as Roupenian's on the internet since the 2010s invites further reflections on the paradigm of habitability as the online space is becoming an increasingly accommodating location for short story writers to publish their work. Most contemporary writers are encouraged by their agents and publishers to have an active online presence in order to promote their work and reach and connect with a wider audience. Yet more importantly, according to Habila, the internet is having a similar impact on the development of the international short story as newspapers and magazines in the industrial age (2012: xi). The new market opportunities that have arisen with the development of electronic books and online publishing have contributed to lending new global visibility to writers for whom the print publishing history has not been particularly accommodating (Adenekan and Cousins, Shringarpure, Sriskandarajah). If traditional venues like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* now publish online as well as in print, other new online literary outlets, such as LittleFiction.com, *Pank Magazine*, *Bodega Magazine* and *Out of Print*, continue to grow. Perhaps more than other genres, the short story has benefitted from this. The online environment privileges shorter forms such as poetry, short stories and flashfiction, or fragmented longer forms such as journal entries, serialised epistolary and/or conventional novels. These are favoured as they are considered less time-consuming and are, arguably, easier to read on small screens than longer forms (Dietz 127, Murphet 599).

The transformation of the digital landscape in the past twenty-years has, unsurprisingly, influenced the form and content of the short story, whether it is published online or in print. 2020, for instance, saw the publication of *The Women Who Forgot to Invent Facebook and Other Stories*, the aptly titled debut collection by Indian writer Nisha Susan. In "Likes" (2017) by Sarah Shun-lien Bynum, a father scrolls through his daughter's Instagram account. The frames of the pictures and their instantaneity are reproduced through short sentences separated from, and sometimes interrupting the flow of, the main text. Gappah's "From a Town Called Enkeldoorn" (2016) is designed as an online forum discussion on a

website for people from Zimbabwe and its diaspora, as it might have been downloaded in pdf format. The title, visuals and headings of the website appear exactly as they would online with the story closing with copyright information and hyperlinks to other pages (as suggested by the use of bold). More recently, in his contribution to the Decameron Project, Charles Yu offered an experimental text bordering on prose poetry which records the arrival of coronavirus through popular Google searches. "Systems" (2020) reads as a mixture of archive and creative writing which encapsulates our online dependence during the pandemic and exposes our shared human vulnerabilities. It powerfully interweaves trivial concerns, such as "Harry and William / Meghan and Kate", everyday worries such as "How to cut hair", and dreams of "Lombardy Italy", alongside more chilling searches that reflect the precariousness of human life: "should I be afraid", "Food bank near me", "How can I tell if I am depressed?". The short story thus continues to be at the forefront of literary experimentations, a tradition which, according to Krueger, stems back from the genre's birth in periodicals, where it was not subjected to the same level of censure as novels and where writers could easily advance controversial ideas through very thin veils. An awareness of this history, she writes, enables us to "see how the genre has consistently offered an outlet for both social commentary and aesthetic experimentation" (11).

In "The Child of the Century': Reading and Writing Short Fiction across Media," Ailsa Cox maintains that "[t]he brevity of Twitter gives it an obvious attraction for the writers of short fiction" (4). Just as the digital world has penetrated the genre, the short story too has infiltrated social media, where exciting formal innovations are being developed. Writers have turned to the platform to practice flash fiction or new forms of collaborative storytelling. In 2008, for instance, Indian Canadian short story writer Arjun Basu started writing daily what he called "twisters", stories that fit in a tweet. More famously, in 2011 Teju Cole used the 140-character limit of the tweet to ironically imitate crime reports found in Nigerian newspapers. He named this venture the "Small Fates" project and it included flash fiction

such as “Ude, of Ikata, recently lost his wife. Tired of arguing with her, he used a machete”. In 2014, he orchestrated a short story entitled “Hafiz” about a man who has a heart attack in a big city. Cole texted other Twitter users 36 sentences which he asked them to tweet, after which he retweeted the sentences in the right narrative order. Between 2012 and 2015, Twitter was the platform for the yearly #TwitterFictionFestival which hosted writers from around the world including Atwood, Celeste Ng, and Lauren Beukes. Starting in August 2020, Gappah has been sharing sections of her short stories in tweets, a process she has called her “Sunday Stories”.

Though a few writers were discovered through Twitter, and despite the large following of accounts such as @terriblytiny which share short stories by diverse writers, Jennifer Egan, David Mitchell and Philip Pullman continue to be the most renowned writers for their Twitter experiments.⁴⁶ Twitter fiction relies heavily on the print publishing industry as famous writers, whose online presence is publicly monitored, are much more likely to get their formal experiments on the platform noticed. Similarly, though digital short story collections “have not exploded in the way that the digital novel has” (Dietz 129), the eBook market has proved particularly remunerative for well-known short story writers such as King and Atwood. The Kindle Singles, for instance, created by Amazon in 2011 to publish short fiction and nonfiction that can be read in under two hours, cost the reader less than US \$2 and are financially beneficial for the authors who keep 70% of the royalties (Kaufman). This is highly significant, given that standard royalty rates are usually 8% for paperbacks, 10% for hardcovers, and 25% for eBooks (Michel). While the form certainly provides exposure for new writers too, the well-established ones are those who benefit the most, financially

⁴⁶ In 2015, award-winning author David Mitchell posted tweets of his work-in-progress to promote his novel *Slade House* which originated from a 6,000-word Twitter story entitled “The Right Sort”. In 2013, Philip Pullman tweeted the tale of Jeffrey the housefly over several months. Pulitzer prize-winner Jennifer Egan published her 2012 *New Yorker* short story “Black Box” as a series of tweets on *The New Yorker*'s Twitter account over nine days.

speaking. Thus, in October 2020, Amazon released Adichie's "Zikora", a story about a pregnant Nigerian lawyer in Washington, DC., on the Kindle Singles store where it is available for free for Kindle subscribers. Adichie turned to the publisher knowing that their atypically high-speed publishing would permit the story to "join the cultural conversation ahead of the US election" (Shringarpure). Given Adichie's status as one of the most influential literary figures of our time, the story received a lot more publicity in mainstream media than most budding writers could hope for.

That said, as the feminist and political mobilisation around "Cat Person" intimates, the online space can contribute to a more radical reshaping of the publishing industry. Accessed from the privacy of a home, personal computer or mobile phone, the online blurs the public/private divide, breaks down geographical, temporal and social boundaries and fosters feelings of interconnectedness between its users. New networks are built online as people connect with each other over shared interests "on a scale and with the kind of ease not previously possible", Bronwen Thomas explains in *Literature and Social Media* (83). Digital spaces provide "new kinds of community for those who may feel marginalised or disempowered" (84). These deterritorialised spaces can be particularly accommodating for people who experience hostility or racism in "the real world". Never was this more visible and universally experienced than during the national lockdowns across multiple countries during 2020.

In this context, publishers (who traditionally act as literary tastemakers and gatekeepers) must increasingly respond to bottom-up movements initiated online. The online dissemination of information relating to racial inequalities in the publishing industry and the ensuing public outrage (see chapter 1) enabled important structural changes. Following the *American Dirt* controversy, Flatiron Books hired Nadxieli Nieto (a board member of Latinx in Publishing) as an editor at large in April 2020, and appointed committees

to audit their catalogue, reassess the advances they gave out, and review their marketing of books by writers of colour. In addition, Macmillan (its parent company), “trained editors in how to hire and work with sensitivity readers, already a widespread practice in the YA world but one that few adult houses had previously incorporated into their routines” (Shapiro). Soon after, the #BlackoutBestsellerList campaign was launched by Amistad Press on Twitter from June 14th to June 20th, 2020 following the death of George Floyd. It urged readers to purchase books by black authors and to buy from Black-owned independent book shops to show support for the African American community and pressure publishers into being more inclusive. In consort with the Black Lives Matter movement, a dramatic spike in book sales followed with titles about anti-racism and discrimination. On June 21st, “all ten slots on the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list were taken up by books about antiracism” (Evelyn), and since then Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* stayed on the list for over 122 weeks, Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist* for over 36 weeks, and Ijeoma Oluo’s *So You Want To Talk About Race* for 26 weeks in a row. The big five publishers responded by creating new imprints and hiring executives of colour. Given that low starting salaries in corporate publishing in big and expensive cities is often a barrier to entry which privileges the wealthy, Macmillan, Penguin Random House and Gove Atlantic committed to raising starting salaries for apprenticeships. In July 2020, Dana Canedy was hired to take charge of Simon & Schuster, becoming the first black woman to head a major imprint, and Lisa Lucas was named senior vice-president and publisher of Pantheon and Schocken Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House. In October 2020, Hachette Book Group created Legacy Lit, an imprint devoted to writers of colour, and named Krishan Trotman at its head. Only time will tell about the long-term impact on diversity in the publishing industry, but both the success of “Cat Person” and the #BlackoutBestsellerList campaign highlight the power of the online to mobilise feminist and anti-racist activism which may render the industry more habitable.

The unexpected success of Instapoetry is another example of how internet and social media facilitate the publishing of stories by creating new audiences and networks which support artists and bring their work to prominence. Instapoetry, a form born in 2014, refers to the prose poems, aphorisms and short texts published in the square picture frames of Instagram picture posts. Like the short story, the instapoem is a hybrid and flexible form; it is defined primarily by its mode of dissemination, by its short length and its consequent ability to fit into a small, square, picture frame. Where the instapoems of Cambodian-Australian refugee poet Lang Leav are typically divided in stanzas to visually resemble traditional poems (which keeps open the possibility of returning to print without significant alterations), Punjabi-Canadian poet Rupi Kaur more frequently offers short narrative paragraphs accompanied by hand drawn sketches. While Instapoetry certainly does not quite fit the formal assumptions that one has of a conventional short story, it is often at the border between a prose poem and flash fiction. Like Twitter fiction then, it tests generic boundaries and indicates potential new directions that the short story is taking in the digital era. More importantly, however, Instagram has provided an outlet for writers who had no print prospects, has hugely benefited marginalized writers and emerged precisely from the lack of publishing opportunities offered to young ethnic and female writers.⁴⁷ Like Kaur, the most famous instapoet worldwide, Indian-British instapoet Nikita Gill turned to Instagram after receiving 137 rejections from publishers. Kaur's writing, which has garnered an impressive readership of over 4 million Instagram followers, focuses on relationships and family, trauma recovery, migrant and female identity and women's bodies. If Roupinian's breakthrough with "Cat Person" was no doubt instigated, at least to a certain extent, by her being published in *The New Yorker*, Kaur's was much less institutional; indeed, it arguably happened *in spite of* literary institutions. As her number of Instagram followers grew, her

⁴⁷ See Cleo Wade (693K followers), Lang Leav (544k followers), Nikita Gill (579k followers), Nayirrah Waheed (631k followers), Yrsa Daley-Ward (176k followers), Yesika Salgado (122k followers). [Numbers last updated on January 21st 2021.]

successful self-published *Milk and Honey* (CreateSpace, 2014) was picked up and reprinted by an American publisher, Andrews McMeel Publishing, which had until then specialised in humour, puzzle and colouring books. Kaur's pivotal role in the spectacular increase of poetry sales in North America, the diversification of the poetry readership, and the rise in the demand in bookshops for poetry by female African American poets between 2012 and 2017 is now well documented (Maher). In 2018, *Milk and Honey* had sold 2.5 million copies worldwide and been translated into 25 languages (Mzezewa). Her third volume of poetry, *Home Body* (2020), parts of which feature on Kaur's Instagram, was acquired by the more prestigious Simon and Schuster.

Though scholarly interest in Instapoetry is on the rise, and 2020 witnessed the first international conference on the topic (at which I was invited to speak), academia has been strikingly slow to respond to the phenomenon. Debates as to the genre's literary legitimacy and to the threat it supposedly poses to "real", "deserving" poetry continue to dominate academic discussions. In a now famous article entitled "The Cult of the Noble Amateur" (2018), white British poet Rebecca Watts condemned "social media's dumbing effect," provocatively comparing instapoets to social media influencers, and denouncing "the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft" that she argued is characteristic of the genre. The piece, which originated as a review of the work of bestselling British working-class spoken-word poet Hollie McNish, indiscriminately lumps together spoken-word poetry with instapoetry and their innumerable practitioners. In this respect, Watts' article resonates with George Eliot's 1856 essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" which is a targeted attack on popular fiction by women. Eliot bemoaned the "absence of rigid requirements" of the novel form which, she contended, "constitutes the fatal seduction of novel-writing to incompetent women" (324). Not unlike Instapoetry now, the 19th century novel was particularly habitable for outsiders – at the time, white middle-class women. It had a relatively low status, was easy to read, bore "no long and intimidating tradition of

‘great masters’”, and “did not demand a knowledge of the classics, of rhetoric, or of poetic devices” (Eagleton 60). Like Eliot, Watts’ article rails against the commercial success of newcomers, demonstrates an attempt at gatekeeping by marking the line between the popular and the literary, and aims to distinguish her own work from that of her female Instapoetry contemporaries. While this literary spat deserves much more consideration than I can grant it here, its particular significance, for the purpose of this study, is how it removes attention from the literary and generic innovations of the form and acts to silence the voices of working-class and migrant women. Like the accusations of “food porn” discussed above, women Instapoets have disproportionately been the object of these attacks, despite the presence of men among the most famous practitioners (Miller).

My interest resides not so much in the literary quality of these texts, but in their adroit effort to self-consciously mediate between form and content. In “Women of Color” (Fig. 11), Kaur theorises the politics of form to highlight the habitability of the online sphere. She juxtaposes a critique of the print publishing industry with a political message

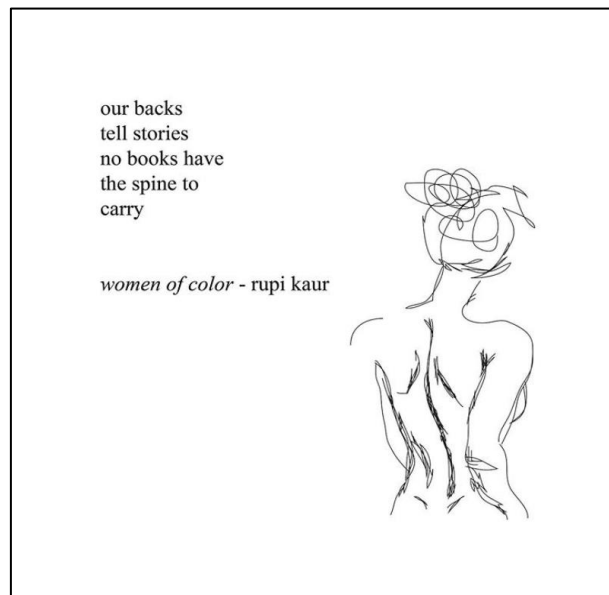


Fig. 11. Kaur, Rupi. “Women of Color.” *Instagram*, 7 Mar. 2020.

about transnational female solidarity and an empowering discussion of ethnic female identity. Playing on the word and forms of a curvy “spine”, she highlights the vulnerability of women’s bodies to the traumas of History, but also suggests that the book, as material object, is too fragile and limited to carry the stories women do across generations, time and space. Having published and shared this text several times on her Instagram page since 2015,

Kaur thus contrasts the ongoing nature of Instagram and the infinite capacity of the online, to the small and limited space of the book. By extension, she also implies that the book industry does not have the courage to publish some of these stories. Her deliberate decision to use an inclusive “our” and a racially unmarked female body before announcing her allegiance to “women of color” is an expression of the transnational female solidarity that occurs online. Carving out a new literary space on the magazine-like, “low brow” yet highly popular platform enabled Kaur and her instapoet colleagues to bypass literary gatekeepers while simultaneously creating a new genre which accommodates their experiences as unbelonging identities scattered across the globe. In the process, they challenge us to consume text as we consume photos and social media and offer a powerful reflection on contemporary society and the value given to “ethnic” writing.

Like instapoetry, online self-publishing on social media, blogs and other such outlets carry the advantage of bypassing and questioning the politics of Western literary production. As Shola Adenekan and Helen Cousins contend in “African Short Stories and the Online Writing Space,” many African writers migrate to the online where they can deliberately address an African audience and “break away from the politics of postcolonial literary production” (199) through a more direct interaction between writers and readers. Such self-publishing online “accrues power to the writers and not to the publishers as in print production” (200) and is visibly “less gender-weighted towards men and represents more equally the voices of male and female readers and writers” (210). Postcolonial and diaspora writers from Africa especially have been on the forefront of this “digital revolution” (Shringarpure). They have formed online-publishing collectives such as *Storymoja*, *Kwani?*, *Sooo Many Stories*, *Jalada Magazine*, *Bakwa Magazine* and *Saraba Magazine* to develop new and untested perspectives which traditional publishing outlets (both in the West and in Africa) may not want to take risks printing and to foster literary communities. In 2003, Wainana founded *Kwani?*, a print East African literary magazine with a strong online

presence, to collect and disseminate new short form writing. It is now one of the leading African literary magazines and has launched the career of several important contemporary authors such as Makumbi (winner of the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize), Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor (winner of the 2003 Caine Prize), and Uwem Akpan, author of the bestselling short-story collection *Say You're One of Them* (2008).

Over the course of the past fifty years, many have worried about the disappearance of the short story. In fact, it has become somewhat of a cliché to conclude an academic treatise on short fiction by lamenting its demise (Bostrom 154, May 2012: 324). As this thesis has shown, however, it continues to be a highly accommodating and habitable form; “an ideal form for experimentation, for breaking new literary ground and for introducing new [...] ethnic voices into the mainstream of literature” (Scofield 237). Its brevity, flexibility and portability enable it to adapt to changing environments “with the precocious rapidity demanded of it by the sheer velocities of technological change” (Murphet 613). As Julian Murphet argues in “Short Story Futures,” it is a forward-looking genre: “already well out ahead of its tardy readers, scouting the existential perimeters of a world we are creating with our eyes wide shut” (613). In this context more than ever, it is important to question static preconceptions of what a short story ought to look and sound like, as “definitions limit, exclude, and deaden our capacity for surprise” (Brown 1995: xxi). Only by expanding our definitions of the short story, citizenry and the nation, by stretching the parameters of short story theory, and by emphasizing form alongside theme, can we fully appreciate the vibrancy of the contemporary short story in North America and migrant women’s consequential contributions.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

Bibliographic Guide to Contemporary Short Story Collections by Migrant Women

This bibliographic guide includes 381 short story collections and short story cycles published between 1980 and 2020 by first- and second-generation migrant women writers from the 'Third World' residing in North America, whether their focus is on migration or not. It excludes Young Adult books and self-published collections, with the exception of those published by established award-winning writers. It includes collections by writers from Puerto Rico, an American territory nonetheless placed in the Caribbean, who moved to the U.S.

Please note that collections labelled or identified as "short story cycles" or "collections of interrelated stories" are followed by an asterisk.

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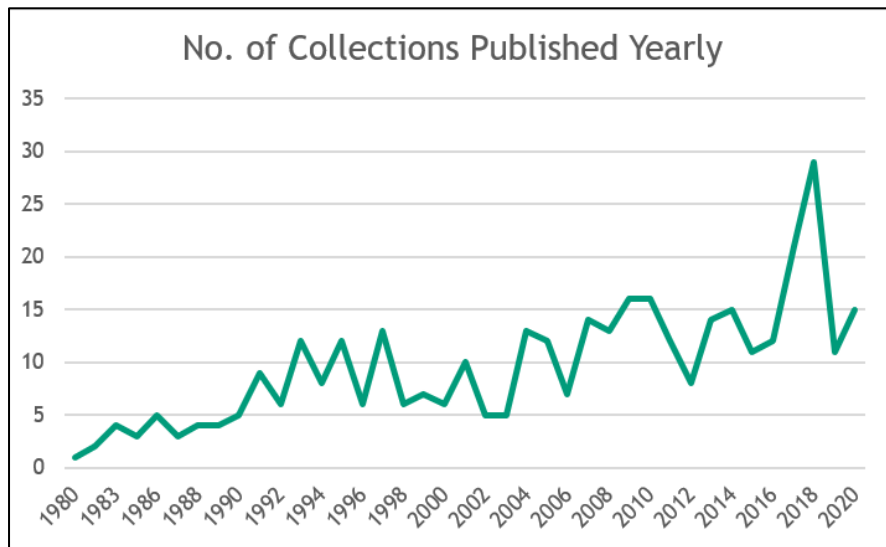
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Appendix 2.

The State of Contemporary Short Fiction by Migrant Women: Publishing Trends⁴⁹**A Rise in Publications of Short Story Collections by Migrant Women Since 1980?**

The chart indicates a positive trend. It suggests that there has been a rise in collections by migrant women writers since the 1980s, with small peaks in the 1990s and late 2000s, and a more significant spike in the post-2015 period.

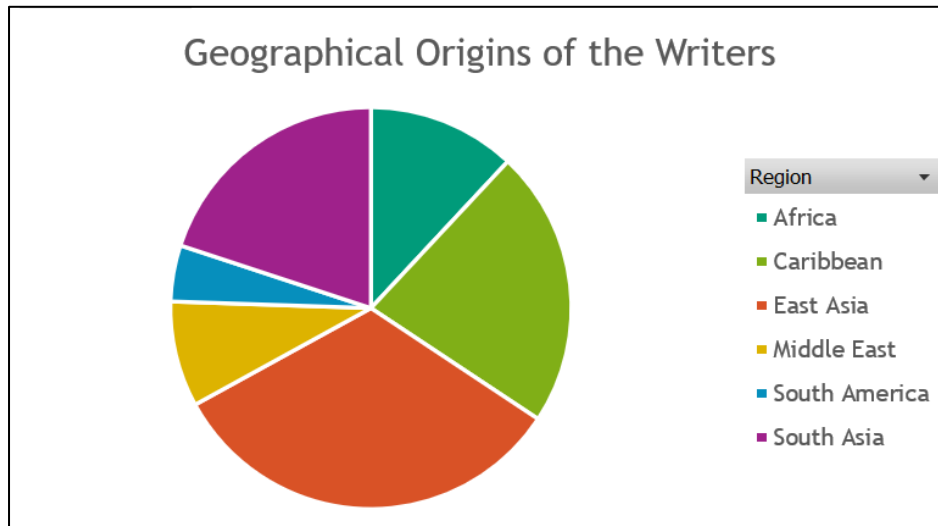
The opening up of the publishing industry to more diverse voices in the 1980s, and the coming-of-age of migrants and children of migrants having arrived to North America following the loosening of migration laws in the 1960s and 1970s may account for the rise. The visible peak in the post-2015 period seems to confirm the idea that the short story is having “a moment”, one which has been a long time in the making with the introduction of new short story prizes in the early 2000s (see chapter 1). It might also be the result of the Black Lives Matter movement initiated in 2013 and the #MeToo campaign of 2017, and the resulting demand for more inclusivity in literature.

I must include a note of caution, however. I collected my data from numerous anthologies, literary encyclopaedias and Google searches. It is inevitably much easier to find references to out-of-print books published in the internet era than before. In the pre-2000s, much

⁴⁹ Please note that the information presented below is based on the data collected from the 376 collections published between 1980 and 2020 listed in Appendix 1. This appendix offers speculations as to the trends that emerge from the data.

ethnic and migrant writing was published by small presses, many of which have closed down and have no online record or catalogue.

Where do Migrant Women Short Story Writers in North America Come From?



The significant presence of writers from East Asia reflects their long presence in North America (see chapter 1). As Xu notes, “[u]ntil the mid - 1990s, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American writers and critics dominated Asian American literature and its studies, for they were the most established groups in America at that time” (2010: 436-437). Unsurprisingly, they account for most of the collections published in the 1980s and 1990s, and continue to be a dominant presence on the post-2000 literary scene. More recently, writers of Vietnamese and Cambodian descent have emerged (Xu 2010), with figures such as Viet Than Nguyen, but Appendix 1 only lists four women writers from the area.

Writers of South Asian descent have been a continuous presence since the 1980s with important figures such as Mukherjee, Divakaruni and Lahiri. The chart suggests that their contributions are comparatively smaller than those of writers of East Asian descent. This may be explained by the fact that East Asians (the Chinese and Japanese especially) have a much longer history of migration to the U.S., and most South-Asian Americans arrived to North America following the loosening of migration laws in the late 1960s onwards.

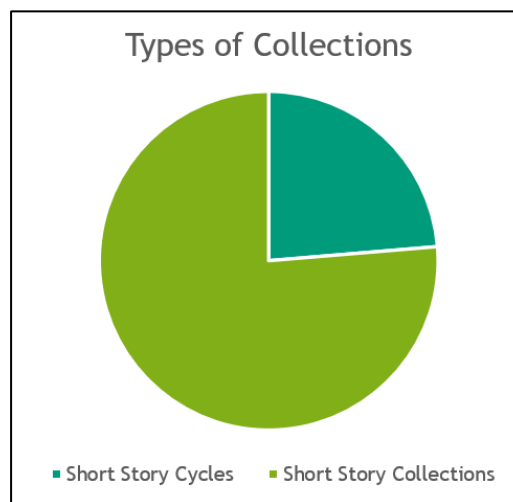
Similarly, short story collections by Caribbean writers have been a consistent thread through the forty years covered by this survey. The Caribbean has a strong history of the short story, as documented by Ramchand in multiple publications, and by E.A. Markham in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Short Stories* (1996). Many of its most famous contemporary female practitioners (Olive Senior, Jamaica Kincaid, Edwidge Danticat) are located in North America.

Most of the collections by writers of African origin emerged in the 2000s, reflecting the more recent migration of Africans to North America (see chapter 1).

It is striking that there are so few collections written by writers of South American descent. This might be a matter of categorisation; the label 'Latinx' brings together writers of migrant descent and writers who have lived in American territory for generations, since before Mexican land was annexed with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago in 1848 and the 1854 Gadsden Purchase. Thus, important collections by Helena Maria Viramontes and Denise Chávez cannot be defined as 'migrant fiction'.

The underrepresentation of collections by authors of Middle Eastern heritage is due to its being, like those by African writers, a 'newer' literature that is affirming its literary presence primarily through the novel. As Steven Sailata writes in *Modern Arab American Fiction* (2011), there has been an upsurge in novelistic publications between 2000 and 2011, a trend that continues to this day. Despite that, a number of collections have emerged in recent years, by writers such as Randar Jarrar, Frances Khirallah Noble, Evelyn Shakir and the award-winning Susan Muaddi Dharraj.

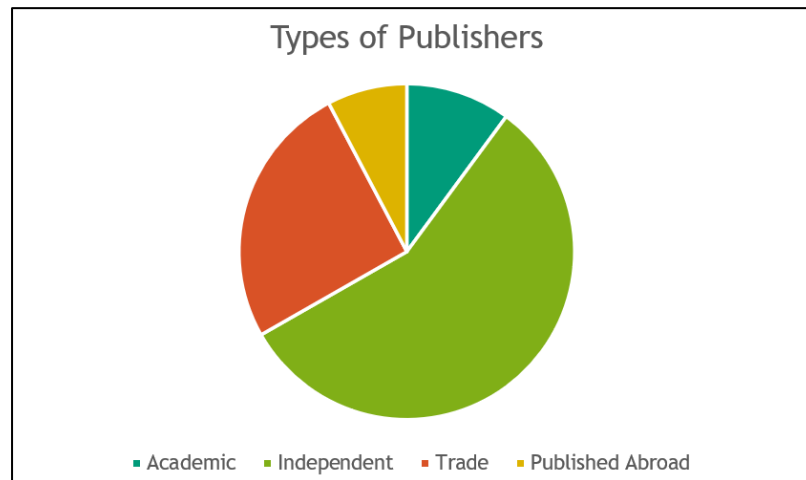
Short Story Collections vs. Short Story Cycles



Short story cycles appear to account for about a quarter of short story collections published by migrant women.

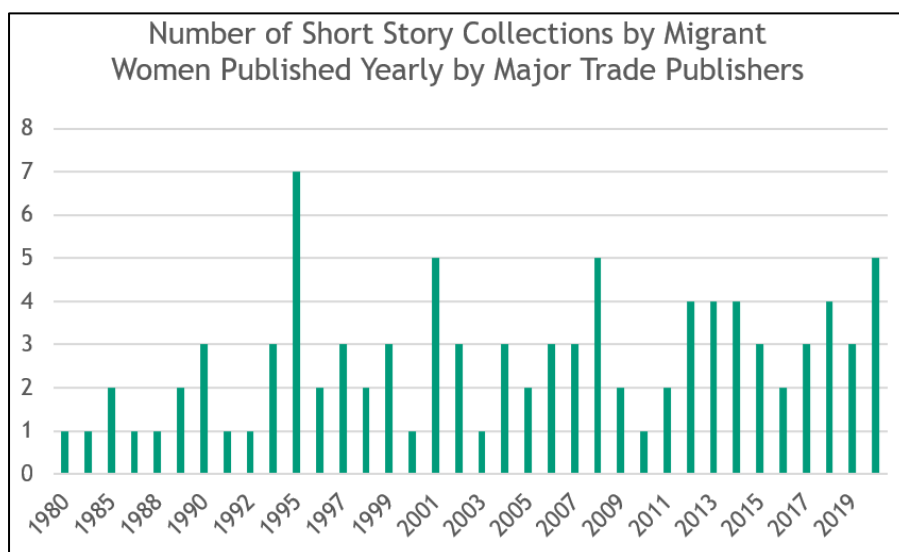
That said, collections of interrelated stories are rarely labelled as such by their publishers, who not do always make explicit the relationality between the stories unless they are coming-of-age cycles. This, of course, may have to do with the fact that the links between stories are sometimes very subtle and require very attentive readings to fully appreciate them, as in Lakshmi's *Pomegranate Dreams*. The information gathered here, despite building also on readers' reviews and comments on *Goodreads* and various selling pages, may therefore be under-representative of the real numbers.

Who Publishes Short Story Collections by Migrant Women?



Despite the opening up of the publishing industry to more diversity, the majority of short story collections continue to be published by independent presses who are ready to take risks both in terms of genre and diversity. (Please note that I have incorporated the 5 self-published collections in the independent publishers' category.)

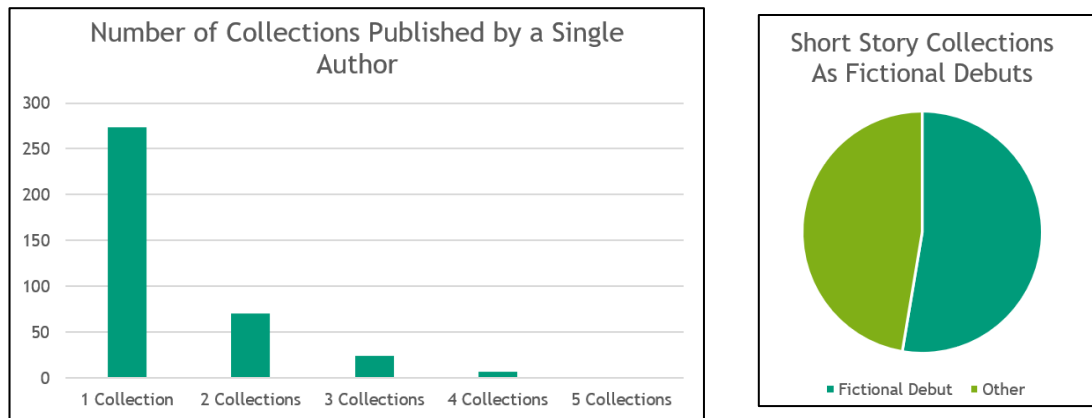
Please note that, as I suggested above, books published by trade publishers tend to be more advertised and therefore have a stronger presence online and in archives. Unsurprisingly, the best-selling collections generally come from mainstream publishers (March-Russell 49). By contrast, independent publishers cannot invest as much and many may not have left any trace online, especially if they opened and closed before the arrival of internet. This means that my data (especially as regards the period before 2000) might be under-representative of the importance of independent presses in promoting ethnic writers.



Though trade publishers appear to publish more collections of stories by migrant women at present than they did in the early 1980s, independent presses visibly lead the way. To a certain extent, this reflects the general trend in terms of short story collections (Michel, March-Russell 49). But given the institutional whiteness of the publishing industry (see chapter 1), a comparative study of collections by white authors and ethnic writers would presumably reveal that trade publishers release more collections by white authors.

Key publishers of migrant short fiction by women involve feminist presses (including Feminist Press at CUNY, Inanna Publications, and Sister Vision Press), independent presses specialising in short fiction (such as Life Rattle Press and Sarabande Books), and small presses dedicated to diversity (including Arte Público Press, City Lights Publishers, and TSAR which now goes by the name Mawenzi House).

‘The Training Genre’?



Publication trends appear to confirm the assumption that, for many writers, the short story collection is a steppingstone into the literary world.

For about half of the writers, their short story collection is their fictional debut.

With only a few exceptions, such as Danticat, Kincaid, Lahiri, Gautier, Goodison and others, the majority of migrant writers only publish one collection before moving on to other genres. This reflects a wider trend in the literary industry, where, for “emerging writers, the short story serves as a showcase for talents that, in the long term, are invested in the novel” (Cox 59).